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Precucuteni Culture:
In light of new archaeological
researches

ABSTRACT OF PHD THESIS

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Key words:

Precucuteni Culture, Copper Age, territory of Romania, ceramics, codification, statistical analysis, architecture, economic life, spiritual life.

In this work, we aimed to present and use the modern technique of coding the main features of Precucutenian ceramics. The advantages of this method consist in the total and complex processing of the discovered archaeological material, from a technological, morphological and stylistic perspective. This avoids over-selection of ceramic materials (on-site selection and sampling of only fragments considered representative and the second selection for publication, when considering only interesting objects or those that are useful in supporting the author's hypotheses), the conclusions, we believe, being very close to prehistoric realities.

CHAPTER I. MOTIVATION/INTRODUCTION. METHOD OF WORK (DESCRIPTION OF THE DATABASE AND CATALOGS), (p. 8-145)

Since at the beginning of our research there were only a few initiatives to develop catalogs of shapes, decorations and profiles of Precucutenian vessel bottoms, we had to take over and adapt to the realities of the Precucuteni culture the dictionaries of technology used in Transylvania. We also designed the morphological catalogs for the rims, bellies, protrusions and bottoms of vessels specific to the studied culture.

The results obtained in this way facilitate the typological analysis of the Precucutenian ceramic material. Although our work to compile a database on the characteristics of Precucutenian pottery is just the beginning, it provides interesting and complex data on the technology, morphology and decorations of the Precucutenian pottery. At the same time, by systematizing the information, we can see what are the legacies, what is preserved and what is new or is borrowed from other cultural areas during the evolution of the Precucuteni culture.

CHAPTER II. THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH (p. 147-167)

Since there are some issues regarding the attribution of ceramic materials and the name of the Precucuteni culture, we divided the chapter into two parts: one was dedicated to the genesis of the name of the culture and the terminology issues that arose over time; the second part was the opportunity to present the history of research and the evolution of the periodization schemes proposed by specialists for the Precucuteni culture.

Since the first discoveries, there have been fierce discussions about the cultural attribution of Precucutenian ceramic materials to Boian or Trypillia cultures.

We know about the division into phases of the Precucuteni culture that it was based, from the first moments until today, on the classical methods of research and interpretation of the discovered archeological materials: stratigraphy, typology, chorology and comparative method.

For the periodization of the Precucuteni culture, the most important moment consisted in the discoveries made by R. Vulpe in the settlement from Izvoare (Neamț County). Then, although the site from Traian-*Dealul Viei* was initially attributed to the Zănești culture, which would have belonged to the Boian culture, in the end it turned out that there was represented the first phase of the Precucuteni culture.

By accumulating a consistent volume of data regarding the Precucuteni culture, in the years 1960 and 1963 Vladimir Dumitrescu proposed a scheme for the periodization of the culture, with three major phases of evolution.

The next stage was defined by the first attempts to divide the classical stages of the Precucuteni culture into subphases. They belong to the researchers Alexandrina D. Alexandrescu, who considered possible the division of the Precucuteni III phase into two subphases, and to Anton Nițu, who, on a theoretical basis, proposed the Precucuteni I a-b and III a-b subphases. These initiatives, based rather on theoretical grounds, will find a partial justification in the discoveries from the site from Poduri-*Dealul Ghindaru* (Neamț County), in which the Precucuteni II late, III classical and III late levels are separated.

Based on the research from Târgu Frumos and Isaiia (Iași County), Nicolae Ursulescu proposed a periodization of the Precucuteni culture in three main phases (I, II, III), with several subphases (I; IIA, IIB; IIIA, IIIB, IIIC) and three large periods, each benefiting from different cultural influences. We consider that today this system can be completed by splitting the Precucuteni I phase into IA and IB, highlighted by the archaeological materials discovered in the settlements of Traian-*Dealul Viei* (Neamț County) and Baia-*În Muchie* (Suceava County).

Given the persistence of the following problems: insufficient research, inadequate publication of results by illustrating materials considered representative, without complete analyses on features, as well as non-publication of materials from some excavations, we believe that the periodization of the Precucuteni culture must remain flexible, to allow periodic corrections of the scheme, due to the appearance of new materials and information as the research progresses.

CHAPTER III. THE IMPORTANCE OF NEW RESEARCH FOR THE PRECUCUTENI CULTURE (p. 169-180)

The purpose of this chapter was to see what was the contribution of new research to raising the level of knowledge about the Precucuteni culture. That is why we made a brief review of the most important and recent contributions. In the end, we believe that the most relevant aspect of the researched period is determined by the multiplication of archaeological researches, but, especially, of the multidisciplinary ones.

By initiating research on new archaeological sites, the dowry of knowledge and cultural assets belonging to the Precucuteni culture was enriched. The several newly established institutions, involved in the research and valorization of this special patrimony, also made a special contribution.

Due to the economic and technological advance in the contemporary world, more and more Precucutenian sites benefit from multidisciplinary approaches (archaeozoological, archaeobotanical, petrographic, geophysical, radiometric), their purpose being to try to reconstruct the prehistoric natural environment and habitat. The new dimension of the involvement of physical research methods through geomagnetic prospecting should be noted. They are part of the field of non-intrusive interventions and provide fundamental data on the size and shape of settlements, their internal organization, fortifications, number and size of houses. With the help of this type of analysis, one can establish the degree of conservation of anthropogenic remains. These methods could not be used intensively in the past, given the technological level and economic situation of the time.

CHAPTER IV. ARCHITECTURE (FORTIFICATIONS, SETTLEMENTS, HOUSES, ANNEXES), (p. 182-203)

Dealing only with the Romanian area occupied by the Precucuteni culture communities, today we can talk about the existence of about 157 discovered Precucutenian settlements. To these we added in our analysis the discoveries of Precucutenian materials in the environments of the neighboring cultures (Boian, Hamangia, Gumelnița, Turdaș, Petrești). Over time, 58 such situations have been identified, which could be evidence of long-distance cultural connections.

At the current stage of research, from a total of 157 known Precucutenian settlements, so far systematic archaeological research has been carried out in only about 45 cases. Also, a single settlement, the one from *Târpești-Râpa lui Bodai*, Neamț County, benefited from an exhaustive research.

Dealing with the problem of Precucutenian dwellings, we found that most Precucutenian dwellings have unitary features in terms of the system according to which they were built. The most numerous are surface dwellings, and the most commonly used shape was the rectangle. Dwellings with special shapes were also researched, such as the square ones from Isaiia and Târgu Frumos, the trapezoidal one (L5) and the one with apse (L11) from Isaiia.

So far, archaeological research has highlighted the existence of delimitation/fortification systems in the case of nine Precucutenian settlements, consisting of ditches, most of them having two such anthropic structures.

CHAPTER V. CERAMICS AND ITS EVOLUTION (p. 205-381)

The fundamental objective of our study consisted in the study of Precucutenian ceramics and that is why it materialized in the most consistent chapter of the work. The method used for the statistical analysis of the main characteristics of this type of material reveals a much more nuanced situation than the one that is currently published in most specialized papers dealing with this subject.

During the analysis we tried to take into account the older requirements, according to which the internal evolution of a culture can be followed very well based on the transformations in the shapes and ornamentation of ceramics, but also in technology. Thus, we could see visible differences between the evolutionary phases of the culture. The different periods are characterized by a dynamic development, an evolution with obvious technological, morphological and stylistic changes. We also tried to highlight every time what is preserved, what transforms, what appears new, what disappears and what degenerates from one phase to another.

In the text we presented the results obtained regarding the following technological, morphological and stylistic characteristics of Precucutenian ceramics: the inclusions used for degreasing the clay from which the vessels were modeled, the ways in which ceramic surfaces were treated, the types of ceramic firing, exterior and interior color of ceramic fragments, vessel rims, lid edges, vessel bellies, protrusions, lid knobs, vessel bottoms, base of vessels with support, shapes (separated by types and variants) and decoration techniques.

As an example of the obtained results, we extracted from the created database a list of the four most used decoration techniques in the Precucuteni culture, resulting in the following chronological scheme:

- IA: incision, excision, poking and grooving;
- IB: incision, excision, barbotine and grooving;

- IIA: incision, barbotine, grooving and pinching;
- IIB: incision, barbotine, grooving and imprinting;
- IIB/IIIA: incision, barbotine, grooving and pinching;
- IIIA: incision, barbotine, grooving and application;
- IIIB: barbotine, incision, application and grooving;
- IIIC: incision, barbotine, indentation and grooving.

The fact that the decorative motifs used by the Precucutenian potters are numerous (about 700 variants inventoried so far), and some are found in several settlements/features/phases and subphases, shows that ceramic artists were free to innovate within the limits of a certain “unity in diversity”.

We think that all the data presented by us in the chapter dedicated to Precucutenian ceramics are a good proof that we have successfully applied the comparative method on collections with a large number of ceramic fragments from different settlements and features, because we used the open system (which can be completed or reworked at any time) of information and databases, catalogs and dictionaries containing data on the main attributes of the studied ceramics.

CHAPTER VI. THE ECONOMY OF THE PRECUCUTENI CULTURE COMMUNITIES (p. 383-430)

Within the limits of this chapter we tried to present the information related to the economic life of the Precucuteni culture communities. Thus we could see that it was based on various subsistence practices in accordance with the historical epoch and the technological level of the moment. In these conditions we can speak of the existence of an occupational scheme that includes the following fields: plant cultivation, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, harvesting, exploitation of salt resources, crafts (stone, bone and horn processing, spinning, weaving, copper metallurgy and processing).

Listing the discoveries and determinations of charred seeds from archaeological features, today we know that the main species of cereals grown and consumed by Precucutenians are some species of wheat, such as *Triticum aestivum* and *Triticum dicoccum*, but also barley, *Hordeum vulgare* and *Hordeum vulgare nudum*.

Most of the information in this area is of archaeozoological nature. Almost as important in the economy of the Precucutenian communities was the activity of animal husbandry. Ordered by output efficiency, the preferred species were *Bos taurus*, followed by *Ovis/Capra* and *Sus scrofa domesticus*. All these were a safe source of food of animal origin, such as meat,

milk, its derivatives, hides, wool for clothing, bones, horns and teeth for making tools and ornaments. Here we must also mention *Canis familiaris*, which was used to guard herds and settlements.

The animal proteins and fats needed to supplement the human diet, but also by-products (hides, horns and bones) were provided by the Precucutenians with the help of hunting. The mainly hunted species were *Cervus elaphus*, followed, in order of importance by *Sus scrofa ferus*, *Bos primigenius* and *Capreolus capreolus*. This category also includes *Unio* and *Helix* molluscs and fish exploited from the ecosystem. As it is not clear whether *Equus caballus* was domesticated, it is included in the list of hunted animals.

We are aware that more complex research, including sifting and floatation of the dirt from pits or various other archaeological structures, would have completed the current picture of some occupations, such as fishing. But such operations are difficult to organize, especially due to insufficient financial funds allocated for Romanian archeology.

The emergence of demand for the much-needed salt for human and domestic consumption has contributed to the emergence of a new productive activity, the exploitation of salt resources, which will have special repercussions on the social structure of the Precucuteni communities. The high density of prehistoric settlements in the area of brine springs proves that they were strictly supervised and controlled, being exploited by specialized workers.

It is believed that the salt contributed to the sedentarization of some communities that controlled the saliferous areas (see the case of the settlement of Poduri, Bacău County), but also to a certain economic development and the appearance of social differentiations within them. Certainly, this mineral product has entered the sphere of inter-community trade relations and facilitated long-distance cultural contacts.

The economic scheme included various types of crafts, such as the processing of copper, stone, bone, horn and antler, which provided the tools needed to perform other economic activities. Local raw materials were used, but also those obtained through exchanges outside the cultural area. This fact reinforces the hypothesis of the existence of organized networks for exchanges of goods between different communities. This exchange lays the foundations for direct links between communities and strengthens existing ones.

All the productive activities included in the occupational scheme of the Precucuteni culture aimed at providing food, tools and weapons, clothing and everything related to covering the basic needs of prehistoric man.

CHAPTER VII. SPIRITUAL LIFE (p. 432-463)

In an attempt to reconstruct some manifestations of the spiritual life of the Precucutenian communities, we considered it necessary to highlight the conclusion that emerged from the research undertaken in this work: *almost nothing was used randomly during the decoration of the ceramic vessels!* We may never grasp the true meaning of all the symbols used, but we believe it is imperative to try this.

In order to help elucidate some aspects related to the spiritual life in this chapter we tried to sketch some ideas about the origins and evolution of the “column-type stylized anthropomorphic decoration”, which turns out to be a complex composition with several actors. In our opinion, in the Precucutenian world, this symbolic composition was formed by the symbiosis of religious ideas belonging to the Linear Pottery and Boian-*Giulești* cultures, with subsequent influences from other civilizations in the southern, western and northern cultural environments.

The information gathered in the database so far has helped us to understand that within the Precucutenian communities there was a well-defined religious thinking, consisting of cosmogonic myths that have been used for a long time. These were then transferred to other cultural areas, diversifying and taking multiple forms.

Constituting only a stage of research, our database, which also includes the catalog of symbols present on the caps of the lid buttons and on the bottoms of the vessels, has been continuously enriched, and we are only at the beginning of the process of systematizing them. Their existence confirms the existence of a very complex symbolic and religious system in the Precucuteni communities.

During the elaboration of this work we constantly wondered what was the purpose for which these symbols were used. That is why we tried to identify in the literature interpretations and hypotheses that would help us find answers about their possible meanings. We did this because the opinions of specialists fluctuate between two extremes. On the one hand, they are considered “part of the realm of magic” or “bearers of “profane” messages without religious significance”.

On the other hand, due to their unusual character and location, it is believed that they were part of a “belief system and were used in various rituals”, an idea that we share.

About the origins of the beliefs and symbols used by the Precucutenians, it is argued in the specialized literature that they come from previous cultural environments, but also from contemporary ones. But in addition to these external influences, which we do not rule out, we believe that it is easy to see that most are original creations of the Precucutenian man.

CHAPTER VIII. CONCLUSIONS (p. 465-486)

At the end of the presentation, using as a basis for analysis the conceptual triad **SPACE - TIME - MEMORY**, regarding the name of this prehistoric cultural phenomenon, we prefer the phrase **PRECUCUTENI CULTURE**, as a component and beginning of the great **CULTURAL COMPLEX PRECUCUTENI - CUCUTENI - ARIUŞD / TRYPILLIA**.

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