

IN DEFENCE OF RURAL RELIGIOUS HERITAGE:
A CALL FOR SUPPORT

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Abstract: The present text is a plea for the protection of the rural religious heritage and the memory it contains, indirectly threatened by the modernist policies promoted by the communist ideology (before 1989) and by the neoliberal one (after 1989).

Rezumat: Textul de față este o pledoarie pentru protecția patrimoniului religios rural și a memoriei pe care o conține, amenințat indirect de politicile moderniste promovate de ideologia comunistă (înainte de 1989) și de cea neoliberală (după 1989).

On the occasion of fieldwork conducted in 2013 in Dobruja (in Constanța County), I have visited a mosque built in the 19th century in the present village of Bărăganu and two Orthodox churches in the villages of Ceamurlia de Jos and Mireasa, built in the second half of the 19th century and, respectively, between the two World Wars (Figs. 1-3). Given the fact that the three places of worship either are too recent, or they do not present particular architectural or artistic value, none of them has been, until the date of my writing these lines, included in the category of ‘historical monuments’, defined, according to the classification criteria set forth by the Ministry for Culture, as “cultural-historical testimonies of architectural, archaeological, historical, artistic, ethnographic, religious, social, scientific or technical interest”.¹ As a consequence, the possibilities of securing the financial resources necessary for the conservation, and even restoration of these places of worship are extremely low. More than that, in the circumstances in which many rural areas in Dobruja (and in Romania in general) are affected by depopulation, aging and poverty, as a result of modernist policies promoted by the communist ideology (before 1989) and by the neoliberal one (after 1989), the required amounts cannot be obtained from the local community either. As an example, in the Bărăganu village, out of 150 families of Muslim Tartars that used to live there after WWII, only seven remained in 2013.²

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¹ Law no. 422 (r) of 18 July 2001, Art. 3 (translation in English according to the law text in the UNESCO Cultural Heritage Laws Database).

² Icuțușă Pacredin, personal conversation, Bărăganu, 8 April 2013.



Figs. 1a-b. Mosque in Bărăganu village (Constanța County).

Meanwhile the places of worship deteriorate: the minaret of the mosque did not exist any longer at the date of my visit, while both Orthodox churches displayed cracks and alterations in various places.

Even if from the official perspective of some “experts” these places of worship would not be “significant” and, consequently, could not be classified as historical monuments, they are in my view extremely important for the memories they contain. The mosque of Bărăganu refers to the Ottoman past and stands now for the only material evidence in the public space of a once large community of Tartars – almost vanished today. Likewise, the icons on the iconostasis of the Orthodox church in Ceamurlia de Jos, with its Cyrillic inscriptions, evokes the memory of the Bulgarian community that built it. In its turn, the Orthodox church in Mireasa, even if more recent, preserves extremely rare material traces, connected to a series of repressive actions of the communist state: bullet marks in the altar (but also in the cross on the church), as well as the wiped-out depiction of the donor king,

of which only the outline survives, resembling a ghost. Put in relation to other material elements, local or from other areas, the three places of worship may contribute to a more sensible understanding of past or present communities inhabiting Dobruja. It is precisely for this that they should be classified as historical monuments, at least in group “B” – “historical monuments representative for the local cultural heritage”.³



Fig. 2a-b. Orthodox church in Ceamurlia de Jos village (Constanța County).

Certainly, there are cases across the country which are similar to those I have encountered in Dobruja. The regional and local museums of history, archaeology and ethnography, as well as the local heritage offices should undertake a complex analysis of all places of worship in the rural areas of Romania and propose the classification of new historical monuments. This analysis should not be limited to places of worship alone, but it should include other categories of vulnerable buildings as well.



Fig. 3. Orthodox church in Mireasa village (Constanța County).

³ Law no. 422 (r) of 18 July 2001, Art. 8-1b.