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# FOR A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH OF MONASTERIES

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## **Abstract**

The article deals with the search of the geographic conditions role in drawing a possible typology of monasteries. From its beginnings, the trajectory of monastic phenomenon reveals multiple transitions. Belonging to the desert, the mountain and the forest, the monastic sites confirm some common characteristics for any natural geographic location, as well adapting forms that made possible a pattern typology. At the same time, the monasticism represents a population form (*oikoumene*) significant for human and urban geography, shaped by history and culture. The present issue is an introductory approach in the geographic aspects of monastic places. The geographic locations of the Romanian monasticism are also analysed.

*Keywords:* Geography, monasteries, phenomenological typology

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## **1. Introduction**

We don't have already a close work dedicated exclusively to the geographical approach of Orthodox monasticism, so much the less to the Romanian one. The map of the monasteries within the Romanian space points out a clear-cut uneven distribution with multiple core concentrations on zones of geomorphologic contact or with inexplicable dispersions within the same level of relief. The geographical perspective (the physical and human geography) didn't have the same opportunity as the historical, institutional, philosophical and especially theological analysis to be materialized in extended works. For this purpose, the present paper has double features. First of all it mainly operates with geographical tools used for a dynamic materiality that can be partially measures. Secondly, it represents an approach centred upon the exterior, material and visible dimension of the monastic reality that covers the spiritual theological kernel like a nut-shell. The greatest challenge comes from the difficulty to clearly separate the absolute geographical reasons of positioning based on a determinist structure, from the political, social, historical and ecclesiastical causalities. But the Geography defines itself as a science of the interaction between the human, nature and society, therefore the human geography is the first one to be interested in the phenomenon. In order to avoid an exhaustive

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approach we have chosen to focus on the line of classical geography, outlining the physic-geographical aspects of the natural environment, but with insertions of elements from cultural geography, of population and settlements. By this type of analysis we point out not only places and physical evidences but also invisible mechanisms that determine the configuration of a sacred geography. The purpose is to identify patterns of natural determination and reflexes of the human choice in the location disposition of monasteries along time.

## **2. Methodology and previous researches**

For an adequate methodology we should take into account previous researches that helped us to put together the relevant sources. On this occasion, we noticed that geographical studies are missing, although the references and information of geographical importance are frequent. Among the few works that are close to our purpose is the one of Raymond Janin [1]. Establishing territorial boundaries of the phenomenon is a problem that involves geographical scale and Janin focused upon the topographic aspects from a quite well marked area that allows focusing on as far as to the level of cloister. Whatever, Janin does not operate with a typology derived from the location.

The second methodological condition refers to the temporal scale of analysis that must allow pertinent generalizations and abstractions. From this perspective, one of the useful works in the field is the one of F. Braudel. He publishes in 1949 a study '*La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philip II*', in which he introduced a tripartite temporal system for the purpose of presenting a balanced study of time, space and social reality in the past. Braudel perceived the past as an entity comprising of different types of structures that operate at different temporal levels. He divided these structures into three categories: the long-term, the medium term, and the short-term levels, which correspond on a temporal scale to geographical, social, and individual time. Hence, depending on the structure that is studied, it is possible to understand it within the framework of different temporal levels. Using the temporal hierarchy, Braudel succeeded to combine the impact of environment and ecology to social activity, so that environment is not just background noise to human action [2]. Braudel's long-term level describes 'man in his relationship to the environment'. In his later works he also included on this level not only physical geography, but mental frameworks as well.

After the investigation and selection of an important amount of geographical references disseminated in works with various subjects, we noticed that the closest preoccupations to the geography of monastic cloisters come from the field of the monastic economy. This could be the main group of works, if we don't take into consideration the extremely large group of historical and cartographic works.

The works centred upon the monastic economy bring arguments for the sectorial, criterial method and also, relevant references for the environment significance in the building of monastic identity and typology. The first monasteries and their monastic economy have been studied by Ewa Wipszycka in 'Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Égypte du IV<sup>e</sup> au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle' (Resources and economic activities of churches in Egypt between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> century) [3] and 'Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive' (Studies on Christianity in Egypt in Late Antiquity) [3], Roger Bagnall's 'Egypt in Late Antiquity' [4], and James Goehring's 'Ascetics, Society, and the Desert' [3]. The Syrian monasteries and their economy have been discussed for example in G. Tchalenko's 'Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord' [3], A. Vööbus's 'History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient' [3], J. Villeneuve's 'L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans les Hauran antique (Ier siècle avant J.-C. – Vie siècle après J. C.)' [3] and in the study of I. Peña *et al.*: 'Les cénobites syriens' [5] and Nina Heiska in 'The economy and livelihoods of the early Christian monasteries in Palestine' [3].

In the Romanian exegesis there is no studies worked out on the principle and criteria of geographical analysis where an intermediate purpose of such an approach could be the geographical regionalization of monasteries and geographical typology of the religious space.

### **3. Monasticism and geographical determinism**

Before analyzing the various hypotheses concerning the possible relationship between monasticism and the geographical conditions, it might be useful to make a quick survey of the origin and first development of monasticism according to its first geographical locations.

#### **3.1. From the desert to the temperate forest**

The origin of the first forms of monasticism is controversial and hints at its ideological basis. For instance, some scientists believe that in Palestine, the origin of Christian monasticism could be the Jewish Nazarene sect. Some others consider that Christian monks came from the order of hermits descendants of Saint Elijah that lived a lonely life in Carmel. Some others think that the Christian monasticism could find its origin in the quasi-monastic Jewish communities from Qumran (Palestine) and in those of the Jewish Therapeutae from Alexandria (Egypt) who lived a life of prayer, meditation and scarcity [6]. By this, the first question with geographical significance comes implicitly – are the beginnings of the monastic phenomenon related to the sub-oikumenic wilderness or it appears in an inhabited space, within or at least in the vicinity of communities? The debate involves generally human arguments, preferring the monasticism from the community. Obviously, the Christian monasticism has exterior resemblances with monastic structures out of the Christian space, not because these were its origins, but because parts of the ascetic efforts are valid in

any system, without any connection with a religious or philosophic one. But the source of Christian monasticism is to be found within the Church and in the patterns of life devoted to the Christian ideal that emerges in the Near East.

The theologian scientists claim that the first persons with a calling for solitude (*monachos*) took upon themselves special anchoritic lifestyles just within the rural or urban communities. While the theologian and the anthropologists are interested in the cultural and the spiritual ways of monasticism, the geographers are interested in the manner in which the geographical place and space together influence the phenomenon as well as in the other side of it, respectively the transformation of a land influenced by the presence and the dynamics of monasticism. That is why it is very important to say that the first forms of monasticism germinated in *oikos* - permanently inhabited space - respectively in the middle of the community and its features transferred selectively to its faithful people. The stories of Saint Athanasius the Great depict how monasticism detaches from everyday life. Thus, the proofs of monastic beginnings within the community are early and related to the life of the great initiator of monastic life, as Saint Anthony whom it is said: “he began to live an anchoritic life in front of his house and looking thoroughly into himself, he lived quietly the harsh life. Since there weren’t so many monasteries in Egypt and no hermit would know the vast desert and the one who wanted to take care of his soul, would do it by himself, not so far from his village” [7]. Gradually, at the same time as he made progress in faith, thus preparing him, “Anthony moved to a tomb, where he resided and closed the door on himself, depending on some local villagers who brought him food” [7, p. 37]. According to Athanasius, this is the first *small isolation* which was followed by the *great separation* from the world that would turn Saint Anthony into the Father of monasticism. “The next day, (...), meeting that old man, he asked him to come and live with him in the desert. But this one refused, by reason of old age and custom and Anthony climbed immediately the mountain. As his decision increased more and more, he went back to the desert, further out, to a mountain by the river (Nile). There he lived strictly enclosed in an old abandoned fort, finding water inside and he only communicated with the outside world by a crevice through which food would be passed twice a year.” [7, p. 41] We have in this text all the elements for an analysis of classical physical and human geography:

- The wild space – un-inhabited, situated far away from the community and however accessible for those decided to reach it, probably situated on one of the roads that went through the desert;
- The mountain – symbol of natural difficulties and selective accessibility; it needed not only physical condition but also determination to humanize it;
- The water – the guarantee of the minimal condition for survival.

Thus, the existence of the first monasteries is related to a morpho-climatic system, rather than to a unique geographical element, where the interaction between the rock – the climate (temperature and wind) – the water generates the desert landscape.

In ancient Egypt and Syria, in a semi-dry and dry climate, the distinction between the tilled and irrigated fields of the villages and the surrounding wilderness was very clear. Beyond the fields was 'the desert', rocky and dry land, with a sparse vegetation of brambles, nettles, and thorn bushes, and incapable of supporting human habitation. It was the site of caves and small springs of brackish or salty water, abounding in poisonous snakes, lizards of all sorts, and watched over by vultures. But believe or not, these conditions favoured the life of a monk. The moderate temperatures and sparse rain meant that he could live alone with little shelter, and the solitude and stark landscape aided in meditation and prayer. Moreover, the mountain and the water are the two natural elements that will decisively mark the territorial distribution of monasticism, being hesychast or monastic shelters and the territorial agglutinations that emerged from the relation with these natural elements are a proof for this idea.

But not any mountain becomes favourable to a monastic settlement as well as not any source of water instantly generates a monastic location. Although relatively few and frequently non-specific, the information with explicit geographical reference is available since the first writings. Saint Paul from Teba, the first hermit known by his name, retiring to the mountains, "came to a place difficult to access, full of rocks, at the foot of which he saw the entrance to a cave (...) he stayed there eating the few savage fruits and drinking water from the brook that sprang from the cave" [6, p. 70]. There are quite numerous references to the communities from Nitra, Kellia and Sketis, where 'the mountain' referred to is a name without geographical support as its altitude doesn't exceed sometimes 400–500 m. The elements that define the space are used only to outline the harshness and the hostility of the place, unsuitable for a normal living.

The monks that had begun to live their life outside towns, although in permanent ecclesiastical connection with the other fellows, gradually went forward to more and more reclusive places that they would inhabit, in a formula of *sui generis* re-oikumenization of the desert in the form of monastic community (**Pachomian**) transformed into monastic 'village'. The structural-functional matrix of the laic society is transferred to the Pachomian monastic system, but in harsher conditions of daily existence. *Koinonia* means the dwelling of the monk that had become *community*. (Saint Pachomie's *Koinonia* was a group of 11 monasteries, organized, from the formal point of view, on the pattern of Egyptian villages, meaning a number of dwellings - with their outhouses - surrounded by a defensive wall. The cells were grouped according to the owners' jobs in some kind of guilds [6, p. 193].) Thus, those Christians cultivated the relation in God not only by themselves but also in solitude that is why it is said: "at the beginning it was the desert" [8]. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the deserts of the Near East (the Egypt, the Sinai, Palestine, the Upper and Lower Syria and Cappadocia) become inhabited by monks, by an explosive growth.

Populating the desert with monks and monasteries took place in a space with different physico-geographical conditions as in now days. The first recorded human habitation is located on the place where Saint Anthony lived his life fighting off the temptations of the flesh and attacks of demons, between Pispir and Qolzum mountains on the Lower Nile, between this river and the Red Sea [8]. Later on, a second monk habitation, quite numerous and soon well-known is founded around The Father Superior Amun, at about 60 km south-east from Alexandria, in the desert of Nitria. It continues at 20 km with the desert of Kella where approximately 600 reclusive monks live their solitary life scattered in all directions. This is the *laura*, a monastic way of living, a transitory status between pure anchoritic and coenobitic life. Around the year 330, a third eremitic settlement is founded - the one of Macarius, in the desert of Sketis, at 70 km south from Nitria. The tendency to advance more and more into the desert will gradually increase as the first hermit settlements become well-known and opened to the world, reaching the Upper Egypt, the Ethiopian borderlines thanks to Onufrie, Marcus the Ascetic and Paul Temueh [8, p. 30].

There were mentioned monk habitations monk habitations with dwellings of one or two rooms, the cells are directly dug into the rock, using natural hollows that are enlarged, the thermoregulation being provided by the depth and type of rock. The diurnal thermal amplitudes that rise above 40° favour the weathering process and the wind-erosion shapes complex forms.

The Egyptian deserts that we refer to are parts of the Great Sahara Desert. The researchers of the Sahara Desert concluded that the actual aspect is different from the one of the Biblical times, and the climatic conditions have also different parameters [9].

From a geomorphologic point of view, the relief is dominated by dry riverbeds (oueds), relic formations from the pluvial periods of the Quaternary Era. 'Ouadi' (Arabian) are the favourite places for the location of the monasteries. These are connected to insular mountains and plateaus advancing to closed intermountain depressions. In depressions and large dry riverbeds we find great piles of sand, dunes, which reach up to 400–500 m. The relief from the Desert of Nubia is mainly composed by a structural plateau 350-1000 m high, decreasing in altitude from East to West, considerably ridged by a great number of dry waterbeds. To the west, the plateau is covered with a layer of Aeolian sands that looks like sand drifts (crescent dunes). From a climatic point of view, the Sahara deserts are high level arid climate as the average multi-annual temperatures are over 20°, the winters are warm (over 10-14°C), high level of evapotranspiration, the precipitations are weak (70mm/year) and the north-eastern trade-winds magnify the aridity in the eastern areas. The hydrographical network of surface waters are scarce discontinuous, except for the Nile [10]. Contrary to this fact, the subterranean waters are more frequently than the terrestrial ones and can be found especially in the dry oueds and into depressions where phreatic waters and springs are often spread and close to the surface. The accumulations of waters from infiltrations are so abundant that, at the foot of some dunes water springs and small lakes appear. The deep water ground layer

is responsible for the formation of oasis and palm groves, otherwise rare to be found in a sandy and rocky desert. The Saharan soils are generally abiogenic, poor in humus, covered with salt crusts that were preserved (chlorides, gypsum, calcium).

In these conditions, during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the entire Biblical territory will be populated by monks, the Egypt keeping its precedence. The other monastic territories cover a symbolic line and a physical and geographical one, to places less and less harsh and more populated, going from the subtropical arid climate to the temperate one.

#### **4. The bridge between desert and urbanity**

From Egypt, the monasteries spreads out to the other neighbouring regions, Mount Sinai being one of the reference points of the monastic pathway to Europe, which seems to connect the monasteries with the proper mountainous heights.

From a geographical point of view, the area is important as the 'bridge' between Africa and Eurasia, belonging to the so called *Fertile Crescent* that includes the Levant and Mesopotamia. Coupled with the Sahara pump theory, Middle Eastern land-bridge is of extremely importance to the distribution of old Christianity, after the spread of humanity.

It is already known that the appearance of the monastic phenomenon follows, at historical level, on medium term, the extinction of subpluvial Neolithic that supported the Egyptian civilization [11]. And if the first monasteries are in relationship with the desert, in the Sinai Bridge we have the first great bifurcation:

1. to the *mountainous monastery*, that will become representative for the Greek world through its Athonite peak and
2. to the *urban monastery*, with regional variations going to the western ones where the monastery becomes an urbigenous factor.

In Sinai, the first monks are mentioned before the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Mount Sinai represents a special place by association with the burning bush and Saint Catherine Monastery that was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century will benefit a rare position in the rank of mountainous settlements.

Mount Sinai (2285 m) and Mount Saint Catherine (2629 m) are the tallest peaks on the Sinai peninsula as the highest mountains of the huge horn between Mediterranean and Red Sea, Arabia and Africa, where the Monastery of Saint Catherine is sited at the bottom of slopes rising at 1260 m altitude. The rocks were formed in the late stage of the Arabian-Nubian Shield's evolution. Mount Sinai spread as a complex ring that consists of alkaline granites intruded into diverse rock types, including volcanic ones. The granites range in composition from syenogranite to alkali feldspar granite. The volcanic rocks are alkaline to per alkaline and they are represented by sub aerial flows and eruptions and sub volcanic porphyry

Sinai is one of the few volcanic regions where monasteries were erected.

Until the Persian and Arabic menace another two areas from the *geographical bridge* come actively to life – the Gaza Strip and Palestine - where monasticism concentrated around Jerusalem, the Dead Sea and The Valley of Jordan. We witness here the *first great return of monasticism to town*. We don't say that the fortified towns wouldn't have sheltered before monastic centres on the outskirts or even up town, as the Near East develops the pattern of the desert as well as the one of urban monasticism, but numerous examples from the 'Egyptian Lives of the Fathers' mention the existence of the monasteries in *extramuros* in the majority, compared to the Palestinian monasteries that flourish in the desert as well as in towns.

The first explanation with geographical dimension and signification would be the degree of urbanization of the Near East during the Biblical times, first of all brought about by the already mentioned natural favourability. The Palestinian and Syrian deserts are less harsh than the Saharan-Egyptian one, which originated the creation and the preservation of a coherent urban network.

Although the purpose of this research aims at the monasteries, a digression to the ascetic phenomenon can support our argumentation. Both Egyptian and Syrian asceticism in the fourth century developed out of earlier ascetic traditions in their respective locations. While the anchoritic life was equally as common in both provinces, the expression of the ascetic discipline, the askesis differed between the two: Egyptian asceticism was considerably milder than the discipline practiced by the anchorites in Syria. This was due to Egypt's severe deserts and harsh climatic conditions, forcing the ascetic to remain in his cell, where he practiced the central tenets of the askesis: fasting, prayer and meditation. Syrian asceticism, in contrast, was less hindered by that province's geography and climate, which was milder and more varied. The Syrians also developed a much more rigorous body renouncing tendency than in Egypt [12]. The natural geographic terrain and climatic conditions, as in the Roman province of Egypt, greatly affected the manifestation of Syria's characteristic breed of asceticism. But unlike Egypt, the geographic and climatic conditions in Syria were considerably milder. The difference between settled land and desert wilderness was not as greatly differentiated in Syria as it was in Egypt, where life was directed towards the hard reality of survival; the extreme heat and lack of annual rainfall severely limited the Egyptian ascetic to his cell, where manual labour and prayer were carried out in one place, whether in solitude or in common. The deserts in Syria on the other hand were not true deserts; the geographical terrain varied greatly from steppe-lands to mountainous regions, where semi-annual rain-showers ensured that water was always near the surface. Theodoret of Cyrrhus commented on the terrain in his own territory as "including many high mountains, some wholly bare and some covered with unproductive vegetation" [12]. The natural geographic conditions of the Syrian wilderness, as opposed to desert, marked the difference between the two provinces.



Consequently, almost simultaneously, new monasteries are built in the river-side regions of Euphrates, Antiochia, Edessa and Nisiba up to the frontiers of Persia.

In Hauran, a basalt region in the southern part of modern Syria and northern Jordan, the settlement pattern is characterized by unfortified villages of different sizes, military settlements and monasteries. The absence of villa-type settlements is noticeable [13]. The climate of the plateau created favourable conditions for growing wine, fruit trees, olives and grains.

Northwestern Jordan comprised fertile farming land, which most probably was incorporated to the areas of the six major urban centres': Gerasa, Gadara, Pella, Abila, Hippos, and Dium. Some of the places have biblical associations, which might have been one of the reasons for attracting monastic presence and pilgrimage to the region [13]. All in all, many regions of Byzantine Palestine show clear signs of growth: expansion of urban centres and increased building activities [14], cultivation of new lands and population growth. The cultivation of plants and animal husbandry appear to have been the main basis for the growth and increasing wealth. This economic prosperity created excellent financial circumstances for the construction of new monasteries and for the extension of the old ones as well.

But the real urbanity of monasteries will be in close connection with Constantinople.

#### ***4.1. The urbanity of the monasteries***

Constantinople, large city (metropolis) of the Empire and also prestigious monastic centre, introduces monasticism in Europe in its mixed form: *intramuros* (the town) and *extramuros* (the nature). Ever since the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the number of monasteries increases, on both riversides of Bosporus. Here will lodge 'the Saints', transferred in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the monastery Studion, and a succession of monasteries spreading between Chalcedon and Chrysopolis. Some other monasteries are created in Bithynia, Cappadocia, Peloponnesus or Thessaly, the trend following its way to Athos at the end of the first millennium.

Constantinople was called the city defended by God for the richness of the religious edifices and the amazing number of relics [15]. In this place, the monasteries see a new dimension of their legal statute which indirectly explains the great urban concentration. Thus, we find in the Byzantine Empire monasteries with the statute of public property and private property, the last ones descending from personal habitations transformed by their owners into monastic cloisters. Before the fall of Constantinople, a number of 325 monasteries are confirmed in the city [24, p. 51], followed by Nicomedia of Bithynia.

The second great concentration of monasteries is found on Mount Olympus, the heart of the Bithynian monasticism and on Auxentie's Mountain, testifying the emergence of an important category of mountainous monasteries.

## **5. Altitude, geomorphology and morphostructure**

Monasticism advances towards Europe and takes a certain shape according to the local conditions found in each space. But Cappadocia represents a special ramification.

A distinctive case, where geomorphology becomes a constitutive part of monasticism, Cappadocia is characterized by a morphological peculiarity as a tableland, with a 1000 meters in average absolute altitude, and its heterogenic structure comprise from limestone, calck and also several pyroclastic ignimbrite deposits. Its climate has continental and semi-arid elements, wet season with rainy and even snowy precipitation, which is intense in winter and spring and almost driest in summer. Severe morphogenetic process activity in the soft ignimbrite context gave rise to a unique landscape, which is defined by branched and deeply-incised valley systems and by the well-known pinnacles or 'Fairy Chimneys'. The human settlements in this area are principally due to the Christians and, at a later stage, to the Byzantines: their activity marked the entire area and produced an outstanding system of underground settlements.

But when monasticism was grafted in Cappadocia, the building of monasteries had already progressed to the Balkan Peninsula so far, going also across the Danube. The Slavs from the south become acquainted with the anchoritic life in the 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the moment when Rila and Ohrida Lake areas are Christianized, becoming the main monastic centres for the Bulgarian and the Serbians. In this place the monasteries are particularly situated in protected but still accessible mountain regions. The sources of water are not anymore a priority because they are more numerous. During the Muslim occupation the Byzantine monasteries show a preference for a new location, besides the mountain - the forest. The forest becomes a favourite geographic site for the choice of monastic locations in the south as well as in the north of the Danube.

The monasticism spreads out to the new Christianized regions, finding in Russia a new way of expression. The Tatars' invasion during the 13<sup>th</sup> century puts an end to the powerful and flourishing monasticism in towns and the epoch of the forests and the frozen northern desert as monastic locations starts all over again. As a matter of fact, after the Turkish occupation, the monasteries become insular into the old 'warm' territories and go back to north, towards Russia and the Romanian Provinces, in highlands or at least in wooded regions.

The map of Orthodox monasticism at the north side of the Danube is marked by natural geographical and urban realities that are different from the original places of the movement. Without embarking upon an unrealistic and obsolete geographical determinism, we try to complete the image of the Romanian monasticism by adding a new dimension, connected to the particularities of physical location and its urban insertion.

## **6. Geographic locations of Romanian monasticism between 4<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries or about ‘the place seeking’**

The places of birth, development and maintenance of monastic cloisters are not uniform, expressing the continuous search for a pattern and an ideal place.

The Romanian territory witnesses Christianity from its very beginning through the relations with the Roman world. During the first centuries of the first millennium, among the first Christian communities of the Lower Danube there were also monasteries - active centres of anchoritic life and refuge centres in time of distress. Romanian monasticism appeared at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Dobrogea. It emerged from four different geographical areas of the large Eastern Roman Empire, almost at the same time. The Byzantine Empire was the first source where bishops and missionary monks of the Eparchy of Tomis mainly came from. They will introduce an urban, cultivated monasticism experienced in monastic arguments concerning Aryanism. It is the branch of monasticism associated with the town, the community that will last along the time although the pure forms will witness a fall together with the fall of the post-Aurelian urban network. A second important source was Cappadocia, the country of Saint Basil the Great and Saint Sava the Goth. This is the point of origin for the monks' penitence in caves with rupestrian churches cut into the rock, i.e. those at Nucu-Aluniş and later on those chalk churches of Basarabi-Murfatlar. The other two sources, Syria and Palestine mainly introduced the way of life in penitence. There aren't similarities of exterior organization between the two geographical areas, although the same pattern of caves with miniature churches seems to be of Syrian inspiration, not only Cappadocian. There would be a late 5<sup>th</sup> source, Illyria and the Dalmatia Coast that establishes easily the Athonite pattern by Serbian influence, mainly in forest area.

Among the first personalities of our primary monasticism we can mention Saint John Cassian (360–435), born in the region of Scythia Minor (now Dobrogea) that comes in touch with monastic experience just in his places of origin. The property of the Cassians, fathers and forefathers of Saint John Cassian, were spreading out to the Casimcea Valley up to the caves mentioned in two landmark writings discovered by V. Pârvan. It seems that some other monastic centres existed in Dobrogea at that time, i.e. the fortresses Callatis (Mangalia), Sucidava, Axiopolis (Cernavoda) and especially Niculitel, in Histria (Istria). Some other monastic settlements at the mouths of the Danube as those located in Dinogetia-Garvan, Noviodunum (Isaccea), Troesmis (Iglita) and in other Daco-Roman fortresses. It is considered that several hesychastic settlements would have existed in the north of Dobrogea, protected by forest and mountains [16].

Thus, Dobrogea represents a double bridge – physical and symbolical – between the beginning monasticism of the stony desert and developed cosmopolite cities and the temperate monasticism of caves and forests.

The monastic centres from Scythia Minor, the eparchies, the monasteries and their anchorites had intense relations over the Byzant, Cappadocia, Rome and Palestine or Egypt as well as with the Daco-Roman towns at the north of the Danube, especially in the area Brăila- Galaţi, Siret River Valley, Codrii Vlasiei (Vlasiei woods) or Buzau Valley up to the curvature of the Carpathians and Subcarpathians. The well-known hesychastic complex from the villages Nuculuniş and the communes Colţi-Bozioru in Buzau county is the oldest monastic centre found in the Carpathians, existing from the Paleo-Christian epoch, in the 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The numerous caves and rupestrian churches built inside stone, as well as the deep hesychastic local tradition transform this area into the most powerful hesychastic place in the middle of the country after Scythia Minor or Dacia Pontica (Dobrogea). Obviously, the insertion of monastic life into Buzau region is due to the fruitful clerical relations between the monasteries near the mouths of the Danube and the North-Danubian Dacia. The invasion of the Slavs (the 7<sup>th</sup> century) and the destruction of the greatest fortresses and monasteries from Dacia Pontica forced many Christians and monks to find refuge in the Buzău mountains and Vlăsiei Woods, thus contributing to the extension of monastic life to the north of the Danube.

But the favourability of the natural environment is indisputably an element that needs attention. For instance, the curvature of the Carpathians and Subcarpathian area have a flysch dominant geological structure alternant sequences given by sedimentary rocks consisting of grit stones, clay and limestone and conglomerates which determine a differential sculptured morphogenetic shaping forms, ready to be baptized ('old men', 'old women', 'sphinx', 'apostles', 'priests', etc) and hollows, sort of caves and caverns, that can be easily enlarged by human action. We can notice the obvious direct relation between this geographical aspect and the multitude of hermitages, found in this type of sites, anchoritic places that later on will turn into monasteries.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century, the period of political and ecclesiastical crystallization in Wallachia, will give place to the Byzantine tradition of Athonite origin in the reorganization of the monastic life in Wallachia, Moldavia, and partially in Transylvania. Vodiţa, Tismana, Motru, Prislop, Bistriţa and Neamţ are the first reorganized monasteries following the Athonite pattern. At the same time, they clearly define the specific location of Romanian monasticism in the Subcarpathian area.

## **7. The present geography of the religious landscape**

The places where the religious edifices are located is due to the non-homogeneity of the Romanian space which gains qualitative attributes on the basis of the number and intensity of the hosted objects. Their mutual reference induces the qualitative aspect of the qualified space. When choosing the location, certain places, certain hierophanies which consecrate that peculiar location should be taken into consideration. After all these elements, the consecration ritual of the construction should be added. Consequently, the space

is not homogenous from the viewpoint of its sacredness either since there are places where the spiritual energy is more present or becomes more present through hierophany, consecration rituals, etc.

Among the other European Orthodox countries or countries with representative Orthodox communities, Romania has the strongest spiritual and constructive monastic phenomenon with its more than 600 old or new monasteries. Inside the country, at the level of bishoprics and historic provinces, the distribution of monasteries displays a strong territorial unbalance. The mapping of the monastic phenomenon at the level of the entire Romanian space has revealed territorial concentrations with various degrees of agglutination of monasteries and hermitages. According to the density of the monastic worshiping places we identified three categories of geographic areas: areas with high density of monasteries, areas with major concentration and areas that are weak, unclear or irrelevant from this point of view (Table 1) [17].

**Table 1.** The correspondence between main historical province areas and geographical units/landscapes.

<b>Areas with high density of monasteries</b>	<b>Type of landscape/geographical unit</b>
Oltenia Province / Vâlcea County	Getic Subcarpathians
Muntenia Province / Buzău County	Curburii Subcarpathians
Moldova Province / Neamț County	Moldavia Subcarpathians Stânișoarei Mountains

The first observation that easily stands out regards the common or at least comparable ‘nature’ of the three locations: hypsometric levels of relief with moderate accessibility, generally located between 500 and 1 000 m, with a high degree of fragmentation and landscape energies of 300 m, permanent hydrographic network forestry area of deciduous species. But the Subcarpathian sites and landscapes displays these features quasi-continuously along its entire length without canonic settlements of the same density, fact which can be explained by the other factors of influence and concentration, namely the degree of isolation and distance to populated settlements, the notoriety of certain pioneering monks around those places, the policy of the administrations, etc.

The second group of areas brings together territories more diverse in terms of physical and geographical conditions and population (Table 2).

It can be seen that the second large location area belongs to the plain; it is an obviously important issue that there the forest have a polarizing rule. Only few monastic settlements looking for the harshness of the open plain, which could have reminded of the Egypt desert conditions where the first Christian hermits secluded themselves. This is also the area where we find the most ‘urban’ monasteries, some of them located in the very heart of the capital city.

**Table 2.** The correspondence between major concentrations areas and geographical units/landscapes.

<b>Areas of major concentration in Romania</b>	<b>Type of landscape/geographical unit</b>
Craiova – Slatina – Drăgăşani	The Romanian Plain
Târgovişte – Piteşti – Câmpulung	The Romanian Plain – Subcarpathians
Ploieşti – Câmpina – Vălenii de Munte	The Curburii Subcarpathians – Romanian Plain
Ploieşti – Bucureşti – Urziceni	The Romanian Plain
Râmnicu Sărat – Focşani	The Romanian Plain
Troţuş Valey	The Curburii Subcarpathians
The Central Moldavian Plateau	The Central Moldavian tableland
Suceava	The Suceava Tableland – Obcine, Bucovina Hills
Olt Valey	The Făgăraş Depression
Maramureş – Lăpuş	The Carpathians and Transilvania Hills

### ***7.1. Isolation versus centrality – from the ‘desert’ to urbanity***

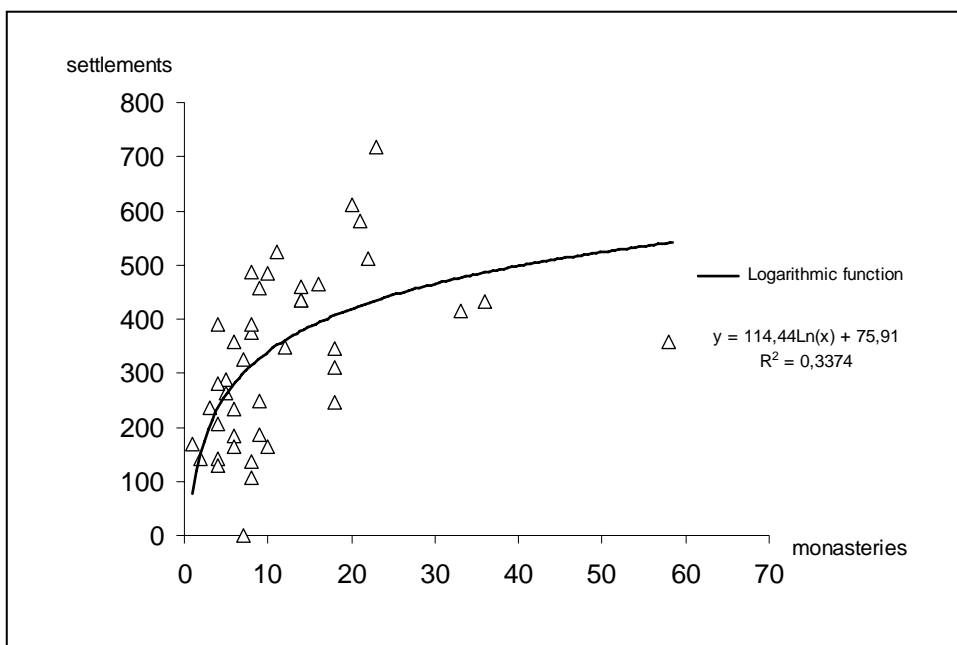
One of the first dimensions accompanying the worshipping location is its relationship with the group of believers which it belongs to by common use. This fact introduces the first major difference in choosing and locating the construction. Historically speaking, the parish churches have been associated with a community which conferred recognition of its importance by locating the church in the most visible, accessible and protected place at the same time, becoming thus the ‘centre’ of the settlement. By opposition and as a result of a much stronger spiritual motivation, of the need for quietness and of minimum contact with the temptations of the laic world, the monasteries choose for their locations places outside settlements, isolated, out of sight and even difficult to reach.

The urban-territorial evolutions in the modern time have gradually reduced, sometimes even to ‘absorption’, the interstices of the uninhabited space which determined the initial positions of certain edifices to change in relation with the rest of the ensemble and the once central cathedrals to become peripheral and isolated monasteries to be included in the everyday circuit as a result of the urban explosion and of a higher level of accessibility conferred by the communication ways.

The first hypothesis we planned on testing refers precisely to the isolation of the monasteries from the inhabited areas, rule which accompanies the choice of locations. By immediate inference, a small density of settlements would attract a predisposition for a high number of monasteries. But the historical reality reveals, at least for the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, a strong dependency between the demographic density and the number of monasteries [18]. The fact is reasonable if we consider the times and specially the geographic places – the Romanian Plain and the tablelands of south.

Nowadays this interrelation could appear incorrect. To support this fact, analyzing the results of the study made on the relationship between the number of the settlements, urban and rural (at the county level), and the number of the monastic worshipping places recorded in 2007, we reach the conclusion below.

The second degree logarithmic function that shapes well the distribution of the intersection points of the variables taken into account (Figure 1) shows the tendency of gradual moderation of the dependence relationship/connection between settlements and monastic worshipping places along with the progressive growth of the prime numbers in the relation [17]. More exactly, the curve displayed by the combination of the two variables is of a logarithmic type, emphasizing the association of the small number of monasteries both to a small number, and to a large number of settlements. The differences between the concentration areas are the second signal of a territorial unbalance of sacredness. This unbalance has both a natural and human resort that could be analyzed for each micro region.



**Figure 1.** The Settlements - Monasteries Connection (county level) in 2007.

## 8. Conclusions

The monasteries are a concentrate and essential form of re-oikumene. Their spatial unbalanced distribution reflects both the natural diversity, which could be explained by geographical reasons and arguments, and an invisible interrelation with social elements. However, there are some areas that preserved through time a strong attraction for monastic life. These areas became special territory by their sacral charge and shape a *sui generis* spatial organization that is not superposed entirely on the quotidian spatial planning.

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