

RELIGIOUS HERITAGE, AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN CREATING AN IDENTITY OF VRANCEA COUNTY TOURISM

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Abstract

The article is aimed to a specific geographical inventory method, the method of mapping, places of worship in general at the national level, then customizing the Vrancea County. Highlighting the religious heritage of Vrancea County tourism is very important because it facilitates the integration of the tourist circuit. The fact that the city of Focșani, except Bucharest and Iași has the largest number of places of worship per capita, the existence of more than 30 wooden churches in the mountain area, mausoleums that functioned as churches, today being declared Historical monuments are several reasons why this area was chosen for analysis.

Key words: Places of worship, Wooden churches, Religious heritage, Vrancea County.

JEL Classification: L83, Y10

1. INTRODUCTION

Romanian people are characterized by a deep spirituality expressed by two unusual features: it is a Latin island in a Slavic sea and the only country in Latin-Orthodox Christian religion (over 90% of the Romanian Orthodox). The spiritual character of the Romanian people has led Romania to be considered the country with the largest number of churches per capita in Europe and even the largest of wooden churches in Europe (Iacob, 2001). This is one of the reasons for which it deserves a touristic-geographical point of view on one of the most prestigious institutions in the eyes of Romanian people. In terms of tourism, churches, monasteries are major attractions for both Romanian and foreign tourists. Their inclusion in the tourist circuits increase the notoriety of the favored regions, which have as their central concern in promoting religious heritage (monasteries of Bukovina and Maramureș wooden churches).

Vrancea County has an important natural potential focused in the mountainous area called The Land of Vrancea and also it has an anthropogenic tourism potential, more balanced spread on large county, integrating here the religious heritage. The rich tourism potential available in Vrancea County deserves to be better exploited and capitalized. On one hand it contributes to increase the local economy and on the other hand to enrich the knowledge of culture, history, tradition, habits of the tourists. The large number of places of worship both in the country and county-level demonstrates the spirituality belief of Romanian people, part of their daily life.

The article includes an analysis of places of worship in terms of type and age, highlighting their importance for local communities and tourism. Furthermore, special attention will be channeled to wooden churches, since it is a remarkable creation of archaic civilization.

It is used a modern method of analysis, that is mapping method, for a view, a location and a much clearer understanding of the phenomenon studied. For tourism, mapping method is important because it facilitates knowledge of tourism phenomenon by simply locating the items on the map.

1.1. Analysis of the concepts of religious tourism and religious heritage in the literature

Along time, the spiritual dimension of tourism has been the attention of academic studies, which can be analysed from two perspectives. On one hand, significant attention was directed to the so-called religious tourism, whose participants are more or less motivated by religion (Rinschede, 1992, p.52). Tourism began to be itself regarded as a religion. Tourism as a particularity of the use of free time began to be perceived as a sacred, spiritual journey. Several investigations have been made to verify the claim that people find spiritual fulfillment through tourism. However, the concept of tourism as a spiritual journey is made by several authors (Graburn, 2001; Olsen, 2006).

To develop a religious tourism in a given region it is necessary to have a religious heritage. The notion of heritage includes material and immaterial components of the identity of any society, developed, and then submitted and updated in the territory (Muntele and Iațu, 2006, p.136). Religious heritage comprises all the achievements of creative genius in terms of religious and military-style buildings, and spirituality and skills acquired over time.

About the religious heritage in Vrancea County has been written very little information. Only in the works of monograph or travel guides, but it has not offered an integrative and an overview of the heritage in a national or even European level. Attention to wooden churches was developed by Ion Cherciu (Cherciu, I., 2003), at the level of Vrancea mountain.

2. NATIONAL IDENTITY OF VRANCEA COUNTY IN TERMS OF RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

To see the location of Vrancea County at the national level, in terms of religious heritage, it was made a map which shows the counties with the largest share in terms of places of worship, in particular the number of churches held (Figure 1).

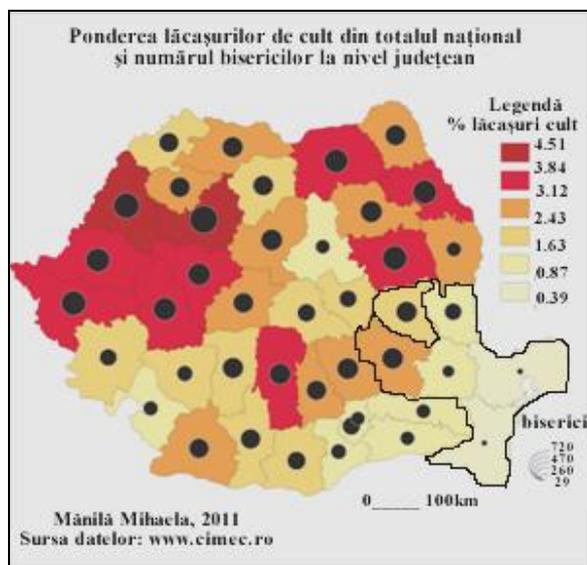


Figure 1 - Share places of worship in the national total and the number of churches in the county

Data source: www.cimec.ro

At first sight it seems that practically every county has a higher or lower number of places of worship, their existence being caused by a number of historical, religious or political factors. The frequency with which places of worship have emerged after the revolution of 1989 may not have escaped to any careful observer of the post-revolutionary Romania.

The fact that a good part of these places were destroyed with brutality during Communist dictatorship, was increasing the religiosity of the citizens, religious groups concerning to raise cult establishments (Andreescu, 2005, p.2).

In the top counties with the largest share of the places of worship are Cluj and Bihor, followed by Arad, Alba, Timiș, Hunedoara and several counties in Moldova, namely Iași, Suceava and Bacău. Multitude of places of worship in western country was favored in particular historical circumstances (the Austro-Hungarian domination). Suceava County is the most eloquent example for the imbalance between demographic needs and the number and location of places of worship. Suceava is studded not only with old churches dating from the times of the famous rulers of Moldavia but also of new places of worship occurred after 1989.

Vrancea County occupies a middle position in the share of places of worship at national level. It is a typical county, which has a religious heritage, sufficient for such an analysis and a diversification of

forms of tourism that can be practiced on this territory. In the South-East development region, the Vrancea County is the second as importance in this area.

To highlight the fact that the Vrancea County deserves to hold the investment to promote religious tourism as an alternative to other forms of tourism (oenotourism, ecotourism, rural tourism) it has resorted to another cartographic representation at the national level: calculating the coefficient of localisation for places of worship in relation to national population (Figure 2).

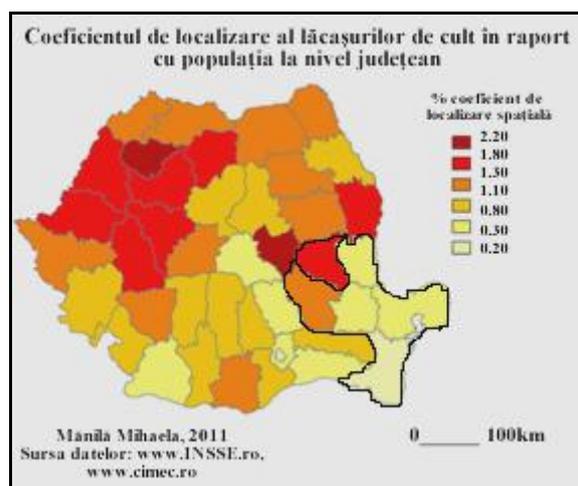


Figure 2 - The coefficient of localisation of places of worship in relation to the county population

Data source: www.INSSE.ro and www.cimec.ro

The counties with the highest coefficient of localisation for places of worship are Covasna and Sălaj. This demonstrates that at a population of less than 250,000 inhabitants, the number of places of worship is quite high - Sălaj - 459, Covasna - 340.

In Moldova, the Vrancea County stands on leading position, reporting places of worship to its county population (431 places of worship and 387632 people) along with Vaslui. In the South-East Development Region ranks first in contrast to the Constanta County, where the coefficient for places of worship has very little value (it can be said that there is a shortage of places of worship than in the rest of the country).

3. PLACES OF WORSHIP IN VRANCEA COUNTY

3.1. Share types of places of worship in the county of Vrancea

Apart from Iași and Bucharest, there is no other city in the country to compete with the residence of Vrancea County churches – Focșani. If Bucharest has over 200 churches for 2 million inhabitants, the city of Focșani, with its 100,000 inhabitants, has over 50 churches, that is a church per 2000 inhabitants, having, according to some statistics, most places of worship per capita across Europe (Muscă, 2006, p.9).

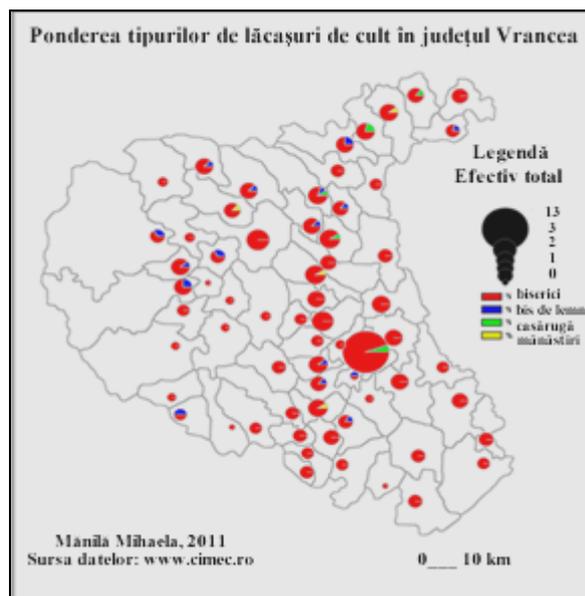


Figure 3 - Share types of places of worship in the County of Vrancea

Data source: www.cimec.ro

According to the cartographic representation above (Figure 3) it is observed that each communes benefit of such places. Their preponderance is more concentrated in the city-residence, Focșani, city symbolically by placing it on the two sides of Milcov, called City of union. There are so many churches in Focșani primarily due to its strategic position - important crossing point on the border between Moldova and Wallachia. The fact that by 1862 there were two cities with separate administrations has determined Moldavian and Wallachian rulers to build churches because of rivalry between princes who lived in frontier settlements.

If in the rural space, places of worship of Vrancea were built by village communities, priests or small landowners, in Focșani churches were built, mostly, by the great officials, often placing them a few hundred meters apart, only to show off their wealth and social status (Muscă, 2006, p.60). In 1806 there were 24 churches in the two fairs, and in 1865, the documents of the time mentions 27 holy places. Half a century later, in 1906, is spoken by 26 churches for 20,000 inhabitants. A century later, in 2006, the number of temples doubled, having today over 50 places of worship.

Of a tourist particular importance is the mausoleums built in honor of the heroes fallen in World War I (mausoleum of Focșani, which functioned as a church, mausoleums of Mărășești, Mărăști and Soveja). All these mausoleums of Vrancea are included in a tourist project called The Glory Road of Heroes (www.ziaruldevrancea.ro).

Panciu city renowned for the quality sparkling wines attracts visitors' attention through an underground religious assembly, built during the reign of Stephen the Great.

The town of Odobești is the only urban settlement in Vrancea where no churches were built

after 1989, which allowed the restoration of the old places of worship unlike other parts of the country which gave priority to raise new churches, neglecting the existent of the religious heritage. A proof that wine commerce was the main occupation in this region is the Church Cazaclii merchants who settled here. At the end of religious service on Sunday they usually decided the price of wine for the whole Eastern Europe.

Vrancea County does not qualify for an impressive monastery and it is unable to rival with counties like Suceava or Neamț. But among the most important and who deserve the title of true cultural monuments are the monastery of Lepșa, near Lepșa village, surrounded by rich forests, raised by the locals to 1789 and restored in its original form on the 1939 (Bănățeanu and Stoica, 1988); here in the past there was a school for the rich children; the Brazi Monastery, situated near the town of Panciu, dating from the time of Stephen the Great can be visited with the completion of the road of wine in this kept; Dălhăuți monastery from Carligele village, is known especially because of a miraculous icon. Also, in Nuruja Valley, there is a monastery called the Monastery of Vrancea, built in 1764 by several monks. The main attraction of this church is an old Russian icon painted around 1431 (Grumăzescu, 1970). Historical monuments with an impressive value are so-called "Pearls destroyed" of the Land of Vrancea, namely monasteries Soveja and Vizantea. Both monasteries were abandoned after the Secularization of 1864. The monastery of Vizantea is the only edifice in Vrancea Mountains built by Movilă family and Soveja is the second princely monastery in Vrancea County. Unfortunately these monasteries were turned into ruins as a result of anthropogenic interference, the royal foundation in Vizantea remaining the oldest religious settlement ever raised in Vrancea by Ieremia Movilă (Giurgea, 1977).

Vrancea Mountains offered an ideal place for heritage and monastic hearths. The territory of the present county was full by monasteries, some of which have managed to resist until nowadays. The churches of Mountains Vrancea value altogether, impressing by age, architecture and decorative style with site-specific. Also Vrancea Mountains house a large number of wooden churches, a real treasure for Vrancea.

3.2. The age of places of worship in County of Vrancea

Moldavian religious architectural style and painted mural represent the opera of a civilisation at the peak of its creativity. Churches, monasteries, embroidery, miniatures, sculptures, paintings compose virtually the image of a civilisation provided as a cumulation of spirituality and a permanent contact with the sacredness (Gheorghiu și Cimpoeru, 2005, p.6).

Knowing the age of places of worship represent a very important element, especially for tourists interested in this form of tourism, whereas there are a multitude of connections between the architectural style and period of construction of these places.

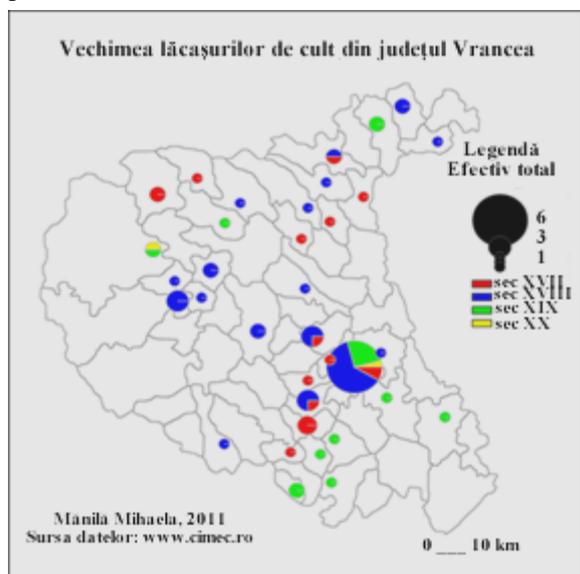


Figure 4 - The age of places of worship in Vrancea County

Data source: www.cimec.ro

Most of the places of worship in Vrancea County dates back to the list of historical monuments of the 18th century. It is observed in the map represented above (Figure 4) that the largest share have churches built between the years 1700-1800. There is in fact a balance during times of building places of worships, respectively the 18th, 17th and 19th centuries.

In the city of Focșani, during the restoration of churches have been discovered foundations of numerous places of worship, prior to these churches, namely in the 14th- 16th century.

3.3. Wooden Churches in the Land of Vrancea - factor of cultural identity

Regarded as a specific achievement, Romanian churches are part of the great family of European timber architecture, about which Lucian Blaga wrote that they are "among the most precious and most admired products of our popular genius".

Wooden churches are found in a large number in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. Their diversity from a widespread, the beauty of their forms, the techniques and the decorative elements place them among the most representative folk creations of mankind. Romania is distinguished at the level of Europe through the existence of the largest number of wooden churches, 1257, according to the Institute for Cultural Memory (Figure 5). Until the early 20th

century, Central and Northern Europe had known the predominant architectural woodworking, both secular buildings and ecclesiastical ones. Huge areas of land covered with coniferous and forestry forests provided cheap and handy material, which favored the construction of these unique monuments with a significant value. It is noted that the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe have developed a cult in building wooden churches, with their own legacy of such edifices. As we move forward towards the southern extremities of Europe, the wood is replaced by the construction in masonry. The oldest wooden churches, which have been preserved to our times are in Norway.

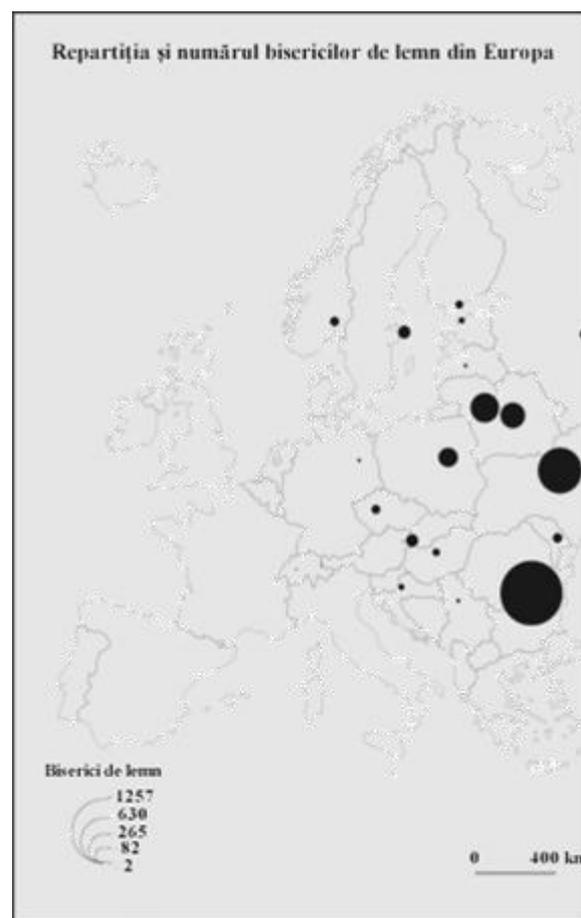


Figure 5 - Wooden churches in Europe

Source: Lungu Roxana-Valentina

The wooden churches as a whole are invaluable for Romanian culture. Wooden churches are an integral and defining part in the national identity. In Romania is thus kept a number of 1257 of wooden churches. It is observed that the counties covered by forest resources have developed buildings of this kind, giving to our country a great religious heritage (Figure 6).



Figure 6 - Wooden churches in Romania

Data source: www.cimec.ro

We encounter them in large numbers throughout the Carpathian bow, each region contributing to the development of specific representative edifices, having the original traits related to the old tradition of building in wood. Wooden architecture has a great diversity and unity at the same time, due primarily to religious orthodoxy membership.

In Vrancea County, there are over 30 wooden churches, some consolidated, others restored, being unique constructions not only in architecture but also by painting and embroidery. A good portion of them have disappeared because of advanced degradation and because of fire. So a wooden church disappeared from Blidari village, which was the only wooden church in the country, painted on the board. Wooden churches require attention and more protection from the authorities because of the perishable material they are built. There is no strategy for saving and protecting such medieval architectural monuments.

Most of the wooden churches are found in the land called The Land of Vrancea representing the main pole of timber architecture, civilization and ethnographic value. Based on inscriptions, documents and notes on liturgical books as well as analysis of stylistic features, the largest wooden churches in the region were uplifted in Vrancea in the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century. The existence of wooden churches is difficult to test physically due to the perishability of the material and to the wars and invasions of all kinds. Rebuilding of the church, with maintaining the shape of the original plan, is a typical case not only for Vrancea County, but for the whole field of wooden church architecture in our country. In the old villages in The Land of Vrancea it has the same classification of the church in a landscape created and maintained by people, the same strategic location, reported to the core of the settlement whether

it is of a hill or a bridge (Cherciu, 2003, p.35-36). Churches are built to scale and modest size, very close to those of an old village house, and they are used the same materials and construction techniques. Also the porch is an item that refers to the construction of the old village house. Porch wooden churches in the Land of Vrancea are an element of connection between the church, dedicated to the deity and the surrounding nature.

Some examples of such buildings of worship are the wooden church in the Campuri village, a historical monument with a different folk architecture. The Church dates from 1663, being the oldest religious building in the Sușița Valley. Originally, the Church has appeared in place of a monastery and is similar to the architecture of the churches erected during the reign of Stephen the Great. Wooden church in Salt Valley is a historical monument and popular religious architecture. The Church was built in 1773, of oak on a stone foundation. Each pillar of the Church is carved differently from each other.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Vrancea County has a great recovery of natural potential, demonstrated by the development of mountain villages such as Lepșa, Greșu, thanks to the picturesque landscape of Vrancea Mountains. The artistic cultural heritage remained more in a cone of shadow, Vrancea County being more visited for the natural potential of mountains area and for the wine-growing potential of the hilly area. For a sustainable development of tourism, it must that the cultural-artistic heritage to be fairly used, for the attention of tourists to be distributed in a balanced way in the territory. In this way, some resources are not subject for touristic overdraft, which could lead to their alterations in the time, thereby making more than necessary the creation of diversified offerings.

The attempt to present for the first time an overview of the religious heritage in the Vrancea County has highlighted a number of notable features designed to complement the cultural identity of the region. The monasteries, wooden churches and even simples churches that hold a spiritual and a specific local architecture are a starting point for the development of any range of tourist offers. The Land of Vrancea thus benefits of the necessary resources to ensure that tourism can become a profitable activity, both for locals as well as for those who discover a land of faith, of wine, of art and of glory. Any spiritual worship of Vrancea County could be reckoned a genuine heraldic insignia on the cost of arms of the county, as it has its place well deserved the vineyard with grape vines.

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