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The Stucco Decoration of the "Tomb of Agrippina" at Bacoli seen by Clérisseau

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Résumé

Dans les Champs Phlégréens (Campanie, Italie), à Bacoli, se trouve un monument connu sous le nom de « Tombe d’Agrippine » qui, selon la légende, abrite la dépouille de la mère de Néron, assassinée par son fils en 59 p.C. Ces vestiges d’époque impériale, qui sont en réalité les restes du nymphée d’une imposante villa romaine, ont intéressé les artistes du Grand Tour comme le prouvent les nombreuses représentations du monument qui ont été faites, mais Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721-1820) est le seul à avoir dessiné la décoration de stuc encore en place sur la voûte du couloir (D). Cette planche précieuse apporte des informations sur les décors antiques à prendre et à laisser...

Introduction

1. The so-called “Tomb of Agrippina”

1.1. Its context

The so-called “Tomb of Agrippina” (fig. 1), an important stop on the Grand Tour (Horn-Oncken 1982: 88), is situated in Bacoli, the former *Bauli* (Naples province)¹. Tacitus (Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 7-9) and Suetonius (Suetonius, *Nero*, 34) indicated that, in 59 AC, Agrippina was killed by assassins commissioned by her son. Tacitus also wrote that, after Nero’s death, his faithful servants erected a modest sepulchre, a simple *tumulus*, on the road to *Misenum*. The scholarly tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries has misinterpreted the testimony of the ancient author, who located Agrippina's tomb on the road between Baiae and *Misenum*, identifying it with the site of an imperial theatre-nymphaeum (Iodice y Raimondi, 1996: 1-2). Moreover, if Baiae and *Misenum* were sought after by the Grand Tour’s travellers because the first was considered by

¹ Our thanks go to Fabio Pagano, the director of the Parco Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei and his team for allowing us to visit the “Tomb of Agrippina” and for accompanying us there, especially la dott.ssa Silvana Carannante and Francesco Russo. We also want to thank Delphine Morana Burlot for bringing to our attention Clérisseau’s drawings, Évelyne Prioux and Pascale Linant de Bellefonds for their iconographic advice, and Bernadette Walker for the grammatical corrections of this text.

the ancient sources, as the most famous spa resort, patronised by the Republican aristocracy and later the imperial family, and the second as the imperial fleet place, *Bauli* was only known for that account. It is therefore not surprising that the only Roman vestige still preserved in the 16th-19th centuries in Bacoli, where Tacitus explicitly located the story, was thought to be her sepulchre. As regards the real tomb of Agrippina, Maiuri believed that it was destroyed in the 15th century together with the remains of Caesar's villa (Maiuri, 1955). The archaeological research has highlighted two phases: in a first phase, according to the construction technique and the rich stucco decoration of the vault of the lower corridor (D), the ruins belonged to the small theatre of a maritime villa dated from the Julio-Claudian period (Iodice y Raimondi, 1996). In a second phase, the remains are probably those of a maritime villa's *nymphaeum*, whose construction started maybe in the beginning of the 2nd century BC. At this time, the *cavea* was transformed into a large semi-circular *exedra* with a large living room, and a cistern was built nearby. The dating is suggested by the decoration, but more stratigraphic information is needed to refine the date as well as the function. In both cases these structures are part of a larger complex, perhaps a villa belonging to the imperial family or a court member. Indeed, the Bacoli theatre is situated in a privileged position facing the sea. Only one third of the original structure, largely destroyed by modern constructions, remains. The "Tomb of Agrippina" belongs now to the archaeological park of the Phlegraean Fields.

1.2. History of the studies

In 1940, Amedeo Maiuri began a major excavation campaign, which really clarified the monument's function as the *cavea* of a small Odeon belonging to a Roman villa. The building, and probably the stuccoes too, were restored in 1940 (Maiuri, 1955: 266). The complete survey of the site was made in the 1960's and 1990's (Iodice y Raimondi, 1996)². Moreover, in recent years, the Naples's university Federico II and the Sapienza at Rome realised a high-tech study applied to archaeology on the site for its enhancement (Catuogno, 2021). The stuccoed decoration of the vault was first mentioned briefly by Roger Ling in 1977 in the appendix of an article about the stucco decoration at Baiae with a sketch of the decorative scheme (Ling, 1977: 50). A more complete and illustrated study was proposed by Silvana Iodice and Marialaura Raimondi in 1996 (Iodice y Raimondi, 1996) and by Nicole Blanc (Blanc, 2007). They achieved

² The presence at the end of the corridor (D), on the south wall, of two fragments of stucco, seems not to be in their original place. These fragments, which present the same swan motif and mouldings, could have been originally part of the stuccoed decoration of the eastern part of the vault.

an architectural and iconographical analysis of the corridor' stuccoes, which today are very altered mostly because of the smoke from the torches of the visitors in previous centuries; graffiti of that time can also be found³. The Italian antiquarian Paolo Antonio Paoli (1720-1790), in his guidebook published in 1768, noted some of them (Paoli, 1768: 33, pl. LVII-LVIII).

The Modern's representations of the "Tomb of Agrippina"

This monument was an essential part of the Grand Tour, as shown by its numerous representations and is mentioned in the Phlegraean Fields' old guidebooks and literary texts.

Non-exhaustive list of Modern times representations of the ancient monument (Tabla: D. Neyme y L. Narès):

Year	Author	object	Title	Publication
1660	Drawer: Etienne Duperac; Engraver: Aegidius Sadeler	engraving	<i>A. Villa di Agrippina Julia figliuola di Germanico Cesare et di Agrippina Agosta (...). Abbreviated title</i>	(Sadeler, 1660: pl. 46)
1761	Charles-Louis Clérisseau	ink and pencil drawing	<i>Plafond à Baya dans le royaume de Naples</i>	(Hermitage Museum, inv. OP- 1855)
1768	Giovanni Battista Natali	engraving	<i>Edifizio fatto in forma di Teatro a Bauli. Detto volgarmente Sepolcro d'Agrippina</i>	(Paoli, 1768: pl. LVII)
1768	Thom Rajola	engraving	<i>Pianta della fabbrica detta Sepolcro d'Agrippina</i>	(Paoli, 1768: pl. LVIII)
1782	Drawer : Chastelet ; Engraver: Varin	engraving	<i>Restes d'un théâtre antique appelé Tombeau d'Agrippine à Bauli près de Bayes</i>	(Saint-Non, 1795- 1798: fig. 216)
1795	Engraver: Bernardino Olivieri	engraving	<i>Veduta degli avanzi di un antico edificio situato a Bauli, che il volgo dice Sepolcro di Agrippina, qualora non fosse stato un Teatro</i>	(Olivieri, 1795: pl. XXIX)

³ This practice was frequent during the Grand Tour in the Phlegraean Fields. For example, many graffiti, often bearing a name and a date, are still present on the internal walls of the *Piscina Mirabilis* in *Misenum*.

1803	Valenti	engraving	<i>Vista a Mezzo giorno degl'avanzi del Sepolcro d'Agrippina presto la strada che dirige a Bacoli</i>	(Morghen, 1803: pl. 34)
1810 - 1825	unknown	Painting on porcelain plate	<i>Paesaggio con rovine</i>	(Napoli, museo di Capodimonte, inv. 1500469371)
1810-1825	unknown	Painting on porcelain plate	<i>Paesaggio con rovine</i>	(Napoli, museo di Capodimonte, inv. 1500469388)
1820-1830	Anton Pitloo Sminck	pencil drawing on paper	<i>Studio di paesaggio lacustre col sepolcro di Agrippina a Pozzuoli</i>	(Napoli, Certosa di San Martino, inv. 13469)
1827	Gigante Achille	pencil drawing on paper	<i>Studio del sepolcro di Agrippina a Bacoli</i>	(Napoli, Certosa di San Martino, inv. 19038)
1838 - 1845	Gigante Achille	pencil drawing on paper	<i>Veduta del sepolcro di Agrippina a Bacoli</i>	(Napoli, Certosa di San Martino, inv. 18897)

The artwork's production on the "Tomb of Agrippina" mainly consist in *vedute*, a genre featuring detailed landscapes, some of which focusing on ancient ruins. One of the earliest views of the monument was achieved by Etienne Duperac and published by the antiquarian Marco Sadeler in 1606. Some other examples show that the monument is generally represented from the front and the engraving even depicts an inhabited shoreline. So, Giovanni Battista Natali (1698-1768) depicted fishermen, as well as the Grand Tour's travellers (fig. 2). Those also appear in a drawing by Valenti, visiting the "Tomb of Agrippina", which is not a surprise since the travel guides mentioned the site as an obligatory passage in the Phlegraean Fields. For instance, Pompeo Sarnelli, in his *Guida De' Forestieri Curiosi di vedere, e considerare le cose notabili di Pozzoli, Baja, Miseno, Cuma ed altri luoghi vicini* from 1685 indicates the stuccoed vaults, with their grotesques and animals, but also that the ashes of Nero's mother were kept there. Moreover, some fifty years after Sarnelli, the abbot Gougenot mentions the decorations in his diary (Gougenot, 1755-1756: 747-756)⁴.

In this series of drawings dedicated to the "Tomb of Agrippina", an overlooked one of Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721-1820) came to our attention and fortunately provides a new interesting testimony for this decoration. While the other artists depict general views of the monument seen from the shore, he seems to be the only one interested in the internal stucco decoration, which

⁴ We would like to thank Antoine Chatelain for the reference.

was already damaged in his time, blackened by the torches' smoke and some of it having previously fallen.

2. Confrontation between the stuccoed vault of “Tomb of Agrippa” and Clérisseau’s drawing

In 1761, Clérisseau accompanied the British architect, James Adam (1730-1794) on his Grand Tour (Lui, 2006: 121; Narès, 2023: 330). They stayed in Naples between September and October and visited the Phlegraean Fields. On this occasion, Clérisseau produced seven ink and pencil drawings, bought by Catherine II of Russia and now in the Hermitage Museum collection in St. Petersburg (Lui, 1995: 35; Narès, 2023: 330-331; ongoing). They represent the ceiling and vault’s decorations of ancient monuments located in Baiae and its surroundings; the ones visited by travellers between the 17th and early 19th centuries, and which are recorded in guidebooks and memories (Horn-Oncken, 1982). One of these drawings (Hermitage Museum, inv. OP-1855) represents a portion of the long east-west corridor’s vault (D).

The white walls of axial underground passage’s vault (D) feature in the middle zone a simple succession of high panels incised in the plaster, which were painted according to the eighteenth-century visitors (Ling, 1977: 50), and the barrel vault is covered with a white stuccoed decoration, occupying the whole narrow surface of the corridor (8 m long x 2 m wide). It has already been the object of different iconographical descriptions and analysis (Ling, 1977: 50-51; Iodice y Raimondi, 1996: 7-12; Blanc, 2007: 508-510) and the aim here is to confront the current remains with Clérisseau’s drawing OP-1855 entitled *Plafond a Baya dans le royaume de Naples* (fig. 3)⁵.

Divided in two rectangular fields delineated by a moulded cornice consisting of a double astragal flanking a leaf-and-tongue frieze, the stuccoed decoration presents two juxtaposed panel compositions, the one of the western section being longer⁶. Clérisseau focused on this last section, which is easily recognizable because of the large rectangular panels; each one flanked by a rectangular compartment on the north and south sides and by two square coffers on the east and west sides, their corner being occupied by a square coffer. An egg-moulding frames all of them. The square coffers of the lateral sides (d) are inscribed with hexagons

⁵ <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/02.+drawings/220165>

⁶ N. Blanc indicates a juxtaposed panel composition for the eastern side and a tripartite pattern for the western side (Blanc, 2007: 509).

adorned with a winged griffon, while the central coffers (e) are decorated with a rosette⁷. The rectangular panels are inscribed by an alternance of medallion adorned with palmettes and sail-shaped fields framed by Doric *cymatia* (Ling, 1977: 50).

Clérisseau did not draw all the mouldings but his observations are correct because they correspond perfectly to the actual remains. As for the ornaments that adorn the hexagons, he did record the rosettes correctly too, but transformed the winged griffins into sphinxes. He seems to have focused on the best-preserved portion as he rendered almost every panel of the corridor's end. Compared with the recent scheme proposed by S. V. Iodice and M. Raimondi (fig. 4), Clérisseau added a band of four small coffers inscribed by hexagons and diagonal squares on the western side⁸. After checking on the site, it appears effectively that this side conserves a band composed by two small coffers flanking a rectangular one, probably already poorly preserved at his time, which could explain the choice to only outline them (fig. 5).

The panels and coffers are still decorated with figures. If a part of the stucco has fallen and is now quite altered, particularly at the level of the eastern rectangular panels, it is still possible to read some of them, that we will describe from west to east and compare with Clérisseau's drawings.

The corridor's medallion (b) presents a flying female figure, seen frontally and naked. Her raised arms hold a thin cloak which floats down her back and is wrapped around her legs. Even if her head and left shoulder have disappeared, she probably figures a Maenad or one of the *Horae* (Blanc, 2007: 509). Instead of this motif, Clérisseau chose to draw in the medallion (b) a seated woman, wearing a *peplos* and holding in her left arm a cornucopia. She is looking at the Cupid holding an amphora on his right shoulder (fig. 6). The French artist represented the counterpart of this seated female figure in the second medallion (l) whose original decoration is now lost. In the drawing, it is possible to observe a seated female figure, in three-quarter view, with her chest bared and her legs covered by her *himation*. On her left an amphora is posed and, on her right, stands a small Cupid holding a little jar (fig. 8).

Some of the rectangular compartments of the vault preserve their figures: the compartment (c) shows a naked female figure, three-quarter view and lying to the left, her right arm stretched

⁷ We choose to use the reference letters of the S. V. Iodice and M. Raimondi's graphic schema (Iodice y Raimondi, 1996: fig. 8).

⁸ Ling seems to have seen them (Ling, 1977: 50): "(1) Downward slope. Edges of three rectangular panels".

forward and her left arm stretched back, in the swimmer's position. She probably had her pendant in the compartment (a). Instead of these probable nereids, Clérisseau represented, in each one, a reclining female figure, also naked, in a semi-seated position: in one, she holds out her right hand to a swan with outstretched wings and in the second, she seems surprised, as her left raised hand suggests, by a Pan unveiling her (fig. 6). The sail-shaped field square (g) shows a sea-centaur with a nereid. The sea-monster is advancing towards the right, his barred torso from the front, while his lower limbs are depicted in profile. He is holding a tray in his right hand and his left arm is stretched back. Of the nereid, seated in a three-quarter position, only the left arm remains, which crosses that of the creature. In Clérisseau's drawing, this panel corresponds to the central one, but the representation is completely different from the one visible on the vault. He drew three standing characters: a naked man, facing front, with a quiver passed around his left shoulder, his right hand raised and his left lowered and holding a spear behind his legs. He's accompanied on his right by two female figures looking towards him. Both are represented in a three-quarter view, wearing a *himation*. One of them is carrying in her right hand a jar and a second jar is placed on the foot of the second one feminine figure. The vault's compartment (h) keeps a nereid riding a sea-panther to the left. The barred feminine figure is lying, frontally. Her right hand rests on the neck of the sea-creature while her left hand, raised, carries a platter. The opposed compartment (f) had a similar motif, but only the female lying figure and a piece of the pisciform tail are still preserved. In the Clérisseau's drawing, these figures are replaced by two naked reclining feminine figures on a three-quarter position: the first one, alone, holds above her head a veil inflated by the wind, while the second one is surrounded by two Cupids, one of them holding a fruit basket on his left shoulder (fig. 7). The compartment (i) and the médaillon (l) are too damaged to distinguish the pattern of the decoration⁹ (fig. 8).

The last remaining compartment (m) in the corridor displays a female figure, reclining to the right. Naked, except for the coat that forms a veil on her back and covers her legs, she rests on her left side, leaning on her elbow, and holds an offering plate on the other hand. In the drawing, only one of the two opposing compartments was designed by Clérisseau, showing another naked female figure reclining on her right side, a Cupid presenting her with a jar (fig. 8).

3. Clérisseau's Drawing: a neoclassical vision of the "Tomb of Agrippina"

⁹ Only a quarter of the médaillon (l) and its palmette remain.

Clérisseau took care to detail some panels but a confrontation between his work and the actual remains has shown that, if the pattern and its ornamentation (rosettes, palmettes) seem correct and the French painter was renowned for his precision, the figurative scenes reveal a reinvention of the ancient decoration (fig. 9). For example, he reproduced inside each rectangular panel on the vault's springing lines a reclining female figure still visible in the compartment (c), (m) and added non-existent elements (l). It is interesting to note that all of them, with the exception of one, contain a curtain similar to those of the Renaissance and Modern's times paintings (Stoichita, 1999: 94). None of the drawings of the central panels and side compartments correspond to the **stuccoes** still visible, whose figures belong to a sea-cortege, Clérisseau seems to have made an assemblage of frequent ancient motifs and well-known paintings in his time.

In the rectangular compartment (c), Clérisseau chose a notorious motif **since the Renaissance, Leda and the swan**¹⁰. Moreover, he probably refers to the archaeological actuality of the time since a fresco found in the ancient ruins of Herculaneum in 1761, the same year of his sojourn with James Adam in Campania, presents an identical composition (fig. 10). The red background wall painting shows a semi-recumbent Leda holding out a patera as if she is offering it to swan with spread wings (Tran Tam Tinh, 1975: 56; Louvre, inv. P18)¹¹.

The nymph and the satyr of the compartment (a) are another well-known theme in ancient art revisited in modern art. This scene can be compared to a Pompeian fresco from the Secret Cabinet of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, in which the satyr is lifting the veil covering a sleeping nymph (MANN, inv. 27685). In modern times, the theme particularly echoes Poussin's *Venus surprised by a satyr* (1626) (Zurich, Kunsthaus, inv. B7/R113), as the position and the gesture of the main satyr are similar to the Clérisseau's one, and even Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving *The satyre surprising a nymph* (c. 1480), which presents too a well-awake semi-recumbent nymph (Louvre, inv. 6910 LR/Recto). The compartments (f) and (m) could be influenced by Titian's *Venus and the Lute Player* (1565-1570) (MET, inv. 36.29) and even by Velázquez's *Toilet of Venus* (1644-1648) (National Gallery, inv. NG2057), which also took its inspiration from Titian. The numerous paintings showing a reclined Venus with Cupids by Boucher could have served as reference. Finally, the last compartment (h) takes part of its inspiration from the Modern figure of Galatea. Generally surrounded by a sea-cortege,

¹⁰ For example, *Leda and the swan* (1530-1540) by Rosso Fiorentino after Michelangelo (National Gallery, inv. NG1868).

¹¹ Entry into the Louvre in 1825.

she is recognisable by the circular shape of the veil floating above her head, but this shape and position of the veil are more a Modern design than an ancient one¹².

Clérisseau's representation in the sail-shaped field square (g) can be interpreted as Phaedra, the nurse and Hippolytus, when Phaedra, by the intermediary of the nurse, reveals her love to Hippolytus. This last one then shows a gesture of refusal with his right raised hand, just before throwing the love letter on the ground. This myth, frequently depicted on Roman sarcophagi (Linant de Bellefonds, 2013), seems to have been widespread in Modern times, as evidenced by the two tragedies written in 1677 by Jean Racine and Jacques Pradon. Furthermore, a wall-painting of Phaedra and her nurse watching Hippolytus go hunting from the room [21] of the *Domus Aurea* in Rome was known since at least the end of the 17th century¹³ and certainly thanks to Pietro Santi Bartoli's engraving of another Roman painting presenting the moment of the revelation by the nurse (RIBA, inv. RIBA82227)¹⁴. The subject was later used in the porcelains of the napolitan manufacture of the king Ferdinand IV (1759-1799). Did Clérisseau choose this scene to echo the funerary character of the place, assimilated by its toponymy to the Tomb of Agrippina?

This motif is also ideally placed in a theatrical setting such as a nymphaeum. In the drawing, the vase placed at the bottom of Phaedra may have the same significance as the crater found on the decoration of the Apollonia's sarcophagus which evokes the palestra, echoing the literary sources that inform us that Hippolytus was deeply involved in gymnastic activities (Linant de Bellefonds, 2000).

The medallions (b) and (l) present a variation of the same seated goddess figure, namely Fortuna, a character very-well attested in Roman art. She follows the model of the seated Fortuna with cornucopia probably known by Clérisseau from Pietro Santi Bartoli's engravings (Bartoli, 1729: section 2, pl. 46) or from his numerous visits of archaeological sites. He only added the Cupids and slightly changed the positions and attributes of characters to give the

¹² See Lanfranco's *Polifemo e Galatea* (1625-1628) in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj at Roma and Van Loo's *Galatée sur les eaux* (1732) (Louvre, inv. 6250).

¹³ See the anonymous' *Hyppolite part pour la chasse* (end of 17th century) (Louvre, inv. 18122, Recto) (<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020205624>).

¹⁴ With a misattributed title: *Wall painting probably depicting Aphrodite and Adonis from the House of Titus near the Colosseum, Rome* (1690).

(https://www.ribapix.com/Wall-painting-probably-depicting-Aphrodite-and-Adonis-from-the-House-of-Titus-near-the-Colosseum-Rome_RIBA82227?ribasearch=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cucmliYXBpeC5jb20vc2VhcmNoP2Fkdj1mYWxzZSZjaWQ9MCMZtaWQ9MCMZ2aWQ9MCMZxPUJhcnRvbGkmc2lkPWZhbHNIJmlzYz10cnVlJm9yZGVyQnk9MCMZwYWdlbnVtYmVyPTQ=#)

scene some animation. This pattern is often represented in ancient stucco decorations and in particular in the *columbaria* of Pozzuoli (Neyme, 2020; 2022), where Clérisseau went to draw the interior of a Roman tomb¹⁵.

Clérisseau has participated to the beginnings of archaeological research as a friend of Johann J. Winckelmann (1717-1768) and produced with Giovanni B. Piranesi (1720-1778) graphic surveys of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli (Cotté, 1995: 21-22; Lui, 2006: 48, 90-93; Narès, 2023: 330) but he did not draw everything on site – some parts of the Bacoli's drawing were made later in his workshop. There was certainly a desire to present a more complete image than what was still conserved, even at the expense of accuracy, and give an idea of what Classical Roman art should have looked like.

Conclusion

For the first time, a comparison between Clérisseau's drawing and the archaeological evidence is proposed. The analysis clearly shows he didn't produce a totally accurate representation of the decoration. He certainly drew some of the composition's elements on the spot, by the light of a torch, and reworked the figurative scenes later in his studio. It is unfortunate that he did not realise an exact copy of the stuccoes, specially at a time when it was probably better conserved than today. However, his production is of some interest as it reflects the taste of his time for classical antiquity and the development of the Neoclassicism to which he contributed at its beginnings. This cultural movement spread throughout Europe and even beyond, as the purchase of this drawing by the Russian empress suggests. Furthermore, the tales and productions of the Grand Tour were fantasised by the social elite and some of them may have made the journey to see the "Tomb of Agrippina" due to the ancient history associated with it. The haunting of Nero by his mother, also recorded by Tacitus (Tacitus, Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 10), has certainly contributed to the local legend, still lively today, of the presence on full moon nights of her phantom near the edifice. And, even in the light of the archaeological evidence of a maritime villa, the site retained the name of Agrippina.

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¹⁵ *Interior of a Sepulchral Chamber near Pozzuoli* (1761) (Hermitage, inv. OP-11488) (<https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/02.-drawings/288731>).

loro forme da Pietro Santi Bartoli e che ora sono tra le stampe di Lorenzo Filippo De Rossi calcografo vaticano, divise in tre parti con l'osservazioni di Gio. Pietro Bellori. Roma. (<https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/15056>).

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