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Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, and Development in Transylvanian Rural Landscapes

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Abstract

Communities constantly produce and reinforce notions of cultural heritage in their expressions of identity and memory. Especially in rural communities, this process of engaging with heritage is deeply rooted in a landscape, embedded in how people experience connection with the landscape. Preservation of this heritage greatly influences senses of social, cultural, and historical identity at individual, community, and nation levels. As contexts that express a unique sense of place, rural traditional landscapes encounter threats to their heritage in the face of modern development, unemployment, and changing policies. In this paper, we explore the potential for community engagement rooted in archaeology and how it can play a role in sustainable development of rural landscapes. In particular, we present several ongoing projects focused on the prehistoric archaeology of rural landscapes in Alba County, Transylvania. Drawing on theories of placemaking, memory, and monumentality, this paper explores the strong connection between people and place over time as a justification for drawing upon archaeology to reimagine how communities engage with landscape in the present and future. We highlight the potential for community-based cultural heritage revitalization as a way to promote sustainable development in Transylvania's rural landscapes. Knowledge of how people of the past engaged with landscape gives opportunity to reinterpret how people engage with landscape and their cultural heritage. As it is argued, projects geared towards sustainable cultural heritage preservation ignite cultural pride and encourage cultural expression, maintained through social memory creation and key economic opportunities and benefits across different scales. Ultimately, archaeology in concert with community-engaged cultural heritage outreach efforts can be useful to counterbalance urbanization and enhance investment in rural communities.

Keywords

Community engagement, cultural heritage preservation, sustainable development, rural lifeways, landscape

1. Introduction

The Apuseni Mountains in the Transylvanian region of Romania have been continuously occupied for thousands of years. The area's geologically and environmentally complex landscapes have shaped its deep history of occupation. Home to rich deposits of gold and copper, abundant pastures, timber-rich wooded slopes, and the winding Mures River and its wide agricultural terraces, the rural landscape of the Apuseni Mountains is intertwined with the

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cultural heritage of its people. For millennia, communities in the Apuseni Mountains have modified the landscape and responded to the geographic and environmental constraints on their behavior. Through this process, their communal identities were, and are, inextricably linked to the economic, social, and religious activities they practice in the landscape.

Cultural heritage is socially constructed through people's day-to-day interactions (Corsale and Iorio 2013). The ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee (2002) defines cultural heritage as an "expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expression and values" (Veghes and Popescu 2018:130). Heritage encompasses both the tangible, the distinctive places of human habitation, villages, objects, industrial systems, and more, as well as the intangible, the forms of traditional and popular culture, works based on tradition, and the social context rooted in themes of cultural meaning (Veghes and Popescu 2018:130). For communities in the Apuseni Mountains, cultural heritage is rooted in the development of rural lifeways in European prehistory. To preserve, revitalize, and further develop rural lifeways, we must invest in a sustainable future with cultural heritage as a key component of any development plan.

Despite its importance, rural landscapes often lack sufficient infrastructure around cultural heritage preservation, especially when compared with urban contexts. In Romania, state-driven policies during the era of Communism promoted demographic centralization and moved people from small villages into larger urban centers. More recent economic development, including the enhancement of tourism infrastructure, highway construction, and other projects in part supported by the European Union, have continued the trend towards investment in higher population centers. Similar to other rural landscapes, however, the rural lifeways in the Apuseni Mountains are underserved with a lack of sufficient cultural heritage infrastructure. While urban contexts are supported through museums and investment in tourism infrastructure such as transportation networks, accommodations, and restaurants, rural landscapes remain an untapped resource for sustainable development. This is particularly important in the Apuseni Mountains where most economic development has centered on exploitation of the region's vast mineral resources through mining practices that are both dangerous and unsustainable in the long term.

In this paper, we explore how archaeology can contribute to broader efforts to revitalize cultural heritage and promote sustainable development in rural landscapes. Investment and planning can help promote sustainable economic development while also meeting goals of preserving cultural heritage. We highlight the utility of archaeology-based cultural heritage revitalization projects in rural Transylvania to reimagine tourist infrastructure and heritage preservation in these landscapes. More broadly, this case study demonstrates the importance of long-term archaeological perspectives and the potential of cultural heritage revitalization projects in other rural landscapes across the globe.

2. Rural Landscapes in Romania's Apuseni Mountains

Rural landscapes are defined by dispersed communities and their connection to more "traditional" pre-industrial economic systems, including agro-pastoral economies, unexploited forest, prairie, and desertic environments. Rural landscapes are also defined in opposition to urban landscapes based on what they lack: population density, hubs of economic activity, and political power. Mountain landscapes have often been classified as rural landscapes due to their geographic and environmental marginality (Beck and Quinn 2021). While scholars examining

mountain landscapes are increasingly “centering” these spaces as a research focus rather than dismissing them as unimportant, peripheral, and marginal, most mountain landscapes remain distinctly rural. Rural landscapes affect the process of identity formation (Gullino and Larcher 2013). Through shared cultural practices, communities experience and manipulate rural landscapes in a recursive process that produces a distinct form of community identity and heritage. This rural heritage embodies both the physical attributes as well as wider physical, cultural, and environmental links – including cultural knowledge, traditions, practices, meanings and expressions of identity and belonging, and the cultural values attributed to the landscape in both the past and present community (ICOMOS 2017).

The Apuseni Mountains and the surrounding landscape of Transylvania are an ideal context in which to examine the interplay between rural landscapes and cultural identity. The mountainous landscape is topographically and environmentally diverse, filled with deep river valleys, wooded slopes, and a rich and valuable mineral supply. Communities have responded to these environmental constraints, experiencing and manipulating the environment and in turn producing distinct forms of identity and heritage. The channelized landscapes are scattered with hamlet settlement patterns distinct to rural Transylvania. Dispersed settlements hug the rivers and roads along the valley floors and ridges in a clear demonstration of the impact the mountainous environment has on rural lifeways. In addition to its rugged beauty, the landscape has proven itself as a rich cultural resource for the people of Transylvania, with an abundance of agro-pastoral lands, wooden architecture, crafts, and wild plants for medicinal use (Cosma et al. 2014; Gica and Coros 2016; Akeroyd 2007). There is a lack of scholarship on these key practices and their history, however, as much of rural Transylvanian past and present lifeways have been overshadowed by rapid globalization and urbanization.

Despite the lack of scholarship concerning its heritage, rural Transylvania has a deep story that proves it to be an especially unique and important landscape. Southwest Transylvania is home to the richest mineral deposits in Europe, plentiful salt springs, fertile agricultural land, forested uplands that supply fuel, grazing areas for livestock, and a river that fosters trade and exchange (Quinn 2017). Cave paintings reveal that civilizations that developed in Transylvania are as old as the Paleolithic era. Even in the early settlements the value of the landscape is clear – especially early use of minerals, hence the name of *The Golden Quadrilateral* being assigned to the Southern Apuseni Mountains. Evidence from the Neolithic indicates notable advancement in agricultural skills with the northward migration of a South Balkan area as well as the development of pottery and manufacturing of copper tools, indicating early existence and knowledge of mining areas and their copper, gold, tin, and iron resources. Utilization of these valuable resources proved to be impactful throughout the Copper and Bronze Ages during times of social upheaval. Between the Copper and Bronze Ages, Kurgan people from the eastern steppes migrated to the Apuseni Mountains, bringing with them the Yamnaya culture that contrasted the Copper Age Coțofeni culture. Mortuary evidence indicates that people began to situate their dead in order to have access to the rich resources (Quinn et al. 2020, “The politics of placing the dead in Bronze Age Transylvania”). Gold continued to be an important source in ancient Dacia as gold from Roșia Montană drew Trajan to march the Romans into Transylvania and bring down the Dacians. Remnants of this military landscape continue to permeate modern life with the abundance of Roman-era mines, roads, fortifications, and villas that aimed to extract metal and disperse it throughout the Roman Empire. Mining history continued through the Medieval period and Communist and post-Communist Romania (Quinn 2017:2).

While the strong link between community identity and the craft of mining is apparent, communities that engaged in mining for centuries have also been suffering since as early as the Communist period. With the desire for control and surveillance, the Communist drive for consolidation pushed people to live in larger urban centers. Outlying villages, especially ones that relied heavily on agriculture, were seriously disadvantaged (Surd and Turnock 2000:290-292). The agenda of modernization in urban areas and lack of focus on rural areas led to substantial differences in living conditions. The government's commitment to assert Romania in the global scene involved a concentration on and intensification of the mining tradition, which has dangerously exploited the region's mineral resources, increased non-agricultural employment, and a lack of agricultural improvement (Surd and Turnock 2000:290-292). This concentration of economic opportunity in urban centers combined with the increasing obsolescence of agricultural practices meant that young people left rural areas to pursue higher incomes, further isolating rural places that relied on traditional practices to maintain their land (Surd and Turnock 2000:290-292). The trends that emerged during this consolidation continue to threaten rural Transylvania with more recent economic development such as highway construction centering in higher population centers and a continued lack of investment and depopulation of rural landscapes.

Instead of strengthening the bond between communities and the mining craft, modern mining projects have hastened the threat to southwest Transylvanian rural mining communities. State-level societies trans-nation globalization has centralized political control in state institutions and forced project decisions upon marginalized communities. Marginalized communities suffer from this as current mining projects threatening both the environment and health individuals impose a dilemma on communities, forcing a choice between the harmful ramifications of projects or otherwise a continued suffering of poverty, fading connection to mining heritage, and depopulation (Quinn 2017:2). Therefore, it is clear that a sustainable solution is essential, one that highlights the crafts that constitute rural Transylvanian heritage while strengthening infrastructure for sustainable economic development. Rural Transylvanian communities need a way to advocate for themselves, and archaeological and heritage based perspectives may be an avenue through which this can be accomplished.

3. A Framework for Exploring the Rural Heritage Landscape

In order to understand rural heritage, rural landscapes must be understood as dynamic places. All human behavior is rooted in the places in which those behaviors occur. As dynamic contexts for social interaction, places gradually acquire social meaning through associations with group experiences (Fisher 2009). This process, called *placemaking*, is the process by which places embody social meaning (Fisher 2009). Because the meaning of place is derived from human experience, interactions with place entangle past and present notions of broader cultures and identities.

Essential to the construction of these broader notions of identity is a collective memory of place. As an ongoing process that defines characteristics of individuals and groups, identity formation establishes the rights and obligations of an individual and their social interactions. Through the process of placemaking place is often a context through which identities are established. Drawing from a shared memory of a place and the interactions of its past that have shaped its social meaning, individuals constantly contribute to the constructions of identity and community through their day to day economic, social, and religious interactions. In the context

of rural landscapes, communities and their collective identities are inextricably linked to the distinct activities they practice in the unique landscape. With the knowledge of this strong link between identity and landscape, place is often used as a way of intentionally calling upon the collective memory of the past in order to reimagine connections among people and cultural institutions in which social statuses, roles, and identities are reimagined.

Archaeological evidence confirms this strong connection between people and place. The archaeological record of mankind not only indicates that we as humans have a deep history, but that this history is inextricably linked to place. As an especially important landscape, it comes as no surprise that archaeological research in rural Transylvania uncovers the ongoing process of engagement with landscape. Burial mounds in the Apuseni Mountains demonstrate the practice of Early Bronze Age communities purposely situating their dead when contesting territory in an effort to reaffirm connections to the landscape and the resources therein (Quinn et al. 2020). The monumentality of the landscape extends further than these ancient mounds, however, as evidenced by modern indications of engagement such as the construction of roadways and territory markers centered around the landscape.

Understanding the role that place plays in both past and present community identity, archaeology can therefore be a tool used by rural communities to advocate for themselves. Especially in rural communities overshadowed by urbanization, a better knowledge of how people of the past engaged with landscape gives opportunity to reimagine how people engage with landscape now and in the future. As theories of placemaking and identity indicate, landscapes are charged with social meaning. Archaeologists, engaging with the material evidence of interactions that have constructed this very meaning, therefore have the opportunity to make this history known in an effort to reimagine heritage preservation in landscapes receiving insufficient attention on their valuable histories.

4. Documenting Rural Transylvanian Cultural Heritage – MARBAL/BATS/Bucium Projects

With its complex landscapes and history, Romania provides an interesting archaeological record. Of the work that has been done, Romanian archaeologists have taken interest in Neolithic periods as well as the later Dacian, Roman, and post-Roman periods. Compared to surrounding regions in Europe, however, Romania lacks systematic archaeological work and therefore the extensive base required to ask more anthropologically oriented questions. With a lack of time and money dedicated to research, there have been few survey projects (Molnár and Nagy 2013) and difficulty developing a comprehensive, scientifically-based culture history. This is especially true for Bronze Age research, which lacks an expansive history – there has been a greater focus on other time periods and a lack of funding for large-scale research that have limited the amount of research, and the research that has been done has been irregular, mostly done through salvage work or reporting of chance finds (Quinn 2017).

Over the past twenty-five years, there have been major contributions to Early and Middle Bronze Age Romania and developments within the past five years such as motorway construction have uncovered even more archaeological evidence.

The BATS project was designed to document and investigate the organization, lifeways, and landscape of Early and Middle Bronze Age communities in the Mureș Valley and Trascău Mountains. Specifically, it explores changes in regional community organization using different spatial analytical scales (Quinn 2017).

MARBAL (Mortuary Archaeology of the Râmneț Bronze Age Landscape) is a collaborative bioarchaeology and mortuary archaeology project headed by Dr. Jess Beck (University of Pittsburgh), Dr. Colin Quinn (Hamilton College), and Dr. Horia Ciugudean (Muzeul Național al Unirii din Alba Iulia). Through excavations and a field survey of an Early Bronze Age cemetery at Ramet, the project explores the relationship between the inequalities performed through mortuary rituals and those in daily life. The project is designed to assess how these behaviors indicate communities' dynamic relationship to the landscape over time.

The Bucium Project aims to apply archaeology as an advocacy tool, exploring investment in sustainable development that promotes community cohesion and economic practices. The small mining community of Bucium, Romania is threatened by large-scale commercial gold mining operations. In collaboration with Bucium community members and organizations, this project strives to use public scholarship to push back against forces of modernization and urbanization, building on the missions and goals of community partners to raise awareness of the destructive costs of large-scale mining operations.

While each project explores different research questions, the threads of rural Transylvanian cultural heritage tie them together. Each project uncovers the deep connections between communities and their landscape in both the past and present. Due to its uniquely diverse landscape, rural Transylvania has a deep history of communities responding to and engaging with the landscape. The archaeological record makes this apparent, as evidenced by the MARBAL project. Excavations of burial mounds in key resource areas reveal an early understanding of the value of the landscape and how people of the past situated themselves and their dead in order to contest resources. The distinct hamlet settlement pattern still visible today is also a vestige of past human behavior, revealing the specific way that people of Transylvania have adapted to existing environmental restraints of the diverse and channelized landscape (Surd and Turnock 2000:285). Further exploration reveals an understanding and value of the landscape that extends beyond the settlement pattern. In the present, the continuation of agropastoral lifeways and traditional practices such as wooden crafts and using plants for medicinal purposes are a way of drawing from and referencing the past to create a sense of community and belonging in rural Transylvania. For many of the mining villages in Romania, traces of these lifeways, such as simple wooden tools, are often passed down for generations and serve as a medium through which stories and histories are experienced.

Research of the past and present has proven that rural Transylvania's history to be deep and complex. Further contributions, especially in archaeology, have revealed that the unique cultural heritage threading these complexities together is especially important with a global significance. However, modern globalization and corporate mining operations have facilitated a breakdown of traditional mining techniques, knowledge, and practice – often the everyday activities people in these communities have used to define themselves. Investment in this heritage, therefore, is essential. There is a potential for future sustainable development, and archaeology can play a part.

5. Sustainable Economic Development and Cultural Heritage Resources in Rural Transylvania

As scholars working directly with the materials and resources that constitute a community's heritage, archaeologists have not only the responsibility to share their findings, but also the unique opportunity to use their findings to promote and preserve rural heritage.

Especially in rural areas threatened by modernization, we must invest in a sustainable future with cultural heritage as a key component of any development plan. Knowledge of how deeply connected a community's history is to its landscape can be a resource for economic development that promotes heritage and in turn helps preserve rural lifeways. This development involves reimagining how present and future communities engage with the landscape – therefore, it is essential that archaeologists engage in a bottom-up process across all levels of community engagement.

There are a variety of ways in which archaeologists can engage with communities. Some examples of outputs include community museums, as evidenced by the current project in progress at the Early Bronze Age cemetery at Ramet. What determines the success of these products is its ability to incorporate and engage the community. This means that archaeologists need to involve community members in every stage of the process, soliciting questions from locals about what interests them about the past and the archaeological record. Archaeologists need to make the community voice explicit in order to determine how their expertise can help answer those questions. For the development of the community museum at Ramet, this involves asking community members what interests them about the remains uncovered from burial tombs. Addressing what the community finds important about their past allows the archaeologist to determine how to highlight the landscape in ways that people are interested in. Furthermore, archaeologists must make clear that this process of publicizing the landscape can help communities. Developing tourist infrastructure through outputs such as a community museum brings money from outside into the community, introducing various economic opportunities that can help maintain the everyday life practices of these landscapes. When this connection is established, archaeologists can promote and publicize the values expressed by the community to ensure that rather than imposing an agenda upon the community, the community members commit to the process.

Establishing a community-based approach ensures sustainability. As a byproduct of archaeological research and a project publicizing the knowledge gained, audiences will engage with the otherwise overshadowed cultural heritage and help maintain rural lifeways through the creation of a collective, social memory. Not only will the project reignite local pride and a sense of cultural identity, but it will also provide key economic opportunities and benefits across different scales as it develops tourism infrastructure, introducing transportation networks, accommodations, and restaurants.

At Ramet, road construction and development of a community museum have a variety of benefits across different scales. Developing a museum and the surrounding area produces an attraction that makes the knowledge of rural Transylvania's complex and important past more accessible. The construction of a museum itself helps to achieve an educational goal, and growing economic opportunities ensure the maintenance of this goal, in turn preserving cultural heritage in rural Transylvania.

6. Conclusion

Upon an investigation of ongoing projects focused on the prehistoric archaeology of rural Transylvanian landscapes, it is clear that there is a potential for community-based cultural heritage revitalization as a way to promote sustainable development. Knowledge of Transylvania's past agro pastoral and mining lifeways gives opportunity to reinterpret how present communities engage with landscape and their cultural heritage. Projects centered around

cultural heritage preservation ignite cultural pride and encourage cultural expression, maintained through social memory creation and key economic opportunities and benefits across different scales.

Engaging with material vestiges of the past, archaeologists have a unique opportunity to use their findings in community-engaged cultural heritage outreach efforts in rural communities across the globe. Rural landscapes and their communities' cultural heritage remain an untapped resource for sustainable development. They often lack the kinds of infrastructure for sustainable economic development, and their cultural heritage is less well-studied or protected.

Archaeologists uncovering the important histories of these communities' past can draw upon new research to reimagine tourist infrastructure and heritage preservation in these landscapes. Ultimately, archaeology in concert with community-engaged cultural heritage outreach efforts can be useful to counterbalance urbanization and enhance investment in rural communities.

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