

## THE TOURISTIC POTENTIAL OF THE MONASTERIES FROM OLTENIA REGION

Elena BOGAN\*, Ioana Mihaela IAMANDEI\*\*

**Abstract:** The Oltenia region, including the counties of Vâlcea, Gorj, Dolj, Olt and Mehedinți, has a valuable cultural and religious heritage, with material and spiritual assets that exist in over 100 orthodox monastic settlements. These are monasteries and shrines hundreds of years old, some of them dating before the year 1000 AD. Most of them were built during the medieval period, and were endowed by the country's leaders and representatives of the Church with valuable things especially consisting of gold and silver, objects and church vestments, manuscripts and unique or rare books, original murals and paintings. Oltenia is the one of the few regions that placed Romania for the first time on the UNESCO list, with the Hurezi / Horezu Monastery, in 1993. The monastery is a symbol of the Brâncoveanu architectural style and also of the Painting School, that imposed artistic expressions that can be recognized throughout the Balkans. After 1989, the monasteries from Oltenia region have started to open for the public more and more, bringing real development in tourism accommodation, restaurants and shopping. The St. Ana and Horezu Monasteries are among the first to have developed around them real industries for the promotion of Christian symbols and also nearby tourist attractions.

**Keywords:** Orthodox monasteries, cultural tourism, cultural heritage, religious tourism, religious heritage, pilgrims, accomodation, Oltenia region.

### Introduction

Cultural tourism is a phenomenon in Europe engaging millions of visitors and tourists from all around the world. It is estimated that cultural tourism accounts for 40% of all European tourism; 4 out of 10 tourists choose their destination based on its cultural offering<sup>1</sup>.

The quality of the cultural destination is based upon the elements of attraction which formes the cultural patrimony of international importance museums, theatres, archaeological sites, historical cities, industrial sites as well as music and

---

\* Lecturer, PhD., Faculty of Geography, Bucharest University; E-mail: elena.bogan@yahoo.com

\*\* PhD. candidate, Faculty of Geography, Bucharest University; E-mail: iamandeimihaela17@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup> For details, see [http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/cultural\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/cultural_en)

gastronomy. Religious spots like cathedrals and churches are important touristic attractions whether they are Catholic or Orthodox. In Western Europe prevails the interest for Catholic cathedrals, but associated with the interest for museums, amusement parks and other touristic attractions, like the ones from France, Spain, Belgium, Germany. In the East, byzantine churches and some of the assimilated monasteries developed by themselves a religious tourism industry not necessarily related to other cultural objectives. The Orthodox churches communicate between them, they have their own specialized travel agencies or collaborating ones and they send or receive tourists in accommodation units organized in or near monasteries. It is specific for Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia and Romania.

Religious tourism is usually considered to be a part of cultural tourism, however, it could be more precisely defined as its specific component. It is necessary to realize that both forms are different from the viewpoint of the participants and their motives as well as from the viewpoint of using the services and ways of spending free time<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, we must define the culture concept. "Culture is a complex of symbolic systems, such as language, rules of marriage, economic relations, art, science and religion" according to U. Eco<sup>3</sup>. The culture makes from EU an important global destination that rich culture being considered as a part of tourism experience. Travelling and spending time and money for religious objectives means to be well determined to achieve a goal linked on religion. It is specific for Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It is about spirituality but the benefits include also observing and learning about the intended religion, people in their group of travelers and from the tourist area, culture, food, lifestyle and customs and buildings or the environment<sup>4</sup>. For the catholics, the itinerary to Santiago de Compostella Cathedral represents both spiritual and initiatory ways. In this journey they meet new people, overcome obstacles, they strenghten their body and mind, they uncover their unsuspected inner force.

For the Orthodox socialization and the road are less important. The pilgrims – tourists have attention focused on symbols and prayer, they are characterized by some loneliness. Across Romania, the authentic ecumenical or monastic tourism is practiced by the ones who want to find the peace of their own soul and wise advice, who want to meditate in a simple and a modest place such as the chalet of a monastery. Most of the time, the pilgrims confessed that after one day or several hours spent in a monastery they found an answer for their spiritual, psychological and even physical problems<sup>5</sup>. Even those who initially come only for cultural reasons, for visit for e.g., in a monastery, can be touched finally by the spirituality

---

<sup>2</sup> For details, see [https://is.mendelu.cz/eknihovna/opory/zobraz\\_cast.pl?cast=71622](https://is.mendelu.cz/eknihovna/opory/zobraz_cast.pl?cast=71622)

<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University Press, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see <https://cplondon.wordpress.com/2012/06/25/potential-benefits-of-religious-tourism-44-2/>

<sup>5</sup> For details, see <http://discoverbucovina.info/distreaza-te/turism/turism-ecumenic/>

and faith. In Romania, people with spiritual problems rather go to a priest than a psychologist, this is a practice for hundreds of years. The church is still the first among Romanian institutions that people mostly trust.

### **Monastic settlements from Oltenia region situation**

The Orthodox churches from Oltenia, a region from south Romania, are subordinated to the Metropolitan Church of Oltenia and include monasteries and hermitages, as well as a huge cathedral – Craiova Metropolitan Cathedral. Next to these holy places there are hundreds more churches, that do not depend on monasteries and hermitages, and are representing individual values in the spiritual landscape of Oltenia. They are divided into churches that are tens or hundreds of years old, and churches built after the fall of communism in Romania (after 1989). The trinity crosses also represents spiritual and cultural values, and are usually located at the crossroads or in historical places. Also, the cultural sites, consisting of the ruins of very old monasteries and churches are representing a particular interest for tourism in Oltenia.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used for this work consisted in consulting the documents regarding the cultural tourism, especially ecumenical tourism in Romania, field trips in Oltenia, to the monasteries from all 5 counties: Vâlcea, Dolj, Olt, Gorj and Mehedinți. Using the method of field observation and on the basis of accessing and consulting written and audio-video documents, particularities resulted directly related to the monastic settlements in Oltenia. The aim of this work is to highlight specific elements related to the practicing of increasingly ecumenical tourism in this region. In this regard, statistical data have been processed regarding accommodation facilities organized by the monasteries from Oltenia. The accommodation offer reflects a relatively large demand from tourists interested in Christian values of monasteries from Oltenia region. The basic tools were the monastery guides edited by the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The last systematic touristic census of the orthodox monasteries was made in 2013 but there are not major changes regarding the data related to the settlements from Oltenia.

### **Particularities of monasteries in Oltenia**

The Metropolitan Church of Oltenia includes three orthodox archdioceses and two dioceses (see Table 1). In Oltenia there is only one orthodox cathedral, in Craiova city. Most of the monastic settlements are situated in the Vâlcea, Gorj and Mehedinți counties, which are preferred by monks and nuns due to the hilly climate

and the sub-Carpathian wooded areas, with unpolluted air and quietness, favorable for prayer activities.

The monks and the nuns are also cantoned especially around large settlements that have an old history. These are monasteries and hermitages that were built by former rulers of Wallachia starting around the year 1000 AD, most of them being built especially during the medieval period. However, they have undergone numerous reconstructions because of wars, during which they were partially or totally destroyed.

Table 1

Situation of monastic settlements in the Oltenia region, South Romania

No.	Arhiepiscopia/Episcopia Archdiocese / Diocese	County	Number of Monasteries	Number of hermitages	Catedrale cathedrals	No of Călugări Monks
1	Arhiepiscopia Craiovei	Dolj	8	0	1	43
		Gorj	10	3		231
2	Arhiepiscopia Râmnicului	Vâlcea	23	5	0	459
3	Episcopia Severinului și Strehaiei	Mehedinți	12	0	0	60
4	Episcopia Slatinei și Romanaților	Olt	6	0	0	103

Sources: Analysis based on last monasteries guide data edited by Gh. Ciocoi et alii, 2013.

Vâlcea is the county with almost half of the number of monastic settlements (41%) in the Oltenia region (Fig. 1). It is followed by the counties of Gorj and Mehedinți, that also have a large number of monastic settlements built during the medieval period.

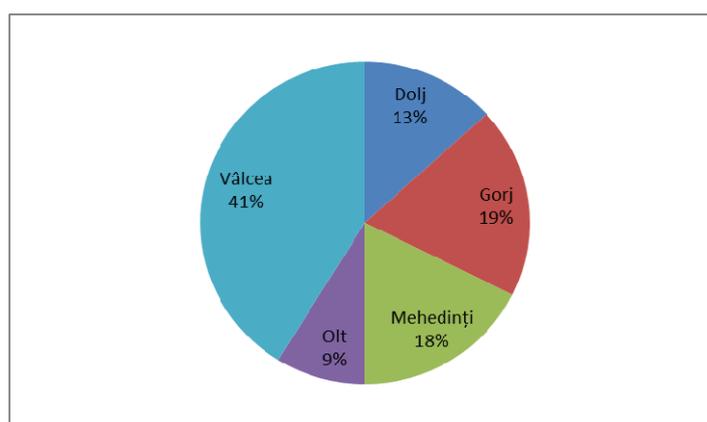
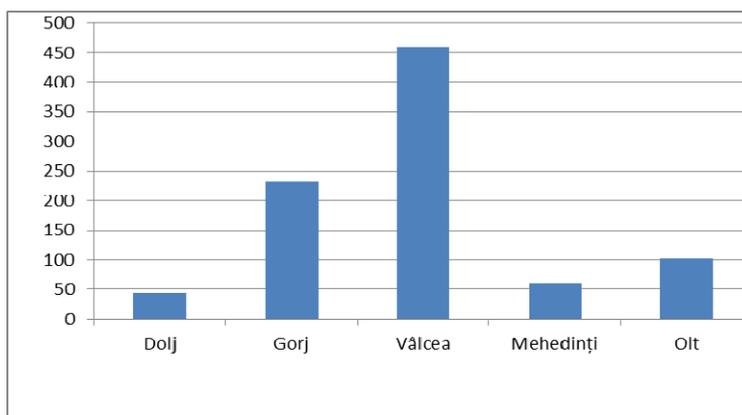


Fig. 1. The distribution of monastic settlements in the counties of the Oltenia region.

The counties of Dolj and Olt, located in the southern region of the country, have a smaller number of monasteries and hermitages (see also Fig. 1), with a smaller share of settlements in the region from this point of view.



**Fig. 2.** The comparative situation between the counties of Oltenia according to the number of monks and nuns.

Vâlcea County ranks first in the number of monks, predominantly female (over 300 nuns). Most nuns live in the monasteries of Hurezi and Bistrița (60 nuns). It is followed by Gorj County, with more than 180 nuns (compared to almost 50 monks). In the Tismana monastery live most of the nuns –55, in Strâmba Monastery and Lainici Monastery –35 nuns, and in the Polovragi Monastery –30 nuns. The third place is taken by Olt county. Here, in the monastic quarters, only 10 monks live in the community, compared to almost 100 nuns. Most nuns live in the Brâncoveni Monastery (40) and Clocociov Monastery (42). It is important to notice that Olt county has the lowest number of monastic settlements, but a relatively large number of monks compared to the others counties analyzed here.

In Mehedinți County, there are only 20 monks distributed in four of the largest settlements, as compared to the 40 nuns that live in six other large monasteries. Most of them (20 nuns) lives in St. Anne's Monastery (near Danube, S–W of the county). Also, in Mehedinți, two large monasteries are undergoing redevelopment, which will accommodate an unknown number of monks or nuns – the Crișnicic Monastery (for men) and the Godeanu Monastery (for women).

In Dolj county, the monastery with most nuns is the Cârcea Monastery, while at the Jitianu Monastery there are only 8 monks. Several monasteries in this county have no monk parishes.

The worship of miraculous icons and relics have also led to a cultural effervescence in the region over time. Thus, the settlements for the monks or nuns have begun to organize themselves for the reception of guests, consisting in tourist and accommodation structures in the broader economic meaning, involving the

capitalization of goods and services with the purpose of obtaining profits. The most profitable endeavors are souvenir shops, which are selling reproductions of Christian symbols considered holy, even if their originality and quality have decreased more and more by being multiplied on an industrial scale.

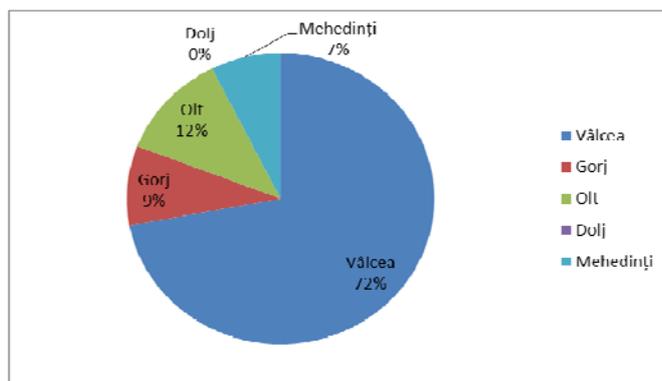


Fig. 3. Distribution of accommodation in the Monasteries from Oltenia region.

Most of the accommodations in the Oltenia monasteries are found in Vâlcea county – almost 500 special places for accommodation. On the opposite side, the monastic settlements in Dolj county do not accommodate tourists, and they do not have accommodation facilities for this purpose. Although Gorj county is an ecumenical tourist area much more famous than Olt county, it is surpassed by Olt to the number of places for tourists accommodation in monasteries. Also, Mehedinți County, an important tourist pole for both the Oltenia region and the Banat region, is situated on the last place at the number of accommodation places for tourists who want to stay overnight in the monasteries.

### The largest and most famous monasteries in Oltenia

In the Oltenia region there are several monastic settlements that can be visited. Also in Dolj county the tourists and visitors can visit different monastic landmarks such as Saint Dimitrie Monastery, Coșuna Monastery or Jitianu Monastery.

SAINT DIMITRIE MONASTERY seems to be the oldest monastery from Oltenia region of Romania, being built before 1000 AD. That monastic settlement is situated near the Metropolitan Cathedral in Craiova city.

COȘUNA MONASTERY (1483) was built with the brick stone of the ancient Roman camp Pelendava. It has a beautiful painting from 1574 – named “The Chronicle of Bucovăț” fresco. It is about the painted chronicle of the princes that ruled in Wallachia. That monastery is an historical monument and protected accordingly.

JITIANU MONASTERY (15<sup>th</sup> century) was built by Mircea the Elder, after the Battle of Rovine against the Turks. In 1877 (Independence War) the monastery was a weapon depot and hospital<sup>6</sup>. It is important to know that the monasteries from Dolj county have no places for the accommodation of tourists. In the Gorj County, tourists can visit both monastic settlements and their natural and cultural surroundings. In this county, they can accommodate at some monasteries and in their neighborhood, in the guest houses.

POLOVRAGI MONASTERY (1505) is the only monastery in Romania having painted on its front some images of the monasteries from Mount Athos<sup>7</sup>. It was also a special place where revolutionary leader Tudor Vladimirescu organized his army. Next to Polovragi Monastery tourists can visit: The Polovragi Cave, The Woman Cave, The Olteț Gorges.

LAINICI MONASTERY (14<sup>th</sup> century) is the place where Tudor Vladimirescu would have been hiding disguised in a monk not to be recognized by the Turks. It was destroyed in the Second World War and includes two overlapping churches (the Catacombs Church). Here, a saint icon that makes miracles was brought from Mount Athos and is the main attraction for pilgrims. Nearby, tourists can visit also Vishina Monastery, Locurele Hermitage, Ruins of Roman Buildings, Constantin Brâncuși complex from Târgu Jiu, Prislop Monastery, The Jiu Gorges.

TISMANA MONASTERY (1377-1383) is another monastery where can be found the relics of Saint Nicodim (a monk that returned from the Saint Mount Athos in 1365, and built with the help of Vlaicu Vodă and Radu I the monasteries Vodita (1369), Tismana (1377), Gura Motrului, Visina, Topolnita and Aninoasa, Prislop I, and he was an incessant ascetic living in the cave above the monastery). That monastery was also administered by Constantin Brâncuși's father. Today, the settlement has 30 places for accommodation. Next to the Tismana Monastery, the tourists must visit: The Cave of the Saint Nicodim, Waterfall of Tismana (40 m) The Cioclovina de Jos Hermitage.

In Vâlcea County, there are some beautiful monasteries that can be visited no matter the season.

ARNOTA MONASTERY (1633–1634) was built by the ruler Matei Vodă Basarab after he escaped from a battle with the Turks.

In the narthex it exists the tomb of Matei Basarab and the tomb of his father. It is important to know that the architectural style of that monastery is named Brâncoveanu architectural style (1700). There are very valuable paintings and sculptures from 1600. Here can also be seen small pieces of relics belonging to Holly innocents, killed by King Herod. At the same time, the Arnota Monastery is one of the most representative historical monuments of religious orthodox art in the country<sup>8</sup>. Here are about 30 accommodation places for tourists.

<sup>6</sup> Gheorghită Ciocoi *et al.*, *Ghidul mănăstirilor din România*, Bucharest, Sofia Publishing, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*



Fig. 4. Tismana Monastery [www.crestinortodox.ro/manastiri/manastirea-tismana](http://www.crestinortodox.ro/manastiri/manastirea-tismana).

BISTRIȚA MONASTERY (1492–1494) is the place where the first book from Romania was printed after the invention of the printing – in 1508, by the Slavonic Liturgist of the monks named Macarie. Here can also be found the relics of St. Gregory the Decapolite that banished the plague from Bucharest in 1763. Here tourists can also admire the Exhibition of the church including objects made in the monastery's workshops. In the neighbourhood, they can visit The Bats Cave with the Ovidenia cave ensemble and the Archangels Saints, Buila Vânturarița National Park, The Păpușa Hermitage (1710), The 40 springs Hermitage (1701). That monastery has reported 60 places for accommodation of tourists.

In the COZIA MONASTERY (1386–1391) can be found the tomb of Mircea the Elder, an important ancient Romanian ruler. The Museum of the Monastery include manuscripts, old and precious icons, stone and wood sculptures, cult objects. That monastery has a special place where an important Romanian poet, Grigore Alexandrescu, wrote “Mircea’s Shadow at Cozia”, a poem dedicated to Mircea the Elder. The monastery was transformed between 1879–1893 into a prison and after that into a hospital. In the First World War, it was a stable for horses. At the present, next to that beautiful monastery, tourists and visitors can visit Turnu Monastery, Ostrov Monastery and Stanisoara Monastery. That area is rich in thermal waters. Cozia Monastery has 50 places for the accommodation of tourists, and because the distances are small the tourists can also be accommodated to the other nearby touristic locations.

GOVORA MONASTERY (14<sup>th</sup> century) was built by Vlad Dracul – the father of Vlad Țepeș (Dracula). The name of that monastery comes from the word Govoriti (Slavonic) – to speak, to say.

“Pravila de la Govora” – the first Romanian printed Book (package) of law can be found in the monastery’s collection. Here can be admired the Brâncovenesc

architectural style and the influences of The International Painting School of Hurezi (Horezu) style. Govora Monastery has only 15 places for the accommodation of tourists (with booking).

Close to the city of Horezu is the HUREZI/HUREZU/HOREZU MONASTERY (1690–1697), which was built by the ruler Constantin Brâncoveanu and which is now protected by UNESCO (starting 1993). Here the Horezu Painting School gave birth to the Brâncovenesc style, which is characteristic for the Hurez Monastery and represents a distinctive element of the area. The region that surrounds the city is called “Foothill Oltenia” and it is known as being the area with the highest concentration of monasteries in the country<sup>9</sup>.



**Fig. 5.** Hurezi Monastery, UNESCO Patrimony [www.crestinortodox.ro/biserici-manastiri/mitropolia-olteniei/manastirea-hurezi](http://www.crestinortodox.ro/biserici-manastiri/mitropolia-olteniei/manastirea-hurezi).

The Hurezi Monastery (located at the Romanii de Jos) was built between 1691 and 1693 and it was initially called Huhurezu Monastery, founded by Costantin Brâncoveanu, nowadays, this monastery being under the protection of UNESCO. This monastery was a large training center for copyists, grammars, etc.

The painting school from Hurezu gave birth to the Brâncoveanu style, another representative element of the area<sup>10</sup>. The monastery church dedicated to “St. Constantine and Helen” was built in triconical plan, with ample porch in the West and a valuable iconostasis. In the church, there are also votive paintings of the royal families of Basarab, Cantacuzino and Brâncoveanu. They stand out by the expressiveness and artistic mastery of drawing, color and paintings with religious

<sup>9</sup> Elena Bogan, Elena Ramona Roman, *The Horezu ceramics – between traditional and commercial*, in “Quality – access to success Journal”, vol. 14/2013, S1, pp. 208–213.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

themes made by the Greek painter – Constantinos<sup>11</sup>. The same painting style of the artists from Hurezi can be found at: Polovragi, Mamu, Surpatele, Cozia, Govora, Feldelșoiu and Saracines monasteries. The Hurezi monastery has reported 35 places for tourist accommodation.

In Olt county tourists can visit BRÂNCOVENI MONASTERY (1491) built by the grandmother of Constantin Brâncoveanu.

There are also the tombs of the grandfather and father of the ancient ruler Constantin Brâncoveanu, an important personality of Romanian architecture, painting, and Christian culture. That monastery has 30 places for tourist accommodation.

### **Mehedinți County is rich in religious landmarks.**

VODIȚA MONASTERY (1370–1372) built by St. Nicodim with the support of king Vladislav I is a strong Orthodox center in the Danube area. In 1493 the monastery becomes the *metoch* of Tismana monastery, transferring all its properties to it. But today tourists can visit the wooden church (Maramureș-style, 2001) and the ruins of the first monastery – one of the oldest monasteries in Romania. The ruins are situated near Danube river surrounded by hills with rare species of flora and fauna.



**Fig. 6.** Vodița Monastery – one of the oldest monasteries in Romania – ruins. The new church Vodița.

**Source :** Mihaela Iamandei, personal archive.

---

<sup>11</sup> Melinda Căndea, Tamara Simon, Elena Bogan, *Patrimoniul turistic al României*, Bucharest, Universitară Publishing, 2012.

TOPOLNIȚA MONASTERY (XIV<sup>th</sup> century) situated in the Topolnița valley (Mehedinți Plateau) was painted in 1673, in Byzantine style. Today the tourists and visitors can admire the original fresco and beautiful natural landscapes nearby, an ostrich farm and trout fishing spots, places for picnics and walks in the fresh air.



**Fig. 7.** Topolnița Hermitage on the beautiful Topolnița Valley.

**Source :** Mihaela Iamandei, personal archive.

BAIA DE ARAMĂ MONASTERY (1699–1703) was built by Constantin Brâncoveanu, being representative for Brancoveanu architectural style. That monastery is placed in a beautiful karstic area with wonderful landscapes and touristic natural landmarks: Natural Bridge from Ponoare God's Bridge, The cave under the Bridge of God, the Lilac forest from Ponoare, The karen fields from Ponoare, Băluța Cave, Băluța Gorges, Zaton Lakes.



**Fig. 8.**

**Source :** [www.manastireabaiadearama.ro](http://www.manastireabaiadearama.ro)

The SAINT ANA MONASTERY (1894–1980) was founded by Pamfil Șeicaru, journalist. That is the only monastery from Mehedinți County having some places for tourists accommodation (50 places with booking). Next to the St. Ana Monastery tourists can also admire: Mraconia Monastery, Danubian landscapes in the Gulf of Orsova, mountain massif Ciucaru Mare, The Danube Gorges, Iron Gates Natural Park, Iron Gates II Lake, Iron Gates II hydroelectric power station (on the Danube river), Drobeta Turnu Severin city.



**Fig. 9.** – a, b, c, d. Guests House of the Saint Ana Monastery – beautiful landscapes over Danube.

**Source:** Mihaela Iamandei, personal archive.

A place to stay in an accommodation of a monastery can cost between 0 and 100 lei/night. Some monasteries host tourists for free, but time is limited to one night. Even if the accommodation is paid the time for resting there is limited to 3 nights. For e.g., the accommodation in the St. Ana Monastery costs 35 lei/night. The price does not include meals.

## Conclusions

In Oltenia region, the cultural heritage includes numerous monastic museum collections (with clothes, icons on various supports, tapestries, embroidery, objects of worship), libraries and storehouses of cult books (old prints, manuscripts, incunabula), old prints, specialized crafts, painting schools and church music. The relics of saints, miraculous icons and miraculous waters are the main attractions for Orthodox believers and tourists in general. In addition to these, there are the shops that capitalize on the monastery's productions, including reproductions of objects of worship, books, food (jams, honey and derivatives, various wheat products), wines with labels of monasteries. In Horezu monastery, besides the many handmade church items, dozens of jams and wine productions, the famous ceramic pots, which have recently been included in the UNESCO heritage, are also being offered. The icons are highly sought after, whether they are very old icons that can be admired in the monasteries, or commercial ones that can be bought in nearby shops. The status of the representative religious objectives is mostly good, and this advantage must be exploited. Although there are concerns from the authorities, however, the higher promotion of the existence of such cultural – religious objectives and possibly of the traditions and events in each area are necessary etc.<sup>12</sup>.

Oltenia has many religious buildings that deserve to be visited, a specific architecture, paintings and religious objects of inestimable spiritual value. Also the monastic hospitality is national and international recognized. Those who want to pray for several days have accommodation and meals in specially designed rooms near holy places from Mehedinți, Gorj or Vâlcea counties<sup>13</sup>. The phenomenon of growth in religious tourism in recent years has forced the massive sale of plasticized reproductions of icons. These marketing practices are an international model, with every cultural edifice, including church buildings, having more and more diversified their own handmade products stores. Many monasteries have special accommodation for tourists and the development in this area is growing.

---

<sup>12</sup> Bogan Elena, Roangheș-Mureanu Ana-Maria, Constantin (Oprea) Dana Maria, Grigore Elena, Gabor Sebastian, Dîrloman Gabriela, *The religious tourism – an opportunity of promoting and developing the tourism in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians*, in “Academic Journal of Economic Studies”, vol. 3, no. 3/2017, pp. 106-111.

<sup>13</sup> Ioana Mihaela Iamandei, *Turismul Cinegetic și Turismul Piscicol în județul Mehedinți*, Bucharest, Universitară Publishing, 2016.