

A Roman mountaintop sanctuary in Southeastern Austria

Assoc. prof. Mag. Dr. Manfred Lehner
University of Graz
Department of Classics, Archaeology Section
manfred.lehner@uni-graz.at

Mount Schöckl – the name has Slavic origin and means “single, outstanding” – is situated 14 km northeast of Graz in Styria (Austria). With 1.445 m a.s.l., at the southeasternmost rim of the Alps, it looks far into Pannonia to the east and south – a “strategic” point to see and to be seen. Its plateau consists of limestone with numerous karst phenomena like caves and sinkholes. Numerous legends of treasures, witches, white ladies with snakes, black dwarfs, and Satan himself are attached to the mountain.



Fig. 1 The Schöckl, view from south-east. © R. Koeberl 2017.

Today, the alpine-pasture-like plateau, with a cable car station and several hostels, is an infested touristic spot for hikers, bikers and flex wing aviators, but still serves pasture, forestry and hunting purposes as well – a combination of economic interests putting archaeology in the third place due to the weak Austrian monument preservation laws.

The first scattered single-find traces of a Roman site on the distinctive eastern summit (1423 m a.s.l., fig.1) were recorded in the 1980s; since 2015, this site is being properly investigated by the Archaeology Department of Graz University. After two surveys, the whole site proved to be about 2 hectares large; after seven short excavation campaigns (no more than 525 m² so far), it turned out to be a sanctuary with at least two main *fana* and widespread infrastructure areas¹. The recent landscape of the site is, of course, formed by modern interventions like a transmitter mast, forest roads, hiking paths, and, worst, extensive forest

¹ For detailed annual excavation records, see <https://kfunigraz.academia.edu/ManfredLehner?swp=rr-ac-36291756> [2024-06-19].

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clearing and leveling for the aviators, but still shows frequent traces of Roman shaping like quarries, terraces, and hollow ways. By topography, the terrain of the site can be divided into four distinctive sections: the very eastern summit, an anticline with karst funnels immediately to the west of it, a rocky step leading to the western pasture plateau, and the slope south of it (fig. 2).

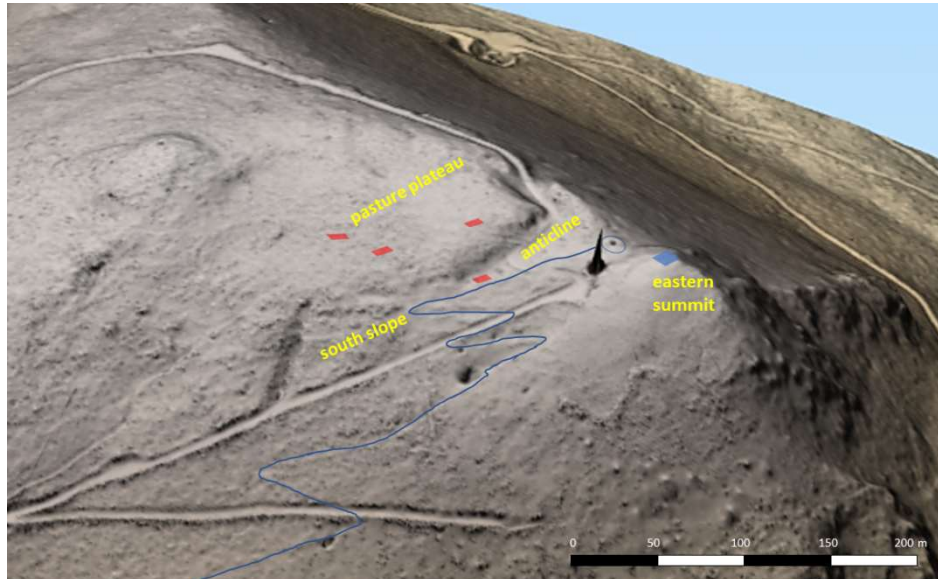


Fig. 2: 3D-LiDAR view of the site, looking northwest, with terrain sections, excavated Roman sanctuary features in blue, and surveyed profane buildings in red. © E. Lozić 2020, author 2024.

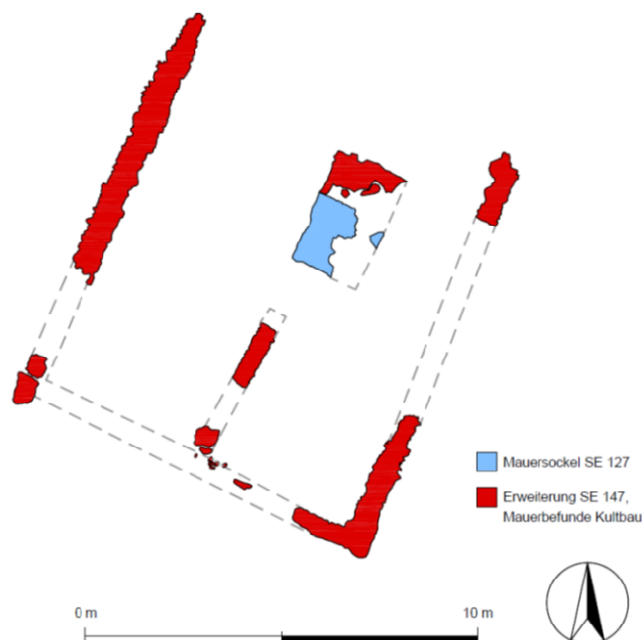


Fig. 3: Plan of the building on the eastern summit; blue: early base; red: building ca. 270ies AD (© L. Horváth 2020)

On the very eastern peak, harassing the aviators, it took four campaigns to unearth the poorly preserved remains of a fine Roman stone building with wall paintings and a tile roof, most

likely erected in the 270ies AD. The building (11 to 10 m, fig. 3) does not have a temple-layout, but encases an earlier base (altar?) built directly on the cleaned rock. A Radiocarbon date from sediment filling a small crevice nearby suggests earliest activity in the 1st half of the 1st century AD. As votive offerings, the eastern peak yielded mostly coins (n=66) ranging from Tiberius to Constantinus I. After 22 coins from the first and 1st half of the second centuries (peak with Traianus, last mints by Hadrianus), which may be assigned to the first cultural activities around the then open-air central base, there is a find gap of 120 years. Forty-four well-preserved coins from Valerianus to Constantinus (last mints from 326 AD) with a prominent peak of Aurelianus, Probus, and early tetrarchy, show an intensive, but short resumption of cultural activities in and around the new building, which must have been difficult to build and maintain in its exposed position. Although there are two fragments of graffiti in the murals, one listing a dedication item worth one and a half denarii, the other showing a line [...]ETICO V[...] – no deity with suffix [...]eticus is known – we cannot possibly assign the building to a certain deity. To judge from the position of the building, Jupiter, or, with an eye to Aurelian and Probus, Sol Invictus might be possible, maybe with a (hitherto unknown) by name of a local deity.

Also, for the second fanum, a 4.60 m deep karst funnel some 30 m west of the building (fig. 4), no deity can be named with any certainty, but it is sure it was a female one: Thousands of glass beads, 40 bracelets from “black glass”, lead mirror frames, a loom weight, several *lunulae*, finger rings from iron, bronze, silver, jet and glass, two golden earrings and fragments of female marble statuettes were found in the area around the karst shaft (fig. 5).



Fig. 4: The karst shaft *fanum* under excavation © author 2021



Fig. 5: Find samples from around the karst shaft fanum (no scale). © R. Pritz 2021.

The shaft itself was robbed to its depths by medieval treasure hunters in the later 12th or early 13th century, as proved by pottery and a radiocarbon date from the lowermost refill.

The heavily jointed rocky area around the funnel shows thorough Roman leveling to fill gaps, shaping the cleft mouth of the funnel into a smooth circle (diam. 5 m) and creating a proper sacred area; a coin of Aurelianus gives a *terminus post quem* of 273 AD for these works, showing the place was pimped in the same time the building on the eastern summit was erected. There are only a few earlier finds, e.g., fragments of pipe clay figurines and four coins of the 2nd and early 3rd centuries, but all in all, together with the “female” finds mentioned above, the place seems to have been fashionable only from the 2nd half of the 3rd century onwards. 98 of 102 coins date between Valerianus and Constantius II. (three Centenionales minted 351/361 AD), showing that the karst shaft area was used a generation longer than the (declining?) building on the nearby summit.

For both fana, there is no archaeological evidence for cult-continuity, neither of a Late Iron Age predecessor nor of any Early Christian (Late Antique or Migration Period) activity. In fact, the place seems too remote to keep up in less organized times with thinner population before and after the Roman Imperial Age.

The “via sacra” – or at least one of the ancient paths – climbs the south slope in several serpentine before reaching the karst-shaft area from the southwest. The latest excavation campaign in 2023 showed that the elaborate path, partly graveled, partly using smoothed rock sections and accompanied by dry stone walls or rows of boulders on the slope sides, was also built after the middle of the 3rd century and thus belongs to the overall design of the late sanctuary phase. The leveling underlying this trail contains numerous finds of the late first to middle third centuries (e. g., partially burnt and heavily fragmented Sigillata dishes, broken mills and sharpening stones, damaged bronze and iron tools, and lots of animal bones). Twelve coins range from Domitianus to Philippus Arabs. We may conclude that these are the remnants of garbage dumps of an uphill Alpine pasture settlement on the rim of the plateau. At least one of the traditional alpine log cabins, so far only localized on the surface by rows of

underlying stones, find concentrations of roof tile fragments from molehills, most likely also served as a hostel.

There are still a whole lot of questions to be solved apart from identifying the deities: how was the water problem solved on a karst mountain, how to explain the absence of military finds, was there activity in winter, who had the economic (or political) potential to build an elaborated sanctuary on a remote mountain peak in the second half of the troubled third century, and in detail: does the early first and second-century phase of the sanctuary (the early base on the eastern summit) go together with the Alpine pasture settlement in the western part of the site, which seems to have been abandoned when a proper path was built and the sanctuary enlarged?

The special exhibition in the unigraz@museum will be open until December 2024².

²<https://universitaetsmuseen.uni-graz.at/de/unsere-standorte/unigrazmuseum/sonderausstellungen/> [2024-06-19].