

ON RITES AND RITUALS DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD FROM THE NEOLITHIC TO THE BRONZE AGE (Archaeological Discoveries at Ostrovul Șimian, Romania)

By Lucian Roșu

As yet there is no satisfactory answer to the question of when and where the rite of cremation was first adopted by some population groups of the Eastern European Eneolithic. We do know that the practice of inhumation is very ancient, dating back to the Middle Paleolithic among the Neanderthals. During the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods in Central and Eastern Europe, inhumation continued as the only form of burial although with types of rituals that varied from region to region. The archaeological evidence for the Neo-Eneolithic period - that is, the transitional phase from the Neolithic to Bronze Age, the first half of the third millennium BC - in Eastern Europe shows inhumation rites in leveled tombs.

As mentioned, the type of ritual practice differed among different groups of people in different areas. Two forms of inhumation ritual were prevalent in the Neolithic period: a) the body fully extended on its back, and b) the body flexed in a contracted or foetal position. The placement of the deceased arms also varied in the several cultural areas. E. Coma has pointed out that the manner of positioning the arms of the dead is as important as the orientation of the body.ⁱ During the last phase of the Eneolithic period, in the middle of the third millennium BC, Anatolian and Black Sea elements penetrated into southeastern Europe. Graves containing red ochre or burials in tumuli, located near the leveled graves, have been identified. The end of the Neolithic and beginning of the transition into the Bronze Age in Eastern Europe (c. 2800 BC)ⁱⁱ is marked by a process of fusion, a symbiosis, of local Neolithic elements with the invading peoples from the eastern and northeastern regions. It is this entry of foreigners that is known as the Indo-European migration into Europe. The continuing fusion--ethnic, cultural, and linguistic--developed during the transitional period into the formation of the new populations of the Bronze Age. South and Central Eastern Europe was populated by such new cultures as Coțofeni, Schnekenberg A, Early Glina, Baden, Kostolak-Bosaca, Vucedol, and Globular Amphora (Zlota).ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the many changes that occurred during this transitional phase was the rite of burial by the population of the Coțofeni culture who shows a marked difference from their Neolithic predecessors. The Coțofeni people in some areas continued to bury their dead in leveled graves or under tumuli, sometimes using red ochre, in both the extended and contracted positions. But in other areas, especially in southwestern and northwestern Romania, we have the archaeological record for cremation.

The information available on such finds appears to indicate that, for the present at least, only the cemetery of the area occupied by the Coțofeni culture, discovered at Ostrovul Șimian, Romania (an island in the Danube river near the city of Drobeta Turnu-Severin), contained both cremation and inhumation burials. There the two rites were practiced concurrently, but are sharply differentiated: cremation for adults, inhumation for children.^{iv} Now, there, still remains unanswered the question of precisely when and where the practice of cremation was first introduced by Central and East European populations, as well as the significance of this change? According to Marija Gimbutas, "the cremation rite may have developed in the Pontic area, where during the Hut-graves and Catacomb-graves periods (c. 2500-2000 BC), partial cremation of the dead had been executed. A cremation grave was reported from the Fatianovo culture (2300 BC?), Istra cemetery near Moscow. This rite is also not unknown in Central Europe."^v

Before discussing the archaeological evidence from the Ostrovul Șimian excavations, that which is of primary interest, it is helpful to note briefly our present knowledge of burial rites practiced by the Late Neolithic and Eneolithic populations in East and Southeast Europe.

The time frame of concern here, that during which the Coțofeni culture developed (the Ostrovul Șimian cemetery being a product of this cultural group), is 2900-2300 BC.^{vi} The Coțofeni culture belongs within the later part of the period, between 2455 and 2300 BC, roughly the second half

of the third millennium BC.^{vii} Gimbutas, in speaking of this period, concludes that the mixing of the migratory peoples with the indigenous populations 'caused new grouping of cultures ... and the formalization of cultures in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the second millennium BC [that] very probably was in step with infiltration and the differentiation of the Indo-European speaking nations in Europe.' Naturally, this differentiation might be seen as one of the consequences of this process of mixture, of this symbiosis, which covered most of the third millennium BC.^{viii} As noted above, important changes had taken place, even in the manner of disposing of the dead. These changes, especially the beginning of cremation rite, might be related to the Indo-European's cult of fire as a divine power.

Different possible explanations for the introduction of cremation have been suggested:

- a) The migrating people in the third millennium B.C. practiced cremation in preference to inhumation in order to carry along with them the ashes of their dead.
- b) Cremation served to destroy by fire the evil spirits and thereby purified the soul of the dead.^{ix}
- c) The prehistoric impetus for cremating may have been similar to the belief of the Hindus, that the soul is immortal, but it "does not depart from the terrestrial realm as long as its corpse is on earth. Cremation hastens the soul's liberation to heaven. After a sojourn there, the soul is reincarnated in a fresh organism."^x

But to return to the important question of when and where cremation of the dead was instituted and the problem of its symbolic role. Cremation in India has a long history extending without interruption from ancient times through to the present. The practice was forbidden only for children under two years old. There is archaeological evidence of cremation among the coastal cultures of Palestine as early as the fourth millennium BC. There the ashes of the deceased, along with bone fragments, were collected and placed in ceramic urns in the form of miniature houses.^{xi}

Gimbutas sees the rite of cremation in the Pontic area—especially the north Pontic, as previously mentioned—as developed during the Hut-graves and Catacomb-graves periods (Kurgan culture of c. 2000-1700 BC; also calibrated earlier to ca. 2500-2000 BC). The change was gradual, marked first by partial cremation of the dead.^{xii} In southeastern Europe (present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece) only inhumation was practiced during the Neolithic period. There is archaeological evidence for cremation in use during the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, but the new rite was not generally employed. Cremation and inhumation were concurrently practiced by the same community at this time. In the full Bronze Age, some communities continued to use cremation only, as in the Urnfield culture, while others, as that of Sărata Monteoru, used both forms.

Hence, the archaeological evidence places the beginning of the rite of cremation to the transitional period. We might regard the rite as first practiced in southeastern Europe due to the influence of the newcomers to the region, for the Indo-European tribes played an important part in the formation of the Early Bronze Age cultures. Of course, cremation did not appear simultaneously throughout southeastern Europe during the transition period. In Greece, for example, cremation was unknown before the thirteenth century BC.^{xiii}

Archaeological work in the Coțofeni culture area, which includes modern Romania, northwestern Bulgaria, and northeastern Serbia, has revealed that cremation was practiced during the Coțofeni III period (c. 2300-2100 BC): sites of Carna, Măgura Tomii, Ostrovul Corbului, Ostrovul Șimian, Moldova Veche, Medieșu Aurit. But, it must be remembered, cremation was not the only rite practiced by the Coțofeni people; inhumation continued in various patterns of burial: leveled as well as tumuli graves, some showing the red ochre, and bodies placed either extended supine or contracted.

The remains of the dead were placed in circular grave pits in the cemetery of Ostrovul Șimian. The ashes of adults were put directly on the floor of the grave or housed in urns that stood on a stone pavement; all was then covered with stones formed into a cone-shaped pile approximately 50 inches in diameter and 25 to 30 inches high. Another grave type, represented by a single grave, is in the form of a ring of stone with a stone cover; this grave format is known from the transitional period and the following Bronze Age in the area north of the Black Sea and in Central and Eastern Europe. Children's inhumations, with the bodies flexed, were found in circular pits that had been covered with similar

cone-shaped piles. On top of the stone cone, the leg bones of an animal were placed, indicating the offering of animals as part of the burial ritual. Both adults and children were buried in the same cemetery, the children's graves located in the southwest corner. The cemetery itself is located on the western end of the island, covered today by a part of the medieval fortress moved there from the island of Ada-Kaleh in 1967.

As of now, only one inhumation of a child is known from the Coțofeni culture area, outside those found in the Ostrovul Șimian cemetery. This single burial in a pit, the body contracted, was discovered in the cave Peitera Hoșilor at Băile Herculane in Romania.

A first question concerns the date at which the Coțofeni people began to practice cremation, and then we must ask about the significance of cremation being reserved for adults while the children continued to be inhumated? Different interpretations dealing with the significance of cremation have been proposed, as mentioned above, but we have no secure explanation as yet for the continuing practice of inhumation of children. However, a reasonable proposal may be offered.

The role of fire as a purifying element was of great importance in the life of Indo-European people. Cremation, as mentioned above, has been understood by some societies as a way of absolution. Certainly, this would be applicable for adults, but for children, especially those less than two years old and hence hardly as yet to know sin, purification by fire would be unnecessary. Much later in history, Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* tells us that children who have no teeth were to be inhumated, not cremated. Unfortunately, Pliny neglects to provide us with the reason for this distinction.

In some areas of the Bronze Age Unifield culture, cremation was the general ritual adopted for both adults and children. Perhaps the new cultures that were the product of the mixing of the local Neolithic elements with the infiltrating groups from the eastern and northeastern Black Sea regions created important changes, but so basic a ritual as the disposition of the dead would have been changed only partially and gradually. In some communities the traditional custom of inhumation persisted; in some others cremation was adopted and practiced concurrently with the older tradition of inhumation, even for adults. Still other communities made the radical change, completely abandoning inhumation in favour of cremation. Perhaps these several behavioral patterns resulted from the indigenous folk coming into contact and mixing with different groups of Indo-Europeans who brought with them different burial customs.

ENDNOTES

i.... E. Comșa, *Neoliticul pe teritoriul României: Considerații* (Bucharest, 1987), 150-52.

ii.... Ibid., 156.

iii.... P. Roman, *Cultura Coțofeni* (Bucharest, 1976), 61-77.

iv.... P. Roman, in his above quoted *Cultura Coțofeni*, in a brief chapter, pp. 31-33, presents what is known about rites and rituals in Coțofeni culture. In the cremation rite part of the chapter the archaeological excavations from Ostrovul Șimian are ascribed to Gh. Popilian: "... Gh. Popilian discovered many cremation graves" This could be a typographical error or misinformation. In reality, the archaeological diggings on Ostrovul Șimian island (1966-67) were performed by a team (Miu Davidescu, Gheorghe Popilian, Marin Nica, Ștefan Roman) under my leadership, according to the Romanian Academy's commission from 20 October 1966, signed by Dr. C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor, the Deputy Chief Coordinator of the "Porțile de Fier" Academy's Complex Group of Research. Another inaccuracy consists in considering the cemetery from Ostrovul Șimian as a cremation one, contrary to the archaeological evidence which proves the practice of both types of burials: cremation and inhumation.

v.... Marija Gimbutas, *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe. Part I: Mesolithic, Neolithic and Copper Age Culture in Russia and the Baltic Area* (Cambridge, 1956), 109-110.

vi.... E. Neustupny, 'Radiocarbon Chronology of Central Europe from c. 6450 B.P. to c. 3750 B.P.', *Radiocarbon Variations and Absolute Chronology*, Nobel Symposium 12 (Stockholm, 1970), 106.

vii.... Roman, 67.

viii.... Gimbutas, 13.

ix.... Hugo Ericksen, *Cremation of the Dead* (Detroit, 1987), 4.

x.... E. W. Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* (Springfield, Illinois, 1989), 14.

xi.... E. Anati, *Palestine Before Hebrews* (London, 1963), 289.

xii.... Gimbutas, 110.

xiii.... Donn C. Kurtz, and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), 25