

WINCHESTER

A CITY IN THE MAKING

Archaeological excavations between 2002 – 2007
on the sites of Northgate House, Staple Gardens and the former Winchester Library, Jewry St

Section 6

Painted Wall Plaster
by Edward Biddulph

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Introduction

A total of 251 fragments weighing 4363 g was recovered from the Northgate House site; none were found at the Discovery Centre. This report excludes residual occurrences and focuses on the proportion, substantial nonetheless (242 fragments weighing 3944 g), collected from Roman-period deposits (Table 1). The assemblage was sorted into context groups and quantified by fragment count and group weight. A note of the mortar fabrics was made, but these were not examined in detail. The painted plaster was scanned to identify the range of colours and decorative schemes present. The schemes were attributed to individual groups, although since no plaster was found *in situ*, the original location of the recovered material is unknown.

| Group | Phase | Context | Count | Weight (g) |
|---------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|
| NH8516 | 2.3 | NH1351 | 1 | 47 |
| NH8521 | 2.2 | NH3822 | 4 | 96 |
| NH8522 | 2.2 | NH2589 | 184 | 2591 |
| | 2.3 | NH7019 | 19 | 316 |
| | 2.3 | NH7637 | 3 | 30 |
| NH8523 | 2.3 | NH7015 | 1 | 30 |
| NH8524 | 2.3 | NH2300 | 1 | 2 |
| | 2.3 | NH2619 | 29 | 832 |
| Totals | - | - | 242 | 3944 |

Table 1: Summary of wall plaster from Roman-period deposits

Fabrics and application

Three plaster fabrics were identified. Fabric 1 had a soft yellow-brown matrix filled with moderate to frequent chalk fragments, sand grains of varying size and straw or grass impressions. Fabric 2 had a white matrix, but was essentially similar to fabric 1 and should perhaps be regarded as a variant of it. Fabric 3 was a hard yellow-brown

matrix filled with moderate chalk fragments, quartz pieces, smaller sand grains, crushed flint, and occasional black or red iron-rich grains. Fabric 1 was commonest, followed by fabric 3, then fabric 2. The backs of some pieces had the impressions of reed or wattle rods, indicating that the plaster had been applied to reed bundles fixed to roof timbers or wattle and daub walls. The plaster generally survived on its mortar backing up to a thickness of 25 mm. A large fragment in context NH2619 appeared to comprise two layers of plaster, each with an application of red-brown paint, suggesting that the room from which the fragment derived was re-plastered at least once. Different types of surface treatment were recognised. In some cases, for example on pieces in contexts NH2589 and NH3822, the plaster was simply skimmed to form a surface. A thin coat of white or colour paint could be applied directly to this surface for further refinement, as exhibited on pieces in contexts NH1351 and NH7019. Other pieces, for example from contexts NH2589 and NH2619, saw an application of colour paint on top of a white base paint.

Decorative schemes

Coloured washes or painted geometric or figurative designs were recorded on plaster from groups NH8522, NH8523 and NH8524. The plaster collected from groups NH8516 and NH8521 was plain.

Group NH8522(Structure)

The majority of wall plaster fragments (85% of the phased assemblage by count) was recovered from demolition deposits associated with this group. Despite the quantity, the group mainly consisted of amorphous fragments with plain whitewashed surfaces on a fabric 1 mortar. However, traces of colour and patterning, usually applied on a white base, were seen on a few pieces. Red- or orange-brown washes were recorded on some 25 fragments (three being on a fabric 3 mortar). Dark grey paint was seen on a further 17 pieces; one of these a little more decorative, featuring a light grey stripe sandwiched between darker grey stripes or panels (Fig. 1, no.1). Similarly decorated plaster was recovered from a 4th century pit at Neatham, although there the light grey stripe was bordered by orange-brown paint (Redknap 1986, fig. 99.1). It is possible that the red- and orange-brown and grey paint from group NH8522 was used in the same decorative scheme (the colours were used together in group NH8524).

Group NH8523 (Levelling over earlier structure NH8522)

A single fragment had traces of a red-brown painted surface above a white undercoat on a fabric 1 mortar.

Group NH8524 (Pit group)

This group had a relatively wide range of decorative schemes, all on fabric 1 mortar. A small fragment of plaster from context NH2300 was painted turquoise (Fig. 1, no. 2). No edges were seen, but the fragment may be part of a border; blue-brown was used for a narrow border at Neatham (Redknap 1986, fig. 99.8). Another fragment was decorated with a red-brown stripe or panel and a sphere-like motif on a white background (Fig. 1, no. 3). Traces of a red-brown wash bordered by a dark grey stripe or panel were seen on other pieces.

Discussion

The fragments do not allow decorative schemes to be fully reconstructed, but the evidence points to panels painted orange- and red-brown and grey bordered by light grey stripes in NH8522, and red-brown panels in NH8523. The scheme was more complex in NH8524, involving red-brown, grey and turquoise borders and perhaps a floral or rounded pattern. The colours and schemes match those recorded at Neatham in part; given the late 4th century dating at both sites, it is possible that the painting was the product of a single workshop. However, until much more painted plaster is recovered from Winchester and the wider region, the organisation of the industry must remain a subject of considerable speculation. The plaster from the Northgate House site suggests that groups NH8522, NH8523 and NH8524 served a domestic function. Wall paintings would be appropriately placed in areas used for social gatherings and entertaining, for example, a dining room, bath suite or reception area. The plain walls of groups NH8516 and NH8521 might indicate lower status, although given the very small amount recovered from those groups, it is uncertain to what extent the plaster is representative of the overall decoration.

Catalogue of painted plaster (Fig. 1)

1. Light grey stripe between dark grey stripes or panels. Demolition layer NH2589, group NH8522. Phase 2.2
2. Small fragment painted turquoise. Context NH2300, fill of pit NH2299, group NH8524. Phase 2.3
3. Red-brown stripe and rounded motif on white background. Context NH2619, fill of pit NH2299, group NH8524. Phase 2.3



Section 6 Figure 1: Painted wall plaster

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