

Cosmin Minea

University of Birmingham

Europe in the Balkans: The Creation of a National Architectural Heritage in Modern Romania (1875-1918)

My PhD research analyses how the interactions between foreign and local architects and intellectuals defined a national architectural heritage in late 19th century Romania. The transnational entanglements are best illustrated by the actors involved in restoring and promoting the old monuments. Among them are French architects such as André Lecomte du Noüy (1844-1914) and Ambroise Baudry (1838-1906), German-speaking historians and architects such as Ludwig Reissenberger (1819-1895) and Karl Romstorfer (1854-1917) or Romanians trained in German-speaking lands such as George Mandrea (1855-1916) or in Paris, such as Ion Mincu (1852-1912) or George Sterian (1860-1936).

The monuments of the former Ottoman provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia, that from 1859 formed Romania, consisted mostly of Orthodox churches and monasteries, reflecting the multiple Byzantine, Ottoman and Slavic influences in the region. In the second half of the 19th century, they gradually acquired new meanings, from symbols of medieval rulers to symbols of the state, the King and ultimately the nation. The monuments came to represent concepts such as “the people”, “ancestors”, “living history”, in a new language that related directly the monuments with the imagined community of the Romanian nation.

The research on the European-wide intellectual networks reveal to what extent Lecomte du Noüy applied in Romania the ideas and practices of his master, the famous Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Viollet-le-Duc, together with the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts, had a detrimental impact also on the career of many Romanian architects who nevertheless contradicted and shaped the French methods. At the same time the Habsburg Empire took an interest in the region and the works of German speaking scholars were both appreciated by the Romanians, for their new scientific methods and criticised for not relating the monuments to the Romanian “nation”. They acted as stimuli in Romania for the search and promotion of a “national” architecture and made the German scholars a constant reference in local art

historical studies. In this way, the research also questions the common held view that late 19th century Romanian intellectuals were almost exclusively looking towards France.

The main research questions of my dissertation are how a national Romanian architectural heritage was created by restoring and promoting old monuments and how did they fit into and reinforced the national historical narrative of the time? What was emphasized, included but also ignored in the pre-existing cultural heritage of the Ottoman provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia? How did the dynamic relations between Romania and Western Europe influenced the process of identity building? To what extent can one overcome the legacy of the national historiographies as well as the nation-state as main historical unit of analysis by focusing on transnational exchanges?

One of the main aims of my research is to explain a 19th century nation-building process as emerging from transnational relations, collaborations, exchanges and influences in an increasingly globalised space. By exposing a complex and entangled web of relations and influences the project destabilises the centre-periphery paradigm, still largely predominant in modern European history. The local context is seen as far more dynamic and influential than usually considered and in this way the research problematizes the straightforward concept of Europeanisation.

My presentation at the International Forum in Berlin will focus on the key issue of how Eurocentrism can be overcome by stressing the importance of the local Romanian context and the agency of the foreign and local actors to shape and reinvent European-wide concepts of heritage protection, promotion and national identity.