

The Cult of Springs in Roman Dacia on the Basis of Epigraphic Evidence

ANDREA CUMURCIUC*

THE CULT of springs has been intensively studied in some Roman provinces, such as Gaul, Germania and Britain, but regarding the territory of Roman Dacia we have very little such research. The main approach here has been the research of the cult of a certain deity, and not of an attribute that belongs to different divine characters. The present study proposes to present epigraphic evidence which indicate the practice of the cult of springs in the province of Dacia, under the protection of different Gods, and also to identify the respective sanctuaries.

The cult of springs is a religious phenomenon known since the Neolithic period, associated with the development of agriculture, having its origins in the belief in the fertilizing power of water¹. The ritual consisted in votive offerings of different objects to springs, including hot springs, considered to have healing powers². In the Bronze Age the cult developed and among the offerings we can also find human remains, proof of ritual sacrifices³. The source sanctuaries emerged in the Iron Age, especially within the Gallic and Germanic areas⁴. In the Roman Republic, the water of natural sources was used for purification⁵. The cult of springs was formally introduced in Roman religion with the feast named Fontinalia, and a temple was dedicated outside the walls of Rome in the year 231 BC⁶ to the god Fons, a personification of all springs. When the Roman civilization extended as a result of territorial conquest the cult of springs developed considerably. The Romans took over and introduced in their own pantheon the deities of conquered nations.

On the territory of Roman Dacia, the cult of springs can be studied in several places. The best known case is Băile Herculane, a resort with hot springs, water pipes, pools, private and public buildings. The Roman settlement with the probable name of Ad Mediam⁷ has never been systematically researched, and has been largely

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destroyed during the construction of the modern resort. On the other hand, the settlement yielded a rich epigraphic material, statues of divinities and votive reliefs.

Twelve of the discovered votive altars are dedicated to the Greek hero Herakles, in his Roman form as Hercules⁸. The attributes of the god are Augustus, Invictus, Salutaris and Sanctus. The surname Salutaris, and the expression *pro salute*, used in two inscriptions IDR III/1, 57, 58 denote a deity with a healing function. On one votive altar, Hercules is associated with the Genius Loci and the Hot Springs *herculi genio / loci fontibus / calidis*⁹. The association reveals the way in which visitors understood the sacredness of the space. Hercules is the protector deity of the resort, and his power expresses itself through the Hot Springs, so he could be considered a Genius Loci. Obviously, the tree deities could also have been worshiped separately, and the inscription seems to support this theory. The altar was dedicated by Calpurnius Iulianus, commander of the fifth legion and governor of the province of Moesia Inferior between 177 and 180 AD¹⁰. The general was only visiting Băile Herculane and when he realized the positive effects of hot springs he wanted to express his gratitude towards the gods. In order to avoid any possible inaccuracy he preferred to mention all tree deities, even if they are complementary. On the other hand, the members of the mission sent to Rome, Ulpus Secundinus, Marius Valens, Pomponius Haemus, Iulius Carus and Valerius Valens, are more concise and dedicate an altar to the gods and powers of water: *dis et numinibus / aquarum*¹¹. The healing character of the hot springs can also be seen on the two votive altars dedicated to the gods of medicine, Aesculapius and Hygia. Marcus Aurelius Veteranus, an officer of the thirteenth legion, dedicated them to *diis magnis / et bonis aescu / lapio et hygiae*¹². The relationship between the gods of medicine and the hot springs is clearly proven by the inscription carved on a marble altar: *Aesculapio / et Hygiae / pro salute Iuniae / Cyrillae quod a / longa infirmitate / te virtute aqua / rum numinis sui / revocaverunt*¹³, in translation: "To Aesculapius and Hygia for the health of Iunia Cyrilla, who recovered from a severe illness thank to the virtues and divine powers of water."

Based on the presented facts we can confirm the existence of a source sanctuary in the Roman settlement of Ad Mediam. The sacred character of the water is revealed by the reference to the god Fons, but also by placing the springs under the protection of different deities such as Hercules, Aesculapius and Hygia. The healing power of the water is proven by the medical character of the protector gods, but also by the epigraphic evidence of an actual healing that took place there. The presence of Hercules in a source sanctuary with a healing character is neither unusual nor unique. The Greek hero is by his very nature close to the human species, he is aware of the sufferings of mortals and, being the expression of physical power and vitality, he can contribute to the healing process. A similar case was identified in Roman Gaul, in the source sanctuary at Deneuvre¹⁴. Even if the physical traces of the sanctuary at Băile Herculane have never been found, the existence of a sacred place with hot water pools for ritual baths and votive altars, signs of gratitude towards the deities, is almost certain.

Another representative case for the cult of springs is the ancient settlement of Germisara, nowadays Geoagiu Băi. The site with a name of Dacian origin¹⁵ was frequently visited in imperial times for its waters¹⁶. The ruins of the Roman baths were found at a distance of almost 5 km from the military fort of Cigmău. Regarding the construction of the baths, we can identify two different phases. In the first stage, the Romans used only the natural cavity filled with hot water, a natural pool from which archaeologists were able to recover almost 600 coins, 8 small gold plates, a marble statue, 4 votive altars and other objects¹⁷. In the second stage, a network of canals was dug in order to bring the water to the wooden pools¹⁸. The sacred character of the settlement is revealed by the inscriptions and the sculptural monuments dedicated to the healing deities, protectors of the springs.

The artifacts recovered from the natural cavity offer a series of clues regarding the deities that were worshiped here. The marble statue represents goddess Diana hunting, one of the gold plates is offered to the same deity, one to Hygia and tree to the Nymphs¹⁹. All artifacts are offerings, laid around the natural cavity, which then fell in. Because of the large number of pieces recovered from the same place, we can consider the natural cavity as being the center of the sanctuary. But votive offerings were recovered from the whole area of the Roman baths. Tree of the votive altars are dedicated to the gods of medicine Aesculapius and Hygia²⁰. Five other altars are dedicated to the Nymphs²¹. The deities are mentioned with the epithets *regina undarum, Augustae, salutiferae* și *sanctissimae*. On the altar posed by Bassus²² the Nymphs are clearly mentioned as deities who protect the hot and mineral springs from Germisara, and answer the prayers of believers. The inscription does not specify the nature of the aid, but the Nymphs as deities of nature and of springs are often associated with the gods of medicine, a fact also proven by the epithet *salutifer*, and therefore we can assume that the aid given was in case of disease. A votive altar posed by Marcus Aurelius Theodotus in 190 AD²³ is relevant for identifying the main deities, but also the rituals performed within the sanctuary. The deities invoked are the sacred Nymphs, the goddess Diana, and their Spring, and the ritual consists of “fortifying himself tree times in the waters of Germisara.” This inscription are proof of a source sanctuary with a healing character, protected by the gods, such as the Nymphs, Diana, Aesculapius and Hygia, a sanctuary in which ritual baths took place and some believers could recover their health.

Another spa of Roman Dacia was known under the name of Aquae, and it was situated in the same place as the modern resort of Călan. From the Roman baths at Aquae, the only element still preserved is a pool carved in the natural cliff, measuring 14.2 x 7.1 x 3.7 m²⁴. The only inscription that by association can be related with the spring cult is a votive altar dedicated to Hercules by Marcus Iulius Proclianus²⁵.

We have more information from the colonia Ulpia Traiana, where the gods of medicine Aesculapius and Hygia had a sanctuary, studied between 1973 and 1976. Inside the sacred area were identified several temples and auxiliary buildings indicating two phases of construction²⁶. Regarding the subject of this paper, an inscription

from the sanctuary is of particular interest²⁷—*fo[ntibus] / Aesc[culapi et] / H[ygiae]*. The inscription is not addressed directly to the gods of medicine, but to their fountain, the ancient Italic god Fons. The archaeological excavations revealed the existence of a fountain inside de sanctuary in each of the two phases of construction²⁸. Both the fountain and the inscription testify to the importance of water in the cult of Aesculapius. The spring-fountains were considered holy, and their water was used in the purification rituals that took place in the sanctuary.

Two votive altars found at Ulpia Traiana are dedicated to the gods Apollo Gran-nus and Sirona²⁹. Apollo is the Roman god of purification, with a healing character. In the Roman province of Gaul he is associated with the local deity Grannus, the god of springs. The traditional companion of Grannus is goddess Sirona, also a healing character. The divine couple is represented under this aspect in a bronze statue found at Dijon, in France³⁰. Their presence in the capital of Dacia proves the relationship of the person who made the dedications with the province of Gaul, and it is not evidence of a widespread religious phenomenon.

The fountains discovered in the sanctuary of the gods of medicine are not the only ones in the capital of Dacia. Two other monumental fountains were placed on both sides of the entrance to the forum. Unfortunately the only surviving parts are the foundations. The fountains had a central pool with four columns which supported the roof. Behind the pool there was a wall with tree niches, in order to protect the statues of the fountain³¹. From these statues, only some fragments were preserved, one of them representing the god Neptune, and the other a Nymph holding a shell from which water flowed³². The presence of a divine figure places the construction within a sacred area, so it can be considered a *nymphaeum*, even if its main purpose was practical in nature.

The gods of medicine were not worshipped only in Ulpia Traiana. 21 votive inscriptions dedicated to Aesculapius and Hygia were found on the territory of colonia Aurelia Apulensis³³. On six monuments³⁴ we can find the formula *Numini Aesculapii et Hygiae*, which means that believers directly invoked the healing powers of the gods. On eight other monuments we can find the expression *pro salute*³⁵. On a marble plate which represents Aesculapius, Hygia and Epiona, each of them holding a snake, we have the formula *deo Aescul(apio) et Hygiae*,³⁶ and on a votive altar the believer speaks directly to the gods—*auribus Aesc[u] / lapi(i) et Hygiae*³⁷. The gods of medicine were part of a group of deities who listened to prayers, and their images and also the objects dedicated to them were penetrated by the gods' *numen*, so they could hear the people's wishes. Yet, to be sure, prayers could be addressed directly to their ears³⁸. The gods of medicine are associated on a single inscription with Apollo and Diana³⁹, who also had healing attributes, and on one altar⁴⁰ they appear together with "the other healing gods and goddesses"—*Aesculapio / et Hygiae ce / terisq(ue) diis dea / busq(ue) / loci salitarib(us)*.

Three votive inscriptions found at Apulum⁴¹, dedicated to the same gods, certify the construction of three porticos. In the first case, Publius Aelius Rufinus, decurion of municipium Apulum, built a forty feet-long portico to the health of his wife, his

son and himself. In the second case, Publius Aelius Syrus, *augustalis* of *municipium Apulum*, together with his wife and their daughter, built a 30 feet-long *portico*, and in the third case Marcus Gallius Epictetus, *augustalis* of *colonia Apulum*, together with his wife and three sons built a 36 feet-long *portico*. The constructions prove the existence of a sanctuary where they could be placed. The same theory is supported also by the large number of inscriptions for Aesculapius and Hygia, but also by the expression used by C. Iulius Frontonianus, who dedicates an altar for the “healing deities of the place”⁴². From the same sanctuary we have two other votive monuments for the healing deities. One of them is dedicated to Apollo *salutaris* by C. Iulius Varianus, to the health of his wife and son⁴³. The other one⁴⁴ is dedicated to Apollo, Diana, Letona and the other healing deities of the sanctuary by C. Iulius Frontonianus, who built them a bridge. The building plate was discovered on the territory of *colonia Aurelia Apulensis*, near lake Taușor, in the same place where the inscriptions for Aesculapius, Hygia and the other healing gods⁴⁵, and also the one for Apollo *salutaris*⁴⁶ were found. Thus, we can assume that the sanctuary was located near the lake, and the bridge built by C. Iulius Frontonianus provided access to the sacred area⁴⁷.

C. Iulius Frontonianus also offers information about the activities that took place in the sanctuary, and about their efficiency. On the altar dedicated to Aesculapius, Hygia and the other healing deities⁴⁸ he mentions a dream that helped him regain his eyesight. The dream is a reference to the ritual called incubation, practiced usually in the healing sanctuaries, a ritual during which the patient received instructions directly from the god through a dream subsequently interpreted by the personnel of the sanctuary. The fact that C. Iulius Frontonianus did indeed recover his eyesight as a consequence of such a ritual proves that real medical activities were taking place in the sanctuary. Even in the absence of archaeological evidence it is hard to imagine the functioning of the sanctuary without sacred fountains or springs, especially knowing the situation at *Ulpia Traiana*, where the fountains were found in situ, and also mentioned in inscriptions.

The only epigraphic evidence of the existence of a sacred fountain in *Apulum* is the monument of *Ulpius Proculus*, at the command of Apollo, rebuilt the fountain of the god *Aeternus*⁴⁹—*ex iussu dei / Apollinis fon / tem Aeterni Ulp(ius) / Proculus / Speculator / Leg(ionis) XIII G(eminiae) Gordia / nae a solo resti / tuit*. *Aeternus* is a sun-related deity from *Asia Minor*⁵⁰, and probably like Apollo he also has a purifying character, which would explain the existence of a fountain dedicated to him.

A number of votive altars were found during archaeological excavations in the Roman mining settlement of *Alburnus Maior*, two of them dedicated to the Nymphs⁵¹ and tree to the god Neptune⁵². The two persons dedicating to the Nymphs are *Implaius Sumeletis* and *Aelius Mes...* *Sardiata*, the last term being a reference to the tribe of the *Sardeates*. Judging by their names, they are from *Dalmatia*, probably *Illyrian* miners, brought by the Roman state to exploit the local resources. The Nymphs, goddesses of nature and of springs, were also worshiped by miners as protectors of the water used to separate the minerals. On the other hand, they

were also feared as destructive powers⁵³, symbols of the water that could flood the galleries and endanger the miners' lives. Neptune is known in Roman mythology as the god of seas. His cult is one of the oldest Italic cults, and he was initially the god of water. Only later, under the Greek influence, he became the god of seas. His terrestrial character is proven by the date of his annual celebration, on 23 July, in the middle of the summer and in a period of drought⁵⁴. This is the only reasonable explanation for the votive altars placed in a mountain area, far from the coast. On the other hand, people dedicating to Neptune are also Illyrians, Surio Sumeletis, Nassidius Primus and Valerius Nico Platoris, and in the Illyrian religion there is a god of water, Bindus, worshiped in Dalmatia under the form Bindus-Neptune⁵⁵. So the miners from Alburnus Maior worshiped, under the name Neptune, an Illyrian deity, a god of terrestrial water, with an important role in their professional activity. The altar dedicated to the Nymphs by Implaius Sumeletis was found within the same area as the ones dedicated to Neptune⁵⁶, so we can assume the existence of a sanctuary to the water deities.

Another interesting point for this study is at Săcelu, Gorj, where the archeological excavations uncovered a part of a Roman civilian settlement. On an altar fragment discovered in the area we have a dedication to Aesculapius and Hygia⁵⁷. If the Romans knew the healing qualities of the waters at Săcelu, than this is the original place of the monument, and there was probably also a spring sanctuary here. Obviously this theory is for the moment just an assumption.

Consequently we can confirm the existence of the cult of springs in certain locations, such as Băile Herculane, Germisara and Călan, and also in some possible locations, such as Alburnus Maior and Săcelu. The cult of springs had a special role in resorts. Among the protector gods of water we find Hercules, the Nymphs, Aesculapius and Hygia, Apollo, Diana, Neptune, Fons, Apollo Grannus and Sirona, but also more abstract concepts such as the Genium Locus, the healing powers of the water, or unidentified water deities. In all cases, maybe excepting Alburnus Maior, the water deities have healing attributes.

Alongside the spring sanctuaries the cult is present also in sacred places dedicated to other deities, especially to Aesculapius, such as at Ulpia Traiana and Apulum, but also in public places within a *nymphaeum*.



Notes

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9. IDR III/1, 67.
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21. IDR III/3, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243.
22. IDR III/3, 239.
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26. Adriana Rusu-Pescaru, Dorin Alicu, *Templele romane din Dacia*, Deva, Acta Musei Devensis, 2000, p. 32–41.
27. IDR III/2, 183.
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34. IDR III/5, 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 19.
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36. IDR III/5, 9
37. IDR III/5, 20

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41. IDR III/5, 6, 7, 13.
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Abstract

The Cult of Springs in Roman Dacia on the Basis of Epigraphic evidence

The cult of springs is a religious phenomenon known since the Neolithic period. During its evolution the cult acquired a number of values and traditions, and by the time of the Roman Empire it became a mixture of diverse cultural influences. On the territory of Roman Dacia, the existence of the cult was observed at Băile Herculane. The protector of the hot springs is the god Hercules, associated with Fontes Calides and Genium Locus, all of them having healing attributes. The Germisara hot springs are under the protection of Nymphs, of the goddess Diana and the medicine gods Aesculapius and Hygia. These gods received many offerings, placed around the natural cave of the hot spring. A sanctuary dedicated to a spring existed for sure at Călan, but unfortunately the only part preserved is a pool dug into the cliff, and an inscription dedicated to Hercules.

The Illyrian miners from Alburnus Maior dedicated votive altars to the Nymphs and to Neptune, both representing terrestrial waters, a part of their professional activity.

The springs were also worshipped in the sanctuaries of other gods. Two sacred fountains were found inside the sanctuary of Aesculapius and Hygia at Ulpia Traiana, and an inscription was dedicated to *Fontibus Aesculapii et Hygiae*. At Apulum we know about the existence of another sanctuary of Aesculapius and Hygia, but the only fountain mentioned is the one belonging to the god Aeternus.

Other possible spring sanctuaries existed at Săcelu, but water could be worshipped also in public spaces through a nymphaeum, such as the one in the Ulpia Traiana forum.

Keywords

Băile Herculane, Germisara, Nymphs, Neptune, Aesculapius