

Roman Religion in the Danubian Provinces: Space Sacralisation and Religious Communication during the Principate (1st–3rd Century AD). By Csaba Szabó.

Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2022. 312 pp. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2v6pcph>

Tünde Vágási 

Semmelweis University, Department of Languages for Specific Purposes, 26 Üllői út, 1085 Budapest, Hungary; vagasitunde6@gmail.com

In the book under review, Szabó combines Roman religious studies with provincial archaeology, which represents an innovative scientific method in this field, and according to the author's proposal, he wants to trigger dialogue between disciplines that are rarely applied in Central East Europe (p. 15). Csaba Szabó is currently a research fellow at the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Szeged, and this book is the result of a three-year research effort (from 2018), which is supported by a postdoctoral research grant from the Hungarian state (NKFI Postdoctoral Research Grant 127948).

The main focus is Roman religious communication in the Danube provinces during the Principate from different perspectives. Based on the large and rich material evidence of Roman religion in the Danubian provinces (e.g., the Alpine provinces: Raetia, Noricum; the central part of the Danubian area: Pannonia inferior and superior; and the lower Danubian region: Moesia Inferior and Superior and Dacia) the book presents some aspects of the traditional urban and provincial units of the Roman Empire and a new taxonomy of space. The focus is on sacralized spaces, which were represented in macro-, meso- and micro-spaces across the provinces mentioned in the book. These sacralized spaces shaped Roman religion in the first to third centuries AD and created many religious glocalizations and appropriations. In the first three centuries AD, significant changes (structural, demographic, and political) took place in the Roman world, which indicated new divine agents, new sacralized spaces, and new strategies of religious communication.

The book focuses on three main aspects of Roman religion: lived religion and strategies of religious communication; forms of the space sacralization and glocalization of Roman religion; and the religion of individuals. Through five main chapters—"Emerging Roman Religion: The Beginnings"; "Lived Religion and Its

Macro-spaces in the Danubian Provinces”; “Space Sacralization in Meso-spaces Religious Experience in Micro-paces: Housing the Gods”; “Conclusions: Beyond the Materiality of Roman Religious Communication”—the author focuses on these aspects of Roman religion in the seven provinces of the Danubian area.

The author (as he writes, p. 204) struggled with methodological approaches and their limitations and therefore only took epigraphic material as the basis of his investigation since the number of sources of non-epigraphic, figurative material and small finds cannot be estimated due to their large number.

At the beginning of the volume, he explains why the Danube provinces should be considered together and not according to Roman provincial boundaries, but as we progress in examining the different provinces, it becomes clear that each one underwent unique forms of development and individual changes in religious processes as well. The Danube region was never homogeneous in terms of culture, history, politics, geography, and climate, and it had localities and peculiarities. The author mentions here that in Raetia, continuity or reuse can be observed in the *Brandopferplätze*; in Noricum, there were many ‘native’ gods who were constantly honored, and their sacred places remained in continuous use, only these were transformed into ‘Roman’—Roman-type sanctuaries with inscriptions on them, and Roman ceremonies performed. So only the divine name remains native, like that of Noreia (p. 50), although it is also Latinized; and the individual religiosity of believers became much more important. There are macro-regional differences from province to province, and some divinities were obviously popular in some provinces, such as Mercurius in Raetia, the Nymphs in Pannonia, and Asclepius in Dacia. The provinces were not homogenous; they were differentiated into linguistic, territorial, and even tribal sections. However, there was some connection among one or two groups, e.g., the Mithras communities, but the same cannot be said of the religiosity of these provinces as a whole.

The first of the three main theoretical concepts and approaches deals with lived religion. Human agency (dedicants, their status, origin, connection, and mobility) and small groups of believers are the focus of the chapters according to different aspects. The second approach is the sacralization of space, especially the physical, social, and imagined simultaneity of landscapes. The author distinguishes three large types of sacred places at different levels (p. 79, Fig. 1.4): 1. micro-spaces, characterized by religious individuality (domestic spaces: house shrines, corner shrines, rooms, corridors, private gardens, cellars, etc.); 2. meso-spaces or small group religious spaces (assembly houses, synagogues, small-group religious meeting places, *spelaeum*/caves, Mithraea, springs); and, 3. macro spaces (complex sanctuaries, healing shrines, pilgrimage sites, mountains, forests, etc.).

In the first major chapter, “Emerging Roman Religion: The Beginnings,” the author uses new concepts instead of older ones. Globalization is one of the key points

for religious groups—the relationship between the local and global complex in the context of religious studies; the aim is to replace the notion of ‘native’ and ‘Roman’. Indeed, this concept focuses on the mobility, connectivity, and global connectivity of local religious groups. The Danubian provinces represent a unique area in which the pre-Roman cultures (Celtic, Illyrian, Hellenistic, Thracian) were connected within the new administrative, economic, and cultural units of Roman provinces and networks outside them. This chapter focuses on pre-Roman religious communication and its continuity and presents some peculiarities of the area through important case studies. Noricum was under the influence of Celtic tribes and had small hilltop settlements. Similarly, the early republican Roman presence (Roman *emporium*) greatly impacted local, indigenous communities due to its connection with some temples and their Roman followers (i.e., Magdalensberg). In the two Pannonian provinces, István Tóth identified three major regions with different religious characteristics, and Szabó followed his territorial distribution and ideas about the pre-Roman religiosity of *Pannoniae* with some additions.¹ What happened in these areas after the Roman period? The author describes it as the slow process of *interpretatio Romana* and *indigena*, adding the complex interaction of human, material, and divine agents of religious communication. The most important question in this chapter is: can we talk about spatial and functional continuities in pre-Roman sacralized spaces? Some Raetian case studies show that there are no or very few definite traces of settlement or population continuity, although there were some *Brandopferplätze* in continuous use (Döttenbichl) or after a long historical hiatus. In Noricum, the continuous use of a rich variety of Celtic theonyms can be observed after the early Roman period. The author emphasizes Isis Noreia as the personification of the province, although his reconstruction is not entirely convincing.² The goddess shares her name with a Roman province, but it also refers to Noreia, which, according to Caesar, was the capital of the province of Noricum. We must be careful with the author’s conclusion that she was a “general, provincial” goddess because all inscriptions are centered around Virunum and Celeia, where there were also two Noreia settlements (modern Althofen and Deinsberg). The altar from Celeia, which shows the goddesses Celeia and Noreia of the two settlements, represents its local importance even more (CIL 3, 5188). The author could have focused more on the fact that in Noricum, the veneration of settlements as personified gods is common, e.g., Celeia, Noreia, Atrans (CIL 3, 5117), and Bedaius (CIL 3, 5572, 5574–75, 5580–81, 11777–78). The Pannonian representation of pre-Roman religion is very difficult to identify; one of these religious ideas concerns the question about Iuppiter Teutanus and Carnuntinus. These two gods may have been pre-Roman divinities, but the problem is that the sanctuary

1 Tóth, *Pannóniai vallástörténet*, 22–3.

2 Hainzmann, “(Dea) Noreia-Isis”; Grassl, “Ein erkannter Kultbrauch,” 231.

in Pfaffenberg was not used before the Roman conquest,³ and we do not know exactly where the sanctuary of Teutanus was in Roman times.⁴ The Silvanus cult in Pannonia was very popular, and due to the many iconographic variations and divine epithets (Magnus, Magusenus, Viator), can be interpreted as the pre-Roman aspects of Silvanus (pp. 63–6). Earlier religious knowledge and traditions are shown in local features of the various pre-Roman gods: Aecorna, Nutrices, Vidasus, and Thana, but in almost every case, they were associated with a ‘Roman’ type of religious practice. The author should have investigated two issues regarding the former pre-Roman religion: the local significance of the cult of Diana and its rural aspect (as in Balatonfőkajár, Sólápa, and Pusztavám),⁵ primarily in the light of the cave sanctuary in Csákvár;⁶ as well as the chariot burials⁷ and the depiction of chariots in graves⁸ in connection with the death ceremonies. The *interpretatio Dacica*, concerning the survival of Dacian divinities, is a so-called Dacian paradox, according to which there is no trace of the Dacian elite or indigenous divinities and no continuity of practice in Roman times (p. 67). In Moesia superior and inferior, the traditional idea among researchers was that any unusual Latin or Greek epithet is hapax or a unique relief, and epigraphic attestations or unusual religious rituals were associated with indigenous gods, as shown by the case of IOM Paternus; this association with only one god or one ethnic community is very problematic.⁹

Chapter 3, “Lived Religion and Its Macro-spaces in the Danubian Provinces” (pp. 89–152), is dedicated to the problem of the provincial limits of Roman religion in macro-spaces, with a detailed analysis of the epigraphic and archaeological evidence of religious life in forts and civilian settlements. In this regard, the *publicum portorii Illyrici* is an economic macro-unit. This customs system played an essential role in the mobility of objects and ideas of the new cults, especially in the spread of the cult of Mithras. The other macro-network in this chapter is the Roman *officium* and the *beneficiarii*. This network was dominated by Iuppiter Optimus Maximus in the stations, which were religious places with a huge amount of altars.

Another main issue addressed in the chapter is the relationship between urbanity and religiosity. The Danube region brings together a wide variety of urban

3 Kremer, *Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Optimus Maximus*.

4 Kovács, “Megjegyzések a civitas Eraviscorum.”

5 Kerényi, “Die Göttin Diana,” 220, 111.6, 220, Fig. 4; F. Petres, “Angaben zum römerzeitlichen Fortleben,” 229, Pl. V, la–b.

6 Fehér, “Diana’s Cave Sanctuary.”

7 Mráv, “Útas két világ között.”

8 Visy, *Wagendarstellungen der pannonischen Grabsteine*; Palágyi and Nagy, *Römerzeitliche Hügelgräber in Transdanubien*.

9 Kovács, “Iuppiter Optimus Maximus.”

settlement peculiarities and religiosity of its urban inhabitants, which is investigated by the author. He uses a model (p. 109 and p. 110 with Fig. 3.7) to connect these two major factors. The fact is highlighted that 68 percent of the votive epigraphic and figurative material was produced in the urban settlements. The case studies examine four types of urbanity: *canabae*, cities near auxiliary forts, *civitates* transformed into Roman cities, and *coloniae deductae*. The well-documented urban centers are Carnuntum and Aquincum, both of which produced a huge number of votive inscriptions (Aquincum – 566 inscriptions and Carnuntum – 615 votive inscriptions) and have numerous sacralized spaces of different types. Roman forts are another type of macro-space in religious communication, which were inseparable from the military *vici* and *canabae* and civilian settlements.¹⁰

Figurative religious monuments of divine figures are the focus of macro-spaces, e.g., the temples and sanctuaries in the Danubian provinces: the *fora* with the Capitolum (p. 59, Capitoline triad in Scarbantia) and sanctuaries of decisive size (Iseum in Savaria). The opinion of Endre Tóth, who questions whether the statues in Savaria really represented the Capitoline triad, would have been important here.¹¹

The following chapter (pp. 152–90) deals with space sacralization in meso-spaces, with particular attention to religious knowledge and its specialists. These provinces were rich in priests and religious specialists (about 400 inscriptions mentioned them), and in the case of some cults, their activities and distribution work were decisive. Religious specialists were highly mobile, especially the priests of Iuppiter Dolichenus. These religious groups are analyzed in the context of group formation, mobility, and cognitive features; according to Szabó's methodology, he examines small religious communities starting with the founder. In his opinion, small community religions go through a specific process of growth, beginning with the religious idea of a charismatic person through the growth and spread of doctrines across larger borders at an imperial level. The defining point of this process is the continuation after the death of the founder or central figure, which can be observed in all the small religious groups along the Danube (p. 153). Among these, the cult of Mithras was the most successful, which, in a short period of time, created many small groups whose believers possessed complex philosophical knowledge, exotic visual narratives, and soteriological messages. The cult was associated with prominent figures in Pannonia and Dacia, among whom the author includes those responsible for renovating the sanctuaries (p. 160, Tab. 4.1). This is acceptable in the case of Noricum, where there were governors and city dignitaries, but the Pannonians

10 Tünde Vágási's dissertation, written at the same time as the publication of the volume, which examines the religious inscriptions of the Pannonian military, analyzes this meso-space in detail. Vágási, "A pannoniai katonaság."

11 Tóth, "A savariai capitolumi triász."

provided only the resources needed for the renovation of the sanctuaries and did not play a decisive role in the spread of the ideas of the cult or the cities' everyday life. Various religious experiences can be observed according to the author from the material evidence: sacrifice (sacrificial scenes), initiations (especially the cults of Mithras, Isis, and Liber Pater), and sensorial effects (divination, epiphany, haruspicy, prodigy). Oral storytelling based on visual narratives (mythological scenes in macro-spaces) is also very important, especially in the case of those cults (Magna Mater, Liber Pater, Isis, Mithras, Dolichenus, Sabazios) for which we have neither literary sources nor authentic texts. Some unusual narratives came from Danubian provinces, e.g., *ubi ferrum nascitur* in the cult of Iuppiter Dolichenus; and some visual narratives, the so-called panel reliefs of Mithras. Occasionally, the author tries to connect a phenomenon to the Danube provinces, even though it does not only occur there, e.g., the *ubi ferrum nascitur* formula is also known from Germania superior (Nida, CIL 13, 7342b), and from Rome (CIL 6, 30947) and none of them have a demonstrable connection to the investigated provinces.

The last, shorter chapter (pp. 190–98) deals with religious experience in micro-spaces, which is the least tangible part of the religious sphere in archaeological sources. Small finds, house shrines (*lararia*), private spaces of individuals, and small road shrines are the sources for this area of study. At the same time, these objects often come from unsystematically excavated sites and are therefore difficult to examine without context.

The concluding Chapter 6 (pp. 198–208) does not summarize the different topics of the book but rather analyzes a huge amount of epigraphic data. In less than 160 years, the population of Dacia produced more votive inscriptions than the two provinces of Moesia and Noricum in nearly 250 years, which is both truly impressive and, on closer inspection (concerning the fact that these 150 years included the period of the epigraphic boom in the second century AD and the beginning of the third century), is not at all surprising, since the neighboring Pannonia was also at that time the most productive in inscriptions, under similar economic and social conditions.

At the end, in the Appendices, the book also presents for the first time a comprehensive list of sacralized spaces (*templa; loci sacri*), sacralized spaces within forts and fortresses (*aedes signorum*), and the divinities of the Danubian provinces. The author's analysis of the 260 deities clearly shows that many local and specific, occasional, and regional epithets can be observed. Among the divinities, a few are attested to only in one province or even on a single known epigraphic monument. Although such an overview table is essential for detailed analysis, the author sometimes inaccurately uses the names he lists – some are in the dative case (e.g., “Sideri”

instead of Sidus, “Vidaso” instead of Vidasus, “Itunae et Ituno” instead of Ituna et Itunus), especially when there are several gods (e.g., “Artavis” instead of Artaviae, “Dis Maioribus” instead of Dii Maiores, “Dis Reducibus” instead of Dii Reduces, “Diis Propitiis” instead of Dii Propitii, “Diis Auguralis” instead of Dii Augurales, “Dis Dauadis” instead of Dii Davadi, etc.). Names of others are incorrectly listed: e.g., “Dea Vagdavercus” instead of Dea Vagdavercustis; “Casuotanus” instead of Casuontanus; “Deus Attonipal,” who was reinterpreted in the newer publications as Deus Tatonis Patrius;¹² “Diana Plestrens” instead of Diana Plestrensis (derived from the name of the city and Dominus Plester); “Dii Conservatorii” instead of Dii Conservatores; “Dii Maximii” instead of Dii Maximi; “Dis Angelis” instead of Deus Angelus; “Apio Delmatarum,” while the stone has Apto – this god Aptus is known from Viminacium, Moesia inferior,¹³ etc. These gods are completely lacking from the reader during the examination due to the poor interpretation, even though they would have been worth investigating as pre-Roman divinities.¹⁴ In another case, an erroneous interpretation seems to have created new gods: the author mentions “IOM Brigetionis,” but the reading of the inscription is *Brigetionenses* (community of the city of Brigetio), i.e., *dederunt* to IOM. There are also epithets, such as IOM Melcid (ILJug-2, 523), where again there is a problem with the conjugation when interpreting the inscription; the epithet Melcidius or as a personal name Melcidianus (?) also comes up. There are also severe grammatical errors in the use of Latin and Greek termini, such as “*centurioni*” (p. 126) instead of *centuriones* and “*loca sacra*” (p. 208) instead of *loci sacri*. Another problem is the identification of *orcus* as a divinity in the *suscepta fide ex orco* context (CIL 3, 3624), where *orcus* is the underworld and not a god from which the *beneficiarius* has quasi returned (from death). Some citations, such as Kremer 2004,¹⁵ which the author refers to several times (p. 84, note 316; p. 85, note 326; p. 145, note 215, and p. 216), are missing from the literature.

Despite the problems briefly listed here, the book tries to outline the religious history of the Danubian provinces with the help of archaeological and epigraphical material and contains many important and interesting observations in the case studies. All things considered, Szabó's book is a good starting point for further in-depth research with a thorough look at the latest research results of Hungarian, Slovenian, Austrian and Romanian researchers in particular on religious issues affecting the Danubian area, with a number of methodologies that may be applied.

12 Grbić, “The Thracian Hero,” 8.

13 Ferjančić et al., “New Greek and Latin Inscriptions,” 235.

14 Borhy and Sosztarics, “Dii Itinerari, Itunus és Ituna.”

15 The book by Kremer, “Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Optimus Maximus.”

Literature

- Borhy, László and Ottó Sosztarics. "Dii Itinerari, Itunus és Ituna – Az utazás istenei Savariában." [Dii Itinerari, Itunus and Ituna – Travel Gods in Savaria]. *Savaria* 23, no. 3 (1997): 115–32.
- Fehér, Bence. "Diana's Cave Sanctuary in Csákvár (County Fejér)." *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 61, no. 1 (2010): 185–206. <https://doi.org/10.1556/AArch.61.2010.1.6>
- Ferjančić, Snežana, Miomir Korać, and Marijana Ricl. "New Greek and Latin Inscriptions from Viminacium." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 203 (2017): 235–49.
- Grassl, Herbert. "Ein verkannter Kultbrauch im keltischen Noricum." In *Kelten-Einfälle an der Donau. Akten des Vierten Symposiums deutschsprachiger Keltologinnen und Keltologen Linz/Donau, 17.–21. Juli 2005*, edited by Helmut Birkhan, 227–31. Denkschriften der Philosophisch-historische Klasse 345. Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1553/0x0013e444>
- Grbić, Dragana. "The Thracian Hero on the Danube. New Interpretation of an Inscription from Diana." *Balkanica* 44 (2013): 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.2298/BALC1344007G>
- Hainzmann, Manfred. "(Dea) Noreia-Isis. Alte und neue Schutzherrin der Noriker." In *Altertum und Mittelmeerraum: Die antike Welt diesseits und jenseits der Levante. Festschrift Peter W. Haider zum 60. Geburtstag*, edited by Robert Rollinger and Brigitte Truschnegg, 675–92. *Oriens et Occidens* 12. Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2006.
- Kerényi, Károly. "Die Göttin Diana im nördlichen Pannonien." *Pannonia* 4 (1938): 203–21.
- Kovács, Péter. "Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Paternus and the Cohors Milliaria Maurorum." *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 40, no. 1–4 (2000): 239–46. <https://doi.org/10.1556/aant.40.2000.1-4.23>
- Kovács, Péter. "Megjegyzések a civitas Eraviscorum déli határának kérdéséhez (CIL III 3303 = RIU 1011)" [Comments on the Question of the Southern Border of the Civitas Eraviscorum (CIL III 3303 = RIU 1011)]. *Studia Epigraphica Pannonica* 3 (2011): 46–51.
- Kremer, Gabrielle. "Die rundplastischen Skulpturen. Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Optimus Maximus auf dem Pfaffenberg/Carnuntum." *Bonner Jahrbücher* 206 (2006): 370–71. <https://doi.org/10.11588/bjb.2008.0.30573>
- Mráv, Zsolt. "Utas két világ között. A helyi elit kocsit tartalmazó temetkezései a császárkori Pannoniában" [A Passenger between Two Worlds. Burials of the Local Elite in Imperial Pannonia]. *Ókor* 8, no. 3–4 (2009): 78–87.

- Palágyi, Sylvia and Levente Nagy. *Römerzeitliche Hügelgräber in Transdanubien (Ungarn)*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 2003.
- F. Petres, Éva. “Angaben zum römerzeitlichen Fortleben der keltischen Plastik in Pannonien.” *Alba Regia* 14 (1975): 225–34.
- Tóth, Endre. “A savariai capitoliumi triász torzóinak kérdése” [The Question of the Torsos of the Capitoline Triassic in Savaria]. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 100 (1973): 19–30.
- Tóth, István. *Pannóniai vallástörténet* [The Religious History of Pannonia]. Ókor–Történet–Írás 2. Pécs–Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2015.
- Vágási, Tünde. “A pannoniai katonaság vallási feliratai a principátus korában” [Religious Inscriptions of the Pannonian Army in the Age of the Principate]. PhD Diss., Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.15476/ELTE.2020.207>
- Visy, Zsolt. *Wagendarstellungen der pannonischen Grabsteine*. Pécs: Janus Pannonius Tudományegyetem, 1997.

