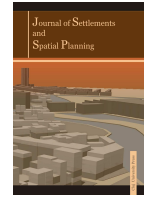




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# Small Villages in Cerna Mountains – Isolation or Blessing?

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## ABSTRACT

In order to find and study the last remains of the Romanian village civilization, looking especially in the most remote areas of Romania, I discovered the hamlets in Cerna Mountains, which are probably the best example for that purpose. Although a national road passes less than 1 km away from them, there is a 300-400 m high natural limestone wall that separates the hamlets from the road and limits the access in the area to a few trails that can be passable only on foot or by horseback. Beside the physical isolation, the hamlets are not connected to any utilities: water, sewer, gas, and or even electricity. There is no hospital in the area and there are only two schools with three or four children, for whom the teacher has to come from at least 12 km away. Despite these inconveniences, people here have benefits that we who live in urban areas or in rural areas close to urban have been stripped of or have given up voluntarily. The paper tries to weigh up the advantages and the disadvantages of living in this area to understand if and in favour of whom they tip the balance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The hamlets in Cerna Mountains are situated on the right side of the Cerna Valley, in its lower sector, in meadows at about 700-800 m altitude. Despite the fact that their real number is higher than ten, officially and statistically only six are recognized: Dobraia, Prisăcina, Cracu Mare, Intelț, Scărișoara and Țațu.

From the administrative point of view, they belong to the Cornereva commune, but are physically separated from it by the Cerna Mountains. Therefore, the unpaved road that connects the closest hamlet (Dobraia) to the first locality of the commune (Bogâltin) is almost 12 km long. In case of all the others the distance increases and the road becomes a footpath, therefore the access in the area being easier from Băile Herculane, on Cerna Valley.

Taking into consideration the toponym of Prisăcina, by which largest one of the hamlets is known, the current occupations of the people and the floristic diversity of the area, they must have primarily been apiaries, which later developed and formed settlements.

This toponym as well as others like Bedina, Cracu Mare, Poiana Lungă can be found on the military topographic plans drawn between 1780 and 1784 by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On these plans we can see that there were meadows suitable for living in the area and we can also find the road that used to connect the hamlet of Dobraia with Bogâltin and Plugova, which still exists today.

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The starting point for this paper was the idea of discovering the remains of the Romanian village civilization about which Ernest Bernea was speaking in his 1940's work [1]. Thus, I wanted to find a rural area which has remained unspoiled by the influences of modernity, in which people's lifestyle maintained authentic over time and which would reflect the realities of the past as much as possible.

Considering inaccessibility as a restrictive factor for the spreading of modern influences and using Google Earth satellite images, I searched for the villages

that would fit into the category of the most isolated in Romania. Thus, based on the information provided by others and the one found on the Internet, I discovered this area in Cerna Mountains where there are several scattered hamlets and to which the access is very difficult because of the lack of roads that could link them to other settlements. However, today most studies on settlements and especially those with respect to living standard are based on statistical data and are analyzed mainly approached in economic terms.

This paper shows a different approach, inspired especially by the monographic campaigns led by Dimitrie Gusti in the Romanian villages during the interwar period [2]. Therefore I made two fieldtrips in the area.

During the first one that lasted four days I crossed the main hamlets in Cerna Mountains, sleeping in my tent. I tried to gather as much information as possible about the location of the settlements, the distribution of households within them, accessibility and land-use. I have also climbed Mehedinți Mountains, which are on the other side of Cerna Valley, to have a better look at the entire area.

For the next travel I planned to live for four days at a family in Ineleş hamlet, having time to interact more with local people and the opportunity to get closer to their way of life. I observed and learned more about how they spend their time, how they work, what their income sources are, and about the relationships between them and their relation with nature.

### 3. DISADVANTAGES OF LIVING IN AN ISOLATED AREA

#### 3.1. The low accessibility of the area

As mentioned above, despite the fact that a national road passes less than 1 km away from the hamlets, the access to the area is possible only by walking on footpaths thus avoiding the limestone wall or by climbing it on wood stairs attached to the rock, just like the one that leads to Ineleş hamlet (see fig. 1). Another way of getting to the hamlets is the unpaved roads that come from other side of the mountain, from Bogâltin and Bolvaşniţa through Poiana Lungă and reaching Dobraia. From here on, the road becomes passable only for carriages and continues this way up to Prisăcina, where it turns into a footpath that follows the contour line and crosses the remaining villages: Cracu Mare, Ineleş, Scărişoara and Țaţu, and finally descends to the Cerna Valley. This means that food or other commodities that people buy or sell in Băile Herculane are being carried by horses or by people.

In addition, if anyone needs urgent medical care, the easiest way of carrying them is on horseback to Cerna Valley, where they can be picked up by an ambulance. A funeral also puts the local people in

difficulty because the deceased must be transported with a metal stretcher to the cemetery. Up until recently, when another cemetery was created near the newly built church of Dobraia, there was only one cemetery serving all hamlets located near Ineleş.



Fig. 1. Wood stairs to Ineleş.

#### 3.2. Almost nonexistent utilities

Another unbelievable fact for those who live today in urban or modernized rural areas is the lack of technical infrastructure, but people here have gotten used to it and they even have developed their own systems.

Thus, now there are many mini-hydroelectric power plants on the biggest rivers in all hamlets, through which people obtain enough electricity for lighting, radio, television, mobile phone charging. However, they cannot produce enough electricity for supplying larger house equipments (i.e. refrigerator), consequently people store food as our ancestors did before electricity was discovered: with salt in cool cellars.

Using water's power the inhabitants have also created mills for cereals or maize, being well-known that these hydraulic structures are very common in Banat area. However, there are exceptions too. For example, the family that housed me (probably the

richest in the area) have built near their house two basins for capturing water, which is transmitted to their home through pipes.

The only drawback is the fact that during drought periods, the creek dries up and they are forced to bring water supplies from a greater distance.

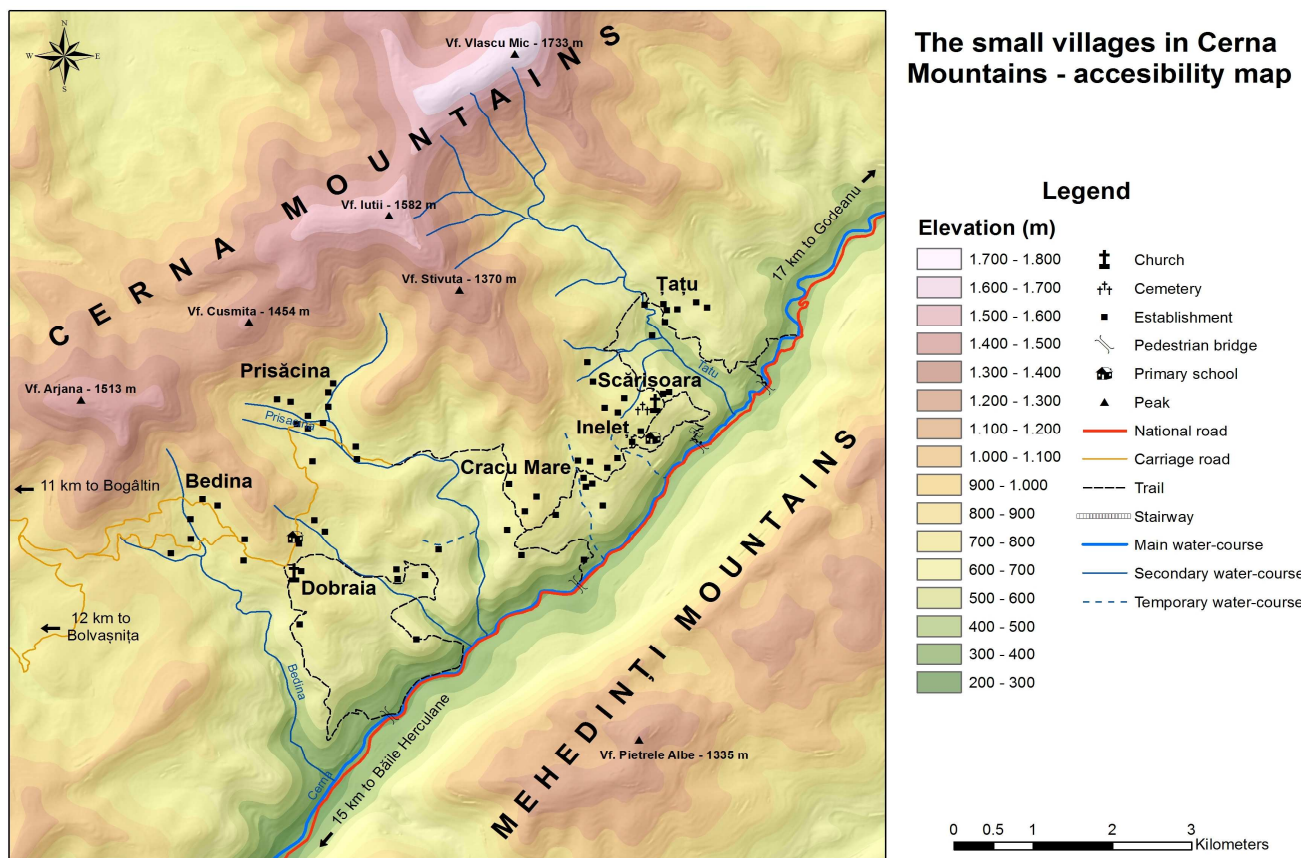


Fig. 2. Accessibility map.



Fig. 3. Water mill.

### 3.3. Church and school

As we know, the church and the school are the most important institutions of the Romanian village. They represent the heart of it, playing a key role in their social life, in the education and development of the spiritual and moral values of the people. Until 2005, when the church in Dobraia was built the only church in the area was the one in Ineleş where the cemetery is also located. The priest, who lived in Bogăltin about 20 km away from there, used to come here couple of times a year on major holidays or when a major event took place in the village: a wedding, a baptism or a funeral. Today, there is another priest who comes from Caransebeş every week and serves the liturgy and who wants to build a house and settle in the area. Also, there are only two primary schools, one in Dobraia and one in Ineleş but children are fewer and fewer every year. In the past year (2011-2012), the school in Ineleş had an off year due to the lack of pupils. This year three pupils will be registered, all in the first grade. The situation is quite alarming in Dobraia too, where the school has only four pupils. The teacher, the same one for both schools, has to come from Bogăltin at about every two weeks and stay two or three days at each school.



Fig. 4. The church in Dobraia.

For secondary school and high school, children commute to Băile Herculane.

However, there are very few adolescents who get to go further to college due to their good marks and the financial possibilities of their parents and if they do, most of them do not return.

#### 4. ADVANTAGES ENJOYED BY PEOPLE HERE

Despite the isolation determined by the natural environment, through its diversity it offers a wide range of favourable conditions for living and related activities.

##### 4.1. Advantages offered by natural elements

Because of the reduced surface of flat lands and of low slope that are used as arable land or for growing vegetables, although they would be more appropriate for buildings; the average slope land is predominantly used by fruit gardens and households, whereas those with high and very high slope are used as pastures, meadows, and forests.

Slope orientation is very important too. People prefer sunny slopes (south-eastern, southern and south-western exposition) which are predominant in the area, and this is obvious if we analyze the position of the households.

Due to the Mediterranean influences the climate here is one of the mildest in Romania, therefore it is suitable for living and farming. The average annual temperature is between 8 and 9° C, the average temperature for January is close to 0° C, and annual precipitation is about 800 mm/year [3]. Although the soil is rather rocky, it is very fertile and most importantly it is not polluted at all. Local people do not use any fertilizers, pesticides or insecticides. Instead, they improve soil quality by spreading on the land the animal manure accumulated throughout the year.

Vegetation is another important factor that influences the lifestyle in this area because through its diversity it provides food for animals (through pastures and meadows), timber for buildings, cooking and house heating (due to the deciduous forest nearby) and also forest fruits and mushrooms for people's nourishment.

All these natural aspects offer favourable conditions to the local residents for practicing various types of agriculture, which is actually the basic activity in the area. Agriculture provides food for people's own needs whereas the surplus is being sold on the market in Băile Herculane, this being a good way of gaining additional income.

##### 4.2. Diversified agriculture

Arable land is cultivated mainly with corn and potatoes, but also with tomatoes, peppers and other

vegetables, whilst the fruit gardens include many species of fruit trees, especially cherry, plum, apple, walnut. The other aspect of agriculture, animal breeding, is perhaps more important than the first one in terms of benefits for the people. Cows are bred mainly for milk, from which cheese is made in order to

be sold later, sheep are bred for meat and wool, horses for transportation, but people also breed pigs and chickens. However, the traditional activity of the area, with a long history and leading to the development of these establishments is beekeeping, based mainly on the floristic diversity in the area.

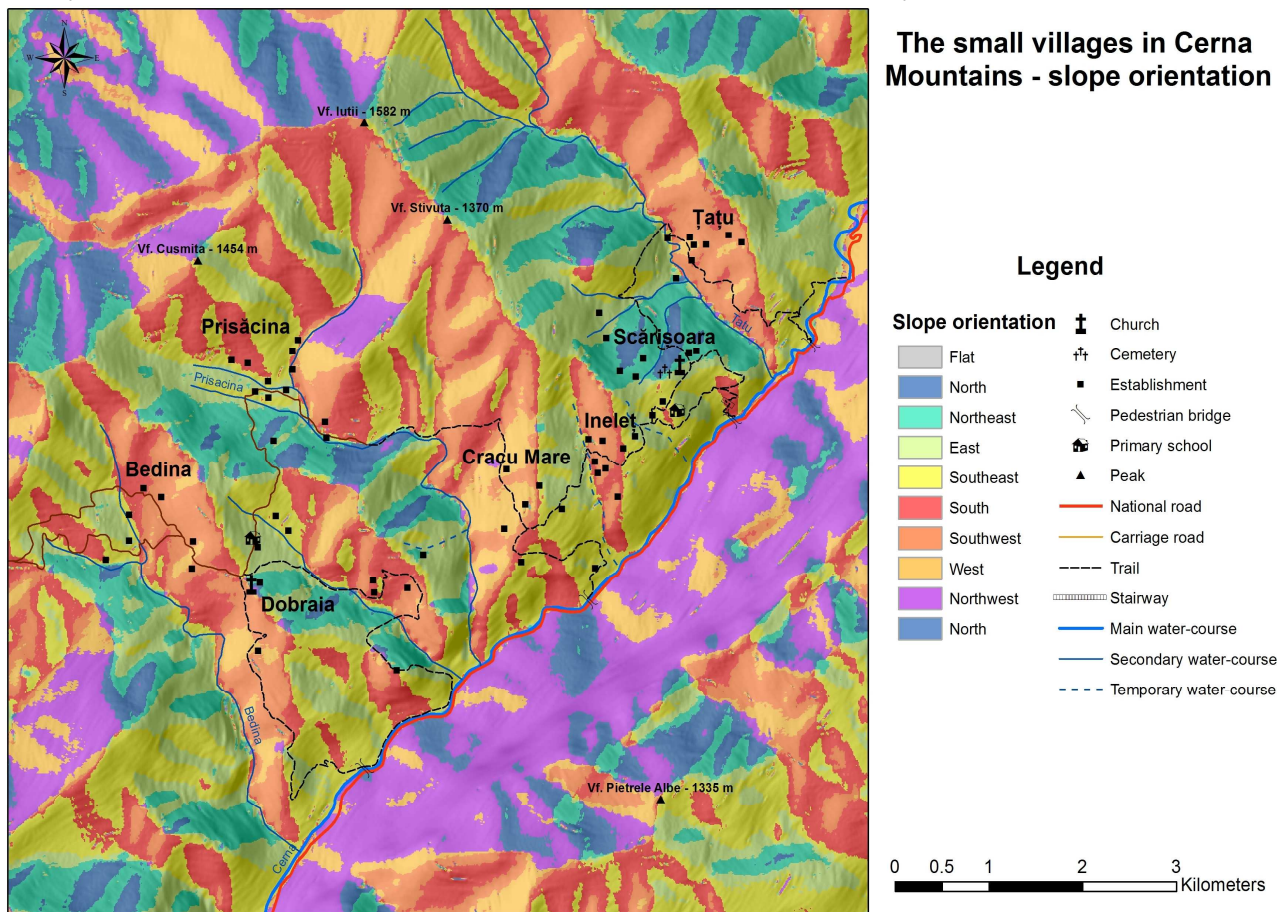


Fig. 5. Slope orientation map.

## 5. PEOPLE'S WAY OF LIFE

During my stay in the area, there were three aspects related to people's way of living and thinking that impressed me the most: their close contact with nature, the tight connection between residents and their simple religious faith.

### 5.1. The connection between people and nature

Taking into consideration that their existence is closely linked to nature, these people respect it and even love it more than any others. This fact was especially visible at the elders. A good example for this is an old lady named Icoana, the eldest of the family who hosted me, who loved flowers very much (every day she would put some of them in pots) and even vegetables that she called "my darlings". She was also very sad when cuckoo's singing changed, this way announcing the end of spring.

### 5.2. Strong links within the community

Since each hamlet has within ten families and consequently very few inhabitants (Craçu Mare – 26, Dobraia – 23, Prisăcina – 30, Scărișoara – 23, Țațu – 44) and that the relations with the closest villages (Bogâltin and Bolvașnița) are very weak, most people are related to each other by blood or marriage [4]. For example, the man who hosted me was married to his neighbour's daughter, so they are now his parents-in-law. There are also family relationships even between local people who live in hamlets at distance, thus the entire community seems to be one big family. This feature is specific for old Romanian villages, when "all the people from the village belonged to one family, being bound together by family relationships that eventually formed what is called a single family tree (ro. *neam*), which represents the descendant of a single ancestor. Called the elder or the old man (ro. *moș* or *bătrân*), this ancestor is supposed to have been the founder of both the village and the people, and all inhabitants were his descendants" [5].



Fig. 6. Beekeeping in Ineieț.



Fig. 7. Baba Icoana and his cats.



Fig. 8. Group work - hoeing the corn.

Another argument for this is the fact that most of those buried in the cemetery were called Cionca, the same as the name of the family that hosted me.

Close relationships between locals can be seen in the agricultural side of life too. Here, group work is still common. People belonging to several families take turns in helping each other for the most important works (ploughing, hoeing, mowing, tending). Therefore they gather on predetermined days to help each other in the end everyone benefitting from help and finishing work.

### 5.3. Faith in God

The time spent among locals and the participation at the Sunday service together strengthened my belief that the church has an important role in the life of a community, especially in rural areas.

Beyond the eschatological function, the church teaches people the real moral and national values and has great social importance as well. Going to church also overlaps with their rest-day (Sundays or major holidays) and it is the best way to reunite as a community. After the religious service, they have the opportunity to talk, to share feelings, discuss news and to consolidate their relationships.

In those moments it really feels like they actually are one big family, regardless of their names or the hamlet they live in. To have an idea of the importance of the church for local people, I will reproduce the words of Iosif from Țațu hamlet, a 76 years old man: *“We are delighted that you came, father. Now we have a church here in mountains too. Before, when the old priest came only for funerals, it felt as if we were living in the woods.”*

Despite the fact that people here have not had a priest for a long period of time (more than twenty years) everyone has a simple, yet strong faith in God. Here, everything happens only with God's help, or, as they say, *“if God allows it”*, and it is probably the tight connection with nature and the simple way of living that gives them such powerful faith.

### 6. CONCLUSION

Viewed from outside, in western civilization's terms of materialism, utilitarianism and progressivism, in which we have been accustomed to think, life in small villages in Cerna Mountains appears to be backward and deprived of minimum living facilities (utilities, health, education) in which people have a unhappy life at the subsistence level.

If we go deeper into this small world and detach ourselves from this way of seeing things, we will discover positive aspects enjoyed by the people here, from which we have been deprived or gladly gave up. Firstly, it is the beauty of the landscape and the richness offered by nature, the simple way of thinking and living in close contact with it, free of worries, stress and crowd of the urban life. Inhabitants here also enjoy a clean environment, with unpolluted air, water and soil, which ensure a healthy and balanced diet. Working is also important because it keeps people in a good shape which is so necessary in fighting against many physical and mental illnesses. Looking from this point of view, isolation seems to be a positive thing which reduces significantly the negative influences of modern civilization.

Therefore, it remains up to each of us whether we consider isolation as being restrictive or beneficial, and to what extent, depending on the way of thinking in which we have been educated.

### 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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