

ASPECTS OF ARCHAIC MEDICINE: HUMAN AND ANIMAL TREPHINATION ON THE TERRITORY OF ROMANIA

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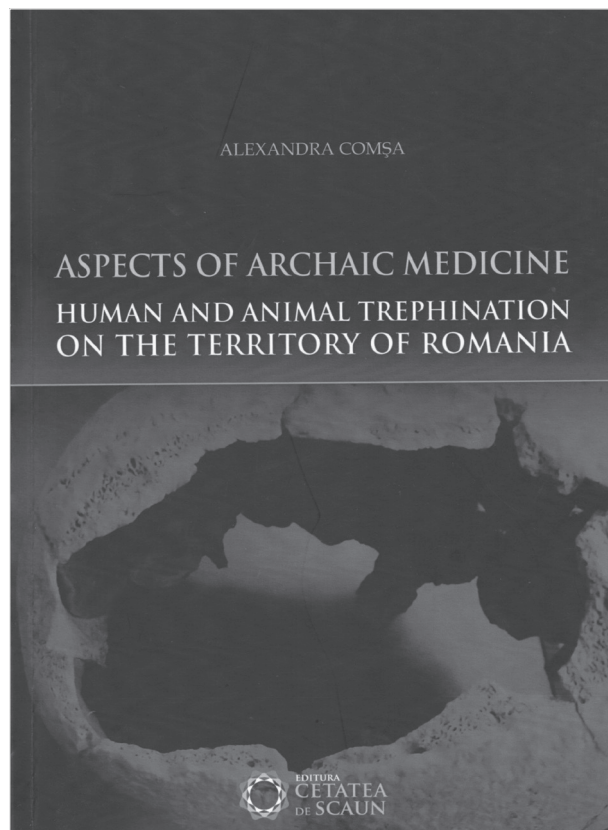


Fig. 1 – Cover of the volume.

The topic of this volume (fig. 1), especially published in the English language for its importance, represents a major concern of several domains, like: archaeology, ethnology, anthropology, palaeopathology, human and veterinary medicine, history of religions, psychology etc. Given the complexity of this theme, very few scientists have ventured to study it in detail. In fact, for the entire South-Eastern Europe, this volume is a

first attempt, for the simple fact that this is the only monographic approach, which refers to the “trepanation”, a surgery that was applied both to the humans and animals. If, for the latter ones the intervention was undertaken just in order to rescue the life of an animal that was valuable for his master, in the case of the people it was performed for different reasons: **medical**, for removing the discomfort, or complications resulted after the so-called

impressive cranial fractures as, due to blows, bone splinters migrated inside the cranial vault and attached themselves to its inner part, resulting in dizziness, confusions, intense headaches etc.; ritual, or **magico-religious**, for the sampling of bone roundels that were utilised for making amulets, which were usually suspended at the neck, being used as protection against the malevolent forces, for taking over the qualities of the deceased from which the respective fragment of bone was cut, or even for enhancing the longevity of the people who used them.

The volume begins with the **Introduction** of the author (p. 13-17), who brings arguments to the most important opinions that she has expressed in the book. It follows the chapter about **General Aspects Regarding Trephination** (p. 18-24), which briefly present the first scientific efforts appeared in this kind of studies even beginning with the 19th century, but also the differences regarding the practice of this surgery between the warfare and non-warfare times.

Further on, there are described the **Ancient Writings about Trephination** (p. 25-27), insisting upon the aspects of the "*Homeric Medicine*", "*Hippocrates Collection*" and "*The Arab Doctors*". The next chapter, **Linguistic Aspects connected with the Trephination** (p. 28-29) refers to some of the linguistic origin of the terms employed for the mentioned practice, but also for the instruments used for making the intervention.

History of Research (p. 30-35) shows the persistent concern for such studies, existing even since ancient times, more precisely even beginning with the antiquity and until our days, on international scale. It also contains a subchapter regarding the evolution of the Romanian anthropology and the mode of approaching this topic. Afterwards, there are presented the methods used for making a trephination (p. 36-59), but also some factors that influence the manner of performing this intervention, like: direction of the blow, position of the patient, as well as the cause of the trephination, namely the type of object that inflicted the trauma, existing an obvious difference between the blunt and cutting objects. Then, there are rendered the "steps" of the surgery, the post-surgical recovery, the trephination types, its purpose when it is done upon living or dead subjects, the moment of the intervention, the election zones for the operation, the different shapes of the cut area. There are also described the natural substances used for dressing the wound, followed by the so-called "obturator". These latter ones were protections means

for the head, used after such an intervention that required the removal of a large cranial fragments and which, in the case of a new trauma could endanger the brain, when missing such a protection. Afterwards, the author refers to the sex of the trepanned individuals, which was predominantly the male. This fact could not be surprising, given that these subjects were involved in the warfare activities. There are also rendered aspects regarding the consequences of this surgery which, despite the rudimentary conditions and instruments, had seldom resulted in the death of the patients. This fact has been documented by the presence of healing traces that were frequently identified on the cranial bone, which delimited the trepanation. There are also presented the **Modern Techniques Involved in the Study of Trephination** (p. 60-63), then the **Trephination Implements** (p. 64-76) used, as well as their evolution from a simple flint blade (silex) and up to elaborate metal utensils, with a symbolic decoration.

It follows a synthesis of the **Trephinations in Ancient Times** in different regions of the world (p. 91-102) and afterwards a very important chapter, regarding the interventions on human beings discovered on the territory of Romania and published even beginning with the first decades of the 20th century (**Human Archaic Trephination in Romania**; p. 103-169). This latter sequence has also included the trauma on the skulls, but also the possible surgeries on the crania of people from different periods, which were not analyzed by anthropologists, but mentioned as such by the specialists who excavated them. The author has considered that it's worth making such a distinction, as the conclusion of the archaeologists might be erroneous in some of the cases. Referring to the historical periods that provided individuals with trephinations, it was mentioned that they were present in almost all of them, beginning with the Neolithic and reaching up to the Middle Ages. Yet, the weight of such interventions varied in time, according to different factors. The largest number of cases was found in the Bronze Age. This situation resembles with the one identified in Italy, where the same historical period provided the most important number of such surgeries. When the cranial index was considered, it could be observed that, in Romania, the most frequent trephinations were found on dolichocranial and brachycranial individuals, while in the mesocranials they were less seldom found. The initial hypothesis regarding the origin of the trephination on the territory of Romania belonged to Olga Necrasov, who considered that it had been brought here by the steppic populations, the so called bear-

ers of the tumular ochre burials (Pit grave culture), during their nomadic movement from North of the Black Sea towards the today Romania. Later on, she was misled by the skull from Girov, belonging to the Cucuteni-Tripolje culture. Nevertheless, she considered that, despite that this was assigned to a local population, the Neolithic communities had seldom performed such interventions. In fact, things were more simple, as the bearers of the Cucuteni-Tripolje culture were the first people from today Romania who interrelated with the bearers of the Pit grave culture. In the opinion of the author, the nomadic people had a more extended medical knowledge, as they permanently had to face new and new challenges, both from the environment, and from the other communities with whom they got in contact. As the Cucuteni-Tripolje people had a higher level of development, they surely must have realized the importance of such a medical practice, and they hurried to learn step by step from the nomadic “surgeons” and then put it into use. This is how, by dissemination, it could reach Girov, the site where it was used to save the life of a woman aged at 40-50, by performing a risky intervention, on the occipital region, which is seldom used for such operations, due to the difficulty of removing the muscles existing in that area. But, even under such conditions, the woman had survived for a short time after the surgery, as shown by the presence of some regeneration traces in the tissue that surrounded the trephination hole.

Another interesting situation was the one from Livezile (Alba County). In that Early Bronze Age site, in a tumulus, it was discovered the burial of a woman aged at 35-40 years. On the skull of the respective individual it was identified the largest trepanning hole in Romania, with its outside dimensions of 12.2 cm x 7.2 cm. This was situated on the left parietal and had an oval shape. Considering the way the intervention had been carried out, as well as the appearance of the cranial bone, it was concluded that the surgery had been done by a skilful person, upon a person in full health condition. At places, traces of healing could be detected, which means that the respective person had survived longer than one year afterwards. It is not known the reason for doing this trephination, but, anyway, the presence of a cranial trauma at that level is excluded.

We should also mention here one of the multiple trephinations found on the territory of Romania. We will refer here to the male individual, uncovered during the excavations undertaken in Burial no. 26 belonging to the Early Bronze Age necropolis (C.18),

from Zimnicea. The skeleton had the male sex and the age of 50-60 years. On its skull, there were evident traces of four trephinations, one situated on the left parietal and the other three on the right parietal. Two necrotic lesions have been detected on the endocranial part of the respective skull. The damaged areas surpassed in dimensions the zone with incision from the left parietal bone. The conclusion that could be reached by the anthropologist who studied the mentioned skull was that all four incisions were unfinished trephinations, carried out upon a living subject who, unfortunately, had died before the end of the surgeries. It was also aborted the hypothesis of performing the operation just for taking over bone roundels. If this had been the purpose, they would have surely been taken away but, instead, they were found in place. The reason for making the interventions upon the right parietal could not be established, as no endocranial lesion could be found at that level.

All the presented cases are richly illustrated, grouped on historical periods which, in their turn, are also rendered as graphs and tables, in order to create a more clear image about the approached topic and its evolution in time.

Another chapter describes the **Symbolic Trephination** (p. 170-186), with all its features and following the same presentation scheme like the one used for the “regular” trephination (historical data, operating mode etc.). This option was taken due to the obvious differences existing between these two trephination types. For the symbolic one, some pictographic representations of the surgery during the Middle Ages have been also added and cumulated with the other illustrations. Besides, there have been also included beliefs about the symbolic trephination, but also the way it was used in the initiation rites. Afterwards, it was presented the monastic trephination, being well known that the monasteries secretly preserved different medical practices, including the mentioned one.

In her volume, Alexandra Comşa had also included the aspects regarding the **Sincipital T** (p. 187-191) and **Pseudo-Trephinations** (p. 192-201), the later ones being perforations that resembled trephinations, but produced by other causes, usually taphonomic ones.

Towards the final part of her approach of human trephination, it has also been added a chapter about the respective surgery as it has discovered in the contemporary period (**Trephinations in Modern and Contemporary Times**; p. 202-205), with evidences that lasted up to the first half of the

20th century, in some regions neighbouring Romania. In the end, the volume has included an interesting chapter about **Pastoral Trephination** (p. 206-213) and **General Conclusions** (p. 214-217). The book also contains a **Summary (Rezumat)** in the Romanian language (p. 218-226).

The used bibliography shows the strong knowledge about the modern research referring to this topic, as the book has cited both papers written and published by Romanian specialists, but also, by foreign ones, especially from the space of the English language.

The **Preface** of the volume (**Comşa's approach to trephination and ancient herbalism in context of medical anthropology**, p. 10-12), has been conceived by Dr. Lolita Nikolova, Director of the International Institute of Anthropology from Salt Lake City, Utah, United States of America, while

peer editor for the English language was Dr. Barbara Voytek, professor at Berkeley University of California, from the United States of America.

The hereby presented book is an interdisciplinary work of great scientific value, addressed to the scholars in the fields of physical and cultural anthropology, archaeology, history of medicine, ethnology etc. The volume is based upon the own research of the author, but, as I have already mentioned above, also upon a rich and recent bibliography, as well. As the work has been published in the English language, this facilitates its circulation on the specialized international market, a fact that is already confirmed by the great number of foreign readers.