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**BEYOND THE LITURGICAL. COMPLEMENTARY FUNCTIONS
OF MONASTERIES FROM BUZĂU AND RÂMNICU SĂRAT COUNTIES,
ROMANIA (16th-19th CENTURIES)**

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Abstract

In the Orthodox tradition, the liturgical function is by far the most important trait of any church, being often perceived either as the only one, or as the only one of importance. In reality, the churches perform also several other functions, which are much clearer and have played a bigger part in the case of monasteries. Throughout the Middle Ages, the monastic establishments have played a key role in developing culture and science and maintaining a good social climate. Most of the times, they were also used as icons of identity and legitimacy by their founders. This study aims to explore these secondary functions of social and ideological nature of the monastery churches from Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat Counties, between the 16th and 19th centuries. Based on their characteristics and connections to Romania's cultural and social history, we can assert that all the secondary functions of the monasteries are complementary to the liturgical one. Further historical-geographical research needs to be conducted in order to have a better understanding of the spatial dimension of these functions in different stages of Romanian history.

Dans la tradition Orthodoxe, la fonction liturgique est de loin le trait le plus important de toute l'église, étant souvent perçue soit comme le seul, ou comme le seul d'importance. En réalité, les églises exercent également plusieurs autres fonctions, qui sont beaucoup plus claires et qui ont joué un rôle plus important dans le cas des monastères. Tout au long du Moyen Age, les établissements monastiques ont joué un rôle clé dans le développement de la culture et la science et le maintien d'un bon climat social. La plupart du temps, ils ont également été utilisés comme des icônes de l'identité et de la légitimité par leurs fondateurs. Cette étude vise à explorer ces fonctions secondaires de nature sociale et idéologique des monastères dans les districts de Buzău et Râmnicu Sărat, entre le 16-eme et le 19-eme siècles. Basé sur leurs caractéristiques et leurs connexions à l'histoire culturelle et sociale de la Roumanie, nous pouvons affirmer que toutes les fonctions secondaires des monastères sont complémentaires à la fonction liturgique. De plus amples recherches de géographie historique doit être menée afin

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d'avoir une meilleure compréhension sur la dimension spatiale de ces fonctions dans les différents stades de l'histoire roumaine.

Keywords: function, ideology, refuge, monasteries, Buzău, Râmnicu Sărat.

1. Introduction

The default and main function of all churches is, without any doubt, that of worship. In the Orthodox Church, this is all the more true (McGuckin 2010). At its heart stands the Divine Liturgy, which is the one sacrament that represents the very being of the Church itself (Plămădeală 2004). In a community, the parish church plays a key role, since it is intimately woven into the lives of generations (Maguire 2004). Yet, the churches of monasteries and sketes are different from parish ones. Beyond their principal function, they were created to meet the needs of monastic communities – isolation, self-administration and lesser connections with other social groups. Furthermore, all these lead to an aggregation of several other functions, depending on the social status of the founders (Pușcașu 2001). It is important to note that higher class people such as princes or boyars have almost always preferred to build monasteries instead of parish churches. This is partly due to the fact that the act of founding is thought to be an extension of the religious experience (Radosav 1997). Formulations that are found in church inscriptions, charters, books of worship and diptychs confirm that the first and most important aspiration of the founders is to seek the salvation of their souls. The choice of founding a monastery as opposed to a parish church is based on the larger availability that monks have to prayer.

2. Social and ideological functions

Monasteries and sketes are symbols of cultural identity and from this perspective, they invite to an active interpretation of the landscape as a product of human continuity (Tilley 1994, Maguire 2004). Furthermore, they are (or should be) one of the few elements of stability that evoke timeless values in the ever-changing landscapes. The higher the social

position of the founder, the more representative nature was acquired by his foundation. This became more evident with the spread of coenobitic life. The very presence and activeness of the coenobitic monasteries built by princes or boyars were actually the primary means by which the representatives of the secular power and the Orthodox Church enhanced their prestige. The princely foundations were very few compared to other regions of Wallachia (Lupu 2011), yet because of this, a series of ideological particularities can be ascertained. First of all, the princes made their foundations in such a way that they would become emblems of power and control similar to the Wallachian monasteries of Cozia, Argeș, Dealu and Arnota. Saint George monastery, founded by either Mihnea Turcitul or Mihai Viteazul (Mândricel 2006, Lupu 2011) and Pinu monastery, restored by Matei Basarab, both had the obvious goal of establishing themselves as polarizing centers of spirituality and culture in the area of Ivănețu massif, where the monastic life was thriving in the 16-17 centuries.

In a charter issued approximately half a century after the rebuilding of Pinu, when Matei Basarab replaced the old wooden church with a brick one, there is a passage which points out that the new foundation was supposed to act as *“mother to all the little sketes from around”*².

The boyar foundations, which were the most numerous in the region, had different fates. Those of the low-ranking squires did not have the sufficient resources to gain an important amount of prestige, yet they managed to create links to the local peasantry, who in some cases, agreed and supported those kinds of initiatives. Before 1767, the chancellor Mihai Vernescu and his wife, Maria, asked the peasants of Cârломănești for their consent in the idea *“of building a small skete on the valley of Ulmeasa”*, which they agreed *“so that we have alms too”*³.

In other cases, the boyars helped in the rebuilding and repairing of monasteries and sketes. Thus, after the new church of Găvanele was destroyed because of the 1802 earthquake, several boyars including Dimitrie and Costache Ghica contributed substantially to the erection of a new building (Filitti 1932, Mândricel 2006, Lupu 2011). There are also quite a few situations where the founders were also boyars (Cucuiata,

² S.A.N.I.C., fond Episcopia Buzău, pach. XCII bis/10, undated draft.

³ S.A.N.I.C., fond Episcopia Buzău, ms. 172, f. 334^v.

Domirești, Lapoș, Micșani, Mircești, Valea Produlesei etc.), yet we know almost nothing about their existence and way of life, which seems to point out that their social and ideological role was at most a local one.

A different discussion must be carried out for the foundations of the greater boyar families. They have always bore in an active manner the mark of foundation and they permanently strove to emphasize it through various ways. The Cârdești boyars, a lineage with hardy roots in the Buzău region, have acquired over time a great political and economic power, whose peak was roughly in the second half of the 17th century (Lecca 1911). The great constable Radu rebuilt Bradu monastery, which was finished in 1641 (Vasilescu 1937); his brother the clucer Negoiaș began before 1659, the construction of Ungurei monastery (Ionașcu 1936a), and in 1694, prince Constantin Brâncoveanu entrusted Negoiaș's nephew, the great stolnik Mihalcea, with Pinu monastery⁴ (Figure 1). Yet by far, the most important foundation achievement was the rebuilding of the Cetățuia or Berca monastery, initiated by the same Mihalcea and finished in 1694⁵ (Cocora 1963). Its church stands out from several points of view. First of all, it was included on Constantin Cantacuzino's map from 1700, being registered with its founder's actual name – *Micalcia*, and has been copied almost unalterably on most of the cartographic representations of Wallachia in the 18th century. During the church's construction, a certain Stoica Oaleș supervised a team of craftsmen which included a shingler from Brașov (Iorga 1905), and the frescoes were executed by the famous painter of the Cantacuzino family, Pârvu Mutu⁶. There are no documents that speak about the ideological role of the monastery, but it can be inferred from the way in which its position was described by visitors. Above Berca village, "*pornind de la căteva căsuțe [...] un mare părete de lut se ridică deasupra văii; pe vârful lui se vede o*

⁴ S.A.N.I.C., fond Episcopia Buzău, pach. XCII bis/10, undated draft

⁵ The church's inscription which is still kept today, does not mention anything about an earlier construction. Yet we know that the monastery existed earlier; In 1762, an old lady named Alba, together with her children and other relatives, sold an estate at Pleșcoiul de Jos to *Mihalcea Cârdescu*, Drăghici and *Berca* monastery (S.A.N.I.C., fond Episcopia Buzău, XX/1). It is possible that the Cârdescu boyars had older ties with the monastic settlement from Berca.

⁶ He made an autoportrait there.

biserică veche, lângă o lungă perdea de zid ruinat” (starting with a few small houses [...] a great clay wall rises above the valley; on its peak, you can see an old church, next to a long curtain of ruined walls) (Iorga 1939: 398). The monastery “*singuratecă, este așezată pe un deal care domină împrejurimile*” (is situated all by itself on a hill which dominates its surroundings) (Figure 2) (Chițulescu 1944: 69). Indeed, its location, on top of a promontory, similar to a fortification, makes it visible from afar, transforming it into one of the key elements of the Buzău valley cultural landscape.

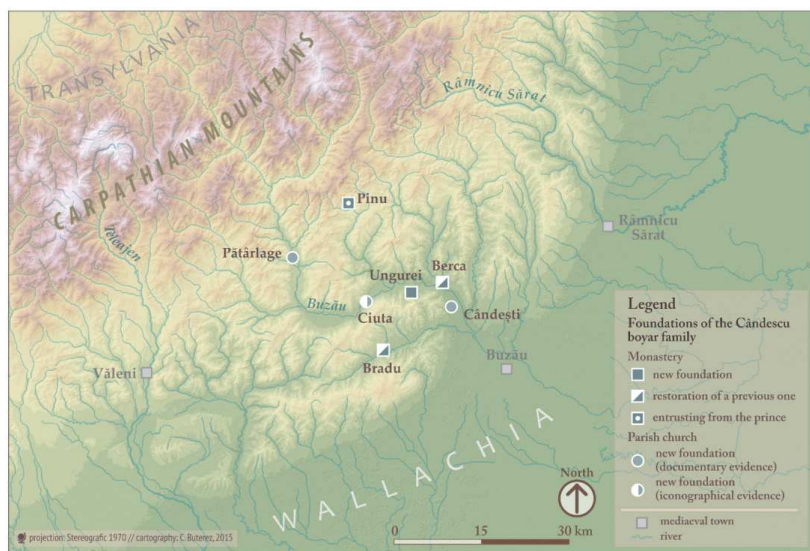


Figure 1. The foundations of the Căndescu family (17th-18th Centuries)
(Cartography: C. Buterez, 2015)



Figure 2. Berca monastery, seen from the Buzău river valley
(Photo: I. Voinescu, cca 1908 ; Source: Chițulescu, 1944, p. 70)

Apart from the direct relationships with their founders, the monasteries were the main centres of creation and dispersion of the mediaeval culture. Not coincidentally, the first Wallachian schools for teaching reading and writing have initially functioned inside monasteries and bishoprics.

In a document from June 25, 1625, at the establishment of Menedic's estate boundaries, one of the witnesses was "*Uriil clisiarul, care au învățat carte în mănăstire la Minidic*" (Uriil the verger, who learned at Menedic monastery)⁷. In 1643, in a similar act, a certain hieromonk Teodosie signed as a witness; he acknowledged that "*am fost la sfânta mănăstire grămătic cu Teofan egumen, în zilele lui Pătru Voevod și la Mihnea Voievod*" (I was a teacher at the holy monastery, with Teofan the hegoumen, in the days of princes Pătru and Mihnea)⁸. From another writing, dated in 1793 we find out that "*la acest locaș Găvanul era nacealnic și starețu părintile schimonah Dionisie*" (the leader, teacher and hegoumen of the holy place named Găvanul, was father Dionisie)⁹. At Grăjdana, in 1801, there was a "*dascălaș pentru ajutor(ul) biserici(i) și pentru învățătura copiilor*" (teacher who helped the church and for the children's education) (Ionașcu 1936b), and at Berca, the metochion of the Buzău Diocese, the bishop brought the school for teachers, candidates for priesthood (Iorgulescu 1901). A certain Grigore Dițescu left in 1851 a short note in which he confessed that "*am intrat la anul 1850 aprilie 29 la învățătură în școala episcopiei Buzău, care este așezată la sfânta mănăstire Berca*" (I entered on the 29th of April 1850, to learn in the school of the Buzău Diocese, which is located at the holy monastery of Berca) (Constantinescu 1941: 388). Also, in the years of the 1859 Union, there were at least four private monastery schools – at Cislău, Saint George, Nifon and Rătești (Figure 3) (Mândricel 2000).

⁷ D.I.R., veacul XVII, vol. B., Țara Românească, vol. IV (1620-1625), doc. 550, pp. 530-531.

⁸ S.A.N.I.C., fond Episcopia Buzău, XXXVII/11. The princes in question are Petru Cercel and Mihnea the 3rd, which demonstrates that the school was active near the end of the 16th century.

⁹ Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cabinetul Manuscrise și Carte rară, ms. rom. 3169.

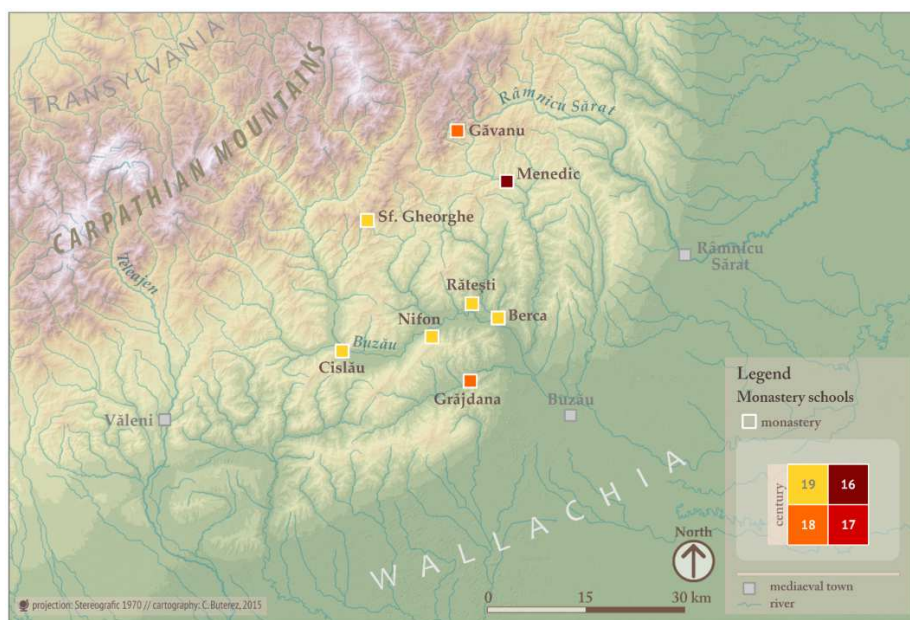


Figure 3. Monastery schools documented between the 16th-19th centuries
(Cartography: C. Buterez, 2015)

Wallachian monks were also preoccupied with copying manuscripts containing patristic literature. This was especially necessary because of the need for liturgical books since the number of typographies was quite small across the entire country. Later on, the copy work was replaced by the actual writing of original texts, particularly philokalic ones (Cocora 1987). The most important copy and translation centre was Poiana Mărului monastery, where the monks were supervised by the hegoumen Vasile, the hiero-schemamonk, *“un predicator al culturii și reformei bisericești”* (a preacher of culture and church reformation) (Iorga 1901: 391). Several monks, schemamonks, and hierodeacons copied some of the writings of saints Vasile, Grigore and Macarie (Cocora 1987). Poiana Mărului had a great cultural influence on other monasteries such as Găvanu, Dălhăuți and Valea Neagră, where the concern for manuscript copying was assumed by a large number of monks.

3. Refuge function

Isolation was characteristic for the monastic life in the Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat region; because of it, some monasteries and sketes which were more secluded than other, became places of refuge, wandering and even exile. The same usage was also common for the rock-hewn settlements. Regarding their origin, the local folklore emanates a unique explanation – that of refuge in times of invasions. In an answer to Hasdeu's enquiry, it is said that *"sunt foarte vechi și la început au fost locuite de tătari prigoniți. Mai în urmă, când din unii din oameni mai bătrâni țin minte, ele au fost locuite de câte un pustnic de unde și-au tras și numele..."* (they are very old and were, at the beginning, inhabited by persecuted Tartars. Closer to our days, when some of our old people still remember, they were inhabited by hermits who also gave their names to them)¹⁰. The reconstruction of Pinu monastery, by Matei Basarab, has a similar explanation in local tradition – *"În acel loc, scăpându-se de furia turcilor, a zidit acea mănăstire"* (In that place, where he got rid of the Turks' anger, he had built that monastery)¹¹. We can suspect that the constant Ottoman and Tatar threats were among the factors that determined a nearly endless swing of population, between the settlements and the more isolated areas – mountains and forests – where it occupied (and maybe also dug) the rock-cut chambers and other small natural shelters.

There are very few documentary mentions of refugees hiding in monasteries and sketes before the 19th century (*Figure 4*). Thereby, Bradu monastery, whose thick stone walls did not only defend the church, was in 1689, the chosen place of shelter by lady Marica, the wife of prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, during general Heisler's foray into Wallachia¹² (Bilciurescu 1890, Del Chiaro 1929).

¹⁰ *Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cabinetul Manuscrise și Carte rară, ms. rom. 3437, f. 43.*

¹¹ *Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cabinetul Manuscrise și Carte rară, ms. rom. 224, f. 302.*

¹² According to some researchers, Bradu monastery was also Mihai Viteazul's camp site from 1597 Cocora, G. 1986. *Pentru libertate și unitate. Studii, articole și documente de istorie buzoiană*, București, Editura Litera..

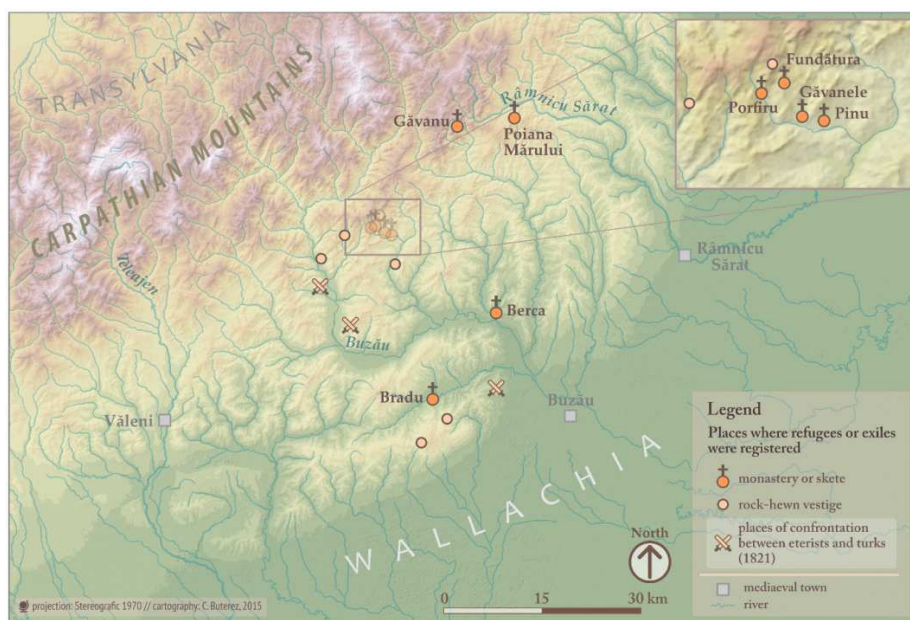


Figure 4. The monasteries and rock-hewn vestiges were refugees or exiles were registered
(Cartography: C. Buterez, 2015)

In the 19th century, the ethnic and political instabilities from the Balkans, caused by nationalist movements, gave rise to a large number of Ottoman raids and further conflicts with the Russians. This greatly affected Wallachia, as we know from a series of documents. Thus, in 1802, the Turks crossed the river Olt and attacked Cleanov, Târgu-Jiu and Ocnele Mari, where “*pă toți negutătorii i-au jăfuit și pă mulți din creștini au tăiat*” (they robbed all the merchants and killed many Christians). The prince, together with the metropolitan bishop, the bishop of Buzău and several boyars fled to Brașov, and “*toate satele s-au băjenit și umblau toți din loc în loc, făr’ de niciun căpătâiu*” (all the villagers ran to take refuge and everybody was wandering around without any aim). All of these were written on a Homiliary by “*Ioan logofăt din sud Meh(edin)ți, fiind băjen(a)ri la satul Buda*” (Ioan the chancellor from Mehedinți County, being a refugee in the village of Buda) (Săndulescu-Verna 1938: 821).

On a Gospel Book from the 17th century, a certain hierodeacon named Ilarion wrote that:

“la 1804 fiind răzmeriță moscalii cu turcii [...], s-au întâmplat de au venit (i)eșit turcii brăileni și au venit la Buzău unde au făcut mari stricăciuni, tă(i)eri, robii. Iar eu, scăpând în Episcopie cu nasul tăiat, am venit aici la Pinu” (in 1804, during the war between the Russian and the Turks [...] as it happened, the Turks from Brăila came to Buzău where they made a lot of damage, killings and took captives. And I managed to escape from the bishopric with my nose cut off, and I came here to Pinu)¹³.

The eruption of the revolutionary movements in 1821 had powerful effects in the counties of Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat. The general confusion caused by the eterists' actions led to the disbandment of many villages. The extent of the population movement was so large, that the entire town of Buzău became empty at one point (Vrapciu 1973). Many boyars ran to more isolated areas and some of them took refuge inside monasteries and sketes. A larger group, which included Nica Mușceleanu, former landowner at Merei and judge in Buzău, found shelter at Fundătura, yet they were caught and killed (Nicolescu and Petcu 1999). The same scenario took place at Găvanu skete, where many boyars with their families came to hide (Pelimon 1864). With the help of some informers, the Turks managed to pick up their trail and to find them, *“iar pe Paharnicul Costache Hrisoscoleu [...] l-au jertfit îndată cu săbiile, și pe iconomul schitului și pe doi Țigani de acolo, și, năvălind înăuntru la schit, au luat toate calabălăcurile băjenilor”* (and the cup-bearer Costache Hrisoscoleu [...] they immediately killed him with the swords along with the skete's treasurer and two gypsies, and rushing inside, they took all the refugees' possessions), burning down the church (Iorga 1921: 88).

In 1821, one group of runaways took refuge in Bradu monastery *“de unde fiind alungat de-o poteră, a fost zdrobit pe apa Nișcovului”* (where it was driven out by a posse and was eventually crushed on the Nișcov valley (Figure 5) (Cojocar 1926: 5). At Cârnu, the monastery church suffered significant damage after a fight between the eterists and the Turks¹⁴ (Constantinescu 1924), and the Berca monastery welcomed some Greek

¹³ Biblioteca Academiei Române, Cabinetul Manuscrise și Carte rară, C.R.V. 42, f. 156.

¹⁴ According to tradition, similar battles have been fought on Panduru hill, Cetățeaua near Pătârlage and Malul Burcheștilor, near Tega. Iorgulescu, B. 1892. *Dicționar geografic, statistic, economic și istoric al județului Buzău*, București, Stabilimentul Grafic I.V. Socecu..

boyars as refugees (Iorgulescu 1892). To avoid being captured by the Turks, other boyars found shelter in some rock-hewn vestiges like *Malul cu Gaură* and *Casa Hoților* (Iorgulescu 1892, Ștefan and Drâmbocianu 1980).



Figure 5. The former Bradu monastery seen from the main gate
(Unknown author, published in *Muguri*, 1929)

Next to the above-mentioned monasteries, some clues like traces of defensive structures and old hiding places seem to indicate that similar functions can't be excluded for Menedic, Barbu and Dedulești, yet with a single notable exception from 1848 (Cocora 1987), we lack clear documentary evidence.

A special case is the exile of poet Cezar Bolliac at Poiana Mărului, in 1841, because of his meddling in the Filipescu conspiracy. Despite the fact that Bolliac "*respira aer curat de munte*" (was breathing fresh mountain air) and "*un cucernic călugăr rus îi citea în toate diminețile molitfele sfântului Vasilie*" (each morning, a Russian monk would read to him Saint Basil's molitvae) (Ghica 1914: 372), he described his stay in a gloomy way:

*"Vrând să-ți spun ce am pățit / Din cauza ciocoimii, vrând să-ți spun că-
s surghiunit / În Camtceatka Rumâniei [...] unde cer să vezi nu poți /
[...] Unde șoimul și vulturul se scald vara în nămeți"* (I want to tell
you what happened / Because of the up-starts, I wanted to tell you
that I'm in exile / In Romania's Kamchatka [...] where you cannot
see the sky [...] where, during summer, the hawk and the eagle
bathe in snowdrifts) (Bolliac 1915: 161).

Conclusions

In this paper we presented a different view on the monasteries, well beyond their default liturgical function. Like any other kind of settlement, they too possess complementary functions such as social and ideological ones, but also act as places of refuge and exile, yet all of them have a strong cultural-geographical dimension. The amplitude of their social influence reflects the status of their founders, who, in case of a great economic and political power, also left their mark in an ideological manner, giving birth to unique cultural landscapes. The monasteries of Aninoasa, Berca, Bradu, Dedulești, Pinu and Vintilă Vodă are among the best examples of higher rank foundations which became representative for the power acquired by local boyars and their connections with the princely authority. Apart from also being cultural and learning centres, the first to promote and spread the use of written Romanian language for other people than social elites, the monasteries stood as places of refuge in times of great trials. Yet this is only documented for the troubled times of the 19th century, when the nationalist movements and numerous uprisings forced the Ottoman Empire to suppress fast any potential threats that came from within. The population fled almost all the times, and one of the favourite hiding destinations were the more secluded monasteries, not few in the Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat regions. In spite of the isolation, in most cases, the refugees got killed or wounded, since the Turks compensated their little geographic knowledge with scouts and informers which denounced the concealed groups.

The secondary functions of monasteries need to be further explored by historical-geographical studies, which can better highlight their spatial dimension and establish some trends or further specificities for different stages of Romanian history. Such work can complement in a new and exciting way the general picture that we have so far about the monastic life and its geographical aspects.

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