

## THE GRASS IS COMING! RUINS AND RUINATION IN THE LANDSCAPE OF THE DANUBE-BLACK SEA CANAL IN SOUTHEASTERN ROMANIA\*

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**Keywords:** Archaeology of the recent and contemporary past; Danube-Black Sea Canal; ruins; communist Romania; post-communist Romania.

**Abstract:** The construction of the Danube-Black Sea Canal was a project that in one form or another accompanied the entirety of Romanian communist modernity (1947-1989). The works undertaken as part of this modernising project resulted in a radical transformation of the landscape and the birth of a new geography, which itself would undergo equally radical changes after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Based on archaeological research carried out over a long period of time (2012-present) along the course of the Danube-Black Sea Canal, this essay aims to illustrate what we might call a phenomenology of destruction, an endeavour that transcends the dominant distinction between communism and post-communism, between past and present.

**Rezumat:** Construirea Canalului Dunăre-Marea Neagră a fost un proiect care a străbătut, într-o formă sau alta, întreaga modernitate comunistă a României (1947-1989). Lucrările la acest proiect modernist au condus la o radicală transformare a peisajului, la geneza unei noi geografii, care, la rândul ei, avea să sufere modificări la fel de radicale după căderea regimului comunist în 1989. Pe baza cercetărilor arheologice efectuate de-a lungul unei lungi perioade de timp (2012-prezent) pe traseul Canalului Dunăre-Marea Neagră, prezentul eseu își propune să ilustreze ceea ce am putea numi o fenomenologie a distrugerii, un demers ce trece dincolo de distincția dominantă dintre comunism și postcomunism, dintre trecut și prezent.

We spent the period from 2012 to the moment of writing these lines repeatedly walking a landscape we consider of great interest to an archaeology of the recent past in Romania, namely that of the Danube-Black Sea Canal (located in the Dobrogea region in the southeast of the country, Constanța County) (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dragoman, Florea 2013; Dragoman *et alii* 2016; Dragoman *et alii* 2018; Dragoman 2019; Dragoman *et alii* 2021; Dragoman *et alii* 2023a; Dragoman *et alii* 2023b; Dragoman *et alii* 2024.

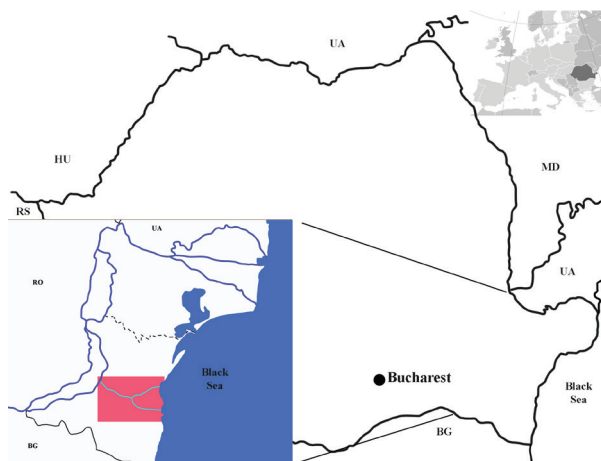


Fig. 1. Location of the study area in southeastern Romania (in red) (map: Cătălin Ion Nicolae).

In the history of the modern Romanian state, the building of the Canal was most likely its most ambitious engineering project. Based on the Soviet model of the Volga-Don Canal, work on the Danube-Black Sea Canal was begun in 1949 by the new communist regime installed after the Second World War (officially in 1947). This chapter in the Canal's biography is best known for the creation of the forced labour colonies and the extermination regime to which political prisoners sent there were subjected. Interrupted after the death of Stalin in 1953, work on the Canal resumed in 1976 based on a new plan, being officially completed in 1984, even if work on the so-called "northern arm" of the Canal continued between 1983 and 1987.<sup>2</sup>

So the construction of the Danube-Black Sea Canal (Fig. 2) was a project that in one form or another accompanied the entirety of Romanian communist modernity. The ideological fervour of the day, monumentalised and idealised in the form of a mosaic on the banks of the Canal (Fig. 3), saw the mobilisation of political and common law prisoners, workers, cooperative peasants, conscripted soldiers, students and intellectuals, leaving in its wake a new landscape, a web of towns and villages, factories and plants, state agricultural enterprises, agricultural production cooperatives and livestock farms, thermal power stations, irrigation canals and water towers, roads and railways, mounds of earth excavated from the Canal and terraced hills covered in orchards and vineyards, long lines of electricity pylons, former forced labour colonies subsequently transformed into prisons, military facilities, blocks of flats and farm buildings.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the Canal, see Ionescu-Gură 2017.