Carnuntum’s appearance and mediation of Roman culture

Marion GROßMANN
Archäologischer Park Carnuntum

Abstract: The archaeological site of Carnuntum situated roughly 50 kilometers east of Vienna, is Austria’s largest archaeological complex and has been known for more than 130 years. Archaeological investigations in an area called „Spaziergarten“ in Petronell-Carnuntum shed more light on houses of which the remaining ruins have been displayed since the late 1940s in an open air museum. In the past ten years, several of these buildings were reconstructed: a citizen’s house, a splendid villa and public baths are structures that can be lived in. For all reconstructions, solely experimental archaeology was applied. What opportunities for interpretation do reconstructed buildings provide? What does the existence of fully visitable Roman houses mean for Carnuntum’s cultural mediation? It is a unique case, not only for Austrian museums, but for European museums as well. Elements of everyday Roman life are not only displayed in a traditional manner, but can be touched and felt offering a clear educational and interpretative visitor benefit. Of course, carefully chosen interpretative teaching and mediating methods used are mostly narrative and give the visitor the feeling as if the inhabitants of the houses or the city had left merely a few minutes ago.

Keywords: living history, teaching everyday Roman life

Introduction
The archaeological site of Carnuntum situated about 50 kilometres east of Vienna, is Austria’s largest archaeological complex and has been known for more than 130 years. Scientific investigations in an area called “Spaziergarten” in Petronell-Carnuntum shed more light on the remaining ruins which have been displayed since the late 1940s in an open air museum. In the past 10 years, several of these buildings were reconstructed using experimental archaeology: that means the stonewalls were carried out with reconstructed Roman tools and using ancient building technologies and craft skills. The wooden constructions were made with old wood cut by hand instead of industrial sawn wood. All tiles were made as an archaeological experiment in a reconstructed kiln by using original pieces as models. In fact, all buildings are fully functioning and can be lived in during the year.

These reconstructions in the Archaeological Park Carnuntum and its vicinity to Vienna offer perfect conditions for living history performances, especially those located in Late Antiquity.


2 http://www.carnuntum.at/en/visitor-information/reconstructions
House of Lucius

In 2006, the re-erection of the so-called House of Lucius was finished. It is a house with stone walls, glass windows and rooftiles. It harbours a large courtyard, a kitchen, two verandas or storage rooms and a living room with a hypocaust heating system. Finally, the house features a room that probably served as an unheatable workshop.

As the owner earned his wealth by dealing in precious goods, but findings revealed no specific merchandise, archaeologists assume him to have traded in organic articles. Thus, he was probably a cloth merchant storing his valuable goods right inside his house. This opens up the possibility for our arts and cultural education programme to address fabrics, various types of cloth, fabrication and clothes of different social classes in Roman times.

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3. E. VORBECK, Zivilinschriften in Carnuntum (Wien 1980) 31 Nr. 121 indicates us the name of one of the house’s owners.

Fig. 2 – House of Lucius (front) - © APC

Fig. 3 – House of Lucius (workshop) - © APC
Villa Urbana

In 2008, the re-erection of a large peristyle villa located on the so-called “Nordstraße” (Northern Street) was completed. As the findings made during archaeological excavations in this insula were extraordinarily luxurious, the archaeologists in charge named the house Villa Urbana. The part that was rebuilt, is the representative front area of the house directly behind the “Nordstraße”. Towards the back, there are several private rooms which can be seen in partial reconstructions.

We do not know much about the owner of this rich house, but however, its dimensions and the already noted luxury suggest that someone from Italy or even from Rome moved to Carnuntum who claimed the same lavish amenities he had been used to before. A house like this required more than 50 slaves and servants to organize the everyday life of the Roman family. Especially the huge representative hall with the apsis and elaborate wall paintings give us a vivid impression of the living area of rich Roman inhabitants of ancient Carnuntum.

Fig. 4 – Villa Urbana - © APC

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As was the case with the House of Lucius, the Villa Urbana was erected using experimental archaeology. The reconstructions are based on findings of the archaeological excavations from the late 1940s and the first decade of the 21st century.6

**Porticus / Therme**

A so-called porticus leads to the next reconstructed complex that is also located along the “Nordstraße”7. The public baths were rebuilt and opened in 2011, when the NÖLA (“Niederösterreichische Landesausstellung – Lower Austria Federal Exhibition”) took place in Carnuntum8. The planning and erecting of a Roman bath of that size was completely new for the archaeologists, architects and for the team of workers. Once again, all

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reconstructed pavements and floors, underfloor heating systems and wall paintings were arranged on top of
the original finding places.

![Fig. 6 – Porticus - © APC](image)

However, in this specific case, not only walls, roofs, windows and heating systems had to be dealt with, but
also operating water supply systems and water basins. Naturally, the basins were rebuilt where the original
ones dating back to Antiquity had been uncovered. Time and again, it is amazing how much the experience of
running water bubbling into basins and fully-functioning water dispensers impact the visitor benefit.

Walking through the baths gives a living impression of one of the most important parts of daily life in Antiquity
– spending hours of leisure in the public baths not only with body cleaning, but also with gossip, meeting
friends, clients, neighbours, colleagues and other inhabitants of Carnuntum.
Fig. 7: Sala thermarum - © APC

Fig. 8 – Caldarium - © APC
Domus Quarta
Last but not least, there is a fourth house which was rebuilt and opened in 2013: the Domus Quarta. This semi-reconstructed building is part of a large peristyle villa with a garden like the rich villae known e.g. in Pompeji. The reconstruction’s purpose is to protect a precious mosaic floor, meticulously restored and eventually reassembled in the original place of discovery.

Interpretation/education
It is unique not only for Austrian open-air museums, but for European museums as well, that the visitor can experience Roman life by walking through ancient living space.\(^9\)

The interpretation methods used are mostly narrative and give the visitor the feeling as if the inhabitants of the houses or of the city as such had left merely a few minutes ago.\(^10\) Working amid the reconstructed complexes was a learning process that soon revealed how much more challenging guided tours had now become: “With so much being visible and tangible, not much is left to the imagination” says one of our education guides.\(^11\)

\(^9\) For a comparison to the Archaeological Park of Xanten and the Archaeological Park in Kempten see MACGUIRE 2013.

\(^10\) F. HUMER, Ein römisches Wohnhaus der Spätantike in Carnuntum (2009), 105.

Nevertheless, we should remind both ourselves and our visitors that the buildings as well as the surroundings were not as clean and tidy as they can be seen today lacking stench and smells of an ancient city.

Fig. 10 – narrative cultural mediation - © APC

**What is the most important benefit for visitors?**

The next step is that Carnuntum’s visitors – no matter if children, young or adult persons – can completely immerse themselves into Antiquity and feel as if they were residents of the Roman houses and the Roman city.

Especially for children, it is extremely exciting to connect ancient with present times and finding out how the Romans lived. This hands-on and interactive approach is the key tenet behind Carnuntum’s educational programs for school classes.

Since most children and teenagers do not come on their own initiative, but because their teachers plan the excursion to the Archaeological Park Carnuntum, this is the most difficult group of visitors to guide. It is thus essential to allow enough time for fun and ensure the information is intertwined with games, role-plays and interactive elements.
The Archaeological Park Carnuntum has several educational programs for pupils of different age groups, all take around 2.5 to 3 hours. Normally, children encounter Roman history for the first time in the higher grades of primary school, between the age of 8 and 10. After that, the next lessons about Romans are scheduled for
pupils between 12 and 13. Of course, higher grades also visit us, especially those who learn Latin or have special projects e.g. in history class. All of them are offered the experience of finding out what it meant to be a Roman citizen in Antiquity.

Re-enactment groups / Living History
There are several re-enactment groups that annually settle down in the Archaeological Park Carnuntum for a couple of days, particularly for special events like “Römerfestival” in June or “Autumn in Carnuntum” scheduled around 26th of October. In this context, I would like to introduce the “Gentes Danubii” founded as a group in 2009 and transformed into an association in 2011.

Gentes Danubii focus their activities on presentations of ancient ethnic peoples inhabiting countries along the Danube from 750 BC to the 4th century AD. The 20 members of Gentes Danubii attach great importance to the authenticity of their presentations, meticulously evaluating scientific sources and new developments in sciences as well as vases, mosaics, inscriptions and various other things. To acquire knowledge about old crafting techniques, they work together with archaeologists and artisans and also try to find out on their own, how things were produced in Roman Antiquity.

In our specific case, members of Gentes Danubii and other Roman re-enactment groups as well, do not perform as actors in a theatre play, but try rather to live a Roman life in Carnuntum which is of course the very best attempt to interpret Roman history: by living it. The existing infrastructure allows Gentes Danubii and
other re-enacters to test and implement different manual projects in best possible historic circumstances. The reconstructed kitchens have already been used for cooking ancient Roman food. Some members of the groups study masonry, ceramics, metal- or leatherwork, others showcase spinning wool and flax, weaving or the process of dyeing threads and cloths with pigments popular in Antiquity such as reseda or indigo. They try out less well-known techniques such as knotless netting and sprang, which also can be found in their clothes and accessories like hair nets, socks etc.

For visitors of the Archaeological Park Carnuntum the best way of obtaining information on Roman everyday life is to directly ask or talk with the re-enactors, to watch them re-enact and become engaged themselves in some of the activities displayed (e.g. at the loom).

What opportunities for interpretation do buildings reconstructed in the manner of Carnuntum provide? Obviously, carefully chosen interpretative teaching and mediating methods need to correspond with and complement the reconstructions. Interrelating between now and then is a very interesting point for visitors of every age. What is important for us in Carnuntum is, to give people the possibility of plunging into Antiquity and to experience living history.

References


