

WOODEN CHURCHES  
IN SOUTHERN TRANSYLVANIA  
AND NORTHERN OLTENIA

*Part I*

*by Ovidiu Daneş*



*"There is something that should get architects and urbanists to ponder over a bit: according to folk beliefs, in Heaven there is no house, whereas Hell is full of ovens, walls and adobes. Somewhere in-between rests human condition, with both the need and the liberty to build a home. In 2001 we shall be either closer to Hell or more near to a paradisiacal state of being. But why there is no home in Heaven, in folklore? Maybe that will help us bear better in mind the goals of houses and the responsibilities of those who build them. In heaven – according to an ancient Romanian legend – there will be no worries left, no sighing, no thoughts or death either, no passage of years or of hours... just one endless day."*

Constantin Noica, *Plain Forewords to the Kindness of Our Times, Foreword to the Houses of 2001*, a 1977 article for the UNESCO Conference 2001: *Urban Life and Work Environment*, published in the *Steaua* review under the title "Various Housings for the People of 2001", year XXVIII, no. 7, July 1997.

The destruction of the tangible or intangible Romanian rural heritage is occurring at a continuously increasing pace, while there are no strategies or policies to counter the phenomenon. The relationship of rural civil authorities and local communities with their own history is in its turn ambiguous in the current context where the feelings of local pride and of belonging to a certain well-rounded social group are strangely mixed with an increasing appetite for destroying or giving up elements of typical identity.

The case of the wooden churches in southern Transylvania and northern Oltenia is a symptomatic one, illustrative in probably the best way possible of the latest trends in Romanian rural life. After a spanning of 20 years of non-stop looting or infelicitous and maiming remodelling, the wooden churches are now almost fully deserted. Ignored by the village communities and deemed as minor patrimony by the governmental authorities, just a few wooden churches were preserved in their intact initial condition in terms of architecture, paintings, icon collections, furniture, ceremonial objects, etc. But they have actually vanished from our own awareness.

There are a few elements that led things to that state of affairs.

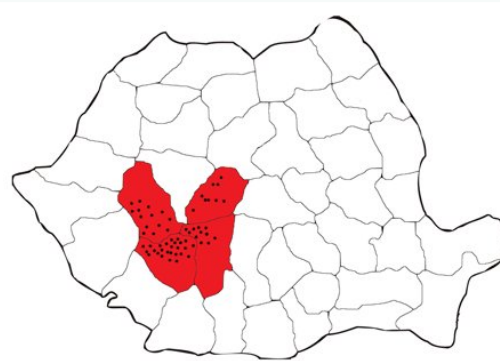


Figure 1. Map location of wooden churches inventoried by DALA Foundation.

First, the prominence of wooden churches within the community started to fade once the masonry ones emerged since the 1850s in southern Transylvania and significantly later in northern Oltenia, and fully prevailed after the 1980s. The masonry churches thus took over all liturgical and ceremonial functions. Since much larger and significantly updated in terms of architecture, they became the new identity epitomizing monuments of the village communities. In the beginning, wooden churches in southern Transylvania and northern Oltenia played a twofold role, both as parish centers and graveyard chapels, with specific funeral services. But both functions were taken over by masonry churches. A relevant aspect here is represented by the way in which locals use the



Figure 2. Wooden church from Pojogeni, Gorj county.

term 'graveyard church' to refer to the older wooden ones not in order to define an actual funeral destination but to just specify location.

There is also another social phenomenon connected to wooden churches and which has evolved quite dramatically within rural communities - the demise of local traditional professions and crafts. In the related specialized bibliography it has already been emphasized while the present-day researchers also keep stressing that those monuments fall into a unitary heritage that mirrors folk creativity and imagination, that such collective projects always involved painters, carpenters, roof tile workers, smiths, stonecutters, etc. Such co-authorship survived as long as the local craftsmen staid active, but the disappearance of the latter shortly resulted in the disappearance of the monuments in their original version. But since this is about collective and local work such trends are natural and predictable. In Oltenia, for instance, the number of crafts workshops has flopped to mere insignificant, while the standard of craftsmanship itself has also decreased in its turn. One of the latest consequences is replacement of the wooden roof tiles by tin roofs, a solution that gained ground on a large scale in the counties of Gorj and Vâlcea. The number of blacksmith shops in northern Oltenia is of only 5 while there are 38 operating

ones in southern Transylvania, a proportion that stands roughly the same in all crafts. Therefore, the occurrence of harmful remodeling or monument abandonment is in direct proportion to the number of skilled hand in the area. Things are better managed, apparently, in southern Transylvania, but the lineage of craftsmen shall soon be interrupted there too. The age of craftsmen and scarcity of apprentices will start to show not after long. Other cultural phenomena such as the exodus of youth out of rural areas, the emigration of German ethnics from southern Transylvania and the Roma colonization in the early 1990s, the low birth

Figure 3. Wooden church from Pistesti, Gorj county.

Figure 4. Wooden church from Frătesti, Gorj county.



rates or geographical isolation are in their turn relevant for the current state of affairs of the two rural regions.

The research started in September 2007 has focused on two regions neighboring the Carpathian range, southern Transylvania and northern Oltenia with a repertory of 60 wooden churches that cover a period of time starting in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century - 1736, Vălari (Hunedoara) - until round mid 19<sup>th</sup> century - 1827, Copăcioasa (Gorj): 9 in Sibiu County, 16 in Hunedoara, 26 in Gorj and 11 in Vâlcea.

The vagueness, paucity, and obsolescence of information, the village evolution, the almost complete absence of file photographic references or publication photos, the significant number and quality of the monuments were some of the aspects to start with.

Field research allowed us to identify some mutual decay issues in certain monument groups, and thus put together the preliminary documentation



Figures 5 and 6. Wooden church from Lelesti, Gorj county.

Figure 7. Wooden church from Colibasi, Gorj county.





Figure 8. Wooden church from Stroesti, Gorj county.



Figures 9-10. Wooden church from Salciva, Hunedoara county.

needed for any future intervention projects. One third of them, for instance, present severely deteriorated roof cladding, the holes being in certain cases up to 1.5 m long. In two years of research we have put together a repertory of 60 churches, craft workshops and traditional occupations in the above mentioned regions that can be entered in a larger scale context of rural heritage and thus provide a wider perspective on present day culture. We also think that such exploration could show us more accurately where we stand in present history and help us grasp the variable outlines of future prospects for such regions, the types of code red intervention needed, the skilled human resources that should be involved in the restoration projects, the degree of local communities' and authorities' interest in development strategies that would make the most of their heritage. On the other hand, both in southern Transylva-

nia and northern Oltenia there are specific traits that come from different historical backgrounds and contemporary realities. The techniques employed in northern Oltenia as well as the style are closer to the post-Brancovean ones. Frescoes on wood or paintings with their paint layers laid directly on wood are typical of Oltenia, while the Transylvanian painters would prefer using interstitial canvas lining on the church walls or layers of gypsum or animal clay first-coats. The iconographic programs are different from one region to the next, also. While in Transylvania iconographic discourse covers all religious service compartments – narthex, nave, and altar - and is strongly narrative, in the other region painting resides mainly in the altar, on the iconostasis, which consists of an assemblage of wooden icons, and it also appears in the narthex where votive paintings cover impressive surfaces. Therefore, icons being not fixtures and

given their artistic standards, looting ensued as a mass phenomenon in the case of Oltenian churches.

The villages in northern Oltenia are by far more underprivileged than those in southern Transylvania. Hence looting in Oltenia was more significant and more frequent, and the losses affected the local heritage in a far more dramatic way. Last but not least, each monument, village or local community played a significant role as they always turned out to be the essential elements in shaping the research projects and in opening new avenues to cultural assessment and effective involvement. One of the fortunate cases is that of the commune of Apoldul de Jos within which there are two wooden churches: Apoldul de Jos (St. John the Evangelist's) and Săngătin (Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel Church). In 2008 the local town-hall financed the replacement of the roof cover, and the works were carried out by roof tile craftsmen. That was the first case in which, after 15 years of abandonment, two



Figure 11. Wooden church from Vălari, Hunedoara county.



Figures 12 and 13. Wooden church from Apoldul de Jos, Sibiu county.

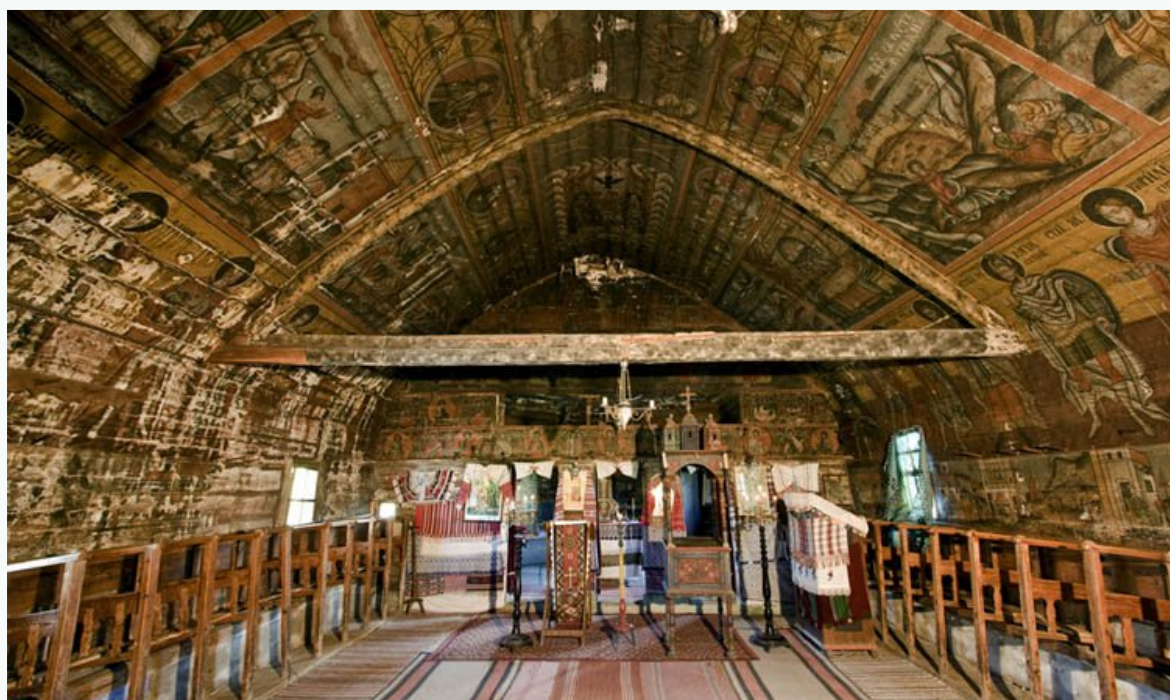




Figure 14. Wall painting depicting the Baptism of Christ, from the church in Apoldul de Jos, Sibiu county.



Figures 15 and 16. Wooden church from Ilimbav, Sibiu county.

Figures 17 and 18. Wooden church from Ursi, Valcea county.

monuments were partly restored to religious life and integrated into the area's heritage tourist itineraries.

Hopefully, the Apoldul de Jos case proved to us that by consistent efforts and lengthy focus, local memory and resources can be re-activated and involved in the restoration projects. We will have to see if the pattern set there works for other similar cases, but what remains certain is that in 2009 there is still an impressive rural heritage present on site in those two historical regions and that it requires immediate intervention.

We shall come back with this topic in the next two issues and proceed to a detailed scrutiny of the wooden churches in northern Oltenia and southern Transylvania.

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