

# Yeni Hammam: History in Graffiti

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

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### Historical Overview

Yeni Hammam is a XVII century Ottoman bath, located in the centre of Plovdiv, Bulgaria and is a monument of culture of local importance. It is one of the last two preserved Ottoman baths in the town. It functioned as a bath until 1990's. After a devastating fire in 2016, the building has been abandoned and heavily deteriorated, yet the fire revealed several layers of plaster and previously unknown decorations.

### Methodology

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

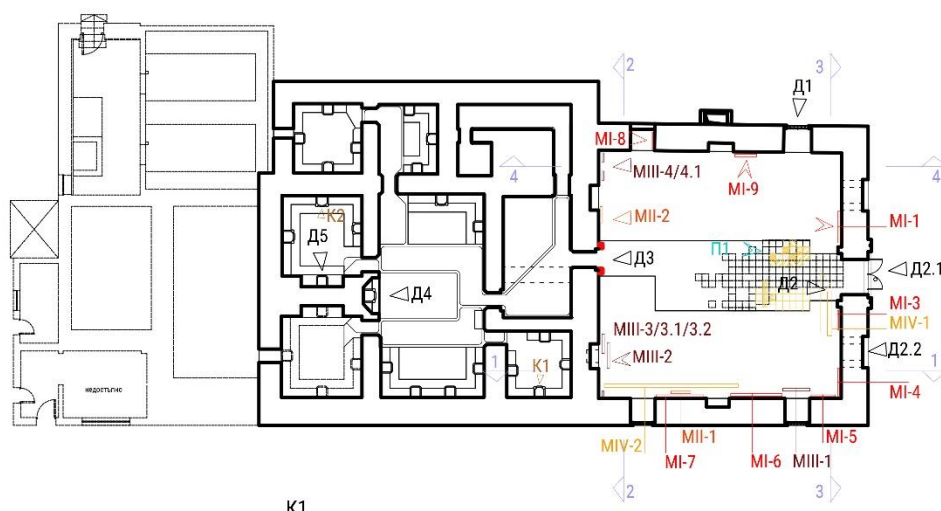


Fig. 1. Scheme of murals location (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

## Results

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

*First period:* The building was erected during XVII century (1630-1640), based on the Ottoman Tax Archives. It was located between the Turkish and the Jewish Quarters, tangent to one of the main commercial routes from Vienna to Constantinopol. It functioned as a bath with few minor repairs. By the end of the XVII century the windows on the front façade were narrowed and new plaster layers were laid. Numerous graffiti drawings are also revealed in this layer (Fig. 1). The pigments used are in the dark range - cinnabar, ocher, black. The elements vary – letters from the alphabet, geometric shapes, scribbles, ships, warriors and fish shoals (Fig.2). They are in extremely fragile state, yet the author managed to document them all. Similar types of graffiti can be observed in medieval churches all across Europe – Greece, Macedonia, France, Britain, etc.

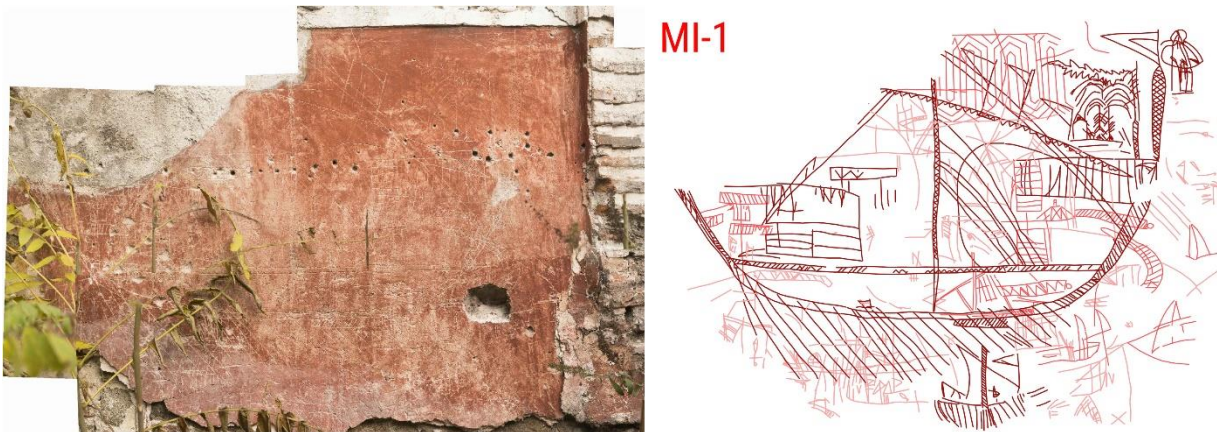


Fig. 2. Graffiti drawings (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

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

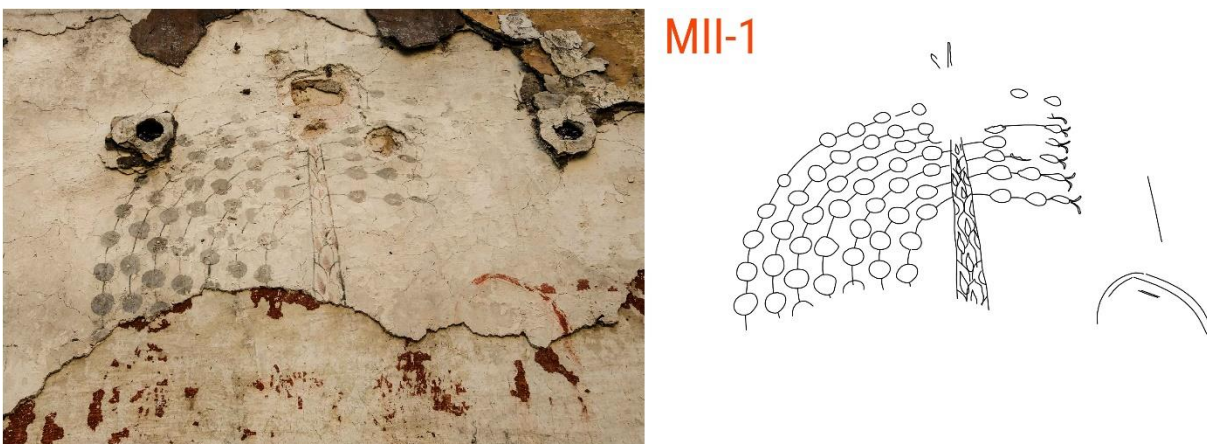


Fig. 3. Peacock detail (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

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



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

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





Fig. 5. Late Revival murals (© Nina Toleva-Nowak).

*Fifth period:* In 1928 another devastating earthquake had taken place. A photograph from 1892 clearly shows the roof of the bathroom, as well as the Tash Kopryu mosque with its minaret, destroyed in 1928 during the great Chirpan earthquake. The roof of the photos from 1892 is in contrast with later photos from 1930s, which signifies another major change. During that period the roof was classic pitched roof with small partial segment timber dome hidden in it.

*Sixth period:* The window openings of the central facade were finally closed. Probably to this period can be attributed ceramic tiles on the floor in the dressing room. Part of the stone sinks have been replaced by cast concrete mosaic elements, ceramic tiles (uncalibrated) have been laid on the walls and the plinths and the high part of the walls, together with the domes, have been treated with oil-based paint. Holes have been formed for the removal of chimneys from wood-burning stoves used for heating, as the hypocaust may no longer have functioned.

*Seventh period:* The bathroom retained its authentic function until the end of the 1980s, and was subsequently turned into a shop and warehouse for solid wood furniture. To this last function we can refer the final closing of the secondary entrance of the north-west wall of the dressing room. On February 18-19, 2016, a fire burned the most representative part - the dressing room with a wooden sloping roof and a segmental dome, the staircase to the gallery on the second level. The bathroom finally closes its doors and remains in high-risk of self-destruction due to weather conditions, threatening to lose the memory of the building and the traces of Ottoman public baths in Plovdiv.

## Conclusion

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

## References

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