WHOM DOES HERITAGE BELONG TO?
THE CASE OF SAINT JOHN CASSIAN’S CAVE AND MONASTERY

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Abstract: Starting from the concrete example of Saint John Cassian’s Cave and Monastery, the present note is a critique of the colonalist spirit of the dominant archaeological discourse and the official state policies regarding the religious heritage in Romania.

Rezumat: Pornind de la exemplul concret al Peșterii și Mănăstirii „Sfântul Ioan Casian”, nota de față este o critică a spiritelui colonialist al discursului arheologic dominant și al politicilor oficiale referitoare la patrimoniul religios din România.

Except for Gheorghe Alexandru Niculescu’s article, “From owners and authorized interpreters to people who care about cultural heritage and their views” (see current volume), so far, in Romania, the existing connections between the research produced by academic communities specializing in the administration of cultural heritage and that put forth by non-academic communities that are interested in the different elements of the same heritage have not been the central point for reflection. As a result, taking advantage of the publication of the above mentioned text, in the following lines I will make a short comment on the topic, starting from a concrete example – that of Saint John Cassian’s Cave and the monastery with the same name in Dobrogea (Constanța county).

Archaeological research carried out so far at Saint John Cassian’s Cave (Fig. 1), specifically in 1980, 1991 and 2010-2011, led to the identification of several layers of material remains, particularly ceramic fragments, belonging to the Neolithic, Iron Age, Early Roman Age, Roman-Byzantine and Mediaeval periods. Along with these layers, the presence of the last “layer of modern gravel” is also mentioned on the inside of the cave. Archaeological excavations are important, among other things, as they document the long-term (re)use of Saint John Cassian’s Cave, yet the image of an inhabitance ended along with the modern gravel layer is but an appearance. The biography of the cave continues to the present day, through material culture elements found inside as well as outside the cave, the research of which does not require archaeological excavation.

In 2003, the erection of the buildings of a Christian Orthodox monastery was begun nearby to Saint John Cassian’s Cave (Fig. 2). The monastery was patroned by Saint John Cassian, who according to his own writings was known to have been born in Scythia Minor and grown up in the region. A series of epigraphic, literary and archaeological data indicate the possibility that during the 4th century AD the cave may have played the role of a “desert” where monks used to live in seclusion. Right inside the cave crosses were identified which had been incised in ancient times in the rock walls. Before completing the first buildings of the new monastery, the monks had set up an oratory (“paraclis”) and sleeping rooms in three containers. Another oratory was set up in the very Cave of Saint John Cassian, where the monks served the divine services during summer. Furthermore, the cave became (again) a space for monks’ ascetic labours, as the presence of an iron bed left in a niche of the cave indicated at the time of one of my visits. According to Abbot Iustin Petre’s Father Savatie Baștovoi from Noul Neamț Monastery in the Republic of Moldova had been living inside the cave for a fortnight, during which time he wrote the Akathist Hymn to Martyr Saints Epictetus and Astion from Halmyris. After the construction of the church of the monastery itself, a series of religious objects were left in the cave – a crucifix, icons and lamps (Fig. 3). Hence the material traces of present day monastics are added to those of the 4th century AD.

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1 Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011.
2 Ibidem, p. 228.
3 Ibidem.
5 Târziu 2008.
6 Ibidem.