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Doctoral Paper

**The water Cult in the Northern Provinces of the
Roman Empire**

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2012

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Summary

Keywords: Roman religion, Northern provinces, cult of springs, cult of rivers, healing sanctuaries, votive altars

The purpose of the paper was to analyze the different forms of water cult, its origins, evolution, characteristics in different areas and historical ages and of course the evolution of human mentality visible from this point of view.

The historical period studied in this paper is that of the I-III centuries AD. However, considering the prehistoric origins of the cult and its permanent evolution, in order to fully understand the problem, a presentation of the pre roman period was also necessary. The geographic area of the research was conventionally named “the Northern provinces of the Roman Empire”, and it consists in Roman Britain, Gaul, Germany, Rhaetia, Noricum, Pannonia and Dacia. This area was chosen because it is placed at the border of the Empire and it was conquered in a relatively late period, which gave the indigent tribes the possibility to create an original culture and to maintain local characteristics even in Roman period due to their continuous relationship with the barbarians. These territories were organized in border provinces and had a strong military presence. As the Roman soldiers had different origins, they brought and introduced in the new provinces different cultural habits, traditions and religious believes. However, as we cannot respect the strict chronological period, the exact province borders will also not be respected. The study is focused on a religious issue which goes beyond the administrative structure of the Empire. These believes often have prehistoric origins and belong to tribes which were later organized in different provinces as the Celts for example.

The historical sources: the sources used in our research are in the first place archaeological ones, consisting in archaeological reports made in sanctuaries and different structures where the cult was practiced. Epigraphic sources, like votive altars, artistic representations of different divine figures, and numismatic and literal sources also had an important role in the research.

Research methodology: our research is chronologically structured, the paper being formed of two distinctive units: the first one analyzes the characteristics of the cult in the pre Roman time while the second, during the Roman time. In the first unit the subject is studied throughout the different prehistoric ages. In the second unit the subject is studied based on different issues, which are presented in the above mentioned provinces. As a consequence the paper is formed of four chapters: *The evolution of water cults before the Roman period*, *The cult of springs*, *The cult of rivers* and *The water between sacred and profane*, prefaced by an *Introduction* and a *History of the research*,

and followed by *Conclusions* and *Plates*. As a general remark, the study was not met to be an exhaustive one, neither in presenting all the secondary aspects of the cult, nor in describing all the archaeological finds. Such an intercession, especially for the prehistoric ages would involve a huge quantity of work and the results would have been insignificant, as the many votive offerings reveal the same characteristic of the cult.

Conclusions:

The first evidences about water related rituals date back to the end of the European Paleolithic and are related to hunting tribes, who made offerings to lakes, hoping that the magical rituals will increase the number of hunted animals. In the Neolithic age most of the religious beliefs related to water are already present in an inchoate form. The water is the basic element of cosmogony, it assures the fertility of nature and all beings, has healing powers, helps the diseased entering the new world and purifies the world by periodical destructions.

During the Bronze Age the society becomes more preoccupied by war and the new deities are placed in the swamps of Northern Europe, where they receive large quantities of weapon offerings. On the other hand, the cult of fertility, prevalent in the Neolithic seems to disappear. A series of finds testify the cult of springs and rivers, often believed to have healing powers. Also the role of water in the funerary cult becomes obvious, as offerings are made at graves, especially in the Mediterranean area.

In the Iron Age the water related rituals multiply considerably and they have more and more complex meanings. All the above mentioned characteristics are present, but in the southern part of Europe the fertilizing power of water is more visible, while in the North, it is seen more like a destructive force. Large water sanctuaries are built in this period and they receive considerable offerings including human sacrifices. In the cultures that left written evidence we can also notice different personifications of the water.

In ancient Greece the water cult is structured around different divine figures, it is reflected in the mythology and expressed through a series of rituals. The fertilizing power of water is visible in the cult of the goddesses Demeter and Core but also of the nymphs, who are protective deities of birth. The sea, as one of the defining elements of the Greek culture is controlled by the powerful god Poseidon who is also in charge of the terrestrial waters. The purifying and healing character of the water is visible in the cult of Apollo. In his sanctuaries are often placed oracles, which depend on the waters of a sacred fountain. The relationship between water and the underworld is expressed by the legends about Hades and the funerary rituals.

In the Roman religion the healing character of the water is prevailing. It is expressed through the cult of Aesculapius and of the Nymphs and proven by the large number of healing sanctuaries and baths, placed under divine protection. The cult of rivers is also highly present, as almost every major water way can be associated with a deity. The fertilizing power of water is represented by the Nymphs, but the cult of Neptune is less important comparing to Greece.

In Gaul and Germany the water cult has ancient origins, often prior to the Celtic civilization. Springs and lakes are often worshiped as healing forces or divine residences. The cult of rivers was less practiced but it gain importance once with the Roman conquest, when the water cult generally flourished and local deities were accepted by Romans.

In the Roman period the cult of springs was present in every province but its meanings and frequency varies from one region to another.

The deities associated with a spring cult in the Northern provinces are both local, like: Grannus, Sirona, Sulis, Coventina, Nemetona, Nemauso, Nerios, Sequana, Rosmerta, Icovellauna, Mattiaca, Abnoba, Borvo, Damona, Noreia, Belinus and Latobius and Roman ones like: Apollo, the nymphs, Minerva, Diana, Silvanus, Aesculapius, Hygia, Hercules, Mercury, Fortuna, Mars, Nemesis and Fons. The rituals performed in spring sanctuaries consisted in ritual baths, which could be performed on the territory of the sanctuary or in the medical bathhouses associated with some sanctuaries, and in the ritual consuming of the water, proven by the presence of many drinking vessels. However not all the spring sanctuaries had healing character, or not just healing character, as shown by the curse plates found at Bath.

In our research area the cult of Neptune is not highly present. The God does not own to many epigraphic or figurative monuments. In the Northern provinces his cult has a more public and military character, and it is often used in the imperial propaganda. The river deities also have a relatively small number of monuments. They are dedicated to the Rhine and Danube but sometimes we can also find representations of the Save, Seine, Thames or Mures. The votive altars and the figurative representations of these deities on sculptural monuments or coins are also used in propagandistic purposes.

As we analyze the bonds between certain public monuments and the water cult we can establish some conclusions regarding the intersection between the religious and profane area. In case of the bathhouses the first category of monuments studied, it is necessary to make a distinction between medical and classical baths. Medical baths can be identified by the presence of a spring sanctuary or by the presence of specific archaeological finds like representations of human body parts, medical

instruments or votive altars. In this case the deities worshiped in the sanctuary are also present in the bathhouse. They can be both local and Roman deities. However divine representations can be found also in classic bathhouses, with no obvious medical character. These deities can have mythological relationships with the water, like the Nymphs, Venus, Apollo, Serapes or Isis or they can represent certain physical characteristics, which the users of bathhouses wish to achieve, like Hercules or Venus.

Regarding the cult of Aesculapius and the use of water in his sanctuaries, we were able to identify different situations in the studied provinces. In Roman Britain the god of medicine does not own any sanctuary, the few votive monuments and figurative representations were all found in military regions, being probably placed in medical facilities inside forts. The situation is almost identical in Roman Gaul, where we do not have any epigraphic or archaeological evidence of a sanctuary. However the relationship with water is visible through two votive monuments found on the territory of two spring sanctuaries at Vichy and Mont-de-Sene. In Roman Germany we were able to identify seven votive altars dedicated to Aesculapius, but unfortunately none of them offers any information about a sacred spring or fountain. In Noricum several sculptural fragments of the deity were discovered in the same room, but unfortunately we have no evidence regarding the presence of a water source. The situation changes considerably in Roman Pannonia and Dacia, where Aesculapius owns several sanctuaries, all of them placed near springs or water sources, and having sacred fountains. Regarding the cult of Aesculapius we were also able to observe that especially in military forts it tends to become more like medical science and less like religious believe.

Regarding the problem of the nymphaeum-s like religious or profane monuments we have to make a clear difference according to the period of time we are studying. During the Roman Empire and the existence of the Northern provinces the term designates exclusively monumental fountains, profane constructions with practical and propagandistic role, and the divine representations attached to these monuments have only decorative purposes.