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PhD Thesis

The Visual Memory of Archaeology.  
Archaeological documentary photography in the research of  
the complex of *Dacian Fortresses from the Orăștiei  
Mountains* - Grădiștea de Munte - Sarmizegetusa Regia  
archaeological site

-Summary-

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Since the middle of the 19th century, archaeology, as a theoretical and practical discipline of the past, was endorsed by the new technology that allowed capturing and freezing a moment in time and a piece of reality, i.e. by photography. The clichés with ancient or medieval monuments, with geographical areas loaded with historical narratives and with the people who interact with them were the first photographic series that shaped the space of archaeology in the collective mind. Printed albums followed that told the visual stories of the archaeological and anthropological expeditions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when extensive research campaigns brought to light great classical sites and unknown monuments.

Archaeological field research integrated the process of taking photographs in all its stages and in a short time the first practical indications were formulated about the implementation and correct use of photographic images in the documentation related to excavations and in specific publications: reports, monographs, studies and articles.

As the methodology of archaeological research was formulated more and more clearly, towards the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a conceptual and stylistic pattern was also prepared for photography. The main characteristic sought in a photographic image with an archaeological subject was neutrality. From the preparation of the researched area by cleaning, the removal of earth and tools, to the lack of human presence or other distracting visual elements, were and are the guarantees of achieving a compositionally neutral image. The stake of photographs conceived in this way is to illustrate and represent the traces of the past in an aura of objectivity and scientific clarity.

The theoretical and philosophical concerns about the archaeological image, especially the archaeological photograph, appeared with the technological paradigm shift generated by what is now called the digital turn. The '90s of the last century recorded the appearance of studies that discussed, from a historical and conceptual perspective, the relationship between the image and archaeological research, about the content and materiality of a photograph taken in the context of archaeological research. Especially in American and British academic spaces, archaeologists and philosophers have created a research and teaching niche with this topic: archaeological photography or archaeology and photography.

I became aware to the practice of this kind of photography as early as 2011, when I started a visual and audio documentation project on the complex of *Dacian Fortresses in Orăștiei Mountains* archaeological site. Beyond the experience I had and the literature I consulted at the time, the most important aspect of starting the project was my integration by

the research team into the archaeological fieldwork. This gave me the opportunity to look from the inside at the archaeological photographic production.

It was not long before we identified specific needs of archaeologists for the application and use of photographic representations. Archaeological field research in general and the particularities of each site became the main subjects to be documented. As the photo series multiplied, I became aware of the long-term potential of the project. Any archaeological campaign has its own degree of novelty, but the view of their development in the sequence of several years seemed necessary to me. Another ramification of the project occurred when we collaborated in exhibition or editorial projects for the research and promotion of the archaeological material from the MNIT and MCDR deposits discovered on the sites in the Orăștiei Mountains. Objects seen for the first time during excavations became the subjects of photographs taken in a different context, i.e. the museum. This stage of research and visual valorisation of the heritage of objects and discoveries is the most direct way to create new opportunities for research and professional collaboration in the field, but also to reach the public interested in history and culture with products specific to the popularization of science: albums, catalogues, short video documentaries, etc.

The entire collection of photos and videos made in the last 12 years is archived and new material continues to be added. The most important idea that I bring up and promote, to some extent, in the doctoral research undertaken is about the recognition of photographic practice and its theory as necessary and intrinsic dimensions of archaeological research. But the specifics I propose refer to the act of photographing through the eyepiece of a camera. The classic positioning to trigger the photo exposure is by bringing the camera to eye level, closing the other eye, framing and shooting. All this process carries in it the characteristics of mental disposition, the technological and artistic tensions, the subjective-objective oscillations that the person who takes pictures processes in real time (that is, the context for the authorship condition is created). It means personal involvement for the visual re-presentation of reality. An observation I have made in recent years is that the pressure of easy, direct and ultra-intuitive technologies available to us at the moment causes an attitude of distancing from the documented subject and vulgarization in the treatment of the photography process. Even more so for professionals, be they archaeologists or photographers, the authorial dimension of the images is important, given that the photographs will be material for study and presentation in their work.

## Chapter 1. The visual memory of Archaeology and documentary photography - an insider's perspective

In the first chapter of the thesis entitled "Visual memory of Archaeology and documentary photography - a perspective from the inside" the conditions imposed on the study activity undertaken are treated: practical and methodological motivation, definitions of visual memory and the use of the concept in historical and archaeological research, the analysis of some photographs from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of the first clichés taken on the archaeological site of Grădișteța Muncelului-Sarmizegetusa Regia during a systematic research. I have selected 5 photographers who have documented archaeological investigations and monuments on several classical archaeological sites (Olympia, La Tene, Pompeii, etc.) and analysed some clichés made by them: Giorgio Sommer, Felix Bonfils, Wilhelm Burger, Konstantinos and Aristotelis Rhomaidis, Jean Fritz Gras. I considered that studying some old photographs with an archaeological subject, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a suitable start of my research. Through their historical, compositional and stylistic analysis we receive vital information about the integration of photographic practice into archaeological research. Even if we are tempted to consider the beginnings of a field of knowledge or a technique as marked by failures and uncertainties, the reality for archaeological photography is that it quickly confirmed the added value it can bring to archaeology. Individual clichés, but especially photographic series preserved from selected photographer-authors are the best argument for the use of photography in archaeology. The images they produced passed (at the time of their creation) the test of artistic authenticity and scientific accuracy, and are now objects of patrimonial, academic and artistic value. The first photographs taken during the systematic research at Sarmizegetusa Regia were taken by D.M. Teodorescu and his assistant, Sandor (Al.) Ferenczi, at the beginning of the '20s of the last century. Their compositional and documentary analysis is important for deciphering the relationship in the era to the studied ensemble, having as its central visual element the "pillar circle" or the great round temple on the 11<sup>th</sup> terrace of the said archaeological site. The study of old photographs is an essential step in appreciating the documentary dimension of archaeological photography, without which the current methodology is not complete.

## Chapter 2. Archaeology, Photography, and their interaction

Theoretical concerns about image and archaeology examine the methodology and practice of producing photographs and how they are integrated into the archaeological research. The second chapter focuses on the approach to archaeological photography through the theory and philosophy of the image. The concepts of *archaeography* and *photology* were formulated by synthesizing, understood as different approaches to the image-time and archaeology-photography relationship. The differences are drawn at the conceptual level and concern the reporting to the subject of Archaeology and Photography. *Archaeography*, a term coined to express the symbiosis between archaeology and photography, undertakes to decipher the methodological similarities and differences between the two fields, to understand the historical parallel between their development and to find answers to the multi-temporality of images with archaeological content. *Photology*, a more recent concept, is the summation in one term of the idea of visual archaeology and interprets the temporal dimension of photographic representations as duration: duration as the time interval between the moment of abandonment and the discovery of a trace from the past, as the time required for research and rediscovery archaeological traces, as the time interval involved in the exposure of a photograph. Through *photology*, the speculative and suppositional approach to the archaeology-photography relationship is proposed, and not the interpretative historical effort. The transfer between photographic theory and practice in archaeological research determines aspects such as: the typology or type of image made, the balancing between single photographs and photographic series, the establishment of the photographic essay as a suitable species for archaeological photography.

## Chapter 3. Case studies

The first case study is about the systematic archaeological research campaigns at Sarmizegetusa Regia from 2011 to 2019. There are 9 campaigns that form an important part of the photographic project documenting the research at the Dacian Citadel Archaeological Site in the Orăștiei Mountains. The main objective of the image production was that the photographic series during a campaign were structured on several levels:

- photos of the archaeological research which illustrate: researched areas, surfaces and open sections, archaeological heritage materials discovered, aspects of the research process, people involved;

- images of the site, especially with the visible monuments, with the checked terraces or with the related areas where we have travelled;

- activities to popularize archaeological research and promote the site (organization of the Open Doors Day event at Sarmizegetusa Regia).

In the second case study, we analysed the photo-documentation process of a bronze object, known in the specialized literature as the bronze matrix from Sarmizegetusa Regia. It is an object that has on all its faces zoomorphic *in taglio* representations, meaning were executed in depth. This makes the piece present some challenges in the photography process. All the technical aspects are mentioned: the digital photo technique used and the digital microscopy cameras, the photo series taken before and after the piece was restored, the archaeological context of the discovery and the research stages to comprehend it.

The third case study is about the production of images with the archaeological material from the Dacian-era sites in the Orăștiei Mountains used in:

1. the exhibition "Sarmisegetusa Regia - Colour and decoration in Dacian antiquity", hosted by the National Museum of Transylvanian History, in mid-May 2015, which also included the printing of an exhibition album/catalogue, with photographs of the exhibited artefacts, short texts with their description and interpretation and a final catalogue with technical data about each object;

2. the exhibition "Dacian incursions into virtual space", a target assumed within the project (financed by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2009-2014, project line PA 16/RO12 - Conservation and revitalization of cultural and natural heritage): "When ancient daily life becomes UNESCO heritage. Scanning, digital restoration and contextualization of Dacian artefacts from the Orăștiei Mountains", which also had an extensive catalogue of digitized artefacts; the exhibition was organized by MNIT and MCDR.

Artefact photography is a genre of archaeological documentary photography in which discovered objects and materials are highlighted and presented to specialists and the public by protecting them from excessive transport, handling and display after they have been catalogued and stored. If we are talking about the preparation of images intended for publication, then artefact photography borrows from the technical and stylistic rules of still photography or macro photography. Hundreds of artefacts were photographed for the creation of the two catalogues-albums, both for their scientific documentation and for their artistic or stylistic representation.



*In situ* monuments from Grădiștea de Munte - Sarmizegetusa Regia and especially the Altar (The Andesite Sun) are the subjects of the fourth case study. They occupy the two most large terraces of the site and are the main objectives to visit next to the fortification wall and the segment of paved road that connected the fortress to the sacred area. Unearthing photographs of the andesite temple on X<sup>th</sup> Terrace, the paved square, and the altar (or andesite sun) are analyzed and discussed in the context of their production process.

The last case study is the one referring to the photographs taken between 1950-1952 documenting the research on the VIII<sup>th</sup> terrace of Sarmizegetusa Regia where traces of the presence of a group of constructions, some of them blacksmith workshops were documented. The images are discussed on several levels: research aspects, characters, framing, exposure times and camera station. The VIII<sup>th</sup> Terrace remains to this day one of the areas with the most important discoveries from Sarmizegetusa Regia. The photographer (or photographers) of the campaigns held in the '50s of the last century accepted the challenge of creating images with as neutral a status as possible (which was understood as a scientific postulate), but they were constantly looking for expressions and nuances to print within them and which could elevate the still images to the status of an author's creation. In this case study, the character of the photograph-object as a visual document is strongly asserted. The act of photography can be infused with artistic vision and concept. As I have stated in other times, there are no good photos and bad photos, only photographs which were taken or not/are absent.

Chapter 4. From still image to moving image; from photography to documentary film.

The invention of photography had a big impact in the 19th century and it took several decades before moving images could be recorded and played back. Documentary film quickly became a medium of representation for fields such as anthropology and archaeology. That's why I presented the categories of the documentary film, as they are formulated in the theory of cinema. I have also defined archaeological documentary film as a cinematographic production, made by a director with or without archaeological training, that presents aspects of archaeological research, different areas of archaeological heritage, the archaeologists and their collaborators from various related fields. Even this sub-subgenre of documentary film has come to be placed into stylistic and discourse categories. If in the literature of the end of the 20th century, documentaries with an archaeological subject were divided according to several criteria: films for archaeologists or for students and the general public, excavation and laboratory films, films dealing with a single site or monument, focused synthesis documentaries

on an entire region or on a specific civilization, experimental or ethnographic films, at the beginning of the 2000s, with the digitization of archaeological practice and the reformulation of archaeological discourse by overcoming the post-processual theory, the categories of archaeological documentary became abstract and conceptual: backstage, detective, expository, essay, how-to, and reconstruction. Currently, four categories of archaeological documentary films are used: expository, testimonial, impressionistic and phenomenological.

That is why I located and analysed archival film materials that document the Dacian sites from the Orăștiei Mountains and bring forth a discourse anchored in the specifics of the periods in which they were made. More than the photographs, the footage from the Dacian sites in the mentioned area also presents more of the human aspect of archaeological research, facilitating (visual) acquaintance with some of the researchers. In the archaeological research from the Orăștiei Mountains, cinematographic documentation was not adopted and all identified footage belongs to media institutions in Romania (TVR, ANF). These recordings also bring a dynamic perspective to the archaeological research process, with the cinematic medium absorbing more of the audience's gaze.

Chapter 5. Putting forward *A Theoretical and Practical Guide of archaeological documentary photography*.

The final chapter constitutes a "Practical Guide" for archaeological documentary photography. The digital technique currently used, the typology of photographs according to the subject and basic rules for any archaeological photographic project are presented and analysed. To the extent that one knows well the technical aspects of photography, the focus of endeavours will be greater on the creative and conceptual side. There are enough similarities between photography and archaeology that producing images during and for archaeological research is a natural step for archaeologists. First of all, both environments have developed a visual understanding of the "place", of the landscape perceived as a topographical map of some visual or archaeological elements, in the context of the permanent connections between the place and the possible events/realities that happened there. Attention to detail and how elements are connected to each other, leaving nothing to chance, is another similarity between the archaeologist's eye and the photographer's eye.

On the other hand, we have the process of removing the ballast of things that are irrelevant and they only burden the frame or research. Both fields are part of a documentary

path that ensures the dimension of the debate on the process of documenting entropy, the degradation/ruin of materiality. Both photography and archaeology operate with the tension between *in situ* traces and the phenomenon of relocation, of the loss of visible signs from the archaeological topography of a site, and with how to approach and treat the vestiges and traces of the past. The need to classify, order, typologize things is specific to both environments. So, at the methodological level there are enough similarities to give courage to archaeologists to produce coherent, accurate and correct photographic series, presenting and interpreting them in the broad context of archaeological discourse. The two attributes attached to photography, documentary and archaeological, create the conceptual framework in which we can understand this photographic style, which produces visual documents (subjective and interpretable, which promote a specific language through shapes, colours and composition) inscribed in a coherent and fluid series of images, which can (should) be used in archaeological discursive presentation and argumentation.

At the level of concepts and practices, archaeological documentary photography borrows methodologies and principles, even production techniques, from other currents. The three directions in which archaeological photographs can be classified are:

- 1) excavation photography;
- 2) photography of the artefact;
- 3) archaeological landscape and monument photography.

Each stage of photography has specificities and different ways of being read, therefore interpreted. But there are a few general principles for archaeological documentary photography:

- ensuring the technical character in the execution, which removes the archaeological documentary photograph from the (so-called) artistic area and places it in the documentary area, of the correctly presented document (the artistic-technical differentiation is a false problem, the artistic value being conferred over time and in direct connection with its creator);

- the selection of the subject, as it evokes the photographer's ideas or feelings;

- framing an image as clearly as possible to fully express the subject;

- examining the cut-out frame through the viewfinder in order to organize the shapes as satisfactorily as possible from the right angle and from the optimal distance;

- exposure and immortalization of the image, not a moment sooner or later.

And only with these principles in mind and practiced at length can one achieve technical mastery of photography and think a coherent visual representation of both a site and the activity carried out during systematic research. Documentary photography is direct, engaging photography that gets results if it starts from correctly positioning the subject.

Whether we use analogue or digital technologies, the involvement in the photography process is personal. From the clichés of work frames to photographs-objects (prints) of high material quality, this entire typological spectrum of images will say something about both the captured subject and about the author behind the camera. The visual memory of archaeology still has a lot of content to receive through photography. That is why the study, practice and criticism of archaeological documentary photography are necessary, as training and development premises for researchers in the field.

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