

# CULTURE IN THE SUBCARPATHIAN AREA OF THE SACRED CULTURAL LANDSCAPE - A SOURCE FOR TOURISM IN THE GORJ SUBCARPATHIANS

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***Abstract.** The entire geographical area of the subcarpathian region of Gorj is an area with a strong religious, Christianity, predominantly Orthodox belief. This has led to a certain organizational structure at the level of the laic community. There are thus many elements that form a sacral cultural landscape, in the component of which series of the countryside churches stand out, whose cemetery is predominantly in the immediate vicinity - where space has allowed, but also churches from the villages whose presence is in the countryside and whose cemetery is positioned further back. Monasteries are also present in this sub-Carpathian geographical area, they are monasteries of a remarkable age and of Orthodox Christian worship. Village and urban life is and will remain under the influence of the Orthodox religion. This study is based on classical descriptive and interview methodology, regarding the importance that locals/visitors give to these secular monuments. The religious activity of these monuments is no longer taking in place, but they continue to attract quite a large number of admirers, which creates the idea of cultural tourism.*

***Keywords:** sacred landscape, tourism, culture, village life, tradition*

## INTRODUCTION

Each geographical region has a certain specificity regarding secular constructions and their painting. Village life took place and, in many areas, it still takes place according to the unwritten rules of local religious life.

The world under the mountain, this population that, according to the written evidence, the documents, but also the material traces, lives here, in the Subcarpathian area of the Neolithic period, has gone through stages of adaptation to all the changes that have taken place, continuing to live and - they conduct their lives as they have considered. Churches are the most

important buildings; they are symbols of the life of a village.

The churches built of stone and brick, with fresco painting, are today true jewels of secular architecture in the Subcarpathian area. As an architectural style, one cannot speak of a sophisticated one, but they correspond to Byzantine art and architecture. The first churches, among those preserved today and which can be analyzed, have the shape of a ship, with a built-in bell tower positioned on the porch or the pronaos. After the 14th century and lasting until the 17th century, the churches appear in a flat plan, with lateral, southern and northern apses, and in the nave area of the building, part of the church building, the large church spire appears as positioned.

Many of the existing monuments in the countryside create the cultural system of a historical stage (Ancuta et al, 2023; Marković et al, 2014; Ortiz et al, 2022; Dumitrașcu et al., 2023). Village life is part of this cultural system. Cultural events, religious manifestations, local celebrations enrich this local cultural heritage (Teodorescu et al, 2016). All these values are important for the residents and very attractive for those who visit the area, being real resources for those who come from European areas where they have largely been lost (Szemkovics et al, 2018; Teodorescu et al, 2019; Park, 2011). Many of the religious monuments in the Gorj subcarpathians, as in the entire Romanian territory, are the preservers of special symbols, of great value and cultural appeal (Szemkovics et al., 2021, Teodorescu et al., 2016; Dumitran, 2015; Teodorescu et al., 2017 ). Besides this offered religious attractiveness, many of the existing monuments can be a very big attraction from a tourist point of view. Cultural tourism is one of the forms of tourism that can highlight the cultural values of a certain area. Through this type of tourism, local values can become known and appreciated as they deserve (Teodorescu, 2009, Mazilu et al., 2023, Mill et al., 2002; Băbăț et al., 2023).

## METHODOLOGY

A reference system in the evaluation of cultural landscapes for framing unique elements, such as constructions, customs and practices, especially religious ones, is represented by the list of monuments of cultural value created by the Ministry of Culture. However, there are many other religious buildings whose cultural value is recognized locally, without being included in this list.

In the current study, following interviews and discussions with the locals, they highlighted the role and importance of these indisputable be-

havioral reference elements - the religious monuments. The importance it represents is rendered in the form of the “word cloud”. The possibilities and evaluation methods of the religious cultural landscape have gained increasing importance, along with society’s concerns for tourism activities. The aesthetic and recreational importance of the landscape has been highlighted in various projects implemented in the development of tourism, but also in the concerns for the declaration of some sites (Bruns et al, 2018).

## THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Village life has been going on for centuries, simply and according to unwritten rules. Many of the secular constructions attract by the way they were made - built, by the painting or by the ensemble or the combination between nature and what man could build. In this sense, the Gorj monasteries are true sources of inspiration, discovery and support in all that is local tourism.

Their age is also relevant, so many tourists or visitors are attracted by their age, the materials used, the technique used. In this sense, we analyzed the behavior and attractiveness offered by the ruins of the Visina Monastery (fig. 1 a and fig. 1. b)



Fig. 1. Ruins of Visina Monastery, Gorj county

Following the discussions held with those who visited these ruins of the Visina Monastery, most of them mentioned the word “faith”. Faith, for most of them, is everywhere, not necessarily where the place of worship has kept its shape. The place where these ruins are located keeps the faith of every individual who arrives here.

Many other values reflected by them are also mentioned, such as “History” or “Christianity”. There are also opinions that mention the role

that these ruins can have from a tourist point of view (fig. 2). Precisely in this sense, some suggestions are given on how they can be capitalized by using modern means of presentation, so that accessibility to the necessary information is much easier.

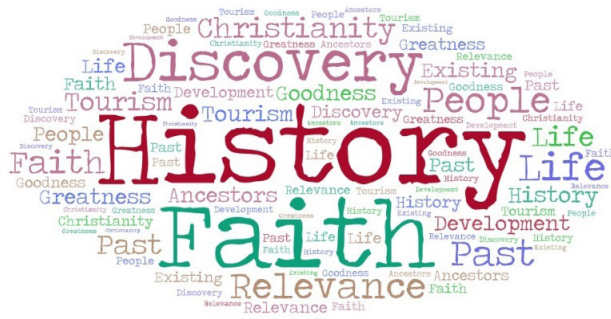


Fig. 2. The relevance of the “Visina Monastery Ruins” monument for those who visited them

The architectural relevance, historical importance, Christianity or life, people or tourism are not to be neglected either. All these are mentioned as being relevant for everything that represents the religious life and the symbols of Christianity in the subcarpathian area offered by the two monasteries, the Tismana monastery and the Polovragi monastery. The age of these places of worship is a factor of interest for the Christian world. The architectural elements, including the value offered by Byzantine and Brancovian art, offer an added artistic, cultural and religious value.

In this sense, the discussions held with those who visited them, had as a central element “faith” (fig. 5). This feeling is offered precisely because of the religious activity for which most of those who end up visiting them are for religious services or for other services of a religious nature.



Fig. 3. Tismana Monastery Church



Fig. 4. Polovragi Monastery Church

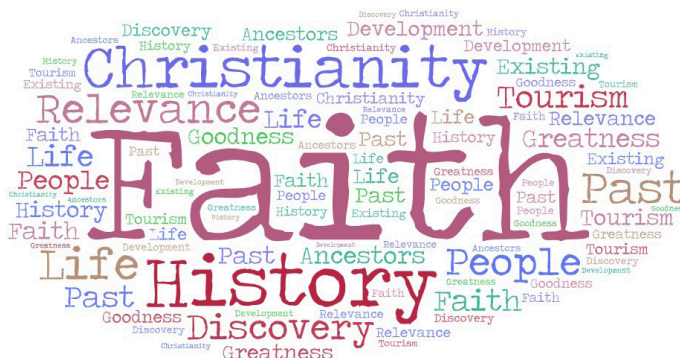


Fig. 5. The relevance of the religious monuments “Tismana Monastery” and “Polovragi Monastery” for those who visited them

The rural settlements in the Subcarpathian area of the Gorj also offer other types of cultural elements specific to the sacred cultural landscape, such as crosses. These have special meanings, and it is the village world that maintains and enhances them so that even those who do not know their meaning can find out these very interesting details: the four meanings: material object, symbol, power and sacrifice (fig. 6 ). The museum is the one that has the quality of keeping and providing information to those interested about any category of objects. In this case, the Museum of Crosses is the one that collected, preserves and provides information about these Christian symbols, thus offering a series of opportunities in knowledge.



Fig. 6. Museum of crosses - Gorge with the four meanings: material object, symbol, power and sacrifice

A special category of Christian symbols and not only are the oath crosses. In the town of Vladimir, the oath crosses have several meanings in this area. Some villagers say that every man in his life makes crooked oaths and this cross has the role of absolving him of those oaths, others say that

it is a memorial cross that is placed on the side of the road for passersby to remember the one who passed away ( fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Oath crosses

## DISCUSSIONS

Each village, each part of the Gorj Subcarpathians offers its specific cultural landscape, depending on the evolution, the demographic composition, the economic activities carried out or become the main ones. The existence of places of worship of a certain value, from village churches, to monasteries with special cultural value and relevance, to symbolic crosses, all are part of the local sacred cultural landscape

Arranging these cultural values so that they become a tourist attraction is, perhaps more than ever, a necessity. This necessity is given by several factors:

- The need to know the population interested in the religious cultural heritage specific to a geographical region;
- The need for the correct transmission of patrimonial values to the local young generation;
- The emergence and expansion of a profitable and job-creating activity in an area where agricultural activity is the dominant one;
- The development of cultural tourism that can lead to local well-being.

Besides this main form of tourism, i.e. cultural tourism, other economic fields of local interest may appear. In this way, agriculture can be-

come supporters of this cultural approach. Every tourist, even visitor, can stock up on local agricultural products. Another way is to capitalize on the products obtained in one's own households to ensure catering services in boarding houses and other public catering spaces (terraces).

Other activities can also be noted for the purpose of economic valorization. In these categories can be registered the seams, the fabrics or the fastenings. These activities have been present in this area for centuries. Their valorization is carried out even today, but only in local fairs and quite weak from a quantitative point of view. The existence of permanent spaces arranged in collaboration with this sacred cultural heritage can become a whole for the local tourist offer. Linking local practices in agriculture with domestic traditions and particular customs could be a way to ensure local development, linking tourism to local agriculture and other old traditions inherited in this space. Such an approach demonstrates that local cultural resources, regardless of form, age and various other particularities, could be harnessed more given the current sustainability of rural areas (Ancuta et al, 2023).

Each type of cultural landscape can represent a very attractive and important form for the development of a certain type of tourism. The combination of several forms of cultural landscape would represent a much more evolved form in capitalizing on the local potential with effects on the local economy. The need for local development requires greater attention in the discovery of local values and, above all, appropriate means to increase the attractiveness of the population, of consumers for them.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, some of the aspects offered by the sacral cultural landscape in the Subcarpathian area of Gorj were analyzed. These religious values, through architecture, antiquity, building materials, construction techniques, stage of presentation, relevant in the local cultural landscape, represent huge sources for a specific tourism.

The local economic development is not one of the happiest. Most of the locals are based on low and medium incomes (predominantly pensions, many being pensioners, due to the aging of the population in this geographical area as well). The existence of many elderly locals is a factor that could become an advantage for highlighting some monuments. They are the ones who really know and can convey the correct message to those who want to know the area and the details about many of the objects to which the study referred - the oath crosses.

In order to attract young people to the area, however, a permanent economic activity is needed, which ensures equally reliable incomes. Local development and the emergence of sustainable activities is more than a necessity! Tourism can be one of them. But it cannot develop without a good knowledge of the local cultural heritage and without other local activities, such as agriculture or other manufacturing fields. Tourism is only part of what attracting tourists to this area would mean. Hospitality is the one that can favor the extension of the time of stay, the valorization of local products, the profit from this activity.

The tourist offer of the sacral cultural landscape is important and very valuable. Finding appropriate means for the time we live in is the key that can lead to success.

The limits of this study are given by several components:

- Practicing religious tourism predominated for a single day;
- The offer of local products is limited and lacks visibility;
- Lack of practical communication between religious heritage monuments and local administration;
- Predominance of religious tourism consumers of the elderly population with low incomes and of local origin.

All these are limiting elements or weak points in the exploitation of this type of local sacred cultural landscape.

The important thing is the existence of these monuments, their good condition, the clear trend of their maintenance and preservation. These represent the strong points of the cultural heritage monuments in the area. Their existence can also lead to a form of higher capitalization.

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