

## A ROMAN AGE VOTIVE OFFERING IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURE C 018 FROM CRISTIAN I, SIBIU COUNTY

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**Keywords:** Cristian, Roman age, well, hand-mill, votive

**Cuvinte cheie:** Cristian, epocă romană, fântână, râșniță, votiv

*During the archaeological excavations at Cristian I, Sibiu county, two Roman features, C 026 and C 018, were found. C 018 was a Roman well, with a preserved timber structure, containing a fragment of a hand-mill (meta). This context and associated behavior has not yet been observed in the province of Dacia. Analogies from the western provinces of the Empire indicate it was a votive offering made at the decommission and abandonment of the structure.*

The frequency of votive offerings from Neolithic to the Modern Age has fluctuated significantly<sup>1</sup>. In the present context, the complex C 018 falls in the category of “water finds”, respectively archaeological items found in rivers, streams, lakes and swamps, but also ponds and fountains. These discoveries are often labelled hoards and deposits, and are an important part of the archaeological record. The number of artifacts found in water environments is in the tens of thousands in Europe, the greatest majority dating from the late Bronze Age or La Tène<sup>2</sup>.

In the Roman world all water bodies, regardless of size, were perceived as an expression of the sacred. As a result, each time its course and/or shape was modified, it became the object of ritualistic practices<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, any action altering the water body’s state had to be marked with a *piaculum*, by which the deity associated with it was asked for permission to proceed<sup>4</sup>. Ritualistic abandonment of wells and fountains has also a counterpart in “civilian” (i.e. not sacred) environments<sup>5</sup>.

The salvage archaeological excavations made in the fourth sector of the Sibiu – Orăștie highway, on the site Cristian I, revealed the existence of a settlement and of a sacred area belonging to the Early Neolithic – Starčevo-Criș Culture, phase I<sup>6</sup>. During the excavation, on the second terrace, two Roman age features, C 018 and C 026, were found. C 026 was an area comprising stones and small pottery fragments, possibly a building, impossible to delimitate planimetrically, situated in the immediate vicinity of feature C 018<sup>7</sup>. The purpose of this building is open to interpretation, although it could

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<sup>1</sup> Wehrberger 2001, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Wehrberger 2001, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Champeaux 2003, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Carandini 2003, p. 410; Santi 2004, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> Diosono 2010, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Luca 2012, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Luca 2012, p. 61.

have served as a warehouse or worker quarters. The pottery suggests that it had been the focus of domestic activity.

The feature C 018 was a circular pit filled with gravel, small stones, pigment and fragmented Roman pottery. On the bottom of the pit, several pieces of timber were found, placed horizontally on vertical pegs at the corners to form of a rectangular well, at – 1,20 m (**Pl. I/1**). These were the only items preserved *in situ* from the original structure. The well had a cobblestone pavement, with a plank dividing it in two<sup>8</sup>.

During the excavation of the wooden structure in feature C 018, on the right side of the southwestern corner peg, a fragment of a Roman hand-mill (*meta*) was found, measuring 27,1 × 20,23 cm, roughly a quarter of the original artifact (**Pl. I/2**). The field workers removed it before the feature was photographed, hence the reason this item was not previously mentioned<sup>9</sup>. However, its location was documented (X marks the spot) (**Pl. I/1**).

In a Roman context, for the most households, milling would have been a lengthy and arduous task. The lower stones of hand querns (*meta*) have to be securely immobilized so that they do not move when the upper stone is rotated. Where quern stones have remained *in situ*, they are embedded into the floor<sup>10</sup>. An archaeological bias towards this type of querns (or quern parts) is to be expected. However, this emplacement of the grounded quern stone was most likely the norm as opposed to the typical museum reconstructions which have the querns placed at a convenient waist height, on a wooden surface. Both ethnographic and experimental observations point to the emplacement of the querns being the most effective at ground level<sup>11</sup>.

A study regarding the fragmentation of Roman quern stones from Holland has noticed several metal blade marks on various stones, indicating the possibility of voluntary destruction<sup>12</sup>. A hand-mill destroyed during usage or transport would have been most likely randomly discarded<sup>13</sup>. The fact that most quern stones found in specific contexts are fragmented would imply a form of remission, a ritual itself. Fragmentation, as a ritual, multiplies the object itself in order for every to “inherit” a fragment as a souvenir and/or to promote social cohesion<sup>14</sup>. The location of the finds seems to indicate that at least 37% of this type of objects were used in rituals<sup>15</sup>.

Across Europe, hand-mills (quernstones) have been found in pits, wells and fountains. In England, it seems that during the Iron Age, quernstones may have been propitiatory offerings in pits that had lost their watertight seal<sup>16</sup>. Deposition of hand-mills in (sweet-) water wells has been identified in late Iron Age sites in France and Switzerland<sup>17</sup>.

For the Roman age there are two analogies in Britannia, at Middlewich, where quern stones offerings were found. The first one is a large fragment of a Roman hand-mill in a timber-lined well<sup>18</sup> (**Pl. II/1**). The other one was found intact in a square-shaped

<sup>8</sup> Luca 2012, p. 61, 90-91, fig. 21-24.

<sup>9</sup> Luca 2012, p. 90-91, fig. 21-24.

<sup>10</sup> Frere 1972, p. 78; Price 2000, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Cool 2006, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Hopman 2010, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Hopman 2010, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Hopman 2010, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Hopman 2010, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Watts 2014, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Information provided by Martin Hees (State Office for Cultural Heritage Baden-Württemberg).

<sup>18</sup> <https://middlewichdig.wordpress.com/2012/08/> (Accessed: 02.08.2012 ).

timber-lined brine well with an associated lead sheet<sup>19</sup> (Pl. II/2). The way the latter object was placed, in a corner formed by vertical timbers, strongly suggest a votive offering. The presence of such an object in this position, after the brine well was closed, is otherwise difficult to explain. The other Middlewich find, the fragment of the hand-mill, found inside the square-shaped well, near a corner, could be interpreted in a similar way. It is interesting to note that both items are part to the inferior/lower quern stone, the *meta*.

Similar discoveries were made in France, at *La Fontaine salée* in Magnien (Côte d'Or, Bourgogne), where a hand mill was found in a well near the remains from a small temple and one hand-mill, or at *Source mourotte* in Jouhe (Jura), where a large hand-mill was found close to the entrance<sup>20</sup>. In Germany, very few brine wells were excavated, none of which have yielded hand-mills<sup>21</sup>.

Ethnographical studies have shown that brine wells are built in a similar fashion as sweet-water fountain. Once a proper location has been identified, a pit is dug, down to three meters in some areas. The bottom is paved with cobblestone to filter the water. The well walls are then consolidated with planks all the way to the top<sup>22</sup>.

In and around Cristian commune, saltwater springs are not yet attested<sup>23</sup>. But the preserved timber, the cobblestone pavement, the votive offering in the form of a hand-mill fragment, would suggest that the fountain from Cristian I was probably a brine well which was later ritually backfilled and abandoned, as it was attested in other parts of the Empire.

The Roman age dwelling (C 026) and the brine well (C 018) were about 500 meters South-East from a presumed *villa rustica*<sup>24</sup> or Daco-Roman settlement<sup>25</sup>. At the base of the terraced hill, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century denarius issued for Barbia Sallustia Orbiana was found<sup>26</sup>. So, there is a possibility that the brine well was used for feeding the livestock from the *villa* or the rural settlement, and its particular ritualistic abandonment was connected with the presence of individuals who came in Dacia from the western provinces, perhaps some veterans. This well would have been the southern limit of the *villa*/settlement, while the mentioned stream bed<sup>27</sup>, with its filling of pottery fragments, would indicate its eastern limits.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page\\_id=143](http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page_id=143) (Accessed: 02.08.2012).

<sup>20</sup> Information provided by Olivier Weller (Université Paris 1).

<sup>21</sup> Information provided by Martin Hees.

<sup>22</sup> Chiricescu 2006, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> *Patrimoniu* 2015, *passim*.

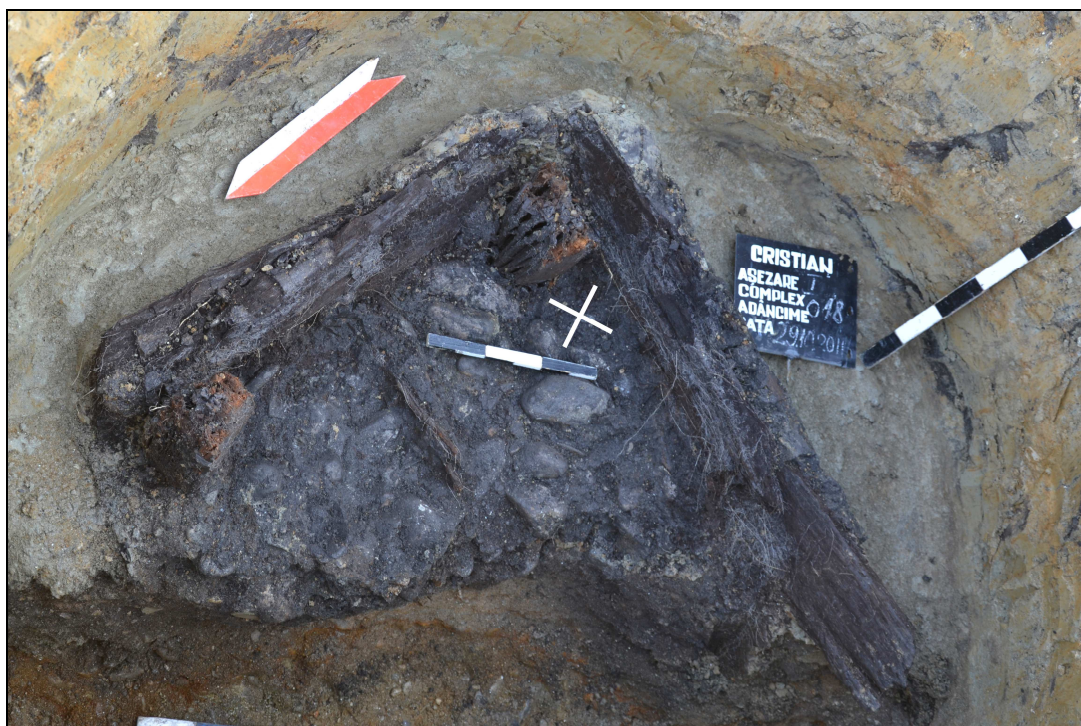
<sup>24</sup> Munteanu 2010, p. 463-465.

<sup>25</sup> Popa 2002, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Purece 2003, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Luca 2012, p. 59.

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**Pl. I.** 1. Cristian I. The feature C 018 where X marks the findspot of the Roman hand-mill fragment; 2. Cristian I. Fragment of a Roman hand-mill found in feature C 018 (Photo: A. Luca)



**Pl. II.** 1. Middlewich. A fragment of a Roman hand-mill in a timber-lined well (after <https://middlewichdig.wordpress.com/2012/08/>) (Accessed: 02.08.2012); 2. Middlewich. Intact Roman hand-mill in a square-shaped timber-lined brine well with a lead sheet (after [http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page\\_id=143](http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page_id=143)) (Accessed: 02.08.2012)

**O depunere votivă de epocă romană în complexul arheologic C 018 de la  
Cristian I, județul Sibiu**

**Rezumat**

Cu ocazia cercetărilor arheologice de la Cristian I, județul Sibiu, au fost descoperite și două complexe de epocă romană, C 026 și C 018 (**Pl. I/1**). În C 018, o fântână romană, au fost descoperite piese din lemn și un fragment dintr-o râșniță (*meta*) (**Pl. I/2**). Acesta pare să fie un obicei inedit în provincia Dacia, analogiile din provinciile din vestul imperiului (**Pl. II/1-2**) confirmând că aceasta a fost o depunere votivă la dezafectarea și abandonarea structurii.

**Lista ilustrațiilor**

**Pl. I.** 1. Cristian I. Complexul C 018 în care X marchează locul în care se afla fragmentul de râșniță romană; 2. Cristian I. Fragmentul unei râșnițe romane descoperite în complexul C 018 (Foto: A. Luca)

**Pl. II.** 1. Middlewich. Fragmentul unei râșnițe romane într-o fântână căptușită cu scânduri de lemn (după <https://middlewichdig.wordpress.com/2012/08/>) (Accesat: 02.08.2012); 2. Middlewich. O râșniță romană într-o fântână cu apă sărată, rectangulară în secțiune, căptușită cu scânduri de lemn și o foaie de plumb (după [http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page\\_id=143](http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/?page_id=143)) (Accesat: 02.08.2012)