

Hunedoara Orthodox Monastic Establishments

History and the Present-Day Situation

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UNDER THE influence of hermitages and monasteries in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor,¹ monasticism—both eremitic (a hermit lifestyle) and cenobitic (a communal lifestyle)—, organized according to the rules known and preserved throughout the Orthodox East, penetrated and developed beginning with the fourth century, first in the Roman province of Scythia Minor—eloquent examples are the cave complex of Basarabi (Constanța County) and the communal lifestyle establishments where theologians John Cassian (360–435), Dionysius Exiguus (470–545) and the “Scythian monks” were trained—, and then throughout the whole intra- and extra-Carpathian territory. Therefore, after the year 1000, numerous Romanian monastic centers are reported in various sources.²

For Hunedoara (Hunyad) County in the medieval period, the beginnings of monasticism are considered to be both the ancient hearths of hermits in the Râmeș and Cib gorges (both in Alba County), and in neighboring Banat and Oltenia, connected to the southern Danube area, from where the phenomenon spread, first in hermitage form, especially in the piedmont regions.³ Later, these simple ways of monastic life were the nuclei for recruiting monks for future sketes and monasteries with a communal lifestyle.

In its eremitic form, it is considered that Hunedoara monasticism flourished in the 13th–14th centuries and then in the period immediately following 1550, when, due to the confessional-ethnic alienation of the descendants of the first founders of the ancient cenobitic establishments, the monks had to take refuge in more secluded places. However, the number of hermitages cannot even be approximated, as long as they evaded any local administrative authority that could have attested to their existence. The only sources for their detection in the field remain, therefore, old records, legends, local traditions and, at the very best, the results of archaeological research.⁴

As for the cenobitic (communal lifestyle) monasticism, due to the harsh historical circumstances, the transition from the hermit form of organization to the monastic one was much slower than in the extra-Carpathian space, the Hungarian royalty considering the transition as a disguised way of strengthening Orthodoxy and, implicitly, the national sentiment. However, the number of Hunedoara cenobitic establishments,

which in reality probably did not exceed the level of modest hermitages,⁵ must have been just as high. This is evidenced by a deed of donation from the second half of the 16th century, according to which, in a small area, namely the properties of the Kendeffy noble family from Râu de Mori, in the Land of Hațeg, several “cloisters and monasteries” were listed, without being named, on 3 April 1579.⁶

At least for the Hațeg communities, a special role in the organization and existence of local Orthodox hermitages, monasteries and sketes must have been played by the monasteries of Vișina and Tismana in neighboring Oltenia. Unfortunately, we have no concrete information about them or their inhabitants dating back to before the second half of the fourteenth century. After this date, although numerous monastic establishments appear in history scattered throughout the present-day county, however, with rare exceptions, medieval diplomacy, archeology, toponymy, or local traditions can only provide vague details. Therefore, the information referring to the beginnings and duration of their functioning still remains uncertain.

Many of the servants of the holy monasteries led an exemplary spiritual life, and the aura of holiness was unofficially conferred onto them by the people during their lifetime or shortly after their death; this is the case of the Pious Saint John of Prislop, who lived at the turn from the 15th to the 16th century, was canonized by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992 and has been celebrated ever since on 13 September every year;⁷ also from Prislop, “The Saint of Transylvania,” the hieromonk Arsenie Boca (1910–1989), is expected to be canonized. Other monks fiercely opposed any attempts at denationalization through the Church by the Vienna Court. The reprisals were harsh; the walls of their monasteries along with their places of worship, cells and outbuildings, fell prey to the cannons and barbarous acts of the Austrian General Adolf Nikolaus von Buccow’s soldiers, their only wealth—namely their dowry of books, icons and modest but precious ecclesiastical objects and sacerdotal attire—being scattered. Although they went on the long road of wandering, the names of monks such as the Pious Saint Sophrony of Cioara, Theodosius of Plosca, or Ephraim of Prislop were carved into the marble of eternity.

REGARDING THE old Hunedoara hermitages, the first known eremitic establishment seems to have been located at the southern edge of the present-day hamlet of *Cheile Cibului* (commune of Almașu Mare, today in Alba County); in the medieval period, the locality was incorporated into the Geoagiu de Jos estate, a fiefdom of the princes and boyars from Wallachia;⁸ then until 1968, it was included in the Hunedoara County and then in the Hunedoara Region. Under the rock called “Piatra Chilei” (The Rock of the Cell), in the historical schematism of the Uniatic Diocese of Lugoj from 1903, traces of modest monastic rooms were found for the first time.⁹ Subsequent archaeological excavations, based on the recovered ceramic material, dated its beginnings back to the twelfth century,¹⁰ thus placing it in the category of the oldest Romanian cave hermitages.¹¹ However, no documents have been preserved regarding the history of this eremitic establishment. It is only believed that, during its centuries-old existence, a modest wooden church was built, in which all the inhabitants of the cells dug in the surrounding limestone massifs met on holidays.¹² Gradually abandoned

in the 18th century, the hermitage seems to have finally completed its mission in 1846, when, according to tradition, the last Orthodox monk in the area retired to a neighboring monastic establishment in the Glod Gorge. As early as 1793, the land had come into the possession of the villager named Onu al Ursului, who gave it to the Uniates of Cib, in order to build a new church.¹³ Monastic life has been revived in the area after 1990.

At the edge of the former village of *Remetea* (*Rimecea*), the Hungarian toponym *Kethremethege* (in translation: hill of the two hermits),¹⁴ was recorded in a document from 1390, the oldest written record of the existence of a hermitage in the district of Hațeg. The hill, known as Florușu Hill, is located on the border of Bucova (the commune of Băuțar, Caraș-Severin County); in the 16th century, for fear of the Turks, the villagers took refuge in the area of Timișoara, and the settlement was abandoned but it was re-established after 1700 under the present-day name;¹⁵ until 1950, it belonged to Hunedoara County. Neither the exact location of the hermitage nor the duration of its existence are known today, but the anti-monastic policy promoted by the Reformation supports the hypothesis of its disappearance during the seventeenth century.¹⁶ In fact, the original name of the village, derived from the Hungarian “remete” (the hypothesis of the reverse derivation of the Hungarian “remete”¹⁷ from the Romanian “râmeț”¹⁸ has also been put forward), having the meaning of “hermit” or “loner,” has a strong monastic resonance. And this is not the only case in which toponymy reveals monastic realities long lost in the mists of medieval history. Thus, the presence of the names *Remetea* (a hamlet incorporated in the village of Rovina, the commune of București), *Rimetea* (attested in 1847 on the edge of Balomiru de Câmp village, belonging to Alba County since 1968;¹⁹ the location could not be established) and *Remetea Hill* (a hill in the village of Petreni, Băcia commune), suggests the existence of three other oases of prayer in Hunedoara County.²⁰

The toponym “Peștera” (Cave), spread throughout Romania, might also indicate the presence of possible medieval hermitages. If this hypothesis is accepted, then at some point, a monk known for his needs by the neighboring believers might have lived within the villages of *Paroș-Peștera* (commune of Sălașu de Sus) and *Peștera* (commune of Băița), rich in karstic phenomena, and his hermitage might have transferred its name to the nearest locality.²¹ Also, *Pârâul Boșorogului* (Old Man’s Brook) (“Poru Boșorogu”), a hydronym from the Șureanu Mountains (in the southeastern part of Orăștioara de Sus commune, mentioned on the Josephine topographic survey from 1769–1773), may also refer to an old anchorite, living a life of seclusion in those remote places.²² Finally, we can add the toponym *Chiciora Călugărului* (The Monk’s Peak) from Romos commune²³ and the hydronym *Valea Iordanului* (The Jordan Valley) in Hațeg, recorded in documents around 1400.²⁴

Along the same lines, we mention two local traditions. According to the first one, the little ancient wooden church in the village of Lăpușnic (commune of Dobra), built by the side of the road to Rădulești, in the place called Valea Morii, was moved, sometime in the 17th century, to Pietra Albă, and in it served a hermit, living in seclusion in a neighboring cave, dug in the side of Albiuța.²⁵ And in the neighboring village of *Dumbnăvița* (commune of Ilia) sometime in the medieval period, a hermit

*as old as the world lived, who fed on roots and herbs and would not to talk to anyone, and when he spoke, very rarely, he said everything about the past, present, and future of the one in front of him. He lived in seclusion in a cave in the forest so that he could talk to God and was ready to flee from the vanity of men.*²⁶

In fact, eremitic lifestyles are known in Hunedoara area even in the contemporary period. Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century, in one of the caves in *Ardeu* gorge, an anonymous elderly monk lived the life of a hermit; he used to go down to the village church only on Sundays and holidays to receive the Eucharist.²⁷ At the same time, the hermit Vasile Demian lived in a cell dug in the ground at the edge of *Cucuiș* village (commune of Romos).²⁸ The example of the latter was followed by the believer Mircea Munteanu from Orăștie, retired—in 1993—in a similar cell inside the Saint George skete, built by his family; later, he became a monk on Mount Athos.²⁹

In the past, there were many cenobitic monastic establishments, identified—in general—based on the same toponyms, hydronyms, and local traditions. Regarding the toponym “Mănăstire” (Monastery), found in several parts of the county, we find a first example in the case of the famous *Prislop* medieval cenobitic monastic establishments from the Land of Hațeg, where, about 200 m from the present-day stone church, to the northwest, the memory of the elders placed Mănăstirea Bătrână (The Old Monastery), an ancient hermitage,³⁰ whose material traces were preserved until the last century.³¹ This establishment was built either before the arrival of Saint Nicodemus of Tismana in the area of Hațeg, or it represents the original place itself, founded by the well-known South-Danube monk;³² aware of the need to strengthen religious life in the region of Hunedoara, he supposedly initiated, at the turn from the fourteenth century to the fifteenth century, with the support of the Wallachian ruler Mircea the Elder (1386–1418) or one of the powerful local Romanian princely families, the construction of a lasting stone church (the only triconch religious monument in the whole of medieval Transylvania), rebuilt around 1564 by Princess Zamfira, daughter of Prince Moses of Wallachia, to thank God for healing her of a disease she had suffered from.³³ Nicodemus himself recorded his visit at the Hațeg hermitage, when he stated that he copied his famous Slavonic *Four Gospels* “in the Hungarian Country, in the sixth year of persecution, and from the beginning of the world we count 6000 and nine hundred and 13” (1404/1405).³⁴ In order to piece together the history of the monastery, besides the preserved documentary sources and the results of archeological research, of capital importance is the versified chronicle *Plângerea Sfintei Mănăstiri a Silvașului din eparhia Hațegului, cea din Prislop* (The complaint of the Holy Monastery of Silvaș in the diocese of Hațeg, at Prislop),³⁵ written in 1763 by the hieromonk Ephraim, who was living in exile in Wallachia. The fragments of the mural painting preserved both inside and outside the place of worship, superimposing an older medieval iconographic decoration, date back to 1759 and bear the unmistakable “seal” of the artistic talent of the “priest” Simeon Zugravul from Pitești. The proof of the spiritual and cultural prestige enjoyed by the monastery in the medieval period is the fact that one of the Orthodox archpriests of Transylvania, namely Ioan II of Peșteana, lived at Prislop; three other hierarchs came from the community of the monastery, namely the metropolitans Gennadius I and John III, and bishop Theophilus of Vad. Alienated in the first half of the 18th century, the

cenobitic establishment was returned to the Eastern Church around 1744, but was set on fire in 1762 at the order of General von Buccow; then, it came again under the jurisdiction of the Uniate Diocese of Făgăraș with the see in Blaj (after 1853, under that of the Diocese of Lugoj). Abandoned after 1800, it was reactivated at the beginning of the 20th century, gradually becoming a well-known place of pilgrimage for Greek Catholic believers. In 1948, Prislop Monastery regained its original Orthodox affiliation. Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan of Transylvania (1920–1955) is responsible for establishing a new monastic community by bringing in young monks, among whom was the hieromonk Arsenie Boca. After Hunedoara County, and therefore implicitly the Prislop monastery, came under the administrative-canonical jurisdiction of the Diocese of Arad, as a result of the difficult postwar conditions and as there were few monks (a few had left), in April 1950, Bishop Andrei Magieru (1936–1960) decided the transformation of this cenobitic establishment into a nunnery. In the following decade, under the guidance of the abbess Zamfira Constantinescu and the priest-confessor Arsenie Boca, a “cooperative” was set up inside the monastic establishment dealing in weaving, knitting and tailoring; several buildings for cells and workshops, the bell tower, as well as some outbuildings were erected. In 1954, extensive restoration and consolidation works started on the monastery church that was included on the list of Romanian historical monuments. Unfortunately, in 1959, as a result of enforcing the State Decree no. 410, the community of this cenobitic establishment was scattered by the communist authorities, and an old people’s home was established in its outbuildings. It was not until 1 October 1976 that the Ministry of Religious Denominations gave its approval for the reopening of the old monastery. In 1985, work began on the Brâncoveanu-style building, intended for the cells of the monastic staff.³⁶

The hydronym “Valea Mănăstirii” (The Monastery Valley), a testament to the existence of an ancient and flourishing cenobitic establishment destroyed by the cannons of the General von Buccow’s soldiers on 5 June 1762, refers to another contemporary monastic community, namely that of *Plosca (Teliuc)*;³⁷ on the place of the altar of the former small church of the monastery, there is a stone cross, erected in 1802 by a local.³⁸ After the community had been scattered, at least one of the monks seems to have taken refuge in the neighboring village of Ghelari. Re-established under the jurisdiction of Blaj, as evidenced by the mention of the Romanian school that “is located between Plosca and Ghelari, at the monks of the so-called monastery [which] is in the middle of the forest”,³⁹ the cenobitic establishment was abandoned in the early nineteenth century, and the buildings disappeared, either destroyed by rains and by the two streams that framed the former establishment, or intentionally demolished, in order to recover and reuse the building material to raise the outbuildings of the new monastery, located downstream, about 3 km from the old site. At the edge of a wide plateau, a small part of the walls of the former “monks’ house” can still be seen among the weeds. In time, around this monastic complex, a hamlet appeared, fully united until 1948, named after the spiritual center around which the whole community revolved: Mănăstire (Monastery); the few existing households are currently incorporated in Ghelari communal center.⁴⁰

Also on a “Valle[a] Monasteri[i]” (Monastery Valley), a hydronym indicated on the Josephine topographic survey of Transylvania (drawn up between 1769 and 1773),⁴¹ another

well-known Romanian cenobitic establishment, namely *Cerna (Negoiu)*, had existed at the edge of the present-day hamlet of Negoiu (commune of Lunca Cernii de Jos) in the 16th–17th centuries.⁴² Its ruins were discovered in 1984–1985 on a plateau surrounded by hills with steep slopes, during archaeological excavations coordinated by the historian Adrian Andrei Rusu, a site that accurately showed the entire layout of the establishment.⁴³ The monastery is mentioned in documents only at the end of the 16th century, at a time when the tolerant religious policy of the Báthory Catholic princes had allowed a certain freedom for the Orthodox building initiatives.⁴⁴ The attestation was occasioned by the takeover of the estate of Francis Mursinai, the last descendant of the local nobles from Răchitova, by the nobleman John Gálffy of Cucerdea, who was in the employ of Prince Sigismund Báthory, among which “Chiarna Zarda,” that is, the Cerna monastery, was listed on 13 March 1585. Other than that, except for one written yet undated source, the series of mentions of the monastery comes exclusively from external, direct, or indirect sources.⁴⁵ The founders of the establishment are undoubtedly the members of the noble family Mușina or Mânjina from Răchitova, the owners of the feudal domain of Lunca Cernii and its surroundings. The important cultural-ecclesiastical role that this cenobitic establishment played in the ecclesiastical past of Transylvania is amply demonstrated both by its rich old book collection and by the election of two of its former abbots to the episcopal see of Vad: John (circa 1599–1605) and Spiridon (1576–1599, 1605–1614).⁴⁶

Previously, there was a monastic establishment at *Suseni-Colț* (commune of Râu de Mori), a medieval cenobitic establishment, served to this day by an ecclesiastical edifice architecturally individualized by the presence of its strong fortified stone tower (provided with three levels and a pyramidal helmet of slabs), supported on two buttresses, raised above the altar. This bizarre place of worship, used as a seasonal stable during the communist period (it was restored only in 1996–1998), was at the core of a heated debate among specialists regarding its original destination. If Vasile Drăguș assumed that the church had served as a place of worship for the soldiers from the garrison of the fortress,⁴⁷ Radu Popa believed it had served as a chapel for the adjoining princely court, identified a few hundred meters downstream;⁴⁸ on the other hand, I. D. Ștefanescu, Adrian Andrei Rusu and Cristian Moisescu pleaded for its monastic destination,⁴⁹ an opinion found in both the old Uniate⁵⁰ and Orthodox historiographies.⁵¹ A valuable pictorial ensemble, preserved only fragmentarily, once adorned the entire interior surface of the walls; the iconographic decoration had been made by an anonymous South-Danube errant artist at the turn from the 14th century to the 15th century. The history of the cenobitic establishment ended in the middle of the 16th century; with the consent of the Kendeffy family (formerly Cândea), Hungarianized, Catholicized and then Calvinized, a small monastic community continued to live sporadically here until after 1700.⁵²

In the Zarand part of the county, there is the medieval monastery of *Vaca* (present-day *Crișan*). The original monastic complex, consisting of a rotunda-type place of worship, painted in fresco, and several outbuildings, all within a small perimeter, was discovered following archaeological excavations in 1990–1991 and 2001. It is assumed that the establishment was founded by the small monastic community expelled from neighboring Ribița, and benefited from the support of Wallachian ruler Michael the Brave (1593–1601). Its cultural role, as well as the prosperity it achieved, are demon-

strated by the rich dowry of books it owned and the school that functioned intermittently on the premises. This prosperity, however, disappeared in the first decades of the eighteenth century, with the cessation of the supposed substantial material aid from abroad. In addition, archaeological evidence has shown traces of a large fire. The events that followed the abusive dissolution of the Transylvanian Orthodox Metropolitan See in 1701 do not seem to have bypassed Vaca monastery either, although the documentary sources do not explicitly mention it. Passed under the authority of the Uniate Diocese of Făgăraș (with the see in Blaj), the cenobitic establishment, transformed into an affiliate of Prislop monastery, was renovated in 1759. But, following landslides, it was completely abandoned at the end of the 18th century, being re-established only on 28 June 1992.⁵³

In order to identify other ancient monastic establishments in Hunedoara County, we have at our disposal, as mentioned before, toponyms, hydronyms, local traditions, the text of Slavonic inscriptions, or some architectural features of some medieval churches; archival sources rarely confirm their presence. Thus, in the northwestern part of the village of *Răchitova*, in the place called “La Ciliu” (At the Cells), faint traces of a former medieval monastery have been preserved until today. Archaeological excavations carried out in 1986 led to the discovery of a cell in the shape of a slightly deepened pit (3 × 4.20 m), dug in the rocky side of the terrace of a tributary of the Măciș brook; in front of it, a path that followed the contour line could be clearly seen. The cenobitic establishment seems to have appeared around 1650, following the dissolution of neighboring Cerna. Its precise period of existence is unknown, and it might have disappeared by the end of the same century.⁵⁴ The toponym “Valea Chiliilor” (The Valley of the Cells) on the edge of the locality of *Bucium-Orlea* (commune of Sântămăria-Orlea) in the Land of Hațeg, refers to the presence of another Orthodox monastic establishment, abandoned in the medieval or modern period;⁵⁵ so does the toponym “La Ciliu” from the *Lelese* commune located in “Ținutul Pădurenilor” (The Country of Forest Dwellers).⁵⁶

Referring to the beginnings of the medieval establishment in the village of *Galați* (commune of Pui), Uniate Vicar Ștefan Moldovan wrote on 30 November 1852:

*Regarding its age, it is said that it was built by some monks as a monastery centuries ago; however, the evils of the world led to their disappearance. There didn't use to be a village here, but only a forest, and a shepherd, who, wandering with his goats in these parts, stumbled upon these walls, which then the Christians covered and rebuilt the church . . .*⁵⁷

The tradition was then taken over by other Greek Catholic historians.⁵⁸ The ruins of the place of worship, built in the 16th century, were unearthed in an archeological site between 1 and 20 July 1990.⁵⁹

At the edge of *Băiești* village (commune of Pui) there seems to have been, until the 17th–18th centuries, another Orthodox cenobitic establishment of an uncertain age. The only known information is provided by the same Uniate vicar of Hațeg. Following the canonical visit made on 1 December 1852, he recorded:

*To know better the status of this parish, an old man, Peter Halmagi, says that, in olden times, within his village, across the Strei, to the northwest, in the place called Șiglău, there used to be a monastery, traces of which can still be seen today in the vineyards.*⁶⁰

According to tradition, in the annexes of the noble castle at *Nălăţrad* (city of Haţeg) in the 17th–18th centuries, there functioned an Orthodox or Catholic cenobitic establishment, which the Hungarian owners called “barátok” (a term derived from the term “brotherhood,” in the sense of monastic congregation). If the preserved information is authentic, then, based on an archaeological discovery (a stone “chest” containing 200 coins, a censer, and a golden chalice from the time of the Wallachian Michael the Brave), monastic life could have started here around the year 1600.⁶¹ The small community was probably scattered in the following decades, through the agency of the members of the same Hungarianized and Calvinized Naláczi family, the descendants of the former local Romanian princes.

Near the locality of *Zeicani*, the same Uniate historiography records the presence of another medieval Orthodox monastic community, which seemingly disappeared during a Turkish incursion from Banat to Haţeg through the “Iron Gate of Transylvania.” Thus, according to the tradition recorded by vicar Ştefan Moldovan, in 1479, fearing the Turks, the inhabitants

*withdrew under the mountain, where, at the bent of the hill toward the west into the so-called valley of Haţeg, above the rectory, at the place called “Progadea Veche,” they built another wooden church, exactly in the place where it is said that there used to be a monastery in ancient times.*⁶²

The Schematism of the Diocese of Lugoj from 1903 also conveys the detail that the present-day place of worship “would have been built on the site of an old monastery.”⁶³

Among the founders of the old place of worship “The Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel” of *Ghelari*, “built and painted on 17 June 1770,” a “hieromonk Ştefu” is mentioned; he is an Orthodox monk who must have fled from neighboring Plosca, devastated by General von Buccow in the summer of 1762. Indeed, the hypothesis of re-establishing a small monastic community must be taken into account; if it existed, it disappeared in the context of the Josephine anti-monastic policy of 1783–1787.⁶⁴

In the fragmentary inscription kept in the altar of the “Annunciation” church in *Micăneşti*, reference is made to the service in that place of two hieromonks: “Any priest who will serve at the Holy Liturgy shall mention these names: Hieroschemamonk Cozma, hieromonk Ştefan; Father Teodor, Father Ioan, Father Ştefan . . . , 1761.”⁶⁵ We consider that they are either hieromonks who had served in the church in the past, in the absence of parish priests, or—more likely—hermits, retreated to one of the surrounding valleys and joining the community only on Sundays and holidays to receive the Eucharist.

In addition, in the diptych of the medieval church of Saint Hierarch Nicholas in Hunedoara, among the serving clergy, some hieromonks are mentioned: Pavel (15th century), Iosif (15th century), Anastasie (16th century) and Macarie (17th century).⁶⁶ The monastic tradition was continued in the “city of iron” by a Uniate monastery, built around 1738, when, on March 14, in a letter of archpriest Zaharia Cioca of Hunedoara (1734–1761), a building initiative of this kind was mentioned.⁶⁷ Less than three decades later, however, another document, from 1765, refers to a “dissolved monastery” (“monasterium

cassatum”),⁶⁸ which certainly disappeared during the devastation ordered by General von Buccow in 1761–1762.

According to tradition, another monastic community existed in the village of *Ocolișu Mare* (commune of Bretea Română), liturgically served by the forerunner of the imposing present-day stone church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, located on the outskirts of the town; it may have ended its existence either in the 18th century or in 1865, when a devastating fire severely affected the place of worship.⁶⁹

The Uniate historian Zenovie Păclișanu also lists among “the monasteries untouched by the destructive fury of General Buccow” the one in *Deva*.⁷⁰ Indeed, in the upper part of the Ciurgău Valley above the city, the toponym “Bisericuța” (Little Church) has been preserved,⁷¹ which could support the hypothesis of the existence of a monastic community, scattered towards the end of the 18th century in the context of Josephine anti-monastic measures.

A monastic establishment seems to have existed within the village of *Bretea Mureșană* (commune of Ilia), tradition providing the information that, on the place of the Hungarian cemetery on the hill on the edge of the locality, in the 17th–18th centuries, there was a modest skete, destroyed by order of General von Buccow. The records of the time do not mention its presence, only the memory of the elderly has preserved the toponym “La Bisericuța” (At the Little Church).⁷²

The same documentary scarcity is found in the case of the cenobitic establishment that once existed on the northern border of the village of *Câmpuri-Surduc* (commune of Gurasada), an establishment indicated by the toponym “La Mănăstire” (At the Monastery). Thus, near or inside the old Dacian fortification (1st century BC–2nd century AD), built on an isolated promontory, with steep slopes,⁷³ a small monastic community, later on scattered by the vicissitudes of the times, might have existed either in the medieval period or in the modern one. The toponym “Bescheritz Berg” is recorded on the Josephine topographic survey of Transylvania (1769–1773),⁷⁴ in the vicinity of the present-day church.

The information regarding the cenobitic establishment that once existed in the village of *Nojag* (commune of Certeju de Sus) is similarly scarce. It is believed that the holy establishment was destroyed by the Austrian cannons in 1761–1762; in 1952, the former parish priest Aurel Vrăbiescu noted the following on a page of a Cyrillic *Gospel*: “Before the union of 1700, in Nojag, there was a monastic skete with several monks, in the place called ‘La Chilia’ [At the Cell], which was burnt down by order of General Buccow.”⁷⁵ Another tradition links the disappearance of the monastery to the passage of General Joseph Bem’s troops on the edge of the locality during the Revolution of 1848–1849.⁷⁶ It seems that lithic material recovered from the ruins of the former cenobitic establishment was used to build the bell tower of the medieval church in Bârsău, a construction site dated back to 1888 on the basis of the exterior inscription above the entrance.⁷⁷

On the abovementioned topographic survey, a group of buildings and the toponym “Beszerikutza” (Little Church) appear in the vicinity, on a wooded peak in the north of the village of *Hondol* (commune of Certeju de Sus).⁷⁸ The only information about the existence of the monastic establishment dates back to 1783–1787, when the Austrian authorities ordered the dissolution of the monastery; its monks and possessions were to be moved to the nearest village, Hondol, where John Popovici, archpriest and vicar general

of the Transylvanian “Non-Uniate Greek-Eastern Diocese” on several occasions, served at that time.⁷⁹

Another toponym of this kind, recorded in the form “Piserika” (Church) in the same cartographic source, is found to the east of the village of *Fintoag* (commune of Lăpușiu de Jos).⁸⁰ Also, to the west of the present-day spa resort of *Geoagiu-Băi* (on the Josephine topographic survey, Baad von Gyögvy) the toponym “Poiana Monastery” (The Meadow of the Monastery) and the hydronym “Font Monaster” [“Izvorul Mănăstirii” (The Spring of the Monastery)] are mentioned, both referring to the existence of another medieval monastic establishment that must have disappeared in the middle of the 18th century, so prior to the map.⁸¹

Near the town of *Cugir* (belonging to Hunedoara County until 1968), to the east, the toponym “La Mănăstire” (At the Monastery) has been preserved to this day, identified on the Valley of the Ghișag, on the slope of a wooded hill below Glodu peak. Although no information about the existence of any monastic establishment could be obtained by archeological and documentary means,⁸² its existence is beyond any doubt, since, on the same Josephine topographic survey, the indicative “monasterium” appears accompanied by the graphic representation of a place of worship.⁸³

To the north of *Renghet* village (Geoagiu town), in the same cartographic source, the toponym “Diallo Grecilor” (The Hill of the Greeks) is mentioned.⁸⁴ The information, correlated with another local toponym, namely “La Cilio” (At the Cells),⁸⁵ refers to the presence of a medieval monastery of “Greek” monks (Orthodox, in the religious language of the time). And they were supposedly scattered either during the Reformation or during the anti-monastic persecutions in the second half of the eighteenth century. Likewise, the hydronym “Pârâul Grecului” (The Greek’s Brook) (“Poru Grekului”) and the toponym “Pîscul Grecului” (The Greek’s Peak) (“Pîsku Grekului”) from the southeastern part of Orăștioara de Sus commune, mentioned in the same cartographic source,⁸⁶ may refer to “Greek” anchorites, retired to remote places for meditation and prayer.

In the southern part of the old Saxon seat of Orăștie (Broos), in the village of *Sibișel* (commune of Beriu), in the second half of the 19th century, there was also a monastic establishment

*in the upper part of the village, on the right, on the Strâmbava, a valley between Mount Negrița and Pleșul . . . , a monastery built by Ilisie from Sibișel, who sold his possessions to build cells, [but], since he led a secular life, Metropolitan Andrew Șaguna called him to account, asking the authorities to dissolve the monastery.*⁸⁷

Indeed, on 11 October 1873, the Sibiu Consistory submitted to the archpriest Nicholas Popovici of Orăștie a circular letter requesting that “regarding the dissolution of the eremitic establishment, known under the name of ‘monastery of the monks from Sebeș[el],’ this illegal establishment should be dissolved for moral and political reasons.”⁸⁸

Other medieval monastic presences come to light from the texts of the inscriptions of the time. Thus, on the eastern wall of the bell tower of the church in *Streisângeorgiu* (town

of Călan), inside the nave, there is the votive painting of the family of Prince Căndreș, the donor of the painting from 1408, accompanied by a Slavonic inscription:

Servant of God, Lord Lațco, servant of God Lady Nistora, the founder Lord Chendereș, God's servant Vlaicu, the son of Chendereș, dedicated the monastery to Saint George, their grandfather . . . , in the days of Jigmon [Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387–1437)] the king, the Transylvanian voivodes Ioaneș and Iacov [John Tamási and Jacob Lackfi, 1403–1409] year 6917, October 2.⁸⁹

Analyzing this inscription, Adrian Andrei Rusu came to the opinion that, at the beginning of the 15th century, a few monks might have lived around this church, thus giving the place the status of a monastery.⁹⁰

The same opinion exists in the case of the fragmentary text of the inscription of the church of Saint Hierarch Nicholas in *Ribița*:

With the will of the Father and with the help of the Son and with the deed . . . , master Vratislav and mistress Stana and their son . . . and with his brother, master Miclăușu, and with his mistress, Sora . . . , the monastery of St. Nicholas . . . was built to the Heavenly Father and painted in the year 692(?) [1414 or 1417], in the month of July 15, was finished and painted by hand.⁹¹

It is believed that a small number of monks, with the support of the local princely family, might have lived in a separate wooden building near the church.⁹² At the turn from the 16th century to the 17th century, as a result of the Hungarianization and Calvinization of the descendants of those founders, the monks were expelled, thereafter founding the cenobitic establishment in nearby Vaca (present-day Crișan), with the help of Prince Michael the Brave (1593–1601).⁹³ Echoes of this monastic establishment are identified through history until later, since in 1763, the “monastery of *Ribița*” is mentioned in a document entitled *Specificatio aggraviorum dioecesis Fogarasiensis*.⁹⁴

The votive inscription of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin church in *Crișcior* from the end of the 14th century is also about a cenobitic establishment, the text painted next to the founder of the place of worship being as explicit as possible: “The servant of God, the founder master Bălea [/Bălea], presents the *monastery* of the Most Holy Mother of God, the eternal Virgin Mary.”⁹⁵ Adrian Andrei Rusu concluded again that the specification regarding the parallel monastic destination of the edifice is not a literary artifice, since in 1411, the church might have also sheltered around it some Orthodox monks, later scattered by the hardships of history. In support of this view, there would be the mention of the disappeared medieval establishment called “Kalugier,” attested in 1600,⁹⁶ as well as the present-day toponyms “Dealul Ciliilor” (Hill of the Cells)⁹⁷ and “Mănăstire” (Monastery).⁹⁸

Inside the Saint Hierarch Nicolae church in *Leșnic*, a fragment of the fresco on the south wall of the nave shows the well-known scene of the two soldiers.⁹⁹ Below, there is a Romanian-Cyrillic sgraffito with uncial characters, rendered as “monastery” (ignored by

specialists so far), which could refer to a temporary monastic destination that the building might have had sometime during its centuries-old existence.

References to the medieval monastic realities are also provided by the construction details of four well-known Hunedoara religious establishments. Thus, in the case of the church in *Densus*, the presence of the two rooms attached to the southern wall of the nave made the historians N. Iorga¹⁰⁰ and Iacob Radu,¹⁰¹ a century ago, claim that there was a monastic community around this place of worship sometime in the medieval period. In support of this view, there is a Slavonic sgraffito from December 1473 that mentions the Father “Daniil” and Mother “Stanca.”¹⁰² Indeed, the name of the priest is an onomastic rarity for the country of Hațeg, but very common in the monastic environment. Then, the appellative “Mother” should be understood as “maică” (nun); so, next to the hieromonk Daniil, there would also have been a nunnery.¹⁰³ From this perspective, the space in question was thus identified as a cell.¹⁰⁴

Another architectural detail led to the association of another place of worship, namely the church in *Streii*, with the cenobitic way of life. According to the archeological research undertaken in the years 1969–1970 and 2000, in the 15th century, a spacious “narthex” was added near the western entrance—it also included the present-day bell tower—, disused around 1717, when, on the north side of the church, an ephemeral Reformed chapel appeared. This large porch, actually an enclosed quadrilateral courtyard, without a roof, with access from inside the building, was considered to be part of a small monastic complex, having as its core the old princely religious establishment.¹⁰⁵

The art historian Cristian Moisescu, putting forward the hypothesis of the contemporaneity of the three-bay narthex of the church of Holy Archangel Michael in *Gurasada* communal center, with its original layout in the shape of a four-leaf clover, includes this princely religious establishment in the category of Orthodox monastery buildings, referring to the well-known letter of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) of 16 April 1204, for the establishment’s period of activity.¹⁰⁶ In 1930, archaeologist and restorer Rudolf Wagner put forward the same hypothesis, based on the floor plan of the original building from the 10th–11th centuries.¹⁰⁷

Finally, at the southern border of *Zlăști* village (Hunedoara municipality) there are the ruins of a medieval stone construction, whose quadrilateral foundations, demarcating two distinct interior spaces, were unveiled more than a decade ago, in the southeastern part of the locality, in the place called “Dumbravă.” The ceramic material—the fragments of two glazed tiles, presenting numerous analogies with those from the ruins of the monastic complex at Vaca (Crișan)—and the bone object, discovered during the archeological excavations from 1999, date the construction (supposed to be a monastic establishment) back to the 17th century.¹⁰⁸ However, the ecclesiastical censuses of the time do not record its existence.

Officially, only the monasteries of Vaca (Crișan) and Prislop, though totally depopulated in the following decades, survived the anti-monastic policy promoted in Transylvania by General von Buccow and the Emperor Joseph II;¹⁰⁹ if the dust of oblivion had settled over the former, a small Greek Catholic community was re-established in the latter at the turn of the 20th century. For this reason, only the monasteries of Prislop (returned to the Orthodox Church in 1948) and Afteia (in present-day Alba County, then located between

the borders of the Hunedoara Region) were subject to the State Decree no. 410 of 1959, which provided for a drastic reduction in the number of Romanian monastic establishments and their inhabitants (in fact, aiming at their dissolution).¹¹⁰

AS A NEW freedom dawned after 1989, besides the monastic establishment of Prislop (nunnery), other 21 monasteries and sketes gradually (re)opened their gates. As such, in the Hunedoara area there are currently nine monastic communities of monks, namely the monasteries of *Crișan* (established in 1991) and *Deva* (established in 2015), the sketes *Cucuiș* (established in 1993), *Poiana Muntelui-Vulcan* (established in 1992), *Straja* (established in 1999), *Bălata* (established in 2011), *Nandru* (established in 2013), *Ohaba* (established in 2013) and *Ardeu* (established in 2015), as well as thirteen monastic community of nuns, namely, the monasteries of *Prislop* (the oldest monastic establishment from Hunedoara County), *Crișcior* (established in 1992), *Măgureni* (established in 2010), *Măgura* (established in 2014) and *Jieț-Groapa Seacă* (established in 2011), the sketes *Ghelari* (established in 1992), *Suseni-Colț* (established in 1995), *Râu de Mori-Retezat* (established in 1999), *Băița* (established in 2003), *Gmădiștea de Munte* (established in 2010), *Câmpu lui Neag* (established in 2015) and *Vața de Sus-Bujoara* (established in 2019), and *Alun*, the metochion of Ghelari skete (established in 2011). In all these monastic establishments, there have been numerous and varied achievements, especially when it comes to buildings.¹¹¹

In retrospect, it can be stated that the monastic establishments of Hunedoara County have been a continuous presence in the ecclesiastical space of Hunedoara, some monasteries and sketes surviving through the centuries to this day; others have been established in the past three decades, especially after 2009, when the Diocese of Deva and Hunedoara was established. Oases of peace of mind and communion with God, they have made an important contribution to restoring the religious and moral life of the faithful in the surrounding localities, to helping each other, to the spiritual strengthening of people in times of hardship or to their emancipation through the light of authentic Romanian culture. □

Notes

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3. Ioanichie Bălan, *Vetre de sihăstrie românească: Secolele IV–XX* (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1982), 14–16, 321.
4. Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Ctitori și biserici din Țara Hațegului până la 1700* (Satu Mare: Editura Muzeului Sătămărean, 1997), 91–92.
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19. Cristian Ioan Popa, “Din toponimia Văii Cugirului: Toponime de interes istoric și arheologic,” *Acta Universitatis Apulensis: Series Historica* (Alba Iulia) 7 (2003): 131.
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37. Augustin Bunea, *Episcopii Petru Pavel Aron și Dionisiu Novacovici* (Blaș: Tipografia Seminarului Arhidiecezan, 1902), 326–327; Radu, 85, 87; Meteș, *Mănăstirile românești*, 102.
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Abstract

**Hunedoara Orthodox Monastic Establishments:
History and the Present-Day Situation**

For many centuries, monasticism has been a favorite spiritual way to attain spiritual perfection through fasting, prayer, and contemplation. In the wilderness, in dark caves or deep in the heart of forests, all those who have chosen to devote their lives to God have found the peace and quiet necessary for a clear conscience and an uncorrupted heart. The Hunedoara space has been connected to these spiritual realities since ancient times, as evidenced by the multitude of eremitic or cenobitic monastic establishments that still come to light from chancellery documents, various notes on old religious books, toponyms, hydronyms, or local traditions. Without claiming to be original or exhaustive, this paper aims at nothing more than a brief presentation of all those past and present monasteries, sketes, and hermitages that have enriched the map of Romanian Transylvanian spirituality in general and that of Hunedoara County in particular.

Keywords

Orthodox spirituality, Eastern monasticism, Transylvanian monastic establishments, Hunedoara County, Prislop monastery