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ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE TELEORMAN VALLEY: THE CONTEMPORARY PAST AND FRAGMENTED RECORDS

Douglass W. BAILEY

Abstract: *How does one practice an archaeology of the Teleorman Valley? What are the correct scales of research? How precise should be the chronological scale? How precise the spatial scale? Based on the author's collaboration with the Muzeul Județean Teleorman, this article examines these questions and investigates the dimensions of research in the Teleorman Valley. With a discussion of the potential for cross-period research, a comment on the fatal assumptions that underlie distribution maps of prehistoric sites in riverine landscapes, and a suggestion of the benefits of a 'archaeology of the contemporary past', this article proposes a multi-period and multi-disciplinary approach to an archaeology of the Teleorman Valley.*

Rezumat: *Cum se practică o arheologie a Văii Teleormanului? Care este dimensiunea corectă a cercetării? Cât de precisă ar trebui să fie scara cronologică? Cât de precisă ar trebui să fie scara spațială? Având la bază colaborarea autorului cu Muzeul Județean Teleorman, acest articol analizează aceste întrebări și investighează dimensiunile cercetării din Valea Teleormanului. Cu o discuție asupra potențialul de cercetare, un comentariu asupra premizelor decisive care marchează distribuția siturilor preistorice în peisajul riveran și o sugestie cu privire la avantajele unei 'arheologii a trecutului contemporan', acest articol propune pentru o arheologie a Văii Teleormanului, abordarea multidisciplinară a mai multor epoci.*

Keywords: *Teleorman Valley; Măgura; Archaeological Method and Theory; Contemporary Past.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Valea Teleormanului; Măgura; metodologie și teorie arheologică; trecutul contemporan.*

What is the archaeology of the Teleorman Valley? What can archaeology bring to our understanding of one part of one river within the vast stretch of plains and river valleys that run from the southern Carpathians to the Danube? A first answer must be that there is no one, single archaeology of the Teleorman, but many deep and complicated palimpsests of often conflicting records of past behaviours. In this sense, it is common (and valid) for us to identify and study (on their own) different periods in a traditional way, for example, with a Late Upper Palaeolithic giving way to an Early Neolithic, yielding to a Middle Neolithic, and so on through the proto-historic and into the historic eras. Alternatively, we can focus our analytical attention on a particular culture: on Gumelnița or on Dridu or any of a vast range of other groups. Furthermore, we can work on the archaeology of a particular modern political or administrative region or of a geographic territory or of a geological and geomorphic zone. Regardless of the approach that we take, we must ask ourselves an important question: when we design our archaeological practices in any of these ways, what is it that we are doing, and what are the consequences of these practices for shaping (and potentially limiting) the types and ranges of knowledge about the past that we are creating (and indeed on the validity of that knowledge)? In this article I attempt to answer this question by examining the range of different scales of analysis along which an archaeology of the Teleorman Valley could proceed. The resulting article is intended as a provocation to potential future work in the Teleorman County to be planned with my colleagues at the Muzeul Județean Teleorman (MJT).

Time

If we pause for a moment in order to think about the different scales at which we carry out our archaeological (and historical) research, we realize that there is a tremendous variation in the types of knowledges about the past that we can produce. In thinking about the scales of our analyses, we begin to ask fundamental questions about the goals and consequences of what we are doing when we study the past. What is the correct temporal or chronological scale at which we should set our investigations? Should a prehistorian set the time-scale of his or her investigative vision at a millennium or perhaps half a millennium, so that discussions and research questions remain at a relatively imprecise scale of understanding, so that one can only conclude about very large scale processes of human activity over 500 (or more) years? Such a scale of research generates conclusions and interpretations of a very general nature: about movements of populations, of significant changes in rainfall, humidity, or temperature, and of shifts in technologies, industries and economies.

A critical question that lives at the core of my own work follows: is the prehistoric archaeologist trapped at this, more general, scale of research, and are higher resolution examinations of past behaviours only permissible for archaeologists of later, mostly historic, periods? Does the prehistoric archaeologist have any method (or justification) for working on a finer scale of shorter periods of time: of centuries, of decades, of years, and even of months, days, or moments? If the prehistorian cannot work at these finer scales of temporal resolution, then a second question surfaces: what is an acceptable resolution for the historical archaeologist, such as a specialist in the Medieval period? Is there an advantage (in terms of temporal precision) for the scholar who can intertwine material culture and architectural floorplans with the words of written texts? What justifies this advantage? Does the Medievalist's opportunity to match the written word with the excavated object and architectural plan allow a temporal precision that zooms-in on the scale of a year, or even a season, or even a particular moment of a particular day? Does the presence of a written record justify such a high resolution of examination? Why are the written records of the historical periods given a priority over the material culture of the prehistoric? More critically, how accurate is that written record? How closely does it represent the reality of the past? Is it more accurate and representative than the organic deposits in a sequence of hearths from the Neolithic or Bronze Age? More importantly, what exactly does that page of text represent? Do the records of the historic periods provide a closer representation of life as it was lived, or do they, in fact, represent the perceptions (and ideologies) that a privileged group (the literate, the landed, the powerful) held about how life should be lived (and thus probably not of how life actually was experienced on a day-to-day basis)? Seen in these ways, the temporal resolution of investigation emerges as one of the fundamental dimensions along which archaeologists must consider their positions before approaching an object of study, such as the archaeology of the Teleorman Valley. For example, can I (while working on the Neolithic) carry out research at a temporal scale that is traditionally accepted for the historical specialist? Can I study a Neolithic moment?

At another level, there are multiple, potentially conflicting, levels of temporal variation available for an archaeologist examining the human record of the Teleorman Valley. At a very practical level, one can ask another question: can an archaeologist (who specializes, for example, in the specific material and patterns of the Neolithic period) contribute anything of intellectual value to the study of the Dacians, or of the Early Modern Period, or of post-WWII totalitarian Romania, or even of the Teleorman of the current period of EU-membership? In many parts of the world, most of the authorities (i.e., those who control permits for fieldwork and who distribute funds for research) argue against such cross-period collaborations; they stand firm in defense of the specializations of period-particular expertise and for the separation of experts into narrow areas of interest and research. I am convinced that these authorities are mistaken.

One of the great advantages that institutions such as the MJT possess is that the practicalities of their personnel and economies necessitate the practice of a local archaeology in which a small team of practitioners are obliged to work across very different periods of time and with significantly diverse methodological approaches and research agendas. Writing this, I do not doubt that in the highly specialized (and funded) research institutes of capital cities or large departments of the world's mega-universities, there is much to be appreciated and envied. What these latter institutions lack, however (and perhaps what their directors refuse to understand) is the value of the enforced multi-disciplinary, multi-period, work of archaeologists whose daily and seasonal schedules do not have the luxury of those (apparently) more prestigious centers of research. Of course, there is a third set of archaeological institutions: the professional units or archaeological contract companies. Like the archaeologists of the regional museum, the contract archaeologists also find themselves excavating widely different periods and stratigraphic sequences. Like the regional museum archaeologists, the contract archaeologists gain an advantage in all of this; their approach to the past (of all periods) is open and multi-faceted, and (of necessity) they accumulate a unique and vast set of perspectives on the varieties contained within the material records of the past and on the conflicting accounts that the past contains.

In recent debate about the goals and direction of archaeology, there have been repeated calls to redefine archaeology and to collapse the past into the present, indeed to argue that the past only exists in the present. Many of the most theoretically informed archaeological thinkers now define archaeology as a study of the way that the past is related to the present (for examples, see the interviews of Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Ruth Tringham, and Kostas Kotsakis; Bailey 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). The basic premises of the approach are as follows. If one accepts, first, that the archaeologist sits in the present and does all of his or her work in the present (looking out from the

present onto the past), and, second, if the archaeologist accepts that that all of the objects, sites, records that he or she studies also sit in the present (where, in fact, the archaeologist studies them), then one must conclude that the past only exists in the present. The consequence of these arguments is that we dissolve the traditional temporal distinctions between periods, phases and eras: most bluntly, that we reposition the (pre)historic record into the present.

A second recent debate of relevance to the archaeology of the Teleorman Valley is one that has broken long established rules of archaeological practice and which focuses on an 'archaeology of the contemporary past' (Buchli and Lucas 2001). One part of this approach refers to historical archaeology, especially as it studies the very recent past, such as the material culture and traces of human behaviour of the 20th and 21st centuries. A second, integral, part of the archaeology of the contemporary past is the application of traditional archaeological methods (excavation, compositional and provenance analysis, etc.) and thinking (research agendas, applications, consequences) to the currently unfolding patterns of life lived in the present. Fieldwork in this new tradition combines ethnography with archaeology and creates something that is more than the sum of those two disciplines.

The archaeology of the contemporary past is not to be confused with ethnoarchaeology, where modern experiments or observation are carried out in order to create explanatory analogies that can be used to better understand activities and processes in the distant past. The archaeology of the contemporary past is only about the present; it has nothing to do with the past. Its contribution to the knowledge about mankind is that it recovers, examines, documents and represents the commonplace rhythms of daily life that are the fabric of existence and which are commonly avoided or discarded by the more traditional studies of the past as they are practiced by large institutions where research continues to focus on 'big-men' and large-scale processes over the long-term. The archaeology of the contemporary past has substantial and significant contributions to make to the wider study of the modern human condition, and of what it means to be human at the personal and daily levels. What distinguishes this approach from sociology and cultural or social anthropology are the particular methods and the research questions that a study of the contemporary past brings to the archaeological record of the modern world. For example, by studying the patterns of modern garbage disposal, or the daily stories of mobile communities (such as seasonal agricultural workers), or the patterns of design of mass produced objects, the archaeology of the contemporary past directs professional analytic attention onto the minute and almost always overlooked traces of activities, everyday objects, and commonplace processes that make up the reality in the modern world.

Space

If time is one of the major dimensions along which the variety of archaeologies of the Teleorman Valley extends, then an equally significant dimension is the spatial one. What is the correct spatial scale to work: to think, to catalogue, to interpret, indeed to practice the craft of archaeology? Should we continue to work at the large-scale: of regions, territories, counties, or even parts of a single river-valley? When we walk across, document, and investigate a prehistoric landscape, what is it that we are investigating? Is the landscape a spatially coherent unit? What assumptions do we make about its condition and about its coherence? Can we justify the assumptions that we make? These questions are fundamental ones for the prehistorian to ask (and to answer).

An example from our collaborative work with the MJT in the Teleorman Valley has proved to me how important these questions are, and how significant are the consequences of the answers. More importantly, this example has irreversibly shattered my confidence in the creation and use of site distribution maps in prehistory. As distribution maps are one of the standard information sets that prehistoric archaeologists create and exploit in their interpretations of ancient human behaviour, a fatal flaw within them will have substantial implications for the practice of prehistoric archaeology in the Teleorman and beyond and in the ways in which archaeologists draw conclusions not only about the location of sites, but also patterns of population increases, decreases, migrations and immigrations?

The example comes from the work of the Southern Romania Archaeological Project, codirected with Radian Andreescu (MNIR). One of the greatest lessons that I have ever learned as an archaeologist came during that project, in the summer of 2003, when I walked across the bottom of the Teleorman Valley south-west from Măgura, crossing first the Clănița and then the Teleorman Rivers, continuing across the flat open grasslands, and then climbing up the terraces and on towards the Vedea Valley. I was walking with Mark Macklin, a Professor from the University of Aberystwyth who specializes in the long-term patterns of river activity, of changes in the position and direction of

ivers, of changes in the speed and depth of rivers, and of the characteristics of rivers as they change over long periods of time in landscapes just like the one in the valley bottom of the Teleorman. In a way that I had never understood before, Mark talked me through (and walked me through) the history of that part of the Teleorman River Valley.

To begin with (and as any local would have told me), the present, 21st century, Teleorman River, in its current position and with its current rate of flow, is a relatively young river and does not represent its prehistoric position or character. Indeed radiocarbon dates subsequently analyzed by Mark and his team showed that the river had taken up its current position only in the past 1000 years. As Mark and his colleagues studied the Teleorman in the area southwest of Măgura, their team started to reconstruct an increasing dynamic history for the river which revealed a river that had moved its position and changed its character significantly over the long-term (and indeed which would continue to change in the near future). The period-by-period details of that history are significant and as such will be published soon elsewhere, though see Bailey et al. 2002, 2004. However, the most significant lesson that I learned from Mark was how naïve and wrong I had been in seeing the Teleorman Valley as one coherent landscape, which had been sequentially occupied (or abandoned) by successive culture groups over thousands of years. With my perception of the valley as a stable landscape, I had been working with data from our own field-walking research and from other studies of the region by local archaeologists. I had been using this data about the distribution of sites from different prehistoric periods in order to develop models of changes in the human use of the valley over time (from before the Neolithic through to the Iron Age).

Mark showed me how misguided my perception had been and, in turn, how unsupportable were most (perhaps most?) distribution maps of sites in riverine landscapes. The long-term record (i.e., the palaeohistory) of the Teleorman contains clear traces of many changes in the river's position and character. Furthermore, these changes occurred frequently, have continued to occur up to the recent past, and will accelerate if current predictions of changes to our present climate are correct. The significant cause of these changes in the river have been due to very large-scale (i.e., global level) changes in climate (and thus the frequency of rainfall, storms). The major consequence has been cycles of major events of river flooding which have assaulted the valley bottom and, as a result, which have fundamentally affected the coherence of the archaeological record. As Mark explained, each major flooding event or extended period of intermittent flooding, washed away significant portions of the cultural landscape that had accumulated before the flooding. Thus, large portions of evidence for the actual record human settlement and activity in the valley had been swept away repeatedly at irregular intervals running back through the entire record of human activity in the Teleorman Valley. After each period of flooding, the valley-bottom re-established itself (both geologically and culturally) with the gradual accumulation of silts and soils and the equally gradual re-establishment of a record of human activities and occupations.

The position of the Teleorman River also reestablished itself with each new post-flooding period. Sometime the river's position was greatly changed; other times, the change was minimal. Importantly, as no two cycles of major flooding events were the same, the effects on the landscape varied. During some flooding periods, huge parts of the soils (and with it the cultural record) were washed away and redistributed. During others, only some parts were affected. Over the long-term, the repeated cycles of flooding and re-establishment created a modern archaeological landscape which represents no complete record of any of the successive periods of the past. The long-term flooding-and-regeneration cycles have created a landscape that is (literally) a shredded fragment of its true past. While some parts of each different prehistoric landscape survived the cycles, many other portions were lost (or worse, redistributed fatally out of context positions). Therefore, when we look at the valley bottom of the Teleorman River west of Măgura, we are looking a cultural landscape that has been sequentially (and disproportionately) scrapped clean and re-established due to natural events.

The best analogy that I can think of for visualizing the situation in the Teleorman Valley is to think of a cardigan sweater made out of blue wool. The first winter that you wear the cardigan, it is new and the fabric has no holes in it and all of the buttons are in their places running up-and-down along the front. At the end of the first winter, you pack away the cardigan with the rest of your winter clothes. That summer, a flock of moths takes residence in your wool cardigan. When you take the cardigan out of storage at the beginning of the next winter, you see that there are big holes in the fabric where the moths have eaten the wool; in fact, even one of the buttons is missing. Your mother-in-law (after she has scolded you for not properly storing your cardigan), repairs the holes by sewing them full of new wool, though she cannot match the original colour and thus uses brown wool for her repairs. She also replaces the buttons, but uses buttons of different shape from the original ones.

Year after year, this process is repeated again and again with the changing of the seasons. After ten years, your mother-in-law gives up and stops repairing the holes and replacing the buttons, and your wife takes over. To establish her regime of repair from that of your mother-in-law, your wife uses green wool and square buttons. The moths do not mind which colour wool they eat, and during some summers they eat a combination of some of the brown wool that your mother-in-law has sewn as well as some of the original blue wool of the cardigan as well as some green wool that your wife has sown. In other years, they eat only the original blue wool, in other years they eat only your wife's green wool, and in still other years they eat only the brown wool. Furthermore, the moths don't mind which part of the cardigan that occupy during the summers.

Another ten years pass and your wife refuses to make any more repairs (and she tells you to get rid of the cardigan). Your daughter (always sympathetic) then takes over the repairs; she decides to use yellow wool and triangular buttons. In any event, after many years of wool-eating by the moths and of sewing by the women of your life, the cardigan contains very little of its original wool and, to make matters worse contains wildly different proportions of the different colours of wools that were used by the different repairers. This past winter, your granddaughter asks you to tell her what the cardigan looked like when it was new; you tell her that it was completely blue and had seven pyramid-shaped buttons running down the front. You begin to tell her about all the repairs that have taken place and of each of her relatives who carried out the work. Your granddaughter asks why your mother-in-law did so little repairing as there is very little brown wool in the much repaired cardigan. You insist that, in fact, your mother-in-law did the most repairing of all of the women. The problem is that the successive phases of wool-eating and of repair have left very little of the brown wool or of her buttons. There is very little evidence of your mother-in-law's work, even though she probably did more than any other.

Translating this analogy back to the archaeology of a riverine landscape, the original wool cardigan represents a landscape without any human occupation. Each storage-season of wool-eating by the moths represents an episode of significant flooding in the river valley which striped away parts of the then existing natural and cultural landscapes. Each repair-sewing represents a re-occupation of the landscape by people of a successive culture or phase. The moths (or, in archaeological terms, the flooding events) partially remove evidence of the sewing repairs (or, the reoccupations of the landscape). Your conversation with your granddaughter represents the archaeologists arguing about the density of population in the riverine landscape for a particular phase of the past.

Thus, for the Teleorman River, the most significant problem for the archaeologists is not the loss of portions of the prehistoric cultural landscapes; the biggest problem is that it is almost impossible for us to reconstruct (with any degree of accuracy) the successive versions of the flood damaged (but successively re-occupied) landscape. When we look at the cardigan (and the landscape) today, it is clear that both cardigan and landscape have changed from their original conditions. We cannot, however, reconstruct an accurate series of successive colours of repair or of phases of cultural occupation. In both cases, we only have a fragmented record of the past.

In terms of the Teleorman Valley as a cultural record therefore, no distribution map based on modern field-walking data will provide an accurate representation of any period of the past. While this is particularly the case for the prehistoric past, it is also true of the more recent proto-historic and historic pasts. This is confirmed by the evidence that major changes in river activity not only occurred frequently but also occurred through the recent past. It is with this understanding of the behaviour of rivers over the long-term that I no longer have any confidence in site-distribution maps, or archaeological population estimates, or arguments about immigration, migration or demic diffusion, that are based on the modern-day distribution of sites across a riverine landscape. Furthermore, as most prehistoric landscapes are riverine, I have little (if any) confidence in larger discussions of site distributions and thus of population movements (and thus of cultural change) across a region as a whole.

(Re)definition

The conclusions about the reality of site distributions across riverine landscapes (i.e., that we study landscapes which as palimpsest of periods, phases and events) complement the earlier discussion about the potential for archaeological work at many different places along the temporal dimension (i.e., that archaeologists should not be limited to individual periods). Following these proposals, a final (and most critical) question emerges: what are we to study if we are to carry out an archaeology of the Teleorman Valley? Is it to be about the Neolithic or the Medieval period, on their own, or is it to be about all periods and phases of activity from the most distant past to the day during

which you are reading this sentence? If the surviving cultural landscape has been fragmented in such a way that we cannot reconstruct successive periods of its occupation, then what are we to study? Towards what investigations, if any, should we focus our efforts and investigative energies?

My suggestion is that an archaeology of the Teleorman Valley should take as its object of study everything ranging from the entire valley itself over the longest period of time (e.g., from the earliest appearance of Homo Erectus in Europe to the present, EU-dictated present) down to the tiniest object which has the shortest life span (e.g., a snippet of conversation between two people standing outside the current Mayor's office in Măgura, or the lesson plan for this morning at the School, or yesterday's visit by the priest to an elderly village resident). How can all of these diverse (and by definition, fragmentary) pieces of information be orchestrated into a piece of research that has value for the residents of the villages and, at the larger level, for the county, and indeed for communities further afield?

Based on the work that we have already carried out (in collaboration with the MJT) on the prehistory of the valley, and based on the philosophy sketched out in this article, I propose that there exists the perfect context for the MJT to carry out a fundamentally radical and trend-setting project into the archaeology and history of the Teleorman Valley. Such a project would take as its basis the current population of Măgura and their perceptions of their pasts. In this sense, the project would be an archaeology of the contemporary past. It would provide an opportunity for the village to locate itself, with the sophistication of specialist histories and prehistories of its past, but also with authority given to the local, small-scale, but no less important personal histories of its everyday existence. In these senses, such a project would establish Măgura (and the MJT as the coordinator of the project) as trend-setters on the maps of county, country and European Union at the beginning of the 21st century. In addition, it would also provide the opportunity for local archaeologists, historians and ethnographers to create a rich and full academic and intellectual record of this part of Europe. Such a project would have the potential to establish the MJT at the cutting-edge of interdisciplinary work in archaeology and history.

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