

HABILITATION THESIS

ABSTRACT

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As stated in first chapter of the present thesis, the research summarized here emerged entirely from the research program sketched almost a decade and a half ago in the concluding chapter of my doctoral dissertation focused on the theoretical and methodological evolution of Romanian prehistoric archaeology. I was pleading there for a massive reconsideration of Romanian archaeology's research agenda, theoretical footing and methodological imagination, inviting the research community, admittedly a bit surprisingly, to consider the return of Romanian prehistoric research to history – that is, to coherent and solidly built narratives, instead of dry descriptions of artifacts and archaeological contexts, vaguely animated by stereotyped prehistoric humans. I was well aware that such a broad and ambitious goal was asking for many converging approaches, including a massive theoretical renovation, fresh and omnivore methodologies and, particularly important, a careful adequacy between the archaeological scale of inquiry and the resolution preserved by each prehistoric context. As a researcher of Paleolithic societies, I had the opportunity to evaluate and implement these self-assumed rigors on a particularly challenging record, blending large scale and long lasting evolutionary trends, century or millennial scale cultural dynamics, and humble traces of hunter-gatherers daily lives.

My research work in the last decade amounts to around fifty papers and studies, many elaborated as leader of, or partner in, national or international research teams; they benefited from the support of several nationally or internationally funded research grants and two scholarships, including a DAAD stay at the Erlangen-Nürnberg University in Germany. The selected contributions here are ordered according to the general topics approached and therefore do not necessarily follow a strict chronological order. They cover many inter-related aspects of Paleolithic research and, for the sake of clarity, have been organized, according to their theoretical and explanatory breadth, in three main chapters: (2) broad assessments of prehistoric biological and socio-cultural evolution, including a critical reevaluation of neo-Darwinian thinking in prehistoric archaeology; (3) explorations into the paleosocial field, including researches on the emergence of egalitarian behavior and social inequality; (4) field researches focused on Romanian Upper Paleolithic. The final chapter (5) deals with the prospects and research avenues opened by previous work both on the issues above and on several other topics to be elaborated upon in the coming years.

Chapter (2) summarizes several contributions to a research topic totally ignored as a topic *per se* by Romanian prehistoric archaeology: socio-cultural evolution. Due to its traditional affiliation to the humanities, Romanian archaeology has been defending a vague and totally unelaborated understanding of evolution, emerging straightly from the XIXth century evolutionism. One of the most unfortunate effects of this conservative stance has been the chronic confusion between explanatory levels leading in turn to

naïve and plainly false causal connections. In an attempt to bring the issue of evolution to the central stage it deserved, my goal was to put forward a superior, coherent alternative. Consequently, I devoted several papers to a critical analysis of current evolutionary models inspired by neo-Darwinian thinking (behavioral ecology, evolutionary archaeology, and especially dual-inheritance, niche and macro-evolutionary theory); I further evaluated their explanatory power/limits in understanding both long-term evolutionary dynamics along the Lower and Middle Paleolithic and relatively swift cultural changes like those involved in the transition to the Upper Paleolithic in Eurasia. These case studies revealed the theoretical and empirical strengths and weaknesses of Darwinian models applied to cultural evolution and invited to the development of more elaborated evolutionary models.

Chapter (3) gathers the main points made in several papers exploring some key issues of social evolution in prehistoric times – a topic hotly debated abroad, but again completely neglected by the local research tradition. The general goal of these attempts was to put forward a comprehensive, anthropologically inspired and ethnographically informed perspective on some key issues in prehistoric social evolution: the emergence of basal human sociality, the stabilization of egalitarian arrangements in Paleolithic times, the status of women and children in hunter-gatherer societies. Last but not least, I devoted a particular attention to the possible emergence of social stratification during the European Upper Paleolithic. The main conclusions of these analyzes were: (a) social inequality (i.e. status difference between individuals and social categories based on sex/age criteria) is an essential feature of many assertively egalitarian societies; (b) egalitarian societies are a typically human socio-economic arrangement likely emerging already in the Middle Pleistocene; (c) hierarchically organized hunter-gatherer societies may appear relatively fast in particular environmental and social circumstances; (d) although there are archaeological hints for the appearance of social stratification (i.e. inherited differences between classes of individuals) in several Upper Paleolithic contexts, this hierarchical arrangement could not survive the (highly adaptive) pressure of egalitarianism.

Chapter (4) assembles the main results obtained during the field researches undertaken on several key Upper Paleolithic contexts in Eastern and South-Western Romania, respectively. The excavations or field surveys I ran as leader or partner of several international research initiatives focused either on settlements already known to Romanian archaeology (Ceahlău-Dârțu, Bistricioara Lutărie I, in Eastern Carpathians; Românești-Dumbrăvița and Coșava in Banat) or on recently identified settlements (Bistricioara-Mal, Bistricioara Lutărie III, Toplița-Pârâul Baicăului). They were all guided by pressing priorities of Romanian Paleolithic research – i.e. a solid chrono-cultural and paleo-environmental framework, modern, multidimensional analyses of Paleolithic material culture, all based on state of the art excavation techniques. As a consequence, these researches aimed at a throughout reassessment of the regional chrono-cultural frameworks (including OSL, TL and radiocarbon sampling and dating), coupled with wide-ranging paleo-environmental assessments and comprehensive attribute analyses of lithic collections. Significantly, all these researches led to a massive reconsideration of previous archaeological knowledge, including (1) a completely new understanding of Upper Paleolithic chronology and cultural dynamics in Eastern Carpathians, now documented as consistently longer and far more complex than

previously considered; (2) a radically changed picture of the chronology and cultural content of the Aurignacian in Banat, now proved to document the earliest presence of this technocomplex in Romania. Much like the theoretical incursions described above, the field results of the field researches I conducted, severely contradicting previous knowledge, emphasize the massive renovation still required by the Romanian Paleolithic research.

My personal view on this necessary theoretical and methodological renovation, including the steps I plan myself to make, is summarized in the last chapter (5). On the high theoretical level, I stress the need for a wide-encompassing and operational definition of cultural evolution able to include both some important tenets of neo-Darwinian thinking and the invaluable experience of social sciences with human mental, social and cultural uniqueness. On the middle-range theoretical level, I defend the need for imaginative archaeological explanations and models based on all possible sources of inspiration, from natural to social sciences and history. I intend to put all these principles at work in the frame of a consistent monograph on prehistoric social evolution. On empirical grounds, given the low, almost unusable quality of old data, but also the amazing archaeological potential of the Romanian Paleolithic revealed in the last decade, fresh new field researches with a serious inter-disciplinary input stay as priorities. However, contrary to the sadly common understanding of inter-disciplinarity in Romanian archaeology – the opportunistic and random use of archaeometry, or the enthusiastic use of archaeological science to actually define archaeology's research objectives – I defend my initial programmatic statement: as a comprehensive discipline dealing with cultural change and aiming for historical narratives, archaeology should decide its own agenda and make use of (natural) sciences only to the extent they contribute to solidly built and coherent narratives.