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Historical Narratives and Spatial Strategies of Reappropriation in Three Romanian Orthodox Monasteries*

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Abstract

Contrary to the abundance of shared religious places throughout south-eastern Europe, multi-religious interaction is not a regular feature in Romania. Pilgrimages and visits to the popular Orthodox monasteries of Prislop and Nicula in Transylvania and Dervent in Dobruja are an exception to this trend. Unsurprisingly, these two regions are historically characterized by a remarkable ethnic and religious diversity. The two Transylvanian monasteries attract practitioners of different Christian denominations (Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Roman-Catholic and Evangelical), while Dervent is a devotional site for Christians and Muslims (Tatars, Turks and Roma) alike. Common to all three monasteries is the presence of allegedly miracle-working objects, artefacts and bodies: a stone cross at Dervent, the Virgin Mary icon at Nicula, and the tomb of the charismatic monk Arsenie Boca at Prislop, respectively. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the three monasteries during both important feasts and everyday monastic life, this article is a multidisciplinary exploration of the workings of inter-religious competition, sharing and interaction. It combines the methods typical of ethnographic research with observations on how the religious space is navigated and socialized through the support of cartography and archival satellite images. The article casts light on how the historical narratives and spatial strategies enacted by the Romanian Orthodox Church overlap in the attempt to reclaim legitimate ownership and exclusive primacy over three popular devotional sites with a composite ethnic and religious past.

Keywords: multi-religious interaction; Romania; Orthodoxy; pilgrimage; Greek-Catholicism; lived religion; Islam.

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Introduction

The study of shared religious places (SRPs) is accompanied by lengthy disputes and controversies over what exactly "sharing" is supposed to mean. If it hints—*strictu senso*—at a cohabitation of two or more religious groups in the same place that is negotiated or accepted by the ministers of each denomination, then it would be highly debatable to locate any SRPs in contemporary Romania. Top-down, ecumenical attempts to foster inter-religious dialogue through the edification of multi-religious places—like, for example, the case of Vulcana-Băi (Cozma 2021)—have encountered little to no participation at all. A wider understanding of sharing, instead, would include the simultaneous attendance of believers belonging to different religious groups to the same site. It is this second definition that we follow when we claim these three Orthodox monasteries with a contested past and a prosperous present as SRPs.[1]

Contrary to the abundance of SRPs throughout Southeastern Europe, systematic multi-religious interaction is not a regular feature in contemporary Romania. Pilgrimages and visits to the popular Orthodox monasteries of Prislop and Nicula in Transylvania, and Dervent in Dobruja are the most famous exceptions to this trend.[2] Unsurprisingly, the history of these two regions is particularly heterogeneous in terms of ethnic and religious diversity. The two Transylvanian monasteries attract practitioners of different Christian denominations (Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Roman-Catholic and Evangelical), while Dervent is a devotional site for Christians and Muslims (Tatars, Turks and Roma) alike.

The presence of non-Orthodox practitioners, attested not just by historical and ethnographic literature but also by participant observation conducted by Tateo and Cozma, was further confirmed by local informants. Nevertheless, the participation of believers who are not Orthodox is hardly noticeable: in Transylvania,

1. This study resulted from a joint collaboration of the authors. The ethnographic data presented here have been collected by both Cozma and Tateo. Cozma paid several visits to the three monasteries over the years, the latest in November 2022. Tateo visited all the three monasteries throughout the month of August 2023 and is the first-person narrator in the ethnographic vignettes from Dervent. Massenz took care of the spatial analysis and the elaboration of maps and geographical data. Informants are generally anonymized. When people are mentioned by name and surname either they are public figures or people who agreed to give us an interview and to be cited in this script.

2. Other relevant pilgrimages with a multi-denominational character take place at the Bixad Monastery (Satu Mare county), the St Maria Radna Monastery (Arad County), the Sanctuary of the Mother of God in Cacica (Suceava county), and in Șișești and Ruoaia (Maramureș county, see Șerban 2010).

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Christians belonging to the Hungarian-speaking minority stand out for their different language, while in Dervent the rare Muslim participation is signalled by the particular repertoire of devotional gestures, which obviously does not include the sign of the cross. In all sites, such religious plurality develops solely on the grassroots level of popular veneration: the sites are managed exclusively by the local bishoprics of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and there are currently no processions, meetings or rituals performed jointly by different denominations.

This article zooms in on three popular sites which are exceptional—within Romania—for their multi-religious character. It pays specific attention to the spatial and narrative strategies of re-appropriation enacted by the Romanian Orthodox Church representatives. In Dervent, this resulted in the promotion of the local (Paleo)-Christian identity in a region that was under direct Ottoman control for centuries, thus historically marked by the presence of Muslims of Turk and Tatar origin (Jiga Iliescu 2023). In Transylvania, the long-standing competition between Orthodox and Greek-Catholics has been abundantly studied in terms of economic rivalry (Zerilli 2008), property relations (Mahieu 2004; Stan and Turcescu 2007: 91–118) and parallel historiographies (Verdery 1999: 63).

We add to this body of literature by focusing on two specific aspects. First, the popularization of the cults of charismatic figures (Prislop), icons (Nicula) and stone crosses (Dervent), which retain a potential for inter-religious dialogue that can easily turn into competition. Second, the politics of space and the built environment inaugurated within each monastic complex. Just like in other Orthodox monasteries throughout the country, infrastructural expansion has resulted in the construction of new houses of worship (Dervent), cultural centres and imposing churches threatening the Greek-Catholic heritage (Nicula) and theological seminaries (Prislop). Such interventions reflect the flows of both private donations and public financing for religious buildings construction in the last three decades (Tateo 2020).

We have approached the study of the built environment by leveraging available tools and methods that work in synergy. Specifically, we have utilized open data from platforms such as Open Street Maps and Google Earth Pro to create maps through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software. These maps have been adopted during fieldwork to track down the flow of pilgrims within the physical environment. Moreover, these cartographic representations have facilitated precise measurements and assessments of architectural dimensions and spatial distances. Lastly, Google Earth Pro's long-term satellite visualizations have been instrumental in monitoring infrastructural development.

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Prislop—Venerating the Most Popular Folk Saint of Contemporary Romania

The Prislop monastery (Figure 1) is located in the territory of the village Silvașu de Sus, in the historical region of Hațeg (Țara Hațegului), in Hunedoara county. Presumably founded by the Greek-Serbian monk Nicodemus (1320–1406), the monastery was previously known as the Silvașu Monastery. Pilgrims come here to pray at the miracle-working tomb of Arsenie Boca (1910–1989), one of the most important charismatic Orthodox monks of twentieth-century Romania, also called the "Saint of Transylvania" (*Sfântul Ardealului*). In recent years, Boca has been probably the most venerated folk saint for his alleged capacity to perform healing, clairvoyance, and bilocation. Arsenie Boca was the monastery's first superior and spiritual father after it was taken from Greek Catholics in 1948. Fearing the growing popularity of this spiritual figure, state authorities tried to put a hold on local religious activities: in 1959, Boca was deposed from priestly functions and moved to Bucharest to work as an icon painter while the monastery was closed. In 1976, the monastery was reopened as a nunnery. Currently, the monastery hosts a female-only minor seminary. According to Mother Anastasia—a member of the monastic community—in the monastery live 30 nuns and a hieromonk who is their spiritual father.

This monastery is a popular destination even on normal calendar days, especially in summer and on the day of the commemoration of the death of Boca on 28 November. On Sundays, cars are parked in a queue that goes on for kilometres. Before the entrance, on the left side, a dress code and behavioural rules sign is displayed. Smoking is absolutely prohibited inside and in the parking area: "Any cigarette lit is an incense to the devil", as the sign goes. After passing the gates, one finds the first of many queues: a small religious paraphernalia shop is crowded with pilgrims, mostly women, eager to buy a holy card of Boca, bracelets or jewellery—which are appreciated as souvenirs as much as protective tokens.

Next to the shop, there is a large sign telling the story of the monastery. Here, pilgrims are told (in Romanian and English) that, in the eighteenth century, the monastery was first burned down by General Von Buccow at the order of the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa and then given to the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church of Transylvania (henceforth GCC). Without giving any further details, the sign simply says that it again became the property of the Romanian Orthodox Church (henceforth ROC) in 1948, thus re-establishing justice after 150 years. This is a well-established narrative within the ROC: the disbandment of the GCC operated by the newly-established Popular Socialist Republic in 1948 was not a suppression of religious freedom, but rather the compensation of an earlier injustice set in 1700 with the establishment of Greek-Catholicism in Transylvania. Boca himself—on a mission to ease the conversion of Greek-Catholic nuns to Orthodoxy—defined

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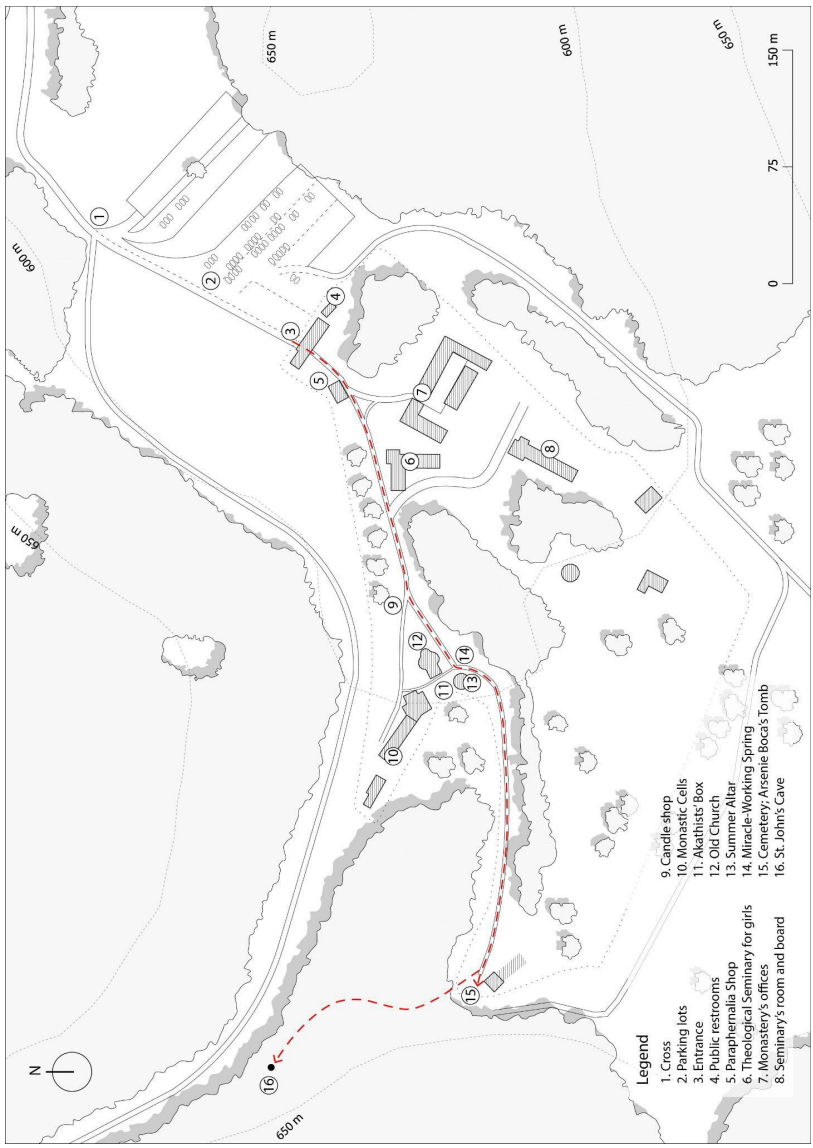

Figure 1: Prislop Monastery today. The dotted line shows the main pilgrims' flux. Elaboration by Giulia Massenz.

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the disbandment as a reparation for what happened in 1700 "in a forceful manner and for purely political reasons" (Petcu and Dobrin 2017: 202).[3]

A gentle slope leads the pilgrims inside the religious complex: on the left, a beautiful, brand-new, white building hosts a female theological seminary. Geraniums decorate its balconies. "The best flowers are at the monastery and at the cemetery!", says a middle-aged man to his group raising his finger. The path leads to the old stone church—dating back to 1564. The church is a three-conic building with a hexagonal spire on the nave built in stone at the end of the second half of the sixteenth century by princess Zamfira, daughter of Moise Voda, the former ruler of Wallachia (see Figure 2). After her second husband's death, Zamfira rebuilt the monastery, retired, and lived here: her tombstone with Latin and Slavonic texts can be seen in the church's narthex. The church is sided by a small kiosk selling candles and a table for writing akathists (*pomelnice*), prayers for loved ones—both alive and departed. Churchgoers first write the names of their loved ones on a piece of paper, then fold it, put a few banknotes inside and drop it in a box under the table. The nuns open the box and bring the akathists to the altar of the church to be read by priests during weekly liturgies. After that, they light candles for their dear ones (living and departed) and queue at the holy spring.



Figure 2: The old stone church. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

3. However widespread this narrative might be among Orthodox clerics nowadays, historical research presents a much more nuanced scenario: the reasons pushing the voivodes of Moldova and Vallachia to choose the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople were quintessentially political as well. This choice was meant to thwart the Hungarian Kingdom's progress into the nascent principalities (Barbu 1998).

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The presence of cash offerings is clearly visible in several places in the monastic complex: the bottom of the spring is full of coins thrown by pilgrims, while banknotes are left at the foot of a tree near Arsenie Boca's tomb and also further on, in a cliff near St John's Cave. Once arriving before Boca's tomb, some of the faithful sit on the nearby benches so they can stay a while longer in the presence of this very special figure. Some remain praying with a prayer booklet in hand, others go back down, and others continue uphill to the last place of interest: the cave of St Saint John the Hermit (known as St John of Prislop), a seventeenth-century local monk who lived in a cave he dug himself in the forest nearby. A sign nearby discourages worshippers from throwing banknotes into the adjacent ravine as offerings to the saint "because it is not a Christian tradition".

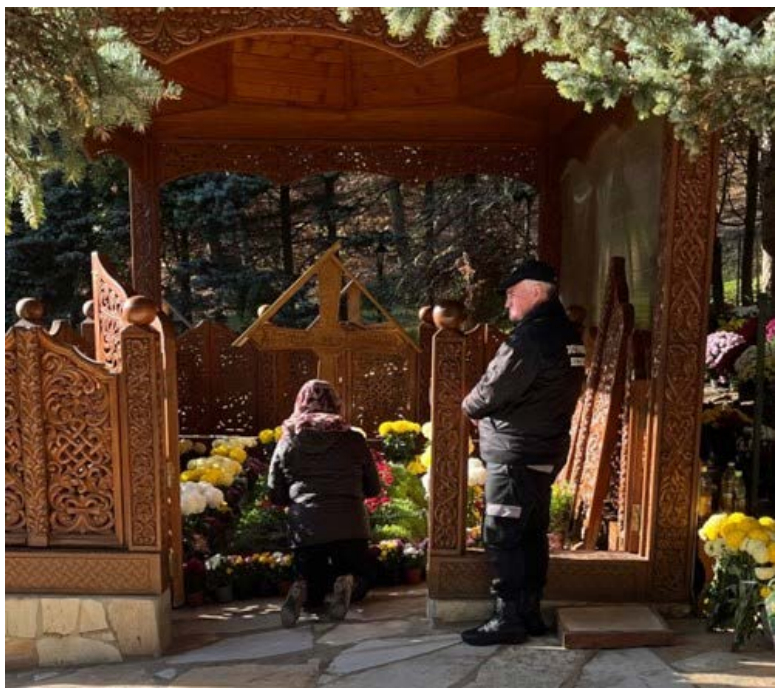

Figure 3: Kneeling in front of the saint's tomb. Photograph by Ioan Cozma.

Climbing the path leading to the grave, the faithful skirt the tombs of the nuns who lived in the monastery. When they reach the miracle-working tomb, the faithful bow and make the sign of the cross (see Figure 3). They touch the wooden cross with the palms of their hands and with their foreheads whispering a prayer, or seeking to bless pieces of cloth by rubbing them against the cross. Some faithful turn away from the tomb with their eyes lined with tears from emotion. In these

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circumstances, the faithful ask for help, protection or blessing when hit by a difficult situation—be it economic, work-related, sentimental or health; some ask to pass an exam, or to protect their dear ones, others instead need money to build a house, or ask for help against a bad illness. In fact, it is not unusual to see the faithful with bandaged limbs, in wheelchairs, or affected by illnesses of various kinds. One mother asks her daughter to get in line again for the blessing as if the latter were cumulative. Another whispers in her teenage son's ear that praying before the saint's tomb is an extra step to gaining access to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Before the tomb, many testimonies report a powerful scent of the so-called "myrrh"[4] that makes them emotional and convinces them of the holiness of the site (Bichiș 2014: 26). Two nuns manage the flow of pilgrims together with a security guard. One nun urges the faithful not to stand too long in front of the cross, the other makes sure that no one takes photos or videos. The nun watching over the grave is vigilant and unyielding: sometimes, she scolds a child for stepping on the ground covering the grave, and other times she reprimands those who pull out their phones to capture the moment. Such strict prohibitions contribute to enhancing mystery and respect for the cult of Arsenie Boca and reinforce its popularity.[5]

In fact, the whole system of myths, hearsay and interdictions associated with the devotional cult of Boca is part and parcel of its success. Although Boca was a much-appreciated priest confessor even in his lifetime, his fame grew year after year starting in the early 2000s and is expected to peak with his possible canonization in 2025.[6] In the last two decades, biographies and testimony books have multiplied, together with the number of pilgrims visiting Prislop. In his ethnography of Romanian pilgrimages, Bănica reports that the accommodation offered was still scarce, improvised, scattered, and unprepared to welcome the ever-growing number of pilgrims (2014: 138). In the meantime, more and more locals have opened their houses to meet the growing demand for accommodation. A decade

4. Myrrh is a resinous material used as anointment whose fragrance is commonly associated with holiness in Orthodoxy.

5. Sociologist Mirel Bănica—who has written extensively on the Romanian Orthodox pilgrimage scene—recounts the interdiction to take materials from the local shrine, be it stone, wood or land: the vehicle you came with will not start until you let go what you illicitly took away from Prislop (Bănica 2014: 137). Those who want to take something home can receive holy oil from the nuns or the flowers they leave as gifts for the visitors. In turn, the faithful often bring flowers to the saint's tomb.

6. A dossier for the canonization of Father Arsenie Boca was proposed by the Metropolitanate of Transylvania to the Holy Synod in 2019. Further research was required—and is currently ongoing—in order to investigate a few aspects considered troublesome: his alleged sympathies for the Iron Guard, and the foundations of some of his writings, which may not be fully compliant with the theological tradition.

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later, housing opportunities are abundant and well-advertised, often relying on online booking services. Important changes in the site's layout—particularly the expansion of the adjacent parking lot—have been carried out to accommodate the increasing number of visitors. The aerial views shown in Figure 4 illustrate the 7,000 square metre extension of the parking area in 2014.

The pilgrimage to the tomb of Arsenie Boca has recently acquired an evident commercial and leisure tourist character. The majority are families with children, sometimes with grandparents. According to a recent study (Giuşca 2020), most of the pilgrims are women (60%) and are at least 50 years old (56%). On weekends there are no real opportunities to interact with the nuns except briefly, as they are more concerned with handling the large number of tourists. It is not unusual to hear the faithful speak English, Hungarian, Serbian, Italian and Romani dialects.

Mother Atanasia confirmed that visitors are not just Orthodox: Greek and Roman Catholics, Protestants, and even non-Christians all come to get blessed at Arsenie Boca's tomb. She also recounted that one time a group of Jehovah's witnesses from nearby villages came on Easter night to attend the celebrations. Ramona, a music teacher at the seminary who is considering taking the monastic vows in the future, reported that a Muslim woman who lives in Silvaşu de Sus village comes regularly to the monastery. The Muslim woman sometimes attends the liturgical celebrations, visits the tomb of Arsenie Boca, lights candles, and takes home water from the spring. The presence of non-Orthodox believers is hardly noticed, and comes to the surface only when asked specifically to local believers and clerics: "Right a few minutes ago, a group of Hungarians passed by. God is One, we do not send anyone away from here", said another nun in charge of assisting the pilgrims crowding the saint's tomb.

Nicula—In Procession for the Dormition of the *Theotokos* (Mother of God)

It is 14 August and a few hundred Orthodox pilgrims walk under the blazing sun, finding shade under umbrellas, caps and veils. Many wear folk costumes and carry basil branches.[7] It will take them more than three hours to walk the seven

7. The aromatic basil is the canonical plant of the Orthodox Church, and it is utilized in blessing and purifying rites. The plant's relationship with the Church stems from the tale of St Helen's discovery of the Holy Cross in AD 325. According to Church tradition, Emperor Constantine dispatched his pious elderly mother to Jerusalem to locate the Holy Sepulcher and the Cross of Christ. Following the aroma of delicious basil that had grown over the site where the Cross was buried, St Helen uncovered the holy Cross after a lengthy investigation. As a result, the plant was given the name *vasilikos* ("royal" in Greek) and has been associated with the Holy Cross ever since.

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Figure 4: Prislop Monastery's parking lots in 2012 and 2014. Elaboration by Giulia Massenz. Source: Google Earth Pro.

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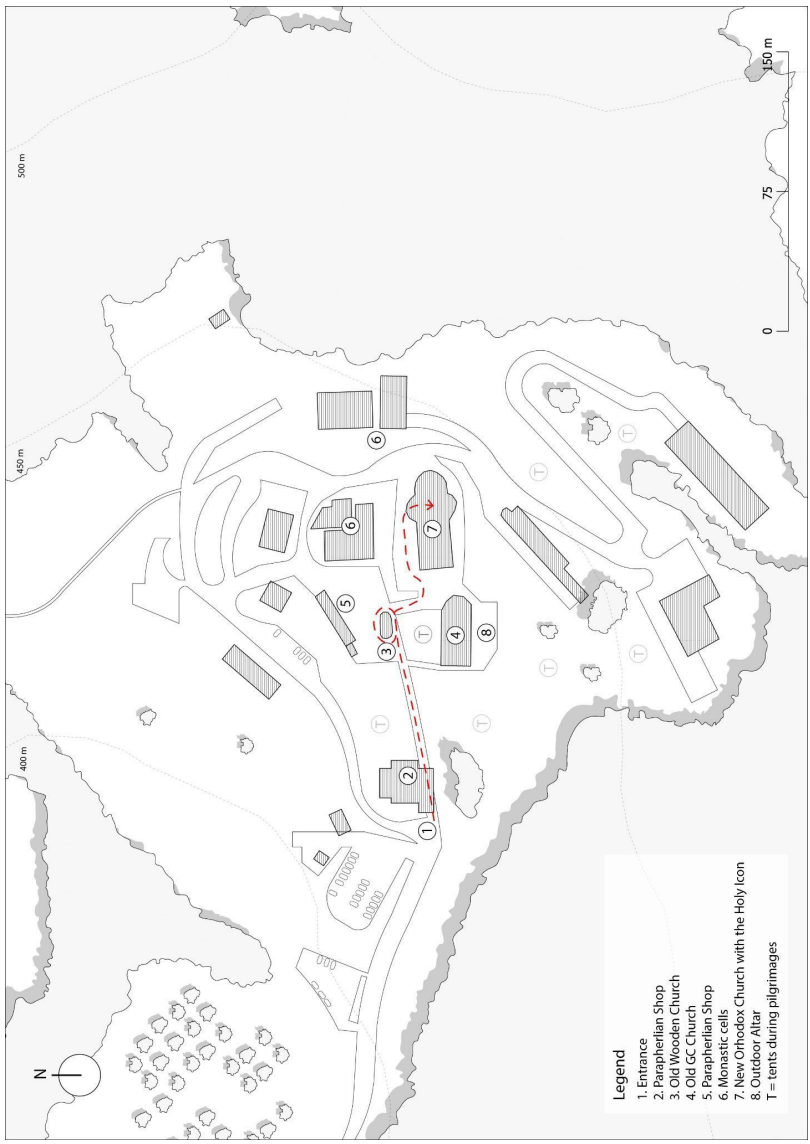

Figure 5: Nicula Monastery today. The dotted line shows the main pilgrims' flux. Elaboration by Giulia Massenz.

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kilometres dividing the city of Gherla from the monastery. During the procession people sing odes to the Virgin Mary, while others chat among themselves: the atmosphere is festive. The priests—who lead the procession together with the local metropolitan Andrei Andreicuț—have different behaviours: some discuss theology, others keep singing hymns in honour of the Virgin Mary—among the most popular is *O Măicuță Sfântă* (Oh, Holy Mother)—some others talk about renovation works or different activities in their church. Their attitudes diverge as well: some have a more pious attitude, others chit-chat informally and greet the policemen from the security service. The gendarmes act like sheepdogs trying to keep the procession and pilgrims as compact as possible to keep traffic moving. All along the way, residents take photos and videos of the procession. This is a key event in the region: the local people participate with great enthusiasm by serving water, fruit and sweets to the pilgrims along the way. As we approach the monastery (Figure 5), we begin to catch glimpses of parked cars and many stalls selling sweets and items both religious and non-religious. The group of pilgrims is mostly women over 40, sometimes accompanied by daughters or grandchildren.

After crossing the threshold there is a religious paraphernalia shop selling books, icons and religious items. Despite the fact that there are thousands of people in the religious complex, there is no line, while at Prislop it would take at least 30 minutes to enter it. Less of a touristic goal than Prislop, this pilgrimage attracts for three days dozens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the country to celebrate the Dormition of the Virgin Mary—patronal feast day (*hram*) of the monastery. Continuing up the path there is a small wooden church. The original church dated back to the late seventeenth century: the legend has it that in this church, in 1699 the Virgin Mary icon (see Figure 6) had wept for 26 days (between 15 February and 12 March). As the icon became a popular object of veneration it was first appropriated by a local nobleman, then moved to the church of the Franciscan monks in Cluj, and was finally returned to the newly founded Greek Catholic Monastery of Nicula at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Bojor 1930).

Shortly after the disbandment of the GCC in October 1948, the Basilian monks were taken into custody, and the place was converted into an Orthodox monastery. The monastery's abbot, Hieromonk Leon Manu, was jailed and died in Gherla prison ten years after his arrest. After the rehabilitation of GCC on 31 December 1989,[8] disputes over property rights provoked heated confrontations between the two Churches (Cozma 2012). Some Orthodox hierarchs argued that the date on which the icon wept is not coincidental: the following year, 1700, would mark

8. The *Decree-Law n. 9* of 31 December 1989—enacted soon after the fall of Communism—abrogated the *Decree-Law n. 358* of 2 December 1948, which proclaimed the disbandment of the GCC.

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Figure 6: The miracle-working icon of the Virgin Mary at Nicula. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

the birth of the Greek Catholic Church.[9] From their perspective, the icon wept to announce the approaching of a harsh period, namely that the Orthodox Church in Transylvania was torn apart and forcibly united with Rome (Blasen 2011: 120–22).

In 1974, the church burned entirely and another wooden church from the village of Gostila in Sălaj replaced it. Not all pilgrims seem to be aware of this, as they treat the church walls with the utmost veneration. The church is listed as a protected site in the national heritage. From the small window, one can see the akathists thrown in by the faithful. Pilgrims pray with their heads bowed toward the walls and icons, devoutly touching the holy wood. A sign urges believers not to take off pieces of wood from the roof since it is a historic monument. Some believers—especially women over 40—crawl around the church to thank the Virgin Mary for the graces received or to ask for intercession (see Figure 7).

9. The so-called "Act of Union" was sealed by the Orthodox metropolitan Atanasie Anghel of Transylvania together with the majority of his clergy with the Church of Rome.

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Figure 7: Devotional acts at the old wooden church. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

North of the church are other stalls selling gifts and receiving offerings from the faithful. One of these serves food coming from the monastery kitchen, which has been equipped to serve thousands: the smell of bean soup invites pilgrims to have lunch.[10] South of the small church that marks the centre of the whole religious complex, there is the old Greek Catholic church, now used only on infrequent occasions. Next to it and of similar proportions—but on a slightly elevated floor—there is a new Orthodox church, erected here in the late 1990s, that preserves the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary.

Worshipping the icon took about three hours of waiting in line. The beating sun and steep location made the wait harder and thus in the minds of some pilgrims more effective. In fact, the moral economy of many faithful and priests says that greater suffering corresponds to devotion therefore greater consideration of the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the Trinity. When some faithful try to cut in line—called by relatives or friends waiting in the line further ahead—others protest by pointing out that this attitude does not produce any spiritual reward (*nu cred că veți avea răsplată*). While in line, some compare the pilgrimage with the previous year and with other pilgrimages. Experienced pilgrims know that queues can last for hours and that visiting the icon or holy relics is at the discretion of the monks. When the doors are closed even for an hour or more, no one asks questions or

10. In the Orthodox Church, the Mother of God Dormition Feast is preceded by a fasting period of two weeks (1–15 August). In this period, believers do not eat meat, milk, cheese and eggs. Fish consumption is allowed only on 6 August, on the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord.

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protests, because that would be against a good pilgrim attitude. Waiting is an integral part of the devotional act, not a sorrow necessary to get in front of the icon.

The pilgrimage is also an opportunity to find friends and acquaintances. In fact, pilgrims often recognize and greet each other; some come only for one day, others for two or even three. Three hours in line under the sun may seem like a lot but it is nothing compared to the ten-hour pilgrimage of Santa Paraschiva in Iași, says one of the resident monks of the monastery. Queues of this kind are also at Bucharest on the feast of St Dimitrie Basarabov (27 October)—but the one at St Parascheva is something else: the faithful come for five days straight, non-stop, and it takes a large number of priests to confess them—a necessary measure of spiritual hygiene.

What is surprising about this pilgrimage, however, are the tents pitched almost everywhere except on the main path: on the pavement, in the dirt tracks, on the meadow, and on the adjacent hills. This event is as much a religious and devotional occasion as it is an opportunity for leisure tourism and socialization, especially for the less affluent sectors of the population: there are many Roma families, farmers and retirees. The local young people flock in the evening to attend the Dormition of the Mother of God and the usual tour of the church. The feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary is also called the "Summer Easter" as it takes place during the night, commemorating her death and assumption.



Figure 8: Pilgrims attending the homily in front of the summer altar. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

Just like during a music festival, a variety of activities takes place: those who rest in tents after a long journey, those who are in line to visit the miraculous icon, those who go to the priests for confession, those who write akathists and light

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candles for the living and the departed, those who shop at the stalls, and those who video-call relatives and friends to show them the spectacle, take part in the holy devotion of icons, or to let them hear the sound of the bells. When evening comes, a vast crowd surrounds the summer altar to attend the religious services commemorating the Dormition (see Figure 8). Metropolitan Andrei delivers the homily. He rails against those parents who have left Romania to earn more money abroad, leaving their children in the care of relatives: "a mother's love, her presence, cannot be bought with gifts, neither with money nor with any other material good".

While in Prislop one hears Hungarian and English spoken, here in Nicula the public is less international: the Romanian dialect of Transylvania prevails, but the pilgrims come from all over the country. It is attested by several sources that the miraculous icon has attracted Protestant, Greek-Catholic and Roman-Catholic believers (Blasen 2011; Cobzaru 2020), some of the former coming every year since 1990 (Bănica 2014: 289). Local priests and monks themselves confirm this too, although they are at pains to point out that not only are there no forms of ecumenical celebration of cults, but also no real interaction with non-Orthodox believers. When the latter come, they mostly visit the icon and the old wooden church. "At least when the Greek-Catholic Bishop Crihălmeanu was there, a common pilgrimage to the village of Nicula was organized", says the local vicar-bishop Benedict Vesa, "but since the new Greek-Catholic bishop was installed, that is no longer organized either". Nowadays, the local Greek-Catholic community celebrates the Dormition of the Mother of God in a newly-built convent in the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca.

If some notice the lack of interdenominational dialogue, others are actively involved in widening the gap with other Christian denominations. Father Radu, an Orthodox cleric originally from Cluj who was serving as a confessor during the pilgrimage, complained with his acquaintances about some young people distributing brochures with radical and anti-ecumenical content at the entrance of the monastery: "They should leave them alone", he tells one of them, "there is no need to attack Catholics with such a vehemence" (*nici să dai în gura Catolicilor*).

One of the most disputed topics dividing Greek-Catholic and Orthodox clerics is the management of space and the built environment within the monastery. In 2001, the Orthodox archbishopric of Cluj set off the construction of a new priory, a xenodochium, a museum, a creative workshop for glass icon painting, a study centre, and a conference hall. More importantly, it inaugurated the construction of an imposing church right next to the old one erected by the Greek-Catholics at the turn of the nineteenth century (Figure 9). Renovation works targeted the old church as well—at risk of being demolished or at best relocated without any

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authorization from the local authorities (Alexa 2019). This controversy pushed the then Bishop Crihălmeanu to raise awareness about "the erasure of any trace of Greek-Catholicism"[11] in the region.

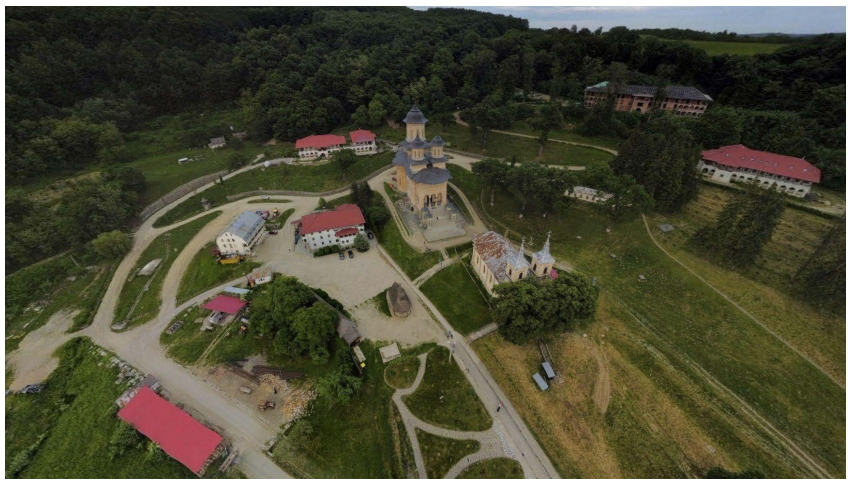

Figure 9: Aerial view of the three churches of the monastery. Clockwise from left: wooden church, new Orthodox church, old Greek-Catholic church (Source: GoogleEarth).

Dervent—The Dobrujan "Garden of Getsemani"

The Dervent Monastery (Figure 10) is located a few kilometres away from the Bulgarian border. To reach it from the north, one must first cross the Danube by ferry. The historical region where it is located—Dobruja—hosts the biggest Muslim community in the country, which is mostly composed of Romas, Turks and Tatars and dates back to the twelfth century.[12] The name of the monastery is also

11. Bishop Crihălmeanu condemned the behaviour of the Orthodox monks at Nicula during the homily of the Dormition of the Mother of God in August 2020: "The altar table was removed without even being politely told: 'we give you the relics you have placed in the altar table; we give you the golden bull (*hrisov*) that you had in the altar table'. Nothing has been communicated to us at all, and we learn from various sources that the church will probably be, if not demolished, certainly moved. Why? For that now it is confusing. It stands in the way of the believers who want to bring the right worship to the big church, newly built near the old church" (Crihălmeanu 2020). The Orthodox bishopric answered publicly, reassuring that—within the whole process of reconstruction of the monastic complex—"the old church will find its own place ... with all the due respect for this house of worship and its rich history" (Fărcaş 2020).

12. Although Sunni Muslims are the largest denomination within the Muslim community, the Dobrujan town of Babadag hosts an important pilgrimage site for the Bektashis, namely the tomb of Sarı Saltuk Baba—a thirteenth-century Alevi Turkish dervish who

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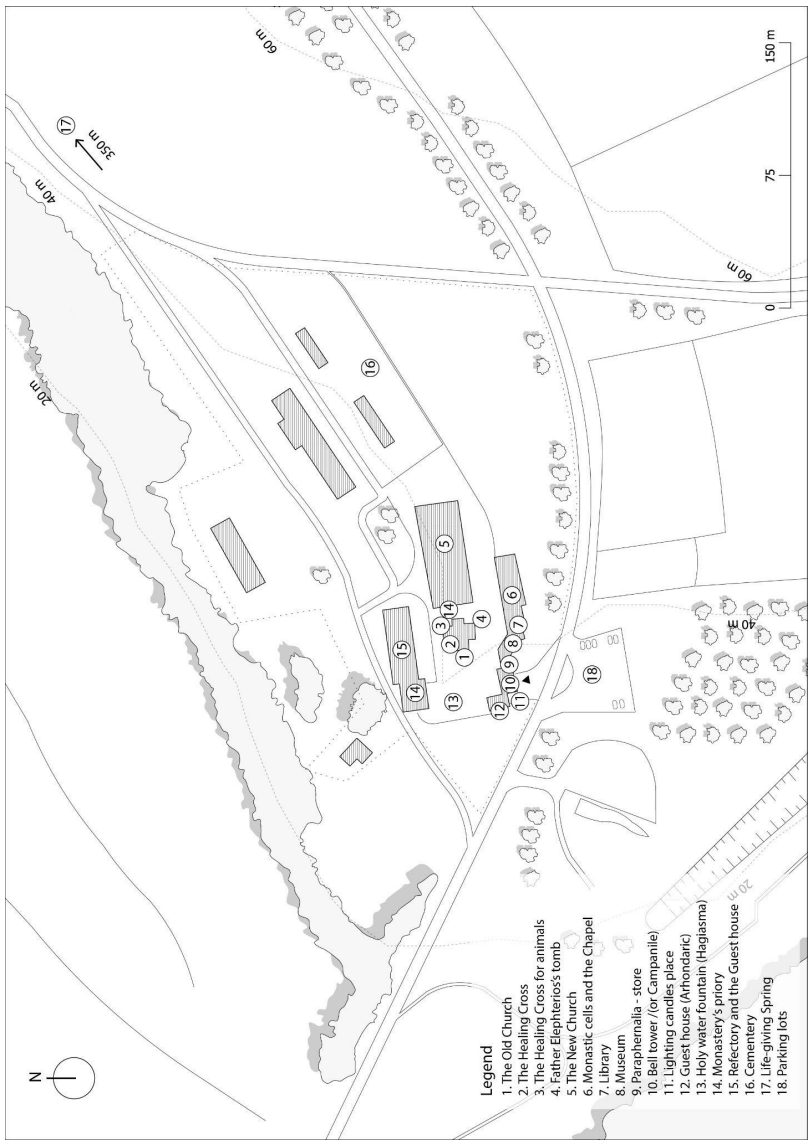

Figure 10: Dervent Monastery today. Elaboration by Giulia Massenz.

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of Ottoman Turkish origin (meaning "passage" or "crossing"). At the same time, Dobruja is considered the cradle of Romanian Christendom. Although not borne out by any solid archaeological evidence—but simply based on reports by Origen, Hippolytus and Eusebius—since the late nineteenth century, the evangelization of Scythia Minor by St Andrew has been taken for an ascertained fact by the Romanian Orthodox clergy and political elites alike. In the last decades, both have contributed to reinforce the narrative that Romanians have been Christians for two thousand years, ever since St Andrew came to preach in modern-day Dobruja (Verzan 2016).

When I asked him if he attends the place regularly, a local from the closest village, Bugeac, defined the monastery as his "garden of Getsemani". The moment I mentioned the monastery, he crossed himself the Orthodox way, bringing together the first three fingers and leaving the small finger and the ring finger down: the former three are the three persons in the Trinity, he explains to me smiling, while the other two stand for Adam and Eve sent away from Eden. Indeed the thick vegetation both outside and inside the threshold of the monastery strikes one immediately: between the guest house and the monastic cells, there are vines, ivy and pines. At the very centre of the complex stands the old church, built in the mid-1930s, and a tiny chapel nearby where the holy cross is enshrined (see Figure 10). The flow of pilgrims is consistently smaller than at Prislop: it becomes remarkable only during major calendrical feasts and on the patronal feasts: St Parascheva (14 October), St George (23 April), Life-Giving Spring (Friday after Easter), and Holy Cross (14 September).

The religious paraphernalia shop lies on the right, next to the entrance: an old monk scornfully asks the Roma pilgrims to speak only Romanian while in the monastery, even when they speak with one another. The Roma family buys a few bracelets and a plastic bottle to gather the holy oil (*Mir*) which lies next to the holy cross (Figure 11). This cross attracts most of the churchgoers entering the chapel: they usually first kiss the icon of the Virgin Mary, then the relics of martyrs Astion and Epictet, and finally stop at the cross. Once facing it, the mother and her adolescent daughters piously make the sign of the cross and kneel, asking for blessings and praying while touching the cross with their forehead. Like most pilgrims, they press against the cross some cloth they brought with them, convinced of the protection it grants by contact. After they are done with their

reached Dobruja leading Turkomans from Anatolia (Reuter this issue; see also Rohdewald 2017: 75–77). Frederick Hasluck reports the legend according to which Sarı Saltuk sent seven coffins to seven different places, only one of which would indeed contain his body: this would explain why there are several shrines dedicated to him spread along central Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East (1929: 430).

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Figure 11: The miracle-working cross. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

prayers, some of the youngest members of the Roma family try sticking coins on the cross. While sitting on the bench nearby, their mother tells me it is the third year they have come to Dervent to ask for protection and blessings. She also asks me whether it is true that you will get your wishes fulfilled if the coins stick on the cross and do not fall. Indeed, some coins adhere to the cross's surface due to the holy oil that trickles on the stone here and there. This is also one of the reasons why a few coins lie on the floor next to it. The visitors coming after them mistake the coins for an offering and leave a few banknotes at the feet of the cross, ignoring the donation box right next to it.

The allegedly healing power of the stone cross grew in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. A few years after Romania's independence wars against the Ottoman Empire (1877–1878), a young Romanian deaf-mute shepherd was tending a flock when he suddenly felt an overwhelming drowsiness. He succumbed to sleep right where he stood. Upon awakening, he miraculously found himself cured and began shouting loudly to announce this wonder. Local people rushed to the scene to investigate, and they discovered that the shepherd had rested his head on a small stone, which, as it turned out, was part of a partially

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buried cross. This event bestowed a reputation of healing power upon the location. Ever since, this site has drawn visitors from various religious backgrounds, including Christians (Romanians and Bulgarians) and Muslims (Tatars and Turks), some of whom even spent the night there, sleeping at the base of the cross (Jiga Iliescu 2023).

In 1923, a male monastery was established there: a church and cells for monks were built as well as a chapel (*paraclis*) in the place of one of the crosses in the late 1930s, while the other cross was left outside to be, according to the tradition, for the healing of animals (Hagiul 1933; nr. 3 in Figure 11). In 1959, the communist regime closed the monastery, prohibiting all pilgrimages: the cells and other monastic buildings were transformed into offices of the agricultural cooperative of the Ostrov village, and the church was transformed into a parish church. The monastery was reestablished in 1990, being well-known as the "Monastery of the healing cross" (Ciocioi and Tica 2010: 33).

Like at Prislop, Nicula and any other place considered miracle-working, some pilgrims have serious medical conditions and come here to seek healing.[13] A woman with Parkinson's is assisted by her husband while kneeling and getting anointed with the holy oil. Others come in a more jolly and touristic spirit, such as the two retired couples coming from Moldova and heading to Golden Sands beach in Bulgaria, who decided to stop at the monastery for a night. The healing cross (*Crucea de Leac*) and a miracle-working spring were the two main attractions they came for, besides the tomb of a popular folk music singer. Roxana, a woman in her fifties who wears a headscarf and hails from Constanţa, is also spending one night in the monastery. At lunchtime, the janitor and a few pilgrims like her come to the kitchen to get served. You can tell this area is much poorer than central and northern Transylvania not just by the appalling condition of street infrastructure and the small houses falling apart in the neighbouring villages, but also by the voracity which pilgrims like her eat the frugal meat they received: some fresh cheese with polenta, white bread, a vegetable soup, and a portion of overcooked pasta with cheese. Roxana has been to Dervent before: for her, it is an occasion to pray, rest in a quiet place, get a blessing from the holy cross, but also ask the monks for spiritual and financial help. When I ask her if it is true that Muslims visit the monastery, she answers with indifference that some Muslims come from time to time and that everyone can enter, after all no one is denied access.

13. The monastery keeps records of the testimonies of those who were cured over the years by touching or praying the holy crosses. According to these records, at Dervent not only Orthodox people but also Muslims found healing: "At the cross outside, a Mahomedan had tied his sick horse to heal himself. Around midnight, the healed horse broke the tack and ran to Adamclisi where his master was living" (Druche 2020, our translation).

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Another middle-aged woman came with her family from Medgidia (80 km north-east of Dervent). Visiting the monastery was a present to her from her family: since she is such a staunch believer, there was nothing she would have preferred to do on a small vacation. Rather than dwelling on the miraculous power of the holy cross, the old churchgoer asks me to take off my earring: for her, any intervention on the body—especially such a bizarre token of perverted modernity—is an offence to God, a devilish gadget. When she was young—she recounts—she tried to wear earrings too, but they just would not hang on her ears. Since then, she understood that God did not want her to modify her body in that way. "Your beard, that's fine! That you can keep it. Have you seen the monks here? Having a long, thick beard is a gift from God, one that shows your piousness."

As she remarks on my foreign accent, she recounts the founding legend of the monastery: during the era of the Roman emperor Diocletian, the lifeless bodies of four local martyrs, a man and three young women who were descendants of St Andrew's disciples, were cast into the Danube River. Almost immediately, the very spot of their martyrdom was marked by the emergence of four stone crosses from the earth. A more detailed version of this story is reported on the official website of the monastery and in monographs dedicated to it (Hagiul 1933).

Apparently, some of these crosses were completely destroyed during the times of Christian persecution under Diocletian. Many centuries later, Ahmet Bey, the Ottoman governor of the province, became aware of the miraculous nature of the remaining crosses and took steps to safeguard them. After his passing, one of his descendants attempted to vandalize these crosses, which disappeared into the ground and remained hidden for a long time. It was not until the area fell under Christian rule that they reappeared, eventually being revealed to the deaf shepherd. Some authors report Muslims converting to Orthodoxy due to the miraculous power of this cross (Tudor 2009).

Anthropologist Jiga Iliescu observes how this foundational myth—which insists on martyrdom as the original element of the miracle-working cross—serves the efforts of the Romanian Orthodox Church to claim the religious heritage of Scythia Minor as the birthplace of Romanian Christianity (Jiga Iliescu 2023: 131). Traces of Christian presence in what was then called Scytia Minor are attested by archaeological evidence already in the third century, and martyrologies report the names of six Roman soldiers martyred in 298 in Durostorum—nowadays Silistra, in Bulgaria (Păcurariu 2006: 20). Yet, as Jiga Iliescu remarks (2023: 126), there is no documented evidence of a relation between their tombs, their relics (currently preserved in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Silistra) and the site of the healing crosses.

As with the case of Nicula, a brand-new imposing church stands out within the monastic complex (see Figure 12). A vast atrium connects the new house of

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Figure 12: At the construction site of the new church. The stone indicates the way to the spring. Photograph by Giuseppe Tateo.

worship with the old one, built in the interwar period. According to the official website, construction works started in 2011. The architectural style is inspired by the Byzantine basilica model and complies with the local tradition by adopting a longitudinal cross plan. The dominant scale of the new church is not only expressed through its volume but also in the complexity of the architecture itself. Three ramps of staircases located right after a welcoming atrium leads to the pronaos and then to the three-tiered nave, separated by two rows of six columns and crowned by a spire vault. An elevated linear portico surrounds the church, running under the two side apses. The aerial view of the different construction phases (see Figure 13) illustrates many height registers which are visible from the sides' elevation and culminates with a roof almost twenty metres high. The building will also host a cafeteria accessible from the ground floor and a multifunctional cultural space located in the basement which will host exhibitions of Christian art, conferences and meetings.

Conclusion

This article has reported on three sites which are a popular destination for practitioners belonging to several religious groups—a rather unusual phenomenon in contemporary Romania. Inter-religious interaction has been attested by many sources and is still ongoing, yet it is mostly informal, lacks organization in terms of religious diplomacy, and enjoys little visibility. We have focused on the narrative and spatial strategies employed by the Romanian Orthodox Church—the

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Figure 13: Dervent Monastery 2003–2021. Elaboration by Giulia Massenz. Source: Google Earth Pro.

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current owner of the three monasteries—to restate its prominence in the built environment and reaffirm its primacy *vis-à-vis* other religious competitors in two regions historically marked by ethnic and denominational heterogeneity: Transylvania and Dobruja.

Just like other regions in east-central Europe which are prone to syncretic leaps and mutual influences between different Christian denominations (Hann 2014), cross-cutting devotional practices and pilgrimages have been reported in Transylvania as well. Consider, for instance, the popularity of the ritual fasting of St Anthony, which "exemplifies the popularity of this Catholic saint among the Orthodox faithful, spread along the Greek-Catholic line throughout Transylvania" (Cosma 2023). A similar fertile ground for such forms of "everyday syncretism" has been reported among Greek-Catholic communities in Southern Poland (Buzalka 2008).

Likewise, the cult of the Virgin Mary at Nicula is part of a wider network of tearing icons in Romania (Dumitran, Hegedűs and Rus 2011) and of an even wider network of Marian devotion sites that attract Christians of different denominations. A few hundred kilometres west, in the village of Máriapócs in eastern Hungary, another weeping icon of the Virgin Mary is venerated by thousands of pilgrims each year, mostly Greek Catholics. Its story resembles the one in Nicula: the original icon—which is now kept in Wien's St Stephen Cathedral—wept in the local wooden church for over a month in 1696. Proceeding north-east, Our Lady of Dzhublyk in Ukrainian Zakarpattia is now celebrated in a Greek-Catholic shrine which attracts thousands since its apparition in 2002. Further north, the famous icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa—conserved in the Catholic Jasna Gora monastery in south-central Poland—was attributed the miracle of saving the sanctuary from the Swedish invader in 1655. Eastwards, tens of thousands of Catholics gather in Csíksomlyó (Şumuleu Ciuc in Romanian) on Pentecost each year to honour the Virgin Mary and partake in what is regarded as one of the biggest Catholic celebrations in the Carpatho-Danubian basin. This site is of crucial importance not just for the Hungarian Roman Catholics from Romania and abroad (especially from Hungary), but for the Csángós as well.[14] The pilgrimage was established in remembrance of the locals' resistance to the attempts to force conversion to Unitarianism in 1567.

Some of these popular devotional shrines represent an occasion for the majority Churches to reinstate their privileged relationship with state authorities and national and ethnic identity. Conversely, those sites managed by minority

14. The Csángós are a Roman Catholic ethnic group speaking an old Hungarian dialect who live mostly in Moldavia, Romania, particularly in Bacău County.

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Churches like Greek Catholics in Hungary and Ukraine or Roman Catholics in Romania are an opportunity to claim recognition and legitimacy. Yet they all instantiate the ability of bottom-up, multi-religious attendance to thrive. It is against this background that we locate the historical narratives set forth by the Orthodox Church in Nicula, Prislop and Dervent.

The two Transylvanian monasteries—contended between Greek Catholics and Orthodox—are presented by the latter according to a narrative of expropriation and return to the legitimate owner. Gaining control over them through the disbandment of the GCC perpetrated by the communists is thus understood as a form of reparative justice that offset the crimes committed by the Habsburg leaders and the Catholic West a few centuries before. Rebranding these sites as pillars of Romanian Orthodox heritage, faith and belonging might lead to religious and ethnic homogenization and the erasure of their multi-religious past, as suggested by recent developments at the Nicula complex. In this perspective of inter-religious competition, it is not coincidental that miraculous events are registered on seminal dates: the Virgin Mary icon weeps in 1699 (right before the birth of the Uniate Church), while the healing of the (Romanian) shepherd is reported just a few years after the independence wars against the Ottoman empire.

The historical narratives told by Orthodox monks and reported in monographs, conversations and information signs are meant to validate Orthodox presence and control over each site as in line with local history. Tracing the historical trajectory of pilgrimages in northern Transylvania, anthropologist Stelu Șerban has argued that the growing national character of such events at the monasteries of Nicula and Ruoaia might have contributed to their recent popularity. Conversely, formerly important Greek-Catholic pilgrimages like the one in Șișești fell into oblivion after Communist persecution (Șerban 2010: 169, 181). Such attempts to claim the historically undisputed primacy of Orthodoxy in multi-ethnic and multi-religious areas are one side of a strategy of symbolic and material re-appropriation that is complemented—on a spatial level—by new infrastructural projects.

More importantly, this infrastructural expansion is not just meant to provide further liturgical space but also to reassert the Church's hegemony over a growingly secularized society as much as over old (Greek Catholics) and new (neo-Protestant Churches) competitors: since 1989, the Pentecostal and Adventist Churches have been recruiting new members and building new houses of worship at an impressive pace, thus gaining major visibility. In 2015, Pentecostals owned around 10 per cent of the totality of houses of worship in Romania and twice more than a long-established Christian denomination like the Roman Catholic Church (Tateo 2020: 219).

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Following this logic, the recently erected church in Nicula towers over the old wooden church and the abandoned Greek-Orthodox one. While all three structures fall within the same visual range, they showcase distinctive architectural styles. This spatial arrangement suggests a sense of competition: the buildings are situated within approximately 23 metres of each other. Proximity and visual prominence mark the spatial dynamics in Dervent as well. The ongoing construction of the new complex in Dervent is positioned just eight metres away from the existing church. Official accounts describe this as a continuation of architectural design, facilitated by a grand atrium. Yet this strategic positioning also aims at enhancing the visibility of the newly built church.

The adoption of religious buildings of such an imposing architectural scale had been alien to Orthodox visual culture in Romania for most of its history until the formation of the modern nation-state, influences from Russian Orthodoxy (such as the usage of higher iconostasis), and growing inter-religious competition encouraged the adoption of larger-scale construction (Tateo 2020: 103). The construction of religious buildings in Dervent and Nicula reflects a paradigm shift prevalent over the past thirty years: embracing a more imposing visual index on the one hand, and the multiplication of infrastructural projects on the other hand, which has resulted in the appearance of new cathedrals, churches, cultural centres and pilgrim houses in Romanian cities, towns, and within monasteries.

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