

LOCAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS REFLECTED THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF MERCHEAȘA / MIRKVÁSÁR / STREITFORT, TRANSYLVANIA, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

In the last three decades the Transylvanian villages faced a slow, but constant decline in many aspects. One of the many villages in this situation is Mercheașa (known as Mirkvásár in Hungarian, or Streitfort in German), part of Homorod (Hamruden) Commune, Brașov County, Transylvania. The aging and numerically reduced population of the village, occupied exclusively in agriculture, in parallel with an inefficient local administration, induced the impoverishment of a once flourishing and prosperous village. This long decay is now clearly reflected by the degradation of the buildings, abandoned historical built heritage, desolate landscape, lack of consensus or a minimum order that would reflect any kind of management. Based on an extensive field research and cooperation with a local non-governmental organisation dedicated to sustainability, culture and education, this paper shows how the actions initiated from outside the community have managed to change the mentality of the inhabitants, who are now more open to culture, improvements and even variety. Following a mixed, interdisciplinary methodology, involving both local history and social investigation methods, approached from a geographical perspective, this article answers several questions, including the most important: How did the locals react to these projects? and Does sustainable development depend primarily on community involvement and consensus? The results show an assessment of the current situation, an analysis of the elements that can become a local brand, and the initiated projects by the organisation, the results, and their impact on the villagers' attitudes towards development. This paper also includes an extensive evaluation of the local landmark, the fortified church, including a bird's eye (perspective) drawing of the site.

Keywords: sustainability, rural, local branding, fortified church, local identity, ONG, culture, nature

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to believe that in the 21st century, within the European Union, there are still rural settlements forgotten by the world, which need to be rediscovered. Isolated, impoverished, quiet, but with a remarkable history and surrounded by a pristine nature, these settlements remained preserved only due to lack of financial resources, and thus, lack of investments for modernisation (interpreted in terms of individualism). Although Mercheașa is not an isolated case, and somehow recalls the famous and now successful village of Viscri (Weißkirch) but 20 years ago (Corsale & Iorio, 2014; Ilovan & Maroși, 2015), it is now facing the critical turning point from long agony to dynamic development. This important moment requires wise support from

all involved factors (especially from the local population). Quick or irrational interventions seeking only short-term profit can easily cripple exactly those preserved characteristics of the village (quietness, pristine nature and built heritage) which are supporting sustainable development and can become a favourable local brand for tourism.

The context in which this turning point appeared in Mercheașa (and other small villages with similar characteristics) is given by the end of the 2014-2020 Romanian Rural Development Programme, which had a decided budget of around 9.52 billion € from the European Structural and Investments Funds (ESIF). According to the European Commission, from a decided 9.52 billion € funds, 6.79 billion € have been invested at the end of 2020 in the development of the Romanian rural areas (European Commission, 2022, European Structural & Investment Funds, Romania).

The European Commission's adapted vision on rural development and the new Common Agricultural Policy planned to be released in 2023 are both considering the dysfunctionalities of the rural areas, such as the aging and shrinking population, and the necessary responses to achieve long-term sustainable development (European Commission, 2021, press release). The EU's new Rural Action Plan considers a sustainable, cohesive, and integrated development, with actions grouped in four different categories towards increasing strength, connectivity, resilience, and prosperity of rural areas. The implementation of these action plans (together with all programmes, projects, and other initiatives) is made under the supervision of the European Commission and the results are managed and transmitted by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), which aims to generate and share knowledge based on practical experiences. ENRD also publishes databases with funded projects, statistics, summaries, seminars, workshops and so on, being a true indicator for the success of the Action Plan.

With the available European funds, the financing of innovative, sustainable, and integrated rural projects will be ensured. However, there is a sensible aspect on how local actors (administration, landowners, farmers) will interpret modernisation. Investments will gradually raise the comfort of the villagers and will bring them to the 21st century, and might even stabilise the demographic balance. The sensitive part is if this modernisation will be made with respect to the past, if the raising of the comfort level will not be done to the detriment of the local cultural heritage. This contradiction between preserving built heritage or adapting it to the present standards is also highlighted by Nasser (2003, pp. 467-468) who observes that "a dichotomy exists between preserving the past for its intrinsic value and the need for development in response to changing societal values." Certainly, the sociologists' perspective on this dichotomy is not always in favour of the past. For instance, Rodgers, Sosa and Petersen (2017, pp. 193-195) are considering that "the buildings that become historic sites are chosen by preservationists and do not represent all members of the community, past or present" and even that traditional architecture might not represent anymore a changed population or a marginalised group and might produce a case of social injustice. There are also sociologists with a critical attitude towards conservation, environmental protection and associated rules. For instance, Ivan (2013, pp. 4-5) considers that fishing bans and environmental protection restrictions in the Danube Delta (UNESCO site) had a negative impact on the social and cultural life of the native population and she even opposes strict conservation rules. These aspects are highly relevant for the Saxon villages of Transylvania, left without the Saxon population, who emigrated en masse from Romania after the 1989 Revolution. In this context, the 'new' non-Saxon population might not have a feeling of belonging to the Saxon area and its built heritage, but the goal towards sustainable development, which also involves tourism, made the built heritage become equally important for diverse ethnic groups (Ilovan & Maroși, 2015, p. 68, 2019, p. 117, pp. 121-122).

For instance, in the case of the well-known UNESCO World Heritage Site Viscri / Deutschweiskirch, many non-Saxon residents (Romanian and Roma) complained that they could not bring their homes up to nowadays' standards of comfort because of strict conservation rules, which had been initiated by a leader Saxon lady, who descends from the village (Jordan, Havadi-Nagy, & Maroși, 2016, pp. 205-207). It is clear that without the strong initiative of the Saxon leader and that of the Mihai Eminescu Trust Foundation, the harmony of Viscri would leave room "to more individualism, which in turn means that the village would assume a more ordinary shape and will lose in attractiveness" (Jordan, Havadi-Nagy, & Maroși, 2016, pp. 205-207). It was also observed that most of the inhabitants are willing to leave some of the comfort of modernity to maintain the attractiveness of their place. The value of the properties has increased 5-6 times in around ten years, and this changed the structure and attitudes of the owners: some of them kept their properties and continued with the conservation policies and others have sold theirs and sought modernity. The new owners from big cities like Bucharest or even from abroad quickly embraced the lifestyle and the limitations of conservation, out of passion for traditional architecture, or to support / benefit from a thriving and profitable tourism.

For the future development of Mercheașa, these case studies on the dichotomy of conservation and modernisation are highly relevant. Although considered a barrier to individualism by sociologists, the preservation of unique cultural landscapes (including the built heritage) produces many benefits for a sustainable development, if a community is united by common goals. This place-led development is promoting a sense of comfort given by a visually pleasing, stimulating, and cohesive landscape and it creates a sense of community (which is also expressed in pride and volunteerism), increasing the self-reliance of the community and reducing the need of an allochthonous administrative control (Ilovan & Maroși, 2019, pp. 121-122). All these are even more relevant if we consider that the public administrations of any relevant case studies of rural development in Transylvania are rather passive, rural areas usually lacking basic official legal documentations, like Master Plans (P.U.G.) or Local Development Regulations, based on historical and architectural studies.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology underlying this research is a personalised and balanced mixture of several qualitative and quantitative methods, calibrated to achieve efficiently the established objectives. These mixed methods appeared in response to interdisciplinary approaches, also known as 'new' approaches (Băban, 2002, pp. 45-78). In this case, the research is from a geographical perspective, but follows a specific methodology for studying local history, and includes, when necessary, architectural approaches on conservation of the built heritage.

In addition to the traditional methods, such as direct or indirect observation, comparison, deduction, this research also used social investigation methods of data collection, as part of the field investigation (information from locals was used and interviews were conducted with relevant local actors) (Băban, 2002, pp. 45-78). As this research focuses on a well-defined case study and has a significant part of local history, there has been a tendency to scale down the attention and to pay attention to the particular, to examine every detail under a magnifying glass and to collect all possible clues which explain the local cultural heritage and local identity. This focus on detail is also caused by the vacuum in the scientific literature regarding this subject and place, as there is no article having the village of Mercheașa as a case study.

This research was carried out in three major stages: (1) the field investigation, (2) the office work and indirect observations, and (3) the synthesis and interpretations.

The field research was carried out between April and May 2020, when the physical condition of the privately owned houses and of the built heritage were preliminary assessed, and between August and December 2021, when the attention was directed to specific objectives, the fortified church, the famous 900-year-old oak, the saltwater wells, the nearby farms, and activities, etc. During this stage, instruments such as GPS, laser measuring equipment, cameras and recorders for interviews were used. Among those interviewed were the president of the Carpaterra Association, an active NGO which implemented many projects locally, and several elderly people of the village. During these field observations, sketches were made, which in the following stages would become the synthesis drawing of the research (Figure 3).

During the office research, most of the information sources referring to the village of Mercheașa were collected (these are referred to in the next section). It was noted that the information was often erroneous or incomplete. The cartographic sources were also studied, among which it must be mentioned the *Josephinian Land Survey* conducted from 1763 to 1787, of which section 225 is containing the oldest accurate representation of the village. A cropped part of section 225 was added in this article (Figure 6) after the copyright permission was obtained from the Austrian State Archives / Österreichisches Staatsarchiv. These cartographic sources were relevant to study the traditional saltwater wells and the physiognomy of the village. Cartographic sources have successfully completed other sources and even stories from interviews. In the last stage of synthesis and interpretations, everything was organised in order to obtain an overview of the current situation in Mercheașa.

The most important questions around which this methodology was designed, and to which this research will answer are: (1) To what extent were the village and the fortified church of Mercheașa researched until now? (2) In what state is the built heritage of the village and what significance does it have for the region? (3) What projects were been carried out in the village to promote the local culture and nature? and (4) How did the villagers react to these projects?

Sources of Information

Most of the few academic sources mentioning Mercheașa are referring to the fortified church, and all these are recycling the same information on the building stages of the church and its fortifications. All this information comes either from the inscriptions preserved on the walls of the architectural ensemble, or from archaeological deductions. There are a few authors who researched the Saxon fortified churches and also mentioned Mercheașa. Among these, the largest contributions were made by architect Hermann Fabini, with his monumental *Atlas der siebenbürgisch-sächsischen Kirchenburgen und Dorfkirchen* / *Atlas of the Saxon Fortified Churches of Transylvania* (Fabini, 1998, 2020) and *Die Kirchenburgen der Siebenbürgen Sachsen* (Fabini, 2009). In Romania, architect O. Teodor Gheorghiu made his contribution to the subject with his monumental *Arhitectura medievală de apărare din România* / *Medieval Defensive Architecture of Romania* (Gheorghiu, 1985). In Hungary, archaeologist Gábor Kiss treated the subject in *Erdélyi várak, várkastélyok* / *Transylvanian Fortifications and Fortresses* (KISS, 1987). Other authors who contributed on this subject are: Mariana Borcoman (2010, pp. 83-84), George Opreșcu (1985), and Gheorghe Mitran (2013).

A local monograph written by Michael GALZ, a Saxon who descends from Mercheașa, is *Streitfort in Siebenbürgen* (Galz, 1997) and it is an extensive and accurate description of the

traditions and ways of life, local dialect, and history of the former Saxon population of Streitfort / Mercheașa. Due to its low circulation and inaccessibility, this publication is very difficult to find, and this research was based only on several extracts from the original monograph (e.g. Melzer, 1997, article about Streitfort based on Galz, 1997, published in Siebenbürgischen Zeitung, 15 July).

Relevant research articles on the Saxon built heritage, which offered good practices and teachings, also relevant for the Mercheașa case study, are those authored by: Ilovan and Maroși (2015, 2019), Jordan, Havadi-Nagy and Maroși (2016), Corsale and Iorio (2014), and Maroși (2017, 2018, 2021).

Mercheașa was also mentioned in several research articles and books referring to the cultural heritage of the pre-industrial exploitation of salt in the Homorod Valley, Eastern Transylvania. Relevant to this research were Andrea Chiricescu's (2013) *"Civilizația tradițională a sării în estul Transilvaniei"* / *The Traditional Salt Civilisation in Eastern Transylvania* and the guide of Valerii Kavruk (ed.), Andrea Chiricescu (ed.), Dan Buzea, Corneliu Gaiu, Iulius Toma Hulpe, Camelia Târnovan and Radu Zăgreanu (2013) on the immovable cultural heritage of the pre-industrial exploitation of salt.

Besides the academic literature that makes up the golden thread of this research, other documents as historical illustrations, postcards, photographs, and maps were used as valuable sources of information (methodology described and applied also in Maroși, 2016, pp. 45-58).

Other relevant information sources were the local town halls, the County Department of Culture, the National Archaeological Repertoire, and the List of Historical Monuments of Romania (LMI 2015) edited by the Romanian National Institute of Historical Monuments, part of the Ministry of Culture. For example, the fortified church of Mercheașa is registered on the list between the numbers 690 and 692 with the code BV-II-a-B-11732. The only built heritage listed on the LMI 2015 in Mercheașa is the fortified church, although there are many high cultural value buildings, which could benefit from legal protection (Table 1).

Table 1: Extract from the List of Historical Monuments of Romania (LMI, 2015)

List no.	LMI 2015 Code*	Monument	Date
690	BV-II-a-B-11732	The architectural ensemble of the fortified church of Mercheașa, Commune of Homorod	13 th to 19 th century
691	BV-II-m-B-11732.01	The Evangelical church with its clock tower	13 th to 19 th century, 1848-1858
692	BV-II-m-B-11732.02	The fortified enclosure with tower and annexes	16 th to 17 th century

*Code interpretation: BV – Brașov County, II – monuments of architecture, a – historic ensemble, m – monument, B – of local importance. Edited by The Romanian National Institute of Historical Monuments, part of The Ministry of Culture of Romania. LMI Code, according to the Order of the Minister of Culture no. 2.828 / 2015, amending the annex no. 1 to the Order of the Minister of Culture and Cults no. 2.314 / 2004 regarding the approval of the List of Historical Monuments, with the subsequent modifications from 24.12.2015. The order was published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, No. 113 bis, 15.02.2016, having an official and legal character.

Village of Mercheașa Case Study

Mercheașa is a small village, formally part of the Saxon administrative unit “The Chair of Rupea” within the Königsboden (lat. *Fundus regius*) as an autonomous part of the Hungarian Kingdom, today is a small village, part of the Homorod commune, Brașov County, Transylvania, Romania (on Google Maps coordinates: 46.066382, 25.335049).

The first known written mention of the village was made in a tax list in 1400 under an old variant of its German name Stristfordin / Streitfordia (Borcoman, 2010, p. 83; Mitran, 2013, p. 37). The second mention was in 1442 under the Hungarian name Mirkevására (“vásár” means fair, so the name of the village means Mirke’s fair or the place where the fair of Mirk is held). The Romanian name Mercheașa is derived from the medieval form of the Hungarian name Mirkvására. The Saxons named the village in many variants, all formed by combining the German words Streit (meaning dispute / verbal argument) and Furt (ford - river crossing / shallow area in a stream or river) resulting Streitfort.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the extended field research, gathering information from villagers and local actors, studying the relevant bibliographic materials, many relevant aspects came to the surface about the village of Mercheașa. The results are reflecting the current situation in Mercheașa, the changes that occurred in the last ten years and also the opportunities which can be considered towards a sustainable development of the village. All these aspects are depending on the formation of a consensus among the locals, assuming their role in the local development and setting a common goal. In this research, several built and natural features of the village were examined, especially those that were within the scope of past projects or that had a substantial potential in constructing the villagers’ place identity. Local identity and the significance of the place to the current inhabitants is crucial towards a sustainable development, as the below results will show.

The Saxon Fortified Church and its Defence Architecture

In the specialised literature the fortified church from Mercheașa is rarely mentioned, and almost never described in detail. Several articles focusing on the same subjects can be found in various German or Romanian newspapers. This is due to the hidden position of the church and its smaller size than the others in the area, but still, preserving an equally impressive architecture.

The church has a long history and at first glance impresses with its size. One has to think how a small-size village like Mercheașa could gather the resources to build and fortify such a church. The second question that arises is how long it took them. There is also the thought of the huge threat to which they were subjected, that they built these fortifications everywhere. As with other nearby Saxon churches, the former inhabitants’ sense of belonging to this place justified their constant effort to defend their land and the traces of their actions are still visible in the defensive architecture of the church (Maroși, 2017, p. 31). Even today, there is a sense of peace and security in the churchyard, an environment defended for years by a huge key (Figure 2.2).

Although fortified churches are not to be found in Transylvania alone, nowhere else these monuments, born from a terrible necessity, have taken the proportions and developed the variety of solutions and ingenious architectural combinations like in Königsboden, the part of

Transylvania / Siebenbürgen formerly inhabited by Saxons (Oprescu, 1957, pp. 3-4). It is very interesting how these churches, over time, have undergone major changes and have been transformed into formidable community defence structures. Every Saxon fortified church, including that from Mercheașa (Figure 3), has something unique, an original architectural feature, a special element that is not found in any other fortified church (Oprescu, 1957, p. 4).

The village was settled by the Saxons in the 13th century, and as it happened with many nearby Saxon villages, they either found an old Roman basilica which they rebuilt (like the Viscri, Deutsch-Weisskirch case), or they built a new one (most likely). It is clear that the actual church contains in its walls and foundations traces of a Romanesque Basilica with three naves from the 13th century, from which today only the central nave was preserved (Mitran, 2013, p. 37). Until the 15th century the church underwent drastic changes, extensions and modifications which also reflected the development of the village and the periods of relative prosperity in the Kingdom of Hungary ruled by king Matthias Corvinus. During this time, the church also received its Gothic characteristics from which only a few are preserved to this day. The south-eastern area of Transylvania (Siebenbürgen) was periodically subjected to Tatar and Turkish incursions, even since the arrival of the Saxon colonists, attracted by the exemptions and privileges given by the Hungarian kings. The colonists were brought in to stabilise this peripheral part of the kingdom economically and demographically, and to protect the borders.

At the beginning of the 16th century the political stability of the kingdom deteriorated rapidly. During this period, most churches in the area (from the Chair of Rupea / Repser Stuhl) were fortified. This heyday of fortifications was the result of previous economic prosperity, but also of the growing political instability and the Ottoman raids that put southern Transylvania to the test. Beginning with the 16th century most of the free village communities decided on new important fortification works, at this time big cities, like Brașov / Kronstadt were already extensively fortified (Gheorghiu, 1985, p. 183). This conflictual, instable period, dominated by the numerous Ottoman raids has culminated with the Battle of Mohacs (1529), when the Hungarian army was crushed, and King Louis II was killed. This resulted in the division of the Hungarian Kingdom into three parts: (1) the Ottoman occupied Hungary, (2) the western part as Habsburg Hungary and (3) the Eastern Hungarian Kingdom, which in 1570 became the semi-independent Principality of Transylvania (Gheorghiu, 1985, p. 183). Mercheașa remained part of the Principality of Transylvania, in the same special Saxon administrative region known as Universitas Saxorum (Königsboden, lat. *Fundus regius*, "The Land of the King") to which the Chair of Rupea also belonged.

It is very interesting that in this context, between 1517 and 1541, according to preserved inscriptions on the walls (Gheorghiu, 1985, p. 182), a quadrangular walled enclosure of the church with four towers in the corners was built, from which today only the northern and eastern walls are preserved (Figure 3.12) and the eastern tower (Figure 3.10). These 7 meters tall defensive walls formerly had covered passageways supported by wooden consoles, from which today only the cut-outs in the stone walls are preserved (Figure 1.6). Borcoman (2010, p. 84) considers, based on a preserved document, containing an official request for tax exemptions between 1603 and 1613, that the fortifications were completed only after this time (with the four corner towers). This fortification existed until 1850s, when the western and southern walls and towers were demolished (or embedded) and from the resulting materials the former town hall and the school were built (Figure 3.14 and 3.15).

In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation also reached Transylvania and spread largely due to the humanist and pedagogue Johannes Honterus (1498-1549), event after which the church of Mercheașa converted from Catholic to an Evangelical Lutheran church. This event

produced many modifications to the original architecture of many nearby churches, such as whitewashing the frescoes, if they existed, and removal of the statues. In Mercheașa, some of the original frescoes are still preserved under the plaster near the altar. By eliminating church taxes, local fortifications were further encouraged. The church of Mercheașa was also renovated between 1621 and 1623 and it is possible that it had a bell tower, which later collapsed.

In the new political context of Transylvania, these fortifications proved to be important during the Turkish-Tatar military campaign of 1658, when many non-surrendering settlements were burned to the ground. The church of Mercheașa was set on fire and only the walls remained, but later was rebuilt in a form which is close to what can be still seen today.

The newest addition to the church, and the most visible structure, which also gained the status of a local landmark, is the clock tower (Figure 3.5), constructed between 1848 and 1958, housing a bell dated 1570 (Figure 2.4), with text in German “casted by craftsman Georg Hörel in Nürnberg 1570”, donated by the mayor Mauritius Ludwig of Reps, today Rupea (Mitran, 2013, p. 37; Fabini, 2020). The tower also housed a functional mechanical clock, installed in 1900, which used pulleys and weights, from which today only a few pieces are preserved.

Most of the chronological data can be still found in the original inscriptions preserved on the clock tower, on the nave and some important ones on the defensive walls. Right above the front entrance to the church, on the southwest side of the tower, there is the first inscription (Figure 1.4 and 1.5):

*“Dem Höchsten sei der Dank gebracht
Mit tausend Herzen, tausend Zungen.
Durch dessen Hilfe Gnad und Macht
Uns dieses schwere Werk gelungen.
Zu guten Werken gibt Gott Mut
Wohl den der seinen Willen tut!
Der 2 Elafertiefe Grund ...
wurde gelegt im Jahre 1848 und der neue ...
wurde vollendet im Jahre 1858.”*

Thanks are due to the Highest
With a thousand hearts, a thousand tongues.
By whose help, grace, and power
We succeeded in this difficult work.
God encourages good works
Blessed is he who does His will!
The 2 eleven-deep foundation (...)
was laid in 1848 and the new tower was
completed in 1858. (*Our translation*)

Saxon churches are preserving many types of inscriptions (commemorative ones mentioning historical events, completion of construction phases, prayers for divine support, wise quotations, donations, etc.); these clarify what was happening to the past generations, what seemed as essential to builders and the community, allowing researchers to interpret and draw conclusions about their character and way of life (Fabini, 2009, p. 94).

On the southeast side of the clock tower (the opposite side to the inscription shown in Figure 3.4), the following text was left for posterity by those who built the church:

*“Den Meister kann das Werk nur loben;
Doch aller Segen kommt von Oben.“
Beschütze Vater Kirch und Thurm,
Nor Feuer und im Wettersturm;
Gib, daß wir deinen Willen thun,
So wird dein Segen auf uns ruhn!
Erbaut vom Jahre 1848-1858.*

“The work can only praise the master;
But all blessings come from above.”
Protect Father church and tower,
No fire and in stormy weather;
Grant that we do Your will,
Your blessings will rest upon us!
Built between years 1848-1858.
(*Our translation*)

The first two lines of the inscription came from a song written by Friedrich Schiller (1799), *Das Lied von der Glocke* (The Song of the Bell), and it shows how the intentions and values of the locals have changed over time. At present, the church has no parishioners, the Saxons from Transylvania have emigrated en masse. The next part of the inscription is a prayer for the longevity of the new tower, given that it was replacing an older collapsed one. This relatively new tower, built between 1848 and 1858 is now more than 165 years old and survived many hazards, but it might not survive the current danger of abandonment and lack of maintenance.

In February 2016, at an interval of one week, two towers of fortified churches (classified monuments) collapsed in the county of Brașov, Romania, one of them disappearing from the landscape for the first time in hundreds of years. These two Gothic churches, Roadeș (Radenthal) and Rotbav (Rothbach) were built in the 14th and 15th centuries by the Saxon community. The Saxon exodus left the churches without financial support for proper maintenance and over time the monuments deteriorated. The fortified church from Mercheașa faces the same danger if there are no interventions. Another real threat is an unfortunate (failed) restoration, which could seriously compromise the original substance of the monument or its correct historical appearance, and even making false additions, as it happened many times in Romania (for example, Feldioara / Marienburg Fortress, Mălăiești Fortress, Deva Fortress, and many others).

There is another partially preserved inscription on the northwest side of the tower (Figure 3.4), which motivates the construction of the church in the name of the Lord and attributes to the construction the feeling of peace:

*Zur Ehre des Herrn bis du erbaut
Der Friede erschalle dein Glockenlaut
Beim Frieden wir alle einst kehren ein
Laß deine ...*

You are built up to the glory of the Lord
Peace rings out from your bells
By peace we will all come in one day
Leave your... *(the continuation was not preserved) (our translation)*

The interior of the church is also in a state of disrepair. The roof above the altar and at the contact between the tower and the church's nave are damaged, and due to water infiltrations, some structural beams rotted and collapsed (Figure 2.1). The tall nave of the church has two rows of interior balconies supported by wooden consoles; these were made to accommodate more people (Figure 2.3). These balconies were used mainly by young parishioners, and by those who did not complete the rite of Confirmation (usually at the age of 14); the access to these balconies was through exterior arched buildings with stairs on both sides of the nave (Figure 1.2 on the southern side and Figure 3.19 on the northern side). These balconies are also connecting the choir (above the main entrance) and the dedicated place to the organ (above the altar). These wooden structures were made, probably, at the same time as the furniture, considering that they keep the same Baroque style. An inscription still shows that the furniture was made in 1788 (Figure 2.5). A newer piece of wood is the pulpit (raised stand for preachers) to which access was made through a small door, through the sacristy / vestry (Figure 3.9).

The organ of the church, currently removed from the decaying building, was also installed in 1788, date which shows that the church was extensively renovated (following Baroque, even if this style was more representative for the Catholic Church). Installing the organ raised several problems regarding the required auxiliary equipment. For this purpose, a new building was annexed to the church, to accommodate the organ's bellows (Blasebalg) which pumped air through a wall tunnel to the organ, installed above the altar (Figure 3.8). As the bellows were

manually operated by pedals and the mechanism was noisy, it required isolation from the rest of the church. The organ was moved in 2002 to Vulcan / Wolkendorf to be restored and preserved in the local church, where it is now functional and its original sound can be heard (also on YouTube, Orgue Vulcan (RO) - Wolkendorf, Transylvanie – Frédéric ZAPATA *singing* “*Il Transylvano*” of Girolamo Diruta from 1593, a song in honour of the Prince of Transylvania).

The altar of the church, also in Baroque style, was removed together with the organ, in order to preserve it, as a temporary solution in the context of the rapid degradation of the church and the lack of resources or initiatives for restoration (Figure 2.6). This procedure of moving old artifacts from degrading churches is a common procedure in the area, considering that there are no strategies or plans for immediate interventions in cases similar to that of the church of Mercheașa. If the church is renovated in the future and the risks removed, these artifacts would be returned to their place of belonging.

In the current situation, it is very unlikely that the church will ever rebuild a community of parishioners that will support the maintenance of this massive building. A building without any function, even if it has a rich history and a special cultural significance, it is doomed to oblivion and inevitable degradation. Although it is protected as a historical monument, it is only registered as of local importance. The local administration has no special measures for planning the built protected area and has no strategies to obtain financing for maintenance work. There are very rare interventions for the most urgent aspects, such as those performed by the volunteers of the Ambulance for Monuments, a project initiated in 2016 by the Monumentum Association. In such cases, there were also donations from the Saxons who left their native places and settled in Germany or Austria, but over time, the former community shrunk and organising fundraising meetings and events is no longer possible. In this case, a possible solution would be to give a new function to the building, one that would coexist with the need to preserve the cultural heritage and to contribute to the insertion in the tourist circuit of the building. The building could be adapted as an event hall or used for cultural activities, fulfilling different needs of the community. As the past shows, these buildings were renovated many times and always kept up with the needs of the community and today it should not be a problem if this re-use of the building would be an effort to maintain the building and its cultural heritage. The present inhabitants of Mercheașa inherited this building from the Saxons and now it is important to find ways to establish a new relation with the place, and to define a new way to use this building for the benefit of community life. Tourism alone cannot generate enough maintenance costs for the building; the solution should be a flexible one to allow the use of the building for several purposes that could generate a constant income. Rather than waiting for parts of the building to collapse, as has already happened in many places in Transylvania, and the impossibility of rebuilding due to exorbitant costs, urgent solutions must be found, both by the community and by the local administration.

Regarding the church of Mercheașa, even a minimal periodic intervention by the inhabitants, for example by the initiative to replace the tiles destroyed by extreme weather phenomena, would greatly slow down the degradation of the church. But the problem is more complex and as long as there are no more Lutheran parishioners, except the key keeper who is the only Saxon left in the village, maintenance is lacking. The administrator of the private property of the church has no finances for renovations. The state does not intervene for private property and the local administration, although it could identify funds for such projects, lacks any interest (or is overwhelmed by the situation). Figures 1 and 2 show the actual (2022) state of degradation of the fortified church of Mercheașa.



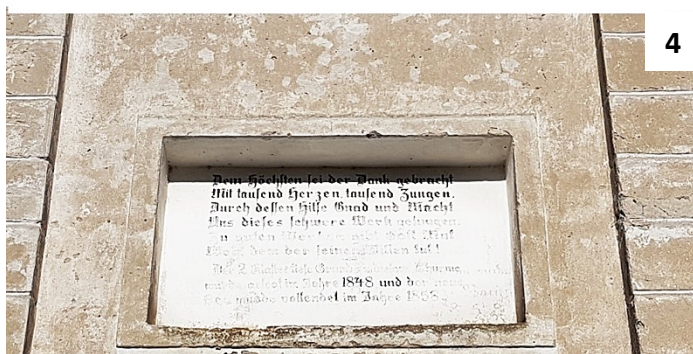
1 – The sacristy, Figure 3.9



2 – Access to the balconies



3 – The southern side of the nave



4 – Inscription above the main entrance, dating the tower



5 – Front of the tower



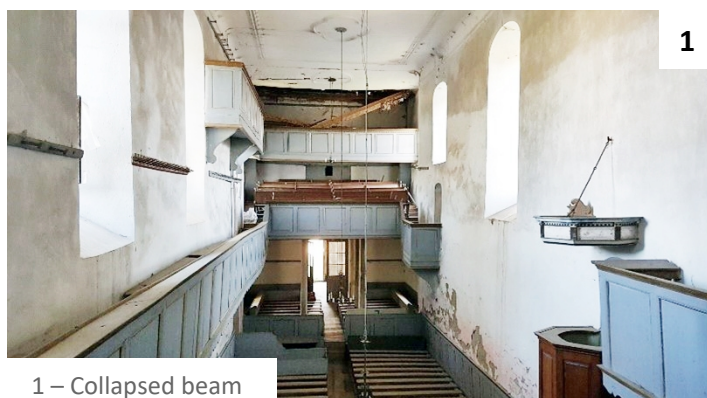
6 – Defensive walls without the wooden structures



7 – View from the street

Figure 1: Pictures from the exterior containing relevant details (indicators related to the text)

Source: Author's personal collection



1 – Collapsed beam



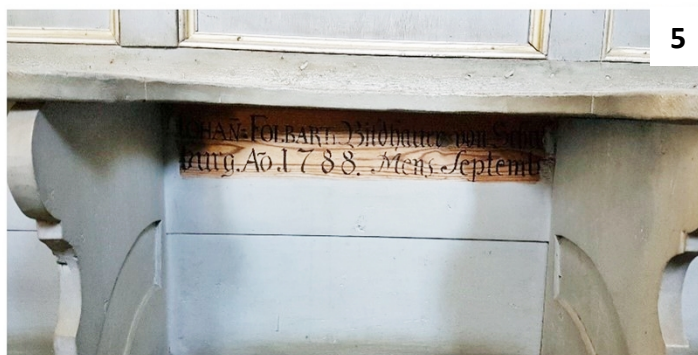
2 – The main entrance key



3 – Interior balconies supported by wooden consoles, 1788



4 – Bell dated 1570, casted by Georg Hörel in Nürnberg



5 – Inscription recovered dating the Baroque furniture



6 – Decaying roof of the Sacristy



7 – Fatback & bacon preservation chambers, Figure 3.2

Figure 2: Pictures with the interiors containing relevant details (indicators related to the text)

Source: Author's personal collection

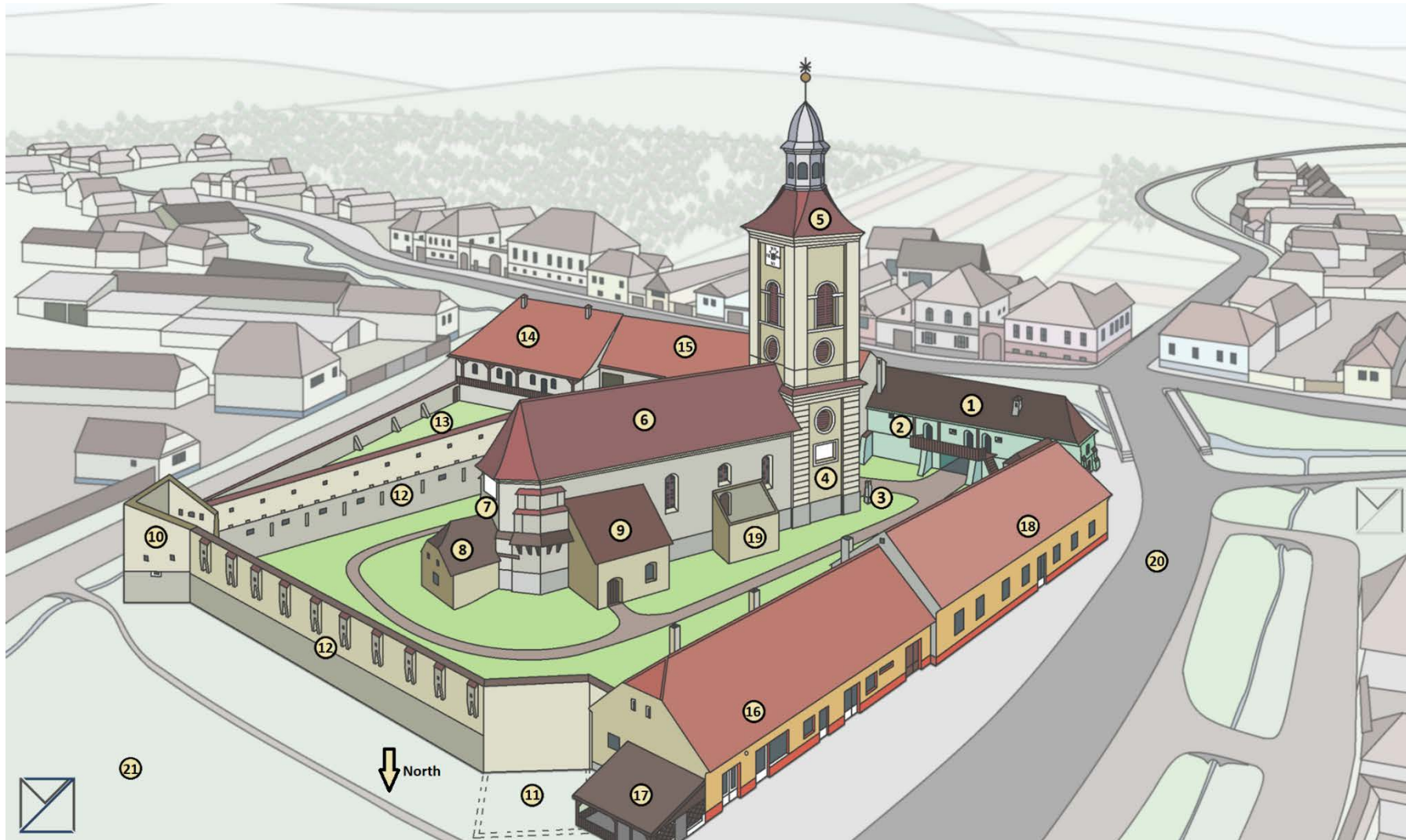


Figure 3: Bird's-eye view of the Evangelical church with fortifications, in Mercheașa, in its current form (annotations on the next page)

Drawing by Zoltan Maroși, 2022

Annotations for Figure 3: ① The Gate House (cca. 18th century), probably the second oldest preserved building in the town, after the church; ② The fatback and bacon drying chambers of the settlement (specific for Saxon rural fortifications); ③ First World War Monument with a list of victims; ④ Inscriptions on each side of the tower, with one of them showing the construction date 1848-1858; ⑤ The clock tower of the church (the clock no longer exists), with a bell casted in 1570, donated by the mayor of Reps; ⑥ The church built in the 13th century in Romanic style, heavily modified in the 16th century, when it was also enclosed with defensive walls; ⑦ Inscriptions with the major renovation dates, DENUO RENOV 1621, 1858, 1933 (last time); ⑧ Special annex to the church which contained the organ bellows (Blasebalg), the pumped air reached through a wall tunnel to the organ installed in 1788 (since 2002 was moved to Vulcan / Wolkendorf and is still functional); ⑨ Sacristy / vestry; ⑩ The eastern tower, the only one preserved of the 4 corner towers built between 1517-1541; ⑪ The site of the former northern tower, demolished in 1899; ⑫ The defensive walls, originally with covered passageways (1517-1541); ⑬ The school yard reminiscent of a defensive zwinger; ⑭ The school built from the materials resulted from the demolition of the fortifications in 1899; ⑮ The former town hall; ⑯ Local shops and bar; ⑰ Bar terrace; ⑱ Local administrative building; ⑲ Annexed building with stairs that offer access to the interior balconies and to the choir; ⑳ County road DJ 132 Rupea – Vlăhița; ㉑ The former fair place which gave the name of the village, now a park.

Traditional Architecture and the Specificity of the Cultural Landscape

Local architecture in Mercheașa is distinct for its Saxon houses, a style common in the southern part of Transylvania (in the former Königsboden). The appearance of old houses, dating from the 18th or 19th century, is forming a very attractive rural (cultural) landscape in many villages, and usually, this is a very important element of local branding. The nearby village of Viscri / Deutschweißkirch is today a model to follow; being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, there are strict regulations for the preservation and restoration of the colourful Saxon houses (described in Ilovan & Maroși, 2015, pp. 63-70). Although they had to put aside certain comfort, the inhabitants of Viscri understood that the flourishing tourism was a result of their comfort sacrifices and care for the very old houses. They preserved a unique landscape of a world that no longer exists and that brings them wellbeing (to the detriment of individualism and some comfort).

Mercheașa is far behind in terms of order and care for the traditional houses. In the absence of the Saxon population, the traditional houses have been neglected and any modernisation being allowed, the original architecture was altered, resulting houses out of context, contrasting and sometimes even unsightly, with a hint of kitsch. In this case, it is observed that the inhabitants have no common purpose or sense of community and the local administration, especially the local planning office, has failed in issuing building permits with conditions. It is very likely that many modernisation works were made without building permits and the authorities did not react on time. Unfortunately, this resulted in an architectural chaos in which everyone builds according to their own skills and aesthetic sense, if any.

Originally, Mercheașa was a charming village, with houses whitewashed or painted in light natural colours, following a common pattern, not imposed by the local administration, but by the Saxon self-managed neighbourhoods. Members of a neighbourhood helped each other in building new houses, so these managed to follow the same style without a modern administrative planning in place. Mercheașa is one of the few villages that was represented on postcards during the Austro-Hungarian administration, a privilege that only towns and cities had. This is due to the passion of Martin Maurer, the owner of a former spice shop in Mercheașa,

where he originally sold these postcards (Figure 4). The existence of these old postcards shows that the picturesque character of the village was well recognised in the past.



Figure 4: Postcards representing Mercheașa during the Austro-Hungarian and interwar periods; 1 – The fortified Evangelical-Lutheran Church; 2 – The Romanian State School (it indicates that these pictures were made after Transylvania became part of Romania); 3 - The Evangelical-Lutheran parish house; 4 – A general view of the village, postcard made before 1918 (note that Hungarian language is still used). Pictures made by H. Köhler in his photography workshop formerly based in Reps / Rupea

Source: Author's personal collection

Traditional houses that are still preserved in varying degrees of degradation, are retaining the typical jerkinhead roofs with raised fronts, on which are found floral patterns, the household name, and the year of construction (Figure 5). Modernised houses have lost this traditional roof, being replaced by gabled roofs, attics, and balconies. Because this phenomenon of neutralisation of cultural heritage is present in many villages, there are actions to raise public awareness about the importance of the local specificity. The dedicated non-governmental organisations are most actively involved in preserving the local culture and traditions. At national level, the Order of Architects from Romania (OAR) elaborated guides of good practices for each area in Romania with a predominant architectural style. One of these guides refers to the Saxon area, southern Transylvania, which Mercheașa is part of. The architectural guide for the local specificity of the rural environment contains descriptions of restorations and interventions for all elements of a building with dozens of illustrated examples of good and bad practices (Vaida et. al., 2017). However, it seems that neither the local administration, nor the owners are aware of this guide.



Figure 5: Traditional houses in a state of disrepair; 1 - on the raised front is inscribed: GEORG DEPNER, 1865; 2 – inscribed 1913

Source: Author's personal collection

The Saltwater Wells and the Civilisation of Salt

Mercheașa is one of the villages lined along the Small Homorod River (in Romanian *Homorodul Mic*, from the original Hungarian name *Kis-Homoród*, derivated from *homorú*, which means concave, referring to the original meandering bed of the river). Homorod Valley is also known as a hilly transition zone from the Transylvanian Plateau to the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, forming an area of great geological variety and abundant salt deposits. Mercheașa was one of the blessed locations where these salt deposits appeared on the surface and made possible the pre-industrial (traditional) exploitation of high-quality salt with the ease of a bucket. Salt, as a very expensive material before industrialisation, used for the health of herbivores (sheep and cows), cheese production, pickling, and meat preservation (including the tradition of producing and preserving bacon and fatback in common, Figure. 2.7), was one of the most important sources of local well-being and wealth. Salt used to appear on the surface in the form of salt ponds (which disappeared with the dredging works during the socialist regime) and in some places the locals dug wells, which they covered with small wooden houses, the door of which was guarded by a salt clerk. Many of these wells have been contaminated in recent years (because of ignorance, either with sewage or animal manure), so that the salted water became unusable. However, these sources of wealth, which have been around for centuries, are still preserved in various forms and could become a serious local brand for the entire region.

One Romanian ethnographic research dedicated to the traditional exploitation of salt is that of Chiricescu (2013), *Civilizația tradițională a sării în estul Transilvaniei* (The Traditional Civilisation of Salt in Eastern Transylvania). The subject was also of great interest to archaeologists, which were preoccupied with explaining the connections between these sources of salt, the former salt trade routes, and the financing of the defensive works (including the medieval fortified churches). One of the most relevant publications on this subject is that of Kavruk et al. (2017), *Towards an Archaeological and Ethnographic Network Analysis of Salt Supply Routes in Southeastern Transylvania*. Many of the researched saltwater wells from the Homorod Valley are centuries old and are so rare and culturally so significant (even if at present they are forgotten and neglected) that these could become, with small efforts, eligible for the UNESCO lists.

The saltwater well (Saltz Brun) and the salted grounds (Saltz Grund) of Mercheașa are clearly visible on the first known cartographic representation of the village from 1773 (Figure 6), today preserving the same locations (Google Maps: 46.06764973622488, 25.344664291963028).



Figure 6: Mercheașa (Mirkvásár, Streitfort) on the first military survey of the Habsburg Empire (Josephinische Landesaufnahme, 1769-1773), Section 225 Repser Stuhl und Albenser Comitats

Source: GZ 2021-0.414.646, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖSTA Kriegsarchiv).

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The saltwater wells of Mercheașa are very old, there are many confirmations by interviews that older generations were using these wells extensively (Chiricescu, 2013, p. 181). According to Kavruk et al. (2017, pp. 384-386), there is archaeological evidence that salt mining in the Homorod Valley started during the Roman occupation, 13 kilometers northwest from Mercheașa, near the village of Sânpaul (in Hungarian, Homoródszentpál), where a Roman military camp and a settlement were discovered, together with former salt mines. At present, the former Roman mining site is partially occupied by a lake and on the adjacent archaeological site, pieces of solid wood were discovered, which indicated large-scale constructions, dated to Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Kavruk et al., 2013, pp. 43-48). It is also possible that the abundance of salt determined the Saxons to settle in this location, Mercheașa being one of the easternmost settlements founded by them. The importance of salt sources in the past is undeniable.

The original wooden building over the well was demolished and replaced by a square shaped construction with a side of 3.2 meters, made of cement bricks on concrete foundation. Inside there is a well with oak walls (originally having an oak bucket too), as this wood is salt resistant. The depth of the salt water is cca. 2.50 meters (Chiricescu, 2013, p. 193). According to Chiricescu (2013, p. 194), the villagers from Mercheașa explained how before the socialist collectivisation of agricultural lands (before 1962), near the fountain there was a swamp with a small saltwater lake from which people also used the mud with healing properties. After the drainage system was built, the swamp, the saltwater lake and the specific micro-ecosystem disappeared.

During an inspection of the well house in September 2021, it was observed that despite its huge significance for the local traditions and history, the place was in a precarious state. Neither history, nor the protection or conservation of the well were respected. The well is under the local administration, in the past it had a person responsible with holding the key, but the door was broken several times and since then it was left in ruins. The inaesthetic concrete building does not even meet the minimum standards, it is not made of natural materials, the protection zone around the well is not delimited, and there are no rules at all regarding its usage. Although many villages lost their salty wells (naturally or accidentally) and, at present, these are extremely rare, the lack of attention and care is worrying. The Saxon villagers regarded this well as one of their most important treasures for centuries, but at present there seems to be a general disinterest. This place and resource have great potential for capitalising on local traditions, for tourism and cultural events and they should be protected in a similar manner to the successful case of the Old Man of the Carpathians (case study discussed in the next section).

The 900 Years Old Man of the Carpathians

Currently, the most important tourist attraction of the village of Mercheașa (better known and more popular than the inaccessible fortified church) is an oak (*Quercus petraea*) tree that, according to biologists, is almost 900 years old, and which is popularly named “The Old Man of the Carpathians” (Carpatterra Association, website). The fascination around this remarkable tree stems from the fact that it probably existed when the Saxon settlers arrived in the area and is popularised as the oldest living tree in Romania (Țimonea, 2018). This huge oak is the largest and oldest among the other secular oaks preserved on the same meadow, which originally was the place of a large oak forest. This resistant wood was used extensively in the past in constructions; older houses in the village, as well as their tall stables, the fortified church, and its fortifications, all have oak beams in their construction. Many traditional household items

were also made of oak, for example, salt resistant buckets and barrels for lard and bacon preservation.

The secular oak tree of Mercheașa, localised at 1.7 kilometers northeast from the village, has a circumference at the base of 9.3 meters with a height of over 21 meters with an almost complete, majestic crown (amazingly, without traces of lightning strikes, but with several broken branches) (Carpatterra Association, website). Although the importance of the tree has been known during the communist regime, being mentioned in several monographic works from the 1970s, the oak received the status of a monument of nature with a protection area only recently.

The Carpatterra Association, led by Cătălin Cantor, is actively involved in projects of sustainable development, and came with the initiative to classify the oak as a natural monument. The procedure based on a scientific substantiation study was completed by Carpatterra and the Experimental Forestry Research Station of Brașov, and through the Decision no. 18 of 22 February 2012 the oak became a natural monument with all the legal protection obligations. The tree was fenced off to protect it from animals, information panels were added, and local shepherds have been informed that they are no longer allowed to graze animals nearby.

After the oak become a natural monument, many foreign scientists, biologists, nature lovers, free lancers and above all cyclists came to visit the tree. The local shepherds were not always friendly, sometimes they gave false indications or said that “there is nothing to see here”, as a reaction to an increasing number of tourists, perceived as a threat to their activities due to new restrictions. However, the tree became not just highly popular, but also the central subject of an important yearly cultural event named “The Oak’s Day” which also involves a GoRun Trail Race (Gorun is the popular name of one type of oak), a running race being organised on an arranged route that also includes the secular oak in this picturesque area (Florea, 2017). These events also changed some locals’ attitude as they felt the importance of culture and especially the importance of protecting the places around the village (Florea, 2017).

The Old Man of the Carpathians, the 900 years old oak of Mercheașa, declared the oldest tree of Romania, is accessible on a country road, cca. 3 kilometers from the centre of Mercheașa village (Figure 7) (Google Maps: 46.066149034062136, 25.361999435669357).



Figure 7: The Old Man of the Carpathians – the 900 years old oak in different seasons

Source: on the right from the author’s personal collection, on the left Florea, 2017 (published with permission)

Although the tree has become popular and loved, it is threatened by many natural but especially anthropogenic factors. Natural factors include diseases, parasites, lightning strikes, extraordinary weather events, etc. The avoidable anthropogenic factors are primarily an effect of ignorance. Every spring, shepherds and those who use the meadows are setting fire to the dry vegetation. In March 2022, a large fire, which burned tens of hectares, stopped only a few meters from the fence of the famous oak. The emergency response staff (ISU Homorod) announced that the situation could no longer be controlled, with so many reported fires in March.

Projects That Promoted the Local Development and Identity

The strength of the cultural development of Mercheașa village comes neither from the efforts of the local administration, nor from the inhabitants. The local administration has proved incompetent even in the most basic services for serving the population. For example, on 16th of March 2022, the local administration issued an urgent notice (no. 1825/16.03.2022) by which the inhabitants were warned that the water in the centralised supply system is contaminated and not suitable for consumption or bathing (Bună Ziua Brașov, 2022, 21st March, Newspaper Ed. 7660). The analysis of the water was conducted by the Public Health Directorate of Brașov County, the same which regulates the sanitary protection areas around the local water catchments. The local population seems to contribute to their own problems, first through aggressive overgrazing, supported by generous subsidies, which also lead to prescribed burns of dry vegetation each spring to improve the pastures (actions that often are turning into uncontrollable fires consuming tens of hectares of pastures and forests). The population seems reluctant to change and does not readily accept changes in their way of life, even if it is incompatible with the long-term local sustainability and nature protection. Aggressive agriculture is very harming for nature.

Most of the local development actions in Mercheașa come from the initiatives and efforts of the Carpaterra Association. This is a non-governmental organisation that collaborates with schools and local administrations of several territorial units that extend over the area of the Carpaterra Geopark. The mission of this established geopark is to socio-culturally develop a community in terms of education and tourism and to promote local environmental protection measures.

The following projects were completed by Carpaterra in Mercheașa:

- I. Between 2010 and 2012, Carpaterra together with the Experimental Forestry Research Station of Brașov, the subsidiary of the National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry, elaborated the specialised study necessary for declaring the oak a monument of nature (landmark). Carpaterra succeeded and the oak was declared a natural monument, with the recognition of the local administration through Decision no. 18 of 22 February 2012. The oak gained all the legal rights to be protected and conserved.
- II. In the following years, Carpaterra raised donations and funds to promote the oak, a very effective action, given that many articles referred to the oldest oak in Romania and the number of tourists (especially cyclists and nature lovers) has increased considerably.
- III. Carpaterra has made the minimum arrangements for tourism around the tree. The agricultural road to the oak has been levelled and signalled, a small parking space has been created (without asphalt or concrete, just pounded earth), the oak has been delimited with a traditional wooden fence and information panels have been added,

along with benches and trash cans. Since then, Carpaterra has taken care of the site, together with the local administration.

- IV. Starting with 2016, except for 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, every autumn the oak was celebrated through a dedicated festival: “The Oak’s Day Festival” (Figure 8.2). These events put Mercheașa on the map of cultural tourism in the area and had a major influence on the way locals perceive their future and local development. A local brand was created, and several local tourism-oriented businesses emerged (e.g., renting electric bicycles for organised excursions). This festival is also housing a GO-RUN trail, a running competition that brings together many lovers of nature and sports (as described in the 900 Years Old Man of the Carpathians section).
- V. In 2018, Carpaterra leased for ten years a degraded historic building, the former kindergarten of the village. For the renovation of the building, a project funded by Kaufland, titled “Healthy development of the community of Mercheașa in harmony with the nature” was implemented between September 1, 2019 and February 29, 2020. The project was a success not only because the historic building was saved, but also due to the friendly interventions made with the locals’ involvement (Figure 8.1). The former abandoned space has been transformed into a community centre for children and young people in Mercheașa, open to all children in the village, also available for adults who want to participate in various cultural events. Carpaterra regularly organises events and creative workshops for children in this building, with the themes of hygiene, health, nutrition, personal development, environmental protection, foreign languages, etc.



Figure 8: Local projects in the village of Mercheașa; 1 – Renovating the abandoned former kindergarten (project financed by Kaufland 2020; 2 - The Oak’s Day Festival 2021 Poster; 3 – The semester project of the architecture students of the University of Darmstadt, 2016

Source: Carpaterra Association (published with permission)

- VI. Carpaterra has carried out a long series of smaller projects with children, involving schools in the area, among these, establishing a junior ranger club through which greening actions of ecology and sanitation were carried out, together with photography lessons for nature lovers. One problem Carpaterra is currently facing is the emigration of young people aged 18 or more, to work abroad (usually in slaughterhouses or agricultural work).
- VII. Many excursions were organised in the area, but also in other protected areas like Piatra Craiului, Văcărești Natural Park, Mount Tâmpa, Lake Sf. Ana, Bugeci Natural Park, etc. These actions aimed to bring young participants closer to nature and in this way to develop their more responsible behaviour towards nature.

Another project initiative was that of the architecture students of the Technical University of Darmstadt. In 2016 the buildings around the fortified church (especially the school and its courtyard represented in Figure 3.13 and 3.14) received the attention of the architecture students and their coordinating professor, in elaborating a semester project with direct applicability and use for the villagers (Figure 8.3). The idea of the project was to transform the space around the church into a social centre, useful for the villagers. Being just a semester project, the ideas were not implemented, but the involvement of foreign students was an important step for the future of the church.

All these projects, coming from outside, with minimal involvement of the local administration but embraced by most locals, give a more optimistic perspective on the future of Mercheașa village, which would have the chance to enjoy the benefits of a cultural village with little efforts. However, there are problems that need to be solved, some of them very urgently, and the locals' lack of consensus, the lack of a local strategy agreed by all, is felt.

About the Future: Recommendations and Problems to Be Solved

Mercheașa village is well-known for a few things, which can be easily transformed into strong local brands with minimal promotion (local branding actions) and inhabitants' involvement. At present, it is observed that those from outside the village appreciate more the cultural heritage of Mercheașa than its own inhabitants. The impulses coming from 'outside' managed to change the attitude of many locals and opened the possibility of transforming the village, but in the long run a common awareness of the community about its own development must be raised. At present, only subsistence agriculture, or the one animated by European subsidies, dominate in the village. A diversification of activities would animate the life of the village and would contribute to locals' wellbeing, maybe even restore the demographic balance that is currently negative.

The following elements contribute to the uniqueness of Mercheașa village:

1. The hilly meadows with their secular oaks, of which one is the oldest tree in Romania "The 900 Years Old Man of the Carpathians." Even if Carpaterra managed to give the old tree a legal protection status and made it so well known, the tree is threatened by aggressive local activities of overgrazing and the burning of dry pasture vegetation each spring. In March 2022, over 50 fires were registered in the Mercheașa-Rupea area. Dozens of acres of land were burned. One of the fires affected the oak meadow, the fire miraculously stopped a few meters from the fence of the protected oak. The shepherds and some locals of Mercheașa do not understand the importance of such a monument and they even oppose tourism. The

conflict between the grazing areas with the involvement of the absent local administration should be resolved.

2. Mercheașa is also famous for pears that grow in the area, either in orchards or wild. In the past, during the existence of the Saxon community, the nearby villagers called the Saxons from Mercheașa as “Birrlāwên” because they used to produce pear cider (Perry), a fermented alcoholic beverage which they made from wild pears (Galz, 1997).
3. The salt wells of Mercheașa, a local source of water with high salt concentration, which were exploited locally since the arrival of the Saxons, are also very well known. These wells are now unique, as the nearby villages lost their wells by drying or contamination. However, the local population treats the place with the utmost indifference, because of ignorance.
4. The former Saxon population preserved fatback and lard in oak buckets submerged in salted water. The product is known in Hungarian as Mirkvásári szalonna (Fatback from Mercheașa) since very old times, and under the local Saxon name “Baofloisch” (Galz, 1997). At present, it is not produced anymore by the Romanian and Romani people, but it could be easily reinvented and used as a local brand, if the village chooses the path of tourism.
5. The village has also been a well-known fairground, since the medieval period, even the Romanian name Mercheașa, derived from the Hungarian Mirkvásár (“vásár” meaning fair, the Fair of Mirk) is originating from a fairground. It should remain in the village as an annual cultural event, celebrating “the days of the village.”
6. The Saxon cultural heritage (Saxon traditional houses or traditions that prevailed) can also become an important element of the local brand, as long as the current inhabitants embrace these aspects and the foreign culture.
7. Last but not least, the fortified Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mercheașa, today without parishioners and in an advanced state of degradation, built in several stages starting with the 13th century, with many valuable architectural features, like the fortification walls built in the 16th century, can become a local landmark and an attraction for tourists, part of a larger tourist area that extends within the limits of the former Chair of Rupea (the image rebirth of the former Chair of Rupea was extensively analysed in Maroși, 2021, pp. 175-190).

Our recommendations for the sustainable development of Mercheașa village are:

- a. To inform the inhabitants about the chance to promote the settlement through culture and tourism and the associated benefits, as the main action towards the formation of a local consciousness / consensus regarding the further development of the village;
- b. To renewing the local Master Plans (Urban Plans / in Romanian “Planuri Generale de Urbanism - P.U.G.”) (i.e., to be renewed by the local administration) and to designate special protection zones for the built heritage (e.g., the fortified churches and the built areas with preserved traditional architecture; to clarify the rules regarding grazing and the areas where this activity is prohibited, for example in the areas of water catchments, in the area of secular oaks, etc.; to solve the conflicts between shepherds and tourists.
- c. To develop local brands and protect them, like the saltwater wells (which require a lot of attention and protection), the Fatback from Mercheașa / “Baofloisch” preserved in salt water and oak buckets, the pear cider (Perry) made of wild pears, and many others.
- d. The implementation by the mayor’s planning office of a local set of architectural rules and style for the housing, paying more attention when issuing building permits; all these are intended to maintain an architectural order and an attractive cultural landscape; the guides

realised by the Order of Architects from Romania (OAR) are showing good practices for the Saxon area, southern Transylvania, which Mercheașa is part of (see Vaida et al., 2017).

- e. The villagers should form local associations, for different purposes (agricultural, cultural) and function observing the principle of the former Saxon neighbourhoods, with mutual help among members and pursuing a common goal; these would contribute to a local development from the inside (originated by the villagers) and from the bottom level towards the upper ones.
- f. The fortified Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mercheașa requires urgent restauration and a new purpose / function, which would introduce it to a tourist and economic circuit. Professionals in the field should do the restoration to avoid the loss of original elements and cultural heritage (there are several failed restorations in the area). The building is related to the establishment of the village of Mercheașa by the Saxons and preserves traces of its 700 years history. The church, although abandoned and closed to visitors, without parishioners, has remained so far, the local landmark, visible from distance. Although it requires considerable financial efforts, if Mercheașa is to be a cultural village, investments must be made in preserving the church and avoiding its collapse.

CONCLUSIONS

By providing an overview of the current situation of the village of Mercheașa and highlighting issues that affect sustainable development, this study achieved its objectives. The questions that guided the research have been answered and other unexpected issues have been raised, which may become the subject of further research, or of specialised studies, initiated by the local administration, for updating the local Master Plan (currently expired).

Among the most important aspects related to the development of Mercheașa village are:

- All the projects and initiatives for the sustainable development of the village came from outside, either from a dedicated non-governmental organisation or from different institutions; the local administration was only responsible for approving projects initiated by external actors; for sustainability, development should be at the initiative of the villagers, with actions taken for the good of the entire community and not just for a small part of the privileged individuals (usually politicians).
- Although the village has many elements of originality that could be transformed into a local brand (the saltwater wells, the specially preserved fatback, wild pear cider, hilly natural meadows with secular oaks and an abandoned church dated to the 13th century), it seems that the inhabitants are either indifferent to the local potential or are completely opposed to tourism; there is a conflict between overgrazing (and related agricultural activities) and tourism activities, as well as between those open to the new and those who see tourism as a threat to their own agricultural activity; these two activities should be reconciled and continued in such a way as to support each other in forms of agritourism, green tourism, or even ecotourism.
- The successfully implemented local projects have brought a change in the attitude of some locals towards sustainability and culture, especially of the younger generations, but there is still no common goal assumed by the whole community and the lack of consensus is reflected in all local activities, including the appearance of local houses (the

antithesis between traditional houses that followed a common style and modernised houses that emphasise individualism, hence the lack of common sense and clear local regulations).

- An important progress has been made in promoting the village and introducing a new development path for the locals, the secular oak, now a designated natural monument, is known nationally as the oldest living tree in Romania; however, there are threats because of the aggressive agricultural activities (such as burning dry vegetation and overgrazing) and because of the ignorance of the local cultural heritage, that may reduce the progress achieved with much effort.

In conclusion, the village of Mercheașa is now at a critical moment in which it can assume, through minimum effort, the development towards sustainability by diversifying activities (adopting cultural events, green tourism, or ecotourism) or by continuation with a more conservative approach, in which an intensive and modernised agriculture prevails. Regardless of the direction of future development, success depends on the community's involvement in its development and the assumption of a common goal. Further research is highly recommended on this aspect and also on the entire area (the former Chair of Rupea / Repser Stuhl), considering possible collaborations among neighbouring administrations in common projects related to tourism or cultural events.

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