

NOTE ȘI DISCUȚII

Nona Palincaș*. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE AT POPEȘTI (CO. GIURGIU) AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN RESEARCH, CONSERVATION, AND PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Keywords: category A archaeological site, museum, basic research, site conservation, public archaeology, legislation in archaeology.

Abstract: For several decades, archaeologists considered the site at Popești (belonging to the town of Mihăilești, Co. Giurgiu) from the perspective of basic research and, secondarily, from that of site conservation. The initiative of constructing a local museum related to such an important site was welcome both because it could offer the possibility to present the archaeological research to the wider public, and it could turn into an important element for the future development of the tourism in the region. Nevertheless, quite from the very beginning of the project, it became obvious that such a construction raises a lot of problems. This article discusses the most difficult of them – that of the appropriate location of the museum – from an archaeologist's perspective.

Rezumat: Decenii la rând, arheologii s-au ocupat de situl arheologic de la Popești (oraș Mihăilești, jud. Giurgiu) din perspectiva cercetării fundamentale și, în plan secundar, și din aceea a conservării. Dată fiind importanța sitului, inițiativa construirii unui muzeu local nu putea fi decât binevenită atât pentru că oferea posibilitatea valorificării cercetării arheologice pentru publicul larg, cât și pentru că ar fi putut contribui la o viitoare dezvoltare a turismului în zonă. Totuși, încă de la demararea studiului de fezabilitate a devenit evident faptul că o asemenea construcție pune multe probleme. Articolul o discută pe cea mai dificilă dintre ele, aceea a alegerii amplasamentului, din perspectiva arheologului.

The archaeological site at Popești (belonging to the town of Mihăilești, Co. Giurgiu – see Fig. 1), code RAN¹ 104172.01, is registered as a category A site. From the first systematic excavations, which began in 1954, to date, the site has been permanently in the scientific responsibility of the Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest and was always considered from the perspective of archaeological research. The problem of its conservation was raised repeatedly, but postponed because the research was perceived as more urgent.

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¹ RAN stands for Registrul Arheologic Național (The National Archaeological Register).

As the site also contains a late medieval church (called 'Holy Trinity'), which is itself a historical monument from the 17th century,² the local priest initiated the paperwork for the construction of a museum devoted to the church (which was also meant to include a section on archaeology and one on ethnography). Under the circumstances, the archaeologists working on the site saw themselves forced to assess the relation between three aspects: scientific interests, the obligation of conserving the site, and the possibility of engaging with the wider public. These relations and their implications are the topic of the present paper.

Seen from the view of the researcher.

The site is located on the right bank of the Argeș River (25 km south-west of Bucharest), on the longest promontory in the Romanian Plain (Fig. 2). It is an exceptional topographic position owing to its closest possible location to the Argeș – the main line of communication between southeastern Transylvania, a large part of the Lower Danube, and the west shore of the Black Sea (Fig. 1). It is also easily defensible; the only access way – that from the promontory – was protected by one wall and three ditches (Fig. 3). Two of the ditches are visible today even from far away (Fig. 2).

The aims of the archaeological research were twofold: 1. gathering of primary archaeological data such as dwelling structures, artefacts, stratigraphic relations; 2. aspects that pertain to basic research proper. I shall present them together, briefly.

Generally on the site there are 11 walking levels, but in some parts there are as many as 13. One layer dates to the Early Bronze Age (Glina Culture), 2–4 layers to the Late Bronze Age (Fundeni-Govora and Radovanu³), 2 to the early Hallstatt period (Pre-Basarabi), one to the middle Hallstatt period (Basarabi), and 5 to the classical La Tène period. From the early La Tène period there are only isolated features and stray finds (Fig. 4). Despite several interruptions of the habitation of the site, there are no corresponding sterile strata. The interruptions are identifiable in some cases by the large time-gaps between successive layers (see Fig. 4). In other cases, pedological analyses were necessary to prove these interruptions: between the Pre-Basarabi walking levels Ha I1 and Ha I2, and between the latter and the Basarabi walking level.⁴

² Trajanescu 1911.

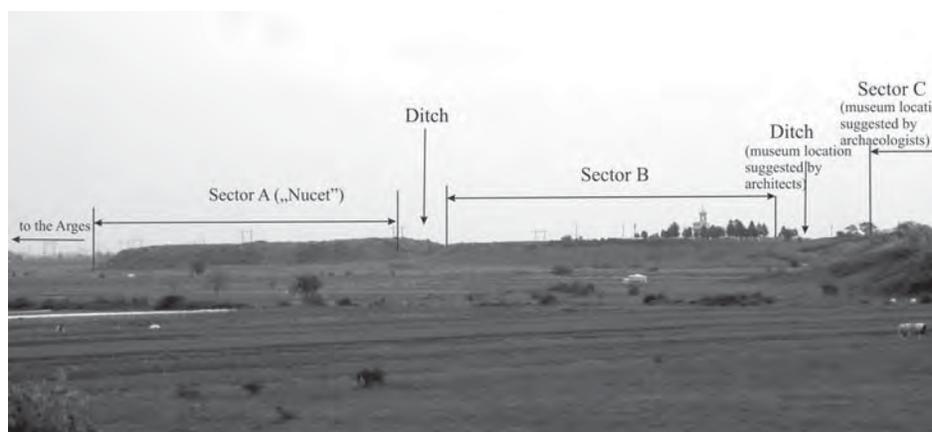
³ The layer referred to here as Radovanu appears in my previous publications (e.g. Palincaș 1996; Palincaș 2004-2005a, Palincaș 2007) as Zimnicea-Plovdiv. I decided to change the label after the publication of the article by C. Schuster (2007).

⁴ This information is based on an unpublished pedological report by C. Haită.

Fig. 1. Location of the archaeological sites and localities mentioned in the text (basic map by Iuliana Barnea).



Fig. 2. The course of the Argeș, its terrace and the location of the archaeological sites at Popești and Novaci.



Excerpt from ARA Reports 2, 2011.



Fig. 3. Popești (Co. Giurgiu). The archaeological site and the church seen from the west.

Lt II 5		—	c. 2 – 4 AD
Lt II 4			
Lt II 3			
Lt II 2			
Lt II 1		—	c. 150 BC
Lt I		—	4–3 c. BC
Ha II	Basarabi	—	8 c. BC
Ha I2	Pre-Basarabi type Popești	—	9 c. BC
Ha I1	Pre-Basarabi type Novaci	—	10 c. BC
Br IIIb	Radovanu	—	12 c. BC
Br IIIa	Radovanu		
Br IIb	Fundeni-Govora		c. 1400 cal BC
Br II a	Fundeni-Govora		
Br I	Glina		c. 2600 BC

Fig. 4. Popești (Co. Giurgiu). The stratigraphy in Sector A and the dating of the archaeological layers.

Fig. 5. Popești (Co. Giurgiu). 1–4: the four locations suggested for the museum; A–C: axes of the profiles in Fig. 6.

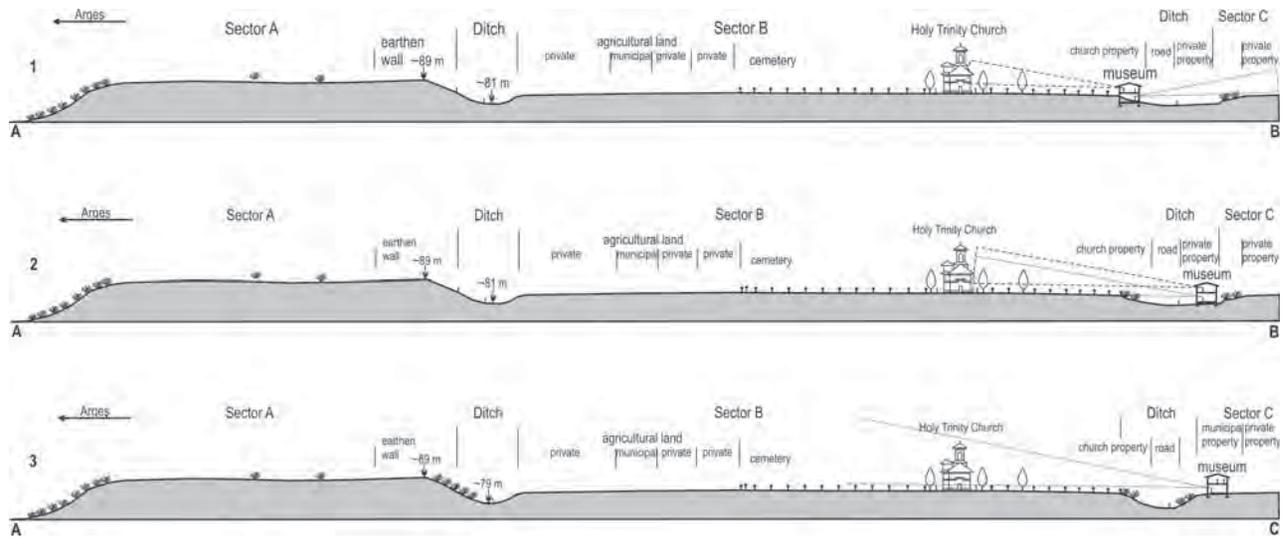


Fig. 6. Popești (Co. Giurgiu). Profiles (approx. representation) of the archaeological site with church, with the locations suggested for the museum (for axes see Fig. 5).

The stratigraphical relations from the Late Bronze Age as well as those from the early and middle Hallstatt periods are so far unique in the Lower Danube region. In terms of their importance, the most remarkable habitations are those from the Late Bronze and classical La Tène periods.

Beginning with the *Late Bronze Age*, the local communities integrated into a network of exchange relations of unprecedented expansion. The process began in the Fundeni-Govora and continued during the Radovanu phase. Estimated according to valuables (Mycenaean rapiers, axes and sceptres of bronze of Drajna type, cheek pieces of bone and antler, etc.), this network spans the space between the Upper Tisza and Middle Danube Basins, the Aegean, the eastern Mediterranean and the Ural Mountains. One of the pieces produced in our region – the sceptre of Drajna type – has one parallel in the shipwreck at Uluburun, in the eastern Mediterranean. The site at Popești was in the centre of the aforementioned integration process beginning with the Fundeni-Govora period. It was the first fortified settlement in Muntenia, after hundreds of years of settlement in open, short-lived hamlets; part of the ceramic repertoire belongs to a rare category, with parallels in cultic contexts hundreds of kilometres away – Govora (Co. Argeș), Cârcea (Co. Dolj), and Lăpuș (Co. Maramureș). Further, the artefacts recovered from Popești revealed that an internal process of renegotiation of gender relations accompanied the integration of the local communities into this extensive trade network.⁵

This site also contains the remains of the largest Pre-Basarabi (early Hallstatt) settlement in Muntenia.⁶ The rest of the materials known from this period are stray finds or stem from destroyed sites.⁷ Aspects of social processes, primarily in the context of gender relations, can also be identified, albeit not as clearly as for the Late Bronze Age.

The dwelling remains from the La Tène period consist of 5 layers dated between c. 150 BC and 2 or 4 AD. They were analyzed mainly from the perspective of the political events known from antique written sources.⁸ The site was identified with Argedaon/Argedava, i.e. the *dava* upon Argeș, mentioned in the inscription that honoured Akornion from Dionysopolis,⁹ but this link is not unanimously accepted.¹⁰ Apart from the issue of identification, it remains a matter of fact that the site of Popești was in Muntenia the only site of its time that qualifies for the category of *dava*. This is due to the structure of the dwelling – fortified settlement with basilica

and workshops – and to its wide commercial relations with the Hellenistic world, Popești being the site with the largest quantity of Hellenistic imports known in the region.¹¹

The end of the *dava* can also be linked to a historical date – sometime between AD 2 and 4, when we know that, as a reaction against the frequent attacks on the Roman border by the local inhabitants of what is today Muntenia, the locals were forcefully relocated by the Romans. The dating of the remains from the last layer at Popești (including one coin from Augustus) is compatible with the aforementioned historical date, while its general aspect points to abandonment (unlike the earlier settlements which were destroyed by fire).¹²

On Sector B of the Plateau the site is only partly similar (there are remains from the Pre-Basarabi-, Basarabi-, and La Tène periods) and so far we do not know how exactly they relate to the layers identified in Sector A (the Acropolis). Preventive excavations, carried out in 2009 during the consolidation works of the church, brought a new element to the history of the region: a late medieval cemetery (more specifically, four graves older than the church – inaugurated in 1689 – were found).¹³

From the point of view of conservation. The site was permanently sacrificed in favour of research. The excavation, which often exceeds 3 m in depth, produces a large amount of earth, which is difficult to deposit so that it does not hinder the excavation process, and backfilling of the trenches entails considerable costs. This is why only the minimum necessary earth was put back into the trenches. Consequently, the site is currently cut by many trenches and looks unattractive even to archaeologists, let alone the public.

Nevertheless, the research impact on the general aspect of the site is reversible since the trenches can be filled in. Even more relevant for the conservation problem is that in 2000–2001 the plan to excavate the La Tène well¹⁴ to its bottom was abandoned because it would have involved technical solutions that would have destroyed a large part of the fortification ditch between Sectors A and B:

- the first option presupposed the construction of a caisson, which in turn presupposed producing cement on the site and the use of a crane;

- the second option was to dig away the southeastern corner of Sector A so as to gain lateral access to the well and excavate it in daylight.

We cannot assess what we have lost by not excavating the remaining 13 m (from a total of about 20 m).¹⁵ In planning the excavation, we had in mind the spectacular content of the

⁵ For a more comprehensive image see Palincaș 1996; Palincaș 2004–2005a; Palincaș 2007. For the bronze sceptre with parallels at Uluburun see Buchholz 1999.

⁶ Palincaș 2004–2005b.

⁷ Mănuțu-Adameșteanu, Palincaș 2007a; Mănuțu-Adameșteanu, Palincaș 2007b.

⁸ R. Vulpe 1955; R. Vulpe 1966, pp. 27–38; A. Vulpe 2004–2005.

⁹ Mihailov 1970, pp. 51–56, no. 13; R. Vulpe 1960; A. Vulpe 2003.

¹⁰ E. g. Suceveanu 1983. See a summary of the debate in A. Vulpe 2010, p. 670.

¹¹ R. Vulpe 1960, p. 562; A. Vulpe 2003.

¹² Palincaș 1996, p. 185; Preda, Palincaș 2004–2005, p. 81.

¹³ Palincaș et al. 2010.

¹⁴ Palincaș, Lippert 2003.

¹⁵ Palincaș, Lippert 2003, p. 60.

contemporaneous Celtic votive wells.¹⁶

The general look of the main part of the settlement – i.e. Sector A – is what mostly attracts attention in terms of neglect of the site, but in fact the real danger comes from the expansion of the contemporary cemetery. Our requests, addressed both verbally and in writing, to the local priest to be notified before new graves were dug have remained without response.

From the view of the public archaeology. The idea of constructing a local museum replaced the old dilemma *do we research or do we conserve?* with a new one: *do we preserve the site as it is or do we build a museum?* This happened because the finding of a suitable location for the museum proved to be quite difficult. The main eligibility criteria for the project were that the beneficiary would possess a suitable amount of land for the construction of the museum and the land would have a suitable access road. To these requirements of the Valletta Convention and Romanian laws (Law 43/2000, in particular) were added: the construction should not damage the archaeological site. A debate among architects, the local priest and archaeologists resulted, the main lines of which are presented here:

Locating the museum on the southern edge of the cemetery (fig. 5. 1) had the advantage of solving the problem of property (for the land belongs to the church) and access (a road already exists, though in need of some improvement), but entailed the destruction of a significant part of the ditch. This option was opposed by the archaeologists.

The second location, situated opposite the first one, in the area where the ditch was already damaged (fig. 5. 2), retained the advantage of the access road and was accepted by the archaeologists on the condition that the building would be limited to the already destroyed part of the ditch and its form would not contradict the structure of the site. The architectural firm ignored these conditions and placed the building in the ditch (fig. 6. 2). The National Commission for Monuments rejected this variant because it placed the museum on private property, but seemed completely uninterested in the disruption of the structure of the archaeological site.

The archaeologists secured the mayor's agreement, and suggested locating the museum in Sector C, next to the edge of the second ditch (fig. 6. 3), on a piece of land belonging to the municipality (fig. 5. 3). This offered an excellent view over the local topography and archaeological sites, the La Tène barrows (registered as GR-I-s-B-14817), and the Tei settlement located 1 km to the east of our site. This suggestion was not accepted by the National Commission for Monuments because: 1. the museum was perceived as separated from the church, the history of which it should present; 2. to secure access the existing road must be asphalted and lengthened by cutting through three private properties. The municipality could have

offered these owners land in exchange but for this transaction to take place, it was necessary to be sure that the museum was going to be constructed. On the other hand, as already mentioned, the existence of an access road was a precondition for the approval of the building of the museum. Further, the asphaltting of the road is not stipulated in any budget in the near future.

Anxious to find land for its project, the architectural firm suggested using the easily accessible land (belonging to the municipality) next to the schoolyard (fig. 5. 4). This location, however, is too far away from the site and the church to profit from the local association of archaeological sites and their topography.

The discussion is suspended, but only for the timebeing. Nevertheless, it deserves attention for several reasons:

- It raises the problem of the adequate location of a museum the *raison d'être* of which is an archaeological site and a historical monument.

- It raises the problem of adjusting the structure and dimensions of the museum to two contradictory requirements: on the one hand, to be large enough to accommodate the triple function of museum of archaeology, religious art and ethnography, and on the other not to be too large for a village museum.

County Giurgiu has to date a total of 541 registered archaeological sites and historical monuments, is close to Bucharest, and lies partly along the Danube. This means that it has good potential for tourism. Yet no itinerary was ever offered to tourists. The particular importance of the site at Popești, its proximity to Bucharest, to the archaeological park at Bragadiru (with replicas of La Tène buildings from Popești) and to other sites (Tufa, Novaci – GR-I-s-B-14817) and monuments (in the former village Tufa Costieni: GR-II-m-A-15036 and GR-II-m-B-15037) could turn the construction of a museum at Popești into a good starting point for a future itinerary for tourists.

One final observation – recently the Minister of Culture issued an order (<http://www.monitoruloficial.ro/RO/article--e-Monitor--339.html>, see article 1 of the annex) giving local museums jurisdiction over all archaeological sites; the institutions previously in charge can retain that role only if a museum acknowledges in a protocol that it is unable to fulfil its new role. This means that the role of the Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest is automatically taken over by the County Museum in Giurgiu. If the latter wishes to take up its new role, the following situation arises with respect to the building of the aforementioned museum – the investor is essentially the same as the institution that has the museum on its payroll, i.e. the county authority. Under these circumstances one cannot but wonder whether local archaeologists would be able to maintain an independent position, and defend the integrity of the archaeological site.

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¹⁶ See, e.g. the quite spectacular Celtic votive well at Holzhausen (Schwarz 1962, pp. 22–73, figs. 30–31). For – albeit less spectacular – votive wells from Romania see, e.g., Ciolăneștii din Deal (Petrescu-Dimbovița, Sanie 1963), and Brad (labelled Pit 18 – Ursachi 1995, pp. 80–83, fig. 24).

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