

# WHOM DOES HERITAGE BELONG TO? THE CASE OF SAINT JOHN CASSIAN'S CAVE AND MONASTERY

Radu-Alexandru Dragoman\*

**Keywords:** Religious heritage, academic and Christian-Orthodox communities, Saint John Cassian's Cave and Monastery, Romania.

**Abstract:** Starting from the concrete example of Saint John Cassian's Cave and Monastery, the present note is a critique of the colonialist spirit of the dominant archaeological discourse and the official state policies regarding the religious heritage in Romania.

**Rezumat:** Pornind de la exemplul concret al Peșterii și Mănăstirii „Sfântul Ioan Casian”, nota de față este o critică a spiritului colonialist al discursului arheologic dominant și al politicilor oficiale referitoare la patrimoniul religios din România.

Except for Gheorghe Alexandru Niculescu's article, "From owners and authorized interpreters to people who care about cultural heritage and their views" (see current volume), so far, in Romania, the existing connections between the research produced by academic communities specializing in the administration of cultural heritage and that put forth by non-academic communities that are interested in the different elements of the same heritage have not been the central point for reflection. As a result, taking advantage of the publication of the above mentioned text, in the following lines I will make a short comment on the topic, starting from a concrete example – that of Saint John Cassian's Cave and the monastery with the same name in Dobrogea (Constanța county).

Archaeological research carried out so far at Saint John Cassian's Cave (Fig. 1), specifically in 1980, 1991 and 2010-2011, led to the identification of several layers of material remains, particularly ceramic fragments, belonging to the Neolithic, Iron Age, Early Roman Age, Roman-Byzantine and Mediaeval periods.<sup>1</sup> Along with these layers, the presence of the last "layer of modern gravel" is also mentioned on the inside of the cave.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological excavations are important, among other things, as they document the long-term (re)use of Saint John Cassian's Cave, yet the image of an inhabitation ended along with the modern gravel layer is but an appearance. The biography of the cave continues to the present day, through material culture elements found inside as well as outside the cave, the research of which does not require archaeological excavation.

In 2003, the erection of the buildings of a Christian Orthodox monastery was begun nearby to Saint John Cassian's Cave (Fig. 2). The monastery was patroned by Saint John Cassian, who according to his own writings was known to have been born in *Scythia Minor* and grown up in the region. A series of epigraphic, literary and archaeological data indicate the possibility that during the 4th century AD the cave may have played the role of a "desert" where monks used to live in seclusion.<sup>3</sup> Right inside the cave crosses were identified which had been incised in ancient times in the rock walls.<sup>4</sup> Before completing the first buildings of the new monastery, the monks had set up an oratory ("paraclis") and sleeping rooms in three containers.<sup>5</sup> Another oratory was set up in the very Cave of Saint John Cassian, where the monks served the divine services during summer. Furthermore, the cave became (again) a space for monks' ascetic labours, as the presence of an iron bed left in a niche of the cave indicated at the time of one of my visits. According to Abbot Iustin Petre's Father Savatie Baștovoi from Noul Neamț Monastery in the Republic of Moldova had been living inside the cave for a fortnight, during which time he wrote the Akathist Hymn to Martyr Saints Epictetus and Astion from Halmyris.<sup>6</sup> After the construction of the church of the monastery itself, a series of religious objects were left in the cave – a crucifix, icons and lamps (Fig. 3). Hence the material traces of present day monastics are added to those of the 4th century AD.

\* The Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology, Bucharest, e-mail: al\_dragoman@yahoo.com.

<sup>1</sup> Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Târziu 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.



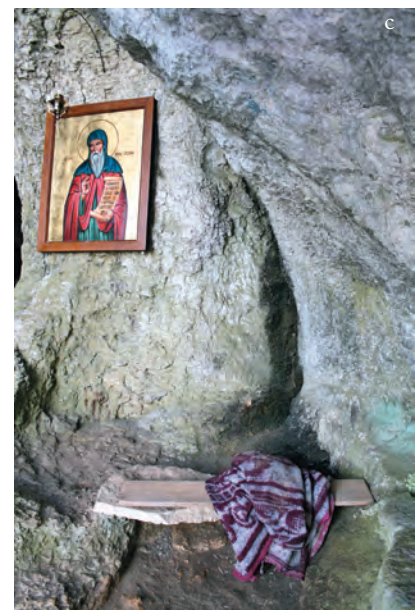
Fig. 1. The entrance to Saint John Cassian's Cave (all photos by the author, May 2014).



Fig. 2. The entrance to Saint John Cassian's Monastery.



Fig. 3. A crucifix, icons and lamps inside the Saint John Cassian's Cave.



Among the contemporary material elements found in the cave there are also objects brought by pilgrims, such as lamps, notes containing prayers inserted in the cracks of the rock or fragments of diptychs (Fig. 4). The access of pilgrims and visitors is facilitated by another achievement of the monastery: as it is difficult to reach the cave due to the rugged and steep rocky terrain, a road with

stairs and balusters has been built at the initiative of the monks (Fig. 5). The road does not play only a functional role: through it the monastery has been thoroughly connected to the cave, thus forming a complex. The cave becomes an integral part of the new ensemble, a praying cell used by monks in the 4th century AD as well as today. All the constructions of the monastery may be viewed as a material extension of the cave, to which they are symbolically and physically linked by the new road. In other words, it is Saint John Cassian's Cave that gives birth to the present-day monastery with the selfsame name.

From a Christian-Orthodox perspective, Saint John Cassian's Cave is not just a simple prehistoric or late antiquity site, and the discovered material remains are not just simple contents of some chronological segments, with no connection whatsoever with the monastery built in the 2000s. The cave and the surrounding area keep not so much the memory of ancient ascetics, but indeed their presence and Grace. The Grace that accompanied the lives of 4th century hermits embraces all the materials, including the chronologically preceding or subsequent. Therefore, we do not have a linear time, as stratigraphy might suggest, but a liturgical time in which the past and the present coexist. The place, the temporal depth of which has been enhanced by archaeological research, is enriched by the liturgical time.

In the analysed example the collaboration between monks and archaeologists was one of the most joyful. The abbot of Saint John Cassian's Monastery has fully supported the archaeological research carried out between 2010-2011, and is envisaging to set up a museum dedicated to the memory of the place, in which archaeological



material would be included as well. In turn, archaeologists published the results of their research on Saint John Cassian’s Cave in an academic journal<sup>7</sup> as well as in a Christian-Orthodox magazine.<sup>8</sup> The example of Saint John Cassian’s Cave and Monastery illustrates the harmony of the efforts undertaken, also the mutual understanding, respect, intelligence and faith, all found in the harmony of the monastery’s space and in the innate symbolic geography of the site, attracting more than just believers.

Unfortunately, the Cassian case appears rather as an exception. The dominant archaeological practice and the Romanian official policies governing the cultural heritage are turning the places with deep symbolic significance to present-day Christian-Orthodox community (e.g. the Church) into scientific objects, by converting them into abstract categories like “sites”, or “monuments”, issued on criteria that disregard the beliefs of that community (e.g. age, national importance).

To many (if not most) archaeologists, art historians, and architects interested in the cultural heritage, the archaeological sites and ancient or mediaeval historical monuments associated with Christianity are exclusively linked with the past and not with present day believers. What is considered relevant is the historical data or data referring to the architecture and art of the epoch they belong to, and not the symbolic value that those sites or churches represent for today’s Christian-Orthodox community. That is why interpretations from a Christian perspective and mainly the claiming and re-use by the Christian-Orthodox community of certain Christian spaces or churches included as historical/archaeological heritage are perceived by the “experts” as totally unacceptable and illegitimate. According to the latter, the sites and monuments of cultural heritage must be “managed” only by the specialized state institutions.

Furthermore, in the discussions held (in organized or unofficial settings), but almost never in writing, many of the “specialists” are keen to assert the superiority of secular knowledge, deemed as “objective” and “rational”, unlike the theo-centric one. In various forms, embracing today a perspective on the world and materiality that places God and the lives of His saints at the centre, triggers mockery and labels such as “subjective”, “irrational”, “old-fashioned”, “ideological” and even “dangerous”. This approach can very well be summarized by an observation by Dipesh Chakrabarty:

“A secular subject like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world. [...] Secular histories are usually produced by ignoring the signs of these presences. Such histories represent a meeting of two systems of thought, one in which the world is ultimately, that is, in the final analysis, disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular one, translates the second into itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead, in contrast with this bitter rejection of any theo-centric perspective, in the period following 1989, most of the “experts” uncritically accepted the import and utilization within the discipline of certain



Fig. 4. Lamps and fragment of a diptych left by pilgrims inside the Saint John Cassian’s Cave.

<sup>7</sup> Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011a.

<sup>8</sup> Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011b.

<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarty 2008, p. 72.



Fig. 5. The road with stairs and balusters leading to Saint John Cassian's Cave.

the cultural heritage of the Istria-Dobrogea Gorges tourist area, a heritage that can transform any vacation or trip into an initiation. The message supports the idea of the voyage to seek knowledge of the natural and cultural, local and European heritage, through the exploration of the extra-littoral offer of Constanta county. Thus, the Istria-Dobrogea Gorges tourist area, included in the **'Following in the argonauts' footsteps'** touristic product which was identified in the area within a coherent itinerary, is presented as the adequate space to start a trip, the place where one can surely set the first step into the European culture."<sup>11</sup> (emphasis in original)

In such projects, addressed also to pilgrims, the heritage is "exploited" by converting it into merchandise offered to be consumed by the general public.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the dominant archeological practice and the official state policies regarding the heritage in Romania are colonialist in spirit, as they are delegitimizing – explicitly or implicitly – the interpretations produced by the Christian-Orthodox community regarding the sites and monuments closely connected to their own faith and tradition, and at the same time are trying to impose by using the authority of academic expertise and institutional affiliation, a modernist secularized interpretation of materiality, an interpretation impregnated by the new religion of our times – the capitalism.

evaluation and financing conditioning criteria specific to capitalist ideology, such as the stimulation of cultural tourism.<sup>10</sup> Such objectives are identical to those promoted by the official state institutions. For instance, local and central state institutions have included Saint John Cassian's Cave and Monastery in a "touristic product" meant to attract profit from as many sources as possible:

"In order to exploit the natural and anthropogenic touring potential of the Istria-Dobrogea Gorges tourist area and promote the unique characteristics of tourism in the area a need to launch the **'Following in the argonauts' footsteps'** touristic product on today's market was identified; this is a thematic itinerary that reunites all cultural and natural sites scattered in the area which will be promoted in a uniform and integrated way, capitalizing on the existing touring potential.

The approach message has been built based on the richness of

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Angelescu 2005.

<sup>11</sup> \*\*\*, *Pe urmele argonauților: promovarea traseului turistic Constanța, Istria, Cheile Dobrogei*, <http://www.histria-cheiledobrogei.ro/Turism-3/> (accessed: 3 December 2015).

## Bibliographical abbreviations:

- Angelescu 2005 M. Angelescu, *Arheologia și tehnicile de management*, [www.cimec.ro/Arheologie/arhmanagement/management.htm](http://www.cimec.ro/Arheologie/arhmanagement/management.htm).
- Chakrabarty 2008 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, 2008.
- Târziu 2008 C. Târziu, *Părintele Iustin cel Tânăr, starețul Mănăstirii „Sfântul Ioan Casian”*, Formula As 816, 2008, <http://www.formula-as.ro/2008/816/spiritualitate-39/parintele-iustin-cel-tanar-staretul-manastirii-sfantul-ioan-casian-9515> (accessed: 18 march 2013).
- Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011a V. M. Voinea, B. S. Szmoniewski, *Din nou despre Peștera Casian*, Pontica 44, 2011, p. 221-238.
- Voinea, Szmoniewski 2011b V. M. Voinea, B. S. Szmoniewski, *În umbra casienilor...*, Lumină Lină 2, 2011, p. 22-25.