

AFTER THE PROTESTS: COMMENTS  
ON CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN  
ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF THE  
ROȘIA MONTANĂ CASE

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**Keywords:** Roșia Montană; archaeology; heritage; Romania.

**Abstract:** In this text I argue that the Roșia Montană case, which became well-known especially after the large-scale protests from the autumn of 2013, is a revealing one for understanding the relations between the contemporary archaeological practice and the Romanian society. The Roșia Montană case highlighted a series of deeply problematic aspects of Romanian archaeology, namely: the tendency to “reform” the discipline and to define its social relevance by simply adapting to the current capitalist ideological context; the absence of theoretical reflection on the dominant research philosophy (i.e. culture-historical), which leads, among others, to the separation of the practice from the current socio-political context, to the conversion of the discipline into an instrument for implementing capitalist projects, to the construction of ideological interpretations of the past, as well as to the refuge in the research of the distant past, hence the lack of concern for an understanding of the current society through the study of the materiality of the recent and contemporary past; the existence of a reflex of subordinating the archaeological practice to the “national” commands, to the detriment of the autonomy of the discipline; an autistic scientific practice, in which archaeologists do not engage with their own scientific capital in criticizing the political instrumentalization of heritage in harmful ideological discourses (capitalist or nationalist). Thus, the social relevance of contemporary Romanian archaeology is defined exclusively from outside the field, by political factors. In contrast, I believe that the relevance of the discipline can be built only through the permanent renewal of its epistemological bases and through the continuous reflection on the relations with the present.

**Rezumat:** În acest text susțin că dosarul Roșia Montană, devenit binecunoscut mai ales în urma protestelor de amploare din toamna anului 2013, este unul revelator pentru înțelegerea raporturilor dintre practica arheologică contemporană și societatea românească. Cazul Roșia Montană a făcut evidentă o serie de aspecte profund problematice ale arheologiei românești, și anume: tendința de a „reforma” disciplina și de a-i defini relevanța socială prin simpla adaptare la contextul ideologic capitalist actual; absența reflecției teoretice asupra filosofiei de cercetare dominante (i.e. cultural-istorice), ce conduce, printre altele, la separarea practicii de contextul socio-politic prezent, la convertirea disciplinei în instrument de implementare a proiectelor capitaliste, la construirea unor interpretări ideologice asupra trecutului, precum și la refugiul în cercetarea trecutului îndepărtat, de unde lipsa de preocupare pentru o înțelegere a societății actuale prin intermediul studierii

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materialității trecutului recent și contemporan; existența unui reflex de subordonare a practicii arheologice comandamentelor „naționale”, în dauna autonomiei disciplinei; o practică științifică autistă, în cadrul căreia arheologii nu se angajează cu propriul capital științific în criticarea instrumentalizării politice a patrimoniului în discursuri ideologice nocive (capitaliste sau naționaliste). Astfel, relevanța socială a arheologiei românești contemporane este definită exclusiv din afara câmpului, de factori politici. În contrast, consider că relevanța disciplinei nu poate fi construită decât prin permanenta reinnoire a bazelor epistemologice și prin continua reflecție asupra relațiilor cu prezentul.

## Introduction

Roșia Montană does not need any introduction. Its name became well known following the large-scale protests that took place in the fall of 2013 against the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation’s (RMGC) mining project, aiming to extract gold and silver from the region through massive open cast mining and the use of cyanide. The protests were the most important since the revolution of 1989 – 200,000 people participated in demonstrations organized in 50 cities in Romania, but also in other cities around the world,<sup>1</sup> such as London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Chicago, etc. The Roșia Montană case has become the subject of several analyses,<sup>2</sup> which is why I do not detail it here. Suffice to point out that Roșia Montană represented “the most significant Romanian environmental conflict, with a significant national and international impact”.<sup>3</sup>

Specialists from many fields were involved in the scientific debates regarding the project envisaged by RMGC,<sup>4</sup> one of the most hotly contested topics being the consequences on the cultural heritage of Roșia Montană, an important mining region whose history dates back to the Roman era (probably even to the Iron Age) and continues into the medieval and modern eras. In the end, the RMGC project did not receive an operating license and in February 2016, Roșia Montană was officially proposed to be inscribed at UNESCO as a “World Heritage site”,<sup>5</sup> a result considered to be a true “triumph”.<sup>6</sup> This “triumph” was threatened in 2018, when the government withdrew the Rosia Montană file from UNESCO provoking “new ‘waves’ in mass media and social protests”,<sup>7</sup> but in the end, on 31 January 2020, the

<sup>1</sup> Besliu 2013.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Chiper 2012; Branea 2013; Goțiu 2013; Poenaru 2014; Jarosz 2015; Galin n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Branea 2013, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cocean 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jurj 2014; Dawson 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Jarosz 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Musteață, Cozma 2020, p. 395.