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BEYOND THE ROMAN EAST: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF THE MITHRAEUM BASED ON ITS ARCHITECTURAL AUTHENTICITY AT CASTRUM ZERZEVAN (DİYARBAKIR, TURKEY)

Abstract: A rock-cut Mithraic sanctuary (2nd-3rd centuries) was excavated in Castrum Zerzevan. With its architectural authenticity and connectedness to the neighbouring structures, it has remained intact since it was purposefully buried probably around the 4th century. The authors argue that it stands as the only known Mithraeum on the eastern border of Rome until proven otherwise. The close up of the site is expressible with the transition process from paganism to monotheistic practices. In the spatio-temporal context, it must have been one of the oldest sanctuaries, due to interactions over the Persian peripheries, of the Mithras belief adopted by the Romanly world.

Keywords: Roman world, castrum, Zerevan, cult, paganism, Mithras.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Castrum Zerzevan,¹ is situated approximately 13 km distance to Çınar district (Diyarbakir Province) amidst ancient Dara (Anastasiapolis) and Amida (on the route from Edessa to Nisibis in a broader region), in southeast Turkey (Fig. 1). Lying over a north-south oriented hill and 120-124 m above the modern highway (at an elevation of about 900 m from the sea level), the outer boundaries of the garrison forms an enclosure measuring ca. 1.2 km (in cognizance of the gates and bastions' measurements) in perimeter, with a maximum width of 120 m across the hill and a length of 330 m along the axis where the entire site is scattered over ca. 2.75 hectares.²

The history of the site dates back to the 1st millennium BC when it was occupied by the Assyrians and was, as of location, established at a strategic point protruding above the edge of the ancient (royal) road that was used for commercial and military purposes in the neo-Assyrian (882-611 BC) and Persian periods (550-331 BC). Few details are known of how the Assyrians or the Persians mastered the region, except for some datable finds of periods in question, uncovered by the recent excavations and that corroborate an earlier

¹ It has come to be known as the "Zerzevan Castle" in the preliminary publications of the relevant archaeology project.

² DURSUN/COŞKUN 2020. Regarding the origin of stone materials and characterization.

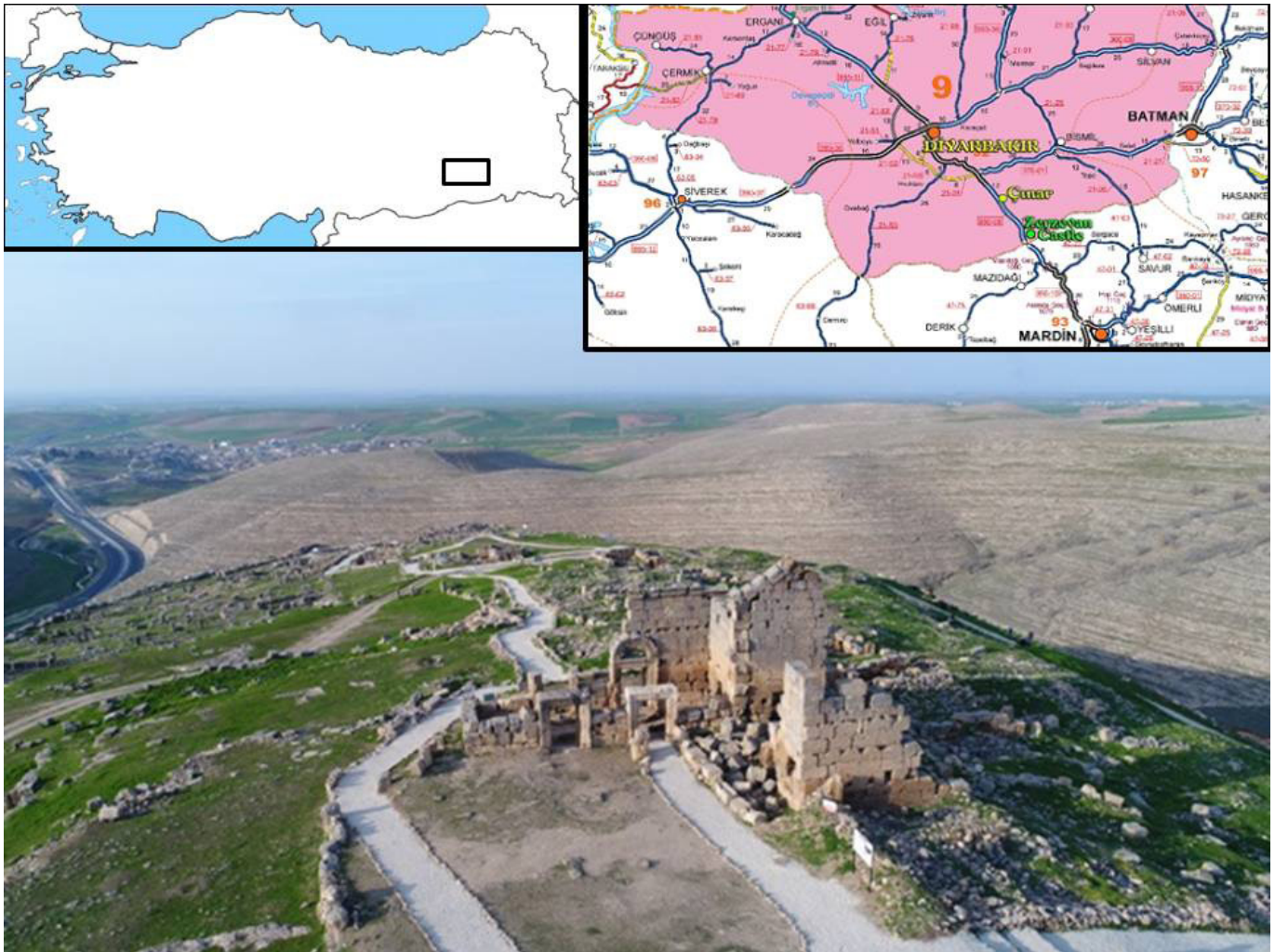


Fig. 1. Location of Castrum Zerzevan and View of Northern Frontiers (Source: Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

existence. Something beyond doubt is that earlier use of the site goes back to the Persian, Parthian and Sassanid periods, starting from the Assyrians' fingerprints.³

The hinterland of Zerzevan forms the extreme eastern border of the Roman Empire during which struggles were taking place between the Roman armies and Parthians/Sassanids who aspired to the region politically and economically around the 3rd century AD. It was settled uninterruptedly from the 3rd to the 7th century AD. The substantial settlement of military character was constructed during the Severan dynasty (AD 198-235). Presumably, the ramparts and associated buildings were restored in the periods of Anastasios I (AD 491-518) and Justinian I (AD 527-565) and some of them underwent a renewal process when the present final state was obtained.⁴ Although not mentioned in the catalogue of the late 4th century units included in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, the *castrum*, with the robust defensive elements and typical features identifiable with military planning principles, is one of the well-preserved Roman legionary bases, with the almost untouched underground and surface structures, apart from the normally expected adverse effects caused by the natural processes and human intervention for occupational

purposes until 1967s. The excavation and restoration projects were launched in 2014, with the collaboration of Dicle University, under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The researches, which are still in progress, have provided a satisfactory level of knowledge about enlightening of the long-time period from the region's entry into Roman domination in 69 BC to its conquest by the Islamic armies in AD 639 and, explanations on the different cultural-belief phases that took place over the site.⁵

The *castrum* was built on-site and in deference to the topographical features. The rectangular units built around a T-shape street system, again according to the grid principle, forms the basic texture of the site (Fig. 2). Alike the ramparts, the administrative and civilian buildings were erected with the rock mass excavated from the ground, probably at time of or soon after the construction of the entire fort system, where the measurable height of the ramparts is 15 m.

The most conspicuous, excavated bodies of architecture are the towers, bastions, churches, military administrative buildings, residential blocks, an arsenal, rock altars, cisterns and double-chambered collecting tank (the vaulted *castellum* fed by a main canal running from the southern sector with gravitational flow, travelling across

³ COŞKUN 2017.

⁴ Procop. *Aed.* 2.3.

⁵ COŞKUN 2017; COŞKUN 2019.



Fig. 2. Drone Image of Castrum Zerzevan (Top) and 3D Reconstruction (Below) (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

the eastern ramparts), along with some other structures the functions of which have not been yet identified. The *necropolis* area characterized by the rock-cut tombs is also visible in the southern part. The structure, identified as a Mithraeum, falls to the northernmost sector of the *castrum*.⁶

2. MITHRACENTRIC BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

The knowledge on the Mithraism (Cumont 1956a) doctrine and phenomenon is shaped within the framework of bull slaying scenes (tauroctony),⁷ in the niches found at the center of the temples and traces thereof, particularly all around continental Europe and the Near East.⁸ According to

belief, all the living things on earth were created as a means of Mithras' sacrificing the said beast. Afterwards, the day and night came into being and seasons occurred cyclically (as the tauroctony scene seen on the plates is thought to symbolize the deviation of the solstices from the axis) with the commencement of chronology. The moment when the blood of the bull outflows has been the main credit for the beginning of life and time.⁹

In the theological sense, Mithras is the god corresponding to the sun.¹⁰ The origin of the Indo-Persian Mithras (perhaps originating from the root "mihra"), who also has counterparts *i.e.* the Hittites' sun god,¹¹ Greek Helios or the Roman Sol Invictus¹² in other cultures, dates back to the

⁶ COŞKUN 2019; COŞKUN 2020.

⁷ VERMASEREN 1982 (Pl. XXII); CLAUSS 2001, 78-95; DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 147. E.g. the tauroctony reliefs at Louvre and Pisa Museums, LAVAGNE 1978, Planche XXII (figs.2-3)

⁸ VERMASEREN 1978; COOK *et alii* 1939, 428-430; HENSEN 2004, 96-107. On a variety of geographies testifying to the cult, BIBLIOTHÈQUE

PAHLAVI 1978.

⁹ SCHMIDT 1978, 345-348; DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 153.

¹⁰ CUMONT 1956b, 1-2.

¹¹ COOPER 1996, 1-2. Some texts make a mention of the first given reference of Mithra by the Mitanni people in a treaty between the Hittites (found on clay tablets in Hattusa, VERMASEREN 1956, Mitanni 16: 49).

¹² ALVAR 2008, 413.

15th century BC.¹³ He is a multi-functional figure, in charge of contracts often imaged with a *dexiosis* scene,¹⁴ and is the god of friendship and intermediacy, as well as he is acknowledged with concepts such as the light, warfare, justice or faith.¹⁵ Because the doctrine of this belief system is based on the genesis of earth, the god, from time to time, appears as the powerful figure who has control over the universe.¹⁶

Plutarch makes reference to the first members (*teletai aporettoi*) of the sect-like organization of Mithraism as the Cilician pirates.¹⁷ The supporters and worshippers, only accepted from male merchants, soldiers and aristocrats, entered into a system of seven grades of initiation where they had their communal ritual feasts.¹⁸ The rites were secret and performed in caves (*spelaeum*)¹⁹ or underground sanctuaries (i.e. Sarrebourg²⁰). Unsurprisingly, no information was leaked to the outsiders.²¹ The most interesting works providing information about the Mithraic cult liturgy²² are owed to the archaeological findings, especially the “Paris Papyrus”²³ or the mosaic unearthed in Ostia. However, nothing concrete has been discovered in Anatolia, except for Zerzevan.²⁴

In fact, the trend, which became common during the 2nd-3rd c. AD in Rome, does not fully coincide with the perceptions and thoughts of Mithraism in the Persian and Greek worlds where the god is not much mentioned, either. The “mysteriously” rendered worship or tauroctony is absent, for example, in the Zoroaster holy book, the Avesta.²⁵ Two views dominate in the adoption of Mithraism in Rome; the first one, echoing Plutarch, assumes that it was introduced by the Cilician seafarers whereas the latter postulates that it was spread among the Roman soldiers during their ground wars with the Parthians. Being part of the easternmost geographies of the Roman Empire, there is a kernel of truth in Zerzevan’s role as per the second option; Rome’s, perhaps first, encounter with this cult must have arisen from the regular contacts in its military campaigns to the east. Nevertheless, the mystification or cloaking of the religion which was widespread even among slaves, must have developed around a certain set of exoteric ideas. Because the astronomers dealt with celestial teachings in the early stages of adoption and deemed it a privilege, they considered themselves as VIP people as if “they knew very deep and secret knowledge” and controlled it at the same time while they

also declared that “only those who had the cosmic expertise could learn and master these secrets”.²⁶ When all this was used and served for those inclined to superstitious beliefs, things must have changed dramatically as the candidates went through various stages of perhaps “torture” and turned into cultists (the disciples, in a sense).²⁷ The liturgy was embraced as a “heavenly” talismanic journey or an adventure full of misfortune for consecration (via a Mithraeum, zealously admitted as a portal to the afterworld), linkable to the Plato’s cave matching the cosmos and Neo-Platonism in the later period. With the acceptance of Christianity in the 4th century, it was suppressed and eliminated.

The ground plan of a typical Roman Mithraeum often reveals an oblong rectangle where the supply of water²⁸ and fall of sunlight are among some indispensable requirements of the associated space, accompanied with the imagery of deities of the sun and the moon during the gatherings or rites, as well as a *mithraeum* may be, though occasionally, identified with the small finds associated with, for instance, the feasts.²⁹ The purpose of this study is to lay down and discuss the main aspects and architectural originality of the rock-cut Mithraeum unearthed at Zerzevan as well as its physical connectedness to the neighboring constructions of archaeological value, in the light of fresh data and selected comparative evidence given in the sources. The archaeological field work at the site is the basic tool that helps an interpretation in various contexts, with a particular emphasis to the architectural uniqueness of the sanctuary. Room is also reserved to the counterparts which may prove common grounds or dissemblance in regard to planning and practice.

The rationale, as an extension of the newly introduced ongoing studies, is overt. The fact that no extensive research has been carried out to date, has limited our knowledge of the pagan belief systems of the period in subject around Diyarbakır.

3. THE MITHRAEUM AT ZERZEVAN

Castrum Zerzevan, where the Christian and pagan elements co-exist, is particularly striking as it houses the last Mithras sanctuary found all over the world and the first one, dating to the 2nd-3rd century AD, on the eastern border of the Roman Empire, as of today.³⁰ Located below a trimmed terrace of limestone which is shared by another “underground building” (priorly identified as a “shelter” in the case of a siege, etc.), the structure was masterfully carved into the bedrock in the northernmost end of the *castrum*, within the ramparts (Fig. 3). Clearly traced are the inscriptions and symbols (yet undefined) at the entrance on its west. The inner height from the excavated ground to the ceiling is 2.5 m.

Despite a series of vexed questions on the sources of the Mithraic referents (from iconography to celestial

¹³ DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 146-147; indicatively the works in BIBLIOTHÉQUE PAHLAVI 1978, i.e. SCHMIDT 1978, 345-348).

¹⁴ LE GLAY 1978, 279-304.

¹⁵ On the discussion of meanings, especially SCHMIDT 1978, 345-392.

¹⁶ This subject is also encountered in the texts of “conservative” Cicero, with its emphasis on the stoic philosophy in the framework of astronomy (Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.19).

¹⁷ Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 24; DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 146-148.

¹⁸ VERMASEREN 1956, 352; CLAUSS 2001, 108-113. The person to participate in the ceremonies is said to have suffered seven tortures. COOPER 1996, 113-120; 144-150.

¹⁹ LAVAGNE 1978, 217-275. On possible Mithraic offerings (diagnosed through symbolic illustrations of Mithra on artifacts) found in a cave in Kermanshah in western Iran, ALIBAIGI *et alii* 2017, 234-250.

²⁰ WALTERS 1974, 17-21.

²¹ For a dining scene reported from a catacomb in Rome, INGLE 2019 (Plate 3).

²² Especially BETZ 2003.

²³ MEYER 1987, 211.

²⁴ For opinions on the existence of an insignificant mithraeum in Trabzon, also CUMONT 1956b, 143, 263.

²⁵ i.e. SCHMIDT 1978, 348; DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 147.

²⁶ DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 153.

²⁷ CLAUSS 2001, 102-104.

²⁸ WALTERS 1974, 8; CLAUSS 2001, 71-74.

²⁹ *c.f.* the case of Tienen, Belgium, MARTENS *et alii* 2020, 11-22.

³⁰ Along with a special emphasis on the Mithraeum, the entire *castrum* has been declared as the first-degree archaeological site, to be conserved with decision issue, dated 04.05.2005 and numbered 257. Both of them have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list.



Fig. 3. Aerial View of Some Major Structures in the Northern Sector (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

subjects) all over the ancient world and in cognizance of the domain of potential error arising from the heuristic procedures³¹ besides the dearth of small archaeological finds which would demonstrate a relevance to the organization of a ritual feast or lack of application of a variety of new techniques that would reveal some details of the structure in the microscale (as realized in the Zillis cult cave³²), the disparateness of the structure from the others can be seized by paying attention to the following details when entered:

The orientation of the sanctuary is due east, as obvious with two pseudo-columns (over which a belt was rising) carved onto the eastern wall, on both sides of a large niche in the middle, and two other small niches on either side in the same wall (Fig. 4A; Fig.5).

On the eastern wall is also carved the crown beam motif, as one of the symbols of Mithras.

Paint residues are visible on the said belt rising in the middle, which could have contained miscellaneous symbols of the religion.³³

The plate with a tauroctony scene was possibly placed in the same niche.

The belts with traces of paint on the two small niches have also survived to the present day.

A blood or water bowl is neatly observed in one of the small niches near the north wall, and right in front of it is also carved a pool in the ground (Fig. 4A-B). The bowl and the pool, that are connected with a channel running through the wall, do not fall wide of the Mithraic rituals.

Presumably, an altar (Claus 2001, 57-62) for the *ex-voto* was available in the middle space adjacent to the pool, facing the large niche on the eastern wall (Fig. 4B; Fig.5).

In addition, four symmetrical hollows (Fig. 5), probably for tethering purposes, are saliently seen on the ceiling. These hanging points could have been used for slaying the beasts or for a symbolic sacrifice ritual, if not any other, but notably the bull.

The southern wall, with slight traces of a mini channel or part of a *substructio* seems to be a suitable façade for receipt of water directly running into the Mithraeum.

Next to the pool, there is a longitudinal cavity where a person can lie with the head to the east and feet to the west (Fig. 4A).

The usable area is designed for about twenty people.

From the abovementioned particularities and orchestration of certain segments of the structure, one can well postulate that the Mithraeum is an exceptionally unique locality in terms of explaining the way in which the cult was performed and rituals were held at Roman Zerzevan. Interestingly, it was destroyed and deliberately closed in the 4th century AD when Christianity was embraced in the Empire.

4. DISCUSSION: CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER REMARKS

4.1. Contextuality

4.1.1. Zerzevan reached the present time with its ancient layout where the ruins are spread over an area of approximately 60 acres. They reflect a good many architectural features and technological developments of the

³¹ BECK 2006, 25-39.

³² See LO ROSSO *et alii* 2022

³³ See BECK 2006, 102-113.



Fig. 4A. Inner Area of the Mithraeum (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).



Fig. 4B. Closer View to the Inner Part of the Mithraeum (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).



Fig. 5. 3D Reconstruction of the Mithraeum (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

pagan and Christian Roman structures and artefacts. In a broader context, the archaeological remains still allow for an impressive insight into a typically planned Roman *castrum* with the *valli* and administrative-civilian-religious buildings. As the two main distinguished constructions on the northern edge of the fortification over a comparatively independent plot, the Mithraeum and the underground building, that have survived in almost complete condition, add much to the repertoire of constructing in-place (and building technology tracked with plasters, in part, particularly in the underground building, which calls to attention to reuse or periodization) and presumably by the virtuoso hands.

About general planning and other archaeological ruins, the “public” realm probably centered around the intersecting point of the Praetorium and Principum from which the Mithraeum is relatively distant. When *spelaea* were not encountered in open areas outside a city, they were placed inside a “private residence or a public dwelling” (if correct) in the city, but likely at the furthest point out of sight.³⁴ On the other hand, considering a “must be” relationship with water, its *locus* in the immediate north of the *castellum* (Fig. 3), at a lower elevation, may make sense.³⁵ Also, the proximity to the military barracks finds an explanation in literature that the structure can also be part of an independent residence, which may signal the singularity of the cultist(s) as the householders. Whatever

³⁴ DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 155.

³⁵ For a mithraeum situated near a running water source, *i.e.* Sarrebourg (WALTERS 1974, 20).

the case, the idea of proximity to water sounds reasonable than a somewhat biased interpretation; it is situated some 45 meters away from the *castellum*, which could have been the source point of dispatch to the structure.

From an archaeological point of view, the square grid system run over the terrace where the excavation was conducted, offers a complementarity of the Mithraeum and the underground building regarding (Fig. 6A) the outer boundaries thereof (Fig. 3) (over the narrow *insulae* adjacent to the demolished northern tower that had surveillance of the northern frontiers of the entire site and the lowlands stretching as far as Çınar and beyond (Fig. 1, below). Along with the drone images clearly exhibiting the surface plan of the plot, there is also the likelihood that the sanctuary and the underground building might have been interrelated from the former surface (but a connection from an underground passageway seems improbable as per the present case, and visible on the plan and section (1/50 scale) in Fig. 6B. Although no trace of a port or a corridor appears in the courtyard plan of the Mithraeum in its north, this section could have been linked to a passage for an emergency flee crossing the northern ramparts, reminiscent of the case of the hidden passage, which was discovered to have been obscured in the 6th century AD, beneath the southern watchtower having at least 21 m height).

To the immediate west-southwest lies the underground building having 110 m² areal measurement with six openings³⁶ which are at about the same elevation

³⁶ For structures described with holes visible from the above, *i.e.* COOPER

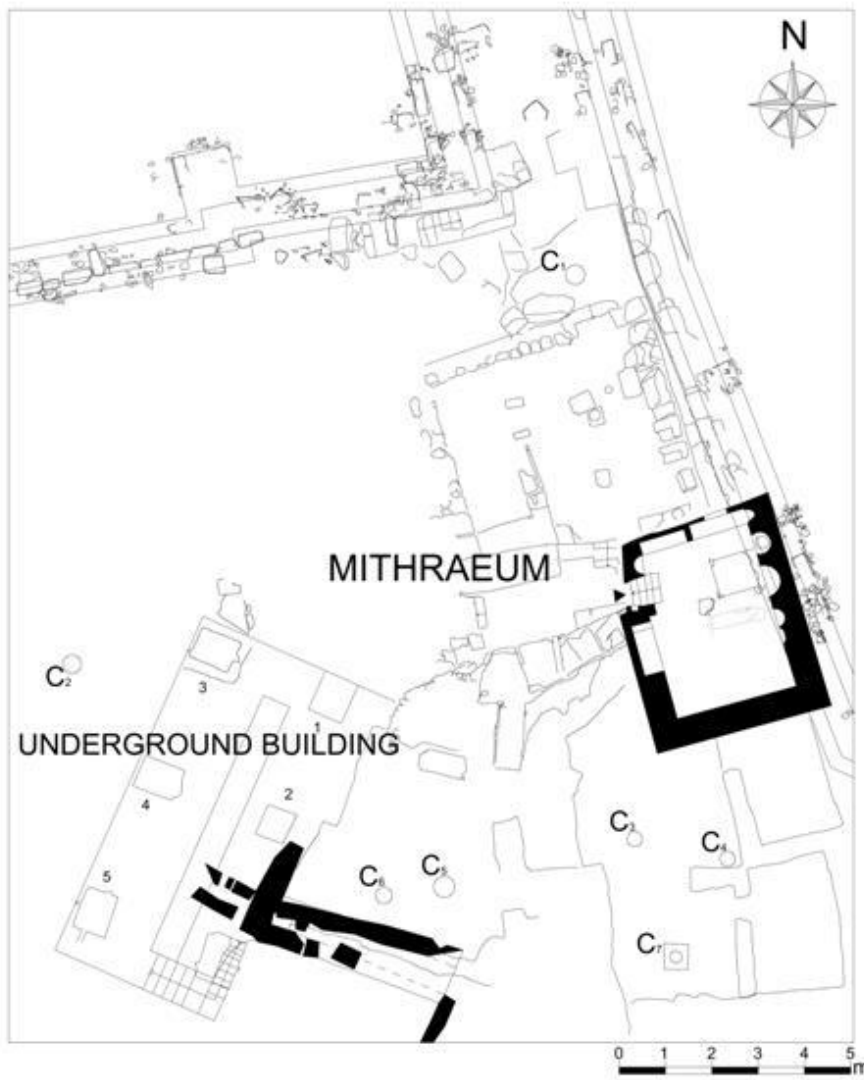


Fig. 6A. Plan of the Mithraeum Sacred Area and Outer Boundaries (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

of the entrance of the Mithraeum. Equally possible is that it was a *granarium* due to the sockets visible at the basement, however the situation is too controversial since the theory about the usage of the said openings for bull slaying at the surface and channeling their blood down to the sockets has come to forefront, so far (since it would physically be too difficult to get the bull into the Mithraeum). In that regard, some rituals identifiable with the Mithras' sacred area could have taken place in the said building, too.

In brief, part of the eastern ramparts, which pass over the temple, limits the structure in this sector. Given the setting and layout of the Mithraeum and underground building, the places in the north (Fig. 6A) seem to be connected with the entire "sacred" area, hence a cautious approach is that there could be a trail and an alternative entrance gate on its south.

4.1.2 Yet, the Mithraeum itself offers a well diagnosed inner design and architecture. It shows a number

1996, 52.

of parallels with the plan of the other Mithraea, particularly in terms of rectangularity and presence of water (or blood) inside or nearby.³⁷ Should any of those be beyond the visible limits, they would probably outreach a separate space via the courtyard which was probably roofed when the sanctuary was actively used.

From the viewpoint of, again, private planning, the benches are not aligned on the wings of an "elongated" aisle, as is known from the other *mithraea*.³⁸ The case in Zerzevan is clearly limited to an area of approximately 35 m². With an effective use of space, the viewable area of the altar is enlarged for those sitting over the benches and/ or banqueting and; a more ergonomic worship in a lavish space in front of the small niches seems to be aimed. The dimensions of the longitudinal space next to the pool fits to a normal-size person (with the head facing east and the feet west). It may be that the candidate was baptized in the pool and got cleansed of all his sins (as he was thought to be reborn from the rock just like Mithras did). The cisterns and faint channels tracked in the courtyard might call attention to a water line originating from the inner space of the Mithraeum, that either functioned as a discharge or collecting space. The inner part appears to have received water from the southern façade on which a hollow for a spouting channel is slightly recognized.

4.1.3 Roads, maritime or overland routes matter to the extent that they provide the suitable conditions for the civilian and military groups meet. Geologically, it is yet uncertain whether the positioning of the *castrum* was driven by a specific geographical factor. However, the ancient road so controlled or the climatic and logistical conditions of the past could have made it practical to dominate over such a hillslope which sufficiently stays at the back, far enough to resist against a siege.

No profound evidence of a large enough quarry, in order to build up all the main and supplementary bodies of the *castrum* has been found in the close environment of the site. A recent study, which is under way, has shown that with a smart shaping of the original hilltop topography, the site itself was successfully manipulated, first by trimming the bedrock where necessary and then cutting the stones required for the entire enclosure and all the other structures

³⁷ WALTERS 1974, 8.

³⁸ CLAUSS 2001, 42-52; BECK 2006, 111-112.

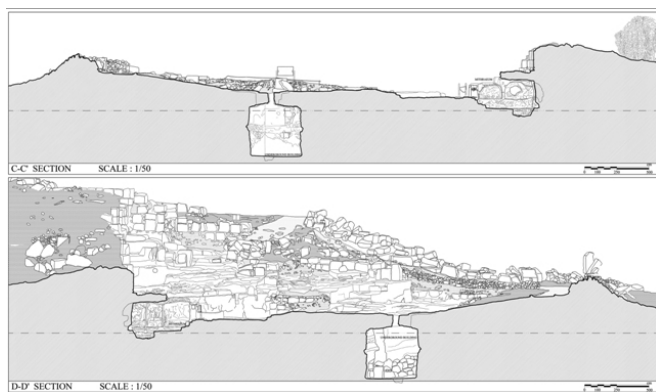


Fig. 6B. 1/50 Scale Plans of C-C' and D-D' Sections of the Mithraeum and Underground Building (Zerzevan Excavation Archive).

inside. The Mithraeum and the underground buildings seem to be the direct products of this process and were parts of a same specific work in light of the cutting traces on the inner walls. Hence, both seem to have been constructed according to similar techniques; by being carved into the bedrock (basically of carbonaceous rocks characterized with limestone and dolomite) which is represented by horizontal sequences. Hence, it is highly likely that they formed a complex, with yet unexcavated or not found units where the modern walking trail passes (Fig. 3). On the other hand, humidity and perhaps underground natural processes caused a loss to the original fabric on both of them where plasters applied onto the walls decayed partly, also in a number of other buildings at the site.

4.1.4. Finally, relevant to the religious and ritual framework, this socially popular and psychologically attractive touristic spot (for those from all over the world), but archaeologically and architecturally intact and almost complete place must have aimed at divorcing itself from the public and/or other pagan practices of the Classical world. It seems that the choice of place, perhaps as attached to the ground floor of the northern tower which is totally demolished, was made in cognizance of the secrecy principle, away from the eyes of the people and low rank officers.

A supplementary discussion is that the cult could have been come across during the military campaigns launched over the east, hence the structure could be amongst the oldest Roman sanctuaries of this belief system within the borders of the Empire. Certainly, the area in question must, too, have been considered sacred in the earlier periods as the archaeological research has also brought to light the associated finds. In this respect, the Mithraeum must have taken its final form during the Roman Period.

As the cult was quite backed up especially among the legionnaires, the proximity of the Mithraeum to the military barracks and the residential area might have become the norm (on Fig. 3). The Mithrasians, as the Roman equivalents of the Eleusis cultists in the Greek mainland, and as they did in continental Europe, from Ostia³⁹ to Aquileia, tried every way to instill the dose people wanted to hear, that is, the mystery. Due to the closeness of the cult to the outside and quite equivocal imperatives for its members, the reason of

³⁹ i.e. DANILOVA 2020, 93-103.

planning in the bedrock giving the impression of a *spelaeum* is to be taken as an ordinary behavioral pattern and religious perception of the “inhabitants” of Zerzevan.

The *castrum* houses other “religious” structures. An underground church, indeed a chapel, which was converted from a rock tomb, was uncovered nearing the main gate with Aramaic inscriptions. The other church, which was built in the 6th century, is the largest one (one of the oldest, half-standing,⁴⁰ churches in the region) rising above the ground in the middle south of the site from which a unique baptism bucket was taken to the İstanbul Archeology Museum in 1895. Despite the site’s military character, the light it has shed on the belief values of the ancient and Late Antique period makes it a lot more important in the context of history of religion and cross-cultural exchanges.

4.2 Counterparts and authenticity

The Mithraism, encountered in a wide Mediterranean geography from Spain to Palestine, was the strongest candidate to be the official cult of the Empire rivaling Christianity at that time.⁴¹ Various parts of the Roman world is thus familiar with the figure.

In Anatolia,⁴² Mithras is depicted or indirectly addressed in a handful sites from Kommagene⁴³ to Cappadocia, Pamphylia, Phrygia, Pisidia, Mysia, Pontus, Cilicia and Lykaonia.⁴⁴ The epigraphic inventory also calls to the god’s presence in a variety of sites⁴⁵ which shall not be attested here one by one. Among these, Doliche,⁴⁶ may be a regional precedent, however is somewhat different from the case of Zerzevan, as it was built in a quarry and left open. Notwithstanding, the Mithraeum in Dura Europos,⁴⁷ which was also once a Roman property in Syria, shares a similarity with its middle niche structure associated with symbols depicting tauroctony.⁴⁸ Some architectural parallels can be found in Italy, in the mithraea in Rome, Ostia and Santa Maria Capua Vetere. Those in London and Carrawburgh, on the other hand, were built quite differently, above the ground level. The Mithraeum at Zerzevan looks better preserved in comparison to many others, also because the architectural

⁴⁰ The baptism bucket bearing the name of Antipatros and his family was brought to the İstanbul Archaeological Museum from this church. Also mentioned by DEICHMANN/PESCHLOW 1977, 19.

⁴¹ There are exceptions, though. For instance, Tarsus, which was a “science paradise”, once worshipped the Hittites’ Sanda. According to Strabo, as the people were fond of philosophy and ethics (Str. 14.5.13; DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 148-149) and maybe because they were closer to rational rather than cabalist thought, it can be considered normal that they were not affected. As a matter of fact, the writing of Apollonius of Tyana (also Philostratus) that “the Athenians liked philosophia; Tarsians loved linen but hated philosophy” (ix) seems to contradict this situation. Even though, it competed with Athens “in its time”, it can be hard to compare the two on certain issues. Again, the universe model and conceptual framework of the Stoics, who took the mind as their axis, must have influenced the Mithrasians (DÜRÜŞKEN 2000, 150-151).

⁴² CUMONT 1956b. It is thought that the belief in Mithra, originating from the Mitanni language (GÜNALTAY 1987, 172) and the Veda texts, was brought to Anatolia by the magi priests (BILGIN 1996, 111, especially for the magi found on the relief in Daskyleion (CUMONT 1956b, 11).

⁴³ BLÖMER/CROWTHER 2014, 361-362.

⁴⁴ cf. ABAY 2020, 273-276.

⁴⁵ CUMONT 1896, 87-179.

⁴⁶ In Gaziantep, WINTER 2014.

⁴⁷ DRIVEN/ MCCARTY 2020, 165-182.

⁴⁸ DOWNEY 1978, 135-151.

elements enables to get into the details of a possible “rite”. Looking at its private planning, a general commonality with the others can be the activity taken as a ritual fest by reclining over the benches that were placed in an area out of sight and designed like a *speleum*.

5. CONCLUSION

The visible ruins and associated findings demonstrate that *Castrum Zerzevan* was actively used in the 3rd century AD. The remoteness of the uninhabited site (at least since the 1970s), with its impressively standing monumental buildings, over an invisible landscape of underground and surface structures, provides an unaltered window onto the past.

Except for the adverse effects of human intervention and weathering impact in parts, the originality of the recently excavated “Mithraeum” has remained intact, as one of the best-preserved sanctuaries of the related cult (hinting at an exceptional testimony of Rome’s exoteric religious practice and sacredly perceived space) and the first one acknowledged on the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire during the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Given that, it is also, in all likelihood, one of the oldest sanctuaries, which was an output of the initial contacts of the Romanly world with the East, along the well-known Sassanid borders often crammed with the legionnaires. That its co-existence with the ecclesiastic buildings over the same site indicates a transition from the pagan practices to Christianity and can be regarded as a synopsis of the history of religion in the region.

The authenticity of the purposefully buried structure, which nicely describes the liturgical elements and a presumptive ritual of entering the religion of Mithras, if not another, is still high, as there has been no extra intervention over the site and close surroundings. But archaeology is never innocent. Its discovery has aroused great interest both at the national and international level, however the case has a more precious correspondence in the archaeo-ritual expression of the Romans and residents of the peripheral communities, probably no later than the adoption of Christianity. Hence, the encounter of the “East” on the “West” comes in solid appearance, paralleling the endeavors of Alexander the Great who intended to implant the western cultural practices and cults to the east but almost the exact opposite happened, with a silent resistance, through the passage of centuries. Something unchanged is that the legacy of the Mithraic cult, pattern and practice can still be powerful in the eyes of the public but is and has to be skeptically approached by the scholarly world.

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