Monasteries of Buzău County, Romania (fifteenth–twenty-first centuries)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this project is to create a map at the scale of 1:275 000 of all Christian Orthodox monasteries that existed between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, in the county of Buzău, Romania. This area has been one of the biggest centers of Orthodox monasticism in the country, in a time when monasteries were the main centers of culture, science and education. This paper describes how the map was created, while also explaining its purpose and the challenges that emerge in mapping the monasticism and its basic features. The project which underpins the map is unique because it integrates and synthesizes results from historical-geographical studies, which have not yet been depicted cartographically. The map, initially begun in 2012, is based on a large amount of information gathered from a number of collections of historical documents, which were analyzed, validated and complemented in several field campaigns carried out between 2008 and 2015. The procedure, performed with difficulty because of numerous gaps in historical sources and few archaeological evidence, intends to represent a cartographic model for illustrating a phenomenon that otherwise sought to avoid any social exposure.

1. Introduction

Today, the Orthodox Church in Romania is divided into 28 (arch-) dioceses, within six metropolitan areas (B.O.R., 2015). The Diocese of Buzău was established around year 1500, most likely to continue an older church administration, which is only hinted in some historical sources (Păcurariu, 2010). The decision of selecting the old market town of Buzău as the diocesan seat is a question that still has not been fully answered. The Diocese initially included the border counties of Buzău, Râmnicu Sărat, Saac and Brăila, at the northeast of Wallachia, but its territorial structure had changed several times after 1845, and especially after 1948; today, it comprises only the counties of Buzău and Vrancea, and was promoted to the rank of archdiocese in 2009 (A.B., 2015). One of the main features of the historical diocese of Buzău was the impressive extent of its monastic life, which was sometimes compared to that of Mount Athos in terms of practice and way of life. Its backbone was indeed the hesychast tradition, rigorously followed by monks especially in the northern part of Buzău, where they developed a vast network of rock-hewn churches and cells before the fifteenth century (Buterez, 2012). Alongside members of the clergy, in the following period, both Wallachian princes and local boyars founded a large number of monasteries, which they endowed with estates, goods and tax exemptions. During the Middle Ages and up until the nineteenth century, the monasteries had experienced periods of both growth and decay, but very few survived after the secularization of monastic estates proposed by the prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza and approved by the Romanian Parliament in 1863 (Hitchins, 1996). The most difficult period for monasticism was the one following decree number 410 from 1959, when the Romanian socialist regime closed several coenobiums and sketes and banished a large number of monks, claiming that they were dangerous because of their support for the anticommunist resistance movement. After the fall of the socialist regime in 1989, the diocese of Buzău reopened some of the monasteries which were closed in 1959, and founded two new ones (A.B., 2015).

2. The monasteries of Buzău in older cartography

The central practice of Orthodox monasticism is the withdrawal from the world in order to dedicate oneself fully and intensely to the life of the Gospel (McGuckin, 2010). Regardless of the style of monastic life, the monks have sought to isolate themselves from the outside world, building their churches and hermitages far away from settlements (Bălan, 1982). Consequently, very few monasteries from Buzău actually appear on historical maps. Nevertheless, the monastic tradition of the hermits from this region was quite famous at least during the sixteenth century, since the area was registered by the Steward Constantin Cantacuzino on his map from 1700 as ‘Schiturile Monahilor’ (The hermitages of the monks, Giurescu (1943)). Apart from a few main cartographic sources, the occurrence of
monasteries on most maps that feature Wallachia is rather random (Table 1). While some lesser sketes like Bîsca and Cislău are constantly featured in maps throughout the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, other important ones such as Ciolanu and Găvanu do not appear at all. There are two reasons for this situation. First, most of the maps from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that include Wallachia were created by foreign geographers and cartographers who simply copied Cantacuzino’s map from 1700 (drawn at a scale of ca. 1:435,000), which was the first detailed and accurate cartographic work of the country (Giurescu, 1943). Except the Austrian survey in Wallachia, between 1790 and 1791 (Specht, 1790–1791), no fieldwork was ever done until the middle of the nineteenth century to capture the exact situation of the country’s geography in a map. Apart from cartographic documents, we can use also the work of von Bauer (1778), which is the first geographic dictionary of the country.

Second, the main purpose of cartographic works in Eastern Europe was providing the armies with updated geographical information, in which case the orthodox monasteries, which did not play any military role at all, were excluded from maps.

In the twentieth century, the interest for scientific research of the monasteries gradually increased, and thus a small map was produced by draftsman Paul-Valeriu Stânescu, and published in Plămâideală (1983).

The idea of creating a new and complete map originated from discussions raised in the catechetical talks organized by Deacon Marius-Fănășelu Suiugan, at the parish church of St. Anthony the Great – Titan, in Bucharest, in August 2012, who wanted to use such a map as a tool for teaching church history. The main problem discussed was that all the previous maps were unusable since they were based on mostly inaccurate data. A first draft, based on earlier research, was made shortly after and was presented in November 2012 to priest Mihail Milea, at the Saint Sava Cathedral in Buzău.

### Table 1. The list of monasteries documented in the main written and cartographic sources, between 1700 and 1900. Those written in italics had little or no scientific investigation.

| Source | Monasteries mentioned | Total number |
|--------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Cantacuzino (1700) – known as The Steward’s Map; scale: ca. 1:435,000 | Vintilă Vodă, Manasia, Bîstelmatele, Pinul, Ticov, Ungurei, Broadu, Barbă  | 8 |
| The ‘Mémoires’ of von Bauer (1778) | Vintilă Vodă, Berca, Pinu, Maguran, Ungurei, Cislău, Broadu, Poiana Mărului  | 8 |
| Specht (1790–1791); scale: ca 1:57,600 | Băsca, Alunii, Skitt [Sf. Gheorghe], Izvoranu, Broadu, Barbă, Skrălat, Tânași, Cârnu, Găvanu, Poiana Mărului  | 12 |
| Charta României Meridionale – Szathmári (1864); scale: ca 1:57,600 | Ciolanu, Nifon, Broadu, Barbă, Cârnu, Găvanu, Poiana Mărului, Sf. Gheorghe, Fundătura, Găvene, Rățești  | 11 |

2013, significant progress has been made in the historical–geographical research of the monasteries in Buzău County. The results of this research represented the basis on which we could begin developing a new map.

### 3. Methods

The map (Main Map) was created in three stages:
- Initial archival research and fieldwork;
- Creating a Geographical Information System database;
- Cartographic work;

#### 3.1. Initial archival research and fieldwork

To create a complete list of all the monasteries that existed throughout Buzău County from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries, we have used a large number of historical documents from the National State Archives, the Romanian Academy Library, the Diocese of Buzău, and private collections, part of them being already published by historical research groups from the Romanian Academy, or by other researchers. The list contained eighty-seven monasteries and sketes attested in historical documents or in old maps at least once. Locating them on the field was done during over forty field campaigns throughout Buzău County, between years 2008–2015, yet only seventy-one sites were precisely identified using a GPS receiver, and thus made it into the map. At that stage, the only information available for all of the monasteries was the age and the geographic coordinates.

#### 3.2. Creating a geographical information system database

The list of seventy-one monasteries was converted into geographic information using the vector data acquired by GPS, and its attribute table was expanded to include other characteristics such as the Founder’s name and social status, the patron saint and the current status. By including all known information for each monastery, we obtained a broader image of the phenomenon’s specificities. This was done initially in June 2012, and since then, the attributes were constantly updated with new information from historical documents or fieldwork. All three components of the data, spatial, temporal and attribute, were initially stored in shapefile format and later included into an Esri file geodatabase for easier management. In the geodatabase we added a digital elevation model, which was used for the topography and shading, and the road and river networks of the Buzău County which were extracted from OpenStreetMap. All data were reprojected to Stereographic 1970, with the Dealul Piscului datum,
which is Romania’s national projection (Rotaru, Anculete, & Paraschiva, 1989).

3.3. Cartographic work

Mapping the geography of religion at regional scales came to the attention of researchers in recent years (Weisenberger, 2014; Župan & Frangeš, 2014; Župan, Lapaine, & Frangeš, 2010). A common observation these papers point out is that producing such maps can be difficult in terms of data representation and level of complexity. Thus, the design of the map took into account three important issues. Essentially, the monasteries had to be classified by at least one significant attribute, in order to somehow decipher the reason for their particular spatial distribution. To achieve this, several experiments were made; they consisted of testing different attribute combinations with the purpose of finding one that shows monasticism both as a historical–geographical phenomenon and as a profound cultural one. As a result, we chose a total of three attributes, which had to be depicted using only a simple point marker.

The monasteries’ founders, which contain five classes, are illustrated as different standard symbols. The age, which also has five classes, is represented as a color value in a sequential multi-hued scheme (yellow–orange–red) generated using ColorBrewer 2.0 (Brewer, 2015). The current status is shown through different label typography and a secondary symbol emphasis for the last class.

Obtaining a visual contrast was another key issue. To make the monasteries stand out, the topography and shading rasters were combined after being enhanced separately, using a variation of the technique developed by Patterson (1997).

Finally, the most important features needed to stand out. To achieve this, we added simple two-dimensional pictograms of the seven main functional monasteries, together with Bradu and ‘Adormirea Maicîii Domnului’, which were both abolished in 1864, but still stand as fine examples of Romanian medieval architecture, and the diocesan cathedral in Buzău, which functions as a monastery church (Lupu, 2011).

The final map has been drawn at a scale of 1:275,000, which is a common scale for representing regional units, such as counties in Romania, with an A2 page format.

4. Conclusions

The map of the monasteries from Buzău County is an inventory-type map. Its primary information is simple from a technical point of view, but its generation implied many hours of archival research and fieldwork. Its main advantage is that it combines social and historical aspects of local monasticism in a geographical way, making them accessible for a wide audience. By representing these aspects in their spatial context, the map now suggests that the uneven distribution of the monasteries throughout the county of Buzău is not purely random as one might initially think. Indeed, we can distinguish two main monastic areas – one to the west of the diocesan center, where the boyar foundations dominate, and another to the south of the Buzău Mountains, where the boyars had little or no influence. Instead, most of these northern monasteries and sketes have been founded by other social categories, such as princes, peasants and clerics. Overall, the map is intended to act as an invitation for the further exploration of monasticism, since it is the first of its type in Romania.

It provides an example of how data gathered from historical documents and maps integrated into GIS technology can be combined in order to provide a new perspective on an important cultural feature of the landscape.

Software

The geodatabase creation, data processing and GPS data imports were initially conducted using QGIS 1.8.0, which was gradually updated to version 2.6.1, and Esri ArcGIS 10. All of the raster enhancements were done in Adobe Photoshop CS3, and the final cartographic work, as well as the pictogram creation and label adjustments were performed using CorelDraw X3.

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