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# Tradition and Contemporaneity in the Tourist Life of “Muscelele Argeşului” Countryside

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## Introduction

The hillsides between the Dâmbovița and the Topolog valleys represent the eastern subdivision of the Getic Subcarpathians. In the Romanian specialist literature the area goes either by the name of the Argeş Subcarpathians, or "Muscelele Argeşului" (Popescu Voitești, 1909). The picturesque natural landscape, together with the settlements sheltered by the crests of the Făgăraş Mountains, as well as those extending in the tributary valleys of the Argeş are as many tourist assets.

Muscelele Argeşului boast a well-known urban tourist tradition through some of its towns with a rich historical background eg., Curtea de Argeş and Câmpulung the former capitals of the Walachian Principality. The natural and human resources of the countryside had attracted tourists, mainly for its mineral springs (at Bughea de Sus, Bradetu), the folk festivals and the famous fairs (Domnești, Mușetești), and no less simply for walks around Curtea de Argeş and Câmpulung. The folk costume, the architecture and the distinctive customs, stirred the interest of visitors on short stays who used to travel towards the mountain zone in the north.

Today, tourism follows on the line of past practices, but takes on new forms in the rural area. After 1990, once twin villages appeared and spread, as did family tourist associations, together with the building of second dwellings in the countryside adjoining the town (or even at greater distances up to 200 km), rural tourism acquired fresh scope and breadth. We are witnessing a diversification of economic activities, in that beside traditional activities, villages develop also a tourist function.

However, industrialisation-induced landscape degradation and pollution, extending also outside Câmpulung and Curtea de Argeş, alongside with the denaturation of the folk costume and the disappearance of some customs under the influence of urbanisation, put a threat to rural tourism in the Argeş region.

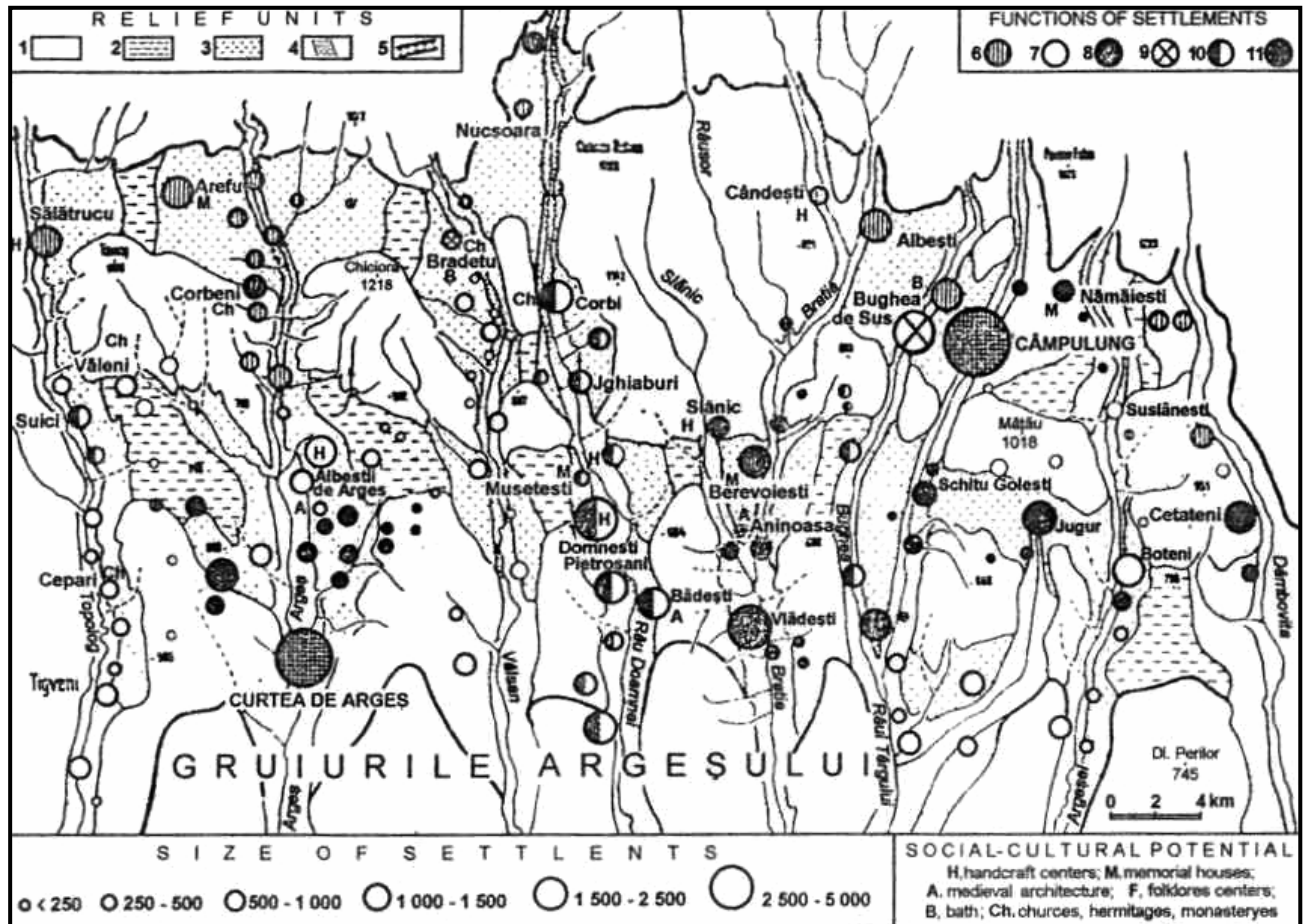
## Natural Background

The lower step of the Făgăraş contains the Frunți - Ghițu - Iezer massifs bounded to the south by a level of 1 200 - 1 400 m alt. wherefrom elongated summits extend southwards separated by a rich network of Subcarpathian valleys tributary to the Olt, Topolog, Argeş and Dâmbovița rivers. These hills are often named "muscele". They are kind of butresses propping up the mountain. The higher segments alternate with wide saddles forming together step-like alignments parallel to the mountains sloping down southwards to the flattened level of the Gruiurile Argeşului hills. The upper step includes the highest Subcarpathian hills (1 000 - 1 200 m) that close in a series of small submontane depressions and widenings of the valleys coming out from the mountain. These hills, with isolated peaks, are strongly fragmented and have steep slopes. They line up from west to east as follows: Tamaş 1 104 m; Cioara, 1 043 m (between the Topolog and the Argeş rivers); Chiciura, 1 218 m (between the Argeş and the Vâlsan rivers); Toaca, 899 m (between the Vâlsan and the Râul Doamnei rivers); Muscelele Plăticăi 1 143 m (between the Râul Doamnei and the Bratia rivers); Ciocanu 886 m (between the Bratia and the

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Bughea rivers); Ciuha, 750 m (between the Bughea and the Râul Târgului rivers); Mățau, 1018 m (between the Râul Târgului and Argeșel rivers); Groapa Oii, 751 m (between the Argeșel and the Dâmbovița rivers) (Geografia României, 1992).

This row of hills, of similar altitudes, extend southwards into a lower, undulated step (600-650 m) of saddles between contact depressions and the piedmont (fig. 1).



**Figure 1. Muscelele Argeșului:** 1. Subcarpathian hills; 2. Saddles; 3. Depressions; 4. Flood plains and terraces; 5. Defiles; 6. Forest-pasture; 7. Agrarian-fruit tree-plantation; 8. Agrarian-industrial; 9. Balneoclimateric; 10. Fruit tree growth and animal breeding; 11. Complex. (compiled after Geografia României, 1992).

Several rivers spring up from the mountains, flow into the Olt (the Topolog), Argeș (the Vâlcan, Râul Doamnei, Brăția, Râul Târgului and Argeșel) and the Dâmbovița, cutting wide corridors (with well-developed floodplains and terraces) along a NS direction, representing actual depressions in contact areas of hydrographic convergence. At the contact with the mountains they shape small submontane or Subcarpathian depressions, linked by hill saddles, and forming a kind of depressionary corridor, obviously less significant than the one west of the Olt River: Sălătruc on the Topolog, Arefu on the Argeș, Brădetu-Nucșoara on the Vâlcan, Cămpulung on the Bughea, Râul Târgului and Argeșel.

A second row of intra-hilly depressions is found in areas of hydrographic convergence at Tîgveni, Curtea de Argeș, Mușetești, Domnești, Slănic, Berevoiești, Godeni, Jugur and Boteni. It has been frequently referred to as the "Depression of the seven muscele" (Mihăilescu, 1966), do to its undulated aspect of an intra-hilly depressionary coridor.

Since part of the tourists use the Subcarpathian settlements as stop-overs, or points of departure to mountain hikes, we would recall that most of the Subcarpathian valleys crossing the "

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Muscele” originate from the high mountain zone, having cut gorges on their southern rim, alternating locally with small widenings: Cheile Vâlsanului, Cheile Râului Doamnei and Bahna Rusului Depression, Cheile Argeşului and Vidraru Depression. The glacial relief in the source area adds to the picturesque forms of the high mountain region.

**The shelter climate** could be considered a basic natural resource, an asset for the practice of tourism in these parts. The circulation of air masses follows a NS trajectory along the large valley corridors of the Topolog, Argeş, Râul Târgului, and Dâmboviţa, carrying ozone-rich air. Besides, there is little humidity and higher average temperature.

Many rural settlements lying in depressions and valley corridors benefit by this sparing climate good for rest and rehabilitation tourism nearly the year round.

Mineral springs, known for a long time now, have not been introduced into the national spa-cure circuit, being used only locally (at Brădet and Bughea de Sus), while cure installations and treatment have an artisanal character.

**The construction of dams** on the Argeş River (Oeşti, Albeşti, Cerbureni, Valea Iaşului, Curtea de Argeş), over the 1970-1980 period has brought about changes to the Subcarpathian landscape, yet without damaging the region's attractiveness. As it is, these hydrotechnical managements have not entailed the diversification of the tourist offer, because no tourist endowment programmes were put in place. That is why, contrary to expectations, tourist flows were slow in coming. For the time being, when the installations are partly silted and waters polluted, tourist prospects are even slimmer.

**The natural vegetation** is rich in foliated forests (beech and Quercus stands) that cover over 60% of the high hills, yet not in Câmpulung Depression and in the valley corridors where only small pockets have remained. This reality is illustrated by the presence of two nature reserves alone (a geological reservation at Albeşti and a dendrological park at Mihăileşti). The first is not very much sought by the tourists. The second attracts a few visitors, and it would be worth advertising it.

**Rural settlements** (177) populate the fringes of the forest, or the deforested areas turned into pastureland. The two main activities: wood exploitation and shepherding, are practiced by numerous people. The density of settlements, about 7/100 km<sup>2</sup>, represents an average number for the Subcarpathian areas.

In time, more people used to arrive, being attracted by the possibility of intensive cultivation of fruit-trees. So, settlements kept extending, moreover in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 20<sup>th</sup> when lignite exploitation began (Berevoieşti, Aninoasa, Albeşti-Muscel, Godeni, Schitu Goleşti, Valea Iaşului etc.). The industrialisation of the countryside, started in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> cent., caused serious modification of the natural environment, often leading to its degradation. Excavations would change the landscape, hills disappeared in part, waste was dumped into the floodplain forming actual man-made hills (Berevoieşti, Godeni, Aninoasa etc.). The closure of some coal mines or quarries left the environment to develop in a natural condition. The quarrying of limestone at Mateiaş and its processing since 1972 at the binder factory of Valea Mare Pravăţ have impaired the natural surroundings.

Spa and health cure are complementary activities practiced at Bughea de Sus and Brădet alone.

**The social-cultural potential** of this Subcarpathian area is remarkable, indeed.

*Historical monuments and works of art.* The monasteries with their fine architecture and frescoes, old objects of cult and original documents (Curtea de Argeş Monastery) and the old churches in Curtea de Argeş and Câmpulung towns are some of the outstanding tourist attractions. *Ensembles of medieval architecture (1677) and the Brankovan style (1722)* can be seen at Aninoasa.

Of exceptional interest are the *old village churches* at Schitu Văleni-hermitage, Cepari, Robaia Hermitage, Brădet (15<sup>th</sup> cent.), The Stone Church in Corbi village (the oldest rupestrian paintings in Walachia) etc., unfortunately not put to account as they should.

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Several villages in the Argeş Subcarpathian depressions, or on edge of the mountains are famous for the *architectural style* of their buildings and households, for their original customs, local folklore and ethnographic specificity designated by the name of "muscelean".

**Memorial houses with exhibitions** should be better integrated into the tourist circuit: Berevoieşti, Mihai Tican Rumano House with an art exhibition; Retevoieşti, Drăgănescu House; Nămăieşti, George Topârceanu House; Căpăţâneni Pământenii, composer George Ştefănescu Memorial House etc.

**Handicraft centres composer** at: Slănic, Domneşti (local popular art of the Valea Râul Doamnei); Muşăteşti (ethnographic museum with household items); Vâlsăneşti (red pottery, enameled or not); Albeşti (folk art and metal-thread embroidery); Sălătruc in the Topolog Valley, (with very well preserved costumes and stone-and-wood work etc).

Many old structures and household items can still be seen in almost every village. A number of museums eg. (Domneşti) have on display local artifacts. "The Muscele zone owes its attractiveness also to the folk costumes, folk songs, popular dances, traditional processing of stone and wood for constructions etc.

Renowned fairs (seasonal, annual) are taking place at: Domneşti (in spring – March 25, in summer – August 6); Vâlsăneşti (April 23, May 21, October 14, December 6); Albeşti (August 15) etc. Famous folk festival are at Sălătruc - The Nedeia of the Topolog Valley - feasting the shepherds before going up into the mountains with their sheep, June, 1); The Harvesting of Strawberries at Albeşti etc., (Bonifaciu, 1985).

The Muscel villages have of old been known to faithfully preserve folk traditions, fact that has made some of them (Domneşti, Corbi, Muşeteşti) very attractive for tourists. However, finding accommodation with the locals was not customary. There are a few chalets, motels, and tourist stopovers (Arefu, Brădetu, Domneşti and Bughea).

A beginning has been made in that lodgings are offered in those genuine monuments of folk architecture, an organising endeavour for true agrotourism in the "Muscele"world, a demand of the present time.

## Rural Tourism

A landmark of the area's specificity are the symbolic names attached to some places, reminiscent of local legends, eg. The Argeş Valley or The Valley of Master Manole, the Vâlsan Valley or the Valley of Pastoral Traditions, the Topolog Valley or the Valley of Golden Apples.

*Twin villages* (with those in France and Belgium), officially set up after 1990, have undertaken sustained tourist activities - eg. mutual visits of families from the respective countries, an opportunity to learn on the ground about the economic and social reality of their settlements. Moreover, in the wake of "tourist exchanges of experience", the Muscel families could get a first-hand knowledge of what agrotourism and rural tourism in France and Belgium is really like.

*Agrotourist Associations* were recently established (2000), one each in some of the valleys. Their aim is to promote rural tourism and start certain agrotourist activities. Such associations operate in the valleys of the Argeş ("Cheile Argeşului"), Vâlsan ("Poienile Vâlsanului") and Topolog ("Nehoiu"). The initiative belongs to some families (about 30 in each valley) ready to practice this new type of tourism.

An interesting aspect is that here international tourism preceded the domestic and local one. The region has plenty of agricultural resources (fruit-trees and livestock) but insufficiently put to account. With its present technical endowment agriculture care hardly become profitable. A solution for the regional development of the countryside would be to stimulate agrotourism and the small and medium enterprises. The real help would be the integration of the region in the EU programmes (SAPARD, ISPA etc), with focus on the development of agrotourism.

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### Conclusions

The villages in the Muscelele Argeşului region that have a tourist vocation have over the past decade benefited from assistance under international programmes helping them to integrate both into the local and domestic tourist market as well as to enter the foreign one. The development of local tourism and agrotourism must rely on the use of local resources.

The old centres know, outstanding in various crafts, ought to be revitalised for tourism: folk embroidery (Câmpulung), cheese-making (cheese wrapped up in fir-tree bark, Domneşti, Brădet, and Câmpulung Muscel), the famous beverage made from plums “ţuica de Argeş” (Cepari, Tigveni, Domneşti, Corbeni, Valea Danului etc.), wood-working (Sălătruc, Nucşoara, Arefu, Albeştii de Muscel etc), stone and wood used in house-building (Arefu, Sălătruc etc.).

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