

WOODEN CHURCHES - A REPRESENTATIVE COMPONENT IN THE CULTURAL RURAL LANDSCAPE OF TRANSYLVANIA

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ABSTRACT. – This paper analyses one of the most representative components of the rural religious material culture – the wooden churches – typical for the historical province of Transylvania and especially for Maramureş. Wooden churches are specific for the rural space inhabited by the Romanian communities, with an accented character of conservatism and preservation of the traditions from Maramureş, the Someş Plateau and the Apuseni Mountains. The physiognomic architectural characteristics and the technique of the buildings, joining the archaic means with a science of equilibrium and of wood resistance have imposed this category of objectives, offering originality and even uniqueness to the rural landscape to which they belong.

Key words: wooden churches, cultural patrimony, villages of Transylvania, wood civilization.

Wooden churches join as essential components in the civilization and rural culture belonging to the Romanian space, next to the households with dwellings, annexes, enclosures and gateways, using the same building material – wood.

They can be considered as a quintessence of the multi - millenary folk civilization of wood, due to some anonymous creators, who formed in time a genuine school, perpetuated until nowadays, especially in Maramureş.

They succeeded a harmonious union between the ancestral representations and symbols related to the village's universe, transposed in a marvellous way - by form, dimension, wood modelling (sculpture) and by the adoption of some stylistic components derived from Occident - as belfries and steeples, individualizing an authentic rural "Gothic" style from Maramureş.

Wooden churches can be considered as original representatives of mainly Romanian Carpathian and Peri-Carpathian rural habitat, related especially to the Transylvanian space, where wood, abundant, but unfortunately perishable, is used as a housing material, but they also appear in the southern part of the country.

However, Maramureş and Transylvania are the most representative habitats in which the wooden churches imposed themselves. In these regions, more than 3,000 wooden churches were preserved up to the end of the 19th century. In 1930, they remained less than 1,300 or even less than 900 in the second part of the previous century. Nowadays, about 600 historical-cultural and rural architecture monuments are recorded in the whole country.

This patrimony was built during several centuries, from the 14th century until the 19th century. Their perpetuation as cult establishments was strongly related to the perishability degree of the building material, namely wood, reconstructions with architectural impact and adaptation being often required. It also depended on the attitude of the authorities towards the Christian Orthodox cult and on the manifestation of the counter reform, as an offensive of the Catholic cult, and the transposing within the Christian Orthodox community of the Greek - Catholicism.

The oldest wooden church is that from Ieud, Maramureş, dating back from 1364, followed by that from Lupşa Albă – 1420, continued with the period of their maximum proliferation between the 17th and 18th centuries.

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Many of these objectives were often renovated on limited portions, in the parts exposed and affected by the climatic conditions related to rainfalls and temperature, especially the roof and the steeple. Thus, the churches older than half a millennium, kept the original form, less the initial wooden material. It is only in the case of the churches built after the 18th century that the content and form were both preserved.

There is an immediate connection between the dimension of the space destined for religious ceremonies within the churches and the size of the Christian community. Later on, this fact determined the building of some larger establishments within the frame of the same locality, which kept, however, the features and the religious architectural style (an illustrating example is that of Ieud). In other cases, more durable construction materials, such as brick or stone, were preferred mainly in the 20th century.

After 1990, a revitalization, both of the new wooden churches and the monastic establishments, is to be noticed especially in Maramureș, by keeping the technique and the style, but offering dimension and greatness on a background of a general equilibrium. It is the case of the religious ensembles from Bârsana and Săpânța, with churches whose steeples are considered the highest wooden constructions from Europe and even from the world.

In comparison with the wooden churches from Scandinavia, Germany or Austria, the so-called “blockbau” technique was used for the wooden churches from Transylvania and especially from Maramureș. This technique was also used in the process of building the houses, namely for ordering the beams horizontally, with their joining in the corners. This system limited the dimension of churches to lengths of 12-15 m, determined by the length of the trunks laid at the basis. On the other hand, as the old churches did not have a dug foundation, they could be moved. This fact permitted the disassembling and the reconstruction of some of them in the ethnographical open-air sections of the Village Museum from Bucharest, Astra Museum – Dumbrava Sibiu or Hoia – Cluj-Napoca.

Wooden churches have two basic components: the body proper, of relative modest dimensions, 40-60 m², usually having a west-east direction, consisting of three sections (the altar being situated in the eastern part), and especially the steeple, apparently in a dimensional contrast with the body of the church (or the nave).

The steeple, tens of meters high, is the one that imposed the “Gothic from Maramureș”. It is the symbol of the self-taught science, fructification of a secular experience in wooden constructions, through the basis-height rapport, through the used essences of wood (coniferous trees with light and flexible wood) and the inner structure of support, with junctions using wooden nails, made from strong essence (*Taxus baccata*). The steeples are arrow - shaped, sometimes presenting smaller turrets in the corners, which surround the basis of the shaft. The role of the steeple was not only a decorative one; it also served as an observation point and, later on, as a place for installing the bells.

The body of the churches, as well as the steeple, was protected against the unfavorable weather by the wooden shingle, which had different forms and dimensions and was often in a swallow’s tail shape.

The wooden churches comprise numerous decorative elements, whose component, theme and significance confer them a note of uniqueness, especially for those from Maramureș.

The wooden sculptural symbols are Pre-Christian, Dacian and even Celtic, or of Asian origin brought in by the Romans. They appear on the façade, on the sides of the churches or even in the interior: the motif of the convolute rope, signifying the temporal infinite, and the sun as a perpetual source of life, but also the symbol of knowledge and truth.

The tree of life also appears, being taken over from the themes embossed on the pillars of the gates, doors and walls of the houses or even from menial objects in the households.

The inner paintings made on the wooden walls or on the ceiling present a real interest, as well as those comprised in the registers of the rood screens, created in icon-shape, with a religious thematic and an ordering specific to the Orthodox churches.

By theme and style, some influences from the religious Medieval-Occidental art can be also distinguished, those belonging to the Byzantine culture being filtered and interpreted by the local handicraftsmen. Clear chromatic tones were used, with the predominance of white, red, and blue. Sometimes, yellow or semitones were used, and very rarely the armorial colours.

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The theme is centered upon the main biblical symbols from the Old and the New Testament, the characters being often presented with clothes worn at that time by the native Romanians. The moralistic intention from the picture, completed by explanatory texts, is to be noticed. Sometimes, the picture is made on a canvas.

Within some of the wooden churches, valuable collections of icons on wood or glass appear. In addition, very rare manuscripts were discovered, such as the Codex from Ieud (Codex Ieudensis), dating back from the 14th century.

Territorial repartition

1. *Maramureș* is the typical region for these cultural-historical and architectural monuments, with a patrimony including dozens of wooden churches.

Most of them are concentrated in the Iza Basin: Rona, Vadu Izei, Rozovlea, Bârsana, Șieu, Botiza, Ieud Deal (the oldest wooden church from Maramureș and also from the country, attested documentarily in 1364), Bogdan Vodă (Cuhea - Bogdan Vodă's former capital, known as the founder of the feudal state of Moldavia), Dragomirești, Săliște de Sus, Sârbi, Șugatag Village, as well as in the superior basin of the Mara, an affluent of the Iza, in Giulești, Hornicești, Desești, Budești, Călinești, Brebu. In the Vișeu Basin, such religious objectives are fewer: in Borșa or Moisei.

As for the current tendencies, two new monastic centers, related to old religious traditions, compel recognition, namely Bârsana, that can be considered one of the most interesting and original monastic complexes from Maramureș and from the country, with an architectonic and functional ensemble perfectly integrated into the environment of Maramureș, and the Săpânța-Peri monastery, with the highest religious wooden edifice in the world, still in construction.

On the southern slope of the Gutâi Mountains, in the Land of Lăpuș, a second ensemble of wooden churches was built over time, with features similar to those in the Land of Maramureș, but a little more recent (in the 17th and the 18th centuries). The religious objective from Surdești is to be noticed (on the third place in height, after Săpânța-Peri and Bârsana), as well as those from Rogoz, Cupșeni, Libotin, Săcălășeni and Plopiș.

2. A second group of wooden churches, resembling those from Maramureș and closely related to those from Lăpuș as ancientness is concerned, can be noticed in *the Someș Plateau*. The most numerous ones are in Sălaj, especially in the localities situated alongside the Someș Valley (21 objectives): Măgura (Poiana Blenchii commune); Fodora, Bârsău (Gâlgău commune); Ieanda, Răstoci (Ieanda commune), Toplița, Purcăreți, Letca, Șoimeni, Ciula (Letca commune); Preluci, Valea Loznei, Lozna (Lozna commune); Văduvele (Năpradea commune) etc.; on the Almaș Valley, with 14 wooden churches, such as those from Fildu de Sus, Cubleșu, Zâmbor, Sânmihaiu Almașului, Dragu, Hida; alongside the Crasna and the Barcău Valley, with 9 churches, in Tusa, Sâg, Cehei, Zalnoc. On the Agrij Valley, other 14 churches are to be found in Răstolțu Mare, Păușa, Ciurmărna, Poarta Sălajului, Creaca, Jac, Brustur.

3. In the space of *the Apuseni Mountains*, in the Land of the Moți, the wood civilization had the same intensity as in Maramureș, with a fundamental impact upon the elementary habitat: upon the household of the Moți, the domestic objects and tools, as well as in building up wooden churches, architecturally and physiognomic different from the first two concentrations. Among these, Lupșa (the second in ancientness, after Ieud-Maramureș, dating back in 1420), Ponelel, Gârda de Sus and Vidra compel recognition. There is also a prolongation in Beiuș, where the churches from Lazuri and Rieni are to be noticed.

The value of these objectives – original architectonic achievements, in which the ensemble of the churches from the Maramureș county asserts itself also through the uniqueness deriving from the joining of the natural frame with the well-preserved and authentic rural civilization and culture – had as a result the integration of eight of the most representative religious monuments into the UNESCO World Patrimony, namely those from Ieud-Deal, Bârsana, Budești, Desești, Plopiș, Poienile Izei,

Rogoz and Surdești. They were offered funds for rehabilitation and conservation, were given buffer and protective habitats and, in addition, they benefit by the possibilities of promotion.

The wooden churches from Maramureș are the most nationally and internationally well-known anthropic tourist objectives. They represent one of the factors of tourist attraction, which contributed to the enforcement of one of the most representative and original rural tourist zones from Romania.

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