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Towards prehistoric wellness in Eurasia: clay and health

Lolita NIKOLOVA*

Abstract: *Clay is widely used today as a physical preventive health and aesthetic means, as well as a remedy. According to ethnographic data, pregnant women in Nigeria, Kenya and Iran consume a variety of clay. The major elements in the consumed clay from two countries, Nigeria and Kenya, were Ca, Ti and Fe.*

The analysis of Cucuteni pottery from Romanian Moldova shows that white pigment was clay rich in Ca (kaolin), which is frequently distributed in Romanian Moldova. The red pigment was also clay-based rich in Fe and Ti as reinforcing agent. The black (dark brown) color was due to Mn and Fe as the main elements.

The Romanian scholars believe that the used colors on Cucuteni pottery had magic significance: red = life (blood), white = good (light) and black = the evil (darkness). There are missing written records about Cucuteni mythology from fifth – early fourth millennium cal BC, while red, white and black have a variety of meaning in world culture. Based on a series of comparative data it is possible to propose that the clay used for pigments was rich in minerals and also popular as medicinal clay. If so, a health component in the meaning of the decoration colors can be applied.

Rezumat: *Argila este astăzi utilizată pe scară largă în scopuri de prevenire fizică a îmbolnăvirilor și estetice, dar și ca remediu medical. Conform datelor etnografice, femeile însărcinate din Nigeria, Kenya și Iran consumă o varietate de argile. Elementele majore din argilele folosite în două dintre aceste țări, Nigeria și Kenya, sunt Ca, Ti și Fe.*

Analiza ceramicii culturii Cucuteni din Moldova (România) a arătat că pigmentul alb era o argilă bogată în Ca (caolin), întâlnită frecvent în această regiune. Pigmentul roșu era de asemenea o argilă, bogată în Fe și conținea Ti ca agent de întărire. Culoarea neagră (brun închis) era datorată Mn și Fe ca principale elemente.

În literatura arheologică românească se consideră că anumite culori ale ceramicii Cucuteni aveau semnificație magică: roșu = viață (sânge), alb = bine (lumină) și negru = rău (întuneric). Nu există izvoare scrise despre mitologia Cucuteni din mileniul 5 și începutul mileniului 4 cal BC, în timp ce culorile roșu, alb și negru au o varietate de semnificații în cultura lumii. Pe baza unei serii de date comparative, este posibil să afirmăm că argila utilizată pentru pigmenți era bogată în minerale și de asemenea era populară ca argilă medicinală. Dacă este așa, o componentă ce descrie starea de sănătate poate fi aplicată în semnificația culorilor decorului ceramic.

Keywords: *clay, health, Cucuteni culture, pottery decoration.*

Cuvinte cheie: *argilă, sănătate, cultura Cucuteni, decor ceramic.*

◆ Introduction

Clay was vital for prehistoric people. It was a material for their consumption supplies, their houses, and for their art objects, for instance. It was possibly also essential for prehistoric physical and aesthetical health, although there are missing direct evidence for a detailed analysis in this direction.

In archaeology clay is usually studied as a source for making ceramic products. It is interesting that even in the advanced archaeological research of geochemistry of clay it is missing a section of the healthy aspects of clay and of the rich mineral composition of the different primary and secondary clays (A.M. Pollard, C. Heron 2008, p. 98-143), although its remedy function has been well known for millennia (R. Dextreit 2000; K. Cohen 2003; Medicinal clay, online).

In course of research of prehistoric health interesting data were collected that may relate to documentation of medicinal clay knowledge among Cucuteni people that influenced the Cucuteni art. The methodology of an archaeo-ethnographic comparative analysis in combination for use of chemical data for cultural analysis resulted in a new explanation cultural model.

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◆ Clay and health: comparative data

Clay is widely used today as a physical preventive health and aesthetic means, as well as a remedy. Clay works in two ways: external and internal. The internal use may have positive and negative effects on human physical health.

According to ethnographic data (I.G.E. Ibeanu *et alii* 1997), pregnant women in Nigeria, Kenya and Iran consume a variety of clay. There are different beliefs that underlie contemporary geophagia – as reducing salivation, smoothening of the unborn infant's skin, etc. A market survey put the amount to 2 kg per week consumed individually. The major elements in the consumed clay from two countries, Nigeria and Kenya, were Ca, Ti, and Fe.

It is interesting to compare the ethnographic data above with some prehistoric archaeological data from the Balkans. The analysis of Cucuteni pottery from Romanian Moldova (B. Constantinescu *et alii* 2005) shows that white pigment was clay rich in Ca (kaolin), which is frequently distributed in Romanian Moldova. The red pigment was also clay-based rich in Fe and Ti as reinforcing agent. The black (dark brown) color was due to Mn and Fe as the main elements.

The Romanian scholars believe that the used colors on Cucuteni pottery had magic significance: red = life (blood), white = good (light) and black = the evil (darkness). There are missing written records about Cucuteni mythology from fifth – early fourth millennium cal BC, while red, white and black have a variety of meaning in world culture. However, it is possible for the time being, to presume that the used for pigments clay was rich in minerals and also popular as preventive health food supplement, and also eventually utilized as a tattoo pigment. If so, a health component in the meaning of the decoration colors can be proposed. Visually, the Cucuteni vessels have some anthropomorphic characteristics, then, an interaction between the meanings applied to the vessels and human body looks likely.

The pattern of ornamentation with red lines characterizes some Cucuteni figurines as well (D.W. Bailey 2005, p. 92, 96). Some of the interpretations include representations of tattoos and/or body ornaments (S. Marinescu-Bîlcu cited in D.W. Bailey 2005, p. 101). In addition, there are richly ornamented clay spoons (B. Constantinescu *et alii* 2005, fig. II-7-2 (b)) that might have been used for medical purposes as part of rituals or belonging to healers. Theoretically, the clay spoons may have imitated wooden spoons. However, the longevity of the clay probably increased their magical curing function in the mind of prehistoric people as a mediator between the nature (medical clay, plants and fruit) and the individuals. They also might have been accepted as luxury objects in compare to ordinary (wooden) objects. Using clay for figurines itself might have appreciated its curing (magical) function that explained the popularity of clay figurines although many ethnographic and contemporary sources refer to wood or other sustainable materials.

Very important piece of information about how clay helped prehistoric people comes from Fremont Indians who lived in what is now rural Southern Utah. According to the local legends, they learned about the healing properties of Redmond clay deposit noticing that herds of deer frequently gathering to nibble at the soil around the deposit. Native Americans were known "to carry a ball of clay with them in their packs, dissolving some in water and with their meals to ward off the effects of stomach ailments and food infections, and the practice persisted for generations" (Tao of herbs, online). In the summarized table of Native American healing Kenneth Cohen (2003, p. 146-147) classified placing earth on or near the body as energy therapy.

◆ Conclusion

Although some evidence suggests that the medicinal use of clay might was known even by *Homo habilis* (Medicinal clay, online), there are still missing certain data from prehistoric Eurasia that can be used as a source of using clay for preventive clay and remedy. This communication attempted to connect records of different characters for interpreting of Cucuteni decoration as eventual indirect argument of medicinal clay knowledge and use in the Balkans.

Further research in this direction may result in discovering new essential aspects of the lifestyle of prehistoric people all over the world.

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