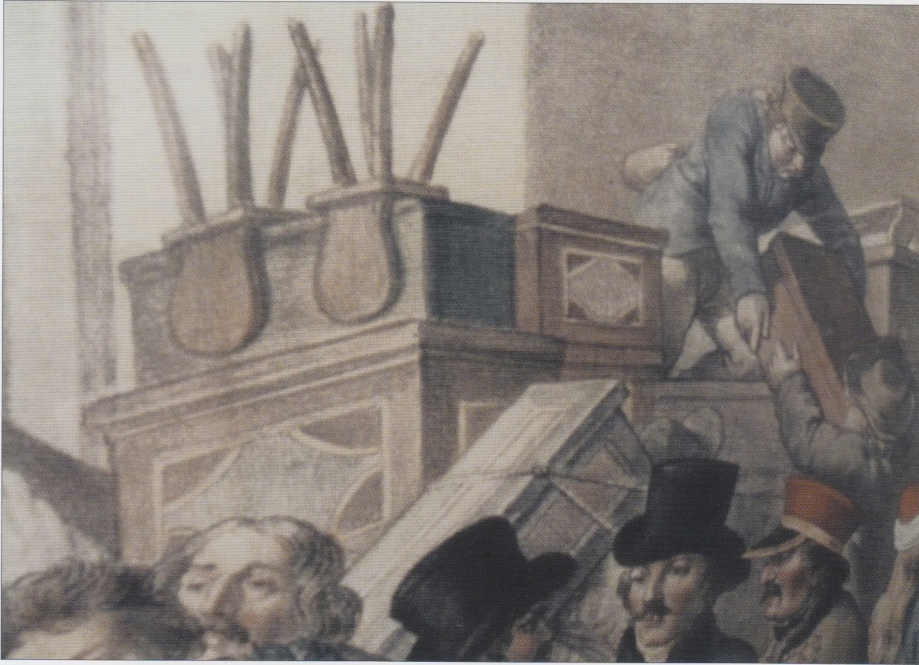


# RFS trip to Romania

## September 2012



Early 19th century print from Sibiu Museum, illustrating furniture of the period

Specifically, we were studying the culture of Saxon Transylvania, a geographical region dominated by settlers from western Europe. How had this vibrant, but totally alien, Germanic culture become established in what we now call Romania and lasted for over 700 years, marooned within a veritable jigsaw of different peoples: Magyars, Szeklers, Slavs, indigenous Romanians (Vlachs) and others? Simply put, the mix is a product of mass migrations in the early middle ages, of nomadic peoples from Siberia and central Asia who ended up in the Balkans and eastern Europe. By the 10th century, fragmentary organisational structures were emerging, with Magyars dominant and effectively ruling in Transylvania. In the 1240s, Mongol invasions had left a trail of devastation. The Hungarian King Bela IV, concerned to retain and repopulate his devastated territory, offered land and special privileges in return for its cultivation and defence. New settlers came from all over Europe; but it was the Germans (by no means only from Saxony) whose innate sense of

order and social structure prevailed; they became the driving force in the new communities, winning special rights and privileges in both towns and villages. 'Saxon' has become a convenient generic term for these people and their culture.

The history of Transylvania, as part of the Hungarian kingdom and later Austria-Hungary, with these 'Saxon' settlers from the early middle ages and a majority Romanian population, meant that the furniture we were introduced to reflected this multi-ethnic mix, with each group making a distinctive contribution. The earliest furniture included ark-like chests (Saxon), gothic choir stalls and inlaid renaissance church furniture. Most of the furniture we saw, however, was painted furniture dating from the 18th to the early 20th century. Simona Malearov, our

guide for much of the visit, was able to distinguish between 'Saxon', Hungarian, and Romanian furniture on the basis of distinct types, differing decorative motifs and dominant colours and forms of construction. She added further complexities by pointing out that the Saxons made furniture not only to order but also for sale at fairs, where Romanians could buy it. Romanian mass-produced furniture was made to a cheaper construction standard and with lower quality painting. Also in Transylvania, Romanians made painted furniture which imitated Saxon styles. By the end of the visit we were rather baffled by this complexity. Some types of furniture had endured over the centuries, but reflected these changes. We saw a 16th century counter-table in Sibiu historical museum with a gothic tracery panel in each side and a stretcher held with tusked tenons, a painted Saxon example (18th/19th century) with plain sides and tusked tenons, and a 19th century painted one with joined sides at Rupea Museum.

*Giles Hopkinson and Chris Pickvance  
(with advice from Simona Malearov)*