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## NOTE ȘI DISCUȚII

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# A political chronicle of Romanian archaeological exhibitions: the case of the "Cucuteni civilization"<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The present text refers to the main form of communication between the archaeological world and laypersons in Romania, namely the exhibitions. Taking as a case study the "Cucuteni civilization", I will show that many exhibitions organized in communist and post-communist Romania have pinned a more or less explicit political message to the Cucuteni material, in order to serve the dominant ideologies of their respective times.*

**Rezumat:** *Textul de față se referă la principala formă de comunicare în România dintre mediul arheologic și cel al nespecialiștilor, și anume expozițiile. Luând ca studiu de caz „civilizația Cucuteni”, voi arăta că, în multe dintre expozițiile organizate în România comunistă și postcomunistă, materialele Cucuteni le-a fost atașat un mesaj politic mai mult sau mai puțin explicit, ce servea ideologiilor dominante de la un moment dat.*

**Keywords:** *Archaeological exhibitions, "Cucuteni civilization", dominant ideologies.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Expoziții arheologice, „civilizația Cucuteni”, ideologii dominante.*

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### ◆ Foreword

In Romania, exhibitions have been the main form of communication between the archaeological world and laypersons. Over time, a special place in such exhibitions was given to items attributed to what is called the "Cucuteni culture". After 1989 the "Cucuteni culture" became a country brand, as proven by the Government's decision to declare 2008 the "Year of the Cucuteni Civilization" (L. Stratulat *et alii* 2008, p. 9) and by the fact that most of the international exhibitions related to the (E)Neolithic between 1990-2010 focused exclusively on the "Cucuteni culture" (compare D. Popovici, Y. Rialland 1996; C.-M. Mantu *et alii* 1997; I. Mareș 2008; M. Wulschleger 2008; L. Stratulat *et alii* 2008; 2009; D.W. Anthony 2010; see also C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009, p. 25; L. Stratulat *et alii* 2013, p. 25-26). The archaeological literature reveals that the "Cucuteni culture", the research of which begun during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the most intensively researched prehistoric "civilizations" (*e.g.* C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009, p. 23). The achievements mentioned in relation to the "Cucuteni culture" include a considerable number of excavations, numerous published books and articles, an international research center dedicated to this "culture" in Piatra Neamț, the archaeological park at Cucuteni, as well as exhibitions and their respective catalogues (C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009, p. 23-25; L. Stratulat *et alii* 2013, p. 19-26). Such narrative, which renders the image of a continuously improving knowledge of the "Cucuteni culture", pictures the exhibitions and the related texts as means of disseminating results of objective scientific research. In opposition to this image, I will show here, using the example of a series of texts written for the so-called "public at large", that many exhibitions have pinned a more or less explicit political message to the Cucuteni material, in order to serve the dominant ideologies of their respective times.

### ◆ Exhibitions during the communist period

In 1949, two years after the official establishment of the communist regime in Romania, the Institute of History and Philosophy of the Academy of the People's Republic of Romania – the Ancient

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian version of this text has been included in R.-Al. Dragoman, S. Oanță-Marghitu, *Arheologie și politică în România*, Bibliotheca Marmatia 4, Baia Mare, 2013, Editura Eurotip.

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History Department and the National Museum of Antiquities organized an exhibition of the archaeological research of that year, simply entitled *Expoziția Arheologică. Rezultatele săpăturilor arheologice din 1949 în Republica Populară Română* (Archaeological Exhibition. The results of the 1949 archaeological excavations in the People's Republic of Romania) (*Expoziția* 1949) (fig. 1). The exhibited items were organized chronologically and the displays and halls were numbered, so that "the public [...] could form an idea about the development of the material culture of human society across our country, throughout the fundamental stages of development in the course of ancient history [...]" (*ibidem*, p. 3). The "fundamental stages" are those defined by Friedrich Engels: (1) "primitive communism", subdivided into "savagery" and "barbarism"; (2) "slave society"; and (3) the stage of "development of the feudal mode of production" (*ibidem*, p. 3-4). Cucuteni items were assigned to the "more advanced phase of the lower stage of "barbarism" (*ibidem*, pp. 8 and 11). The terminology had been recently imported to the professional vocabulary, following the political changes after 1945. Older terms, such as "Neolithic", were subsumed into the "stages". The new language remodelled the prehistoric past according to the views of the founders of the communist ideology and, through a circular logic, at the same time contributed to confirming said views.

The following year, the same institution organized a new exhibition by the same criteria (*Expoziția* 1950). This exhibition gave particular attention to the Cucuteni settlement excavations at Hăbășești, to which it dedicated an entire hall with four display cases, as the first Neolithic site in Romania to have been entirely excavated (fig. 2). According to the exhibition booklet, this exhaustive research was the merit "of using methods applied in Soviet archaeology, of well thought planning and of the material resources available to the site" (*ibidem*, p. 5). By emphasizing this aspect, which was partly true (at least as regards funding and organization), the 1950 exhibition inoculated to visitors the idea that the communist regime, following the Soviet model, created better working and living conditions than the bourgeois society.

The exhibition organized in 1951 also presented the excavation of a series of Cucuteni settlements (Larga Jijia, Trușești, Corlăteni, Traian) according to F. Engels's stages, and thus attributed them to the "primitive communism stage", "middle stage of barbarism" (*Expoziția* 1952). The fact that items from the same site, Trușești, that belonged to different chronological stages of the "Cucuteni culture" (A and B) were exhibited in different halls shows the extent of the efforts to keep in line with the evolutionism outlined in a "classic" Marxist-Leninist text (*ibidem*, p. 12 and 15).

One year later, the exhibition took a more "didactic" turn, displaying panels with pictures of the life of the inhabitants of researched areas, as well as panels of items from various ages and their use (*Expoziția* 1953, p. 3). One such panel was made for the "painted pottery culture"/Cucuteni, and entitled "Types of Neolithic tools and their use" (*ibidem*, p. 16/fig. 5) (fig. 3). In the 1952 exhibition, an entire hall was dedicated to Cucuteni material from the excavations at Trușești and Traian, assigned to the "Primitive communism stage. Neolithic Age". The Cucuteni site excavations were inserted into a narrative that reiterated the superior working conditions created by the communist regime and the related research progress, as evidenced by a panel (fig. 4) described as follows in the exhibition booklet:

"a comparative panel presents the unprecedented progress of archaeological research in the PRR [People's Republic of Romania] under popular democracy as opposed to during the bourgeois regime. While in 1901-1944 such research amassed an annual average of only 4,000 working days, during the last four years (1949-1952), since research has been conducted under the leadership of the Academy of the People's Republic of Romania, it has reached an annual average of over 30,000 working days." (*ibidem*, p. 34)

The comparative panel also mentioned that the average number of working days in archaeological research had increased by 750% during a mere four years of the new communist regime (*ibidem*, p. 35/fig. 14).

In summary, during the period 1949-1952, the archaeological materials, including those of Cucuteni, were manipulated in order to build and promote the official communist view of the ancient past.

A major change in the museum policy during the communist period was the establishment of the History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1972 (fig. 5). In accordance with the directives of the Communist Party, history museums in general were called to "take part in a grand accomplishment: building a new man with a new conscience, a creator of the multilaterally developed

socialist society" (*Muzeul* 1973, p. 5). The new history museum was assigned preeminently the same mission:

"Hosting in Bucharest important vestiges of the history of human society throughout the country, the History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania enriched the national museum network with an institution that is necessary for creating new citizens, the builders of socialism and communism." (L. Ștefănescu 1973, p. 304)

Some of the factors that established the concept were "unitary presentation", "continuity of the historical phenomenon" and "the educational and pedagogical nature of the core exhibition" (F. Georgescu 1972, p. 389). Original items considered to be "representative for the history of human society on the territory of the Socialist Republic of Romania" were brought to the museum (*ibidem*, p. 389). The Cucuteni items were categorized as "special exhibits" and were therefore exhibited separately in a room in the "ancient history department" (V. Leahu 1972, p. 406). The ancient history department was meant to "materialize the theses of Marxist-Leninist historiography as pertaining to our country's history" and at the same time aimed to "demonstrate the Carpathian-Danubian populations' extraordinary capability to develop – in the framework of the entire prehistoric human population – a most original and advanced culture" (*ibidem*, p. 403-404). Thus, in presenting the ancient past to the public, the Party discourse merged together with nationalism. Moreover, the halls dedicated to the "primitive communism" were the first episode of a historical narrative that peaked in the rooms dedicated to the socialist era and the Ninth Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (*i.e.* the Ceaușescu regime), included among "crucial events and important historical moments" (G. Sarafolean 1972, p. 419). The communist-nationalist rhetoric is obvious in the speech attributed to the Party leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, at the museum inauguration:

"I have visited with great interest the History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania, inaugurated today, 8 May 1972; its testimonies suggestively evoke the Romanian people's millennial history, material and spiritual culture, and the tradition of the Romanian people's and other nationalities' common struggle for social liberation and national independence. The exhibits truthfully render the heroic struggle of the working class under the leadership of the Romanian Communist Party to gain political power, the triumph of socialism on Romanian land, and the Romanian people's contribution to human civilization. We believe that through these wonderful testimonies of the glorious history of our nation, the Museum will be an effective means of patriotic, internationalist education for the young generation and for all working people in our country." (Nicolae Ceaușescu quoted in *Deschiderea* 1972, p. 293)

Although the organizers claimed that the exhibition rendered history "realistically and objectively" (G. Sarafolean 1972, p. 418), the exhibited items were in fact manipulated to provide a material dimension to the official narrative.

### ◆ Exhibitions during the post-communist period

After the fall of the communist regime in Romania (1989), the Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum held in 1997 an exhibition dedicated exclusively to the "Cucuteni culture" (fig. 6). It is relevant, in terms of political content, that the exhibition was organized under the patronage of the Romanian Ministry of Culture, the Romanian Academy and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture in the year that Thessaloniki was European Cultural Capital. The same year, Romania had had a change of political regime, when a political alliance with a determined pro Euro-Atlantic orientation came to power after the elections. This choice of exhibition context is a symbolic mark of the country's political commitment to "Europe", associated with the West and the European Union. This is proven by including "Europe" in the title of the exhibition catalogue: *Cucuteni. The Last Great Chalcolithic Civilization of Europe* (C.-M. Mantu *et alii* 1997). In the short introduction by the Romanian Minister of Culture at the time, the words "Europe" and "European" appear no less than five times (I. Caramitru 1997, p. 11). The author places the "Cucuteni culture" "at the top of prehistoric Europe's chart" and describes it as one of the "pillars" of "Old Europe" and as "a brilliant culture of Old Europe" (*ibidem*). Moreover, the Greek Minister of Culture's text stated that the exhibition would bring to the attention of "Europe" another stage of the "historical progress of mankind" (E. Venizelos 1997, p. 11). Thus, the

political message of the exhibition was that, regardless how its present was defined, Romania was moving towards “Europe” with its “brilliant” past, “European” since prehistoric times.

Shortly after Romania’s accession to the European Union on 1 January 2007, another international exhibition, dedicated to the (E)Neolithic in Romania, was organized at the Historisches Museum in Olten, Switzerland, in 2008 (M. Wulschleger 2008). The event, described as “the largest Romanian archaeological exhibition ever held abroad” and “one of the five major exhibitions of 2008 in the entire world” (Lazăr Comanescu, in M. Wulschleger 2008, p. 68), took place under the patronage of Romania’s Prime Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture and Cults. In this exhibition, entitled *Steinzeitkunst. Frühe Kulturen aus Rumänien*, the items belonging to the “Cucuteni civilization” held an important place. In the catalogue, *Neolithic art in Romania* (M. Wulschleger 2008) (fig. 7), the exhibited items were accompanied by texts written by various political and cultural personalities from Romania, including archaeologists, albeit not specialized in the (E)Neolithic. Apart from some exceptions (e.g. Cristian Mungiu, in M. Wulschleger 2008, p. 89), many of these texts contained propagandistic statements, true “hymns” praising the European Union (for a critique see also Al. Dragoman 2009). In the main text – written by specialists in the (E)Neolithic field, unlike the other texts – the archaeological data was ideologically manipulated. One example would be the Cucuteni items themselves. The presence of the so-called “type C” ceramics, shell-tempered and with corded decorations, in Cucuteni settlements with painted ceramic – as early as stage A – was interpreted by the authors as the result of the accession of allogeneic and ethnically diverse populations to the area inhabited by the Cucuteni communities, sharing the area for a long time; in the end, due to the increasing number of the newcomers, the “Cucuteni culture” gave birth to new cultural features (F. Draşovean, D. Popovici 2008, p. 34-35). This whole scenario was enhanced by a modernist sounding title – “living together, a cultural model” (*ibidem*, p. 34) – which suggested a similarity between the alleged communities that crafted the “type C” ceramics and the immigrants in Western Europe nowadays: the “type C” ceramic communities gradually entered the Cucuteni territory, their numbers increased, and they inhabited the area for a long time together with the Cucuteni population, which was more advanced both materially and technologically (e.g. ceramic of much better quality), thus contributing to developing the new cultural models that would shape the early Bronze Age. What this theory fails to mention, however, is that “type C” pottery seems to have been a functional category, used for example to make salt, rather than the contribution of a different population (R. Munteanu, D. Garvăn 2008).

The exhibition in Olten fostered the publishing of another book for the “public at large”. Several Romanian archaeologists thought that the book released during the exhibition in Olten failed to fully capitalize on the information on Romania’s prehistory, and dedicated to the “Cucuteni culture” a special book entitled *Cucuteni: a great civilization of the prehistoric world* (C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009) (fig. 8). However, statements serving the current dominant ideologies could be found in this book as well, namely the idea that the archaeological items belonging to institutions’ collections might essentially benefit the Romanian people’s European re-integration (*ibidem*, p. 6).

Besides Eurocentric discourses, the catalogues of post-1989 exhibitions contain elements that might be classified as nationalist. For example, while before the fall of the communist regime Cucuteni-type findings from Bessarabia were assigned to the “Trypillia culture”, named after a town in Ukraine, and included in chronologies developed by Soviet archaeologists, later on some exhibition catalogues such as *Cucuteni – magia ceramicii* (*Cucuteni – the magic of pottery*) (fig. 9) stated that “within the great painted pottery complex there are two major regional areas, Ariuşd-Cucuteni and Trypillia, and the conventional dividing line is not the Prut river, as was thought earlier, but rather the Dniester” (L. Stratulat, S. Ţurcanu 2009b, p. 16; emphasis in the original). Despite using the word “conventional”, the fact that a part of the text is emphasized proves that the authors meant to highlight to the reader that particular information. One way the message might be understood is that Bessarabia belonged to the Cucuteni area, and therefore to Romania. Moreover, keeping in mind that the exhibition was the result of a project financed by the European Union within the Neighbourhood Programme Romania – Republic of Moldova, we note that the introductory text also includes the following statement: “Good neighbourly relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, especially in the cross-border area, which resulted in joint economic, social and cultural projects, appear to be necessarily a priority, despite *some temporary political constraints*” (L. Stratulat, S. Ţurcanu 2009a, p. 9-10; emphasis mine). In order to not be misunderstood I should add that I myself support Romania’s union with Bessarabia, although I believe it is an issue on which Moldovans should decide for themselves; I do however find that manipulating archaeological data for current political purposes is a harmful exercise. The archaeological approach to the present should be a direct one,

based on a research of the recent or contemporary past and not of the ancient past. As regards the specific case of Cucuteni-Trypillia materials, I support extending the co-operation to all institutions of all countries that have collections and a tradition of research of such items, that is, not only to the Republic of Moldova but to Ukraine, the Russian Federation and Poland as well. A first example would be the exhibition held at the Vatican in 2008 (fig. 10), which exhibited items from Cucuteni-Trypillia sites from three countries: Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (L. Stratulat *et alii* 2008; on the political aspects of this exhibition, see R. Dumitrescu 2011).

In the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Bucharest Museum (fig. 11) some Eurocentric references appear alongside nationalist ones. The word "European" is used in the title, while the introductory text mentions that national values are freely presented "within a spiritual dialog of reunited Europe" (L. Stratulat *et alii* 2013, p. 9). In the same introductory chapter, the "Cucuteni culture" is connected to the present "cultural and national identity":

"The public targeted by this project is represented by the youth (14-35 years old) who, generally, have the tendency of appropriating easily 'imported' values, due to the context created by the accelerated globalization process which, within a medium and long-term, may result into the loss of cultural and national identity. We want that, through this project, cultural values, in this case of prehistoric archaeology, create a strong impact on the youth whose interest towards their own culture, history and art, shall be, hopefully, stimulated and educated." (*ibidem*, p. 14)

This discourse is problematic, as it juxtaposes elements that are politically incompatible: on the one hand, it uses keywords such as "European", thus signalling obedience towards Eurocentric policies, and on the other hand it laments the loss of national identity as a result of globalization promoted by the same policies. The end result is the annexation of the prehistoric past ("Cucuteni culture") to entirely unrelated political constructs – the Romanian nation and united Europe. Such texts do not pose an (absolutely necessary) opposition to globalization and uniformization, but rather legitimize them.

### ◆ Afterword

The writings on the history of the "Cucuteni culture" research always presented achievements of all sorts, but never mentioned the political uses of material culture. Some archaeologists have included in their messages to the "general public" features that agree with the dominant political ideologies of one time or another, thus contributing to legitimizing them. Instead of prompting reflexivity, critical thinking and contemplation, the organizers of the exhibitions in question have adopted and disseminated the discourse of "the powers that be". It should also be noted that the people who produced the beautiful Cucuteni items are tacitly mobilized to meet the current political and ideological agenda. Unfortunately, the archaeologists' professional endeavour to approach the present seems to be limited to including politically correct statements in their writings, rather than an archaeological perspective of the present.

### ◆ Acknowledgements

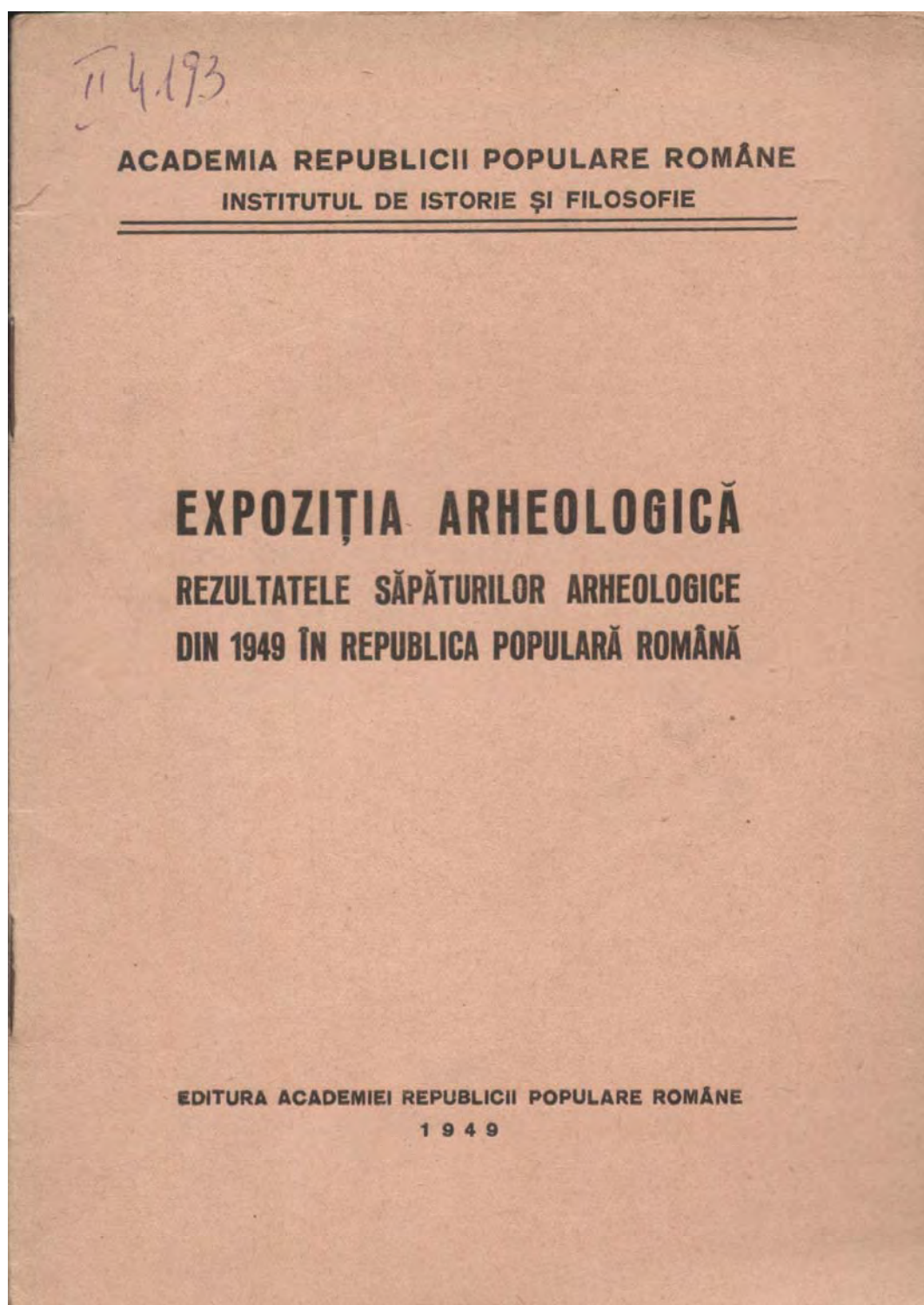
I wish to thank Sorin Oanță-Marghitu for his comments on this text, Tiberiu Vasilescu for his contribution to the illustration and Maria Krause for the English translation.

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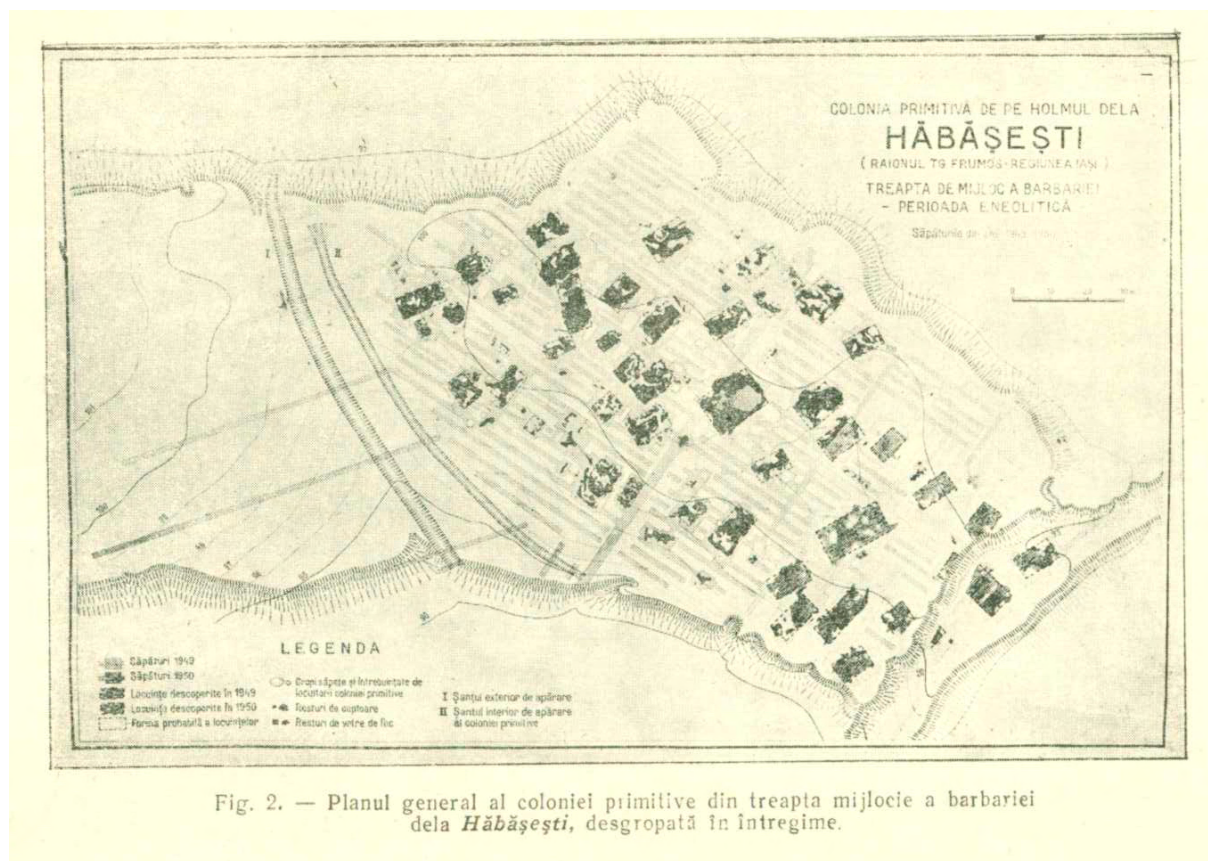
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**Fig. 1.** Cover of the booklet of the 1949 *Archaeological Exhibition*, Bucharest (after *Expoziția 1949*).  
Coperta broșurii dedicate *Expoziției Arheologice* din 1949, București (după *Expoziția 1949*).





**Fig. 2.** Hăbășești excavation plan, as published in the booklet of the 1950 *Archaeological Exhibition*, Bucharest (after *Expoziția 1950*, p. 15/fig. 2).  
Planul săpăturilor de la Hăbășești publicat în broșura dedicată *Expoziției Arheologice* din 1950, București (după *Expoziția 1950*, p. 15/fig. 2).

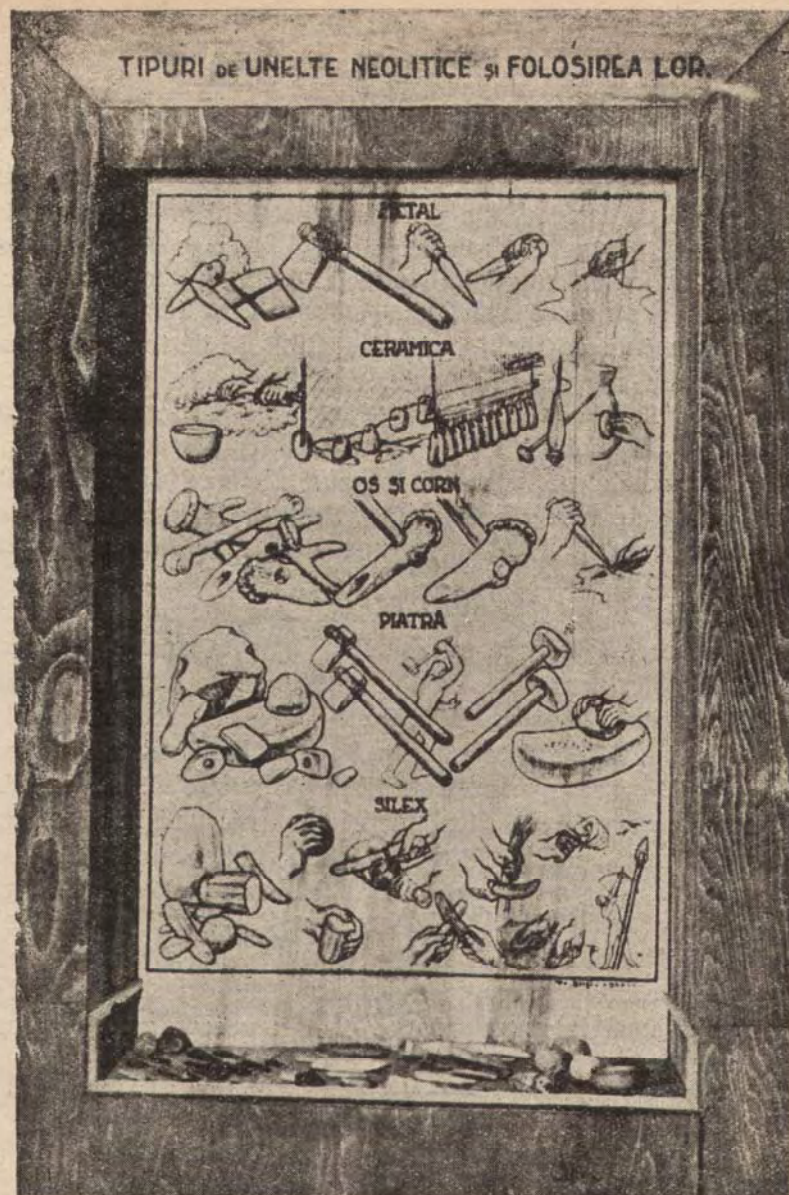


Fig. 5. — Unelte din cultura ceramică pictată (neolitic) și felul lor de folosire

**Fig. 3.** Panel displaying "painted pottery culture"/Cucuteni items and their use, as published in the booklet of the 1952 *Archaeological Exhibition*, Bucharest (after *Expoziția* 1953, p. 16/fig. 5).  
Panou cu obiecte din „cultura ceramică pictată”/Cucuteni și maniera lor de utilizare – publicat în broșura dedicată *Expoziției Arheologice* din 1952, București (după *Expoziția* 1953, p. 16/fig. 5).





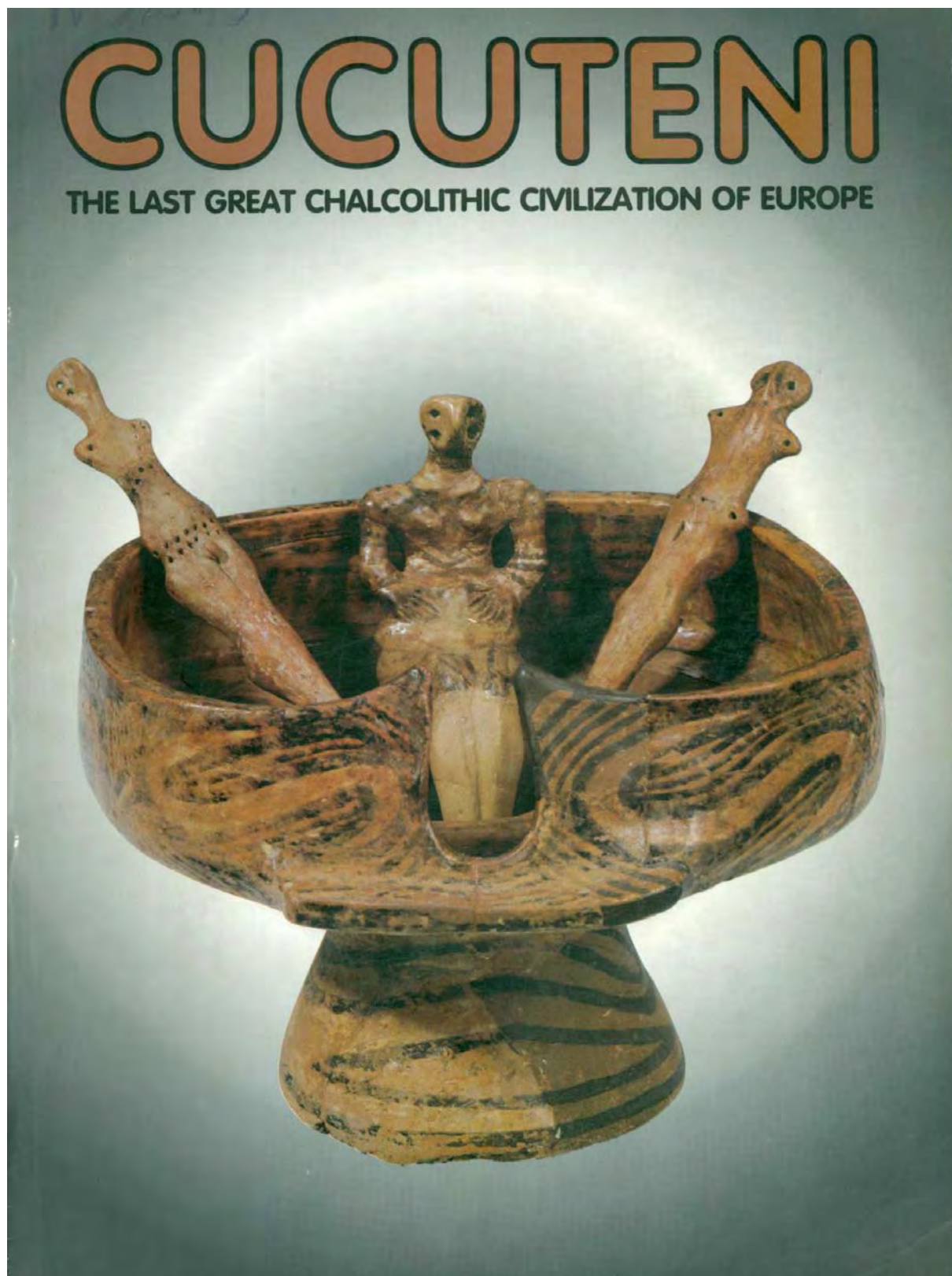
**Fig. 4.** Comparative panel, as published in the booklet of the 1952 *Archaeological Exhibition*, Bucharest (after *Expoziția* 1953, p. 35/fig. 14).

Panou comparativ publicat în broșura dedicată *Expoziției Arheologice* din 1952, București (după *Expoziția* 1953, p. 35/fig. 14).



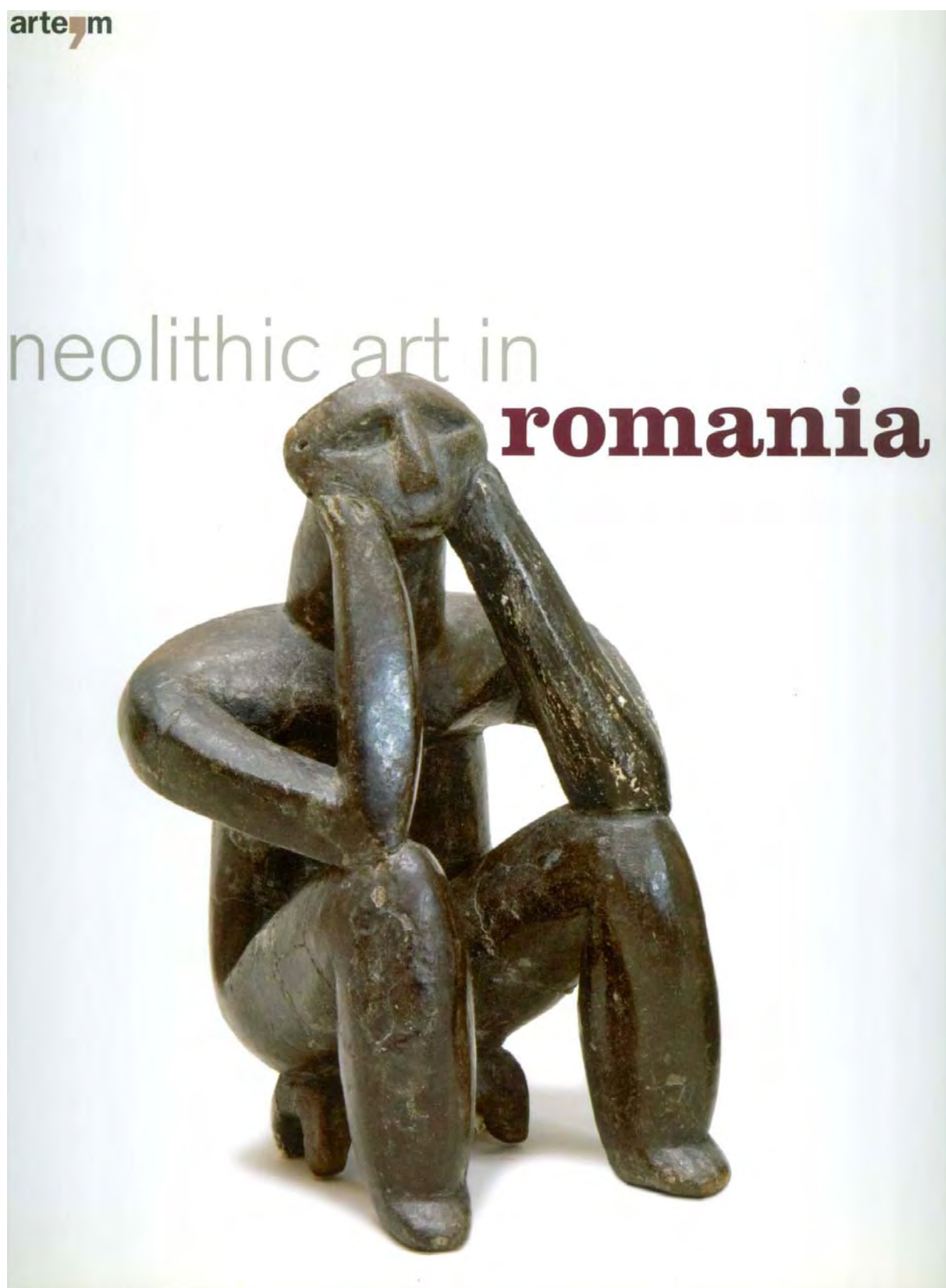
**Fig. 5.** Room dedicated to the Neolithic at the History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest (after V. Leahu 1972, p. 404).

Sală dedicată neoliticului în cadrul Muzeului de Istorie al Republicii Socialiste România, București (după V. Leahu 1972, p. 404).

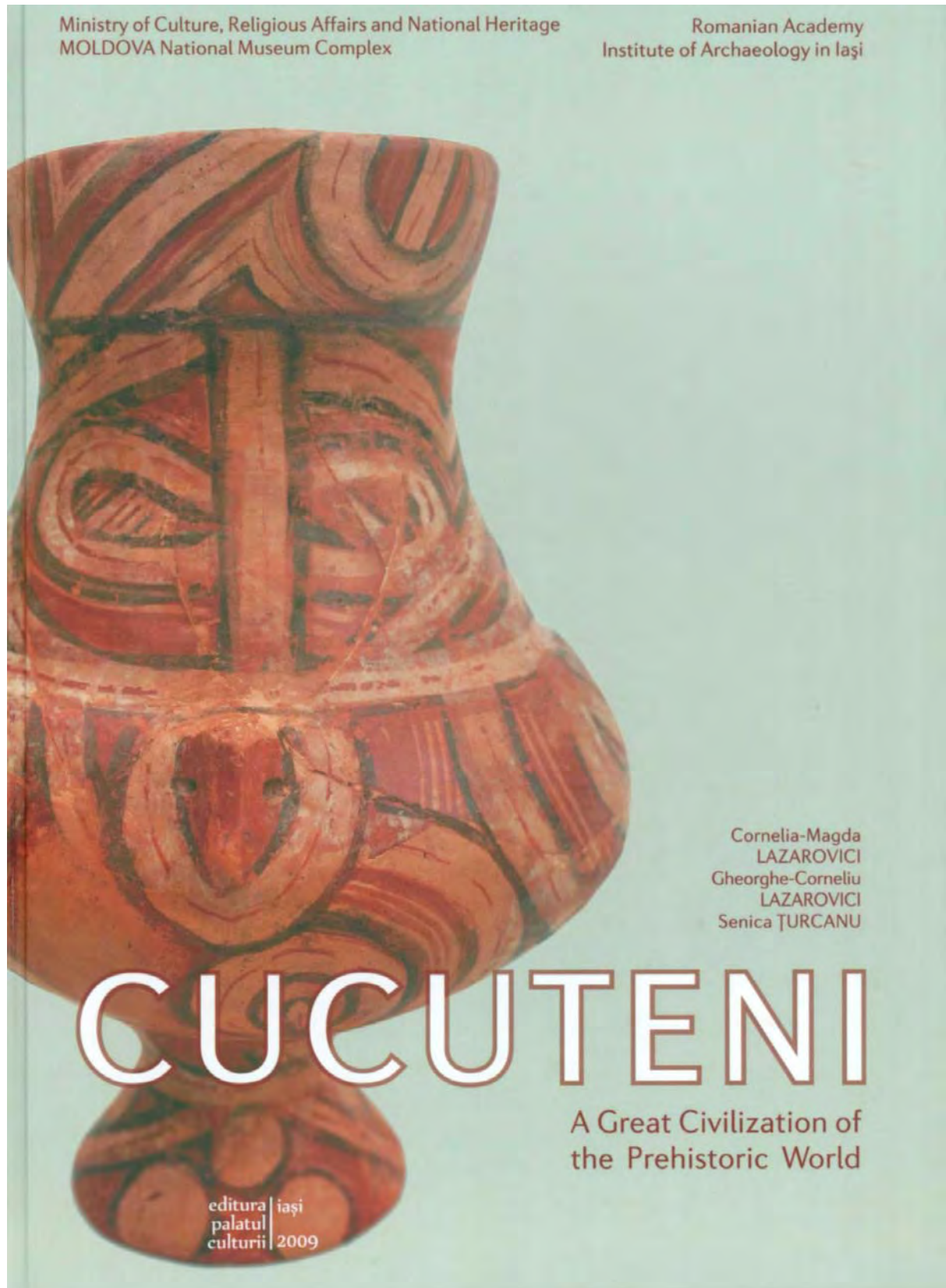


**Fig. 6.** Cover of the catalogue of the 1996 exhibition in Thessaloniki (Greece) (after C.-M. Mantu *et alii* 1997).  
Coperta catalogului dedicat expoziției de la Tesalonic (Grecia) din 1996 (după C.-M. Mantu *et alii* 1997).





**Fig. 7.** Cover of the catalogue of the 2008 exhibition in Olten (Switzerland) (after M. Wulschleger 2008).  
Coperta catalogului dedicat expoziției de la Olten (Elveția) din 2008 (după M. Wulschleger 2008).



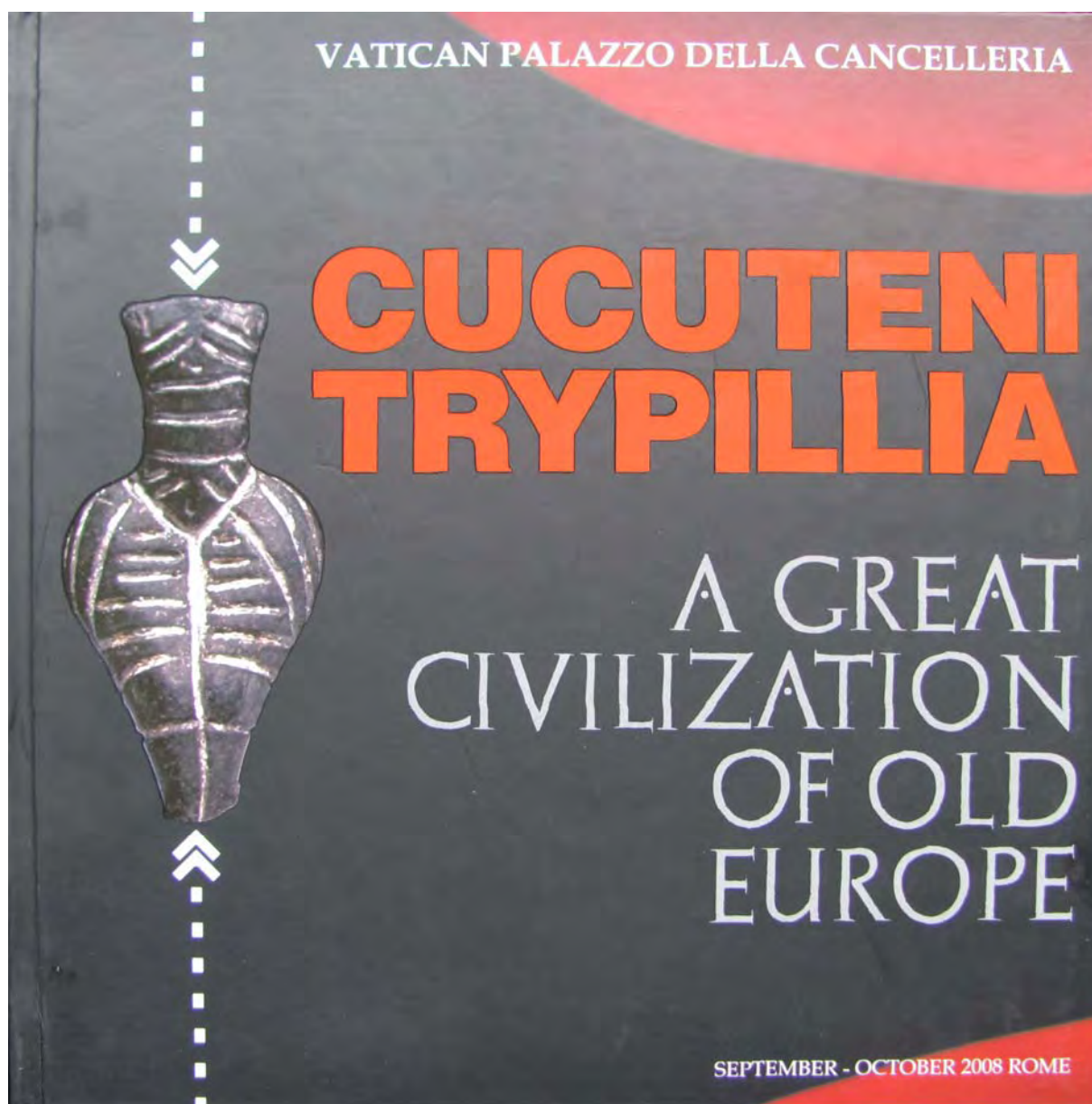
**Fig. 8.** Cover of a book on the "Cucuteni civilization" published in 2009 (after C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009).  
Coperta unui volum dedicat în 2009 „civilizației Cucuteni” (după C.-M. Lazarovici *et alii* 2009).





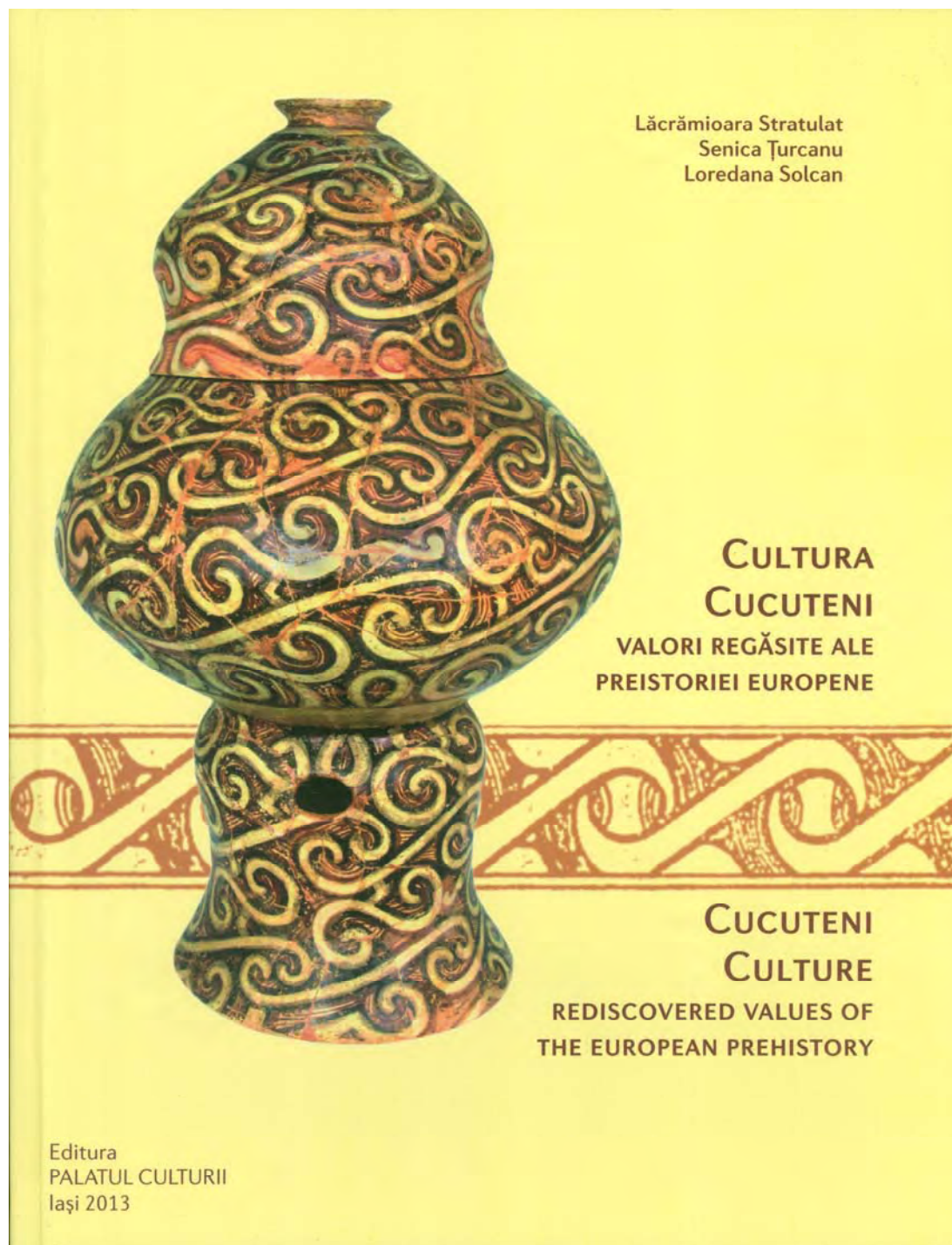
**Fig. 9.** Cover of the catalogue of the 2009 exhibition in Chișinău (Republic of Moldova) and Iași (Romania) (after L. Stratulat *et alii* 2009).

Coperta catalogului dedicat expoziției de la Chișinău (Republica Moldova) și Iași (România) din 2009 (după L. Stratulat *et alii* 2009).



**Fig. 10.** Cover of the catalogue of the 2008 exhibition at Vatican (after L. Stratulat *et alii* 2008).  
Coperta catalogului dedicat expoziției de la Vatican din 2008 (după L. Stratulat *et alii* 2008).





**Fig. 11.** Cover of the catalogue of the 2013 exhibition at the Bucharest Museum (after L. Stratulat *et alii* 2013).  
Coperta catalogului dedicat expoziției de la Muzeul Municipiului București din 2013 (după L. Stratulat *et alii* 2013).