THE GRAVE WITH OFFER OF MOLLUSCA (8^{th} CENTURY) DISCOVERED AT ALBA IULIA — „FIRST AID STATION“

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1. Remarks on the offer

The mystical-religious thought of former human communities considered the cemetery to be a „village“ or a „ceremonial house of Death“. The funerary pile contained the sepulchres of the members of the community, which, leaving the active life one after another and generation after generation, went the returnless way towards the new „residence“ situated in the „everlasting rest place“. The arrangement of the new „house“ was performed under the stiff action of the ancestral belief in a *„post mortem* survival“, a life in another world, where the deceased will continue to practise specific activities[1].

The religious significance of the sepulchres and the faith in a „personal survival“, according to which the defuncts continue after death the activity carried out during the lifetime[2], were concretized in the particularly careful burial[3]. The „spiritual“ survival, explained by the post-existence of the soul after separating from the body, is reflected in some graves by the position of the corpse, funerary ritual and practice, objects belonging to the funerary inventory and food remnants presented as „food for Death“[4].

Our researches during the last two decades uncovered an appreciable number of graves of old standing (from prehistory up to the early Middle Ages). Some of such funerary piles contain rich offer remnants of animal origin. So, the cremation grave in Hallstatt lided urn discovered în 1978 at Mediaş contained, besides the calcined human bones, the remnants of the morturay offer cremated together with the deceased. These ones are illustrated by a fragment of lower jaw (the external wall of the mandibula at molar level) and three remnants of diaphysae of long bones belonging to a great size animal, probably cattle or horse[5].

* The archaeological research at Alba Iulia (1980—1981), the identification of mollusca remnants, and the anthropological study of the cremated bone remnants were respectively performed by M. Blăjan (Muzeul Unirii, Alba Iulia), Prof. dr. Al. V. Grossu (Faculty of Biology, University of Bucharest) and D. Botezatu („Al. I. Cuza“ Uuniversity, Iaşi).

1 M. Eliade, *Istoria credinţelor şi ideilor religioase*, I, Bucureşti, 1980, p. 9.

2 *Ibidem.*

3 *Ibidem*, p. 7.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 9.

5 M. Blăjan, D. Botezatu, D. Comşa, *Mormântul de incineraţie hallstattian de la Mediaş (jud. Sibiu)*, in *Apulum*, XXIV, 1987, p. 49.

EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS, III, 1993, p. 273—280.

The archaeological excavations performed at Şpălnaca-„Şugud“, in the area of the prefeudal cemetery (6—7th centuries) uncovered two very large graves, each of them containing the inhumed remnants of the defunct and a horse skeleton, ritually sacrified at the death of the rider. The animals, equipped with the usual harness (bridle, saddle, stirrup etc.), were accompanied in the grave by the defunct's weapons. Such funerary customs belong to a group of Avars which crossed the Mureş valley towards the salt pits of Ocna Mureş, overlapping the inhabitants of Şpălnaca and neighbouring villages[6].

The cremation graves at Berghin (7—th centuries) have the food offer represented by bone remnants of burnt animals (cattle, pigs, sheep, poultry), while the women inhumed during the first half of the 9th century were accompanied by half-skeleta or even integral skeleta of sheep laid down above the corpse in the grave[7].

In the early feudal (9—10th centuries) inhumation graves uncovered at Alba Iulia — „First aid station“ (1980—1981) there were found fragments (legs, portions of spinal column, head) or integral skeleta of animals, especially poultry, symbolically laid down in the grave. The frequence of remnants of cattle, pigs, sheep is remarkable, and that of poultry remnants (attested by eggs and integral skeleta) too. Pieces of ritually sacrified horses, found in two inhumation graves, are to be added. Near the fragmented bones of the animals sacrified for the funerary feast there laid down the knives used to sacrify them, and one or two pots with beverage or meat broth, as well[8].

2. **Description of the archaeological discovery**

Among the most interesting discoveries recorded in the early feudal cemettry at Alba Iulia — „First aid station“, located North-West of the town, we shall describe a cremation grave (8th century) whose offer consists of *mollusca*.

Grave 456. Cremation urn. Depth 0,30 m. The oval pit (0,60×0.70 m) had on its Northern and Western sides a layer consisting of 220 snail shells. In the central zone of the grave there were found 58 slivers of calcined human bones, of white or bluish colour, and fragments of the urn. The anthropological study of the bones found two large fragments, six mean portions and 20 small chips. The cephalic part is not represented, but the postcranial skeleton is attested by a diaphysary fragment of femur and several small remnants of disphysae of humers and tibia. The small dimensions of the bones, especially represented by slivers of long bones, constitutes an argument for assigning the grave to a 6—7 years old child *(infants I)*.

There were recovered from the grave four small fragments belonging to the body of a Roman jug (?), with blackish-grey sandy fabric.

[6] The researches were performed during 1976 and 1979 by D. Protase and M. Blăjan (M 19 and M 37) (M=grave).

[7] New diggings performed between 1977—1979 by M. Blăjan.

[8] The new discoveries of 1980—1981 belong to the archaeologist M. Blăjan.

The urn is broken (bottom and upper part are missing); only 19 fragments belonging to the lower part of the pot are kept. Worked at fast wheel, from sandy fabric degreased with pebbles and mica spangles, the vessel is incompletely burnt, being black inside and red-brick-brown outside. The outside ruggedness was attenuated by bathing the pot into a fine loam solution, which covered the external surface with a thin layer of clay having an aspect of glaze. The interior of the pot presents large grooves resulted from the whirlings of the wheel. It was impossible to restore the lower part of the pot.

The study of the shape of the sheels laid in the sepulchral pit allowed the identification of two different species of mollusca. Most patterns belong to the species *Cepaea dacica Grossu and Bădărău,* represented by lungged gasteropoda still living in the forest steppe inhabiting the groves, gardens, and orchards with relatively high moisture content (Fig. 1). The mollusca belong to a common species spread especially in East-Europe (Austria, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine) and more rarely in the Balkan Peninsula, appeared as far back as the end of Pliocene, and found in Quaternary sediments up to 700 m altitude. The shape (but not the size) of the snail shell is similar to that corresponding to the species *Cepaea vindobonensis C. Pfeiffer.*

The gasteropoda whose shells have been laid down in the grave covers a larger areal in Romania, and present some features differing from those we know nowadays. The frail patterns are much smaller than the normally-sized *Caepaea vindobonesis,* and correspond to more unfavourable temperature and moisture conditions. The development of these

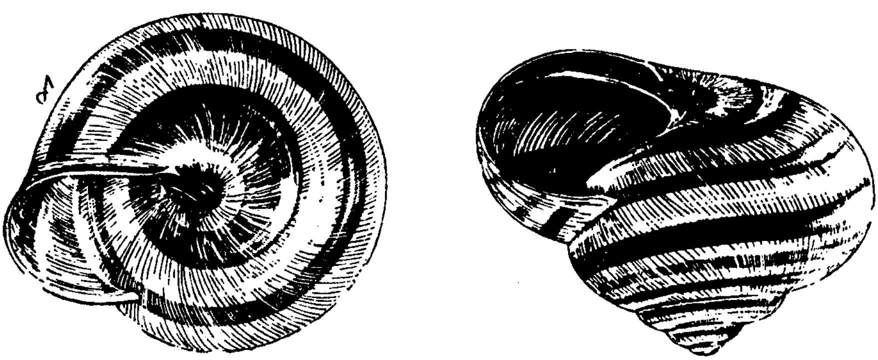

Fig. 1. — *Alba Iulia* — *„Stația de salvare“* ("First aid station"). The grave with cremation urn (8-th century). *Cepaea dacica.*

forms took place under the action of a climate featured by long drought and cool weather. The topoclimatic conditions can be represented by a local mollusc, living into limited areas and still found nowadays, but conditioned by the same morphologic changes. Unlike *Caepaea vindobonensis,* this new species, called *Cepaea dacica,* has a wholly different anatomy of the reproduction system. Although only shells similar to the actual ones were found in the grave, these ones are wide-spread in the respective region[9].

The *Cepaea gasteropoda* served perhaps as food; in certain regions they are still esculent, however without an appreciable use.

The second species, illustrated by *Helix lutescens (Zgl.) Rossmässler*, is represented by lungged gasteropoda found only as fragmented shell remnants. This mollusca also is a terrestrial species characterizing the

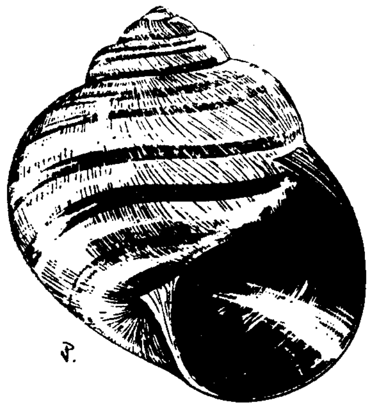

Fig. 2. — *Alba Iulia* — *„Stația de salvare"* ("First aid station"). The grave with cremation urn (8-th century). *Helix lutescens.*

forest steppe, but living in everglade and wood zones, too (Fig. 2). Our contemporaries hunt for this snail, which is esculent and used to alimentation purposes.

Therefore Helix lutescens and *Cepaea dacica* cohabit the same geographic areal. In unfavourable climatic conditions, they were possibly used as food by the local inhabitants.

3. Grave and inventory general characterization

The above presented discovery includes a cremation grave dating from the 8th century A.D., belonging to a larger cemetery pointed out North of town, in the neighbourhood of this one's contemporary prefeudal location. The bony remnants laid down in the urn originate in the post-cephalic skeleton of a child belonging to the age group *infans I.* The offer laid down in the sepulchral pit consists of a small pile of snail shells belonging to the species *Cepaea dacica* and *Helix lutescens.* The two groups of forest or grave lungged gasteropoda inhabited the everglades and wood zones from the forest steppe region surrounding the Alba Iulia location. The patterns, carefully arranged in the form of a semicircle near the urn laid down in the sepulchral pit, are featured by marked striations and smaller dimensions of the shell, due to the influence of a dry, precipitationless climate. Collected during the summertime, the gasteropoda were used as food by the inhabitants of the respective prefeudal and early

[9] Al. V. Grossu, A. S. Bădărău, *A New Species of the Genus Cepaea Held. 1937: Cepaea Dacica n.sp. (Gasteropoda, Helicidae)*, in *Revue Roumanie de Biologie*, Série de biologie animale, 35, 1, Bucharest, 1990, p. 3—7.

feudal placement. The fact that the snail shells were laid down in the grave argues for the character of funerary food offer of the mollusca[10].

4. General importance of mollusca for the economic and spiritual life of human collectivities

As far back as in the palaeolithic the mollusca played an important part in the human life and civilisation[11]. They had been used, especially during the Neolithic, as food of the coast on different continents as Asia (Japan), Europe (England, France), America (U.S.A.) proves. Such clumps reach sometimes amazing dimensions: some hundred meters length, 8—10 m breadth, and high as genuine hillocks. The information provided by certain authors, among which we mention P. H. Fischer[12], prove that still nowadays, in some insular countries, the basic food of the inhabitants consists of different species of mollusca. But, together with the use of the mollusca as food, their shells were used to manufacture different objects: buttons, knives, spear and arrow points, spades, etc. That is why the Ethnologic Bureau of the U.S.A. organized special research concerning the connection of the prehistoric man with the mollusca. The studies of Vivian Abren[13] and especially those of W. H. Holmes[14] bring valuable contributions as to the part of the mollusca as food, raw material used to ornament manufacturing, or to various practical purposes. These authors often mention the use of mollusca as cult objects. Even today, as W. Adams[15] asserts, in the religious Buddhist life of India and Indonesia, the mollusca *Xancus pyrum L.* is considered to be a holy oyster, representing as cult object one of the symbols of the god Krishna.

The use of certain species of mollusca to manufacture jewelry: pendants, necklaces, bracelets etc. is of great archaeological interest. R. Tucker Abbott[16] dwell upon *Capraea cassia rufa L.*, a beautiful species of gasteropoda from the Indian and Pacific Ocean, found into the French caverns, in Cro-Magnon prehistoric sites. Also, *Cypraea tigris L.* (the cowry), living in the Indian-Pacific zone, is pointed out in prehistoric archaeological diggins from England. There are many such exemples, and the presence of such oysters in the archaeological piles indicated the origin and the way followed by the prehistoric peoples during their invasion in Europe.

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[10] One of the summer diseases able to cause the death of the children could be the dysentery (diarrhoea), happened as a consequence of the consumption of infected water. Even today, 75 % of the cases of infantile sickening with tragic end are due to the same cause. This oppinion belongs to the primary physician Dr. Viorel Moraru (Maternity Hospital of Lupeni), to whom we are very grateful.

[11] Al. V. Grossu, *Gasteropoda Romaniae*, I, București, 1986, p. 1—524, especially p. 100—108 *(Valorificare și importanță economică)*; idem, *Mollusca — Bivalvia (Scoici)*, in *Fauna R.P.R.*, III, 3, 1962, p. 88—91 *(Importanța economică)*.

[12] P. H. Fischer, *Rôle des coquillages dans les premières civilisations humaines*, in *Journal Conchyologie*, 39, Paris, 1949, p. 82—98.

[13] Vivian Abren, *Mollusca and Man*, in *Of Sea and Shore*, 5 (3), 1923—1930, Washington, 1974, p. 123—130.

[14] W. H. Holmes, *Art in Shell of the Ancient Americans*, in *Of Sea and Shore*, 5, 93; 6, 185; 7, 105, 113; 8, 31—32, 111, 229—230, 254; 9 (1), 49 (2), 113, Washington, 1974—1979.

[15] W. Adams, *Faune de Belgique. Mollusques*, I *(Mollusques terrestres et dulcicoles)*, Bruxelles, 1960, p. 402.

[16] R. Tucker Abbott, *American Seashells*, New York, 1955, p. 511.

On the Romanian territory, the archaeological diggins performed during the last four decades discovered numerous evidences of the use of mollusca as food for the human collectivities, as well as to manufacture jewelry and tools.

The use of gasteropoda and lamellibranchiata as food is attested in Neolithic, Bronze Age, Hallstatt and even prefeudal and Early Medieval placements situated along rivers or near moorlands. So, the researches performed by C. N. Mateescu in the Neolithic settlement at Vădastra (1946, 1948, 1954) and Cruşova (1955) in Oltenia, identified sea species of gasteropoda intended to manufacture jewelry or ornaments[17]. We also point out discoveries of mollusca in the Early Neolithic placements at Cluj — „Gura Baciului"[18] and Iclod (Cluj country)[19], or in the area of the neo-eneolithic ones (Petreşti culture) at Târnava — „Balamor", Mediaş — „Gura Câmpului", Şona, Alba Iulia — „Lumea Nouă" etc. in Transylvania[20], and Hăbăşeşti, Valea Lupului etc. in Moldova[21]; Bronze-Age or Hallstatt sites of Mediaş — „Cetate", Blaj — Petrisat[22] etc. The presence of these mollusca in prefeudal and Early Feudal villages was proved by the investigations at Alba Iulia — „Cetate", where a fragment of valve of an Indo-Pacific originated mollusc, belonging to the species *Haliotis sp.*, was discovered into a residence dated in the 11th century[23]. Other disco-

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[17] R. Protopopescu, C. N. Mateescu, V. Grossu, *Formation des couches de civilisation de la station de Vădastra en rapport avec le sol. La faune malacologique et le climat*, in *Quartär*, I, 20, 1969, p. 135—162; Al. V. Grossu, *Consideraţii paleofaunistice şi biogeografice asupra moluştelor găsite în săpături arheologice şi în straturi de loess*, in *Materiale*, III, 1957, p. 374 sq.; C. N. Mateescu, *Săpături arheologice la Cruşova*, in *Materiale*, III, 1957, p. 104, notes 1—2, p. 11.

[18] Olga Nekrasov, *Studiul oseminţelor umane şi al resturilor de paleofaună descoperite în mormântul neolitic de la Cluj-„Gura Baciului", datând din cultura Criş*, în *Apulum*, V, 1964, p. 28; see also N. Vlassa and A. Palkó, în *Apulum*, V, 1964, p. 13, V.

[19] We are very thankful to Gh. Lazarovici (Cluj-Napoca) for this information kindly offered.

[20] Surface researches performed by M. Blăjan between 1973—1980.

[21] Vl. Dumitrescu and collab., *Hăbăşeşti. Momongrafie arheologică*, Bucureşti, 1954, p. 606. See also Al. V. Grossu, *Moluştele găsite în diferite gropi la Hăbăşeşti*, in *Hăbăşeşti. Monografie arheologică*, p. 605; idem, *Consideraţii paleoecologice şi paleoclimatice pe baza gasteropodelor găsite în săpăturile arheologice de la Mitoc (Malul Prutului)*, in *Materiale*, VI, 1959, p. 19; idem, *Interpretarea unor resturi de moluşte din Rumelianul I şi II din Cuina Turcului*, in *SCIV*, 21, 1970, 1, p. 45—47. Around the chest of a crouched skeleton inhumed into a grave belonging to Cernavodă culture (transition period from Neolithic to Bronze Age) there were found "some unperforated shells of *Columbella* snails", cf. D. Berciu, S. Morintz, P. Roman, *Săpăturile de la Cernavodă*, in *Materiale*, VI, 1959, p. 103.

[22] Journeys and archaeological diggings performed by M. Blăjan during 1973—1974 and 1976.

[23] Discovered by M. Blăjan in spring 1986, the piece was determined, as the other species of mollusca found in different placements, by Prof. Dr. Al. V. Grossu, See also Gh. Ştefan, I. Barnea, Maria Comşa, Eug. Comşa, *Dinogeţia*, Bucureşti, 1967, p. 289, figs. 171, 23 and p. 325 ("three integral little cowries" from 12-th century). In the residences uncovered at Dridu there were collected 24 mollusca belonging to clams *(Unio sp.)* and gasteropoda *Cepaea vindobonensis Pfeiffer* and *Helix pomatia L.* (snail). Dozens of *Cepaea vindobonensis* shells were collected from B 2/1957, and one or two patterns from B XI/1957, B XVII/1960, B 3 and B X/1956. Cf. Olga Nekrasov, S. Haimovici, *Studiul resturilor osoase de animale descoperite în aşezarea feudală timpurie de la Dridu*, in Eugenia Zaharia, *Săpăturile de la Dridu*, Bucureşti, 1967, pp. 204—212, 215—217, 224.

veries are to be pointed out at Sânmiclăuş — „Răstoci“ (5—6th centuries)[24] and Războieni — „Valea Socşoara“ (10—11th centuries), where there were found many oysters belonging to the species *Unio crassus batavus*[25].

The transformation of mollusca shells into jewelry or ornaments constitutes a frequent pursuit of the prehistoric artisans, especially during the Neolithic and Eneolithic. The most eloquent example is provided by numerous ornament pieces found in the inhumation cemetery originated in the phase I of Boian culture and uncovered at Cernica, near Bucharest. Is was ascretained here that the ornaments found into the graves were manufactures from oysters belonging somtetimes to several species. So, integral shells of *Ostrea edulis* mollusca, „endowed with two or more orifices in order to be sewn on clothes or hung on breast, were found on clavicles, left omoplate, or pubis“, in some sepulchral pits[26].

The bracelets, of small and great size, include 20 pieces manufactured from shells of living mollusca and two pieces manufactured from fossil valves. The first ones belong to the species *Pectunculus pilosus* or *bimaculatus*. Grinded polished, the bracelets were carried, one or several, on one or both arms.

The necklaces placed around the neck or on the waist belt (breast, pelvis) were composed of shells of *Spondylus gaederopus, Ostrea* and *Dentalium*, strung on one or two threads. There also are pointed out plates with two or four orifices, drawn together into necklaces, and more than 90 beads of *Spondylus*[27].

The Eneolithic skeleta discovered at Decea Mureşului[28] and Copşa Mică[29] had on their hips large bead girdles of shell fragments belonging to *Unio sp.* The girdles found in the Eearly Feudal (9—10th centuries) graves of Deva[30], Alba Iulia[31], Gâmbaş[32] etc. also contain fossil or actual shells belonging to the species *Spondylus sp., Ostrea sp.* and especially *Cypraea moneta* and *Cyprarea sp.*

5. Symbolic significance and heathen character of mollusca offer

The use of mollusca (specially gosteropoda) as offer is rare. That is why we actually don't know in the Transylvanian prefeudal graves (7—9th centuries) mollusca offers laid down into the sepulchral pit as

[24] Systematic diggings performed by M. Blăjan during 1973, 1975, 1977—1979.

[25] Researches performed by M. Blăjan during 1989—1990.

[26] Gh. Cantacuzino, in *SCIV*, 18, 1967, 3, p. 377—400 and notes 46—56, p. 391, fig. 8, 3—4 and 8, 2; Gh. Cantacuzino, Sebastian Morintz, *Die jungsteinzeitlichen Funde in Cernica (Bukarest)*, in *Dacia*, NS, VII, 1963, p. 83—85 (significance of offers).

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 70—71, fig. 27, 1, 9—10; p. 72—73; fig. 28, 16—17, 20—24; p. 74—75. Gh. Cantacuzino, *op. cit.*, p. 391, fig. 11 A/1—5, 9, 13; 11 B/4, 6, 8, 15 *(Spondylus)*.

[28] Şt. Kovács, *Cimitirul eneolitic de la Decea Mureşului*, in *AISC*, I, 1932, p. 89—101, fig. 1, 2—3, 5; 2—4; 10, 3; 12; 15; 4; etc.

[29] New discovery (1973).

[30] New discoveries (Hunedoara County), Deva Museum).

[31] Diggins performed by M. Blăjan in 1990.

[32] M. Roska, *Adatok a Magyarország erdélyi honfoglalásához* (reprint), p. 260, figs. 21—22, 24—25 *(Cypraea)*, 23 *(Murex?)*; see G. Nagy, *La conquête de Transsylvanie et les trouvailles*, in *ArchÉrt.*, új f., XXXIII, 1913, p. 268—275, 293—294; K. Herepei, *A gómbasi népvándorláskori sirról*, in *ArchÉrt.*, XV, 1985, p. 426—430.

food for the defunct in the world beyond grave. In the actual stage of documentation, we consider that the grave 456 uncovered at Alba Iulia represents a unique discovery in the intracarpathian geographic space[33].

As to the symbolic significance of mollusca, the literature provides us interesting informations. Gilbert Durand assigns to the oyster the significance of shelter, hiding place[34]. The snail is considered to be a provileged lunar symbol which represents by its shell the aquatic aspect of fecundation and the female attribute of sexuality. The spiral shell represents the „universal symbol of temporality and permanence of being along changing fluctuations“, the sign of „equilibrium out of balance, order, being in the bosom of change“[35].

But whatever the symbolic significance of the presence of mollusca in the described grave is, food offer or sign of survival of the being of the cremated child, despite the continuous temporal and spatial changes, this practice belongs to the heathen ritual of burial.

6. Conclusions

Therefore, the gasteropode offer found in the prefeudal grave at Alba Iulia constitutes, by its novelty, a unique discovery which allows to precise a new kind of funerary sacrifice, with alimentary character. The discovery shows the importance of mollusca in the economic field, and emphasizes the symbolic significance of these ones in the spiritual life of human collectivities, spread along the time on various geographic zones of the Eearth. It contributes to the knowledge of certain ritual practices with funerary meaning used by the people with heathen uranian-solar believes and cremation, during the constitution of the first political formations on the Romanian territory, at the time of companionship of local Romanian inhabitants with the Slav-Avar groups settled in the Transylvanian intracarcpathic space.

[33] A similar discovery was reported, three decades ago, at Ciumbrud-„Podireu“. Here, in the neighbourhood of a bowl and a spear point, an elliptic spot with the major axis of 0,50 m has appeared, on which there were little, calcined cranial and pelvian bones. "On this spot a great deal of snail shells also appeared, while around and in the whole digging — these ones were totally absent“. This discovery, dated in the Scythian epoch (VI—V-th centuries B.C.) was "considered to be a ritual laying down“. Cf. A. Dankanits, I. Ferenczi, *Săpăturile arheologice de la Ciumbrud*, in *Materiale*, VI, 1959, p. 612—613; Şt. Ferenczi, *Cimitirul „scitic“ de la Ciumbrud (I)*, in *ActaMN*, II, 1965, p. 104. Also at Ciumbrud, some Scythian inhumation graves contained oyster valves (M II, man) of the species *Unio pictorum* (*Ibidem*, p. 91, 93) and (M XIV, woman) — oyster shells of the genus *Unio* (*Ibidem*, p. 101—102), placed between the left elbow and the chest, or near the right elbow. Also, a woman (M III) had at her neck a small necklace consisting of "little snail shells, an iron bead, and other vitreous paste beads“ (*Ibidem*, p. 91, fig. 8. 3).

[34] G. Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, Bucureşti, 1977, p. 390; M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 298, note 37.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 11, too; G. Durand, *op. cit.*, p. 391; P. Caraioan, *Geneza sacrului*, Bucureşti, 1967, p. 62.