
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE CAVE BURIALS IN THE BRONZE AGE OF ROMANIA

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Introduction

The cave is an unusual environment, always fascinating the human communities. Its specific characteristics, the contrast between the outside light and the inside darkness, the modelling of its inner structure, the water presence that normally occurs, the specific sounds (or echoes), the relatively constant temperature and humidity level, the unexpected level changes, all have brought their contribution in creating a special state of mind of the people, especially in the ancient times.

The caves and rock shelters have been used in time for different purposes, some of them being mentioned here:

- habitation area (even beginning with the Paleolithic time);
- exploitation of various substances (i.e. ochre¹);
- hiding places;
- shelters;
- different rituals (funerary ones, or not);
- burial grounds (in Romania beginning with the Middle Paleolithic).

¹ M. Cârциumaru, *Cele mai vechi mărturii certe ale utilizării ocrului în paleoliticul din Europa descoperite în Subcarpații Olteniei*, in *Buridava*, IX, 2011, p. 9, 10.

The last two ones are the most spectacular and challenging, as the customs connected to the death of the individuals, are part of the passage rites. According to Van Genep, the passage rites had three components, namely: the segregation, liminal and aggregation phases. Among these, the liminal one is mostly connected with the death.

In fact, the choice of using caves as locations for rituals, especially funerary ones, is not surprising, if we take into account some important elements.

Drawbacks and advantages

An important fact is that many caves are not easily accessible and this is why, they could not be investigated, or this has been just partly done by archaeologists. Some of these specialists are not attracted by this kind of studies, as they involve risky situations, a good physical training and adequate equipment. Besides, the conditions provided by the caves are rather difficult, due to their horizontal, uneven strata, sometimes with large discontinuities, to the humidity which is frequently present, but also to the lack of light, which also hampers the detailed information that could be taken from there.

This is a reason why, in most of the cases, the Bronze Age funerary finds from the caves in Romania had been done by speologists. But, in such situations, even if they had all good intentions, those specialists could not assure the complete information that the archaeologists had needed, for the simple reason that they see things from a different angle, the one of their speciality. Even so, they made possible the study of some burials and funerary customs that, otherwise, would have been lost.

What about the animals from the caves ?

If we take a look in almost any cave, the animals who live there are all blind, because they don't need to use the sense of sight. On the other hand, they have developed special means of orientation, like, for instance, the one used by the bat. The sonar system is being used for detecting the surrounding objects, but also the prey of the animal, by following the echo of the sound waves, sent in all directions by the bat. Therefore, a very simple and efficient means of orientation in the darkness.

What about the humans ?

The humans, as beings with a large adaptability, could live both in, or outside the caves. Normally, they used them just as shelters over the night, while, during the day they had outdoor activities.

But, if we compare them with the animals from that habitation area, we could see that, due to their mobility, the humans didn't lost their sight. Still,

when they spent some longer time in the cave, their senses had been constrained to get adapted to that specific environment.

The neurosciences have pointed out that during such an experience the sight is diminished but this results in the more acute hearing, smelling, feeling, touching of the surroundings. All these perceptions are giving a totally different „image”, not only of the cave, but also of what is happening in there². This fact might have been obvious for the prehistoric communities and exploited as such. In fact, this was a means of creating a halucinating atmosphere, but also a special state of mind in the participants to certain ceremonies which occurred in this kind of spaces. Moreover, the people involved in such events had surely considered that the divine forces accompanied them and facilitated or, on the contrary, rejected what happened in the cave, also giving specific responses to these acts.

Cave and spiritual life of the ancient communities

The spiritual interpretation of the cave is a multiple and interesting one.

First of all, the cave is an archetype³, indicating a spiritual ascent, as light is also a symbol of consciousness and knowledge. Therefore, the threshold from darkness to the light is a symbolic representation of the spiritual evolution, from the novice to the initiate. This could be an explanation for the use of the cave in different kind of ceremonies.

The cave, the same like the water, had been considered by a large number of populations as assuring a facile connection with the after world⁴.

It is also connected with the female principle and it has two interpretations in this sense. One of them is that the cave represented the womb. This one, if we take into account the irregular pattern of its walls, the darkness, the persistent humidity and its usually sack-shape, could be a good argument in the favor of this symbolic interpretation of the cave. But, being a womb also implies giving birth and maybe this was a strong reason why people have been interred in the caves, in order to facilitate their revival into the afterworld, which, in fact, would mean their second birth. In fact, as soon as a human gets into a cave he practically comes back to life, on another level.

² A very nice description of these changes in perception has been offered with sensitivity by R. Whitehouse, *A Tale of Two Caves. The Archaeology of Religious Experience in Mediterranean Europe*, in P.F. Biehl, F. Berthemes, H. Meller, *The Archaeology of Cult and Religion, Archeolingua*, 13, Budapest, 2001, p. 161-168.

³ C. Hogh, *The Archetypes „Earth”, „Water”, „Air” and „Fire” in Cave Paintings and Rock Carvings*, Merveilles & contes, vol. 7, no. 2, December 1993, p. 403-421.

⁴ R. Madgwick, *Patterns in the modification of animal and human bones in Iron Age Wessex: revisiting the excarnation debate*, in O. Davis, N. Sharples, K. Weddingtonp (eds.), *Changing Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C. Proceedings of the Iron Age, Research Student Seminar 2006*, Oxford Oxbow, 2008, p. 99-118.

Moreover, the moment of going out from the cave, from the darkness to light, from wet to dry, is somehow similar with the moment of birth.

Another interpretation is associated with the „vulva”. As in ancient times the Earth was considered as being the Mother Goddess and the sky was the male divinity, the entrance of the cave, that was practically an „access” to her inner body, was considered to have been the „vulva”. In some regions of the world, some special fittings had been done in order to allow the penetration of the Sun beams, for a hierogamy with the Mother Earth in specific moments of the year⁵.

It is most probably that the choice of using the cave as a burial ground was in fact connected with the chance of reviving the departed ones. In order to do that, the ancient people had performed specific rituals, not only to maintain the benevolence of the Mother Goddess, but also to help their departed to reach the realm of the spirits and adjust to their new „life”.

Ceremonies associated with the cave

As already mentioned, due to the specific environment created by the cave, this was appropriate for many kinds of ceremonies, including the funerary ones. Out of these, we could mention here some specific treatments of the dead, which are found more frequently:

- inhumation into the soil of the cave;
- deposition in deepenings created into the floor of the cave;
- deposition of mummies in caves⁶;
- cremation on site, or elsewhere, with the burial placed there, or exposure of the cremated remains on the floor of the cave;
- excarnation, with its different variants and upon which we will insist a little in the following lines.

Excarnation

This kind of funeral has some certain variants, like natural, controled excarnation, as well as deliberate excarnation.

For the caves from Romania there is no information about the existence of the latter variant.

The cave finds of human remains are usually characterizd by the unchanged appearance of the bones. This lack of changes is specific to the decomposition in such a subterranean environment. This created a good opportunity for the bones to be curated, or circulated among the members of the living community, sometimes being re-interred, sometimes being not.

⁵ See for instance, Al. Fol, *Thracian Sanctuary Cave Vulva (or the Whomb Cave)*, Web: www.Krstatiza.rodenkrai.com.

⁶ Such discoveries are found worldwide, but they lack in Romania.

Usually, it was made a selection of specific skeletal parts, most commonly being chosen the skull and limb bones, the others being left in the initial deposition, or re-used for other purposes. All these procedures show a strong awareness of liminality, in all the processes involved, like: death of the individual, decay, exhumation, curation, circulation, re-burial. Moreover, this created stronger social bonds among the members of the living community, between them and the deceased, all associated with a symbolic depersonalization of the dead individual⁷ who, after passing through all these stages, could be able to join the ancestors realm.

Generally, the excarnation in caves could take place in certain ways, out of which, we mention here just a few:

Deposition of skeletons in a shallow, or deeper depression on the cave floor.

Regarding the Roșia cultural group, this was documented by some funerary finds. Considering the inhumation practice of this group, studied in the caves from Roșia, Gălățea, Râpa, Izbuca Topliței, Gălășeni, all from the Bihor County, it was presumed that this cultural group might have had analogies to the south and east, as to the west it was a compact mass of cremation practitioners. The skeletons were usually discovered in a flexed position and with vessels next to the skeleton⁸. According to one latest opinion it is considered that there are not well defined arguments for their assignment to it⁹.

As a result of the investigation carried out in the Românești Cave (Timiș County), the so-called Water Cave, some human and animal fragmentary bones mixed with broken pottery, all placed in two deepening had been discovered. I was drawn the conclusion that the remains had resulted from an inhumation necropolis. The respective find had been assigned to the Balta Sărată cultural group of the Bronze Age¹⁰. Regarding this interpretation, I. Motzoi-Chicideanu expressed his reluctance, considering that on that spot it was rather a

⁷ R. Madgwick, *op. cit.*, in *loc. cit.*, p. 99-118.

⁸ P. Roman, I. Némethi, *Descoperiri din perioada timpurie (pre-Otoman) a epocii bronzului în nord-vestul României*, in *SCIIVA*, 37, 3, 1986, p. 198-232. This cultural group had been also taken into consideration by J. Machnik, *The earliest Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin*, *ArchSc*, 1991, p. 44, 82.

⁹ I. Motzoi-Chicideanu, *Obiceiuri funerare în epoca bronzului la Dunărea Mijlocie și Inferioară*, vol. I, 2011, București, p. 317.

¹⁰ P. Rogozea, *Grupul cultural Balta Sărată în contextul epocii bronzului din județul Caraș-Severin*, in *SympThrac*, 9, p. 23-25; Idem, *New archaeological finds in the cave from Românești, Timiș County*, in *SympThrac*, 9, 1992, p. 98-100; Idem, *New archaeological finds in the cave from Românești, Timiș County*, in H. Ciugudeanu, N. Boroffka (eds.), *The Early Hallstatt Period*, Alba Iulia, 1994, p. 155-166.

disturbance of the entire deposition layer and therefore, it cannot be known for sure if it was really a necropolis¹¹.

The anthropological study made upon the bones found at Românești is the only one referring to Bromze Age remains discovered in a cave. Unfortunately, this had been done by a specialist from another field than anthropology, thus resulting the establishing of the number of individuals that was possibly more than 11. At the same time, no anthropological norm had been used, so that the respective analysis cannot be used for comparisons with other skeletons due to the lack of the specific measurements and indexes of the individuals¹².

Deposition of skeletons in a niche, in the wall of the cave.

Deposition right on the surface of the cave floor.

Possible deposition in a place that was flooded, at least from time to time, in a kind of cuvetes.

For this category, the so-called burial ground discovered in the Cave Izbcu Topliței (Aștileu commune, Bihor County), of the Roșia cultural group, comprised, in fact, disturbed osteological remains, very probably due to the periodical floods that affected the area where they had been discovered. The scarce information provided by the speologists who had signaled them, without too many relevant elements both for archaeologists and anthropologists, had pointed out the idea that such depositions had been used for a long time, being obviously done on purpose, as shown by the axe (made of copper ?) and fragmentary pottery that accompanied the deceased. Unfortunately, for this case, we cannot tell for sure if they had been really buried in that space, or just exposed for excarnation. A drawback for such a conclusion would be the difficult access in that cave. The find had been culturally assigned to the early Nagyrév culture, even though, as pointed out by I. Chicideanu, „compared with the area of the group, the position of the Izbcu Topliței cave is totally excentric”¹³.

Deposition of skulls on the floor of the cave or in stone „boxes”.

Deposition of selected bones, the so-called symbolic burials.

In this sense, we could find the example of the Late Bronze Age (Bronze D) discovery from the Cioclovina Cave, namely the Water Cave (Hunedoara County) where some bronze objects together with a broken dish among whose fragments charcoals, but also a lock ring and bones of raindear and pig could be found. Near the dish it was also found a fragmentary urn (fig. 1). On another

¹¹ I. Motzoi-Chicideanu, *op. cit.*, p. 661.

¹² M. Muntean, *Considerații antropologice asupra unor oase umane povenite din peștera de la Românești (jud. Timiș)*, in *Banatica*, 13, 1, 1995, p. 145-148.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

level of the cave, a huge amount of objects could be found, dispersed in heaps, few meters away from each other. It could not be clearly established if these depositions were somewhat connected with each other¹⁴.

Deposition of cremated bones.

In this category of finds those belonging to the Igrîța group could be included. In the Igrîța cave (Peștera village, Aștileu commune, Bihor County), for instance, according to the information provided by the speologists who investigated it, there were a series of cremation burials belonging to the late Bronze Age, out of which the funerary inventory could be recovered, some items bearing traces of burning and being accompanied by charcoals and ashes. It was also mentioned the fact that the cremation remains were totally missing, being not known what happened to them. The only thing which could be established for sure was that cremation had been done outside the cave, as inside of it there was no trace of fire. Those who investigated the cave had considered that the missing cremated bones from the cave is just „a purely technical aspect of the problem”, the deceased being, in fact, represented by the ashes brought from the pyre. A similar situation could be also observed in other almost contemporary cemeteries from the Bihor County. Still, the ashes is accompanied by broken pottery and other objects, most of them being burnt up to vitrification. All the items had been placed right on the floor of the cave, without other fittings and without being covered with earth. They had been arranged in groups, covering a surface of about 0.5 sqm. Obviously, the vessels had undergone a secondary firing, some fragments of them being deformed, or just bearing traces of the process. Moreover, the pottery was very fragmented, being not possible to tell if this was due to its deliberate breaking or its throwing into the fire. The space used for the burials was represented by secondary galleries, or niches, being somehow protected spaces.

Regarding the pyre that was employed for the dead cremation, it was a community one, fact proven by the ceramic fragments coming from the same vessels that could be gathered from distinct burials.

Based upon the context of this find, it was considered that the cave contained about 40 burials which, besides the urn had three adjacent vessels, to which bronze objects, animal teeth, or perforated shells used as pendants could be added, the same as some stones of red color and rounded quartz stones that were also put together with the grave goods. A nice necklace made of animal teeth can be seen in the figure no. 2.

It is also worth being mentioned the presence of two burials which most probably had belonged to craftsmen, as their specific implements could be

¹⁴ I. Emödi, *Noi date privind depozitul de la Cioclovina*, in *SCIVA*, 29, 4, 1978, p. 481-495.

recovered from there. They had a rich inventory but this fact is not unusual, given that in those times the craftsmen had a high position in the society¹⁵.

More recently, it was considered that, in fact there were no burials in the mentioned cave but more probably some depositions of cremated remains¹⁶.

Conclusions

Despite the existence of some funerary finds of the Bronze Age in caves, they are less known, both archaeologically and anthropologically. Many of them are even uncertain finds.

It would be encouraging that at least in few possible cases the skeletons should be anthropologically studied.

¹⁵ I. Emödi, *Necropola de la sfârșitul epocii bronzului din peștera Igrița*, in *SCIVA*, 31, 2, 1980, p. 229-273.

¹⁶ I. Motzoi-Chicideanu, *op. cit.*, p. 657.



Fig. 1. Cioclovina Cave – grave goods from the symbolic burial
(*apud* Emödi, 1978)

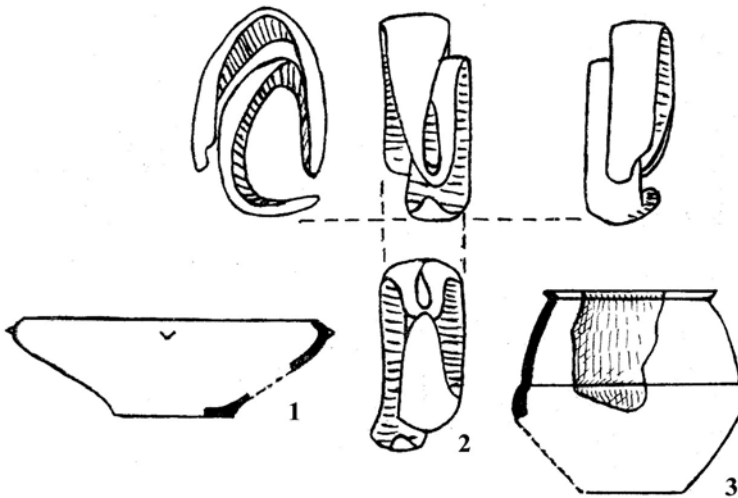


Fig. 2. Igrîța Cave – necklace made of animal teeth:
1 – dish; 2 – lock ring; 3 – fragmentary urn (*apud* Emödi, 1980)