

ROCK-CUT MONASTERIES AND HERMITAGE IN EASTERN EUROPE. A CASE STUDY - ORHEIUL VECHI (REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)

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Abstract

The paper discusses the rock-cut architecture phenomenon from the Republic of Moldova based on the case study of Orheiul Vechi (Old Orhei). The landscape played the most important role in developing hermitages and monastic communities, their infrastructures, religious, social and economic activities. Another important aspect is the chronology, which is a debated question because written sources mention such sites very late and some scholars have been trying to link this phenomenon with early monasticism. The building time of these complexes is not clearly established, but their existence can certainly be framed with the medieval state of Moldova. In this context, it is particularly important to place the rock-cut sites from Moldova in their broader geographical context, which would mean an examination and presentation of the elements of such architecture from South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. The paper describes one of the most important hermitages from the Republic of Moldova, which is placed in the rock blanks of the Răut river. During Medieval time, the town of Orheiul Vechi was an important administrative center and, probably in this context, a huge hermitage network was developed there, concentrated in six areas of the Răut river valley. Two of them are known as monasteries – Peștere and Bosie and the other ones as monks' hermitages. During the last two decades, we have registered over 150 rock-cut cells. So, based on written and archaeological sources, the paper discusses the history of Orheiul Vechi rock-cut hermitages, the role of the natural environment in their development and place in the context of an ecclesiastic system of Medieval Moldova.

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Keywords

Rock-cut monastery; hermitage; Orheiul Vechi (Old Orhei); the Republic of Moldova.

Resumo

O artigo discute o fenômeno da arquitetura de corte de rocha da República da Moldávia com base no estudo de caso de Orheiul Vechi (Old Orhei). A paisagem desempenhou o papel mais importante no desenvolvimento de ermidas e comunidades monásticas, suas infra-estruturas, atividades religiosas, sociais e econômicas. Outro aspecto importante é a cronologia, que é uma questão debatida porque as fontes escritas mencionam esses locais muito tardiamente e alguns estudiosos vêm tentando relacionar esse fenômeno com o monaquismo primitivo. O tempo de construção destes complexos não está claramente estabelecido, mas a sua existência pode certamente ser enquadrada com o estado medieval da Moldávia. Neste contexto, é particularmente importante situar os sítios rochosos da Moldávia no seu contexto geográfico mais amplo, o que significaria um exame e apresentação dos elementos dessa arquitetura do Sudeste e Leste Europeu. O artigo descreve uma das ermidas mais importantes da República da Moldávia, que se encontra nos espaços rochosos do rio Răut. Durante a época medieval, a cidade de Orheiul Vechi foi um importante centro administrativo e, provavelmente neste contexto, desenvolveu-se uma enorme rede de ermidas, concentrada em seis áreas do vale do rio Răut. Dois deles são conhecidos como mosteiros – Peștere e Bosie e os outros como ermidas dos monges. Durante as últimas duas décadas, registramos mais de 150 células cortadas em rocha. Assim, com base em fontes escritas e arqueológicas, o artigo discute a história das ermidas rochosas de Orheiul Vechi, o papel do ambiente natural no seu desenvolvimento e o lugar no contexto de um sistema eclesiástico da Moldávia Medieval.

Palavras-chave

Mosteiro escavado na rocha; convento; Orheiul Vechi (Old Orhei); República da Moldávia.

Introduction

The natural caves are known as the safest natural shelters for human communities from prehistoric times. During the centuries these areas had been adapted and used for various needs. In this context, the rock-cut became a type of architecture linked with a specific lifestyle. This type of sites is archaeologically recorded for five to four thousand years BC. In the context of the development of Christianity, numerous caves became religious spaces, linked especially with hermitage life and later with monastic activities. The first manifestations of the Christian monasticism were in the eastern Roman provinces. Egypt was a theatre of the asceticism and Anthony (late 3rd century AD) was the best known among the so-called *Fathers of the Desert*. In the 4th century the archbishop of Caesarea, Basil, founded monastic communities in Cappadocia, which became one of the well-known rock-cut monastic centers in the World.

At the beginning of monasticism, natural caves were used, but these have gradually been developed by digging into the cliffs of numerous cells and churches. The caves became not merely a hermitage place for hermits but developed gradually into spiritual centers where the monks lived and did many religious duties. The phenomenon of religious rock-cut architecture development is widely attested in different parts of Europe. Thus, we find the development of this type of human settlements, particularly in the areas with a specific landscape. The spread of monasticism in South-Eastern Europe was inevitably influenced by the Eastern precedents. So, most of the rock-cut sites located in the Carpathian-Balkan area (ancient sanctuaries, churches, temples, hermitages or medieval monastic complexes) are characteristic for the epoch of the spread of Christianity, some of them maintaining their function until today. Among rock-cut sites from South-Eastern Europe, the religious complexes are attested in limestone banks of the Dniester and the Răut rivers too (Demcencoet *al.*, 1993: 135). The sites from Țipova, Saharna, Japca and Orheiul Vechi are the most famous rock-cut hermitages/monasteries from the Republic of Moldova (Map 1). The origin of rock-cut monasteries from the Carpathian-Balkan regions, their history, typology, and architectural morphology are insufficiently studied. In this context, the rock-cut architecture from the Republic of Moldova presents a great interest due to a number of particularities still unknown to the public.



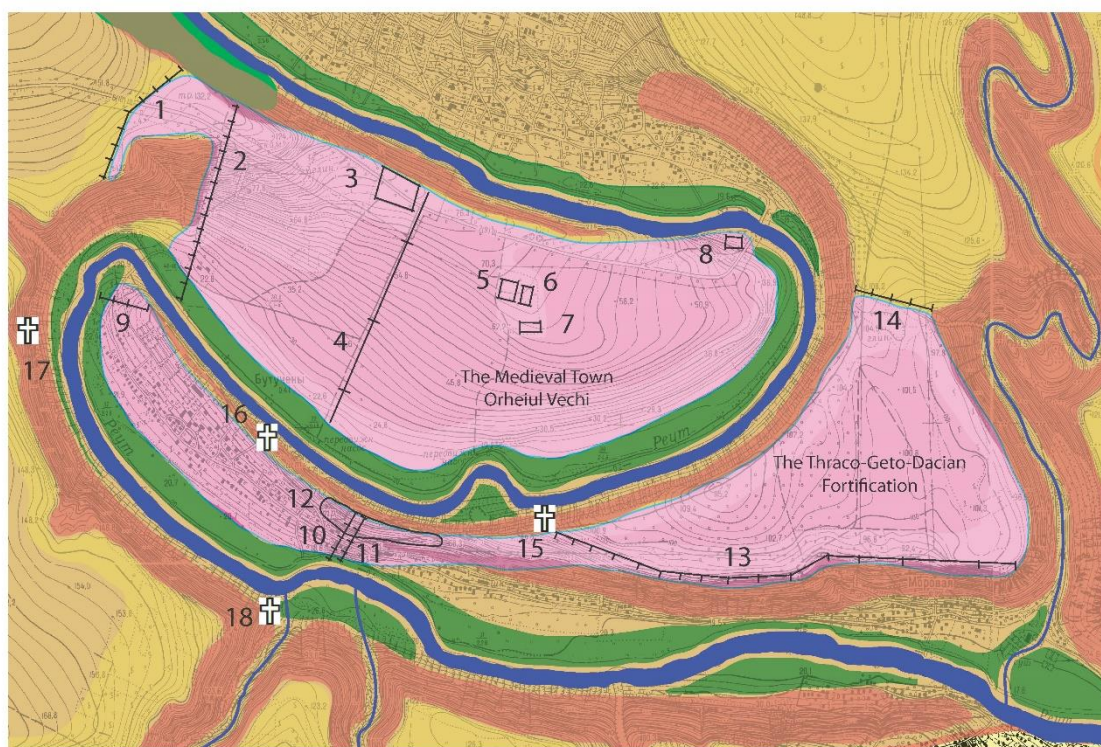
Map 1: Map of mentioned sites from Dniester regions.

Original Landscape

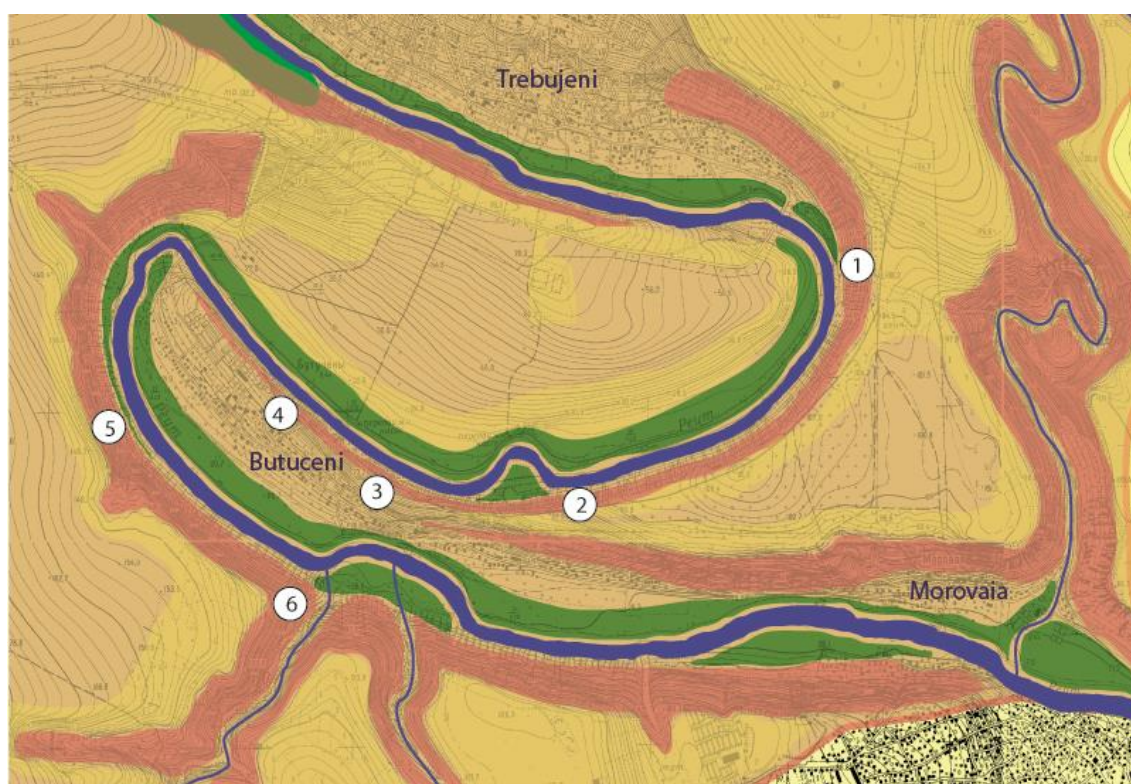
Human evolution has always been closely linked to natural factors. Therefore, in historical research, it is necessary to know the peculiarities of the geographical environment (landscape, hydrography, climate, vegetation, etc.) and their connections with the human factor. The landscape is determined by the geological structure of the region, the result of a process of sustainable development that influenced the formation of other elements of the environment (river, soils, flora and fauna, human settlements, economy, etc.). The hydrography of the Republic of Moldova is made up of rivers, lakes of various types, groundwater and the Black Sea. Most rivers originate in the Carpathian Mountains and are collected and taken to the Black Sea and the Danube. The Dniester is the longest river (1352 km) which is taken to the Black Sea through the Dniester Lyman. The second river, which actually makes the border between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, has a length of 967 km. The largest tributaries of the Dniester are Prut, Ikel, Bic, and Botna. The Răut, a tributary of the

Dniester, played an important role in the development of human communities over the centuries (Map 1). The Dniester and the Răut are original by steep limestone cliffs and create a special landscape in some regions. The rock-cut sites are concentrated in the rocky banks of the Dniester and the Răut rivers. The limestone is a result of Sarmathian Sea bottom. The deposit of the chalk, scallops and other Sea creatures are seen on the rock structures. This type of rock is usually soft and easy to be excavated. The most important cave monasteries placed on the banks of the Dniester are Japca, Saharna, and Țipova (Map 1). Ja.N. Taras considers that rock-cut monasteries from Bessarabia are part of the same group of constructions from Podolya region. Țipova and Butuceni (Orheiul Vechi) are the most representative architectural monuments of these complexes (Taras, 1986: 108).

In the middle part of the Răut, the river has steep banks of limestone which made an original landscape known as Orheiul Vechi (Map 2). The Orheiul Vechi is located on the middle part of the Republic of Moldova, at the intersection of the sylvo-steppe and steppe regions. The river Raut has a meandering course and making in the area Orheiul Vechi seven promontories resulted from long term erosion and other morphogenesis processes. The rocks of this area have 100–130 m height, the highest parts are up to 170–180 m, and some slopes have 90° (Image 1). The area became attractive for human communities since prehistoric periods. From one point of view, it is very well naturally protected. From another point of view, the Răut valley is an ideal area for various economic activities agriculture, fishing, hunting, etc. The forest around Orheiul Vechi is an important resource too. Today Orheiul Vechi includes three villages – Trebujeni, Butuceni and Morovaia, parts of Orhei rayon. The Orheiul Vechi since 2008 became a natural-cultural reservation and has a special legal status (Postică 2010: 12–31). In the Butuceni and Măscăuți slopes are attested series of rock-cut complexes (hermitages, churches, and monasteries). Four groups of rock-cut complexes are registered on Butuceni slope (72 excavated cells and 183 karstic grottos) and the other two groups on Măscăuți slope (cca 60 cells), (Map 3), (Postică, 2010: 69).



Map 2: Map of the Orheiul Vechi Archaeological Landscape.



Map 3: Map of the Orheiul Vechi with location of the rock-cut cells, churches and monasteries.



Image 1:OrheiulVechi. General view from the West (photo credit Gh. Postică).

Rock-cut Hermitages and Monasteries at OrheiulVechi

Monasteries in the eastern Carpathian territories occur with the foundation of the medieval state of Moldova and the Orthodox Metropolitan since the end of the 14th century (Cereteu, 2004: 23). According to the written sources, the first monasteries in the regions between the Prut and the Dniester were attested at the time of the ruler Alexander the Good (1400–1432). Some rock-cut cells and hermitages could be used earlier, but some well-organized rock-cut monasteries appeared during the 15th–16th centuries (Eșanu, 2013: 35). The building of rock-cut monasteries in limestone banks of the Dniester and the Răut Rivers took place for several reasons. Firstly, for the security and limited access reasons – during the Middle Ages, the regions were often attacked by various powers, especially by Tartar hordes. Secondly, it reflected the early monasticism and relations with the Middle East model. Thirdly, because of the soft rock, the limestone was easy to be excavated.

3.1 OrheiulVechi (Old Orhei), actual villages Butuceni, Trebujeni and Morovaia are ones of the most visited touristic places in Moldova (Map 1, Image 1). The original landscape makes this place attractive for locals and for foreigners. OrheiulVechi is placed on promontories, formed by the Răut

river which is basically a canyon with high banks (Map 2). From a geological point of view, this region is a part of the Lower Dniester, the plain terrace. In the micro-region Orheiul Vechi over 350 cave complexes have been attested, out of which about 100 dug caves cells and around 250 are karst/natural formations, some of which are used by people. Orheiul Vechi cave complexes are concentrated on the north slope of the promontory Butuceni and on the north slope of the right Răut terrace named Mașcăuți (Image 1, 2) (Postică, 2010: 68). Several documents from the 18th century attested Orheiul Vechi or chief magistrate of Peștera town, which formerly was called Movilova. Probably, the village name comes from an impressive number of cells/caves in the limestone cliffs of the river Răut. During the 20th century investigations determined that caves/cells from Orheiul Vechi are concentrated in six complexes, out of which two are monasteries – Bosie Pârcălab and Peștera, and four other groups of cells: Peștere, Macicauți Hermitage, Peșterile Ciucului hermitages, and Bisericuța chapel (Ciocanu, 2008; Ciocanu, 2009; Ciocanu, 2011; Postică, 2010: 67–77; Postică and Kavruk, 2018: 7–25). The monastic life in Orheiul Vechi is dated the 15th–17th centuries with some developments during the 18th–19th centuries by the majority of scholars (Taras, 1986: 110; Sârbu, 1995: 236).



Image 2: Bosia Monastery, general view (photo credit Gh. Postică).

3.2 *Bosie Pârcălab* Monastery represents a cave monastic complex situated at the altitude of circa 20–30 m above the Răut waters and ca. 1.5 km east of the *Peștera* Monastery (Image 2-6). The site is composed of a church and 9 cells. The Church is a relatively large room (11x4,5 m) with apses and an altar (Image 6). Arched niches are designed for icons and/or candles. There are two entrances in the northern part of the monastery. The porch is placed in front on a limestone platform (Image 3). On the church's façade, nine inscriptions have been attested in Slavonic and Romanian languages (Image 4-5). The inscriptions were published and commented a few times during the 20th century (Ciobanu, 1924: 39–45; Ciocanu, 1998: 44–47; Ghimpu, 2000: 134–135; Kurdinovskij, 1918: 1–11).

The inscription that gives the name of the rock-carved church is situated in the arched niche. Today the inscription is degraded and only those 4 lines into which it has been divided can be read. Its text is in the Slavonic language and has been preserved only due to a written record from the 19th century: *"The Church of the hierarchy of Christ, of the Holy Father Wonder Worker, Nicolae"*. The foundation inscription of *Bosie pârcălab* monastery is situated to the left of the church's entrance. It is framed by a motif similar to an unfolded paper roll which is probably a heraldic cartouche:

СЕЙ МОНАСТИР РАБЪ БЖІЙ БОСІЙ ПЫРКАЛАБ ОРХЕОВ
СЪВРЪШИ СЪ ПОДРУЖІЕМ И ЧАДИ СВОИМИ В ЧЕС ГУ БУ ЗА
ОТПУЩЕНІЕ ГРЕХОВ СВОИХ СЕЛЕВЯСТР У ЛТ 7173 (1665). [This
monastery was built by the slave of God Bosie, chief magistrate of Orhei district,
together with his wife and his children, to cherish God, to forgive his sins.
Selevestru, year 7173 (1665)].

Another inscription in the Romanian language is preserved on the opposing part (Image 5):

АЧЕСТУ ЗАПИС ЛАУ ФЪКУТЬ ВАСИЛЕ АНДЕЕСКУЛ ШИ КУ
РЪЗМИРИЦЪ ЛЕКА І(Н) ЗИЛЕЛЕ ЛУІ КОСТАТИН ВОД(А) КЪНДУ
А(У) ЕРЪНАТ УКРАИНА І(Н) ИВАНЧЕ ШИ АУ ФОСТЬ СТЕЦЪ
ХАТМАН ЛА УКРАИНА ШИ НОИ А(МЕ)РНАТУ АТУНЧЕ АИЧЕ ЛТО
7198 НОЕ (М) 20 (1689). [This inscription was done by Vasile Andeescul and
with Razmeritse Leka in the days of Constantin ruler when Ukrainians spent
their Winter in Ivancea led by Stetsi Hetman and we spent the same Winter here
in the year 7198, 20 November (1689)].



Image 3: Bosia Monastery, terrace and entrance into church and cells (photo credit Gh. Postică).

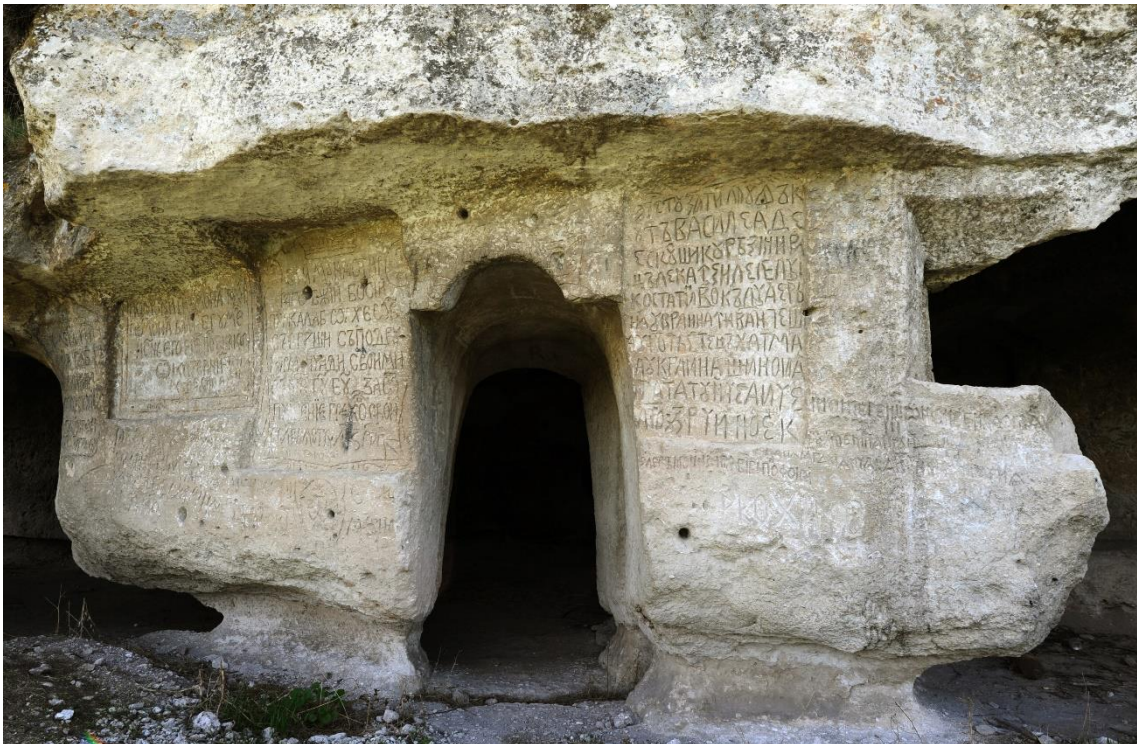


Image 4: Bosia Monastery, main entrance into church (photo credit Gh. Postică).

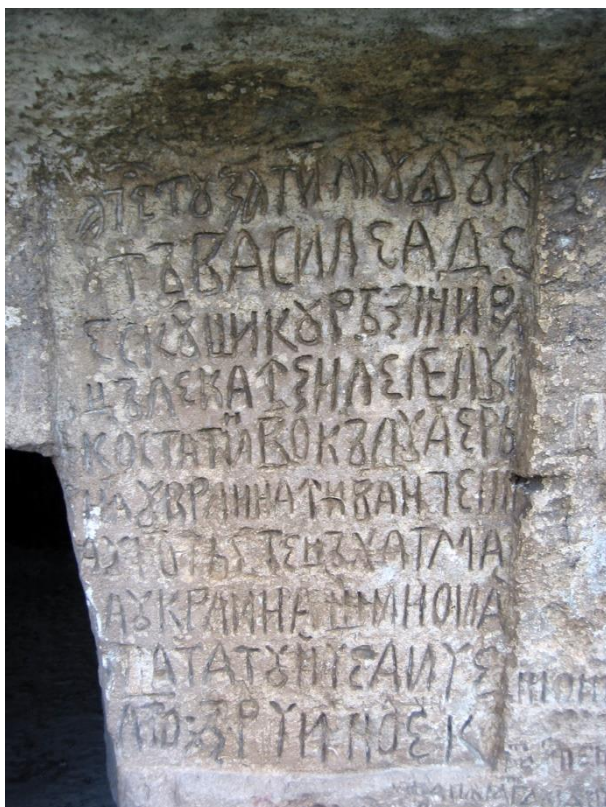


Image 5: Bosia Monastery, inscription from the entrance into church (photo credit Gh. Postică).



Image 6: Bosia Monastery, view from inside of the church (photo credit Gh. Postică).

According to the first inscription, we could understand that the monastery was built in 1665 by donation of Bosie, chief magistrate of Orhei district and the second inscription confirms that monastery had already functioned by the year 1689. But, under one inscription there is another one, mentioning the name of Simion dated on 17 February 1656. This source confirms that the monastery existed earlier than Bosie made his donation. During the excavations a few years ago, we discovered a burial-ground on the terrace in front of the church. So, it is a very interesting case when the graves were cut in the rock of the monastery terrace (Image 3).

3.3 *Peștera Monastery* is attested at the beginning of the 19th century with Dositei abbot (Image 7-9). Some documents are mentioning monastic life in this area since 1609 during Movila ruler. Another document from 1816 is mentioning that monk Iesechie was transferred from Neamț monastery, with permission of abbot Dositei, to the Peștera monastery in 1805 (1807), where Victor was the abbot. The monastery had 14 people at that time (the abbot, two hieromonachs, ten monks and one listener). However, we have more written sources from 19th century which confirm the activity of Peștera monastery, like the document from 1815 which is mentioning Roman Bileșchi as one of the founders of this monastery. By 1816, the

monastery had had five monks and three brothers (headed by Rafael hegumen). However, according to the documents, the Monastery Peștera was placed on a territory of actual Brănești village and just used the rock-cut church from Butuceni village. Due to a conflict with the landlord Matthew Donici, they moved to the Condița monastery in 1816, where Rafael was appointed as the hegumen. The written sources from the beginning of 19th century shows us that in Orheiul Vechi the monastic cells are placed on the territory of Matei Donici, but the church is placed on the territory of another landowner (Sârbu, 1995: 236-237).

The monastery is about 40 m above the water of the Răut (Image 7). On top of the rock, a stone cross is placed. The Peștere monastery consists of a church and 12 cells. It has two entrances from the riverside, one leading to the terrace and the entrance to the church, and the second entering the area of hermitages (Image 8). The church was built through the reuse of some older rooms whose traces are clearly visible on the surface of the walls. The church is oriented on a west-east axis with a deviation of 20 degrees towards the south. The length of the Church is 14.7 m, the breadth is 4 m in the *Nave*, and the height 2.6 – 3.5 m. The steps from the side of the church entrance were damaged due to erosion or earthquakes, which caused a rupture in the rock. The church has an area of 36 square meters, with a nave, a vaulted nave, and a 6x4 m altar, the height varies between 2.6 and 3.5 m (Image 9). In the wall behind the altar, a diaconicum and a recess were made. On the perimeter walls of the church, a number of niches designed for icons were preserved. It has kept the altar table which is carved in stone. Monastery Peștere differs from other cave complexes because even in the church is a cell and the church is passing into another room where there are another 11 cells, separated by stone walls. *The complex of cells* is situated to the west of the Church 0.6 -0.7 m above, being connected to the latter through a special corridor. The cells are distributed radially, opening towards the centre and receiving light from outside. There is a door out of the church leading to a terrace and steps to evil, which was destroyed. The terrace opens an exceptional landscape in the valley and towards the headland (Image 7).



Image 7:Peștera monastery, general view (photo credit S. Musteață).

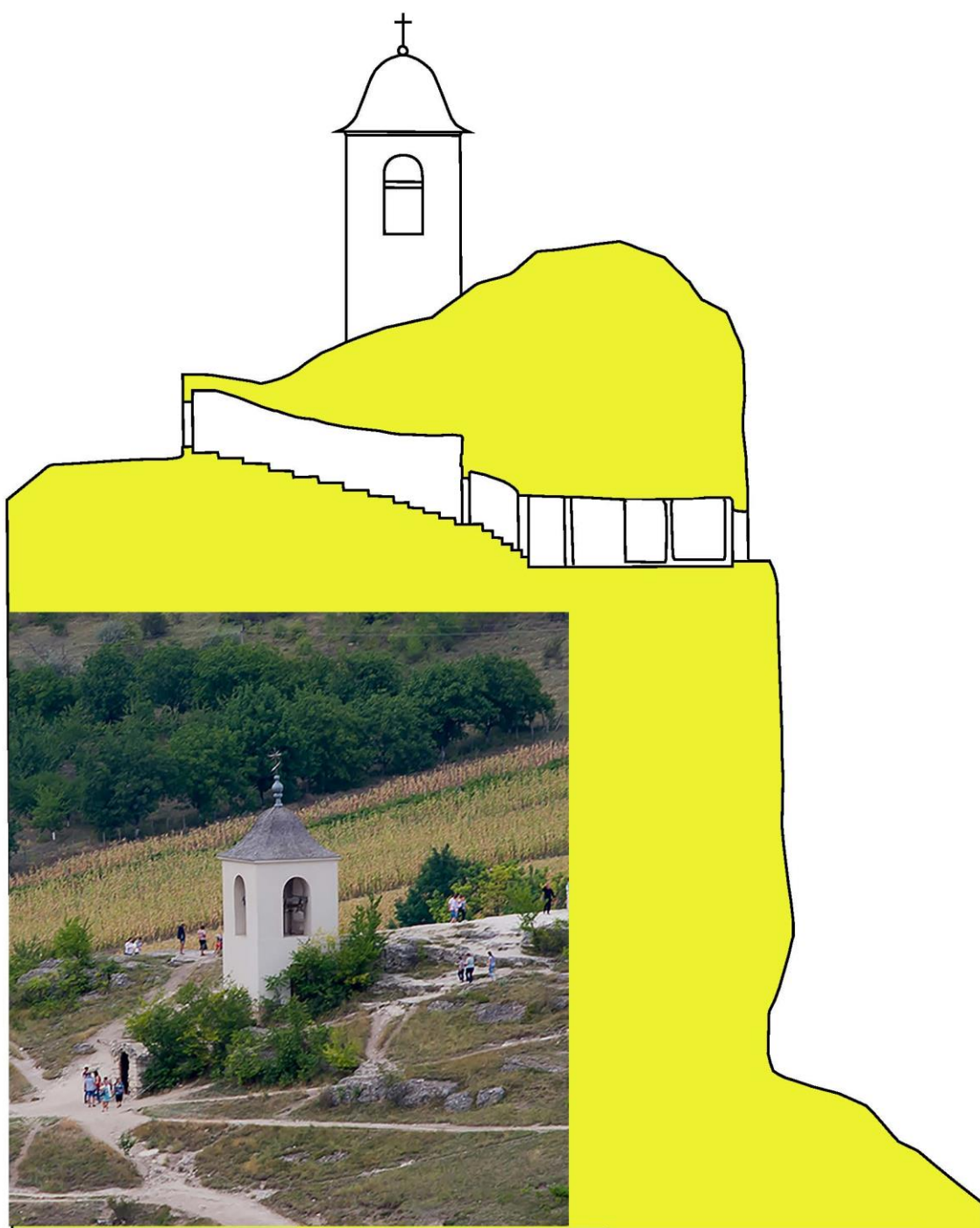


Image 8:Peștera monastery, section of the rock (photo credit Gh. Postică).



Image 9: A view from the church of the Peștera monastery (photo credit S. Musteață).

At the beginning of the 19th-century monastery became a parish of the village Butuceni. In 1821, local inhabitants built a tunnel from the village to the monastery church. They arranged a narthex from the space designed for cells and left intact just one cell, next to the exit door onto the terrace. The traces of other cells are visible in the walls. During 1821–1822 a belfry was built there (Image 8). Local inhabitants used the monastery church for local religious needs until 1946, when communist authorities ordered the closure of the monastery and the heritage (altar, icons) were plunged into the Răut river. The monastic life was re-established at Peștere monastery since 1996. The recent constructions are in total contradiction with conservation methods and destroy the authenticity and integrity of the rock-cut monastery (Image 9). Nowadays, the situation of most hermitages and cells is very bad because of earthquakes and especially because of the disastrous effects of erosion and human exploitation of the region. A. Dumbrăveanu discussed the state of cave monasteries (Japca, Saharna, and Butuceni) and noted that the degradation of cave temples is a phenomenon caused by both natural and human conditions. He notes that today's monks' attempts to protect and restore the caves spoil the originality of these monuments and lead to their destruction because they do not meet the current methodology and techniques of protection and preservation of historical monuments (Dumbrăveanu, 1997: 84).

Both monasteries are quite small and were rather some hermitages. Although many researchers date this rock-cut monastery back to the Middle Ages, the written mentions of them are just since the 17th century. A lot of Christian signs and ancestral inscriptions are engraved inside the cells (Grosu and Vasilachi, 1984; Grosu and Vasilachi, 1997), which are important but do not help us so much to date more precisely the hermitage and monasteries from Orheiul Vechi. Even if some historians are trying to date the rock-cut monasteries from Butuceni to the end of the 13th century – the beginning of the 14th century (Ghimpu, 2000: 137), we think, that the monastic life at Orheiul Vechi started in the 15th–16th centuries when the region was under control of the ruler of state Moldova. The monastery Bosie stopped its activity at the end of the 18th century and the Peștera monastery was closed in 1816.

3.4 Peștere Hermitages are placed at 20–30 m above the river and in the rock engravings 72 cells and 63 natural caves are registered. The absolute majority of these are situated in the lower part of the slope. Among the rock-carved features with habitation or cult functions (73 in total) in the complex of Butuceni, one can distinguish constructions made of a single room – 50, of two rooms – 5, of 3 rooms – 2, of 4 rooms – 1, of 5 rooms – 4, of 6 rooms – 3, of 7 rooms – 1, of 10 rooms – 2, of 12 rooms – 1 and of 14 rooms – 1. The 23 rock-carved constructions with more than one room (from 2 to 14) are situated in the upper exokarstic horizons and are completely missing from the lower horizons.

3.5 Macicauți Hermitage. On the right side of the Răut river, in front the Butuceni village, on the steep bank of the limestone terrace, at the height of 100–130 m above the river level, two monastic rock-cut hermitages and several single caves are attested. At the top part of the versant, at the left side of the Răposu gorge, below the Mașcăuți-Poiana Ciucului fortress, the *Macicauți Hermitage* is situated (Image 11–12). This is situated in the middle of the slope of Mașcăuți at a place called *Chilioare* on the right bank of the river Răut, at a crossroads with the gorge of *Răposu*, on the axis of the church of the village of Butuceni. The complex contains around 20 rock-carved rooms situated on five levels, some of them interconnected through specially arranged openings. The present state of the Hermitage's components suggests the destruction over time of several rooms, and blockage of the entrances to upper rooms by fragments of rock and earth that fell from the slopes (Ciocanu, 2011: 119–138; Postică, Kavruk, 2018: 126–128).

3.6 Peșterile Ciucului hermitages. On the right bank of the river Răut (at a height of 60 – 80 m), opposite the south-western edge of the village of

Butuceni, in the superior part of the of the Măscăuți promontory is situated hermitage *Peșterile Ciucului* (Image 10). The complex contains 29 grottos and karstic galleries distributed on five levels and which have been largely destroyed by tectonic processes. On the walls of some rooms can be seen a variety of rock-carved signs (Postică, Kavruk, 2018: 129).



Image 10: Hermitages Cucului (photo credit Gh. Postică).



Image 11:The Macicauți Hermitage, general view (photo credit S. Musteață).



Image 12: The Macicauți Hermitage, frontal view (photo credit Gh. Postică).

3.7 *Bisericuța chapel*. Many other isolated grottos are present at the Mașcăuți versant. Some of them were used as cells of hermit monks, and one as a small rock-cut *Bisericuța* chapel. The church represents an isolated quadrangular cave (2 x 2 m) located 150 m west of *Macicauți Hermitage*, 30 m above the river level of Răut. Ten crosses of various shapes are engraved on its walls (Postică, Kavruk, 2018: 129).

Conclusions

The Orheiul Vechi Landscape is unique and provide the framework for an sustainable development. The meanders of the Răut River have cut through limestone bedrock, forming escarpments hundreds of meters high. Compared to the natural fortress of Orheiul Vechi, castle moats and walls pale in comparison. Within this naturally fortified Landscape are the most fertile soils in the world, varied ecosystems, and abundant plants and animals. The Răut River provides an inexhaustible supply of water for consumption and sanitation. Probably these factors made Orheiul Vechi

attractive place since prehistoric time. But, during Middle Age the area was used as political, economical, cultural and religious center.

The main problems when studying the topic of the rock-cut hermitages are related to the date and chronology, type of monastic practices and architecture, the relations between local and foreign monastic centers, ethnic origins of monks, etc. Hence, there is not an easy solution to these research questions, especially because of the lack of written sources, lack of complex archaeological excavations, a small number of historical-comparative studies, etc.

In most cases, all rock-cut hermitages, churches, and monasteries try to reflect the earliest and original Holy Land and the Judean Desert monasticism. The sites from the Republic of Moldova are not an exception to this phenomenon. The building time of these complexes is not clearly established, but their existence can certainly be framed with the medieval state of Moldova (the 15th–the 17th centuries) and modern times (the 18th–19th centuries). In this context, it is particularly important to place the rock-cut sites from Moldova in their broader geographical context, which would mean an examination and presentation of the elements of such architecture from South-Eastern Europe starting from the Late Antiquity throughout the medieval period, when the Balkan peoples accepted the Christian religion.

For a better understanding of the rock-cut churches, hermitages, and monasteries known on actual territory of the Republic of Moldova we need complex and multilateral analysis, taking into account the landscape and climate conditions, political and religious organization, economic and cultural situation, etc.

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