

THE SACRED CULTURAL LANDSCAPE - A SOURCE OF TOURISM IN THE MOSTIȘTEA BĂRAGAN

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***Abstract.** The sacral cultural landscape requires greater attention in the analysis of knowledge, through the multitude of details and messages it conveys, through painting and laic architecture. This study attempts to highlight and value the potential that the Mostiștea Baragan has from this point of view. The method of analysis is the empirical one of the interview which had as basis of analysis and discussion the knowledge of the main lay monuments (some of them without religious activity) of the locals, but also of those who visit the area. The results support the local administrations to pay more attention to these monuments that form a special cultural landscape, the sacred one. It can be an important source of tourism for a geographical area whose physical-geographical landscape is not particularly remarkable. Together with the wealth of lakes used for fishing and recreational purposes, this sacred cultural landscape could become an additional source of tourist attraction.*

***Keywords:** sacred cultural landscape, traditions, religious heritage, recreation, Mostiștea Baragan.*

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is the most widespread religion in Romania! It emerged in the 1st century in what is now Israel, with its „founder” being our Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Christianity developed rapidly over time. Thus, following the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, the Holy Apostles, as well as His disciples, went out to preach the Word of the Gospel to all creation, according to the commandment of the Messiah before He ascended bodily to heaven, when He said to them: „Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have

commanded you; and I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” (Matthew 28:19-20 Holy Scripture).

Based on this commandment, the Apostles went to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. Church tradition asserts that the territory of today’s Dobrogea was Christianized by Saint Andrew the Apostle. However, we also know that in Scythia Major (Serbian Banat), Saint Peter the Apostle is said to have preached. Despite this, the most plausible aspect of the Christianization of the current territory of Romania seems to be the colonization of Dacia by the Romans, as well as the interaction of the Dacian population with other already Christianized populations, particularly the Romans.

Regardless of the truth, it is very important to note that Christianity became the dominant religion not only in Dobrogea or the Serbian Banat or in Decebal’s Dacia, but throughout the territory over time (. (Dumitrascu et al., 2021; Szemkovics et al., 2021).

Regarding the study area, namely the Mostiștea Plain of Bărăgan, we can say it is rich in sacred cultural landscapes, a fact that should lead to greater publicity among the population.

HERITAGE MONUMENTS IN THE PLAIN AREA

In the plain area, where temperatures are very high in summer and low in winter, people need God, and thus they have built places of worship. Naturally, it is not just the temperatures but also the need for the sacred and the profane, the need to belong to God. Whether Christians were Orthodox Serbs, Bulgarians, Armenians, Protestants, or Roman Catholics, the need to pray and worship remains the same (Butoi et al, 2022). We will not delve into the circumstances under which people are more or less religious, or how practicing their faith is an individual freedom.

The variety of places of worship, roadside crosses, wayside shrines, monuments dedicated to heroes, and chapels demonstrate the religiosity of the inhabitants of this area. Each resident has become a founder of the place of worship in their village or town, perhaps not always with significant sums of money, but with fervent prayers for rain for the fertile soils of Bărăgan or in thanksgiving that they could place „our daily bread” on the table each day.

In Mostiștea Bărăgan, there are traces of civilization, and implicitly of its religiosity. The Archaeological Site of Sultana - Malu Roșu stands as testimony to the civilization from the Bronze Age, Eneolithic, and Neolithic

periods, reflecting the religiosity, culture, material, and social status of the site's inhabitants (Szemkovics et al., 2018; Dumitrascu, et al. 2021; Dumitrănu, 2015; Szemkovics et al., 2021; Teodorescu, et al. 2021).

We can certainly say that this population did not lack a sense of the divine, having over 7000 years of faith in divinity, a period confirmed by archaeological research (fig. 1 and fig. 2).



Fig 1. The Goddess of Sultana



Fig 2. The Vessel with Lovers

The archaeological site at Sultana is complex, centered around a necropolis used successively by two communities, Boian and Gumelnița, genetically related but different chronologically and in how they produced and decorated everyday objects, with strong visual impact elements such as pottery and ornaments

It should be noted that from Sultana-Malu Roșu, approximately 4500-4400 BC, until today, the population's religiosity has not diminished, as evidenced by discoveries such as the „Goddess of Sultana” and the „Lovers' Vessel” and the recent wayside shrines erected in 2023 in honor of national heroes (in Măriuța and Coțofana, near the local wayside cross) or the latest church founded in Valea Presnei in 2008.

About 98% of the places of worship where religious services are conducted belong to the Orthodox Christian faith, with some representing historical monuments. These places of worship are primarily built of brick and

have retained their beauty, authenticity, richness, and simplicity over the centuries!

Notable examples include the former Negoiești Monastery (1649) (fig.3), later transformed into a parish church, and Plătărești Monastery (1646) (fig.4), both founded by Elina Doamna and Matei Basarab.



Fig 4. The Church of the Holy Plătărești Monastery



Fig 3. The Church of the former Negoiești Monastery, Negoiești Parish

Unfortunately, the same beauty and authenticity have been lost in the case of Codreni Monastery (fig.5), whose church, cells, and enclosure walls can only be admired during dry summer periods when the Mostiștea recedes, revealing the tower and a few walls or cells (Băbăț, 2023).

This was caused by a Ceaușescu-era project to create a navigable canal connecting the Dâmbovița River to the Danube, which would have included the Mostiștea Lake. This project has not been realized even today (Bruns, 2018).

It should be noted that not only Codreni Monastery suffered (fig.5), but also the homonymous village and many other villages along the Mostiștea Lake. This led to the submersion of cemeteries, the abandonment of villages, and the neglect of churches, clearly seen in the old church of Valea Presnei (fig.6), called the „church in the field,” which served until five years ago.

The sacred cultural landscape is further enriched by the many historic churches in the area, new and old wayside crosses in almost every village, located not just at crossroads but also at the entrances and exits of villages, once again proving the belief in divinity (Dumitran, 2015).



Fig 5. Codreni Monastery, founded in 1678



Fig 6. The old Church from Preasna Walley



Fig. 7. The Church of Hagiești - 1704

Certainly, the Romanian Orthodox Church has greatly contributed to honoring our ancestors, especially on the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven, which also celebrates the Day of National Heroes, observed 40 days after Easter. The abundance of ecclesiastical historical monuments is clear proof that people have managed to express their faith over time and maintain these monuments.

A less positive aspect is the abandoned churches, such as the deserted church in Luica (fig.8), the ruins of the church in Pelinu (fig.11), the ruins of the church in Pițigaia (fig.16), the degraded state of the church in Hagiești (fig.7), the ruins of the church in Frunzănești, Fundeni commune (fig.12), and the field church in Valea Presnei (fig.6).

These places of worship have suffered degradation due to earthquakes in Pițigaia and Frunzănești, weather phenomena in Hagiești, changes in the landscape like at Codreni Monastery and Valea Presnei, and neglect by authorities and parishioners as in Luica. In the last case, residents needed a more spacious place for worship due to the continuous degradation of the church and neglect.



Fig 8. Biserica de la Luica, 1852

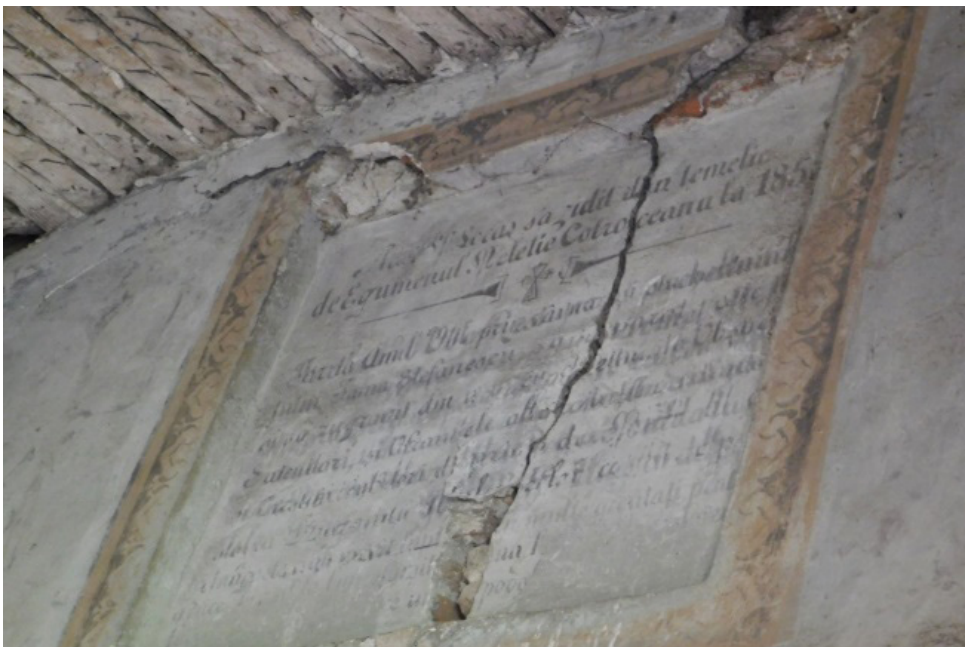


Fig 9. The Inscription of the Church of Luica



Fig.10 The Altar of the Church of Luica



Fig. 11. The Church of Pelinu, 1849

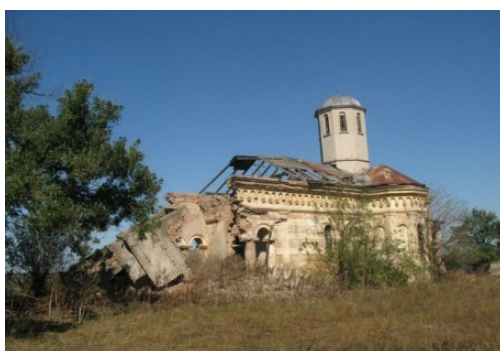


Fig. 12. The Church of Fundeni

You may ask, what is needed for these to be included in a religious tourism circuit? First and foremost, involvement! Another significant aspect is the lack of signage. Even with a list of historical monuments in the area, it was challenging to find some of them. Additionally, not all churches, crosses, or wayside shrines visited are categorized as historical monuments; some reflect the faith and care of the people towards places of worship and the sacred.

In this sense, people have shown their faith even in times of great hardship. A conclusive example is the cross in Vărăști (fig.13), erected during a plague or cholera outbreak, as testified by locals who know this from their ancestors (Dumitran D., 2015).



Fig. 13. The cross from Varasti



Fig. 14. Ensemble of Crosses from Sapunari

During droughts, people gather in the fields to pray for rain, demonstrating their faith. On the initiative of the church clergy, relics of Saint Filofteia (1908) or Saint Parascheva (1925) were brought, and crosses were erected where they stopped as places of pilgrimage and remembrance, examples found in Arțari (two crosses), Ostrov, Săpunari in the churchyard (an ensemble of crosses) (fig.14), and Darvari.

The richness of the sacred landscape in the studied area is not only shown by the churches but also by the multitude of church icons and cult books, which



Fig.15. Icons placed by the faithful for veneration in the church of Pițigaia



Fig.16 The Church of Pițigaia

are extraordinarily beautiful or very old (in Arțari, we find 18th-century icons, although the church was founded in the mid-19th century).

It should be mentioned that Plătărești Monastery and the church in Negoiești, founded in 1641 and 1644 respectively, are living proof of ancient Orthodox Christianity and their continuity through the care of clergy and believers over the centuries.

The church in Pițigaia (fig.16) occupies a special place in the area we are analyzing! It should be noted that Pițigaia, close to Bucharest, about 15 km away, is a nearly abandoned village, with only 10 standing houses as clear evidence that without infrastructure investments, everything in rural areas will ruin! The church was shaken by the 1977 earthquake!

Although the towers fell, and the roof no longer exists, only the walls remain standing, people continued to pray there, bringing icons to honor the saints and lighting candles because there is no other place of worship. The church is about 1 km from the village center, in the middle of the cemetery, which is not entirely abandoned, as people continue to bury their dead there.

CONCLUSIONS

Investment in infrastructure is urgently needed, connecting these cultural and spiritual edifices to all transport networks. The lack of signage makes the beauties of Mostiștea Bărăgan almost nonexistent. Reconsidering the infrastructure will benefit visitors, pilgrims, and locals, facilitating the learning of culture, civilization, and popular traditions We could ask: *What would attract us to visit these degraded or conserved historical sacred monuments?* The answers could be multiple:

- Organizing scientific sessions to save these sacred tourist sites, where specialists from various organizations or fields can understand the touristic potential and the need to keep these sites safe, both for visitors and for the sites to be visited. vizitat.

- The need to showcase the beauty of these sites, which are either deteriorating or already deteriorated, and which would gain greater artistic and cultural value after restoration.

- The imperative that all these tourist sites be integrated into a tourist circuit to promote at least a local sacred cultural tourism.

- Various legends or events related to their construction. In this regard, I have collected a series of testimonies that would help create a picture of their importance for the communities that duly value them.

- The fact that people come to these sites to worship or pray shows their sanctity, importance, and the fact that, although they are in a degrading state, they will remain forever spiritual landmarks not only for their communities but also pilgrimage sites for those who know them or will come to know them.

- Important information gathered during the research about the closing of some churches.

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