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A MITHRAEUM BENEATH THE DISTILLERY
The excavation of the sixth Mithraeum in Aquincum

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A small Mithraeum was discovered during an excavation in the northeastern part of the military town of Aquincum. The new sanctuary could be identified by its characteristic layout and the finds associated with the cult. Thus, the architectural remains of altogether six Mithraea are now known within the Aquincum settlement complex today. The recently discovered Mithraeum is the first of its kind in the military town. Unusually, the monument is not displayed in situ: it was removed in several parts and remains to be reassembled and exhibited later.

Keywords: Aquincum, Mithras sanctuary, Roman Period, sacred architecture

Excavations on the site of the former Óbuda Distillery, which started in 2017, continued in the summer of 2023. Based on the topographical situation outlined from the results of the 2017 evaluation excavation (Budai-Balogh 2020), the newly opened area lies within the northern boundary of the built-up part of the Aquincum military town. Consequently, areas spared by former industrial constructions revealed a much denser urban network, comprising two to three, and in some places even more, Roman Period layers than seen in previous trenches. The unearthed features included wall foundations and the stubs of some rising walls (*Fig. 1*). Three construction phases were identified from the spatial relations and direction of these walls; the dating of these can only be specified in light of the evaluation results of the find material. The unearthed features included wells, storage pits, refuse pits, and latrines lined with timber (*Fig. 2*). Hundreds of crates of finds— including *terra sigillata* vessels with workshop stamps, potter's moulds, bricks stamped with legionary marks, intact pottery vessels, bronze brooches and belt buckles, and more than a hundred Roman coins spanning the 1st–4th centuries AD—collected from the Roman Period layers and features were brought to the Aquincum Museum.

The most significant discovery was a small Mithraeum. Despite partial damage and truncation resulting from modern disturbances (such as building and pipeline constructions), the original function of the

Fig. 1. Dense fabric of urban phenomena in excavation (photo by the author)

Fig. 2. Timber-lined latrine (photo by the author)

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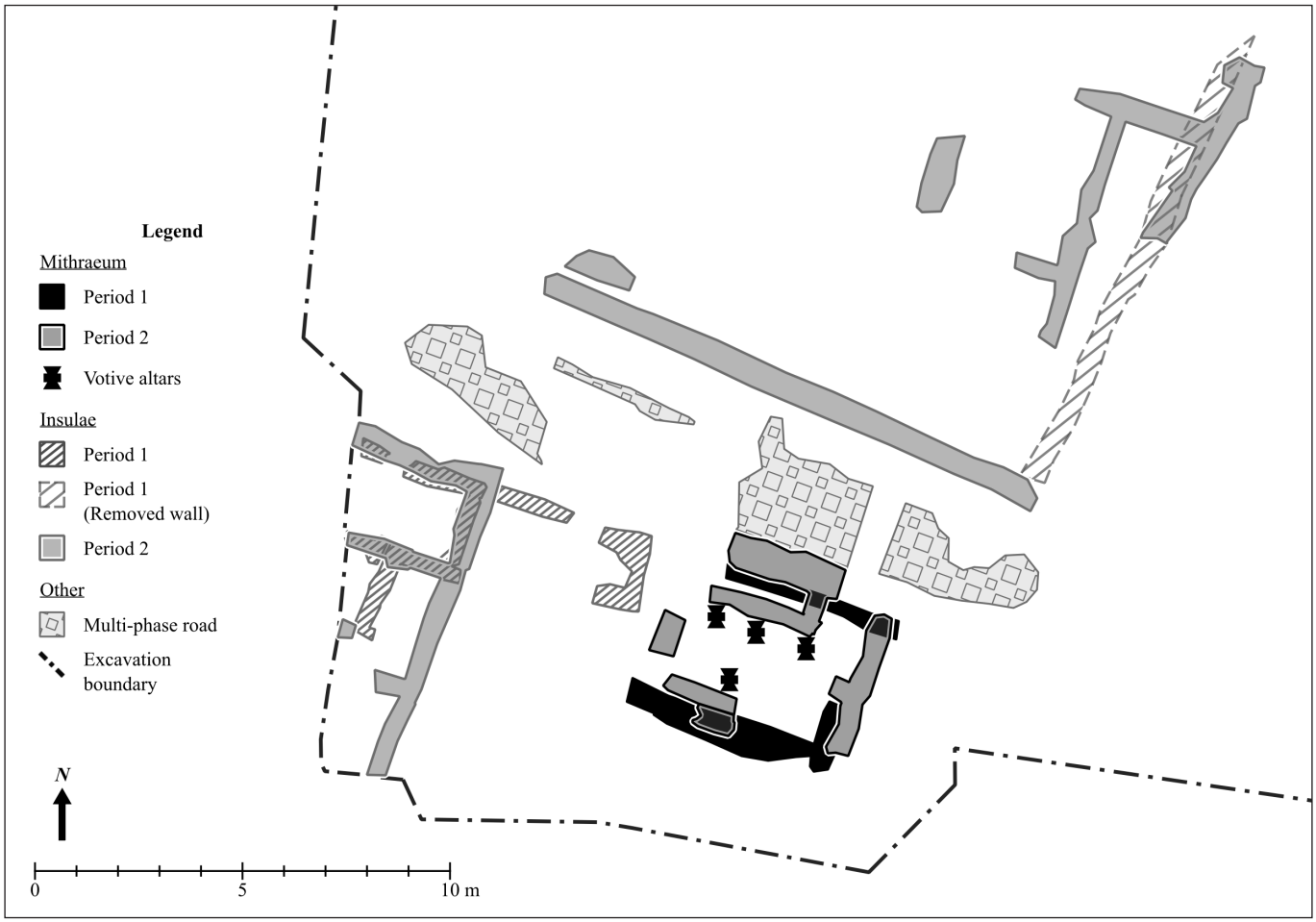

Fig. 3. Position and building phases of the Mithraeum (survey by Sándor Imre-Horváth, BHM)

structure was clearly determined by its typical layout and the finds related to the Mithras cult. No similar religious building had come to light in the former provincial centre since the excavation of a sanctuary in the house of the *tribunus laticlavius* in 1978–1979. This Mithraeum is the sixth known one in Aquincum and only the first in the military town, despite the many Mithraic stray finds collected there over the past 250 years (*Fig. 3*). The monument secures Aquincum a special place in Mithras research: no other Roman settlement north of the Alps has as many archaeologically identified Mithraea.

The building was situated at the southern edge of the excavation area, south of an east-west-oriented street (*Fig. 4*). Its orientation aligned with the typical east-west orientation of other similar buildings in Aquincum, with its entrance facing east. A stone block was found there, likely a step leading to the sunken floor level of the *cella*, a common feature in Mithraea to evoke a cave-like interior. Architectural parallels suggest that an antechamber may have existed on the eastern side; however, no archaeological evidence has been found to confirm the existence of such a structural element.

A block-shaped base built of small limestone fragments set in mortar was found at the western end of the central axis. Its front and side faces were plastered; the rear was left unfinished. It likely supported the cult image. Its top part was missing, so no dowel hole could be identified. Originally, the base probably abutted the western rear wall of the sanctuary; however, no wall remains aligned with it could be identified.

The eastern end of the northern podium wall was clearly identified, while the western end had been destroyed by modern disturbance. This podium wall was crudely built and thin. Three stone monuments were found *in situ* on the trampled earthen floor in front of it. The stones, spaced evenly apart, are not part of a uniform set: they differ in material, size, and execution (*Fig. 5*).

The western altar stone (35.0 × 18.5 × 17.5 cm) was made of Budakalász travertine. It is not a traditional altar but rather a tapering trapezoidal block with no base or cornice, and a slightly concave top that

Fig. 4. Multilayer east-west road section with the northern end wall of the sanctuary on its right side (photo by the author)

Fig. 5. The third altar stone in the moment of discovery, with the roof debris filling the interior of the sanctuary around it (photo by the author)

served for making offerings. The central altar (29.5 × 17.0 × 9.5 cm), made of sandstone, features a simple, profiled base and cornice, with triangular motifs on its upper part. Though damaged, a rectangular depression for liquid or burnt offerings is visible on its right side. The eastern stone (39.5 × 18.5 × 17.5 cm), also made of Budakalász travertine, has a simply profiled base and cornice with mouldings that curve downward at the edges. Based on its plain design, it may have served as a base for a statue rather than an altar. Traces of the lime coating under the original paint are visible on the front face, although no paint is visible to the naked eye.

The southern side of the *cella* was disturbed and partly destroyed during the excavation of a modern brick-lined channel. Based on the remaining part, the podium wall was directly adjacent to the rear wall, without a proper podium.

In the central section, only a sandstone altar on a flat stone slab remained of the original monuments in front of the southern podium wall. The upper part of the altar had broken off and was displaced due to modern disturbance. This small altar, like those on the northern side, is of modest artistic quality, but the original paintwork survived on all faces. After being coated in white, it was decorated with red-painted lines. Its upper part is missing. The front and side faces are framed in red, with a solar symbol—a central disc with eight elliptical rays ending in dots—in the centre of each side panel and a red TRASI/TO(!) inscription on the front (*Fig. 6*).

Fig. 6. Painted ltar stone with TRASI/TO(!) inscription (photo by Péter Komjáthy, BHM)

After removing the debris, a large ungulate skull and an oil lamp under it were found in the central axis of the small, asymmetrical *cella*, opposite the pedestal. The lamp is a local version of Iványi's Type VIII, featuring a palmette handle and three nozzles (*Fig. 7;* Iványi 1935, 13). The depiction in its discus shows an indeterminate animal leaping right inside a frame of pine branches. This locally made lamp came from a pottery workshop identified at the northwestern edge of the military town (Vámos 2014, 143). A red Tardos limestone basin frag-

ment (*Fig. 8*) and a lead votive figurine possibly depicting three figures (*Fig. 9*), found in the rubble outside the sanctuary, may also be related to the Mithraeum. The latter belongs to a Pannonian type, depicting a deity or triad under a tympanum supported by two columns. The one-sided casting had a socketed base for mounting on a handle. Below a garland is a central, larger female figure flanked by two smaller ones, all in pointed headdresses and long, sleeveless, knee-high tunics. The type usually relates to female deities in Aquincum and Pannonia in general; its specimens rarely feature depictions of male gods (Zsidi 2000, 324–327), and were never used in a Mithraic context. However, it is not impossible that this one was reinterpreted incidentally or deliberately (perhaps interpreting the figurines as Mithras in a Phrygian cap flanked by Cautopates and Cautes, two *dadophores*), and used as a votive offering in a Mithraeum.

Two building phases of the extremely small, ca. 4.2 × 3.9 m Mithraeum were distinguished during the 2023–2025 excavations. The sanctuary discussed so far, representing the younger phase, was erected directly on earlier walls, slightly shifted to the north and east. Both buildings had dry foundation walls and rising walls made of stones set in mortar. The collapsed roof debris indicates a roof covered with *tegula*s, with no evidence of connection to other buildings. Its floor was lower than the earliest walking surface. Beneath the trampled earthen floor of the *cella* lay fragments of a Mithraic-themed wall painting, depicting a man in a yellow robe and Phrygian cap (*Fig. 10*). The fact that the northern podium wall was founded on this fresco debris proves that the Mithraeum had at least two building phases.

Other furnishings typically found in Mithraea, such as the cult image, additional altars, statues, bases, cult vessels, and animal bones, were not discovered anywhere in the excavated area.

The sanctuary thus had an earlier phase in the 2nd century AD, and the second phase likely ended in

Fig. 7. Iványi's Type VIII oil lamp with a palmette-shaped handle and three nozzles (photo by Péter Komjáthy, BHM)

Fig. 8. Fragment of a basin carved from Tardos limestone (photo by Péter Komjáthy, BHM)

Fig. 9. Lead votive with the depiction of three figures in pointy hats (photo by Péter Komjáthy, BHM)

Fig. 10. Detail of a mural depicting a man in a Phrygian cap and yellow garments (photo by Péter Komjáthy, BHM)

the AD 260s. However, based on the orderly abandonment and the removal of valuable furnishings, the Mithraeum may have already been abandoned before the city was deserted.

The Mithraeum likely ceased to function during the unstable period that began with the major barbarian invasion of AD 260 (FPA V, 177–181). Archaeological evidence from the plot of the former modern distillery suggests that the northeastern suburb of the military town was abandoned in the last third of the century and not reoccupied later. The uninhabited wide zone within the 3rd-century AD built-up area and the coeval administrative boundaries of the town became a burial ground by the early 4th century AD; simultaneously, people also started burying their dead among the abandoned buildings.

Fig. 11. Removal of the 'boxed' eastern wall of the Mithraeum (photo by the author)

As the Mithraeum discovered 'under the distillery' is the first one in the military town, its unusually small size and single proper podium make it difficult to judge how typical it was. If this 'family-scale' size was common, the Mithraic stray finds in the military town may indicate a denser network of shrines than in the civilian town.

In 2024, discussions began between the Budapest History Museum, the real estate developer, and heritage protection authorities. Finally, they agreed to dismantle and reassemble the Mithraeum at a nearby accessible location in the new residential development. Archaeological firm ArcheoJedi Ltd. carried out the dismantling and preparatory work between 6 March and 5 April 2025. The wall remains were wrapped, the surrounding soil was cut away, and then steel plates were inserted underneath. A steel beam structure was built around the plates, and a box was constructed around them using formwork panels and timber beams and filled with sieved gravel. The sanctuary was thus divided into four parts and lifted in stages between 2 and 5 April 2025. The components are stored in a temporary protective structure before being transported to their final place of exhibition (*Fig. 11*). The preserved and lifted walls will be placed according to their original orientation within the new residential area, most likely by 2027. The presentation and protective structure of the ruins are in a planning phase.

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