

Comsa's approach to trephination and ancient herbalism in context of medical anthropology

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Medical anthropology is still not well developed branch in the Eastern European scholarly studies. However, the focus of such a wonderful researcher like Alexandra Comşa on trephination and related to it another phenomenon, herbal ancient medicine, is a good luck for the whole global medical anthropology. Trephination is a theme with different independent directions of research in historiography, while the author combines her academic knowledge in physical anthropology, archaeology and psychology to offer a book that captures the interest of researchers even from much more fields of research – medicine, history, ethnography, comparative cultural studies, psychopathology, mental health, religious studies, etc. These broad aspects determine her innovative contribution to interpretive archaeology as a cross-cultural study of past humankind.

Health and culture

Our civilization has reached the point to consider how important is to place the value of health on the very top of all individual, community and global projects. While in past it was possible to have looked at the human success as the pick of human pyramids of interests, nowadays the success looks even a bad luck if it is at the expenses of human health - physical, social, moral, aesthetical, etc. From this perspective the statement of A. Comşa that a comparison between the archaic and recent communities is not very reliable, due to the fact that in older times, “the immunity of the individual was better than today, when the body is permanently under the “pressure” of pollution and stress” looks not over-idealistic. It is really a very serious scholarly problem how the people from different epochs evaluated health and cared about health. In the contemporary historiography the right direction was found in the comparative research in depth of healthy cultures and search for keys of their high health status. However, the study of deceases is equally essential since it destructures a whole complex of social issues – genetic and kin relations, environmental, enculturation and socialization background, etc. Not all of them, however, can be traced through the archaeological record.

A. Comşa shares the opinion about trephination as a consequence of a few steps: cutting off the skin above the election place in the case when no lesions existed there (1); the scalp was flapped by incision and cut through (2); taking off a fragment of bone (3); finally, the membranes of the brain (*dura mater*) would have been exposed (5). She has provided a rich record and analysis of trephination as a specific human practice, a subject of scholarly interest since Antiquity (chapters 3-9). This book wisely leaves many of the actual problems like the origin of surgical operation on human without definite answers to problematize the issue and stimulate further research in depth.

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Trephination as a surgical modification of the skull (Selin, 1997: 985-986) has two main aspects – as a cure of disease and ritualistic. In prehistory both might have overlapped to have created a cross-society global subculture with endless analogies worldwide, which may have or not have direct cultural synchronic and diachronic interactions. In other words, trephination is an independent way of relation of people to certain conditions and a response which looks similar world-wide from archaeological perspectives, although culturally it might have had even a controversial content (see also Arnott, Finger, & Smith, 2003). Current techniques in human and animal trephination of different parts of the body confirms its positive value at certain conditions (Zhang & Arnold, 1997) and may show that in prehistory the skull trephination was just one of the aspects of this type of intervention into the body.

In particular, A. Comşa reasonably analyses the relations between the trephination and mental health (chapter 10). The professionals became able very late in human history to describe and explain the mental deviations in specific scientific terms. Respectively, learning how people in the earliest stages of human culture responded to actual problems of their everydayness creates a documentary for a broad cultural comparative analysis. A. Comşa has focused her interest mainly on Romanian data, although it is a case study which conclusions go considerably beyond the limited regional analyses because of the numerous included comparative data and of the development of the research on prehistoric trephination as a theory with clear structure and problems.

Herbal medicine and ancient culture

One of the original contributions of A. Comşa in this book is her research on the role of herbs in ancient everyday life and rituals. The guess of A. Comşa about hemp plant (*Cannabis sativa*) as being one of the oldest in use in the herb medicine has confirmation in data from Central Asia which is considered the homeland of this herb (Amar, 2006). Future research is required to learn whether this herb had really one homeland or polycentric theory looks more reliable for the period of early humankind. However, if the monocentric theory finds strong arguments of this and other herbs, it may appear the exchange and distribution of medical herbs was among the most essential social practices in prehistory of Eurasia. The data from Gurbăneşti which belong to the nomad Pit Grave Culture can be used for possible cultural model according to which Pit Grave Culture communities were the main distributors of herbs from Eurasia to Central Europe. Through the systems of nomadic cultures (the Pit Grave Culture, Afanasevo, Andronovo and to the east till Xinjiang) the Balkan ancient medical skills were connected with the two other gigantic centers – Caucasus and Tibet. The herb horizon Tibet – Caucasus – the Balkans (the Carpathians – Stara Planina – the Rhodopes – Pirin and Rila) is a working hypothesis that can be further extended to the Alps. The research in depth of this horizon from perspectives of the prehistoric medical anthropology may reveal extremely important cultural patterns and structures of human social relations, comparable with the Silk Road or overlapping with the Silk Road.

The exchange of skills, herbs, subsistence products and rituals stimulated movements of people and distribution of specific language, in particular the Indo-European languages. The Europeoid anthropological type in Eurasia from Bronze Age indicates lines of cultural interactions and not invasions according to the archaeological data. In other words, Gimbutas' Kurgan theory in the light of recent advanced research (e.g. Nikolova, 1999; Bailey, 2000; Bennet & Kaestle, 2006; Xinjiang, online; Nikolova, 2010), theory and methodology of prehistoric research can be

modified as a theory of globalized network of cultural interaction in which the Kurgan nomads were main transmitters of cultural information connecting directly and indirectly huge social and cultural spaces. Such view was very well argued in the works by N. Ya. Merpert (1987). The new data, in particular the study of prehistoric medical herbs, may provide new arguments and insights into the mechanism of the networks.

In this monograph A. Comşa provides rich data about ancient herbs and their healing qualities which can be in future expanded by cross-cultural research and development of the techniques of the archaeological excavations.

In conclusion, currently the folk medicine has been flourishing all over the world because of the high value of its results. This fact in turn increases the importance of the research on early forms of medicine and ritualistic curing, including trephination, shamanism, the ancient plant and animal medicines, the social response to deceases, etc. The contribution of A. Comşa develops considerably the topic of ancient medicine and health rituals and stimulates further research in depth of Balkan ancient tradition as case studies and in a broader cultural context.

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