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CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE *BRIQUETAGE* VESSELS

Abstract: The paper aims at proving that the briquetage vessels found in the inventory of some Cucuteni sites, near the salty springs in the Sub-Carpathian region of Moldavia, should be related to the presence of the steppe population, bearers of the Cucuteni C pottery. The argumentation is based on the analysis of the archeological contexts from Solca-Slatina Mare, Lunca-Poiana Slatinii, Cacica, Țolici-Hălăbutoaia sites where the fragments of briquetage vessels always appear in association with the Cucuteni C pottery present in big quantities. This conclusion calls for new explanations and details regarding the relationships between the Cucuteni population and the shepherds in the north of the Black-Sea steppes.

Keywords: briquetage, Cucuteni, Cucuteni C pottery, salty springs, trades, exchanges

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A lot of researches have been dealing with the role played by salt in the nutrition of humans and animals¹. Salt is indispensable to the existence of humans and animals, therefore starting with the Neolithic period the resources of salt gained a vital importance for the agrarian and shepherd communities. At the same time, salt became one of the most desired wares in the intertribal exchanges. This is proved by the great number of neo-Chalcolithic sites in the Sub-Carpathian area of Moldavia whose communities intensively exploited the salt and the salty springs located in this region.

The latest researches on the sites near the salty springs from the Sub-Carpathian area of Moldavia brought to light new information regarding the crystallization techniques of salt from brine during the prehistoric times. Of great interest were the fragments of *briquetage* vessels found in the archeological deposits in the neighbourhood of more brine ponds.

The *briquetages* are single use vessels, in the shape of a truncated cone glass, with a short leg and very large basis, used for boil-crystallization of the salt in order to make salt briquettes that are easier to transport at long distances. The presence of these vessels in more sites in the salt deposits area

¹ Monah, 1991, 387-389; Cavruc, 2006, 33.

of the Eastern Carpathians, in similar archeological contexts, raises the question of assigning this type of pottery to a certain culture, the more so as the answer to this question can reveal new aspects of the relationships between the Cucuteni local communities and the shepherd populations in the steppe area, bearers of the Cucuteni C pottery.

Nicolae Ursulescu is the first who brought the *briquetage* vessels into discussion in 1977 when he published the materials revealed by Mircea Ignat's excavations in 1968 at Solca-Slatina Mare site. At that time Nicolae Ursulescu gave a correct interpretation of the pottery fragments, unknown in Romania until then, considering them as part of the vessels used for the crystallization of the brine from the salty springs², relating them to the Starčevo-Criș culture.

The use of the *briquetage* vessels in the process of salt crystallization is confirmed by the researches at Lunca-Poiana Slatinii (Vânători village, Neamț county) and Oglinzi (Răucești village, Neamț county)³. These studies also resulted in the reconsideration of the cultural-cronological assignment of the pottery. Thus, the excavations in the A and B zones at the Lunca site showed that the *briquetage* vessels cannot be assigned to the Starčevo-Criș culture and also „all fragments of this type discovered in Moldavia are not older than the Cucuteni culture”⁴. In the author's opinion, this requires „the reconsideration of the cronology of the *briquetage* pots from Solca”⁵. These observations were confirmed by the ulterior researches on the sites from Cacica (Suceava county)⁶, Solca-Slatina Mare (Suceava county), Țolici-Hălăbutoaia (Petricani village, Neamț county)⁷. Mugur Andronic drew the attention on the similitudes between the discoveries from Cacica and the ones from Solca or Lunca, stating that the fragments of *briquetage* appear in association with the Cucuteni B and C type pottery. In their turn, the authors of the recent excavations at Solca⁸ and Țolici⁹ confirmed the presence of *briquetage* fragments in association with the Cucuteni B and C pottery, concluding that the unusual large quantity „of Cucuteni C pottery and consequently the presence of steppe populations near the salt resources, where the crystallization of salt was made in *briquetage* vessels, raised a series of questions to which we are still looking for answers ... The relation

² Ursulescu 1977, 307-317.

³ Dumitroaia, 1994, 7-79.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 66.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Andronic, 1989.

⁷ Dumitroaia et alii 2008, 325-326

⁸ Nicola et alii 2007, 35-56.

⁹ Dumitroaia et alii 2008, 325-326

*between the steppe populations and making of the salt briquette seems pretty obvious in the Sub-Carpathian areas*¹⁰. The answer to this question involves identifying the culture the *briquetage* vessels belong to, based on their analysis from two points of view: the paste and firing technology on the one hand and the comparative analysis of the stratigraphic contexts in which this type of pottery appears, on the other hand.

From a technological viewpoint, the *briquetage* vessels are made of rough paste with a lot of sand and pebbles as degreasing agent, unequally and incompletely fired, showing signs of secondary firing. This pottery does not have many similitudes with the Cucuteni pottery, resembling more the characteristics of the Cucuteni C pottery, both in composition and the quality of firing. It worths mentioning that a *briquetage* fragment with crushed shell in its composition, the typical degreasant for the Cucuteni C pottery, was found at Solca-Slatina Mare.

The conditions in which this ceramic was discovered in the above mentioned sites can reveal more information in order to clarify the problem of assigning it to a certain culture. We are going to present them briefly emphasizing the repetitive aspects and the specific ones in each site.

At Lunca-Poiana Slatinii, in zone B, the excavation revealed a consistent layer of Cucuteni B pottery in association with a large quantity of Cucuteni C pottery (33%) and many fragments of *briquetage* vessels (420 fragments representing 16% of the total ceramic in the Chalcolithic layer)¹¹. The author states that the Cucuteni C pottery „forms a very compact layer”¹².

The situation is almost identical at Solca-Slatina Mare and Cacica. At Solca, the *briquetage* fragments represent 21.15% of the total Chalcolithic pottery also in association with the Cucuteni B and C pottery present in very large quantities, 39.2% of the total Chalcolithic pottery¹³. An almost identical situation can be found at Țolici-Hălăbutoaia with the mention that large quantities of Cucuteni A-B pottery¹⁴ appear at the basis of the Cucuteni B layer that also contains Cucuteni C pottery and *briquetage*. This leads to the conclusion that the *briquetage* vessels seem to belong to the Cucuteni B phase. This is also confirmed by the researches at Cucuieti-Slatina Veche (Solonț village, Bacău county) where the phases of brine exploitation belong to the Starčevo-Criș, Precucuteni, Cucuteni A cultures and the Bronze Age. The researchers did not find any *briquetage* fragment in this site¹⁵. A peculiar

¹⁰ Nicola et alii 2007, 55

¹¹ Dumitroaia 1994, 58,62.

¹² *Ibidem*, 58.

¹³ Nicola et alii 2007, 47.

¹⁴ Dumitroaia et alii 2008, 325

¹⁵ Munteanu et alii 2007, 63.

situation appeared at Oglinzi-Cetățuia with ceramic belonging to the Cucuteni A phase where some *briquetage* fragments were discovered¹⁶. However, they might have been brought here from Poiana Slatinii (at 1 km distance) in a later phase.

The comparative analysis of the data from Lunca, Solca, Cacica and Țolici shows that the *briquetage* fragments always appear in association with the Cucuteni C pottery, found in very large quantities in these sites, similar with the quantity found in the Cucuteni sites in the Sub-Carpathian and plateau regions. The *briquetage* vessels could not be found in the sites where the C pottery is present in very small quantities or not present at all, so that there is no indication of an effective/or long term presence of its bearers. A good example in this respect is represented by the seasonal sites nearby the tell from Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, belonging to the Cucuteni B phase from Prohozești-Siliște¹⁷ and Dealul Păltiniș (Valea Șoșii)¹⁸. Both sites lie nearby the salty water sources, their presence being related to salt exploitation, characterized by thin cultural layers, with a poor inventory and modest housing structures.

The excavations at Siliște during the 80's and in 2003 revealed interesting data on the seasonal activities of brine exploitation because they did not indicate the presence of any firing facility that could certify the process of salt crystallization by boiling the brine. If this activity had taken place there, it might have been done by evaporation¹⁹ as indicated by the ceramic shapes present in the inventory (bowls, tureens, etc.)²⁰ ideal for the purpose. This suggests the spring was exploited by the natives for meeting their main needs. Another activity in which salt played an important part is animal-skin preserving and processing as indicated by the stake-holes revealed by the excavations in 2003²¹. It should be mentioned that the Cucuteni C pottery appears in small quantities in this site.

Based on the technological characteristics and the archeological evidence shown above, the *briquetage* vessels are culturally related to the presence of Cucuteni C pottery, especially in its late phases corresponding to the Cucuteni B phase from a chronological point of view. This conclusion reopens the discussion regarding the relations between the local agrarian

¹⁶ Dumitroaia 1994, 72.

¹⁷ Popovici, Trohani 1984, 65-80; Monah, Dumitroaia 2007, 16; Chapman, Monah 2007, 71-88.

¹⁸ Popovici, Bujor 1984, 45-64.

¹⁹ Chapman, Monah 2007, 86-87.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 83, 87.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 77-81, 86

communities and the steppe shepherds, especially in what the exchange relationships are concerned.

The archaeological literature offers different opinions on the presence of the Cucuteni C pottery in the Cucuteni area and the characteristics of the bilateral relationships. Hubert Schmidt²², when showing the allogeneous nature of this type of pottery, related its presence to the slaves, prisoners or „barbarians” from the north.

Marija Gimbutas²³ connected the presence of this pottery to the kurgan population migration in the cultural areas of the Old Europe Civilization. Other theories, belonging to the Romanian or foreign specialists, related the presence of this pottery to the infiltrations or the cultural relations with the eastern steppe populations²⁴, especially the Srednyi Stog II type.

An original theory that generated some discussions in the Romanian archeological literature was formulated by Anne Dodd-Oprițescu. Based on a thorough typological and stylistical analysis, Anne Dodd-Oprițescu argues that the bearers of the Cucuteni C pottery represent a population from the periphery of the great complex Cucuteni-Tripolye that migrated towards the west under the pressure of the eastern populations²⁵. The researcher denies the genetical connection between the „C” type pottery and the Srednyi Stog culture, considering that the origin of the Cucuteni C pottery should be found in the Precucuteni tradition²⁶, idea rejected by Silvia Marinescu-Bîlcu²⁷. Ruxandra Alaiba states a similar idea in the monography of the Cucuteni-Cetățuie site. Referring to the origin of the Cucuteni C pottery, she concluded that it is the result of a synthesis between the traditional Tripolye elements and the ones characteristic for the cultures at the periphery of the Tripolye area²⁸.

A recent contribution on the origin of the Cucuteni C pottery belongs to I.V. Palaguta. Based on the materials from Strilicea Skelia, published by V.N. Danilenko (1974)²⁹, that show similarities with the Cucuteni C pottery, I.V. Palaguta states that the presence and the spreading of the Cucuteni C pottery reflects the penetration and the incorporation of the Strilicea Skelia³⁰

²² Schmidt 1932, 77-79, 80-81.

²³ Gimbutas 1961, 148-160.

²⁴ Passek 1961, 151, Nestor, Zaharia 1968, 17-44; Nițu et alii 1971, 67; Dumitrescu 1980, 27; Lăzurecă 1990, 17; Monah, Cucoș 1985, 36; Monah 1991, 397.

²⁵ Dodd-Oprițescu 1980, 554; Dodd-Oprițescu 1983, 230-232.

²⁶ Dodd-Oprițescu 1980, 554; Dodd-Oprițescu 1983, 232.

²⁷ Marinescu-Bîlcu 1983, 126; Marinescu-Bîlcu 2000, 108-109.

²⁸ Alaiba 2004, 242.

²⁹ Danilenko 1974.

³⁰ Palaguta 1997, 51-62; Sorokin 2002, 181.

steppe elements in the Cucuteni-Tripolye environment starting with the A₃ Cucuteni phase.

Vladimir Dumitrescu was the first who suggested the existence of trades in which women were involved³¹ as a possible explanation for the presence of this type of pottery in the Cucuteni area, hypothesis accepted by Dan Monah too, who also details it. The researcher explains the means and the reasons that determined the presence of women from the steppe regions inside the Cucuteni communities, based on shepherds' needs of salt. Without explicitly stating a direct trade salt-women, D. Monah tends to believe that women were specially valued among the goods these shepherds could offer in exchange of salt³². Adopted by the members of communities as concubines or IInd degree wives, they had an important economic value and brought social fame to the owners³³.

None of these theories can be generalized so much the more they do not exclude each other. The historical realities must have been different from area to area, or phase to phase, and the latest researches, especially the ones regarding the exploitation of salt during the Chalcolithic in the Sub-Carpathian areas, allow new interpretations. Certainly, these relations developed as exchanges too, but they do not exclude some infiltrations of population, that prevailed in some historical periods.

During the Cucuteni A phase, the number of findings and the quantity of „C” pottery are reduced, fact that does not support the theory of the infiltration of eastern population in the area of the Cucuteni culture. The theory of the presence of individuals as a result of exogamic marital relations or other trade forms involving individuals from the eastern area is more sustainable.

The quantity and number of „C” type pottery findings continue to increase reaching the climax in the Cucuteni B₁ phase and the beginning of the B₂ phase. In these conditions, the presence of the eastern pottery in the Cucuteni sites can not be explained exclusively based on the marital relationships, the presence of slaves etc, and we have to admit the effective infiltration of eastern population in the Cucuteni environment. These groups reached the Sub-Carpathian area bringing their specific pottery with crushed shell in the paste. Here they integrated the local communities. The presence of „C” pottery without crushed shell in the sites at Ghelăiești, Podei-Tg. Ocna, Mărgineni-Bacău or in association with the crushed shell type as at

³¹ Dumitrescu 1980, 23-31.

³² Monah 1991, 398.

³³ *Ibidem*.

Hlăpești or Văleni - Piatra-Neamț³⁴ can be explained by the steppe populations living together with the Cucuteni communities.

This common living created the basis for learning some Cucuteni technology elements and some aesthetical canons –spiral motifs, zoomorphic protome decorations³⁵ that led to the diversification of shapes and motifs, improved the quality of paste starting with the Cucuteni A-B phase and especially the B phase, when the number of Cucuteni vessels increased. Therefore there can be stated the existence of some trades in which information, experiences, aesthetical values were exchanged leading to the cultural assimilation of the steppe elements. Nevertheless, in some late Cucuteni B sites there could be found a type of the best Cucuteni C pottery with decoration reminding the earlier stages. This „returning to tradition” could be explained by a new wave of eastern population that penetrates the Cucuteni environment joining the existent elements found in an advanced process of assimilation by the local communities. In our opinion, this is the context in which we should explain the findings of Cucuteni C pottery and *briquetage* vessels in the sites located near the salty springs.

As it could be seen in the sites where this type of pottery is present, the quantity of Cucuteni C pottery is larger and if the *briquetage* fragments are added to this, the percentage of pottery belonging to the two types gets closer or even passes over 50% as at Solca-Slatina Mare where they go beyond 60% of the total Chalcolithic pottery³⁶. Based on this archaeological evidence, we believe that at least in some periods, most probably during the Cucuteni B₁ and B₂ phases, the eastern element had free access to the sources of salty water or they even controlled them temporarily. In these conditions, at least some groups had a direct acces to exploit these sources and not intermediated by the local communities, also having the opportunity to involve themselves in the salt trades. This could be a possible explanation for the presence of some *briquetage* vessels in some late Ariușd type sites or the ones in the Sub-Carpathian area of Moldavia. At Păuleni - Ciomortan (Harghita county) there were discovered a few *briquetage* fragments proving the existence of these trades. A route for these exchanges could have been Bălan – Oltul Superior – Păuleni - Troțuș – Moinești³⁷, also a possible route for the copper from Bălan to Moldavia, and the salt from here to be carried in the Ciucului Depression where this kind of resource was completely absent³⁸. Similar fragments are also mentioned in some Cucuteni sites like

³⁴ Cucos 1985, 68.

³⁵ Cucos 1985, 70; Cucos 1999, fig. 59/7.

³⁶ Nicola et alii 2007, 47.

³⁷ Căvruț, Dumitroaia 2006, 39.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

Răucești (Neamț county), Negritești (Podoleni village, Neamț county) and even at Poduri (Bacău county)³⁹. Their presence in these sites can be related to the circulation of salt too. The publication of these data and the future researches could bring new information in this regard.

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³⁹Dumitroaia 1994, 66.

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