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Any correspondence will be sent to the editor:
INSTITUTUL DE ARHEOLOGIE ȘI ISTORIA ARTEI
Str. M. Kogălniceanu nr. 12–14, 400084 Cluj-Napoca, RO
e-mail: choprean@yahoo.com

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DELIBERATE DESTRUCTION AND RITUAL DEPOSITION AS CASE STUDY IN THE LIBER PATER-SANCTUARY OF APULUM

Alfred Schäfer¹

Abstract: *A Bacchic sanctuary at Colonia Aurelia Apulensis (now Alba Iulia in Romania) is presented here as an example of deliberate deposits in pits as part of a sequence of religious acts. The methodological approach is governed by the question of what archaeological criteria would contribute to the identification of a ritual deposition and the deliberate destruction of offerings to the gods.*

Keywords: *Deposits of votive offerings, gifts to the gods, favissae, collective and individual religious practices*

Communication in ancient religions was mainly by means of symbolic acts and rituals, which can only be identified archaeologically if they have left traces buried in the ground. Ritual activity can be determined by the analysis of these material remains, especially gifts dedicated to the gods and the remnants of sacrificial offerings and religious feasts. Many objects that can be interpreted as gifts to the gods, or the remains of such gifts, have been recovered from a large number of sanctuaries in the Mediterranean and neighbouring areas. As a rule, the material is extremely fragmented and is often found in especially created deposits. These sometimes quite large deposits of votive offerings, with the remnants of a sacrifice and religious feast, are the material remains of a symbolic exchange of gifts with the gods. In the individual context of each ancient sanctuary, the question arises of what religious activity can be deduced and reconstructed from these deposits. What finds and features are the result of a ritual deposition or deliberate destruction of offerings to the gods? Once the sequence of actions has been determined, a more general question can be addressed. Which deposits in the sanctuaries can be attributed to individual or group-specific patterns of behaviour?

1. Research situation

The most extensive excavations of sanctuaries in the Mediterranean area were carried out at the end of the 19th century or early in the 20th century, at a time when archaeological research was primarily concerned with questions relating to the history of art. In order to be able to publish the large quantities of excavated material, different researchers processed the various categories of material separately and concentrated above all on its chronological and artistic classification. Moreover, the features unearthed during these excavations were often inadequately recorded and many remains of the rituals performed, such as the sherds of vessels used in the ritual and bones left over from a sacrificial feast, were not recovered because they were insignificant from the art history point of view. All this meant that the find contexts were lost from sight and, for a long time, the interpretation of the finds and

¹ Römisch-Germanisches Museum der Stadt Köln, Roncalli-Platz 4, 50667 Köln, Deutschland, email: alfred.schaefer@stadt-koeln.de.

features in the sanctuaries did not take into consideration their relevance for the history of religion. Only since the 1980s can a change in approach be observed. In more recent investigations, the religious significance of the votive offerings found in Greek sanctuaries is increasingly taken into account and the find contexts of the offerings are analysed with regard to the rituals in which they played a part². Not only the votive offerings themselves but also the remains of the ritual feast are paid greater attention, especially since it has become clear that an analysis of the ritual pottery, and the features in which it was found, permits the reconstruction of aspects of the rites that are not reflected in the written and iconographic sources³. Finally, the bones deposited in the sanctuaries are now subjected to scientific analysis to determine what animals were sacrificed and how they were butchered and prepared⁴. Over the last few years, the new emphasis on questions relating to the history of religion and ritual traditions has led to a more detailed examination of the features found in recent excavations⁵, but the depositions in Greek sanctuaries have still not been the object of comparative investigations.

As far as Italy is concerned, a separate series of publications, the *Corpus delle stipi votive*, has endeavoured to record the finds and their contexts⁶. Archaeologically oriented research into rituals in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire has only just begun and is often dealt with under the heading of Romanization⁷. Particular attention is paid not only to osteological but also to botanical remains: their identification can reveal yet other aspects of religious activity, such as the composition of food offerings and libations or eating and drinking habits at banquets in the sanctuaries⁸. Unlike the animal bones, the remains of ephemeral sacrifices and food are only preserved if they were exposed to fire. Typical find contexts include pits containing enormous quantities of votive offerings. Researchers often see these votive pits as evidence of a widespread individual religious practice⁹. Whether there were also factors beyond the individual that influenced personal decisions – the rhythm of group-related festivals or perhaps specifically regional and local traditions – still remains to be investigated within the context of each sanctuary.

Depositions of votive offerings in pits are often referred to as *favissae* in archaeological terminology. Care must be taken here, however. The origin of the expression is a passage in Aulus Gellius 2,10, which gives an account of a typical dispute among scholars and is primarily of a theoretical nature with little in common with the everyday language of the time¹⁰. Already in the 1st century BC, the term *favissae* was obviously barely still understood by linguists. The expression should therefore no longer be in general use by modern scholars for votive pits in sanctuaries. The antique usage suggests a firmly established way of depositing, storing and disposing of votive offerings and other material from a sanctuary. By the indiscriminate use of an antique literary term for archaeological finds and features, a static construction is created, which does not correspond to the variety and dynamism that exists in religious practice. Indeed, it is the very variety in the ritual depositions that has to be investigated by a broad-based archaeological study of rituals.

² ALROTH 1998; ALROTH 1998a; VÖLLING 2002; HAASE 2003.

³ KRON 1988; KRON 1992.

⁴ FORSTENPOINTNER 2003.

⁵ FIEDLER 2005.

⁶ e.g. LISENO 2004.

⁷ NICKEL 1999.

⁸ e.g. MÉNIEL 1992; LEPETZ/van ANDRINGA 2008.

⁹ RÜPKE 2004.

¹⁰ HACKENS 1963; BOUMA 1996; EGELHAAF-GAISER 2000, 339–341.

2. A sanctuary of the *Liber Pater* cult at Apulum

A Bacchic sanctuary at *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis* (now Alba Iulia in Romania) is presented here as an example of deliberate deposits in pits as part of a sequence of religious acts. The methodological approach is governed by the question of what archaeological criteria would contribute to the identification of a ritual deposition and the deliberate destruction of offerings to the gods.

The sanctuary of a religious group in the urban area of *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis*, in the Roman province of Dacia, was investigated¹¹. It consisted of a rectangular complex of buildings approximately 43 m long and, as far as is known so far, about 20 m wide (Fig. 1). The visitor would enter the forecourt of the sanctuary from a street that ran in a north-south direction. The entrance area faced a rectangular hall-like building measuring about 23.5 by 8.5 m. Marble statues dedicated to *Liber Pater* indicate that this central hall served as a ritual and assembly place for members of a Bacchic cult. Smaller rooms were grouped around this central ritual area. To the north, an open corridor was bounded by the wall that enclosed the sanctuary area. Four pits (A-D) had been dug in the corridor and their contents suggest ritual activity. This article discusses pits A and B, which date to the final phase of activity in the sanctuary, in the first half of the 3rd century AD¹². Evidence that the pits were especially dug to contain depositions rather than having simply been filled with refuse from the sanctuary is furnished by their stratigraphy. Parts of pits A and B were dug into a large older clay pit that had subsequently been filled with potter's debris, in which only misfired and damaged vessels from a former pottery workshop were found. In other words, the visitors to the sanctuary did not dig their pits in the remains of an earlier pottery workshop in order to obtain clay but rather to contain deliberate deposits.

Pit A was dug first. It had an approximately rectangular shape measuring 6.50–6.80 m long, 3.80–4.50 m wide and 1–1.50 m deep. The bottom of the pit could be reached via an earthen ramp in the northeastern corner. The bottom was completely covered with pottery vessels that had been carefully laid down and then deliberately smashed with stones, odd tiles and *dolium* sherds (Fig. 2). The spectrum of vessels is dominated by simple bowls (CAM 306) and plates, each represented by between 200 and 300 vessels¹³ (Fig. 3). The vessels were not of a particularly high quality: overhanging edges and adhering pieces of leftover clay had not been removed during the production process. The potters had obviously mass produced them for brief or one-off use. In addition to the bowls and plates, there was the occasional miniature vessel, including 'piggy banks'¹⁴. These miniature money boxes could not have been used since coins would not have been able to pass through the small slits. Most of the approximately ten money boxes had also been deliberately destroyed. Evidence of the deliberate destruction of the bowls, plates and money boxes at the bottom of the pit is furnished by several facts. Firstly, the bottom of the pit was completely covered with carefully placed pottery vessels. Secondly, the single stones, roof tiles and large *dolium* sherds lay so close to the fragmented pottery that they were surely what had been used to smash the vessels. Thirdly, after excavation, the fragments could be reassembled to form complete pots. Consequently, the vessels lying at the bottom of the pit must initially have been intact before they were destroyed on the spot.

Given the relatively large size of pit A, the access ramp and the deliberate destruction of intact vessels at the bottom of the pit, it can be assumed that this was a place where ritual acts were performed. The pit with the deposited vessels was soon filled in. When it was about half full, a fire was lit on the northern edge. Only later, but within a relatively short period

¹¹ HAYNES 2005; SCHÄFER 2011.

¹² FIEDLER 2005.

¹³ FIEDLER 2005, 99 Fig. 4.

¹⁴ FIEDLER/HÖPKEN 2007; FIEDLER/HÖPKEN 2007a.

of time, was pit A completely filled: conjoining sherds in adjacent layers indicate that the pit was left open for just a short while. The pottery in the fill is of a character totally different from that at the bottom of the pit and consists only of odd sherds that cannot be reassembled to form complete vessels. Similar, sometimes conjoining, fragments were found in the central hall building, which suggests that some of the vessels found as fragments in the pit had previously been used in the hall. Particularly remarkable are typical 'cult vessels': wide-mouthed goblets with long stems – so-called *turibula*, fragments of snake vessels and tall pedestal bowls¹⁵. Moreover, various types of tableware, drinking vessels and dishes that had probably been used during sacrificial feasts were also thrown into the pit. For example, the tableware included oval serving platters, high-quality imitations of *terra sigillata*. In addition, there was much coarse 'everyday crockery', in particular plates/pans, bowls, pots and lids. Their use as cooking vessels is often indicated by traces of soot.

In pit A there were a number of small finds as well as the pottery. The fragment of a hand holding a *kantharos* was originally part of a *Liber Pater* statuette: the type of marble suggests that it was imported. Fragments of a total of 38 lamps, fragments of glass vessels, broken pieces of terracotta and a few bone artefacts were also found. The terracotta pieces included a cock, a horse and fragments of four Venus statuettes. There were also two miniature clay cartwheels. While the pottery at the bottom of the pit is characterized by a large number of similar, complete vessels, the fill lying on top of them contains fragments of many different types of vessels. The fact that the spectrum of finds in the fill is extremely heterogeneous and the sherds can only rarely be fitted together, suggests that the fill consists of material that had been disposed of. After the pottery vessels at the bottom of the pit had been deliberately smashed, pit A was filled with refuse from the sanctuary.

The second pit in the corridor, pit B, cut into the eastern part of pit A and was therefore dug later (Fig.1). However, further encroachment on pit A had been avoided. Pit B had an almost rectangular shape and measured at most 7 × 6 m; the depth was about 1.5 m and the bottom of the pit was more or less flat. Three of the sides were vertical while the western side was slightly sloped. This may have been an access ramp like that in pit A. On the northern edge of the pit was a double row of tiles that probably served as a firm surface for people to stand on. The stratigraphic connection between pits A and B suggests that not much time elapsed between filling in the first pit and digging the second. A mass of pottery was found at the bottom of pit B but, unlike pit A, there was no concentration of specific vessel types. Some of the vessels had been broken on the spot, and stones or fragments of tiles lay on sherds that fitted together. Some of the vessels had probably been deliberately smashed. Nevertheless, the evidence was not as clear as in pit A: only two complete *kantharoi*, one bowl (CAM 306) and one pot could be recovered from the bottom of the pit. Otherwise, almost always only slightly less than 25% of the rim of the vessel was found. After the vessels and sherds had been placed at the bottom of pit B, the deposit was covered with soil. As in pit A, a burnt layer could be observed on the northern edge of the pit, where a fire had been lit *in situ* when the pit was half full. The fact that the location of the fire is similar in both pits may mean that both contain traces of ritual activity. Pit B, too, was probably completely filled within a relatively short period of time as adjoining sherds from the same vessel were found in adjacent layers.

At various places in pit B, several vessels had been deposited together in such a way that they formed distinct groups. In the southwestern corner of the pit, a large bowl held two other bowls that had been turned over and probably served to cover foodstuffs¹⁶ (Fig. 4). Elsewhere, a couple of miniature money boxes were found with their tops facing each other: their position and small size suggest that they had been deposited in the pit as votive offerings. Small groups of

¹⁵ FIEDLER 2005, 102–104 Figs. 6–8.

¹⁶ FIEDLER 2005, 111 Fig. 11, 2–3.

vessels, obviously deposited with great care, are thus typical of pit B. Moreover, the pit was filled with fragmented tableware representing approximately the same range of vessels as that found in pit A. Among the small finds from pit B, sherds from glass vessels as well as fragments of terracotta and lamps should be mentioned. There were 36 fragmented lamps in all. Five miniature clay cartwheels mean these were a relatively frequent occurrence. The terracotta figures included cocks and Venus statuettes and, above all, statuettes of Telesphorus, the companion of Asclepius and Hygieia.

3. Ritual feasts

In the *Liber Pater* sanctuary at Apulum, it would seem that pits A and B were dug for two specific purposes. On the one hand, to deposit complete vessels, many of which were then deliberately destroyed or made unusable. On the other hand, to dispose of fragmented vessels and other objects that had previously been used in the sanctuary. The numerous fragments of tableware in the pits indicate that sacrificial feasts had taken place: the proportion of drinking vessels, including *kantharoi* as well as simple beakers, is very high in both pit A and pit B¹⁷. Some of the plates have marks that were left when food was cut up on them. Some of the tableware, the so-called washing bowls and oval ceramic and glass platters, suggests that the religious community held very lavish banquets.

The remains of animal bones in pits A and B may have come from sacrifices and ritual feasts. Fragments of chicken, piglet and sheep/goat bones were thus found in the fill layers of pit A. Especially notable are three right lower-leg bones from dogs: these were not from one animal but from one small, one medium-sized and one large dog. Scattered on top of the first layer of fill that covered the pottery vessels at the bottom of the pit were bones from four horse legs. It remains to be investigated whether the three dogs' lower-leg bones and the four horse legs in pit A can be traced back to widespread sacrificial rites connected with long-established cults in the Danube area or perhaps in the Germanic provinces.

4. Collective and individual religious practices

The deposition of large quantities of vessels at the bottom of pit A and their subsequent destruction can be attributed to the collective wish of the members of the religious group using the *Liber Pater* sanctuary. The large number of bowls and plates/pans at the bottom of pit A are very probably connected with a specific community festival. However, given the small number of pits, it cannot be assumed that this ritual was part of an annual festival. The destruction of the pottery at the bottom of the pits makes most sense if it was carried out in the presence of the participants in the festival. The uniqueness of the event is matched by the poor quality of the pottery at the bottom of pit A, which was mass produced for brief use only. Attention should also be drawn here to the sealed soil that was observed on the northern inner wall of the half-filled pits, both A and B. Given the repetitive nature of this feature, they may well be burnt layers related to ritual acts that were carried out on the spot. It is possible that the depositions at the bottom of the pit were sealed by fire, so to speak; that it was a ritual of closure. A sequence of rituals was surely carried out at both pits, but it can only be partially reconstructed on the basis of the excavated finds and features.

Pits A and B were both accessible from the corridor by means of a ramp: pit A could be approached from the northeast and pit B from the west. This can be compared with an accessible cult pit in the Roman sanctuary at Baudécet near Namur¹⁸. Similarities can be seen in the

¹⁷ FIEDLER 2005, 111 Fig. 11,1.

¹⁸ PLUMIER-TORFS/PLUMIER 1993, 789–802 Figs. 2, 6; PLUMIER 2004, Figs. 55, 57.

large size of the pit, access via a ramp, the deposition of material from the sanctuary and the location immediately adjacent to a long rectangular cult building (Fig. 5). The ramp clearly had steps. The finds from Baudecet included incense burners, lamps and a large knife – perhaps a knife for performing sacrifices.

Another comparable situation is a pit in the eastern sanctuary at the Italic city of Gabii¹⁹. This pit, which had been hewn with great effort out of the tuff bedrock, measured approximately 7 × 5 m with a depth of about 2 m. A flight of stairs led from the terrace of the sanctuary to the bottom of the pit. The pit dates back to the middle of the Republican period and had been filled with figurative terracotta, architectural terracotta and pottery. Given the sketchiness of our knowledge about Apulum, Baudecet and Gabii, it is not possible to reach any firm conclusions regarding religious traditions in their respective regions. The great distance between these examples, in both time and space, nevertheless clearly demonstrates that pits can not only be filled with ‘sanctuary debris’ but can also reveal traces of ritual activity. Pits A and B in the *Liber Pater* sanctuary at Apulum can certainly be understood as places where ritual acts were performed. They were large enough to hold several people. The corridor, which was isolated from the outside world by the *temenos* enclosure wall, provided sufficient space for the spectators who attended the event, and who also took an active part in it. The northern edge of pit B was secured by tiles to make a stable floor. After the pottery vessels at the bottom of the pits had been deliberately destroyed, the pits were filled with refuse from the sanctuary. The significance of the procedure at the bottom of the pit is expressed in the quantity of vessels deposited in pit A. Such demonstrative lavishness would ensure that the unique festival was remembered for a long time. Despite the similarities, the fill in each of the two pits was not the result of identical ritual sequences. At the bottom of pit A were a large number of vessels of a specific form, which had been deliberately destroyed. At the bottom of pit B there was a wide range of pottery with few vessels that could be reassembled completely. Nevertheless, deliberate destruction of the vessels could also be deduced for pit B. Depositions of small groups of vessels were particularly characteristic of pit B: given their limited size, these depositions may have been sacrifices by individual persons. It would seem that the acts performed in pits A and B did not follow an established pattern but were rather variations on or newly structured religious practices. The archaeological finds and features suggest a religion in which collective and individual practices were carried out side by side; a custom that the visitors to the *Liber Pater* sanctuary at Apulum found particularly attractive.

5. Outlook

The pits used for rituals in the *Liber Pater* sanctuary at Apulum permit the reconstruction of various kinds of deposition. The detailed sequence of actions involved in the creation of the deposits does not lend itself to rigid terminology and the simple application of classical terms to complex archaeological finds and features. Instead, the very openness of the term chosen here – deliberate deposit – allows us to investigate the various deposits of votive offerings, sacrificial offerings and everyday utensils in the context of the religious practices that were carried out at the location of the finds or in their immediate vicinity in the sanctuary. A deliberate deposit can be seen as a logical sequence of actions or part of a specific act. If the precise context of the archaeological finds and features is determined, a wide range of ritual activities can be deduced.

Deliberate deposits are an important source of information in the reconstruction of ancient religious activity. On the one hand, such deposits can be the direct result of foundation, completion or transition rituals, symbolic destruction, boundary-marking rites or performative or commemorative acts. On the other hand, the votive offerings and everyday utensils that

¹⁹ ZUCHTRIEGEL 2012.

were placed in the pits as secondary deposits of waste material yield indirect information about religious practices in the sanctuary, e.g. sacrificial feasts. The purpose of deliberate deposits was often to satisfy both the personal and the collective wishes of the visitors to the sanctuary. The large number of possible activities and the resulting dynamism that can be observed in ancient religions may seem inconsistent or arbitrary to modern eyes. For the people of the time, however, a wide range of choices and activities in one's personal religious practice were an important part of everyday life.

All in all, it is a matter of increasing our awareness of deliberate deposits in ancient sanctuaries. What archaeological criteria permit the identification of a deliberate deposit and what is the difference between deliberate deposits and other features, such as simple waste disposal? Was the deposition linked with deliberate destruction? Relevant factors include the choice, possible size and material value of very different kinds of objects and materials as well as their combination and arrangement. Complete objects, the deliberate fragmentation or deformation of objects, careful or repetitive combinations of objects and their spatial relation to each other can be seen as characteristics of such deposits. The location of the deposit in the sanctuary or its vicinity is also significant; it can provide information about the purpose of the deposit. As well as the archaeological evaluation, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological analyses contribute greatly to the reconstruction of religious activity in the context of a deposit and help identify plant and animal offerings to the gods.

Based on these archaeological premises, further questions arise about the evaluation of deliberate deposits. How can one recognise the probable location of a ritual deposition, a votive-storage place or a refuse pit with redeposited material? Is it possible to distinguish between ordinary sanctuary refuse and the disposal and deposition of refuse in a way that can be understood as a sacred act? Can the term 'sacrificial deposition' be applied to a deposit that is linked with a sacrifice that took place on the spot, or have only the remains of a sacrifice that took place elsewhere been found? The temporal dimension of deliberate deposits also has to be discussed. Can ritual sequences be identified in such a way as to differentiate between a single event and repeated or regularly recurring religious practices? A central point that has to be emphasised here is the significance of ritual depositions as a means of religious communication. Was there a reaction to specific signs in the sanctuary? Did local conventions or social controls govern the organisation of deliberate deposits? Who ordered the acts, and was a specific public addressed? A detailed description of the archaeological finds and features is more likely to encourage a discussion of these issues than rigid terminology. The discussion would thus not address cults of the gods in the usual sense but rather the archaeologically observable rituals that can be detected in the sanctuaries of various deities.

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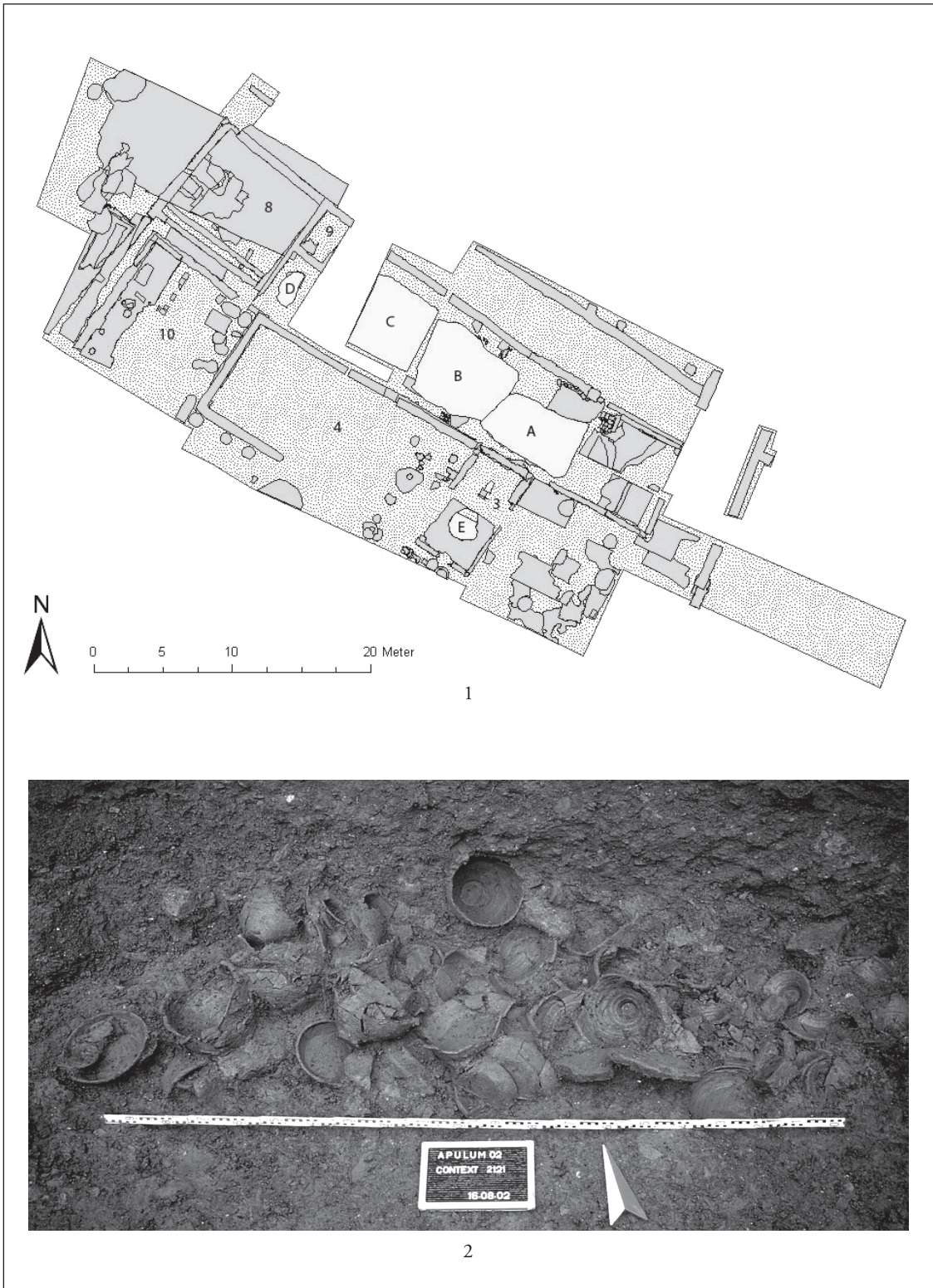
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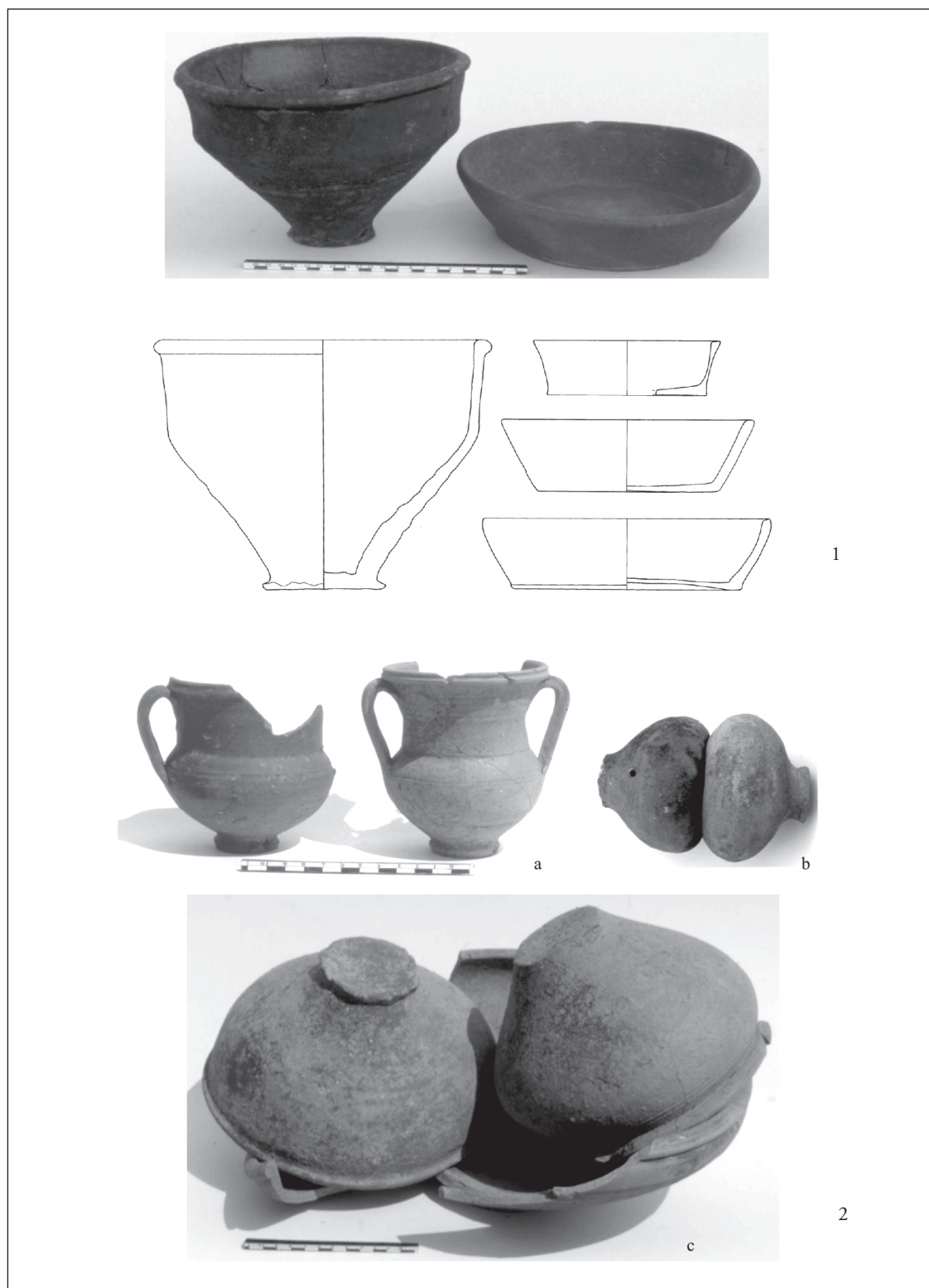
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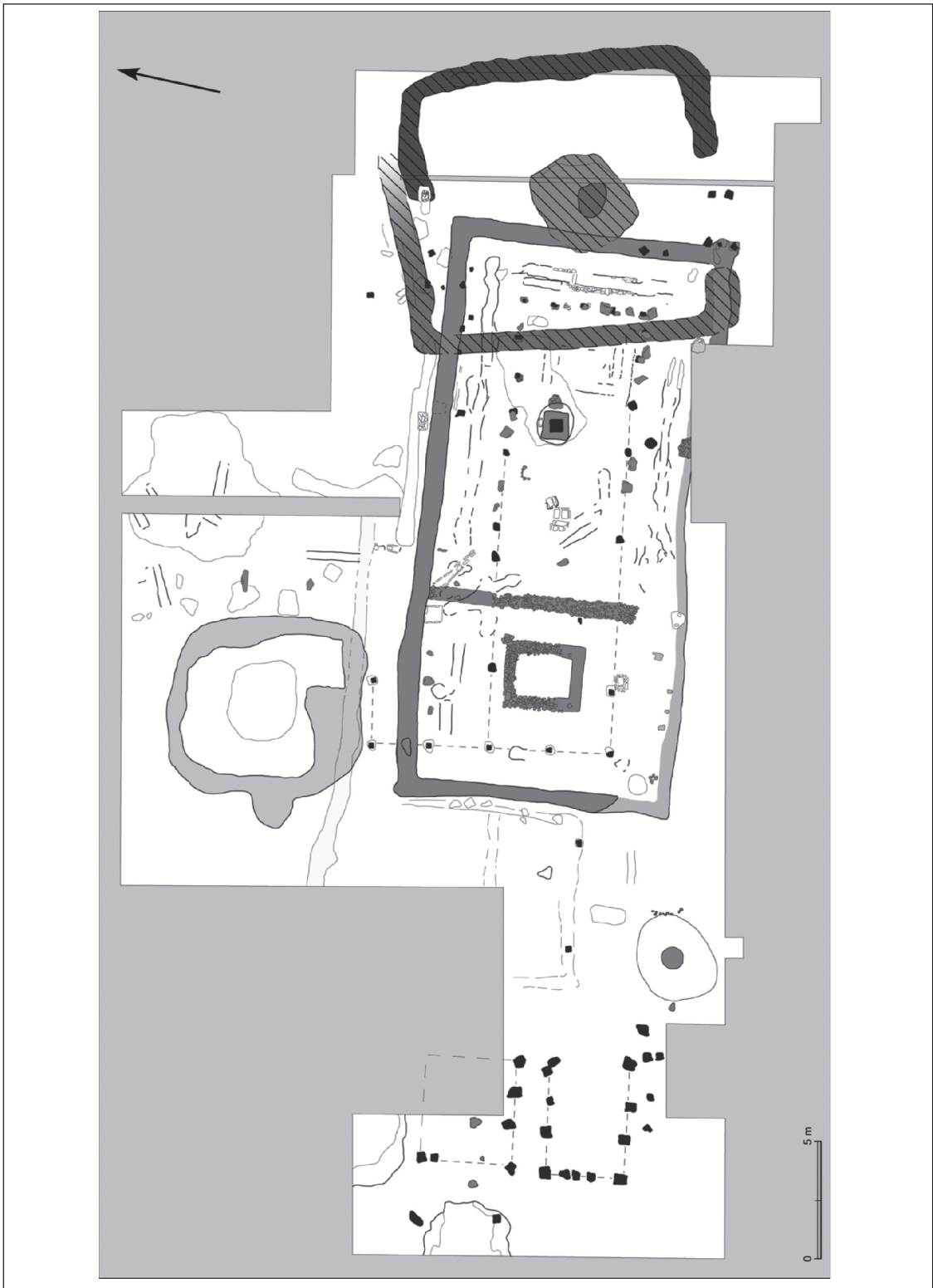
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Pl. I. 1 – The Bacchic ritual site at Apulum. Structural features and ritually used pits. After A. Diaconescu, I. Haynes, A. Schäfer; 2 – Apulum. Concentration of vessels at the bottom of pit A. Photograph by M. Fiedler.



Pl. II. 1 – Apulum. Bowls and plates from pit A. After M. Fiedler; 2 – Apulum. Groups of vessels from pit B. After M. Fiedler.



Pl. III. The Roman sanctuary at Baudecet (Gembloux). After J. Plumier. MRW D.Pat; infographie: CRAN-UCL.