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BUILDING THE NATION IN STONE AND WOOD. RESTORATIONS AND WRITINGS ABOUT HISTORICAL MONUMENTS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN ROMANIA*

Cosmin Minea

Abstract

The paper looks at restoration and preservation practices and at art history writings to explore attitudes and mentalities in the first decades of the twentieth century in Romania. It deciphers the creation of an architectural heritage and the meanings of writings about and restoring historical monuments in a young nation-state that expanded significantly after World War I. Some of the major restoration sites in Romania, around 1900, are analysed together with several of the architectural history writings of the interwar period that reveal a growing turn to nationalism in the Romanian cultural and political spheres.

Keywords: architectural heritage; historical monuments; restorations; interwar Romania; Romanian art history; Byzantine architecture; Andre Lecomte du Noüy; Virgil Vătăşianu; Coriolan Petreanu.

Introduction

This paper explores some of the major debates, restoration sites, writings and ideas about historical monuments in Romania, between approx. 1890 and 1930. It is not meant to be an exhaustive history of monuments restoration and protection, but to uncover some of the multiple implications of writings about architectural monuments and their restorations. These relate to discussions about identity, the past and future

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of “the nation” and, indeed, to the national ideology, which has often centred on historical monuments. Therefore, this paper pays particular attention to how architectural styles and the history of buildings could inform and at the same time be influenced by ideas about the Romanian nation. The research will at the same time draw attention to the modern history of historical monuments and namely to the material modifications and symbolic transformations that “the age of nations” (to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm) has brought to century-old buildings.

While the nineteenth century restoration of monuments in Romania has been the focus of several studies in the past decades¹, the ones in the first decades of the twentieth century, even if perhaps equally significant, have been largely ignored. The best sources are still the first extensive art history works written in the interwar period, such as those by Gheorghe Balș.² From a theoretical perspective, this paper assumes that ideas about national identity and the concept of “the nation” essentially emerged in the modern period, even if they continued and reused older local or regional traditions, histories, heritage practices, identities, etc. As one of the most famous scholars of the modernist approach, Ernest Gellner noted “nationalism is not the awakening and assertion of these mythical, supposedly natural and given units. It is, on the contrary, the crystallization of new units, suitable for the conditions now prevailing, though admittedly using as their raw material the cultural, historical and other inheritances from the pre-nationalist world.”³ Gellner’s metaphor “raw material” is a practical reality in the case of this research since former buildings were embellished, reconstructed or modified to create national monuments, and therefore represented a vivid illustration for the constructed nature of national symbols.

I further see nationalism as an intellectual and elitist project, serving as a tool for those in power to maintain their status and legitimacy, as John Breuilly or Eric Hobsbawm have argued.⁴ The ways elites tried to impose top-down ideas on the general population also serves as a justification for paying increased attention to these elites. In the current project I leave aside questions of transmission and effect and concentrate solely on *how* ideas about historical monuments and Romanian nation have emerged.

Within the field of heritage studies, this paper has as theoretical basis the concept of *Critical Heritage Discourse* as defined by Laurajane Smith to explain the significance of creating a “heritage” and its relation to political ideologies, social hierarchies, gender relations, alternative or subaltern discourses.⁵ Specifically, heritage practices are not just ways to preserve

monuments but processes of negotiating historical and cultural meanings and values. The decision of preserving or not certain constructions is a performative action that actively and continually affirms values, identities, discourses that are in turn subject to negotiations and changes. At the same time, identity must be understood as a fluid, ever-changing set of ideas about the past that are strictly related to the present and to a network of actors, including specialists, state institutions, local communities, enthusiasts, etc. Critical Heritage Discourse equally emphasizes the asymmetrical power-relations between those who are in control and create the official interpretations of the past and those who hold alternative or subaltern ideas. Smith calls an *Authorized Heritage Discourse* one that privileges monumentality, grand scale, time depth, expert judgment and ignores less grandiloquent, diverse, alternative, multicultural discourses. This paper will demonstrate the creation and use of an Authorized Heritage Discourse in Romania and its support for ideas about cultural uniformity, ethnic purity and national past.

1. The formation of notions about Romanian Architectural Heritage in the Nineteenth Century

A first moment when historical monuments became an occasion for extensive discussions in the Romanian society was when the activity of the most important restorer of monuments in the country at the time, the Frenchman André Lecomte du Noüy (1844-1914), began to be strongly criticised. Between 1875 and 1904, he restored the most significant five monuments in Romania: the former monastery of Curtea de Argeş (1875-1886), the church of Trei Ierarhi in Iași (1881-1890), the Princely Church Saint Nicholas in Iași (1886-1904), the Metropolitan Church in Târgoviște (1885-1895), and Saint Dimitry Church in Craiova (1887-1896).
[Fig. 1]

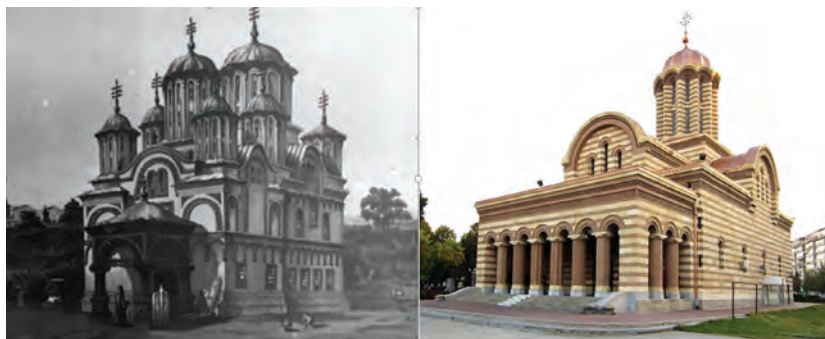


Fig. 1

His restorations modified the monuments and their surroundings according to French ideas about Byzantine architecture and the restoration of monuments, but Lecomte du Noüy also adjusted his practice in order to respond to requests from the Romanian authorities.⁶ He worked in the manner of his master, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc but also in that of the European fashion of the time that accepted reconstructions and additions to create idealised versions of monuments.⁷ The results were a set of almost new monuments that represented a revival of Byzantine and Orthodox art in Romania. While highly praised and well-connected at an official level, especially with the Royal House of Romania, Lecomte du Noüy was, between 1888 and 1890, the target of criticisms from several Romanian architects such as Ion Socolescu (1856-1924), Nicolae Gabrielescu (1854-1926) and George Sterian (1860-1936), who accused him of modifying and even destroying the monuments.⁸

The Romanian architects also accompanied their criticism with a much more emotional engagement towards the monuments. These were not seen any longer only as representing Romania but as an integral part of their personal identity. One of them argued, for example, that monuments were not just “material forms”, but they “remind us of the glorious deeds of the past, or of ‘the painful efforts suffered by our parents’.”⁹ Concepts such as “nation”, “tradition”, “duty”, “ancestors”, “patrimony” were designed to raise emotions and first-person pronouns “We” and “Our” drew discursive boundaries between them and foreign artists. The historical monuments in Romania were suddenly presented not anymore as a tool for integration into a broader European culture but as a reason for reinforcing the national identity and differentiating it from what was seen

as “foreign”. Furthermore, monuments were described as part of personal identities for which one has a “duty” to preserve and respect them: “Let us conserve (...) the only traces of our past artistic culture that proves we were not born yesterday. We have the duty to continue the tradition and to grow the patrimony left by our ancestors.”¹⁰ Indeed, the concept of “duty” to preserve monuments for one’s ancestors and equally for one’s and the nation’s future becomes central.

The increased interest over how the heritage is preserved in Romania also fuelled the first attempts at creatively interpreting this heritage for new creations and designs in what later has been termed the Neoromanian or National Romanian Architectural Style.¹¹ Therefore, the criticisms against Lecomte du Nouÿ and the strong stance against his restorations became a birth certificate, almost a “lieux de memoire”, for a new generation of architects that argued for the national significance and care of historical monuments.

2. The continuation of the restoration tradition in the first decades of the twentieth century

If Europeanisation was the main aim of cultural policies in nineteenth-century Romania, this drive was replaced with a more and more persistent inward search for national specificities in the early twentieth century. The search for unique “Romanian” characteristics of the heritage became more predominant, and so was the assertion of a Romanian culture defined in opposition to that of others. Societies, literary circles and various cultural figures promoted around 1900 an aggressive ethnic nationalism in the realm of arts. Among the most vocal against foreigners was the at the time young historian Nicolae Iorga, according to whom they “humiliate and subjugate us, tear our people apart.”¹²

In the realm of restoration practices, the Romanian architects also managed to establish a number of institutions, all new in Romania and founded on a claimed break with past restoration practices: the Commission together with the Law for Historical Monuments and the first School of Architecture in Romania in 1892, the journal *Analele arhitecturiei* in 1890. Until now the history of heritage protection in Romania followed a linear path: first, a foreign architect were brought in, who modified monuments; the local experts rose against and this led to more patriotic views and to practices more oriented towards preservation of existing old buildings.

However, and here comes perhaps the surprise that breaks the linear narrative, the way monuments were restored did not change with respect to the creative and intrusive methods of the late nineteenth century. Many prominent monuments suffered many modifications to end up as brand-new buildings. Architects harboured the same intentions, to recreate a supposedly once-existing or possible “original style” of the buildings by removing later additions, reconstruct parts or forms based on vague descriptions, reports or similarities with other monuments, polish old materials and reuse new ones. Significantly, Ion Mincu (1852-1912), considered otherwise the creator of the “national style” was the first to restore an important monument by using the same methods and ideas as the previously-criticised Frenchman André Lecomte du Noüy. He was asked in 1897 to restore the much-praised church of Stavropoleos in the centre of Bucharest, a monument considered the pinnacle of Brâncovenesc art.¹³ Mincu disliked from the beginning the conservation state of the building, its materials and even its placement among tall, modern buildings.¹⁴ He initially proposed its demolition and reconstruction in another place to finally restore it, between 1904 and 1908, by replacing and repainting the exterior frescoes and the sculpted decorations, adding a new tower, a new roof and addition of new church furniture on the inside.¹⁵ [Fig. 2]



Fig. 2

At around the same time architect Constantin Băicoianu (1859-1929) was working at the church Saint George in Hârlău (restored between 1893 and 1904), Saint Nicholas - Popăuți (restored between 1898-1908) and Saint Nicholas in Dorohoi (restoration finished in 1904). They were all churches built in the last decades of the 15th century during the rule of one of the main figures in Romanian national history, Stephen the Great (reign 1457-1504). Băicoianu also modified the monuments in a similar fashion, likely with the view of emphasizing a common “Stephen the Great” style. He placed on the facades coloured ceramic tiles in the dominant brick-red colour and disks in geometric forms, he replaced the roof with a steeper one and changed the aspect of the towers. **[Fig. 3]**

Another architect and more prolific restorer of Romanian monuments was Nicolae Ghica-Budești (1869-1943), a French-educated architect who returned to Romania in 1901. At the restoration of the Princely Church (Biserica domnească) in Târgoviște he modified the decoration of the towers, enlarged the windows, and replaced the base of the small towers arguing that the masonry was of bad quality.¹⁶ At the same time though, he was also careful not to remove some traces from the history of the monument that he deemed valuable or interesting, as in this case the cannon ball on the northern facade.¹⁷



Fig. 3

Perhaps the most visible modifications to a monument were made by Ghica-Budești at Albă Church in Baia, another 15th century monument attributed (according to local traditions but not to historical proofs) to Stephen the Great. Here, between 1907 and 1914, he remade all the damaged parts, he added a row of bricks under the roof and he left the bricks at the tower exposed in order to show, in his view, the difference in construction stages between the tower and the rest of the church.¹⁸

[Fig. 4] The result was almost an almost brand-new monument that is very similar to the church transformed by Constantin Băicoianu as previously described, but which also had as model contemporary restorations in Bukovina, a region which was at the time part of the Austrian territories in Austria-Hungary. The Commission even directly mentioned the works of the Austrian Commission of Historical Monuments at Saint John the New (Sfântul Ioan cel Nou) church from Suceava as a positive example.¹⁹



Fig. 4

One of the most extensive restoration sites – that led in practice to the creation of a new building – was at Cetățuia Monastery in Iași. While the church of the monastery did not suffer major modifications, architect Gheorghe Lupu (1882-1916) heavily restored the monks' cells

and the dining hall on the south side between 1910 and 1911. [Fig. 5] He justified at one point the various demolitions by saying that they were just additions from the time of the “Greek monks”.²⁰ He also explained that the entire building needed to be elevated as “a rational” thing to do because “no proof had been found of their initial aspect”.²¹ He was therefore clearly focused on recreating a more beautiful building, without care for preservation or accurate reconstruction. The resulting restored building, with the two open balconies that recalls the traditional “foișor” of old boyar houses in Walachia, a feature that references, as also do the round arcades, contemporary Neoromanian buildings, while the red brick under the roof reminds of the restorations of Băicoianu and Ghica-Budești. The building was therefore more a statement in support of contemporary directions in Romanian architecture rather than a preservation attempt of an old monument and can be analysed as part of the history of the modern Romanian national style. Furthermore, in 1911, on the north side of the monastery a row of new buildings was added to serve as cells that expand on the architecture of those allegedly older ones, while bringing even more modern elements such as the large glass-windows and effectively creating a modern display of Romanian orthodox architecture. [Fig. 6]



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The restorations were overall as intrusive as the previous ones of the French Lecomte du Noüy and had the same basic restoration methods: to uncover an initial, “original style”. What has changed was the ideology behind the restorations: the style to be uncovered was not a generic “Byzantine style” anymore, but one connected to the history of Romania and the figures of its voivodes. As we have seen, a “Stephen the Great style” was identified with the red brick decoration on the facade. The monuments chosen to be restored had clear significance for the history of the country and were among the most impressive artistically, as was the case with those restored by Lecomte du Noüy. In that case, monuments chosen to be restored, such as Curtea de Argeş or Trei Ierarhi, were significant in the first place from an artistic and architectural perspective.

3. The essential role of the Romanian Orthodox Church

In the analysis of Romanian heritage or the beginning of art historiography, the Romanian Orthodox Church is the elephant in the room because almost all the historical monuments in the country were ecclesiastical ones and many of them were in the possession of the Orthodox Church.

Even if administrator of a historical patrimony, the church in Romania was a very young institution. It had historically been under the Patriarchy in Constantinople and only in 1885 it was recognised as independent, with the right to self-govern. At the same time the church was not only an institution but also a network of priests and monks, with various ranks and often in close connection to each other.

The growing interest in researching, restoring and promoting monuments was received with scepticism by various church representatives. Conflicts among restorers or researchers and priests or monks were not uncommon. When Lecomte du Noüy was working at Curtea de Argeş the local Bishop of Argeş, Ghenadie Petrescu (1836-1918), complained of a variety of matters, including the modifications brought to the church, the way artefacts were kept, the work schedule of the French restorer.²² The bishop likely felt that his authority and institutional powers were threatened by the way the church was transformed through restorations. He would nevertheless later play a noticeable role in the transformation of the former monastery, by drawing a plan and noting the requirements for the future Episcopal Palace that was to be built near the church.

The scepticism of the church towards restorations was not unjustified but directly related to the symbolical significance of the restorations. Once restored, a church or monastery became a national possession, not meant to serve only the local community anymore, but a symbol of the whole "nation". It became subject to certain preservation laws, to celebrations, studies, etc. At the same time, the restoration of monuments could have been seen as another strong move of the Gouvernement against the church after the loss of many former privileges, the most notable of which was the one inflicted through the 1863 secularization of the monastic estates that meant essentially the nationalisation of most of the land held by monasteries and churches.²³

All these various tensions came to a head in 1892 in the Romanian Parliament during the discussions around the new Law for Historical Monuments. The debates in the Parliament directly opposed the second-in-rank member of the Orthodox Church, the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Iosif Naniescu (1818-1902), with the politician who presented the law, Grigore Tocilescu (1850-1909), then director of the Museum of Antiquities, one of the main connoisseurs of the country's cultural heritage and the most active archaeologist in Romania at the time.²⁴ The Metropolitan voiced fears and opinions widely shared by the church representatives. He argued that the church is the best place to conserve

historical artefacts; the priests had been compiling inventories of objects for a long time and thus there was no need for a special commission. He also argued that restorations undertaken so far by Lecomte du Noüy had been demolitions rather than real restorations and the local church was actually much more knowledgeable in repairing and conserving monuments.²⁵ Naniescu even criticised directly Tocilescu by saying that “the archaeologist wants to take everything from the church” and compared the situation of the church with someone having their personal belongings taken away.²⁶ He finally argued that a law and a Commission for Historical Monuments were not needed since the priests are much better at documenting and preserving monuments and artefacts.

Grigore Tocilescu responded with a long, vehement speech listing the many artefacts, manuscripts, and inscriptions that have been damaged or sold outside the country by priests.²⁷ He argued that “the canons of aesthetics and architecture are in this case over and above the canons of the church” and received applause from fellow senators when he praised the principles of secularism: “Today, along with the church, another, much brighter type of church came into being, namely the university, a forum of free thinking. The church will not stand in the way of free thinking at the end of our century.”²⁸ His promotion of secular educational and aesthetic value of the artefacts was also connected to his position as director of the only museum of antiquities in Romania, an institution that had as its main aim to collect artefacts taken from the monasteries and churches in Romania. These various tensions and often opposing voices of church officials were not subdued with the passing of the new law for historical monuments in 1892 but remained a rather permanent feature in the process of documenting, preserving and restoring the religious heritage.

4. Attitudes Towards the Heritage of Transylvania after 1918

Romania almost doubled its size and radically changed its ethnic composition after 1918 with the addition of the regions of Transylvania, Bukovina (formerly part of Austria-Hungary) and Bessarabia (formerly part of the Russian Empire). But how did studies about Romanian art and the restoration of monuments change after 1918? The paper will follow some of the most important writings about historical monuments in interwar Romania to assess the changing ideas about what was “Romanian” art.

After 1918, a first significant moment for the study of the historical monuments in Romania was the publication of the most comprehensive art history survey about the country. The work published in Paris in 1922, called *The Romanian Art. History of the Old Romanian Art* (L'Art Roumain. Histoire de l'Art Roumain Ancien) has 407 pages, richly illustrated, and was written in French by the historian Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) and engineer Gheorghe Balș (1868-1934).²⁹ The volume included mainly analyses of the architecture of monuments, but also in-depth descriptions of frescoes, religious artefacts and some princely mansions. However, two significant aspects stand out. The work was published in Paris, in French and therefore addressed as much to a foreign audience as was to the Romanian elite. It was indeed meant to define an image of Romania outside the country, on the European scene, and it was also a way to integrate the local heritage into the European one. As Shona Kallestrup noted, in the 1920s "art historians also looked for ways of overcoming the intellectual 'chasm' between local traditions and Western canons", an attitude already present in the nineteenth century.³⁰

Another surprising focus (or rather lack of focus) of the book is that it excluded the heritage of Transylvania from its analysis, being split equally between descriptions of Wallachian and Moldavian heritage. Not only that by the time, in 1922, Romania included also Transylvania but the region had long been subject of descriptions, admirations and aspirations of many Romanians. As Vlad Țoca noted, a practical reason for this neglect was that the research for the book has mainly been written before the war.³¹ However, two other reasons were likely in play that this paper will detail next: (1) the heritage of Transylvania was in the midst of a brief power-struggle between the Transylvanian elite and those in power in Bucharest; and (2) the heritage of ethnic Romanians from Transylvania did not fit at the time into a glorious narrative about the artistic production of Romanians, worthy to be presented outside the country. It was rather seen as a symbol of oppression and discrimination, the mark of a smaller "culture" rather than of a glorious nation.

In fact, if one follows the only publication of the Commission for Historical Monuments after the war, its quarterly Bulletin, but also the various writings of historians such as Iorga, the impression it has is that Romania's borders remained unchanged.³² There are extensive studies about the main monuments of Wallachia and Moldavia, survey works or monographs, all focused on the two provinces. In practice, Transylvania

does not exist in the concerns of the members of the Commission based in Bucharest.

Transylvania was also ignored institutionally. In 1921 4 new branches or sections were established, for Transylvania, Bukovina, Banat and Bessarabia.³³ Much smaller in size, their funds were insufficient for any major activity, be it restorations, studies or research missions. Especially visible was the underfunding of the Transylvanian section of the Commission for Historical Monuments, the biggest of the new branches. For example, in 3 years, between 1926 and 1928, it had money only to complete restoration works at two Orthodox churches while smaller consolidations or reparations were done at other 8 churches and at Corvinilor or Hunyadi Castle.³⁴

So why the initial neglect for the heritage of Transylvania, a region that was at least officially in the centre of the national aspirations of Romanians? A reason for this oversight was that even if Transylvania might have been loved, it was unknown to the francophone elite in Bucharest, which was much better acquainted with Western European art and architecture. The local Transylvanian intellectuals were much more knowledgeable, but the former Hungarian and German elite was overthrown from power, while the local Romanian leaders were not in the most favourable terms with those from Bucharest. In fact, as Irina Livezeanu and more recently Gábor Egry have shown, much of the Romanian elite of Transylvania has initially welcomed with reluctance the new transfer of power and the locals, such as Iuliu Maniu, sought a “provisional autonomy” or even a permanent one.³⁵ The 1923 Constitution, for example, was considered as reflecting centralisation policies, making the leaders of the former National Romanian Party of Transylvania to initially not recognise it.

Even if a good part of the Romanian Transylvanian elite eventually came to Bucharest and participated in the leadership of the country, the replacement of the former Hungarian and German ruling-elite was a slow affair.³⁶ The formation of a new class of Romanian-speaking bureaucrats and specialists simply took time and this was paralleled by enduring regionalist sentiments in Transylvania.³⁷ For example, complaints about the inefficiencies of the Bucharest administration were common. As one lawyer from Cluj remarked, “No one listened to our grievances and the promised improvements never happened; (...) on the contrary, we imported the oriental practice of *baçşiş* and harassment.”³⁸ This sort of tensions was a far-cry from the triumphant nationalist tone struck by official histories or discourses.

In this context, the members of the Commission for Historical Monuments in Bucharest saw their role as asserting the supremacy of Bucharest rather than promoting the cultural heritage of the newly acquired region. The choice of president of the Transylvanian Section of the Commission makes even more clear the attempts in Bucharest to impose itself. Over the entire history of its existence, from 1921 to 1941, its president was the historian Alexandru Lepădatu (1876-1950), disciple of Nicolae Iorga and one of the main specialists in the architectural monuments of Wallachia and Moldavia. Alexandru Lepădatu was Transylvanian by birth but studied in Iași at high-school and then moved to Bucharest around 1900 to pursue university studies. After the World War I he was therefore named president of the Transylvanian Section of the Commission and also professor of “Old History of the Romanians” at the newly reorganised University of Cluj where he set up the Institute for National History.

5. Writings about historical monuments in interwar Transylvania

The Transylvanian section, even if with limited funds, focused its activity on mapping and promoting the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic monuments, considered to be the only ones produced by the ethnic Romanian community. The monuments were small, stone churches (earliest from the fifteenth century) and many more wooden churches (ranging from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries), all situated in or at the margins of villages and being used by the local peasant population. Many of the monuments are works that elude established artistic categories. For example, the churches of Ribița, Criscior or Remetea (all from approx. early fifteenth century) have an architecture close to the Catholic or Reformed churches. The paintings inside have been seen however as closer to Byzantine ones even if the iconography is not entirely Orthodox.³⁹ This iconography features most prominently the three Hungarian Holy Kings, Saints Ladislau, Stephen and Emeric, which was a representation common to the fourteenth and fifteenth century in the Hungarian Kingdom. For the nobles of the Orthodox community, it was probably a mark of allegiance to the Hungarian rule. But the artists of the time also worked outside boundaries of nationality, religion, ethnicity, categories defined in the modern times at the beginning of art history as a research discipline.

The wooden churches are also very interesting and unique examples of folk art. The paintings inside might look naïve, but are certainly original. So is the case with other artistic productions associated with the churches, such as garments or glass icons.⁴⁰

Indeed, Romanians, the most numerous ethnic group, were mostly peasants, with a minority living in towns or being part of a middle class. And the notion of ethnic Romanians was based especially on religion and therefore was defined in relation to the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic monuments. The difference in religious rite was never really an issue with regard to the heritage. Greek-Catholics were fully assimilated as Romanians perhaps also because many of the communities' leaders were Greek-Catholic priests. The Greek-Catholic Church, officially known as the Romanian Church United with Rome, separated from the Orthodox Church in 1698, when it signed a union with the Catholic church, recognising the authority of the Pope but keeping its Orthodox rite. Known today mostly because it was outlawed by the Communist regime and subjected to harsh persecutions, it enjoyed at the time more rights than the Orthodox church. This meant it could build more important monuments and form a class of Romanian intellectuals. Most of the leaders in 1918 were themselves or came from families of Greek-Catholic priests.

The most significant moment for the discovery of the Romanian heritage was probably the appearance of several extensive studies between 1927 and 1931 by well-known art historians or researchers of Transylvanian heritage: Coriolan Petreanu (1893-1945), Virgil Vătăşianu (1902-1993), Atanasie Popa (1896-1982), Silviu Dragomir (1888-1962).⁴¹ The first two were students of Josef Strzygowsky, professor of art history in Vienna, from whom they took inspiration in studying and promoting both wooden architecture and the artistic heritage considered "minor" until that time. They were also representative for almost all researchers of Transylvania, self-described as ethnic Romanians from the region, with studies in Vienna, Budapest, Chernivtsi, and who already had a history of promoting Romanian culture and heritage within Austria-Hungary. All these researchers were Transylvanian-born, with studies in Budapest or Vienna, while the more established researchers from Bucharest were generally not involved in studies about the region.

Romanian researchers on Transylvania harboured a sense of historic injustice towards Romanian art, marginalised by Hungarians and by studies about 'European' art, in which they strongly felt the Romanian heritage of Transylvania should be included. Their attitude was influenced by the

work and teachings of Strzygowski, who became famous by arguing for the significance of non-European heritage, especially Asian and Eastern European one, and who built a large base of followers, with many students from Eastern Europe among them.⁴²

The studies on Transylvanian heritage are apparently positivistic in their approach of recording sources, describing buildings, noting local knowledge about the church, its natural setting. However, the nationalistic tone and aim is more than evident. Their declared aim was to prove the value of Romanian art, rooted in a long artistic tradition and with a high degree of originality. Vătășianu for example wrote in such terms as the following: "This ancient nest of the Dacian bravery, centre for the Roman civilization (...) we will prove that our architecture is not only a mixture of foreign influences but has ancient roots, fed by the same soil from which our people fed."⁴³

Age-value was indeed an essential element and Petreanu went so far as to argue that some constructions seen on Trajan's column (a monument built in 113AD in Rome to commemorate the Empire's victory over Dacians) are proof that wooden buildings in Romania have their origins at least from that time.⁴⁴ Making claims without concrete proofs can often be seen in these writings, in spite of their apparent objectivity. For example, the same Petreanu noted: "Compared to the cumbersome German and Hungarian towers, the Romanian ones introduced finesse, gracefulness, elegance, a mysterious-romantic character, and these qualities cannot be found in the Saxon and Hungarian churches."⁴⁵ He expanded on the mysterious nature of the orthodox or Greek-catholic churches to argue for their value, especially when studying the 'Romanian soul':

Here, as everywhere in Transylvania, the wooden churches are the emanation of the people personality, of the folk soul. Their builders are simple peasants who are often unable to write; they are not city artisans. What they have created is all the more remarkable. All who have seen the Romanian wooden churches have admired the fully developed art, the silhouette, the proportions, the solidity of the artistic detail, the harmonious fusion with the environment, the gravity, mystery, power and grace of the whole. (...). The study of the art of wood building in Transylvania signifies not only an enrichment of our knowledge of this history of art, but also the proof of the Romanian folk-soul and of its artistic products.⁴⁶

Petreanu did not go into specific details about for example what “the silhouette” or “the proportions” of the monuments exactly mean, creating a convenient ambiguity to speak about “Romanian” art. The same ambiguity, a mark also to be found at other authors in writings about Romanian monuments, also served him to draw multiple parallels between architectural elements of wooden churches (towers, window frames, doors, etc.) and Western artistic styles, chiefly Gothic and Baroque.⁴⁷

Other writers simply based their dating on rumours and legends that made the monuments much older than they really were, such as Tit Bud, a Greek-Catholic priest, who claimed that Ieud Wooden Church is from 1364 or that the church in Apșa de Mijloc is from mid-fifteenth century, dates repeated later by others.⁴⁸ These authors were adamant supporters of the ancient Romanian identity in architecture and for them the Romanian churches were also a symbol of the persecution of Romanians, of their marginalisation by Germans and Hungarians. In their writings the feeling of resentment is transparent. As Vătășianu noted:

The churches belonged to Romanians and were built by them, in spite of what some Hungarians and Germans authors claim. The proofs are: a specific architectural type that does not appear in regions inhabited by Hungarians or Germans; the Slavonic inscriptions; the churches remained in the possession of the Romanian community even if the occupiers could have taken them.⁴⁹

The resentment cultivated by ethnic Romanians educated and trained after all in Budapest and Vienna was due indeed to the overlooking of the Romanian heritage in the Habsburg publications and in the Hungarian ones. But they also internalised an inferiority complex that made them struggle to justify why the Romanian monuments were smaller, less important or in more isolated places.

Beside praising the Romanian identity, the authors saw the monuments also as symbols of poverty, of the dire conditions of Romanian community and as reflecting their persecutions, while admitting that the monuments lacked the value or monumentality of others. Often their discourse was one of grievance, of complaint, of self-pity. These writers asserted the innate value and merits of the Romanian heritage in Transylvania, but at the same time they were thinking in a framework in which the Western artistic canon still dictated what was beautiful and impressive. For example, Atanasie Popa noted: “Hidden between the trees, surrounded by an old

fence, darkened by the times, the little wooden church from Apahida stands modestly, away from the main road, without drawing attention."⁵⁰ In the case of the church from Ieud, he argues that it is a symbol of the past traumas of the Romanian community who consequently abandoned it.⁵¹ Along the same lines, he noted about the church from Vad that it "is testament to a noble Romanian ambition and determination to survive the tough times, urging us not to give up and not to doubt our will and our faith."⁵² The churches were valued therefore not for their artistic merit but because they embodied the Romanian spirit and because they were proof of the tragic fate of Romanians. They were monuments to a tragedy in a way not so different from the World War I monuments commemorating horrors, traumas or sacrifices.

These attitudes were in line with broader ideas about Romanian identity as that of people who survived hardships, invasions; whose heritage has been destroyed but not their ethnic spirit. On the other side of the Carpathians, in Wallachia and Moldavia, the elite had long internalised the view that the architectural heritage of their country was inferior and to a great extent not worthy of being preserved. For example, in one of the very first studies about Romanian architecture, the architect Dimitrie Berindei complained in 1860 that "we can say that the country seems without any arts."⁵³ Also, the Romanian painter and chair of art history at the School of Fine Arts in Iași, Paul Verussi, noted in 1875 that "The state of our national art is that until this moment, we don't have any art."⁵⁴ Indeed, the history of Romania has been written on both sides of the Carpathians as a sort of history of survival, camouflaged in national pride.

Conclusions

The paper has sketched some of the multi-faceted meanings that historical monuments held in Romania in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. It analysed restoration and preservation practices, on writings of art history, attitudes and wider mentalities. Without the goal of representing an exhaustive history of heritage protection, restoration or art history writings, this research continues some of the recent efforts of disentangling how and why a Romanian architectural heritage and art history were created and written.

First ideas and definitions about historical monuments in Romania were formed in the late nineteenth century with important inputs from

foreign specialists. This paper has chiefly detailed the activity of the French restorer André Lecomte du Noüy who was the most important restorer in the country for several decades. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Romanian architects took over the restoration activity. Claiming a break with past practices, they instead continued them. What has indeed changed was the significance of monuments. They were not tools to present Romania as a European country and to integrate or relate it to the wider European culture anymore, but means to forge a distinct national identity, presented often in opposition to that of others. This trend has directly influenced writings in interwar Transylvania, which were focused on building, defining or explaining the Romanian cultural identity also accompanied by sentiments of resentment, self-pity and national pride. They were also in line with the wider nationalistic turn in Romania in the 1930s. Overall, the monuments played an essential role in the cultural politics of Romania and reveal broader attitudes as well as the evolution of preservation practices and of architectural styles.

NOTES

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- ²² Report by two architects, active in Bucharest: Alexandru Orăscu (1817-1894) and Carol Kuchnowsky (unknown life years, active in Romania between 1860 and 1884). "Report by Orăscu and Kuchnowsky", April 7, 1980, *Restaurarea monumentelor istorice. Acte și rapoarte oficiale*, 99-100. Ghenadie Petrescu, "Letter from the Bishop of Argeș", March 4, 1980. *Restaurarea monumentelor istorice. Acte și rapoarte oficiale*, 97-98, 97. See more details about the criticisms of Ghenadie Petrescu in Alexandru Istrate,

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[Fig. 1] The Metropolitan Church in Târgoviște before and after the restoration of 1885-1895

Credits: Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice, 1917-1945; Mvelam, Creative Commons Licence

[Fig. 2] Stavropoleos Monastery, restored between 1904-1908.

Credits: Credits: Fusion-of-horizons, Flickr; Creative Commons licence.

[Fig. 3] Saint George in Hârlău, restored between 1893 and 1904.

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[Fig. 4] Albă Church in Baia, restored between 1907-1914.

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[Fig. 5] Cetățuia Monastery, South Side, restored between 1910-1911

Credits: Author

[Fig. 6] Cetățuia Monastery, Cells on the North Side, 1911.

Credits: Author

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