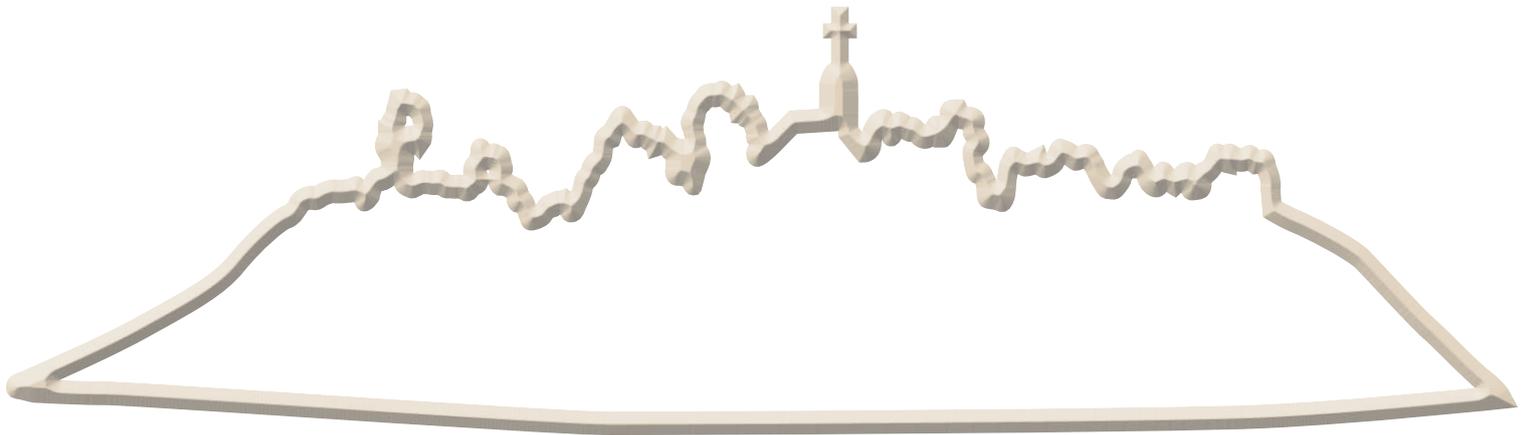


What is Măgura?



What is Măgura? And who do we think we are?

By Steve Mills & Douglass Bailey



When we first went to Măgura in 1998, as western European team-members of the Southern Romania Archaeological Project (SRAP), we did not know what to expect. We were equipped with archaeological theories, methodologies and equipment; we had an academic agenda, had secured research funding and obtained all the relevant permits and so were prepared for fieldwork, as prepared as we could be in that first season. But we had no knowledge, experience or expertise that could have prepared us for the village, its people, history, politics and daily routines. We came for the archaeology not for the village and with hindsight that reflects some short-sightedness on our part. The same cannot be said of our collaborators from the Teleorman County Museum; they have worked with people from the village for many years and have built up strong relationships with them. Thus the museum staff became the mediators between the village and the foreign archaeologists. Consequently, and with the exception of the project directors, the team were largely shielded from the necessity of engaging and negotiating with people from the village and thereby freed to get on with the archaeological research. This was not an arrangement we had requested, although it certainly helped, but it is how it worked out.

Over the intervening 12 years, however, the situation has transformed significantly. In returning every year for continued fieldwork we have gradually thrown off our protective shield, met and worked with many people from the village, enjoyed each other's company, overcome language barriers and slowly built up a relationship with many based on friendship and trust. We have been welcomed into the village and done our best to reciprocate where we can. But that does not mean that we have done nearly enough. We have only ever visited Măgura, we have only ever intervened; we are not from, nor part of, Măgura. We remain transitory interlocutors on the periphery.





When we first started the Măgura Past and Present project in 2008, as archaeologists and artists of various kinds, we did not know what to expect. This was a project in which none of the participants had any previous experience. The research aim of the wider EU-funded Art-Landscape Transformations project was to use art (understood in a broad sense) to transform a selection of landscapes within Europe, with a particular emphasis on local heritage, for the benefit and welfare of rural communities. Ten partners were involved in the project (from Ireland, France, Latvia, Portugal, Sardinia, Spain and the UK) of which the Cardiff University Măgura Past and Present project was one. But how do you successfully blend art and archaeology on the one hand, and in a way that is relevant, accessible and meaningful to the people of Măgura on the other? Who gets what from such an endeavour? Who are we doing this for? What are the priorities? What will be the outputs? Who is the audience? What is, and who is in, the community with whom we seek to engage? And, what is Măgura? What are the boundaries (spatial and temporal)? How do we define it? Does it require defining? What aspects of Măgura do we work with? As scientists we are used to, and safe in, working within (or challenging) defined frameworks and clearly defined study areas. If our framework (or study area) is now loosely Măgura, what does that mean?



None of these questions have ready or easy answers, but we had an opportunity with this new project to at least begin to explore some of the possibilities. Many of these issues grew from our developing relationship with, and understanding of, the village and its surrounding archaeology and landscape, but that we had not been able to address as part of the SRAP. We were excited at having this opportunity.

From the start, this project has begged the question, who are 'we'? Those who are part of the group 'we' has changed in tandem with the lifetime of the project as it has evolved and transformed. We has included at various times and in various combinations (and in no specific order): the museum staff, archaeologists, scientists and artists; the Mayor; the school director, teachers and school children; the man who delivered the wood for the pit-firing event; the people passing by and watching the workshops; the people who read the newspaper reports and watched the TV news bulletins; the hotel manager and staff; the conference delegates; the graphic illustrator who compiled this book; the web master; the financial support team and the auditor; the other Art-Landscape Transformations project partners; and the unknown audiences of our exhibitions, film, music, books and website. So it has become difficult to determine who 'we' are at any given time during this project; the membership has always been fluid.

So, it would seem, we have a project without robust subject parameters, without rigidly defined spatial or temporal boundaries and without a defined team. An interesting, certainly flexible, if somewhat challenging, remit!





The 'we' originally cast as principal investigators came up with a working outline at the start of the project, an excerpt of which follows.

“The interventions will take place in the prehistoric and historic landscapes of the village of Măgura and in the neighbouring valley of the Teleorman River in southern Romania. Participants will come from the local village, the regional and national capitals (Alexandria and București), and other member states (France, England, Wales). The subagenda for the intervention is to question the political and historical power that people commonly ascribe to historic (and prehistoric) monuments, and to re-assert the value and power of events and activities of a more transitory and temporary nature. The aim is to provide contexts in which the inhabitants of a rural village in southern Romania can become authors, artists, and actors within the creations of their own histories while working in collaboration with personnel from the county museum and from foreign universities. The interventive acts will relocate and democratise the authority of making history and of authoring representations. Once taken from the formal institutions of knowledge (the museums, academies, universities) and the institutional authorities (professors, experts, specialists, foreigners), authority will be given to the local inhabitants of the village, with particular empowering of the village children.



In standard institutional terms, the village's (pre)historic identity rested primarily on the presence of pre/proto/early-historic monuments: early Neolithic pit-hut sites from the Criș, Dudești and Vădastra Cultures (6000-5000 BC); a late Neolithic settlement tell of the Gumelnița Culture (4800-3800 BC); and Iron Age and Roman phase burial mounds. Unacceptably, previous work carried out by west European teams on the prehistory of the village and surrounding landscape had excluded the local people from full participation in the research projects: workers were hired to do manual labour (shovelling, sifting, guarding the excavation sites), or land owners were paid subsidies for the loss of crops that would have been grown on land under excavation.

The interventions' stance is to discard the regularly assumed evolutionary and developmental importance of the major technological, economic and political advances (or as some wish to term them the revolutions). Thus the interventions do not assign any significance to the transition from gathering to producing food (the basis for the Neolithic revolution at c. 6000 BC in temperate Europe), or to the emergence of metal working (of copper, gold and then bronze and finally iron), or to the establishment of urban centres, or even to the changes in national political philosophy (from totalitarian socialist, to communist, to post-communist, to European Unionist). The Măgura interventions set to one side these large-scale trends, and focus instead on the local, the particular, and the specific.

The critical stance is that the village only has one moment of history and that moment is today. If the village has a past then that past can only be recognised by us living and working in the present, thinking about and studying objects, finds, distributions of activities that we hold (or reconstruct) in the present. The decision to focus on the singularity of time at present and to work at the level of the particular, all fashion the work of the Măgura interventions so that they can seek out, engage, and evoke the small-scale specifics of life and intentionally ignore the seamless, but false, veneer of coarse-scaled understandings of life in Romania at the start of the twenty-first century.



By taking this position on the contemporary past of Măgura, the interventions demand the juxtapositioning of diverse and separate representations, images, objects, media, and material or immaterial experiences. The different actions of the Măgura interventions swirl around a common process: transformation. Whether it is the transformation of a raw material (such as flint or clay) into a tool or a pot, or whether it is the transformation of the real-time reality of a dirt road in the village via moving digital images, the commonality rests in the realisation that all of the interventions' actions examine, engage, or create transformative processes." (Bailey and Mills 2007, unpublished project notes).

To what extent are these inspiring and well intentioned (though extra-academy) aspirations relevant or appealing? Some of us who are involved with the project are academics and these are the kinds of issues we wrestle with and argue around; they provide the bait for us to offer our academic teeth. But are we (the academics) using this opportunity as a means of furthering our research agendas and of patting ourselves on the back in the process? This kind of project seems to tick the right boxes in terms of impact and engagement. After all, we have spent many years doing our research and now we find ourselves with an opportunity to 'give something back' and to explore new academic territory in the process. Of course, all of this is true, how could it be otherwise? There is nothing that needs to be defended.



With that said, we are faced with an important question. As academics, are we capable of thinking and working outside of our research agendas, as is implicated in the above proposal; can we integrate ourselves sufficiently to be able get to the local, the particular and the commonplace? It would seem that that is what is required and what we are advocating. A difficult request. Perhaps with hindsight, having now completed this project, this is not always possible. Part of the problem is in the proposal itself: we are re-acting. We have created something that needs to be confronted, changed and transformed and, consequently, we can only ever leave ourselves with the option to intervene rather than to integrate. Academia is entrenched in a situation where there is a requirement to demonstrate 'impact and engagement'; we have to continuously create, and ingratiate ourselves in, that 'we' with whom we wish to work. This is in part a consequence of communication and dissemination; we do not speak the right language for much of the time. Being part of 'we' is not a given, it has to be continuously negotiated and it must be something we earn. This may be a situation of our own making; it may not be. But if it is, it is certainly not limited to academics. Importantly, how much of this resonates in the thinking, aspirations and lives of the people of Măgura? That is an issue that, perhaps, none of us are yet ready, qualified, or experienced enough to truly engage. This project has certainly made us face these issues head on, even if we have not yet found satisfactory resolutions to them.





At various stages in the past, and during the lifetime of this project, we 'foreign' archaeologists, scientists and artists have faced accusations of having a colonialist attitude to our research; going to Romania, doing our work and then leaving, without leaving very much. To an extent there is some truth in this, but only if we should be considered guilty for having an interest in the archaeology of southern Romania, of being fortunate enough to be in a position to secure funding and adhering to the funding remit, and of showing a willingness to collaborate with Romanian institutions of various kinds. If we are to transcend modern political, ideological and physical boundaries in our research (as discussed above), and if we try to avoid imposing similar boundaries, knowingly or otherwise, on our interpretations of the past, then international collaboration of the kind we have been pursuing is essential. But as already acknowledged, we can always do more to make participation more inclusive and outputs more accessible and the Măgura Past and Present project has enabled us, collectively, to work towards achieving this.



Throughout, the project has demanded considerable negotiation and compromise on the part of all involved. The extent to which different participants have been able to contribute towards project activities and outputs has varied for reasons to do with expertise, access to resources, location and time. And, out of necessity, some have been organisers and others participants. With co-operation and support from the Mayor, the school Director and priests in the village, responsibility for the project workshops, conferences, exhibitions, and the books, film, website and music, lay with the museum staff, archaeologists and artists. This is not to suggest that, without us, the people in the village could not achieve all of these themselves if they had the necessary resources and expertise. Through this project we hope that there has been some transfer of knowledge and enthusiasm that will enable and incentivise more people in the village to pursue similar kinds of activities in the future. With respect to this book in particular, all essays have been written in English by the archaeologists and artists; that is by the interveners and not by people from the village. This is deliberate to enable us, the interveners, to explore the concept of interventions and to reflect on the results and implications of our having intervened. We acknowledge, however, that this book would likely be a more balanced reflection of the project as a whole if it included an equal range of contributions by people from the village. To rectify this deficiency, a future book, or similar output that mirrors this one, could be written in the Romanian language and produced by people from the village presenting their experiences of the project, and views of its implications and consequences. We hope to be able to facilitate this in part by inviting people from the village to contribute, in ways of their choosing, to the future bi-lingual project website.





Referring back to our working proposal above, how much of its agenda have we been able to achieve? We would like to think we have come some way during this project in transcending boundaries, and in empowering people from the village to be able to engage in processes of the interpretation, creation, and authorship of their heritage. We deliberately choose not to label this as progress because it is an ongoing transformative process, and because, really, it should have started many years ago. If nothing else, there has been some blurring of divisions between the categories of archaeology and art, of academics/specialists and villagers, and of locals and outsiders. Teamwork of various kinds has resulted in workshops, conferences, exhibitions, books, a film, music and a website. We leave it to the reader to decide whether, combined, this range of activities and outputs can be considered a success.

We cannot be certain, but it seems to us (authors) unlikely, that an international, collaborative project of this nature would have succeeded in Măgura ten years ago. Previous work in and around the village by the Teleorman County Museum, the National Historical Museum of Romania and then by the SRAP paved the way, establishing strong working relations and, more importantly, instilling a sense of trust. The timing of the Art-Landscape Transformations project was fortuitous in that it was at about the right time, for all concerned, to begin exploring opportunities for wider participation, for re-negotiating and consolidating collaboration, and for knowledge transfer.

So what is Măgura? And who do we think we are? It is probably not possible to answer these simple questions. Perhaps it is not sensible to forward them as questions. If there are answers they are some way off in the future and not to be found in this book. We have learnt a lot through our workshops, conferences, exhibitions and other activities. Whether that learning is about the village, its archaeology or about art, or is more to do with the ideas, application and outputs of this project (or indeed if, in the end it is only about us), is an ongoing discussion.

Regardless of what we may, or may not, have 'revealed' about Măgura, we have all intervened in various ways into the project Măgura Past and Present. Some of those interventions are presented in this book, and we invite you, the reader, to now intervene and dwell on what is Măgura.





