

Ritual deposits of Mithraic cult-vessels: new evidence from Sechtem and Mainz

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with an appendix by Hans Mommsen

Since the conference at Tienen in 2001 devoted to small finds in mithraea, scholars have been giving increased attention to this theme.¹ Here we present two cases where the small finds apparently indicate Mithraic cult practices. One is a new discovery, the other a re-interpretation of a find from the 1970s.

The excavations at Sechtem (C.U and C.-J.W.)

Sechtem lies on the W bank of the Rhine between Cologne and Bonn, at the confluence of three streams (fig. 1). The Roman road from Euskirchen (*Belgica vicus*) to Wesseling probably passed through it.² Early in 1999 the remains of a Roman settlement dating from the late 1st to the late 4th c. were discovered during the course of a rescue excavation prior to work on a new housing estate. The most important discovery was a mithraeum, the first stone-built temple excavated in Germania Inferior since the early 19th c.³ Prior to 1999, occasional Roman finds had turned up without providing any hint at the nature of the settlement;⁴ a striking number of dedications to Mercury found in the neighbourhood had suggested the existence of a temple to this god, though it has still not been located.⁵ Apart from the mithraeum, a cemetery, some poorly-preserved footings and a large number of refuse-pits were discovered over a discontinuous area of some 5,000 m², as a result of which the archaeological context of the mithraeum could not be determined satisfactorily. Moreover, the footings had been damaged during World War II by bombs. The remains could be completed hypothetically to give the ground-plan of the frontage of a winged corridor-villa some 50 m wide (fig. 2). The remains of a hypocaust at its SW corner would support such a restoration. However, another interpretation is possible (see below). It is also difficult to date the building precisely, though since at various points the footings are carried over refuse-pits containing 2nd- and 3rd-c. pottery, they must post-date these.

As well as some scattered cremations of the 1st-3rd c. A.D., a small well-planned group of inhumations was found about 50 m south-east of the buildings. They contained the remains of men, women and children and probably belong to a civilian cemetery. Some of the inhumations were relatively well furnished, including numerous coins dating almost without exception to the first half of the 4th c. These Late Roman graves are overlain by others, probably dating to the early Mediaeval period, that lack offerings and are oriented E-W. The inhumations tend to support the interpretation of the wall foundations as belonging to the main building of a villa, and suggest that it is to be dated to the 4th c.

The mithraeum and its phases

The mithraeum, measuring 13.50 x 6.80 m, was situated immediately to the north of the hypothetical main building (fig. 2). We distinguished two, possibly three, phases.

- 1 Martens and De Boe 2004.
- 2 Wagner 1988, 74; Horn 1987, 617-18; cf. Maassen 1882, 32-36; von Veith 1885, 1-27.
- 3 On evidence for the cult of Mithras in Germania Inferior, see Wiegels 2000, esp. map 3 (cf. fig. 1 here); Huld-Zetsche 2001, 339-59; Biller 2003, 49-70. The only excavated mithraea are Dormagen (1821) (Schwertheim 1974, 11-13 no. 8) and the wooden temple of Krefeld-Gellep (Pirling 1986a, 32-33, 36-37, figs. 24 a-c; ead. 1986b, 244-46; Reichmann 1997, 21-24), but there clearly were temples at Bonn, Cologne (2, if not 3), and Alt-Kalkar.
- 4 Hoven 2000.
- 5 Oxé 1902, 246-51; Bauchhenß 1988a, 223; id. 1988b, 89; Yeo *et al.* 1990, 125. Mithras and Mercury were often worshipped together in the NW provinces: Hensen 1995, 211-16.