

A possible miniature chair from the Hamangia cemetery at Cernavodă *Columbia D*, Romania

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Abstract: *The Late Neolithic Hamangia culture is not known for miniature representations of buildings or furniture pieces, except for the small chair attached to the famous figurine of “the Thinker”. During recent work on the vast quantity of unprocessed and unpublished pottery from the Cernavodă Columbia D Hamangia culture burial ground, an artefact was discovered that might represent a miniature clay chair.*

Rezumat: *Cultura Hamangia din neoliticul târziu nu este cunoscută pentru reprezentări plastice de clădiri sau piese de mobilier, cu excepția scăunelului (taburet) atașat de celebra figurină a Gânditorului. În timpul recente activități de prelucrare a vastei cantități de ceramică nepublicată din cadrul cimitirului Hamangia de la Cernavodă Columbia D, a fost identificat un artefact de lut care ar putea reprezenta un scaun miniatural.*

Keywords: *plastic representations, Late Neolithic, Hamangia culture, cemetery*

Cuvinte-cheie: *plastică, neolitic târziu, cultura Hamangia, cimitir*

◆ Introduction

Plastic representations are well known for the Hamangia culture, especially from the two large burial grounds, at Cernavodă (Romania) and Durankulak (Bulgaria). They mostly illustrate the human body, in a more or less schematized form, according to the material they were made of (clay, marble, *Spondylus* or, occasionally, other materials). So far, only one animal figurine, possibly an ovicaprid, was found in a pit within the settlement at Ceamurlia de Jos (Berciu 1966, p. 103, 231, fig. 92/2 and 93/2).

The Hamangia culture is not known for miniature representations of buildings or furniture pieces, except for the small chair attached to the famous figurine of “the Thinker” (Berciu 1960, p. 426).

During recent work on the vast quantity of unprocessed and unpublished pottery from the Cernavodă *Columbia D* Hamangia culture burial ground, an artefact was discovered that might represent a miniature clay chair.

◆ The possible miniature chair

The artefact, with the collection inventory indicative F 520, has been identified in one of the packages containing unprocessed pottery fragments from the site. After considering and subsequently dismissing the hypothesis that it might be some kind of fragmentary vessel handle, we arrived at the opinion that it might illustrate a fragmentary miniature chair.

The dimensions of the preserved piece (fig. 1 and 2) are 5.6 cm in length, 4.9 cm in width and 3.6 cm in height.

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The shape, although incomplete, resembles that of a sitting device with a backrest. The sitting area is not supported by four legs, but on two narrow supports along the piece, one to the front and one to the back. The lower extremities of these supports are broken, so we cannot infer the height of the “legs”. The backrest is also broken almost immediately above the sitting area. The “front” margin of the chair is also damaged.

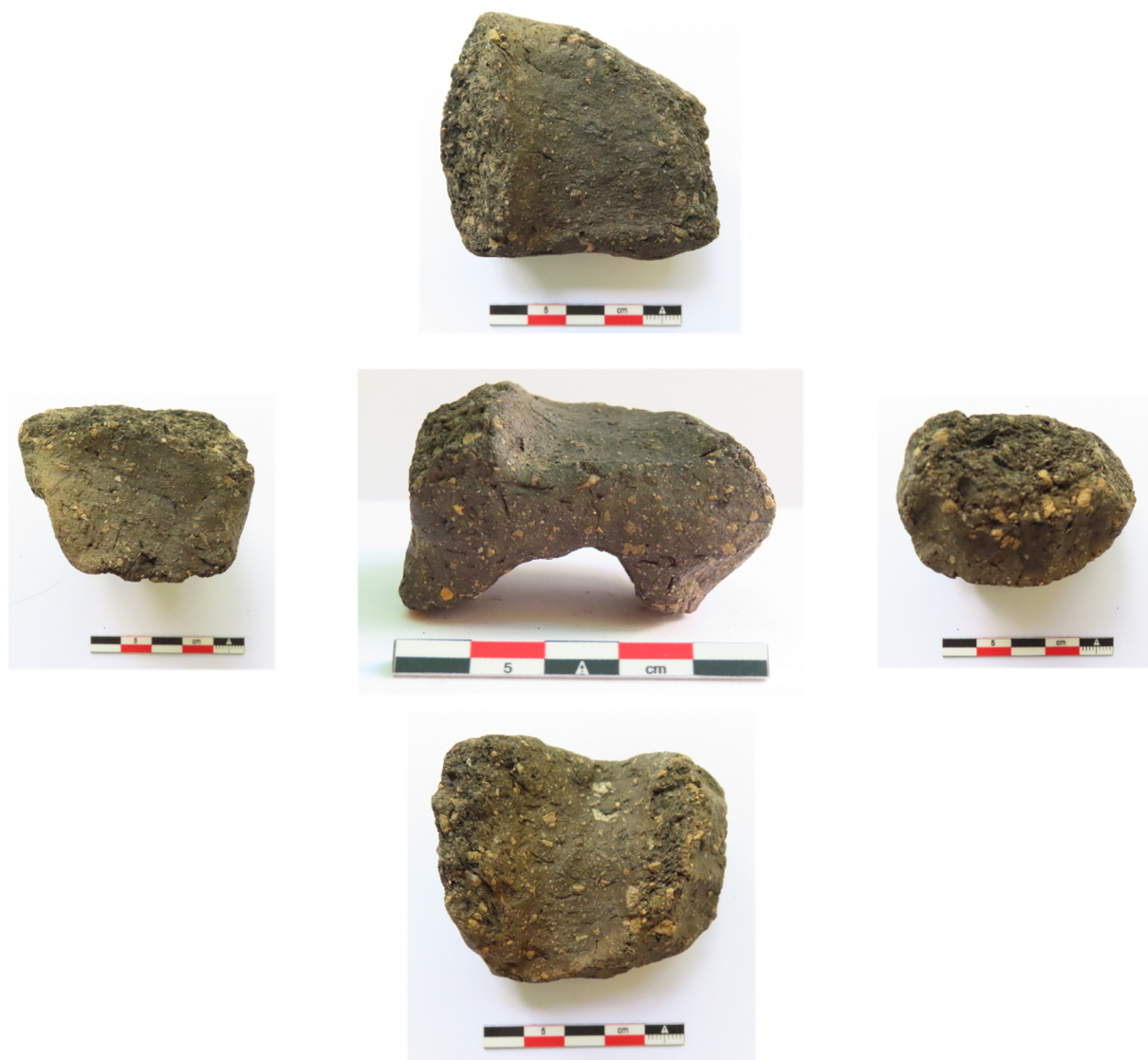


Fig. 1. The possible miniature chair from Cernavodă *Columbia D* site (F 520).
Posibilul scaun miniatural din situl Cernavodă *Columbia D* (F 520).

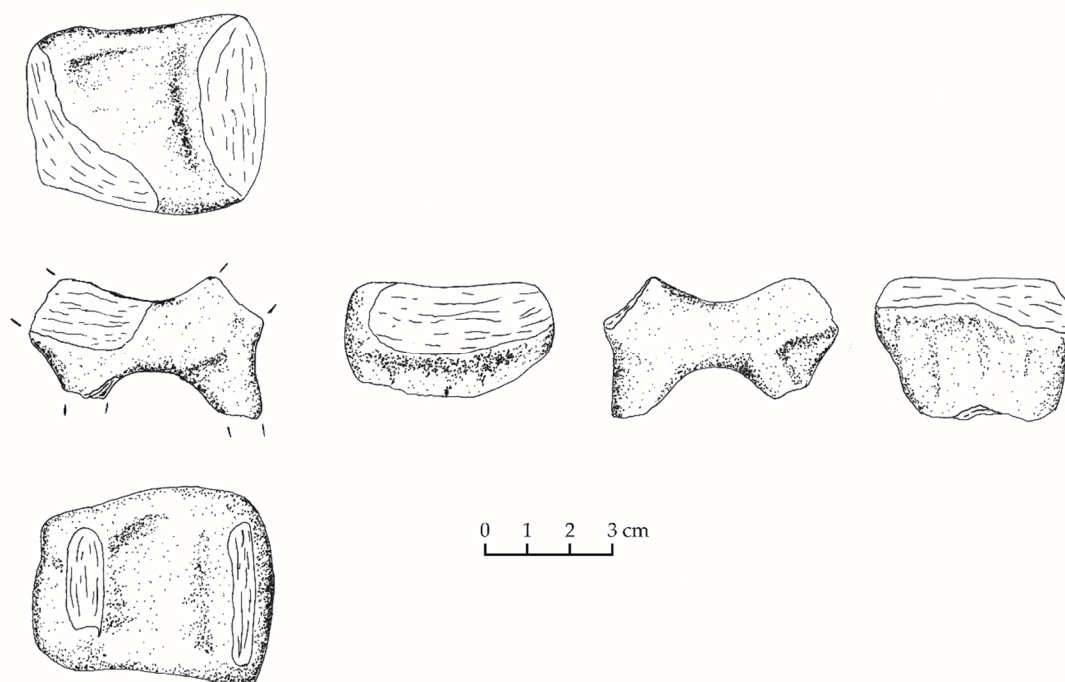


Fig. 2. The possible miniature chair from Cernavodă *Columbia D* site (F 520) (drawing by R. Dobrogeanu).
Posibilul scaun miniatural din situl Cernavodă *Columbia D* (F 520) (desen de R. Dobrogeanu).

Given the shape of the “legs”, the item presented here might also be interpreted as some kind of miniature bench (instead of a chair).

Seen from a lateral, the curved inferior part of the sitting area makes the item very similar to a miniature animal silhouette (see the photo and drawing of the animal figurine discovered at Ceamurlia de Jos (Berciu 1966, p. 103, 231, fig. 92/2 and 93/2). Whether this was an intended effect or just a coincidence, it is difficult to say without more similar discoveries.

The fabric used is coarse, including many pieces of crushed burned clay and small pebbles (fig. 3). The modelling was done somewhat negligently, and the artefact was not polished or covered with a finer layer of clay. The firing took place in an oxidizing environment, resulting in a black, uneven color (darker on one lateral side and slightly reddish on the opposite). Nonetheless, the piece was well fired. Fabric and firing of the piece resemble that of the coarse pottery from the site.



Fig. 3. The possible miniature chair from Cernavodă *Columbia D* site (F 520). Fabric detail.
Posibilul scaun miniatural din situl Cernavodă *Columbia D* (F 520). Detaliu pastă.

In terms of location for the discovery of this artefact, the label from the pottery package indicated the year 1954, the area as Columbia D, Trench S III, at a depth of -0.50 – -1.00 m. A note on the original label indicates that the pottery was gathered from an area of the trench “close to Trench S I”. Consulting the field notes and the published excavation plan, we think a slight mistake might have been made on the label, and instead of trench S III should be trench S IIIA¹.

This location places the discovery of the artefact outside the area of the classic burials, close to the so-called ritual pits, more specifically east of Pit no. 1 (fig. 4).

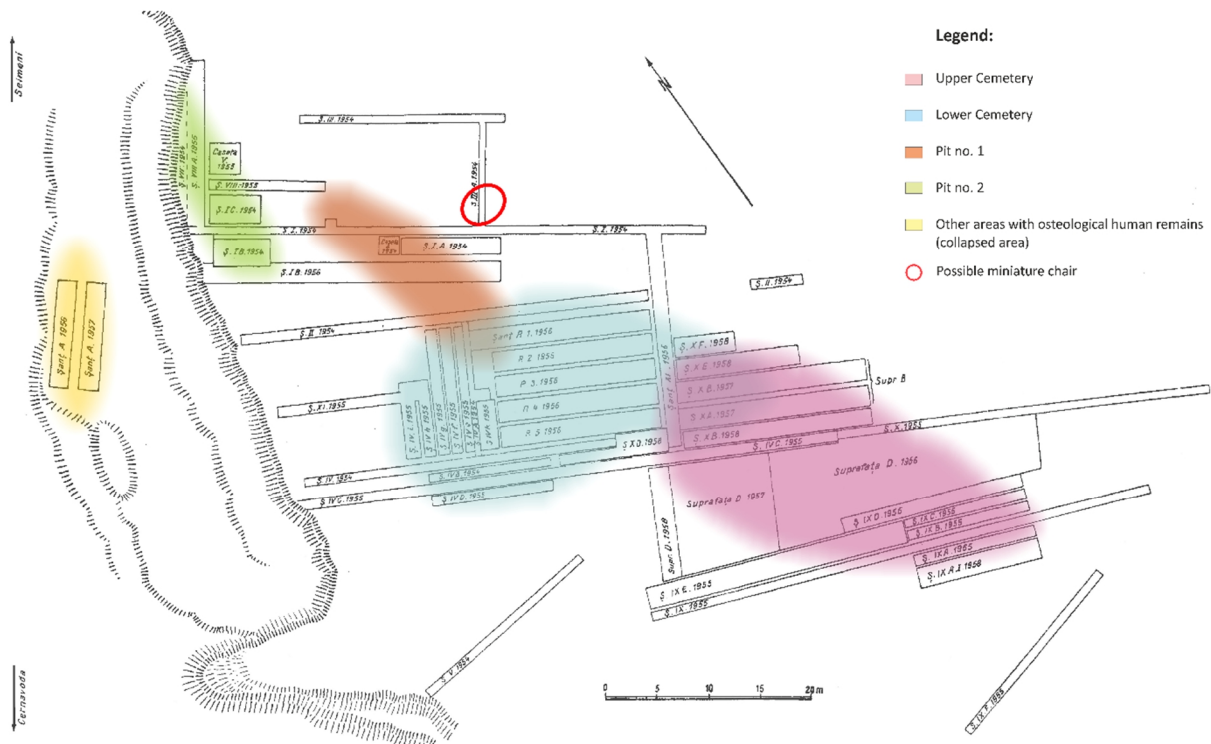


Fig. 4. Location of the possible miniature chair inside the Cernavodă Columbia D site.
Localizarea posibilului scaun miniatural în cadrul sitului Cernavodă Columbia D.

As for chronology and cultural association, the artefact was found with fragments of pottery coming from common ware, mostly coarse, fired in both oxidizing and reduction environments. The pottery fragments are poorly decorated. Lines of round or nail/shell impressions under the mouth were noted on several fragments (fig. 5/a), sometimes combined with barbotine. A handle is also to be noted among the pottery fragments (fig. 5/c), which confirms our previous assertion that the artefact presented here together with the accompanying materials come from Trench S IIIA (see note 1 below). Without being very

¹ “Extremely few sherds were found in Trench S III, starting from the surface and down to -40 – -50 cm, below which nothing else was found, the soil being clean yellow” [“În Ș III s-au găsit extrem de puține cioburi și acestea începând de la suprafață și până la -40 – -50 cm sub care nu s-a mai găsit nimic pământul fiind galben curat”] (Morintz 1954, p. 92). “Trench S IIIA was excavated between Trenches S III and S I in front of square 15. At the extremity of Trench S III A towards Trench S I, between approximately -0.50 and -1 m, an interesting material was found (package no. 12), a vessel handle” (see fig. 5/c – upper row) [“Ș III A a fost săpat între Ș III și Ș I în dreptul careului nr. 15. La extremitatea șanțului III A către Ș I între aproximativ $-0,50$ și -1 m s-a găsit un material interesant (pac. nr. 12), toartă de vas”] (Morintz 1954, p. 127).

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indicative, the ceramics that were found together with the possible miniature sitting device suggest an earlier phase of the Hamangia culture, phase II (Golovița) (Berciu 1966).

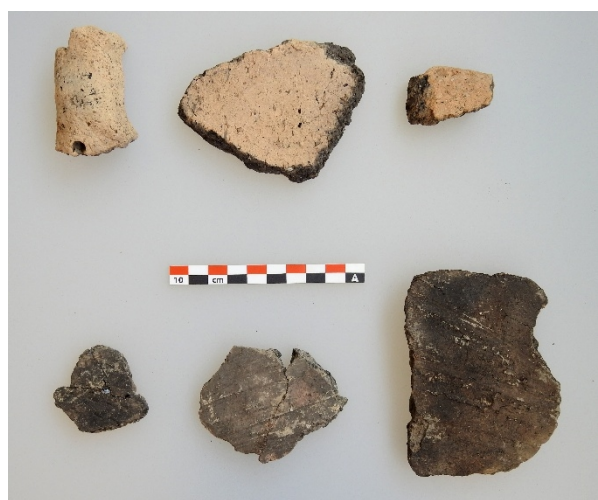


Fig. 5. Pottery fragments found together with the possible miniature chair. Fragmente ceramice descoperite împreună cu posibilului scaun miniatural.

◆ Discussion and conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, there is no other miniature sitting device reported in the Hamangia culture, apart from the one attached to the figurine of the Thinker, which is quite different from the piece under discussion here. The Thinker's chair is low, without a backrest, with four short legs and was decorated along the front and back sides. In addition, it was attached to the figurine and not an individual piece (Berciu 1960, p. 426).

Approximately during the same chronological period, but further north geographically, in the Precucuteni culture, miniature sitting devices are more frequent. Although they were found as separate items, they were usually in association with female figurines, and they had backrests in the shape of animal horns, but no feet (Ursulescu, Tencariu 2017, fig. 1; Palaguta 2021, fig. 4). This tradition is continued in the Cucuteni culture (Comşa 1980, p. 47-50). In the Precucuteni-Cucuteni cultural complex chairs with four feet and high backrests were also noted, known as "thrones" in the specialized literature (for an overview, see Comşa 1980). Gumelniţa culture on the other hand, is better known for chairs with four legs and high backrests or armchairs with no legs and low backrests (Comşa 1980, p. 40-44).

Our purpose was to bring forth an artefact that, so far, has no published parallels in the Hamangia environment, in order to stimulate the publication of other similar items that might wait for analogies or possible directions of interpretation. The presence of miniature clay sitting devices in the Hamangia culture, if confirmed in the future by other, more complete, items, would enrich the material repertoire of these Late Neolithic communities.

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