

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND ROMANIAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF MANELE¹

Nona Palincaș*

Keywords: heritage, public archaeology, museums, exhibitions, Romanian archaeology.

Abstract: Starting from opinions of the public collected by the author over approx. 25 years, these comments on Gh. Al. Niculescu's article in this volume maintain that by following the latter's ideas for the reformation of the specialists – public relationship in Romania the archaeological heritage would be even more endangered, rather than better conserved. The causes originate in the dominance among the public of a view of the past as backward and consequently as irrelevant for present human lives. This view is promoted primarily by the school system, the press and the Church, but it is also supported by archaeological exhibitions, the vast majority of which convey a simplistic, even caricatural image of humanity, often comparable with that of the lyrics and subject matters of the manele. Before reforming its relationship with the public, Romanian archaeology needs to reform itself.

Rezumat: Pornind de la păreri ale publicului adunate de autoare în cursul a cca. un sfert de secol, acest comentariu la articolul lui Gh. Al. Niculescu susține în acest volum că, dacă am urma ideile celui din urmă pentru reformarea relației dintre specialiștii în patrimoniu și public, patrimoniul ar fi periclitat și mai mult decât în prezent și nicidecum conservat mai bine. Cauzele își au originea în dominația în rândul publicului a viziunii despre trecut ca ceva depășit și prin urmare irelevant pentru umanitatea prezentă. Această viziune este răspândită în principal prin școală, presă și Biserică, dar și prin expoziții de arheologie, a căror mare majoritate promovează o imagine simplistă, chiar caricaturală a umanității, adesea comparabilă cu textele și temele manelelor. Înainte de a-și reforma relația cu publicul, arheologia românească trebuie să se reformeze pe sine însăși.

My comments on Gh. Al. Niculescu's article in this volume 'From owners and authorized interpreters to people who care about cultural heritage and their views' focus on two related aspects. One is his statement that heritage would be better protected if Romanian archaeologists would give up the state supported right to decide the fate of monuments (based mainly on legislation copied from other countries) and accept the right of the wider public to participate in heritage protection; that it is better for archaeologists to accept that the public would want to protect monuments for reasons other than theirs than to hope that the public would start thinking like archaeologists. Examples of such other reasons would be: 'pietas due to the traces of what has lived' and 'resistance to the arrogance of the local present'.

The second aspect is Niculescu's argument that archaeological interpretations would have only to gain if, instead of considering the public incompetent, Romanian archaeologists would encourage the former to think about heritage, as this might lead to a fresh view; to encourage people to think and even challenge 'scientific knowledge' is a democratic act; people should not refrain from expressing opinions for fear that these might be 'unscientific', all the more so after having experienced 'the disastrous consequences on scientific knowledge of a political regime that repressed autonomous thinking'. New ideas are expected primarily from 'amateurs' understood in the primary sense of the word – non-archaeologists who love archaeology –, as well as workers from excavations. Niculescu argues that we cannot know the outcome of such relationships as no such experience exists so far.

While I agree that the relationship between Romanian archaeologists and the wider public needs fundamental changes, I maintain that given the present state of Romanian archaeology and the image of archaeology among the Romanian public, the changes suggested by Gh. Al. Niculescu will most probably endanger the archaeological heritage more than it already is. My argument is based on a series of opinions – limited for reasons of editorial space – about archaeological artefacts (monuments included) and past human lives – both in archaeological and non-archaeological visions – which I have collected over the last twenty years of interaction with workers, professionals from domains connected to archaeology (archaeometry, biology, etc.) as well as a public not particularly interested in archaeology.

* The Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology, Bucharest, e-mail: palincas@gmail.com.

¹ Manele (sg. manea) is a Romanian lower classes' music style, which I use here for comparison because of the poor quality of the themes and lyrics (for an overview of the style see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manele>).

Opinions

Workers. The following examples are selected from my discussions about sites, archaeology and past humanity with some 200 workers during approximately 20 archaeological campaigns.

Workers and artefacts

Example 1: Alarmed by the rumour that someone built a cottage on the pre- and protohistoric settlement at Popeşti, I first asked around in the village. Everyone told me that this was impossible since all knew that that place was an archaeological site and as such it was off limits.

Example 2: Struggling to excavate the hardened clay of a Late Bronze Age rampart at Popeşti, and realizing that it was so hard because it was meant to resist attacks, the workers agreed that ‘People back then were certainly not stupid ...’.

Example 3: Artefacts which regularly appear during excavation are treated carefully only because I request it. Workers do not show any particular interest in them. The only exceptions are coins and objects of precious metals. In 1989, when we found *in situ* a silver coin hoard,² one elderly worker was so excited that he immediately threw his hat upon the coins. A few years later it was rumored in the village that some villagers and excavation staff took coins from that hoard. They did not: I was one metre away from the hoard when it was found, and we recovered and documented every single coin.

Example 4: In Popeşti (Giurgiu county), peasants who never worked on the excavation tried to sell me artefacts and information about where they found them. They were convinced that this was only fair since, in their opinion, I would get a salary raise or some other advantage based on their information. In Năeni (Buzău county), at dawn, a shepherd came to our excavation and pierced with his stick several superimposed hearths, probably believing that there was something hidden beneath: otherwise why would we excavate?

Example 5: A taxi driver to whom a Swiss postman visiting Bucharest said that people would come to visit our country if the restaurants and hotels were good, told me ‘Investing in archaeological monuments is a waste of money: they don’t put food on our table’.

Workers and archaeological interpretations

Example 6: After I explained to the workers how we date the fortification at Popeşti, one of them said ‘I doubt anyone can tell for how long these things have been here!’ The rest of the group nodded thoughtfully.

Example 7: While writing about the archaeological site at Popeşti, known to elements of the wider public as the residence of King Burebista’s father, a journalist from ‘Formula AS’, asked the locals – some of whom worked on the archaeological excavations – what they believe about the people who lived there. He was told they were ‘Jidovi’, a race of people of huge stature, who built the settlement by carrying the earth in their lap.³

Amateurs. This category would typically include people working in different domains and who have contact with archaeology because they like it. I also include here those who work part-time in archaeometry (e.g., radiocarbon dating, archaeometallurgy, conservation techniques, etc.) because in Romania the field as a whole is far from being institutionalized, so that its existence depends entirely on personal interest in archaeological heritage.

Amateurs and artefacts

Example 8: A number of intellectuals from small towns or villages, mostly teachers and priests, gathered chance finds and rescued artefacts from sites destroyed by construction works, donated them to museums or organized small local museums. They either published together with established archaeologists⁴ or published alone imitating professional archaeological interpretations.⁵

Example 9: Romeo Dumitrescu, MD, invested a large amount of money in excavations and experimental archaeology. According to Silvia Marinescu-Bîlcu, what attracted him to the Cucuteni Culture (and not to

² Preda, Palincaş 2004–2005.

³ Lupescu 2015.

⁴ e.g., Nistor, Vulpe 1969.

⁵ e.g., Isăcescu, Burlacu 1978; Petre-Govora 1995.

archaeology in general) was the beauty of several Cucuteni finds he came in contact with.⁶ R. Dumitrescu differs from the previous group through his use of medical knowledge to put forward interpretations of Cucuteni figurines.⁷ Later, these became a starting point for professional archaeological interpretations, but one should note that those who integrated his ideas in their work were not Romanian archaeologists.⁸

Example 10: This summer, two young actors, representing a larger group of fellow artists and friends, came to the Institute of Archaeology with an offer of raising money for an archaeological excavation which was meant to contribute to the better knowledge of the Geto-Dacians. They decided to do so after finding sherds on the surface of various archaeological sites during casual walks at the seaside. They wanted to make an act of justice as they believed there was a state orchestrated silence about the Geto-Dacians and archaeologists were forced to hide things from the wider public. While representing basically the same ideas as the Thracomaniacs⁹ (which I also consider amateurs, but I will not discuss here for reason of complexity of the phenomenon), these young people had no direct link to them. I told them that this was certainly not the case and that rather than investing more money in excavations we need better equipment which would enable us to work more efficiently in documenting excavation results, interpreting and presenting the results to the public. After several discussions they agreed with my idea.

Example 11: Established researchers in physics, chemistry, etc., who apart from their regular research work decided to get involved in interdisciplinary aspects of archaeology (composition analyses, radiocarbon dating, conservation techniques, etc., as is the case with several departments of the Horia Hulubei Institute for Nuclear Physics and Engineering)¹⁰ show a certain fascination with the artefacts themselves. As far as interpretations are concerned, their understanding is limited to aspects of natural sciences: where certain metals came from, technological details, dating, etc.

Amateurs and archaeological interpretations

Example 12: The aforementioned physicists, chemists, as well as other professionals interested in archaeology met with disinterest my attempts at explaining the relevance of archaeology for contemporary social concerns. For instance, given the ongoing debate over legal changes in gender relations in Romania and their social acceptance, I argued that gender studies of which gender archaeology is a part would be certainly relevant and archaeologists should participate in this debate. A chemist immediately reacted with a total refusal of the idea that there is anything other than the 'natural' division of genders. An architect, while passionately arguing for the importance of preservation and study of monuments in the last ARA Symposium, had a short reaction indicating that monuments are not there for us to discuss gender issues. Further, one physicist characterized gender archaeology as 'pure speculation' and I could not convince him that it was not, and that presently it is much more difficult to link artefacts to ethnicity than to gender. To my explanations on the role of the costume in the subjectification process in the Bronze Age, a researcher in chemistry with a recognized specialism in artefact conservation said 'Oh, that's a nice game you play!' And this was only partly a joke.

Professionals with no particular interest in archaeology. Here, along with various casually encountered persons, I include my friends who are not archaeologists as well as people I met on various occasions, usually on interdisciplinary conferences with no special concern for archaeology.

⁶ Silvia Marinescu-Bilcu, a senior researcher well-known for her contributions to the archaeology of the Cucuteni area – personal communication, November 2015.

⁷ Dumitrescu 2008.

⁸ Watson, Gaydarska 2014.

⁹ Thracomania is a current of opinion which considers the Thracians as exclusive forbears of the Romanians, and maintains the primacy of the Thracian civilisation over all other ethnic groups in Southeastern Europe – Romans primarily – by ignoring or distorting professional archaeological data and interpretations. Quite like Celtomania, it appeared in the 19th c. in connection with the formation of the national states.

¹⁰ Department of Applied Nuclear Physics (<http://www.nipne.ro/research/departments/dfna.php>); IRASM-Radiation Processing Centre (<http://www.nipne.ro/research/departments/irasm.php>), Department of tandem accelerators (<http://www.nipne.ro/facilities/facilities/tandem.php>; <http://www.radiocarbon.org/Info/Labs.pdf>).

Non-amateurs and artefacts

Example 13: During preventing excavations preceding restoration of the late medieval church in Popești (Co. Giugiu), while discussing the excavation plan with the architect in charge of the restoration, she told me ‘Tell us where you want to scratch, so we get over it as soon as possible’. The engineer in charge of the consolidation works, to whom I said that we cannot excavate more rapidly if we were to recover data from the graves, answered ‘I don’t care about those dead, I need to get my job done, so that I can get paid’. (Although these people should have belonged to the category of amateurs, as they were employed by an institution in charge of monuments protection, their indifference and sometimes outright hostility towards archaeology made me include them in the category of the wider, non-amateur public).

Example 14: An oncology professor who received several flint pieces from the land surveys of a friend who was an amateur archaeologist told me that both he and his family were wondering why those flints would be of interest to anyone. At the same time, he was very enthusiastic about his visit to Troy and considered that I was a poor professional since I hadn’t visited that site. This reminded me of most children’s and adolescents’ reaction when they hear that I am an archaeologist: ‘Have you seen the pyramids?’

Example 15: One friend who is a surgeon, after showing no interest in the artefacts I was working with, once said ‘There might be something interesting in these as well’ in a tone that clearly indicated she couldn’t possibly think what that was.

Example 16: Ovidiu Marincea, journalist (and in the meanwhile spokesman for the SRI/ Romanian Intelligence Service), in February 2015, in a broadcast ‘Oameni și fapte’ at the television post Realitatea TV, analyzing the various reasons why there are hardly any motorways in Romania, angrily said that archaeologists are keeping the workers up from doing their job because of ‘every little bone’.¹¹

Example 17: A friend with a career in artistic photography was very impressed when he could touch a few (decorated) sherds in my office. He said he was getting goose skin thinking that they were 3500 years old.

Example 18: A friend, IT engineer and practising Christian, was very impressed by the beauty and complexity of Bronze Age figurines and vessels from the Žuto Brdo–Gârla Mare Culture – which are indeed remarkable.

Example 19: Several medieval castles and towns are used as the locations for festivals where people can impersonate medieval or antique characters.¹²

Example 20: The Church obtained a large part of the archaeological site at Târgșoru Vechi (Co. Prahova, registered as PH-I-s-A-16216),¹³ despite the area having not been property of the Church at the time it was nationalized by the communist regime,¹⁴ seemingly in compensation for land it owned in the pre-communist period;¹⁵ in 2003 the newly organized monastery banned archaeological researches in the area until 2009, when, for reasons unknown, it had a change of heart.¹⁶ The Orthodox Church claimed and obtained for its own use the Culture Palace in Sighetu Marmației (registered in the List of Historical Monuments as

¹¹ I was unable to find on the website of the Realitatea TV the broadcast with this statement, as most of the earlier episodes of the television program ‘Oameni și fapte’ are not available online (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=oameni+si+fapte+cu+Zeiceasca+si+Marincea). Anyway, Ovidiu Marincea is not the only one to consider archaeological preventive excavations as part of the causes of delay in the construction of infrastructure. See, e.g., the former Romanian president Traian Băsescu, who in August 2009 considered that archaeological excavations delay the construction of motorways and suggested that legislation about preventive archaeological excavations should be changed in the case of the big infrastructure projects (<http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Economie/70241/Basescu-vrea-sa-modifice-legislatia-privind-siturile-arheologice-de-pe-traseele-autostrazilor.html>) or the former Minister of Transportations and Infrastructure Radu Berceanu, who in February 2009 said that ‘Since we announced the route of a new motorway, on 19 km we have 29 sites, as if the Romans had known 2000 years ago where were we going to build motorways. It is a means of milking money’ (<http://www.amosnews.ro/arhiva/berceanu-considera-siturile-arheologice-traseul-autostrazilor-au-devenit-metode-muls-bani-pentru-srl>; <http://ziarero.antena3.ro/articol.php?id=1246546064>).

¹² e.g., the ‘Sighisoara Medievală’ festival <http://www.infomusic.ro/agenda/festivalul-sighisoara-medievala-2015>; ‘Dac Fest’ in Deva: http://www.servuspress.ro/dac-fest-2014-aduce-atmosfera-din-urma-cu-2-000-de-ani-la-uroi_99287.html.

¹³ <http://ziarullumina.ro/dreptatea-lui-dumnezeu-a-invins-la-turnu-59715.html> (last accessed January 18, 2016).

¹⁴ http://www.simpara.ro/ara3/a3_02_06.htm (last accessed January 18, 2016).

¹⁵ Andrei Măgureanu, member of the team excavating at Târgșoru Vechi – personal communication January 2016.

¹⁶ <http://suntemromania.blogspot.ro/2014/07/607muzeul-castigat-razboiul-rece-cu.html> (last accessed January 18, 2016)

MM-II-m-A-04732), built in 1913 by private donors, during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for the use of municipality – i.e. a monument which did not belong to the Church before the communist regime.¹⁷ Yet, when the construction of a car park at the Piața Universității in Bucharest led to the destruction of the remains of Academia Domnească, the first university in Valachia, built as part of the St. Sava Monastery by Constantin Brâncoveanu, a former prince of Valachia declared saint by the Romanian Orthodox Church, the latter did not support the archaeologists who tried to preserve the monument.¹⁸ When restoring churches, most local priests are at first displeased to hear that they have to pay for archaeological research and bear the disturbance archaeological excavations entail; nevertheless, many of them become more interested in archaeology once they come into closer contact with the findings.

Non-amateurs and archaeological interpretations

Example 21: One surgeon saw on my desk drawings of sections and features from excavations and was not interested in them at all. He specifically said that what is interesting in archaeology is to explain the process of anthropogenesis.

Example 22: A friend and surgeon (same as Example 15) always followed with interest my explanations of various world views from the Romanian Bronze Age. Nevertheless, her interest was clearly related to her preoccupation with alternative medicines and the non-European world views from which they emerged. Once, after she complained about the work overload and the bad management of the health system in Romania, as I was talking about my work on costume and subjectification, she said ‘At least somebody around here is concerned with philosophy’.

Example 23: The only person I know to have shown interest in the various world views as a way of thinking about humanity is an art historian from the upper class from before World War II. She was accustomed to this kind of inquiry from a friend who was an anthropologist.

Example 24: A friend, IT engineer and a practising Christian (same as Example 18), showed no interest in the various alternative world views. Her comments were grounded in the idea that any human attempt at knowledge can only be partial and destined to fail, and that real knowledge is the result of divine revelation – the Christian revelation in particular.

Example 25: A celebrated Romanian intellectual known for his writings of philosophy of religions and art history, hearing that I was preparing for a conference on creativity in the Bronze Age, asked amused ‘About how they sharpened arrow-heads?’ (This seemed to me a rather odd comment if for no other reason than the oldest part of the Old Testament having been written in the Bronze Age).¹⁹

Example 26: Almost ten years ago, a sociologist I asked to comment on an article I wrote on gender relations in the Lower Danube Late Bronze Age replied that if archaeologists would write in this manner, she would certainly include archaeological literature in her reading list. A talk I presented in 2014 on embodied knowledge in archaeological perspective raised much interest on the part of surgeons, bio-physicists, philosophers, linguists, etc., to the point where I was invited to extend the topic in a seminar. Here the interest was clearly a professional one, as embodied aspects of knowledge were relevant for those various professions as well.

A singular position. *Example 27:* A local from the village Cozia (Vrancea county) addressed to the director of the Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest a letter which I summarize here: When the local was still a child, his grandfather told him a legend about the barrows at Dumbrava Bârsești, the spot ‘Lacul Dumbrăvii’ (presently the archaeological site registered as N-I-s-A-06351) and asked his grandson not to allow the legend to be forgotten. The grandfather said the barrows were not to be disturbed because of a curse of the dead. At that time the villagers were still praying at those graves to appease the souls of the buried. In 1955, when

¹⁷ http://www.sighet-online.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3539:o-istorie-a-palatului-culturii-din-sighetu-marmaiei&catid=37:cultura&Itemid=133; http://www.sighet-online.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5359&jossclean=1&comment_id=9825&Itemid=1 (last accessed January 18, 2016)

¹⁸ <http://www.simpara.ro/Distrug--259-torii-228.htm>; <http://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-imobiliar-8760305-parcarea-subterana-universitat-gata-primavara-anului-viitor-ong-urile-acuza-primaria-bucuresti-demolat-ilegal-ruinele.htm> (last accessed January 18, 2016).

¹⁹ Sperling 2005.

archaeologists came to excavate the barrows, the village's elders agreed with the archaeologists that a part of the barrows would be left untouched. This is why 25 barrows were excavated, but three were spared. Recently, a villager dug a big clay-hole in the area, while others used the place as a dumping ground for household refuse. The author of the letter blamed local authorities for this situation as they did not mark the archaeological site. In 2014 an archaeologist from the Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest, the same institution which had organised the 1950s excavations, dug one of these last barrows. The author of the letter asked the Institute to stop the excavations and leave the remaining barrows intact so that the local story would not die out and the village would preserve its only archaeological site. He argued that there already exist archaeological reports on the 25 barrows, so what new data would there be to recover from the few remaining barrows? He first addressed his request to the Ministry of Culture, where he was told that the excavation permit was issued to the Institute of Archaeology based on scientific arguments and that this latter institution should decide whether it wished to excavate further or not.

Discussion

Let me begin with the first set of Niculescu's arguments mentioned above. None of the comments I have reproduced here or any other experience of mine suggests that the contemporary Romanian public relates to archaeological monuments and other artefacts in any way similar to Niculescu's 'pietas due to the traces of what has lived' or 'the finite character of existence'. The situation described in the letter from Cozia is only in part an exception. This clearly says that peasants felt they were connected to past humanity as recently as the early communist period, but it also testifies to the disappearance of this relationship in the mind of the majority since then. Nowadays workers and other peasants living close to archaeological sites link the latter to a completely different, unrelated mankind (giant 'Jidovi'; in other places, mostly with reference to prehistoric cemeteries, the people from ancient times are considered plague victims). This is a concept encountered world-wide,²⁰ but relevant here is that the Romanian locals of today do not think that their fate is in any way related to or influenced by those 'others'. Further, my experience with southeastern Romania (which may or may not apply to the whole country) shows that villagers are not melancholic about the death of a really old person and are not prone to see the finitude of human life as disturbing; they rather focus on the problems and tragedies within normal lifespans. Furthermore, the taxi driver considered the conservation of the traces of the past to be a waste of money. I do not know whether his opinion is characteristic of urban workers with little contact with monuments like him. Concern with the finite character of human life is certainly present among the more educated, but again, none of the comments from above indicate that these people link it at all to the material traces of the past. The subject evokes in people's minds domains such as literature, philosophy, and – in the first place, in present day Romania – religion. While the attitude of the Christian Orthodox Church – to whom c. 85% of Romanians declare they belong²¹ – to monuments as relicts of past humanity is certainly complex, the experience of the last couple of decades showed that the higher clergy was interested in major monuments only inasmuch as they could use them for the purposes of the Church (Example 20). Thus these 'reasons other than ours' impose the tyranny of the local present upon the past, past Christian monuments included.

The reliance on the past against the tyranny of the local present seems to be an idea of archaeologists and not of the vast majority of the population – with the so far unique exception of the aforementioned local from Cozia (Example 27), who fights against the disappearance of the traditional peasant worldview in his area with groups as varied as contemporary villagers, local authorities and national authorities, as well as archaeologists. The wider public is nowadays more concerned with the adjustment to the requirements of the present, to the demands of what is perceived as development and European standards of living, albeit when this is nothing more than Neoliberal propaganda.²²

²⁰ Helms 1988.

²¹ http://www.avocatnet.ro/content/articles/id_33662/Recensamant-2011-rezultate-finale-Populatia-Romaniei-depaseste-cu-putin-20-milioane-de-locuitori.html (last accessed December 2015).

²² Dragoman and Oanță-Marghitu 2014.

In addition to economic interests, the material traces of the past are also endangered by the public understanding of evolutionist theory and a modernist view of human history. These have led to the widespread idea that past people were backward if not altogether primitive, and that the present surpassed that stage.²³ Consequently, whenever the public resorts to the past against the tyranny of the local present, they do not resort to the remote past – which they cannot conceive of in any other way but primitive – but rather to the period immediately preceding state socialism or even to the state socialism period.

Furthermore, most professions requiring higher education have a better social status than archaeology, so that those professionals are advantaged by what from the point of view of an archaeologist (or an anthropologist for that matter) might seem to be the tyranny of the local present and have no interest in dismantling it – with or without recourse to the material traces of the past.

Of course, the public could treasure the material traces of the past for other reasons than pietas and resistance to the tyranny of the present. Yet none of the comments from above suggests any comparable reasons. For the vast majority of people regular archaeological artefacts do not make any sense. It is not only the less educated who see the zillions of potsherds, fragments of bone, metal, glass and other trivial objects, because they are not practically usable, as mere refuse, quite like any broken object from their household. Examples 14–16 show that this idea is widespread among the higher-educated as well: for instance, none of the medical doctors seems to have considered that if it makes sense to analyze blood, excrement and other body substances to determine people's state of health in terms totally unknown to common knowledge, analyzing the material remains of the past to understand humanity might also make sense in a similar way. Consequently, I see no indication that this wide public would agree to pay money for the preservation of archaeological artefacts (not even the small amounts presently allotted in Romania), let alone would they consent to funding an archaeological excavation, to delay in the construction of a motorway or to changes in an investment plan for the sake of the recovery of archaeological artefacts, let alone for the preservation of a site.

A somewhat better fate might be enjoyed by 'beautiful' objects (Example 9 and 18), generally valued by the more educated. This originates obviously in the status of arts in society, and is not due to archaeology proper. Yet, to present only these to the wider public is to falsify human past. I remember how in the mid-1990s colleagues from German museums often complained that many temporary exhibitions with extraordinary pieces left the public with the impression that prehistory was full of gold and other valuables.²⁴ There are also instances when the public seems keener to preserve artefacts, monuments in particular, when these attract

²³ For instance, Mihaela Criticos, a faculty member of The Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning, writing a disclaimer for the use of the word 'primitive' explains that this refers to "the idea of logical, and not historical anteriority" and that "from this perspective, archaic societies can be named primitive not because they would be "retarded", but because they incarnate primary structural forms from a logic point of view" (Criticos 2015, p. 374, following a text by Taylor 1999, p. 550). Or, to state that archaic thinking is logically anterior to ours is to imply that it belongs to a stage that our thinking surpassed and that it cannot represent a source of inspiration for us or a viable alternative way of thinking. For a completely opposite stance, see Marilyn Strathern, well-known for her work in Papua-New Guinea, who argued that the purpose of anthropology consists in finding 'ways to create the conditions for new thoughts' (Strathern 1988, p. 20).

²⁴ Andrea Jacob, German archaeologist, graduate from the Heidelberg University – personal communication 1996. Among the aspects which I do not discuss here for reasons of space is the wide public perception of archaeology as meant to dig up artefacts for their own sake, as a search for valuables. This perception, created, among others, by the focusing of museum exhibition on artefacts and by many exhibition titles (see, e.g., 'Comorile României' / 'Treasures of Romania', an exhibition recently opened in Beijing (<https://cimec.wordpress.com/2016/01/27/deschiderea-oficiala-a-expozitiei-eveniment-comorile-romniei-treasures-of-romania-la-beijing-china/>), has dire consequences for archaeology especially since metal detectors became widely accessible: there are clearly many users of such detectors who thinks that they are contributing to archaeology by 'bringing to light' artefacts (http://detectoare-metale.ro/index.php?main_page=page&id=59; <http://www.obiectivdesuceava.ro/local/asociatia-cautatorilor-de-tezaure-din-romania-sustine-ca-a-descoperit-o-cetate-dacica-in-judetul-suceava/>; in the latter case, note that despite mentioning the 'archaeologist Gheorghe Poenaru' as president of the association of treasure hunters, his name does not appear in the 'Register of archaeologists': <http://arh.cimec.ro/RegistruArheologi.aspx>). This is a typical case of amateurs of archaeology who can cause serious damage to monuments.

tourists, either for economic reasons or for entertainment (Examples 19).²⁵ It would require a thorough analysis to tell whether this is a way of using the past against the tyranny of the local present – for which Niculescu pleads – or, on the contrary, it is a way of extending the tyranny of the present to the remains of past societies.

Finally, some objects are valued for their old age (Example 17), a value learned from the school system and implied by the existence of the trade in antiquities. And they might also be valued for their authenticity, just like folk art, a value generated by the industrial and postindustrial mechanical production.²⁶

From my argument here it follows that a part of the public, but not the vast majority, would agree to the preservation of *some* artefacts and that their reasons are mostly different than those of archaeologists: esthetic, value for tourism, authenticity, old age, etc. Niculescu tells us that it is better to accept this than to hope that the public would do so for our reasons. What Niculescu does not tell us is what would happen to the sites and artefacts if – as the survey of opinions presented above suggests – the majority of the public would not be willing to protect them, precisely because their reasons are other than ours: interest in development projects, need to trim budgets, deep belief in the lack of relevance of the past humanity for the present, etc. Or, if we archaeologists are willing to accept only the opinions that are to our advantage, how democratic is that and how can this be done without legal support privileging the opinion of archaeologists over non-archaeologists?

The second statement of Niculescu concerns the beneficial effects upon archaeology that could be expected from the encouragement of the wider public to think about artefacts. He argues that because artefacts were not produced to be studied but to be used, workers would be better than archaeologists in understanding those artefacts. I could agree with this as a principle, although I think that it would be more efficient to resort to ethnographers who studied traditional villages, especially in other places than Romania, because after decades of socialist industrialization and more recent contact with contemporary technology the chances that Romanian peasants would know how to use traditional technology is very small.

Many amateurs interpret artefacts in terms of the natural sciences – physics, chemistry and medicine (Examples 9 and 11) – or of works of art (Example 9), two ways of looking at things which are spread through society by the school system and the media. These are domains which, at least as a principle, are already implicated in the archaeological research, albeit not on a regular basis, and so far they have not engendered any new direction in archaeological thinking.

The wider – non-amateur – public, which I invited to express their opinions on archaeological artefacts and knowledge, when not seeing in artefacts works of art (Example 18), see them as giving information about anthropogenesis (Example 21), the evolution of society from simple to complex (Example 24) and the history of ethnic groups (Example 10) – again a way of thinking learned from the school system and the media. Human evolution is still exciting for them because it is not yet fully understood. The question of how ‘progress’ unfolded in the past is not raised, but my guess is that it is considered an outcome of the battle for survival. History of ethnic groups is not exciting any more unless it is coupled with the alleged stated imposed secrecy about the Geto-Dacian civilization.

In fact, both amateurs’ and non-amateurs’ opinions originate in the school system and the press. This comes as no surprise, since all knowledge originates somewhere and the school and the media are the most important means in generating opinions. These media share in the guilt of conveying to the public the modernist view according to which past humanity was simpler than us, belonging to stages that we surpassed and which are, consequently, irrelevant to contemporary human lives. And the same message is spread by archaeologists through museum exhibitions – the major means by which archaeologists communicate with the wider public – as well as most specialist archaeological publications, even if in a more indirect way. Exhibitions in particular basically show past human lives as reduced to birth, family life (always monogamous and heterosexual), preoccupation with securing the wherewithal for life by means of primitive technology, and

²⁵ Not even during the ARA Symposium from 2015 did I ever hear the argument that monuments are there for us to understand human social life in general, the present included, while the arguments that they can contribute to the local and national income was brought up repeatedly.

²⁶ e.g., Spooner 1986.

ending with one's burial. This is what I refer to here as the manele type archaeology, because, as in the case of manele, these exhibitions and specialist texts have 'overly simplistic or childish lyrics and subject matter',²⁷ they say about human lives not much more than, for example, the famous manele singer Adrian Minune when he sings 'I love you, you love me, this is the life'.²⁸ To compensate for this embarrassingly simplistic image of past human lives, museographers sometimes resort to big words in titles and texts accompanying artefacts: for a recent example see the exhibition title 'The radiography of a disappeared world. Looking back towards the past: Sultana-Malu Roșu, a prehistoric settlement from 6000 years ago' (May 12 – December 31, 2015).²⁹ As one can easily see, what our contemporaries do is expressed in big words (they radiography, they look back towards a disappeared world), while the remains of prehistoric people are referred to in a simple and direct manner. A visit to the exhibition only reinforces the impression created by the title. A similar attitude towards prehistoric people is present in the written press and many archaeological publications: Neolithic copper artefacts seen as the equivalent of present day Rolex watches, the Danube as highway', etc.³⁰ Yet these big words and parallels to contemporary values do nothing more than to confirm in the public's mind the idea that there is only one way of living human life and that in the past people did so in a simpler, 'primitive' way. Thus, the wider public is never informed about alternative views of the most basic concepts that could invite us to question our own concepts and taken-for-granted: see the debates around how to define humanity,³¹ the variety of concepts of person,³² some of which are so different from ours that we might experience difficulties in fully understanding them,³³ the non-geometric concept of space,³⁴ to give just very few examples.

A different yet equally damaging ideology for archaeology is that disseminated among the wider public by religious institutions. By assessing all human actions according to its worldview and set of values, religious ideology does not invite the public to explore alternatives, to understand the variety of ways of living human lives; by promoting a vision about how humanity should be as the only *true, normal* vision, religious ideology annuls the value of alternative social organization and values and, consequently, deems useless the value of the past as a source of inspiration for alternatives for contemporary humanity.

I do not see how these stances could inspire archaeological research or contribute to artefact preservation, for that matter, as Niculescu expects would be the case. What is wrong with these approaches to the past is that they ignore a set of principles on which contemporary social sciences – albeit only rarely in Romania – are based: that whatever it is we might think we know about humanity, the latter remains mostly unknown and, consequently, it has to be researched; that ongoing social change and globalization make knowledge about the variety of ways of living a human life indispensable for everyone; that humanity and material culture cannot be disentangled, hence the importance of artefacts for researching humanity; that historicism (i.e., the concept according to which all traits of past societies are replaced at the same pace by new ones and, consequently, the conceiving of past as gone)³⁵ are long overthrown. Archaeology, the only social science whose subject is the whole of human evolution, should have had the major role in promoting these ideas. Instead it failed utterly. To expect inspiration from a public educated in a modernist view of humanity is unrealistic.

By these comments on Gh. Al. Niculescu's article, I do not mean that archaeologists should not be interested in what the public thinks about heritage or that there is no chance that an important idea should pop up based on remarks made by non-archaeologists. I mean only that given the present state of archaeology

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manele#Characteristics> (last accessed January 2016).

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSFvh3PKzB8> (last accessed January 2016).

²⁹ 'Radiografia unei lumi dispărute. Privind înapoi spre trecut: Sultana-Malu Roșu, o așezare preistorică de acum 6 000 de ani' – 12 mai – 15 decembrie 2015 <http://www.mnir.ro/index.php/portfolio/expozitia-temporara-radiografia-unei-lumi-disparute-privind-inapoi-spre-trecut-sultana-malu-roshu-o-asezare-preistorica-de-acum-6-000-de-ani/> (last accessed January 2015).

³⁰ Dragoman 2010, p. 215. See there further examples as well.

³¹ Geertz 1973; Thomas 2004, pp. 223–248.

³² See summary with literature in Thomas 2004, pp. 123–126.

³³ Thomas 2004, pp. 124–125.

³⁴ Strathern 1998.

³⁵ Olsen 2010, pp. 110–112 and *passim*.

in Romania the risks are much higher than the possible benefits: we risk having a majority of the public opposing monument and other artefact preservation in the name of local development, the state and private firms who will only be too happy to cut the budget for archaeology, and a majority of archaeologists incapable of explaining what monuments are good for. Niculescu's parallel with art is incorrect for several reasons: the production of art is not paid for by the public (state or private firms); works of art are only exceptionally in the way of big development projects, while archaeological sites often are; works of art that can be easily destroyed are usually not accessible to the wider public, while archaeological sites and their artefacts are; art has a prestige which archaeology does not have, and which was built over a very long time through various social mechanisms among which social distinction takes pride of place; etc. In short, archaeology costs the public much more than art, its objects are more exposed to destruction and more difficult to understand. Archaeology does not exist in present day Romania because the state needs it – as Niculescu states –, but due to inertia (as it has been there before, it is difficult to do away with it now) and, primarily, because of international laws which protect heritage. Clearly, we cannot rely forever on international laws to hide the debility of Romanian archaeology from the public and avoid public debates, and an archaeology which is practised only for the sake of archaeologists is nonsense. But if we wish the Romanian public to be involved in archaeology by protecting monuments and becoming a source of knowledge, then we need to live up to our duty of informing the public about the infinite potential monuments have in informing us about humanity. Then, indeed, as Niculescu argues, monuments would be better protected by what we do not know about them. In short, what I mean is that we have first to find a way of updating Romanian archaeology to the present state of research in archaeology and other social sciences worldwide and then we can start a wider dialogue with the Romanian public. Presently, in my opinion, the vast majority of archaeologists are not convincing interlocutors for the wider public, and there is a high risk that Niculescu's democratic approach will endanger monuments rather than protect them.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Prof. Clive Bonsall for annotating the text, to Dr Andrei Măgureanu, Dr Anca-Diana Popescu and Dr Monica Mărgineanu Cârstoiu for help with references.

Bibliographical abbreviations:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Criticos 2015 | M. Criticos, <i>Architectural form between mimesis and genesis</i> , in: C. Vasilescu, M. L. Flonta, I. Crăciun (eds), <i>On Form and Pattern. Humboldt Symposium (Bucharest, 29–31 May 2014)</i> , București, 2015, pp. 373–393. |
| Dragoman 2010 | Al. Dragoman, <i>Archaeology, media and dominant ideology in today's Romania</i> . Caiete ARA 1, 2010, pp. 213–222. |
| Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2014 | R-Al. Dragoman, S. Oanță-Marghitu, <i>Manifest pentru o arheologie critică a capitalismului din România</i> , Marmăția 11, 2014, pp. 93–101. |
| Dumitrescu 2008 | R. Dumitrescu 2008, <i>Neolithic codes – a different approach of Cucuteni woman (Para-archaeological and para-medical meditative essay)</i> , in: F. Coimbra, G. Dimitriadis (eds), <i>Cognitive archaeology as symbolic archaeology</i> , BAR International Series 1739, Oxford, 2008, pp. 47–50. |
| Geertz 1973 | C. Geertz, <i>The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man</i> , in: C. Geertz, <i>The interpretation of cultures. Selected essays by Clifford Geertz</i> , New York, 1973, pp. 33–54. |
| Helms 1988 | M.W. Helms, <i>Ulysses's Sail: An ethnographic odyssey of power, knowledge and geographical distance</i> , Princeton, 1988. |
| Isărescu, Burlacu 1978 | C. Isărescu, D. Burlacu, <i>Noi descoperiri arheologice în zona Giurgiu</i> , in: V. Vrabie (ed.), <i>Ilfov – File de istorie</i> , București, 1978, pp. 43–55. |
| Lupescu 2015 | B. Lupescu, <i>Cetatea uriașilor</i> . Formula AS no. 1154(7), 19–26 February 2015, p. 16–17 (http://www.formula-as.ro/2015/1154/societate-37/cetatea-uriasilor-18829 , last accessed January 2016). |

Excerpt from Caiete ARA 7, 2016.

- Nistor, Vulpe 1969 F. Nistor, A. Vulpe, *Bronzuri inedite din Maramureș în colecția prof. Francisc Nistor din Sighetul Marmăției*, SCIVA 20, 1969, 2, pp. 181-194.
- Olsen 2010 B. Olsen, *In defence of things. Archaeology and the ontology of objects*, London, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, 2010.
- Petre-Govora 1995 Gh. Petre-Govora, *O preistorie a Nord-Estului Olteniei*, Rm. Vâlcea, 1995.
- Preda, Palincaș 2004-2005 C. Preda, N. Palincaș, *A tetradrachm hoard from Settlement 'A' at Popești (District Giurgiu)*, Dacia NS 48-49, 2004-2005, pp. 77-98.
- Sperling 2005 S. D. Sperling, *Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion*, in: D. C. Snell (ed.), *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, Malden, MA, Oxford, UK, Victoria, Australia, 2005, pp. 430-442.
- Spooner 1986 B. Spooner, *Weavers and dealers: the authenticity of an oriental carpet*, in: A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge, UK, New York, NY, Melbourne, Madrid, 1986, pp. 195-235.
- Strathern 1988 M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkley, Los Angeles, London 1988.
- Strathern 1998 M. Strathern, *Social relations and the idea of externality*, in: C. Renfrew and C. Scarre (eds), *Cognition and material culture: The archaeology of symbolic storage*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 134-147.
- Taylor 1999 A. C. Taylor, s.v. *Primitive*, in: P. Bonte, M. Izard (eds), *Dicționar de etnologie și antropologie*, Iași, 1999.
- Thomas 2004 J. Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity*, London & New York, 2004.
- Watson, Gaydarska 2014 E. Watson and B. Gaydarska, *Little Cucuteni pots of hope. A challenge to the divine nature of figurines*, Studii de preistorie 11, 2014, pp. 115-124.

Excerpt from Caiete ARA 7, 2016.