

Biertan

16 September

After lunch we left Malancrav for Biertan and its fortified church built on a conical hill in the centre of the village. The church is a three-aisled hall church built between 1500 and 1525. The fortifications are typical of the region but the late Gothic architecture and furnishings of this, our last church, were a final magnificent contrast to many of the simple 'Saxon' churches we had visited. This was not a Lutheran church developing its own style in what became rather a Saxon backwater but a church in the mainstream of late Gothic medieval Europe. We had already had a taste of this culture in the church at Malancrav but here was a medieval church in its fully restored glory. We had the added excitement of contrasting the two churches' folding altarpieces. Martin Body explained how the gilding in Malancrav was duller but deeper and Polly Legg was proved correct that the frieze above the panels in Malancrav had remained in its original position. The 12 panels of the altarpiece in Biertan representing the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the infancy of Jesus can be dated to 1483, some of them copies of paintings in the Schottenstift (Scottish) church in Vienna. The pews and vestry door are from the workshop of Johannes Reychmuth of Sighishoara and date from 1514 or 1523.

Throughout our Romanian visit we were reminded of the time when this land was no backwater where time had, as in the recent past, stood still. At the time when the pews were made Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great Dutch Renaissance humanist, theologian and priest was writing and lecturing, and his ideas were spreading along the Rhine and the Danube. We bought our postcards in Sibiu in the Erasmus café across from our hotel. Medieval Europe with its pan-European ideas and culture is still very much alive in modern Romania. Almost our first sight when we arrived, somewhat weary, at our hotel in Cluj on our first night was the bookshop across the street and it was almost the last thing we saw that very early morning of our departure: *Gaudeamus*, the song sung by students from St Andrews via all the universities of Europe to Cluj, the song based on a medieval drinking song and sung for the last 800 years. *Gaudeamus*: 'Let us rejoice while we are young.' Some of us are now not so young but we did, often led by Mike Copperwheat, rejoice in Romania.

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