

The Fortified Churches of the Transylvanian Saxons

Zoom In, Zoom Out

Although not necessarily known in the first place as such, the fortified churches of the Transylvanian Saxons (image 001) are shelters for numerous valuable art objects and therefore highly significant for the development of arts in this corner of Europe. Basically, each church (image 002) is endowed with the most important ritual object (image 003), often a masterpiece of painting and wood carving. Along with altars, the given religious buildings may still host pulpits, baptismal fonts (image 004) and at least one pipe organ (image 005). But no one should overlook even modest pieces of crafts as benches and chandeliers or even humble door leaves (image 006), once painted to embellish the house where people gathered to praise God. Even less accessible floors should be considered as these may also hide surprises as, for instance, the bells (image 007) that used to ring to gather the community both for peaceful and for violent reasons. And last, but not least, one should never overlook the written words that remind not only of significant building stages, including renovations (image 008) and enrichments (image 009), but that may recount historical happenings that, later, have often turned out to be genuine historic events. Such an inscription (image 010), to be found in the fortified church on Mergeln / Merghindeal, is, for instance, associated to the first unification of the major three historical provinces. For, although Romania celebrates in 2018 its hundredth birthday as the modern state it is now, truth is that Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia have been united before, between 1600 and 1601. The given text (image 010) is a reminder of a battle related to that process, a battle in which the church has been devastated.

But why would a small village try to defy the by far more powerful army? In order to understand the answer to this question, one has to remember that, originally, the Transylvanian Saxons didn't belong to the natives – but have been settlers. Wishing to colonise the south-eastern part of Transylvania, the ruler of that time, the Hungarian king, has attracted, in the 12th century, peasants and craftsmen by offering a series of privileges, expecting them, in exchange, to work hard and, if necessary, to defend the country. Once arrived, the Saxons have founded, as expected, villages – villages consisting in groups of properties, organised like those known as “*Fränkisches Gehöft*” (Franconian farm). Basically (image 001), the narrow but deep plot was comprising a front part for the equally narrow and deep main dwelling, as well as the adjoining edifices. The barn, placed crosswise, was also acting as the border towards the kitchen garden and the orchard, occupying the back of the plot. The major agricultural lands were beyond the village' boundaries, along with grazing fields and woods that also belonged to the community. As expected, the heart

of the dense, concentrated settlement was the church, by then still a normal building (image 011) that stood out only by its sacred character, the long-lasting building materials and the precious works of art (image 012), glorifying God. Due to the efforts of their inhabitants, these villages flourished, some maybe even starting to develop towards the town status – until a traumatic event took place, shortly before the midst of the 13th century, namely the Mongolian invasion. The given raids have certainly devastated all villages and towns laying in its way, harming all given communities, despite their origin and status. But, unlike the natives, who afforded to flee from such a cruel enemy, knowing that they could return unconditionally after the hordes have moved forward, the Saxon colonists must have avoided to leave, fearing that they wouldn't be allowed to simply go back, after the danger had passed, as if nothing had happened. Being also responsible for the security of the country, the settlers must have thus decided to rather die on the spot than to abandon, even temporarily, their new homes. Consequently, this must have been at least one reason why the Saxons have started to build fortified ensembles.

It is supposed that, for the beginning, they have erected citadels hidden in the nearby woods and/or placed on the nearby hill – difficult to be reached, especially by horsemen. First, such fortresses must have consisted in wooden and earthen palisades (image 013, fig. A) that didn't last, of course. Later on, during the 14th century, some communities managed to build stone and brick citadels (image 013, figure B). But towards that very same 14th century, Transylvania became the target for abrupt Turkish attacks. Bulgaria was occupied and using it as a basis, small and fast groups started to cross the Danube and harass Wallachia. The Turkish warriors also even managed to cross the Romanian principdom and thus to reach southern Transylvanian villages and towns. As the strikes took place very sudden, the Transylvanian Saxons didn't have time enough to retreat behind the walls of their secluded citadels and, consequently, they understood that another solution was required – a solution able to both allow them to stay put and to successfully defend their lives, thus a solution able to allow communities to preserve both their sheer existence and their way of living. Basically, and accordingly, what the given communities needed was a building near enough, to be quickly reached by any of their members, large enough to shelter all of them and also able to resist assaults. In other words, the Saxon villages and even towns not yet surrounded by urban defensive systems needed a fortified church (image 014).

The Transylvanian Saxons have not been the first and not the only ones who had this idea. During the Middle Ages, the fortified church was a well-known concept, for, in absence of centralised states, able to ensure the protection of their inhabitants by keeping enemies at the country borders, each community was forced to secure its local boundaries. As, unlike towns, villages weren't rich enough to afford walls surrounding the whole settlement, the fortified

church has been a widespread phenomenon. Only, unlike the rest of Europe, in Transylvania, the mentality of the Saxons settlers offered its own share of this building type reasons to last longer.

As a consequence, the fortified churches of the Transylvanian Saxons are an unique opportunity to study a phenomenon otherwise lost in its initial density and intensity. In Austria, for instance, the two most known fortified churches are a pilgrimage church, the one in Maria Saal and the Saint Oswald church in Eisenerz, an iron ore mining town. In Transylvania most of the fortified churches are ensembles conceived and built by rural communities and their preserved concentration is matched only by their diversity (image 015). This assortment relies on the infinite possibilities of combining various ways of shielding an edifice and on the fact that, as it seems, each Saxon community has adapted the basic defensive principles and means to its own needs and its own resources. Therefore, the fortified churches of the Transylvania Saxons differ with regard to numerous points of view. For instance, the church itself – may be protected by a strong western bell tower (image 016) or, quite the opposite, by a powerful eastern tower erected above the choir, above the altar apse (image 017) or above both, while others enjoy both a western and an eastern tower (image 018). Elsewhere, the two towers are connected by a defensive storey within the roof (image 019), while other churches have abandoned all towers in favour of such a truss floor (image 020). Last but not least, it is either the western tower that works together with the defensive attic (image 021) or, quite the opposite again, the eastern one (image 022).

To all these thinkable versions of the sacred building one should add the endless possibilities regarding the precinct with regard to its shape that may vary from an organic oval (image 023), to a severe rectangle (image 024), through mixed outlines consisting in one (image 025) or two walls (image 026). Three enclosures (image 027) are rare but all the much impressive. The choices may be also increased by means of the towers and bastions (image 028), zoom in to slits and machicolations (image 029) and then one will understand why even in a restraint area as, for instance, the one around Braşov / Kronstadt (image 030) each fortified church is unique. Last but not least, during siege people required at least water and food and thus one should also consider the necessary edifices, sometimes built as collective, shared storage houses, some other times as individual cells, one for each family. Truth is that each component of the fortified churches seems to have been employed intensively – as their names suggest. For instance, one common name is the “School Tower” and, as far as it is known, such towers seem to have served during sieges either as a dwelling for the teacher or as the ... school itself – a sign that the community tried to live its normal life even under abnormal circumstances. And this means that, during sieges, the fortified church had to replace the whole village and all its activities, as if the whole universe was compressed into the given ensemble, the only one able to

ensure the survival of its builders. No wonder that, in time, the communities started to identify themselves with the fortified churches they had conceived.

The last statement is valid also in the case of the church as a, primarily, religious edifice and, accordingly, the communities never ceased to use it as such, to maintain it and to embellish it – even after it had been turned into the last stand. This explains why, for instance, in a late Gothic hall church, with the most flamboyant stone carvings (images 031 and 032), one can find not baroque balconies (image 033), dating back to the 18th century, along with a younger, neoclassical altar (image 034), added only during the 19th century.

On the other hand, simultaneously, the Saxon communities also kept to carefully maintain the defensive components of their fortified churches – even long after these ceased to be used for military reasons. After a rather tempestuous Renaissance, the late 17th century turned Transylvania into a battle field and, thus, the fortified churches have proven, once again, vital in protecting the communities that have created them. 1699 Transylvania was handed over by the Ottoman Empire to Austria and thus the region was finally ruled by a power not only capable but also willing to ensure its protection at the borders. Consequently, the fortified churches soon became obsolete – but, as already mentioned, the communities kept to carefully preserve them, almost never allowing the defensive elements to decay. The reason for such a noteworthy attitude relies in the special bond that had developed, during centuries, between the creators and their creations. The Saxons communities had conceived and developed their fortified churches in order to save their lives and ended in reflecting their whole universe in these major ensembles (image 035). Unlike in many other cases, the communities have imbedded in their fortified churches not only some, but all their major features i.e. their entire identity. This is the reason why, the fortified churches have such a strong identity of their own, which is powerful enough to influence not only their immediate neighbourhood (image 036), but also the distant one (image 037), creating thus a genuine cultural landscape (image 038).

Unfortunately, now-a-days, in many cases, the once defining presence of the fortified churches is being eroded by newly developed industries (image 039) and supermarkets (image 040). At the same time, their direct vicinity is being emptied of its initial intangible heritage (image 041) and the resulting voids are being inevitable filled with new uses (images 042) and symbols, symbols that are valuable for the emerging new communities (image 043) and, consequently, not only the cultural landscape (image 044) is being changed, but also the nearby context (image 045) – a reason more to value the fortified churches for themselves, as tangible items, both at the scale of an entire ensemble (image 046) and at the level of the smallest details (image 047).

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Image captions and source

Image 001

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal, still surrounded by typical properties.
Google Maps, downloaded in July 2018.

Image 002

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal, seen from the West. The author, 2006.

Image 003

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: the altar apse and, on its left, the pulpit.
Mioritics.

Image 004

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal, seen from the East. The author, 2006.

Image 005

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: the pipe organ. The author, 2006.

Image 006

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: painted door leaf. The author, 2006.

Image 007

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: the bells. The author, 2006.

Image 008

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: inscriptions regarding an “improvement” from
1775 and a restoration from 1975 – 1985. The author, 2006.

Image 009

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: text on the back of the altar consolidated and
gilded in 1794. The author, 2006.

Image 010

The fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: text regarding the devastating battle of 1600 (as
well as the “improvements from 1634, 1732, 1773 and 1803, and the renovations from 1923 and
1958). The author, 2006.

Image 011

The church in Michelsberg / Cisnădioara, seen from the South. Mioritics.

Image 012

The church in Michelsberg / Cisnădioara: a detail of the Romanesque portal. Mioritics.

Image 013

The first citadels built by the Transylvanian Saxons, of wooden and earthen palisades (figure A), of stone and brick walls (figure B). Fabini 1985, p. 156.

Image 014

Near enough, large enough and able to resist assaults: the fortified church in Bonnesdorf / Boian. Gerster and Rill 1997, p. 102.

Image 015

By different symbols for different types of churches, as well as by various signs for various types of precincts, this map shows that, basically, each fortified church is unique. Fabini 1985, annex.

Image 016

The church in Holzmengen / Hozman: seen from the South-East. Mioritics.

Image 017

The church in Frauendorf / Axente Sever: seen from the North-East. Mioritics.

Image 018

The church in Mergeln / Merghindeal: seen from the South. Mioritics.

Image 019

The church in Wurmloch / Valea Viilor: seen from the South-East. Mioritics.

Image 020

The church in Henndorf / Brădeni: seen from the South-East. Mioritics.

Image 021

The church in Probstdorf / Stejărișu: seen from the South-East. Mioritics.

Image 022

The church in Baaßen / Bazna: seen from the North-West. Mioritics.

Image 023

The ensemble in Wurmloch / Valea Viilor. Fabritius-Dancu 1983.

Image 024

The ensemble in Mergeln / Merghindeal. Fabritius-Dancu 1983.

Image 025

The ensemble in Baaßen / Bazna. Fabritius-Dancu 1983.

Image 026

The ensemble in Holzmengen / Hozman. Fabritius-Dancu 1983.

Image 027

The church in Birthälm / Biertan: seen from the North-West. Mioritics.

Image 028

Just a few of the tower and bastion types encountered at fortified churches. Fabini 1985, p. 147.

Image 029

Some of the slits and machicolation types. Fabini 1985, p. 144.

Image 030

The fortified churches of the Burzenland / Țara Bârsei. Fabini 1985, annex – excerpt.

Image 031

The church in Meschen / Moșna: late Gothic portal. Mioritics.

Image 032

The church in Meschen / Moșna: late Gothic “sacrament box”. Mioritics.

Image 033

The church in Meschen / Moșna: the balconies, at the end of the 18th century. Mioritics.

Image 034

The church in Meschen / Moșna: the neoclassical altar. Mioritics.

Image 035

The church in Deutsch-Weißkirch / Viscri. Mioritics.

Image 036

The village Mergeln / Merghindeal seen from its own fortified church. The author, 2006.

Image 037

The fortified church and the village Schönberg / Dealu Frumos seen from the fortified church in Mergeln / Merghindeal. The author, 2006.

Image 038

The cultural landscape defined as such by the fortified church in Wolkendorf / Vulcan.

The author, 2018.

Image 039

The new “cultural” landscape where the once defining presence of the fortified churches is being eroded by industrial units. Tartlau / Prejmer seen from the main road (from Kronstadt / Braşov).

The author, 2018.

Image 040

The new “cultural” landscape where the once defining presence of the fortified churches is being hidden by supermarkets. Weidenbach / Ghimbav seen from the main road (from Kronstadt / Braşov). The author, 2018.

Image 041

Traditional Saxon use of the church square – now-a-days taking place only once a year, during the annual meeting of the Transylvanian Saxons. Biertan / Birthälm. Mioritics.

Image 042

New and, fortunately, compatible use of the church square, as children play ground. Honigberg / Härman. The author, 2018.

Image 043

New symbols in the church square. Petersberg / Sân Petru. The author, 2018.

Image 044

Another version of the new “cultural” landscape, defined by series dwellings. Neustadt / Cristian seen from the road to Wolkendorf / Vulcan. The author, 2018.

Image 045

Other new symbols in the church square. Weidenbach / Ghimbav. The author, 2018.

Image 046

The fortified church in Neudorf / Nou. The author, 2006.

Image 047

Still the fortified church in Neudorf / Nou. The author, 2006.

Selected literature

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