

Yeni Hammam: History in Graffiti

Catalogue of images found in plaster layers in an Ottoman bathhouse in Plovdiv

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Historical Overview

Yeni Hammam is a 16th century Ottoman bath (the first mention in the Ottoman archives date back to 1541), located in the centre of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It is a monument of culture of local importance and is one of the last two preserved Ottoman baths in the town. It functioned as a bath until 1990s. After a devastating fire in 2016, the building has been abandoned and heavily deteriorated, yet the fire revealed several layers of plaster and previously unknown decorations which clarified the history of the edifice.

Methodology

The author explores the history of the building by creating a complete catalogue of all the medieval graffiti and the murals from the Revival period, revealed in the plaster layers (Fig. 1), and thus puts the monument in national and international context referring not only to the eastern Ottoman bath tradition and construction, but also to the western decorative practices.

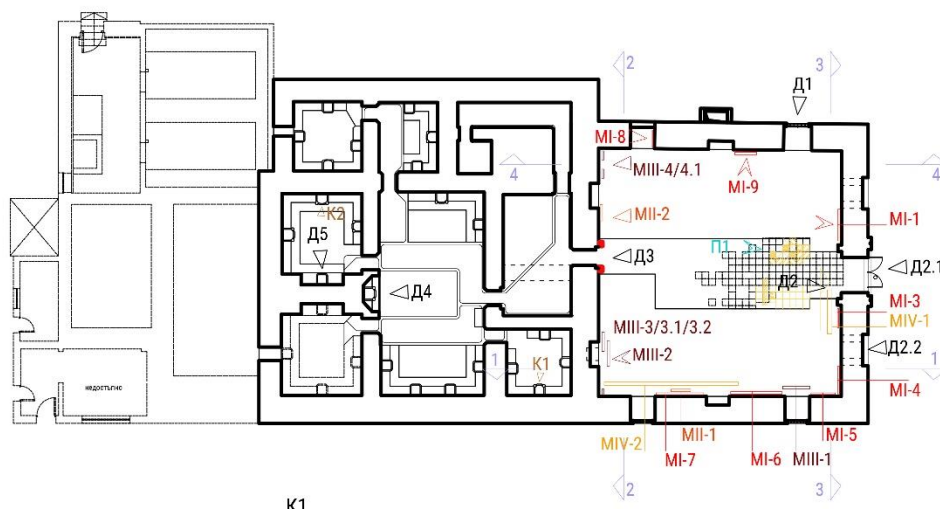


Fig. 1. Scheme of murals location (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

Results

The analysis of the plaster layers revealed the following building periods:

First period (16th–17th century): The building was erected during 16th century (1530–1540), based on the Ottoman Tax Archives. It was located between the Turkish and the Jewish Quarters, tangent to one of the main commercial routes from Vienna to Constantinople. It functioned as a bath with few minor repairs. By the end of the XVI century the windows on the front façade were narrowed and new plaster layers were laid. Numerous graffiti drawings are also revealed in this layer (Fig. 1). The pigments used are in the dark range – cinnabar, ocher, black. The elements are inscribed in the plaster and vary in shape and size – letters from the alphabet, geometric shapes, scribbles, ships, warriors, and fish shoals (Fig. 2). They are in extremely fragile state, yet the author managed to document them all. Similar types of graffiti can be observed in medieval churches across Europe – Greece, Macedonia, France, Britain, etc.

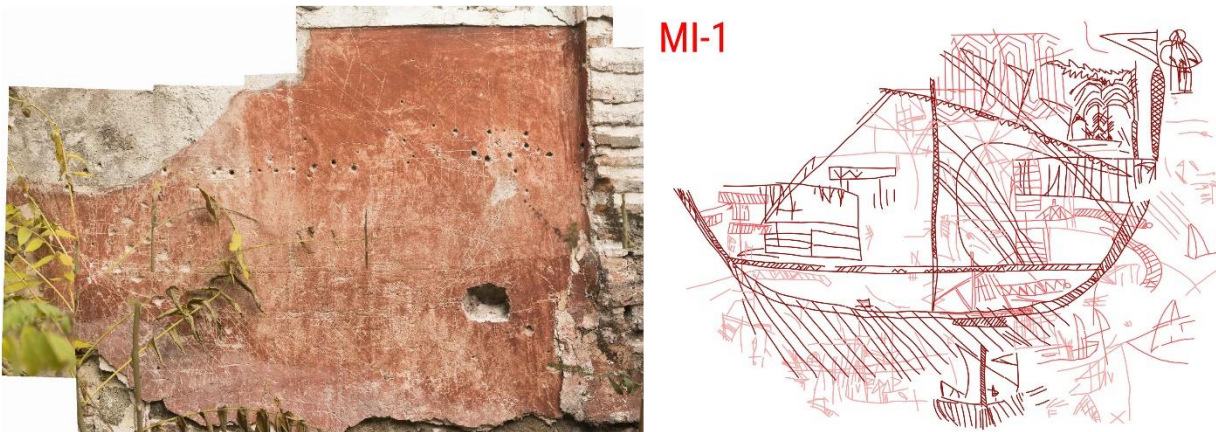


Fig. 2. Graffiti drawings (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

Second period (18th – early 19th century): In the next plaster layer, traces of two bird images, most possibly peacocks, are found (Fig. 3). A similar technique of depicting tail and neck feathers is found in medieval manuscripts in both the Western and Eastern traditions (Manuscript Sacramentarium gelasianum, Psalter Netherlands, from Utrecht, 1290, Kalila and Dimna – 1310, Kitab Na't al-hayawan wa-manafi'ih, 13th century and Aja'ib al-makluqat – The Miracles of Creation by Al-Qazwini, early 15th century).

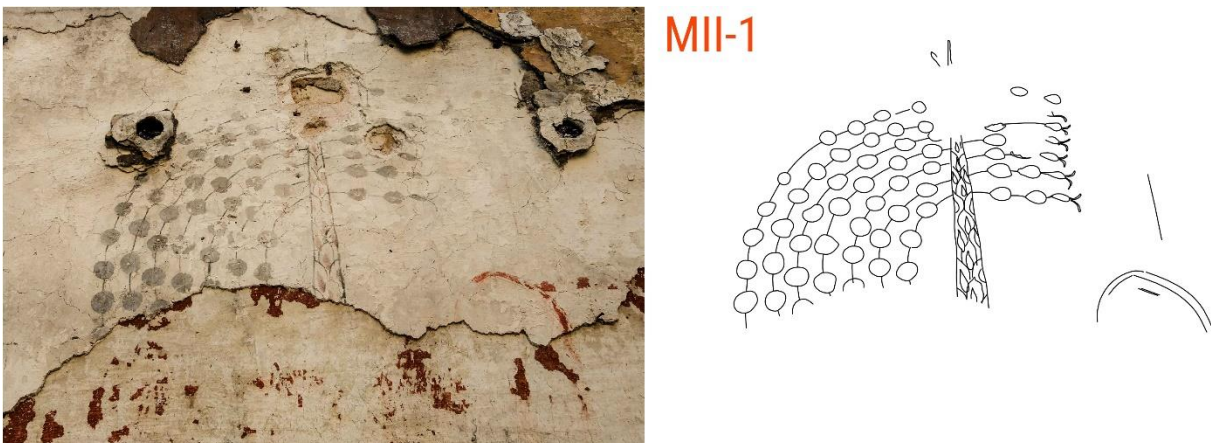


Fig. 3. Peacock detail (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

Third period (1818 – 2nd third of the 19th century): After several earthquakes in the first third of the 19th century, the urban landscape of Plovdiv was heavily damaged. One of the most devastating earthquakes was the one from 1818 and it most probably led to the demolition of the original masonry dome and the need of quick construction of new wooden one, which can be spotted on later photos from 1892. The plaster layer is characterized by saturated, dark colors, executed entirely in the spirit of the frescoes from the early Bulgarian Revival (which are heavily influenced by the Western Baroque) – lavish hand-painted ornamentation with the rhythmic demarcation of the mural panels (traced throughout the height of the dressing room), reinforced with black ribbons and lines in Turkish blue and ultramarine. These murals are severely damaged and can be traced only in a few fragments (Fig. 4). The author is currently working on a restoration project based on the documented elements.



Fig. 4. Early Revival murals (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

Fourth period (2nd third of the 19th century – 1928): The next plaster layer is characterized by bright, colorful chromatics (white, Turkish blue, yellow, black) and remnants of painted architectural elements – columns, railings, vases. The style of the murals is typical for the Mature Revival (the second third of the 19th century). Unlike the previous plaster layer, here the ornamentation develops in height – the preserved fragments are at the level of the second floor, around the windows. Given the classical proportions of the painted columns (Fig. 5), and given the growing population of the city and the need for more infrastructure, probably in this period a wooden gallery in the locker room appeared, forming a second floor. Its presence is documented in the photographs archived in National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage during survey from 1980s. The window openings on the second level were probably drilled in the stone wall during that period. Unfortunately, this plaster layer is heavily damaged and its reconstruction is becoming more and more challenging.



Fig. 5. Late Revival murals (© Nina Toleva-Nowak) remnants of column with decoration.

Fifth period (1928–1945): In 1928 another devastating earthquake had taken place and the wooden roof was destroyed for a second time. Evidence for this we find by comparing two photos of the building – the first one from 1892 clearly showing the roof of the bathroom, as well as the Tash Kopryu mosque with its minaret, destroyed in 1928 during the great Chirpan earthquake, and a second one photo from 1930s, which clearly shows the major change in the slope of the roof and its overall morphology. After the final reconstruction, the roof remained classic pitched roof with small partial segment timber dome hidden in it. In that period, after the reconstruction, the walls were treated with roller stencils and decorative floor ceramic tiles were installed.

Sixth period (1945–1989): The window openings of the central facade were finally closed and ceramic tiles on the floor in the dressing room were laid. Some of the stone sinks have been replaced by cast concrete mosaic elements. Ceramic tiles (uncalibrated) have been laid on the walls and the plinths. The higher part of the walls, along with the domes, have been treated with oil-based paint. The holes made for the wood-burning stoves used for heating indicated that the hypocaust system may no longer have functioned.

Seventh period (1989–2016): The bathroom retained its authentic function until the end of the 1980s, and was subsequently turned into a shop and warehouse for solid wood furniture. To this last function we can refer the final closing of the secondary entrance of the north-west wall of the dressing room. On February 18 - 19, 2016, a fire burned the most representative part – the dressing room with a wooden sloping roof and a segmental dome, the staircase to the gallery on the second level. The bathroom finally closes its doors and remains in high-risk of self-destruction due to weather conditions, threatening to lose the memory of the building and the traces of Ottoman public baths in Plovdiv. By 2022, no strengthening of the structure of the walls or the domes were implemented and the facility remains in extremely poor condition.

Conclusion

The study of the immovable cultural heritage of local significance revealed the rich and full of twists history of the building. Placed in a Balkan and European context, it does not lose its value, on the contrary – it is a witness to a unique amalgam of Eastern architectural and urban influences and Western European techniques of monumental synthesis of arts. The evolution of the decoration in the most representative room (the dressing room), and the multiple layers with their specifics (graffiti drawings, stylized images of birds, traditional Revival decorations, techniques of applying patterns with a roller, etc.) prove that with such buildings there is a need for a strict research methodology so that each monument is examined in the necessary depth and context, in order to prevent the loss of valuable information. The author is currently working on a reconstruction of the decoration, which will be presented in the future.

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