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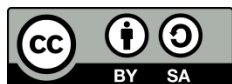
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Interview

Vasile DIACONU

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Archaeology across the ocean
Interview with Professor Ashley Dumas - University of West Alabama

Vasile Diaconu¹

European archaeology has always been connected to scientific accomplishments from across the ocean and thought currents or historical concepts have often had their origins in the American intellectual environment. American archaeologists have taken the science of the human past to another level through their approach, which focuses more on historical evidence and less on the testimonies left behind by human communities. Prof. Ashley Dumas from the University of West Alabama can also be included in this group of specialists.



Although she is part of the younger generation of researchers, Prof. Ashley Dumas has a rich career and a significant scientific repertory. A graduate of the University of South Alabama (1996), Prof. Dumas earned her Ph.D. from the University of Alabama in 2007 with the topic "The Role of Salt in the Late Woodland to Mississippian Transition in Southwest Alabama."

She later served as an assistant researcher at the Center for Archaeological Studies, and as an Assistant Instructor, at the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work, University of South Alabama.

Between 2009 and 2014 she was Assistant Director of the Black Belt Museum in the Division of Educational Outreach and Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the Department of History and Social Sciences, University of West Alabama. Afterwards, until 2016, she held the position of Assistant Professor of Anthropology, at the Department of History and Social Sciences, Director of the Fort Tombecbe Archaeological Site, and Curator of Archeology with the Black Belt Museum, University of West Alabama. She is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology, at the Department of History and Social Sciences, Director of the Fort Tombecbe Archaeological Site and Curator of Archeology with the Black Belt Museum, University of West Alabama.

Among her areas of research are the archeology of salt, late prehistory in the Southeast, slave housing in the Southeastern U.S. and French colonial archeology.

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She was a member of several research grant projects whose theme was related to the exploitation and use of salt, the study of ceramics, as well as military forts of the 18th century.

Her scientific activity also includes participations in a series of national and international events and hosted several archaeology conferences.

She has participated at and coordinated the excavation of several archaeological sites related to salt exploitation from prehistory to the modern era.

She is a member of several American scientific organisations, such as the Society for American Archaeology, the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation, the Society for Historical Archaeology and the Alabama Archaeological Society.

Dumas is a member of the editorial boards of several archaeological publications and a reviewer for specialized journals, such as the Midcontinental Journal of Archeology, Southeastern Archeology, American Archeology and American Antiquity.

Because she is a researcher with broad visions, Prof. Dumas has published and edited several interdisciplinary works dedicated to the archaeology of salt, prehistoric pottery and remains related to the life of slaves and military fortifications in the 18th century.

Professor Ashley Dumas, you are very well-known in the academic environment as a specialist with various interests in archaeology and anthropology. What determined your focus on these areas?

Since childhood I have been drawn to the vestiges of previous lives, such as the sites of old farmhouses, cemeteries, and roads, and wanted to understand what connected them to us today. I did not know about anthropology, or that archaeology was a part of it, until I was in university. I had good professors who fostered my love for human cultures and provided opportunities to work with them on archaeological sites. I have developed a wide-ranging set of interests, which include the transition to agriculture and complex society in eastern North America, the importance of salt in human society, European colonization of this region, and the use of material culture to understand the effects of slavery. This means that it's difficult to be an "expert" of any single subject, but I enjoy diverse research.

Was there a personality in the scientific world who influenced your passion for archaeology? Did you believe in the Indiana Jones model, or did you want to do a different kind of archaeology?

I was a young girl when the Indiana Jones movies were introduced, and I was definitely an admirer of his adventures! Like most of the general public, I was drawn to the idea of exotic, lost civilizations. When I was around 10 years-old, I documented an old cemetery and was inspired to invent a business called "Ashley's Archaeological Services". However, as I grew older, I forgot about archaeology and did not know that it could be a viable career until I was at university. Today, I think that Indiana Jones or Lara Croft and similar characters are useful

for igniting a spark for archaeology, as long as further education about its realities is eventually obtained. More recently, the problem for American archaeology is the popularity of television shows that feature untrained individuals who dig up sites only for entertainment or the monetary value of what they find. They set a terrible example for the public, and I must often correct the misconceptions that my students learn from these shows.

It is well-known that in the second half of the last century were laid the foundations of the New Archaeology, under the guidance of the American professor Lewis Binford. Later, this current was transformed into Processual Archaeology. How can you define the American school of archaeological theory today?

American theorists today focus less on approaches to gathering data and more on including diverse interpretations. The school of thought is often referred to as Post-Processual, a view developed by Ian Hodder during his long-term excavations at Çatalhöyük, Turkey. A Post-Processual approach focuses on using the archaeological record to understand the thoughts and beliefs of past peoples. In the American Southeast, for example, archaeologists and ethnohistorians have made enormous progress in their understanding of the iconography represented on prehistoric pottery and in the organization of space. As a result of this collaborative, focused effort, we are more confident that we understand the belief systems of native peoples. Additionally, there are increasing attempts to interpret material culture through the eyes of women, children, and ordinary people who exercised agency in their everyday lives to effect culture change. This is an approach borrowed from sociologists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work is not new but has been applied to archaeology only in the last twenty years. Finally, the most recent approach in American archaeology is to “decolonize” our work. Our history and prehistory has been excavated, interpreted, and taught largely by white men of European descent. Thus, American archaeology has been a field *about* indigenous or enslaved people, but it has not *included* the voices of their descendants. It is past the time for archaeologists to include descendant communities in every part of the process - excavation, analysis, and interpretation - especially as American archaeology is grounded in Anthropology. Students here receive university degrees in Anthropology, not archaeology, and often refer to themselves specifically as anthropological archaeologists, meaning that we incorporate comparative culture theory in our interpretations. Followers of American archaeology will see increasing references to decolonization of our field.

Among your scientific interests is the topic of salt in archaic societies, especially in the Southeastern United States. For the European specialists, could you please explain the defining elements of what salt archaeology means in the USA?

The study of salt is a tiny subfield of American archaeology, and those of us in active salt research probably number less than thirty. I suspect this is due to two factors. First, the USA lacks the impressive mountains of salt and vast salt mines like those in Europe that have been in use for thousands of years. The visible salt resources here are primarily salt lakes (in the west) or salt springs (in the east). Our salt mines have been in use only since the 19th century. Second, indigenous peoples of North America have not made or traded salt for more than 300 years, so we have very few ethnohistoric records to tie salt to the past. Nevertheless, the archaeology of salt and its importance to indigenous peoples has gained more attention among those who study agricultural societies (about AD 1000-1600 in the east). Because of the work of Ian W. Brown and Jon Muller especially, salt is recognized as another important item of trade and perhaps ritual significance.

You know to some extent the most important aspects of prehistoric salt mining in Europe. If we were to make a comparison with the American space, could you tell us the common elements but also the different ones in terms of salt mining techniques and the role of this mineral in the economy of human communities?

Unlike continental Europe, especially in the Carpathians, there are few rock salt outcroppings in North America. There are several places in the American Southwest with evidence for mining salt, but these are unusual. Most of our salt resources are in the form of salt lakes or salt springs, whose brine must be evaporated to obtain crystallized salt. Another difference is that, unlike the long history of salt making in Europe, indigenous peoples in North America began to practice intensive agriculture around A.D. 900, and it did not spread to some regions until a couple of hundred years later. Thus, our archaeological salt deposits represent a smaller amount of time. The basic techniques of reducing brine to salt follow the same principles as those found in Europe and elsewhere - the application of solar or fire heat to containers of brine. It is interesting, however, that briquetage in the form of augets and pedestals, as seen throughout many of the world's salt production sites, is quite rare here. Apart from these differences, I believe that the use of salt among indigenous peoples as a dietary supplement, trade item, and ritual object is comparable to other communities around the world.

Although not necessarily related to archaeology, it would be interesting to know how the Amerindian peoples managed the salt. Did it only have economic or social values?

We are fortunate to have an ethnohistoric record of salt among indigenous Americans in Eastern North America dating to the earliest 16th-century colonization. European explorers, colonizers and, later, Euro-American settlers sometimes observed native peoples making salt

or participating in the salt trade. The economic importance of salt may have been partly responsible for the establishment of a large administrative town along the northern Gulf Coast around A.D. 1100. For insight into other values of salt, so far we rely solely on the ethnohistoric record, where in Euro-Americans recorded certain taboos and proscriptions regarding the use of salt. I do hope that we will find some archaeological, material representation of the ritual value and meaning of salt.

I noticed that you are taking an interest in the investigation of ceramics, especially from an interdisciplinary perspective. For Southeastern U.S. prehistory, how can the social value of pottery be defined?

There has been a strong emphasis on the study of pottery fabrics, forms, and decorations to establish culture history sequences across the region. In the past two decades, archaeologists have taken a special interest in deciphering the iconography incised on indigenous pottery. Through careful methodology, often drawing from the work of art theorists, ethnohistorians, and conversations with living native peoples, we have succeeded in using designs on pottery to better understand indigenous beliefs about the cosmos, origins, death, and how these perceptions changed over time. Pottery has also been used to define matrilineal communities of practice in prehistory. I often use these studies to demonstrate to my students that it is possible to use broken pieces of pottery to get into the minds of prehistoric people.

A special aspect of your work is the research of some archaeological sites from relatively recent periods, such as forts or slave dwellings. What is the place of this type of investigation in the landscapes of American archaeology?

I understand that an 18th-century fort is almost too recent for most European archaeologists to bother with. In the U.S., however, any archaeological site from the 16th through 18th centuries will be a site of culture contact between European colonists (from a variety of countries), native people, and sometimes enslaved Africans. These sites are also on the frontier of the globalized world, where access to material goods and political power was reduced. These diverse relationships often led to hybrid, or creolized, adaptations to life reflected in unique forms of architecture, pottery, and other material culture. The military sites can be surprising, because the written documents, meant for military leaders, tell a very different story from what archaeologists find in the ground.

My interest in slave dwellings grew from the fact that I live in a region of the Southeast that had a high percentage of enslaved Africans. The legacy remains tangibly present our current social, economic, and political lives. On my drive to and from work, I would pass by old farms and small towns that have changed little since the end of the American Civil War (1861-

1865) and where one can find the extant structures used to house slaves. So little of the personal lives of slaves was recorded, but the places where they lived can offer insight into their daily experiences. These places also serve as structures about which we can begin productive conversations about a painful part of our past. After documenting the patterns of slave dwelling architecture and landscapes, I hope to excavate one with the help of local descendants.

You visited Romania and got in touch with our academic environment. You also have a collaboration with colleagues from the University of Iași regarding the editing of the articles of the First International Congress on the Anthropology of Salt. For the specialists in this field, but also for the general public, could you tell us, from the perspective of the foreign archaeologist, how important do you think is the archaeological heritage related to the exploitation of salt in the Romanian domain?

Romania is fortunate to have a wide range of salt sources and a cadre of talented scholars interested in understanding how humans have exploited those sources. Not only are some of the oldest salt production sites located in Romania, which provide insight into the human adoption of salt as a commodity, but salt is still used in traditional ways by contemporary Romanians. The opportunity to observe people making and using salt, and to speak with them about its significance to them, is an extraordinary privilege nearly unique to Romania.

I have been extremely impressed with the leadership of Romanian archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians in establishing the anthropology of salt and making valuable contributions to the research. They have also created long-term, fruitful collaborations with scholars across Europe and in other parts to the world, which demonstrates a commitment to scholarly excellence. It has been my pleasure and honor to learn from my Romanian colleagues, and I hope to continue doing so in the quest to understand the importance of salt in human societies.



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Fig. 1. Professor Ashley Dumas on the Fort Tombecbe Archaeological Site



Fig. 2. Professor Ashley Dumas at the 3rd salt congress in Vitoria-Gasteiz (2018)

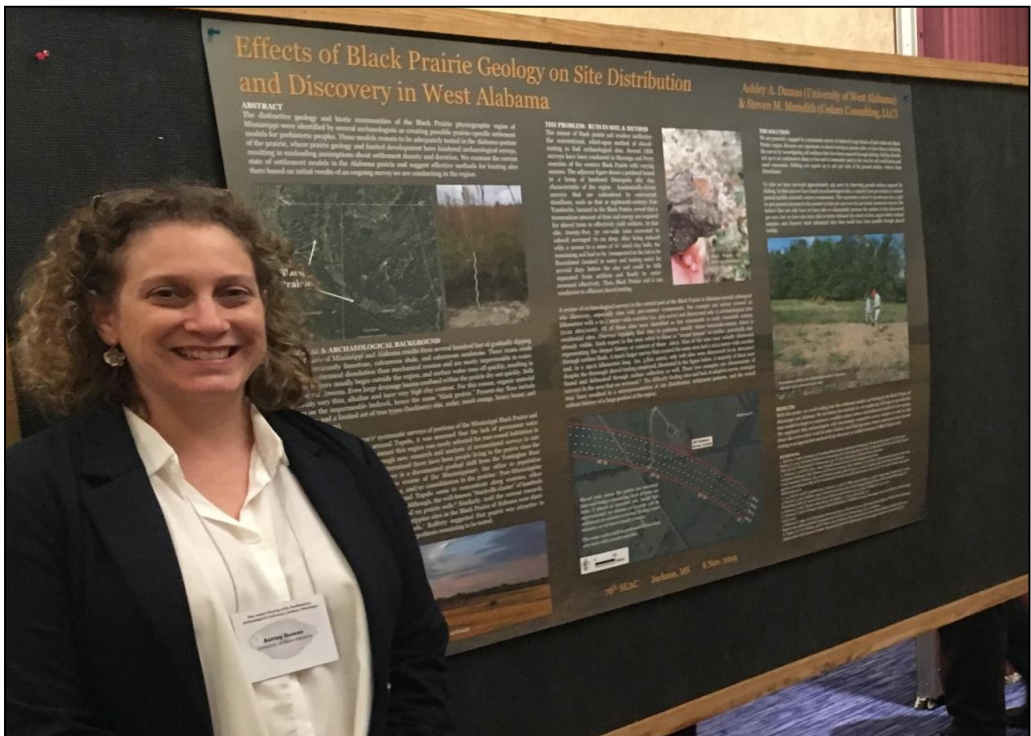


Fig. 3. Professor Ashley Dumas at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference in 2019.