

Alexandra Ion, *Regi, Sfinți și anonimi. Cercetători și oseminte umane în arheologia din România* (Kings, Saints and Anonyms. Researchers and Human Remains in the Romanian Archaeology), Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun, 213 p.

Alexandra Ion, a Romanian anthropologist, is doubtless contentious in her first book. Coming against a traditional approach in Romanian – and largely East European – archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology with roots in German tradition, she is not shy in pushing further the interpretative limits of her topic: the anthropology of the dead body. Settling herself in Bruno Latour and his followers' theoretical approach she questions the methods, understandings, and epistemologies in researching human remains. Unlike many Romanian scientists, for Ion the scientific process is – following the theoretical perspective initially called *sociology of knowledge* – a social construct. For an archaeologist or an anthropologist who embraces a “scientific realism” point of view the remains of the past are out there, objective artefacts to be discovered and then interpreted by the scientist. For the social constructivists, and Alexandra Ion is obviously one of them, these remains, artefacts or social facts are only an occasion to look at the ways in which knowledge is produced and displayed in publications or in museums. This perspective also keeps a close eye on the ethics of collecting and displaying the dead bodies in museums and the objectification of bodies through analysis and display. All these matters are discussed theoretically in the Introduction of the book. At the same time the author warns us from the very beginning: instead of offering definitive responses to each particular case she is offering a set of questions for further rumination.

The book comprises four chapters plus the Conclusion and it is structured to take the path from general to particular. As the author mentions, “each chapter presents a different type of context in which the researchers meet human remains” (19). First chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the meeting between archaeologists and osteo-archaeologists and human bones from burials. The chapter is mainly focused on the Romanian archaeologists, their funerary discoveries, and the evolution of the osteo-



archaeological research in Romania in a wider global context. The author follows the steady transformation of what was some time ago a human being into an archaeological artefact. A valuable observation is, in my reading, the distinction between the body, understood as nature, and the archaeological inventory perceived as culture (69). The distinction between nature and culture, which I guess it is still scarcely questioned in the Romanian archaeological literature, has already been debated in the socio-cultural Romanian and international anthropological literature.⁴ To this observation, one should also add that assigning a biological sex based on the biophysical measurements may be scientifically rigorous. It is misleading though to equate sex and gender. At any rate, as the author shows, the feminist approach (which, one should say bluntly, is in short supply in the Romanian archaeology) has produced a rich literature on the biological sex as a cultural construct. Starting with the interwar period, socio-cultural anthropologists have produced quite a lot of literature showing cases in which women played the role of men and vice versa in many societies – including non-industrialized ones.⁵

The second chapter discusses the national fate of different remains of medieval kings from Wallachia and Moldova and the genetic analysis of their remains within a large academic project. This project aimed to eke out the archaeological analysis through the new historical genetics methods in order to prove, once for all, the ethnic identity and the genealogic relationships of medieval kings from the actual territory of Romania. Ion uses the concept of *agency* and Pierre Nora's theory of *lieux de mémoire* in order to explore the way in which contemporary archaeologists and osteologists contribute to building national history and to current ideological, political and social debates. Besides that, the author questions the way scientific evidences are legitimated by the aforementioned categories of scientists. Alexandra Ion is rightfully criticizing the approach of the project, which tried by means of historical genetics analysis to attribute an ethnic identity to the first medieval kings on the territory of Romania. As she shows, genetics cannot contribute to precise ethnical identities, as only a cultural analysis can do that. Yet, this is tricky too. The archaeologists have only material remains (clothes, pottery, jewels etc) to analyse. Now, imagine the house of a current rich Romanian person, which will be discovered in 5000 years from now by future archaeologists: the clothes are all made in Italy and the UK – the labels prove that –, the cutlery is from the UK, the electronic appliances are all from Germany and the rugs are clearly of Oriental origin. Then future archaeologists will have troubles in establishing the ethnic appurtenance of the people from that household. Even more

⁴ See for instance Latour 1993; Sørensen 2013; Dorondel 2016; Dorondel *et alii* 2019.

⁵ See for instance King 2019.

confusing, a poor people's clothes, shoes, cutlery and electronics of doubtless Chinese origin may lead the future archaeologists to think that the inhabitant of that household is a Chinese ethnic. These two farcical examples which the reader may find preposterous are intended to pinpoint the difficulties in attributing an ethnic identity to a certain group of people in different periods based either on genetics or on material belongings only. This chapter is important not only because it decorticates the scientific discourse and the way mass-media propagate it into the larger society, but for the fact that it shows this is not a strictly Romanian phenomenon. The examples of Henri IV King of France and Richard III King of England's contemporary public and scientific adventure are indicative for similar phenomena in Western Europe. Here, the DNA analysis prevailed in establishing the individual identity of the two kings and the fuss and emotions these researches created in the French and English societies prove, as the author emphasizes, that some dead persons are more important than others for the current society. As the author puts it, some bodies have more agency than others over different categories of social actors, including institutions (106).

The following chapter focuses on the analysis of the Francisc Rainer osteological collection in European context. Collecting (dead) bodies was, from seventeenth century onward (and especially in the nineteenth century), an institutional duty which conferred scientific value to those institutions. In collecting skulls, the ethnic identity comes again into play, although in a different way than the one discussed in the previous chapter. The state was equally interested in such collections, which would determine through "scientific evidences" the ethnic composition of the national body. One should not forget that we are at that historical moment in plain eugenics policies throughout the Western world. The chapter shows that Romanian scientists – anthropologists, physicians, biologists – concurred at that moment with their Western peers in their interest in creating collections. The chapter also explores the question of how a human body transforms into a museum exhibit. Virtually none of the once living humans have ever been asked if they would like to end up as an exhibit into a bones collection. An important addendum to this chapter is the ethical question: what will become of these collections of skeletons and skulls? In other parts of the world ethnic groups requested the bodies of their ancestors in order to be properly buried and subjected to culturally accepted funerary rituals. In Romania, the ethics of displaying human remains is still poorly discussed and problematized.

The final chapter analyses the author's own osteological work on the exhumed body of the bishop Vasile Aftenie and the network of interpretations, methods of inquiring, scientific meanings and public and private agendas the author found herself immersed in. Ion strives to unravel each of the agendas, attributed meanings

and methods in order to pinpoint the “limits of our (archaeologists and osteologists, my note) methods and questions” (144) and the need for new meanings attributed to the dead body.

The conclusion of the book is short but clear: the book strives to explore new alternative models of interpreting human bones and to disentangle various factors that contribute to the scientific interpretation. Away from the stream of theorists who consider the archaeological and osteological methodologies – or any other sciences, for that matter – crystal-clear the author shows the multitude of agendas, ideologies and cultural factors that contribute to the final interpretation of scientific facts.

The book has many strong points and a weak one. Ion illustrates the link between socio-cultural anthropology and archaeology, which is quite obvious in the Anglo-Saxon institutional arrangements but less clear in the continental European one (Romanian *y compris*).⁶ In Romania, and more generally in Eastern Europe, the archaeologists rarely, if at all, collaborate with socio-cultural anthropologists in their attempt to interpret the material findings (I include here the findings, which reflect what is usually put in the pigeonhole called “spiritual”). The book for sure brings a contribution to a still missing approach in the Romanian literature called the anthropology of science. This approach, which should be included in the university curricula, reflects the myriads of elements which contribute to building scientific knowledge and how much and how deep scientific knowledge depends on society and politics.

The book would have gained a lot from not only looking at what archaeologists and osteologists *do* but what they also *say* about their methods, discoveries and their scientific position. In other words, the book would have gained from using the ethnographic approach and from interviewing the actors involved. In a sense, Ion is doing – without mentioning – what is now termed as “para-ethnography”⁷. Para-ethnography is the collaboration of the anthropologist-cum-ethnographer with the experts-cum-informants, regardless the field of expertise – be it science or administration. Even without making an explicit ethnography, as Ion proceeds in this book, this approach would have clarified her position within the epistemological field. When Ion is crediting the experts-cum-informants in “producing academically relevant work”⁸ she is doing, again implicitly, para-ethnography.

The book seems to make a clear distinction, without explicitly stating that, between dead and alive bodies. However, this distinction is rather a mid-twentieth century achievement. Until the beginning of the twentieth century the dead bodies

⁶ See for instance Hodder 2012; for a more general view see Thomas 2012.

⁷ Holmes, Marcus 2005.

⁸ Islam 2015, 232.

and the “exotic bodies” were treated virtually in the same way. “Primitives”, pygmies, bodily deformed persons or other “exotic” representatives of the human being were exposed in the museums and at the Zoo along other animals in the USA.⁹ After their death their brain or the skeleton were put on display in the museums. The distinction between dead and the alive bodies of certain races or those carrying various diseases is, alas, just quite recent one.

Leaving aside something, which I know it cannot be imposed on the author but to the editorial milieu in Romania that is too many typos, which sometimes irritate the reader, this book is by all means extremely useful for archaeologists, anthropologists of all sorts and museum scientists. It is a certain and timely contribution to Romanian socio-cultural anthropology, theoretical archaeology and osteology. Moreover, this book should be the ground on which future authors can build a Romanian contribution to the anthropology of science.

As an anthropologist whose career started in archaeological studies – a refugee from this field - I have learned a great deal from this book.

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⁹ King 2019.

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