

**LUCIAN BLAGA UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU
THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES**

***Wooden Churches of Southern
Vâlcea County
Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis***

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Key Words: wooden churches, Vâlcea county, ecclesiastical architecture, construction materials, construction techniques, planimetry, elevation, wood panel painting, distemper paint, preservation status, valorization.

ARGUMENT

During our master studies, we were shown research on wooden churches both in Europe and in our country. The universe of peasant creation, as this is what it is about here, reveals an orderly, simple world, having the sense of good taste and a sense of thrift that nowadays one finds more and more rarely. Tradition, the taste of community, climate and

relief conditions, all these mark their influence on these special buildings. Thus, one finds different types depending on the existing ethnographic areas. Wooden churches have turned from merely museum old houses into monuments full of Christian living and feeling. This motivates one to want to know them even more, to take care of them and to share with others the richness of such findings. I have discovered the beauty of wooden churches in Oltenia. That is why I have chosen the study of some wooden churches in Vâlcea county, with my research being directed especially towards the preservation of monuments and interior painting.

This work aims at describing the smallest details possibly of the wooden churches in southern Vâlcea county. These small features and details make them unique in the universal and vernacular architectural landscape. Even if their modest less imposing sizes do not help them to be easily sold on the cultural tourism market, they should be known as they are living documents of Romanian peasant existence.

Structure of the Work:

The work is divided into nine main chapters ending with the tenth one – including general conclusions of the thesis. The annexes include: list of wooden churches surveyed, tables on the wood moisture values measured on the outside beams and photographic documentation. The content of the thesis extends on 285 pages of which 42 pages are intended for photographic documentation about the wooden churches surveyed. The criticism section comprises 147 titles quoted and used in the text and in its 435 footnotes.

Chapter 1: Considerations on Research Methodology

The list of historical monuments includes over one hundred wooden churches in Vâlcea county. I have noticed that in the north, where settlements and towns are scarce and the predominant form of relief is mountainous, the presence of wooden churches that exist today is lower. Instead, in the central and southern parts, the situation is completely different. There is an area rich in such monuments in the south of the county along the Olt river, between the towns of Băbeni and Drăgăni.

I have envisaged the investigation of 21 monuments in the area:

1. The wooden church in Amărăști village, Amărăști parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*
2. The wooden church in Nemoiu village, Amărăști parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*
3. The wooden church in Pietroasa village, Sutești parish, under the patronage of *The Dormition of the Mother of God*

4. The wooden church in Cet eua village, Mitrofani parish under the patronage of *The Dormition of the Mother of God*
5. The wooden church in Mitrofani village, Mitrofani parish, under the patronage of *Holy Voivodes*
6. The wooden church in Racu village, Mitrofani parish, under the patronage of *Holy Voivodes*
7. The wooden church in Cre eni village, Cre eni parish, under the patronage of *Holy Voivodes*
8. The wooden church in Mrene ti village, Cre eni parish, under the patronage of *The Entrance of the Theotokos*
9. The wooden church in Ur i village, Pope ti parish, under the patronage of *The Annunciation and Archangel Mihail*
10. The wooden church in Butari village, Gu oeni parish, under the patronage of *The Entrance of the Theotokos*
11. The wooden church in M gureni village, Gu oeni parish, under the patronage of *Pious Paraschiva*
12. The wooden church in Gu oianca village, Gu oeni parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*
13. The wooden church in Suie ti village, St ne ti parish, under the patronage of *Pious Parascheva*
14. The wooden church in Ciopone ti village, St ne ti parish, under the patronage of *Holy Angels*
15. The wooden church in tef ne ti village – Linia, tef ne ti parish, under the patronage of *Holy Archangels Mihail and Gavriil*
16. The wooden church in Dobru a de jos village, tef ne ti parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*
17. The wooden church in Gorgote ti village, Gl vile parish, under the patronage of *Holy Voivodes*
18. The wooden church in Olteanca-Chituci village, Gl vile parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*
19. The wooden church in Olteanca-Sâncule ti village, Gl vile parish, under the patronage of *Saint Paraschiva*
20. The wooden church in St ne ti-Lunca village, Lunge ti parish under the patronage of *The Holy Trinity*

21. The wooden church in Irineasa village, Irineasa parish, under the patronage of *Saint Nicolae*

Chapter 2: Natural Environment

The wooden churches of southern Vâlcea county have turned up in a natural setting: relief, climate, hydrographic network. The survey area is the Carpathian foothills and the piedmont step. The hydrographic network is dominated by the Olt river and its branches: Olte, Lunca, Pesceana, Verdea, Cerna, Mamul.

The soil and the altitude generate a particular type of vegetation. There are beechwood forests with mixtures of beechwood and holm in the south of the county. The piedmont hills have oak grove, Turkey oak and flask forests.

The hills west of the Olt river are more fragmented, with thin degraded soils used in horticulture and viticulture. In the valleys of the mountains and hills, there are walnuts and chestnuts. All over the south of the county there have been intense and early deforestations and the lands have been converted to grassland or farmland.

The wooden churches in villages have been built from large oak beams. It is obvious that the wood used grew abundantly in these places. It was a determining factor in choosing such a building material.

Communication ways follow the line of the Olt river or the beds of the Olt branches. As a result of the relief's influence, they follow the north - south direction with east - west connections among them.

Chapter 3: Wooden Churches in Southern Vâlcea County – Research Background

This chapter approaches specialized literature, structuring the beginning stage of the basic research of this thesis. In the references addressed, one can find that information can be configured according to the following types: censuses of which one gets the first data about the county, historical monuments catalogues, monographs, specialized literature in the field of art history - wooden architecture, mural paintings and the field of monuments preservation.

Chapter 4: Vâlcea County, 16th – 19th Centuries. Brief Historical and Socio-Cultural Description

The fourth chapter briefly analyzes the historic, social and cultural environment between the 16th and 19th centuries in Vâlcea county. The time interval corresponds to the period when the churches were erected.

Here there are the main foundations, the first documentary proofs of the towns included in this survey, and also the events that marked them over this period of time.

Chapter 5: Monograph of Wooden Churches in Southern Vâlcea County

Nowadays, folk architecture is a final development stage aesthetically and spiritually. This final stage is stated as the sum of the previous ones along with their specific dynamics. An important feature of folk art in general and of architecture in particular is the resumption and reproduction of essential elements and features, of already-known patterns. It has allowed for the long-term preservation of primary forms and old decorations.

The survey refers to the description and categorization of a series of twenty-one wooden churches in southern and eastern Vâlcea county. The wooden churches that have come to the author's attention were built between the 18th and 19th centuries. They have changed over time, some of them have been moved to or from other villages, while others have disappeared. (ANNEX 1).

Chapter 6: Construction Materials and Techniques

In Vâlcea county, what is predominant are the churches whose walls were built from hardwoods (oak, holm) with little conifer elements (vaults, shingle ceilings), whereas for the painted or decorated panels they preferred softwood (linden) and also for gates or iconostases (fir).

Besides wood, they also used other construction materials: earth, grain cereals, brick and stone. The earth was used as a filler and they added and mixed straw or other organic matter. The brick began to be used in the nineteenth century for setting the foundations. The stone was used as river boulders in dry stone masonry, laid on the ground under the foot beams. Today, such bases are often clad in cement masonry, often including the foot beams.

The religious paintings that one finds in wooden churches were performed in hard wood in two versions: paintings on panels - icons and mural paintings.

Paintings on wood panels can be greasy tempera, distemper paint or al secco.

Mural paintings in wooden churches of southern Vâlcea county were executed in the techniques of frescoes, al secco, distemper paint and plywood panel painting.

Chapter 7: Typology of Wooden Churches

The churches surveyed are part of the context of wooden churches' architecture in Vâlcea County and of the broadest context of Oltenia. Still very numerous, these churches mainly date back to the 17th and 19th centuries. They are a testimony of the existence of local craftsmen and traditional construction techniques perpetuated over time. Simple in terms of their execution and having small sizes, the wooden churches in terms of their typology are the

same in the entire Oltenia and Muntenia. Peasant life style is reflected in the way of their building. The reasons for the emergence of such buildings are: the existence of rural communities with low economic opportunities, for which the labor force used was represented by local craftsmen and the raw material which was mostly at hand, namely wood.

There is the following classification depending on the plan shape and the construction system:

- The ship-shaped plan with the apse following the side walls of the nave (Ur i, Gorgote ti)
- The apse narrower than the nave, symmetrically unhooked in the temple plan (Pietroasa, Cet eaua, Mitrofani, Am r ti, Nemoiu, Cre eni, Mrene ti, Olteanca-Chituci, Olteanca, Butari, M gureni, Gu oianca, Lunge ti, Racu, Ciopone ti, tef ne ti, Dobru a de Jos)
- The ship shape with the apse following the side walls of the nave, with an anaphora and a diaconicon (there is no example)
- The plan shape with an over-enlarged nave or ante-temple (Suie ti, irineasa-trefoiled plan).

As noticed, most of them are “uninavat” plan churches whose apses are narrower than the naves.

The porch or veranda is an additional plan element. This is an introductory space in a church, anticipating the ante-temple. The porch can be a closed room or opened by arches supported by pillars or columns.

The way the elements are placed in a block system is widely used in erecting traditional wooden buildings. Regarding religious buildings, the need to elevate the interior space has led to a staggered configuration.

The walls of wooden churches are made up of three vertical components: the sole (sows), the wall layers (tiles) and the sill (crown).

The portals have been made in a trilithic system of two pillars and a crossbeam. Their jointing can be:

- 45° joint with a pin at 1/3 of thickness (Dobru a de Jos, Ciopone ti)
- straight joint with a pin at 1/3 of thickness (Mitrofani, Cre eni, Butari)
- joint by propping and pin (Pietroasa, Cet eaua, Olteanca-Chituci, Olteanca).

The wooden churches of Vâlcea county have a modest appearance, imitating country houses. They were first built without towers. This element of elevation was added later on, when a new church was built or when an old church was restored. The same happened with porches.

Wooden churches without towers belong to the 16th century and they are in a chronological order: Pietroasa, Ur i, Cet eaua, Mitrofani, tef ne ti, Lunge ti.

Wooden churches with one tower emerged in the 17th century. Some of those that are part of this survey are: Suie ti, Am r ti, Cre eni, Gu oianca, Olteanca, Dobru a de Jos, Racu, Nemoiu, Olteanca-Chituci, Mrene ti, irineasa, Ciopone ti, Gorgote ti.

Wooden churches with two towers are the rarest in Vâlcea county, only the one in M gureni being worth mentioning. The wooden church of Butari dates back in the 16th century.

Chapter 8: Wooden Churches of Southern Vâlcea County in a Regional and National Context

In this chapter, I have made an architectural comparison between the ecclesiastical wooden buildings in Vâlcea and the ones in the neighboring counties: Arge , Olt and also with wooden churches from distant regions: Moldova, Transilvania (Maramure).

Chapter 9: Preserving and Valorizing Wooden Churches in Vâlcea County

In order to provide an overview of each church's preservation status, I have started from the outside to the inside. There are comments about the vegetation surrounding the church, the base it has been erected on, and then the condition of the construction materials from the sole, walls up to the roof. I have described the interiors from the halidom entry (usually a western porch) up to the altar apse. I have also taken down notes on the signs of degradation seen on interior or exterior paintings.

Additionally, the exact, scientific determination of the current preservation status can be regarded as a starting point, a database that can be used in restoration projects both of mobile and fixed patrimony.

While performing the survey and in-field research, I have conducted several measurements of wood moisture from the timber beams on the outside walls where possible (the walls were not plastered or built up). I have registered the average values depending on the area where there were measurements both horizontally (porch, ante-temple, nave and altar) and vertically (bottom - foot beam, middle beam and upper beam). The measurements were conducted in summer and autumn.

Subsequent to this survey, I have noticed humidity is higher on the northern sides rising from the altar to the ante-temple. Vertically, humidity varies because the roof maintains shadow and is slightly high, whereas the foundation (especially if it is built in cement) also raises wood moisture values (ANNEX 2. Table 1-21).

Conclusions

The theme of the research in this work is “*Wooden Churches of Southern Vâlcea County*”. In the end of the survey, it can be said that potential research directions related to the theme have opened up.

The twenty-one churches are located in the extreme south of the county, up to the middle, near Horezu.

The research performed for the study of wooden churches in southern Vâlcea county has had as main objective the thorough analysis of the places in the area. It refers to developing detailed monographs and establishing the preservation status as close to the present as possible. It is believed that the institutions dealing with the preservation and protection of such churches should take a greater interest in this respect because there is no information material for that.

The documentation about the history of each church has been made in situ, in the Archives of Vâlcea County Directorate for Culture, at Antim Ivireanu Public Library in Râmnicu Vâlcea, in documents held by the parishes and by the talks with parishioners. The result was not always satisfactory; documentary evidence is often insufficient, truncated or preserved and perpetuated in a personal manner, not based on a scientific demonstration. I have often found explanations or historical events in the life of a church that sounded “as an ancient document says ...” or “as told by the charter (historian) ...”. If the primary source was found, the information was recorded; if it was not confirmed documentarily, it remained just a story.

In this respect, I have been largely helped by the Catagraphy written in 1840 and rewritten by priest I. Popescu-Cilieni in the 20th century, the Great Geographical Dictionary of Romania, the investigations made by Ioana Ene about Vâlcea County Historical Monuments and the studies of Mr. Constantin B Ian on inscriptions and other ancient documents in the region. When I found churches not included in the List of Historical Monuments, and here are the church in Irineasa and the church in Ciopone ti, the issue of timing and compiling a history became more difficult. The churches that have been part of this survey have not been included in restoration programmes (except the one in Uri – Pope ti), which is why I have not found archival photographic documentation for comparison and study regarding the evolution or the change in the preservation status of a place over time. Moreover, I have not found architect studies on the buildings’ elevation plans.

The churches in the survey were mostly built in the 18th or 19th centuries. They have suffered removals or relocations over time, as shown by the ax marks on the wall beams. These trips of the buildings were caused by harsh conditions (invasions of the Turks and other

enemies - Pietroasa) or donations of certain communities or benefactors to poorer villages (Suie ti, tef ne ti La Linie) where they are now. Some of them bear these traces but nothing has been recorded about another place of their having been erected (Butari, Olteanca, Lunge ti). Others have been saved and relocated by restorers (Mrene ti – Cre eni in Vâlcea Village Museum, Palanga – Am r ti in the park of Curtea de Arge Monastery).

From the historical point of view, one can notice the flourishing of rural architecture and of the desire to embellish the churches after Cuza's reform after which the peasants became owners of the land. Thus the "cl ca i" were set free. The peasant communities - freeholders founded churches. The rural places of worship became the fruit of collective endeavor, as evidenced by long commemoration lists painted in the altars, naves, ante-temples and porches, and whenever they were intervened on, they were painted and renovated.

From the architectural perspective, it can be seen that wooden churches with uniform planimetries have been preserved. The predominant type is the ship-shaped plan with a five-sided apse unhooked from the building body. There is only one case of four-sided altar (tef ne ti – La Linie), a case of an unhooked altar (Ur i), a case of a nave unhooked from the ante-temple (Butari), a case of a pentagonal ante-temple (Suie ti) and a case of a trefoil-shaped church (irinasa). All the churches in Oltenia have porches.

The in-field survey has brought forth certain repetitive cases: in the 19th century, especially after 1864, some churches were plastered, painted, raised. Therefore, one resorted to various techniques and ways to transform and adapt traditional wooden architecture into/to masonry architecture. Painting went from the thin execution of painters to the one of painters with evident neoclassical influence or Byzantine orientation. This turning point in rural ecclesiastical art and architecture is thought to be interesting to study. In this category of monuments, one can study the churches in irineasa, M gureni, Marine ti, Mamu and Boro e ti, and Ciopone ti. These are the ones I have found in the study area and in the neighbouring regions. There are certainly many examples throughout the county that could be the topic of further research.

ABBREVIATIONS

D. I. R. = *Documente privind Istoria României (Documents on the History of Romania)*

DRH, B, ara Româneasc (Romanian Land) = *Documenta Romaniae Historica*

mah.= mahala (suburb)

Popescu, *Biserici* = I. Popescu – Cilieni, *Biserici, târguri i sate din jude ul Vâlcea*, Editura Ramuri, Craiova, 1941

AMO = Anuarul Mitropoliei Olteniei (Yearbook of Oltenia Metropolitan Church)

A.O. = Arhivele Olteniei (Oltenia Archives)

Doc. nr. = document number

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