https://www.doi.org/10.17234/9789533791074.06

NOT ONLY MITHRAS – REFLECTIONS ON SANCTUARIES OF THE HIGH AND LATE ROMAN EMPIRE ON PRIVATE GROUND, WITH PARTICULAR CONSIDERATION OF NORICUM AND PANNONIA

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Abstract

The "Oriental cults" spread already in the Roman Republic but had their climax in the 2nd/3rd century AD. Whilst sanctuaries of these cults and gods in public places were frequent, in the last third of the 2nd century AD additionally many small sanctuaries and places of worship on private grounds began to appear, increasingly in the Severan period. This phenomenon has not until now been reflected on a general level. When looking for private sanctuaries, especially in cities and city-like settlements – in this study especially in the provinces of Noricum and Pannonia – one may detect that these sanctuaries are found more frequently in so-called insulae than in domus, in keeping with the example of Ostia. Moreover, the same is true, at least up to a certain point, for traditional Roman cults and gods as well, such as in Carnuntum for Silvanus and associated gods. Thus, the process of privatisation of cult and the generating of small groups is not limited to "Oriental cults" alone. The article introduces some well-excavated and analysed examples and discusses the question of who the performers of cult (the owners and users) in these sanctuaries were, and what reasons led them to form such groups.

Keywords: *Roman religion – private sanctuaries – Mithras – "Oriental cults" – Noricum – Pannonia.*

Preliminary remarks and issues

This work is concerned – primarily on the basis of a few selected examples from the Danubian provinces of Noricum and Panonnia superior and inferior – with the question of why, and under which social, economic, and conditions of ownership during and after the later 2nd century AD, a significant increase in sanctuaries on private ground can be observed. In the process, the work does not go into questions of ritual, cultic, or liturgical practices or cultic-religious content, but instead views the phenomenon in general terms and not limited to originally Egyptian or "oriental salvation religions", since analogous cases are found not only for cultic communities such as for Isis, Mithras, or Jupiter Dolichenus, but also for traditional divinities of the Roman pantheon.

Although a few Egyptian (e.g., inscriptions for Isis Capitolina in the 2nd century B.C.) and other Oriental cults[1] (e.g. introduction of Magna Mater as a state cult during the Second Punic War, construction of a temple after 204 BC; Bacchanalia scandal as a result of an escalated private cult in 186 BC) were able to become established in Rome already during the Republic, roughly around the beginning of the 2nd century BC, it was only after the final third of the 1st century AD, however, that a significant increase can be observed in the archaeological-epigraphical evidence in almost the entire Imperium Romanum, if nonetheless in very differing regional intensity. For Mithras as well as for other "oriental" divinities, such as the diverse versions of Baal of Doliche and Heliopolis, equated with Jupiter Optimus Maximus, or also Sabazios, to mention only a couple of prominent names, an increasing number of cult sites arose not only in the centre (Rome, Ostia, etc.) but also in the provinces. In contrast to the deities of the old Roman pantheon and the imperial cult, these – with few exceptions, such as the Severan renovation of the Isis temple in Savaria[2] – were mostly relatively modest sites. These, with their cultic assembly rooms frequently with associated temple buildings which were rather modest in scale (in size being often only aediculae), clearly were differentiated from the earlier, mostly (relatively) monumental public temples, not only in terms of construction and inventory, and equipment with wall paintings and mosaics, but also in the inscriptions and statues/statuettes erected in their interiors. A good example might be the sacred precinct of IOM Heliopolitanus in the *canabae legionis* of Carnuntum, with two large cenatoria and only a modest *aedes*.[3] Almost without exception these sanctuaries were located in public space in the 1st and up to the mid-2nd century AD; after the final third of the 2nd century, however, they shifted increasingly into the private sphere, in the cities being either in large residences, or in marginal areas, accessible from the street, of so-called insulae (in the sense of enclosed building blocks), with or without demonstrable, direct connection to an individual "house". Interestingly,

1 In what follows, the word "cult" will be used non-specifically for ritual/religious actions arbitrarily, also for smaller or purely private groups, and not in the sense of state cults (polis religion).

2 After the extensive scientific research and restorations of recent years, the corresponding publication has unfortunately still not appeared; cf., in preliminary fashion, Sosztarits, Balázs and Csapláros 2013.

3 On this see recently Gassner, Kremer, Steigberger and Tober 2010; Gassner, Steigberger and Tober 2009–2011; Steigberger and Tober 2014. – The outlet of the sanctuary might change a lot, if the assumption of a huge podium temple – the interpretation is a result of geophysical measurements in a still unexcavated area – should prove to be correct; see for that Gassner and Steigberger 2013, esp. 14–17 with tab. X.

at the same time period similar sanctuaries become increasingly apparent in the same location for the traditional gods (e.g. very strongly in Pannonia for Silvanus and the goddesses of the ways);[4] there was, therefore, no general, religious-political reason, for example persecution by the authorities of the religious content and religious practices underlying these, or also only social disdain, for these sanctuaries to be privatised.[5] How, therefore, can the phenomenon be explained?

From the beginning, Christianity, as a persecuted religion formed a contrast to the religious cult communities of other "oriental" divinities mentioned above, despite many commonalities of content (and organisation?). Only in the 3rd century after the edict of tolerance of Gallienus did Christianity become apparent with publicly visible and accessible church buildings[6] – and also here obviously rather as an exception –, before its final recognition after 311; before, its focus was (generally) on private cult sites and meeting places which were unrecognisable from outside. A good example is already provided by the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul preached initially in the synagogue at Ephesos. Due to the resistance of orthodox Jews, he moved to the *schola* of Tyrannos where he was able to preach unchallenged for two years (Acts 19.8–10).[7] Yet after two years of missionary activities when he had achieved great success and public renown, at least according to the interpretation of the Christian authors, a public demonstration in support of Artemis Ephesia took place in the theatre on the part of the silversmiths under the leadership of a certain Demetrios (Acts 19.23–41).

Such completely private meeting places (the common translation of σχολῇ / *schola* as "lecture hall" or "school" is perhaps too narrow) were therefore utterly normal in the mid–1st century AD; whether they primarily served the purposes of teaching, club evenings, religious goals, or as all-purpose rooms remains obscure in individual cases. During the imperial period such meeting places were certainly found in many houses of the upper classes who were qualified for office (*honestiores*), who received and entertained *clientes* and *amici*, yet who could also commit to their political or other agendas. Such spaces also had a long tradition in the Roman club houses, where guilds of craftsmen or associations with public duties (*centonarii* etc.) celebrated feasts and cultic gatherings, yet also – and above all – discussed and stipulated their internal organisation (voting for leading individuals, distribution of financial support to needy members,

4 Kremer 2012, 330–337; Kremer 2014; on this, see further below.

5 On the general decline of the public temples in the upper Danube region already in the early 3rd century: Walsh 2016.

6 Strobel 2016, esp. 2–7 and 13–14; on a church in Edessa, destroyed apparently by a flood already in 201: Ross 2001, 104–109.

7 Acts 19.8–10: 8 Εἰσελθὼν δὲ εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐπαρρησιάζετο ἐπὶ μῆνας τρεῖς διαλεγόμενος καὶ πείθων [τὰ] περὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ. 9 ὡς δέ τινες ἐσκληρύνοντο καὶ ἠπείθουν κακολογοῦντες τὴν ὁδὸν ἐνώπιον τοῦ πλήθους, ἀποστὰς ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀφώρισεν τοὺς μαθητὰς καθ' ἡμέραν διαλεγόμενος ἐν τῇ σχολῇ Τυράννου. 10 τοῦτο δὲ ἐγένετο ἐπὶ ἔτη δύο, ὥστε πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας τὴν Ἀσίαν ἀκοῦσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου, Ἰουδαίους τε καὶ Ἕλληνας. – "8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." – In the Acts of the Apostles, however, there is no discussion that Paul had "rented" the rooms, as Strobel 2016, 15, claims. It is much more likely that Tyrannos shared his views.

pricing agreements, purchasing strategies etc.).[8] In his letters, Paul frequently refers to houses with such spaces in which he had met the community.[9] These meeting rooms,[10] affiliated with a group or (better off) individuals, with their symposia during which offerings were made to the Roman house gods, are with great probability the underlying substance from which in the course of the (later) 2nd century private sanctuaries arose with communal banquets as an important liturgical event; amongst these were the Christian house chapels.[11] Precisely this pattern of distribution is shown in fortunate individual cases in the archaeological evidence, both in cities as well as in rural villas or *vici*. The architectonic or spatial-sociological background for the development which is investigated here is therefore generally clear; the most important questions to be clarified are those concerning, rather, the motives (the advantages) for the individuals and groups involved. It is therefore clearly significant to elucidate who the sponsors of these cult spaces and organisers of these cults were – not necessarily as named individuals or precisely defined groups, but rather as a species within imperial society.

A fine example of private assembly rooms and prestigious rooms for the urban official élites in the early and high imperial period, and to which religiously defined rooms were appended in the late 2nd and early 3rd century, is Residence 6 in the so-called Terrace House 2 in Ephesos; its owner in the Severan period is attested epigraphically as C. Furius Aptus, priest of Dionysos. Around 200 AD, a new group of rooms consisting of an apsidal assembly hall (*cenatorium*?) with water basin, an adjacent Room of Mysteries with rich stucco decoration in the vaulted ceiling and an oculus (through which a deity could descend in the sense of an epiphany?), as well as additional smaller rooms were built next to a large reception hall existing since the Trajanic period and behind an atrium, which now served as a vestibule; the new rooms were dug into and carved out of the slope (fig. 1).[12]

The sponsors of the "oriental" cults

Aside from isolated episodes such as the veneration of Baal of Emesa by the Severan emperor M. Aurelius Antoninus (218–222) who originated from the priestly dynasty

8 On this, see extensively Bollmann 1998.

9 Röm 16; Kor 16, 19; cf. also Strobel 2016, 15.

10 These rooms – even if sacrifices to gods were made here occasionally – are by no means identical with the small shrines of the house gods (so-called *lararia*) neither in function nor in locality. For a recent careful examination of the *sacra privata* or "domestic cults" in the Roman house see Dardenay and Bricault 2023. In the present work, however, sanctuaries will be presented that are situated on private property, but obviously did not serve the domestic cult in the narrower framework of the family. On the contrary, they were either open to an extended circle of political and economic *amicitia*, even if they were located within the domus or were created in the vicinity of a domus, but were structurally separated from it or built within an insula on properties that were used by a *collegium* in the broadest sense. But, of course, it cannot be excluded that certain rituals and cultic equipment were not taken from domestic cults for these "sanctuaries on private ground" as especially the frequent use of snake-vessels may show (cf. Scherrer 2021, esp. 240).

11 On the actual, probably distinctly smaller number (in contrast to previous opinion) of house chapels and alternative meeting places, cf. Adams 2016. Extremely critical with regard to the existence of house chapels per se, Strobel 2016, 16–17.

12 Thür 2022. Residence 6 is probably the tract of the Terrace House used for public purposes, whereas Residence 7, dovetailed with it, probably constituted the associated private sphere.

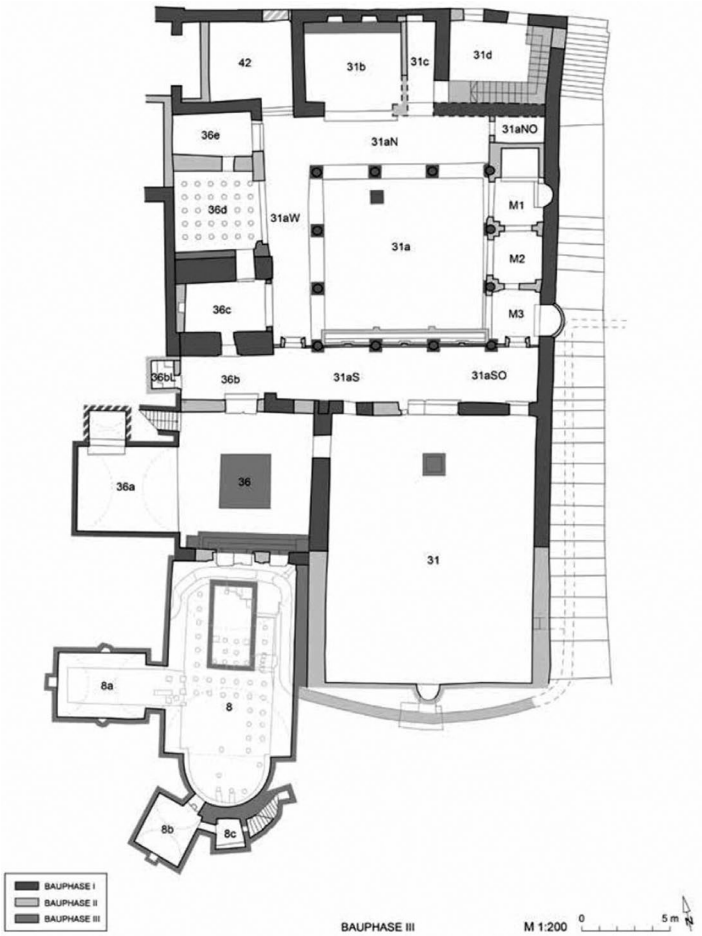

Fig. 1. Plan of Terrace House 2, Residence 6, in the Severan period (building phase 3), in Ephesos: 8) Cenatorium with apse; 8a) Room of Mysteries; 8b+c) small rooms carved into the rock; 31) large hall; 31a) peristyle courtyard; 36) atrium with conpluvium (after Thür 2022, fig. 5)

of that city[13] and who later received the name Elagabalus, an excessive devotion to the "oriental" cults never really asserted itself at the Roman imperial court. When, however, Diocletian for example and his co-rulers officially dedicated an altar to Mithras on the occasion of the imperial conference at Carnuntum in 308,[14] one might equally expect a certain exemplary effect on the population just as, conversely, the emperors could assume that they were in line with trends. In the senatorial high aristocracy, as well, individuals had always been involved with these cults, nevertheless without having been particularly active in their organisation or dissemination; this was simply not in accordance with their principal interests, as R. Gordon has emphasised more than once.[15] The fact is that, in their *cursus honorum*, the highest echelons of the imperial

13 On Elagabalus see now extensively: Altmayer 2014.

14 *CIL* 4413.

15 Gordon 2011, 109–110; Gordon 2021, 126–127. On the archaeology of Mithraea in rich private houses, e.g. the senatorial family of the Olympii, in Rome, cf. now Van Haeperen 2023, 88.

population essentially strove for the established, formal offices and positions, and in the religious sector clearly aimed to be accepted into the traditional urban Roman priestly colleges (above all: *pontifices*, *fratres Arvales*; possibly individual offices as *flamen*). A similar situation probably also held true to a certain degree for the majority of the respective urban families who qualified for official duties in their cities in the entire *imperium Romanum*, whereby here old local protective divinities, in particular in the east, and the imperial cult in addition to Jupiter or the Capitoline Triad were in the foreground. In this regard, the interests of a large part of the equestrian class aiming for the Senate, and the well-to-do citizenry below them, were well covered.

As the inscriptions also reveal, the following elements of the population could be considered above all as the sponsoring class for the new cults:[16] on the one hand, soldiers and other individuals who were in professional imperial service over a long period (e.g. customs officials), who during their period of service, characterised by redeployment of troops or relocations and postings, were not able to maintain closer connections to any urban community and who, as a substitute, frequently formed their closest contacts with communities in their profession. On the other hand we can consider the *humiliores*, craftsmen and small tradesmen who were not qualified for public office but who were certainly endowed with ambition and financial means. Both groups, basically so different from each other, were therefore accustomed to organising their social life to a great extent by means of *collegia*, which were frequently officially registered and also occasionally integrated into the social life of the city; these might include professional incorporations, burial clubs, or foreign societies formed on the basis of origin from a province or city. In addition, in the financial and provincial administration below the procuratorial level it was primarily freedmen who were locally active leaders, and were thereby supported by state slaves in the lower ranks. These had an essential similarity with the *humiliores* and *peregrini*, to whom the auxiliary soldiers down to the *missio honesta* also belonged, namely, that even if they had access to a certain wealth, they could not take up any priestly functions in the traditional Roman cults. Indeed, Augustus had already created an outlet for a possible engagement in the imperial cult with the *vicimagistri* and Augustales; yet the respective positions were strictly limited and were locally staffed. Now, with the empire-wide emergence of the new cults from the Orient, the possibility existed for practically everyone to become engaged as a functionary in the non-state sector, from the private house cult up to more or less official societies. Typical in this regard are the numerous references to the vague, that is to say not legally protected priestly term *sacerdos* in the relevant inscriptions, which could be combined with the term *pater* in the Mithraic communities.[17] As the two membership lists from Virunum indicate,[18] which will be discussed further, the title of *pater* was by no means limited to one person per group and could also be bestowed on relatively new members; from this it has been concluded that these leading individuals apparently were already hierarchically high-ranked in other Mithras communities before they were appointed or voted to the position of *pater* in

16 On this comprehensively Clauss 1992.

17 On this cf. Mithoff 1992.

18 See below pp. 10-13.

another group.[19] To this must be objected, however, that the position of *pater (familias)* in the Roman social system was inherited, for which the prerequisites were not a long, successful series of activities and a slow advancement, but – in particular with communities in private sanctuaries – the role of the *pater* was probably regularly taken up by the landowner or temple owner, or at least it could be.

The average composition of the cult collegia, equally known from lists of members or which can be extrapolated from other epigraphic material as votive inscriptions, for example for Mithras[20] or Jupiter Dolichenus,[21] shows with few exceptions – when occasionally *patroni* are definitely referred to – that the groups mentioned above are consistently *cultores*. A preliminary overview, which needs to be sharpened, of the dedicatory inscriptions both for Mithras and for Dolichenus in Noricum reveals many similarities, and apparently is in contradistinction to other provinces such as the two Germanias and the two Pannonias. The main regions of dissemination were the large cities and only second the frequently conjured limes zones; soldiers, officials, freedmen, and slaves are rather the exception,[22] the majority of sponsors instead being private individuals with secure or probable citizenship (*tria nomina*; nevertheless, the *praenomen* is often absent, in particular in the 3rd century).[23]

It is likely that in such more or less private associations, even when traditional divinities such as Vulcan or Hercules are addressed as the recipient of cult, the respective rituals and sacrifices were conducted on private ground by persons who were excluded from public priestly duties, in a type of extended status as *pater familias*.

The cult of Mithras, exclusively focussed on men but not provided with limitations based on social class, certainly was very attractive for soldiers and others who were excluded from a legal marriage, especially slaves; but also the imperial freedmen who were often active relatively briefly in a *statio* could not easily involve a family in their religious activities. The role of the military and of the customs administration in the dissemination of the cult has already been frequently emphasised.[24] But perhaps what was at stake here was not so much the qualities of Mithras as victor or covenanted deity, qualities which were also implicit in Baal or Dolichenus, equated or merged with Jupiter; but instead loyalty and communal spirit, ignoring the distractions arising from the female sex and possible sources of strife, as has been demanded and promoted at

19 Gordon 1996, 425–426.

20 On the two membership lists from Virunum, see below pp. 10-13.

21 Here, for example from Mauer near Amstetten (formerly: Mauer an der Url), a fine cross-section exists, with the numerous dedicatory inscriptions in the treasure find and the entire metal inventory of the sanctuary (cf. Noll 1958). – The special composition of this treasure with a good deal of agrarian tools, three pairs of scales, kitchen ware and household stuff, still awaits a convincing explanation. Probably it was not hidden by the temple warden or priest, but by Germanic plunderers, who had sacked the whole village and could not pick it up anymore afterwards (cf. Scherrer 2008, 142–44).

22 This is not true for Ostia, where freedmen are much more dominant in the Mithraic evidence than elsewhere; see Gordon 2011, 109. But this may well root in the whole social structure of the port-city of Rome, quite different to average cities in the empire, compare Ciambelli 2020.

23 Naturally, for Dolichenus, a high proportion of women of 20–30% is to be borne in mind; for Mithras, in contrast, the special position of the customs personnel, strongly represented here, with imperial *liberti* and *servi*.

24 On the discussion about the social position of followers of Mithras, cf. already Gordon 1994.

all times in armies and paramilitary organisations. In this respect the leadership of the troops will have viewed the veneration of Mithras as an instrument of discipline and of the strengthening of the soldierly community. The chronological component perhaps plays a greater role than has been previously assumed. From the late Republic up to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty the legions were mainly recruited from (Upper) Italy and southern France, that is, the formerly Celtic, population-heavy provinces of Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Narbonensis. With the civil war of the year of the four emperors and the Jewish insurrection, the troops suffered great losses due to battles as well as to the strain of sudden relocations and additional trenchwork; therefore recruiting constantly took place in the locations of their garrisons and areas through which they marched in order to maintain the strength of troop numbers.[25] In contrast to the opinion of many Mithras scholars, it was probably not so decisive that by these means soldiers came into contact in the east with the Mithras cult; instead, it was important that the soldiers be quickly and intensively integrated into the military community of the *commilitones*, and that *virtus* (fighting in union) should be maintained or increased, in spite of the many new recruits. It seems to be significant, in contrast, that the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus quantitatively increased first in the Severan period, when the active soldiers were allowed to have families, and thereby women (and families) began to play a role in the religious life of the military recruits.

Possible reasons for the location of sanctuaries on private grounds

The question therefore still remains open as to why precisely after the later second half of the 2nd century and especially in the Severan period, sanctuaries for Mithras and other "oriental" cults appear on private ground in relatively large numbers. In the German provinces, where there are correspondingly extensive investigations, this phenomenon is well demonstrable for large rural villas,[26] otherwise it is primarily encountered in the cities. The search for the reasons is complicated by the only approximate dating possibilities for the emergence of these sanctuaries. For instance, in Rome and Ostia Mithraea are found after the later 2nd century both in a number of *domus* (cf. for example the Mitreo di Fructosus in the cellar under the *oecus*, north of the peristyle courtyard) as well as, in larger numbers, in insulae, where probably people of more modest social standing, perhaps organised groups of craftsmen or merchants, had their residential and working spaces.[27] The same also holds true, if not to such a conspicuous extent, for many provincial cities. The first question that arises in this regard is whether, in the choice between a *domus* with one owner and an insula with the probable amalgamation of a group, an actual difference exists. In at least individual cases it may even be true that an entire insula belonged to one person (or a family), and that the owner, with the building of the sanctuary, likewise played a leading role in the cult community as *sacerdos* or *pater*. Then we might be dealing with a relatively

25 A particularly well studied example of this is the *legio XV Apollinaris*, which was relocated from Carnuntum to the east in 62/63 and returned to Carnuntum again in 73; cf. Mosser 2003.

26 Cf. the corresponding lists in Spickermann 2008 and 2014; cf. also Spickermann 2007, 155–156.

27 Van Haeperen 2023, esp. 85–91. – On the Mithraea in Ostia more specifically, still fundamental is Becatti 1954.

wealthy principal who might have erected a sanctuary for his *familia* including *amici* and *clientes* in the sense of Roman munificentia, yet only for a selected group, not the entire civic community; this would then be a site for communal banquets as well as cultic and ritual activities which helped to strongly establish identity.[28] Such a scenario would above all explain the appearance of private sanctuaries in villas, with the choice of divinity being rather of secondary importance. The *pater familias* or *patronus* would then have fulfilled his duty of care with regard to the group that was dependent on him.[29]

Another reason might be that, as the archaeological evidence also reveals, the economic situation of the cities clearly worsened after 165 AD, and new temples (and other public buildings) only arose by way of exception; such constructions were, however, still possible, as the large and elaborate Iseum in Savaria shows. Wealthy sponsors or financially strong cities constituted an exception after this period; during the period of Marcus Aurelius and the subsequent era, many cities were under the supervision of curators (also called logistes in the Greek east). With the end of the war against the Parthians, although victorious, the returning legions and the sutlers and other travellers with them spread the so-called Antonine Plague throughout the entire empire after ca. 165.[30] Only a few years later, probably in spring of 171, the Marcomanni and other peoples raided the empire from the north, reaching as far as Upper Italy and causing a ten-year war with enormous loss of life. It is likely that entire cities and stretches of land were depopulated by periodic abduction of the population; the army also had to endure huge losses, as the reports of the miracle of lightning and rain (probably in 174) reveal. In addition, during the final three decades of the century, a number of volcanic eruptions in New Zealand and Latin America would have caused crop failures and deterioration of the climate, leading in the Danubian provinces to an increased construction of heating installations.[31] One may assume that with all these factors – plague, war, and (unexplainable) natural catastrophes – not only was public building activity strongly affected and many large fortunes withered away, but also – as the increasing nuisance of robbers (*latrones*) shows – the middle classes were also impoverished. With this situation, on the one hand the responsibility of the leading urban classes with regard to the *plebs urbana* increased, while on the other hand so did their burden of raising taxes and duties, as well as the burden of organising the necessary workforce and logistics. Additional natural consequences would be an increased closing of ranks within trusted groups (families, professional associations etc.) and the concomitant xenophobic behaviours. Precisely the inexplicability of the drastic climate deterioration, caused by volcanoes on unknown continents and islands, as well as the

28 On the role of such financially strong leaders of cult communities and the resulting dependence, and implicit weakness, of the group: Gordon 2021, 120–127.

29 Gordon 2011, 108, doubts or rather relativizes the importance of *patron-cliens*-relations at least for Mithraic communities: "The informal system of patronage thus conflicted with the overt value system. Because in Mithraism the ambition of escaping from the world depended more upon commitment to the god and his commands then upon the whim of the Father …". – But see for their importance in all aspects of life: Ciambelli 2020.

30 The plague seems to have lasted for about 30 years, and half a century later the scenario was repeated with the Cyprianic Plague (after 249); on this, see Harper 2015.

31 On this phenomenon in overview: Harper 2017, 65–159; McCormick 2012; Vetters and Zabehlicky 2003.

related harvest failures and the additional costs for heating, and earthquakes which occurred at least regionally, certainly promoted an orientation towards religions of salvation which at least partly promised more or less a better existence in a "life after death". Such liturgies and communal banquets could also have taken place, as before, in or near sacred buildings on public ground. Yet one reason why these activities were shifted into the private sphere might have been the possibility of keeping track of the groups that arose in this context. In this manner, the necessary resources could be relatively accurately planned and would benefit only the listed members of a cultic community, without arousing public umbrage due to the inconspicuous exclusion of others. But we have to admit that small private sanctuaries were not limited to "oriental" gods and cults, which flourished in these times, but they could be devoted to any cult or god of the Roman pantheon.

After the experience of the global Covid–19 pandemic, however, the question also arises whether the observed isolation of small groups within a local population (and even more the case with regard to foreigners) might have had its strongest motivation in the fear of contagion. According to modern estimates, in the several Roman provinces approximately one third of the population died of *lues* in the half century until the abatement of the plague. This justified fear of plague, and the frequent deaths it caused, may in fact have been an important reason why social meetings took place in spaces that were easily controlled. For even if a theology was present, one which is not completely comprehensible to us in detail yet which offered the prospect of a permanent other life in the Mithras cult or other "oriental" salvation religions, for Mithras – with his essential openness also regarding the veneration of other divinities – there is no evidence of a desire for an early death and the associated early arrival into paradise or closeness to god – as was expressed by the numerous martyrdoms in Christianity, which strongly prohibited belonging to other religions.

A particularly affecting example for the explanation of this new pattern of behaviour might be the inscription of a Mithras Collegium[32] discovered approximately 30 years ago on the outskirts of Virunum and published in exemplary fashion by G. Piccottini (so-called Album 1, fig. 2):[33]

Heading:

D(eo) I(nvicto) M(ithrae) pro salute Imp(eratoris) [[[Commodi]]] Aug(usti) Pii / qui templum vii(!) conlapsum impendio suo restituerunt / et mortalitat(is) causa convener(unt) / Marullo et Aeliano co(n)s(ulibus) VI K(alendas) Iulias // Iulius Secundinus pat(er) //

In 4 columns:

(obitus) Trebius Zoticus pat(er) / Rufius Severinus / Iulius Optatus / Septimius Mercator / Septimius Marcus / Tertinius Tertinus / Mamilius Dionysius / Sabinius Hermaiscus / |(obitus) Sentius Hermes / Priscius Oppidanus / Varius Fortis / Titius Ruso / Annius Syrillio / Lydacius Charito / Baienius Axio / |(obitus) Rufius Fuscus / Marius Achilleus / Claud(ius) Quintilianus / Iulius Carpus / Publilius Moderatus / Mamil(ius)

32 Piccottini 1994; Gordon 1996; Beck 1998.

33 *AE* 1994, 1334 = *AE* 1996, 1189 = *AE* 1998, 1016.

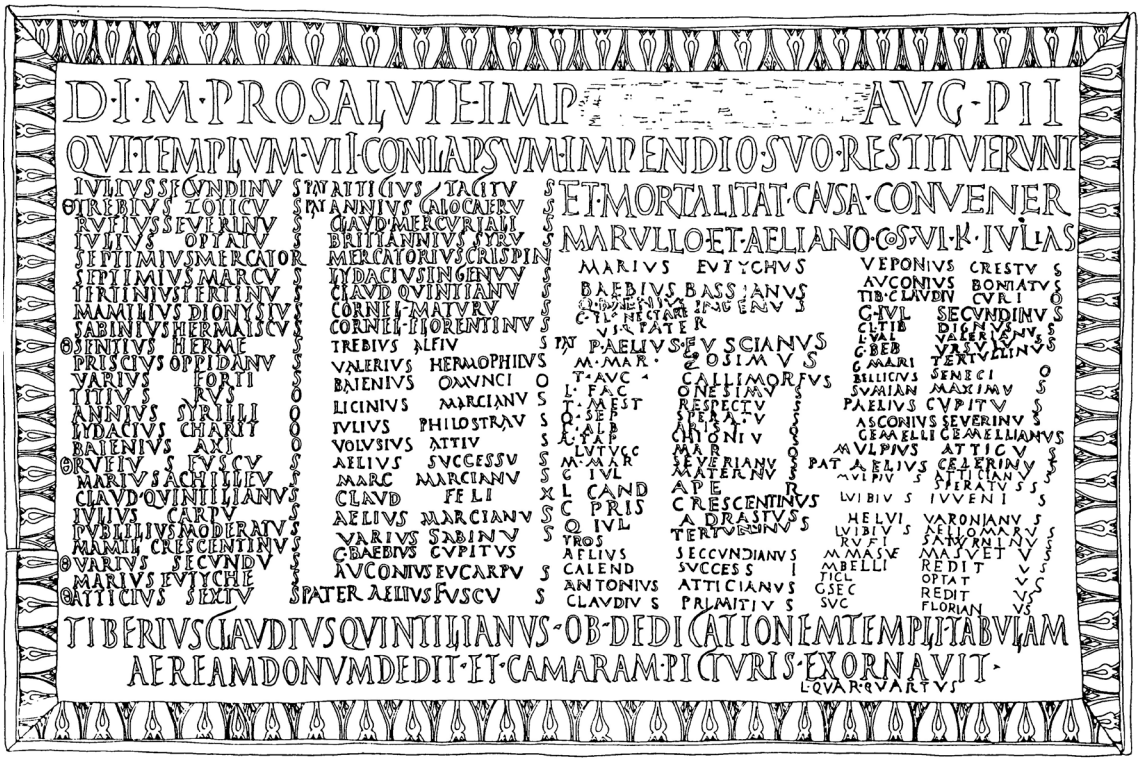

Fig. 2. Bronze plaque of a Mithras Collegium from Virunum (© Landesmuseum Kärnten)

Crescentinus / |(obitus) Varius Secundus / Marius Eutyches / |(obitus) Atticius Sextus pater //

Atticius Tacitus / Annius Calocaerus / Claud(ius) Mercuralis / Brittannius Syrus / Mercatorius Crispin(us) / Lydacius Ingenuus / Claud(ius) Quintianus / Cornel(ius) Maturus / Cornel(ius) Florentinus / Trebius Alfius pat(er) / Valerius Hermophilus / Baienius (H)omuncio / Licinius Marcianus / Iulius Philostra(t)us / Volusius Attius / Aelius Successus / Marc(ius) Marcianus / Claud(ius) Felix / Aelius Marcianus / Varius Sabinus / C(aius) Baebius Cupitus / Auconius Eucarpus / Aelius Fuscus //

Marius Eutychus / Baebius Bassianus / Q(uintus) Baenius Ingenu(u)s / C(aius) Fl(avius) Nectare/us pater / P(ublius) Aelius Fuscianus / M(arcus) Mar(ius) Zosimus / T(itus) Auc(onius) Callimorfus / L(ucius) Fac() Onesimus / T(itus) Mest(rius) Respectus / Q(uintus) Sep(timius) Speratus / L(ucius) Alb(ius) Aristo / A(ulus) Tap(petius) Chionius / Lutucc(ius) Maro / M(arcus) Mar(ius) Severianus pat(er) / C(aius) Iul(ius) Maternus / L(ucius) Cand(idius) Aper / C(aius) Pris(cius) Crescentinus / Q(uintus) Iul(ius) Adrastus / Tros(ius) Tertullinus / Aelius Seccundianus(!) / Calend(inus) Successi / Antonius Atticianus / Claudius Primiti(v)us //

Veponius C(h)restus / Auconius Boniatus / Tib(erius) Claudiu(s) Curio / C(aius) Iul(ius) Secundinus / Cl(audius) Tib(erius) Dignus / L(ucius) Val(erius) Valerianus / C(aius) B(a)ebius Ursulus / C(aius) Mariu(s) Tertullinus / Bellicius Senecio / Sum(m)ian(ius) Maximus / P(ublius) Aelius Cupitus / Asconius Severinus / Gemelli(us) Gemellianus / M(arcus) Ulpius Atticus / Aelius Celerinus / M(arcus) Ulpius Atticianus /

Speratus s(ervus) / L(ucius) Vibius Iuvenis / Helvi(us) Var(r)onianus / L(ucius) Vibius Aeliomarus / Rufi(us) Saturninus / M(arcus) Ma(n)suet(ius) Ma(n)suetus / M(arcus) Belli(cius) Reditus / Ti(berius) Cl(audius) Optatus / C(aius) Sec(undius) Reditus / Suc(cessius) Florianus / L(ucius) Quar(tinius) Quartus //

Dedication below:

Tiberius Claudius Quintilianus ob dedicationem templi tabulam / aeream donum dedit et camaram picturis exornavit.

According to this text, on 26 June 184 the 30 members who were still living met on the occasion of the inauguration of a Mithras sanctuary that had been destroyed by natural forces (*vii conlapsum*) and re-erected from the year 183 onwards (the imperial title refers to a date after 10 January 183). At the same time, they met to carry out a memorial liturgy for the five deceased *cultores*, who had probably died of the plague and who had contributed financially to the construction.[34] This reveals the solidarity of this community as well as the intimate closeness amongst its members. On the lower border of the *tabula* in two lines a certain Ti. Claudius Quintilianus is particularly emphasised; on the occasion of the *dedicatio templi* he caused the vaulted ceiling in the actual cult room (*camara*) to be decorated with paintings and set up the plaque. In the following years, until at least 198 (at the outside until 209), an additional 64 members (each year shows between one and eight new accessions) were added to the list, so that the group could have consisted of a maximum of 94 individuals. Additional deaths as well as departures due to moving, etc., also need to be subtracted for this relatively long time period, so that seen realistically the group actually grew relatively modestly.[35] Furthermore, G. Piccottini concluded, from a membership list extensively reconstructed by him (datable between 198 and 209), that the group divided (in his opinion, in 202) and at least 20 members, whose names are listed in the first Album and all of whom are also listed in the new Album, were transferred to a new Mithras community.[36] Piccottini's point of departure was that the new Album of the Severan period reported about the founding of a new temple:[37] *[D(eo) I(nvicto) M(ithrae) pro sal(ute) Impp(eratorum) Caess(arum) L(uci) Septimi] / [Severi et M(arci) Aur(eli) Antoni]ni Augg(ustorum) / [nn(ostrorum) [[et P(ubli) Septi]mii [Getae] nob(ilissimi) Caes(aris)]] / [templum a s]olo i<m=N>pe[ndio] suo exstruxer(unt) // [Val(erius)] Hermofilus / [Li]cin(ius) Marcianus / Iul(ius) Fylostrat(us) / Mar(cius) Marcianus / Ael(ius) Marcianus / Baeb(ius) Cupitus / [3]l(ius) Eucharpus / Ael(ius) Fuscu[s] / Mar(ius) Euty[chus] / [M(arcus)] Mar(ius) [Zosim(us)] / [// [Q(uintus) Sept(imius)] Speratus / L(ucius) Al[biu]s Aristio / A(ulus) Ta[p]pet(ius) Chionius / L(ucius) Lut[u]cius Maron / M(arcus) M[ari]us Sever[ianus] / C(aius) Iu[l(ius) Maternus] / [// C(aius) Marius Tertul(l)inus / Bell(icius) Senecio / S(extus) Summ(ianius) Maximus / Ael(ius) Cupitu[s] / […*

Based on the missing areas, it can be assumed that a maximum of only half of those originally named is preserved, so that the group in Album 2 must have originally

34 On the celebration for the dead and the significance of the date in the cult of Mithras, cf. Beck 1996.

35 Gordon 1996, 425.

36 Piccottini 1994, esp. 48; see also Dolenz 2016, 133 n. 432; Walsh 2016.

37 *CIL* III, 4816; *AE* 1994, 1335.

comprised about 40 or 50 persons. The new temple and the new group thereby stated that a certain group size may not be exceeded, since the architectural and economic resources would not permit a larger group, and the confidentiality amongst the members would only be assured in groups of up to about 80 members. Yet this contradicts above all what we otherwise know about ancient cults and their known rituals, which often included an entire urban population. This is also contradicted by the contemporaneous rise of Christianity and its communities, where at least in theory an *episcopus* attempted to unify the entire Christian population of a city under his leadership, and *caritas* concerned not only the members of a church community but all Christians, and also the entire extended population.

Therefore, I would like to propose the hypothesis here that this later Album of an actual inventory of the 40 or 50 (still) living members at this point in time concerns one and the same community that was also listed in Album 1 in 183 AD and which continued for about 20 years up until the drawing up of Album 2. The new temple must not necessarily signify a new Mithras community; the old one might have been irreparably damaged – on whatever grounds – and replaced by the one mentioned here; alternatively, perhaps it had simply become too small for the group of now 40 or 50 members.[38] A third possibility is that we are dealing with a building in private ownership and that the previous building ground or construction was no longer available for the community (sale, lack of interest on the part of the owner, etc.). If, in contrast, the community had been subdivided, one would therefore expect a stark increase in the foundation, yet not a single new name appears.

On the property situation and the financing of private sanctuaries

Furthermore, the outsourcing of a daughter community cannot really be explained with economic arguments; the construction of a new sanctuary used up substantially more financial means than an expansion. Additionally it can be assumed that, independent of whether a financially powerful community member, as the leading individual, made available essential resources for the operation of the cult – as assumed above in the theoretical case – or whether the community in its entirety shared the costs, if the existing means were exceeded at any time, a collection could be made or regular "membership fees" could be collected in order to ensure an adequate financial basis for the costs of the operation and of cult banquets. Album 1 from Virunum indeed refers expressly to the common funding, in the year 183, by the 35 members who vowed the temple, with the surviving 30 celebrating the dedication and commemorating the five deceased on 26 June 184.

In fact, scholars generally assume that such groups regularly maintained themselves by means of communally raised funds.[39] With such group financing, the existence of private sanctuaries in insulae may also be explained: the sanctuary then stood, for example, on the club's grounds and was financed by the community coffers.

38 See for example the enlargement of the Mithraeum of Strasbourg-Königshoffen in 225, which was about twice the size of its forerunner; cf. Vermaseren 1960, 1335; see also Spickerman 2007, 155.

39 Gordon 2021, 119, 124–125, 127.

It is not insignificant for our theme if the society (*collegium*) was the owner or only the leaseholder of the property, or whether at most a mere *precarium* existed. The property circumstances in provincial cities belong in general to the great unknowns of Roman antiquity. In particular, it is seldom clear if, in the case of an identifiable *domus*, the adjacent undeveloped areas (garden, commercial courtyards) or areas with a variety of structures (guest houses, lodgings for workers, depots and workshops, salesrooms, etc.) were independent from a *domus* or whether they constituted a unified entity of ownership and function with it. In this respect, the simple appearance of a sanctuary within a *domus* or on other areas of an insula reveals little about the property situation; at the most, one could conclude that a more or less private circle (close or extended family group, possibly with the inclusion of *clientes* or of a *collegium*) were its users. In Pannonia, moreover, a number of inscriptions and archaeological finds are present that shed light on some of the possibilities of ownership addressed here.

In the *vicus Vindonianus* (today: Budakeszi) not far from Aquincum, eight *possessores*, listed by name (probably house- or landowners) set up (*ex voto posuerunt*) on 11 October 229 an altar (*aram*) in honour of the Capitoline Triad and all other gods and goddesses.[40] The first person named, *M(arcus) Aur(elius) Aepictetianus dec(urio) col(oniae) Aq(uincensium) sacerdotalis*, performed the dedication of the altar; the second one named, *Aur(elius) Vettianus eq(ues) R(omanus)*, made available with express permission (*permissu eiusdem*) a piece of land on his property as a *precarium* for the petitioning inhabitants (*petentibus vicanis*) of the village of Vindonianus. Involved in the action were a *decurio coloniae Aquincensium* and *sacerdos* in the person of Aurelius Aepictetianus – probably rather a *sacerdos arae provinciae* than a priest of a small cult association -, an *eques Romanus*, another *decurio* – more likely an officer of an *ala* than a municipal councillor from Aquincum – and a veteran; the society was therefore of high status and probably prosperous in the region of the village. As patrons of the village inhabitants, with this *precarium* they enabled them to establish a sanctuary on the property of the knight and made the gift of an altar *in (h)onorem vic[an(orum)] vici Vindoniani*. Typical here is the fact that the élite male property owners dedicated the altar to the Capitoline Triad, and not any newly popular deities, yet they did include all the other gods in the votive formula. Based on his 3rd century tomb inscription from Budakeszi, a certain P. Aelius Victorinus may also have discharged the functions of priest (*sacerdotalis*) and *patronus* (of a cult association?), in this *vicus* in the vicinity of Aquincum (somewhat earlier).[41] Much more explicit is a dedication to Sol Invictus (Mithras) from the *vicus* near the cavalry camp of Campona (Nagytétény; ca. 20 km south of Aquincum) from the year 213, which was sponsored by a Claudius Neronianus *in*

40 *TitAq* II 926: *[I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo)] / Iunoni [Re]g(inae) Min[e]rvae / [c]eteris dis deabus[q(ue)] / omnibus possessor(e)/s vic[i] Vindoniani / ex voto pusueru/nt q[u]or(um) nom(i)na / sunt / Aur(elius) Aepictetian(us) sac(erdos) / Aur(elius) Vettianus eq(ues) R(omanus) / Au[r(elius)] Victorinus de[c(urio)] / Aur(elius) [3]dian[3] / [3]R[3]us ve(teranus) / Aur(elius) Trop(h)imus C[3] / [U]lp(ius) Candidianu[s] / [A]ur(elius) Maximu[s 3] / Ant(onius) Quirin[us 3] / III Id(us) O[ct(obres) Imp(eratore) d(omino) n(ostro) Ale]/xan[dro Severo Aug(usto) III et] / Ca[s]si[o Dione II co(n)s(ulibus)] // item M(arcus) Aur(elius) / Aepictetianus / dec(urio) col(oniae) Aq(uincensium) / sacerdotalis / aram donavi(t) / in (h)onorem vic[an(orum)] / vici Vindoniani // quae ara con/secrata est / [i]n possessione / Aureli Vetti/ani eq(uitis) R(omani) per/missu eius/dem precario / petentibus / vicanis Vindo/niani.*

41 *TitAq* IV, 1708: *D(is) M(anibus) // P(ublius) Ael(ius) Auscul/tus P(ublius) Ael(ius) Victor / P(ublio) Ael(io) Victorino / sacerdotal(i) / patrono / pientissimo / posuerun(t).*

templo / Mucapor/is sacerdotis.[42] Here, with *Mucapor sacerdos,* the property owner in whose legal possession the sanctuary was located is probably addressed. He was so interested in the cult and its associated social contacts that he also functioned as the religious principal of the cult community.

We may now direct our attention to some archaeologically investigated sanctuaries. A special case is represented by the Mithraeum in the house of the *tribunus laticlavius* in the *castra* of the *legio II adiutrix* in Aquincum; this was apparently erected in the early 3rd century and continued in use until the great devastation of the camp in the 260s (268?).[43] L. Kocsis had already connected the building and the dedication of the sanctuary with the period of service of the tribune L. Cassius Pius Marcellinus in 202, due to the dedicatory inscription below the painted cult image.[44] On the one hand, the service building of the deputy legionary commander was naturally public property, yet on the other hand during the period of his presence it was also his residence with a guaranteed private sphere. Therefore, when he invited guests, this could be viewed both as official as well as private; here – as still today – a certain grey area existed. In addition, this Mithraeum represents, so to speak, the glaring exception to the predominant scholarly opinion that the senatorial aristocracy were not particularly interested in Mithras. Mithras must in any event have been important enough for the senatorial tribune to set up the space for the cult during his relatively brief period of office and to provide it with high-quality wall paintings. The guests and cult companions returned the favour for one of his successors, L. Aurelius Gallus, with a Mithras altar for his well-being,[45] as we also know from Furius Aptus in Ephesos and from many other private sanctuaries, as thanks for the host and patron. In this manner the *cultores* displayed their respect, in a way typical for Roman client culture, towards the hosts who not only bore the costs for the building, maintenance, and/or furnishings, but probably also the communal banquets. Accordingly, the cult space was also used, or at least respected, by the successors for a number of decades.

The cult location, with a total of about 10 m in length, was small and particularly narrow: the usual podium for reclining for banquets existed only on one side, thereby offering space only for nine individuals, the usual group for private invitations in the evening. In terms of size, therefore, this Mithraeum was similar to the Mysteries Room of Furius Aptus in Ephesos, introduced here at the beginning (fig. 1). It seems, therefore, that the previously prevalent approach of researchers to such facilities, under the aspect of each relevant cult, is insufficient, and a new perspective needs to be added, from the social position and the associated responsibilities and expectations of the *pater familias*. What is perhaps important is not the affiliation to a particular cult (association), which a *pater familias* could select for himself (relatively) freely as long as a certain element of acceptance for it existed in his clientele; but instead, the

42 Vermaseren 1960, 1808: *Imp(eratore) [Ant]on[in]o II / co(n)s(ule) // Deo Soli / Invicto / Cl(audius) N(e)ronia/nus v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito) / in templo / Mucapor/is sac(erdotis)*.

43 Kocsis 1989; see also Kocsis 1991; Zsidi 2018, 21–28.

44 Kocsis 1990; *TitAq* I, 254: *D(eo) S(oli) I(nvicto) M(ithrae) / L(ucius) C(assius?) Pius Marcellinus*.

45 *TitAq* I, 251: *Invicto // Mithrae / pro sal(ute L(uci) / Aur(eli) Galli / trib(uni) laticl(avi) // Aurelius Ali/phus posuit*.

fundamental interests, as a member of the local élite class, apparently determined the amenities of such private cult spaces within a *domus* (and probably similarly for the large villa buildings which, in the 3rd century, increasingly mutated into the primary residence).[46] In this manner the possibility was created to re-evaluate and upgrade the previously predominantly profane "symposium" – which indeed had been established with rites such as libations amongst a group of friends and guests – into a religious act, thereby strengthening the obligations amongst those invited by yet another component. One can assume that the relatively élite officers' groups, consisting of the legionary commander, the six tribunes, as well as the *primuspilus* and the *praefectus castrorum* regularly met for dinner; with whom else should they have spent the long evenings in the garrison? Yet whoever not only eats and drinks together but also embeds this in the framework of a liturgical activity, has the deity as a witness of their *amicitia*. It is possible to surmise here the background of the Mithras dedication at the imperial conference in Carnuntum on 11 November 308. The hope may very well have existed that the agreements made by the rival emperors would be adhered to when they were struck in the context of a communal banquet with a liturgical background. Against the backdrop of the legionary camp of Aquincum and additional, less well studied garrisons[47], the obviously strong presence of Mithras in the camps also played a role. In addition to the Mithraeum in the house of the *tribunus laticlavius*, further small-scale, often perhaps only provisionally adapted Mithraea (in the soldiers´ quarters?) can be reckoned with, due to the extensive scattering of Mithras memorials in the camp of the *legio II adiutrix* and the *canabae legionis*. The widespread, small-scale reliefs of the killing of the bull, interpreted by R. Gordon as evidence of private devotion to Mithras, would fit well with this scenario; their display in a wall niche of the troops' quarters or of a small residence in the *canabae* or urban peripheral areas could (temporarily?) transform a room into a Mithraeum without great effort.[48]

Sanctuaries in insulae in Aquincum and Carnuntum

In the excavated area inside the *colonia Aquincensium*, three small Mithraea alone are structurally attested; their distance from each other is between approximately 150 and 250 m; two additional Mithraea, deduced by circumstantial evidence, somewhat to the east and west complete the picture, while in total one must reckon with a dense distribution of Mithraea in the entire region of the town, the *canabae* and even in the legionary camp (fig. 3). The intra-urban Mithraea are similar in their size to the one in the legionary camp; the actual cult rooms (with *camara*) possess lengths of 8 to 10 m, so that even if we have to calculate a smaller space per person, the rooms offer the maximum possibility for 20 to 30 *cultores* to participate at a time. Thereby we are again

46 A solid overview of the German provinces, well studied in this regard, is offered by Spickermann 2008 and 2014.

47 Such a Mithraeum, equally strongly diverging from the so-called normal type, was found in the vicus of the fort of Lentia (Linz) in Noricum, where a *veteranus* of an unnamed unit left behind a dedicatory altar (Clauss 1992, 133; *AE* 1956, 82); on this, see now Jochade-Endl 2011, esp. 25–29.

48 Gordon 2021, 126. For a broad discussion of a new finding from the *canabae legionis* in Aquincum see Kirchhof 2022.

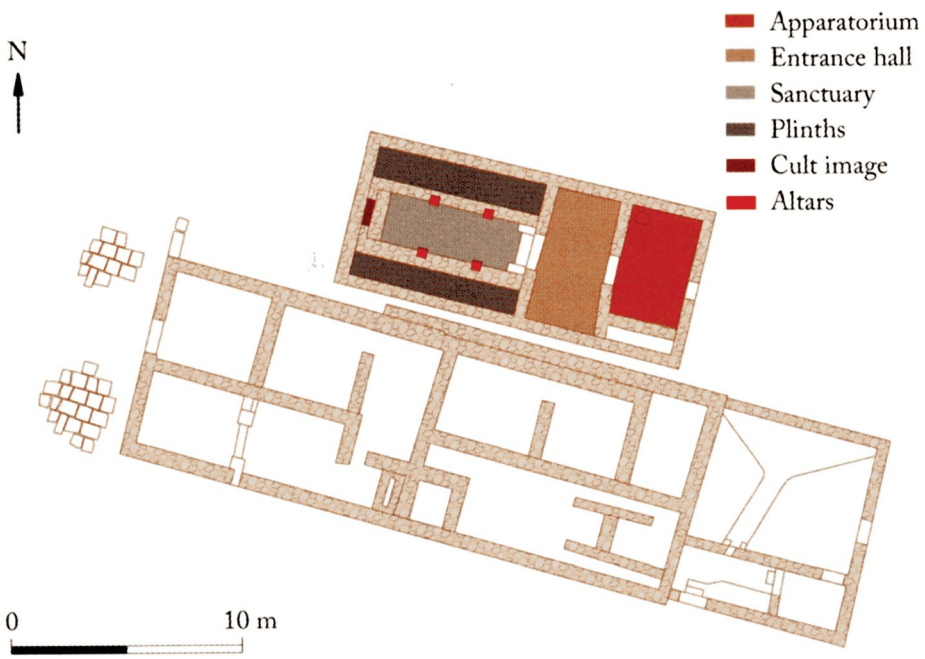

Fig. 3. Location of the so-called Mithraeum of M. Antonius Victorinus in the colonia Aquincum (after Zsidi 2018, 32 fig. 32)

confronted on the one hand with the size proportions of the communities as described in Virunum and other Albums,[49] and on the other hand with a quantity of grown men which ought to correspond approximately to the male percentage of the population of an urban insula, to the members of a small professional *collegium*, or to the clientele of a member of the urban upper class. This should indicate only a few possibilities as to how such cult groups might have been recruited or assembled. Since the precise connection with the adjoining buildings of the insula cannot be exactly determined, yet the Mithraea (so-called Mithraea of Symphorus, of Antonius Victorinus and of Iulius Victorinus, due to the appearance of these persons on votive inscriptions) apparently stood here unattached near the houses (fig. 4),[50] we should rather assume that a group, rather than individual private persons, was the client and user; certainty on this point, however, cannot be achieved.

If we change to Carnuntum, the other large frontier agglomeration in the Pannonian provinces, we may detect similar evidences. Besides some not well explored Mithraea and/or Dolichena[51] in the *municipium/colonia*, we are attracted by an insula-sanctuary for Silvanus and the Quadriviae. The sanctuary with numerous dedication stones, also for additional divinities such as, for example, Diana was already excavated in 1892 in Carnuntum, but the modest building remains and archival materials have only recently

49 Gordon 1996, 425.

50 Zsidi 2018, esp. 28–43.

51 See the overview of Gassner 2003.

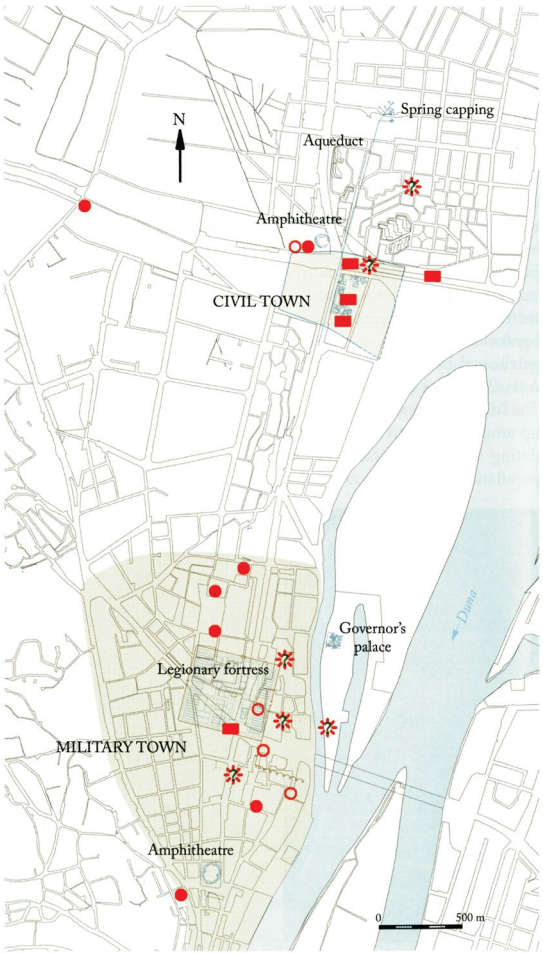

Fig. 4. Dissemination of the Mithras memorials in the area of Aquincum (Zsidi 2018, 22 fig. 18); red rectangles: structurally attested sanctuaries; solid red circles: inscriptions; empty red circles: fragments of cult images; sun symbols: accumulation of finds as evidence of a Mithraeum

been convincingly analysed and interpreted by G. Kremer.[52] The finds lie in the middle of an insula south-west of the forum of the former *municipium Aelium* and later *colonia Aurelia Severiana Carnuntum*, and are adjacent to a large residential house. A sponsor named C. Sulpicius Seneca appears twice (or we are dealing with close relatives), for which reason Kremer supposed that this one (or these) had the function of patron(s) of the sanctuary or of the *collegium* behind it.[53] The sanctuary ought to have been accessible via a narrow alley along the north side of the residential house, without having to encroach upon the private sphere of the house. This fact supports Kremer's attribution to a *collegium*.[54]

The allocation to this sanctuary of a building inscription, probably found in the immediate vicinity and dated to 211, is important: *Silvanab(us!) et / Quadri<v=B>i(i)s Aug(ustis) sacrum / C(aius) Antonius Valentinus / vet(eranus) leg(ionis) XIIII G(eminae) murum a fu/ndamentis cum suo int/roit<u=O> et porticum cum / accubito vetustate conla/<p=B>sum impendio suo restitu/it Gentiano et Basso co(n)s(ulibus)*.[55] The inscription was embedded between reliefs that are no longer visible due to the walling-in of the stone into Schloss Traun–Abensberg: to the left a Mercury with caduceus and money bag, to the right a figure with bundle of corn, perhaps Diana.[56] The reference to the building elements of *murum* (surrounding wall?) with entrance (*introitus*) and *porticum* (colonnaded hall) with *accubito* (dining room) is significant.

52 Kremer 2014. – See also Kremer 2012, 330–337; for earlier investigations and opinions see Kandler 1986; Gassner 2003, esp. 136.

53 Kremer 2014, 128 and 130.

54 Kremer 2014, 130.

55 *CIL* III, 4441; Kremer 2014, 129–130.

56 Kremer 2014, 129–130, refrains from naming the figure at the right, but since Diana also appears on the dedicatory inscription *CIL* III, 13454, I venture to make this identification.

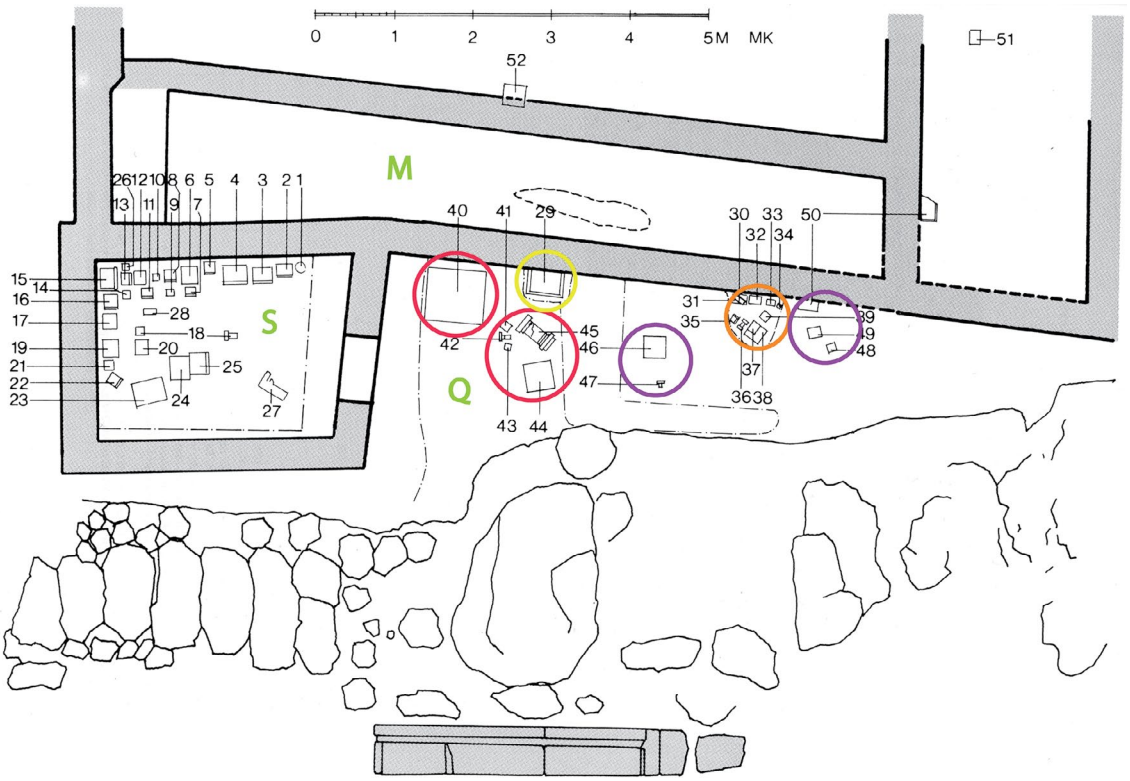

Fig. 5. Groundplan of the sanctuary for Silvanus and the Quadriviae in an insula of the colonia Carnuntum (section of the plan of 1892, re-drawn by M. Kandler 1985), with distribution of the dedicated stone monuments in the area Q, according to four reconstructed phases: violett = Phase 1; red = Phase 2; orange = Phase 3; yellow = Phase 4 (after Kremer 2014, fig. 4)

Despite this, the precise construction of the sanctuary is difficult. A three-aisled dining hall with transverse vestibule M,[57] in a manner typical for Mithraea, is recognisable, with a courtyard (Q) in front of it, and within this, built into the vestibule, a room S with entrance oriented to the east. Most of the total of 56 altars and other dedicatory monuments, many of which without chiselled (therefore perhaps once painted?) inscriptions, were found in room S and the court Q, with only three originating from room M.

An insula-sanctuary in Aelium Cetium

In this regard, a relatively unknown and still not completely published find[58] from an excavation in the years 2002–04 in Aelium Cetium (St. Pölten) in Noricum allows additional insights into the construction, the architectural design, and the issues of property ownership of such small-scale sanctuaries in insulae. Due to the planned construction

57 For this reason also sometimes identified as Mithraeum IV or V in the older literature; on this, see Kremer 2014, 131.

58 Cf. Tschannerl 2008, on whose plans and reconstructions the following remarks are based. On the chronology, preliminarily: Börner 2013, esp. 63–64 (the chronological framework is constructed by her purely on the basis of ceramic material, while the other finds such as coins are not considered).

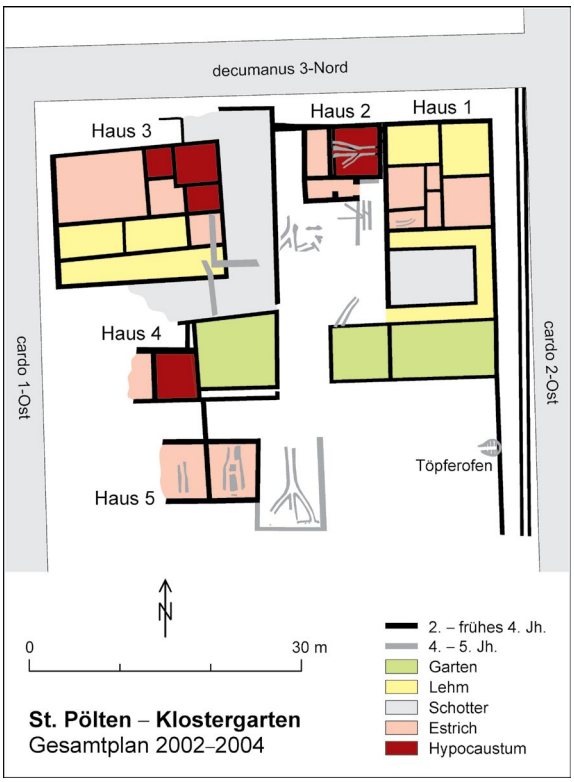

Fig. 6. Cetium, plan of the results of excavations in the cloister garden in the north-east of the city (authors: P. Scherrer and M. Hofbauer)

of a music conservatorium on the until now undeveloped terrain of the so-called cloister garden of the former Monastery of St. Pölten (now, the seat of the diocese), an entire insula in the furthest north-east of *municipium Aelium Cetium* was archaeologically investigated; only the outermost southern part, which would not be affected by the new building or which, in part, was destroyed in the Baroque period by the cellar of the monastery, as well as an already developed strip in the west, were exempted (fig. 6).

The northern half of the insula was taken up by two almost square plots (ca. 25 × 27 m), which were originally separated only by a wooden fence, and later by a garden wall. In the north-west lay House 3, which already possessed an extensively heated living space in building phase 2 (after the destruction in the course of the Marcomanni Wars). In addition to the two street façades, in the east and south the house was surrounded by a broad, gravelled entrance. Adjacent at the south was a garden area, in which later (building phase 2 or 3) a row house (House 4) was erected. The second plot of land was only developed in the north-east corner (House 1) during building phase 1 (mid–2nd century). In the north, two open working courtyards with mud floors and the remains of a number of furnaces, apparently for small cast-bronzes, were located; to the south was appended a building with originally two rooms, and adjacent to this, in turn, a peristyle courtyard with a well and then a small garden area (figs. 6–7). The entire southern half of the plot of land, as far as we could explore it, was not developed.

During building phase 2 (fig. 8), which at all events can be dated relatively soon after the Marcomannic destruction (after 172), one of the western living rooms in the house was downscaled by an L–shaped corridor. In addition, on the northern street façade to the west of the western court, an almost square room (length of side ca. 5 m), heated via tubular heating and with vestibule (=House 2, figs. 6 and 8) and entrance possibility from the adjacent *decumanus* was erected; this is most probably to be interpreted as a *cenatorium*. Probably shortly afterwards, at least in the Severan period (building phase 3, fig. 9) an extension in the south was added, with the form of a small temple and vestibule (*in antis*) oriented to the east (total length ca. 6.2 m). Most likely already during building phase 2 (at the latest in building phase 3), the western boundary of the peristyle courtyard of House 1 was removed, opening it up to the garden area south of the little temple. The reconstruction in fig. 10 gives an impression of the approximate, probable appearance of the ensemble in the Severan period.

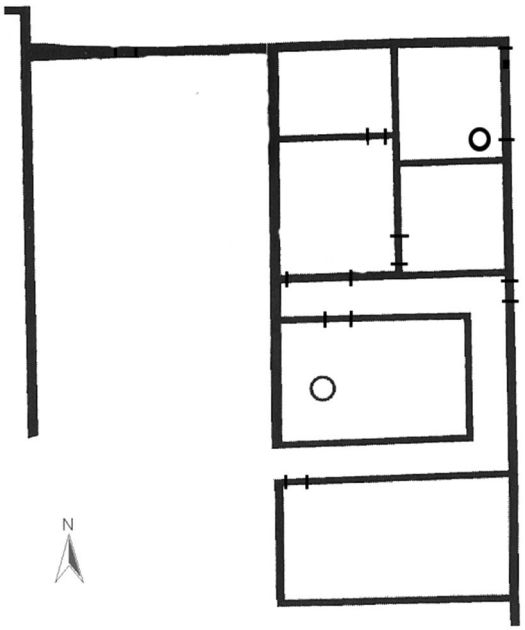

Fig. 7. Cetium, House 1–2, building phase 1 (after Tschannerl 2008, fig. 18)

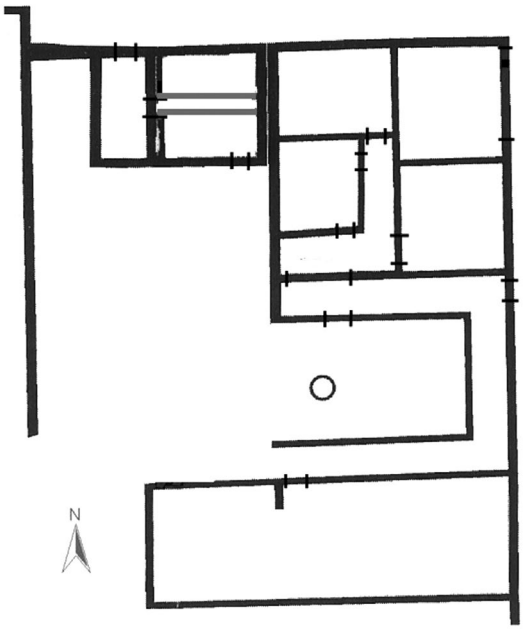

Fig. 8. Cetium, House 1–2, building phase 2 (after Tschannerl 2008, fig. 19)

If we interpret House 1 not – as previously thought – as a private residential building in the sense of a small *domus*, but instead as a structure with spaces for the purpose of a collective of craftsmen (with only 2 roofed rooms), then we receive the image of a division into two working courtyards in the north, two bedrooms or lounges in the middle, and a three-sided peristyle court with adjacent garden in the south. During building phase 2 a heated *cenatorium* was added, to which apparently quite quickly an *aedicula* followed. The evidence is structurally very similar to the construction developed for the sanctuary of Silvanus and the Quadriviae in Carnuntum, in particular when one includes the garden (or courtyard) areas and the peristyle now opened up for usage by the cult association. Whether the private house (House 3) on the neighbouring plot was involved in terms of ownership or socially (role as patron?) in the events on the land of House 1 and House 2, or whether it was

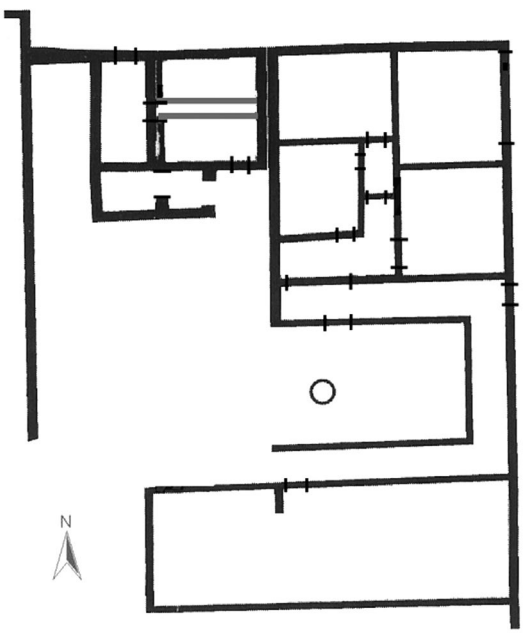

Fig. 9. Cetium, House 1–2, building phase 3 (after Tschannerl 2008, fig. 20)

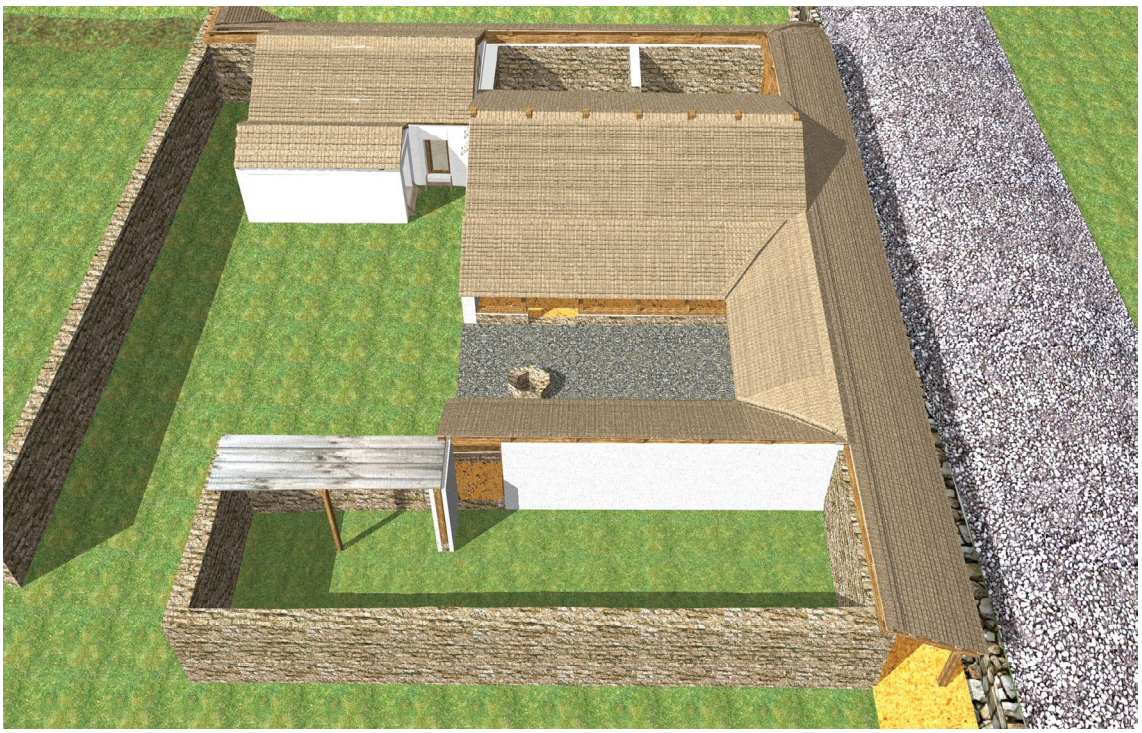

Fig. 10. Cetium, House 1–2, reconstruction by M. Tschannerl (Tschannerl 2008, fig. 36)

separated from this by the border wall, remains speculative. Nothing much can be said about the divinity/ies worshipped there. In addition to a few fragments of vessels decorated with snakes in the area of the heated cult room (*cenatorium*?), only a small marble base with the foot of a female divinity[59] is preserved as a relevant find from the *aedicula*, which was completely destroyed in Late Antiquity. Scant remains of painted wall plaster perhaps show traces of a procession with waving flags.[60] Since the previous assumption that vessels with snakes were predominantly or exclusively employed in "oriental" cults is now questionable, and that their origin is rather in private cults (Roman domestic cult),[61] no definitive assignation of the insula-sanctuary of Aelium Cetium to a traditional Roman or to an "oriental" cult is therefore possible.

Final review and theories

The starting point for the considerations here was that, in roughly the Severan period, or rather already in the late years of Marcus Aurelius, following military, economic, climatic, and health (so-called Antonine Plague) decline, large parts of the population banded together in private, relatively closed cult associations[62] instead of the former

59 Jilek, Scherrer and Trinkl 2005, 25 cat. no 38; Tschannerl 2008, 82 fig. 13.

60 Jilek, Scherrer and Trinkl 2005, 44 cat. no. 164; Tschannerl 2008, 83 fig. 15.

61 For the snakes in the house cults now Flower 2017; see also above n. 10.

62 The causes and mechanisms of the formation of such groups are multivalent, and cannot be pursued further in the context of this study; in general on this, see now: Lichterman, Rieger and Rüpke 2017.

cult practices in large, public sanctuaries. The choice of divinities, and the deities associated with this, were hardly accidental, yet the phenomenon did not only affect specific cults with more or less implicit salvation character. These associations consisted primarily of Roman citizens of the lower social strata (craftsmen, tradesmen, etc.) – with perhaps occasional involvement of privileged freedmen and slaves; these groups were mostly more or less clearly dependent, although not always, on patrons from the *honestiores* class. Frequently, such *honestiores* perhaps directly provided the impetus for such associations, with their *clientes*, *amici* and *familiares*, or else they formed such associations exclusively amongst their peers, as can be assumed in the case of the *tribunus laticlavius* in Aquincum. R. Gordon's theoretical approach claiming a certain instability and inherent short lifespan of such cult groups – and in his study, in particular Mithraic groups – is in this way on the one hand strengthened, yet on the other hand also generalised and independent of a specific cult. Of great importance were the communal banquets and a relatively strong personal connection between the members (generally, local cultural or professional groups, or associations with other social factors in common); such groups probably were brought together due to reasons of health security, and were strongly promoted. Preservation of life in this world was therefore increasingly superimposed by the hope for a good life in an assumed hereafter.

The theory developed here, by way of example, on the basis of finds and evidence from Noricum (Aelium Cetium and Virunum) and the two Pannonian provinces (Aquincum und Carnuntum) may easily be corroborated by numerous additional excavation results and epigraphical evidence from other parts of the *imperium Romanum*. This must take place, however, in another context. Here we may only indicate in conclusion that, apparently at least in many towns, if small or large – well demonstrated for example in Ostia or Aquincum –, irrespective of their location within the empire and the composition of their populace, in both a civil as well as a military context, extensive sanctuaries arose on private property, and these sanctuaries drew their adherents from only one or a few insulae. Elsewhere, in contrast, apparently the usual sacred precincts with small temple buildings and altars continued in use, as is well documented for example in the Altbachtal in Trier (Augusta Treverorum); these could also open themselves up to "oriental" cults such as that of Mithras.[63] An example of this scenario in Pannonia is Savaria, where an extensive area on the southern border of the city along the Amber Route was used for the imperial cult, the cult of Isis, of IOM Dolichenus, of Mithras, of Magna Mater, and of additional gods, partly unknown elsewhere (Itunus and Ituna); this area continued to be expanded in the Severan period and later, whereas no sanctuaries have yet been discovered in private residential spaces.[64] The formation of cult sites on private property in Roman cities is, therefore – as with so many phenomena in the Roman empire – not explicable by means of a fixed rule; it could take place, but did not have to do so.

63 See i.g. Cüppers 2002; Faust 2007; esp. for Mithras: Ghetta 2021, esp. 142–143 (dating the temple soon after 275).

64 On the Iseum cf. above n. 2. On IOM Dolichenus: Toth 1977, recently on this, critically: Berke 2019, 583–586. On Mithras: Scherrer 2022; Kiss 2011, who produces on p. 190 a good mapping of the inventory of sanctuaries and dedication stones in the whole area.

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