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A gladiatorum munus depicted in a Roman villa at Maasbracht¹

Louis J.F. SWINKELS

En 1982, de nouvelles peintures murales datant probablement de la fin du II^e siècle ont été découvertes dans une villa près de Maasbracht. A côté de panneaux blancs et rouges, on trouve des fragments de trois groupes de figures humaines. Le premier groupe comporte des scènes mythologiques dont l'interprétation reste incertaine vu le petit nombre de fragments conservés.

Le deuxième groupe est formé de figures humaines proches de la grandeur nature et qui semblent s'insérer dans le monde de l'amphithéâtre, à savoir des gladiateurs et des bestiarii.

Le troisième groupe enfin montre des figures de petite taille dans lesquelles on pourrait voir des indigènes romanisés. Du point de vue stylistique, elles se rapprochent des représentations qu'on rencontre sur les stèles funéraires du nord-ouest de l'Empire.

L'ensemble illustre le standing et les aspirations des propriétaires de la villa.

In 1982 a new group of wall-paintings was found in a Roman villa at Maasbracht, near Roermond in the south-east of the Netherlands². The villa was built around the year 100 AD and was largely rebuilt and extended at the end of the second century. It seems to have been abandoned during the sixties or seventies of the third century. All the fragments of paintings were found as debris resulting from the demolition of the villa during the Early Middle Ages.

Although the study of the fragments is still in progress, it is now possible to present an overview of the paintings. Apart from a number of panel decorations, both on a white and on a red ground, the paintings comprise three groups of figure scenes. Two of these groups provide sufficient evidence for a preliminary interpretation.

Mythological scenes

The first group, of which very few fragments remain, consists of mythological scenes represented as pictures, framed and fixed to white walls between two columns. The remains are too scanty to allow of an interpretation of these scenes, nor is it possible to reconstruct the decoration system they once formed part of. A small number of fragments which show parts of texts painted in white, probably belong to these mythological scenes. The texts may have served to explain the pictures, but so far it has not been possible to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of these texts either. The mythological content of the scenes can be deduced from the way they are represented as pictures on a wall and from the clothing of the best preserved figure, who is shown half naked.

Gladiatorial scenes

The next group consists of nearly life-size figures on a black ground. In spite of the fact that no complete figures have been preserved in this group either, we have nevertheless managed to reconstruct the decoration system in question and to establish a tentative interpretation of the figures' identity.

The figures are shown standing on a platform in the main zone of the wall. The dado zone consisted of alternating black and brown panels and was framed at the top by bands suggesting a moulding. These were followed by a yellow band that served as a platform for the large figures in the main zone. The latter are shown isolated on a black ground, divided into large panels by means of green bands. At the top this main zone was framed by an elaborately painted cornice.

The fragments comprise parts of at least two figures. Two heads, one arm and two legs can clearly be distinguished. One of the heads is well preserved and shows the quality of the workmanship in this group of paintings³. Only part of the other head remains. The arm and legs lead us closer to the identity of the figures. Of the legs, one is shown naked in front of a green band that separates two black panels. The other leg is preserved from foot to knee (fig. 1). The person in question wears knee-long purple trousers, bandages or *fasciae* and sandals. The bottom fragment, showing the heel, was damaged by fire: the colour black has faded almost completely and the yellow platform has turned red. The fragments from which the arm and part of the accompanying torso can be reconstructed, have also been affected by fire (fig. 2). As a result, any details of the clothing are hard

¹ Participation in the Colloque was made possible by a grant from the Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.).

² Willems 1982; Moormann 1983.

³ A colour photograph of this head has been published in Bechert 1982, fig. 267.

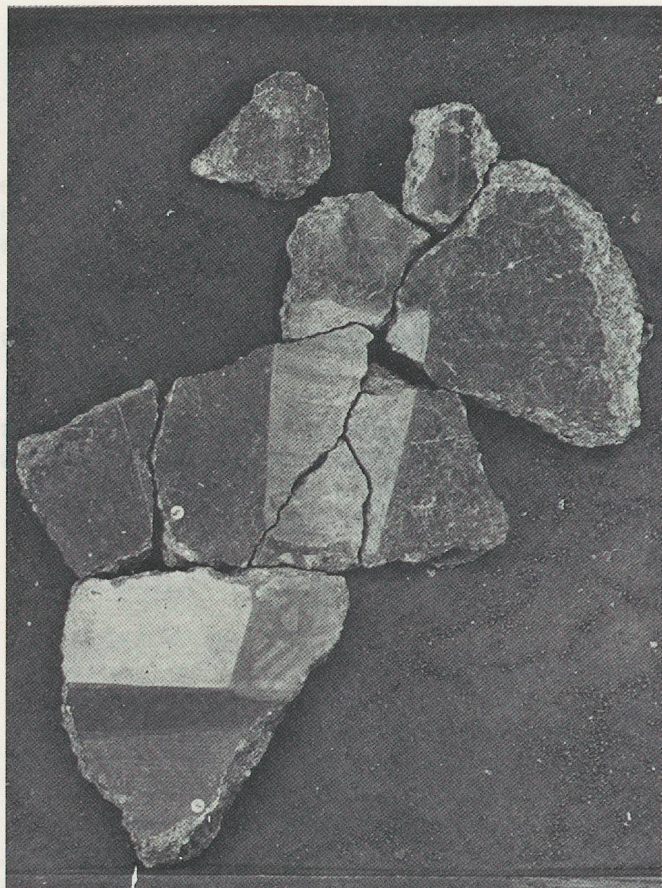


Fig. 1.

to distinguish. Nevertheless the figure was obviously dressed in a multi-coloured costume. The arm is rather thick and seems to be heavily enwrapped. Thin bands run crosswise over the arm suggesting leather straps.

Comparing the fragments described above with some of the gladiatorial scenes in the mosaic-floor of the Roman villa at Nennig in Germany, some striking similarities emerge. First, the leg standing on the platform is almost identical with the left leg of the *bestiarius* who, having struck down a panther, is raising his right arm in triumph⁴. Moreover, the left arm of this *bestiarius* is likewise protected by a cover that renders it disproportionately thick. Although we see no thin bands running crosswise over his left arm, this is a normal feature in representations of gladiators⁵. The bare leg may have belonged to a gladiator wearing only a loin-cloth or *subligaculum* as in another scene of the Nennig mosaic⁶.

Apart from the similarities with the mosaic-floor at Nennig, there is some additional evidence that we are dealing with scenes derived from the amphitheater. Most straightforwardly pointing in this direction are



Fig. 2.

the fragments showing the characteristic skin of a panther, an animal often appearing in such scenes and, as we have seen, also present in the Nennig mosaic. Furthermore, there are some fragments forming part of an object that may very well be a helmet. The position of this object, at the upper side of the scene just underneath the cornice that frames off the main zone at the top, is fully in line with this hypothesis. Finally, two or three lance-heads provide further evidence for the interpretation proposed above.

Portrait scene

In the last group of paintings, some of the figures have been better preserved. Nevertheless, there are more problems of interpretation. The figures, no more than 50 cm high, are represented in an elaborate setting consisting of upright garlands, tendrils and fluted columns that support an entablature shown in perspective. As the gladiators in the second group of paintings, they are standing on a yellow platform or stage in the main zone of the wall. The fragments belonging to this group may have formed part of one single scene consisting of at least five figures.

The left part of the scene was found with most of the fragments still closely connected (fig. 3). We see two males standing close together, one dressed in a wide-fitting and ungirt purple tunic with sleeves, the

⁴ Parlasca 1959, pl. 39,2.

⁵ Cf. Bögli 1984, fig. 12.

⁶ Parlasca 1959, pl. 37,1.

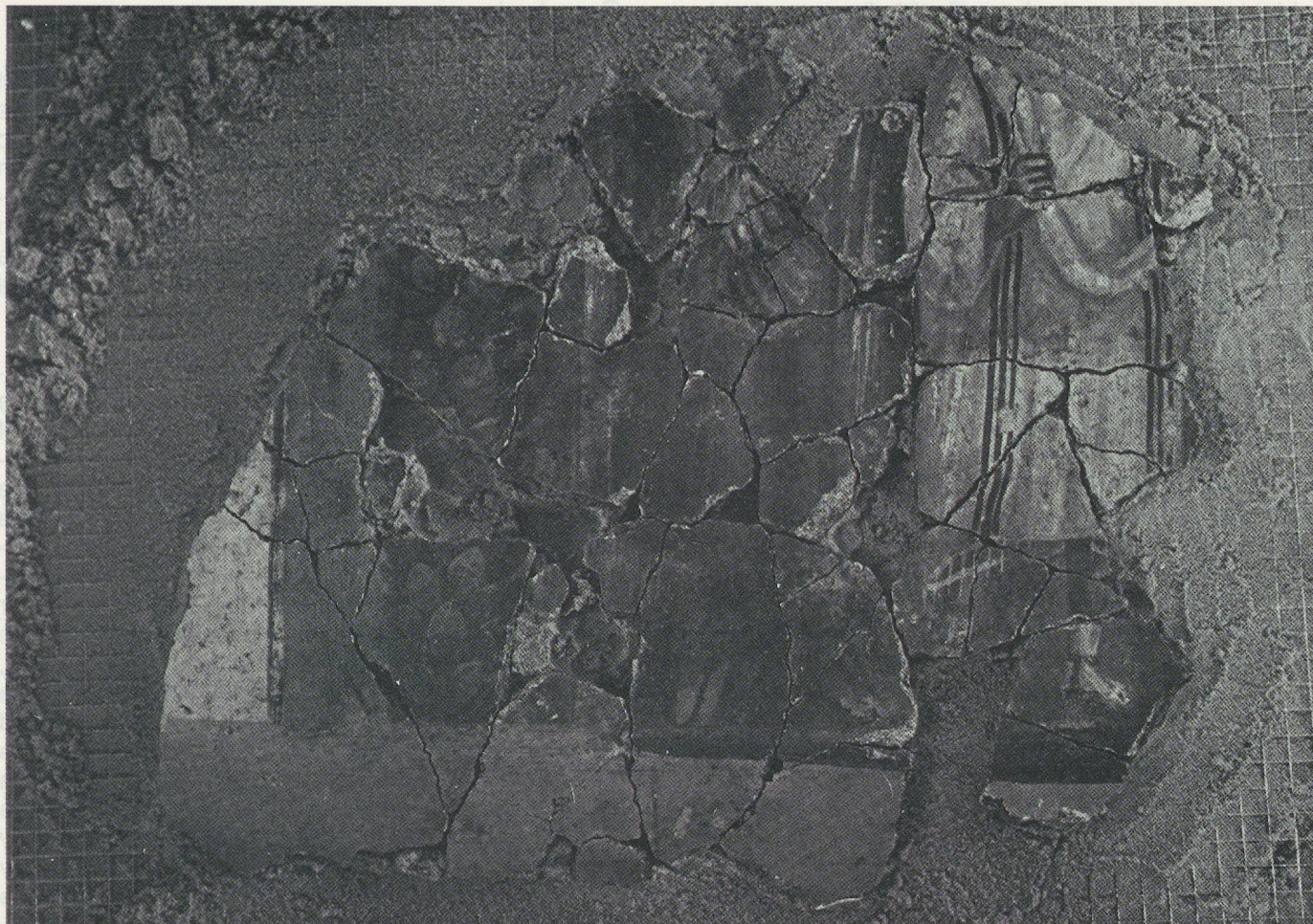


Fig. 3.

other dressed in a similar white tunic with three purple *clavi* on either side of the body. Heads are missing. Both tunics are fringed. The right hand of the person in the purple tunic holds a round object that probably represents a purse. Both figures are turned to the left, to what must be the centre of the scene. Unfortunately, only a minor part of the rest of the scene could so far be reconstructed.

The centre may have been formed by a person who appears to be seated. Five adjoining fragments show a person holding a writing-tablet in his left hand and a pen or *stilus* in his right (fig. 4). Here, also, the head is missing, but part of a beard has been preserved. The man is dressed in a purple tunic. In addition, a white robe is draped over his left shoulder and is also visible beneath his left hand. He holds the written side of the



Fig. 4.

tablet towards the onlookers. To this figure probably belong some other fragments, one showing a bare foot and another the leg of a chair. The man is represented a bit larger than the two standing figures, due to the fact that he is sitting somewhat more to the front of the scene.

Two other figures, dressed in a white and purple tunic respectively, may have formed part of this scene. Thus, we may be dealing with a symmetrical composition, centred round the sitting person with the writing-tablet. To his left there may have been a standing male figure in a white tunic, also carrying *clavi*, whose head and right hand have been partly preserved. The orientation of the head, towards the right, fits in with this hypothesis. Finally, a fragment showing a left foot and part of a purple garment must belong to a fifth figure.

To the right and left of the scene there were upright garlands on a red ground, followed by yellow tendrils on a white ground and fluted columns supporting an entablature.

The interpretation of the scene is uncertain. Nevertheless, a few observations can be made. The representation shows a few striking similarities with funerary reliefs from the Roman provinces in Central and North-West Europe. It seems certain that real, living persons are represented and that the scene has no mythological content. Moreover, the figures do not seem to be engaged in any sort of action. In fact, the scene seems a mere representation of a group of persons apparently joined together on the basis of some common bond, whether as relatives or as colleagues. Comparison with the funerary reliefs reveals that their clothing forms part of a native Gallic tradition⁷. The purse held by the standing person in the purple tunic occurs quite frequently on grave-monuments and is believed to illustrate the material well-being of the deceased⁸. The writing-tablet, also, is a common attribute in grave sculpture, underlining the social status that the art of writing must have had in a society where literacy still was a relatively rare phenomenon⁹.

Conclusions

The villa in which these paintings were found, must have been owned and inhabited by a member of the local land-owning elite¹⁰ and it seems reasonable to assume that the owners had themselves portrayed in the scene with the writing-tablet. Like other villa-owners in this area, the family may have played an active role in the administration of their *civitas*, whose capital is assumed to have been the Colonia Ulpia Traiana, modern Xanten¹¹.

The wall-paintings found in the villa serve as an illustration of the social achievements and ideals of the inhabitants. Their portrait shows them as members of the native population adopting Roman culture, exemplified by the writing-tablet and by the *clavi* on the white tunics, although the number of the *clavi* is quite unusual. As on the grave-monuments, the purse probably points to the family's prosperity. The mythological scenes with their explanatory texts are another example of Graeco-Roman culture copied by the villa-owners, reemphasizing their education. In fact, on the basis of the mortar composition it cannot be precluded that the portrait of the inhabitants and some of the mythological scenes shared the same room. The gladiators and other fighters in the arena must have been depicted in another room, as the mortar composition in this group of paintings is very different from that of the other groups. This may imply that the scenes derived from the amphitheater were not painted simultaneously with the other decorations. Probably, most of the wall-paintings found in the villa were applied at the end of the second century, at the time when the villa was being rebuilt and extended. Apparently, at a later date a workshop was called in to apply the decoration with the arena-scenes, possibly in commemoration of a *munus* in the amphitheater of the Colonia Ulpia Traiana, offered to the *civitas* by the owner of the villa¹².

⁷ Wild 1985.

⁸ Walter 1974, 146-147.

⁹ Walter 1974, 147; Merten 1983.

¹⁰ van Es 1981, 235-236.

¹¹ van Es 1981, 217, 236; Bechert 1982, 47-48, 62.

¹² Cf. Dumasy 1983, 214-215.

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Fig. 1 is based mainly on observations made and thoughts developed while examining the wall-paintings.

Aardenburg is a village in the Dutch province of Zeeland, situated near the Dutch-Belgian border, on the northwestern edge of the pleistocene coversand region in the south of the Netherlands and Belgium. Excavations by the State Service for Archaeological Investigations since 1985 showed that the settlement was founded on the eastern bank of a creek¹. Traces were found of the southern part of the west settlement wall, revealing a gate and a ditch. Within the Roman walls two buildings were uncovered: the larger one possibly the main building, and a smaller one a Romano-Celtic temple (fig. 1). Faint traces of other buildings were found as well, but their floorplan cannot be reconstructed. However, it is clear that they were facing the same quarter as the main building and the temple. Outside the walls another building was partially uncovered (fig. 1).

On account of the finds the settlement must be dated from 170 to 275 AD.

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categories: a smooth surface category comprising some 800 fragments and a coarse surface category totalling up to nearly 1700 fragments. Within these two categories 13 groups were distinguished according to other criteria, e.g. mortar composition and design. Nearly all fragments belong to variants of the panel decoration system. Only two groups supply enough evidence to propose a reconstruction of the decorations.

The first category paintings with a smooth surface are richer and more carefully finished than the second category paintings with a coarse surface. Thus the first category has marblings derived from Egypt and exhibits combinations of marbles. Also, the first category presents more additional decoration motifs, especially garlands, than the other.

As for the interior second category, the fragments are more numerous and much smaller in size than the pieces of the first category. Moreover, a considerable part of the fragments were found in the lower strata, in dumps or reused as road material, and naturally, have crumbled away considerably. Therefore, the second category paintings must have been removed during the Roman habitation period and must be dated in the early phase of the settlement, which according to the excavator extends from 170 to 275 AD and terminates in a clear-cut phase for the whole area. The first category paintings may have replaced them in the second period, eventually replaced in the demolition of the buildings during the Middle Ages.

