EVERYDAY-LIFE ON THE PANNONIAN LIMES:
HOUSES AND THEIR INNER DECORATION IN
ROMAN BRIGETIO (KOMÁROM/SZŐNY, HUNGARY)

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The name of Brigetio (fig. 1), one of the four Roman legionary fortresses in Pannonia, today’s Komárom at the southern bank of the Danube in the north-western Hungary, has always been well known in the illegal market of antique art as an enormously rich site of small objects like coins, gems, jewels, glasses and ceramics. This is the result of two facts: first, Brigetio was an extended and rich Roman settlement, comprising three different agglomerations (legionary fortress, canabae and municipe), second, there had been only non-systematic archaeological excavations in Brigetio until the beginning of the 1990-ies.

In the course of the gradual occupation of the territory from the south of the later province Pannonia since the Emperor Augustus, by the mid 1st century AD Brigetio had become a Roman military base at the fluvial border of the Roman Empire. At the turn of the 1st - 2nd centuries AD the stone fortress of the legio I Adiutrix was established to defend the frontier of the Roman Empire between Aquincum (today’s Budapest

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in Hungary), the base of the *legio II Adiutrix* and *Car- 
numtum* (today’s Bad-Deutsch-Altenburg in Austria), 
the base of the *legio XIII Gemina*. The legionary fortress 
was surrounded by a military town (*canabae*). Many 
of the inhabitants of the *canabae* became members of 
the city council *ordo decurionum* in the civilian settlement, 
situated 3 km to the West from the military town. This 
civilian settlement became *municipium* and *colonia* in 
a relatively late period, during the late-Severian dy-
nasty. Right after this period began the decline of this 
formerly flourishing settlement, which had always been 
exposed to the attacks of the Barbarians (*Quadi* and 
*Marcomanni*) living on the northern bank of the Dan-
ube in today’s Slovakia. The 2nd half of the 3rd century 
and the whole 4th century were characterized by con-
tinuous attacks from the north. By that time the civilian 
settlement probably had already been abandoned. The 
last reference to Brigetio in antique sources comes from 
Ammianus Marcellinus, who describes the visit of the 
Emperor Valentinianus I to Pannonia through his cam-
paign against the *Quadi*. In November 375 he stopped 
in Brigetio to discuss the conditions of a peace treaty 
with the Quadian legates, who infuriated him so much 
that he died of a stroke a few days later, on November 
15th, in the legionary fortress.

In comparison to *Aquincum* or to *Carantum*, Brig-
etio has a relatively short history of research. Some ar-
chaeological excavations were started in the territory 
and the vicinity of the legionary fortress as late as the 
20-ies and 30-ies of the 20th century. They were inter-
rupted by World War 2. Apart from some occasional 
rescue-excavations, until the beginning of the 1990-ies 
there had been no systematic excavations in Brigetio. 
Since 1992 excavations have been managed by the De-
partment of Classical and Roman Provincial Archae-
ology of the University Eötvös Loránd in Budapest in 
cooperation with the Museum Klapka György in 
Komárom. The newly started explorations in the cen-
tre of the civilian settlement have quickly brought their 
first and important results: in 1996, i.e. four years ater 
the beginning of the excavations, a new archaeological 
museum was founded, established exclusively from the 
findings that our excavations had brought to light.

We were able to determine that as early as the be-
ginning of the 3rd century A.D. the houses (fig. 2) had
been equipped with heating systems (hypocaustum) (fig. 3), that a regular network of the streets (fig. 4) in the municipality had been established, separating the insulae and the domi of the city. The east-west extension of the first insula is approximately 50 m, the limits of the north-south extension are not known precisely. The houses inside the insulae had been separated by arrow alleys (angiportus). In the northern part of the houses there had been the living parts, in the southern tracts we found extended courtyards with economic and partially agricultural purposes (fig. 5). In 2009 we excavated a perfectly preserved cellar (fig. 6), this year we found some traces of a sewage system (fig. 7).

From the diverse, multicoloured material of the excavations I would like to present one segment, the inner decoration of the houses, i.e. the wall-paintings, which have become our most important profile in the last 20 years, confirming that real high-quality Roman art was present even in this very north-eastern edge of the Roman Empire\(^5\).
fig. 3  Detail of the heating system (hypocaustum) in one of the houses (photo by L. Borhy, 1995)

fig. 4  Detail of a street in the centre of the civilian settlement of Brigetio, the western limit of the 1st insula (photo by L. Borhy, 1998)

fig. 5  System of courtyards in the southern tract of the houses in the 1st insula in the centre of the civilian settlement of Brigetio (photo by L. Borhy, 2008)

fig. 6  A completely preserved cellar, with traces of the staircase in the northern wall (photo by L. Borhy, 2009)

fig. 7  Detail of the sewage in one of the courtyards of a house in the centre of the civilian settlement of Brigetio (photo by L. Borhy, 2010)
The cosmological vault

In the years between 1994 and 1996 a coherent surface of bigger and smaller fragments of wall-paintings in the house Nr. I, in Rooms Nr. 1. and 2. was uncovered. Although the fragments were found in two different rooms, they belonged - as we were able to determine in the course of the restorations, in the summer of 1998 - to the same surface, i.e. to the barrel-vault of room Nr. 1. (figs. 8, 9, 10). In the middle of this composition there is a half-nude female figure and a depiction of a horse. The body of the woman and that of the horse are partially covered by the same green drapery, which floats behind the woman’s back. The horse is depicted while galloping, in an unusual position, from below: in this position the disagreeable sight of the genitals is covered by the same green drapery which covers the woman’s body. The head of the horse is turned backwards, facing the woman, who is holding the horse by its bridle.

In the four corners of the vault there are four female busts (figs. 12a, b, c, d): they are the personifications of the Four Seasons (Horae). In the middle of each side of the vault we can see a panther upon a red surface, each of them running to the right. Below them there are four symmetrically opened green curtains, corresponding in colour and pattern to that of the drapery which covers the bodies of the woman and the horse. Below this motif a red stripe runs along all four sides of the vault: this is the closing motif of the vault, beneath which the vertical walls of the room begin.

The key to the interpretation of this unique representation lies in the personification of the Four Seasons. Topologically they belong to the “female portrait-busts,” wearing fruit in the hair as attributes corresponding

\[\text{fig. 8 The painted vault in the exhibition of the Klapka György Museum in Komárom (photo by L. Borhy, 2010)}\]

\[\text{fig. 9 Reconstruction drawing of the painted vault (drawing by E. Harsányi and Zs. Kurovszky)}\]

\[\text{fig. 10 Reconstruction of the room with the painted vault (drawing by E. Harsányi and Zs. Kurovszky, computer animation by Z. Fuchs)}\]

\[\text{fig. 11 The central motif of the vault (photo by L. Borhy, 2010)}\]

\[6\] The wall-paintings were excavated between 1994–1996. The restoration was done by Eszter Harsányi and Zsófia Kurovszky.


to each season. The fragmentary head of “Springtime” (Ver) wears a flower-wreath, that of “Summer” (Aestas) is crowned by wheat, while from the hair of “Autumn” (Autumnus) bunches of grapes are hanging. Since the fourth season, “Winter” (Hiems), due to climatic conditions cannot be represented by agricultural produce, her attribute is a scarf, covering her head. In keeping with the antique sources describing the Four Seasons, they are young and beautiful, with pinkish skin, wearing golden earrings decorated with a pearl.

The personifications of the Four Seasons are present both in the official imperial art and in the personal sphere. In the official art they emphasise the security of the Empire and its citizens. In the late antiquity they had acquired a rather allegorical meaning, which can be explained with the aid of the central pages of the Notitia Dignitatum: the allegorical representation of the Divina Electio is decorated on its four corners by the personification of the Four Seasons, which provide a visual representation of the eternal existence of the immovable Roman Empire. Their position, function and importance correspond exactly to those of the Four Imperial Virtues (Scientia rei militaris, Virtus, Auctoritas, Felicitas) on the opposite page, symbolising the Divina Providentia. In the personal sphere, i.e. in mosaics, on painted sidewalls, ceilings or vaults - depicted mostly in triclinia - the Four Seasons represent the wealth of the householder.

But what could the representation of the Four Seasons on the vault of Brigetio mean? Are they merely - but still ideal - corner decorations, do they symbolise the immovable security of the eternal Roman Empire, or do they simply show off the wealth of the householder? As we will see, none of the above. Regarding...
the surface of the vault on which the Four Seasons are depicted, we can see the motifs of the four opened curtains on the same level: together with the Four Seasons they guide the viewer’s look through the world of thought to a higher sphere, i.e. the sphere of the sky and heaven. This sphere will be separated from the lower, earthly sphere - and from the vertical side-walls - by the red stripe, from which the opened curtain (kataketasma) leads through to the curved surface of the barrel-vault. In this sphere the Four Seasons symbolise the cyclical, annual renewal, i.e. the “Year,” the abstract idea of which used to be represented in Roman art by a complicated, allegorical and symbolical pictorial language. According to antique sources, the “year” (annus) was understood as “space” (spatium), in which the “sun” (Sol) consumed the “seasons” (anma tempora) through its “course” (cursus). The best definition can be found in Lucretius’ De rerum natura: “Annus ... id spatium ... annus Sol in quo consumit tempora cursu”\(^{14}\). In terms of the antique astrological concepts, the space of the circular motion of the “time” was situated in the heaven.

In antique astrological views, the heaven was a part of the universe. The heaven covered everything. Its highest sphere was called aither (ether)\(^{15}\). This highest sphere of the sky, the ether, crowns (Cicero: coronavit) the universe. In Roman art this sphere is sometimes represented in the form of a circle (circulus): the red circle in the middle of the vault of Brigetio can be identified exactly as this highest, most distant part of the universe, i.e. ether (aither). This red - fiery - circle (pyr technikon)\(^{16}\) is usually adorned, both inside and outside, with two other unique motifs: outside by a blue circle, which might represent the lower sphere of the sky, in antique sources called aer, i.e. air. Inside we can see a kind of wreath, composed of blue and black leaves: this can be identified as the wreath (corona) which crowns the universe. And, finally, here, at this very edge of the universe the eternized figures of Greek mythology are situated in the form of fixed stars.

On the vault of Brigetio, in the middle of the red circle - which we identified as a representation of the aither - we can see - in accordance with the antique astrological concepts, expressed by Arathos in his Phainomena – the highest fixed stars of the northern hemisphere of the sky: Andromeda and Pegasos (fig. 11)\(^{17}\). The iconographical similarity of this composition to the iconography of the Nereids on the back of e.g. sea-horses or on other marine animals is indisputable. The closest parallel to this can be found in Stabiae, in the representation of the so-called Nereide bruna\(^{18}\). How can we explain this unquestionable similarity of Andromeda to the Nereid? We can find the solution in a partial motif of Greek mythology\(^{19}\): Cassiopéia, the mother of Andromeda (another fixed star herself), compared the beauty of her daughter to that of the Nereids, for which Andromeda was punished by Poseidon, who was himself married to Amphitrite, i.e. to a Nereide. Poseidon chained Andromeda to a rock on the seaside, and gave her to the sea-dragon, Ketos (another fixed star in the vicinity). It was because of this parallel that on the vault of Brigetio Andromeda was represented, unlike her usual iconography, chained to a rock on the seaside.

14 Luc, De r. nat. V. 6.16-619.
15 Cic., De nat. dest. II. 41; 57.; Sen., Natur. quaest. I. 2. 1: hum (i.e. circulum) Graeci halo vocant, nos dicere coronam aptissime possumus; Plin., Nat. hist. II. 38.: circa soli orbem crus spicat coronae ... Existunt aedem coronas circa lunam et circa mobilia caducia inhærentia. See further A. Le Beaufille 1957, p. 106.; c.s. Corona.
16 Cic., De nat. dest. II. 41; 57.
18 O. Elia 1957, pp. 66.
In both cases (figs. 10; 14) we can observe the limits of the representation, the depiction of domes with the aid of artistic methods: while the illusionistic dome of Brigetio is depicted on a barrel-vault as a horizontally laid out thelos, in Cosmas the same dome is represented in the form of a room, covered above by a barrel-vault, explained by controversial terminology as oikos, but also as thelos, dome-like covered (kamaroeides). In the words of K. Lehmann: ‘All these expressions of the systematic Byzantine mind. But the basic idea of this vision of an intellectualized and spiritualized heaven on the dome, like that of many of its individual elements, is clearly rooted in a now aging antique tradition’.

A wall-painting with the representation of a feast

In the years between 1999 and 2001 we had a rescue-excavation in the garage of the house belonging to Mrs. Emese Számadó, Director of the Museum Klapka György, which is located right in the vicinity of the excavations in the centre of the civilian settlement of Brigetio. In the course of the excavations we discovered four coherent surfaces, which used to decorate the side walls of a peristyle house destroyed by the end of the first third of the 3rd century AD.

Although only three of the four surfaces have so far been restored, it is already possible to read the pictorial programme and produce a provisional interpretation.

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25 The meaning of the decoration of the ceiling (fig. 13) probably representing Perseus from the neighbouring room (i.e. room Nr. 2) of the same house of Brigetio. However, let us return to our central motif, i.e. the iconographical identification of the horse as Pegasos. Two facts are helpful: first, that of the representation of the golden harness (chrysampyx chalinos) - corresponding to Pindaros’ XIIIth Olympic Ode - which was given to Bellerophon by Athena Chalinitis to help him capture Pegasos, and second, that of the representation of Pegasos in a very unusual position, viewed from below, as a star (fig. 11).

The circular motif in the middle of the barrel-vault has close parallels in architecture: circular openings on domes, called oposition in Greek or oculus in Latin. The hemispherical dome the cross-section of which forms a semicircle used to express since the time of Nero and Hadrian - according to ancient beliefs - the perfect form of the universe.

The drawing of Cosmas Indicopleustes in his Topographia Christiana (fig. 14), which expresses his ideas about the shape of the universe with the aid of a particular, rectangular room-like drawing can be added to this series of decorations and descriptions of vaults and domes. This space - called by Cosmas oikos and thelos - is evidently closed above by a barrel-vault (called kamara, kamaroeides), thus representing the universe (called by him Ouranos). In Cosmas’ world the heaven is depicted with golden stars on a dark blue surface, a representation also well-known from Late Roman or Early Byzantine dome mosaics.

In both cases (figs. 10; 14) we can observe the limits of the representation, the depiction of domes with the aid of artistic methods: while the illusionistic dome of Brigetio is depicted on a barrel-vault as a horizontally laid out thelos, in Cosmas the same dome is represented in the form of a room, covered above by a barrel-vault, explained by controversial terminology as oikos, but also as thelos, dome-like covered (kamaroeides). In the words of K. Lehmann: ‘All these expressions of the systematic Byzantine mind. But the basic idea of this vision of an intellectualized and spiritualized heaven on the dome, like that of many of its individual elements, is clearly rooted in a now aging antique tradition’.

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Although only three of the four surfaces have so far been restored, it is already possible to read the pictorial programme and produce a provisional interpretation.
The surfaces can be divided into two groups (fig. 15). The first consists of animal skins, hanging on the wall: one of a lioness (fig. 16) and that of a panther (fig. 17 – which has been only partly restored). The second group includes two male figures, probably alternatively represented with the animal skins. Both figures are dressed in white clothes, both have dark skin and black, short, curly hair, all of which create a negroid impression. Both are holding something in the hand: the figure on the surface Nr. 1. is probably holding a bronze vessel (fig. 18), the figure on the surface Nr. 3. is holding something flat, a bright blue object, decorated with white pearls along the edge (fig. 19). This object is probably a silver tray. There are three elongated objects lying on it (fig. 20). The figure, which certainly depicts a servant, is lifting up his arm and lowering into his mouth a fourth object of the same kind as those on the silver tray.

Both servants give rise to further questions, i.e. what are they holding in their hands? What can be lying on the silver tray? What is in the bronze vessel? Since one of the four objects is about to be eaten by the servant, we can be fairly certain that the objects must be a kind of food. Another question is, are they of vegetable or animal origin? Regarding the form, they look like small, longish fish, such as small anchovies, young eels\textsuperscript{27}. But, if the painter wanted to render, for example, a fish such as an eel, it would have had at least eyes and/or fins. If we consider the representation of sea-animals in Roman art, we can find that such representations were always very specific, that it was always easy to identify them as fish, crabs, or shell-fish. The best example is a mosaic from the first half of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century AD in Pineda (Vila.seca) exhibited in the Museu Arqueològic in Tarragona, which shows 47 different fishes and crabs each of which can be precisely identified\textsuperscript{28}. Even food leftovers can be identified in artistic representations, as on a mosaic in the Vatican, which shows discarded grapes, chicken, crab, parrot-fish, shell-fish, walnut etc\textsuperscript{29}.

We can also reject the theory of interpretation of the objects as food of animal origin. The forms and colours of the objects on the silver tray are more important for their identification. If we wanted to give an exact description of the objects, we should say that they are green and white, their white part is lightly swollen, while the green part is elongated. An exact description

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. recipes by Apicius: Apic., De re coq. 10.2.1-6; Representation of fishes on wall-paintings and mosaics: A. Dosi – F. Schnell, A tavola con i Romani Antichi, Roma 1990, pp. 201, 268, 319.
\textsuperscript{28} X. Aquilé et alii 1992, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{29} E. Moorman 2000, p. 88, fig. 27.
of the same phenomena can be found in Latin poetry, in Martialis, a Spanish poet from Bilbilis in Zaragoza, who sang of all the regional specialties and delicacies of the Roman Empire in his book XIII\textsuperscript{30}. There he dedicates his 19\textsuperscript{th} epigram to a kind of onion, called \textit{porrus capitatus} (a kind of leek), which he praises as follows: \textit{Mittit praecipuos nemoralis Aricia porros: in niveo virides stipite ceme comas} [in English translation: “The woody Aricia has sent delicious leek: Look at the green leaves on its snow-white back!”]. This literary evidence is identical to the objects represented on the wall-painting, which are certainly these leeks, the \textit{porri capitati}.

However, was this leek so delicious that one would eat it like the servant in the wall-painting at Brigetio? We come closer to the solution if we open the cookery book by Apicius, which will help us realize through his numerous recipes on how to cook and grill the \textit{porrus capitatus}\textsuperscript{31} and serve it with different, but always simple dips that this leek wasn’t eaten raw. And through this particular detail the unusual posture of the servant’s head can be explained: that is to say, boiled or grilled leeks of this kind become so soft in texture that it is impossible to eat them using a hand in any other way than in the posture shown in the wall-painting at Brigetio.

This custom of eating boiled or grilled leek survived antiquity and still exists. Traditionally on the last Sunday of January a big feast, the \textit{“calçotada”} (i.e. “the feast of the \textit{calcots},” a kind of spring-onion) takes place in north-eastern Spain, in Catalonia. This delicious vegetable grows in late winter or early spring and can be eaten only using hands, in the posture like the servant’s in the wall-painting of Brigetio (fig. 21a, b, c, d, e). The Catalan \textit{porrus capitatus} is grilled on a grate (\textit{a la brasa}) and served everywhere, in restaurants and on the street in Catalonia and elsewhere in Spain in springtime. A dip, called \textit{“salsa al romesco”}, made of garlic, olive oil and a kind of mayonnaise goes well with the leek (fig. 22): since Apicius probably describes something similar, purely hypothetically can we suppose that such a sauce was in the bronze vessel held by the servant on surface Nr. 1.

And finally, we need to turn our attention to the last particular detail, namely a series of short, 4-5-cm-long wall scratches to the right of the servant’s shoulder. Though this surface is mostly fragmentary nevertheless 23 scratches are preserved, and we can add at least 20 more. We can suppose that originally about 40-42 such scratches must have been there. If we remember that

\textsuperscript{30} Mart., Ep. XIII.19.  
\textsuperscript{31} Apic., De re coq. 3.10,1-2.  
\textsuperscript{32} During my stay at the University of Zaragoza on March 4th, 2011 I was invited to eat \textit{calcots} by Prof. Francisco Marco Simon, whom I’d like to express my thankfulness. These pictures should preserve the memory of this unforgettable event. Cf. further the interview of Ignasi Aragay with the author: \textit{Calçots a la romana. Avui}, August 6th 2008, pp. 38-39.
than 2700 grams), as did a certain Ramon Fores Sans in 2006, will be reported everywhere in the newspapers - and nowadays on the Internet as well. Therefore it is possible to propose that the 40 or so scratches on the wall-painting of Brigetio could be a message from the end of the first third of the 3rd century AD immortalizing such an achievement of somebody having eaten a large quantity of onions in this room. Of course, a certain interpretation of this detail cannot be given, but it is possible to produce an iconographical analysis and a plausible interpretation of the scenes, which can be understood using ancient sources and explained in view of ancient customs probably existing in the Mediterranean since the antiquity.

the four painted surfaces structurally belong together and that both fields with their servants refer thematically to each other, we can at least theoretically suppose that these scratches might have had some reference to the servant holding in his hand a kind of “salsa al romesco” in the bronze vessel. To support this hypothesis, let’s consider the “calçotada” again. There are various competitions associated with the feast of the spring-onion: a competition in preparing the dip (concurs de salsa de calçots), a beauty parade of the calçots (vista de manats de calçots) with a prize (primer premi). Finally, there is also a competition in eating the onions (concurs de menjar calçots). The winner gains a huge prestige in his community: his new record, having eaten more than 238 pieces (which corresponds to a weight of more than 2700 grams), as did a certain Ramon Fores Sans in 2006, will be reported everywhere in the newspapers - and nowadays on the Internet as well. Therefore it is possible to propose that the 40 or so scratches on the wall-painting of Brigetio could be a message from the end of the first third of the 3rd century AD immortalizing such an achievement of somebody having eaten a large quantity of onions in this room. Of course, a certain interpretation of this detail cannot be given, but it is possible to produce an iconographical analysis and a plausible interpretation of the scenes, which can be understood using ancient sources and explained in view of ancient customs probably existing in the Mediterranean since the antiquity.
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ABBREVIATIONS

ActaAntHung  Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae
ActaArchBrig  Acta Archaeologica Brigetionensia
AnnÉp  L’Année Épigraphique
AntTard  Antiquité Tardive
AW  Antike Welt
CahArch  Cahiers Archéologiques
CIL  Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
DissPann  Dissertationes Pannonicæ
FolArch  Folia Archaeologica
KEMÖMK  Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Önkormányzat Múzeumainak Közleményei
KölnJbVF Gesch  Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte
LIMC  Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae
NP  Der Neue Pauly
PACA  Proceedings of the African Classical Associations
PWRE  Pauly-Wissowa, Realencyclopadie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft
RA  Revista de Arqueología
RIU  Die römischen Inschriften Ungarns
RQ  Römische Quartalschrift
SAŽETAK

SVAKODNEVICA NA PANOŃSKOM LIMESU: KUĆE I UNUTARNJE UREĐENJE U RIMSKOME BRIGETIJO (KOMÁROM/SZÓNY, MAĎARSKA)

László BORHY


Na temelju ovih otkrića možemo naglasiti da u Brigetiju, usprkos činjenici da se nalazio na periferiji Carstva, u "sjeveroistočnom kutu" pograničnog područja Imperijuma Romanuma, nije nedostajalo visokokvalitetnih proizvoda rimske umjetnosti.