

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EXCAVATED EARTH: THE DANUBE-BLACK SEA CANAL, ROMANIA*

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Abstract. Based on the archaeological surveys carried out in 2002, 2004 and 2005 in the former communist-era forced labour colony at Galeșu/Nazarcea (Dobruja, eastern Romania), this text brings into discussion the materiality of the earth excavated during the works at the Danube-Black Sea Canal, a component of the waterway that links the North Sea to the Black Sea, probably the most ambitious project in the history of modern Romania. It is argued that, although ignored so far, the analysis of the excavated earth is essential for an archaeological understanding of the landscape and may lead to some important reconsiderations: (1) the excavated earth represents the main material element of the Canal and (2) it pleads for the rethinking of the concept of monument, related to its meanings in the current legislation regarding the protection of the archaeological heritage in Romania.

Rezumat. Pe baza cercetărilor arheologice efectuate în 2002, 2004 și 2005 în fosta colonie de muncă forțată din perioada comunistă de la Galeșu/Nazarcea (Dobrogea, estul României), textul de față aduce în discuție materialitatea pământului excavat în timpul lucrărilor la Canalul Dunăre-Marea Neagră (Dobrogea, estul României), componentă a căii navigabile ce leagă Marea Nordului de Marea Neagră, probabil cel mai ambițios proiect din istoria României moderne. Se afirmă că, deși nevăgat în seamă până acum, analiza pământului excavat este esențială pentru o înțelegere arheologică a peisajului și poate conduce la câteva reconsiderări importante: (1) pământul excavat se constituie în elementul material central al Canalului și (2) îndeamnă la o regândire a conceptului de monument, față de înțelesurile din actuala legislație privind protecția patrimoniului arheologic din România.

Introduction: the excavated earth as object

According to a modernist research philosophy, the excavated earth is not an archaeological object, but is perceived as a 'natural' element. This perspective also dominates current archaeological practice in Romania. For example, even when the objects of research are the burial mounds, the Romanian archaeologists seem to be exclusively interested in aspects such as the relative and absolute chronology of the graves, the manner of laying of the bodies, the grave goods and the stone rings, but not in an understanding of the earth.¹ Similarly, in the years 2000, in the Alburnus Maior National Research Program, dedicated to the archaeological research of the Roșia Montană mining site (Alba County), the areas for depositing the mine tailings, no matter whether they came from ancient or modern periods, were avoided, their research being considered a waste of time.

The modernist distinction between nature and culture was criticized *in extenso* by the post-processual archaeological literature and I do not think it is necessary to reiterate the arguments here. I shall only present the case of the earth. As Terje Gansum shows, in the early Bronze Age in Scandinavia, the presence in the stone coffins of sand deposits containing shells and sea snails is an intentional act through which a symbolic connection is made between the water and the land, on the one hand, and between life and death, on the other hand.² Moreover, earth cannot be reduced to the mere status of construction material or available resource. The analyses of some mounds, dated back to the Bronze Age in Denmark, indicated that they were made of soil combinations that are not at all random.³

The ethnographic and ethno-historical studies have shown that the earth/soil may have a great symbolic value in many non-Western contexts.⁴ For example, for the Mesoamerican peoples, 'the layer of soil that supports all life on Earth was considered to be alive'. This is the reason why, when a gardener in a Nahua area was asked to throw away the earth from a flower pot, he replied that he could not do such a thing because 'the earth cannot be treated as garbage'.⁵

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¹ See, for instance, Frînculeasa *et alii* 2015.

² Gansum 2004, p. 13.

³ Gansum 2004, p. 13.

⁴ Boivin, Owoc 2004.

⁵ Marcos 2014, p. 97.