

## FUNCTIONALITY OF THE ROCK-HEWN VESTIGES IN HUMAN SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS

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**Abstract.** The northern part of Buzău county is well-known for the existence of a network of rock-hewn vestiges that spreads between Cătina and Brăeşti communes. Traditionally seen as refuge places and known as components of a monastic center, the period as well as the purpose of their digging have yet to be discovered, although as places of worship, they had an important role in local history. This study aims to discuss the functionality of the rock-hewn vestiges as a factor in human settlement dynamics.

**Keywords:** *rock-hewn vestiges, monachism, human settlements, historical geography, hermitages*

### **Introduction**

Over time, apart from permanent settlements, different seasonal or temporary buildings used as sheepfolds, shelters or huts have emerged as necessary. Their major functions are related to livestock, but due to the fact that they are seasonally or temporarily inhabited, they automatically receive a social function. When the ratio of the two functions is changed, a transition to permanent settlement status can take place, forming a possible basis for future human settlements (*Cândea et al.*, 2006).

The *rock-hewn vestige* represents a trace or a remnant of something old, dug or inscribed on rock, lost a long time ago, yet denoting a historical, cultural or spiritual presence (*Radu-Buterez*, 2010). The main characteristic of a rock-hewn vestige is that it no longer has any active function, being exactly the opposite of a rock-hewn settlement, which is working actively. By default, rock-hewn vestiges are associated with the reclusories and hermitages that existed in the northern part of Buzău and Săcuieni counties.

One aspect about the rock-hewn vestiges that still remains unclear is related to the period and purpose of their digging. The first documentary mentions of the area refer to the local hermitages and did not appear until the first half of the sixteenth century, but without giving us any clue as to their foundation. This allowed researchers to give various assumptions about the circumstances of their occurrence.

Referring to the Casa Hoţilor (House of Thieves) vestige, *Iorgulescu* (1892, p.271), without further explaining, advances the idea that "*săparea ei însă, ca și a tuturor celorlalte peșteri din Munții Buzăului, se poate atribui geților*" (its digging, however, as all the other caves in the Buzău Mountains, can be attributed to the Dacians). Ptolemy's map shows that the Buzău area was inhabited by tribes named *siensii*, several archaeological and numismatic findings indicating that there has been a union of Getae tribes between Buzău valley and the lower valley of Siret river (*Pârvan*, 1926). Further archaeological research in the area has revealed a Dacian settlement in the heart of Scăeni

village (*Drâmbocianu*, 1980) and a first level of housing within the Iron Age period<sup>1</sup> in Peștera (The Cave) vestige (*Boroneanț*, 1988, 2000) and in Siliștea Scăenilor, Bozioru commune (*Drâmbocianu*, 1980). However, Peștera appears as a particular case, whereas originally it is a man-modified natural shelter, as shown by *Boroneanț* (1988), not a fully excavated settlement.

### Local tradition and shelter function

Local folk tradition gives a single explanation regarding the origin of the rock-hewn settlements, namely that they were used as refuge during the invasions (*Mândricel*, 1980, p.40). This is what we can conclude from some of the responses that Hasdeu received to his questionnaire, which all state that the settlements “*sînt foarte vechi și la început au fost locuite de tătari prigoși. Mai în urmă, cînd din unii din oameni mai bătrîni țin minte, ele a fost locuite de cîte un pustnic de unde și-au tras și numele...*”<sup>2</sup> (are very old and have been originally inhabited by persecuted Tatars. Not so long ago, according to what some of the old people still remember, they were each inhabited by a hermit who also gave his name to the respective settlement).

The shelter function of the rock-hewn settlements is mentioned by *Drâmbocianu* (1980). The only clear indications come from the Peștera vestige, where the first Iron Age dwelling may be evidence of a former temporary or seasonal settlement.

A similar situation is found at *Gura Tătarilor* (Tatars' Entrance), which was mentioned for the first time by the village teacher George Filipescu, from Colți village, in 1874, in a letter to Alexandru Odobescu, thoroughly describing the inside, where he found piles of ash, embers and smoked rock, “*iar săpînd am găsit și niște oase prin pămînt, ca de om*”<sup>3</sup> (and while digging, I found some buried bones, that seemed to have human origin). The tunnel had been dug by the “*oameni pitiți de frica tătarilor*”<sup>4</sup> (people hiding from Tatars). The original floor is covered with a layer of soil and litter of  $\approx 0.90$  to 1.50 m, which forms the current floor (Ștefan and *Drâmbocianu*, 1980, p.64) (*fig. 1a*). We cannot say with certainty whether *Gura Tătarilor* is an entirely man-made tunnel or just a bigger cave, as there is no clear evidence of digging or widening. Any markings or other dating elements have been covered. At  $\approx 95$  m southwest of the entrance, there are two dippers excavated in sandstone, at a distance of about 7 m apart (*fig. 1b*). Most likely they were used to collect rain water. Also, on a cliff located at  $\approx 45$  m southwest of the entrance we can find two incised symbols, a heart-shaped one and some illegible form (*fig. 1c*).

The fact that *Gura Tătarilor* served as a refuge is undeniable, but it is difficult to determine exactly how long it held this function. The description offered by the teacher is lacking a name to designate this vestige, while the current toponym cannot make clarifications on its exact age.

<sup>1</sup> Officially known as Hallstat and spread between XII – V centuries B.C.

<sup>2</sup> Biblioteca Academiei, Cabinetul de manuscrise și cărți rare, mss. Rom. 3.437, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Biblioteca Academiei. *Secția manuscrise și cărți rare. Răspunsuri din județele Bolgrad, Botoșani, Buzău*, 224, tom. 11, p. 387

<sup>4</sup> *idem*

More recently, in the nineteenth century, because of isolation, we know that Fundătura (The Impasse) had been used as a refuge. In this respect, we remember nobleman Nica Mușcelanu, landowner at Merei village and judge at Buzău County Stewardship, who died in 1821 at Fundătura, where he retired with other băjenari (exiles) who ran because of the zavera<sup>5</sup> (Nicolescu and Petcu, 1999, p.30). If the nineteenth century saw Fundătura serving as a refuge, the possibility of a similar role in earlier periods cannot be excluded.

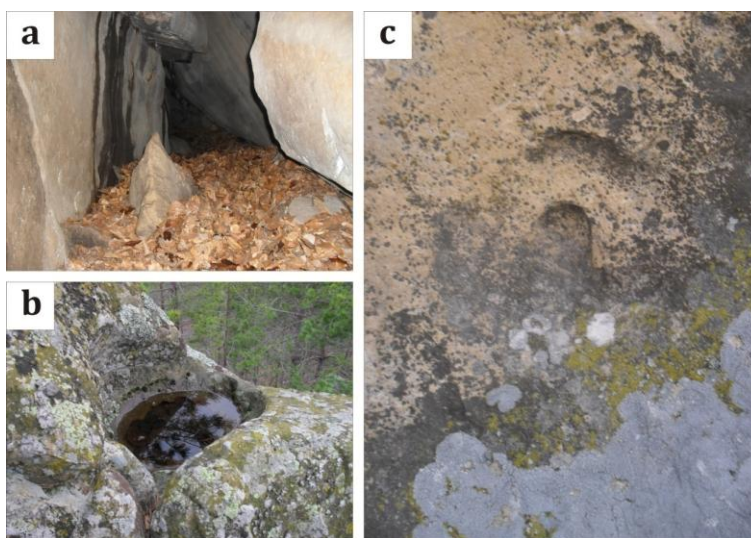


Figure 1 Gura Tătarilor a) inside the tunnel; b) excavated dipper; c) heart-shaped incision; (photos: Cezar Radu-Buterez, 2010)

The only rock-hewn vestige which is an exception to the place of refuge stereotypy is Aluniș ensemble, whose legend is as follows:

*„A fost odată, demult, să fie acum vreo mie de ani, un cioban pe numele său Vlad. și cum păzea el oile, într-o zi, a adormit într-o frumoasă poiană, legănat de adierea vântului, în parfum de floare și în cântec de privighetoare. Numai ce ațipise și în vis i se arată Maica Domnului, care-i spune să sape împreună cu prietenul său, ciobanul de peste deal, Simion, în stânca muntelui din preajmă, pentru că în mijlocul stâncii vor găsi o icoană. S-au apucat de lucru cei doi ciobani, au săpat în stânca lângă care-și țineau oile, găsind în mijlocul ei icoana Maicii Domnului. A venit multă lume să vadă minunea, iar acolo, în acea stâncă, a fost construită o biserică, altarul făcându-se exact în locul în care cei doi ciobani au găsit icoana. Biserica există și azi, ea este biserica în piatră a satului Aluniș din comuna Colți, județul Buzău”<sup>6</sup>.*

<sup>5</sup> Zavera is the name given to the uprising organized by the Greeks in 1821 against Turkish rule; the uprising had follow-up in the Romanian countries also (Schwartzfeld, W. (1889) *Zavera sau eteria de la 1821*, *Analele Societății istorice Iuliu Barasch*, III, nr. 1-2, pp. 196-199;

<sup>6</sup> Gathered by Viorica Nica and transcribed on the 19 May 2004 at Colți.

(Once upon a time, maybe a thousand years ago, there was a shepherd by the name of Vlad. And as he was guarding sheep one day, he fell asleep in a beautiful meadow, rocked by the breeze, in fragrance of the flowers and song of the nightingale. Just as he fell asleep, he had a dream showing Virgin Mary, who told him to dig with his friend, the shepherd over the hill, Simon, in the rock surrounding the mountain, because they would find an icon in the middle of the rock. The two shepherds went to work, they dug in the rock near the place they were keeping their sheep and in the very heart of it, they found the icon of the Virgin. A lot of people came to see the miracle, and there in the rock, a church was built, the altar being made exactly where the two shepherds found the icon. The church still exists today; it is the stone church of Aluniș village, in Colți commune, Buzău county).

First, we note that the Aluniș legend is identical to that of Nămăești hermitage (*Constantinescu*, 1983). Its *hram*, "Beheading of St. John the Baptist" is explained by the fact that its completion was exactly on the 29 of August<sup>7</sup>. Regarding its dating, the local folk tradition as well as the church's official history mention specifically the year 1277, making it clear that from the outset, its role was to be a place of worship. If this were true, Aluniș would represent the only rock-hewn settlement from Buzău that we know it hasn't fulfilled any other functions. The most obvious difference between Aluniș and other rock-hewn settlements is that it neighbors a permanent human settlement. The village of Aluniș is considered to have a *clăcași* origin (*Petrescu-Burloiu*, 1977), while some sources see it established by people retreated there because of barbarian attacks<sup>8</sup>. As outlined in the *Charta României Meridionale*, of Carol Popp de Szathmary, the village appears tightly positioned in the area to the north-west of the rock church, near a place currently called Lacul Verde (The Green Lake)<sup>9</sup>. Subsequently, from the twentieth century, it began a process of linear expansion to the South, on the Țigănească Valley.

### Religious function of the rock-hewn settlements

It is possible that starting with the fourth century A.D., Buzău area had been under the influence of audianism teachings promoted by the missionary Audius. He was exiled by Constantine II in Scythia Minor, where he converted many pagans. From here, he traveled to the north of the Danube, "*în părțile cele mai dinăuntru ale Gothiei*" (in the innermost parts of Gothia) where he founded monasteries based on the practice of asceticism (*Coman*, 1983 apud *Holl ed.* 1980). *Rămureanu* (1978) locates Gothia in eastern Wallachia and southern Moldavia, as he sees the monastic settlements of the audians being based in the hilly and mountainous areas that were protected from migrators' attacks. *Mândricel and Bortaș* (2008, p.75, note 28), assuming the opinions of Vasile Drăguț, suggest that some rock-hewn settlements like Ghereta (The Booth), Peștera lui Dionisie Torcătorul (Dionisie's Cave) and Ușa Pietrei (The Stone's Door) have some characteristics that recommend them as audian prayer altars. We detect a correlation with

<sup>7</sup> Informer: Dumitru Cîrștian, Colți village, 2010

<sup>8</sup> Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Statului Buzău, Fondul Sfatului Popular al Comunei Colți, 1/1942, f.30;

<sup>9</sup> Informer Grigore Rotaru, Muscelul Cărămănești, 2010

*Drâmbocianu's* research (1980), which dates by analogy Peștera lui Dionisie, insisting that its excavation took place between III-VI centuries A.D. (Ghereta and Uș a Pietrei lack dating elements), although the truthfulness of this dating is questioned (*Radu-Buterez*, 2010, p.126).

*Chihaiia* (1974) sees a link between the work of Theodosius from Kelifarevo, founder of Ivanovo churches, Bulgaria and the patronage of the former rock-hewn hermitages and defines their medieval stage during the hesychast irradiation from Kelifarevo, between the years 1346 - 1371, although indicating that local place names show that their function of worship is much older. *Bălan* (2001) argues that the emergence of monastic life in the North of Buzău took place in ancient Christian times (centuries IV-VII A.D.). Destruction in the seventh century of most Dobrujan cities and monasteries by the Slavs, forced the monks to take refuge in the Buzău Mountains, thus contributing to the spread of monastic life at the bend of the Carpathians.

The study of hermits is extremely complex. Withdrawn in isolated areas, they rarely came into contact with other people. The first people to discover them were mostly shepherds, who informed the nearby rural communities about the emergence of a new hermitage (*fig. 2*). Being close to a village usually meant that, over a few generations, houses would appear around the hermitage, thus a new settlement being founded. In most cases, the hermits would leave to other isolated areas, offering their cell as the new village church (*Bălan*, 2001, p.18) (*fig. 3*).

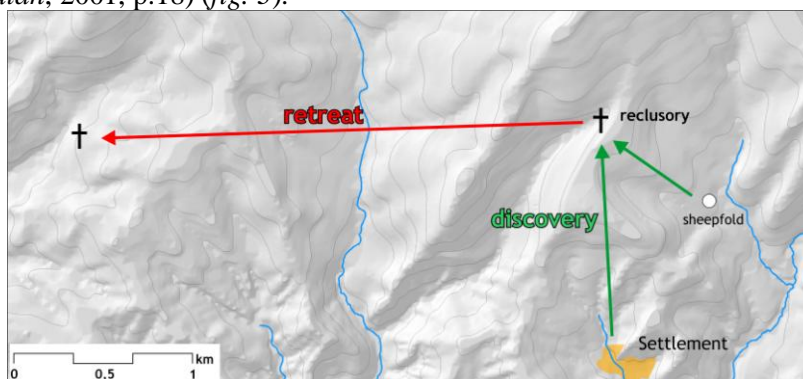


Figure 2 Map showing the usual scenario, as a reclusory is discovered by local communities

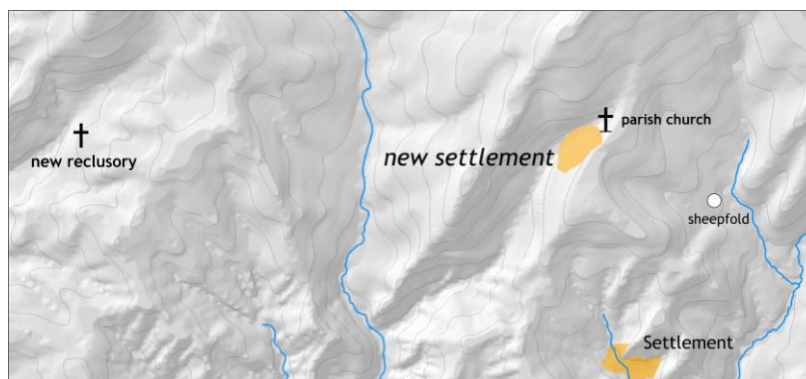


Figure 3 The emergence of a new settlement

While the situation does not apply directly to the reclusories established in rock-hewn settlements, its implications will be further shown. A feature of all Romanian hermits, also illustrated in the area of the rock-hewn settlements of Buzău, is the formation of small communities that had a main hermitage acting like a church (*fig. 4*), although the hermits only gathered there during Sundays and holidays. The monastic reorganization made by Nicodemus from Tismana, which occurred in Romanian countries during the fourteenth century, did not immediately affect the northern parts of Buzău and Săcuieni.

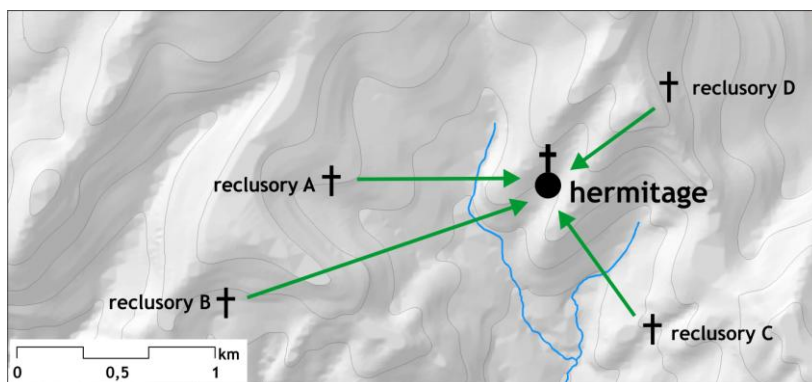


Figure 4 The spatial relations of a small community of hermits

Significant changes occur only in the second half of the sixteenth century, along with a 1587 decree of Prince Mihnea Turcitul which gives commandment to “*mănăstirii numită Motnău unde este hramul Sfintei Troițe și mănăstirii Agaton unde este hramul Sf. Ioan Zlataust și mănăstirii ce se cheamă Ion Bogoslov ca să le fie ocină în jurul mănăstirilor*”<sup>10</sup> (the Motnău, Agaton and Ion Bogoslov monasteries to receive the surrounding estate).

The charter gives us some interesting information about the evolution of monastic life. It marks the passing from the anchoritic to the coenobitic organization with a voivode intervention. Also, Motnău, Agaton and Ioan Bogoslovul are listed as having several monks, thus stepped out from the hermitage phase.

By episcopal or royal intervention comes the advance to the next step of shaping monastic life, transforming the reclusory or hermitage which had a self-depending life, to a more stable community life (*Bălan*, 2001, p.19) (*fig. 5*). Monasteries are thus given land and are granted the right to cut the forest.

We note that the charter uses the term *monastery* (probably for the first time in case of the three monastic settlements), instead of *hermitage*, one that seems most appropriate since it is only now that the coenobitic organization is installed; although a copy of a document from 1524 shows that the boundary of Scăeni estate “*la Vîrfu Agatonul se hotărăște cu schiturile*”<sup>11</sup> (borders the *hermitages* at Agatonul Peak).

<sup>10</sup> Arhivele Statului București, S.I., 1.354;

<sup>11</sup> Arhivele Statului București, Episcopia Buzău, Cop. XCII bis / 1-17, f.14;



The Tatar invasion in 1596, led to the destruction of the monasteries and to the scattering of the monks (*Mândricel*, 2001). Therefore, in the same year, Prince Michael the Brave felt the need to reorganize the area, and in the midst of the monastic community, he founds a monastery dedicated to St. George, with the intention to coordinate all surrounding hermitages (*Mândricel*, 2006, p.58).

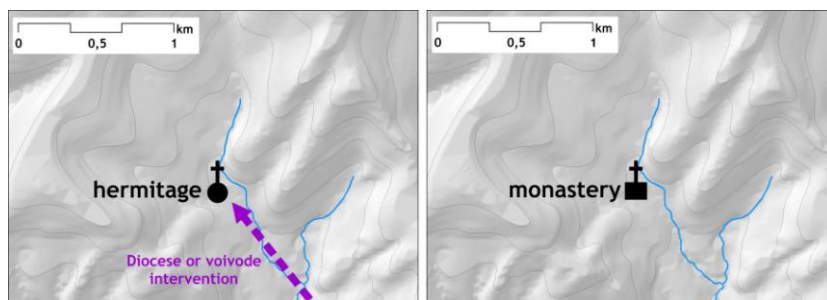


Figure 5 The passing from anchoritic to coenobitic organization

In 1786 “*au fost și 12 sfinte biserici schitulețe care fiecare stăpânea câte un petic de loc împrejur, dar după vremei dărâpându-se s-au împresurat de moșneni rămânând numai schitul Fundătura*” (there have been twelve church hermitages, each of them owning a small patch of land, but after a while, they have been run-down and besieged by the *moșneni*, Fundătura being the only one to remain) (Filitti, 1919, p.158). Difficult geographical conditions, coupled with numerous land conflicts with the *moșneni* slowly led to the extinction of the monastic life from small communities, leaving only the larger monasteries, which also began to be decommissioned after the *Secularizare* (Fundătura - in 1864, Saint George – in 1872 ) or to become parish churches (Aluniș – from 1864, Găvanele – from 1903) (*fig. 6*).



Fig. 6. Ruins of Sf. George monastery  
(Photo: Cezar Radu-Buterez, 2008)

Towards the end of their existence, new settlements had been established around them, mostly made up of so-called *liudi* who had earlier served in the monasteries (Chitu, 1980) (fig. 7).

We possess some information from Iorgulescu (1892, p.452), which specifies that at St. George “*biserica s-a dărâmat, abia mai cunoscându-se locul; iar din chilii au rămas 4, unde s-au stabilit câțiva locuitori*” (the church collapsed, its place being barely recognizable, and the four remaining cells that became home to newly established people). The hamlet didn’t last long since the official statistics only mention him in 1912.

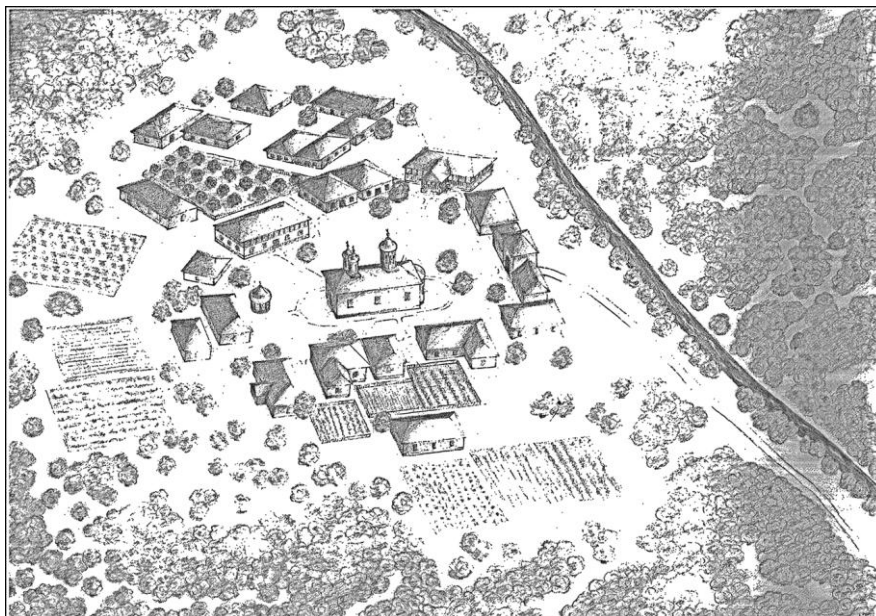


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the Sf. George hamlet  
(drawing by Alina Ciobanu)

In the clearing around Fundătura there were several outbuildings which have been operating as cells, and areas, as well as small patches where maize was grown (figure no.7). On the Scheda 1856 map<sup>12</sup> and the Charta României Meridionale from the same year, we can find a village named *Fundăturile*, roughly located around the rock-hewn settlement. Aricescu (1872) states that “*astă localitate Fundătura se numesce, căci aci se’nfundă locul, de giur împrejur fiind munți rîpoși și cu pădure*” (this settlement is named Fundătura because the of a dead end, surrounded by steep mountains and forest). The village does not appear on any later map, probably being decommissioned shortly after the hermitage’s dissolutions, since Iorgulescu (1892) does not write about any settlement at all near Fundătura.

<sup>12</sup> Scheda, J. (1856) General - Karte Des Oesterreichischen Kaiserstaates., sheet XV, Vienna; available at [www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)



## Conclusions

The rock-hewn vestiges had dominant functions of refuge and worship, each of the two being proven by their isolated location, the existence of incised inscriptions both on their inside and outside and the abundance of medieval documents.

Indirectly, the rock-hewn vestiges from northern Buzău County have greatly influenced the human settlements. Starting with isolated reclusories which stood at the base of founding small hermitages, the monastic community flourished during the feudal period. The initial hesychast organization was replaced, with the aid of royal intervention, to a coenobitic one which promoted a more socially-oriented life to the hermits. The large monasteries have frequently acted as coordinators for the remaining hermitages, but also contributing to their disappearance. Following the confiscation of monastic properties in 1864, the monasteries began to dissolve; leaving behind small hamlets partially formed with or on the place of the former cells, these small settlements lasted only in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The extinction of monastic life automatically led to a decline of the settlements, marking the end of an ensemble that occupied the entire northern Buzău County and spanned through at least five centuries.

Further research concerning the monastic communities is currently undergoing.

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