

THE HOLY MONASTERY OF TISMANA



The Holy Monastery of Tismana is one of the oldest, the most important and the most beautiful monasteries in Romania. This monument, built in the middle of nature, is perfect for those who want to gather their thoughts, to be close to God and to know the Romanian Orthodox religion.

Settled on Starmina Mountain, surrounded by wooded, rocky peaks, the monastery took its name from a coniferous tree called "tisa", that used to grow around here long time ago. On the occasion of some archeological works, there were discovered the ruins of an old Daco-Roman fortress; in the ancient language of the Dac people, the word "tismana" meant "fortified place".

It was founded in the 14th by Saint Nicodim the Pious, with the financial support of the Basarab princes Radu I (1377- 1383) and his sons Dan I (1384- 1386) and Mircea the Old (1386- 1418). Near the monastery, there was a small church made of the wood of a big "tisa" tree. It was consecrated in August 15th, having the dedication on the Pure Virgin's Dormition and it is historically attested in a charter of Leader Dan, written on October 3rd, 1385.



Saint Nicodim lets us feel his permanent presence here, enlightening our lives with his holy gifts. He was born at the beginning of the 14th century at Prilep, in Macedonia, as a member of the great Basarab family. Lazar, the leader of Serbia, was also his relative. The young Nicodim, only sixteen, chose to leave home and become a monk in the Saint mountain Athos, in Greece. Due to his extreme intelligence and to his strong wish to lead a saint life, Nicodim the Pious became a very profound theologian, an expert in Greek and Slav languages, a perfect orator, an exceptional miniature painter. He also knew how to work with people and he was very close to all of them. He had the full support of his contemporary leaders who helped him build churches and monasteries that became centres of culture and of national unity, powerful protectors of the Orthodox religion.

A perfect monk, Nicodim the Pious came to Valachia (the southern part of Romania) and he founded monasteries similar to those in Athos, where the monks learned how to work and become skilful in various arts.

In 1377, the Patriarch Philotheos of Constantinople, raised this monastery to the rank of "archimandrie" which meant that it had the role to watch over the other small monasteries like: Vodita, Gura Motrului, Prislop, Topolnita, and the hermitages Teius, Mocirlita, Saint Anthony, Plostina Dragoiestilor (Hobita), Aninoasa, Visina and others.

Saint Nicodim the Pious lived here like a hermit, spending nights and days on end praying in a small cave near the monastery. Saint Nicodim the Pious had the great gift of making miracles. Many sick people would come to him every day, searching for healing. Some of them were healed by touching his clothes, others simply by calling his name from a distance. His holiness and his miracles became wellknown even abroad. Sigismund of Luxembourg himself, Emperor of Austro-Hungary, visited him, in August, 13th, 1406. He had a sick daughter, possessed by an evil spirit. Many doctors and priests had seen her but with no

results. So, the Emperor took his daughter and some people from his court and came to meet Saint Nicodim.

Coming close to the monastery, the evil spirit went away and the girl got well. Sigismund ordered his people not to tell Saint Nicodim about this. When they reached the monastery, all the monks were waiting for them. The Saint told him: " Praise God for his mercy, for healing your daughter. The guests were all astonished, hearing his words. The Catholic priests who accompanied Sigismund became envious, so they planned to bring shame on Saint Nicodim and his monks. They knew that the monks did not eat meat; so they brought a covered plate with some pork for lunch, saying that there was fish. By his holy spirit, the Saint knew what there was on that plate, and said: "Be it fish!" When they uncovered the plate, there was fish instead of pork. Then all the Catholic priests got frightened. Saint Nicodim told them about the true faith and about the power of God who makes miracles by those who love Him. Then Sigismund and many of his people wanted to be baptized in the Orthodox religion.

Saint Nicodim the Pious died on December, the 26th, 1406.

The architecture of Tismana Monastery is in the Byzantine style of the 14th century, resembling the churches in Macedonia and Athos, also showing a few Romanian architectural elements. The actual church of the monastery is built directly on the rock, following a triconic plan with steeples on the nave, pronaos and porch. Along the years, it suffered many transformations.

The church was painted in 1564 by Dobromir from Targoviste, being financially supported by the great magistrate Nedelcu. The painting is in the post- Byzantine style, in a polichrome fresco, applied on the initial monochrome fresco.

In 1732, the archimandrite Ioan restored the painting in the Saint Altar and in the naos. In the pronaos, the fresco from 1564 was not destroyed but there was applied a new fresco in 1766. Beginning with 1955, the painting in the pronaos started to be pricked and placed on the walls of the museum and on the corridors of the hermitages. The first fresco, the one from 1564, was restored. The porch of the church had been demolished in Prince Bibescu's time (1842-1848) and it was rebuilt in 1983, following Saint Nicodim's plans.

In the same period, the whole monastery and all its dependencies were restored, the coordinator of the restoration work being the engineer Ioan Salajan, the actual bishop of Harghita and Covasna. In 1994, the porch of the church was painted by Grigore Popescu from Campulung Muscel, in a Byzantine style, having an appropriate design and a discrete harmony of colours. The iconographic presentation is also unique, as some newly discovered Daco-Roman saints were painted for the first time.

The Monastery of Tismana had an extraordinary treasure, now lost because of the numerous hardships that came over the monastery during the centuries.

A great part of the valuable objects of the monastery are now at the Art Museum in Bucharest. Among these objects, the most valuable is The Saint Nicodim's Gospel – a complex work of art, valuable by the beauty of its writing and the miniatural ornaments. Its covers are made of golden silver. This is the oldest Romanian manuscript and the oldest silver cover. The museum also has a rich collection of mural paintings (taken from the pronaos in 1766), old icons on wood, religious objects, old books and clerical robes.

Inside the church there is a holy silver coffin, made by the visual artist Gheorghe Stoica. It contains three pieces of holy relics of: Saint Nicodim, Saint Ignatie Theofor and Saint John the Golden Mouth, together with the cross worn by Saint Nicodim. On the cover and inside the holy coffin these saints are presented in medallions. On the exterior there are some life scenes and some miracles made by Saint Nicodim.

In the porch of the church there is Saint Nicodim's tomb, watched by an ever burning candle.

The Holy Monastery of Tismana is a special place not only for its wonderful position but most of all for its spiritual mission that was given to it in the life of the Romanian people. It is a holy place where we can feel close to God and His saints, it is a place where miracle is present every day. It cannot be otherwise, for when Saint Nicodim was on his dying bed, he promised to give his love and help to all those who would come here, to Tismana.