

CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN ROMANIA – THE CASE OF TARNAVA MARE AREA FROM SOUTHERN TRANSYLVANIA

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Abstract : Târnava Mare area is one of the last medieval landscapes in Europe, with perhaps the most extensive flower-rich grasslands remaining in lowland Europe, essentially unchanged for hundreds of years, in which low intensity farming coexists with an abundance of flora and fauna. From the cultural heritage point of view it is perhaps the richest area in Romania and one of the richest in Europe. Out of the seven fortified churches included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list, three of them Viscri, Biertan and Saschiz are concentrated in this area. But, with the lack of a law for the restoration of the Saxon houses and fines if these measures are not followed, altogether with the vanishing of traditional lifestyle based on extensive farming, the natural and cultural heritage, as well as the biodiversity which is a real treasure in attracting tourists, will disappear quickly. Our study tries to analyze and outline the fact that the need for heritage management in this region of Transylvania is huge, as big as the challenges encountered by those who want to perform this task – especially NGOs; the main problem encountered is finding sources of funding and trained personnel.

Keywords: natural and cultural heritage, Transylvania, biodiversity, fortified churches, tourism

1. Romania’s natural and cultural heritage

Romania is home to seven World Heritage Sites including the painted monasteries in Bucovina, the wooden churches of Maramureș, the historic centre of Sighișoara, the Dacian fortresses of the Orastie Mountains, Monastery of Horezu, villages with fortified churches in Transylvania and Danube Delta.

The centre of Romania encompasses what is known as Transylvania. It is well-known for its connection with the legend of Dracula. The country’s wide-ranging examples of architectural styles and a rich musical and literary history are reflected in an ethnic mix of Romanian, Hungarian, German, Roma, Ukranian, Russian and Turkish. A population as diverse and unique as the country’s scenery combined with a rich history to offer the visitor a great insight into Europe’s past and present.

Tourists can admire the unique architectural treasures of Transylvania, such as castles, fortified churches and centuries-old houses, while exploring sites where Saxons merchants and craftsmen, over 900 years ago, established powerful and rich cities. Some of the best preserved medieval cities in Europe, especially Sighisoara, Brasov and Sibiu, are located here.

During the mid-12th century Saxons came here from Luxembourg, Lorraine, Moselle, Rhine and Wallonia regions of north-western Europe. They called their new home "Siebenburgen" (Seven Citadels – in Latin *Septem Castra*) after the seven major walled cities they built here.

“Sighisoara was not the biggest or richest of the seven Saxon walled citadels (known in German as the *Siebenbürgen*) in Transylvania, but it has become one of the most popular. A walk through the town's hilly streets with their original medieval architecture, magical mix of winding cobbled alleys, steep stairways, secluded squares, towers, turrets and enchantingly preserved citadel, is like stepping back in time.” The other *Saxon* citadels were: Bistrita, Brasov, Cluj, Medias, Sebes, Sibiu. (<http://www.romaniatourism.com/sighisoara.html>)

2. The Saxon villages

Transylvanian Saxons had a special status among the nations in the province and their civilization has managed to survive and thrive for over 800 years from the 12th century. They formed strong agricultural, commercial and craft communities. Located in the south of Transylvania, these settlements were constantly under threat from Turkish and Tatar invasions. In order to protect themselves, the Saxons built fortifications. The most important cities were fully fortified and the smaller communities created fortifications around the church. The fortifications were usually added towers and storehouses to safeguard the most valuable goods, often withstanding long sieges.

More than 150 fortified churches survive to present (originally there were built around 300 churches) - with a wide variety of architectural styles, south-eastern Transylvania is home to the highest number of existing fortified churches from the 12th to the 16th centuries. Furthermore, a group of six Saxon and one Szekler villages are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Biertan, Calnic, Darjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Valea Viilor and Viscri. (<http://www.fundatia-adept.org>)

“The saxon villages display a remarkable, unspoilt harmony between people and landscape. The steeply rolling topography has defined the pattern of development in each village, from the linear street pattern in Viscri to the trifurcate pattern in Roades. The valley systems in which Roades and Crit have been built allow for a central village 'square', whereas the single valleys in Viscri, Floresti and Mesendorf have led to a main street with subsidiary cross-streets. These villages are enclosed and neatly protected by steep valley sides. Where landform is less steep, development follows a looser pattern, as seen in Roandola and Laslea.” (<http://www.mihaieminescutrust.org>)



Figure 1. Saxon houses from Viscri (<http://www.dragosciobanu.ro>)

The houses of the Saxon villages have a distinct design: they are painted in a wide variety of greens, ochres and blues, with distinctive hipped roofs. “The houses themselves are built to a format, with their cobbled courtyards, winter and summer kitchens, vegetable patches and colossal timber frame barns enclosing the rear end of the courtyard. Behind the

barns lie a further vegetable plot and an orchard, usually with a row of walnuts at the far end to act as a fire break and provide insect free shelter from the sun.” (<http://www.mihaieminescutrust.org>)

3. The importance of Târnava Mare area

The Saxon Villages Area lies in the south of Transylvania and has about 300,000 ha, with a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants scattered in about 150 small villages and settlements. The area has a triangle shape, known as the Saxon triangle, between the historic cities of Sighișoara, Sibiu and Brașov.

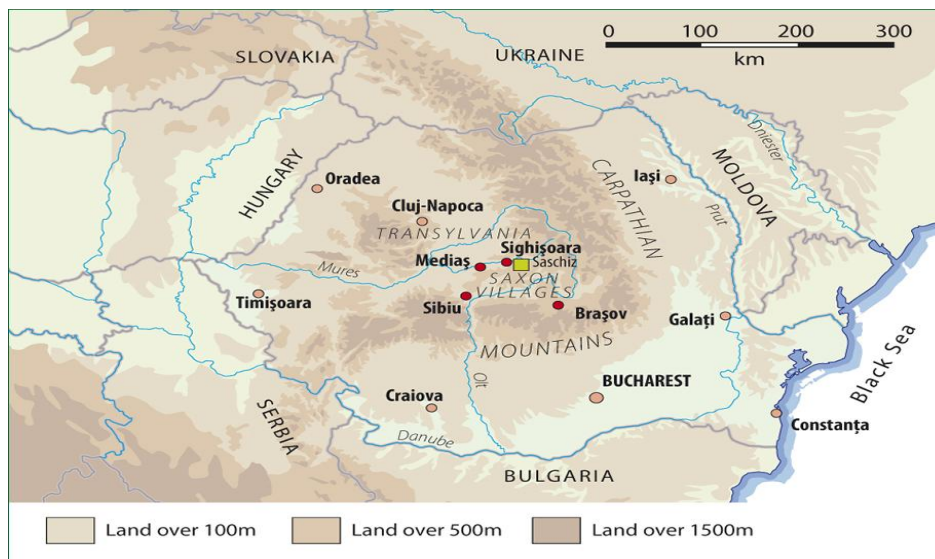


Figure 2. The Saxon Triangle of Romania (<http://www.fundatia-adept.org>)

Târnava Mare area lies at the heart of the Saxon Villages area borrowing its name from the river that passes through 85,000 ha of particularly rich landscape. This is one of Europe’s last medieval landscapes, with probably the most extensive flower-rich grasslands remaining in lowland Europe, essentially unchanged for hundreds of years, in which low intensity agriculture coexists with an abundance of flora and fauna. The landscape still presents a medieval land-use pattern -forested ridges and gullies pasture and hay meadows on gentler slopes and terraces, and arable land and smaller meadows on the flat valley bottoms near villages. (<http://www.fundatia-adept.org>)

“This is perhaps the largest zone in *lowland* Europe with extensive areas of ancient landscape, intact villages and associated traditional agriculture. The biodiversity-rich meadow grasslands, lowland hay meadows, scrub, fens, and oak-hornbeam woods are all habitats threatened in Europe and strictly protected under the EU Habitats Directive.” (<http://www.fundatia-adept.org>) The area contains numerous plant and animal species that are threatened at national and international level, including not only Europe’s most extensive non-alpine hay-meadows, with an astonishing diversity of wildflowers, but also the continent’s last lowland bears and wolves.

The small-scale farming communities and their agriculture practices provide an opportunity to study historical ecology through direct observation - and this kind of low-input farming is increasingly relevant in current economic conditions. The area is threatened by intensification of grassland management and by abandonment of land and of traditional land management. (<http://www.fundatia-adept.org>)

From the cultural heritage point of view it is perhaps the richest area in Romania and one of the richest in Europe. Out of the seven fortified churches included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list, three of them Viscri, Biertan and Saschiz are concentrated in this

area. In the middle of the region, surrounded by these three churches, there is the fortified citadel of Sighișoara, the most beautiful medieval citadel in Romania and the only inhabited medieval citadel in Europe.

It is wonderful how along 70 km of road you can find four settlements belonging to historical and cultural world heritage. Like Sighișoara, whose value lies in a unitary architectural ensemble, the value of the three fortified churches included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list comes from the fact that they are placed in the middle of the Saxon villages with an unified and well preserved architectural style, brought by the first Saxon settlers since the first decades of the 12th century.

Alongside this architectural unity, we have to mention the unchanged traditional way of life which was based on extensive agriculture. The community spirit of these villages is the joint usage of pastures and forests belonging to the whole community as well as sharing animals grazing during summer. For 800 years people have lived in this area in harmony, modeling the nature so as to meet agricultural needs as well as the supply of raw materials for construction, etc. Because of this the area is not only the home of some of the largest non-alpine meadows in Europe and an exceptional wealth of wild flowers, but this is the region where the last populations of bears and wolves of the continent are living. The biodiversity of the landscape created by man (in some places there are more than 60 different plants / m²) is in most cases higher than that of wild areas, because the mosaic of habitats created by humans encourages species diversity.

4. The National Strategy and the actors involved in the process of conservation

At present, the national cultural heritage strategy is focused on the protection, conservation and rehabilitation of goods that represent Romania's cultural heritage priorities. The directions are as such: conservation and restoration of historical monuments within the National Restoration Programme, development of central - local partnership; setting-up and development of partnership with the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform for the protection of national cultural heritage, as well as with UNESCO and other international bodies; use of historical monuments at the core of sustainable development on local level; training of experts; the prevention of illegal demolitions of the architectural monuments, historic buildings; the survey of urban regeneration and industrial heritage.

The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage is the central authority responsible for drafting and implementing public cultural policy and it identifies major dysfunctions and vulnerabilities in the field of cultural heritage in Romania. Currently, the public decentralized services of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage are organized at each county level, as Directorates of Cultural and National Heritage.

But the owners of the cultural heritage monuments and historic buildings are divided into three categories:

1. Local authorities, for example Sighișoara City has owned and managed the entire medieval city fortification structure composed of nine defense towers and the wall that tie them and other buildings located in the upper town and lower town.

2. The Evangelical Church - owns all the 150 fortified churches in the southern Transylvania altogether with presbyteries and in many cases former old school buildings in the vicinity of churches.

3. Individuals, companies, NGOs that own or administrate buildings located inside the sites included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list.

Starting from the axiom that this heritage was preserved and developed more than 800 years as a concrete manifestation of another intangible heritage represented by traditions and customs of the Transylvanian Saxon community, it is clear that with the disappearance of the communities in this area, due to mass emigration of ethnic Germans in the years following the 1989 Revolution, threats to conservation and enhancement of this heritage is huge.

The first obstacle in any activities related to cultural and natural heritage management is the lack of funds.

The local authorities, especially recently, are facing a budget deficit in the most basic sectors and needs of society: health, education and public safety.

The Evangelical Church has extremely low revenues because there are no longer parishioners; in 2011 approximately 27,000 inhabitants of Romania were declared native German speakers nationwide. In Târnava Mare area only in Sighișoara and Malancrav there are weekly liturgical services held in evangelical churches.

Even though most of these churches are introduced in tourist packages and are visited for 1 - 1.7 euro per visitor, the amounts collected do not cover the minimum necessary annual payment for a person as a church trustee.

The individuals who own historic buildings lack the resources needed for conservation, and more than that, no motivation to do that. They do not realize the importance of maintenance work and restoration of buildings which have to be done respecting the traditional construction techniques and materials.

Beyond the financial impediment in conservation of these historical sites there is a deeper reason: motivation. “Why not modifying these buildings so that they meet our today’s needs?” – It is a question frequently heard when speaking about heritage management activities.

And the answers are not well supported: “Because they are included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list”. But being honest and fair who would like to live in a museum?

Another answer is: “Because they can attract tourists”. But communities benefit little or sometimes they do not benefit at all from tourism. People quickly understand this and as a consequence this message has no longer any impact on them. And so, with lack of funds, no motivation or willing to maintain and restore the historic buildings, the individuals try to modernize the Saxon houses using cheap, modern and easy to use materials of construction.

The most common forms of degradation of heritage building are:

1. The demolition of sheds in villages. It is a consequence of the fact that the traditional household which included among others two cows and a horse, in the Transylvania of the 21st century became an expensive hobby that few can afford it.

2. The changing of wooden windows (with shutters cancellation) with PVC windows, most of them of white color because they are cheap and comfortable.

3. The changing of roof configuration and even worse, giving up on traditional tiles in favor of newer material, much cheaper and less durable, e.g. metal sheet, tarred boards, etc.

4. The usage of cement instead of the traditional lime and the exterior painting of houses with washable paints in strong colors, totally inconsistent with the traditional appearance of these houses.

5. The changing of the traditional gate configuration, cancellation of cornices and coat of arms on the facades.

6. The construction of new buildings without any permits or approvals within the historic site with cheap construction material such as BCA or bricks, covered with sheets having nothing to do with traditional materials.

The mayors of these villages and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage know these facts but this is not enough. Even the houses included on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list are destroyed because the inhabitants state that it is cheaper to modernize a house than restore it using traditional materials. In the villages that are not under the protection of UNESCO it is even worse. The traditional elements of the houses are stolen and sent to other countries of Europe where these unique items are valued a lot and are very expensive. So, historic monuments vanish without a trace being sold by pieces in Europe.

Upgrades that do not account for the historic value, can lead to exclusion from the list of UNESCO World Heritage monuments. The villages are no longer promoted as a tourist destination in the guides and programs of this organization. Also, the funds awarded by UNESCO for the preservation and rehabilitation of these objectives are lost. Unfortunately, our law does not provide for any sanctions for inappropriate architectural changes to historical monuments. It is needed a law for the restoration of the Saxon houses and fines if these measures are not followed.

5. Conclusions

Based on all these facts, we can analyze the actions took by the actors involved in the process of conservation and restoration of historic buildings.

The local and national authorities did almost nothing, just some fainted campaigns informing citizens about the importance of proper historic buildings maintenance and restoration.

The NGO sector is quite active, superior to most of the state institutions. There were implemented various projects with European or private funding which aimed at traditional facades restoration of houses from villages' historic centers, trainings and certifications for rural people in traditional trades such as bricklayer, carpenter, locksmith, traditional cooking classes and guest houses management trainings.

We can mention some of the NGOs that support the traditional construction materials usage, looking constantly for solutions in restoration and maintenance of historic houses, implementing projects and protecting the Saxon heritage: „Mihai Eminescu“Trust, Urban Rehabilitation Foundation, Pro Patrimonio, GTZ Germany.

The NGOs try permanently to find ways of correct capitalization of traditional products of the area which are mostly bio, eco, and organic, shortening the commercial chains by organizing manufacturers fairs. But, altogether with the vanishing of traditional lifestyle based on extensive farming will disappear quickly the natural heritage, the biodiversity which is a natural treasure in attracting tourists.

In conclusion we can say that the need for heritage management in this region of Transylvania is huge, as big as the challenges encountered by those who want to perform this task, the main problem encountered is finding sources of funding and trained personnel. Tourist activities provided by different foundations such as Adept Foundation and other local tourist guides can help the region providing money for the owners of the guest houses and for the local producers. But there is a need also for strong laws stipulating the proper restoration and maintenance of the historic buildings, as well as fines for not following the rules.

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