Journal of Roman Archaeology (2025), page 1 of 33
doi:10.1017/S1047759425100354

A painted portrait from the Augustan period in the Municipium Augusta Bilbilis (Calatayud, Zaragoza, Spain)

Lara Íñiguez Berrozpe[1], Francisca Lobera Corsetti[2], and Carmen Guiral Pelegrín[3]

[1] Universidad de Zaragoza <laraib@unizar.es>
[2] Freelance archaeologist
[3] Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Abstract: This analysis focuses on a young female portrait enclosed within an eight-pointed frame, located in the upper zone of a wall fragment discovered among a substantial assemblage of painted plaster within the fill of the *torcularium* of the Domus del Larario in the Municipium Augusta Bilbilis. The wall to which this fragment originally belonged likely formed part of a *cubiculum* within the same domus. The portrait is dated to the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE, making it the earliest known example of its kind to date. This study examines the potential significance of the portrait within one of the most prominent domus of the site, as well as its role in the broader figurative program of the wall it once adorned. In the middle zone of the composition, a couple is portrayed in a highly schematic manner. Together with the young female – likely their daughter – this may represent one of the earliest Roman depictions of a family group in a non-funerary context.

Keywords: painted female portrait, eight-pointed frame, *pinax*, *cubiculum*, family group, *clavi*, tunic

Introduction

In 2007, a large and highly fragmentary pictorial ensemble was found in the Domus del Larario at the Municipium Augusta Bilbilis (Calatayud, Zaragoza, Spain). However, the study and reconstruction of this material did not begin until 2019, leading to the identification of a wall decorated with three portraits. The first, located in the upper zone, depicts a young woman in what appears to be an imitation of an easel painting, while two full-length adult figures – a man and a woman – can be observed in the middle zone.

Despite the fragmentary state of the ensemble and the schematic form in which the painter rendered the three figures, this pictorial testimony is an exceptional find, especially regarding the portrait of the young woman, which will be the focus of this study. It is particularly significant considering its early chronology – the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE – which places it within the first of three pictorial phases of the Domus del Larario, one of the most important domus in the city.

The study of the painting's typology, frame, and content is essential for situating it within the evolution of portraits in Roman wall painting. It also offers valuable insights into the clothing and hairstyle of the young woman, as there are very few iconographic sources – except for the well-known Fayum portraits – that shed light on such matters when it comes to young, unmarried Roman women. Finally, the relationship between the three portraits – two adults and one young woman – should not be overlooked. They likely represent a family group in a domestic setting, rather than the funerary context in which genealogical depictions of this kind are typically preserved.

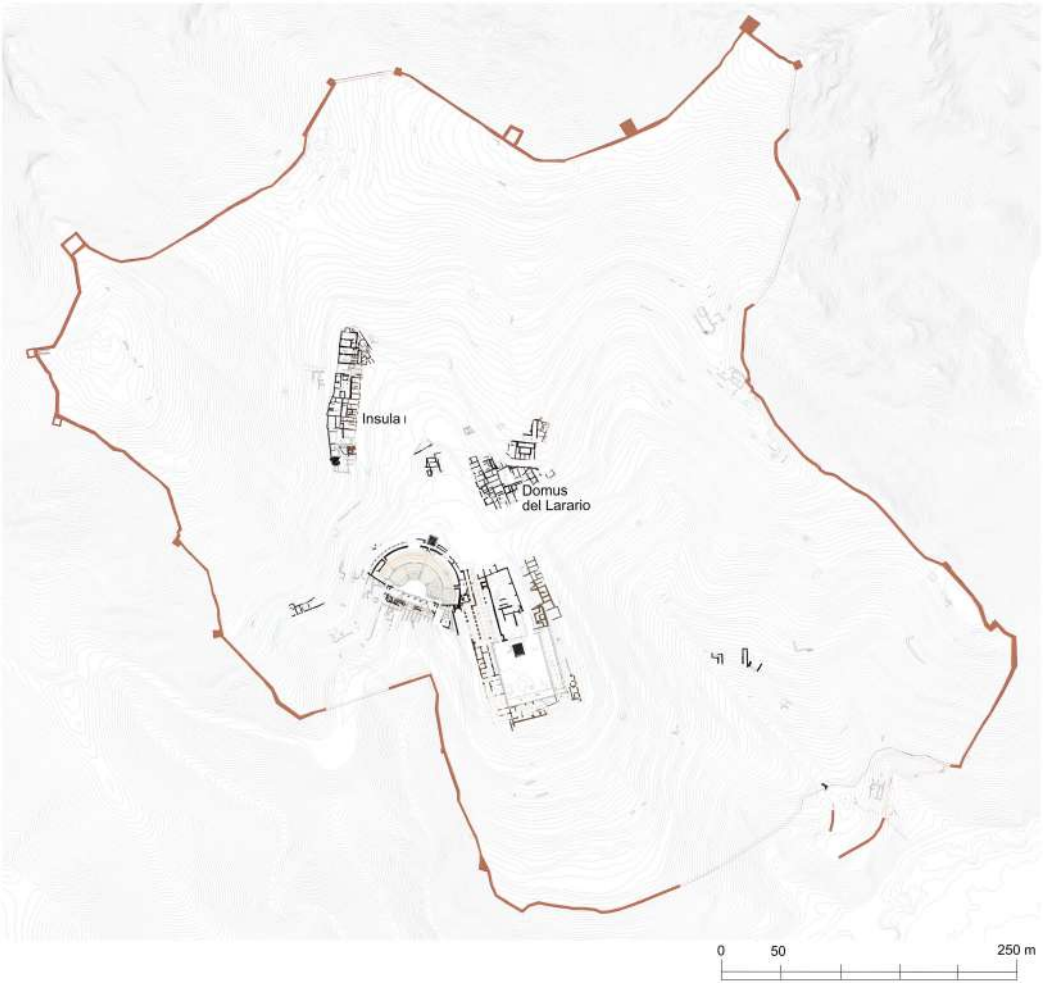

Fig. 1. *Municipium Augusta Bilbilis. (Provided and authorized by the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural de España and realized by Arquitectura y Patrimonio SLP. E. Herrero García and I. Javier Gil Crespo, co-directors of the Bilbilis Plan Director.)*

Archaeological context

The Roman city of Bilbilis (Calatayud, Zaragoza, Spain) (Fig. 1), spanning more than 30 ha, controlled the strategic pass leading to the Ebro, the Levantine coast, and the Meseta, securing its privileged position. Archaeological evidence suggests that its origins date to the 1st c. BCE with its definitive decline occurring by the 4th c. CE. During the pre-Augustan phase, Bilbilis was granted *ius Italicum*, as evidenced by coinage bearing the inscription *BILBILIS–ITALICA*, securely dated to 42 and 39 BCE.[1]

The arrival of Augustus marked a decisive turning point in Bilbilis's history, as the city was elevated to the status of municipium and renamed Augusta Bilbilis.[2] This new municipal status demanded a comprehensive urban transformation to emulate the

[1] Martín-Bueno and Sáenz 2001–2002.

[2] Martín-Bueno 1975.

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architecture of Rome's leading cities. Urban planning focused on integrating public spaces, such as the forum, the baths, and the theater, with private residences.[3] Most construction occurred under Augustus's successor, Tiberius, placing the city's peak development within the Julio-Claudian period.[4]

Regarding domestic architecture, three houses stand out: Domus 1 and 2 (both belonging to Insula I) and the Domus del Larario. The study of their material culture – particularly the wall paintings – confirms construction prior to the 1st c. CE.[5] Analysis of their wall paintings suggests that in the late 1st c. BCE, the same Roman workshop decorated key rooms of these residences: the *cubiculum* (H14) of Domus 2, the probable *exedra* (H7) of Domus 1, and the *tablinum* (11) of the Domus del Larario.[6] That same workshop also produced the wall paintings found in the *torcularium* (20) fill of the Domus del Larario, likely originally adorning the *cubiculum* (12). The portrait discussed was probably displayed on the eastern wall of this ensemble.[7]

Following the instability of 68–69 CE – a period of minor crisis for Bilbilis – the city's development continued under the Flavian and Antonine dynasties, accelerated by the extension of *ius latii* to all Hispania's inhabitants. However, recent evidence indicates the city faced a period of crisis in the 2nd c. CE.[8] The archaeological record reflects this decline, revealing signs of gradual depopulation.

As noted previously, the painting under discussion was discovered in the Domus del Larario (Fig. 2), located in Bilbilis's urban center. This domus features a typical Italic layout, with a large testudinate *atrium* (16) connected to the surrounding rooms: the *tablinum* (11), *triclinium* (4) and two *cubicula* (1 and 12). Particularly notable is the *sacrarium* (13), which contains a stucco *lararium*. The residential quarters are flanked by "industrial" or service areas: on the eastern side, a storage area; and on the western side, a space identified as a *torcularium* (20).

The house shows two distinct construction phases: the first dating to the second half of the 1st c. BCE and the second to the Flavian period, when the *sacrarium* was added. The exact chronology of the "industrial" or service areas remains uncertain. The building was

[3] Sáenz and Martín-Bueno 2004; Uribe 2015, 207–9.

[4] Guiral and Martín-Bueno 1996.

[5] Uribe 2015, 228 with bibliography (n. 174).

[6] Numbers in parentheses give reference to rooms of the Domus del Larario in figure 2. The identification of this workshop is based on technical, stylistic, and archaeometric criteria (analyses carried out by J. R. Ruíz, D. Cosano, and E. Cerrato of the Department of Organic Chemistry of the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Córdoba), as well as petrographic criteria (a study carried out by A. Coutelas of the Laboratory CNRS of AOROC (Archéologie & Philologie d'Orient et d'Occident), Paris). These analyses revealed the same composition of mortars and pigments in the aforementioned assemblages, as well as a series of technical particularities unique to this workshop (see results in Cerrato et al. 2021; Íñiguez et al. 2022; Íñiguez et al. 2024), such as the use of an undercoat of orange-colored, lead-based pigment in certain sectors, a technique for which we have found no parallels in Roman mural painting.

[7] This assemblage is still under study. It has been cited in Guiral and Íñiguez 2011–2012, 284 and Íñiguez et al. 2022, 225–26.

[8] García and Sáenz 2015.

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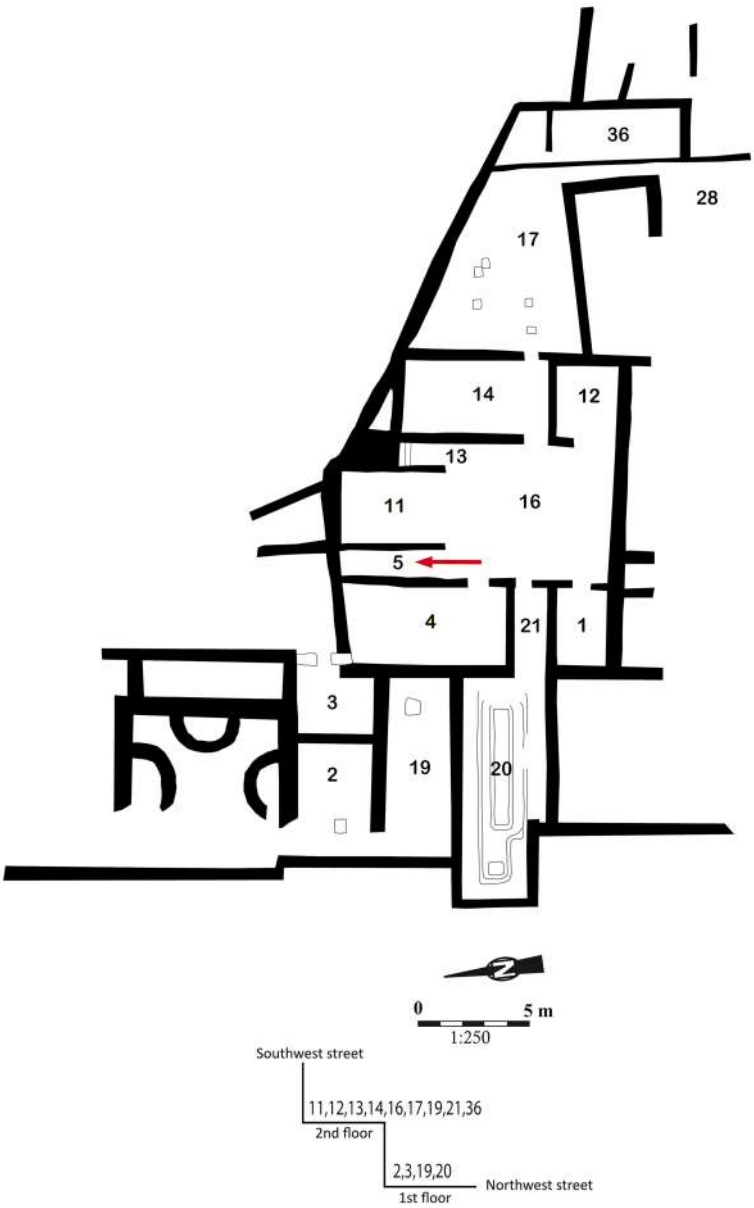

Fig. 2. *Plan of the Domus del Larario. (Uribe 2015, fig. 93.)*

abandoned during the 2nd c. CE. All living spaces featured wall paintings, demonstrating an extensive array of Second, Third, and Fourth Styles decorative schemes.[9]

In the *atrium* (16), only the plinth and a section of the middle zone of the eastern wall decoration survive. The plinth features a series of black compartments defined by a white fillet and framed by red bands. These elements are bordered by a black band that continues vertically into the upper zone, also serving as a division between the red-backgrounded

[9] For an analysis of the domestic structure, see Uribe 2015, 228–34 with bibliography.

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Fig. 3. *Decoration of the* atrium *(16). (© Archivo Excavación de Bilbilis.)*

middle panels (Fig. 3). This relatively simple decorative scheme can be stylistically dated to the Flavian period, particularly through the comparison with the decoration of the *lararium*.

The paintings from the north and west walls of the *tablinum* (11) were discovered collapsed onto the floor (Figs. 4 and 5).[10] The decorative scheme of these walls features a black plinth adorned with a painted imitation of a curtain, suspended from loops beneath the dividing bands of the middle panels. The middle section displays alternating green, white, and burgundy orthostats, each framed with black and white filleted borders. These orthostats are separated by black bands featuring highly stylized plant stems and *thyrsus* motifs. The upper register contains rectangular and square compartments adorned with vegetal designs. This decoration can be attributed to the aforementioned workshop active at the site ca. 30–20 BCE.[11] The eastern wall of the room, preserved *in situ*, holds particular significance, as it was reconstructed in the Flavian period to replicate the original decorative scheme. This modification occurred when the addition of the *sacrarium* (13) necessitated the rebuilding of the eastern wall.

[10] Guiral et al. 2018.

[11] See n. 6. This set (and the one presented here) has an undercoat of orange-colored lead pigment in certain sectors, a technique particular to this workshop.

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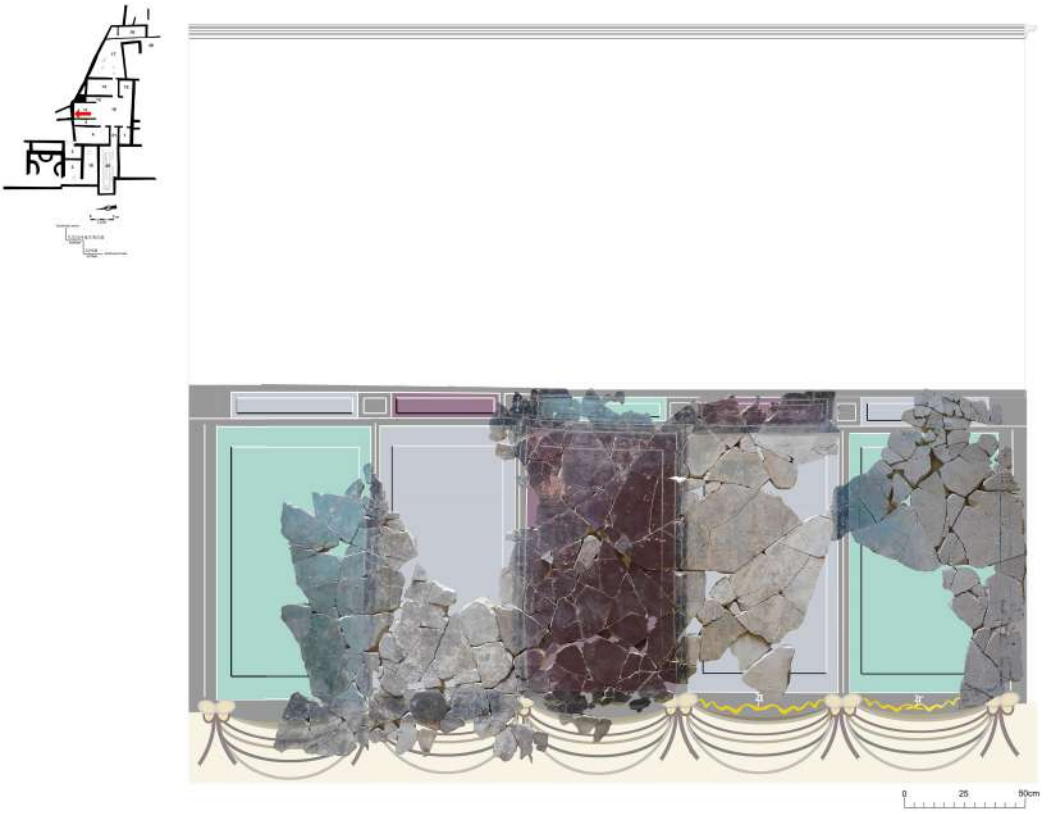

Fig. 4. *Decoration of the north wall of the* tablinum *(11). (Hypothetical reconstruction by L. Íñiguez.)*

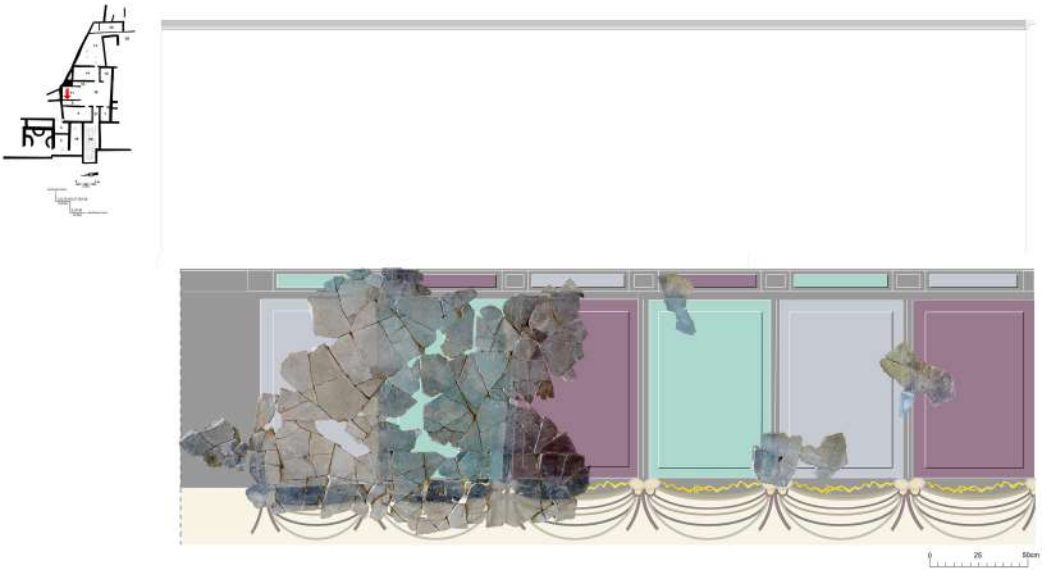

Fig. 5. *Decoration of the west wall of the* tablinum *(11). (Hypothetical reconstruction by L. Íñiguez.)*

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Fig. 6. *The* sacrarium *(13) at the time of its excavation, currently on display in the Museum of Calatayud. (Photo by L. Íñiguez 2016.)*

The decorative program of the *sacrarium* (13) clearly distinguishes two areas.[12] First, at the rear of the room, there is an *aedicula*-type stucco *lararium*, featuring a stepped altar and anthropomorphic appliqués on both the pediment and surrounding cornices. This structure was supported by a parallelepiped block, the lower portion of which was decorated with two white panels, each bordered by a black band and framed with a green band and a black fillet. Second, the walls of the room display a decorative scheme consisting of a mottled plinth, a black band, and a series of red panels framed by a green band (Fig. 6).

To the west of the *tablinum*, space (5) is a corridor that may once have been connected to the upper floor by a wooden staircase, with white walls and ceiling that were recovered during the excavation (Fig. 7).[13]

In the *cubiculum* (12), which will be mentioned several times throughout this study as it was likely decorated with the paintings being presented here (at least in its first decorative phase), red decoration was documented *in situ* on the lower part of the wall (Fig. 8). Notably, this is the same shade as in the *lararium*, suggesting that this room may have been redecorated during the Flavian period.

The final space in the residential area with documented decoration is the *triclinium* (4).[14] Only the composition of the eastern wall has been identified, which featured white plaster applied over adobe, later covered with a new fresco layer. The decorative scheme of this layer consists of a black skirting board with white and brown stippling, a black plinth divided into compartments by white fillets, and a middle zone composed of white-framed panels separated by blue, red, and white *thyrsus*-type candelabra (Fig. 9).

12 Íñiguez 2016.

13 Guiral and Íñiguez 2011–2012, 283.

14 Guiral and Martín-Bueno 1996, 364–72.

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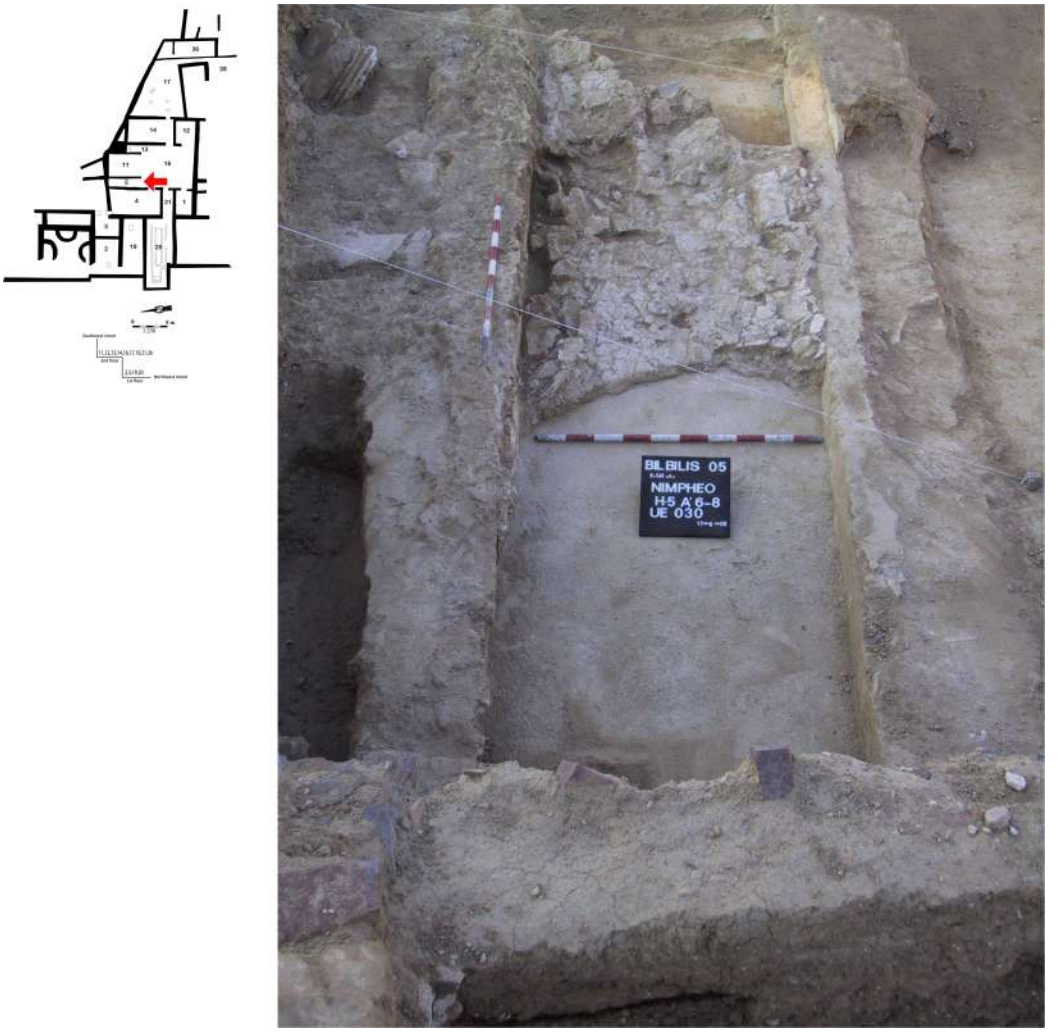

Fig. 7. *Decoration of the ceiling and walls of room (5). (© Archivo Excavación de Bilbilis.)*

This decorative program dates to the second half of the 1st c. CE, likely during the Flavian period.[15]

Additional pictorial ensembles were found in the *torcularium* (20), besides the one presented here. These are currently under study and reconstruction.

Although the house, from an architectural point of view, comprises two phases – the mid-1st c. BCE and the Flavian period, the wall paintings reflect a series of distinct decorative interventions. The only remains attributable to the initial construction period of the domus, around 20 BCE, include the paintings of the *tablinum* (11), the first decorative phase of the *triclinium* (4), and the ensemble presented here, which – as we shall see

[15] Pictorial ensembles were also found in spaces 2 and 3 of the domus (Guiral and Martín-Bueno 1996, 356–61, 361–64), but these are not included here as their provenance is not known with certainty.

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Fig. 8. *Possible second pictorial phase of the* cubiculum *(12). (© Archivo Excavación de Bilbilis.)*

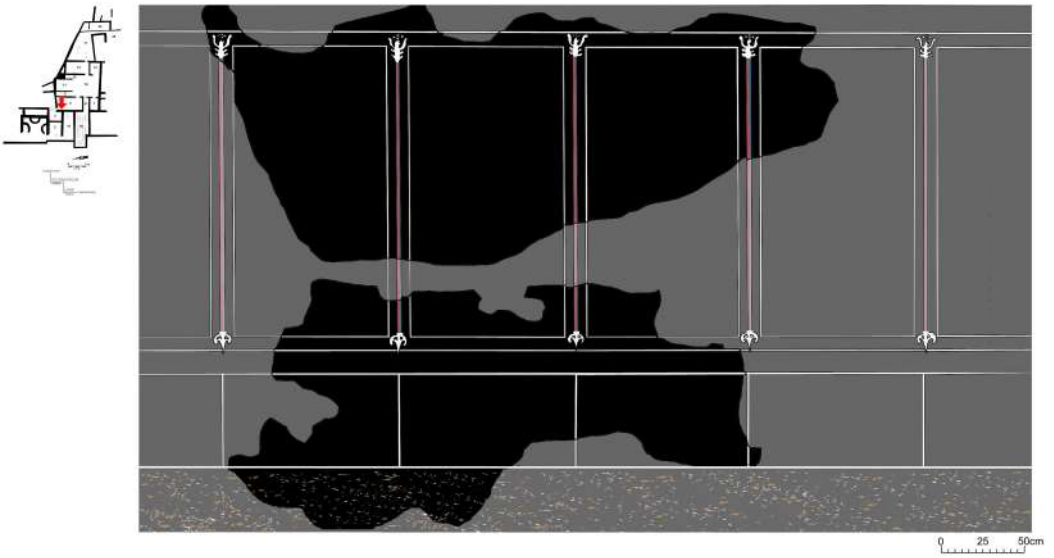

Fig. 9. *Sketch of the pictorial ensemble from the* triclinium *(4). (Based on Guiral & Martín-Bueno 1996.)*

below – was found in the *torcularium* (20), though it may have belonged to the *cubiculum* (12). Between 35 and 45 CE a room – possibly the *cubiculum* (1) – was decorated; fragments of this scheme were also recovered from the fill of the *torcularium* (20).

Finally, around the Flavian period, a major renovation of the entire domus took place. This intervention affected the eastern wall of the *tablinum* (11), the newly constructed *sacrarium* (13), the *atrium* (16), and possibly the *cubiculum* (12), which would then have had two documented decorative phases. If this hypothesis is accepted, the *torcularium* (20) – and

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perhaps the rest of the rooms in the so-called industrial area – must have been constructed during the original building phase of the house, and subsequently fell into disuse in the Flavian period, when the *torcularium*, at least, was completely filled with fresco fragments.

The pictorial ensemble found in the torcularium *(20)*

The set from which the portrait originates was excavated in a highly fragmentary state by the Escuela Taller de Restauración de Aragón. It formed part of the fill of the *torcularium* (20),[16] having been reused in this way to make efficient use of available materials.[17] In the process of assembling this still-incomplete puzzle, we have determined the full width of one of the walls (2.70 m), which allows us to deduce that these paintings decorated the *cubiculum* (12) of the same house.[18] However, it should be noted that the domus may have had an upper floor, so the possibility remains that the decoration came from one of the rooms located there.

We have fragments from all four walls of the room, including the wall with the entrance door. In summary – since we can only provide a rough outline here due to space limitations and the ongoing study of certain aspects of the pictorial decoration – the ensemble likely featured a black plinth, and the side walls a middle zone articulated with white, green, and burgundy-red panels, some of which were adorned with theatrical masks suspended in the manner of *oscilla*. The upper zone seems to have been the most ornate, separated from the middle section by a painted imitation of a cornice (Fig. 10). This upper area, divided into panels in the same colors as the middle section, featured Egyptian motifs and kraters (on a white background), fictitious architecture (on a burgundy-red background), and hanging wreaths accompanied by vegetal motifs (on a green background). All these panels also include the characteristic bichrome fillets of the Second Style. Additionally, this upper area contained interpanels with black or blue background, decorated with the base of a metal candelabrum, crowned by either a caryatid or a krater, depending on the model. These interpanels extended into the middle zone, separating the various panels there, and resting on the base at the beginning of the plinth.

There are several distinctive elements worth noting. The first is the presence of painted columns with Egyptian capitals which – judging by their position on the wall and their extent, from the highest part of the wall to the beginning of the plinth – seem to articulate not only the decoration but also the spatial organization of the room itself. This type of division is common in *cubicula* and *triclinia*;[19] in the case of the former, it

[16] Sáenz et al. 2008, 33–37; Sáenz et al. 2009, 49–51.

[17] Reusing pictorial material for construction purposes was a common practice (Carrive 2017; Guiral and Íñiguez 2020). In general, Roman culture was clearly not inclined to devote excessive efforts to the disposal of the waste it produced. The tendency was to dispose of debris in nearby spaces, reusing it if possible. Thus, it is not unreasonable to think that the reused fragments originated from one of the rooms in the same house. The same phenomenon has been observed in other parts of the site of Bilbilis; it is the case, for example, with the material excavated in Room 7 of Domus 3 mentioned in the previous note (Íñiguez 2022, 23 and 27).

[18] The back wall of *cubiculum* 12, facing E, also measures 2.70 m (Uribe 2015, 229).

[19] Guiral and Mostalac 1993; Guiral 2018. The same phenomenon is documented in another of the Republican pictorial ensembles produced by this workshop of craftsmen, the one in the *cubiculum* (14) of Domus 1. In that case, the element responsible for the articulation is a stucco pilaster in bas-relief.

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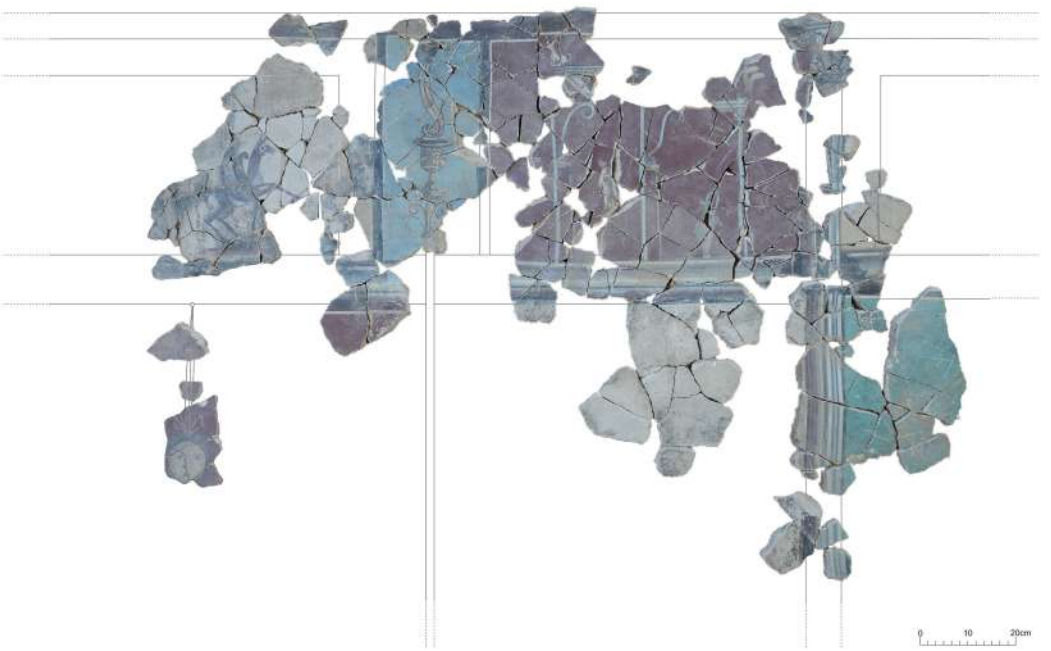

Fig. 10. *Upper area and part of the middle area of one of the side walls possibly from the* cubiculum *(12) in the process of reconstruction. (Photo by J. Ángás; drawing by L. Íñiguez.)*

typically delineated two-thirds of the room for the antechamber and one-third for the resting area or bed.

The decoration of the wall believed to have been at the rear of the room, oriented to the east – assuming this ensemble decorated the *cubiculum* (12) – partially differs from the previously described walls. While it likely shared the same black plinth, the middle zone in this case includes two white panels flanking a central *aedicula* with a red background. This central feature is framed by slender columns with Egyptian capitals that extend beyond the middle section into the upper one. Between the panels are two small standing figures, one male and one female, enclosed with a double fillet that possibly serves as a frame. The upper zone is also divided into three panels: a burgundy-red panel decorated with fine architectural elements, jugs, and small figures; a green panel featuring suspended wreaths similar to those previously described; and, between the two, a white panel containing the portrait under analysis here (Fig. 11).

From a technical standpoint, the workshop demonstrates exceptional skill in the preparation of the mortar – which varies significantly in thickness depending on the wall, forming a zigzag fastening system – and in the application of background colors, using the fresco technique. However, from an iconographic perspective, the execution appears less accomplished. No preparatory strokes are visible.

CHRONOLOGY – It is undeniable that there are many similarities between the compositional system and ornamental repertoire of the wall under discussion and certain paintings from sites such as the Villa della Farnesina in Rome, even though they are not comparable in quality. The wall's articulation reflects the characteristics typically associated with *cubicula*: the alcove serves as a secluded space that receives the most elaborate decoration, as has been highlighted by Irene Bragantini and Mariette de Vos. Both scholars also note a common preference for a tripartite system, in which an *aedicula* marks the center

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Fig. 11. *Upper area and part of the middle area of the east wall possibly from the* cubiculum *(12) in the process of reconstruction. (Photo by J. Ángás; drawing by L. Íñiguez.)*

of the wall.[20] Many of the decorative motifs in our *cubiculum* clearly draw inspiration from the ornamental repertoire of these and other contemporary paintings.[21] In particular, we highlight the rosettes located in the spandrels of the central *aedicula*, which are also found in *cubiculum* B of the Villa della Farnesina,[22] as well as twining or intertwining plant-stem motifs above the *aedicula*. These are likewise present in *cubiculum* B, as well as in *cubiculum* D of the same villa.[23]

There is a scholarly consensus that the Villa della Farnesina dates to the early years of the principality of Augustus – that is, the final quarter of the 1st c. BCE. However, stylistic classifications reveal some variation. H. G. Beyen places the Villa within Phase 2b of the Second Style (between 30 and 15 BCE) and proposes a date of 19 BCE,[24] a classification followed by authors such as Maurizio Borda.[25] Alix Barbet includes it in the final phase of the Second Style, dated between 40 and 20 BCE,[26] while Roger Ling narrows this phase to between 30 and 20 BCE.[27] Agnès Rouveret[28] likewise maintains this classification.

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20 Bragantini and De Vos 1982, 25.

21 Bragantini and De Vos 1982, 39–40; Bragantini 1998, 15–24; Ehrhardt 1987, XXX.

22 Bragantini and De Vos 1982, pl. 36.

23 Bragantini and De Vos 1982, pl. 62 and 84.

24 Beyen 1938, 32–33; Beyen 1960, 19–25; Beyen 1968, 62–63.

25 Borda 1958, 43–52.

26 Barbet 2009, 40–41.

27 Ling 1991, 40–41.

28 Rouveret 2002a; Rouveret 2002b.

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In their now-classic study of the Third Style, Frédéric Louis Bastet and Mariette de Vos date the paintings to the transitional phase between the Second and Third Styles, just before 20 BCE, which they identify as the start of Phase 1a of the Third Style.[29] Irene Bragantini also places the Villa della Farnesina at this transitional juncture, describing the paintings as both the last examples of the Late Republican period and the first of the Imperial period, dating them to the final quarter of the 1st c. BCE.[30] A few years earlier, however, Mariette de Vos had described the paintings as belonging squarely to the Second Style.[31] Renate Thomas also included them within the transitional phase from a stylistic standpoint.[32]

Bearing these points in mind, we propose a chronology for this pictorial ensemble of around the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE. In terms of stylistic classification, it is important to note that the paintings under study were produced by a workshop also active in other houses at Bilbilis, identified through archaeometric analyses.[33] The paintings in the *tablinum* (11) of the Domus del Larario and those in the *exedra* (H7) of Domus 1 feature curtains on the plinth – a motif clearly characteristic of the Second Style. The paintings in the *cubiculum* (H14) of Domus 2, with orthostats decorated with imitation alabaster in the middle zone and marble plaques in the upper zone, are difficult to assign to the transitional phase toward the Third Style. Moreover, the presence of bichrome fillets (black and white) on the orthostats in the middle zone of the *tablinum* (11) of the Domus del Larario and in the *cubiculum* (H14) of Domus 2, as well as in the compartments of the upper zone of the ensemble discussed here, is a motif distinctly typical of Second Style painting. Taking all of this into account, we conclude that the paintings presented here were produced in the decade between 30 and 20 BCE by a workshop that worked in both a conservative style, as in its marble imitations, and a more innovative style, as exemplified by the present example.

The painted female portrait found in Bilbilis

The framed portrait (7.4 × 9 cm) of a young woman under discussion is located within the white panel at the top of the wall.[34] It is set against a blue background (17 × 14.5 cm) and framed by three fillets (0.5 cm wide), colored white, black, and burgundy respectively. The portrait rests on the imitation cornice (10.5 cm wide) that separates the upper and middle sections of the wall. The frame is held in place by strings (Fig. 12) that connect the corners of the eight-pointed, imitation-wood frame (1.5 cm thick) to the curved elements that rise from the slender columns and meet at the center. In formal terms, this portrait closely resembles the well-known real *pinax* of a young woman found in a tomb at Hawara (50–70 CE) (Fig. 13).[35]

After processing the image using the iDStretch app, it became apparent that the painters made certain mistakes, which were later corrected: the upper support ropes initially ran through the center of the frame's corners, as did the lower ones; ultimately, a steeper, more

[29] Bastet and De Vos 1979, 17–23.

[30] Bragantini and De Vos 1982, 39; Bragantini 1998, 15.

[31] De Vos 1975, 75.

[32] Thomas 1995, 27–36.

[33] See n. 6.

[34] A fuller description of the figure depicted can be found in the section below devoted to the iconographic and iconological study.

[35] Walker 1997, no. 117.

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Fig. 12. *Detail of the female portrait in the upper area. (Photo by J. Angás.)*

vertical alignment was chosen. The frame was also initially intended to be smaller, which may explain why the lower part of the bust does not reach the edge of the frame, leaving a section of the background exposed. This suggests that the final version of the frame was painted after the figure itself.

Analysis and interpretation

There is no doubt that we are dealing with a portrait – a term that refers to an image of a specific individual, whether living or deceased, intended to distinguish that person from others (a consideration that, in antiquity, was often more significant than the faithful representation of physical features).[36]

[36] In her study of this question in Greece and Rome, Nowicka (1993, 10–11) distinguishes three types of painted portraits: the "intentional image," in which a person is depicted whose appearance is not known, making it, therefore, totally fictitious; the "typological portrait," in which the individual features are not taken into account but the person, recognizable more by attributes or inscriptions, is represented by means of a stereotype; and the "physiognomic portrait," in which, to a greater or lesser extent, these features are taken into account. See an example of this interesting issue in Gazda 2021.

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Fig. 13. *Framed wooden panel portrait from Hawara, Egypt. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)*

In this case, it is difficult to determine whether the painter aimed to create a realistic likeness or a more idealized image. This uncertainty is due not only to the loss of most facial features but also to the limited skill of the *pictor imaginarius* who executed the work. Analyzing the portraits in the Boscotrecase medallions, Maxwell Anderson argues that Roman portraits often display "generalized similarities"[37] – a view supported by Maria Nowicka, who attributes this lack of realism to the philhellenism prevalent in Rome and the desire to impart a "Greek air" to such representations.[38]

There is little doubt that the painting imitates a real easel painting. Numerous examples in Roman mural painting attest to this phenomenon: portraits painted directly onto walls that replicate easel paintings,[39] albeit in a more economical form.[40] Both formats likely

[37] Anderson 1987, 139.

[38] Nowicka 1993, 131. The author lists some exceptions to what she considers to be proper portraits in the realist sense of the term; for example, that of the famous couple from the Casa di Terentius Neo in Pompeii (VII 2, 6), preserved in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (Inv. 9058) (Bragantini and Sampaolo 2009, 517, fig. 296).

[39] Salvo 2022, 215–16; Salvo 2018. Sometimes the aim was to emulate true picture galleries, such as those cited by Vitruvius (*De arch.* 6.5.2) when he lists the settings necessary in the richest dwellings.

[40] We do not know how much a portrait cost. Some authors defend the hypothesis that among the functions of the *pictor imaginarius* was that of making portraits (Salvadori 2016, 470), and according to the Edict of Diocletian (301 CE), the painter charged 150 denarii per day. Apart from this, we only know of one testimony in the 4th c. CE, from the papyrus preserved in the

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served as more affordable alternatives to bronze or marble sculptures, as suggested by a relevant passage in Pliny (*HN* 35.1). These forms of portraiture were probably widespread and highly sought-after solutions[41] – and, of course, not mutually exclusive.[42]

Portraiture on real wooden panels appears to have been common in the Roman world, in both public and the private contexts. Unfortunately, most such portraits have been lost, though numerous sources – especially indirect ones – attest to the important role they played in both Greece and Rome.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FIGURATIVE CONTEXT OF THE WALL: A FAMILY GROUP? – For a proper analysis and interpretation of our female figure, it is essential to consider the figurative context in which the small portrait was placed. On the same wall of the *cubiculum* – in the middle zone – an adult couple was also portrayed, framed by a white fillet enclosing an area measuring 56 × 37 cm (Fig. 14).

The clothing and hairstyle of the female figure clearly identify her as a *matrona*, dressed in a *stola* – a symbol of virtue and *modestia*[43] – and a *palla*. Her portrayal evokes the almost stereotypical concept of the *perfectissima femina*, as described by Seneca (*Helv.* 19.4), a woman who embodies not only *virtus* and *modestia* but also *castitas*, *pudicitia*, or *pietas*. The exaltation of these feminine virtues is well attested in epigraphic sources.[44] The male figure, wearing a *toga* and holding a *volumen* in his right hand – a symbol of the dignity of a magistrate – adopts the conventional iconography of the *paterfamilias*.[45] This ideal of *dignitas*, represented through the imagery of the couple, is widely documented in Roman mural painting, particularly in funerary contexts. A comparable example, although from a later period, can be found in the tomb of Pomponius Hylas on the Via Appia in Rome,[46] or in the tomb of the Voconii in Emerita Augusta (Mérida).[47]

It seems reasonable to suggest that, if a married couple is represented in the middle zone, the young female figure depicted in the *pinax* in the upper zone could be interpreted as their daughter. This would constitute a possible representation of a family group – a phenomenon archaeologically documented in Rome as early as the 4th c. BCE, again

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Laurentian Library in Florence (PS VII 784) originating from Oxyrhynchus, which states that a man named Zoilos agreed to pay a painter named Heraclides one artaba of wheat and two pitchers of wine for a portrait:

(Ζωίλος Ἀγαθοδαίμονι προνοητῇ χ(αίρειν).
παράσχου Ἡρακλείδῃ ζωγρφῳ(*), ὑ(πὲρ) μισθ[οῦ].
ἰ(*)κόνος(*), σίτου ἀρατάβην(*) μίαν καὶ οἴνου κνίδια δύο μ(όνα).
(ἔτους) λη ζ, Τῦβι κγ. ὁ αὐτὸς σεσημείωμαι)

41 Fejfer 2008, 154. Nowicka (1993, 129) states that specifically portraits painted directly onto the wall were characteristic of the middle strata of society, although she refers above all to the *imagines clipeatae*, typical especially of the second half of the 1st c. CE (see below).

42 Salvo 2022, 219.

43 The tunic worn by matrons or freeborn maidens was very long, reaching the feet (Wilson 1938, 133, 152).

44 Mañas 2019, 23; Navarro 2017, with sources and bibliography.

45 On the Roman *toga*, see Goette 2013; on the significance of *volumen*, see Bragantini and Sampaolo 2009, 517.

46 Borda 1947, 347.

47 Guiral 2002; Castillo in press.

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Fig. 14. *Detail of the couple represented in the middle zone. (Photo by J. Angás.)*

primarily in funerary contexts.[48] In this sense, one of the closest parallels to the group presented here is the well-known funerary relief preserved at the Villa Doria Pamphili in Rome, where a couple is shown accompanied by their daughter.[49]

It is important to note, however, that our presumed family group appears in a domestic setting in the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE. There is a clear intention of self-representation here, especially evident in the figures of the parents. This invites several hypotheses. First, the choice of *cubiculum* (12), which was connected to the *atrium* of the domus, as the location for this family's self-representation underscores the multifunctional character of this type of

[48] Examples are the Tomb of the Magistrate in Spinazzo in Paestum or Tomb 24 of the necropolis of Taranto (Portandolfo 1998, 229–34, figs. 8 and 11; Tinè Bertocchi 1964, 86–87, fig. 67). In both cases, aside from the individualization of the deceased's features, there has been an attempt to see a certain genealogical character in their representation.

[49] Calza 1977, 265–66, cat. 336, table CLXXXI; George 2001, 181, fig. 11.2.

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room.[50] It is quite likely that, in addition to serving as a space for rest and intimate activities, the *cubiculum* was also used for the reception of friends and selected guests. A comparable case is *cubiculum* 6 in the Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii.[51]

Second, the presence of the *matrona* and her possible daughter is significant. During the Republic, representations of Roman women were largely limited to funerary contexts, with few exceptions. It was only in the Augustan period that depictions of women outside these contexts gained greater visibility – though still with the intent of exemplifying the virtues of the Roman *matrona* and of promoting the individual and her family through idealized models.[52] Our two figures may therefore represent an early example of this emerging phenomenon.

However, as we will see in the following sections – focused on the analysis of the *pinax* and the figure it portrays – there is a marked contrast between the representation of the parents and that of their daughter, suggesting two distinct approaches to portraiture. In addition, we will explain below why the figure in the upper zone is interpreted as that of a young, unmarried girl.

ANALYSIS AND CLASSIFICATION OF THE PINAX – Giulia Salvo has compiled and classified imitations of real easel paintings painted on walls, whether portraits or other themes (to the examples from Italy and the provinces cited by Salvo, additional instances may be added: see Fig. 15).[53] Salvo divides these wall paintings into two primary categories: *pinakes* with wooden doors and framed paintings – both falling under the broader concept of *tabulae pictae*.[54] She also identifies a third category, which she terms *tabulae circulares*, referring to images in medallions or *imagines clipeatae*. The three types could coexist within

[50] Uribe 2015, 120–23 with sources and bibliography.

[51] *PPM* III, 1000–1. See also De Maria 1997 and Salvo 2018, 75, n. 367. For the discussion about *cubiculum* 6 see also Peters 1993 and Clarke 2003. This example is interesting, moreover, since the young man portrayed in this domus was perhaps a dead son, to judge by his representation as Mercury. We cannot know whether the young woman depicted here was also dead. This could explain the adoption of a specific form of *tabula picta* sometimes associated with funerary representations. Clarke 2003; Peters 1993.

[52] Mañas 2019, 32–34.

[53] Salvo 2018. The additional examples are: the Hispanic cases from the Colonia Victrix Iulia Lepida Celsa (Velilla de Ebro, Zaragoza) (Mostalac and Beltrán 1996, 255, fig. 2), of the Second Style, with eight-pointed *pinakes* without doors resting on the cornice and leaning against the wall (Fig. 15a); Carthago Nova (Cartagena), paintings of the Third Style with figures inside them located in the upper part of the set in the present-day Calle de Monroy, where one of the figures is resting on an eight-pointed *pinax* with doors (Abad Casal 1982, 122–24, figs. 254–55 and 257; Fernández Díaz 2008, 166–67, figs. 24 and 25) (Fig. 15b); the Roman Villa of Els Munts (Altafuya, Tarragona), where we refer specifically to the commemorative paintings (Wall A) from the 2nd c. CE, with eight-pointed *pinakes* with doors and foreshortened in the upper area (Guiral 2022, 341–43) (Fig. 15c); and perhaps from Emerita Augusta (Mérida), given the fragment found in the levelling fill of the Imperial Cult Complex dated by the author to approximately 20 BCE (Castillo, in press).

[54] The word *pinax* was initially applied in Greece to any panel or plaque, especially if it was written on or painted, whether in stone, metal, or terracotta. Its function varied, being employed for lists, decrees, indexes, etc. One of its main uses was as a votive *ex voto* containing inscriptions or figures, which may have promoted pictorial activity in Greece. In this respect, we may recall the *pinax* of Pitsa (Moreno 1987, 14, fig. 11). The Hellenistic inventory of the sanctuary of Delos is interesting in this context, where *pinakes tethyromenoi* are mentioned, as opposed to *pinakes athyrotoi* (Hellmann 1992, 91–93).

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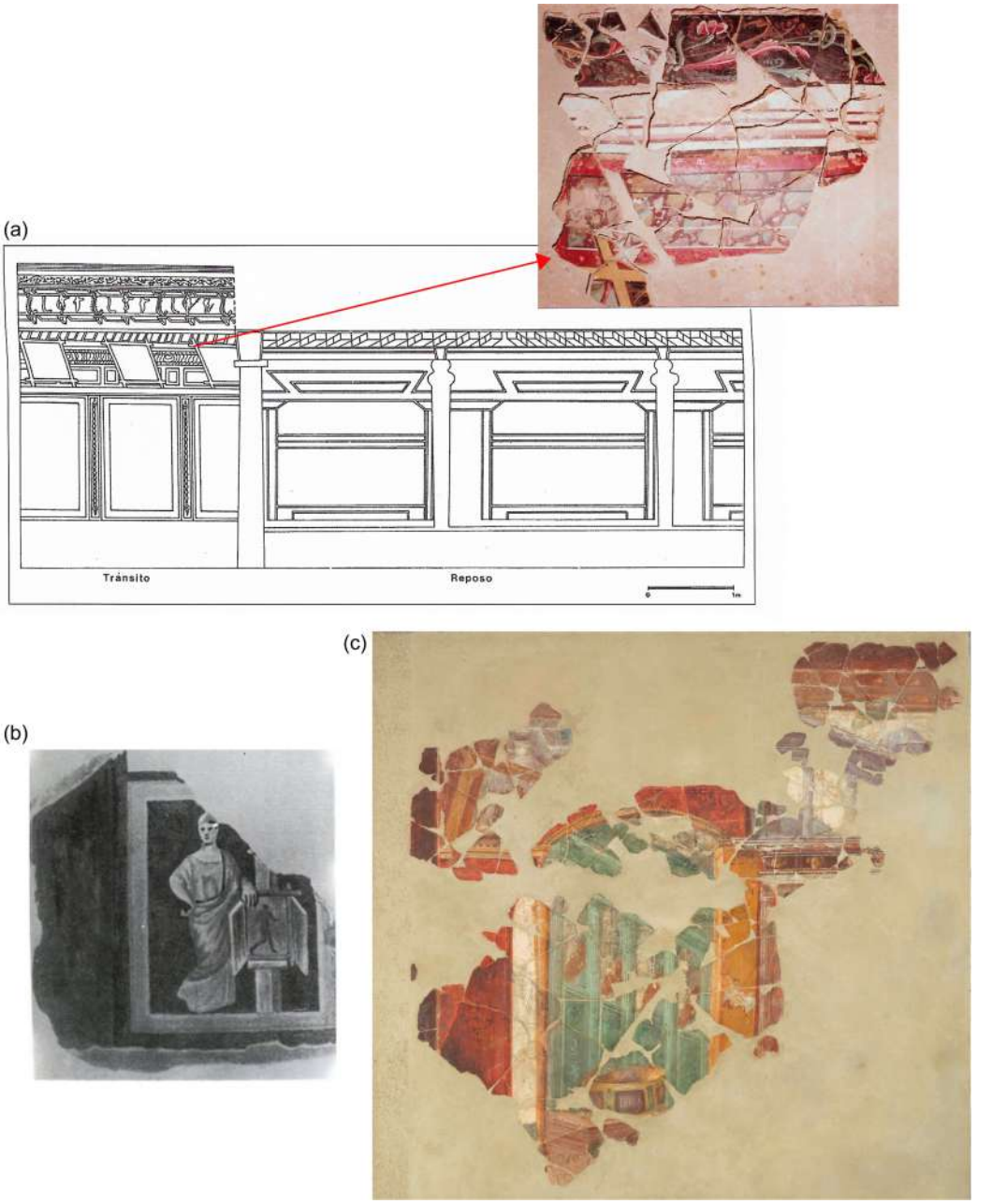

Fig. 15. Pinakés *in Hispania: a. located in the upper area of the Casa de Hércules of the* Colonia Victrix Iulia Lepida Celsa *(Velilla de Ebro, Zaragoza) (© A. Mostalac); b. located in the upper area of the set from the Calle de Monroy of* Carthago Nova *(Cartagena) (© A. Fernández Díaz); c. located in the upper area of the set from the Roman Villa of Els Munts (Altafuya, Tarragona) (© Museo Nacional Arqueológico de Tarragona.)*

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the same space, at least from the 1st c. CE onward,[55] as evidenced by the Kerch Sarcophagus (Crimea).[56]

Several conclusions can be drawn from Salvo's classification and analysis. First, this type of imitation painting gained prominence during the Second Style and remained in use throughout the 1st c. CE, with isolated examples persisting into the 2nd c. CE and beyond. Second, their placement on the wall and their spatial arrangement relative to it vary:[57] *pinakes* with small doors are usually located in the upper part of the wall, while framed paintings appear in both the upper and the middle zones. However, simpler framed versions – such as the eight-pointed wooden model represented here – tend to be placed in the upper zone (see below). Medallions, on the other hand, are most commonly found in the middle zone.

With regard to their positioning relative to the wall, the examples preserved in mural painting seem to reflect a variety of real-life display options available at the time. These paintings could be placed directly against the wall or combined with architectural structures. Alternatively, *pinakes* might rest on various supports – such as pillars, columns, or candelabra – sometimes assisted by anthropomorphic figures. The variant most relevant to the present analysis, however, is that in which the *pinax* is supported by a structure in contact with the wall, such as a cornice.[58] Within this category, there are two sub-variants: the *pinakes* can be shown in a foreshortened position, leaning downwards, or displayed frontally. Both variations were very common between the mid-1st c. BCE and the 2nd c. CE.

There are several instances of *pinakes* – with or without doors – that, like the examples under discussion, are displayed frontally and rest on a cornice in the upper zone of the wall. These include examples from the *oecus* (22) of the Casa del Criptoportico in Pompeii (I 6, 2);[59] room 13 of Villa 6 in Terzigno;[60] *cubiculum* D of the Villa della Farnesina in Rome;[61] *oecus* (H) of the Villa di P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale;[62] *cubiculum* of the House of Augustus in Rome;[63] *tablinum* (c) of the House of Livia in Rome;[64] and the *oecus triclinaris* of the Casa de Hércules in Celsa, Spain[65] – all dating to the Second Style. This configuration continued into later periods, as seen in *pinakes* without doors but with simple frames in the *tablinum* (92) of the Praedia of Iulia Felix in Pompei,[66] and the *triclinium* (6) of the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia in Pompeii (II 3, 3),[67] both examples of the Fourth Style. A real-life

[55] As we shall see, the *imagines clipeatae* in painting did not appear until the Third Style and developed mainly in the second half of the 1st c. CE.

[56] Goldman 1999, fig. 2.

[57] Salvo 2018, 85–95.

[58] There are some cases in which medallions also rest on cornices. One example is the decoration of the villa Plassac (Barbet 2008, fig. 202) in the Fourth Style.

[59] *PPM* I, 256–69.

[60] Moormann 2013, 230, figs. 3–4.

[61] Bragantini and De Vos 1982, 208, pl. 96.

[62] Dubois-Pelerin 2013, pl. 19a–b.

[63] Iacopi 2007, 77.

[64] Pappalardo 2009, 102.

[65] Mostalac and Beltrán 1996, 255, fig. 2.

[66] Bragantini and Sampaolo 2009, 372, fig. 172.

[67] *PPM* III 129, fig. 24.

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parallel is found in the Hall of the Colossus in the Forum of Augustus, where based on surviving evidence, it is plausible that – in addition to paintings embedded in the middle wall zone – others were arranged in the manner described above.[68]

It is worth noting that, unlike in our case, all the *pinakes* mentioned either lean directly against the wall with a slight backward tilt[69] or are affixed to it by some imperceptible fastening device.[70] Various systems – nails, pegs, ropes, and ribbons – are occasionally visible, whether in depictions of framed paintings (with or without doors) or of medallions, but only when these are shown in direct contact with the wall.[71] No other known example exhibits visible ropes anchoring a *pinax* to a cornice in the way seen in the painting under analysis.

The originality of this example lies not only in the visible presence of the ropes but also in their distinctive diagonal arrangement, extending from the frame's corners toward both the cornice and the upper architectural elements. In the Hawara portrait, the twisted cords are still visible at the corners of the frame. Ropes attached to the corners of eight-pointed frames – like the ones discussed here – are attested elsewhere, such as in the peristyle (29) of the Casa delle Vestali in Pompeii (VI 1, 7),[72] as well as in the *tablinum* (7) of the Casa del Bell' Impluvio in Pompeii (I 9, 1),[73] both from the Third Style, and in the Maison aux Xenia (now in the Gallo-Roman Museum in Lyon, ca. 50–70 CE).[74] However, in none of these cases do the ropes extend diagonally outward, as they do here.

Another important aspect highlighted by Salvo's research concerns the frame type. The Bilbilis frame, as previously noted, conforms to the eight-pointed typology,[75] which, Salvo identifies as both the simplest and most versatile, in part because it could accommodate the addition of small doors to conceal the image.[76] Indeed, most attested examples include such doors,[77] with only a few exceptions – like ours – lacking them. These include the *oecus* (3) of the House of Obelius Firmus in Pompeii (IX 14, 4),[78] the aforementioned *cubiculum* D of the Villa della Farnesina in Rome, and the *oecus triclinaris* of the Casa di Hércules in Celsa (Spain) – all Second Style. This doorless variant also appears in the *tablinum* (7) of the Casa del Bell' Impluvio in Pompeii (I 9, 1; Third Style), in the Kerch Sarcophagus (late 1st c. CE), and in the painted tomb of Qweilbeh (Jordan; second half of the 2nd c. CE).[79]

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68 Zanker 1969, 23–24.

69 The Celsa assemblage is a paradigmatic case of this typology.

70 Salvo 2018, table VII, 4–5.

71 See Salvo 2018, figs. 27–29, 40–42, 92 and 174; Clarke 1991, 300, fig. 186; *PPM* I 928, fig. 14; and Rozenberg 2014, pl. CXXIX, fig. 5, and pl. CXXX, fig. 8.

72 *PPM* IV 27, fig. 44.

73 *PPM* I 928, fig. 14.

74 Savay-Guerraz 2013, 96, n. 71.

75 On the design of these frames, see Mathews 2001, 171, fig. 1, and Ehlich 1959, 859.

76 Salvo 2018, 47. Simple wooden frames are already mentioned by Pliny (*HN* 35.173) and Vitruvius (*De arch.* 2.8.9) for an episode of the 4th c. BCE.

77 For examples, Salvo 2018, figs. 14, 17, 19, 21, 22b, 26, 29, 30, 41, 42, and 181; and Guiral 2022, 326, fig. 3.54.

78 *PPM* X 394–95, figs. 58 and 60.

79 Barbet and Safar Ismail 2001, 230, fig. 5.

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This type of frame – distinctive in shape and color – may have been the most widespread due to its enduring presence in Roman mural painting.[80] Unlike other models,[81] it preserves the original appearance of natural wood, although the specific type of wood represented in these painted imitations remains uncertain.[82] Its popularity was such that some scholars have suggested it approached a kind of "mass production."[83]

The subject matter of these paintings and medallions varies considerably.[84] Notably, no portraits are known before the turn of the era, and even afterward, they remain rare in *pinakes* (with or without doors). A few exceptions stand out, such as the portraits in the door-equipped *pinakes* from the peristyle (29) of the Casa delle Vestali (VI 1, 7, Pompeii)[85] and the female profile portraits in *triclinia* A and C of the *deversoriae tabernae* in Murecine[86] – both examples of the Fourth Style. Provincial evidence supports this trend: Third Style male portraits in the Musée Nuits-Saint-Georges (Les Bolards, Côte-d'Or);[87] female portraits displayed on candelabra in the Maison au Péristyle ("salon rouge") of Insula 18 in Avenches (mid-1st c. CE), appearing in both doorless and door-equipped *pinakes*, and possibly including one medallion;[88] the painted tomb of Qweilbeh (Jordan; second half of the 2nd c. CE), featuring multiple male and female portraits;[89] and the late 1st-c. CE Kerch Sarcophagus,[90] depicting a painter's workshop in a *pinax* with doors (three male portraits hang on the wall of the depicted workshop, two of them in medallions and one in a *pinax*).

In the light of the present analysis, the painted portrait of Bilbilis can be identified as the earliest known example of this representational type. It displays all the defining characteristics – most notably, the eight-pointed frame (albeit without doors) and its placement resting on the upper cornice – while also introducing unique features. Most remarkably, it incorporates a distinctive fastening system employing diagonally extending ropes, a configuration not attested in any other known examples to date.

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80 Also given the direct sources available to us. See "The pictorial ensemble found in the *torcularium* (20)," above.

81 There are other much more developed and decorated frames, whose designs imply that they were painted. There may have been a figure specialized in this task, the so-called *pictor coronarius* attested epigraphically (see stele preserved in the Vatican Museums from the 1st c. CE, Inv. 3403/EDR073307; and stele preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Naples from the end of the 1st c. CE or beginning of the 2nd c. CE, Inv. 3599/EDR128536), who could be interpreted as a cornice painter (Giuliano 1953, 264; Salvadori 2016, 471).

82 On the different types of wood used to make frames, see Ehlich 1959, 859. On the reproduction of wood in Roman mural painting and the difficulty of identifying it, see Mulliez 2014, 132–33.

83 Ehlich 1959, 860.

84 A multitude of themes are found in these paintings: scenes of worship, passages, still lifes, mythological representations, erotic scenes, etc. See Salvo 2018, 121–22, table IV; 131–32, table VIII; and 138–39, table XI.

85 *PPM* IV, 27.

86 Nappo 2008, fig. 12.

87 Barbet and Allag 1997, fig. 56.

88 Fuchs 1989, 27–29, fig. 8a and 8b.

89 Barbet and Safar Ismail 2001, 230, figs. 4–6.

90 Goldman 1999 with bibliography. His study also covers other examples of painters making portraits on easels (see 40–41, figs. 12–15).

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ICONOGRAPHIC AND ICONOLOGICAL STUDY – The painting under analysis depicts a half-length female figure set within an eight-pointed frame. Although her face is unfortunately not preserved, the figure turns slightly to her left, with her hair arranged in an updo from which a single lock falls along the right side of her neck. She wears earrings and a necklace, and her short-sleeved white tunic is adorned with distinctive appliqués: two vertical purple *clavi* descending from the shoulders, intersected near the top by two shorter horizontal purple stripes. The tunic also reveals part of her bare left arm.

Despite its partial preservation, the portrait offers significant insight into the subject's identity, as Roman dress codes explicitly communicated social status. Several observations can be made:

a) The tunic[91]

The female figure clearly does not represent a married matron, since women of that status typically wore the tunic, the *stola*, and the *palla* (as seen in the possible depiction of the mother discussed earlier).[92]

Identifying the attire of young, unmarried girls is more complex, owing to the limited and sometimes contradictory visual and literary evidence. Ancient authors note that freeborn girls, like boys, wore the *toga praetexta* before marriage.[93] However, archaeological evidence suggests a broader range of clothing.[94] In addition to the relatively few known depictions of freeborn girls in the *toga praetexta*,[95] other representations show them in Greek-inspired clothing[96] or, as in our case, in a simple tunic.[97] These tunics were typically full-length. A well-known funerary relief from the Villa Doria Pamphili exemplifies this diversity, depicting a *pater familias* in a *toga*, a matron in *stola* and *palla*, and a young girl clad solely in a tunic.[98]

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91 Horace uses the expression *Tunicato popello* (*Epist*. I.7.65) to refer to those who had no right to wear the *toga* above the *tunica*; the *toga*, as we know, was in fact reserved for Roman citizens, Virgil's *togata gens* (*Aen*. 1.282). On the different types of tunics worn by men, women, and children, see Sette 2000, 39–43, 52–57. On the *toga* and its symbolic value, see, among others, Pausch 2003 and George 2008, 95–96.

92 Sebesta 1994, 48–50; Sette 2000, 49–55; Larsson Lovén 2014, 268–70. Varro reports that at an earlier stage, women also used to wear the *toga* in the same way as men (Varr. *ap. Non*. 541.2): "Olim toga fuit commune vestimentum et diurnum et nocturnum et muliebre et virile." On this subject, see also Sebesta 1994; Sette 2000, 49; Dixon 2014, 301.

93 Goette 1990; Sebesta 2005; Olson 2008, 141–43, esp. n. 18. On the *toga praetexta* see Sebesta 2005.

94 Wilson 1938, 133–37; Olson 2008.

95 Goette has identified just 14 examples (Goette 1990, 80–82, 158–59). For a more recent reading of representations of young maidens in *togas*, see George 2001; Harlow 2017, 44–49.

96 It is likely that the depiction of young maidens wearing Greek-inspired dress was intended to convey the sophisticated tastes of their parents (Olson 2008, 144–45).

97 In a recent study dedicated to the typical clothing and ornaments of young Roman girls, Olson justifies this discrepancy between literary and iconographic sources by asserting that while literary sources provide us with an "ideal" view of reality, in which the clothing of girls and boys would reflect their social status, like that of their parents, iconographic sources instead give us a more varied reality (Olson 2008, 149–50). This discrepancy between the literary and iconographic sources has not gone unnoticed by previous scholars, who have provided different interpretations; see, for instance, the reading proposed by Wilson (1938, 137) or George (2001, 184–87).

98 Calza 1977, 265–67, cat. 336, table CLXXXI; George 2001, 181, fig. 11.2.

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Strikingly, even in a formal context such as *cubiculum* 12 of the Domus del Larario at Bilbilis – where both the parents appear in attire appropriate to their social rank – the daughter of this elite family is portrayed in a simple tunic without the *toga praetexta*. This supports the notion that such representations of freeborn girls in tunics, devoid of the *praetexta*, were socially acceptable for members of the upper class.

Of particular note are the tunic's purple decorative elements: the vertical and horizontal purple *clavi*.[99] The use of purple in Roman clothing held significant symbolic weight.[100] Deeply associated with social and political distinction, purple served as a visual marker of elevated status – seen, for instance, in the *latus clavus* (broad purple band) of senators and the *angustus clavus* (narrow band) of equestrians.[101] Similarly, the purple-edged *toga praetexta* signaled the civic status of magistrates and freeborn children.[102] Thus, the chromatic choices in this portrait subtly but unmistakably assert the high status of the young figure portrayed.

While *clavi* of varying colors and widths were common decorative features across Roman garments,[103] the choice of purple for the maiden's tunic in this painting constitutes a deliberate and meaningful statement.[104] This chromatic signaling – especially when paired with the absence of traditionally matronly attire – strongly suggests that the figure represents a high-status, freeborn girl. Her family chose to emphasize her elite standing through this socially prestigious visual language of purple, rather than the more conventional *toga praetexta*.

b) Hair

In Roman society, a woman's hairstyle functioned as a powerful indicator of social status.[105] The arrangement of hair, the use of the veil, and presence of specific accessories served as codified markers of identity.[106]

Hair representation was governed by strict social conventions: Roman women typically wore their hair carefully arranged, letting it down only in contexts of mourning.[107] Gathered hairstyles distinguished Roman women from non-Roman counterparts, who

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99 For a recent reflection on the term *clavus*, see the contribution by Bender Jørgensen 2011.

100 Casartelli 1998, 112–18. More generally on the importance of this color in Rome, see Reinhold 1970, 37–61; Bessone 1998.

101 Stone 1994, 13–15, n. 17.

102 The *toga praetexta* was indeed laid down together with the *bulla* (*insignia puerorum ingenuorum*) in the rite of passage that marked the beginning of adulthood for a child; see Dolansky 2008, 48–50; Harlow 2017, 44–49.

103 For the discovery of tunics decorated with *clavi* of different colors and thicknesses, see Bender Jørgensen 2011 and the bibliography cited therein.

104 This is clearly not an isolated case; on the contrary, numerous parallels can be found in the Fayum portraits (Aubert and Cortopassi 1998; Parlasca and Adriani 1969; Larsson Lovén 2014, 273). Also seemingly indicative of the maiden's young age is the choice of the white color of her tunic; matrons used to wear very colorful robes (Harlow 2017, 55).

105 On the use of accessories see Frapiccini 2011, 21–40.

106 In general, see Bartman 2001; Micheli and Santucci 2011.

107 Santucci 2011, 84–89. Disheveled hair could also be an expression of uncontrolled moods and "divine" possession (Santucci 2011, 81–84).

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were frequently portrayed in art with unbound, or loosely styled hair.[108] These choices were not expressions of individual preference but rather conformed to socially accepted models, which evolved over time while remaining contained by cultural expectations.[109]

For young maidens such as the one in our portrait, hairstyles represented simplified versions of adult coiffures.[110] These might consist of modest knots, braids or buns, frequently secured with *vittae* (cloth bands or ribbons), which both physically restrained the hair and symbolically conveyed modesty.[111]

Although our portrait shows only partial evidence of the hairstyle, the visible long lock flowing in soft waves along the right side of the neck strongly suggests that the hair was gathered up. This leaves open the question of whether the style represents a youthful variant appropriate to her age or a more elaborate arrangement, as some contemporary depictions show young maidens wearing sophisticated hairstyles similar to those of adult women.[112]

The treatment of the maiden's neck finds significant parallels in other female representations from roughly the same period, particularly in depictions where two flowing locks are shown tumbling down the neck.[113] Notable examples include an *aureus* bearing the head of Octavia (39 BCE),[114] a finely carved portrait head from Velitrae (mid-1st c. BCE),[115] and a female bust portrayed within an *armarium* on a well-known funerary plaque (last third of the 1st c. BCE).[116]

While such soft, wavy locks appear in later periods as well,[117] their prominence during the second half of the 1st c. BCE suggests a distinctive trend of that time.

c) Jewelry

The young maiden is adorned with spherical earrings and a short choker necklace – both markers of elite status in the Late Republic and Early Imperial period. From the 1st c. BCE

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108 Santucci 2011, 90–92.

109 For the evolution of women's hairstyles see Virgili 1989, 37 ff.; Sapelli 2004; Liberati 2009, 268–76; Micheli 2011; Buccino 2011.

110 Sometimes only very small girls were depicted with their hair down; see Buccino 2011, 363.

111 It seems significant that the *vittae* of maidens were quite distinct from those of brides. On how different hairstyles characterized the main stages of a woman's life, see Virgili 1989, 37.

112 This is the case, for example, with a mother and daughter group in the Centrale Montemartini. Here, the mother is depicted in the *Pudicitia* type, and the child displays a complex hairstyle characterized by a series of braids gathered on top of her head (Fittschen and Zanker 1983, 39–40, no. 42, table 54).

113 In the portrait of our maiden, only one lock, falling on the right side of her neck, is visible, as she has her head turned slightly to the left. The lock that probably falls on the left side of her neck is not visible to us.

114 Bartman 1999, 59, fig. 47; Buccino 2011, 365–66. After Octavia, Livia too, in many of the numerous portraits thought to represent her, often appears to be characterized by a few locks flowing freely and softly onto her neck (Bartman 1999, 83, figs. 68, 69, 75, 79, 94, etc.).

115 Micheli 2011, 54, fig. IV 5. Some scholars have identified this head portrait as Octavia (Bartman 1999, 214–15). For other, different hairstyles datable to the mid-1st c. BCE, all characterized by soft locks on the neck, see Micheli 2011, figs. IV 6, IV 13.

116 Papini 2011.

117 It characterizes, for instance, some of the hairstyles of the age of Tiberius and Caligula, but also of Claudius and Nero (Micheli 2011, figs. IV 19, IV 22).

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onward, jewelry became increasingly prevalent in daily life, with earrings, in particular, emerging as significant status symbols worn by matrons and maidens.[118] These were among the most prized personal ornaments, especially when incorporating precious stones.[119]

The earrings in this portrait feature large spherical pendants rendered in white, most likely representing pearls. These were exceptionally valued in Roman society, and earrings featuring single or multiple pearls ranked among the most popular – and expensive – types of adornment.[120] Their popularity is reflected in their frequent appearance in painting, where well-preserved examples clearly illustrate the gold wire hoop passing through the earlobe and the wire holding the inserted pearl.[121]

Necklaces, too, served as important indicators of wealth and status.[122] Archaeological evidence reveals a wide spectrum – from simple gold bands to elaborate pieces adorned with gemstones, the latter especially prized for their vibrant colors and intrinsic value.[123] The necklace worn by our maiden features elongated, dark-colored beads,[124] which – judging by their careful depiction – likely represent precious stones,[125] rather than the more affordable glass-paste imitations available to those of modest means.[126] This deliberate choice to depict luxury materials in the portrait reinforces the subject's elite social standing and aligns with the broader visual strategies employed to communicate familial prestige.

Conclusions

The painted portrait we have presented here forms part of the earliest decorative phase of the Domus del Larario in the Municipium Augusta Bilbilis. The house dates to around the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE and clearly reflects the emerging decorative trends in the newly established Roman municipium. The early wall paintings in this house are representative of the different workshops that arrived to refurbish the Roman city. The portrait was created by a workshop possessing considerable technical skill – evident in both the preparation of the mortar and the application of background colors in fresco – though less adept in rendering figurative elements. These painters also decorated other residential areas of the city, as confirmed through visual comparisons and supported by archaeometric analyses of the pigments and petrographic studies of the mortars.

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118 D'Ambrosio 2009, 278–80. In general, see also Berg 2002.

119 D'Ambrosio 2009, 285.

120 For a collection of literary sources referring to the great value of pearls in Rome, see Cerchiai Manodori Sagredo 2017, 206–9.

121 It is likely that this can be attributed to the widespread use of this type of earring (d'Ambrosio and De Carolis 1997, 88, no. 261) but also to the ease of rendering it pictorially. D'Ambrosio et al. 2008, 34–35, type A2a.

122 For a collection and classification of the necklaces represented in painting in Pompeii, see d'Ambrosio et al. 2008.

123 Sources tell us, for example, that emeralds were highly prized (Plin. *HN* 37.16).

124 Tapered necklaces were usually held together by a thread made of gold or another material. This type of necklace is attested both among the jewelry preserved in the Vesuvian area and in pictorial representations (d'Ambrosio et al. 2008, 27, type E1).

125 Cerchiai Manodori Sagredo 2017, 209–11.

126 D'Ambrosio 2009, 288.

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Focusing on the typology of the *pinax*, several aspects of the analysis indicate that this is a *unicum*. The imitation of easel paintings depicting various themes became a common feature of Roman mural decoration from the Second Style onward. In the specific case of portraits, this practice persisted through to the decorations found in the catacombs.[127] There is evidence of a wide variety of frames, with the eight-pointed version being the most prevalent. However, such frames were typically accompanied by small doors and not found in isolation, as in the case here – marking the first distinctive feature of the portrait under discussion. The second peculiarity lies in its placement and arrangement on the wall. Although its typology is characteristic of the upper zone and is usually supported by a cornice, the visibility of the fastening system is an anomaly. Furthermore, it currently stands as a *unicum* in that it features ropes connecting the corners of the frame to both the cornice and the curved elements of the upper zone.

The depiction of portraits within imitations of easel paintings in Roman wall paintings is well-documented. However, no examples of such portraits have been securely dated to the 1st c. BCE. In Rome, the inclusion of portraits in wall paintings – particularly within medallions – became widespread from the second half of the 1st c. CE onward. It appears, therefore, that the painted portrait of Bilbilis represents the earliest known example of this type to date.

The young girl portrayed in this painting is adorned with elegant jewelry, a carefully styled – albeit schematic – hairstyle, and a tunic embellished with purple *clavi*. Her appearance reflects both her young age and her status as an unmarried girl of a prominent and affluent family. This interpretation gains further significance when considered within the broader figurative context: the wall features a central *aedicula* in the middle zone, housing two full-length figures identifiable as the *pater familias* and his wife. The female figure in the upper area may thus be interpreted as their daughter, suggesting that the composition represents a family group. Notably, there is a striking typological contrast. The young woman is portrayed within an imitation of an easel painting and dressed in a simple tunic, while the presumed parents are depicted using sculptural conventions, in keeping with their social rank and *dignitas*.

Equally important is the placement of this family group within the architectural space. The portraits are located on the rear wall of the room, directly opposite the entrance, making them the first visual focal point for anyone entering. Moreover, the fact that this ensemble is situated within a *cubiculum* – accessed through the *atrium* – underscores the multifunctionality of such rooms, which likely served not only as private quarters but also as reception spaces, perhaps for select visitors.

Considering the historical context, it is plausible that this family had Italic origins and settled in Augusta Bilbilis during the last quarter of the 1st c. BCE, a period for which the presence of Italic settlers in the area is well documented. Beyond the evident intent to assert their social identity – clearly visible in the dignified portrayal of the couple – the decoration may also serve as a marker of their cultural origins. The stylistic features of the room's decoration closely parallel contemporary models in Rome, with notable similarities to the House of Augustus, the House of Livia, and the Villa della Farnesina in Rome.

[127] Zimmermann (2020) has studied the disappearance of this custom in Late Antiquity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759425100354 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgments: This work has been made possible thanks to grant RYC2021-030958-I, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Union "NextGenerationEU"/PRTR and the associated work contract N2. It has been undertaken within the framework of two research projects directed by C. Guiral: La decoración parietal en el cuadrante NE de *Hispania*: pinturas y estucos (siglo II a.C.-siglo VI d.C.) (HAR2013-48456-C3-2-P) and *Tectoria et pigmenta*; and Estudio analítico y arqueológico de los pigmentos y morteros de las pinturas del cuadrante NE de *Hispania* (s. II a.C.- s. VI d.C.) (HAR2017-84732-P). Part of the research was made possible by a stay at the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Rome. We would like to thank the directors of the Bilbilis site, Manuel Martín-Bueno and Carlos Sáenz Preciado, for their kindness and willingness to allow the study of these pieces to be carried out. Finally, we thank the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural de España, Dirección General de Patrimonio Cultural y Bellas Artes (Ministerio de Cultura), for providing us with their work on the site plan.

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