

CELEBRATING 170 YEARS OF ARCHAEOLOGY
IN ROMANIA

ALEXANDRU VULPE

At a festive session held in the Hall of the Romanian Academy, we celebrated 170 years of archaeology in Romania (1834-2004). It is also 140 years since on November 25, 1864 Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza signed the decree founding the Bucharest National Museum of Antiquities, which in 1956 became the Romanian Academy's Institute of Archaeology, and 50 years since the initiation of systematic excavations in the important pre- and protohistoric site of Popești, beside the river Argeș (Giurgiu county). All the papers presented here are published in this journal.

This is a joyful moment when we can look back with appreciation on many years of fruitful activity, also reflected in the excellent display in the exhibition hall of the Library of the Romanian Academy. But this moment should also be an opportunity for a critical evaluation of what Romanian archaeology *has been*, but even more of what it *is* and what it *will become*.

Arising, like everywhere else in Europe, out of the wish to reconstruct the history of those periods that are not enlightened by written sources, Romanian archaeology was affiliated to history from the beginning and, to a large extent, it continues to be so. In the Romanian Academy, archaeology belongs to the Department of History and Archaeology, a fact that had a great (and, it should be stressed, not necessarily negative) influence on the prevalent manner of interpretation of the excavated material, as it still does. This is oriented towards historicist interpretations (for example, the main cultural changes are currently explained through population movements), and less towards social organization, daily life, and ideology. Born on the same date (1834) and out of the same institution as the Museum of Natural Science, Romanian archaeology took a different pathway, although interdependence with the natural science is nowadays compulsory for a better understanding of material culture.

The evolution of archaeology in Romania proceeded simultaneously with the rest of European archaeology, an important part of which was the German school. Our most brilliant forerunners, Grigore Tocilescu, Vasile Pârvan, Ion Andrieșescu, studied in Germany or Austria, and were first of all historians and only secondarily archaeologists. This was the case with Vasile Pârvan's pupils as well. Among them we must mention Ion Nestor, a pupil of Gero von Merhart of the Marburg/Lahn school. Nestor is without question one of those who contributed crucially to the foundation of Romanian pre- and protohistoric archaeology. He brought to Romania the research methods of German archaeology, remarkable for their accuracy; they were then adopted by his pupils, the author of these lines included. At the same time we must acknowledge Nestor's merit in striving to analyse the ethnological implications of archaeology – not very evident in the studies he published, but prevalent in the courses he delivered.

The dominance of the historicist approach in Romanian archaeology has been and continues to be reflected in a site strategy relying on the excavation of narrow trenches. This allows researchers to identify archaeological "cultures", as defined by pottery forms and decoration, and by their chronology. These pot styles are reckoned to have ethnic significance in the dynamics of prehistoric populations.

Large-scale excavation of sites, which might allow a better understanding of the relations between material culture and human society, has seldom been carried out in Romania. However, we must mention here the Eneolithic sites excavated by Vladimir Dumitrescu, who was the first to carry out work of this type in our country. Of course the research method also depends on the funds available. In this respect we have always had problems, above all as far as the distribution of funds is concerned. Hitherto, the officials who decide on financial support for research have not realised – maybe our archaeologists have not explained it clearly enough – that archaeological research follows certain steps, beginning with the identification of the site and the digging of the first trenches, up to the final stage, the complete publication of the results. In this “technological chain”, excavation only represents the first phase. If we examine this process, we will see that the largest amount of money and resources is allocated to this initial phase, that is to excavation. Indeed, after World War II, during the “Golden Age” of Romanian archaeology, huge funds were used for excavations due, of course, to political motivations imposed by the Marxist ideology. This resulted in a massive accumulation of material stemming, in most cases, from well-organized excavations.

Unfortunately, except for some preliminary reports and a couple of remarkable monographs – Hăbășești and Cârna (Vi. Dumitrescu), Izvoare and Poienеști (Radu Vulpe) – this immense volume of archaeological material was not processed, and quite often, because of unsuitable storage and preservation conditions, it deteriorated or was simply lost. Even written information (plans, notebooks, etc.) was affected by the death – sometimes premature – of their authors, by deficiencies in inventorying the documentation, and also by the lack of laws to stipulate precisely the requirements placed on the excavators, and on the institutions which store the archaeological material.

This is why I think that this celebration should be not only a joyful festivity but also an opportunity for a profound meditation on what is to be done in Romanian archaeology. What a pity that the situation remains unchanged, because of an unbending, conservative mentality! We never stop boasting about the numerous excavations done by museums and archaeological institutes of the three great university centres, Bucharest, Cluj and Iași. But, if we consider the information supplied by these excavations, we cannot avoid the conclusion that they are of minor significance, and definitely do not meet the requirements of an anthropological – that is a cultural-historical – approach to, and evaluation of, the material.

What should be done to remedy this situation, even if only partially?

First of all, it is necessary for us all to realise that cultural-historical phenomena and archaeological realities go hand-in-hand, not only as a theoretical approach, but also in the interpretation of the material. That is why conditions must be created for our young archaeologists to participate more actively in international meetings on defined topics, so that they can get a better understanding of new theoretical trends in our subject. This is closely connected with the necessity to supply our specialized libraries with theoretical works in sociology, cultural anthropology, etc.

One might say that this goes without saying. And so it does, but the problem here is that we need to direct funds towards *these* targets, even if it means carrying out less excavation.

This brings us to the problem of funding archaeological excavations. Except for rescue excavations, any other archaeological research must be conceived along new lines. Interdisciplinary work with the natural science must become an intentional part of our strategy. The funds available for archaeological research should be used primarily for the systematic processing of the existing material (while this is still possible) and only secondarily to complete the data necessary to interpret these materials through new excavations. That is why those responsible for the distribution of funds should be capable of understanding the need to bring about these fundamental changes. The Romanian Academy's Institute of Archaeology, which in 2006 will celebrate its 50th anniversary, must become in reality and not just formally the authority charged with coordinating the entire archaeological activity in our country, and also a study and training centre for the new generation of archaeologists. Some major excavations – such as Histria (the first great site, studied almost continuously from the time of Vasile Pârvan up to the present day), Popești, Sarmizegetusa Regia, and some other sites – should have priority in getting new research facilities, since they could become real training excavations for the new generation.

By dwelling on Romanian archaeology's position today – with both its accomplishments and its omissions – these lines, dedicated to the important events we celebrated in 2004, are intended to stimulate real change in the evolution of the Romanian archaeological school.