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**Cirencester: Romano-British Wall-paintings from the Dyer Court  
Excavations, 1957**

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# Cirencester: Romano-British Wall-paintings from the Dyer Court Excavations, 1957

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THE fragments of wall-paintings from the 1957 excavations<sup>1</sup> included a variety of designs. Their dating is uncertain as none of them were found *in situ*; they come from collapsed walls or builders' dumps. A number of fragments, however, show evidence of at least two periods of decoration. These may not have been widely separated in date as the plaster layers which back the painting show no significant change in their composition. The scheme usually adopted by the Roman wall-painter seems to have been followed, with large expanses of background colour split up into panels by a framework of stripes and lines above a dado 2-3 feet high. Two versions of this survived and are of particular interest. The first has a background of typical Roman red (PLATE IV, a).<sup>2</sup> On this the panels were outlined by a band of green 0.9 inch wide, edged on either side with a white line. Inside this border is, first, a fine yellow line about 2 inches away, and then a slightly broader blue line 0.2 inch wide and 1.6 inches away from the yellow one. Groups of dots embellish the corners where the blue and yellow lines meet at right angles. The distance from the green border varies, probably because the painter was endeavouring to fit his design into the available wall space. Several fragments show that beyond the green and white border came a black stripe 3.6 inches wide with a thin yellow ochre line running through the centre, decorated with an occasional yellow flower or other motif (FIG. 1). This may have divided the red panel from the dado or run round it on all four sides as part of the framework. Other pieces illustrate an attractive foliate design in either bright yellow and white, with deeper yellow or purplish brown paint along one edge to indicate shadow, or blue and white shaded in dark green, both on the red ground (PLATE IV, b).

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. BGAS*, LXXVIII (1959), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> The author is indebted to Mr John Christiansen for the drawings and to Mr L. P. Morley for the photographs.

Probably these belong to garlands as blue or white ribbons show their starting point attached to the blue line of the panel framework. Some large ochre flowers with green leaves must also belong to this design (FIG. 2, nos. 3, 4).

Numerous small fragments were also recovered from a green background, most of them apparently undecorated but it must be remembered that green survives much less satisfactorily than yellow

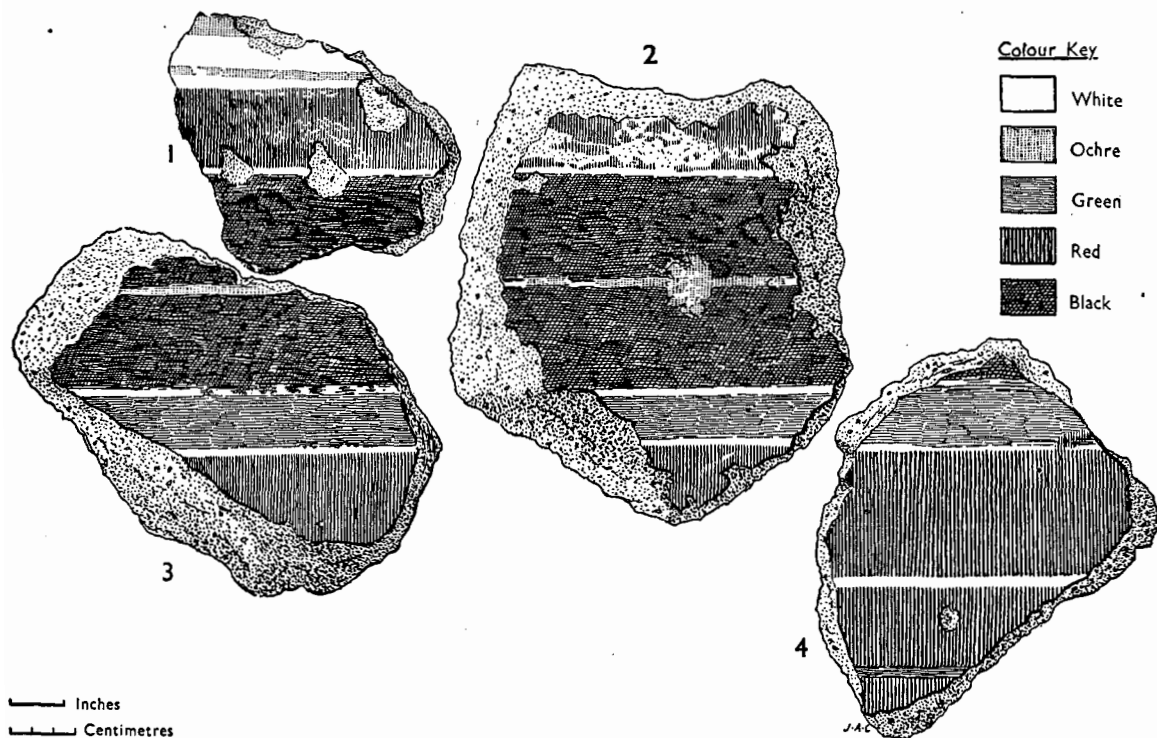


Fig. 1. Period I. Framework of red panel design. No. 2 shows the 'flower'

or red, so some pattern may have been lost. On about seven pieces an attractive design can still be distinguished (FIG. 3). It consists of a fine white line decorated at intervals with a curvilinear motif (FIG. 3, nos. 1, 2, 4), and also with part of an orange flower, probably originally eight-petalled, with each petal tipped with white and with a red centre. Small ovals of blue paint may indicate the petals of a larger flower with a red, white and blue centre (FIG. 3, no. 3). These motifs may be a border or, if the illustration is turned sideways, they suggest one of

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the designs based on the candelabrum which frequently appear on narrow vertical strips between panels. Such a design could well have separated the red panels described above but unluckily no evidence has survived to prove their relationship. A few pieces of the green ground appear to come from the corner of a room; they are edged with black, perhaps from a vertical stripe.

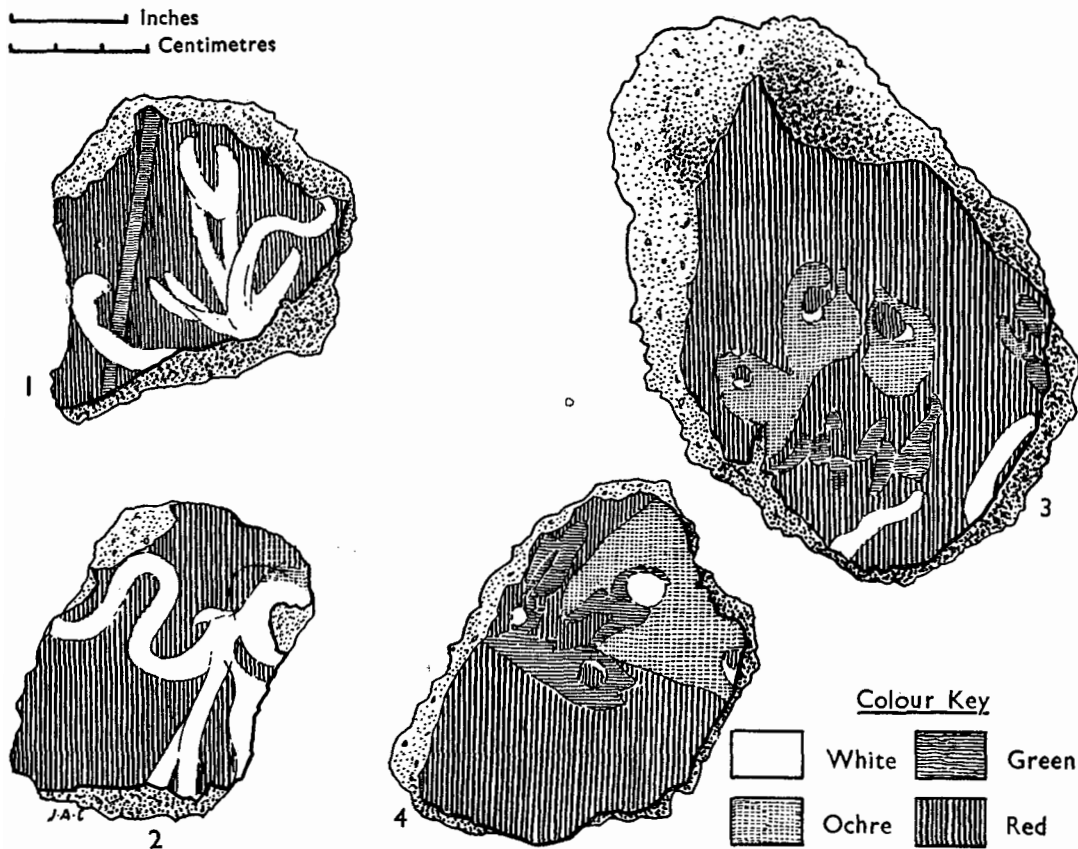


Fig. 2. Period I. White ribbons and yellow ochre flowers from red panel design

More substantial evidence was recovered from the framework of a second panel design, painted this time on a ground of ochre yellow. A black stripe edged with white and about 1 inch wide seems to have bordered the panels and also to have divided them from each other. Inside this was a fine reddish purple line decorated at the corners with beads of colour which were continued diagonally to where the stripes

of the border meet at right angles. The character of the rest of the decoration of the panel is unknown but a few small pieces with a (?)foliate design in orange and in blue painted over black on the same yellow background probably belong to it. The fragments showing the panel framework were edged with a broad stripe of reddish purple which may belong to the top of the dado.

When we turn to the material showing evidence for two periods of decoration we find this largely consists of an upper layer with a

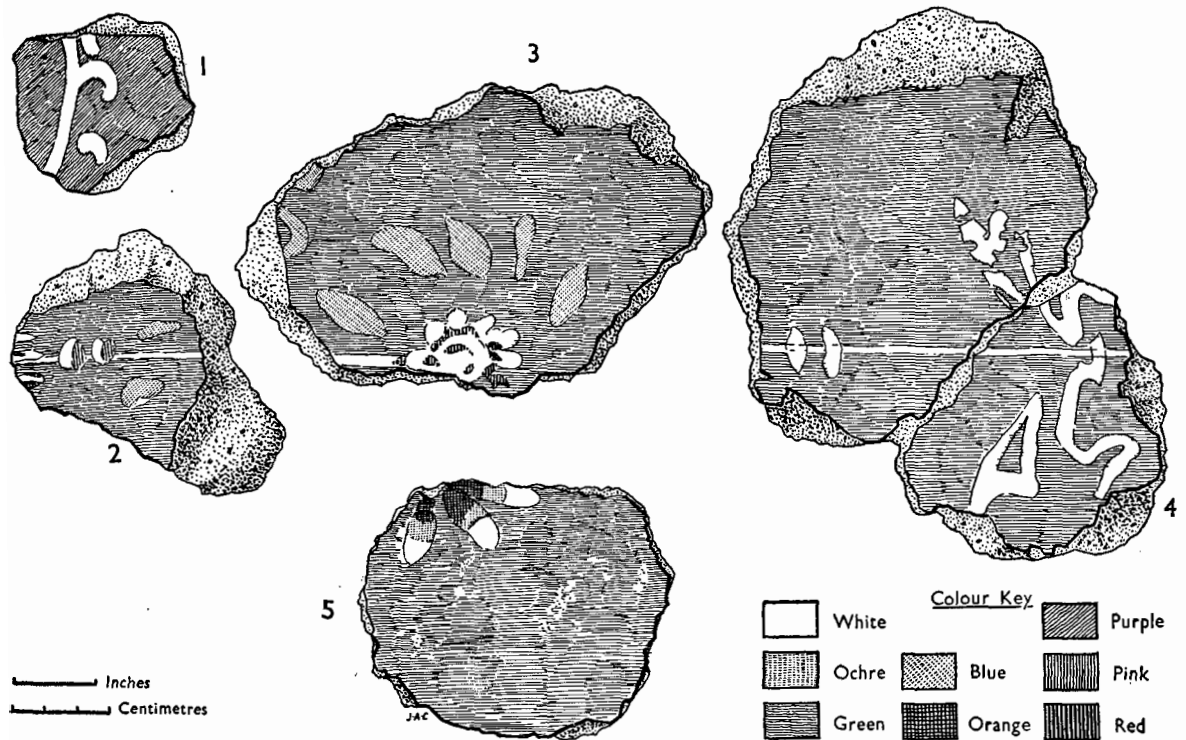


Fig. 3. Period I. Decoration on a green ground; no. 3, with blue flowers; no. 5 with yellow

white ground (Period II) above an earlier surface of either black or white (Period I). In some cases it proved possible to separate the layers while other pieces could be assigned to Period I because they had been damaged by the pick marks of the builders applying the plaster for the later surface. From a collection of tantalizingly small and assorted fragments it appears that in Period I, panels defined by fine yellow ochre lines on a black ground were decorated with a colourful curvilinear design of yellow stalks and small leaves, with

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larger green leaves and flowers of blue, red, white and yellow (FIG. 4). In a few cases the black ground is separated by a white stripe 0.8 inch wide from an ochre ground with its whole area filled in with a design of ovals and circles outlined by concentric fine black lines (FIG. 5). This may be imitation marbling from a dado. Sometimes the black ground occurs with a thin red line and separated from a brown band or background by a white line 0.7 inch wide. The same brown occurs

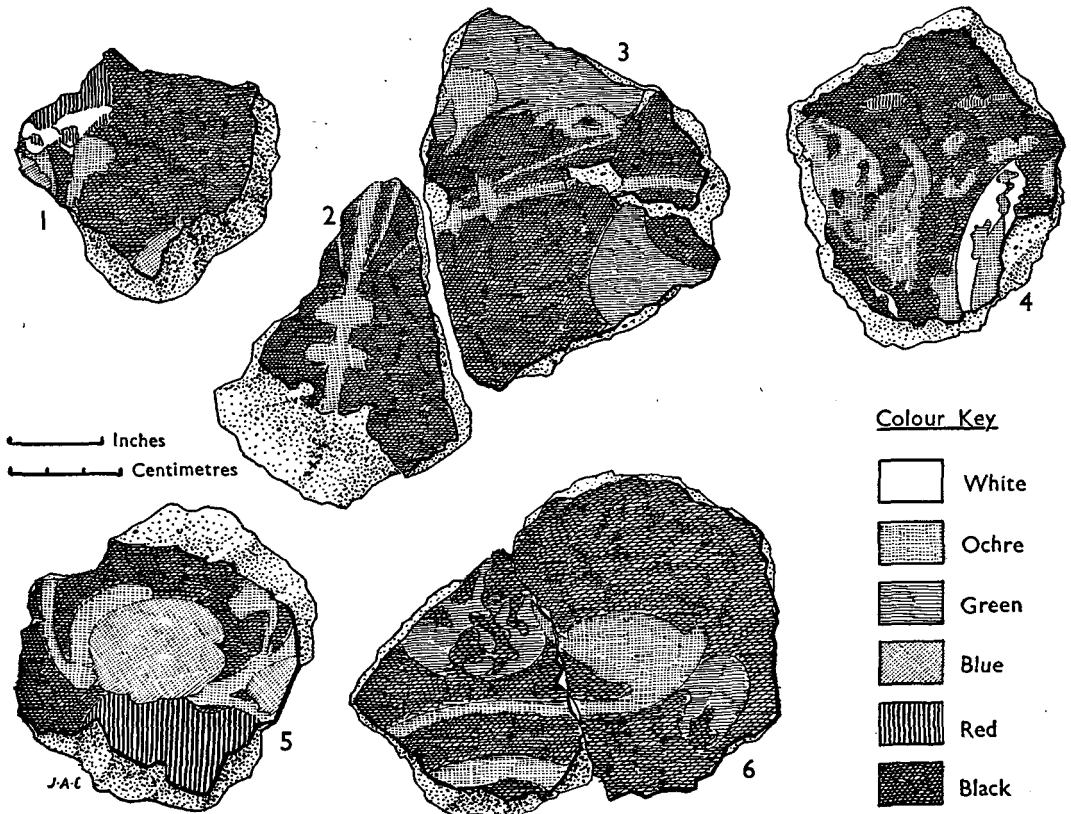


Fig. 4. Period I. Foliate design on black ground

on a larger specimen, next to a rust stripe nearly 2 inches wide, which borders brown, blue and white lines, probably all painted on the brown ground, a very attractive colour scheme which may belong to a framework bordering or dividing the black panels. The black panelling also seems to have been interrupted by windows outlined in rust. Further striped designs in dark red, yellow and black may also come from this area.

Other material, which also probably belongs to Period I and may be associated with the black wall, shows an elaborate design of scroll and (?)leaves in black on a (?)white ground bordered with red. It is unfortunate that this only survives very faintly as it is a design of

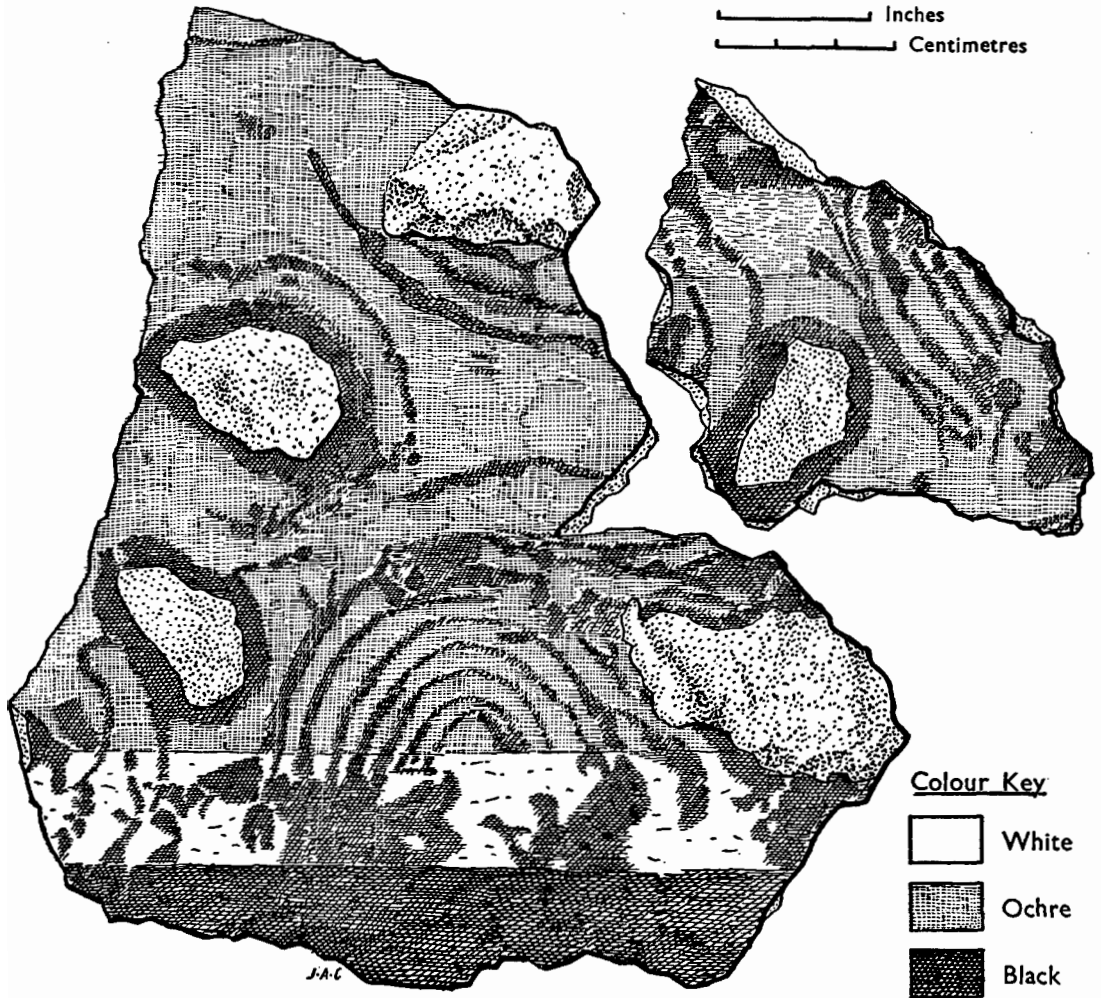


Fig. 5. Period I. Black and yellow design found underlying Period II plaster

great interest (FIG. 6). The most probable explanation of it would be some form of acanthus scroll from near the top of a wall, imitating a sculptured cornice, but this idea is pure conjecture. A single fragment with a possible ovolo pattern in white on rose, next to a band of bright blue, may have a similar explanation (FIG. 7, no. 1).

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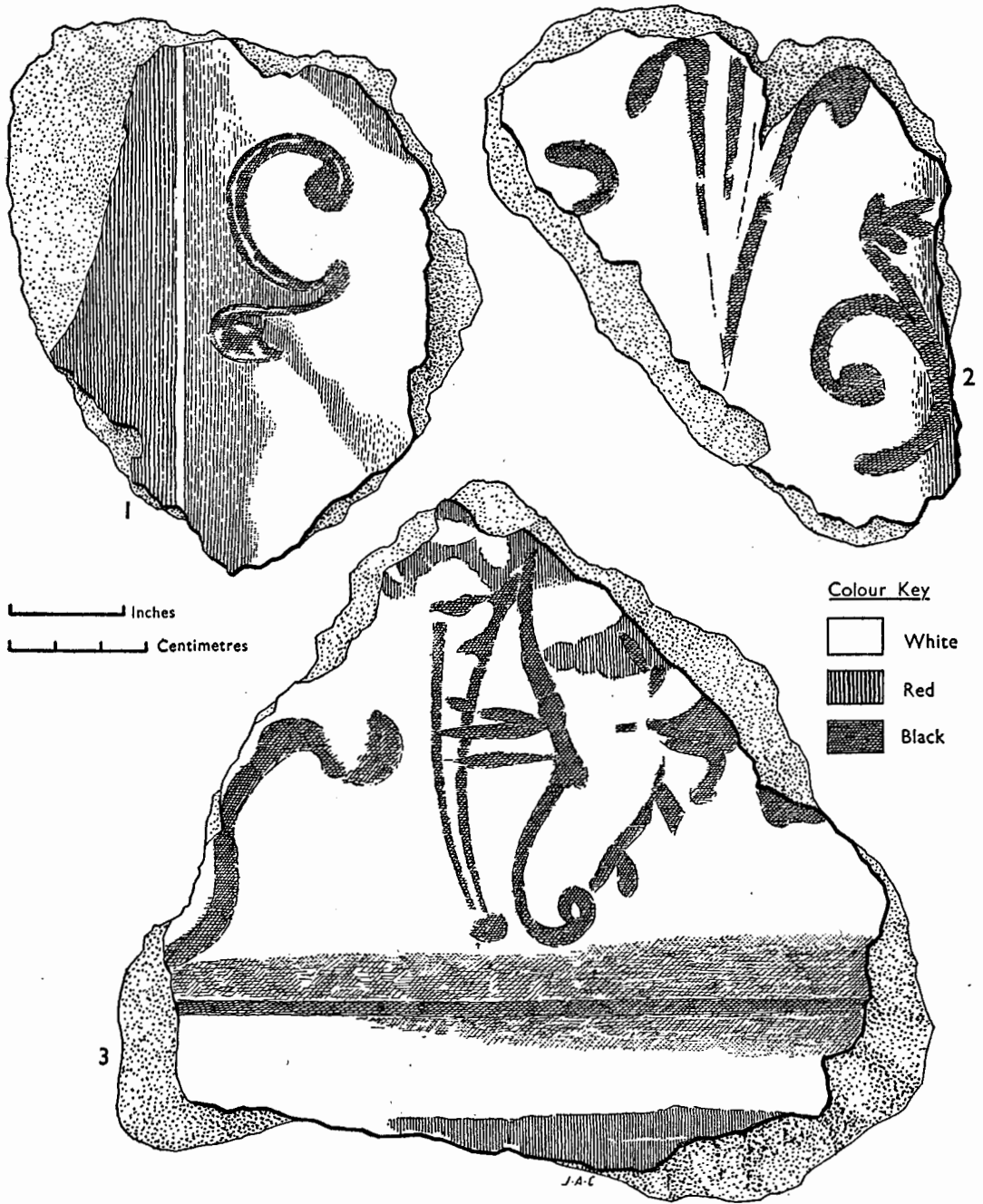


Fig. 6. Period I. Black foliate design on white

The other scheme of decoration found under a later layer and so definitely belonging to Period I was painted on a white ground. It consisted of a thin red line, probably part of a circle  $5\frac{1}{2}$ –6 inches in diameter, with a green leaf or flower in the centre. More blue and green

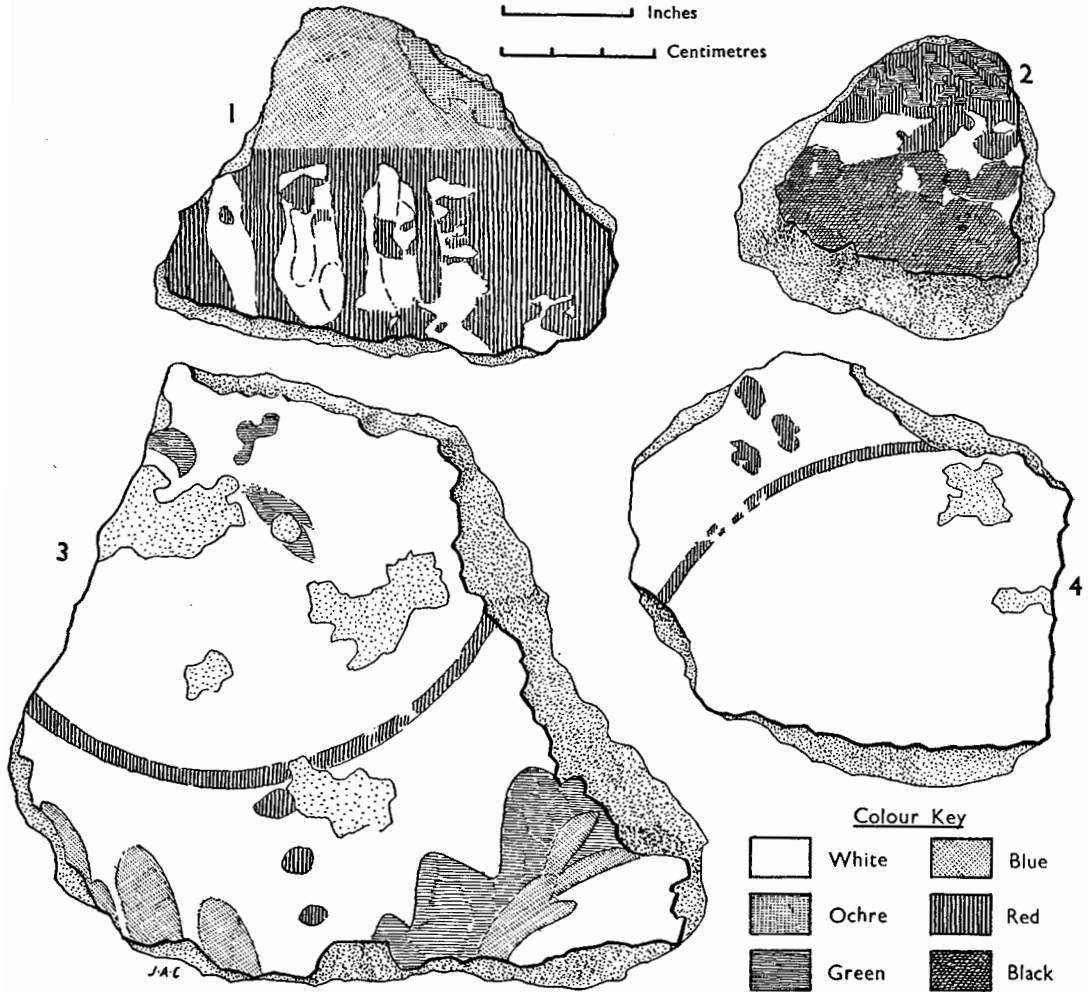


Fig. 7. Period I. No. 1(?) ovolo design; no. 2, part of same pattern

leaves probably outlined squares or oblongs enclosing the circles, and three beads of red painted diagonally from the edge of a circle may be directed at a corner of such a square (FIG. 7, nos. 3 and 4). Other pieces show red or black curvilinear motifs and thin straight



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lines in red or black. An example with green stalks or leaves springing from it must also belong to this design and a broad red stripe may have been associated with it.

In some cases this Period I design was covered by Period II plaster also painted white and decorated with fine black and brown lines, the brown lines apparently defining triangles and decorated with

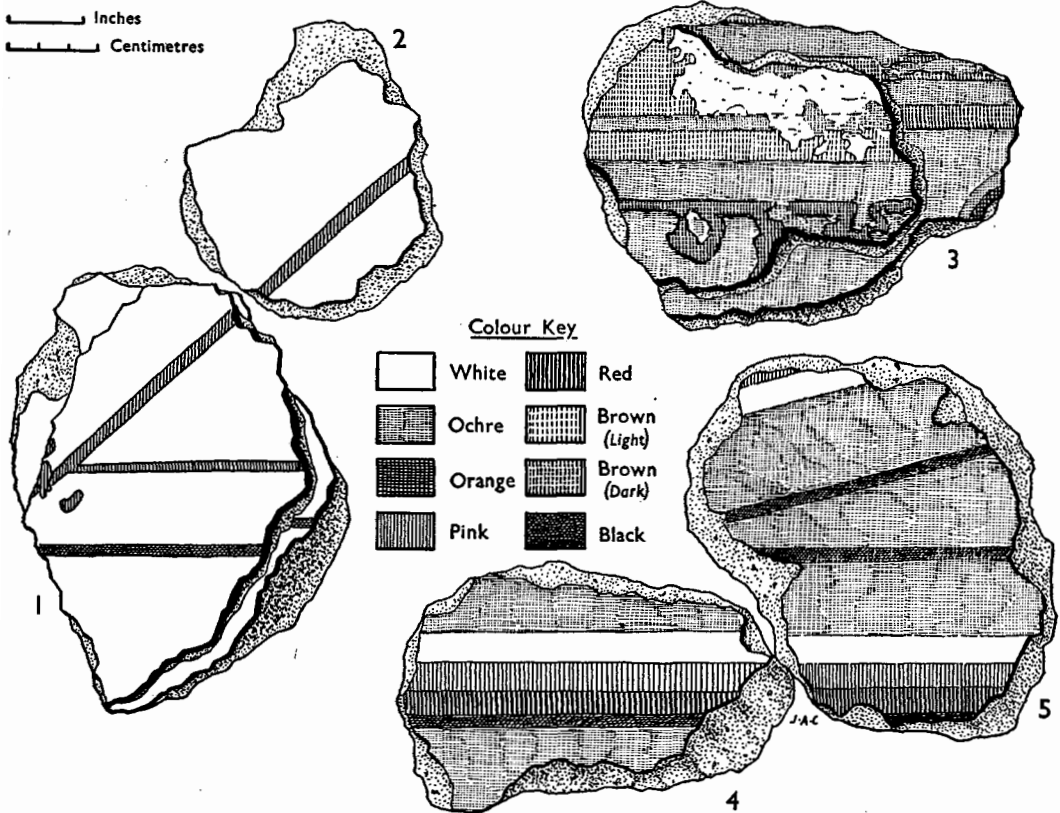


Fig. 8. Period II. Nos. 1 and 3 show Period I plaster underneath

the usual blobs of colour at the angles. The same type of design also occurs with the triangle in black on a buff yellow ground which is bordered by lines of white, pink, red and black (FIG. 8, nos. 4 and 5). A small fragment showing the corners of a black panel on the same yellow ground may also be connected with this and so may a deep red stripe  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide, dividing a white ground from the same buff yellow. The red is edged with white where it adjoins the yellow.

Various other colourful fragments were also found but in insufficient quantity to fit in with any definite decorative scheme. Among them may be mentioned deep orange curving lines on a white or yellow background and a few scraps of an orange and purple design which may be imitation marbling. One particularly interesting but isolated fragment had a Period II brown design with white highlights on a deep buff ground edged with brown and white stripes, over Period I plaster painted white with part of small yellow and red concentric circles and a border of yellow and brown lines (FIG. 8, no. 3).

A number of fragments of imitation marbling presumably came from dadoes and show several schemes of decoration. The most common is stippled in purplish-red, black, white and an occasional yellow spot on a pink ground. This occurs partly covered with mortar so is presumably Period I. A poor quality grey with either larger splotches of black and purple and possibly a few small spots of white or, alternatively, yellow and white, probably came from near the floor level and may have been affected by damp. One fragment shows a design on a similar ground but of better quality, stippled with large black and white and smaller red spots and edged with a purple line  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch wide, dividing it from a yellow ground spotted with black and red.

It is impossible to suggest any detailed decorative scheme for this collection of fragments of wall-painting as they may very well come from more than one room. As noted above, they exhibit a variety of designs and these are usually well executed. Various parallels exist for such motifs as the outlined triangles (FIG. 8),<sup>1</sup> and the garlands from the red panels have much in common with similar motifs recently found at *Verulamium*.<sup>2</sup> If the red curvilinear design of Period I (FIG. 7, nos. 3 and 4) is really a circle in a rectangle of blue and green leaves, here, again, one can see a similarity with the scheme of the purple ceiling found at *Verulamium* in 1956 with its oblongs outlined with barley ears, each containing a bird.<sup>3</sup> Remembering the possibility that the pieces illustrated as (FIG. 6) may have come from a cornice, it seems not unreasonable to suggest that fragments from a painted ceiling may also have survived at *Corinium*. A design featuring barley ears and concentric circles was found at Silchester but this is believed to come from a dado.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> e.g. W. Drack, *Die Römische Wandmalerei der Schweiz* (1950), fig. 3, p. 41, from Augst; fig. 89, p. 93 from Martigny.

<sup>2</sup> *Ant. Journ.*, xxxvii (1957), p. 13, pl. iiiia. Drack (op. cit.), also illustrates a garland from Bellikon, fig. 29, no. 7, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ant. Journ.*, xxxix (1959), p. 17, pl. i.

<sup>4</sup> G. Boon, *Roman Silchester* (1957), p. 151, fig. 29.