

Fig. 11. Casa del Bell'Impluvio. Sampling areas and colour code.

I 9, 1 Casa del Bell'Impluvio

“Casa del Bell'Impluvio. 2nd style decoration in side rooms 5 and 6 belongs to an episode before the doors of these rooms to tablinum 7 were blocked. The 3rd style decoration of the tablinum is subsequent, and belongs to the same building phase as the decoration of triclinium 8/9. It would be useful to establish whether these plasters are similar, and whether the 3rd style decoration of room 11 belongs to the same episode. Note also the fragment of 1st style plaster in room 12.”

Plasters and phases

Room 12 was the natural place to start sampling: the remains of a 1st style decoration would provide plaster from the earliest phase of this building. A large-grained plaster indicated the decoration was made in the later phase of the 1st style. The next sample (sample no. 2) was taken from a layer that partially concealed this decoration, and was, seemingly, the last period in the room. It was a fine-grained plaster, which matched with the plaster used for the 2nd style decorations in room 6 (sample no 4). A plaster layer stuck between a stone block and the wall in room 6 corresponds with the 1st style plaster in room 12.

The 3rd style decorations in rooms 7, *tablinum* and 8, the black *triclinium* had been made on different kinds of plaster (*Fig. 12*). The *tablinum* filler was large-grained with brilliant colours and crystals, imbedded in an abundance of lime.¹ The decoration in the “red” room 11 and in the atrium was made on this kind of plaster. The *triclinium* plaster had little lime, extremely fine grains and lots of crystals, making the plaster look dark and compact. In room 9, previously part of room 8, there were remains of the *triclinium* decoration, partially concealed under a later phase, a late 4th style redecoration.

With 14 samples which made sense, I intended to leave the house with the beautiful *impluvium*. But I had to return to room 12 to check the strange plaster layer with pick-marks that had been applied on the 1st style fragments, and was covered with a decoration of the 2nd style. This was a completely different kind of plaster, which I could not explain, similar to 4th style reused plasters but still not “the same”. I assumed this had to be a particularly attractive kind of late 4th style plaster, which made a “second style plaster” on the top impossible, and, consequently I assumed that there were, sometimes, beautiful plasters made for late 4th style decorations as well. The problem remained in my mind and was not solved until my colleagues at the ICVBC said that, according to their analyses, sample nos. 2 and 4 had the same composition and belonged to the same group of 2nd style plasters. Reviewing the problem with fresh eyes, I realised that the strange plaster had a filler of the same composition as the 1st style decoration below, but that it was crushed and mixed in a lot of lime. It was a reused plaster, and this showed that a reused plaster must not necessarily be dated to post AD 62.

Some unsolved questions made me return to Casa del Bell'Impluvio. Seams and layers below the present floor level were sampled, and room 12 reviewed. The plasters in the seams and below the last floor level are connected with an earlier decoration phase than are the remains of 1st style plasterwork in room 12. After having studied 31 samples it all fits, but new surprises and unexpected information might turn up if samples from each layer in each room were to be analysed.

¹ These observations are confirmed by analyses performed at the ICVBC. The plasters belong to different groups.



Fig. 12. Above: To the left. Decoration in the *tablinum*, detail. To the right: *triclinium* decoration, detail. Below: To the left. Plaster type B17, taken from the *tablinum* decoration. To the right. Plaster type B16, taken from the *triclinium* decoration.

What I would like to emphasize is that the process related to solving the problem of the strange plaster was, in the end, very fruitful. It showed that analysis performed at the CNR was independent and useful. Their observations made me return to my initial judgement and to look for possible explanations. It showed that the first impression may be right because it is not infected by the doubts that arise during the working process.

Plasters and styles

These 3rd style decorations have been given much interest.² Opinions differ slightly on their dating. La Rocca and de Vos consider the decorations in *cubiculum* 11 and in the *tablinum* 7 as reminiscent of the 2nd style, repeated in the final phase of the 3rd style, dating them to the period of Tiberius and Claudius (AD 35-45).³ The decorations in the *tablinum* and in the *triclinium* 8/9, the black room, are regarded as made by the same workshop that decorated the nearby Casa del Frutteto. Ehrhardt recognizes similarities between the black rooms in these houses, but regards the paintings as replicas “*Beide Dekorationen verhalten sich zueinander wie Repliken, sind aber nicht massgleich*”.⁴ He considers the painting in Bell’Impluvio to be the earlier, dating it to Augustan period.

According to Richardson, the decoration of *cubiculum* 11 with its little figure painting showing an erotic scene, can be attributed to a 4th style artist, the “Ephigenia painter”, and is presumably an early work of his hand.⁶ He suggests that the painting is contemporaneous with decorations by the same artist in the Casa del Menandro⁷ and the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia, both houses situated in neighbouring insulae. This is technically possible, since the plaster used in *cubiculum* 11 represents the mature or later phase of the 3rd style.

The results of my study indicate that the *triclinium* decoration should be earlier, and the paintings in the *tablinum* and *cubiculum* 11 slightly later. The plasters used in the latter rooms correspond with the main decoration period in the Casa del Frutteto. Therefore, I suggest the black room in Casa del Bell’Impluvio was decorated earlier than the similar room in Casa del Frutteto – its plaster belongs to an earlier type.

In my opinion, the decorations in this house were made by one team of artists and those in Casa del Frutteto by another. The main difference is the pattern in which the walls have been divided. The elegant architectural solutions in the Casa del Bell’Impluvio transmit the idea of space. Those in Casa del Frutteto look comparatively stiff and repetitive in spite of the bright colours. On the other hand, the delicious garden paintings have no equals in Casa del Bell’Impluvio. It seems a “light-handed” artist created the architectural vista that adorn the walls in Casa del Bell’Impluvio. The red walls in room 11 show elements analogous to those in the *tablinum*, but the little figure painting was probably made by another hand.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Fragments of painted plaster have survived in some rooms, in spite of restorations. Unfortunately, the restoration materials that have been used during the last decades were also used in these lofty spaces. Portland cement and acrylics applied in humid environments do not preserve wall paintings; they contribute to a rapid destruction.

² 3rd style, c. 20 BC-AD 45.

³ La Rocca & de Vos 2002, 228-229.

⁴ Ehrhardt 1987, 136.

⁵ Ehrhardt 1987, 76. The Augustan period: 27 BC – AD 14.

⁶ Richardson, 2000, 140.

⁷ Richardson, 2000, 129f.

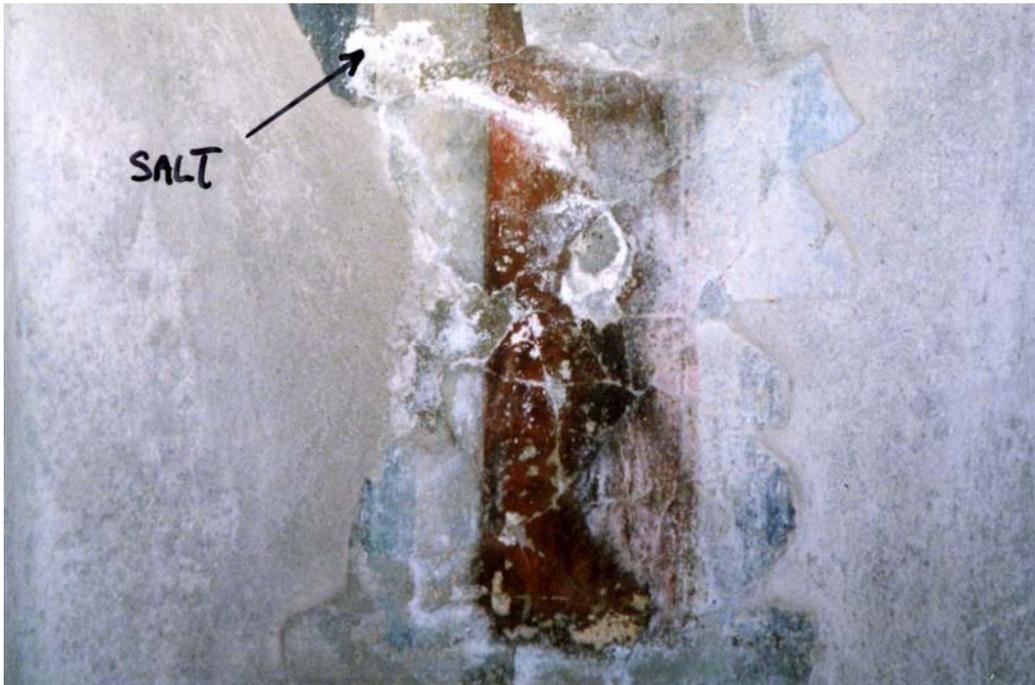


Fig. 13. Salt efflorescence on the east wall in the *triclinium*.

The east wall in the *triclinium* is an example of what happens to wall paintings when exposed to cement, acrylics and humidity (Fig. 13). The salts that penetrate the plaster settle on the painted surface and a thin layer, a veil, is formed. The veil becomes a milky layer, which in turn becomes a salt crust. Salts corrode marble and wall paintings. Salt veils, milky layers and crusts cover most of the east wall decoration in the *triclinium*.⁸ Remains of the same decoration in room 8 are still in good condition, in spite of being badly treated in antiquity; they were picked with a hammer and imbedded in plaster when the room was divided and redecorated. Decay, due to restoration materials is detectible also in the little red cubiculum with the erotic scene, which was noted already in 1981.⁹ These walls were covered with a protective acrylic layer, which captures the smooth and lustrous surface behind a hard and shiny plastic layer.

The plaster study in Casa del Bell'Impluvio shows that plasters below the floor level and appearing as seams in the atrium area, as well as the first layer in room 12, belong to the earliest decoration period. This is followed by the 1st style plasterwork in room 12. The 2nd style decorations in rooms 5 and 6 belong to the third phase. Remnants of this period were found in rooms 10 and 12 as well as in the atrium. The plasters used for the 3rd style decorations in room 7 *tablinum* and in rooms 8 and 9 are different; those in rooms 8 and 9 should be slightly earlier. The plaster type in the *tablinum* appears as the last phase in the atrium and rooms 11 and 12. This was apparently a period of extensive redecoration. Finally, the last phase in the building, probably post-earthquake, is found in room 9.

⁸ A sample of the salt layer (sample BI 6 sali) was analysed at the CNR-ICVBC. Constituted principally by thenardite Na_2SO_4 , it had traces of gypsum and sulphates with sodium and calcium aphthalite, $(\text{K}_3\text{Na}(\text{SO}_4)_2)$; syngenite $\text{K}_2\text{Ca}(\text{SO}_4)_2 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$.

⁹ Parise Bodoni 1981, 62, figs. 14, 15.

I 9, 1 Plaster types, groups, locations

Room 1b

Earliest phase: type BI, 16 group A. West wall: decoration below floor level.

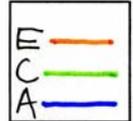


Room 2

Earliest phase: type BI 1, group A. Northern part, decoration below floor level, in the entrance between room 2 and shop.

Second phase: type BI 2, group C. East wall: plaster with white paint layer.

Last phase: type BI 7, group E. East wall: layer covering type BI 2. West wall: column below floor level.



Room 5

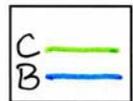
Earliest phase: type BI 4, group C. East and west walls: 2nd style decoration.



Room 6

Earliest phase: type BI 1, group B. East wall: yellow decoration.

Last phase: type BI 4, group C. East wall: 2nd style decoration, violet, covering type BI 1, and continuing behind a later construction. On the south wall and in SE corner.



Room 7

Last phase: type BI 7, group E. 3rd style decoration.



Room 8

3rd style decoration: plaster type BI 6, group D.

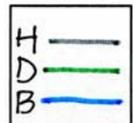


Room 9

Earliest phase: type BI 1, group B. East wall: blocked behind south wall.

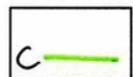
Second phase: type BI 6, group D. North, east and south walls: SE corner, layer with pick-marks.

Last phase: type BI 9, group H. North, south and west walls: covering earlier phases.



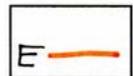
Room 10

Earliest phase: type BI 4, group C. East wall: layer blocked behind north wall.



Room 11

Last phase: type BI 7, group E. 3rd style decoration.



Room 12

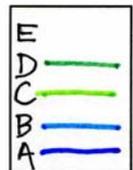
Earliest phase: type BI 16, group A. North wall: blocked behind west wall.

Second phase: type BI 1, group B. East wall: 1st style decoration.

Third phase: type BI 2, group C. To this phase belongs also the preparation, the layer with pick-marks, BI 15.

Fourth phase: type BI 6, group D. West wall: covering BI 2.

Last phase: type BI 7, group E. On all walls: covering earlier phases.



List of examined plaster samples

I 9,1 Casa del Bell'Impluvio (BI)

2003-2004-2005

Nr	Room	Sample location in metres	Order of layer	Brief description	Decoration	Remarks	Type	Group
1a 1b CNR	12	East wall H.1.16, 0.04 from SE corner. H. 1.16, 0.12 from SE corner (below decoration).	1 st layer with decoration, covered by BI 15 preparation-repair , and BI 2.	Black and white, large and small grains. Few red, green, pale yellow grains. Stucco: yellowish with small particles	1st Style (remains of decoration at the middle level).	Very frail plaster. Lime with lumps.	BI 1	B
2a 2b CNR	12	East wall H. 1.05, 0.48 from SE corner.	2 nd , with paint layer, covering BI 1.	Black and warm colours. Small grains. Green crystals.		Good proportion large/small, lime/filler	BI 4	C
3 CNR	6	East wall H. 1.20, at the NE corner.	1 st with yellow decoration. Covered by BI 4.	The same as BI 1. Pale yellow grains. Stucco: yellowish with small particles.		Very frail.	BI 1	B
4 CNR	6	East wall H. 1.20 at the NE corner.	2 nd layer, with decoration covering BI 3.	Mainly black, small grains, red, beige grains. Green crystals. Clean white lime with some lumps.	2nd Style (remain of decoration in rooms 5 and 6).	Hard. Good proportions lime/filler. Stucco.	BI 4	C
5 CNR	6	East wall H.1.63, 0.40 from SE corner. (S wall 1.83 from entrance to Room 5, S wall, SE corner, W wall).	Layer with violet decoration blocked behind a later construction.	Beautiful sample. Nice stucco. The same as BI 4.	2nd style decoration	Some lumps of lime.	BI 4	C
6 CNR	8	East wall H. 1.17, 0.30 from NE corner.	1 st layer with decoration with salt (CNR) (black room).	Multi-coloured, extremely small particles. Lots of yellow	3rd style (decoration continuing into room 9).	Hard. White stucco with large particles.	BI 6	D
7 CNR	7	West wall, H. 1.64, 1.47 from SW corner, and East wall, H. 1.68, 0.92 from SE corner.	1 st layer, red and 1 st layer, blue decoration.	Multi-coloured, with large and small grains, some very large grey. Stucco: cream with large/small particles.	3rd style (last decoration)	Very frail.	BI 7	E
8	9	East wall H. 1.41, 0.08 from SE corner.	Layer blocked behind S wall covered by BI.9.	Black and white. The same as BI 1, with clean lime.	Stucco: lime with transp. and yellow crystals.	Frail.	BI 1	B
9 CNR	9	South wall H. 1.50, 0.38 from SE corner.	2 nd layer, covering BI 8.	Sandy lime with white lumps. All kinds of grains, hardly any lime.	Last phase in this room.	Crushed brick, blue paint flake.	BI 9	G
10 CNR	9	North wall H. 1.64 at the NW corner.	1 st layer with red paint.	BI 6 with some more lime.	3rd style (remains of decoration, with pick-marks).	Stucco: lime with transp. and yellowish crystals.	BI 6	D
11 CNR	9	East wall H. 0.43, 1.11 from SE corner. H. 0.36, 0.37 from NE corner.	1 st layer black decoration. 3 applications of the same plaster.	The same as BI 6 The same plaster on N and E walls, in NE corner.	3rd style layer with pick-marks.	Small brilliant blue grains.	BI 6	D
12 CNR	11	West wall H. 1.55, at the NE edge, entrance to room 2.	1 st layer with red decoration.	Clean white lime with some lumps. The same as BI 7.	3rd style decoration, on all walls.	Very frail. No green crystals. Some very large grains	BI 7	E

Nr	Room	Sample location in metres	Order of layer	Brief description	Decoration	Remarks	Type	Group
13	2	East wall H. 2.00, 0.39 at S side of entrance to room 11.	1 st layer with white paint layer covered by BI 14.	The same as BI 4.			BI 4	C
14	2	East wall H. 2.00, 0.39 at S of entrance to room 11.	2 nd layer, covering BI 13.	The same as BI 7.			BI 7	E
15a 15b	12	East wall H. 1.20, 0.16 from SE corner.	Layer with pick-marks. Covering BI 1. Repair or preparation.	Dirty lime with white lumps. Large and small black, few green grains.	Just stucco. Most lime with a few grains.	Reused plaster, applied as repair?	BI 15	
16	12	North wall H. 0.80 at the NW corner.	Layer with decoration, blocked behind W wall.	Black and white with dirty lime. Lots of black grains.		stucco	BI 16	A
17	2	West wall, N column, below floor level.		Similar to BI 1 with dirty lime. New sample. Dirty.	If this is not BI 1 it may be BI 7.		BI 7	E
18 CNR	12	West wall H. 1.55, at SW corner See 24, 25, 26	Layer covering layers type BI 2 and layer with pick-marks.	Small grains, many grey, beige, brown, small yellow. Lime lumps.	Last phase in this room.	stucco	BI 6	D
19	5	South wall, SE corner. East and west walls.	Layer with decoration.		Same as BI 4.		BI 4	C
20	10	East wall H. 0.86, at the corner.	Layer with decoration, blocked behind N wall.		Same as BI 4.		BI 4	C
21	1b	West wall, below floor level 0.20 from S edge.	Layer with decoration.	Some very large grey grains. Dirty sample.	Same as BI 16.	stucco	BI 16	A
22	2	In the entrance between room 2 and shop, 0.60 from W corner.	Layer below floor level.	Some very large grains. Dirty sample.	Same as 21.		BI 16	A
23	12	East wall H. 1.18, 0.10 from SW corner.	Layer covered by 2b.		Same as 22.		BI 16	A
24	12	West wall, SW corner H. 0.58.	1 st layer on the wall, covered by 25.				BI 4	C
25	12	West wall, SW corner H. 0.85.	2 nd layer, smooth, with pick marks, covered by 26.		Same as 15.		BI 15	
26	12	West wall, SW corner H. 0.35.	Upper layer covering 25.				BI 6	D
27	12	West wall, SW corner H. 1.90.	Upper layer, upper wall, pick marks.		Same as 15.		BI 15	
28	12	West wall, south side of the entrance.					BI 6	D
29	12	West wall, NW corner H. 1.28, 0.60 from NW corner.	Layer covered by 30.				BI 6	D
30	12	West wall, NW corner H. 1.43 at the entrance.	Layer covering 29.				BI 7	E
31	12	South wall H. 0.34, 0.35 from SW corner.	Upper layer.				BI 7	E