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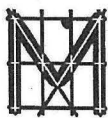
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# PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND FIELDWORK IN COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA: ON THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

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## Introduction

The fundamentals of modern Romanian archaeology were created during the interwar period. Archaeology is regarded as a branch of historical science, and its objective is acquiring knowledge on the remote past. In the case of the periods before written sources, the so-called prehistory, archaeology, or better say, prehistoric archaeology, was defined as the main auxiliary of history (e.g. Nestor 1988 [1933]; Berciu 1939: 3-34). As Gavin Lucas (2004) points out, the term “prehistory” marks not only the definition of a new chronological period, but also the gain of a status of independence of the material culture from the text. Consequently, owing to this independence, archaeology is concerned with studying the material culture irrespective of the chronological period it belongs to. Nevertheless, in Romanian practice the definition of archaeology remained the same as during the interwar period: archaeology continues to be regarded as an auxiliary discipline of history having as subject matter only the “early stages of the history of mankind” (Babeş 1994: 94). We deal with a division between the past and the present, the latter allegedly irrelevant to the archaeologists, resulting in leaving its research exclusively to historians. Even in the case of some recent initiatives of conducting archaeological excavations in places where victims of communist repression were buried, archaeology is confined to confirming historical data already known from oral informations and/or from archive documents (e.g. Petrov 2007; Petrov and Budeancă 2007).

Another axiom is that, to be scientific, archaeological practice should be objective, free of any disturbing factor that might alter the objectivity of the work (e.g. Nestor and Vulpe 1971: 131). Hence the belief not explicitly expressed, but taken for granted, that by observing the specific methods, in their turn an allegedly objective creation, the discipline becomes immune to any form of constraints outside it. Therefore, archaeological practice is clearly separated from the socio-political context where it is carried out and where the researchers live. In other words, the archaeologist’s work has to be purely scientific by all means, that is neutral and apolitical.

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Ever since the interwar period, this research philosophy has been promoted and conveyed from one generation to the other by means of a master-disciple relation. Especially the Communist regime policy in the field made it easier to carry it on. During the Stalinist communism, the creation of a central academic system and the recovery of the “great professors” trained before World War II, brought about a stronger dependence of the young candidates to the profession of archaeologist on their professors; thus, the selected young people took over and faithfully applied the teachings of their forerunners (Anghelinu 2003: 241). At the same time, the ideological pressures put on the discipline during the communist dictatorship resulted, among other things, in reaffirming the neutral apolitical nature of the scientific work, as some of the archaeologists adopted a purely descriptive style aiming at avoiding the collaboration with the dominant power. Last but not least, as a reaction to the manipulation and use of the past for the purposes of state ideology, for example the Dacomania specific of the Ceaușescu regime, after 1989 a (re)valorization of the dichotomy between scientific practice and the socio-political context emerged. Especially the authors of works that distorted archaeological data to meet the expectations of the regime were blamed. As far as I am concerned, paraphrasing Christopher Tilley (1989: 110), I would say that the problem is not that those works are political, but it resides in the type of politics professed, in the fact that they implicitly (even if they searched for subterfuges of “objectivation”) supported an oppressive system. Referring to the well known German archaeologist Gustav Kossinna, justly blamed after World War II for his racist interpretations that fueled the Nazi ideology, Tilley writes:

“Many would say that Kossinna gravely distorts the archaeological record to insert a political reading, but this supposes that some real opposition and distinction can be set up between ‘distorted’ and ‘non-distorted’ work. All interpretations are in a fundamental sense distorted; the attempt to hide or minimize the intrusion of values can never be very successful. All that can happen is that they may be rendered less obvious and, therefore, potentially more insidious.” (ibidem: 110)

As a confirmation of Tilley’s point of view, I emphasized on other occasions that the allegedly neutral apolitical work of the archaeologists in Romania, and implicitly the publications written in this manner were convenient to the communist power and continue to suit fine the dominant power today, because this is how archaeologists, even in spite of themselves, have contributed to the legitimating and perpetuation of the regimes existing at a given moment (Dragoman and Oanță-Marghitu 2006; Dragoman *in press*).

For the present article I looked into the ethics of responsibility in archaeological practice (for other contexts see, for example, Hamilakis 1999; 2003). Taking into account the communist experience, I consider that the perpetuation of the dichotomies between the past and the present, between practice and the socio-political context, is not only harmful, but also immoral, consequently. In order to prove this, first I will present two examples on the archaeological research conducted along the Danube–Black Sea Canal route, and at Piatra Frecăței, respectively, during the period of the harshest communist repression, and further on I will present a recent example, namely that of the archaeological research conducted at Roșia Montană. Discussing

these examples, I maintain the idea that the archaeologists should give up their seclusion in the comfortable ivory tower provided by positivist-empiricist archaeology and assume their responsibility towards *the Other*, not only from the past, but also from the present, an assumption inevitably entailing a political attitude.

## **The archaeological research along the Canal route and at Piatra Frecăței**

The works at the Danube–Black Sea Canal route began in the summer of 1949 and lasted until 1953, when the project was abandoned. The necessary labour force included three distinct categories: (1) paid free labour; (2) conscripted military men, some of them charged with guarding the objectives or the convicts; and (3) prisoners, most of them political ones. In September 1949 at the Canal there were 6,400 political prisoners, while their number was rising. “Ministry of Internal Affairs Colonists”, as political prisoners were called, were submitted to the hardest labour and extremely harsh detention conditions; already starved and lacking the necessary medical treatment, a few thousands died because the hard labour, diseases, beating, etc. (Tismăneanu *et al.* 2007: 587-597).

In the autumn of 1949, the first archaeological research along the Danube–Black Sea Canal route was conducted, and resumed in December (see Comșa and Popescu 1951). The aim of starting this research was to survey the possible archaeological traces that, due to the construction of the Canal, would have vanished. The next year, the archaeological survey was divided into two stages: in February field walking was conducted along the entire route of the Canal, from Cernavodă to Capul Midia, and later, at the end of spring, archaeological sondages were carried out at Năvodari and Poarta Albă (both in Constanța County).

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1950 archaeological excavations in a mound situated near the check point of the highway of the new town of Năvodari began; the investigations are eloquent for the way the archaeologists perform their profession, a reason for which I reproduce the following quotation:

“From the first moments of excavating we were surprised as we saw that the mound is made up of ash layers, containing as unique ‘archaeological’ vestiges shreds, coffee cups and Turkish pipes. On the spot we contacted a few old Turks in the commune and in the close village of Valea Neagră, asking them whether they know how that mound was formed. We were told that the Turks, until a few decades ago, used to gather in a single place the ash from several households. We continued, however, to conduct a section into the mound down to the soil, and found only ash layers.” (Comșa and Popescu 1951: 174)

The authors of the excavations conclude that “this investigation is not deprived of value, as it clarifies the origin of a large number of mounds situated near the villages in Dobrudja, which were inhabited by the Turks” (*ibidem*: 174-175). It is worth mentioning that for the archaeologists the contemporary Turkish material culture does not represent archaeological vestiges, as proven by the term being put in quotation marks. The excavations are considered not to be useless only because it

makes possible to identify other mounds of the same kind as belonging to the contemporary period, and, consequently, I would add, it is not worth to be paid attention from the archaeological point of view. As a matter of fact, as the drawn section had been excavated, the archaeologists moved to another place.

Between 5<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of May, the same archaeologists carried out excavations in a mound situated a few hundred meters west of the village of Poarta Albă, at the crossroads of the Canal with the Poarta Albă-Nisipari road (ibidem: 175-176). According to the published text, “in more recent times” the mound was used by the Turkish population of the village as a cemetery, but the archaeologists do not mention but the ancient material remains. And here, for them only the first “biographical” stage of the mound is important: an ancient tomb with a construction made up of stone blocks, but looted already in antiquity (ibidem: 176).

While the archaeologists were conducting their “scientific endeavour”, at Poarta Albă there was the largest labour camp on the Canal route, one of a sinister notoriety. Like the camp at Capul Midia, the one at Poarta Albă had been established in June 1949, both having about 300-400 prisoners at the time. I do not know how many political prisoners were at Poarta Albă during the period of the archaeological excavations, but the estimated figure for June 1950 is over 6,000 prisoners (Tismăneanu *et al.* 2007: 591). During the archaeological excavations on the Canal route, but especially during the excavations at Poarta Albă, I consider impossible the absence of any contact, at least visual, between the archaeologists and the toiling political prisoners.

By ignoring the contemporary (Turkish) material culture, the excavations at Năvodari and Poarta Albă clearly show that the archaeological practice contained/contains at the core the separation between the past (defined as worthy) and the present (defined as unimportant, as not pertaining to the province of archaeology). The way the archaeologists relate to the material culture is an indicator for the way in which they relate to people: only the people in the remote past count, while the people in the near past, “several decades ago” or in the present, are negligible. The result is that in a landscape of suffering, as the case with the Danube–Black Sea Canal in the '50s, the archaeologists can continue to practice their profession irrespective of what they see around them. The experience lived during the investigation materializes in a neutral, dull excavation report, and an element of support (and a kind of refuge) for the career they want. At the same time, however, while the authors remain unaware, by the narrative style and the fact that it is published in an academic journal, the report contributes to building a “scientific” aura around the Canal project, which conceals and justifies the inhuman regime inflicted on the political prisoners. To reinforce what I have just said, I am going to present another example.

During the planning of a land on the territory of Salcia State Farm (GAS), Tulcea County, a number of inhumation graves which contained pots, bracelets, fibulae, earrings, etc. were discovered (Petre 1962). Some of the finds were brought to the Institute of Archeology in Bucharest. On 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1958, two archaeologists from the institute went to Salcia to see the place. Relevant to the present discussion is the paragraph below:

"It was found that the archaeological zone is located on the GAS Salcia, in the location called Piatra Frecăței, on the right bank of the Old Danube. In agreement with the leadership of GAS Salcia, a plan for the systematic research of this field was made, field which could be used only after the archaeological excavations. Since the territory of the farm extends also beyond the Danube where there were conducted embankment works on a very large area, we had to be present also in these places." (ibidem: 565)

The embankment works referred to were carried out by political prisoners. Moreover, the excerpt cited contains a note of thanks:

"It is much too modest the way we thank the team at Piatra Frecăței led by com[rades] Anton Gh. and Novăcescu Flavius for the understanding and support shown throughout the archaeological campaign, help that is still given and reflected in the concern for taking steps towards preserving intact the monuments discovered." (ibidem: 565, footnote 3)

The note is extremely humble and fawning: its author shows the dependence on the aid that has been granted, and presents those who supported him as enlightened people, who understand the importance of the archaeological material discovered, and who, consequently, take care to protect the site in question. The addresses of the note are presented as "the leadership of GAS Salcia", which suggests to the reader they are simple people with leading positions in a farm like any other. But things are very different. For example, according to a report by the Institute for the Investigation of Crimes of Communism in Romania (Deplasare 2007), "com[rade] Anton Gh." (Anton Gheorghe) is none other than the Ostrov prison commander between 1957-1962, a captain of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ostrov prison (formation Ostrov 0957), established on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1952, had three sections: Piatra Frecăței, Salcia and Grădina. The political prisoners, called "special forces", conducted various agricultural works in the GAS Salcia of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1959, there were imprisoned 5,000 political prisoners to work at the embankments, in agriculture, at the reed harvesting, etc. (ibidem: 1). The political prisoners were used in archaeological excavations as well. The first stage of research lasted without interruption from 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1958 until 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1959. The excavations continued until 1963.

The excavation report to which I have just referred beatifies reality. Someone could say that otherwise the text would not have been published, being rejected by the censorship. Or it could be said that for the political prisoners who worked at the archaeological excavations was better, as the work was easier compared to the tasks usually drawn. But this is not the problem. As the archaeologists had in front of their eyes those oppressed for political reasons, boasting in writing the commander of the prison, in an academic journal, equals praise to the system of repression, which renders the author of the text an indirect unwilling accomplice to the suffering caused by that system. Acceptance and complacency in such a situation is degrading to an intellectual and immoral. It is immoral because it ultimately denotes more interest for the bones and objects of some people dead in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD than for the state of some living human beings around them.



Let me put things straight. Despite my assertions, I have no intention to accuse the archaeologists who conducted excavations on the Danube–Black Sea Canal route or at Piatra Frecăței. It would be wrong of me to blame them under the present comfortable circumstances in which I write these lines for their behavior in a time when every gesture of opposition would have had painful consequences, including the physical disappearance. It is very possible that what they saw around them affected them, deep down they could have not agreed, and must have kept everything to themselves (and/or those close to them) out of the desire to survive and to have a career. It is very likely for them to have simply wanted to practice their profession honestly, as they were educated to do. In the particular case of the excavations at Piatra Frecăței it is very likely for them to have felt prisoners in a situation where the only solution was to accept the compromise, the collaboration with the local representative of the communist power in the interest of research. What I want to emphasize by the examples presented above is the need to reflect on the sources of this dual personality. My interpretation is this: along with others (e.g. Thomas 2004: 31), I consider that between the way we treat people in the remote past and how we treat people living today there is a dialectical relation. For positivist-empiricist archeology, prevailing in Romania, the main purpose is ordering the material culture of the past by specific methods, with the final result of constructing historical narratives (Anghelinu 2003). This type of approach operates at the analytical level with the dichotomy between subject and object: the material culture of the past is passive, completely separate, explicitly or implicitly, from those who produced it and were surrounded by it. It is not taken into account that, “People in antiquity did not live their entire lives as disengaged subjects, gathering information from abstract objects. They dwelt in sensuous worlds of meaning, desire, suffering, and labour” (Thomas 2004: 30). Irrespective of this, the archaeologists do not learn anything from the past, but they just order it according to “scientific bases”, reason for which they find it tolerable for the lives of people of today to be ordered in a similar manner (Ibidem: 31). Precisely because the advocates of positivist-empiricist archaeology consider the material culture of the past as being passive, their attitude towards the people of today and their material culture is also passive. Dialectically, the fact that positivist-empiricist archeology ignores the people of today and their material culture, leads to annihilating the diversity of the people in the past, to reducing them to an abstract collective character on the scene of historical events. In short, the germs of evil are in the very epistemological foundations of the archaeological practice in Romania.

## **The archaeological research at Roșia Montană**

We could expect that, in the conditions of freedom of expression obtained from the changes in December 1989, given their experiences during communism, the disappearance of the repressive communist institutions and the much-discussed problem of the degrees of responsibility for the support and perpetuation of the totalitarian system, the archaeologists in Romania should be more reflexive, give more importance to the relationship between their approach and the socio-political



context in which they evolve. Nothing of the kind occurs. The vast majority of archaeologists continue to ignore this problem and promote the dichotomy between the remote past and the present, and the myths of neutrality and political disengagement. Illustrative in this regard is the example of the excavations at Roșia Montană (Alba County), in which I took part in 2001, 2003 and 2004.

The investigations were determined by the initiation by the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation S.A. (RMGC) of a large-scale mining project, the main shareholder being the Canadian company Gabriel Resources Ltd. The archaeological excavations began in 2000 and were financed in the years that followed by RMGC. In 2001 the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs created the "*Alburnus Maior*" National Research Program, coordinated by the National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest. Many relevant institutions joined this program: the National Institute of Historical Monuments in Bucharest, the archaeological institutes in Bucharest and Cluj of the Romanian Academy, the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj, the National Museum of Unification in Alba Iulia and the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization in Deva, and a team of researchers from France specialized in mining archeology.

Meanwhile, RMGC initiated a campaign to convince the locals to sell their properties. Gradually, many have done it and have moved elsewhere. In 2001, Roșia Montană seemed full of life and crowded; when I returned in 2003, not to mention 2004, I was amazed at the difference. The archaeologists were witnesses to a radical change. However, although some of them spent almost six months per year in excavations, working daily (except Sundays) with people in the area employed as laborers, a large part of the archaeologists failed to reflect on the role, be it indirect, they played in this change; the fact that the lives of people around them took a different course failed to make an impression on them. Instead, most were interested in how profitable in financial terms and/or professional terms their presence at Roșia Montană was, and what they found in the excavation. As resulted from the discussions, there was a hierarchy of the finds: the "top" contexts and materials were those from the Roman period, while the modern and contemporary contexts and materials were considered to be "cinderellas". This hierarchy is contained in the very title of the project: the ancient city of *Alburnus Maior* is the banner of the project, not the mining settlement of Empress Mary Theresa or the ideological exploitation of the Ceaușescu's "Golden Age". Obviously, there were exceptions. Here is an example: in October 2003, at one meeting, the main coordinator of the project warned an archaeologist that he advanced too slowly in the investigation of a property, and asked him, given the near ending of the season of excavations, to cease to concern himself with the remains of the modern age buildings, as Roman tombs could occur under them; the one who had been warned asked him if he would receive a written notice allowing to pass with the pick through the buildings in question, and it was then that the discussion ended. I cannot appreciate whether the project coordinator's reproach was justified for other reasons, but it certainly reflects a widespread attitude: the contexts of contemporary or modern ages do not deserve too much attention, they are not important enough, they may be overlooked. Moreover, the archaeologists limited their role to excavating and analyzing the finds in their trenches, while ignoring the material culture above the ground level. This explains the fact that,

although some of the major concerns of archeology are interpreting the changes in the material culture or the abandonment of houses/settlements, neither the artisans of the research project, nor the archaeologists involved thought that the change they witnessed should have been studied archaeologically, despite the numerous examples of analyses dedicated to these topics (e.g. González-Ruibal 1998; 2005; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Härke 2004).

Even those who were against the project (some archaeologists, architects, etc.) largely took the same attitude. Some of the central arguments were: the small areas excavated compared to the area that has been given certificates of archaeological clearance; and the importance of the cultural heritage and landscape, both from the ancient and the modern periods, that was to be destroyed. The people of today and the changes they were immersed in do not appear anywhere, which is why the opponents did not have in mind an analysis of the contemporary material culture (see, for example, the supplement of the magazine “22”, no. 875, 15<sup>th</sup> of December-21<sup>st</sup> of December 2006). Again, the cultural heritage is more important than the present day people.

To sum up, by ignoring the socio-political context in which they conducted the excavations, the archaeologists involved unwillingly became the servants of an aggressive neo-liberal project and responsible for the negative consequences on the residents in the village of Roșia Montană. At the same time, by ignoring the contemporary material culture, the archaeologists have lost the opportunity to critically analyze and better understand the impact of modernity, materialized – among others – in the communist and neo-liberal mining projects, upon the community of Roșia Montană apparent in the long run. It is my belief that such an analysis would have brought to light things left untold, deliberately concealed by the propaganda around the mining project of RMGC, or things left unnoticed by the noise of the opponents of the project. The local people would have ceased to be treated as a collective character above whose heads the “experts” discuss the pros or cons, depending on the discipline they belong to, and would have acquired a voice and would have told their own story. Equally important, the archaeologists would have made use of the results of their analysis to criticize the ideologies that have structured or structure the past and present Romanian society.

## **Conclusions: following Emmanuel Levinas**

I conclude this brief presentation in a philosophical tone. Emmanuel Levinas’ words best express what I tried to argue; giving the example of drama, he writes:

“The comedy begins with our simplest gestures. They all entail an inevitable awkwardness. Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor and dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did a thousand and one things I hadn’t willed to do. The act was not pure; I left traces. Wiping away these traces, I left others. Sherlock Holmes will apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives, and thus the comedy may take a tragic turn. When the awkwardness of the act is turned against the goal pursued, we are in the midst of tragedy. Laius, in attempting to thwart the fatal

predictions, undertakes precisely what is necessary to fulfill them. Oedipus, in succumbing, works toward his own misfortune. It is like an animal fleeing in a straight line across the snow before the sound of the hunters, thus leaving the very traces that will lead to its death.” (Levinas 2006: 3)

Levinas draws the attention upon the fact that, irrespective of our intentions, we are responsible for the unintended consequences, we are not even aware of, that our actions have not only upon ourselves, but also upon other people. By other people it is not meant only those we are in touch with, but also those we do not meet:

“The social wrong is committed without my knowledge, with respect to a multiplicity of third parties whom I will never look at directly [...]. The intention cannot accompany the act to its ultimate prolongations, and yet the *I* knows it is responsible for these ultimate prolongations.” (ibidem: 19; original emphasis)

According to Levinas, “the relationship with a third party – responsibility which extending beyond intention’s ‘range of action’ – characterizes the subjective existence capable of discourse *essentially*. The *I* is in relationship with a human totality” (ibidem: 19; original emphasis). *The Other* always has to prevail, as the responsibility of each of us towards her or him is boundless and the more responsible we are when our neighbour is oppressed; the way Ticu Goldstein put it is very relevant for Levinas’ message: “You cannot wash your hands if the other is suffering, even if he does not suffer because of you” (Goldstein 2003). The relation between God and ourselves does depend on this assumption of responsibility (ibidem).

Returning to the examples discussed and taking into account Levinas’ words, the archaeologists can no longer assert that they tackle only “science”. The invocation of a (neutral apolitical) objective practice does not spare them the responsibility they have as regards the unintended, indirect consequences of their work (in the case of the period up to 1989 – the legitimating of a totalitarian system). Paraphrasing David Clarke, I would say that, after the communist experience, Romanian archaeology has lost its innocence forever. Therefore, I militate in favor of giving up the dichotomy between past and present; including the socio-political context in which knowledge is produced among the central elements of the archaeological study; giving up the myths of neutrality and apolitical attitude; and, in general, in favor of a reflexive attitude.

One last thing. I do not deny that the archaeologists I referred to wrote important works, nor do I deny the professionalism and honesty of their activity, but I think that it would be better to bear in mind constantly Levinas’ warning:

“The diabolical is endowed with intelligence and enters where it will. To reject it, it is first necessary to refute it. Intellectual effort is needed to recognize it. Who can boast of having done so? Say what you will, the diabolical gives food for thought.” (Lévinas 1989: 488)

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