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# MARMATIA



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ARHEOLOGIE MARAMUREȘ

# MARMATIA

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Pe coperta I: *Solidus de la Valentinianus I, transformat în medalion*

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## A Comment on the *Contemporary Archaeology Programme, Romania*<sup>1</sup>

RADU-ALEXANDRU DRAGOMAN, SORIN OANȚĂ-MARGHITU

*Cuvinte-cheie:* arheologie; materialitate; represiune politică; comunism; România.

*Keywords:* archaeology; materiality; political repression; communism; Romania.

After the political changes that occurred in 1989 in Romania, the communist period, which had lasted nearly half a century, became a new field of scientific analysis. In time, a number of new institutes and foundations were tasked, partly or entirely, with researching the communist period, including repression and resistance among their main focuses: the Romanian Academy's National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism (1993), the Civic Academy Foundation (1994), the Romanian Institute for Recent History (2000) and the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (2005). As a novelty for historical research and for the field of archaeology in general, at the time of its establishment the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (IICCR) included in its organizational structure a "Special Investigation Department". This department put forward a *Contemporary Archaeology Programme*, which planned to carry out archaeological excavations where victims of communist repression had been buried. As revealed by reports posted on the institution's website<sup>2</sup>, IICCR researchers carried out exhumations in numerous places throughout the country.

Following a series of political and institutional changes, towards the end of 2009 the IICCR was restructured and renamed as the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile. The Special Investigation Department continued to exist, but no longer carried out archaeological excavations. In this context, the founders of the *Contemporary Archaeology Programme* created, in 2010, the Centre for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (CICCR) and, as can be learned from the official web page, continued the search and the exhumations in new locations<sup>3</sup>. In 2012, again as the result of political changes, the chair of the CICCR was appointed to lead the Special Investigation Department.

The endeavour undertaken by the *Contemporary Archaeology Programme* promoters is unquestionably commendable – especially as their example was not yet met, until the present date, by any corresponding efforts in the research planning of any of the archaeology institutes and departments in Romania. Thanks to the above mentioned research, the real circumstances of some of the communist repression victims' death were revealed, and, as official documents of the Securitate were proven to have been forged, the perpetrators were indicted (unfortunately without consequences), and, more importantly, the victims' surviving relatives were able to properly bury their dead. Thus, archaeological excavations carried out by the IICCR or CICCR played, or continue to play, a role both towards our knowledge of past events and towards providing moral redress to the victims and their surviving families. At the same time, the *Contemporary Archaeology Programme* also had an educational function: some of the research results were presented to the public in the *Common Denominator: Death* exhibition, held in several cities throughout Romania, including

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian version of this text has been published in Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2013, Chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.iiccr.ro/ro/proiecte/investigatii\\_speciale](http://www.iiccr.ro/ro/proiecte/investigatii_speciale) (accessed: 26 January 2013).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.condannareacomunismului.ro/Proiecte/Programuldearheologiecontemporana.aspx> (accessed: 26 January 2013).

the capital. However, there is one aspect that we consider problematic: due to the research philosophy underlying the *Contemporary Archaeology Programme*, archaeology's very object – materiality – is practically ignored; as a consequence, the resulting narrative is considerably limited. Therefore we consider that some observations are necessary, which do not aim to diminish the merits of the *Programme* at all, but only to highlight certain aspects and thus contribute to a more sensitive understanding of the people and of the items present.

According to the IICCR activity report for 2006, the purpose of the archaeological excavation was to “produce physical evidence to prove the criminal concentrationary nature of the communist regime in Romania, as well as the physical extermination conditions that those imprisoned on political, ethnic and religious criteria were subjected to” (*Report 2006*, 4). The same mention can be found, for example, in the report on the archaeological excavations at Hălmășău and Șasa-Poieni (both in Bistrița-Năsăud county):

“The action was prompted by a desire to learn the truth about the tragic death of the six people, in keeping with the IICCR's mission to inform the public opinion about the crimes and injustice committed in the name of ‘class struggle’ during the communist regime” (Petrov, Budeancă 2007, 17)

After the CICCR was established in 2010, the goal of archaeological research remained unchanged:

“The Centre for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania aims to carry out activities that would lead to identifying human rights violations in communist Romania, to enhance the dynamics of institutional policies as regards condemning the injustice and crime committed in the name of the communist regime in Romania, to conduct investigations in order to provide the relevant institutions and the public with information on the crimes and injustices committed by the regime, and to support any legislative initiative, court proceedings and scientific research that would lead to condemning those crimes and injustices, legally and morally.”

(<http://www.condamnareacomunismului.ro/DespreCICCR/Obiective.aspx>)

The IICCR and CICCR approach the archaeological activity as a quest for incriminating “evidence” against the communist regime; hence the inclusion of this word in the title – worthy of a sensational press article – of the Special Investigation Department's report on the excavations at Glodghilești (Burjuc commune, Hunedoara county): “The mystery of a 1950 summary execution by the Securitate, solved by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania. The “unknown hero”, as Iosif Orșa was known in the area, was exhumed by the IICCR. Irrefutable proof of execution: a 7.62 mm calibre bullet found among the remains” (Muraru et al. 2007). Bullets seem to be regarded as the most important “evidence” because, as in detective work, they bring a major contribution to solving the case:

“Two bullets were found on the skeleton, one in the upper back, which had stopped in the spine, and another one in the back of the left hip, which had stopped in the pelvic bone. From the position in which both bullets were found, the conclusion is that the deceased was shot from behind. Also, the skull shows obvious traces of blows, such as orifices and missing parts of the cap, evidence that the deceased was also shot in the head.” (Petrov 2009a, 7)

The importance given to bullets as “evidence” is also apparent from some published photos that show tools inserted into the skulls (Petrov, Budeancă 2007, 8), whereby the trajectory of the bullet that ended the victim's life is scientifically illustrated through a post-Hamlet gesture.



In the texts that were published (so far online) objects were only described, without being discussed at all. For example, the report on the archaeological excavations conducted at Băiești (Pui commune, Hunedoara county) mentioned the items found together with the skeleton, parts of footwear, buttons, a metal plate (probably) from trouser braces, two ammunition clips with five cartridges each and a decorated pocket knife (Petrov 2009b, 4), but the items were not analysed at all. When it does exceed the purely descriptive level, the interpretation of the items pertains to the actions that occurred around them, and not to the items themselves, as can be noted in the following paragraph about a pair of boots:

“No footwear was found at his feet, but a pair of boots was found in a secondary position at the northern end of the grave, one boot next to the skull of M.1 and another next to the skull of M.3. The boots had been repaired, as the leather soles were covered with rubber patches fastened with small nails on the edges. The presence of the boots in an unnatural position and the absence of footwear on the feet of the deceased might mean two things. One possibility would be that the boots dropped from the victim’s feet while the corpse was being handled, and were then thrown to the place where we found them. Another plausible explanation would be that one of the grave diggers could exchange his own footwear, which was perhaps in worse condition, for the better footwear of the victim. If the deceased were brought directly from the Securitate arrest facility, it is likely that their footwear had no shoe laces, which might explain why it was easily removed from the corpses’ feet, especially considering the circumstances in which the corpses were put into the common grave.” (Petrov 2009a, 8)

The IICCR and CICCRR do not seek to understand contemporary material culture in the context of repressive actions, but rather reduce objects to the status of “evidence” of such actions. Rather than analysing and interpreting the materiality of the repression, to reveal what was left unsaid by historical and political discourse, archaeology becomes an annex of a judicial approach, in which objects become pretexts for prosecution. Thus, archaeology is stripped of its emancipating potential and represents instead an extension of the official policy of state institutions.

Recovering memory cannot be reduced to the legal procedure that involves pulling from the solitude of a grave the bones and the few remaining scraps of garments and turning them into “evidence”. Archaeology, and even more so the archaeology of communist repression, should be metaphysical and ethical. The grave and the landscape around it are the ideologically planned materiality of oblivion: the absence of the humblest mark, even of a wooden cross, or the disguise of the monotony of the rows of graves in the plots of an ordinary cemetery, or the posthumous solidarity of the marginalised community in a paupers’ cemetery, or being dissolved in a cyclical rhythm among the blossoms, the greenery, the autumn’s rusty leaves and the snow-covered branches. Archaeology should see these things, research them in their long duration, and note them; words should adorn the graves’ destitution and solitude in the same way flowers do. Exhumation is the meeting of the moment of the burial with our present moment, a meeting which cancels the long posthumous oblivion to which the prisoner was sentenced; it finally brings the end of the long course of humiliation, torture, suffering, prayers and tears. The memory of those sentenced to oblivion needs to be restored through the archaeology of the remaining material traces. A prisoner who was brutally torn from his family and friends, physically annihilated, and deleted from memory, is re-socialised and re-introduced in the community not as a legal evidence, but as a person with a life story: childhood, beloved books, letters, objects, rises and falls, failures and courage, friends and enemies, family and colleagues, dreams and surrender. An archaeology of repression cannot be reduced to exhumation alone.

Archaeology needs to recover the memory of the entire communist regime trauma: excavations in the villages of those who were deported to the Bărăgan plains, to labour camps and prisons, the study of the items that belonged to the prisoners, and the memories of those who knew them, gathered in an oral history project.

A burial place also has a certain biography, from the moment the prisoner's body is deposited into the grave and until the present moment. The material traces of this biography can offer a glimpse into certain issues that were concealed by communist ideology. For example, after the death of the Greek Catholic Bishop Vasile Aftenie in the custody of the Securitate and his burial in the Bellu Catholic Cemetery in Bucharest, his grave became a pilgrimage destination, and there were testimonies of its miracles. Through the bones, the Grace of God radiated into the proximal materiality: the funereal cross, the items that belonged to the bishop (his clothing and footwear) and the soil in the grave had become a symbolic extension of his body. The soil, classified according to modernist logic as "nature", acquired in this case a material dimension, and could be considered as a sacred object: during the archaeological excavation that was carried out when the bishop Vasile Aftenie's remains were exhumed (Dragoman et al. 2012), a man came and insisted to be allowed to take some soil from the grave pit. The coins that had been put into the soil of Vasile Aftenie's grave over a long period of time, as well as a small bottle containing a request to lift a curse (*ibid.*), reveal how faith, pilgrimage and prayer were perpetuated during the oppressive regime, in contrast to the official image of the formation of the new man, the atheist builder of communism - an image that is perpetuated in the public space today by a discourse claiming that the masses were transformed by communism while the elites resisted by culture.

The exemplarity of memory (Todorov 1999), the need to assign meaning in the present to the suffering and the sacrifices of the past, refers to recovering thus the whole biography of the grave and, above all, the memory of the prisoners, and not to transforming them into a science object by means of dry and technical and brief excavation reports, nor to annulling their identities once more through meta-narrative exhibitions of post-communist anti-communism, or by reducing them to mere statistical figures.

The archaeology of communist repression should be extended to include the archaeology of repression in the modern Romanian state: common graves, cemeteries, concentration camps and other testimonies of the action taken by the state against legionary opponents (during the rule of King Carol II and Marshall Ion Antonescu), as well as the material traces of the Holocaust (during World War II). Rather than a relativisation of the communist regime crimes, such an archaeological approach to repression throughout its duration might reveal the Romanian state's "innocence loss" as early as the interwar period; confiscation of assets and property, imprisonment, torture, summary executions, deportation, and sentencing people to oblivion had become repressive practices even before communism. The trauma of the past ought to pull us out of our apathy, indifference, obedience, and make us more sensitive to the suffering around us. The firmness and depth of convictions and faith, as well as total political involvement, stand in contrast to the perpetually postponed efforts of the self-appointed representatives of the elite to acquire a backbone during their evolution from the communist party newspaper's editorials to sensationalist tabloid news, from anthologies of literature for the communist youth to self-help books on how to succeed in love and business, or surprising leaps from the Socialist International to the European People's Party.

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## **Comentariu cu privire la *Programul de Arheologie Contemporană, România***

### **(Rezumat)**

Textul de față este o critică la adresa *Programului de Arheologie Contemporană* inițiat și derulat de Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului Românesc (București) pentru a documenta “caracterul concentraționar criminal al regimului comunist din România” (*Raport 2006*, 4). Argumentăm că, în cadrul *Programului*, arheologia este transformată într-o anexă a unui demers politic de condamnare a comunismului, într-o simplă prelungire a politicii oficiale a statului. În contrast, considerăm că arheologia trebuie să se ocupe de analizarea și interpretarea materialității represiunii, să scoată la iveală lucruri nerostite de discursurile istorice sau politice. Mai mult decât atât, suntem de părere că o arheologie a represiunii comuniste ar trebui extinsă cu una a represiunii în modernitatea statului român.

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ActaArchHung	Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest
ActaMN	Acta Mvsei Napocensis. Muzeul Național de Istorie a Transilvaniei, Cluj-Napoca
ActaMP	Acta Mvsei Porolissensis. Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Artă Zalău, Zalău
AnBan	Analele Banatului. Muzeului Banatului, Timișoara
Apulum	Apvlvm. Muzeul Național al Unirii, Alba Iulia
ArchÉrt	Archaeologiai Értesítő. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest
ArchKözl	Archaeologiai Közlemények. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia. Archaeologiai Bizottság, Budapest
AS	Acta Siculica. Muzeul Național Secuiesc, Sfântu Gheorghe / Székely Nemzeti Múzeum, Sepsiszentgyörgy
BAM	Brvkenthal Acta Mvsei. Muzeul Național Brukenthal, Sibiu.
Banatica	Banatica. Muzeul Banatului Montan, Reșița
BAR	British Archaeological Reports, Oxford
BiblMarm	Bibliotheca Marmatia. Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Arheologie Maramureș, Baia Mare
BMN	Bibliotheca Mvsei Napocensis. Muzeul Național de Istorie al Transilvaniei, Cluj Napoca
BUA	Bibliotheca Universitatis Apulensis. Universitatea „1 Decembrie 1918”, Centrul de Cercetări Pre- Și Protoistorice, Alba Iulia
CommArchHung	Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae, Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest
Crisia	Crisia. Muzeului Țării Crișurilor, Oradea
CronCercArh	Cronica cercetărilor arheologice. Ministerul Culturii, Institutul Național al Patrimoniului, București
Dacia / Dacia N.S.	Dacia. Recherches et Découvertes Archéologiques en Roumanie, București; Dacia N.S. Revue d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Ancienne. Academia Română, Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan”, București
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EM	Erdélyi Múzeum. Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár / Societatea Muzeului Ardelean, Cluj Napoca
FolArch	Folia Archaeologica. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum - Történeti Múzeum, Budapest

Godišnjak Sarajevo	Godišnjak. Akademija Nauka i Umjetnosti Borne i Hercegovine, Sarajevo
Jahresschr.mitteldt.Vorgesch	Jahresschrift für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte. Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften for Landmuseum für Vorgeschichte, Halle / Berlin
JSA	Journal of Social Archaeology. SAGE Publications, London / Thousand Oaks / New Delhi
MAGW	Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien. Anthropologische Gesellschaft in Wien, Wien
Marmatia	Marmatia. Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Arheologie Maramureș, Baia Mare
Materiale	Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice. Academia Română, Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan”, București
MittArchInstUngAkad	Mitteilungen des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften / Régészeti Intézet, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapesta
Molnár István Múz	Molnár István Múzeum Kiadványai. Molnár István Múzeum, Székelykeresztúr / Muzeul Molnár István, Cristuru Secuiesc
MuzNaț	Muzeul Național. Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, București
OH	Opuscula Hungarica. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest
PBF	Prähistorische Bronzefunde, München / Stuttgart
RevBistriței	Revista Bistriței. Complexul Muzeal Bistrița-Năsăud, Bistrița
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Sargetia	Sargetia. Muzeul Civilizației Dacice și Romane, Deva
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Tibiscus	Tibiscus. Muzeul Banatului, Timișoara

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