

A COMMENT ON THE “OXFORD REPORT”, THE MATERIAL HERITAGE OF ROȘIA MONTANĂ AND THE POLICY OF ROMANIA’S MINISTRY OF CULTURE*

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Keywords: Roșia Montană; material heritage; the “Oxford Report”; Ministry of Culture; Romania.

Abstract: In the present text, read at a press conference organised in October 2013, at the time of public protests against a new and neoliberal mining law, I argue that the criticism raised to the policies of Roșia Montană Gold Corporation mining project, regarding the material heritage of Roșia Montană (Alba County, Romania), have been deliberately ignored by those responsible with heritage within the Ministry of Culture of Romania, while promoting in the public and political space only the interpretations that were in favour of RMGC; I also maintain that the archaeological researches carried out beginning with 2001 at Roșia Montana and coordinated by the Ministry of Culture, as part of “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme, are far from matching the current academic standards in the field. Therefore, the policy of the Ministry of Culture regarding the material heritage of Roșia Montană must be solidarily challenged by the members of the archaeological community.

Rezumat: În textul de față, citit la o conferință de presă organizată în octombrie 2013, în timpul protestelor publice împotriva unei noi și neoliberale legi a minelor, susțin ideea conform căreia critica adusă politicilor companiei Roșia Montană Gold Corporation, referitoare la patrimoniul material de la Roșia Montană (județul Alba, România), a fost deliberat ignorată de către cei responsabili cu patrimoniul în cadrul Ministerului Culturii din România, promovând, în schimb, în spațiul public și politic, doar interpretările ce se aflau în asentimentul RMGC; de asemenea, susțin că cercetările arheologice efectuate începând cu anul 2001 la Roșia Montană și coordonate de Ministerul Culturii, ca parte a Programului Național de Cercetare “Alburnus Maior”, sunt departe de a corespunde standardelor academice din cadrul câmpului. În consecință, politica Ministerului Culturii privind patrimoniul material de la Roșia Montană trebuie cât mai solidar combătută de membrii comunității arheologice.

Given the fact that the report by the British scholars¹ may be freely consulted by anyone willing to

** Text presented at the press conference entitled “*The mining development – an act of cultural vandalism. What do the British experts say on the heritage of Roșia Montană*”, called by The “ProPatrimonio” Foundation, The Romanian Chamber of Architects, The “Architecture. Restoration. Archaeology” Association, The “Alburnus Maior” Association and ICOMOS Romania, Bucharest, 24 October 2013. The press conference has been organised at the time of public protests against a new and neoliberal mining law.

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¹ Wilson *et alii* 2011.

do so, in the following short account I will not dwell on the published arguments, and I will refer instead to the situation of the report in the context of the narrative on the material heritage of Roșia Montană. Thus I wish to emphasise a few worrisome aspects, with respect to the relation between the archaeological field and the political one, upon which I believe it is worth reflecting.

(1) According to the authors of this report, specialised in archaeology of the Roman Empire, the habitation from *Alburnus Maior* (Roșia Montană) has an exceptional character within the whole of the Roman world, and therefore its preservation *in situ* comes necessary. Even on restricting the analysis to this chronological segment, the importance of vestiges from the Roman period is believed to justify the inclusion of the archaeological landscape of Roșia Montană on the list of UNESCO sites, an argument which was contested up until now by supporters of the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) project. From this perspective, the launch of the RMGC mining project would equal an act of “cultural vandalism”. It is worth noting that the opinion of the British archaeologists coincides with opinions expressed, one way or another, by the most prominent representatives of Roman provincial archaeology in Romania, such as, for example, Ioan Piso of the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.² Nevertheless, in the public space, some established politicians and people from the media have relativised the critical voices, by invoking the existence of opposite views and placing the equal sign between the different opinions. Thus, they have created the impression that they adopt an attitude which is neutral and objective in respect to all expressed opinions, leading them to conclude that the archaeological arguments raised by critics would be extremely subjective, therefore fragile; consequently, the only pretended objective arguments would remain those of economical and, maybe, ecological nature. Those politicians and people in the media who used the mentioned discourse have proven a total lack of familiarity to the way in which knowledge is produced and a research field works, such as the archaeological one. It is not the place to go into further details, but one needs to say that plurality of opinions, however contradictory these may be, does not mean in any circumstances that within one discipline all interpretations have the same value: in the specific case of Roșia Montană, I consider that no archaeologist specialised in Roman provincial archaeology could argue, at an international thematic conference for instance, that *Alburnus Maior* is not of outstanding importance and should not be preserved *in situ* – except with the risk of immediately falling from the status of specialist and even of that of archaeologist.

² E.g. Piso 2003.

In short, the minimisation by some political and media people of critical arguments raised by those Romanian or foreign scholars specialised in Roman provincial archaeology, whose symbolic capital is recognised nationally and internationally, by invoking the lack of a general consensus within a discipline comprised, naturally, of researchers with very different degrees and fields of competence, constitutes, willingly or not, an action of levelling the truth claims and of falsification of the state of facts. A very serious fact is that, regardless of governing forces, those responsible with heritage within the Ministry of Culture, in spite of having the instruments and – one may assume – the required professional qualification, did not do anything at all to counter this action; moreover, they have promoted in the public and political space only those interpretations which were agreed by RMGC.

(2) The archaeological research conducted within the “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme, funded by RMGC and coordinated by the Ministry of Culture, has been presented by archaeologists who supported or still support the mining project, as well as by the representatives of the corporation, as a remarkable achievement in terms of invested amounts, of number of specialised institutions and archaeologists involved, extension of research, enhancement measures, etc.; in addition, the programme has been described as being in compliance with all performance standards of the field. In deep contrast to pro-RMGC rhetoric, the report signed by Wilson and Mattingly reveals a whole series of major deficiencies of the “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme, although commendations are not missing either. One of the deficiencies, which I shall limit myself to refer to, is represented by the absence of any plan for the systematic archaeological research of vestiges belonging to the early modern period (of Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian rule) and the late modern period (communist and post-communist).³ This absence is to be related to an obsolete understanding of the role of the discipline and practice from the architects of the “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme: archaeology is simplistically viewed to be useful only for periods from which there is none or scarce written evidence [an annex to history], a cause for not perceiving the materiality of modernity as being relevant; in its turn, the practice is reduced to the act of excavating and of processing the resulted materials, with the consequence that the material culture elements located above ground and/or still in use are not included among the objectives of archaeological research. Although the necessity to connect the Romanian research to that of the West has

been repeatedly stated, the coordinators of the “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme did not consider or have knowledge of the fact that archaeology is a discipline that studies the material culture in general, regardless of the chronological period to which it belongs, and that seeks to understand the role and influence of objects in the life of people, the social construction – by means of objects – of reality and of past or present identities, or the ultimate causes of existence of objects. Precisely for this, the programme does not include anything of the approaches one may witness in other research traditions in the European Union or elsewhere in the world, dedicated to the modern/contemporary material culture, such as ethnoarchaeology,⁴ historical archaeology,⁵ or the archaeology of the recent and contemporary past.⁶ In other words, notwithstanding the official discourse, the “Alburnus Maior” National Research Programme is far from matching the stage reached by archaeology in the European Union or the world. Moreover, even from the beginning there were archaeologists in Romania to raise the attention on the importance of contemporary material culture and landscape research,⁷ but, nevertheless, during the course of the programme no changes in the research philosophy occurred. Independently of the programme, however, certain archaeologists and architects turned their attention to the study of elements of contemporary material culture.⁸ Certain studies have been aimed precisely at the manner in which RMGC relates to the material memory of the people from the past, and at the manner in which, by making use of the material culture in its intendance, the corporation builds specific images on the past of Roşia Montană; these studies revealed the levelling and colonialist character of RMGC’s cultural policies, the construction of narratives of the past by means of which it naturalizes and legitimizes its interests, as well as an unethical behaviour in respect to people from the past – an act of symbolic violence the more serious as these people cannot defend themselves any more.⁹ Unfortunately, in this case too, the critical voices remained unheard at the Ministry of Culture.

To summarise, the persons in the Ministry of Culture called to deal with the management of the cultural heritage of Roşia Montană have ignored all critical voices raised from the academic environment and have selected, in a privileged way, only those opinions which supported the interests of RMGC. These opinions are absolutely marginal as argumentative strength and credibility, and cannot pass a contextual and critical exam within

³ Wilson *et alii* 2011, *e.g.* pp. 14–15, 27, 46–48, 63–66, 70–71, 74, 77.

⁴ *E.g.* González-Ruibal 1998.

⁵ *E.g.* Leone, Potter 1999.

⁶ *E.g.* Schnapp 1997.

⁷ Dragoman, Oanță-Marghitu 2003.

⁸ *E.g.* Apostol, Bălici 2010; 2012.

⁹ Dragoman 2013a; 2013b.

the discipline, a proof in this sense being, among many others, even the report of the British archaeologists. The policy of the Ministry of Culture regarding the cultural heritage of Roşia Montană must be solidarily challenged by the members of the archaeological community, for the simple reason that it is not actually interested in the knowledge of materiality, whilst it converts archaeology from a space of creative, critical and reflexive engagement with the distant or more recent past, to a simple stage in the corporation plans, a ritual act¹⁰ which does always precede – because the law demands it – the big projects in capitalist Romania.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Ştefan Bălici for inviting me to present my point of view at the press conference organised in Bucharest on 24 October 2013.

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¹⁰ Nilsson 2011.