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Wall-Paintings in Roman Slovenia

Ljudmila PLESNIČAR-GEC

Les peintures murales romaines de Slovénie, à en croire les exemples d'Emona, de Celeia et de Poetovio, sont datables de la seconde moitié du I^{er} siècle aux environs de 400 ap. J.-C., et ne suivent pas nécessairement les critères stylistiques courants.

Les plus anciennes présentent des éléments du III^e et du IV^e style avec une tendance à subdiviser les parois en panneaux à fond gris et rouge pompéien, décorés de guirlandes stylisées.

Au II^e siècle prévaut le fond blanc agrémenté de guirlandes, de bandes et de filets encadrant des panneaux larges ou étroits.

Aux III^e et IV^e siècles, les systèmes à réseau deviennent prépondérants. Ils sont décorés de motifs floraux, avec tout un choix de fleurons, ou simplement géométriques, sur le modèle des mosaïques contemporaines.

Les peintures de Slovénie sont sans doute l'oeuvre de maîtres provinciaux indigènes ou ambulants. Ils suivaient la mode, telle qu'elle apparaît dans les villes proches d'Italie du Nord, sans pour autant négliger d'y apporter touche locale et créativité.

In my article I intend to give a brief survey of Roman wall-painting in Slovenia. Frescoes which I write about do not mean a whole. Here motifs and reconstructions are treated from three most important urban centres in Roman Slovenia (Emona – Ljubljana, Celeia – Celje and Poetovio – Ptuj), and that for two reasons: homogeneity of these collections and my special wish to represent wall-painting in the Roman urban centres in Slovenia.

The samples which will be shown here belong to an earlier date: they were excavated by W. Schmid in Ljubljana¹, V. Skrabar and I. Mikl-Curk in Ptuj², A. Bolta in Celje³ and during my own researches from the last twenty years in Emona and in Ljubljana⁴. Remains of the wall-paintings which were found during recent excavations in Celje will be on the other hand represented by Mrs. Vera Kolšek. They surmount in quality all the frescoes having been excavated in Slovenia till now.

In the Roman period the territory of the present Slovenia was divided into three administrative districts: Regio decima Italiae et Histriae where Emona also belonged to since the end of the 1st century AD, then Noricum including Celeia and Pannonia Superior where Poetovio lay (fig. 1).

¹ Schmid 1914.

² Skrabar 1904; Mikl 1960-1961; Mikl 1964-1965.

³ Bolta 1953.

⁴ Plesničar-Gec 1973; Plesničar-Gec 1976.

Therefore traffic and trade in each of the provinces developed in a different way also depending upon ethnic structure of inhabitants and demands of purchasers. Variety in material culture could be noticed as early as 1st century AD especially where autochthonous elements were still strong.

On the other hand colonists – representatives of the ruling class – however brought a new view of life to the conquered countries. That was noticed everywhere especially in the residential culture, i.e. in furnishing and decorating house-interior. In this kind of applied art we can find most of common elements being characteristic of Emona, Celeia and Poetovio though these settlements belonged to the different administrative regions.

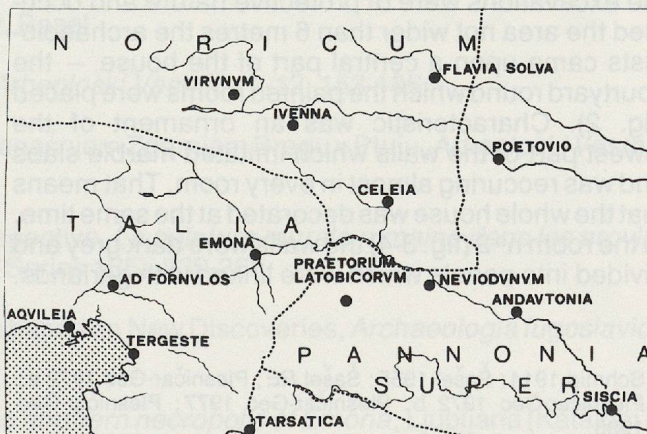


Fig. 1. The territory of Slovenia in the Roman period

Remains of Roman architecture which have been excavated in Slovenia up to now can not be as a whole compared with a classic concept of an Italic patrician house where the frescoes of best quality have survived. Partly researched urban centres such as Emona, Celeia and Poetovio, give us quite special illustration of the residential culture which depended upon geographic, social and economic conditions and ethnic structure of the inhabitants that means also upon tradition of the autochthonous people who in a certain degree proceeded their already established way of life.

Emona is the best examined Roman town in Slovenia⁵. Block-system of building divided the whole city area into the squares, i.e. limited isles or *insulae*. Among them there were also houses of rich citizens. Their architecture (the houses n° I, II and XVII) is very much resembling to the architecture of an early Italic house and there the frescoes of best quality have been found as well.

Though in the first decades of the 1st century AD colonization had a great influence on the then life in Emona which was expressed in trade and way of burying, we can notice that wall-decoration made its way not earlier than the end of the 1st century AD. Emona also in a high degree depended upon the goods coming from north Italy. The number of the colonists exceeds 30 families whose names have been known from inscriptions and who had come from north, central and south Italy. Quite strange is therefore a fact that inner decorating of the houses began to spread as late as the end of the rule of Flavians the more so because the whole area of the city had been built up and inhabited already in the first half of the 1st century AD.

The earliest remains of wall-painting from the Roman urban centres in Slovenia have some components of the Third and Fourth Pompeian styles in which there was a tendency to divide the walls into smaller surfaces. They were painted in basic tints of dark grey and Pompeian red and decorated with stylized garlands. Some of the best preserved frescoes from that time in Emona were excavated in 1963 in the house n° XVII⁶.

The remains pointed at one of the most fashionable houses of a mediterranean type in Slovenia. Though the excavations were of protective nature and occupied the area not wider than 6 metres the archaeologists came upon a central part of the house – the courtyard round which the painted rooms were placed (fig. 2). Characteristic was an ornament of the lowest part of the walls which imitated marble slabs and was recurring almost in every room. That means that the whole house was decorated at the same time. In the room n° 2 (fig. 3-4) the walls were dark grey and divided into panels which were linked with garlands.

The ceiling decoration surprises with its gold-yellow ground. A black wreath with stylized garlands was recurring there which is similar to that one painted on the walls. The best preserved has been the wall-plaster in the room n° 3 (fig. 5 and 8). The lowest part of the walls again had decoration of marble imitation. The walls were gold-yellow and alternatively painted in Pompeian red. The panels were decorated with green and light ochra floral ornaments and the ceiling with stylized floral ornaments in a shape of light ochra (gold-yellow) round dividing strips on Pompeian red ground.

Among the characteristic painting of an earlier date, i.e. from the end of the 1st century AD, we can also enumerate the fragments of the wall-plaster excavated by A. Bolta in 1951 in Celje⁷. It was possible to give a reconstruction of the room which is reminiscent of the house n° XVII from Emona and bath complex at Virunum⁸. Because only the lower part of the wall has survived the panels could have been painted with ornaments which have not been found (fig. 9). In the same house complex some other fragments of border-strips – the remains of *candelabra* – were found (fig. 6 and 7). That points, however, to the high level of wall-decorating in Roman Celeia. The patterns of the dividing-strips which probably bordered the individual panels contain some common details, so in Celeia, Emona and Poetovio as in other finding places in Pannonia, Noricum and even in Roman Switzerland⁹ (Pl. IX).

The fragments of the frescoes from the 2nd century AD are the most numerous and richest in Slovenia. By painting symmetrically divided panels the painters used only a few colours, mostly basic colour tints without shading. The walls were white, light pink or yellow. Decoration gave to the interior the feeling of lightness. The garlands which linked the panels are characteristic of the so-called Antoninian panel painting. They were wide spread in Celeia (fig. 10) and Poetovio (fig. 11). At the other hand the walls of the houses in Emona were at that time painted white and with grooves often divided to the panels. They had no garland ornaments while inner decoration in Celeia and Poetovio was richer and surprises with gentle floral motifs and garlands. That period was also the time of prosperity and great zeal for building which lasted up to Marcomanic wars and were also expressed in furnishing of the dwelling rooms.

In the mid 3rd century AD this kind of decoration was not in use any more. Wall-painting subordinated to the current fashion of the time yet in some cases it developed in its own way inventing its own ornaments and colour combinations. Because the ornaments then covered the whole central part of the wall there came to satiety of geometric decoration.

⁷ Bolta 1953.

⁸ Praschniker/Kenner 1947, 47 fig. 27.

⁹ Thomas 1964, pl. 36; Praschniker/Kenner 1947, fig. 161; Čremošnik 1984, 136 fig. 4 (Višiči); Drack 1950, fig. 71 (Kaiser-augst) fig. 100 (Oberweningen) fig. 123 (Wagen) fig. 124. 125. 126. 133 pl. 7 (Windisch).

⁵ Schmid 1914; Šašel 1955; Šašel *RE*; Plesničar-Gec 1972 a; Plesničar-Gec 1972 b; Plesničar-Gec 1977; Plesničar-Gec 1983.

⁶ Plesničar-Gec 1973; Plesničar-Gec 1976.

In the second half of the IIIrd century – which meant a period of rebuilding Emona after the campaign of Maximinus the Thrax in 238 – coffered decoration being in use at that time so on ceilings as on walls reduced to standard recurrent tapestry patterns which covered the entire wall.

I shall enumerate some examples: first there is a geometric tapestry pattern of rhomboids in various colours found in Emona and Poetovio while Celeia does not know it. Analogies can be seen at Virunum and partly in Pannonia (Palacza Puszta)¹⁰, North Africa and Western Europe¹¹. We can also mention coffered ceilings and walls which are characteristic of Emona and Poetovio while in Celeia this kind of decoration has not been noticed up to now; at last there is a coffered pattern on the ceilings in the bath complex in Emona (Pl. IX, 1).

At that period wall-painting lost its expressiveness and the recurring geometric patterns gave a dull, monotonous decoration though here and there, in the pretentious cases of painting, figural scenes were including. Among them there is the motif of a male figure on the fresco from Poetovio (fig. 12).

¹⁰ Praschniker/Kenner 1947, fig. 35; Thomas 1964, pl. 76.

¹¹ Moormann/Swinkels 1983.

Not long ago only a few remains of figural painting have been known in Roman wall-decoration in the territory of Slovenia. The vacancy was filled up by the excavations in the recent years in Celje that will be represented by Mrs. Vera Kolšek.

From the earlier researches in Ptuj (from the beginning of the XXth century) the water fowls painted on white ground having green vegetation and red flowers are known.

In Emona only one specimen of figural frescoes has been found, excavated by W. Schmid at the beginning of this century but unfortunately it has not survived.

In the collections of the wall-paintings from Emona, Celeia and Poetovio there are also some fragments of stucco decoration which do not differ from the similar ornaments in the other urban centres of the Roman empire.

The ancient frescoes from Emona, Celeia and Poetovio are without doubt the work of the travelling provincial masters who followed the current fashion of wall-decoration as exemplified in the nearby north-Italic towns but at the same time including motifs reflecting nature taste and creativity. This has been evidenced in the motifs in the fresco- and stucco-fragments being part of inner decoration in Emona, Celeia and Poetovio and on the other sites in Noricum, Raetia and Pannonia.

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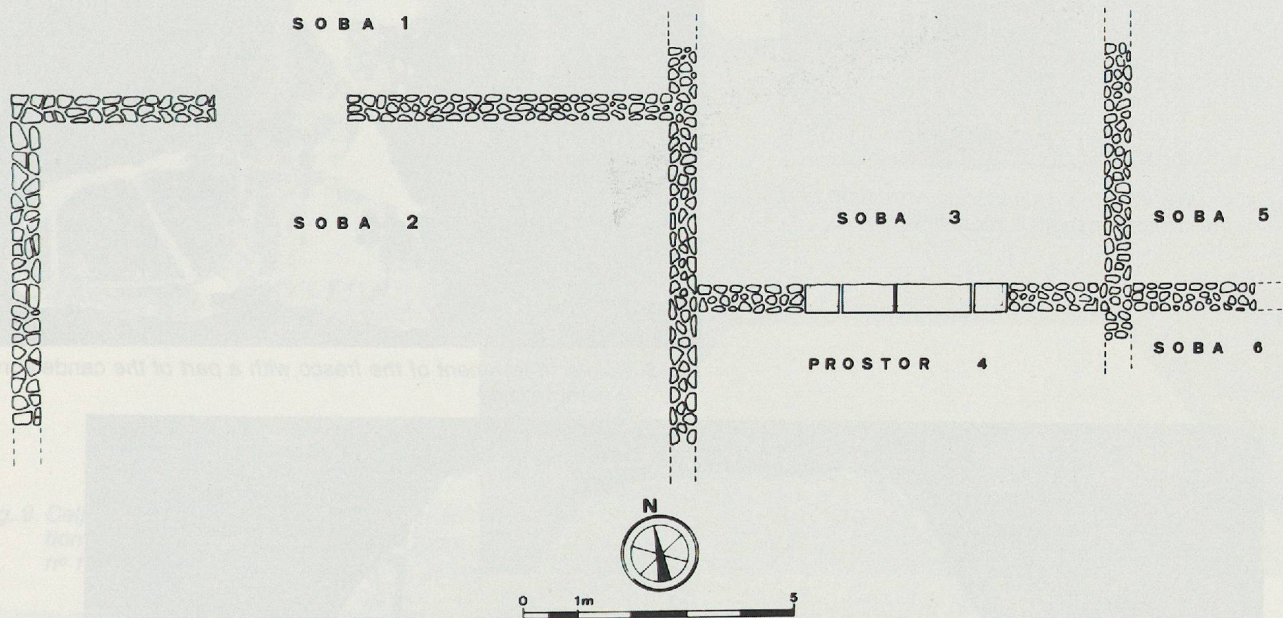
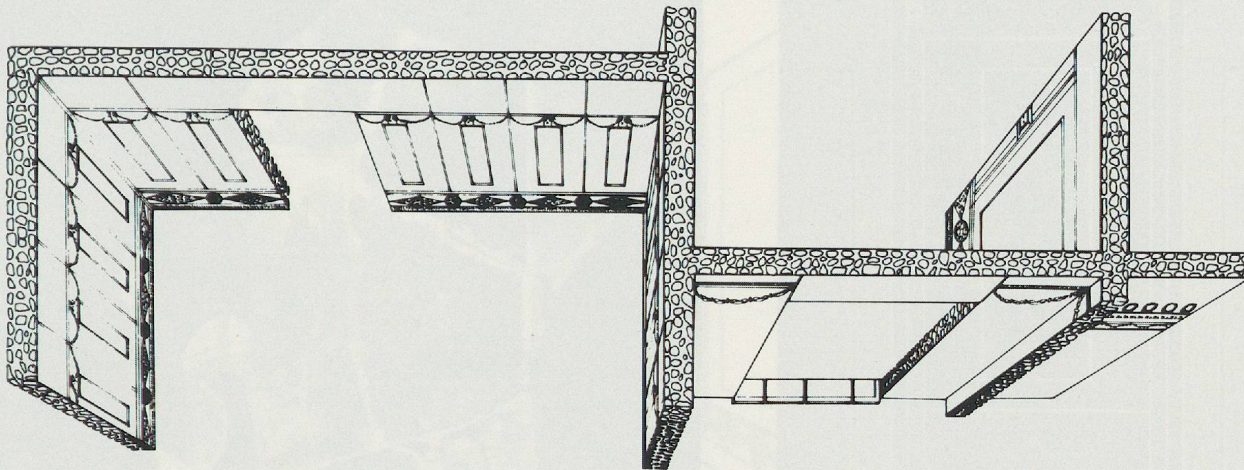
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Fig. 2. Ljubljana-Emona. Ground-plan and reconstruction of an excavated part of the insula 17

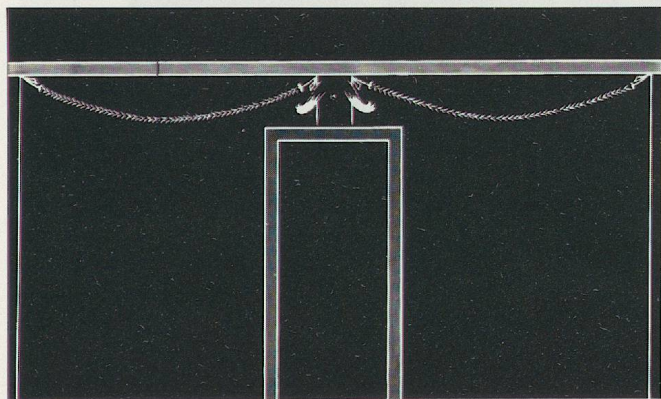


Fig. 3. Emona. Painted graphic reconstruction of the frescoes in the insula 17, room no 2

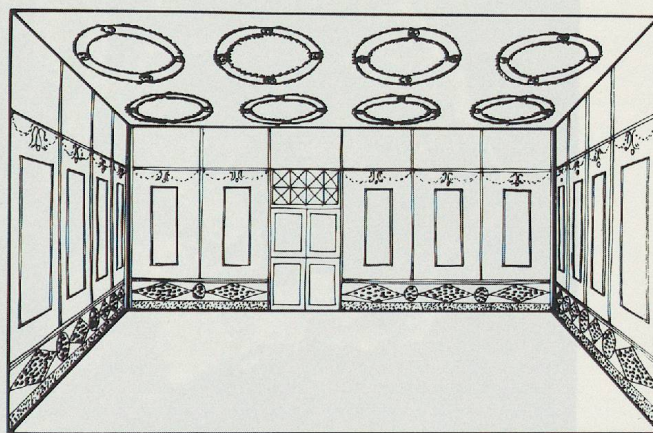


Fig. 4. Emona. Graphic reconstruction of the frescoes and ceiling decoration in the insula 17, room no 2

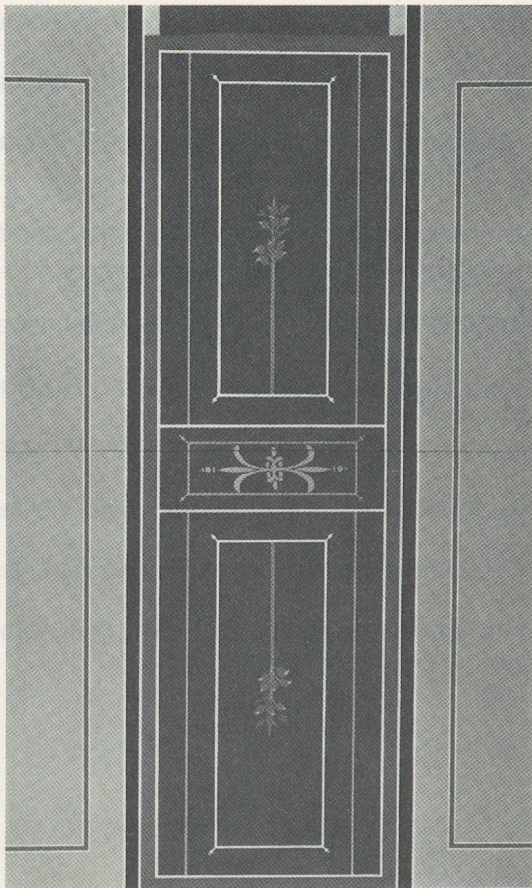


Fig. 5. Emona. Painted graphic reconstruction of the fresco in the insula 17, room n° 3

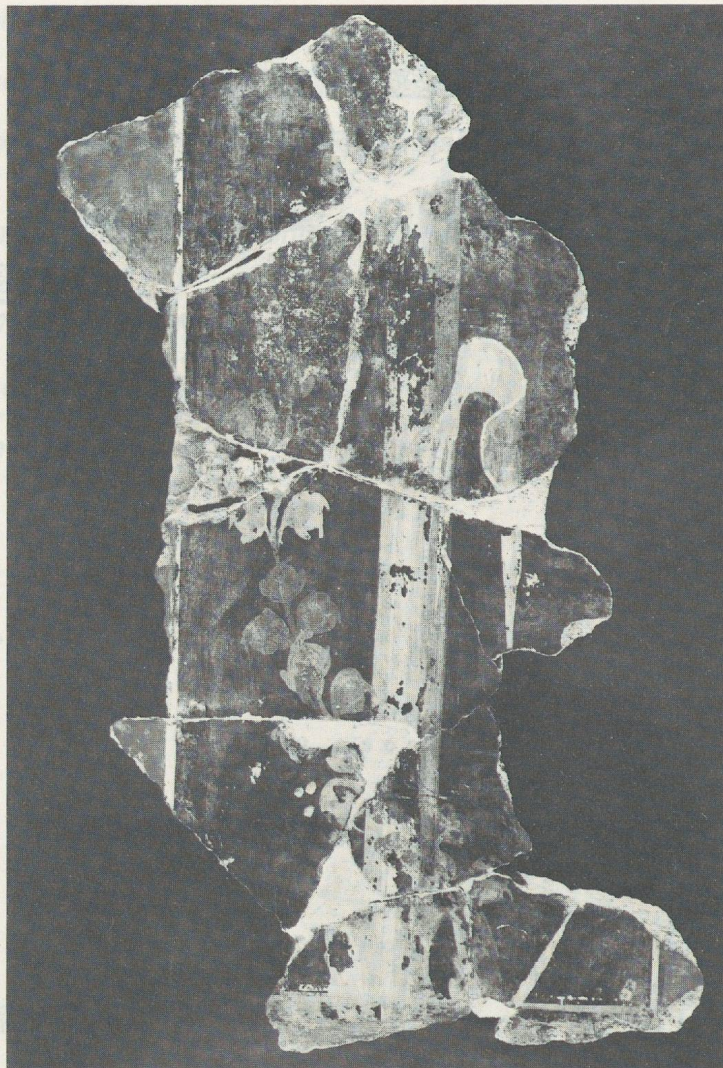


Fig. 6. Celeja. A fragment of the fresco with a part of the candelabrum (Prešernova c.)

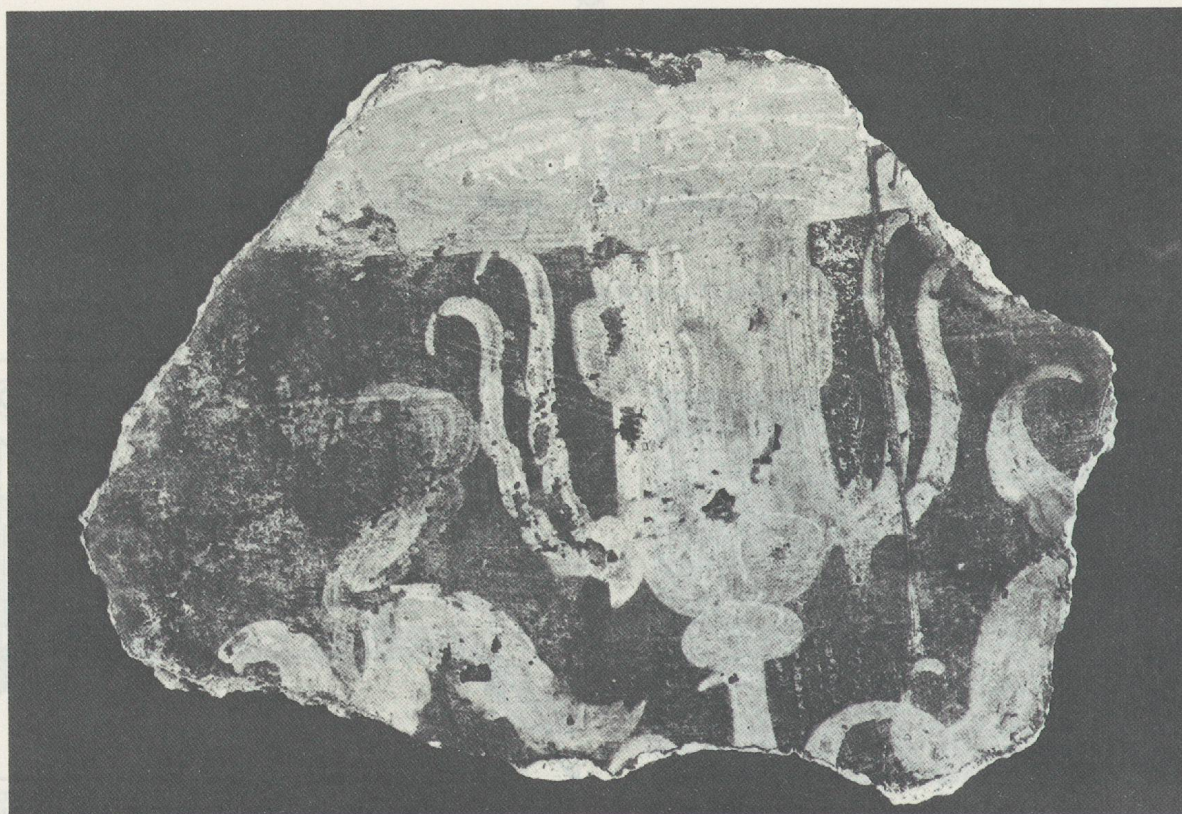


Fig. 7. Celeja. A fragment of the fresco with a part of the candelabrum (Prešernova c.)

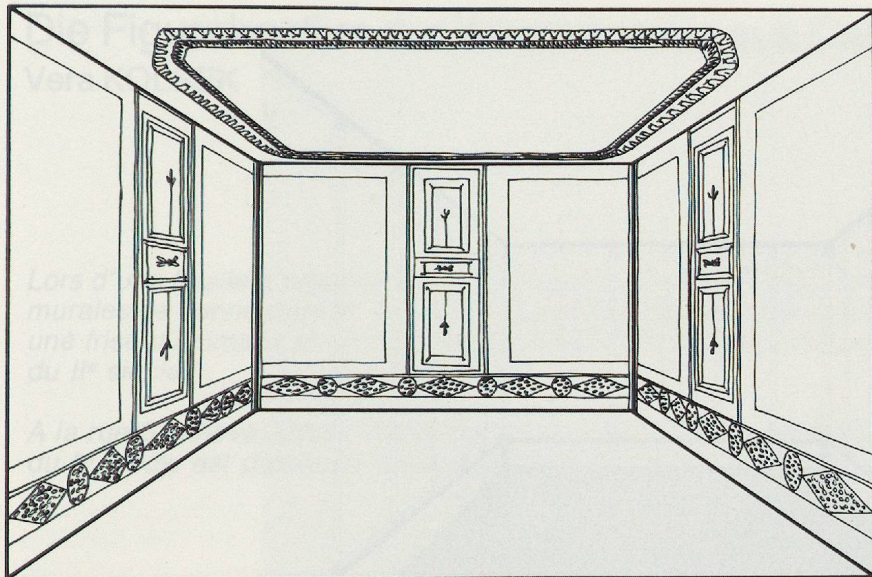


Fig. 8. Emona. Graphic reconstruction of the frescoes and ceiling decoration in the insula 17, room nº 3

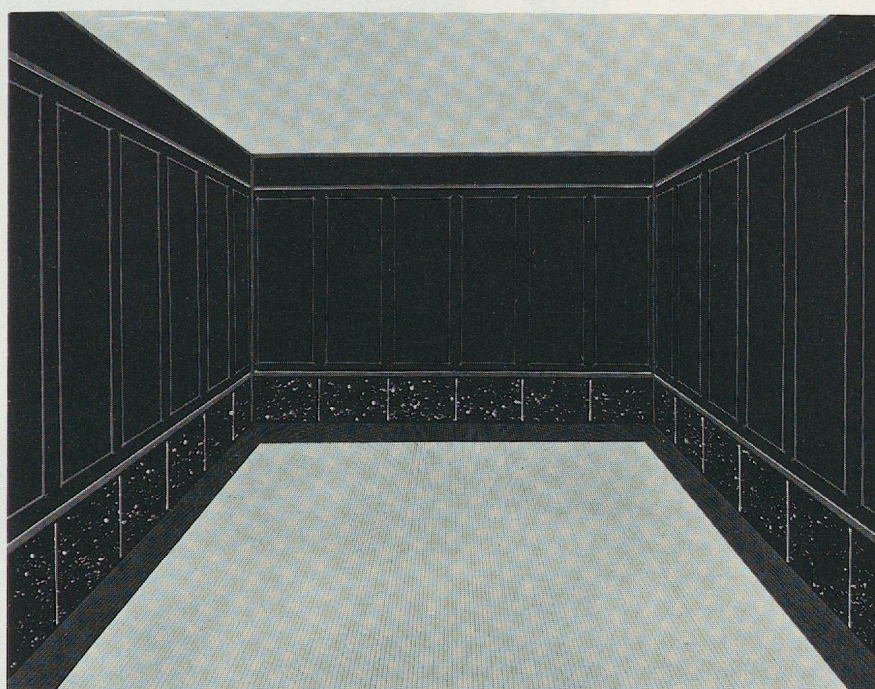


Fig. 9. Celje-Celeia. Painted graphic reconstruction of the frescoes on the walls in the room nº 1 (Prešernova c.)

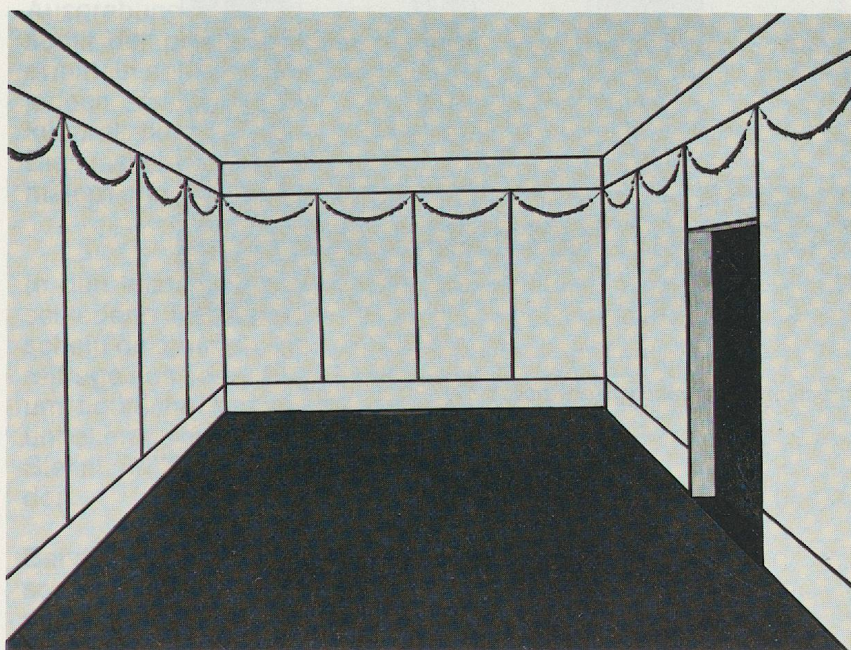


Fig. 10. Celeia. Painted graphic reconstruction of the frescoes on the walls in the room nº 2 (Prešernova c.)

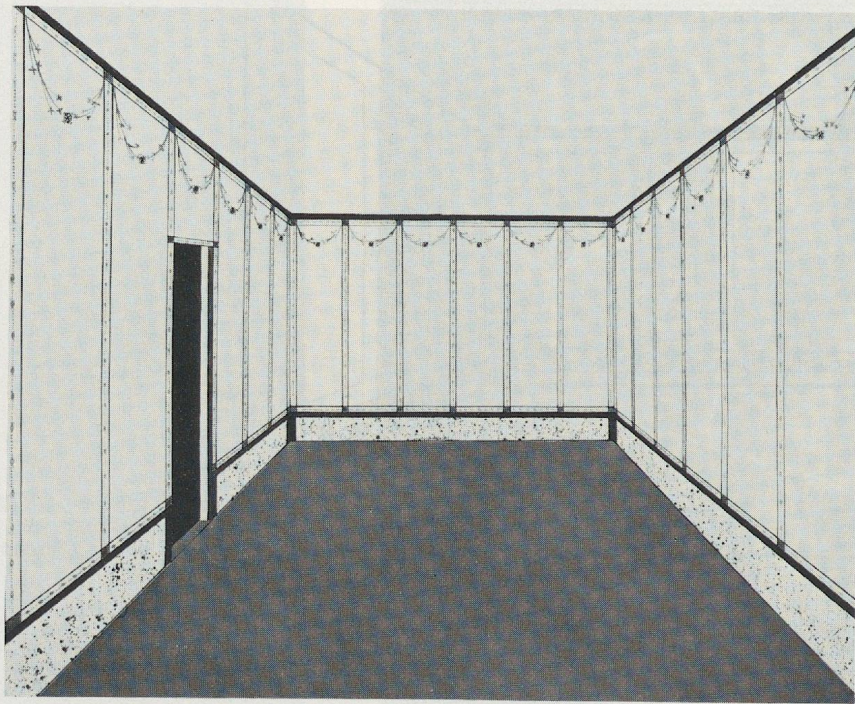


Fig. 11. Ptuj-Poetovio. Painted graphic reconstruction of the wall-decoration (Prešernova c.57)

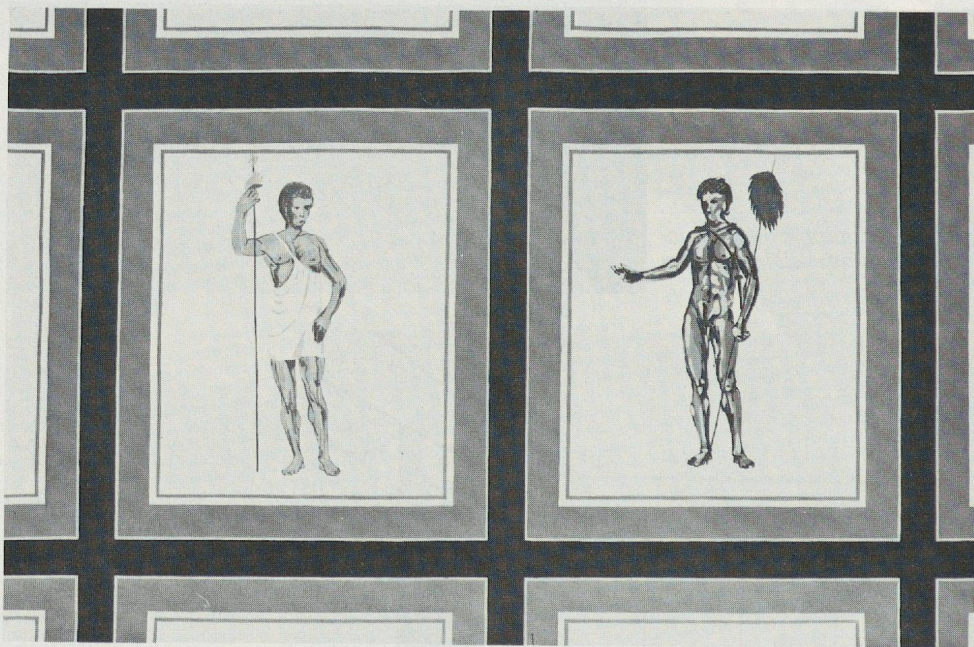


Fig. 12. Ptuj-Poetovio. Reconstruction of the Fresco (Prešernova c.57)