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MITHRAS EXHIBITED.

PERSPECTIVES OF SENSORY MUSEOLOGY

IN MITHRAIC CONTEXTS

CSABA SZABÓ,
MIRUNA LIBIȚĂ-PARTICĂ,
IOAN MUNTEAN

ABSTRACT:

The material evidence of the Roman cult of Mithras is one of the most visible and best-preserved heritage of Roman religion from the period of the 2nd- 4th century AD. There are several *in situ* and reconstructed *mithraea* in European archaeological parks and museums, where the memory of the cult and its worshippers are evoked. The paper examines some of the most well-known case studies of the Mithraic sanctuaries, focusing on *in situ* archaeological sites, reconstructed *mithraea* and museal spaces from Romania, where new, sensorial methods can be used.

REZUMAT: MITHRAS EXPUS ÎN MUZEE. PERSPECTIVELE MUZEOLOGIEI SENZORIALE ÎN CONTEXTE MITHRAICE.

Evidențele materiale ale cultului roman a lui Mithras sunt unele dintre cele mai vizibile și bine conservate moșteniri ale religiei romane din perioada secolelor II-IV d.Hr. Există mai multe *mithrae in situ* și reconstruite în parcurile arheologice și muzeele din Europa, locuri unde amintirea cultului și a practicanților acestuia sunt evocate. Lucrarea examinează o parte dintre cele mai cunoscute studii de caz ale sanctuarelor mithraice, concentrându-se pe siturile arheologice *in situ*, *mithraea* reconstruite și spațiile muzeale din România, unde noi metode senzoriale pot fi utilizate.

KEYWORDS: Roman Religion, Mithras, Sensory Museology, Public Archaeology, Archaeological Parks.

CUVINTE CHEIE : Religia Romană, Mithras, Muzeologie Senzorială, Arheologie Publică, Parcuri Arheologice.

The Roman monuments dedicated to Mithras have captured the interest of intellectuals and later, the general public, since the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The artifacts from this cult possess a remarkable iconography and a distinct narrative that made them easily recognizable¹. By the 15th and 16th centuries, these relics adorned the courts of European monarchs, clergy, and nobility as decorative elements. Detailed descriptions of the Mithras reliefs were provided by humanist writers of that era, who often depicted them in the palaces and courts of Rome, Bologna, Venice, Vienna, Buda, and Gyulafehérvár². Although it is challenging to discuss the exhibitions of Mithras during the antiquarianism age without relevant sources, the literature and symbolism of that time were heavily influenced by the discovery of Mithras relics in ancient ruins, sometimes in remarkably intact conditions. Several lithographs and drawings demonstrate that during that period, Mithras monuments, along with inscriptions and various other Roman artifacts, embellished noble palaces, gardens, and facades, aiming to establish a direct connection with the ancient world in an impactful and awe-inspiring manner³. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the first museums in Europe emerged, showcasing numerous Mithras relics. Notably, Transylvania became a prominent location for such exhibitions, garnering significant popularity toward the end of the 18th century and serving as a vital source for European and local Mithras research⁴. Among the Transylvanian Mithras collections, the Battyaneum collection, established in the late 18th century, stood out with its assortment of large Mithras reliefs and statues originating from the ancient cities of Apulum (colonia Aurelia Apulensis) and municipium Septimium Apulense. Similarly to this, the collection of the Brukenthal Museum in Hermannstadt (Sibiu) in the early 19th century was

¹ On the latest iconographic discussions, see: Adrych et al. 2017; Mastrocinque 2017; Arnhold 2018; Bricault, Veymiers and Amoroso 2021.

² On the historiography see: Gordon 2021.

³ Gordon 2004.

⁴ Szabó 2022.



Fig. 1. The interior of the first Museum of Alba Iulia founded by Béla Cserni (photo: Béla Cserni, from Szabó 2016, fig. 126b with the permission of MNUAI).

also well-known for European travellers of that age⁵. Regrettably, information regarding the arrangement of the first museums in Transylvania is scarce, and there is no evidence to suggest that they attempted to classify the objects based on professional archaeological principles during the first half of the 19th century (fig. 1)⁶.

Photographs from the late 19th century provide the earliest visual documentation of Mithras objects within their newly established museum settings. These photographs indicate that the primary organising principle in 19th century museums generally revolve around the subject matter, with a particular emphasis on animal depictions, epigraphic details or the provenience of the objects. One notable example can be observed in the fate of the Vatican Mithras relics in the Sala degli Animali or the early museal arrangements of Deva and Alba Iulia. Additionally, the size of the objects played a significant role in their arrangement, while the religious significance was rarely considered as a determining factor (fig. 2-3).

At the same time, the discovery of Mithraea during the 19th century provided concrete evidence of the cult's distinct spatial characteristics and sacred geography, which were previously known primarily through literary sources⁷. Mithras sanctuaries stood out due to their unconventional structures, blending into the urban architectural fabric or harmoniously integrating with the natural landscape⁸. However, their internal architectural elements such as podiums, altars, reliefs, and the significance of the pronaos as a crucial space for initiation rituals testified to a deliberate strategy of sacralising space and conveying a central religious narrative⁹. Despite the significant impact of the extensive archaeological findings and sacred sites excavated at locations like Nida Hedderheim, Ostia, Carnuntum, Aquincum, and Sarmizegetusa on local and continental developments in Mithras studies, their museological representation remained somewhat limited during this period (fig. 4). The post-World War I era witnessed the rise of archaeological parks throughout Europe, with the ancient Roman heritage being particularly

⁵ Hammer-Purgstall 1833.

⁶ Szabó 2013.

⁷ See the discussion on the Mithraic architecture in the early works, such as Király 1886.

⁸ Clauss 2000, 42-48.

⁹ Hensen 2021.

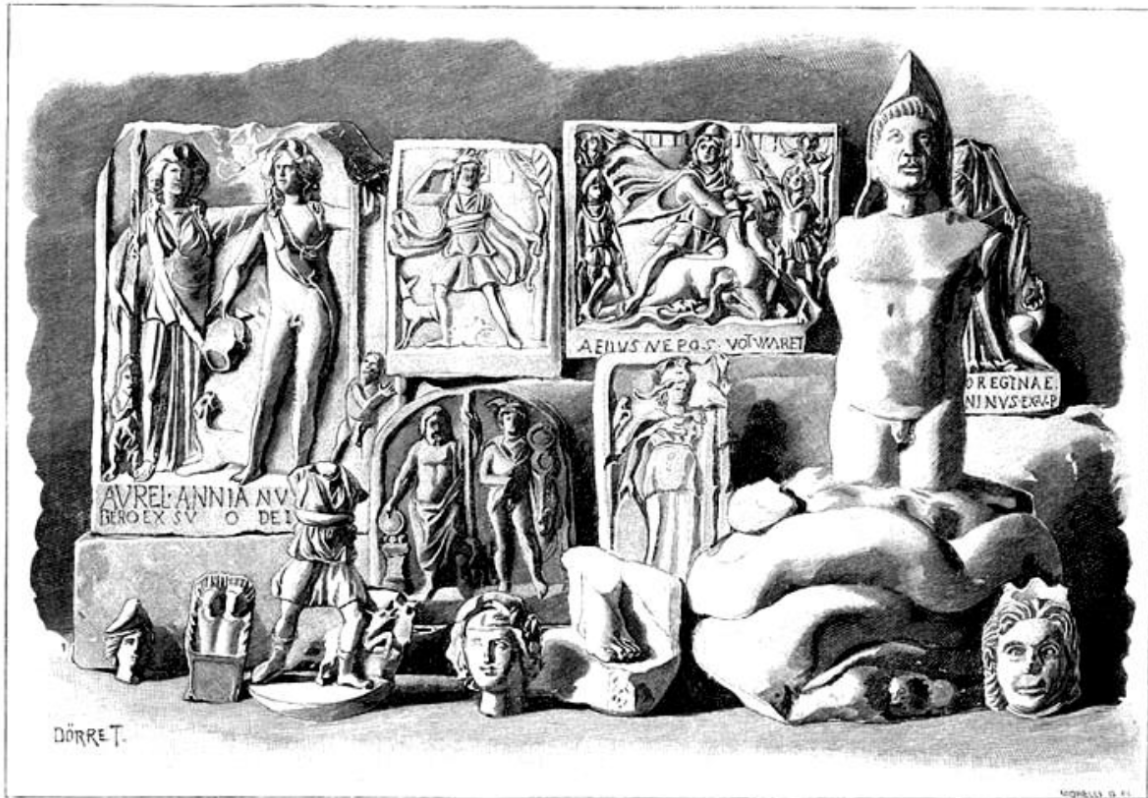


Fig. 2. Mithraic monuments from the Museum of Deva in the early 20th century (after Bodó 2021, 188).



Fig. 3. Mithraic monuments in the Sala degli Animali in the Musei Vaticani (photo: Wikicommons).



Fig. 4. Mithraic relief from Doştat (probably once discovered in Sarmizegetusa) in the early collections of the Museum of Deva (after Bodó 2021, 191).

emphasized in fascist Italy and later in Nazi Germany as part of the glorification of their respective historical pasts¹⁰. However, this emphasis on the reuse of antiquity had only a marginal impact on Mithras research and the presentation of its material heritage. The influential work and international recognition of Franz V. Cumont significantly contributed to the revival and popularization of the Mithras cult, with translations of his French works into various European languages during his lifetime¹¹. This period also saw the presentation and partial restoration of Mithraic sanctuaries in Ostia, as well as the discovery and relocation of the renowned Mithraeum from Dura Europos to Yale University. The latter event provided an opportunity for the first interactive museum exhibition of an ancient Mithras sanctuary¹². In Rome, on-site Mithras sanctuaries have also become visitable, especially following the Second World War, when a second wave of Mithras research was initiated, thanks to scholars like M.J. Vermaseren and John Hinnells¹³. However, only a small fraction of the approximately 127 known shrines were accessible to the public in the latter half of the 20th century, most of which were restored or partially reconstructed in the 1960s. The discovery of well-preserved Mithraea in the United Kingdom during the 1950s, such as Carrawburgh (Brocolita) and London (Londinium, Walbrook), had a significant impact and became internationally renowned examples of public archaeology during that time.

The museological methods that emerged in the 1970s continue to be widely employed in museums today, including the presentation of Mithras relics since the post-war period. The rapid advancements in museal technology, the introduction of digitization, and the progress of interdisciplinary research have played significant roles in the development of museology. These establishments have led to the emergence of colour relief reconstructions, on-site site illumination, and the creation of numerous brochures showcasing Mithras monuments and sites, often featuring high-quality colour photographs¹⁴. Notably, volumes and catalogues focusing on frescoes in Italian sanctuaries have been of particular importance, although noteworthy examples from Germany and England also deserve recognition¹⁵.

¹⁰ Chapoutot 2012.

¹¹ Gordon 1975; Belayche 2013.

¹² Brody 2011.

¹³ Vermaseren 1963. See also the historiographic summary in Belayche 2013.

¹⁴ Vermaseren 1982.

¹⁵ Toynbee 1986.

Driven by advancements in technology and a shifting understanding of visitor engagement, the field of museology has undergone a radical transformation in the past few decades, although only a few museums have fully embraced these changes¹⁶. The advent of the so-called sensorial museology has been made possible by the third industrial revolution, marked by the emergence and widespread use of computers and laser technology, as well as the rapid advancements in audio-visual equipment. New museums, or a select few that have undergone substantial innovation, now utilize a range of technical tools that greatly enhance the experience of museum visitors who seek to understand and immerse themselves in the past.

These tools allow for a form of time travel, enabling visitors to engage with antiquity as a tangible and relatable legacy of the people who lived during that time. By integrating soundscapes, scents, tactile experiences, and even taste, museums can offer visitors a multi-dimensional journey into the past. Such immersive encounters transcend temporal boundaries, evoking a more profound understanding and empathy for the historical context.¹⁷

In the 21st century, various museums have already begun to explore and exploit the potential of sensorial museology in presenting ancient religions, including those of the Roman world. It signifies a departure from the conventional methods of passive observation toward a more immersive and holistic engagement, encompassing deep sensory-perceptual, mental, and emotional involvement. However, a comprehensive examination of the representation of Roman religion in contemporary museology has yet to be undertaken¹⁸.

First, we need to analyse how archaeology contributes to understanding of ancient religious practices and its potential for public education. When considering Roman religion, most individuals often associate them with specific depictions of gods through statues and sculptures, or with the remains of impressive yet dilapidated temples – essentially, the tangible aspects of religion. From this standpoint, these practices might appear unchanging to some, while to others, they are brought to life by the mythologies behind these ruins and idols. Historically, the narratives of our cultural heritage have been primarily visual in nature, focusing on static artifacts and their visual representation. However, this limited approach fails to capture the essence of human experience and the diverse ways our senses interact with the world. The recognition of this void led to the revaluation of archaeological interpretations in the 1990s, as scholars like Skeates advocated for acknowledging the importance of the full phenomenological spectrum¹⁹. This shift ignited a revitalization in understanding the interplay between sensory encounters, transforming how we perceive archaeological sites²⁰ and as a direct response the concept of multisensory museology emerged.

What visitors should grasp is that religion held a central significance in the daily existence of a Roman individual. It constituted a vibrant and ever-evolving phenomenon that exerted influence across all tiers of society, shaping the mindset of Roman civilization. Emerging from the capital city of the empire with numerous elements passed from the Etruscan and Greek traditions, in the imperial period, roman religion is not trying to expand but rather to absorb different religions and rituals encountered during the military expansions²¹. In this sense, roman religious faith, or faiths more correctly, is a very diverse element of roman life. *Sacra publica* or the public cults were seen as an official form of faith, present in the everyday life of a citizen, for such cults the magistrates of the cities were offering money or playing important roles in the ritual practices as priests. The construction of a temple in a public area served as a landmark for city inhabitants, but even the most mundane activities were closely tied to religion in ancient Rome. From settling new territory to planning a trip or a meeting, the Romans had specific rituals that were required in every circumstance.²²

As mentioned earlier, contemporary perceptions often relegate Roman religion to the annals of antiquity, casting it as a distant facet of ancient existence. Yet, upon closer reflection, parallels appear between our current societal fabric and the tapestry of the Roman Empire. In the present day, public officials continue to extend financial support to religious institutions, a practice akin to that observed in antiquity. Our churches, far from being mere vestiges of a bygone era, serve as local landmarks and draw admiration from tourists. Despite our access to a wealth of knowledge courtesy of scientific advancements, vestiges of superstition and faith still find a foothold in our beliefs, explaining phenomena that defy easy explanation. The endeavour to bring multisensorial experiences of Roman religion to contemporary audiences transcends the act of resurrecting an extinct belief system. Instead, it entails unearthing a facet of our own identity that might appear concealed or forgotten in the recesses of history.

¹⁶ Levent and Pascual Leone 2014.

¹⁷ Moshenska 2017, 87-88.

¹⁸ Mairesse 2019. An interesting case study: Lee 2022.

¹⁹ Skeates 2010.

²⁰ Moshenska 2017, 87.

²¹ Rüpe 2007, 4.

²² Rüpe 2007, 4-5.

The Roman Cult of Mithras offers an extraordinary opportunity for the sensorial museological presentation of ancient Roman religions, given the abundance and significance of its archaeological remains. The visual and narrative aspects of these relics are particularly captivating. With nearly 150 *mithraea* and around three thousand inscriptions and sculptural artifacts, they represent a valuable part of the shared heritage held by museums across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East²³. These artifacts offer exciting possibilities for museological exploration and pose professional challenges to museums of various sizes. In the following, we will highlight some case studies that have deviated from traditional museological methods, presenting the materiality of Roman Mithras in innovative ways. These examples can serve as inspiration for museums seeking to introduce fresh approaches in the near future.

Mithraeum near Circus Maximus

During the reconstruction of a mill into the warehouse of the Teatro dell'Opera in 1931-1932, a remarkably well-preserved Roman building complex of significant size was uncovered beneath the structure. However, due to the limited accessibility of the warehouse, the sanctuary housed within it can only be visited on rare occasions and through a touristic association²⁴. They are former students and archaeologists, well prepared in Roman history and classical archaeology and in local topography of the finds – a necessity in such a city, as Rome²⁵. The sanctuary, which is remarkably well-preserved, showcases a stunning state of conservation. Elements such as arches, vaults, the *pavimentum* (paved floor), and the marble decorations on the walls are still *in situ* within the sanctuary. Additionally, porphyry objects can be found within the complex. Although some parts of the original wall paintings and decorations are visible, they have suffered significant damage over the past 80 years. This building was originally situated in the Forum Boarium and was part of the area encompassing the Ara Maxima Herculis Invicti, the large central altar of Hercules. A portion of this altar is still preserved beneath the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin²⁶. The Ara Herculis was rebuilt after 64 AD, so what it might be preserved under the Cosmedin is actually the new, Principate-period building and not the Republican altar²⁷. Undoubtedly, the area where the sanctuary was discovered held great significance as one of the central sacred spaces in Rome, particularly for men. This historical context could provide a compelling reason for the establishment of a Mithraeum in this location, even if the original building in which it was identified was a *horreum* or a similar economic structure. Similar instances of Mithraea being found in unconventional locations, such as the port of Caesarea Maritima, further support the idea that Mithraic worship could adapt to existing structures within important and symbolic areas.

The original building underwent significant transformations during the period of Diocletian, with additional walls added to create the three main areas of the sanctuary: the *pronaos*, the *apparatorium*, and the *naos*, which consisted of a central nave with *podia*. The marble decorations, spheres on the *pavimentum*, and the rich *ex voto* decorations, including statues and statue bases, date from the late 3rd to early 4th century. The central relief, now resting on the left bench of the *naos*, was originally found in the central area of the sanctuary (fig. 5). It depicts the canonical tauroctony, a classic representation of Mithras, with stars near Mithras' head. Another *ex voto* relief remains in its original position, embedded in the wall of the sanctuary. The presence of several niches suggests that the walls of the *naos* were heavily adorned with inscriptions and reliefs. Another significant inscription is integrated into one of the statue bases near the central area, indicating that the building may have been repurposed and abandoned by the Mithraic group in the 4th century. Several poorly preserved graffiti can be observed on the walls, which, to the best of our knowledge, have not been studied using contemporary technologies. However, the example of the Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum demonstrates that infrared and other laser technologies can aid in identifying poorly preserved graffiti and frescoes²⁸. One of the most discussed *graffito* of the sanctuary is the one which mentions the word of “*magicae*” Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae (CIMRM) 454. Guarducci and H. Solin wrote also some important works on this topic²⁹. The sanctuary was published in several short reports and articles in the 1930's by Pietrangeli, Colini, Luigi and others³⁰. Later, M. J. Vermaseren had a long entry in his monumental corpus about the sanctuary and its inscriptions too (CIMRM 434). Vermaseren collected all the material he could from A.M. Colini and the few reports existed in the 1950's when he wrote his entry for CIMRM. It is clear from the epigraphic material, that many of the inscriptions are from the 2nd and early 3rd century AD, which is in a slight conflict with

²³ Scapin et al. 2021.

²⁴ <https://www.visiteromasottterranea.it/mitreo-circo-massimo.html>. Last accessed: 8.04.2023.

²⁵ On the topography of ancient Rome, see: Carandini et al. 2012.

²⁶ Tavolieri and Ciafardini 2010.

²⁷ Fontana and Murgia 2022.

²⁸ Bull et al. 2017.

²⁹ Marrone 2022, 241-242.

³⁰ Canciani 2022, 168-175.

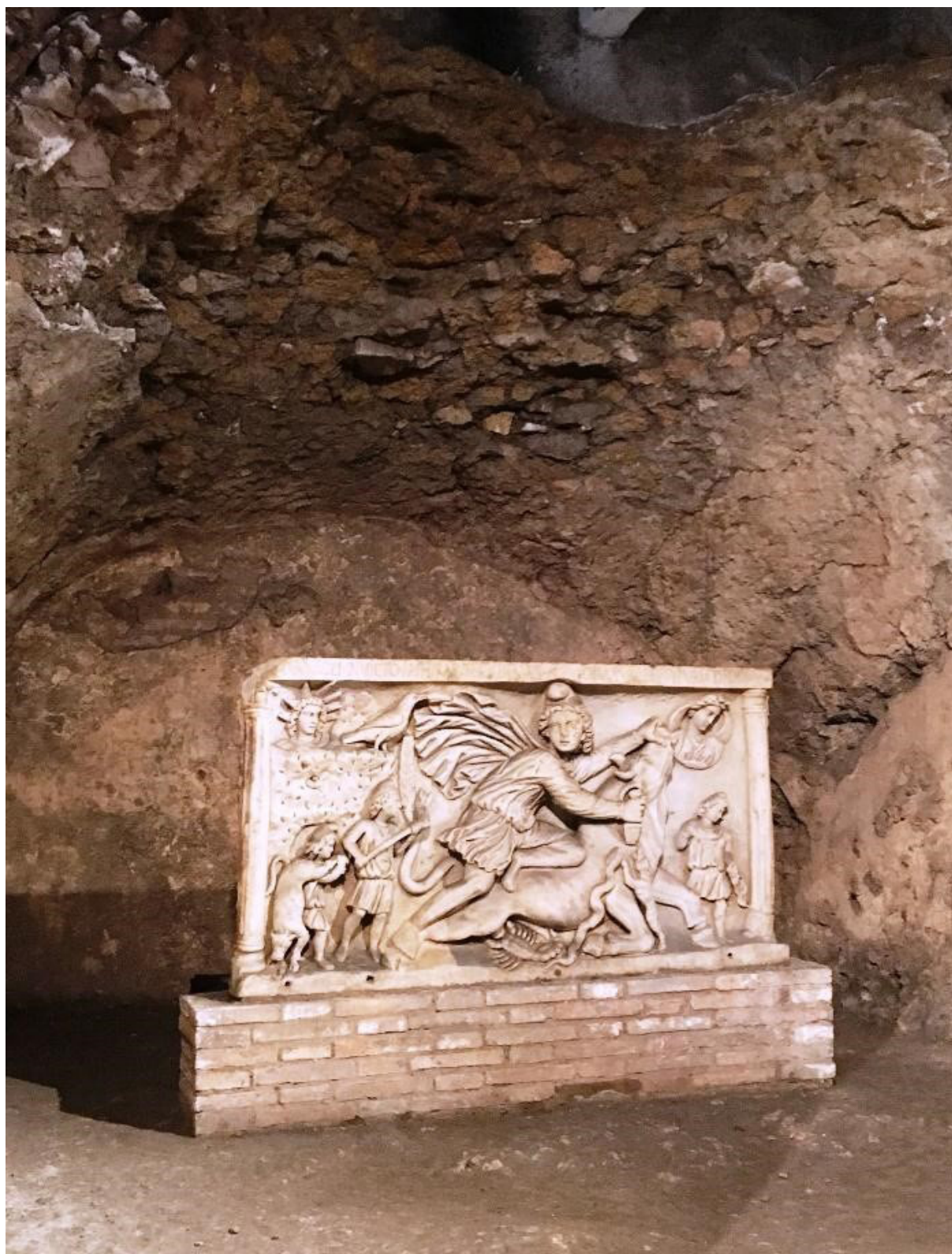


Fig. 5. Mithraic relief from the Mitreo del Circo Massimo (photo: Csaba Szabó, 2019).

the *pavimentum*, which clearly suggest, that it was built in its recently known form during Diocletian's period³¹. The *mithraeum* might have therefore at least two phases: a Hadrianic one and a later, 3rd century one. It could be also, that a Mithraic group moved from an older sanctuary into this new one, moving the old inscriptions (CIMRM 449, 453) with them. One of the inscriptions (CIMRM 449) mentions, that the *sacrarium* (the *mithraeum*?) was built by Publius

³¹ Marrone 2022, 236-237.

Aelius Ur(banus?), when Aulus Sergius Eutychus was *sacerdotes*, priest. The name of Ur(banus?) suggest that we are in the period of Hadrian or post-Hadrian. None of the early publishers of the sanctuary named this *mithraeum* as “mitreo di Circo Massimo”. The building was at least 20 m distance from the Circus Maximus, separated by a Roman road from the edges of the circus. It is clearly not part of the monumental structure, but a separate building, part of the economic area of the Forum Boarium and the sacralised spaces of the Ara Herculis. Still, since the 1970’s Italian and later, English literature cites this sanctuary as the “*mithraeum* from the Circus Maximus”, which is very misleading. The sanctuary of Publius Aelius Ur(banus) or Aulus Sergius Eutychus could be more authentic denomination.

The *mithraeum* near the Circus Maximus (or the *mithraeum* of Eutychus) is one of the *in situ* *mithraea* with minor spatial modifications³²: a large part of the inscriptions, reliefs are *in situ*, the architectural atmosphere is mostly intact and there are only minor, well-integrated modifications in the structure which makes the interior very attractive for the visitors (fig. 6.). The lights are artificial and often anachronistic, which does not allow the



Fig.6. Mithraic relief on the walls of the Mitreo del Circo Massimo (photo: Csaba Szabó, 2019).

³² On modern interventions see: Canavacci and Maffei 2022.

modern visitor to imagine the sensorial experiences and cognitive effects of the *mithraeum* in antiquity³³. Small finds (the rich ceramic, pottery material³⁴) are not presented *in situ*. There are no posters: historical knowledge is provided only for small groups offered by the guides of the site, which need to be booked. This has advantages and disadvantages too: it evokes the secrecy of the Mithraic mysteries and transforms the visitor into an initiate of Mithraic knowledge, however visual aid in form of booklets or posters, perhaps audio-visual effects could increase the effect. From a museological point of view, the *mithraeum* near the Circus Maximus enters the category of minimalist, *in situ* archaeological sites, where the modern intervention is minimal, the ancient archaeological and architectural atmosphere is emphasized, however not helped with contemporary museological or sensorial effects and methods. Similar cases can be found in most of the open *mithraea* of Rome, Ostia, Vulci as well.

Crypta Balbi and San Clemente *mithraea*

The case studies of the Crypta Balbi and San Clemente *mithraea* are truly exceptional, offering a captivating exploration of the layered and intricate stratigraphy of ancient Rome. These sites provide a fascinating glimpse into the city's evolution from the Republican period to the Renaissance, encompassing various interventions throughout history. They offer visitors a remarkable experience, delving into the realms of urban archaeology, uncovering religious and spatial continuities, as well as witnessing the transformative nature of the cityscape over time. These case studies serve as valuable guides, shedding light on the intricate details of Rome's past and allowing tourists to appreciate the richness and complexity of the city's archaeological heritage³⁵. The Crypta Balbi *mithraeum*, showcased within the modern and elegantly designed spaces of the Crypta Balbi Museum (a part of the National Roman Museum), stands out as one of the most well-presented Mithraic contexts in Rome (fig. 7). The museum's approach places special emphasis on the material evidence and sensory experience within the dimly lit space, highlighting the significance of lamps in creating the ambiance. To aid visitors in envisioning the ancient



Fig. 7. Crypta Balbi Mithraeum, Rome (photo Csaba Szabó, 2013).

³³ Martin 2022.

³⁴ Privitera 2022.

³⁵ Sagui 2004; Bjornebye 2007, 32-34 and 41-41.

architectural atmosphere and understanding the context, use, and history of the objects, the museum provides 3D reconstructions and models of the *mithraeum* on posters. These visual aids enable modern visitors to immerse themselves in the ancient setting and gain a deeper appreciation for the archaeological findings and their cultural significance³⁶. The Crypta Balbi *mithraeum* has also been one of the few case studies that have stimulated research on community and public archaeology³⁷.

Mithraeum of Marino

The *mithraeum* of Marino was discovered in 1963 and it is considered as one of the most spectacular Mithraic sites in contemporary *mithraea* in Italy. The site is not easily accessible, but it is close to the main road (Via dei Peperino) and the train station of Marino (41.769330, 12.655150)³⁸.

The significance of the Marino sanctuary primarily lies in its remarkable paintings. Positioned right next to the entrance are two panels. On the right wall, there is a partially damaged depiction of Cautes, encircled by a blue border. Only the upper section of the figure remains preserved. On the left wall, also encompassed by a blue border, stands Cautopates, holding a long torch in each hand pointed downwards. The background features white stucco, while at the centre, there is a large rectangular painting portraying Mithras as the slayer of the bull, accompanied by four minor scenes on each side³⁹.

The painting is among the best preserved Mithraic cult-images (fig. 8 a-c.), a dedication probably associated with the altar standing in front of it dedicated by Alfius Severus and his actor Cresces (*Invicto Ideo / Cresces / actor / Alfi / Seberi / d(onum) p(osuit)*)⁴⁰. The sanctuary is unusually long (29 m) and gives a striking opportunity for the visitor to enjoy the cognitive effects and sensorial experience of the inner geography of the *mithraeum* as a tableau vivant⁴¹.

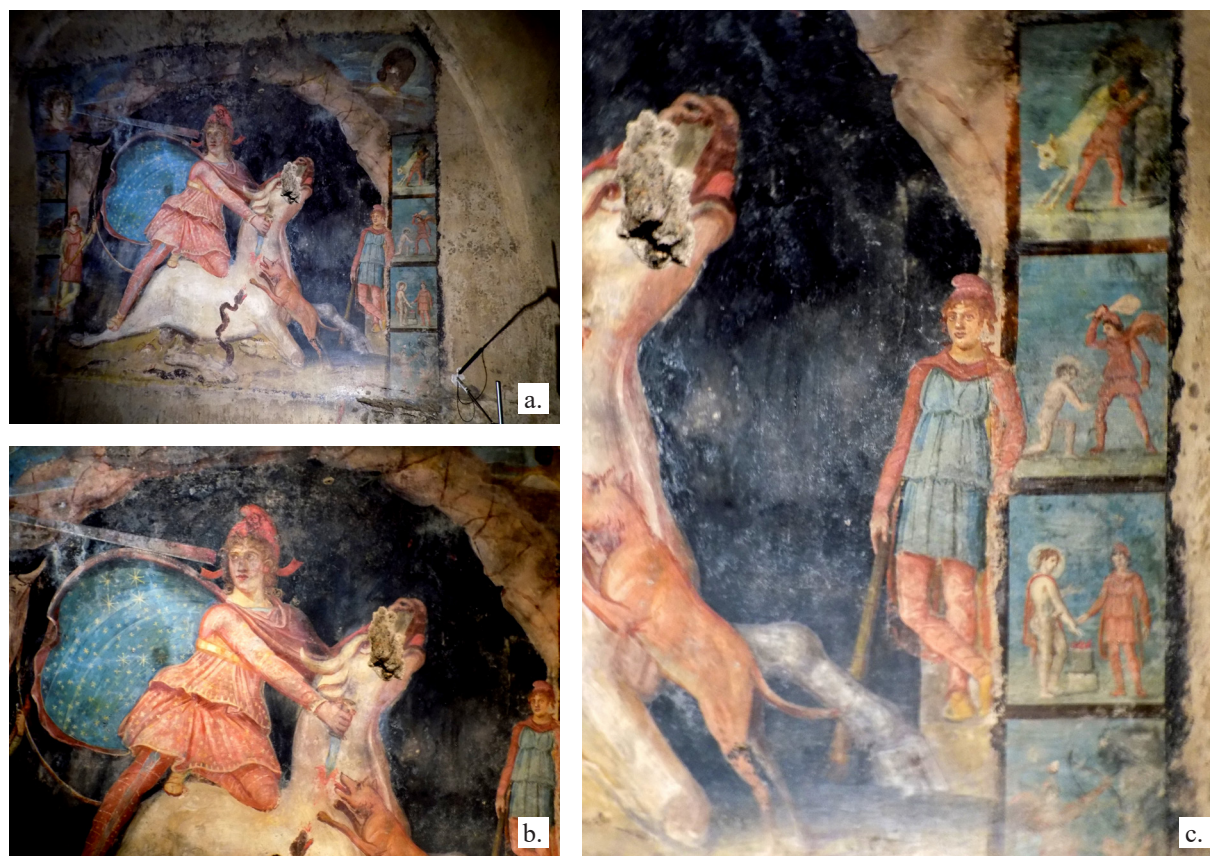


Fig. 8 a-c. Fresco of the Marino Mithraeum with details (photos Csaba Szabó, 2016).

³⁶ Vendittelli 2008, 195. See: <https://www.mithraeum.eu/monument/183>. Last accessed: 10.04.2023.

³⁷ Manacorda 2001; Carandini et al. 2012, 526, tab. 19; Serlorenzi 2018; Canciani 2022, 163-164.

³⁸ Vermaseren 1982.

³⁹ Vermaseren 1982, 4-11.

⁴⁰ Vermaseren 1982, 5.

⁴¹ Dirven 2015.

The vibrant and remarkably preserved colours of the central fresco in the Marino *mithraeum* have a profound impact on modern viewers. The use of modern reflectors and lights, although elegant, may be considered too intense. Utilizing natural lighting sources, such as lamps or modern alternatives that mimic the light effects without causing harm or pollution to the fresco, could create an even more mystical atmosphere within the sanctuary. Incorporating voice effects, such as recitals or Latin textual sources, along with visual performances, can further enhance the evocation of the ancient religious experience. The interior of the *mithraeum* largely remains in its original location, although the vault and upper structure of the *spelaeum* are modern additions. Prior to the entrance, there is a small exhibition space where various artifacts such as pottery, vases, architectural elements, and structures from the Roman site are displayed. Posters and textual sources assist visitors in understanding the contextual significance of these finds. While the Marino *mithraeum* has undergone more modifications compared to the Circus Maximus, the museal exhibition and presentation of small finds aid visitors in grasping the broader context of the Roman cult of Mithras. Investing in cognitive and sensory effects, incorporating audio-visual materials, and providing additional posters or booklets could greatly enhance the visitor experience at the site.

Walbrook Mithraeum

The Walbrook area, near the City of London was known as a possible Mithraic site already in 1889 when a unique relief was discovered in the area, representing the Mithraic tauroctony with a zodiacal representation (CIMRM 810). The *mithraeum*, probably associated with the relief of Ulpian Silvanus was discovered on 18th September 1954 in the city of London⁴². It was not only an important moment in the study of Roman Mithras in Britain, but also a milestone in the history of public archaeology in the UK and beyond⁴³. The story of the Walbrook *mithraeum* changed radically after the area was recently modified by Bloomberg and the Roman sanctuary was moved back to its original position. The new building built upon the site is one of the most interactive and unparalleled examples of sensorial museology used in Mithraic context. A large space dedicated to the presentation of the overall excavations, history of the Walbrook site introduce the visitors in the spectacular results of urban archaeology, which made London a school in field archaeology in the last decades⁴⁴. The modern museum presents not only a large quantity of small finds in an elegant and easily accessible way but offers a great variety of good practice in the spatial arrangements and accessibility of texts, posters, panels and audio-visual material. A special focus is emphasized also on the availability of the sanctuary and museum by the people living with disabilities and mobility problems – a detail, which is rarely discussed in archaeological parks, especially in *mithraea*.

The sanctuary itself has a “*pronaos*”, where the visitor is “initiated” in the mysteries of Roman Mithras in an innovative, stunning way: audio-visual materials, photos, archaeological finds, replicas in 3D printed versions, posters and films help the viewer to understand the universal and global aspects of Roman Mithras within an imperial and urban context as well⁴⁵. The site of the sanctuary is in a dark space, similarly to the Iseum of Mainz. The museal atmosphere evokes the cognitive aspects of the initiations and the sensorial effects (the holographic form of the elevation of the building and the Latin texts, voices and verses evoked) create the ideal atmosphere for a long-lasting emotional impact. The large space, the artificial, dark lights and the uncontrollable nature of the holographic elevation however can be even disturbing for a classical viewer or those who might be interested in the details of the excavation and the archaeological remains of the site itself⁴⁶. The sculptural material discovered at the site – among them the famous head of Mithras, part of probably a statuary representation of a tauroctony of a Petrogenitus statue – is in the permanent, Roman collection of the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA)⁴⁷, which makes the site still, incomplete, but at least gives the chance for the tourist and the visitor to explore different institutions and multiples sites of London (fig. 9 a-c.).

Mithraeum III from Poetovio

Mithraeum III was discovered in 1913 within an area that housed a *villa* and domestic buildings. M.J. Vermaseren speculated that there might have been a temple of Magna Mater located east of the *mithraeum*, although the precise function of the large building adjacent to the *mithraeum* has not been definitively determined through excavation⁴⁸. The *mithraeum* itself is of monumental scale and is considered one of the largest in the Roman Empire, measuring

⁴² Shepherd 1998. See also: Toynbee 1986; Gordon 2000.

⁴³ Moshenska 2009, 47-48.

⁴⁴ Redfern and Bekvalac 2013.

⁴⁵ See also: <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/about/>. Last accessed: 10.04.2023.

⁴⁶ See also: Hunter-Crawley 2019, 443.

⁴⁷ Toynbee 1986.

⁴⁸ CIMRM 1578-1612; Ragolič 2015; Preložnik and Nestorović 2018, 279-281.



Fig.9 a-c. Details of the Walbrook Mithraeum
(photos Csaba Szabó, 2019).

12 x 6.8 m (Fig. 10). It was constructed in at least two phases, with its peak in the late 3rd century around 260 AD when detachments from Potaissa and Apulum, the two legionary centres of Dacia stationed in Poetovio, significantly transformed the inner sacred geography of the sanctified space. The altars found in the *mithraeum*, predominantly dedicated by soldiers, attest to the rising importance of Mithras as a protective deity of the Roman army and imperial power. The sanctuary underwent reconstruction during the interwar period and more recently has been provided with a new protective building. However, the design of the new structure does not accurately reflect the size or architectural ambience of an ancient *mithraeum*. The wide and brightly lit windows of the modern building create a museum-like space, where the archaeological site itself becomes a decorative element within the contemporary spatial arrangement. Unfortunately, there are no posters or textual aids available for visitors, and several of the relief fragments and architectural elements on display are replicas, often lacking the precise contextual information of their original provenance. The large, well-lit interior of the modern building allows visitors

to appreciate the smallest details of the *mithraeum*, including its epigraphic and figurative monuments, which may not be possible in many other dark or shaded sanctuaries in Rome or Ostia that have been preserved *in situ* (fig. 11). However, it would greatly benefit the current visitors if there were a smaller, more intimate, and darker protective building, along with a local museum that focuses on the broader context of the sanctuaries and their archaeological significance. This would provide a more comprehensive experience and enhance understanding of the site.



Fig. 10. Mithraeum III of Poetovio, Ptuj, Slovenia (photo Csaba Szabó 2022).



Fig. 11. Planta Pedis Mithraeum, Ostia (photo Csaba Szabó 2013).

Symphorus Mithraeum from Aquincum

The Symphorus *mithraeum* (known also as Mithraeum IV) was discovered in Aquincum (Óbuda, Budapest, Hungary) in 1941 by Tibor Nagy⁴⁹. It was listed also by M.J. Vermaseren in his monumental corpus (CIMRM 1767). His important excavation from that period was recently reinterpreted by the excavations of Paula Zsidi (1999-2000) and Orsolya Láng (2017)⁵⁰. The sanctuary was discovered in the vicinity of the south-wall of the civilian town, around 150 meters south from the Victorinus *mithraeum* (known also as Mithraeum II)⁵¹. It was the fourth sanctuary dedicated to Mithras, today there are 5 known in the conurbation of Aquincum. The archaeological material of the sanctuary is one of the richest in Aquincum: frescoes, terracotta Mithras tauroctony, interesting globe-shaped stones, altars, rich pottery and glass material was discovered here. The sanctuary was recently reconstructed, the archaeological material is well preserved and presented in a nice manner. It is one of the best reconstructed sanctuaries in Hungary, together with the Fertőrákos *mithraeum* and the Iseum of Savaria. The Symphorus *mithraeum* is a good example for *in situ* reconstructions in archaeological parks (fig. 12)⁵². The protective building of the sanctuary evokes authentically the Roman *domus urbana* and it's well integrated in the architectural atmosphere of the Aquincum civil settlement. Although the elevation and exact dimensions of the architectural features are uncertain, the protective building does not affect the archaeological remains of the site and the modern interventions are elegantly marked and didn't leave destructive interventions. The central area of the naos is restored with partial elevation of the *podia*, following the methods used already by Gyula Hajnóczy before the protective building was built in the new phase. In the pronaos, a small museal area was established, where small finds of the *mithraeum* are presented in a universal and local context: there are several posters on the cult of Roman Mithras, its spread in the Roman Empire and Pannonia, its material



Fig. 12. The reconstructed building of the Symphorus Mithraeum in Aquincum Archaeological Park, Óbuda, Budapest (photo Csaba Szabó 2018).

⁴⁹ On the cult of Mithras in Aquincum see: Brelich 1938, 134-139; Nagy 1942, 433-437; Tóth 1988, 38-52; *Tit. Ag.* I. 227-266. Zsidi 2002; Zsidi 2011; Zsidi 2014; Zsidi 2018.

⁵¹ Tóth 1988, 41-42.

⁵² On Hungarian reconstructions in archaeological parks, see also: Mezős 2021.

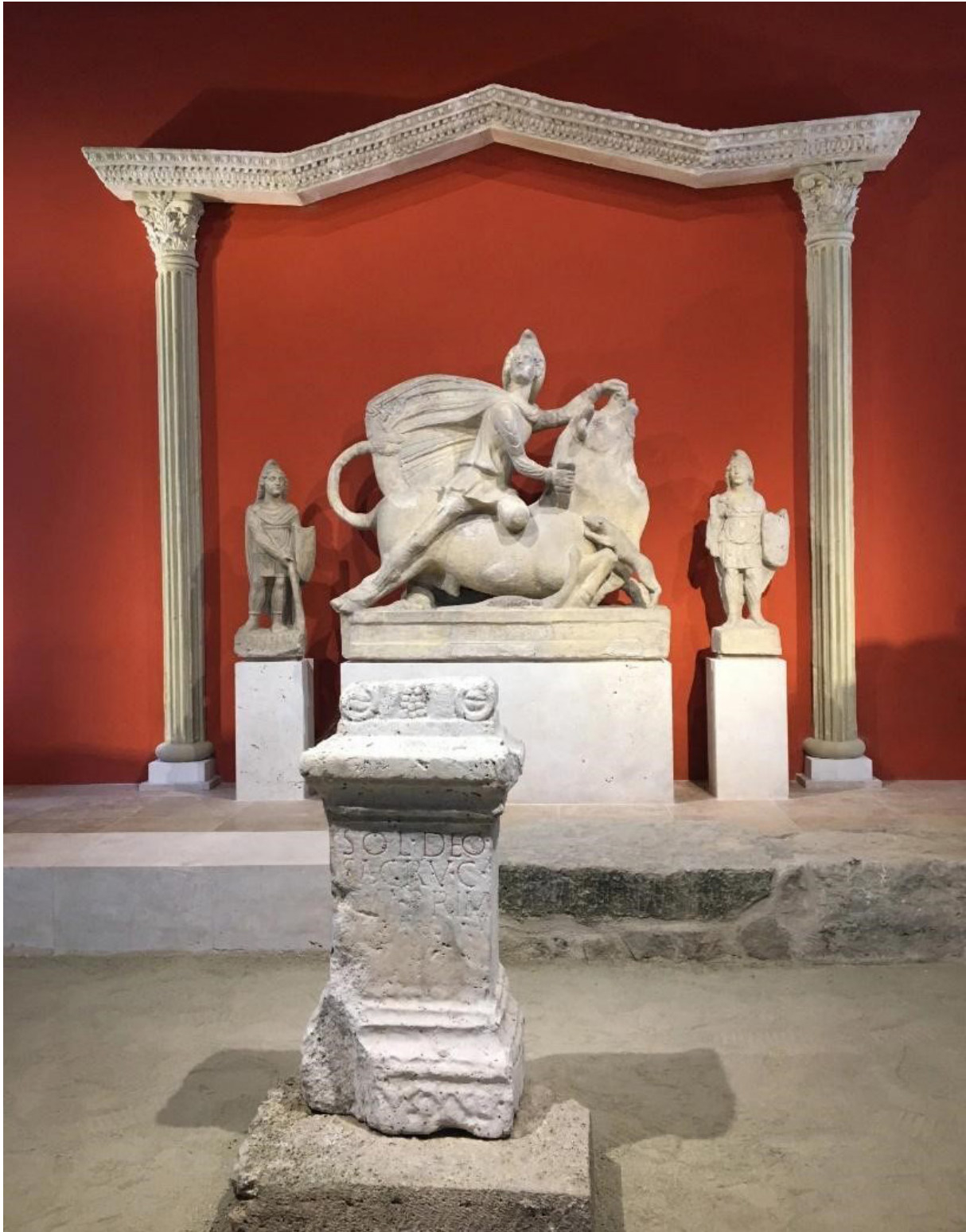


Fig. 13. The central relief and a Mithraic altar inside the Symphorus Mithraeum (photo Csaba Szabó 2018).

evidence and the local cult from Aquincum. In the naos, the *podia* are decorated with further small finds, mostly replicas of pottery, ceramic material (lamps, jars) based on the finds discovered *in situ* or on analogies. Some of the elements, such as the central altar is not from the site (fig. 13)⁵³. There are no classical windows on the protective building, which allows a creative play with the natural light, which can enter from the main

⁵³ AE 1937 = CIMRM 1748 = Tit. Aq. I. 245: *Sol(i) -----Deo / sacru(m) C(aius) / [I]ul(ius) Prim(us) / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. The altar was discovered on the Hajógyári island, in the area of the praetorium consularis, on the bank of the Danube.

door or the small, rectangular window near the central, statuary tauroctony. The site is rarely open during the night (mostly in the night of museums), therefore the evening events and reconstructions of initiations cannot be performed during the night in the building. A film and an audio-visual guide are projected on the inner wall of the central nave, which summarize the information of the posters from the *pronaos* and presents further details on the archaeology of a *mithraeum* and the Mithraic initiations.

Mithras in museums: the case of Deva, Sibiu and Alba Iulia

The Roman province of Dacia is one of the richest in terms of Mithraic finds. During the short-lived existence of the province (165 years: 106-271 AD), almost 300 epigraphic and figurative monuments have been preserved in several archaeological sites, particularly in urban environments such as the colonies of Sarmizegetusa and Apulum⁵⁴. Despite the extraordinary quantity and quality of the finds, there are few archaeologically attested sanctuaries within the territory of the former province of Dacia (present-day Transylvania and Oltenia in Romania)⁵⁵, and none of them are presented *in situ*. The most recent and extensively documented Mithras sanctuary was discovered in 2008 and excavated by an international team between 2013 and 2016⁵⁶.

There are three case studies in Romanian museology where the rich material of Roman Mithras from Dacia can be presented through innovative and sensory museology: the National Museum of Union in Alba Iulia, the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu, and the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization in Deva. The museum in Deva houses the extensive material evidence from the Mithraeum of Sarmizegetusa, which is one of the largest Mithraic discoveries ever made in the Roman Empire⁵⁷. The quantity of finds in Deva makes this case extraordinary, requiring a complete reconstruction of the Mithraeum described by Pál Király. Some of the finds from the 1882 and 1883 excavations have a well-known and documented position within the sanctuary. Therefore, it would be necessary to reconstruct a Mithraeum, present the excavations, and showcase the work and heritage of the members of the Historical and Archaeological Association of Hunyad County as a crucial step in the museum⁵⁸. The reconstructed Mithraeum could showcase the dimensions of the sanctuary, including the partially preserved *naos* and the large relief-pit containing almost 250 fragments of Mithraic finds. Posters and interactive screens placed on the walls of the rebuilt hypothetical sanctuary could present various aspects such as the myth of Mithras, the local manifestations of the cult in Dacia and Sarmizegetusa, different interpretations of the large relief-pit, information about the community members, and details about the small finds. To enhance the visitor experience, reflectors and a projector could recreate the possible colours of the reliefs and statues, as well as scenes from initiation rituals found in other Mithraea⁵⁹. Auditory and visual sources could also be utilized to evoke the atmosphere of the mysteries, thus adding to the sensory aspects of the reconstructed Sarmizegetusa Mithraeum. However, due to the significant quantity of material in Deva, the dimensions of the sanctuary, and the complexity of this case study, it would necessitate a new building complex and a comprehensive yet financially challenging project to properly accommodate and present the artifacts and information in an engaging manner (fig. 14).

The Brukenthal Museum, which is the oldest public museum in present-day Romania (Transylvania), boasts a remarkably rich Roman collection. The archaeological collection, comprising predominantly inscriptions and figurative monuments from Roman Dacia, dates to the time of Samuel von Bruckenthal, the museum's founder. As an enthusiastic intellectual with a keen interest in ancient history, Bruckenthal assembled this collection, forming the oldest portion of the museum's archaeological exhibits⁶⁰. He collected Roman statues, inscriptions and glyptic material from all the places of Roman Dacia and even beyond⁶¹.

The Mithraic finds from Apulum, discovered in 1786 by Franciscus Kastal (or Kaftal), hold a significant place in the collection of Brukenthal Museum. Franciscus Kastal, who was involved in the salt trade in Marosprortus (Partos today), located in the southern part of the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis, was responsible for unearthing these artifacts. These Mithraic objects were among the earliest acquisitions to find their way into the collection of Brukenthal Museum⁶².

⁵⁴ On the rich literature on Roman Mithras in Dacia see: Boda and Szabó 2014, 110-116. For the latest catalogue see: Sicoe 2014. An addendum for this: Szabó 2018a.

⁵⁵ Szabó 2021.

⁵⁶ Egri et al. 2018; McCarty, Egri and Rustoiu 2019.

⁵⁷ Király 1886; Szabó 2014; Szabó forthcoming.

⁵⁸ On the activity of the Association, see: Boda 2014; Bodó 2021.

⁵⁹ For the role of colours in Mithraic context and their museal presentation see the case study of Carnuntum: <https://www.bda.gv.at/themen/forschung/polychromie-roemerzeit.html>. Last accessed: 2.09.2023.

⁶⁰ On the life of Samuel von Brukenthal: Cozma and Vlaiu 2006.

⁶¹ On the glyptic collection of the museum: Țeposu-David 1965.

⁶² Szabó 2013 with all previous bibliography. See also: Sicoe 2014, 144-145, cat. Nr. 16.



Fig. 14. The relief from Doştat (probably once discovered in Sarmizegetusa) in the contemporary collection of the Museum of Deva (photo: Ortolf Harl, lupa 19193).

Kastal's discovery of what is believed to be the first Mithraeum in Dacia is significant, as the remarkable material suggests the presence of an intact sanctuary. Among the findings, there is a beautiful representation of Mithras Tauroctonos (the slaying of the bull), a middle-sized relief, a statue base, and potentially one of the most stunning representations of Mithras Petrogenitus (emerging from the rock) from Dacia as well. These findings provide valuable insights into the Mithraic cult and its iconography in the region (fig. 15-18). The discovery made by Kastal was later mentioned by Antal Bartalis in his history of Roman Dacia. Kastal sent the finds to one of his relatives in Sibiu, who subsequently donated this spectacular material to the Bruckenthal Museum. Today, these artifacts are housed in the Altemberger House within the Roman Lapidarium, where an artificial *mithraeum* has been created. Similar to many museums that reconstruct or recreate a *mithraeum*, the "Sibiu mithraeum" showcases an eclectic collection with items originating from various sources. The dedicated space for the Mithraic material is a relatively small, rectangular room within the museum.

The vaulted ceiling of the cellar, designed in a Renaissance style, imitates the atmosphere of a Mithraic cave (*spelaeum*). The ceiling is painted in blue with gold (yellow) stars. However, the current state of the painting has suffered serious damage and requires structural and technical revitalization. Within the room, there are two oversized podiums that divide the space. Although the podiums are an important element both in *in situ* *mithraea* and museum displays, in this case, they occupy a larger space than they would in an actual *mithraeum*. This arrangement may not be practical for visitors, who will likely use the podiums primarily as benches, sitting on them rather than assuming the kline position, as would have been done during ritual meals⁶³. An altar is positioned near the left podium, although it was not integrated into the overall structure of the *mithraeum*. However, the arrangement of the objects within the space lacks a clear concept. The majority of the seven monuments are crowded in front of the podia and the entrance door without a well-defined organization or arrangement. The central piece is the small, rectangular relief discovered by Kastal as part of the presumed Mithraeum from Apulum⁶⁴ and the signum of Secundinus, representing Mithras Tauroctonos in statuary form – the only such monument from Roman Dacia⁶⁵. The description of the monuments (in Romanian, English) are positioned near the objects, on relatively large, individual and black posters which occupies a large area of the wall. Each of the objects near the niche are on small podia, which equals the problem of the spatial arrangements of the monuments. The altars are small, and

⁶³ Hensen 2021.

⁶⁴ Sicoe 2014, 145-146, cat. nr. 17.

⁶⁵ Sicoe 2014, 144-145, cat. Nr. 16.



Fig. 15. The “Mithraeum” in the Altemberger House, Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu (photo Csaba Szabó, 2019).



Fig. 16. Mithras Petrogenitus in the mithraeum from the Altemberger House Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu (photo Csaba Szabó, 2019).



Fig. 17. Mithras Tauroctonos in the mithraeum from the Altemberger House Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu (photo Csaba Szabó, 2019).

their epigraphic camps are hardly visible from their current position.

The Mithraeum at the Brukenthal Museum can indeed be reimagined and redesigned into a more visually appealing and sensorially interactive form. The podia can be reconstructed in a smaller size to better fit the space. The central nave can be deepened to create the illusion of a cave-like atmosphere (*spelaeum*). Additionally, the walls can be repainted, taking inspiration from frescoes such as those found in Marino or the wall paintings of Mithraeum V in Aquincum, to enhance the visual aesthetics. Improving the lighting system is crucial to create the desired sensory effects. A new, professional lighting setup can be implemented to mimic the ambiance of a dark, subtly illuminated Mithraeum, creating an immersive experience for visitors. Careful consideration should be given to the placement and intensity of lighting to evoke the desired atmosphere and highlight the important features of the space. By implementing these changes, the Mithraeum at the Brukenthal Museum can be transformed into a captivating and engaging exhibit, offering visitors a more immersive and educational experience⁶⁶. The central area of the Mithraeum, which includes the presumed naos area with the statuary representation of Mithras Tauroctonos, the relief, and the altars, should indeed be rearranged. Following the examples set by the inventory of Mithraeum I in Poetovio and the Sarmizegetusa Mithraeum, the statue of Mithras Petrogenitus can be relocated near the entrance door. This



Fig. 18. Details of Mithras Petrogenitus in the mithraeum from the Altemberger House Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu (photo Csaba Szabó, 2019).

adjustment will enhance the flow and presentation of the space. To create a more interactive and immersive experience, small digital displays can be incorporated into the lateral and frontal walls of the Mithraeum. These displays can present information on the Roman mysteries of Mithras, the history of the discovery, and provide basic information about Roman Dacia. Additionally, projected audio-visual elements can be used to transform the space into a vibrant and engaging religious environment, bringing the Mithraic rituals and practices to life.

In order to take precise measurements for a more thorough review of the artifacts' placements within the space of the museum, we travelled to Sibiu again in August 2023⁶⁷. However, because to the deterioration of the Mithras-related zone, this area is no longer open to the general public.

Another noteworthy case for new museological perspectives lies in the rich Mithraic collection of the National Museum of Union in Alba Iulia. This museum houses an impressive collection of Mithraic monuments, including reliefs, inscriptions, and statues. These artifacts were discovered in the ruins of Apulum, which was one of the largest urban settlements in Dacia and the Danubian provinces⁶⁸.

The Mithraic finds discovered in Apulum are known since the 18th century. Some of the earliest discoveries were hosted in the archaeological collection of the Batthyaneum and most of them have no documented archaeological context⁶⁹. Later finds were already transported in the Brukenthal Museum and after 1888 hosted in the museum founded by Béla Cserni, the first archaeologist of Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár)⁷⁰. The largest Mithraic find from Apulum was discovered in 1930 on the field of Ioan or Ștefan Oancea, in the territory of the municipium Septimium Apulense, the military town, in the south part of the legionary fortress⁷¹. The discovery occurred in a turbulent period when there were no museums in the city. The archaeological context was not documented; however, early

⁶⁶ For different spaces, but as relevant analogies, see: Petruț and Gui 2014, 86-87, figs. 11-12.

⁶⁷ Photos were made by Csaba Szabó in 2019.

⁶⁸ On the cult of Mithras in Apulum: Szabó 2015; Szabó 2018b, 98-120.

⁶⁹ Szabó 2022.

⁷⁰ Szabó 2016.

⁷¹ Szabó 2018b, 106-110; McCarty and Egri 2020, 123.

publications mentioned the presence of a Roman building associated with the find⁷². A Mithraic relief, two statues of torchbearers and several altars were identified in the same context⁷³.

The material, including statues of Mithras Petrogenitus, is displayed in a small, rectangular space within the Roman section of the Museum (fig. 19 a-e). This space is not exclusively dedicated to the Mithraic material.



Fig. 19 a-c. Mithraic monuments from collections of the Național Museum of Union, Alba Iulia (photos Csaba Szabó, 2010-2014).

⁷² Christescu 1933.

⁷³ CIMRM 1953-1967; Inscriptiile Daciei Romane (IDR) III/5, 141, 270-271, 279, 282, 288-290.



Fig. 19 d-e. Mithraic monuments from collections of the Național Museum of Union, Alba Iulia (photos Csaba Szabó, 2010-2014).

It also exhibits several other finds that are partially related to Roman religion, although not exclusively. However, the three main pieces of a room (L=5.7 m, w=7.8 m, h= 3.8 m) from a larger space (L= 14 m, w=5.25, h=3.80 m) separated by an arcade (h=2,9 m, w= 0,5 m) into two unequal rooms, are positioned on three metallic stands with

adjustable height (2.10 m - 2.30 m) and have Mithraic character. Additionally, some of the large reliefs and altars are exhibited in another room⁷⁴, with similar dimensions (L=13.6 m, w=5.25 m). These can be seen at the end of the museum's tour from the Lapidarium section of the museum. The current state of the space and museal approach is considered outdated. A potential re-arrangement of the material could involve presenting the Oancea material within a hypothetically reconstructed sanctuary, with a specific focus on the history of Mithraic finds in Apulum, the role of the military and civilian groups, their interconnectivity and local forms of Mithraic art. Similar methods as those suggested for the Brukenthal Museum can be applied in this case as well.

Conclusions

Despite the historiographic traditions, the cult of Mithras (the mysteries of Mithras in the Roman Empire) was far from being the most popular religious phenomenon in the Roman world⁷⁵. Renan was wrong, when he argued, that the world could become "Mithraist"⁷⁶: the cult was mostly limited to civilian, urban male members and some parts of the army, although they represented a minority within the Mithraic groups⁷⁷.

The material heritage of the cult, however, is exceptional: around 150 sanctuaries, hundreds of reliefs, altars, epigraphic sources, and small finds discovered in the last 2-3 centuries in Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. These findings represent a universal heritage of religious history on three continents. This paper focuses on a few case studies of mithraea in archaeological parks and museums, as well as the perspectives of sensorial museology in the presentation of Roman religion. In this field, cognitive approaches and lived religious appropriations play a crucial role. Roman religion in museology represents a fascinating case study with rich possibilities for contemporary museological perspectives. The material heritage of the Roman cult of Mithras not only serves as a great example for contemporary museology, religious studies, and Roman provincial archaeology, but also as an inspiration for new religious movements. It is a lived and constantly reinvented heritage of the Roman world in the 21st century.

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⁷⁴ Anghel 2014.

⁷⁵ Filippo Coarelli argued, that even in Rome where several mithraea were identified and dozens of others might have exist, the number of people visiting regularly these sanctuaries were only few thousands in a city of 500.000 or later 1 million: Coarelli 1979.

⁷⁶ "Si le christianisme eût été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaque": Renan 1882, 579.

⁷⁷ Gordon 2009.

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CSABA SZABÓ

University of Szeged
Department of Religious Studies
szabo.csaba.ptc@gmail.com

MIRUNA LIBIȚĂ-PARTICĂ

University of Bucharest
mirunalibitapartica@gmail.com

IOAN MUNTEAN

University of Babeș-Bolyai
munteanioan998@gmail.com