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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

- Vasileios SPANOS**
DELINEATION OF THE EARTH'S BEST SON..... 3
- John Brendan KNIGHT**
POWER, POSITION, AND PRACTICE. MILESIAN ELITES ON THE MOVE.....17
- Stephen DeCASIEN**
NAVAL RAM PORTRAYALS IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME.....38
- Kublay KOCAK**
THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ANATOLIA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: TRADE, AGRICULTURE, AND URBAN CENTERS..... 53

ARCHAEOLOGY

- Yusuf POLAT**
TRACES OF RITUAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROCK-CUT SANCTUARY AT ESKİŞEHİR YAZILIKAYA/MIDAS FORTRESS..... 60
- Boaz ZISSU, Amos KLONER**
THE FINAL DWELLING: FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE AND BURIAL CUSTOMS AT HELLENISTIC-PERIOD MARESHA..... 72
- Eugen S. TEODOR, Daniela CRISTEA-STAN**
A CONSTRUCTION FORTLET AT BĂNEASA..... 130

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

- Cristian Ioan POPA, Alin TODERESCU**
ON PREHISTORIC PATHS AND MOUNTAIN ROUTES: METAL ARTEFACTS FROM THE HILLS AND MOUNTAINS OF CUGIR.....151
- Gayane POGHOSYAN**
SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF THE RITUAL SCENE ON THE GOLD MEDALLION FROM TOPRAK-KALE.....185
- Ünal DEMİRER**
METAL LAMPS FROM ANTALYA MUSEUM..... 190

ARCHAEOOMETRY

- Beatrice CIUTĂ**
FOOD DIET AND RITUAL PRACTICES AT APULUM. A COMPARATIVE ARCHAEOBOTANICAL STUDY.....203

DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL ARCHAEOLOGY

- Radu-Alexandru BRUNCHI, Andrei ASĂNDULESEI, Felix-Adrian TENCARIU**
CUCUTENI UNEARTHED: A 3D JOURNEY THROUGH TIME.....215

NUMISMATICS

- Ergün KARACA, Ömer TATAR**
PROVENANCED LATE CLASSICAL AND HELLENISTIC PERIOD ROYAL COINS FROM EASTERN THRACE..... 225
- Sergiu MATVEEV, Vlad VORNIC, Lazari DERMENJI**
THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE ROMAN REPUBLICAN COINS WITHIN THE PRUT-DNISTER AREA. THE CASE OF THE DENARIUS RECENT DISCOVERY IN CAJBA..... 244
- Cristian GĂZDAC, Adrian-Daniel STAN**
"PAY THE TROOPS, FORGET THE REST!" PATTERNS OF HOARDING: MILITARY VS. CIVILIAN ENVIRONMENTS IN THE MID-3RD CENTURY AD..... 251
- Cristian GĂZDAC, Vitalie BĂRCĂ, Cristian FLORESCU**
PARS PRO TOTO IN AN INTERPRETATIO SARMATICA OCCIDENTALIS. THE ROMAN COINS IN SARMATIAN GRAVES FROM THE NECROPOLIS TIMIȘOARA – HLADIK 1 (ROMANIA).....262

IN MEMORIAM

- Csaba SZABÓ**
MANFRED CLAUSS AND THE STUDY OF ROMAN MITHRAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY..... 287

REVIEWS

- Matthew G. MARSH**
Alexios G.C. Savvides. *The Cross and the Sacred Fire: Byzantium and the Sassanids (4th-7th Centuries) – An Overview of Relations between the Eastern Graeco-Roman Empire and Pre-Islamic Persia*, Athens, Hērodotos, 2022, 270p.+xlii, ISBN 978-960-485-422-6..... 291

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IN MEMORIAM

MANFRED CLAUSS AND THE STUDY OF ROMAN MITHRAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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Manfred Clauss (16th August 1945 – 20th January 2025) was a historian of antiquity whose scholarly achievements left a lasting impact on several disciplines within the broader sense of *Altertumswissenschaft*. Over the course of nearly six decades, he taught at several German universities, including long-term positions in Siegen, Eichstätt, Berlin, and ultimately Frankfurt am Main, where he served from 1993 until his retirement in 2005, continuing his research activity till the last day of his life.

Clauss' academic legacy is marked by an impressive academic productivity, comprising almost 30 monographs and edited volumes, alongside hundreds of articles published in German, English, French, Italian, Estonian and Polish. His scholarly work encompassed subjects ranging from the early civilizations of Egypt and Israel to late Roman statehood. He also produced biographical studies of historical figures such as Ramses II, Cleopatra, Constantine the Great and Athanasius.

Among his many research interests, the study of ancient religions held a central place. Clauss produced well-cited works on the imperial cult, early Christianity, and most notably, the Roman cult of Mithras. Equally significant was his contribution to Roman epigraphy. A passionate advocate for the preservation and accessibility of inscriptions, Clauss co-founded and developed the Clauss-Slaby Epigraphic Database (EDCS), which remains one of the

most comprehensive digital collections of Latin inscriptions worldwide¹. This resource complements and often rivals other major online epigraphic platforms, playing a crucial role in the history of digital humanities and modern epigraphy². Clauss also held a deep interest in regional religious practices, particularly in the Danubian provinces, where he curated a remarkable collection of votive tablets and plaques associated with the so-called Danubian Riders³. His meticulous documentation and analysis of these materials continue to influence current interpretations of regional cult practices and religious glocalism⁴.

A significant group of studies published by Manfred Clauss between 1986 and 2021 concern the study of Roman Mithras, one of the most well-researched and highly debated religious phenomena of classical antiquity⁵. His 1990 German-language book on Mithraism, followed by a 1992 volume on the *Cultores Mithrae*, became essential reading for both students and scholars⁶. Although these works emerged after a flourishing period of Mithraic scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, Clauss's synthesis stood out for its clarity, logical structure, and strong archaeology-based approach. The English translation of his Mithras book in 2000, by one of the authoritative scholars on Roman Mithras, Richard L. Gordon, further cemented Clauss's international reputation⁷. The enduring relevance of this work is reflected in its continued readership and recent translations into Estonian (2019) and French (2021). Clauss' book on *Cultores Mithrae* is still the only systematic collection of the Mithras cult members, although the number of new inscriptions increased significantly since 1990s and a comprehensive social history of the cult is still one of the major deficiencies of the literature⁸. Local and regional studies focusing on the social aspects of the cult are important but can highlight only a limited number of case studies⁹.

His book on the social agents of the cult was an important step for the English version of his monograph on Mithras translated by one of the leading researchers of Roman Mithras, Richard L. Gordon and published in 2000. In the following I will focus on this particular work and the importance of Clauss' monograph and studies on the study of Roman Mithras.

A SIGNIFICANT BOOK: CLAUSS' MONOGRAPH ON MITHRAS

The book of Manfred Clauss on Roman Mithras is one of the most cited synthesis on this cult since the works of Franz V. Cumont and Maarten J. Vermaseren. Alongside David Ulansey's 1991 publication and Roger Beck's major monograph from 2006, Clauss's slim volume—first published in

German (with little initial impact) and later in English—has become one of the most frequently cited works in the field over the past quarter century¹⁰. While Ulansey's book became popular among new-pagan movements and because its revolutionary idea on the origins of the cult arguing for the role of Mithridates VI and the Cilician pirates in the spread of the cult, the book of Manfred Clauss was among the first interdisciplinary studies on the cult. The book has fourteen short chapters, contextualising the Roman cult of Mithras in the pre-Roman (Hellenistic) contexts, the religious pluralism of the empire, the Greek tradition of the mystery cults, the origins of the Roman cult, the earliest material and literary evidence, the expansion, highlights and late revival of the cult. Clauss had a special interest also in the social aspects of this religious movement, focusing on the role and impact of the soldiers and minor officials in the spread of the cult. He presented in detail also the sanctuary, not only as a theological (religious) imagined space, the sacred geography of the mithraea, but especially as a space of materiality of religion, giving a special focus to the material evidence and their local aspects and production. His chapters on the mithraeum, as a space where objects, small finds and other religious inventories played an essential role set the rule for a new research area: the archaeology of religion in Mithraic contexts¹¹. Clauss collected all the available documentation of the best research and excavated sanctuaries, focusing on the local particularities of the cult. Since the publication of his book in 2000, this research field developed rapidly, contributing to the understanding of cult communities and the materiality of religion on local and glocal level¹².

Closely related to the sanctuary, as a "*tableau vivant*"¹³, Clauss placed particular emphasis on utensils—such as pottery, lamps, and ceramic materials—as agents within the sensorial landscape (sensescape) of the sanctuary¹⁴. A short chapter is dedicated to the rituals (initiation, prayer, ritual meal) attested on graffiti, inscriptions, literary sources and archaeology of the cult, where Clauss shortly emphasized also the role of cognitive studies, however this aspect gained a much more emphasized dimension in the work of Roger Beck and the recent literature after Clauss' book was published¹⁵. Clauss dedicated a chapter on the issue of the seven known grades in the Mithraic cult interpreted by him as "priestly grades". This issue was presented by the author in a study where he argued that the seven grades are local, Italian tradition of a priestly hierarchy¹⁶. This was later criticized by numerous other authors and Clauss himself partially reframed his theory in the second edition of his book from 2012¹⁷. In his book, Clauss also emphasized the importance of other divinities (Attis, Mercurius, Sol, the Lion headed divinity) in the Mithraic pantheon and dedicated a separate, yet short chapter on Mithras and Christ as well. The topics presented by Clauss, the photographic material (although not comparable to later publications and recent

¹ ELLIOTT 2015, 80.

² LORITO 2018.

³ CLAUSS 2006.

⁴ NEMETI 2015; SZABÓ 2017.

⁵ On the research history of the cult see: GORDON 1975; BECK 1984; BECK 2004; SZABÓ 2018.

⁶ CLAUSS 1990a; CLAUSS 1992.

⁷ CLAUSS 2000.

⁸ An international project on the cult of Mithras is an essential need to continue the rich heritage of Cumont and Vermaseren.

⁹ SZABÓ 2015; CHALUPA et al. 2021; VAN HAEPEREN 2024.

¹⁰ ULANSEY 1989; BECK 2006.

¹¹ CLAUSS 2000, 42–61.

¹² SIEMERS-KLENNER 2020; MCCARTY-EGRI 2020.

¹³ For this notion see: DIRVEN 2015.

¹⁴ CLAUSS 2000, 114–130. See also: RUBIO 2021.

¹⁵ On Beck's work and heritage see: SZABÓ 2024.

¹⁶ CLAUSS 1990b.

¹⁷ CHALUPA 2008; CLAUSS 2012, 125.

spectacular albums¹⁸) and the concise narrative of his work made his book a classic of Mithraic studies.

Since its first publication, the study of Roman Mithras produced numerous important works and syntheses¹⁹, yet Clauss' work is still used as a manual for students and became the most cited monograph on Roman Mithras since 1990. The second edition of his volume published in 2012 updated the photographic material, introduced several new archaeological case studies (especially from Germany – Göglingen, Belgium – Tienen) and reconsidered some of his previous ideas on the priestly grades and the lion-headed god²⁰. His chapter on the “sacred narrative” of Mithras, Clauss interpreted the side panels and the major scenes of the complex reliefs of the mithraea as visual narratives of a bricolage of oral and literary traditions, however he completely ignored the so-called star talk theory of Roger Beck in the first edition of his book and shortly mentioned only in the historiographic summary of the second edition²¹.

Clauss' work on the Roman cult of Mithras today surpassed by numerous important local studies and monographs focusing on particular aspects of the cult, focusing on the local forms and variations of archaeology of religion, cognitive studies, iconographies specificities or theories on the origin of the cult, yet the major topics and fundamental structure of his book set the rule for the following generations of scholars. His talent to summarize the library-sized bibliography of Mithraic Studies in a student-friendly book shows his formation as a true *Altertumswissenschaftler*, a scholar of antiquity without the limitations of the over-specialized scholars, englobing all the available sources (archaeological, literary, theoretical). Clauss himself emphasized the importance of religious glocalism and the role of the local communities, therefore the future research should focus on the systematic collection and detailed local analysis of the new archaeological material (CIMRM Supplement) on local and regional or even macro-spatial level (provinces, larger clusters) and to focus on the social networks and lived religious agents of the Roman cult of Mithras, as a relevant, but not the only mosaic of a grand and glocal history of religious pluralism in the Roman Empire²².

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¹⁹ Most recently: BRICAULT-ROY 2021.

²⁰ CLAUSS 2012.

²¹ This was mentioned as one of the great lacks of the book by Roger Beck himself: BECK 2012.

²² BONNET 2021. On religious glocalism in the Roman Empire: VAN ALTEN 2017; SZABÓ 2022, 20–22.

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