Archaeology of a *mithraeum*: the case of Caesarea Maritima. Reading notes

The mithraeum of Caesarea Maritima was well known in the literature since the 1980's, however the recently published monograph on the sanctuary represents the first comprehensive synthesis of the building. In the following, I will present the new volume of the late R. J. Bull and his team with additional notes focusing on the archaeology of "Mithraism"[1].

In the 1960's and 70's after the publication of the monumental and in many ways still indispensable Mithraic corpus of Maarten J. Vermaseren[2], numerous sanctuaries were discovered in Italy, Britain and several other countries in Europe[3], which changed recently our view on religious communication, space sacralisation and the role of objects in the dialogue between divine and human agents[4]. The discovery of the *mithraeum* in Caesarea Maritima need to be interpreted in this, post-Vermaseren era of the so-called Mithraic studies. The building was discovered in 1971, as the very first Mithraic sanctuary of this area of the Roman Empire[5]. Although there were several preliminary reports published on the sanctuary by Robert J. Bull (1921-2013) since 1973[6] and numerous volumes appeared in the Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima Excavation Reports series, this volume prepared by Robert J. Bull since the 1970's represents an important synthesis of the sanctuary and its archaeological context, published four years after the death of the director of the excavations[7]. This is one of the reasons, why the volume is dedicated to his memory and to the 1000 volunteers and members of the staff who worked on the site in the last four decades. The volume has five chapters and three appendixes, followed by a list of references, short bios of contributors and a general index.

The first chapter is focusing on the discovery and excavation of the vaults. Here, the authors did not present the chronology of the site, which is discussed in details in the next subchapters however. During the excavations, in the middle of the vault a small stone construction was identified, probably dividing the podium into two equal parts. The remains of an altar, a marble medallion ("*in a stratified earth layer between the altar and the eastern podium*") and a white circular area was identified in the eastern edge of the vault. The chapter is well illustrated with an old, general plan of the vaults and detailed plans of the vault nr. 1. (the later *mithraeum*), although they didn't explain the exact communication and relation between these connected and attached spaces.

The second, more detailed chapter written by R. J. Bull and J. D. Evans (11-39 pp.) presents the stratigraphic analysis of the vault. It aims to present the stratigraphy of the 13 probes excavated in the 1970's, presented shortly in various reports and preliminary publications by R. J. Bull and others. The vault had seven main phases, although some of them – such as the seventh phase (the Roman) had several subphases as it was latter suggested. The Roman phase (from Herod the Great until Constantine) was followed by two Byzantine phases, a "transitional" Byzantine-Islamic phase around 640 AD, an Islamic, Crusader and other modern phases. Some of them – such as the Byzantine phases – are hard to date. Each phase and their subphases are presented in a very clear and identical structure (technical description of the subphase, drawings and interpretation). What is interesting for us is the general phase nr. 7, which had five sub-phases between 10 BC and 330 AD. In subphase 7.3 a plaster subfloor was established, which was associated with the abandonment of the horreum vault and its transformation in a *mithraeum*. The archaeological material from this sub-phase did not really help us to date precisely the date, when the *mithraeum* was founded: they identified a Palestinian bag-shaped amphorae dated to 2nd-4th centuries AD and two coins from the 1st century AD. They interpreted the two coins (one an unidentified bronze coin, the other one a Neronian bronze coin from the Caesarea mint) as *terminus post quem* (second half of the 1st century AD), although the chronology of Evans, Blakely and Bull seems to be radically different. Subphase nr. 7.4. represents

1 Bull et al. 2017.

2 Vermaseren 1956-1960. See also: Szabó 2018a.

3 Vermaseren 1965; Vermaseren 1971;Vermaseren 1974; Vermaseren 1982; Shepherd 1998; Zsidi 2018.

4 On religious communication and their spatial aspects see: Rüpke 2018.

5 On the Mithraic finds from the Near East see: CIMRM 34-90, Chalupa 2011, 57-67.

6 Bull 1973, 260-262; Bull 1974, 280-283; Bull 1978, 75-90; Bull 1984; Bull 1987, 24-40.

7 The sanctuary was well known in the literature focusing on Roman religion, Mithraic studies and Roman archaeology too: Vermaseren 1982, 88; Donaldson 2000; Sivan 2008, 312-313; Patrich 2011, 228-229.

the period when the *mithraeum* was in use and repaired. In the last phase which ends in the early 4th century AD the sanctuary was abandoned. Before that however, several lamps were found from this period near the altar. Fine wares and glasses were used in religious meals[8].It seems that the vault 1 (the *mithraeum*) and the vault 2 were in direct communication in the last phase at least, a passage, fragments of glass bottle, cups and bowls were found here. It is possible, that this compartment was an annexed room of the sanctuary. The authors – arguing again for an unclear chronology – claimed, that the sanctuary was probably abandoned because of "*the numbers of the initiates had dropped below what would sustain an active cave*" (30.p.). We do not know if this is plausible or not, the archaeology of the later phase of the sanctuary serves with extremely laconic sources, however there are no traces for external or aggressive intervention or events[9].

The third chapter (30-60 pp.) written by Alexandra L. Ratzlaff presents the frescoes and the relief (medallion). The author rightly points out, that creating a *mithraeum* (sacralising the space[10]) needs several elements (material tools) such as the podia, a panel of frescoes on the south wall, a narrative, visual marker (the medallion) and altars, which marks repetitive or non-repetitive moments in the process of space sacralisation, as a facet of religious communication in Roman religion[11]. Ratzlaff enrolls some of the representative Mithraic sanctuaries founded in transformed public buildings, imitating the mythical cave in form of cryptoporticoes or vaulted buildings in Ostia, Rome and several other places. The author rightly points out, that in the case of a *mithraeum*, the external aspect of a building – public or private – was not so relevant; the internal structure played a crucial role in space sacralisation and the reenactment of the mythical meal and sacrifice of Mithras. She argues, that the so-called central cult scene of the tauroctony – which was identified in numerous forms in other sanctuaries (reliefs, paintings, bronze plaques, statues)[12] – is missing from the eastern wall. It might be painted and not preserved, but no chemical analysis was made in this part of the sanctuary. The altar (0.6 x 0.22 m) with a medallion fitted into the front of it was found in front of the central niche, following again a standard spatial tradition, which was part of the sacred geography or star talk of the sacralised space[13]. A local religious appropriation in the sensescape of the sanctuary is represented by the two light wells or the ceiling splay presented in the next chapter. Ratzlaff presents in details the frescoes of the south wall, preserved in a small section (2.2 m x 0.5 m) in a much-deteriorated state. The frescos were covered with a thin (1-2 cm) layer of salt, which was removed with alcohol and water, which probably damaged even more the chemical composition of the paintings. In 2008, R. J. Bull subjected the original photographs to a series of color filters, which revealed several new details of the visual program of this sacralised space. Cypress trees in three panels divide the fresco. The chapter presents the original photo of R. J. Bull, the colorized version of Bobeck and the colored drawing obtained after the saturated photo. The original photographs show how much the fresco was deteriorated. It is the triumph of contemporary technology, that the scenes of the panels could be reconstructed. The three panels – each of them representing a mystagogus and a mystes – are presented in detail in the book, first by an iconographic description, followed by a so-called interpretation. The first panel – named here as a scene of a procession – represents two individuals (one in white with a bread, the second one kneeling with a cloak, caring a rooster). The author presents few iconographic analogies for this scene, mostly from Capua Vetere, Santa Prisca and Konjic, but omits to contextualize these scenes with the literary sources and the other known near eastern sanctuaries, although these iconographic analogies from Hawarti or Dura Europos are radically different, even unique visual narratives and appropriations[14]. Much more detailed is the presentation of the second scene, which represents the so-called fire test, when an initiated pours honey on the hands of a nude uninitiated member of the group. Here, the author cites numerous literary, iconographic and epigraphic analogies too from all over the Empire[15]. The third panel represents the so-called blood pact scene, as one of the last moments of the initiation of a leo. This scene appears in numerous frescos (Santa Prisca, Capua Vetere, Marino, Aquincum[16]) but also on altars and reliefs. The interpretation of the iconographic program of the fresco ends with a short comparanda, where the author correctly stressed the local variations, appropriations and regional, individual choices within each *mithraeum*[17], arguing however that the striking similarities between the iconographic programs of geographically

[8] The authors mention that M. K. Risser and M. Zimmermann are preparing a work on the fine wares of the mithraeum which was shortly presented in this report in few pages (27-30. pp.).

[9] For the late phases and abandonment period of the mithraea see: Walsh 2018.

[10] For the notion of space sacralisation see: Szabó 2018b, 1-10.

[11] Rüpke 2018.

[12] Arnhold 2017.

[13] Gordon 1976; Beck 2006.

[14] Nagy 2012, 37-58; Dirven-McCarty 2014, 125-141.

[15] For a new krater with Mithraic iconography see: Zsidi 2014, 119-129. Another, unpublished fragment of a Mithraic krater was discovered in Apulum in 2015 (verbal confirmation of dr. George Bounegru).

[16] Zsidi 2018.

[17] Dirven-McCarty 2014. See also: Szabó 2018b, 98-120.

and chronologically different sanctuaries might indicate a canonized visual narrative and religious knowledge[18]. The fresco was ordered probably by a single initiate and represents the memorialisation of a religious experience. The author did not analyse the sensecape of the sanctuary and the role of visual narrative within the sacralised spaces of small group religions, which approach is increasingly present in Roman archaeology too[19].

An important subchapter deals with the iconographic analysis of the medallion, a round, middle sized relief representing the tauroctony in the upper register and several other scenes in the lower register. The Mithraic rondo of Caesarea Maritima is a middle sized relief (75 cm diameter)[20] represents the tauroctony and the two torchbearers, with the busts of Luna an Sol in the upper register, while in the lower one there are four scenes from the Mithraic narrative (from right to left: dream of Saturnus, Mithras riding the bull, the sacred meal with Sol and Mithras and the smiting of Sol with the bull's forequarter. Ratzlaff analyses the local specificities of the iconography, highlighting the reversed position of Cautes and Cautopates, which is very similar to the case of Dura Europos[21]. In her analysis, the author stressed the religious appropriation in the iconography of the relief and the individual choices behind such narrative "anomalies" – if there was a canon at all. Ratzlaff interprets the figure of Saturnus or Oceanus as a personalized, even regionalised choice where the aquatic element might play a significant role, similarly to the reliefs in the Danubian provinces, where Oceanus is represented as one of the standard elements of the secondary scenes. She rightly points out, that the closest analogies of this unusual, individualized selection of secondary scenes in the lower register are found in Dacia[22]. The closest analogy for the relief was discovered in 1864 in an unknown location in Transylvania (possibly in Apulum)[23]. The analogy from Roman Dacia (CIMRM 2187) is a much smaller object (15 x 12 cm) from the category of the so called portable Mithraic reliefs[24]. Although the iconographic and visual narrative is almost identical, the functionality of the object is totally different: it is hard to believe, that such a small Mithraic relief as the Dacian one was installed in the wall or podium of a Mithraic sanctuary, while the one from Caesarea served as one of the main tools of space sacralisation processes of the *mithraeum*. The authors mentioned, that there were no marble analysis made on the Caesarea relief, which would be essential to identify also the provenience of the object and perhaps the religious networks which undoubtedly existed between provinces, even between Dacia and the Near East[25]. The presumably imported relief probably was made outside of modern Israel, which reflects the mobility of Mithras worshippers and the material tools of space sacralisation in the Empire too[26]. The book did not present in details the similar analogies, especially those that were created in form of a medallion (CIMRM 1415 - Linz, 2246 – Kral Marko). The medallion – round shape of the Mithraic reliefs might be a creation of the Danubian provinces, which have numerous similar analogies in the visual language of the Thracian Rider representations and the so-called Danubian Riders (Domnus et Domna) cult too[27]. The relief of Caesarea is represented only in a single photograph[28], without a drawing or 3D reconstruction of the inner structure of the sanctuary, which would help the reader a lot to contextualize and understand the role of the medallion in the sacralised space. There is an important subchapter on the so-called visual program of the *mithraeum*, where the author discusses the inner structure of the sanctuary mostly from the perspective of Roger Beck's star talk[29]. The subchapter focuses on the architectural elements (podia, naos), the inner furniture (fresco, relief, altar) and the orientation and illumination of the space during the summer solstice, which proves the astronomic knowledge and tradition in this *mithraeum* too.

The fourth chapter (61-68 pp.) presents the interesting case of the ceiling of the *mithraeum*. During the excavations, the archaeologists identified 19 small, rectangular holes on the ceilings with dimensions of four by seven cm and three cm deep. A larger hole (45 x 45 cm) functioning s a light well in the east part of the ceiling was also identified. These are presented in this chapter by R. J. Bull and R. S. Fritzius, the later who recreated a fascinating representation of the sensescape atmosphere of the illumination within the sanctuary. The chapter presents the theory of R. J. Bull from 1987, which interpreted the holes and the light well as a splay and an astronomic dial

18 Nagy 2012.
19 Panagiotidou-Beck 2017.
20 On the categories see: Gordon 2004, 259-283.
21 Dirven-McCarty 2014.
22 Sicoe 2014.
23 In this period, several important archaeological finds were discovered in Apulum during the construction of the railway. Most of the Mithraic finds known before 1883 from Transylvania were found in Apulum and Micia: Szabó 2015, 136-144.
24 Gordon 2004. See also: Silnovic 2017, 81-110.
25 Tóth 1970, 71-75.
26 Similarly to this case, the Walbrook mithraeum in London might have a central relief transported from another province or mithraeum: Shepherd 1998.
27 Szabó 2017.
28 Oddly, the photograph was made on a carpet or a textile.
29 Beck 2006. See also: Chalupa 2012, 5-17.

and calendar. Based on the calculations of Meton, R. J. Bull presumed, that this illumination system represents a Metonic parapegmata, associating each stave to a given Metonic year. Without similar analogies and a more detailed analysis of the holes (possible chemical traces of metal or wood installations), this fascinating hypothesis is hard to prove, although the presence of light-effects and a visual sensescape in *mithraea* was attested in some rare cases[30].

The last, fifth chapter (69-78.pp.) presented by Alexandra Raztlaff is analyzing the sanctuary in a broader religious, social and political context, presenting the origins of the cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire[31], its distribution and territorial and social expansion too[32]. In the last subchapter, the author discusses the possible members of the Caesarea *mithraeum*, although without epigraphic material from the sanctuary this remains only a general speculation which associates the religious group with the dislocation of the army in Roman Palestina. In some parts of the text, Ratzlaff mentions the important relationship between Jerusalem, Dura Europos and the Danubian provinces, but did not speak about this military relationship in case of Caesarea.

Finally, the last three chapters (Appendix 1, 2 and 3) presents the restauration and saturation work of the fresco by Andrew Bobeck because of the High Dynamic Range Imaging (HDRi), the small finds of the vault (17 coins, 4 bronze, 4 iron, 13 glass) and the phasing for probes in vault 1. The book ends with bibliography (91-96 pp.), a list of contributors and a general index.

The monograph on the Caesarea Maritima *mithraeum* is the result of an interdisciplinary team and four-decade long effort of several archaeologists, historians and specialists. Due to the work of Robert J. Bull and his several preliminary reports on the sanctuary, its reception in academia was significant already in the end of the 20th century. The book aimed to answer some of the question's researchers had after reading the preliminary reports. Some of them – focusing on the stratigraphy, the major finds and the structure of the vault and the mysterious ceiling – was answered with important new information and remarkable precision, while others – such as the historical and especially, religious contextualization of the sanctuary in Caesarea Maritima, Roman Palestina and the Roman Empire – remained unanswered. The book did not give enough attention to the problem of cult of Mithras in the Near East, its relationship with the Danubian provinces, the local appropriations of the visual languages within the Oriental sanctuaries (Hawarti, the Jerusalem relief or Dura Europos). These lacunas and necessary aspects are balanced with the very clear and logical structure of the book, which makes it an easy read, printed in a remarkable quality. The sanctuary published in a form of a monograph is an important work also because of the rarity of *mithraea* published in such details and it is also one of the few cases, where the archaeological narrative meets some of the recent currents of Roman religious studies, therefore it will be a reference work for those who deal with the study of Roman Mithras or the archaeology of religion[33].

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30 Szabó 2018b, 98-116.
31 Citing just the well known work of Merkelbach, but not the latests discussions on this topic.
32 Citing exclusively the Western anglo-saxon literature and never the regional studies of the last ten years.
33 See also: McCarty-Egri 2020.

Abbreviations

CIMRM	Vermaseren, M.J. 1956-1960. *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae I-II*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.

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