



# Religion as a Shelter

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The custom of donating pictures is still alive in the Franciscan abbey and church at Máriaradna (Arad County, Romania). This provides the possibility of examining the relation between the people and pictures, between the people and the picture collection. In the examined multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural region of the Banat this Roman Catholic tradition of donating pictures has particular symbolic meanings of a religious, ethnic and cultural nature, and is also related to the tolerance shown by the Franciscans towards manifestations of folk religion. The social and mental processes in the past decades in the Romanian Banat could be characterised briefly as: flight from uncertainty and the search for security. Religion and the institutions of religion have a major role in this process.

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## About the Fieldwork

After years of preparation the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Szeged launched a long fieldwork project in the summer of 1996: studying the votive picture gallery at the pilgrimage place of Radna in today's western part of Romania. As a working hypothesis we presupposed that the pictures that play significant roles in the private and community spheres of our everyday life bear symbolic functions. This is especially true for the special places of community life, the sacred places, in our particular case, for the Catholic places of pilgrimage. There are special forms of using pictures here, i.e. the so-called votive pictures and objects. These were donated as votive tokens by believers who wished to underpin their pleas and express their gratitude to the sacred place and the figure worshipped in this sacred place – the Virgin Mary in our case – after their prayers had been heard. The votive object is thus a donation made by the donor as the honouring of a vow, with the request for a special help, or out of gratitude for a grace already bestowed, which the donor takes to the place of pilgrimage or leaves there.<sup>1</sup> The votive object or picture expresses the wish of the person making the vow to be present before the venerated votive image and thus to record himself

or herself in eternal prayer. Thirdly, the votive pictures confirm the venerability of the votive image concerned. They recognise the grace and help won there and strengthen the confidence of others in the power of the place. We presupposed that in the examined multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural region of the Banat this Roman Catholic tradition of donating pictures has a particular symbolic meaning of a religious, ethnic and cultural nature.

Folk religion is inconceivable without pictures. Catholicism can be regarded as a religion in which images are especially important.<sup>2</sup> The picture is communication without text and a lasting form of teaching that everyone can understand. The pictures speak in a language that many people understand.<sup>3</sup> Like religious customs and rites in general, the pictures are also a confession of faith.<sup>4</sup> In them the timeless teachings of religion are connected to concrete references linked to time. They show the worldview of a period. However, this worldview is never intimate, but always publicly regulated.<sup>5</sup> The pictures evoke different events of life, they offer the opportunity to recount them again. Portrayal and narrative are thus closely inter-related.<sup>6</sup>

At the site of our research, in Radna the tradition of donating pictures still exists, therefore this practice can be observed, recorded



Virgin Mary appears to Josefine Janda. 50,5x63,5, oil, painted inscription in German: "Zur Erinnerung" meiner schweren Operation, als ich nach dem Erwachen die heilige Gottesmutter erscheinen sah. Mit erfurchtvoller Dankbarkeit. Karansebes 17. XI. 1927. Josefine Janda.

and analysed. Further, the people who follow this practice can be interviewed. Thus the relation between the people and pictures and the people and the picture collection can be examined. We believed that the roles of the collection and the place could be observed not only in the everyday religious life but also in the region's society in general.

## The Field: The Banat Region – Equilibrium of Differences

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the southern part of the Hungarian Kingdom fell under the rule of the Osman-Turkish Empire for nearly two hundred years.<sup>7</sup> It was liberated from the Turkish rule only in 1718 and it is since this time that the area has been referred to as the Banat. The area liberated from the Turks by force of arms was administered for a long while directly from Vienna as an independent administrative unit under the name of Banatus Temesvariensis. The repopulation, recultivation and rejoining of the region in the empire's economic/social life started as a result of the Habsburg military and civil administration.<sup>8</sup> By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the region had a developed agriculture and industry. These processes and the conscious settlement

policy implemented under the auspices of these processes resulted in the multicultural and multilingual image of the Banat in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> The region had a special position until 1918 in Hungary, then in Romania. Until 1918 the social scene was characterised by the fact that Germans, Hungarians and Romanians lived here in nearly the same number and with the same significance, which meant that despite Romanians being in a relative majority there, no ethnic domination was apparent in the region. This resulted in the emergence of often-cited ethnic tolerance in the region; in the background of which lay economic prosperity besides the ethnic equilibrium. The region's ethnic groups had different functions also in an economic sense and this underpinned and ensured their local role. The settlements – with the exception of the big towns – were generally ethnically homogeneous.

The region was divided between Romania and Serbia by the peace treaty that ended World War One and which dismembered Hungary. With this act a developed Central European region was annexed to the Balkans region, which had a different mentality and was at a different stage of development deriving from its different historical background. A common

characteristic feature of the divided (Romanian and Serbian) Banat is that civilisational disagreements and conflicts aggravated.<sup>10</sup> Right after the annexation a large-scale settlement of Orthodox Romanians and Serbs started as well as the expropriation of the local economy, the economic destruction of Germans and Hungarians and their gradual expulsion from the region, which was a way (still supported by the state today) of solving the existing conflicts. The result was a great degree of assimilation among Hungarians and wide dispersion. Following the mass emigration of Germans, after 1990 Romanians from Oltenia and Moldavia moved into the empty villages completely changing the ratio of ethnic groups in the Banat.<sup>11</sup>

### Church Administration – Ethnic Groups, Languages, Cultures

The Franciscan Order settled in Lippa (Ger. Lippa, Rom. Lipova) belonging to the Bishopric of Csanád in the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. However, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century it moved from here to Radna to escape the advancing Turks and has operated here without interruption since then. The monastery and church were rebuilt several times between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Up to 1926 the monastery belonged to the Saint John of Capestrano Franciscan province which operated on the Hungarian Great Plain; in that year it was transferred to the Saint Stephen Franciscan province in Transylvania.<sup>13</sup> The Franciscans here were always Hungarians and Germans, as were the believers of the diocese.

Until 1918–1920, the annexation of the region by Romania, despite their minority in number the German and Hungarian ethnic groups were dominant in the Banat. These dominated local and regional administration beside the cooperating local Romanians. After the annexation to Romania, officials from Romania took over the administration and mainly non-Romanians were appointed to the management of various institutions, such as schools and factories. Romanian colonists were settled near the Hungarian settlements that were not considered trustworthy. Romanian border guards were brought into the expropriated houses of Hungarian and German settlements that were in

the vicinity of the new Hungarian state border. Also during the so-called land reform Romanians were settled in the lands expropriated from local landowners in order to change the ethnic relations and to intimidate. A mentality very different from the previous one started to spread in the Banat. Corruption and despotism, previously unknown to the Romanian population of the region, poisoned everything.

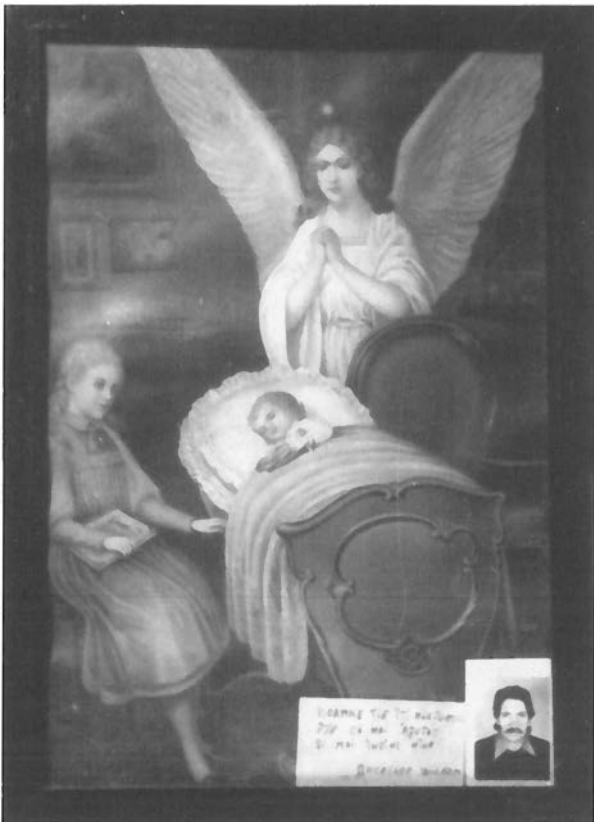
Ethnic threats were manifested in – beside the excommunication of Hungarians and a smaller number of Hungarophile Germans – the expropriations of homes, romanianising of education, then in an attack against churches and their institutions (orders, church schools). At the end of World War Two our region was also affected by the looting by Romanian independent troops: e.g. the still uninvestigated massacre of a large group of innocent Hungarians at Pincota (Pankota) and Şiria (Világos, Hellbrunn). The Hungarians of Radna only escaped death by a stroke of luck. Germans were severely affected by their deportation to the Soviet Union, which claimed many thousands of lives and thus decimated their ethnic group. Those who managed to return home faced expropriation and forced organisation of collective farms (kolkhozes). As a result, the relatively closed society of German settlements dissolved. Beside the emigration to Germany after the war, migration to the towns eroded the society of German settlements in the Banat.<sup>14</sup>

The change of ruling power meant a change in the wider community language usage. Formerly, before 1918 the language of administration was Hungarian. Although the ethnic groups were able to use their mother tongue, belonging to Hungary practically meant that Hungarian was the language of the state as well as of individual success in life.<sup>15</sup> However, the Banat was multilingual where the knowledge of Hungarian, German, Romanian and at places Serbian at a high level was quite general. The intermediary languages between different ethnic groups, dominantly Romanian, German and Hungarian as well as smaller groups of Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, Czechs and Bulgarians were often Hungarian and German.

This situation changed after the annexation of the region to Romania. Romanian became the

state language and thus the language of administration and official communication. While in previous decades the Hungarian ethnic group tended to assimilate Germans and in smaller numbers Romanians and other ethnic groups, now the direction of linguistic adjustment and assimilation changed: everybody was assimilated and has been assimilating into the groups of Romanians. This indicates that the individual language/ethnic groups have never been isolated but they were always embedded in a greater society and show that local/micro processes always depended on global/macro processes.

This change in direction did not, however, take place without conflicts since behind the different languages there were and are different cultures and religions, different religious cultures and civilisations.



Child in a cradle with a girl and guardian angel. 41x30, colour print, with a photo of a middle-aged man, handwritten Romanian inscription: Doamne ție îți mulțumesc ptr. (=pentru) că mai ajutat și mai fîntînms mina. Gherber Vilhem. Cirka 1910.

## The Changes of Identity – Remembering and Remembrance

Few scientific problems have proved to be so long lasting and lengthily intriguing as the issue of identity. It has been the subject of ethnological and sociological researches for many years. Within the next couple of years no drop in interest is expected along the regions of the Danube, either. One reason for this is the tragic history of the nations in the Carpathian Basin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: changes in the political systems, collective accountabilities, excommunications, national eradications, ethnic cleansing, multiple border modifications, financial destruction because of loss of wealth, nationalisation and the scattered character of the Hungarian nation. On the other hand, in connection with the accession to the EU the Hungarian nation, which is an odd one out among the other nations in the Carpathian Basin has to deal with the issues of preserving, forming and re-establishing both its own and the European identity.<sup>16</sup>

Remembrance and historical remembering are key elements and founders of individual and community identity creation. Historical remembering is a precise definition of what a community should not forget. Therefore it is not equal to history, it is a selection from history, although its ties to the past are strong. Historical remembrance is not a spontaneous phenomenon and although it is the individual who remembers something and somebody, remembrance is always collective.<sup>17</sup>

Following the partitioning of Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy after World War One and following the occupation of the dismembered Hungarian lands by the Czechs, Romanians, Serbs and Austrians, the new empire's first task was to destroy the symbols (statues, memorial plaques) of Hungarian remembrance and to exchange them with the objects of another historical remembrance.<sup>18</sup>

## The Role of Religion and Churches

We cannot emphasise enough how important Radna is in the sharing of the experienced

everyday Catholicism and folk religious practice. Radna with its miraculous picture of the Scapular Blessed Virgin – beside Szeged – is a shrine with a large catchment area in the Great Plain, today divided among three countries. Radna is the sacral centre of a large area's Catholicism.<sup>19</sup> Visiting Radna is a symbolic expression and confession of Catholics belonging together as well as a sign of the unity of the sacral area. According to Sándor Bálint<sup>20</sup>, Radna in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries “would be a symbol for Catholicism between Islam and Orthodox religions. (...) Its cultic spell has bound the Hungarian, German, Bunyevci, Bulgarian, Romanian and Tót [= Slovak] people of the Great Plain and Hungary”. It cannot have been by chance that after the Romanian occupation the Romanian authorities prevented pilgrimages to Radna. Not only the processions from the truncated Hungary stopped but also the Banat Hungarians and Germans from Serbia stayed away. The motherland dioceses tried to fill or counterbalance this void by getting the Hungarian parts of Radna's catchment area to organise the “Radna procession” in Szeged in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> The Hungarian pilgrimages by now have been reduced to occasional frequency.

Until World War One Radna was the largest place of pilgrimage of the southern-eastern

Hungarian region bordered by Zenta (today Senta, Serbia), Kecskemét, Szolnok, Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania), Déva (today Deva, Romania), and Fehértemplom (today Bela Crkva, Serbia), and now it is the biggest shrine in Western Romania. The characteristic feature of the place is the still existing tradition of donating votive pictures that accelerated in the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The scale of this is illustrated by the 1711 pictures hanging on the corridor walls of Radna's shrine church. The pictures indicate that many of the pilgrims visiting the church felt and still feel that their prayers and pleas are heard here, and with Mary's intercession God has helped them in their troubles and illnesses. They show their gratitude with a picture or a marble plaque. The votive picture gallery is thus continuously growing, changing and expanding.<sup>22</sup>

These donations all prove that the motives behind the purchase and donation of the votive pictures/objects are the same: the individual in a crisis situation can only hope for help from the transcendent world (from God, Mary, saints and angels). He has tried and exhausted all worldly sources of help: physicians, authorities, and other people's empathy. The problems about which these people pleaded for the help of the Virgin Mother of Radna were mainly illnesses,



Virgin Mary and guardian angels helping a child at a car accident. 61x79, oil, handwritten German inscription: Wir danken Dir für unseres Kindes Leben! Du hast es uns jenem Juli Tag 1963 ein zweitesmal gegeben. Den sicheren Tod hätte es unter den Rädern gefunden, hättest du es nicht dem würger Tod mit rettender Hand entwunden, deiner schützenden Hand verdanken wir inneren Flehen, du mögest auch in Zukunft schützend neben uns stehen. Maria hat geholfen. Fam. Freisinger, Glogowatz



The Holy Family in Bethlehem. 24,5x33, colour print, with three photos:

1. couple with child, 2. woman with child, 3. man, with handwritten Romanian inscription: Tatar Maria Măcuța Sfântă roagă pe D-zeu și pe fiul tău să facă pace întregi mele familii. Circa 1940.

accidents or problems and conflicts of their individual life that seemed to be impossible to solve. These problems did not, however, originate only from family life conflicts, but they also reflect the social history of the past decades: the war, the lives of the Germans taken to the Soviet Union, the search for stability by the Germans who emigrated to Germany under duress or voluntarily, the helplessness and vulnerability of falsely accused officials in face of the corrupt authorities and the almost last cry for help of the youngster who was not or hardly managed to be accepted at the university. Some interviews contained elements of opposition to the Romanian communist atheist authorities, the fear of them, the expugnability to them and the idea of juxtaposing religion and power. These motives prove that for many people in many situations Radna and the Virgin Mother of Radna, the Catholic religion and faith meant security and the last resort.

The old and young monks of the Radna Franciscan cloister accept and tolerate the religious practice of donating pictures. In the past years though there seem to be changes taking place in the new prelate's acceptance of the practice. Behind the acceptance may lie not only a more tolerant Franciscan way of thinking but also the realisation of the fact that the several hundred pictures in the picture gallery

of Radna are all tangible symbols of relying on God, they acknowledge the "last resort" character and role of faith, religion and the church. This was obviously proven by the sharp increase in the number of pictures donated in the times of communism. In the eyes of the visitors the large number of pictures enforce and propagate the effectiveness and popularity of the shrine of Radna.

The tradition of donating pictures therefore lives on in Radna. Its intensity during the past 150 years was changeable. In its outer form the tradition is transformed according to the region's ethnic developments. Over the decades the iconographical composition of the pictures has changed and the language of the messages has also changed. The function of the pictures, however, remained unchanged: they always recall past memories to appear in the present, i.e. the picture makes the past event become present tense. The nature of the pictures and objects as identification and the expression of ethnic identity weakens or disappears. The gallery's pictures will become just signs of intervention by numinosum down here. Although their interpretation becomes increasingly difficult this way, they are still living signs and amplifiers of a peculiar Catholic religious practice. The pictures keep alive a Western Christian religious practice as well as a Central



European, Hungarian, German historical remembrance. These are the roots of the difficulties of the gallery's survival and the clashes with Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Balkan civilisation.

The experiences gained from the Banat fieldwork demonstrate that religion and/or the church and belonging to a church could be the last resort for people in the permanently unstable situation of the twentieth century. It can be a community that provides stability, a hinterland that can mean home and the homeland in a broader sense. This is well illustrated by the fact that the emigrant Germans in their old/new homeland, in today's Germany form and (reconstruct) the sacral space structure that reminds them of their old home, thus they duplicate the sacred place of their old homeland i.e. Radna.<sup>23</sup> The old family house, the cemeteries preserving the ancestors' graves and Radna symbolise the old homeland. The Germans visiting home go to see the old houses they were born in and grew up in, all occupied by strangers (Romanians), they visit the parish church, the cemetery with their ancestors' graves and Radna, the pilgrimage place of the homeland that they left behind. They often brought pictures and photos of their new home in Germany to the Radna picture gallery, thus symbolically unifying the old and new homeland on a sacral level. In the Radna cloister corridor they often look again at the picture they donated, they view the picture gallery and remember, so in this way they help becoming detached spiritually as well.

### In the Atmosphere of Instability

One of the lessons to be learnt from the above situation analysis is that in the territory that 84 years ago was divided and annexed between Serbia and Romania new social developments started to take place. These developments are characterised by instability. The new states could not integrate the Banat on the foundations of the previously established system of values and interests. This system was grounded on a civil society of Western Christianity. The countryside previously showing different types of social background for centuries – which was unique even within the Hungarian state framework –

could and can only be directed according to the centralising government plans if a permanent feeling of instability is created and sustained. The Western Christian religions and churches in this situation create stability for the individual: they provide a stable base among all the changes and instability. These religions differ from Orthodoxy so their roots are different and when they are connected with ethnic groups they ensure ethnic identity. Therefore they sustain national, religious and language diversity. This way their interests are contrary to the state power's intentions to keep an equilibrium of homogeneity. If the individual is still longing for stability and predictability he will search for and find special ways to achieve these: 1) he will assimilate into the majority ethnic/language/religious/cultural group that provides stability; 2) he will emigrate i.e. he will search for stability in his own majority national/language/group; 3) he will create a transcendent stability in his faith, religion and within the frameworks of his church.<sup>24</sup>



The Holy Family in Nazareth, 28x22, colour print, with photo of a boy, Hungarian inscription: Szűz Anyánk légy velünk. Hálából 1995. Kaplony Máncz család.



Those large-scale changes that characterise the Banat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially at the end of the century allow for all three possibilities or choices. And those who did not wish to assimilate in either their language or their religion or to emigrate from their native land, found a final refuge in their faith, religion and church. This is expressed symbolically too in the vast collection of votive objects at Máriaradna which, although representing an insignificant proportion of the estimated mass of 1.5–2 million pilgrims over the last century and a half, has a much greater impact because of its nature. It is of special note that the practice of making donations gained new impetus in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when people throughout Romania were most at the mercy of the terror of the Romanian communist dictatorship which penetrated even into their private lives. Almost the only refuge that remained was religion, where faith, humanity, the mother tongue, culture and awareness of self-identity could be preserved. This could not be taken over and controlled by the dictatorship. Individual and community problems could be expressed within the frames of religion. Only religion and the church offered the experience of a true community. But for the individual who placed his trust in God, faith, religion and the church became a point of reference solving his mental problems, easing his civilisational problems and making them tolerable. The creation and survival of the gallery would have been inconceivable without the co-operation of the Franciscans at Máriaradna. It can be said, also on the basis of the interviews conducted with them, that they tolerated the local custom, received and accepted the objects taken to the monastery, especially pictures seeing in them not worthless kitsch and mass-produced articles but the signs of divine grace manifested in the lives of individuals. They interpreted the objects as proof of grace and effective instruments of propaganda.

At the same time these changes are true reflections of the internal dissemination of a once developed and tolerant region. Romania's behaviour after 1920 is that of a typical colonist. The new state took the "native's" wealth away (houses, land, factories), it dispossessed their

education and is restricting their churches even today. On the other side it introduced its own language, used exclusively to teach its own history and it supports its own ethnic/state religion. The "natives" are second-rate citizens who can only choose one of the above-mentioned ways to achieve their individual and community stability. If Romania once integrates the Banat, too, they can only do so to the land, since the society that established and for two centuries has sustained and operated the unique culture of the Banat has virtually disappeared: Germans and many Hungarians emigrated and a growing majority of the local society have no local roots, were not born here, they are monolingual and monocultural and they are intolerant. One culture, that of the Germans has already died out.<sup>25</sup> Will the culture of the other nationalities and ethnic groups be next? And as individuals find themselves free of one social constraint (communist dictatorship), now under the influence of another external constraint (globalised capitalist domination), will they be able to form bonds strengthening their security, and to what? Or will all systems of human connections totally disintegrate? Or will the Roman Catholic Church, the Franciscan Order which has always been on the side of the little people and minorities, and the monastery at Máriaradna be able to slow down these processes, if necessary at the price of supporting, tolerating and thereby maintaining the phenomena of folk religion, including in particular the customs of pilgrimage and donating votive pictures – which moreover canon law also regards as something to be preserved<sup>26</sup>? Or will they too, in keeping with the rationalism spreading within the church, discourage pilgrimages and with them the custom of donating votive objects?<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. Gockerell 1995, 120; Kriss-Rettenbeck 1972, 271–370.
2. Wiebel-Fanderl 1993, 297.
3. Wiebel-Fanderl 1993, 279.
4. In general Oliva Wiebel-Fanderl interprets the role of pictures in everyday life in this way. Wiebel-Fanderl 1993, 278.
5. Wiebel-Fanderl 1993, 278.

6. Wiebel-Fanderl 1993, 278.
  7. Engel 1996.
  8. Kovach 1998.
  9. Bernadett Békési, Bernadett Kiss and Erika Anna Makovics: The Banat in Light of Historical-Statistical Data: The Administrative, Economic and Social History of the Region looks behind these issues citing further literature. For broader historical context see Volgyes 1981, 130–135.
  10. Huntington 1998.
  11. Bodó 1997; Greffner 1996; Rieser 1992.
  12. Lotz 1980.
  13. On the history of Máriaradna see: Jordánszky 1836; Balogh 1872; Magyary 1902; Szabó 1921, 324–325; Bálint 1944; Bálint n.d.; Roos 1981; Barna 1991; Roos 1998 with further literature.
  14. Cf.: Arnold 2002, and Csóka-Jaksa – Pusztai 2002.
  15. Schenk 1978.
  16. Goddard – Llobera – Shore 1996, 23–27.
  17. Assmann 1999.
  18. Barna 2000a; Barna 2000b; Lipták 2000.
  19. Bálint – Barna 1994; Roos 1998.
  20. Sándor Bálint (1904–1980) professor of ethnography at Szeged university.
  21. Bálint 1944, 49–50.
  22. ifj. Lele 2000.
  23. The quantitative analysis of this collection can be found in the essay in our volume written by Zsuzsanna Péter and Erika Vass.
  24. This kind of duplication is not a rare and new phenomenon. Practically the same thing happened in the Middle Ages after Islam conquered the Holy Land: with the use of relics, the holy places of Palestine were re-established in Europe i.e. they were duplicated. A similar process can be observed in the case of the cults forming around icon copies. See: Arnold 2002.
  25. Eriksen (1993, 123–124) also considers that from the point of view of ethnic minorities and the state power there are three possibilities: 1) assimilation; 2) accepting the inferior status; 3) separation.
  26. Barna – Lönnqvist 2000.
  27. Canon 1234, paragraph 2 of the Codex Iuris Canonici provides: “Votive objects displaying folk art and religiosity must be placed visibly in the places of pilgrimage or close to them and must be preserved safely.” CIC 1986. 835.
- life of Banat-Germans]. Szeged, szakdolgozat, kézirat. Manuscript.
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