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SIMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCES OF IRON IN ARCHAIC SOCIETIES. CASE STUDY: FUNERAL PRACTICES

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Rezumat

Semnificații simbolice ale fierului în societățile arhaice. Studiu de caz: practici funerare

În acest articol ne-am îndreptat atenția către cercetările antropologice, arheologice și etnografice, care au analizat aspecte legate de prezența fierului în practicile funerare. Cercetarea arheologică din ultimele decenii a arătat și a teoretizat faptul că depunerile funerare pot „codifica” date legate atât de structura socială, cât și de ideologia și mentalul colectiv al comunităților respective. În acest sens, în analiza practicilor funerare se folosesc adesea noțiuni precum cea de *persoană socială*, înțelesă ca o varietate de ipoteze (vârstă, rang social, sex etc.), ce definesc identitatea cu comunitatea căreia îi aparține individul sau *energia socială* consumată în derularea unor practici funerare. Tradițiile păstrate în satul românesc contemporan atestă, de asemenea, existența obiectelor din fier (cuțit, bucăți de coasă sau de seceră, cuie, ace sau diferite alte obiecte) în riturile și practicile funerare. Semnificația prezenței acestora este legată de funcția apotropaică pe care o exercită, dar și de capacitatea lor de a stăpâni lumea malefică, fierul fiind considerat, în mentalul tradițional, cel mai puternic element. Ritualul înmormântării indivizilor cu diferite obiecte din fier are o vechime considerabilă și constituie una dintre practicile cele mai răspândite atât în spațiul european, dar și la alte popoare.

Cuvinte cheie: symbolism, fier, obiceiuri familiale, practici funerare, mental colectiv.

Резюме

Символические значения железа в архаичных обществах (на примере похоронных практик)

В этой статье авторы уделяют внимание антропологическим, археологическим и этнографическим исследованиям, в которых анализировались аспекты, связанные с присутствием железа в похоронных практиках. Археологические исследования последних десятилетий сложились в теорию о том, что похоронные отложения могут «кодировать» данные, связанные как с социальной структурой, так и с идеологией и коллективным разумом соответствующих сообществ. В этом отношении при анализе похоронных практик часто используется такое понятие, как «социальный человек», что подразумевает различные признаки (возраст, социальное положение, пол и т. д.), определяющие идентичность с сообществом, к которому принадлежит индивид, или социальной энергией, потребляемой при развитии некоторых похоронных практик. Традиции, сохраняемые в современном румынском селе, также свидетельствуют

о наличии железных предметов (нож, фрагменты косы или серпа, гвозди, иголки и др.) в погребальных обрядах и практиках. Значение их присутствия связано с выполняемой ими апотропейческой функцией, а также с их способностью контролировать мир зла, поскольку в традиционном сознании железо считается самым мощным элементом. Ритуал захоронения людей с различными железными предметами имеет давнюю традицию и является одной из самых распространенных практик как в европейском пространстве, так и у других народов.

Ключевые слова: символика, железо, семейные обычаи, похоронные практики, коллективный разум.

Summary

Symbolic significances of iron in archaic societies.

Case study: funeral practices

In this article, we have directed our attention to the anthropological, archaeological and ethnographic researches, in which aspects related to the presence of iron in funeral practices have been analyzed. The archaeological research in recent decades showed and theorized the fact that the funerary deposits can “encode” data related to the social structure, the ideology, and the collective mentality of the given communities. In this regard, in the analysis of funerary practices, are often used notions such as *social person*, understood as a variety of hypotheses (age, social rank, sex etc.) that define the identity with the community to which the individual belongs, or *social energy* consumed while developing a funerary practice. The traditions preserved in the contemporary Romanian village also attest to the existence of iron objects (knives, pieces of scythe or sickle, nails, needles or various other objects) in the funeral rites and practices. The significance of their presence is related to the apotropaic function they exercise, but also to their ability to rule the evil world, iron being considered, in the traditional mind, the most powerful element. The ritual of burying people with different iron objects has been known for a long time, constituting one of the most widely-spread practices both in the European space and in that of other peoples.

Key words: symbolism, iron, family habits, funerary practices, collective mentality.

In the archaic societies, the objects were invested with certain symbolic significations that were specifically articulated in time, leading to the creation of complex and coherent symbolic systems, able to explain many of the human behaviour mysteries. There have been ample discussions in the contemporary socio-anthropology on the signification of the

prestige objects or of their daily use in the archaic and traditional societies.

The symbolic thinking and language have played an important part in the life of communities, shaping the entire human behaviour, and our endeavour to decode the hidden significations generate, most of the times, from the concrete objects. Mircea Eliade was emphasising that “the symbol, the myth, the image are related to the substance of the spiritual life” [12, pp. 13-14], each primordial element – fire, water, air – bears a symbolism specific to the collective mentality where it comes from. As Luc Benoist was noticing, “through this normalisation of the signs, through this alphabet of the symbols and rites, a civilisation is defined” [12, p. 136]. Similarly, it can be identified as belonging to some universal cultural archetypes.

The cult of the fire dates back from prehistory, having a polyvalent symbolism, in which the metallurgy and the iron occupy a central position. The first iron items appear in the Near East, starting with the 3rd millennium BCE. They are represented by meteoric iron-made objects (which, unlike the metal obtained from terrestrial ores, contains nickel). The “heavenly” original iron was rare and expensive, this particular reason acknowledging it as a noble metal, from which there used to be made adornments, luxury weapons and representations of the social status. We can mention, as examples, the iron-blade daggers found in the royal tombs from Alaça Hüyük (Anatolia, the end of the 3rd millennium BCE) and Ur (Southern Mesopotamia, the 27th–26th centuries BCE), from the famous tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun (1336–1327 BCE). The gold inlaid adornments discovered at Byblos (Phoenicia, the 19th century BCE) or the ring found in a well-tomb at Mycenae (Greece, the 16th century BCE) had also the function to represent the social prestige, these being only few very famous examples from archaeology [3, pp. 233-234].

The tomb is an acknowledged place, its symbolism being related to that of the mountain, the tumulus, perceived as place of burial and rebirth. In mythology, the underground world was subjected to Hades and dwelt by the gods of the fire, the masters of metallurgy that originated at the beginning of humankind: the masters of the fire manufactured weapons used by the priests of the Great Mother Cybele, the Dactyls from Ida Mountain, the Cabiri, the Cures and the Coribantians from Samothrace [12, p. 104]. At the beginnings, the weapons were spiritual symbols. The shield was the defensive weapon behind which the gods ensued their invisibility, the spade, the spear or the arrow-heads were offensive weapons, combining the symbols of lightning and

destructive power. Within the human communities, they become symbols of power and of social rank.

The socio-anthropological approach of the funerary practices, starting with the 20th century (Emil Durkheim and Arnold van Gennep), allowed that the understanding of the diversity of funerary behavior to be followed by the more nuanced knowledge of this type of archaeological discoveries. The funerary ceremony takes place on several stages that are indissolubly related one to another, stages that, in their turn, are related to the rites [15, pp. 32-47] where the communities strictly observe certain rules. Radcliffe Brown, analyzing the primitive societies, underlined that “the religion was an essential part in the constitution of a society. The forms of religion and of social structure correspond to one another” [24, p. 152]. This opinion is relatively close to the conception that Georges Dumézil developed. Analyzing the mythology that he considered specific for the population that belongs to the Indo-European linguistic family, he tried to demonstrate that “the ideology” of a society reflects the structure of its social organization, meaning that the mythical figures from the Indian, Iranian or Roman pantheon reproduce the tripartite system that we find in the social organization represented by the religious, warrior and economic functions [10]. An important domain in the primitive communities’ religion is the cult for the ancestors. As referring to it, Radcliffe Brown showed that: “The rites, in which the members of the group participate, are connected with their own ancestors, naturally including the offerings and the sacrifices... A family, if it has more than 3-4 generations, consists of both the living and the dead persons... The social function of the rites is obvious: receiving a solemn and collective expression, the rites reaffirm, renew and rebuilt those feelings on which the social solidarity depends” [24, pp. 152-153].

There is a tight connection between the religious beliefs and the funerary practices, but most of the times it is hard to be evidenced only by funerary discoveries. There had been made different attempts to sketch the religion of the prehistoric communities using the funerary discoveries for this purpose. Taking into consideration the complexity of the phenomenon, the reserves regarding the veracity, when thinking of such hypotheses, seem to us entitled, “the data about the religious beliefs of the period that we analyze here reveal only the external forms of the spiritual manifestation” [30, p. 366].

The anthropological and ethnographic researches have described a great variety of rites related to death. “The rites are more complex as it isn’t just about a natural phenomenon but a change of onto-

logical and social regime... To some people, only the ritual burial confirms the death; the one, who isn't buried according to the custom, isn't considered to be dead. To others, somebody's death is recognized as real only after fulfilling the funerary ceremonies or, if the deceased's soul was accompanied with rituals to his/her new home, to the other side, where he/she was waited for by the dead people's community" [13, p. 139]. Precisely this change of ontological statute that death involves, through association with the death and the resurrection of nature, made possible to use the symbolism of the ritual death in certain passing rites [15, pp. 30-47; 24, pp. 150-155; 13, pp. 138-149].

The archaeological research in the recent decades showed and theorized the fact that the funerary deposits can "encode" data related to the social structure, the ideology, and the collective mentality of those communities. In this regard, in the analysis of the funerary practices, are often used notions [1, pp. 23-27; 5, pp. 79-90; 25, pp. 105-141] such as *social person*, understood as a variety of hypotheses (age, social rank, sex etc.) that define the identity with a community to which to the individual belongs, or *social energy* consumed while developing a funerary practice.

The habit of depositing metal objects in graves has been observed since the end of the Neolithic Age, when the first copper objects appeared. In the Bronze Age, we can report this practice in the Gârla Mare necropolis, and later in Hinova, Mehedinți County, in the incineration necropolis in urns from the beginning of the Iron Age [9, pp. 117-179].

In the Râureni site, County Valcea, on the tall bank of the river Olt, two necropolises had been dug, one of urn cremations is attributed to the Early Hallstatt and the other, tumular, belongs to the Ferigile group from the Late Hallstatt. The cremation necropolis (Râureni I) included 100 individual (urn) tombs, situated along the river Olt. In two funeral urns, two bronze knives were found [21, p. 343; 20, pp. 49-71].

Starting with Hallstatt, the habit of depositing iron objects in graves becomes frequent in the necropolis of Balta Verde and Gogosu, Mehedinți County [4, pp. 255-489] and in Basarabi, Dolj County, in the tumular necropolis of inhumation dating from the VIII-VII centuries AD. Diverse iron objects were found here: swords, spearheads, fibulae, bracelets. A similar inventory was also found in the tumular necropolis at Desa dating back to the same period of the Middle Hallstatt [27, pp. 49-91].

At Ieșnița, Mehedinți County, in a tumular necropolis, with incineration tombs from late Hallstatt, fibulas, bracelets, knives curves, spear heads often

bent ritually, two axes Lappenbeile-type were found [22, pp. 7-42].

Another funerary discovery dating from the end of the Iron Age, where ceramics and a rich metal inventory has been encountered, is the Ferigile necropolis. We found weapons, harness pieces, fibulae, bracelets [26, pp. 106-185; 28]. A similar inventory was discovered in Telesti, Gorj County (19, pp. 7-22), both discoveries dating from the end of the Iron Age.

On addressing the previously mentioned archaeological discoveries, from the area of Oltenia, there could be concluded that the presence of metal objects (weapons, adornments, and rarely some harness items) represent a constant presence, both in the flat and tumular tombs. The signification of the deposits is related to the apotropaic function of some of the items, but neither the function of social status representation in the "other side" world should be ignored, the deceased person had to be accompanied by the attributes meant to show the social status.

Moreover, in understanding the importance of the deposits of certain metal pieces, the place where the objects are located, is essential because certain deposits from the funerary space can be considered offerings dedicated to "the spirits of the ancestors", or the gods, in order to obtain protection.

Later on, there was accentuated the apotropaic function related to the presence of the iron objects in the funerary practices, in parallel with the diminishing, even the loss of the function that represented the social status.

The traditions preserved in the Romanian village attest the presence of the iron in the funerary rites and practices since the first moments that precede the death of a person. Nonetheless, the iron items, a type of metal with magical and apotropaic valences, occupies a significant place amongst the specific objects used for every passing threshold from our life [6, pp. 201-210].

In the Romanian spirituality, there is the belief that, leaving its body, the soul becomes vulnerable, wandering on the long road that it needs to cross, between "this-side world" and "the other-side world" or, along this crossing, it can be abducted by the evil spirits. Consequently, according to some ancient rituals, an axe is thrust into the threshold, where it remains until all the people have returned from the funeral [8, p. 285]. Moreover, in the coffin, along with other objects (money for paying the customs, toiletries, useful items from the household, food, Christian identity objects etc.), there are also placed different objects made of iron (nails, a knife, pieces of a scythe or a sickle), which bear the same apotropaic meaning.

On the long and the last journey, the soul does not always reach the kingdom of the dead, and this happens when not all the norms of the funeral ceremony were observed (the deceased did not receive the coin for paying the customs; he passed over a black cat, etc.). In these situations, the dead, who wander on the way, return to where they had left as enemies of this-side world [16, p. 139] and perturb the order of the community.

The state of restlessness, caused by an eventual return on earth of the demonised passed-away was generalised in many Romanian settlements. Referring to this aspect, Mihai Pop noticed: "In the traditional conscience and its folkloric manifestations, there cannot be met, in our case, a preponderant fear of the dead, nor a fear of all the dead. On the contrary, many customs were showing that, in the traditional popular conception, between the world of the alive and that of the dead there were connections, and that the people were afraid only of the dead ones that could turn into ghosts" [23, pp. 179-180].

There are, in the collective mentality, two types of ghosts: *the living ghosts* (children born with distinguished marks such as a caul on the body or on the head, a tail, who became ghosts at their birth) and *the dead ghosts* (that come from the people who wronged or who did not have the customs observed at their funeral) [18, pp. 269-270]. They could return from where they had left, especially on St. Andrew's night, producing great damage and sufferance. Thus, so that they do not return, there were performed different practices that would prevent the phenomenon of transformation into a ghost, and techniques for not being ghosts anymore, in both situations the objects made of iron were among other "magical" elements.

The preoccupation for preventing the transformation of the passed-away into ghosts, similar to the burying of the unmarried girls in a wedding dress, "resorts from the absolute necessity to keep the established, natural order, while passing through the stages of the human existence... The origin of this exigence is related to the order, the rhythm and the equilibrium of the cosmic phenomena" [14, p. 133]. It was believed that the lack of balance within this cosmic harmony might have destructive methods (floods, earthquakes, draughts) with implications in the life of the entire community.

According to some ancient beliefs and rituals, the living ghosts were *killed* since the funeral, by thrusting a nail, an iron spike, a needle, a wooden spindle or stake, as the old from villages confess: "They used to thrust an iron spike into the heart, if they suspected it would turn into a ghost or wraith"

[16, p. 163], "Immediately after death, a long needle penetrates the heart" [16, p. 163]. Only after "the liberation" from the evil spirits, the passed-away would no-longer represent a danger for this-side world, the one of the living.

If the soul transforms into a ghost, it can be identified and killed through certain techniques of *repairing* or *changing it back* from the ghost condition, rituals in which the magical-religious valences of the iron are also rendered valuable. Few of them are mentioned by Ion Ghinoiu: the thrusting of some sharp objects, heated in fire, into the heart; the sticking of the sickle tip into the chest; the striking of nails into the heels; the taking out of the dead body on the side of the grave and cutting it with scythes and the hoes, the pricking with forks, etc. [17, pp. 286-287; 18, p. 270].

The magical practices of restoration to the former state have been recorded in writing since the 19th century. The old people from the village had the conviction that the wraith could be sent away only if they were "properly killed", an action done in diverse ways, in which the iron items had an important role. In an oral history document from the commune of Căineni, Vâlcea County, it is mentioned even the name of the *ghost*: "If they do become ghosts, in a six-week period, they are disinterred and thrust into the heart, to kill the evil soul inside, and then they are buried again. This was the case of Fănică Cojocaru, who would visit his wife and scare her to death! They took him out of the grave and put a nail in his heart" [16, p. 169]. A similar situation was registered at Curtișoara, Olt County: "They were disinterred and a nail was thrust into their heart. It happened four years ago with a girl that died, and, after her, six weeks later, her mother-in-law also died. She was suspected of becoming a wraith. She was disinterred and, because she was found she was red-cheeked, a nail was plunged into her heart. People did it at night" [16, p. 168].

Thus, the iron objects, a metal with multiple magical and apotropaic valences, occupy an important role in the assembly of required objects to be used in the funerary practices. In the popular mentality, iron gains symbolic valences, of annulling the evil influences, of protecting against them. The ritual of burying people along with different iron objects has been known for a long time, constituting one of the most widely-spread practices, both in the European space and in that of other peoples. Although some objects have no longer the same symbolic load that they had in the past, due to their detachment of sacred and their anchorage in the profane space, we notice that iron still retains many archaic meanings.

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