

THE MIDDLE PALAEO LITHIC RESEARCH IN ROMANIA. PAST AND CURRENT ISSUES

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Abstract: This paper presents some new results concerning the Middle Palaeolithic in Romania. Recent research on loess-paleosol sequences and tephra deposits has provided an accurate picture on the geochronology of the Pleistocene. Reliable absolute ages indicate that some Middle Palaeolithic occupations are much older than previously assumed, namely they date back to the Middle Pleistocene. Lithic industries, both coming from old and recent excavations were (re)interpreted from new perspectives, other than cultural-historical ones. The study of fauna still leaves to be desired, as it needs to go beyond mere taxa identification. Many loci that have yielded surface collections of lithics that could belong to the Middle Palaeolithic indicate a great potential for discovering new sites in Romania.

Cuvinte-cheie: Paleolitic Mijlociu, România, geocronologie, datări radiocarbon, arheozoologie, analiză litică, fosile umane

Rezumat: Acest articol prezintă câteva rezultate recente privind cercetarea Paleoliticului Mijlociu din România. Noi cercetări asupra secvențelor de loessuri și paleosoluri, precum și asupra nivelurilor de cenușă vulcanică au contribuit la crearea unei imagini mult mai exacte privind geocronologia Pleistocenului. Noi datări absolute arată că unele situri de Paleolitic Mijlociu sunt mai vechi decât fusese estimat anterior, având vârste din Pleistocenul Mijlociu. Industriile litice provenite atât din săpături vechi cât și recente au fost re/interpretate din noi puncte de vedere, diferite de perspectiva cultural-istorică. Studiile de arheozoologie pentru această perioadă lasă în continuare de dorit, deoarece în multe situații ele constau doar din simple identificări la nivelul speciei. Numeroase locuri în care a fost descoperit material litic la suprafață, atribuibile Paleoliticului Mijlociu indică un mare potențial pentru descoperirea de situri noi din această perioadă.

INTRODUCTION

By its geographical location in the northern Balkans and by the side of the Danube, the territory of present-day Romania has drawn lot of attention of the scientific community, given its resources for a better understanding of the colonization of Europe with Anatomically Modern Humans, as accounted by the fossils from the caves of Oase (Trinkaus *et alii* 2003), Muierii (Soficaru *et alii* 2006) and Cioclovina (Soficaru *et alii* 2007).

However, the general focus of the international community on the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic in this region has somehow blurred important issues regarding the Middle Palaeolithic (MP) state of affairs. Therefore, I intend to provide an updated synthesis on the MP research in Romania, presenting the current situation regarding the main MP sites, geochronological framework, absolute ages, lithic industries, hominin fossil evidence, and archaeozoology.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND CURRENT SITUATION

The first reports on Pleistocene fauna were made by palaeontologists and geologists starting with the second half of the 19th century. In the first half of the 20th century, archaeologists and palaeontologists reported lithic

collections coming from caves and open-air sites, both on the surface and in exposed profiles, some of them heralding MP sites that were subsequently excavated, others just signalling potential sites (Păunescu 1989).

Most of the research on the MP was carried out by Romanian archaeologists after the Second World War and resulted in a total of ca. 20 investigated sites, both in caves and in open-air loess environments; they mainly concentrate in northwestern Romania, in the Carpathians, on the river Prut and in southeastern Romania (Fig. 1). The results were presented in site monographs (Cârciumaru 2000; Cârciumaru *et alii* 2008a; Păunescu 1993) and regional monographs and syntheses (Anghelinu 1998; Bitiri 1972; Cârciumaru 1999; Cârciumaru *et alii* 2010; Dumitrescu *et alii* 1983; Mertens 1996; Mogoșanu 1978; Păunescu 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2001), as well as in numerous academic papers.

The most important MP sites constitute a very heterogeneous lot: some only feature a handful of lithics, while others have yielded thousands lithics, fauna and combustion features, with Ripiceni – Izvor championing the MP sites in Romania. Some assemblages were assigned to the MP solely on typological grounds, as lithics were only found on the surface. Therefore, differences lie not only in the types and size of archaeological finds, but also within the context of discovery (Table 1).