

The Impact of the Transylvanian Saxons on Current Place Names in the Romanian Carpathians

Abstract

The Transylvanian Saxons are among the German ethnic communities that have a long tradition in the current territory of Romania. Their number and ratio in the ethnic structure of the country decreased considerably after the Second World War as a result of migratory flows caused by the geopolitical circumstances of the 20th century. Nevertheless, this ethnic community has had a major impact, visible to this day, on the arrangement of the geographical space and the place-name heritage in the areas of origin located in the Carpathian and Sub-Carpathian areas of Southern and Northern Transylvania, respectively. The preservation and conservation of the cultural heritage, specific to the regions that were inhabited by the Transylvanian Saxons, is a major objective of Romanian and European policies in the field. Given the context, this paper aims at highlighting the current place-name heritage of Saxon origin, official and informal alike, in the areas that were inhabited by this ethnic community. Data and information gathered from historical, statistical and bibliographic sources, as well as field information were used for this research.

Keywords

Saxons • Germans • place names • Transylvania • Romania

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Introduction

Aim of the study

The global policy strategy of the European Union places, at its core, the field of culture as a means for promoting the diversity of the European way of life. The preservation of cultural identity, traditions and the specifics of each ethnic community – of how they influenced and organised the spaces in which they lived and still do, and of the impact they have on the ethnic majority – are elements of major importance in defining the policy priorities of the European Commission. The promotion of a Union of equal opportunities requires acknowledging and respecting diversity and identity – even when ethnic communities have diminished considerably or have almost completely assimilated. This also applies to the Transylvanian Saxons, an ethnic community of German origin, who lived for centuries in the Carpathian and Pericarpethian areas on the southeastern borders of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Based on this starting point, our study aims to highlight the place-name heritage of this ethnic community in the Carpathian and Intracarpethian regions of Romania, given that Saxon names have all but disappeared locally. The research focuses on the locality names (oiconyms) in Southern and Northern Transylvania (Figure 1), which were founded, inhabited and developed by this ethnic community. The purpose is to highlight this place-name heritage that is on the verge of extinction; the authors regard it as important to know, preserve and pass on to future generations, particularly since this ethnic community has considerably decreased in prevalence and importance in the ethnic structure of the respective regions.

Theoretical-methodological considerations

From a theoretical point of view, we wish to depart from the paradigm substantiated by Romanian sociologist Chelcea (2001)

of “ethnic flows and ebbs”, which is of particular importance for understanding the identity particularities of a territory, as these particularities are the basis of European regional identity. In this context, we believe that intercultural exchanges facilitated the process of assimilation of migrants (when the autochthonous ethnic population prevailed) or of the autochthonous population itself (when the incoming population turned out to be more numerous; however, more often than not, this occurred through its social-political organization (Săgeată 2019). In cases in which there were policies promoting the separate development of different ethnic communities, including their social segregation, with the limitation and even elimination of all contact between communities, *ethnic enclaves* came to be, some enduring to this very day, and becoming the root cause of tensions and conflicts (such as the events in the Yugoslav space or in the Caucasus) (Fall 2010).

The abrogation of the policies that contributed to the formation of ethnic enclaves, together with other circumstances – whether geopolitical (wars, deportations, ethnic persecution) or economic (the economic gaps between the territories of origin and those of residence) – have led to the complete resorption of some ethnic communities through return migrations to the countries of origin. This is the case of the Transylvanian Saxons; they massively migrated to Germany against the background of the geopolitical circumstances that marked the 20th century (especially after the First and Second World Wars) but also for economic reasons (the economic and social gaps between Romania and (West) Germany deepened considerably after the 1950s). The Saxon minority, which has coexisted for centuries on good and cooperating terms with the majority Romanian population in a multi-ethnic and multicultural Transylvania, left solid marks on the organization and arrangement of the geographical space, on architecture and, not least, on place names.

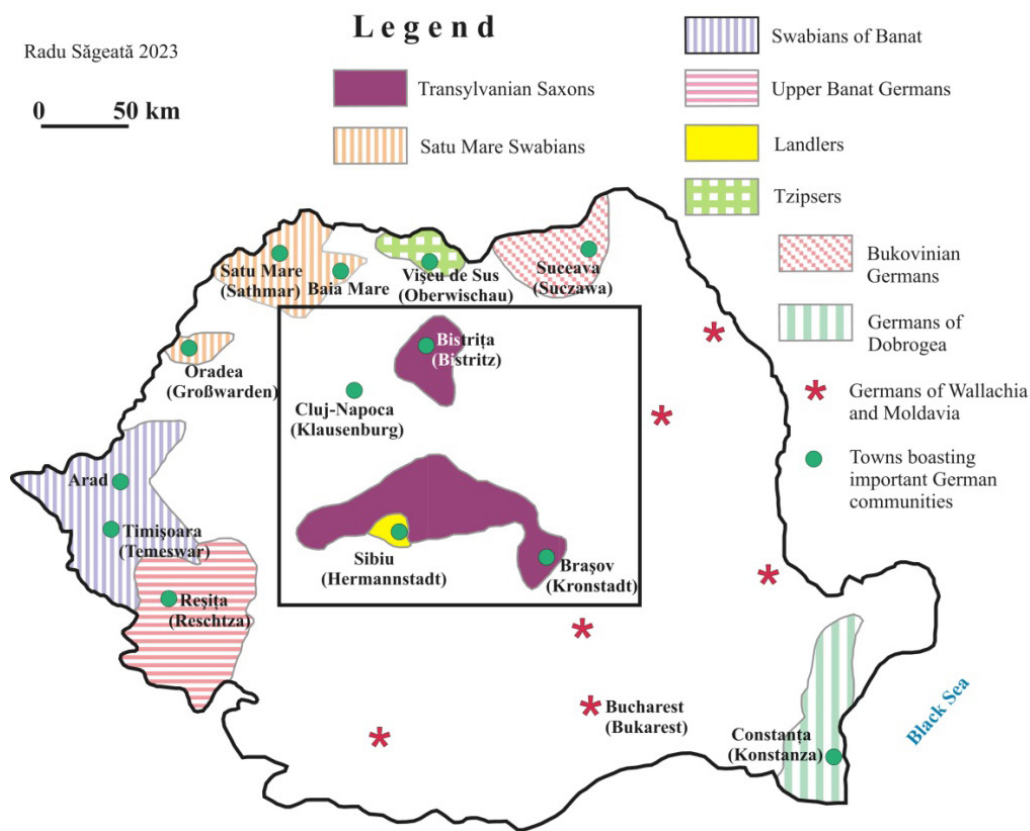


Figure 1. Study area
Source: Săgeată et al. 2017

Our research on the Saxon place-name heritage is based on extensive field research, which was carried out between 2010 and 2022 in villages founded by Saxon settlers in Southern and Northern Transylvania, and on data and information gathered from bibliographic and cartographic sources. The analysis consisted of creating an inventory of Saxon place names, especially Saxon oiconyms, and comparing them to their German and Romanian equivalents, as well as highlighting their origin in relation to the local, topographical, economic and social characteristics, against the background of the demographic evolution and ethnic structure of said villages. At the same time, the evolution of Saxon toponymic heritage was taken into account by comparing the status quo at the beginning of the 20th century with the current situation, as reflected in the official place names of the respective localities.

The literature and the database

The presence and evolution of the Saxon community in Transylvania is well documented in the rich scientific literature; many scientific and cultural elites have come from this ethnic community. Works on the Saxon community have also been written by representatives of the majority Romanian population, which attests to a decent coexistence and the sharing of knowledge between the two ethnic groups (Nägler 1997), and by Anglo-American authors, who have contributed to the formation of an external, impartial image of the Romanian-Saxon cohabitation.

Relevant works on the evolution of the Saxon colonization in Transylvania up until the end of the 19th century are those

of Zimmermann & Werner (1892), Seton-Watson (1925), Kötzsche & Ebert (1936), Müller (1941) and Nægler (1981, 1997). The historical studies on Transylvanian Saxons are rounded out by Göckenjan (1972), Gündisch (1998, 2001), Roth (2003), Cioroianu (2004), Kroner (2009) (whose study focuses on the Saxon communities in Northern Transylvania), Wagner (2000), Gruia (2012), Mărculeț & Mărculeț (2009), Săgeată, Buza & Crăcea (2017) and Klusch (2001).

The developments that took place after the First World War and the ethnic and toponymic situation in the interwar period are highlighted in the first encyclopaedia of Unified Romania (ed. Asociația Științifică pentru Enciclopedia României 1938). They are joined by large-scale works on the Saxon community in Transylvania, particularly useful for the analysis we propose in this paper, such as the *Transylvanian Saxon Dictionary* [Siebenbürgisch-Sächsisches Wörterbuch] (ed. Haldenwang, Maurer & Thudt 1998), the *Historical Dictionary of Transylvanian Localities* (Suciu 1969), and the atlas of the fortified churches of Transylvanian Saxons (Fabini 2008), which also contains valuable information on Saxon place names. Works devoted exclusively to German place names in Romania were written by Loth (1971), Wagner (1977) and Buza (1999), while Akeroyd (2006) approaches Saxon place names by means of the spatial planning systems of Saxon villages in Transylvania.

The dramatic consequences of the Second World War on the German communities in Romania and, in particular, on the Saxon community, were amply highlighted in works written mainly post-1990 by Șandru (1995), Poledna (2001), Böhm (2003), Rus (2007), Kloos-Ilea (2014) and Țimonea (2016, 2023). Additionally, there are two synthesis papers (Schreiber 1993; Gheorghiu 2015)

on German emigration from Romania between 1945 and 1967 – an illustrative phenomenon for the dynamics of the Saxon community in Transylvania in the geopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances specific to post-war Europe. Among the recent works dedicated to the German language and culture in Romania during the interwar period, the large collective study coordinated by Corbea-Hoisie & Gräf (2023) is particularly noteworthy.

The significant wave (almost an exodus) of German emigration from Romania during the late Communist period, as well as immediately after the fall of Communism with its social consequences, has also been analysed in recent works (Cioroianu 2004; Mărculeț & Mărculeț 2009; Gruia 2012; Săgeată et al. 2017; Oltean et al. 2018; Cercel 2019).

In addition to researching the specialized literature, the analyses in this study are based on toponymic, demographic and statistical information extracted from censuses and maps. The population censuses of Transylvania were used to this end, both under Austro-Hungarian (1850, 1857, 1880, 1890, 1900 and 1910) and Romanian rule (1930, 1941, 1948, 1956, 1966, 1977, 1992, 2002, 2011 and 2021), as well as from older (1895, 1948) or more recent (2002, 2010) agricultural censuses, which also provide information on the toponymic background. The following cartographic sources were also used: the topographical maps of Southern Transylvania from 1769–1773 (at a scale of 1 : 28,800) and 1889–1890 (at a scale of 1:75 000) (Institute of Socio-Human Research 1889–90; Molnár, Timár & Biszak 2014), the Austrian maps of the Habsburg Empire from 1853–1858 and 1869–1870 (Timár et al. 2006), the topographic maps of the Sibiu area (1952, at a scale of 1:75 000) and of Romania (1973, at a scale of 1:50 000; and 1996, at a scale of 1:100 000), the pictorial map of the fortified churches of Southern Transylvania (2008, at a scale of 1:200 000) and the updated topographical map of the Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Mediaș areas (2010, at a scale of 1:50,000). The results obtained, following the mapping activities, superimposed on the social phenomenon of a certain historical period, contribute to the toponymic stratification (Crețan 2000).

In addition, historical and documentary data and information were extracted from archive documents – part of the collection prepared by Baier (2005) – and information on the current official German place names in Romania were extracted from the Decision of the Government of Romania no. 1,206 (2001), which includes the rules for applying the provisions for the right of citizens belonging to a national minority to use their mother tongue in local public administration.

Transylvanian Saxons – Part of the German Communities in Romania

The Germans in Romania are less a homogeneous ethnic community than a group that is differentiated according to geographical location, based on the historical and geopolitical periods and circumstances that enabled them to come to the present-day Romanian territory (Romanian Government 2005). Eight distinct ethnic subgroups can thus be discerned:

- Saxons (*Siebenbürger Sachsen*), the most numerous and representative ethnic group of German origin in Romania; they colonized two distinct areas from the middle of the 12th century – the south and the north-east of Transylvania – and are native speakers of the Saxon dialect (*Siveberjesch Saksesch*) and of standard German;
- Banat Swabians (*Banater Schwaben*), who are part of the group of Danube Swabians who emigrated to Banat in three successive waves in the 18th century (Săgeată 1997);
- Transylvanian Landlers (*Ländler*), deported in the 18th century for political and religious reasons (Capesius 1962; Buchinger 1980); they lived in the same geographical regions as the Saxons, but with a much more restricted distribution

(in the villages of Turnișor,¹ Cristian and Apoldu de Sus in Sibiu County);

- Zipser Saxons (*Zipser*), an ethnic community of German origin located in two areas – Northern Romania (Maramureș and Suceava counties) and Eastern Slovakia – originating from the former Hungarian county of Szepes (Zips) in the Tatra Mountains,¹ in modern-day Slovakia;
- Bukovina Germans (*Bukowinadeutsche/ Buchenlanddeutsche*), who came between 1782 and 1913 (Weckerka 1954) when Bukovina was part of the Austrian Empire;
- Bessarabia Germans (*Bessarabiendeutsche*), a compact ethnic community who arrived in the first half of the 19th century, prior to 1940, when, with the occupation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union, they were deported² – first, to the territory of Poland under German occupation; then, to Southern Germany (Schmidt 2004);
- Old Kingdom Germans (Germans from the Romanian Old Kingdom³) (*Regatsdeutsche/ Altreichsdeutsche*), who, in turn, made up a heterogeneous ethnic subgroup;
- Dobrujan Germans (*Dobrudschadeutsche*), arrived between 1840 and 1940 in three successive waves⁴ (Stinghe & Toma 2007) – the only German ethnic community that was directly influenced by the Ottoman civilization.

The number of ethnic Germans in Romania decreased during the 20th century, from 745,421 in the interwar period (following the 1930 census, when they made up 4.1% of the Romanian population), to 343,913 after the Second World War (1948), to 384,708 in 1956⁵ (2.2% of Romania's population); 359,109 in 1977; 111,301 in 1992 (as a result of the Recovery Action/the Secret Channel, whereby persons belonging to the German minority were sold by the Romanian government to the Federal Republic of Germany); 59,764 in 2002; 36,042 in 2011 (when they barely accounted for 0.17% of Romania's population); and 27,019 according to the last census (2021) (figures 2–3). Of the latter, between 11,400 and 13,000 (approximately 35% of all Germans in Romania) are Saxons.⁶

In Sibiu, for example, a relevant urban centre for the Saxon civilization in Southern Transylvania, the share of this ethnic community decreased from 74% in 1880, when Sibiu was a predominantly Saxon city, to 55% in 1900, 45% in 1930, 27% after the Second World War (1948), 23% in 1966, 17% in 1977, just 3.5% in 1992 (as a result of *Acțiunea "Recuperarea"* [the Recovery Action]), 1.6% in 2002 (given the intensification of emigration flows to Germany, Austria and other Central and Western European states), and 0.72% in 2021⁷ (Figure 4). The dynamics of the Saxon communities in Brașov (40.8% of the total population in 1850, 22.0% in 1930 and only 0.5% in 2021), Mediaș (38.5% in 1930 and 1% in 2021) and Sighișoara (40.2% in 1930 and 0.9% in 2021) are also quite similar.

On a global level, the number of Saxons is estimated to be around 300,000 individuals, which means that the Saxons currently inhabiting their native lands make up just 4.2% of this ethnic community's total population.

¹Today, Turnișor is a neighbourhood of Sibiu City.

²Hence, being called Carpathian Germans (*Karpatendeutsche*).

³As a consequence of the deal between Hitler and Stalin (The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact).

⁴The Romanian Old Kingdom (1881–1918) comprised the historic regions of Moldavia, Dobruja, Wallachia and Oltenia.

⁵1841–1856, 1873–1883 and 1890–1891.

⁶Demographic growth amid policies to limit emigration.

⁷According to 2011 census data.

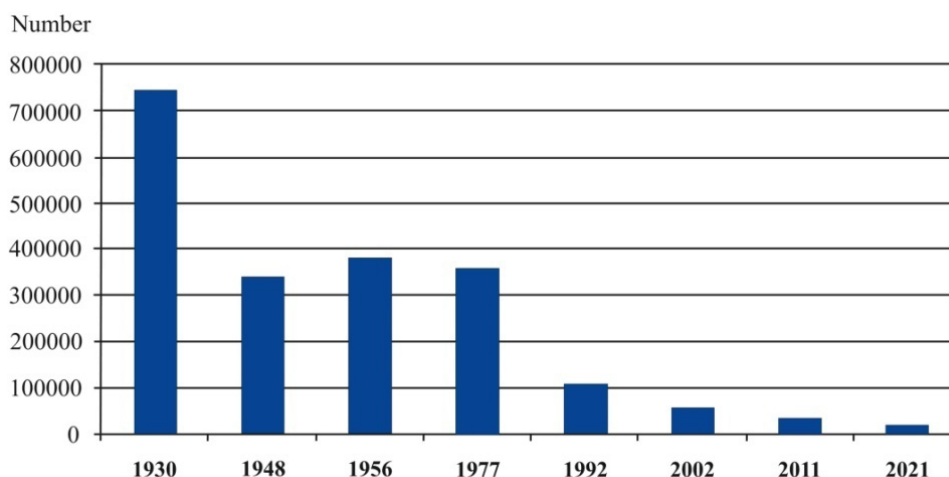


Figure 2. The demographic evolution of the German minority in Romania (1930–2021). Census data

Source: own study

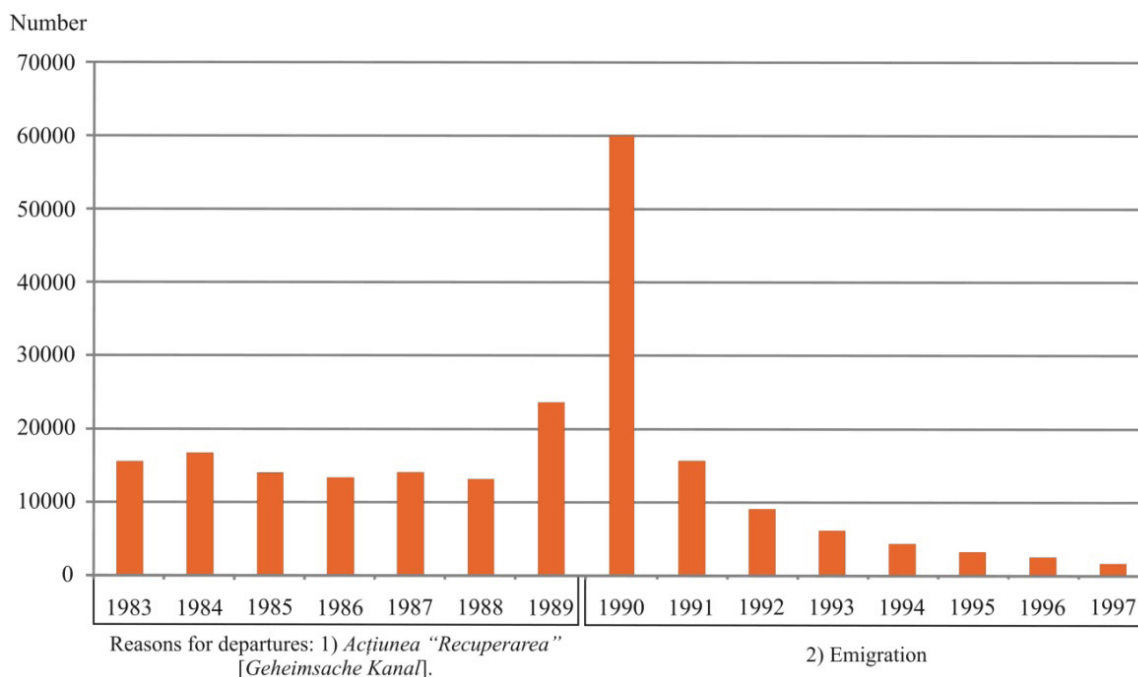


Figure 3. Departures of ethnic Germans from Romania (1983–1997)

Source: own study

The origin of settlement by the Transylvanian Saxons

The first settlements in Transylvania of populations hailing from the territories located in the basins of the Rhine and Moselle rivers were initiated by the Hungarian king Géza II (1141–1162) with the aim of defending the borders of Southern Transylvania.

It was only in 1206 that the name "Saxon" (Saxones) was documented, when King Andrew II of Hungary (1205–1235) granted special privileges and legal status to the Saxons from the villages of Cricău (Krakau), Ighiu (Krapundorf) and Romos (Rumes) (Țimonea 2023). While at the beginning of the settlement process this name was given to poor miners and convicts originating from Saxony (Gundisch 2001), over time, it became the lingo of the royal chancellery, so much so that the Germans in Transylvania were uniformly called "Saxons" (Vogel 2002).

In addition to Hungarian royalty, the Order of the Teutonic Knights played an important role in the process of the German settlement of Southern Transylvania in the 13th century. They settled in the Burzenland (Brașov Depression) in 1211 after the defeat of the Christian powers that took part in the Crusades with the aim of helping King Andrew II defend the Eastern borders of the Kingdom of Hungary from Cuman incursions and of strengthening the position of the Catholic Church (Nicolle 2007) in an area where the population was mostly Orthodox.

The Saxons occupied three areas:

- the first and most extensive is in Southern Transylvania, in the region of Sibiu (*Altland* or "The Old Country"), an area colonized until the middle of the 12th century, almost simultaneously with the Sebeș-Orăștie area (*Unterwald*); it

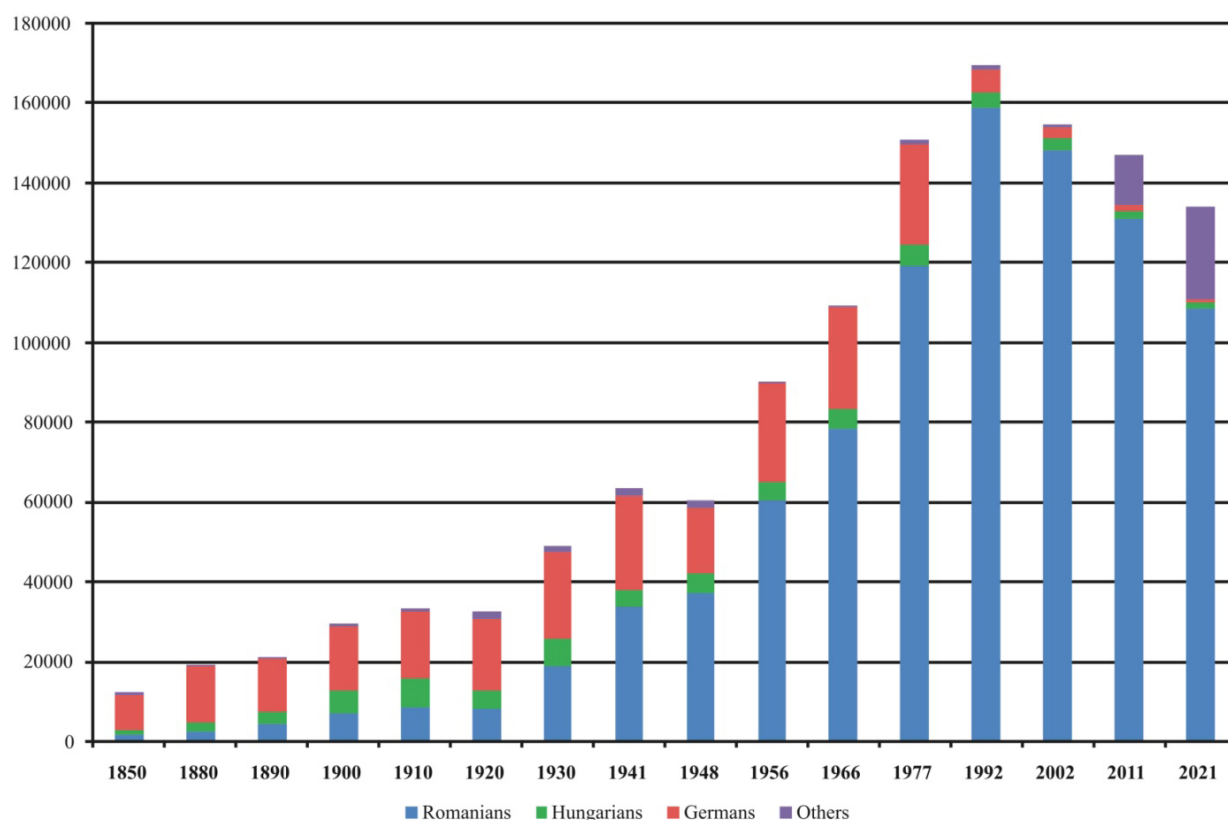


Figure 4. The demographic evolution of the Saxon community in Sibiu, against the background of the overall demographic evolution of the city (1850–2021)

Source: own study

was later extended to the north on the interfluvies between the two Târnave rivers (*Weinland*), between Hârțibaciu and Târnava Mare (*Waldland*), as well as in the Secașelor Land (*Zekeschgebiet*), an area colonized by the settlers who came by way of the Mureș Valley, which later made up the Royal Lands, under the direct jurisdiction of the king (Figure 5A);

- the second, in Burzenland (Brașov Depression), settled by means of the Teutonic Knights (Figure 5A);
- the third, at the northern border of Transylvania, in the region of Bistrița (*Nösnerland*) and around Reghin (*Reener Ländchen*), an area also colonized in several successive waves during the 12th and 13th centuries by the settlers who came to the Someș Valley (Figure 5B).

The Saxons were granted autonomy by King Andrew II of Hungary (ca. 1175–1235), so that the population kept their language and customs and were organized in 10 seats: Sibiu, Sebeș, Sighișoara, Cinc, Miercurea, Rupea, Nocrich, Orăștie, Mediaș and Șeica, as documented in the *Diploma Andreanum* (1224).

With the invasion of the Tatars in Transylvania in 1241, which led to the utter destruction of many villages, the first stage of the Saxon colonization was over (Nägler 1981, p. 198). As a result of the damage caused, King Béla IV (1235–1270) took economic, administrative and political measures with the aim of rebuilding the devastated territories. In these conditions, new groups of German settlers were called to Transylvania, especially miners from Central Europe, who enjoyed new royal privileges. Thus,

in 1291, King Andrew III (1290–1301) granted privileges to the colonists settled in Dej, Turda and Rimetea (Zimmermann & Werner 1892, pp. 169–184), while, in 1315, Charles Robert of Anjou (1301/08–1342) granted the right of passage to the Saxons from the seats of Mediaș and Șeica and, in 1318, exempted the Saxons from Mediaș, Șeica Mare and Șeica Mică from military service; all these measures facilitated the establishment of over 200 villages in the areas inhabited by Saxons at the time (Suci 1969).

Saxon settlements

The settlement process resulted in the establishment of the cities of Sibiu (*Hermannstadt*) – 1191, Orăștie (*Broos*) – 1224, Brașov (*Kronstadt*) – 1234 and Sebeș (*Mühlbach*) – 1245, which later constituted polarizing nuclei for the settlement systems in the Saxon territories. The villages of Viscri (*Deutsch-Weißkirch*) – 1185, Cisnădioara (*Michelsberg*) – 1204, Mănărade (*Donnersmarkt*) – 1205, Bărcuț (*Bekokten*), Felmer (*Felmern*), Seliștat (*Seligstadt*), Șoarș (*Scharosch*), Lovnic (*Leblang*) and Noiștat (*Neustadt*) – 1206, Ungra (*Galt*) – 1211, Cârța (*Kerz*) and Cristian (*Großau*) – 1223, Drăușeni (*Draas*) – 1224, Albești (*Weißkirch*) – 1231 and Șercaia (*Schirkanyen*) – 1235 (Suci 1969) are also documented in the same period, being among the oldest settlements established by German settlers in Transylvania.

In 1228, the first Saxon settlements on the northern border of Transylvania were recorded: Reghin (*Reen*), Batoș (*Bootsch*) and Budacu de Jos (*Budak*), a territory which made up the Bistrița District and which, in 1366, was granted privileges similar to those of the Seven Saxon Seats (Kroner 2009).

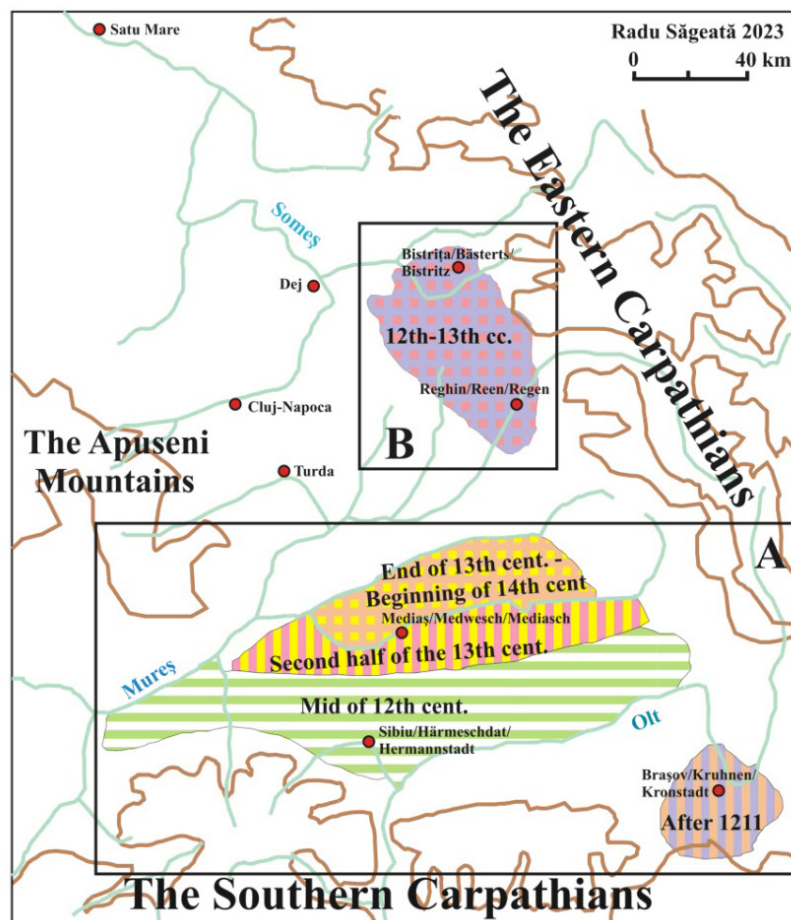


Figure 5. Saxon population colonized in Transylvania. A. = Saxon in Southern Transylvania; B. = Saxon in Northern Transylvania
Source: Năgler (1981)

Thus, while at the end of the 13th century (1299) the system of human settlements in the territories colonized by the Saxons consisted of only 68 urban and rural centres, in the following century, 159 more settlements would be documented – that is, a total of about 95% of settlements in which the Saxon dialect was spoken (Suci 1969; Năgler 1981, pp. 225–239).

The system of settlements founded by the Saxons was finalized at the end of the 15th century, with only one village attested in the 16th century (Tonciu, in 1587) and another at the beginning of the 19th century (Cușma, in 1805), both in Bistrița District.

The basis of the analysis in our study will be the place names of the 243 villages founded by the Saxon settlers in Transylvania mentioned in the *Transylvanian Saxon Dictionary* (eds. Haldenwang, Maurer & Thudt 1998), one of the cornerstone scientific works on the issue of Transylvanian Saxons. These are represented cartographically in figures 6–8.

The Place Names of Saxon Villages in the Romanian Carpathians

Saxon place names and their significance

The Saxons, together with the Szeklers, an ethnic community of Hungarian origin located in the Giurgeu-Ciuc Depression in Eastern Transylvania (the present-day counties of Harghita and Covasna) are ethnic minorities, loyal to the Hungarian administrations that ruled Transylvania prior to 1918,

who were settled here with the aim of defending the Carpathian borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, the location and, implicitly, the place names of these ethnic communities are closely related to the Carpathian Mountains. On the other hand, the origin of the Saxon names was influenced by the local peculiarities of the colonization process, as well as by the social and anthroponymic characteristics of the local communities.

In this context, we believe that the Saxon oiconyms in the analysed sample can be grouped into six categories:

- 1) Oiconyms derived from oronyms and their derivatives (from hydronyms, which, in turn, derive from oronyms; from hileonyms, which, in turn, derive from oronyms; from hodonyms, which, in turn, derive from oronyms; etc.);
- 2) Oiconyms, whose origins can be traced back to hydronyms, indicating the characteristics of running water and its banks, around which villages were formed;
- 3) Oiconyms that stem from the characteristics of the colonization process;
- 4) Oiconyms that express different social and professional aspects of the Saxon communities;
- 5) Oiconyms, whose origins can be traced back to hagonyms, the Saxon population having a strong connection with the Church;
- 6) Oiconyms with origins in anthroponyms, most often derived from the name of the village founder.

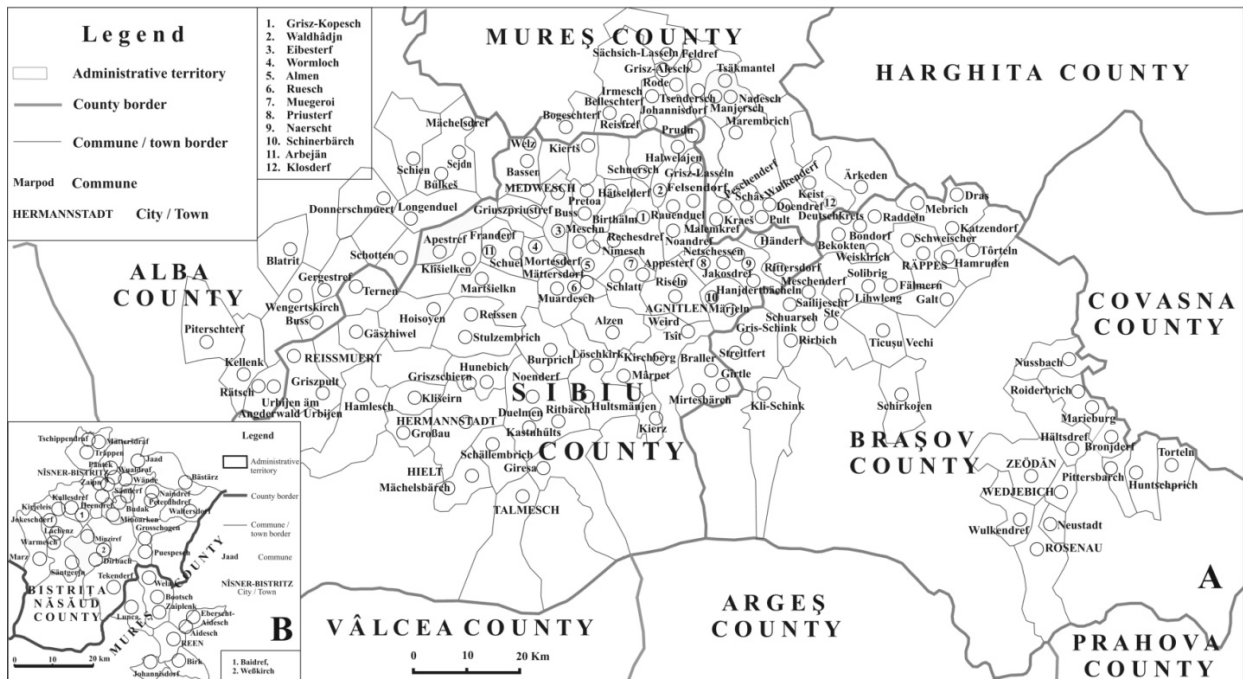


Figure 6. The Saxon place names of the settlements established by the Saxon settlers in Transylvania. A. = Saxon in Southern Transylvania; B. = Saxon in Northern Transylvania
Source: own study

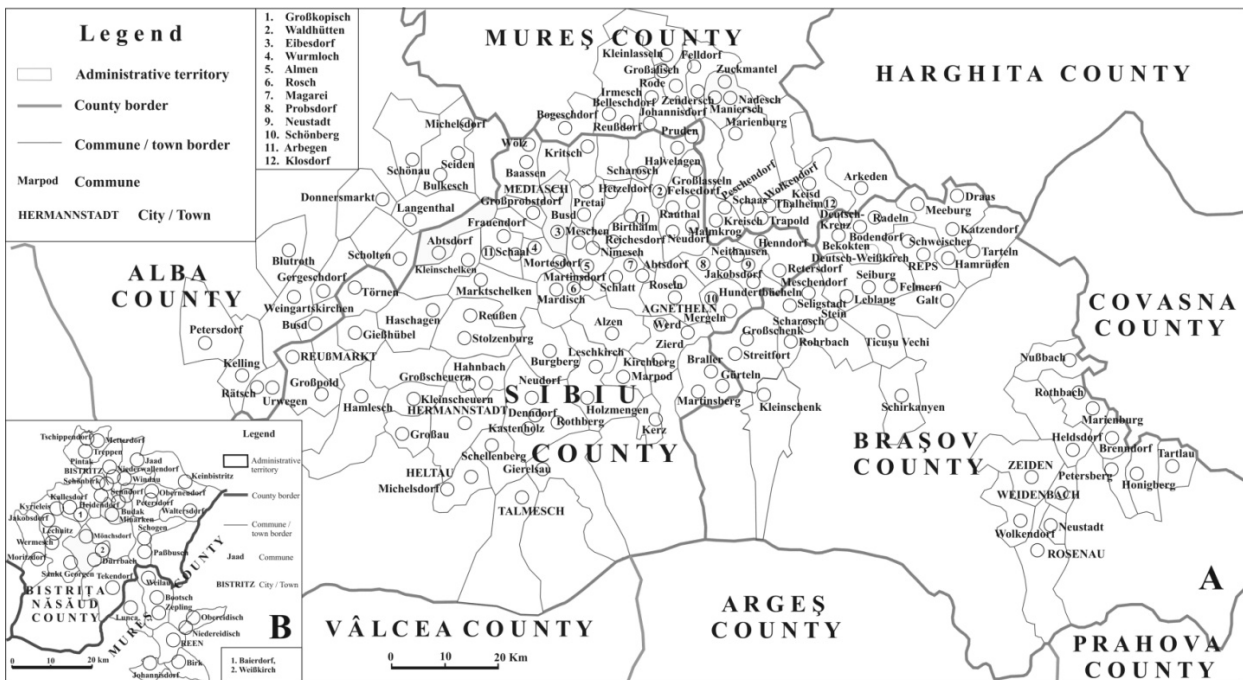
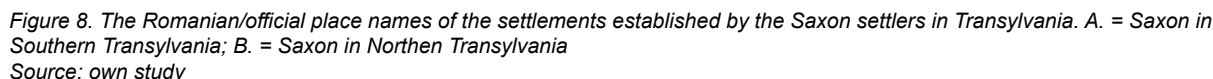


Figure 7. The German place names of the settlements established by the Saxon settlers in Transylvania. A. = Saxon in Southern Transylvania; B. = Saxon in Northern Transylvania
Source: own study



offer certain indications, especially in terms of lithology, often with finely nuanced meanings, transposed by means of a vast lexical richness (Ungureanu & Boamfă 2006, p. 29). Hence, *Schuarsch/Șuerș* (Romanian: Soarș) and *Kellenk* (Romanian: Călnic) mean muddy places, akin to marshlands, located along various tributary valleys of the Olt from the Făgăraș and Brașov depressions; conversely, *Hanjderbtächeln/Hangderbäxeln* (Romanian: Movile) has the meaning of “one hundred mounds”, since it is located in an area with a high degree of relief fragmentation in the Târnavelor Plateau, while the city of Cisnădie (*Hielt/Hilt/Helt*) is named after the word for “slope”. In other situations, the oiconyms refer to local geomorphological phenomena: *Rätsch* (Romanian: Reciul) means a place where frequent landslides are recorded – a village located on hilly terrain with a clay substrate and a steep slope, or *Hamlesch/Hamleș* (Romanian: Amnaș), which means “fault”, the result of a subsidence, a geomorphological process specific to depression areas at the foot of the Cindrel Mountains. The meaning of the oicononym *Mebrich/Mëburx/Mebrix* also refers to the characteristics of the lithological substrate, meaning “clay fortress” (Romanian: Beia).

The altitude and the local topographical characteristics influence the structure of the vegetation cover, which is reflected in place names, as seen in the numerous oiconyms stemming from the names of plant formations (hileonyms). Among these are the following: *Tsăkmantel* (Romanian: Tigmandru), which

The topographical peculiarities are also reflected in the names of the roads, which have ensured, for centuries, the *communication* required for a community to develop homogeneously. One such example may be *Streitfert*/*Streit'fert* – “the ford where a misunderstanding took place” (Romanian: Mercheaşa), which is crossed nowadays by an important road that ensures the connection between Odorheiu Secuiesc and Braşov. This toponym may also have been derived from “strut, struot” (according to Lexer’s dictionary “Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch”: “Gebüsch, Buschwald, Dickicht” or “bushes, bush forest, thicket”) and “furt” (“a shallow place to cross water” or “flache Stelle zur Überschreitung eines Gewässers”).

Since most of the villages in the Carpathian and Sub-Carpathian regions were located along the hydrographic arteries, which provided both a water source and the main means of communication (roads were also built along these arteries), many oiconyms have their origins in hydronyms, reflecting their particularities, but also how the land adjacent to them was used. Some relevant place names in this sense are *Rirbich/Rirbix* (Romanian: Rodbav) – “reed stream”; *Riseln/Rizeln/Rizln* (Romanian: Ruja) – “valley of roses”; *Schuel/Suel* (Romanian: Șoala) – “stony river”; *Roiderbrich/Rudjebich/Rüdebix* (Romanian: Rotbav) – “the stream in the pasture”; *Hamruden* (Romanian: Homorod) – “rushing waters”, recalling the rushing Homoroade waters that converge in this location, only to flow into the Olt; *Schinen* (Romanian: Șona) – “beautiful meadow/valley” and *Lachenzen* (Romanian: Lechința) meaning “the dry stream”, recalling a waterway that often dries up. Along the same lines is the place name of *Durles* (Romanian: Dârlos), which means “dry area settlement”, as it lies out of the way of floods.

The characteristics of the colonisation process are reflected in the place names that recall the origin of the first settlers, such as *Baidref* – “the village of the Bavarians” (Romanian: Crainimăt) or other multi-ethnic villages where Saxons cohabitated with other Slavic peoples (especially Russians); *Reisfref* – “Russian village” (Romanian: Cund); or *Reissmuert* – “Russian fair/the fair of Slavonic-speaking peoples”. What is significant is that the current Romanian name of the town Miercurea Sibului, which means “the Wednesday fair of the Sibiu area”, preserves the commercial function specifics of the settlement, but also recalls the day when it was organized; it does not reflect the ethnic origin of the community that initiated the fair. Likewise, the evolution of the colonization process can also be documented through toponyms such as *Naerscht* – “the new city” (Romanian: Noiștat).

The social characteristics of the Saxon rural communities are reflected in place names such as *Netschessen/Njetesen/Net’ezn* – “unsightly, poor houses” (Romanian: Netuș) or *Waldhädjn/Väldhädjn* – “the huts in the forest” (Romanian: Valchid), which refer to poor communities that later on became villages. Conversely, other place names point to the wealth of various communities: *Sailijesch/Zëljeršt/Zelješt* – “the happy city” (Romanian: Seliștat) or *Stulzembrich/Stültsembrix* – “the proud city” (Romanian: Slimnic).

The professional structure of the coloniser groups that founded the villages also shows close correlations with the characteristics of the natural environment: *Malemkref/Malemkrox* – “round apple tree forest” (Romanian: Mărănglav) and *Griszpult/Pult/Everstpold* – “the big, apple village” (Romanian: Apoldu de Sus) point to the fruit-growing background of the depression areas at the foot of the northern slopes of the Cindrel Mountains; *Zeöedan/Zuidn/Tsâdn* – “the beekeeper” (Romanian: Codlea) and *Huntschprich* – “honey hill” (Romanian: Härman) point to beekeeping activities, while *Lihwleung/Lieflengk*, meaning “hunting” (Romanian: Lovnic), refers to this activity, as well as to the existence of a rich hunting fauna. The breeding of horses is attested by the place name *Detschpien/Pin/Pin* – “horse area”, which most likely comes from Medieval German (Romanian: Pianu de Jos).

The services are consecrated through place names that attest the origin of those who provided certain services to wider communities, such as *Griuszpriustref* – “the bishop’s grand village” (Romanian: Proștea Mare/Târnava), *Klipriustref* – “the bishop’s little village” (Romanian: Proștea Mică/Târnăvioara) or *Priusterf/Pristref* – “the bishop’s village” (Romanian: Stejărișu). *Tsendersch* (Romanian: Senereuș) was “the judge’s village”, *Appesterf/Apestref* was “the abbot’s village” (Romanian: Apoș and Țapu), while *Talmesch* (the Saxon/German name for Tâlmăciu town) means “the interpreter’s village” – that is, the

person ensuring the good communication between the Saxon community and the majority, which was made up of the Romanian population.

Other place names, such as *Gris-Schink* – “the great tavern/the great inn” or *Kli-Schink/Klišink* – “the little tavern/the little inn” (Romanian: Cincu Mare and Cincșor) come from the establishment around which the villages were formed, defining, in an indirect manner, the habits of their first inhabitants. The place name *Wengertsckirch/Wengerskirch* – “the vineyard/the church’s vineyard” (Romanian: Vingard) is also part of this list.

The commercial role that led to the foundation of some villages is documented by place names such as *Donnerschmuert* – “the Thursday fair” (Romanian: Mânărade) or *Reissmuert* – “the fair of the Russians” (the present-day Miercurea Sibului), which we have already mentioned.

Oiconyms stemming from hagionyms are numerous in the lands inhabited by the Saxons, which point to their deep attachment to the values of the Roman Catholic and, later, the Lutheran Church. The practice of naming human settlements after saints began towards the end of the 6th century, as a saint first became the patron of a settlement and, most often, ended up lending their name to the settlement itself (Nicolae & Suditu 2008, p. 254). This phenomenon was characteristic for the early feudal period, when most Saxon villages were founded and when religious elements played an important role in the humanization and development of a geographical area. This included villages such as *Agnitlen* – “Saint Agatha” (present-day Agnita), *Franderf/Frândref/Franderf* – “village of the Holy Virgin” (Romanian: Frâna, present-day Axente Sever), *Grisz-Lassel/Lasln* and *Sächsisch-Lassel* – these two villages were named after Saint Ladislau (Romanian: Laslea and Laslău Mic) –, and *Bartlemis* (Romanian: Bartolomeu), which means Saint Bartholomew. Additionally, there are place names consisting of the words “church” (*Löschkirk/Laeschkirk/Leškirch* – “the new church”, Romanian: Nocrich; *Weiskirch/Veiskirx/Veeskirx* – “the white Saxon church”, Romanian: Viscri; *Kirchberg* – “church hill”, Romanian: Chirpăr; *Wengertsckirch/Wengerskirch* – “the church’s vineyard”, Romanian: Vingard), or “candle” (*Kierz/Kiets*, Romanian: Cârța), “monk” (*Pretoa/Pretai/Preta/Pretâ*, Romanian: Brăteiu), “cross” (*Deutschkrets/Krets*, Romanian: Criț), and those that reference ecclesiastical activities, as previously mentioned in the segment dedicated to the occupations that influenced place names.

Place names going back to anthroponyms are also widespread in the Saxon-inhabited lands, as they most often designate the founder of the village (Table 1).

In addition, there are the oiconyms indirectly based either on anthroponyms or on ononyms (e.g. *Solibrig* – “Sigi’s hill”, Romanian: Jibert; *Pittersbarch/Pittersbarx* – “Peter’s hill”, Romanian: Sânpetru; *Mirtesbärch/Mêtesberx/Miertesbarx* – “Martin’s hill”, Romanian: Șomartin; *Schällembrich* – “Schell’s hill”, Romanian: Șelimbăr) or hydronyms (e.g. *Märjeln/Maerjln* – “Mary’s village”, Romanian: Merghindeal or *Giresa/Gireză/Gereza/Girelsa* – “Gerhadi’s Valley”, Romanian: Bradu) (Romanian Academy 2008, 2009).

The impact of Saxon place names on current official place names

The exodus of the Transylvanian Saxons was also reflected in local place names. Saxon names were used on a narrower and narrower scale; the populations that replaced them (Romanians or Roma coming mainly from Oltenia and Moldova) did not speak German, let alone the Saxon dialect. However, there are numerous cases where Saxon names influenced the current Romanian place names: Cârța comes from *Kierz*; Rotbav from *Rothbach*; Râșnov from *Rosenau*; Felmer from *Fälmern*; Agnita from *Agnitlen*; Noiștat from *Naerscht/Neustadt*; Dârlos from

Table 1. Oiconyms stemming from anthroponyms in the areas settled by Saxons in Transylvania

Name in Saxon dialect	Name in standard German	Place-name meaning	Name in Romanian
Hältsdref, Haljtsdref	Heldsdorf, Heldesdorf, Heltesdorf	Held's village	Hălchiu
Wulkendref	Wolkendorf	Wolbrecht's village	Vulcan
Bronjderf, Brännnderf	Brenndorf	Brenning's village	Bod
Braller	Braller, Brunnweiler	Brunn's hamlet	Bruiu
Händerf, Hendref	Henndorf, Hegendorf	Hagino's village	Brădeni*
Jacosdref, Jökestref, Giukestref, Giukesdrêf	Jacobsdorf, Jakeschdorf	Jacob's village	Iacobi
Hätselderf, Hätselderf	Hetzeldorf	Hetzilo's village	Ațel
Birhălm, Bierthalmen, Bierthalm	Birhălm, BIRTHALMEN	Berath's village	Biertan
Toppesterf	Tobsdorf, Tobesdorf, Toppesdorf, Tobiasdorf, Toblasdorf, Dupesdorf	Tobias's village	Dupuș
Eibesterf	Sächsisch-Eibesdorf, Eibesdorf, Abesdorf, Iwesdorf	Iven's village	Ighișu Nou
Mättersdorf, Metesdorf	Martinsdorf	Martin's village	Mețiș
Mortesderf, Motesdref	Mortesdorf, Märtesdorf, Mertesdorf	Morte's village	Motiș
Nimesch, Nimesch	Nimesch, Niemesch, Nimisch, Nimschdorf	Niemisch's village	Nemșa
Rittersdorf, Reteschdorf	Retersdorf	Rather's village	Rețiș
Bondorf, Bondref, Bodndref	Bodendorf, Budendorf	Bodo's village	Bunești
Schweischer	Schweischer, Schweisser	Schweischer's village	Fișer
Meschenderf, Mešndref	Meschendorf, Meschdorff, Mesche	Maskilin's village	Meșendorf
Marembrich	Marienburg bei Schäßburg, Meremberg	Mary's village	Hetiur
Wulkenderf, Vulkendref, Vulkndref	Wolkendorf bei Schäßburg	Wolo's village	Vulcan
Bülkeš	Bulkesch, Bolkatsch, Bulgatsch, Bolgatsch, Bulgesch	Balcu's village	Bălcaciu
Bogeschterf, Bôzeštref	Bogeschdorf, Bogistorf	Bogo's village	Băgaciu
Sejdn	Seiden, Skyden	Sigi's village	Jidvei
Huinderf, Huindorf	Hohndorf, Hohendorf, Hahnendorf	Hahnen's village	Viișoara/Hundorf **
Belleschterf	Belleschdorf, Bellesdorf Bolleschdorf, Belisdorf Billesdorf, Bollesdorf	Bellesch's village	Idiciu
Irmesch	Irmesch	Ermen's village	Ormeniș
Prudn	Pruden, Prüden, Proden	Prod's village	Prod
Gergestref, Gärjštref	Gergeschdorf, Gergesdorf	Grigore's village	Ungurei
Mächelsbärch	Michelsdorf, Michelsberg, Michaelsberg	Michael's village	Cisnădioara
Hameršterf	Hammersdorf	Humbert's village	Gușterița
Neppenderf, Nâpndref, Naepmdref	Neppendorf, Steppendorf, Nebendorf	Neppen's village	Satul lui Neppen
Blatrit	Blutroth	Berowin's village	Berghin
Attelsdref	Bilak, Attelsdorf, Adelsdorf, Zelt	Attel's village	Domnești
Bonnesdref	Bonnesdorf, Bonisdorf, Bunnesdorf, Unter-Bassen, Boneschdorf	Bonn's village	Boian
Frek, Fraek	Freck, Fryk	Freck's village	Avrig
Härmeschtat, Hermestatt	Hermannstadt	Hermann's town	Sibiu
Jokeschderf	Jakobsdorf, Jachesdorf	Jacob's village	Sâniacob
Piterschterf	Petersdorf, Petisdorf	Peter's village	Petiș
Mächelsdref	Michelsdorf an der Kokel, Michelsdorf	Michael's village	Veseuș

* Prior to 1 January 1965, the village was officially called Hendorf, a name that comes from German.

** The villages of Hohndorf and Maldorf formed the village of Viișoara

Source: own study

Durles; Rupea from *Räppes*; Şaeş from *Schås/Šās*; Şona from *Schinen*; Roandola from *Rauenduel* (“harsh valley”); Noandref (German: *Sächsisch-Neudorf* – “the new Saxon village”) became Nou Săsesc; *Dobrenk* (German: *Dobring* – “good, favourable place” or a Slavic-German hybrid composed of the adjective “dobrъ” with the meaning “good” and the suffix -enk/-ink – cf. Paichl 1996, p. 310) is present-day Dobârca (figures 5–7).

Others, however, were replaced by Romanian place names that had a completely different significance: *Wedjebich/Vedjembrix* (“willow stream”) became Ghimbav; *Neustadt im Burzenland* was replaced by the Romanian anthroponym of Cristian; *Martşielkn* (“large salt area”) became Şeica Mare and *Klişielken/Klişielken/Klişelkn/Sachsschelken* (“little salt area”) is now called Şeica Mică; *Wormloch/Vurmlix* (“dragon’s lair”) became Valea Viilor (“valley of the vineyards”); *Ternen* (German: *Törnen* – “the towers”) is now called Păuca, while *Galt/Gelt* (“barren land”) is present-day Ungra.

According to the current Romanian legislation (Local Public Administration Law 215/2001 and its amendments, according to Law 294/2022) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ratified by Romania through Law 33/2015, citizens belonging to a national minority that make up more than 20% of the total number of inhabitants of an administrative-territorial unit have the right to use their mother tongue when dealing with local public administration authorities. Pursuant to these normative acts, in Annex 1/1 of the rules for the application of the provisions regarding the right of citizens belonging to a national minority to use their mother tongue in local public administration (Romanian Government 2001), the possibility to officially write, in their mother tongue, the names of settlements where the minority communities exceed 20% of the total population is also mandated. Thus, out of a total of thirty-five settlements with names written in both languages (Romanian and German), twenty were founded by Saxons (in Alba, Braşov, Mureş and Sibiu counties) (Table 2).

However, these names are written in standard German and not in the Saxon dialect, leading to the elimination of the Saxon names from the official place names, even in the case of these localities. Thus, the German name (*Schönberg*) and not the Saxon dialect word (*Schinebărch/Şinebarx*) is used for Dealul Frumos; Lovnic is registered using the German name Leblang and not its Saxon counterparts (*Lihwleug/Lieflengk*); Gherdeal is marked with the German name *Gürteln* and not with the Saxon ones (*Girtle/Girtelen*); for Veseud, the German name *Zeid* is also the one used, to the detriment of *Tsit*, which comes from the Saxon dialect; for Meşendorf, the German name *Meschendorf* was also the one chosen, instead of the Saxon term *Meschenderf/Meşndref*, and so on. Therefore, even in the case of these localities, which, at least in 2001 when the law was passed, were still home to significant Saxon communities, Saxon names were dropped when the official naming was implemented. By contrast, in the case of some large cities in Transylvania and Banat that remain relevant for German cultural heritage, the name is also written in German, even if nowadays the share of this ethnic community has become insignificant. It should be noted that the standard German-language version is the usual procedure for the standardization of place names internationally.

Conclusions

The Germans, and especially the Transylvanian Saxons, have a long history in the Romanian Carpathian area, where they founded settlements and traditions and promoted an original culture. The massive exodus during the 20th century, which was the result of specific geopolitical circumstances (the two world wars and the political persecutions that followed, the sale of ethnic Germans during the Communist regime in Romania), caused

Table 2. The official written name, in both Romanian and German, of Romanian settlements that are home to ethnic communities of German origin (according to Annex 1/1 of the Decision of the Government of Romania 1 206/2001)

County	Name in Romanian	Name in German
Alba	Berghin	Blutrot
	Vingard	Weingartskirchen
Braşov	Meşendorf	Meschendorf
	Lovnic	Leblang
	Măieruş	Nussbach
	Ticuşu Vechi	Deutsch-Tekes
Mureş	Cund	Reussdorf
Sibiu	Cisnădioara	Michelsberg
	Gherdeal	Gürteln
	Şomartin	Martinsberg
	Chirpăl	Kirchberg
	Veseud	Zied
	Mălâncrav	Malmkrog
	Nou Săsesc	Neudorf
	Roandola	Rauthal
	Dealul Frumos	Schönberg
	Apoldu de Sus	Grosspold
	Amnaş	Hamlesch
	Mighindoala	Engelthal
	Petiş	Petersdorf

Source: Romanian Government (2001)

the numbers of this ethnic minority to drop considerably, barely reaching 0.14% of the total population of Romania according to the last census (compared with 4.1% according to the first census of Unified Romania in 1930). Among them, the share of Transylvanian Saxons is only 0.7–0.8% of the total population.

The decline of this ethnic community also triggered the decline of the cultural values it promoted. While conservation and restoration measures have been initiated in the field of built heritage, given that many of the traditional Saxon villages were important tourist attractions (Akeroyd 2006; Fabini 2008), the intangible cultural heritage specific to this community finds itself in obvious decline. The Saxon dialect is spoken across an increasingly restricted area; most of the Saxons who still live in the villages and towns of Transylvania (mostly the older generation) speak Romanian fluently and only occasionally their native dialect. Most Saxon villages are faced with the phenomenon of depopulation, and the small replacement population (especially Romanians and Roma) that came to these villages did not take over the Saxon customs, and even less so the Saxon dialect. Furthermore, the official place names, in the few cases where the German version was adopted, were limited to standard German and were not rendered into the Saxon dialect.

Given the situation, firm and urgent measures are required both at the central level and, especially, the local level by promoting cooperation within the local communities of Transylvanian Saxons, in the regions of origin and current places of residence, in order to preserve the Saxon place-name heritage as an integral part of European cultural heritage. These measures are aimed at developing projects with European and/or public/private funding in order to introduce tourism signs in former Saxon villages indicating the Saxon equivalent of some place names and elements of the local history and tradition of these settlements, as well as to expand the actions promoting Saxon cultural customs and traditions. These actions can be based on the fact

that, especially in summer, many Saxons residing in Germany, Austria or Switzerland visit their birthplaces in Transylvania as tourists – they are nicknamed “summertime Saxons” (Poledna 2001) – and take part in all kinds of cultural activities of a Saxon nature. Moreover, German investors, who have Saxon origins in Sibiu and other Transylvanian cities, can contribute to preserving and promoting the cultural and linguistic values of this ethnic community through tourist orientation signs and the Saxon press.

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