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Privatisation of salvation: Religious communities as axes of resonance in the Roman Imperial period

Beginning in the late 1st and more broadly from the 2nd century AD onwards, it is possible to trace an increasing presence of small sanctuaries on private ground or even as part of upper class dwellings, appearing often more or less simultaneously in different city districts of urban spaces in the Imperium Romanum. Most of these emerging complexes consisted of a temple or a treasure house with a cultic image and dedicated votive offerings, an assembly or dining room and a courtyard closed off from the outside world. In many cases, those sanctuaries are not only attached to private homes, but participate in their infrastructure like heatings, gardens or kitchens. They house various cults, frequently ones of the so-called Oriental (e.g. Dolichenus), or Egyptian (e.g. Isis and Sarapis) religions of salvation, or Mithras. But also Silvanus and the *Viae*, Mercurius or other 'Roman' gods and goddesses are venerated. It might be possible that the so-called house churches or oratoria of early Christianity benefitted from or were generated by the contemporary pagan structures serving as meeting points within the various town's districts. In any case it becomes obvious that the cult practises and rituals performed in these complexes contrast strongly with what was seen as the official cult of Rome and lokal *civitates* (polis-religion). They stand witness for a systematic privatisation of faith, cult and ritual in the high and late Imperial Era. A comprehensive study of the phenomenon of the different cults and religious groups has not yet been undertaken. Existing approaches always focussed on one specific cult while general sociological phenomena were not part of the considerations. But it seems that privacy and local connections in a city's quarter (*vicus*) became more and more important instead of the citizen's official duties in the service of the Emperor, as the early *Augustales* had been. In times where the emperors changed quickly and their reputation often suffered, from the late 2nd c. AD onwards, the process might have accelerated even more. In many provincial towns founded by the emperors from Hadrian or the Severan dynasty onwards nearly no official, large-size temple building and sacred courtyard can be found. The official cult seems to have been reduced to some locality in the *forum*, but no *area sacra* of comparable size is installed (e.g. Carnuntum) anymore. If supposed *Capitolia* or Imperial temples were built at all, then they emerged quite often on the outer limits of the town and probably their erection was due to an Emperor's visit or other accidental occasions. Thus, not only religious behaviour changed, but the social and political role of Roman citizens on the whole, esp. after the *constitutio Antoniniana*.

A specific explanation of this model of cultic grouping, architecturally as well as sociologically, might be the Roman habit of *pater familias* on the one hand, and of the patron–client system on the other. The traditional liability in sacred affairs and the overall responsibility for his *familia* (in the ancient denotation) and clients made the *pater familias* an ideal *pater* of a privately organised *collegium cultorum* of whatever god or goddess. Thus he not only provided for an adequate

locality, but also for the furnishing of the meetings with the ritual instrumentation, the preparation of meals, and many other necessary processes and instruments. Thus, naturally, the owner of a dwelling housing accommodation for ritual meetings of relatively limited groups of normally less than hundred participants must be identified as *sacerdos* of such groups, who not accidentally is often called *pater* (e.g. in Mithraism).

The success of religions and cultic groups, who promised afterlife and salvation, was very much embedded in the change of society in different ways. So a dissertation project dealing with the distribution of this specific cultic and religious architecture, the form and functions of these sacred places, the upgrading of corporate cultic meals and furnishment for rituals are subjects of fruitful discussions between sociology, religious history and religious studies, Classical Philology, that may allocate relevant texts, and archaeology/architectural history, to see if these texts match or contribute to our understanding of the sacred rooms. Thus, it could be detected how these groups prepared their rituals in the hope for resonant experiences.

Not to overburden the dissertation, a case study with focus on Mithraism, whose liturgy is relatively well known in comparison to most 'oriental cults', might be enough for the main body of the work, in a concluding chapter an analytic comparison to other cults with similar architecture might widen the spectrum.

References

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