

Aurel Rustoiu

*Archaeological
explorations of magic
and witchcraft in
Iron Age Transylvania*

Editura MEGA
Cluj-Napoca
2019

This work was supported by a grant of Ministry of Research and Innovation,
CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0353, within PNCDI III.

DTP and cover: Editura Mega

English translation by Mariana Elena Egri

Photo front cover: Aurel Rustoiu

Photo back cover: Ștefan Martinescu

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României
RUSTOIU, AUREL

Archaeological explorations of magic and witchcraft
in Iron Age Transylvania / Aurel Rustoiu. - Cluj-Napoca :
Mega, 2019

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-020-027-7

902



EDITURA MEGA | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

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FOREWORD

Magic and witchcraft were part of the life of all communities throughout the entire human history. Besides modern theoretical approaches, which first appeared in the Victorian times and continued until today, magical practices are still considered useful means through which people could communicate with the supernatural beings, and sorcerers and witches are the intermediaries of this dialogue through their knowledge and abilities.

Ethnographic studies have provided numerous examples of magical rituals, illustrating the huge variety and complexity of the gestures and actions required by the aforementioned dialogue with the supernatural world. Likewise, ancient literary sources can help unveiling similar information regarding some of the past societies. However, this is not the case for many areas from temperate Europe and elsewhere during most of the ancient times. As a consequence, the archaeologists are called to provide at least partial reconstructions of the magical practices and their practitioners from the regions in question using the evidence they have uncovered.

It has to be noted that the archaeology of magic and witchcraft is not a new subject. There are several important contributions published around the world, which have proposed several methods of analysing and interpreting relevant archaeological evidence; many are mentioned in the introductory chapter. At the same time, a series of recent theoretical approaches taken over from cultural anthropology, for example those related to the “cultural” or “social life of things”, could offer useful instruments for interpreting archaeological data from the perspective of magic and witchcraft in past societies.

In Romania, the approach regarding the archaeological evidence of magical practices is less convincing. In general, any archaeological feature that is not conforming to the expected interpretative model

has been ascribed to the domain of “ritual”, without much clarification about the exact meanings of this term. Consequently, a pit containing more-or-less complete ceramic vessels, or a group of pits located outside the settlement, or objects having apparently unknown functions or meanings, are all attached the “ritual” tag. Nearly all archaeological monographs dedicated to various sites contain chapters dealing with the so-called spiritual, ritual or magical practices, though no methodological or theoretical arguments are provided for these identifications. These chapters usually include contexts and artefacts which are not fitting easily into the other chapters dealing with the presumed “profane” life of the respective communities. In most cases, the anthropomorphic figurines made of clay, which resemble the so-called “voodoo dolls” from the Mediterranean area, are those artefacts that are regularly classified as belonging to the domain of “magical practices”.

However, one has to start from the observation that the existence of archaic or traditional communities was always defined by a constant negotiation between the profane and the sacred, both concepts being quite fluid and often overlapping, not only during various ceremonies, but also in the daily life. For this reason, one could reasonably expect to find material traces of the rituals of all kind among the wide variety of archaeological evidence from a given site. Nevertheless, many objects which were commonly used in profane contexts to accomplish various practical tasks were sometimes taken over to be reused in various rituals, including the magical ones. At the same time, an entire range of material culture was exclusively created for and within the magical practices. In all cases, their meanings and functions can only be understood if their contexts of “consumption” are properly interpreted.

This book aims to discuss certain aspects regarding the archaeology of magic and witchcraft in Iron Age Transylvania. The reason for choosing this period stems from my longstanding interest in the Iron Age archaeology in general. Likewise, Transylvania has been chosen as the main target due to the fact that archaeological investigations of the last few decades, based on both traditional fieldwork and more modern interdisciplinary approaches, allowed the accumulation of an important body of evidence regarding the proposed subject, which is facilitating the elaboration of a coherent synthesis. Nevertheless, the book is not going to solve all of the questions raised

by the archaeology of magic and witchcraft in Iron Age Transylvania, but will hopefully initiate a fruitful debate on this subject. How much of this aim has been achieved, will be decided by its readers.

Acknowledgements

While writing this book, I benefited from the help of many colleagues and friends, specialists in different domains of research and archaeologists, and I would like to express my gratitude to them all: Gabriel Balteş (Alba Iulia), who contributed to the archaeological investigation of the cemetery at Sâncrai; Georgeta El Susi (Reşiţa), who analysed the faunal remains from a series of cemeteries and settlements; Beatrice Ciută (Alba Iulia), who provided important paleobotanical data; Szilárd Sándor Gál (Târgu Mureş), who carried out the anthropological analysis of the human remains from several cemeteries.

I would also want to warmly thank Mariana Egri (Cluj-Napoca) for the numerous bibliographic suggestions and for thoroughly reading and commenting on the initial draft of the book. She has also translated the text into English. Other warm thanks must go to Senica Țurcanu (Iași) for providing a series of useful bibliographic suggestions and comments, and to Andrei Georgescu (Timișoara) for allowing me to use some of his unpublished archaeological results and for useful bibliographic suggestions. Last but not least, my friends Iosif Vasile Ferencz (Deva) and Sándor Berecki (Târgu Mureş) again stood alongside me in the investigation of Iron Age Transylvania, and our collaboration and many discussions contributed to the clarification of many problems raised by this subject.

At the same time, it has to be mentioned that the research for this book was supported by a research grant financed by the Ministry of Research and Innovation (CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0353, within PNCDI III) for a project which was developed at the Institute of Archaeology and Art History, Romanian Academy, Cluj Branch, with the title *Community dynamics and identity constructs in the eastern Carpathian Basin during the Late Iron Age. The impact of human mobility (CommunityID)*.