Can Tourists Purchase 'the Past'? The Past as a Commodity in Tourist Sites

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Abstract

The following paper gives an account of my ethnography, which questions the idea of a 'traditional past' that can be presented to and, on occasion, sold to tourists. This process has in part done away with the tourist practices of socialism, which had themselves created an idea of 'traditionality' not dissimilar from the one proposed by today's tourism industry. Fieldwork was carried out in Botiza, a rural town in northern Romania, where various practices have been implemented to promote and satisfy the tourist market. In this context, I analyses host-guest encounters, in particular their practises and narratives when dealing with concepts such as 'past', 'tradition' and 'authenticity' which are represented, managed and sold as tourist commodities.

Key words: rural tourism, arts and crafts, tradition

Introduction

This paper is the outcome of research carried out in Botiza,¹ a Romanian village that in 1994, thanks to the economic liberalization that began with the fall of the Ceauşescu regime, began to offer what is locally known as 'rural tourism'.² Botiza is in the mountainous region of Maramureş in north-western Romania. The town is home to some 3,000 people in nearly 900 families; 60 of which provide accommodation and meals for tourists, others provide ancillary services and a very few more host families only occasionally. The type of tourism proposed is on a small scale – there is no large tourism infrastructure and the tourism flow is concentrated in three periods of the year (summer, Christmas and Easter). The limited accommodation capacity and very limited system of public transportation and information centres necessarily leads to a smaller and easily manageable tourist presence and to a customised interaction of tourists with the environment and the local community (Cipollari 2008).

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¹ Fieldwork was carried out from 1999 to 2001 in several phases and in 2007 for a few months.

² In 1989, the EU's PHARE Programme initiated investments in order to foster local development. Initially the projects were not directly aimed at tourism development but, at times, initiatives have been dedicated to the organisation and promotion of local tourism. From 1994 ANTREC (National Association of Rural Tourism) and O.V.R. (Operation Villages Roumaines - a Belgian association started in Romania against the territorial planning promoted by Ceausescu), begun a network of tourism offers by choosing three towns in Maramures (Ieud, Vadu Izei and Botiza).

In the context of this rural micro-economy,³ the tourist experience is only partly shaped by the specific locality and context, given that the trip is often organised and influenced by others, both locally and internationally (guides, tour operators, interpreters, travel agencies, development agencies etc), all of whose gazes contribute to influencing the environment in which the encounter takes place (Cipollari 2007). The idea of tradition – how tradition is constructed and represented at different stages – is commonly used by all social actors (though in different ways and at different times) as the main attraction drawing tourists to Botiza and to Maramureş in general.

At the outset, scholars of tourism theory fell into the camps of those who considered it a 'passport to development' and those who sounded a note of warning regarding its destructive effects. Some anthropological literature is permeated by paradigms that refer to the economic advantages that tourism brings to local communities, others to tourism as the destroyer's of fragile cultures, knowledge and traditional practices, and some others to tourism as a form of modernization for rural societies. Scholars for and against tourism tend to oppose tradition vs. modernization without considering other elements, such as urbanization. Despite the fact that anthropology has gone beyond this Manichean vision and views tourism as one of the factors of change of a society, tourism remains a phenomenon that gives rise to misunderstandings, sophisms, paradoxes and ironies, in that it projects onto a particular locality the yearnings of subjects – both internal and external – who act in it, live it and interpret it with different means and aims, and for different reasons.

This paper shows both how the tourist location was created and how the tourist experience is represented and narrated. I intend to highlight some of the specific aspects of the tourist experience through the analysis of the narratives underlying the 'rural' and 'traditional' aspects of the town.

My ethnography shows how concepts such as 'authenticity' and 'tradition' run through the narratives of both tourists and locals, and how in practice, through their interaction, a 'past' is created, a past which is born and survives in part due to proactive promotion of tourism, and to initiatives to enhance the local heritage. Tourists and locals both adopt shared narratives that locate Botiza in ideal surroundings, preserving a past that has no specific bearings in time and which often hinges on a mythical past. Therefore, tourists and locals together create a landscape through a self-referential game in which they each provide the other with the contrivance they expect to see.

Going to Maramures: travelling into the past?

Maramureş is presented as a region where time appears to stand still, and where tourists can experience a world that modernity has now expunged: a sort of trip back through time to seize a nostalgic, lost past that in Botiza still exists and is experienced daily. The Ro-

³ The local economy is mainly based on farming, agriculture and a low level of mining.

⁴ See De Kadt (1978).

⁵ For example, Crick (1989: 335) refers to tourism as 'conspicuous scapegoat'.

⁶ For an overview on this debate see among others: Boissevain (1996); Burns (1999); Cipollari (2008); Michaud (2001); Simonicca (2007).

manian Ministry of Tourism started promoting Maramureş back in the 1970s as a region with heightened tourist potential due to the beauty of the landscape and to local traditions of great interest to researchers of folklore. Thus, the idea of folklore as an inherent part of local heritage and as a major draw for the development of tourism was already established during the socialist period. The Romanian intellectual world too, including the anthropology and folklore milieus, contributed to creating the myth of 'rurality' as juxtaposed with the contemporary world. Rural life was seen as both the quintessence of the Romanian soul and as the main reason for Romania's backwardness.

Cuisenier (1995: 335) underlines how, in historical analysis, the 'rural farm world' has been seen as both the preferential guardian of Romanian people's values, and as the main barrier to the policies of modernization of society of the communist regime. One belonging to this school of thought is Eliade (1953), who writes of Romanian identity as an essentially rural agricultural identity, claiming that the Romanian people (read farmers and shepherds) remained divorced for various historical reasons from certain modern European cultural movements, and focused instead on their own traditions. Mihailescu, Popescu and Panzaru, however, emphasise that the 'popular' nature of this culture did not prevent it from enjoying a certain Western-style dynamism. What is special about the Romanian experience is that 'the transition to modernity occurred with and by means of a "traditional mentality" whose main component is the oral tradition typical of rural agricultural societies' (Mihailescu, Popescu and Panzaru 1992: 9).

Studying the travel literature and other media used by travel advertising, it is easy to see how stereotypes and clichés are used to convey the idea of an unchanging past that continues to exist ad infinitum (Cipollari 2005). Travel advertising suggests that Maramureş is iconic of rural Europe, a 'living museum in Central Europe' (Cristea and Dancuş 2000: XV), a haven of age-old and charming life in comparison with globalised modernity.

In order to understand what many people seem to seek in travelling to Maramureş, and what the tourist guides and the advertising promise, we must refer to the anthropological debate on tradition which has clearly explained how different subjects' claims of authenticity, identity and of unchanged traditions and customs occur within multifaceted contexts, with different purposes in mind, and using different rhetorical expressions. The debate started by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1987) has resulted in many scholars proving how tradition is an invention of the present, a process whereby 'the past is socially constructed by those who interpret it on the basis of their political, economic or other interests which are rooted in the present', and it is not the 'permanence of the past in the present' (Papa 1999: 106).

The tourist narrative constantly refers to an immutable concept of the past, as if it were possible in Maramureş to live in a way that is nostalgically termed traditional: for some tourists, their experience in Maramureş is an opportunity to relive moments of their own past life, often belonging to their childhood; for others, it is a quest for certain aspects of tradition which they have not experienced directly but only imagined; others experience

⁷ This quotation, like all others, has been translated by the author of the paper.

their trip to Maramureş as a sort of introspective, soul-searching journey in order better to get to know themselves. According to some tourists, visiting Maramureş is like stepping into a time machine in order to travel back to a past which is experienced with nostalgia and is now juxtaposed with the modern world within the typical paradigm of pure versus impure and healthy versus unhealthy, where the countryside embodies all positive values and the city all the negatives ones connected to modernity. In the words of an informant:

I came here with my wife to see how our European ancestors used to live. We lived with a rural farming family, hoping to understand where we ourselves have come from... While the world keeps racing towards the future, these rural farmers invited us into their house and into the past (American tourist, 6/8/2000).8

This American couple chosen to live a year in Maramureş not only in order to collect material for the publication of a photographic book, but also in order to have experiences of the way 'their ancestors lived'. However in the house where they lived they organised a room like a small office, with a notebook computer and a mobile phone they could use to connect to Internet and update their web site with information about their stay in Maramureş. On their web site it is still possible to see some pictures with descriptive captions of Maramureş, of people and events. The two Americans wished that through their images people might see '...what remains of an old European way of harvesting. Here you can see agriculture capacity from beasts of burden on hills carved from centuries of ploughing' (www.leafpile.com).

The memory of the past, the wish to experience cultures and landscapes that are out of the ordinary, the desire to observe and to be in close contact with cultural traditions and items from a past age are common themes, and are often found in the tales of tourists who visit Maramureş in search of elements that survive in the region but are extinct elsewhere. These sentiments are clearly expressed by one of my informants:

I really wanted to smell the scent of the villages again. Because villages in France used to have the same smell that they have here. One could smell the wheat, the hay, the horses... When I was a boy we used to harvest hay by hand and see sheaves like these ones here, but now all agriculture is mechanised (French tourist, 10/8/2007).

The testimonials often present an interpreted superimposition of memories of experiences in these places and of farming life and country practices, which are indeed part of some tourists' past. European tourists are particularly prone to this experience, and there are many French and Belgian tourists who say that in Maramureş they can re-experience events, smells and images connected to their childhood.

The locals attempt to play on the backwardness – compared to Western Europe – of their living conditions: a backwardness that is deemed to be an asset and is therefore

⁸ This quotation, like all others, includes the informant's nationality and date of interview.

constantly emphasised.⁹ The milieus in which tourists and locals meet, and where the wares are sold are clear evidence of this representation and performance of the past. Tourists are often interested in the markets, because they say much about the local environment and about the locality through the products on sale and the display of typical objects. The markets and the crafts workshops – as in this case – are places where in addition to goods, what is on offer are interpretations, tales and life stories of the craftsmen who are not just telling their personal stories but also that of their whole community.

Tourists seek rural life in Maramureş, with the pace, gestures, flavours and colours that they imagine and require it to have, a landscape which is undeniably shaped by man but is also rich in natural elements; conversely, local inhabitants and institutions construe and present their location as a favoured place which is able 'naturally' to meet the requirements and expectations of tourists. The workshop spaces are one of those stages where tourists and locals meet and where each presents a particular representation of the self that is what the other would like to see.

Rethinking art crafts

The ethnographic example I have chosen to consider is the visits made to crafts workshops or showrooms. These visits represent the moment when the past – an abstract concept recounted in all tales narrated by locals, tourists and advertising – becomes an actual, practical experience and even becomes tangible through the acquisition of specific items. Visits to crafts workshops are the main local attraction promoted by tourist guides, and do in fact represent the major draw for tourists. Of course, there are many other similar examples elsewhere; in Europe for instance, there are tourist visits to Harris tweed weaving centres in Britain, where a new lease on life for a tradition is closely linked with new technology in weaving¹⁰ (Coffre-Baneux 1999), while in France there are the food markets in the tourist centres of the Auvergne, which are specifically designed to meet tourists' rural expectations¹¹ (Abram 1996).

Resorting to tradition is a way to underline the local nature of the commodity and/ or the experience and, therefore, the tourism industry plays on the important social role, one in which the rhetoric of 'authenticity' has in the representation and staging of reality.

In Botiza, the workshops or showrooms are generally in the home, and at times in wooden sheds in the garden. All are very clearly marked with signs saying artizanat; the tourists do not just visit the one in the house they are lodging in, but search for others, and the showrooms are also visited by tourists who are not staying in Botiza at all but are

⁹ Tourists claiming to appreciate Botiza for its 'landscape', containing both natural and cultural elements, perceive it as the result of a 'pure' life-style, untouched by the aggressions of modernity. Some tourists do not realise, some others do not care that the landscape they appreciate is manipulated and changed by people living in that very place. Today, as well as in the past, there have been people who have worked the land in order to make profit from the harvest. What tourists think to be 'out of a fairytale' is actually the result of everyday's people work. In Cipollari (2008), I examine the various practices that local people have implemented to modernise dwellings and landscape while keeping traditional marks.

¹⁰ Tweed weaving centres offer guided tours to show tourists spinning and other weaving techniques (Coffre-Baneux 1999).

¹¹ According to Abram (1996) there is a close association between past, image, locality and identity. Tourism market tends to play on the sense of 'Auvergnat-ness' that local food and markets evoke to tourists.

brought there by tour guides who point the town out as a traditional rug-making centre. It is common to see tourists walking around Botiza looking for artizanat signs, shyly pushing open gates to enter courtyards, waiting for someone to appear on the doorstep so they can ask: 'artizanat?' These showrooms are different sizes, depending on how many goods are on offer, and everyone tries to display more as time goes on. They generally have different-sized rugs hanging on the walls, and there are wooden rails displaying local artefacts, for example opinci (leather shoes) or cojoc (very heavy woollen or leather waistcoats), woollen socks and traditional costumes that are now no longer used. As well as clothes, there are displays of hand-woven cloths, cushions, and fabrics such as those used in churches to adorn ceiling lamps; there are wall-hangings and occasionally also wooden objects. Sometimes the homes themselves are furnished to recreate an old-style ambiance, and the fittings are arranged as in pictures of rural houses of old, such as those found in the museums of Sighet or Cluj.

As I was able to observe, normally such visits follow a rather standard, conventional pattern: tourists enter the workshop, begin to look around, are made welcome and are often also offered food or a glass of tuica (a home-brewed liqueur) the craftswoman then presents her handiwork, the tourists ask questions on how it is made, the woman explains and may even sit at her loom to give a practical demonstration, the price of the items is negotiated and the purchase is made, all of this in an atmosphere which is generally friendly and cordial despite frequent problems with communication (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Tourists observing a wooden loom, while the craftswoman shows her weaving techniques

Tourists take photographs or videos posing next to the hand loom or the rugs, standing next to the weaver and often putting on the traditional clothes themselves. The tourists are most often interested in taking pictures of the loom, and they take turns sitting on the little bench in front of it, pretending to weave. There are almost always skeins of coloured and raw wool on the floor next to the loom, and sometimes also a wooden spindle. All workshops display the stones and dried flowers and bark, which are the raw materials used for the natural dyes for the wool (Cipollari 2005). It is explained that all rugs on display were woven by the woman of the house, who knows all about which plants must be dried to obtain the dyes and who weaves the rugs during the long winter months so that they can be sold during the tourist season. The rug sellers present their rugs as 'their work', as the work done by a woman who has learned the art of weaving from her own mother, who in turn learned it from the previous generation; thus the dyeing and weaving are presented as crafts dating back centuries. This has a dual effect: on the one hand the object in question acquires the label of 'traditional', and on the other the collective work done by a group of women is attributed to a single weaver in order to provide an easier identification experience for the tourist who is buying it. The value of the authenticity of the experience lived by the tourist can thus be added to the aesthetic value of the object purchased (Aime 2005).

One tourist expressed her interest in the local crafts in the following way: Maria [her host] likes weaving very much, she learned by watching her mother at the loom. All this positive knowledge has been transmitted from generation to generation, and it has become Maria's trade. It's fantastic to pass on something so positive. The young women do what they have watched their own mothers do. I would have bought everything, I would even have bought socks to take back to France, because none of it is expensive and in any case it is heritage, it has a real value (French tourist, 20/7/2000).

Within the tourist experience, the aesthetic value of the goods is often subordinate to their 'native symbolic universe', and drawing a strong link between an artefact and its craftsman allows the tourist to refer it strongly to a local identity, and to give it its own history (Aime 2005: 113).

For example, during the workshop demonstrations, hosts often wear opinci, leather shoes with cross-over laces along the calf, over a thick woollen cloth for warmth – nowadays often a sock (see Figure 2). They are generally worn by elderly people and by shepherds, or during traditional folklore events and special ceremonies. Tourists have seen pictures of this practice in brochures before their arrival, and when they see elderly people wearing them they take their photographs in order to immortalise the exotic as embodied by an individual who loses his or her 'uniqueness' and becomes a 'symbol' or 'type', thereby satisfying the tourists' gaze and ensuring that both the preparation and the actual experience of the trip take on substance and meaning (Urry 1997).



Figure 2: Inside a craft workshop, tourists can see the carpet display and observe the seller wearing traditional clothes and shoes (opinci)

Objects become symbols, they represent a past that is still alive and which is preserved within families and by the town and the community, but which can also be purchased by tourists and transported elsewhere. There is, for example, a stall at Botiza's weekly market selling these shoes in all sizes, including a miniature version to be used as a key ring or a simple souvenir.

Local items are also bought and then used quite differently to how they are intended. For example, cloth used at home as a decoration for plates or table lamps, and in churches around icons, can be worn as eclectic scarves or shawls (see Figure 3). Just as new elements permeate the narratives of locals, so do outside views reinterpret local items and give them a new meaning in different and distant contexts.

Sometimes the visits to the workshops become essentially a stage where the ritual of traditional dress is played out (see Figure 4). Tourists don the clothes on display, struggling into rough cotton shirts with bouffant sleeves, the women trying on little pleated skirts with unflattering flowery patterns, the braver men wearing waistcoats and jackets with thick wool linings, even though the rooms are generally small and often hot. Thus adorned, the tourists become the protagonists of their own photographs, they 'take on' the local colours, get under the skin of the host community and experience a situation where they themselves become 'the representation of authenticity' (MacCannell 1976).



Figure 3: A French tourist wears as a scarf a hand-made cloth locally used as a decoration for plates or religious icons, both at home and in churches



Figure 4: A young Belgian tourist wearing traditional clothes on display in crafts workshops

Some tourist situations make something available which is not offered by museums: life as lived by the locals, be they Romanian farmers, Sardinian shepherds or Masai warriors, who thus become representatives of the place visited by the tourists, a place that is thus experienced by means of a magnificent 'leap into the past' (Satta 2001), and construed in order to create a tourist attraction.

Simonicca (2006) emphasises precisely this aspect of tourist practice, the transition from merely observing the environmental and cultural context, and the actual desire to live and experience the surroundings. Tourists are no longer satisfied with getting to know, admiring, discovering and visiting a location, they want to embody it, live it, take it on, and if possible, take at least some part of it home with them.

In Botiza, it is no longer a case of simply meeting the other, but rather of meeting the other in their environment; it is no longer merely the search for human contact, but rather the search for 'real' human contact, 'real' because occurring in an authentic world where the 'other' is met while busy with daily work; on occasion, these tasks, and thus emotions, are shared.

Tourist encounters produce a conflict between both the tourists' wish to penetrate the local environment – to go beyond the 'front stage' (Goffman 1969) in order to reach and discover the exotic element hidden in the backstage – and the locals' need to keep a private life. From what I observed, the tourist experience offers some possibilities to experiment with the new while remaining within a given familiarity that guarantees the tourists' well-being and prevents discrientation ¹²

For instance, when tourists choose Maramureş for all it has to offer and they want to keep the distance from mass tourists, they knowingly accept playing a role that is far and different from their daily life, but only temporarily and in ways that are compatible with their own experience; therefore, they become farmers, but 'only for a day' (Gottlieb 1982). Quite often tourists ask their hosts to share housework or other daily practices. Some female tourists are fascinated by local women doing the washing in the river and want to do it themselves, or young backpackers join their hosts in the field to help with the harvest or to milk the cows. Regardless of the fact that what they do is just a performative practice, they want their holiday to be an experience more than a vacation.

Ethnography shows that there is a shift in the motivation for and practice of tourism, from observing to doing, and from watching to sharing. Tourists are involved in domestic chores – such as market shopping, cleaning the house, or working in the fields – and are appreciative of these relationships that go beyond a simple host-guest rapport. Spending the day in a field, for example, building a hayrack with one's hosts is for many tourists an opportunity to do something out of the ordinary and at the same time to gain intimacy with the other.

At local level, tourists' interest in everyday objects and items leads to an enhancement of local heritage. The community's and location's potential is 'revealed' as a result of its contact with the outside world; over time, it is shaped and reinterpreted in order to tailor it to the requirements of the 'other', in this case, of the tourist. In this way, contemporary items have become part of the clothing which is made available to tourists for their photo sessions in the workshops, and similarly, items which are supposed to only be worn by some, depending on age or marital status, are also

¹² Regarding 'environmental bubbles', see Cohen (1972) and Lanfant (1995).

freely worn by others. Men's vests, for example, are also worn by women, or the host wears two garments together which are normally always worn separately (see Figure 5). This promiscuity blurs the subtle differences that traditional dress used to emphasise, such as those based on age, gender or marital status: for example, women tourists are encouraged to wear men's waistcoats, or girls are given waistcoats with trimmings normally reserved for married women. Hosts also wear a melange of dress styles: the woollen striped skirt (which should be worn over a black or white cotton underskirt) is worn over a much more recent pleated skirt.



Figure 5: Tourists wearing traditional jackets (cojoc) over T-shirts, under the gaze of local host while other tourists take pictures

Concluding reflections.

Tourists' desire to be involved, to become a part of local life, means that they are part of Hannerz's (1992: 327) category of cosmopolitans, but given that for Hannerz this term denotes 'the offspring of the organization of diversity in world culture', in this case, those local inhabitants of Botiza who have never left the town can also be considered cosmopolitans; through the gaze and the behaviour of tourists on the one hand, and the policies and choices of the decision-makers of the tourist industry on the other, they enact a form of authenticity that makes the rural tourism offered by Botiza profitable as well as effective. In practical terms, it would appear that it is only the tourist who actually travels elsewhere, however, in the context of tourist experiences, very often all social actors use their imagination to become part of a broader vision, in which far-flung scenarios become familiar and in which the home environment includes elements from different cultures.

Much anthropology of tourism research highlights the conflict between tourists wishing to become a part of local experiences in order to discover the exotic elements hidden behind the scenes, and the local inhabitants' need to preserve their private sphere

where tourist practices are often derided or criticised (Boissevain 1996). This conflict is also manifest and clearly present in certain situations in Botiza, but my research shows that the meetings that occur in the showrooms reveal that tourist demand and supply do connect in a context of tradition and authenticity that is jointly created.

In practice, it is my view that the meeting the tourists wish for and which is promoted by tour operators and advertised in brochures, takes place in a context where meanings can be created and interpreted jointly, despite the fact that it is the result of a chain of organizational events that extends further than the local community as it also reaches local networks, and despite the fact that it is mired in misunderstandings and ambiguity. This very duality, giving rise to paradoxes, irony and ambiguity, ensures that the situation can be described using Bourdieu's categories of the economy of symbolic trading exchanges. The properties which Bourdieu identifies as being part of symbolic exchanges – the 'dualism' inherent in practices which 'present dual realities which are difficult to reconcile' and the 'making something explicit' (1995: 160–161) – are also applicable to tourism. Furthermore, just as in the economics of symbolic exchanges, 'declaring the truth of the exchange... is tantamount to annulling the exchange' (Bourdieu 1995; 161), so in tourism – which is at once a social and economic activity – do the majority of relations conceal their true commercial nature behind the fig leaf of gratuity (Bruner 1996), and hospitality is often understood to be a gift (Satta 2002). For Bourdieu, symbolic capital cannot be understood separately from the subjects who recognise it and give it value, and so tourist practices take on a meaning as they take place within meaningful networks built and understood by all subjects.

Seen from the standpoint of symbolic capital, tourism, just like a product typical of a region, (Papa 1999), is an oxymoron because at the very least it embodies a dual reality: an economic reality, governed by market mechanisms of supply and demand, and a complex reality founded on experiences which transcend the utilitarian dimension. Both offer and demand are adaptable to different interpretations and manipulations and in due time are managed by different social actors. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, it is necessary to leave an antinomic logic where tourism is either development or destruction, and it is imperative to carry out research able to illustrate and analyse tourism diversity and many-sidedness.

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POVZETEK

Pričujoči članek opisuje mojo etnografijo, ki pod vprašaj postavlja idejo 'tradicionalne preteklosti', kot je predstavljena in občasno prodana turistom. Ta proces je delno odpadel s turističnimi praksami socializma, ki so same ustvarile idejo 'tradicionalnosti', zelo podobno tisti, ki jo promovira današnja turistična industrija. Terensko delo je bilo izvedeno v Botizi, podeželskem kraju v severni Romuniji, kjer so izvajali različne prakse za spodbujanje in zadovoljevanje turističnega trga. V tem kontekstu sem analizirala srečanja gostiteljev in gostov in še posebej njihovih praks in naracij v trenutkih, ko so se soočali s koncepti, kakršni so 'preteklost', 'tradicija' in 'avtentičnost', ki jih turistična industrija predstavlja, upravlja in prodaja kot turistične proizvode.

KUJUČNE BESEDE: podeželski turizem, umetnost in obrt, tradicija

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