

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Decorating Overlapping Buildings: A *Domus* and Palmyrene Temple at *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*

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*Colonia Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa*, founded by emperor Trajan, was the first Roman city in the newly conquered province of Dacia. This paper focuses on the area located in the very heart of the city, occupied during the Severan period by the temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods. The temple overlapped a *domus* with two different construction phases. During the archaeological excavations, fragments of painted walls belonging to the first phase of this *domus* were discovered. This paper aims to show how the decoration of the building evolved, particularly when we are dealing initially with a domestic use of the area, along with a religious and sacred one later. How a place is decorated gives us insights into the Roman way of life in the province of Dacia. Taking into consideration the multitude of meanings one could apply to the concepts of *place* and *space*, it is important to see how the perception of a monument has changed over time.

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**Keywords:** Sarmizegetusa; temple; decoration; fresco

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## Introduction

When discussing a specific place – in our case a building – we should not forget to take into account its entire history while not referring to it as a singular entity existing at a particular moment in time. A place goes through several phases and meanings as given by its inhabitants.

One of the aims of this paper is to present the ‘life’ of a monument throughout every stage, from the foundation of a city to the end of the Roman occupation. To do so, we have used a theoretical approach dealing with concepts such as *space* and *place* in correlation with the archaeological data. Another related aim was to evaluate how the signification of a place changed over time, and what were the factors contributing to it. Despite the many definitions given to certain concepts such as *public* and *private*, we chose to use them with their broader sense. *Private* refers to what belonged to one individual or a family, and used in a household where domestic activities are taking place. *Public* denotes belonging to a community that can constantly change its configuration. These concepts have sparked debates in literature since houses could be defined as a semi-private space as well, especially *atria* (Russell 2016: 9), or changed their role depending on the status of the visitors or viewers (Russell 2016: 13). These concepts were used by Roman writers as well in order to give indications about how a house ought to be arranged, built and decorated based on the social status of the owner (Vitruvius 6.5.1). Other authors have argued whether rich and expensive decorations belonged in a private or a public space, and to what extent (Cicero, *In Verrem* 2.1.57).

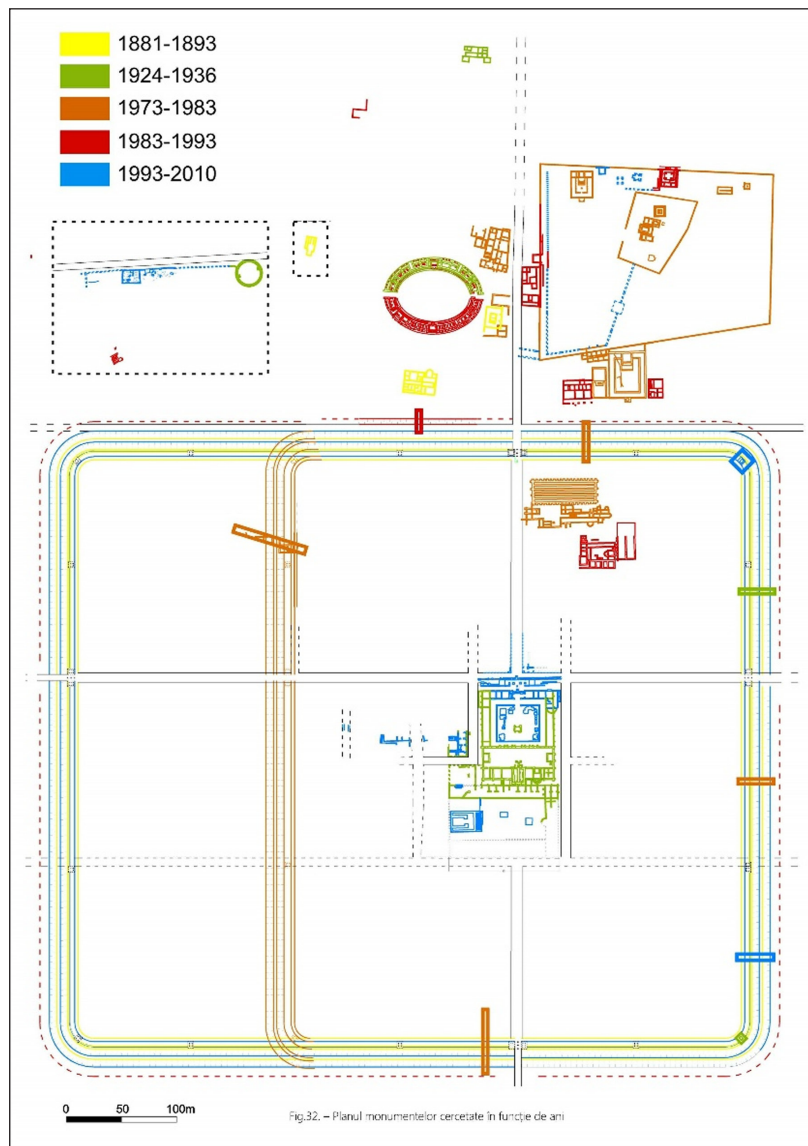
When discussing sacred spaces, we also have to acknowledge that these are not always easy to distinguish from political spaces, but archaeological finds can help us interpreting the functions of the places uncovered. Without the presence of a god’s statue, inscriptions or artefacts used in a religious context, temples can be difficult to identify. The main difference between profane and sacred spaces are in terms of norms and regulations applied (Russell 2016: 98–99). A sacred area is not defined only by the building of the temple, but included the entire area where rituals were performed. In these type of spaces, human behaviour changed and was influenced by a different set of regulations under the supervision of the god itself, its priests and temple servants. When dealing with sacred areas, we write about the temple, the god’s

residence, but attention must also be paid to the surrounding areas, while taking into consideration the different behaviours required.

Given that the structure of the *colonia* was modified through time, an overview of past research was necessary to understand the site chronology. In particular, a detailed presentation of the frescoes uncovered there can provide more insights into the Roman way of life and how we can use this type of data to determine the use and function of a building. This article presents a first attempt at interpreting the findings uncovered in this area using a theoretical approach. What was unearthed is of great importance for the understanding of the Roman presence in Dacia and its implications. Sarmizegetusa is one of the few locations in Dacia where significant segments of frescoes were discovered *in situ*.

*Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* was considered the religious and economic capital of the province of Dacia because it was the gathering place of the *concilium trium Daciarum* as illustrated by the construction of the first Capitoline temple in Dacia.<sup>1</sup>

This edifice, representing the main focus of this paper, is situated in the central area of the city, next to the two fora.<sup>2</sup> Excavations have revealed that it went through a few construction phases, lastly serving as a temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods.<sup>3</sup> The archaeological excavations commenced in 2007 and are still ongoing (2007–2011; 2016–2019). During 2007–2011, a public edifice was found – probably the seat of a *collegium* or another public function – in the area west of Trajan's forum and north of the forum built by Antoninus Pius (**Figure 1**). A large number of inscription fragments, engaged pilasters, columns, stairs



**Figure 1:** Map of the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* showing the time period when excavations took place before 2011 (Țentea 2017a: 11).

and Corinthian capitals were uncovered here.<sup>4</sup> All the inscriptions can be dated to the Severan period.<sup>5</sup> Dedications concerning this temple honouring the Palmyrene gods had an official phrasing (Piso and Tentea 2011a).<sup>6</sup> Four of them are dated to the reign of Severus Alexander.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the meeting places of religious associations were similar in appearance to the layout of Syrian temples, even though these were often mistaken as “classical temples” (Diaconescu 2011). Sometimes, even parts of *insulae* were considered to be temples or sanctuaries. From Dura-Europos (Syria), we have cases of houses built and used by various associations which included areas regarded as sanctuaries comparable to temples (so-called temples of Artemis, of Zeus Megistos, of Atargatis, of the Gadde, of Azzanathkona, of Zeus Kyrios, of the Palmyrene gods, of Aphlad, of Zeus Theos, of Adonis, and the Necropolis temple) (Buchmann 2016: 116).

Why was this temple situated in the city centre, close to the two *fora*, and what was its function? Moreover, what is the connection between a military wooden barracks, a Roman house and a temple? These are a few of the questions that will be addressed in this paper. It is important to consider that more than one interpretation can be attributed to a place. One of these meanings is linked to its location and geographic position. Another one is tied to its connection to the surrounding area and to the environment. A different connotation can be further given by the inhabitants of the city, and the outsiders having access to the area. Finally, it is worth considering the local narrative, the history of one's place. How was it perceived by the locals, and what was its civic function while in existence? How does the relationship between people and place change when the function of the latter one did? In order to investigate the complexity, relevance and evolution of this site, we thus need to understand the steps that led to the construction of this *Colonia*.

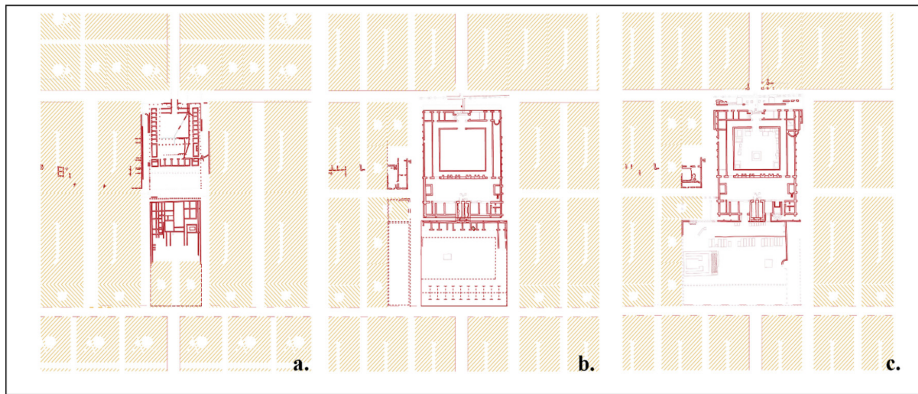
Emperor Trajan's Dacian campaigns concluded with the defeat of Decebalus, the Dacian ruler, and the incorporation of his territory into the Roman empire. Following the first campaign (AD 101–102), *Sarmizegetusa Regia*, the capital of the Dacian kingdom, was conquered and a Roman fort was constructed next to it. During the second campaign (AD 105–106), *Sarmizegetusa Regia* was again conquered, only this time, it was utterly destroyed. Following the Roman victory and Dacia being turned into a Roman province, a vast process of urban development and remodelling of the province began. The first Roman city founded was the *Colonia Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa*, referred to in this paper as *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* or simply *Sarmizegetusa*.<sup>8</sup> The exact year of its foundation is unknown, but an inscription dated to around AD 109–110 marks the end of the works on Trajan's forum, the central monument of the city.<sup>9</sup>

The excavations of the first forum, the so-called *Forum Vetus*, brought to light clear indications that an important battle, part of the Dacian campaigns, took place in the area. Later on, soldiers and veterans from the *Legio IIII Flavia Felix* built what became the first Roman city in Dacia (Piso 2006: 48, 51 fig. II/10). Since its foundation, this settlement received the highest rank of *Colonia*, and its citizens received the *ius Italicum*.<sup>10</sup> It is possible to have here a *deductio* of Roman army veterans.<sup>11</sup> The *colonia* most likely overlapped the legionary fortress of *IIII Flavia Felix*.<sup>12</sup> During Hadrian's reign (AD 117–138), a *macellum* (a Roman market) was functioning at the southern end of the forum, flanked on its sides by various shops or *tabernae*. Around AD 153, this space was transformed, a new forum (*Forum Novum*) was built which included the Capitoline temple, thus transforming this area into a city centre with monumental buildings made of marble (Piso and Tentea 2011b). During these transformations, an interesting detail is that a *cardo* was blocked and individuals had to use a street situated on the southern side of the Palmyrene temple.

### **Introduction to the Roman fora of the Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa**

A short description of the archaeological layout of the two *fora* is necessary in order to have a proper understanding of their exact location within the city (**Figure 2**).

*Forum Vetus* (or *Forum Traiani*) (**Figure 3**) was the first and oldest forum identified in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*, situated at the intersection of *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus*. This area was initially built using limestone and sandstone, but these materials were replaced with marble in the following years (Piso 2006: 134). To access the forum, one had to pass through a monumental gate, a *tetrapylum*. This edifice had the inscription referring to the foundation of the city placed on its façade. Thanks to the discovery of architectural decorations, researchers have managed to identify its position on the fronton of the building (Diaconescu and Bota 2009: 33). The entire forum was built using marble from the Bucova quarry, situated 11 kilometres west of Sarmizegetusa. The Corinthian capitals and fragments of cornice discovered in the forum were decorated with acanthus leaves while the columns had a different vegetal motif. Two inscribed columns further mention the names of local benefactors who commissioned the work. These discoveries imply that craftsmen from Asia Minor were hired to decorate this edifice (Diaconescu and Bota 2009: 34–36).



**Figure 2:** Area of the two fora. The three construction phases of the area: a) wooden phase, b) first stone phase, c) second stone phase (after Piso 2017: 26, 28, 30).



**Figure 3:** Aerial photograph, north-south, of the *Forum Vetus* and *Forum Novum* before starting the excavation of the temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods (Țentea 2017a: 12).

Both *fora* were adorned with gilded bronze statues. The *Forum Vetus* housed statues of emperors and governors, and was surrounded by porticoes on three sides (Piso 2006: 140). The *Forum Novum*, on the other hand, was only decorated with statues of provincial governors.

The *Forum Novum* (*Forum Antonini Pii*) was built around AD 153, under Antoninus Pius. Around the same time, the Capitoline temple was dedicated. Situated on the western side of this forum (a religious forum), this temple was inaugurated on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May (a. d. X Kal. Iulias), but as of yet, the exact year remains unknown. However, AD 153 is the *terminus ante quem* given the date of the statue of M. Sedatius Severianus, the governor of the Dacia Superior province, placed in the eastern end of the northern cryptoporticus of the forum.<sup>13</sup> Right next to the *Forum Vetus*, the temple devoted to the Palmyrene gods was found. One of the inscriptions found there can be dated to the reigns of either Caracalla (AD 211–217) or Severus Alexander (AD 222–235) (Piso and Țentea 2011a: 116–117).

Another important aspect that needs to be discussed is the relevance of the Palmyrene temple for the political and local context, and how these Palmyrene communities ended up in Sarmizegetusa. The connection between the temple, its placement and its dedication must be understood through the existing relationship between the two provinces of Syria and Dacia. While being part of the same empire, the provinces of

Syria and Dacia held a stronger connection. During the Parthian War at the end of Trajan's rule, Hadrian was governor of the province Syria. The close connection the Emperor Hadrian had with Palmyra explains why he sent a unit of elite Palmyrene soldiers to Dacia to help fight off Sarmatian populations attacking from the Pannonian steppe in AD 117–118. These soldiers were highly effective equestrian archers, especially against populations coming from steppe regions. This group consisted of *Palmyreni sagittarii*, Palmyrene archers, and were later divided into three ethnic units, the *numeri* (Țentea 2017b: 40). Each of these units was garrisoned in a different location, one at Tibiscum (Jupa, next to nowadays Caransebeș, jud. Caraș-Severin) (Țentea 2012: 107), a second one to *Porolissum* (Moigrad, next to Zalău, jud. Sălaj) (Țentea 2011: 66–71) and the third one was most likely stationed somewhere close to Sarmizegetusa (Țentea 2011: 69).

The arrivals of soldiers and veterans from Palmyra led to the creation of important Palmyrene communities while becoming full Roman citizens later on. These groups were joined by rich merchants who had connections with the trade routes leading to and from the East. Members of the Palmyrene community in Dacia later became part of the elite municipality in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* as well as in other cities. This is attested epigraphically by very specific names: *Theimes*, *Zabdibol*, *Audeo*, *Malcus*, *Iacubus* etc. The most important Palmyrene communities have been epigraphically attested in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*.

In the case of the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*, it can be observed that the cult edifices devoted to eastern divinities were built within the city walls or in close proximity to the more traditional temples, without being part of a designated sacred area. This process began during the Severan period, and the edifices could be found in the south, south-west or west sections of the *colonia*, but not in the north where 'traditional' cults were honoured. This can either be explained by a lack of available space in that particular area, or because during an initial phase they were separated topographically (Boda 2015: 296).<sup>14</sup>

The construction of the temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods in the city centre during the Severan period was closely connected to the imperial cult, as shown by the uncovered inscriptions.<sup>15</sup> This can be further linked with the Syrian origin of the Severan Emperors. The paradigm in which we have analysed our data is that at this time, Emperors were considered gods even during their lifetime.<sup>16</sup> This opinion has caused debate, but gained more support lately, especially since Ittai Gradel's book which has demonstrated that, at least in private homes, the imperial cult – that honoured the Emperor while alive – was widespread in the entire empire.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to associations, the data was analysed by Wojciechowski.<sup>18</sup> Based on this, we could corroborate the existence of the Palmyrene cults and temples in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* with the imperial cult. This also supports the conclusion that the temple was built around the beginning of the third century AD.

## Decorating a *domus* and a temple

Due to modern interventions, the stratigraphy of the temple has been disturbed. Nevertheless, four phases can still be clearly distinguished. The first phase corresponds to the initial military camp, where a wooden barrack was built on this particular spot. The next two phases belong to a former *domus*, and the fourth one is that of the temple (**Figure 4**). The temple's podium was erected on top of the previous walls, overlapping the entire structure, either destroying or heightening, in places, the former walls in order to fit the structure.

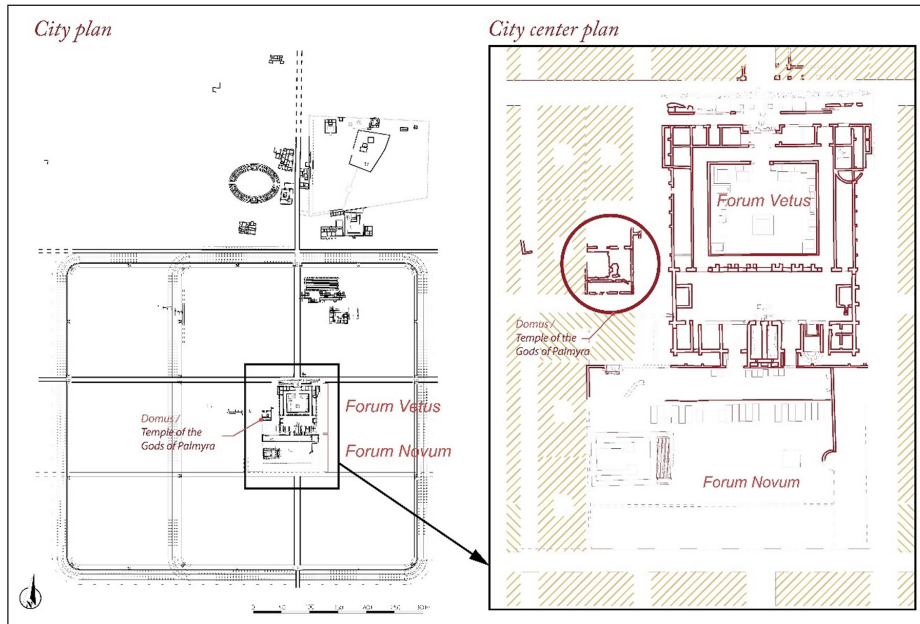
During the second phase (**Figure 5**) of occupation, a stone *domus* was built. The excavations have permitted the identification of a heating system, water canals for water supply and drainage, and as such the attribution of a domestic function to this building (Piso and Țentea 2009: 189).

We know that even in Rome, in Republican time, houses could be built near the *Forum Romanum*, but the costs of such properties were extremely high (Russell 2016: 81). Besides, it has been noted that in various cases, the power held by such an individual, owning this kind of property, could affect the public areas of the *Forum Romanum* and the political activities that took place there (Russell 2016: 82). Consequently, the owner of the house excavated was most likely someone with a high social status (a member of the *ordo decurionum*), based on the *domus*' location and its rich decorations.

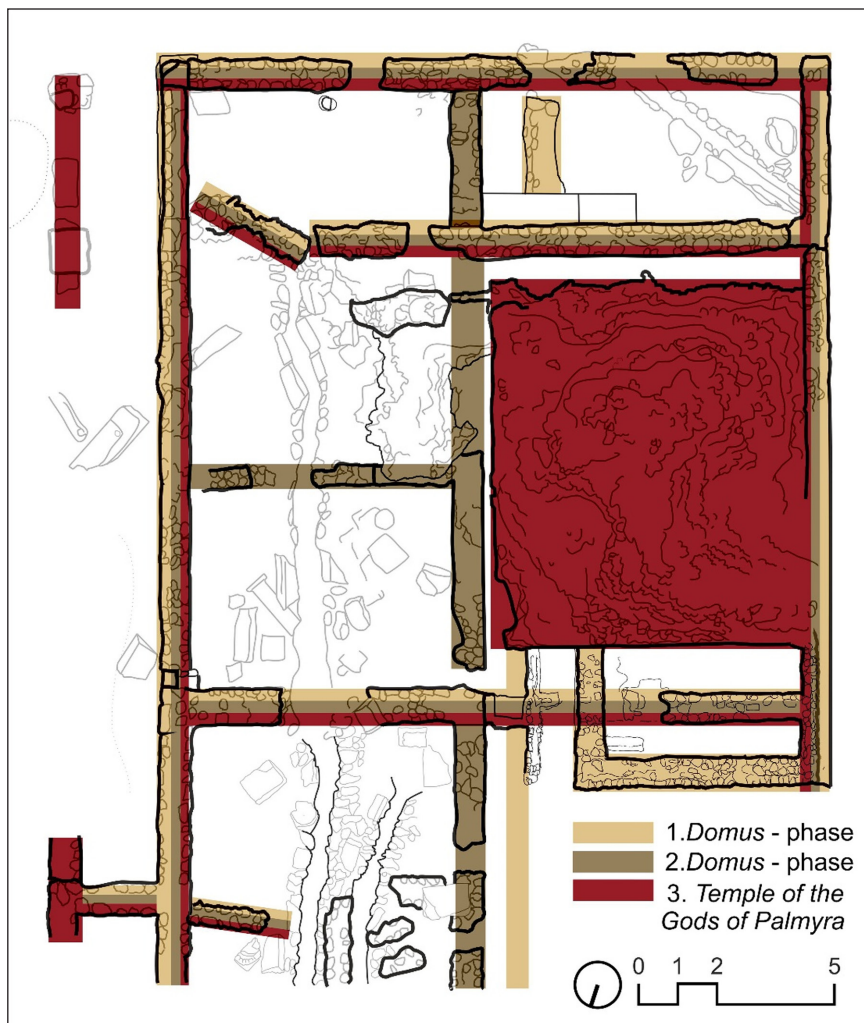
The house had at least three decorated rooms with frescoes. A second phase of the house, but third overall, was identified when an elevated floor and walls decorated with thick layers of white plaster were uncovered. The already existing frescoes were roughened so that the new layer could have a better grip.

There are two completely different ways in which the two monuments were adorned. One was decorated with the use of frescoes, while the other one with marble and stucco, giving off a more austere impression.

During the excavations of the Palmyrene temple (**Figure 6**) in Sarmizegetusa, a few fragments of walls covered with frescoes were discovered. These belonged to the first construction phase, being part of the *domus*. The podium of the temple overlaps the *domus*, thus preserving the frescoes. Some of them were found *in situ* still attached to the walls, however smaller fragments were found in the rubble. Unfortunately, these



**Figure 4:** (a) General layout of the archaeological site at *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* showing the location of the findings, (b) layout of the edifice (after Cortea et al. 2019: 2).



**Figure 5:** Layout of the construction phases representing the *domus* and the temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods (Author's photo 2019).



**Figure 6:** Aerial photograph of the Palmyrene temple situated next to the two *fora* (Author's photo 2017).

are fragmented, making it difficult to obtain a clear picture of what these walls might have looked like, but a few observations can be made. We are mostly talking about vegetal decorations, made with a green pigment, while a red one was used for creating a background or for details. Moreover, it was established with certainty that the lower panel was created using a mix of yellow and red pigments which could be seen as a marble imitation.

In order to have a better understanding of the pigments used, plaster and paint samples were collected and sent to analysis. The results have been published in a recent article (Cortea et al. 2019) which offered more details on the matter. The colours mostly used were: white, green, red, yellow and black. Using various types of analysis, the pigments used for creating the decoration have been identified (Cortea et al. 2019: 4–5). Plaster samples were also collected in order to gain more information regarding the materials used, and to identify the number of layers. Therefore, we can say with certitude that in the case of *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* we are talking about *fresco secco* painting, using *a secco* when inserting certain details (Cortea et al. 2019: 10). Several studies confirmed that in Roman times the most commonly used technique was that of fresco painting for decorating various buildings (Casoli and Santoro 2012; Gelzo et al. 2014). It is often mentioned in the literature that this technique was used because combining certain wet pigments with the plaster could create a different colour than the intended one (McCorquodale 1983: 75). The results of the analysis offered more detail regarding the plaster applied in this case (lime with some silicates and vegetable fibres as inserts) (Cortea et al. 2019: 10). This led to the conclusion that the craftsmen employed for this purpose had a very good understanding of the materials needed in order to create a proper layer of plaster upon which paint could be applied.

When discussing Roman mural paintings, we have to take into consideration the effect it had on the viewer and how it reflected the social status of the owner. The costs of decorating the walls with frescoes were significant, thus not accessible to everyone. Additionally, certain rare pigments had to be acquired by the owner and were not included in the price of the commission. Both Pliny the Elder (*Historia Naturalis* 35.12) and Vitruvius (7.5.8) mention that the patron had to order the rare pigments himself and pay for them separately.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to talk about paintings without paying attention to the building itself. Until now, it was believed that rooms were decorated with a certain motif due to the specific use of the room or the message implied in the painting. This was established in situations where entire walls were preserved or large pieces could be restored, but following recent studies on temples, these views were dismissed (Moorman 2011). The house certainly belonged to a member of the elite (*decurio* or *augustalis*), his status being pointed out by the location of his *domus* right next to the forum and by the use of frescoes as a way of decorating the interior of the house.

It is clear from the numerous Greek and Roman sources that colours had a certain significance during this period of time (Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 35.11, 35.32). Various expressions in Latin illustrate the range of colours and shades, from a brighter hue to a darker one, and trying to translate these expressions accurately has sparked many scholarly debates (Bradley 2009a: 19–21). The use of various pigments did not apply only to fabrics, but to what we consider nowadays as 'Classical art' or any ancient monuments. We have seen over the last

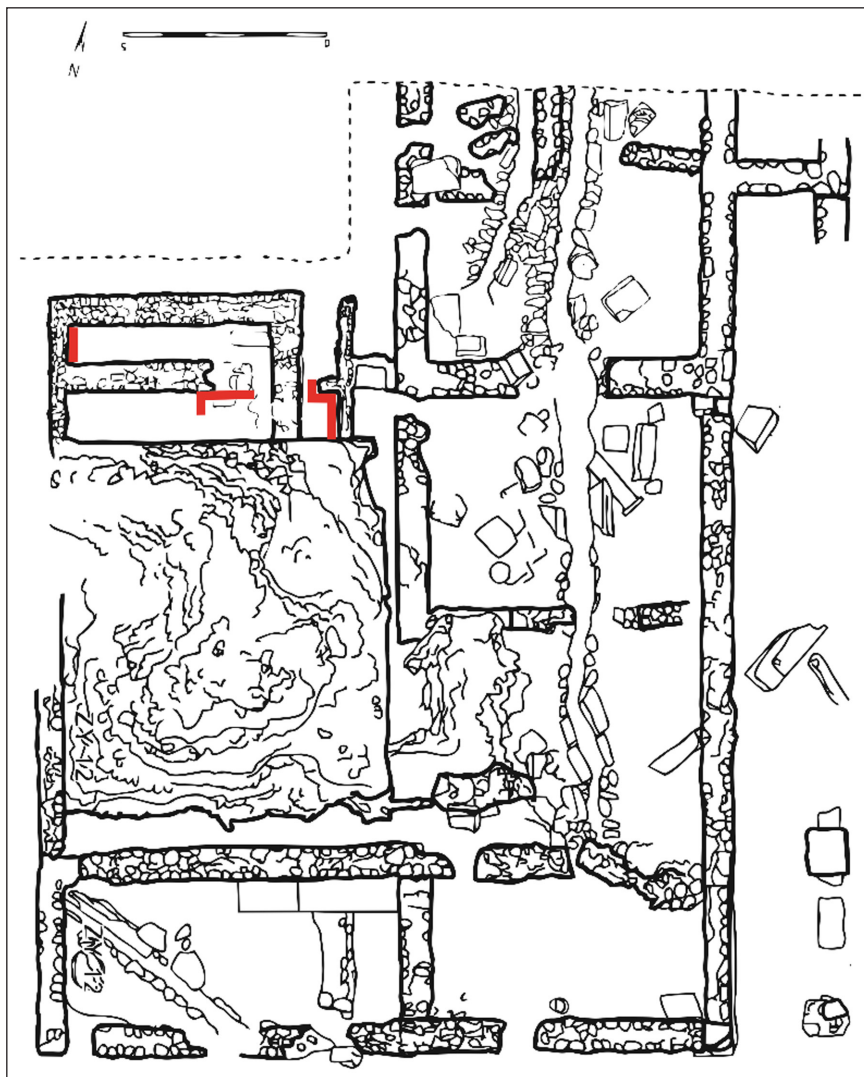
decades the outdated interpretations of ancient art and the quality of marble were significant up to a point, because most scholars were unaware that most monuments were decorated using pigments or that the natural colour of the marble was used in order to recreate a certain effect (Bradley 2009b: 429). Nowadays, careful cleaning helps identify the pigments used, and recently available technologies allow us to observe and analyse these pigments without damaging the surface of the object. (Bradley 2009b: 427–428). Using pigments on the facades of buildings as well as on statues was a practice used even in ancient Egypt, while in Rome it became 'fashionable' centuries later.

In the case of this particular *domus*, we have identified three areas (**Figure 7**) where frescoes have been uncovered while still attached to the walls. In one case we can see how the frescoes continue onto the adjacent wall into a room. This was an entrance to one of the other chambers.

There were also two walls with frescoes, with significant fragments still attached to the lower part of the walls uncovered. To obtain the marble decoration white background was used on top of which yellow details were added by flicking the bristles of the paint brush, alluding to a marble-like pattern (**Figure 8**). Following this first step, red vines were added using a narrow brush in order to circle the yellow dots. When the space was too wide between two such models a new red pattern was inserted to fill the gap.

On one of these walls, this type of decoration was overlapped by what seems to be a red-black circle with a yellow outline (**Figure 9**).

In the third area (**Figure 7**) two walls were uncovered. On the wall parallel to the podium, frescoes seemed similar to those previously discussed, with red lines encircling the yellow dots, a yellowish background,



**Figure 7:** Map of the temple, walls decorated with frescoes marked with an orange line (after Piso and Țentea 2011b: 115).





**Figure 8:** The three connected walls that are decorated with frescoes (Author's photo 2010).



**Figure 9:** The section of wall that is decorated with the red-black circle (Author's photo 2010).

resembling marble. The most intriguing aspect of this area is that it gives the impression that someone splashed green pigment on the wall. Moreover, another noteworthy decorative element is a large circle, but unlike the previously mentioned decorations, it is painted in dark blue and dotted in yellow and red (**Figure 10**).

On the last wall, frescoes were uncovered in the top right corner but it seems they were later covered with rough plaster (**Figure 11**). This appears to have been the case for the entire *domus*. Underneath this layer of plaster, the decoration was made using red and yellow pigments, probably representing a flower or a plant. A few fragments present red or green vertical lines being used as separation in order to create different vertical panels, perhaps in order to recreate a spatial effect. In this case, we can most likely talk about a lower panel with a marble imitation, but on the upper level there were vertical panels. Four such panels were identified, one of which has a vegetal decoration and another one a geometric motif.

The third panel of which two fragments of frescoes were uncovered, depicts the body of a bird on a red background, with its head missing (**Figure 12**). It was painted using yellow and blue pigments. Unlike the previous examples, the fourth panel appears as quite different, using various pigments and a *secco* technique to create the impression of blooming trees.

During the second phase of the *domus*, the walls with frescoes were covered by a layer of rough plaster, approximately two centimetres thick. Based on the conclusions of Davey and Ling (1982: 31) which found



**Figure 10:** Inferior register of the wall with the pattern disrupted by the presence of a different drawing (Author's photo 2010).



**Figure 11:** Decoration resembling a plant/flower made with a yellow pigment (Author's photo 2010).



**Figure 12:** Fragments depicting the body of a bird (Author's photo 2017).

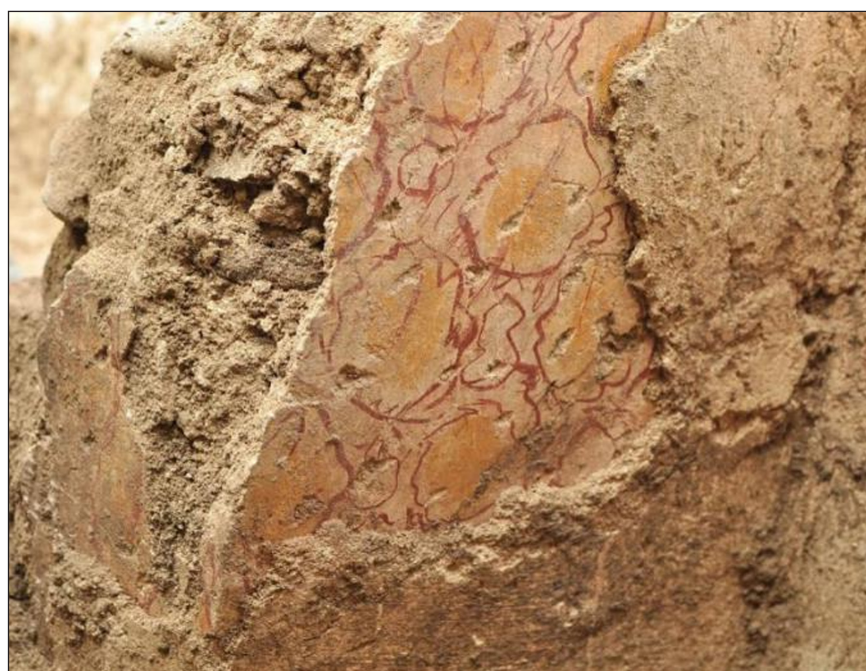
similar cases in Britain, a chronology can be established based on the finds. According to both authors, during first and second century AD much attention was given to the finishing touches while the surfaces were neat, with evenly applied pigments. In the third and fourth century, white plaster was more generally used as a background, and the layer was much courser. This can be also observed in our case study of the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*. During the first phase, the walls were covered with plaster on which decorations were applied. Later on, these were roughened so that a new layer could be applied and covered with a course plaster without any decoration (**Figure 13**).

The decorations discussed so far follow the general trends presented in the Roman empire at that time. We know that later on, the fresco painting technique was not so widely used anymore, Romans started decorating their constructions with new materials and techniques (Moorman 2011: 203–204). This trend can be observed in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa* as well where we witness a change in both the functionality of the building and the implementation of new trends circulating the empire.

Regarding the frescoes discussed above, it is clear that the individual commissioned for the work was very proficient in the *fresco secco* technique. At the same time, the patron was familiar with this type of decoration and commissioned someone from outside the newly formed province of Dacia for this type of work. The local artists were most likely not familiar with the technique early on, and it could be an indicator of the higher status of the owner as well, as frescoes were expensive to make. To conclude, looking at the location of the *domus*, its rich decorations and facilities such as the water canals, we can safely assume that its owner had political power and a high social status.

The third phase of this building is marked by the construction of the tetrastyle temple dedicated to the Palmyrene Gods on top of the previously discussed *domus*. During the Severan period, the city Imperial cult was firmly established through the particular use of this space, creating a stronger tie with the rest of the empire.

The temple had a narrow *cella* divided in three niches dedicated to the gods Bel, Iarhibol and Malagbel respectively (Piso and Tentea 2011a: 115). The entire monument was 21.8 × 17.1 m, the podium 8.75 × 8.75 m and was oriented eastward. The temple was decorated using marble extracted from the nearby Bucova quarry, known since the ancient times and still in use nowadays.<sup>20</sup> At first, craftsmen from Asia Minor were commissioned to decorate four columns which were part of the *propylon* situated at the entrance of the *Forum Vetus* (Diaconescu 2013: 30), as previously mentioned. With the spread of these decorative methods in this area, it is believed that some of these craftsmen perhaps opened a workshop which led to a certain ‘transfer of knowledge’. Later on, columns used for various buildings, although created in the same style and using the same techniques, were not as detailed as the four ones decorated by imported craftsmen. That being said, several fragments with decorations were uncovered, with beautifully carved details, such as flowers and acanthus leaves. One fragment in particular stands out as part of an inscription and was



**Figure 13:** The second layer of course plaster used to cover the frescoes (Author's photo 2010).

decorated with a rosette, while another one worthy of mention was decorated solely with darts alternating directions. Among these fragments, many decorative plaques were recovered and showed geometric motifs. This kind of decoration, combining vegetal and floral motifs with geometric patterns was predominant, using complicated acanthus leaves, palm leaves and rosettes used in on the walls of the *domus*.

Cornice fragments and architrave pieces, all made of marble, as well as fragments of capitals, decorated with acanthus leaves, were recovered. Some interesting pieces have a decoration similar to a torque, a twisted line, rope or a strand of pearls right underneath the plinth. One fragment seems to have a representation of an animal, but as they were found in a very poor condition, it is very difficult to say for sure.

## Discussion

Alike in the rest of the empire and throughout centuries, we are also confronted with a case of special building reuse in the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*. A *domus* was transformed into a temple, changing its nature from a private space, someone's household, into a temple, a public and sacred space for the community. There is no indication that the *domus* suffered any damage from a natural disaster such as an earthquake, or even fire; it is believed that the building was bought by a college in order to alter its function. We can clearly see that the function of the building changed, and so did its decorations: from a *domus* decorated with expensive frescoes, to a temple with carefully carved marble pieces. Although much of the *domus* was demolished, some parts of it survived in the basement of the new edifice, with the frescoes still attached to the walls. Thus, we cannot talk about a total demolition of the building in order to make room for a new structure. What changed drastically was the perception of this space, with the entire area being transformed into an administrative centre, a place for business and judiciary courts, entertainment, leisure, commerce and religious manifestations.

The question 'Why a Palmyrene temple?' still arises and is still unanswered. The temple was inaugurated as part of the imperial cult during the Severan dynasty. Given the expansion of public spaces in the centre of the city, perhaps a *domus* was out of place there while a temple was more appropriate. Furthermore, the proximity to the fora and the heart of the city may have been another convincing argument. The community created here by the Palmyrene soldiers and merchants was a strong and prosperous one. The link with both the imperial cult and the community could create a perfect opportunity to build a temple here. This area was also not the only one that suffered alterations. As previously mentioned, the Capitoline temple was built on top of a previous *macellum*. In this specific case, we can talk about a changing function applied to the same space, with again a profane space being turned into a sacred one.

'Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted. When we think about them, however, they may assume unexpected meanings and raise questions we have not thought to ask' (Tuan 1977: 3).

This quote is significant for our study and invites us to think beyond the simple, cold archaeological data. We have to keep in mind that in the temple, sacred activities took place, sacrifices were brought before the gods and the devotees. While inside the *domus*, actual people lived, carried on with their domestic activities inside and outside the perimeter of the house. Even before this place was called a 'home', soldiers had shared originally a wooden barrack, a small area that brought them together in a unique space. All these instances, while separated in time, happened in the same place in its geographical sense. This is an example of how a given piece of land can have more than one life and hold separate meanings for individuals at different periods of time, but not that far apart.

Talking about a particular place makes one think of the role the city played in the life of its inhabitants. A temple or a house is usually situated between certain boundaries, either of the property itself or the ones imposed by the city walls or regulations. So, it does not stand on its own. It is influenced by the environment and the community. The city must be seen as a unique geospatial area. It becomes the central point of movement and relations, creating new social interactions and spatial arrangement (Rüpke 2018: 28). The life of the city is much more significant. It expresses the agency, the interactions between individuals and the environment. The city is a space that is built by a community first of all, and then reshaped by it according to its needs. The entire space is appropriated and used (Rüpke 2018: 29) by different agents to their own individual gain, but also for the benefit of an entire community. Perhaps when studying ancient populations along with its religious aspects, more attention should be paid to the role the city plays in the social and religious life.

When we talk about a building or a place, we have to take into consideration its meaning for the local population and not see it as a mere location. A place can have many underlying dimensions. One being its precise location, but it can also refer to the relationship created between a particular building, its inhabitants, builders and all those that interact with it on a certain level. Referring to this particular subject, there

are a few works that have discussed this issue and attempted to find a definition for the term *place* that includes all its underlying meanings and relation to the people throughout time (Tuan 1977; Rohl 2014: 7).

'Places do not exist *ab aeterno* ('from the beginning of time'), but are created, made, and produced – by individuals, communities, and at the national and global levels. Places depend upon experience, and are thus inhabited spaces where human activity occurs and time is spent.' (Rohl 2014: 7).

They change over time due to the interactions between individuals and the building itself, with the passage of time, so its meaning is given by people and is constantly changed by them according to their own narrative.

*Place* can be seen as a sum of things and can be understood as a geographical point, a collection of objects in a specific order or a space that acquires meaning, a memory, a lived moment. A *place* is the inhabited area and can be defined by its limits, boundaries, but must be understood as a whole and studied in relation to all its components. A *place* can also be seen as a lived moment in a particular point in time taking place in a specific area, region or site. Personal experience is also considered by several authors (such as Tuan 1977, Lipovac 1997; Rohl 2014) to be part of a place and the ways of understanding it due to its particular significance for the individual.

The place presented in this paper went through different stages of existence, but scholars tend to merely focus on its significance as a temple. As discussed above, the life of this particular building started with the presence of the Roman army in the region and was transformed by people according to their needs. Starting as barracks, a shared space between a few occupants, it became a house for high-status individuals, implying the *domus* played a significant role in the social life of the city, before becoming later on a temple that connected gods and mortals, but also the imperial cult to the oriental ones.

Perhaps the community was looking to gain more support, or favour from the Emperor, hence they built a temple directly linked to the Emperor as an institution and with the Emperor as an individual, through links to birthplaces of the Severan dynasty. There was a local community originally from Palmyra but the temple and altars dedicated by them and the *diis patris* dedications were all connected to the other Palmyrene temple situated on the outskirts of the city.

In this case, the location already sent a clear message concerning the status of those living there during a first phase, before its function changed again. Its central location, right next to the fora implies a vital role for the inhabitants of the *Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa*. As such, the way a specific space was perceived by others could change over time, because people invest in it and give meaning to it. A *place* thus consists of three elements: a locale, location and a sense of place (Adnew 2002: 16). Its location was the centre of the city, connected to the important buildings for the life of the city. As a locale, it was first a shared area for soldiers, then a private building where its owner spent time, receiving guests or clients, and later it became a place of ritual practices for priests and believers. This building further gained a sense of place linking the city and its inhabitants to the imperial cults while showing a certain degree of devotion to the emperor.

Another interesting aspect to discuss is the ancient perspective over the monument itself, and how it was perceived by the local population. Did they actually remember its initial function and its transformation, or did they refer to it only in its current phase? Unfortunately, no written texts give us answers to these questions. Based on current technologies and archaeological finds, we can nevertheless establish the technical details of this building in all its phases (entrances, stairway etc.), its decoration giving us insight into how it was adorned over time, but cannot provide us with more details as to how it was perceived or understood by the ancient population. It is most likely that when this spot was occupied by a *domus*, given the proximity to the city centre and the *fora*, the social status of the owner was well known and recognized. A house and a temple cannot be perceived in the same manner by the people. A temple is by definition the house of the god/gods and the relationship between viewer and monument is different. It requires respect, awe and reverence from the viewer, and entering the space requires specific rituals. These factors are clearly not expected to the same extent when referring to a private and domestic space. In addition, the social and ideological context of the whole area must have changed. What used to be a city centre was modified and adapted to the needs of the city in order to fit in new cults and new ideologies. A ceremony dedicated to the Emperor, relating to the imperial cult, must have implied rituals or processions that took place in public, thus requiring further space that could not be provided by the temple itself. The changes in the layout of the city, the reuse of an older building and the modification of its function, the alterations to the original structure and decorations prove that this community approved and welcomed changes. It also shows a change in the mentality of the inhabitants. As we know, accepting to worship an emperor as a god during his lifetime was a major change in Roman society and religion. At the same time, rituals, manners of addressing the emperor or his family adapted in order to fit in and include the new norms.

## Conclusions

The individual that owned the *domus* clearly had a high status and could afford spending significant sums of money in order to acquire this particular plot of land and moreover, to decorate some of the rooms with frescoes. This type of decoration was done by a tradesperson who had the required set of skills and experience. As mentioned, creating a proper fresco required time and the necessary know how.

The construction of the *Forum Novum (Forum Antonini Pii)* south of the *Forum Vetus (Forum Traiani)* brought a change in the configuration of the street layout in the western part close to the Trajan's Forum, in the proximity of the Palmyrene temple. This major change led to an increase in the visibility of the area. The traffic from a *cardo* was deviated and went along the southern side of the monument we are discussing.

Replacing a *domus* with a public building required numerous modifications of the planimetry and of the layout. Even though the new building was on the same plot of land, so the same space, it follows a different plan. The change of the function of the building takes place during a significant political change, more precisely the moment when the Severan Emperors, of Syrian origin, ascent to the rulership of the Roman empire. Given the circumstances, we have to understand the inscriptions found here in a more complex context. The dedications honouring the Palmyrene gods uncovered in this area can be seen in a different perspective, as being used as part of the imperial cult honouring the Severan Emperors. This is the explanation for why we are dealing with a religious building, a temple, situated in the city centre and should not be seen as a loss of an ideological role.

The space discussed in this paper saw its meaning evolved through time because of those who spend part of their lives in this space, or the viewers whose lives were connected to it. In this paper, we have argued that each meaning is connected to a particular moment in time and also influenced by the evolution of the city as a whole. Each stage, as a barracks, a *domus* or a temple, brought its own influence over the development of the space and its decoration, and how it was perceived on a larger scale. All these elements are intertwined and should not be studied individually, but as a whole, while taking into consideration the political context and various implications, recreating an ancient landscape and offering a glimpse of the Roman way of life in Sarmizegetusa through time.

The location of the *domus* is an indicator of the social status of the owner. The frescoes discovered also offered details on how this Roman house was decorated. The inscriptions uncovered have provided information about the use of this space in a later period of time and the high-quality marble decorations are an important detail regarding the relevancy of this edifice for the community. We must consider all these aspects when talking about the multiple uses of this place. They provide insights on how space becomes a relevant place and how it gains new meanings over time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CIL III 3 1454; IDR III 2, 280; EDCS-26600890: *Concilium prov(inciarum)/Daciarum (trium)* – 241 AD; CIL III 3 1433; IDR III 2, 266; EDCS-26600870: *coronatus Dac(iarum)/III d(ono) d(edit)* – 238–244 AD; IDR III 2, 79 = ILD 240; EDCS-11200092: *concilium p[ro]/vinciarum Daci[arum ...]* – an 222–235; IDR III 2, 81 = EDCS-11200093: [... c]on/cil[ium trium pr]o/vi[nciar(um) Dac]iar(um) – 248 AD.

<sup>2</sup> A report about the frescoes uncovered in the *domus* was published in Țentea and Olteanu 2018: 91–93.

<sup>3</sup> As far as we know, there were three temples dedicated to the Palmyrene gods in the area of Sarmizegetusa. A first temple dedicated to these gods was uncovered west of the fortified precinct of the city (IDR III/2, 18 = CIL III 7954; IDR III/2, 262 = CIL III 7955). Two inscriptions mentioning Malagbel have been reported beyond the northern enclosure of the city, but without knowing their clear location: CIL III 7956 = IDR III/2, 265; CIL III 12580 = IDR III/2, 264.

<sup>4</sup> One inscription made on a marble slab confirms a triad of divinities from Palmyra: [*Deo Solli inv[ic]to Belo? – – –*] /*Mal[a]gbel(i) Hie[ri]bolo deis Palmyrenis?* – Piso and Țentea 2011: 116–117; Piso and Țentea 2014: 479–480; *Cultores Dei Solis Malagbeli* – Piso and Țentea 2011: 118–121; *Dei/[Solis Ierh]abolis*.

<sup>5</sup> The oldest inscription from this edifice, dedicated by Philomusus, attests the existence of the temple during the time of Septimius Severus (193–198). Piso, Țentea and Matei-Popescu 2019. Another inscription was dated in the time of Alexander Severus.

<sup>6</sup> Piso and Țentea 2011.

<sup>7</sup> IDR III/2, 18 = CIL III 7954: *Dis patriis*; IDR III/2, 262 = CIL III 7955: *Deo San[cto] Malagbel[o]. pro salute imperatoris Caesaris Marci Aurelii Severi Alexandri Pii Felicis Augusti et Iuliae Mamaeae Augustae matri Augusti nostri et castrorum/Primitivos Aug(usti) lib(ertus) tabularius/prov(inciae) Dac(iae) Apulens(is) posuit*. The name of the emperor Severus Alexander and the one of his mother were erased due to *damnatio memoriae*, as decreed by Maximinus Thrax in AD 235, after the assassination of Severus Alexander.

<sup>8</sup> Ardevan 1998: 42–45; Piso 2005: 435–457; Petolescu 2010: 85–89.

<sup>9</sup> CIL III 1443 = IDR III/2 1 = ILD 238: *Auspiciis/[Im]peratoris]] Caes(aris) divi Nervae f[il(ii)]/[Nervae] Traiani Augusti/[Germ(anici) Dac(ici)] condita colonia/[Ulpia Traiana Augusta] Dacica/[Sarmizegetusa] per/[D(ecimum) Terent]ium Scaurianum/[legatum] eius pro pr(aetore)/[...]*. See also ILD 239 and Petolescu 2011: 85–90, no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ardevan 1998: 43–44; Piso 2005: 436; CIL III 1443 = IDR III/2, 1 = ILD 238 = Piso 2006: 214–216, no. 2

<sup>11</sup> Piso, Étienne and Diaconescu 2004; Piso 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See the inscription of *M. Calventius Viator*, which is to be dated when *C. Avidius Nigrinus* was governor (Piso 1993, 19–23, no. 3, 110/112–114), CIL III 7903 = IDR III/2 205: *Eponab(us) et/Campestrib(us)/sacr(um)/M(arcus) Calventius/Viator (centurio) leg(ionis)*

*III F(laviae) F(elicis)/exerc(itator) eq(uitum) sing(ularium)/C(ai) Avidi Nigrini/leg(ati) Aug(usti) pr(o) pr(aetore)/v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. Tile stamps of this legion, of the first type *LEG IIII FF*, were also discovered during the excavations from the *forum vetus*, Piso, Étienne and Diaconescu 2004: 64, 87–90, pl. XIX, Tg. 1 and Tg. 5. See also Piso 2005: 296–299, nos. 1–4 and 338–340 and Piso 2006: 315–320, nos. 1–5. For a short history of the presence of this legion in Dacia see Piso 2005: 406–410.

<sup>13</sup> Piso et al. 2012: 119–124. IDR III 2, 98 = AE 1933, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Boda 2015: 296. Csaba Szabó (2018: 16) considered the city walls of Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa had the distinct role of separating the official religious public cult spaces from the areas dedicated to healing and small religious centres, dividing between religious “entrepreneurs” and areas dedicated to gods. When he discussing the role the temple dedicated to the Palmyrene gods erected in the city centre during the Severan rule had, he take into consideration that the city centre had lost the ideological role it had before.

<sup>15</sup> CIL III 7919 = IDR III/2, 247: *Pro salu[te] d[ominorum] n[on]ostrorum/Augg(ustorum) in hon[or]em domus/divinae Ph[ilomus]lib(ertus) adiut(or) tabul(ar)ii ...../ [...] ex su[oc] fecit*; Piso, Tentea, Matei-Popescu 2019: 247: *[...] et Neptuno/[di(i) s] magnis sacr(um)/[Philo]mus Augus(ti)/[lib(ertus)? ad]iut(or) tabul(ar)ii/5 [votu]m ? s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*; Piso and Tentea 2011a: 111–121; Diaconescu 2011: 148–158, 182–185, pl. XII–XV; CIL III 7954 = IDR III/2, 262: *Deo sa[n]cto Malagbel[io]/pro salut[e] Imp(eratoris) C[laes]aris M(arci) Aurel(i)/Severi [[Alexandri]] Pii Fel(ici)s Aug(usti)/et Iuliae [[Mamaeae]] Augustae/[...] matri Aug(usti) n(ostri) et castrorum/Primitivos Aug(usti) lib(ertus) tabularius/prov(inciae) Dac(iae) Apulens(is) posuit*.

<sup>16</sup> Clauss 1999: 17.

<sup>17</sup> Gradel 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Wojciechowski 2014: 162. It is mentioned by the author that religious associations and other social groups, had various local ways of including the imperial cult in their manifestations, usually as ceremonies for celebrating the birthday of the emperor or of his family, generally attested in inscriptions found in temples or on statues dedicated to them. According to Price (1984: 213), “language sometimes assimilated the emperor to a god, but ritual held back”. This led to the assumption that in regards to the religious life, the emperor was situated between people and gods. Harland, in his conclusions, regarding at first only the societies attested in Efes but later extending his study to Asia Minor (Harland 1996; 2003) considered that “emperors functioned as gods” (Harland 1996: 23) and that “emperors could function as gods within social and the religious life at the local level” (Harland 1996: 330).

<sup>19</sup> Pliny also discusses about marble, its use and provenance, connecting parts of the world with a specific kind of marble (Bradley 2006: 32). The information he provides on pigments, extraction and use and also marble is significant showing the fact that there was an interest for such materials. And people learned how to use these materials and in which order, how to combine and create art with its use. Such detailed accounts as both Pliny and Vitruvius provide give a starting point for better understanding the entire process involved in creating a fresco or the reason behind choosing a particular type of marble instead of a different one.

<sup>20</sup> Müller et al. 2012: 80–99, S1–10, S12–16, S 19–29, S 34–34.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## Abbreviations

**CIL III** Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum III.

Mommsen, T. 1873. *Inscriptiones Asiae, provinciarum Europae Graecarum, Illyrici Latinae*. Berlin.

Mommsen, T., Hirschfeld, O., and von Domaszewski, A. 1899–1902. *Inscriptionum Orientis et Illyrici latinarum supplementum*. Berlin.

**IDR III 2** Inscriptiile Daciei Romane. Vol. 3. Piso I., Russu, Ioan, I. and Wollmann, V. (eds) 1980. *Inscriptiile Daciei Romane. Vol. 3, Dacia Superior. 2, Ulpia Traiana Dacica (Sarmizegetvsa)*. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România.

**ILD** Inscriptiile latine din Dacia. Petolescu, C.C. 2005. *Inscriptiile latine din Dacia (ILD)*. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române.

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