Art and Prehistory
(Visiting the Gaydarska and Chapman’s Answers to Why were Prehistoric Persons Interested in Rocks, Minerals, Clays and Pigments?)

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Introduction

Yesterday (8-29-09) I attended a jewelry workshop with my anthropology students. It was absolutely exiting, not because the art students, with their creativity, made the workshop an event, but because I tried by memory to make an Ur-like necklace including especially a red colored bone/horn, to look like with a carnelian bead. And as a surprise, today reviewing the new publications on Balkan archaeometallurgy online I saw the question of Gaydarska and Chapman (2008). Just seeing such big thing as the problem about the aesthetics of prehistoric Balkans made me turn to the publication and forget about everything else. Below I will share my reflection on the Gaydarska and Chapman’s thoughts from the perspectives of my social and academic experience.

Aesthetics versus aesthetic

Although the article’s title starts with “aesthetics” (the pleasing appearance or effect) in fact in the text more definite thoughts have been expressed in the context of aesthetic as a theoretical or philosophical approach to color and object significance in Prehistory. In more strictly academic sense, in fact the authors have been touching the problem of art in prehistory since the aesthetics as
pleasing appearance or effect characterize not only the material expression, but any human behavior and its results. On its side, the cultural relation to rocks, minerals, clays and pigments was in fact relation of artists to nature in order to interact and create cultural products that in turn connected the people and nature (Nikolova, 2009). The art was invented in particular, to connect the gradually self-developing social world with the nature and in such way to make the world look united and complex (Figures 1 & 2). Although the archaeological or archaeological-anthropological view on Balkan prehistory (e.g. Nikolova, 1999; Bailey, 2000) in many cases do not describe the materially as an art, the artistic, respectively aesthetic function, is embodied in any cultural activity because the culture of people was created upon the model of nature and the nature was a mirror of harmony, beauty, symmetry and balance. So, the question is not about the aesthetic of prehistory but how to understand this aesthetic.

Social anthropology’s parameters

Gaydarska and Chapman (2008: 63) understand social anthropology as a formal expression of power and status. However, social anthropology is a gigantic research field of positioning of the individuals and social groups in a variety of cultural contexts and analyzing their responses and interactions. Social anthropology always models personalities and identities that can be tested against different context but never limits to only one model since the context creates always more opportunities of explanation. The problem of power-status model is based on the presumption of absence of for instance, leading pure aesthetic, entertainment, memory or exotic functions of the prehistoric objects. Even if they exist, they would have secondary and dependent function (see the brilliant analysis of D.W. Bailey (2005) on prehistoric figurines). Then, Gaydarska and Chapman (2008) have limited their aesthetical approach within the power-status social model of understanding of the prehistoric object, but at the same time in the following text even this determination is not explored because of the method of eclectically selected arguments.
Art, aesthetic and materiality

It is impossible to follow the authors’ structure of arguments since they preferred a diachronic view on Balkan community but actually in the different selected periods are discussed different themes. Then, I will try to understand at least the main points as theoretical and not cultural-historical constructs.

1. People and their environment

According to Gaydarska and Chapman (2008: 65), “object-colours were as important as environmental colors in the creation of significance and meaning”. My understanding is that this statement read in the conclusions is key for understanding the prehistoric culture as a process that included creating art to connect the people’s social life and nature (Nikolova, 2009; for the connectivity between art and archaeology see Bailey, 2008). I shared with my students that when I was undergraduate student I spent an enormous time to try to understand the origin of art. As more as I read, more troubles I had in my understanding. Finally, even Ivan Marazov in his lectures concluded that there are just many theories.

The problem was that I read at that point about the origin of art in the library of the Art Academy and not in a library of Social Anthropology. In the former the authors of the existed books searched for origin of aesthetics, while I easily prepared my presentation a week ago, because I thought as an anthropologist. The most helpful was the research project of my student, Jennifer Manitoken, who came to the Art Institute with a group of Native Americans and their dances were in fact imitation of nature – colors, costumes and sound (Manitoken 2009).

So, in my most recent definition, from the perspective of origin “Art is a creative human expression that connects people’s culture and nature” (Nikolova, 2009). Unfortunately, I could not find any arguments in the body text of
Gaydarska and Chapman that would be applied to the cited thought in the conclusions.

2. Black pottery and art

The first distributed pottery in Balkan Prehistory was under Anatolian influence and it relates mostly to red and brown. When we think about black pottery as archaeologists, we need probably to refer to black-firnis-ware from classical Antiquity. However, there are really periods in Balkan prehistory in which it is possible the dark brown and grayish-black, brownish-black pottery to be more popular than brown reddish, beige or other lighter colors. My on-site experience is from Early Bronze Age when in Early Bronze I dominates grayish-black or brownish-black, while in Early Bronze II together with development of the encrusted style the reddish and lighter brownish began to be wide distributed.

My understanding is that in Balkan Prehistory the color of the pottery primary depended on the technology. If the pottery was mainly household activity, then, the household followed the technological traditions or changed the technological traditions upon influence. Secondary artistic, mythological and even religious meaning could have been applied but the aesthetic function was subordinary. The obsidian on the whole was an exotic material in the Balkans and I don’t believe that it has big or even any influence in the development of the aesthetic values of Balkan prehistoric population (cp. Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64).

4. Graphite and art in Balkan prehistory

Graphite distribution in the artistic activities of Balkan population relates to the emergence of copper industry. The recent discussion about the origin of graphite pottery (see Vajsov, 2007; Boyadziev, 2007) is as a matter of fact most probably a discussion about origin of metallurgy in Southern Balkans. The graphite was the one that divided Eastern and Western Balkans, so graphite
ornamentation was by nature highly attractive and aesthetic but it could not create any effect of silver motifs (contra Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64) in the context of Balkan Copper Age since the Copper Age population of the Balkans still did not know silver at that point. The graphite ornamentation may have somehow related to gold, since the sources of graphite were not everywhere and its distribution probably was a complex networking with many cultural, economic and artistic consequences.

5. Carnelian beads and Balkan Prehistory

Again coming back to the jewelry workshop, I recalled how strongly wanted to include red beads in my necklace. Just because they look like carnelian – those exotic small objects that were not native for the Balkans and that for sure created a huge circles of emotions regarding how to obtain them and from whom to get them. So, the last what can be think in my opinion about the carnelian beads discovered in the Varna cemetery is that “The close association of the body of the person with the flashing beads that they wore, presumably on special ceremonial occasions, created a lasting aesthetic bond between person and thing” (Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64). For the Balkan population carnelian was a rare and exotic mineral that may connected some with people from distance, may recalled a journey, successful exchange, expensive gift, but by all circumstances something much more than pure aesthetical pleasure. In other words, evaluation of art is always hierarchical classification of values and context.

6. Gold and Balkan Prehistory

I always was wondering how gold was discovered in the Balkans. The recent deeper research showed that I needed to stop to be so proud that it was first invented in the Balkans. A good candidate is also Egypt. Then, I decided that probably gold was accidentally discovered when the rivers changed their beds
and small grains wondered some eyes of our prehistoric ancestors. Later they may have also found gold ores. But as the Balkan records show, the gold was valued as wealth. The color of gold increased the wealth and not the aesthetic value, because if aesthetics/beauty was primary, we may have much more gold objects. When there is wealth, there is a competition, visible and invisible self-social regulation and even development of institutions to make the access to the wealth resources limited and as a question of power. The gold invented or invertibly increased in art the role of wealth. The people compared the color with sun and made the gold mythological, religious and aesthetic but first of all a wealth sign of the developed prehistoric society. Accordingly, the relation of gold to art and aesthetics is again secondary and not primary. Gold became a sign of wealth because it was rare.

Conclusions

Recently the theoretical prehistoric science has been developed as complex and multidisciplinary attempting to avoid building mythology, sharing archaeological narratives and developing sacred knowledge about our distant ancestors. This prehistoric science is anthropological, but also it should be knowledgeable and transparent. Hopefully, this approach to art and aesthetic of prehistoric would be understood as a piece of a social experience that I share to provoke a dialogue, because art was created for communication and its understanding is possible only in the context of dialogue and communication.

To conclude, my understand is that art was created to connect the human culture with nature (1) and every piece of human culture has aesthetic function (2). The material culture is multilayered with meanings and functions which in turn ask the researcher not just to reveal some of them, but to understand and discovery them in the hierarchy of meaning presumably like in Past (3). Last but not least, social archaeology offers opportunity to describe the social determination of materiality but never helps a lot if we use only one or selectively the possible models of interpretation (4).
For further discussion and updates please visit
http://www.iianthropology.org/anthro_art_aesthetics.html

References


Figure 1. Scheme of art as a creative human expression that connects people’s culture and nature.
Figure 2. Art connects people’s culture and nature from the perspectives of its origin.