

The reconstruction of the Villa of Serenus, 2013 season

Dorothea Schulz

After completing the ‘wallpaper’ patterns in the Domed Room in February 2012 Martin Hense and Dorothea Schulz dedicated their time to reconstructing the decoration of the dome and commencing work on the figurative scenes.¹

It was planned to decorate the dome in November 2012, but the year’s permit was issued only in January 2013, and work was carried out from January 19th to February 17th 2013. Because it was not possible for conservation work to take place at Kellis this year, we were able to hire Tamer Ramadan, who usually works as conservator in Kellis. He proved to be a great and enthusiastic collaborator, without whom the decoration of the dome could never have been accomplished.

Martin Hense could not be present in Amheida but nevertheless provided important information, revised reconstructions and an indispensable ‘helpdesk’.

Thus this season saw the complete reconstruction of the decoration of the dome in the ‘Domed Room’ (Room 1 in the original building).



The collapse of the dome in the original Villa.

Since the dome of the original Villa completely collapsed, not one fragment of the decoration is still in situ. Even worse, the decorated plaster was smashed and there are only smithereens left. They are stored on trays in the dig house and were studied extensively.

¹ The construction of the recreation of the Villa of Serenos was financed by the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, from funds provided by the Leon Levy Foundation. The decoration of the Villa has been principally funded by a grant from the Embassy of the Netherlands in Egypt in collaboration with the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC).

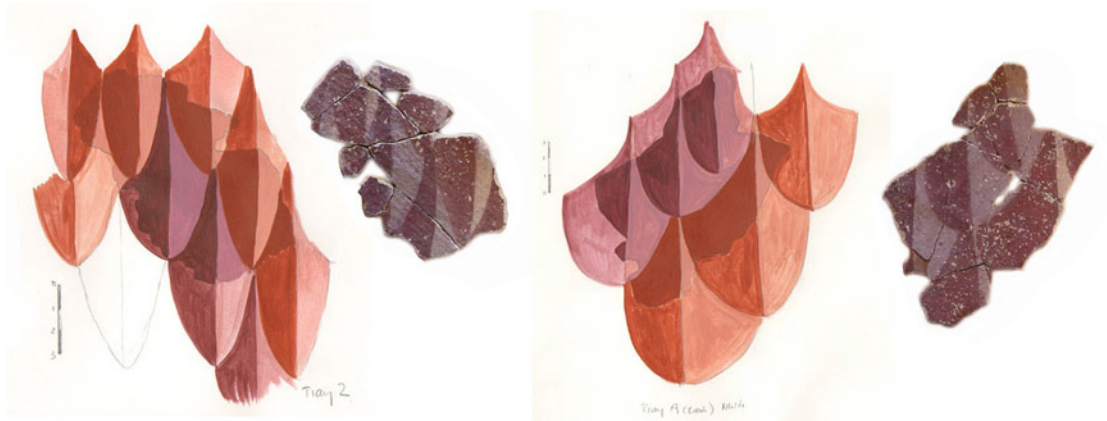
Based on these remaining fragments Martin and Dorothea could work out a very probable solution for the decoration of the dome.



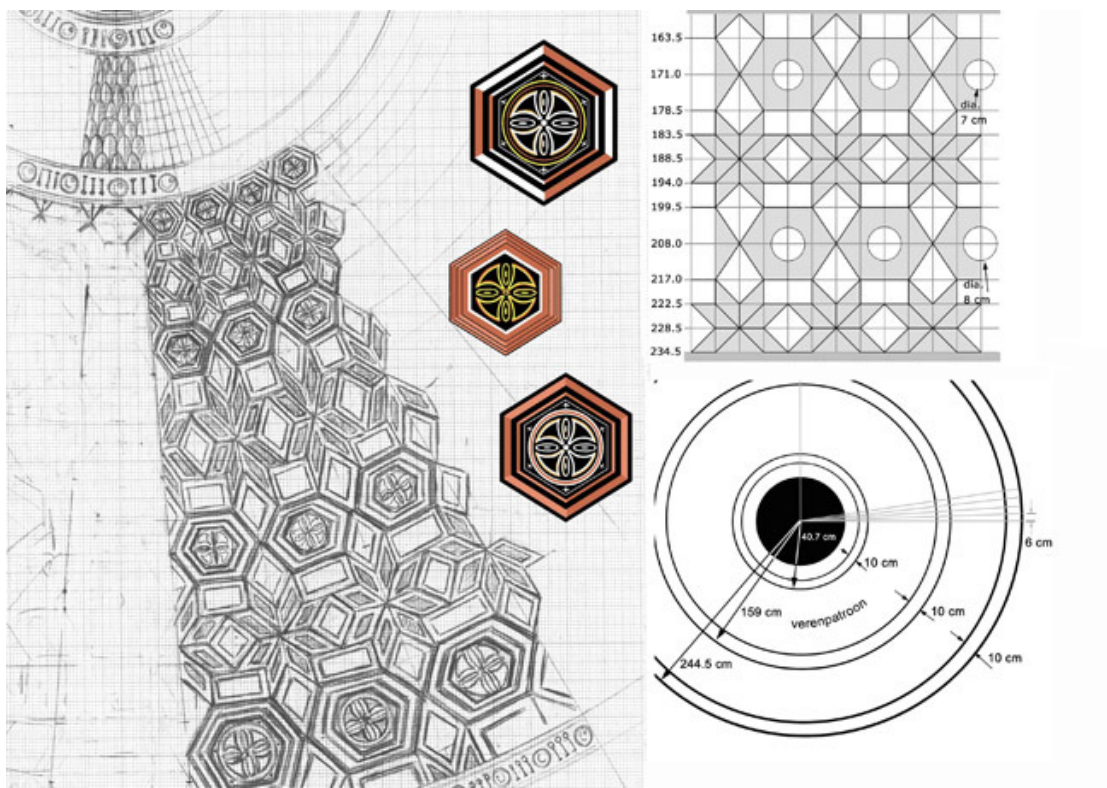
Virtual selection of original fragments - not to scale.



Martin recording the surviving fragments of the dome decoration.



Sketches of surviving fragments of the feather pattern.



Sketches of several elements of the dome decoration by Martin Hense.

The dome is divided into two areas, the upper 'inner' circle, which is decorated with a lively feather pattern and the lower 'outer' circle, which is decorated with an intricate geometrical pattern. This pattern, the so-called 'coffering', is constructed with lozenge-stars, hexagons and squares.

The hexagons were decorated with floral motives in the centre, apparently in two different colour settings (of both there survived sufficient fragments to reconstruct them). Some of the 'diamonds' appear to be decorated as well (no surprise) and one fragment clearly shows grapes. The rectangles seem to have had a variety of decoration but they are far too fragmentary and too faded to make a faithful copy. Leaving them empty was not an option; thus most of the decoration in the reconstruction is based on motives from the geometrical patterns in the 'wallpapers'.



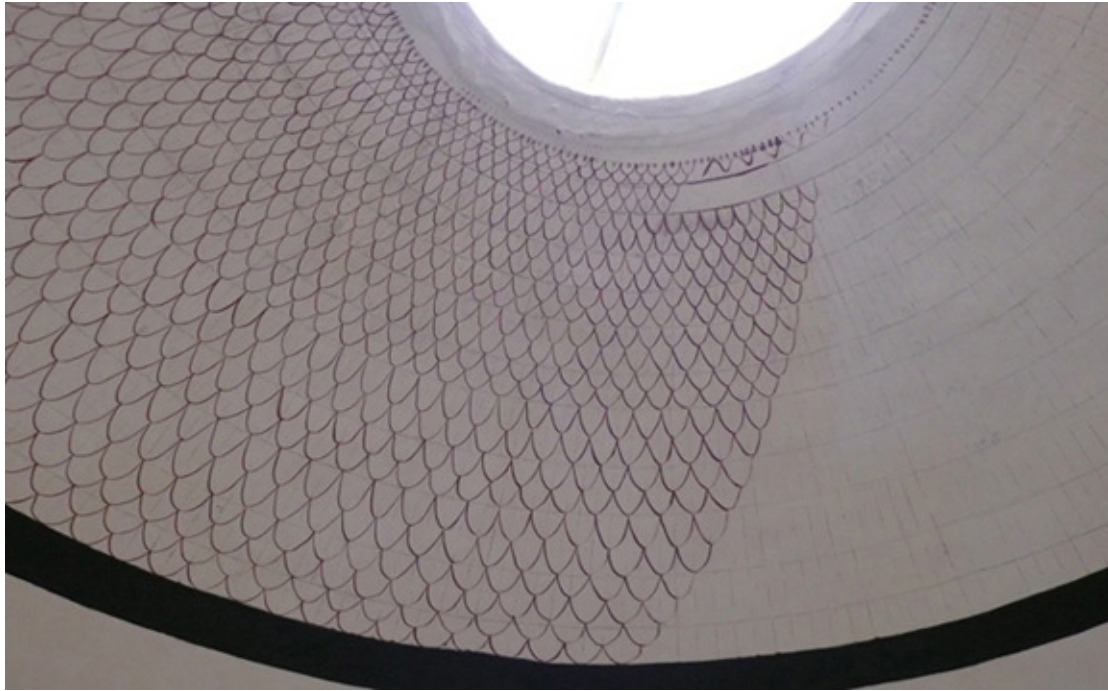
Tamer applying gesso to the plaster.

Since the plaster of the dome was pretty rough, the painters had to start with smoothing the surface with sandpaper. The next step to prepare the plaster was applying a layer of gesso.

Then Tamer and Dorothea could set up the grid, starting with dividing the dome into circles. To their utter delight the 'chalk line' method even works on a slightly curved surface.



Setting up the grid with a chalk line - a piece of string, dripped in red colour. It has to be 'fixed' on two points, then let it snap. The result will be a red line.



The grid for the feather pattern with sketched feathers.



Painting the feathers: Tamer applying the light colours (white, yellow, light red and pink), Dorothea adding the dark side (black, red, dark red and purple).

The next step in decorating the dome was actually adding some colours, starting with the feather pattern. It turned out that the best way to paint the feathers was the original way: starting with the lighter colour and then adding the dark side of the feather. On the original fragments it can be clearly observed that the darker colours are lying on top of the lighter colours.



Tamer painting the first layer of colours for the 'coffering'.

While still working on the feathers the painters already made a grid for the 'coffering' pattern, constructed the elements (hexagons, lozenges, et cetera) and started filling in the colours.



...while Dorothea is finishing the feathers... in the meantime the 'coffering' is taking shape as well.



The first steps: a grid, construction lines, adding colours and lines.

One of the great aspects of reconstructing the decoration right through all the phases is, that it helps to understand the structure of these intricate patterns.

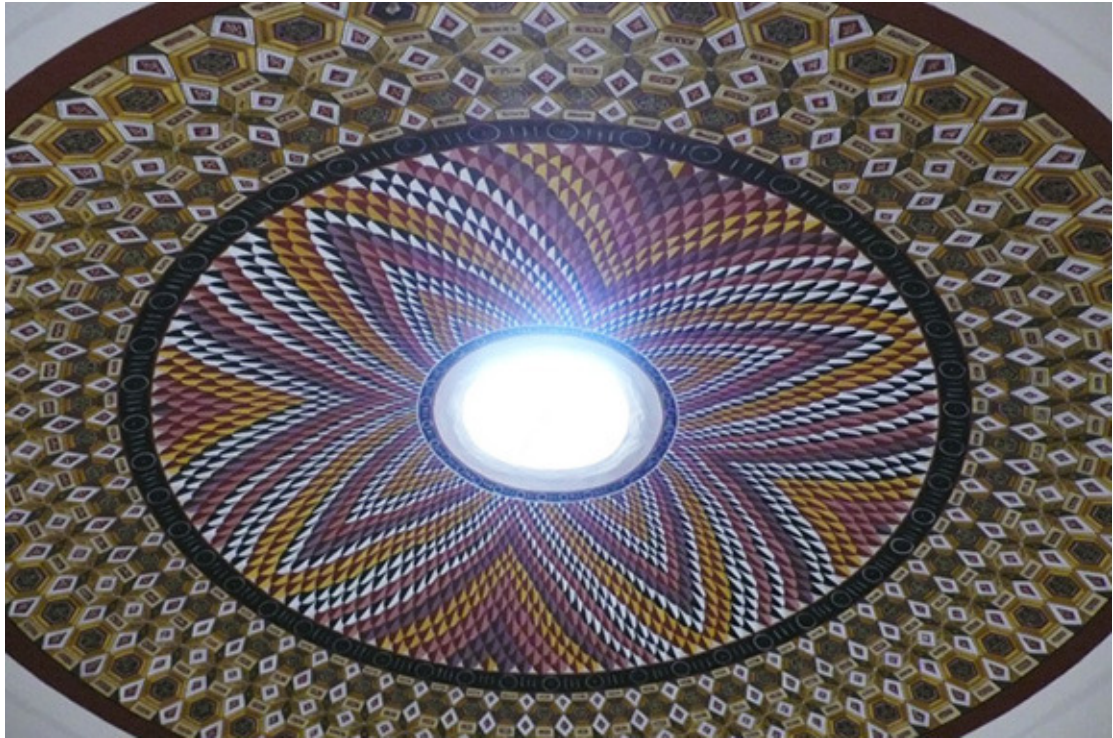
While working on the patterns Dorothea had to go back to the originals again and again to verify not only the colours but every single step. For a faithful recreation the full understanding of the original is of utmost importance.



Adding more and more lines, the details and finally the finishing touch: 'light' in white and of course white lines.

The patterns are very cleverly constructed, and it turns out that all the elements are absolutely necessary; not a single line could be omitted.

Dorothea had to paint the dazzling amount of 17,920 lines (all adding up to nearly a kilometre).



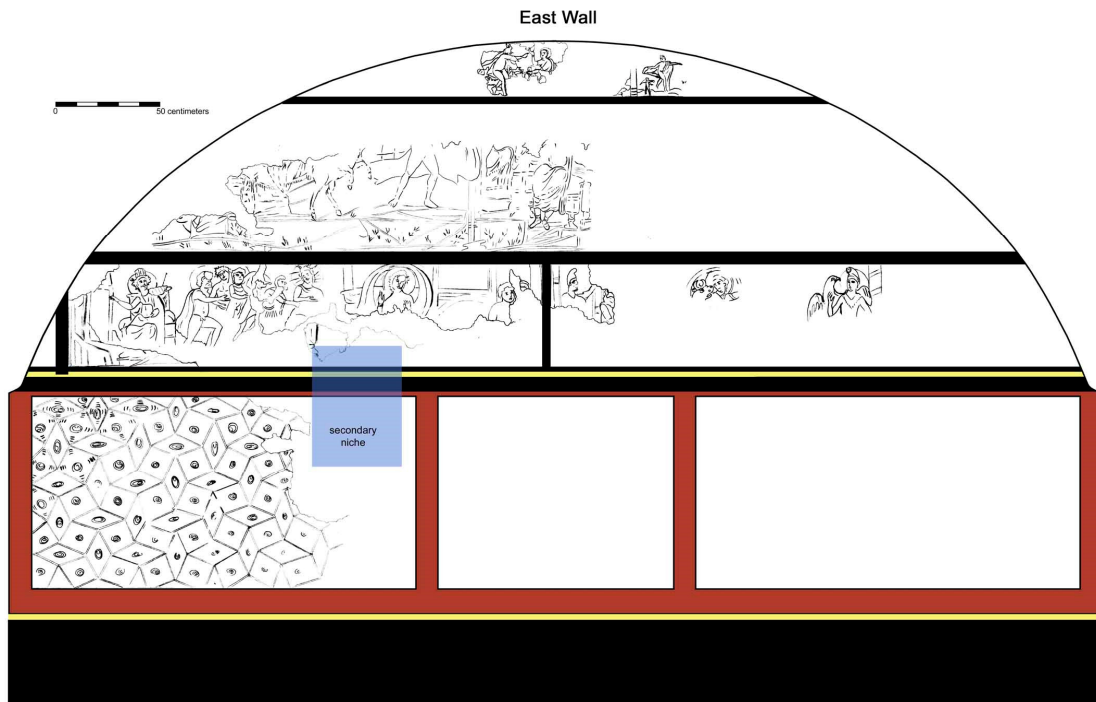
The finished patterns.

It took Tamer and Dorothea four weeks of hard work (constantly working on the ceiling is a strain for neck and shoulders) to decorate the dome.



Original fragments virtually fitted in the reconstructed decoration - it works!

Even though this reconstruction may not be the only possible solution, it is a very probable one and certainly gives a stunning impression of what the original dome looked like.



Preliminary reconstruction of the East Wall of Room 1 by Martin.

During the next season, which is planned to start in November 2013, we will fill in the last missing details of the dome pattern (the circles in the black bands) and will finally start to paint the figurative scenes.



For more and actual information and plenty of pictures please have a look on the facebook site of Serenos' Villa:
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Villa-of-Serenus/161742407197412>

