

WHAT WAS ARCHAEOLOGY DURING THE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s

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Abstract: An investigation on the workings of archaeology in Romania a few decades ago shows features of a culture-historical archaeology, with some particular traits, in part generated by the political regime of that time, which structure around defending accumulated tacit knowledge and the autonomy of the discipline. The reduced capacity of producing new thinking in the discipline is preserved after 1989, in changed social and political circumstances.

Rezumat: O investigație asupra felului în care funcționa arheologia la noi acum câteva decenii arată caracteristici ale unei arheologii culturale istorice, cu trăsături proprii, în parte generate de regimul politic din acea vreme, care se organizează în jurul apărării unui fond de cunoaștere tacită și a autonomiei disciplinei. Capacitatea redusă de a produce gândire nouă în disciplină s-a păstrat și după 1989, în contextul unor condiții sociale și politice schimbate.

Writing about how the discipline looked like decades ago is not an easy task for an archaeologist educated in Romania during the 1980s. This is something we were taught to believe we should not do. The public past of the discipline was imagined as inferior to its present and its scrutiny on anniversary occasions, when some sterile genealogy of the present could be performed, or some new one could be invented to please the powerful of the day, worthless. What I knew then and what I remember now are products of positions unsuitable for an all-encompassing view. I will not sketch a balanced, overall picture of archaeology in Romania. I have organized my recollections with the purpose of giving shape to what was believed at that time, in the office from the Macca House in which I started being an archaeologist in 1986, by being educated in a local variant of pre- and proto-historical archaeology, to be a coherent cluster of good practices, amounting to an implicit view of what archaeology was and of what it should be. I have recognized similar ideas in other places of archaeological research from Romania, during conversations with archaeologists from other offices and other institutes and museums, during symposia and annual meetings. I will not present other views, and there will be no attempt to reduce the diversity to the lowest common denominator or to show how bad archaeology looked like.

To the history student I was in the 1970s, archaeology presented itself in many ways: primarily as history of ancient art, then as access to ancient peoples through their cultures and chronologies, and as discovery during excavation campaigns. At that time I had no intention of becoming an archaeologist. This was partly due to a mystique of personal giftedness shared by those of my colleagues who had started their archaeological education by being close to an experienced archaeologist. Their knowledge was not a development of what we learned as students, it was something radically different, something no one was able to put into words other than the esoteric names they used for archaeological facts and those of the extraordinary tales about their masters. All that I learned from my professors in the history department was irrelevant compared to this knowledge.

The tales of my former colleagues from the history department and what my prestigious colleagues at the institute said had one thing in common: an archaeologist was someone entirely dedicated to the discipline. Nothing beyond the benefit of getting a particular kind of knowledge was expected from it. It was not a means for obtaining something else.

I had the privilege of being accepted as a researcher at the Bucharest institute of archaeology without the ideally long apprenticeship, which seldom brought the apprentice to such an important position as was then that of a researcher at the most important institute of archaeology in the country. This, together with my respect for knowledge coming from books, made some of my experienced colleagues very sceptical about my ever becoming a true archaeologist. I worked mainly with two masters, but my apprenticeship started late (I was 30), I do not know if too late to assimilate practical knowledge or because the eventual archaeologist

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