

SAINT TEOFANA BASARAB – SPIRITUAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC ITINERARY IN THE ROCK-HEWN COMPLEX OF IVANOVO

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ABSTRACT

Saint Teofana Basarab represents one of the most important nuns in the Romanian and Bulgarian Orthodoxy of the 14th century. Daughter of Basarab I, founder of Wallachia, Teofana was a symbol of the political-spiritual connections between the Romanian and the Bulgarian area. Her activity and personality are closely connected to the cultural and religious context of the epoch, marked by the rise of the hesychastic movement and the consolidation of the Orthodox monasticism in the Balkans.

Keywords: *Teofana Basarab; Pious Saint; Ivanovo; hesychasm; Bogomilism;*

INTRODUCTION

Teofana chose the way of monasticism after having been sent away by the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander, opting for a heremitic life. According to some historical sources, she would have had connections with the hesychastic centre of Kilifarevo and with Saint Theodosius of Tarnovo, the best known disciple of Saint Gregory of Mount Sinai. Saint Theodosius is supposed to have been her confessor prior to her becoming a nun.

Saint Teofana is also known for the rock-hewn church she founded, part of the complex of monasteries and churches of Ivanovo, in the north of Bulgaria, where remarkable frescoes can still be seen to this day, of which a votive representation of the Saint with a halo around her head. This image is considered by some researchers as a clear indication of the fact that she must have been honoured as a saint even during her life or not long after her death. The frescoes in the rock-hewn churches of Ivanovo, situated along the Rusenski Lom River Valley, between Cerven and Ivanovo Village, have been researched by specialists such as Karel Škorpil, André Grabar and Gabriel Millet of Sorbonne University.¹

The context in which Teofana lived was marked by great political unrest, but also by an intense spiritual flourishing. Wallachia and Bulgaria, under pressure, first from the Byzantine Empire, then from the Hungarian and Serbian Kingdoms, and later on from the rising Ottoman power, lived a religious and cultural renaissance, in which hesychastic monasticism played a central role. The Orthodoxy constituted a link between the two peoples, facilitating the circulation of ideas, manuscripts and iconographic models.

¹ *** *Inventory of antiquities along the course of the Rusenski Lom River, Royal Court Printing House, Sofia 1914, (Materials for the archeological map of Bulgaria I), pp. 140-144.*

The few written sources on the life of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab include *The Kuklen Psalter* (1337) and *The Synodicon of Tsar Boril* of the 14th century, preserved in Sofia. In *The Synodicon*, she is called *blagocestivă* (pious or devout) and she is mentioned along with other benefactors of the Orthodoxy, being celebrated liturgically during the Sunday of the Orthodoxy.² Her presence among those celebrated on this significant day indicate the spiritual prestige she enjoyed in her lifetime.

Saint Teofana actively supported the copying of manuscripts and the creation of cultural centres, such as those of Loveci and Tarnovo, where texts were copied in Slavonic with Byzantine or Athonite sources. Among the manuscripts connected to this epoch are *The Chronicle of Manasses* (1344), *The Four Gospels* (1355) copied during Ivan Alexander's time and *The Tomić Psalter* (1360).³

Although few hagiographic texts about her life remain to this day, the popular cult and the memory of Saint Teofana's image have been perpetuated by icons and frescoes, especially those in the rock-hewn churches of Ivanovo. Here, in the Church of the Great Martyr Saints Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat, is the only known representation of Saint Teofana, painted with a halo and keeping in hands the church shrine – a symbol of her votive offering.

1. CONTEXT: FAMILY, RELIGION, CULTURE AND POLITICS

Teofana's family context represents an essential element to understand her intellectual and spiritual formation. Born between 1300 and 1305, she benefited of the privilege of an exceptional education for that epoch, in the framework of the Princely Court of Argeş. The education received at the Princely Court included not just theological studies based on the Church Fathers' writings but also elements of diplomacy, administration and ecclesial art. This well-founded formation later on allowed her to actively participate in the cultural and religious life of Bulgaria, where she was sent by marriage.

The matrimonial union with the governor of Lovec, Ivan Alexander, concluded in 1322, represented a strategic movement of primordial importance in the external politics of Basarab I. This alliance should not be regarded in isolation, but as part of a complex system of diplomatic relations which also included the marriage of Teodora's sister, Ruxandra, to Ștefan Uroš III Dečanski of Serbia.⁴ As the Bulgarian researcher Dimo Ceshmedzhiev remarks in his fundamental work on the respective period, these matrimonial unions demonstrate a great geopolitical vision that transformed Wallachia from a peripheric entity into a central actor on the Balkan scene. By these marriages, Basarab I managed to create a network of alliances which assured the stability and the influence of the new Romanian state. The same Dimo Ceshmedzhiev calls this period of cultural and spiritual flourishing for

² Gheorghiță CIOCIOI, "Sfânta Teofana Basarab – împărăteasa pustnică" (Saint Teofana Basarab – the hermit empress), in *Lumea Credinței*, no. 3 (221), March 2022, p. 15.

³ Răzvan Mihai CLIPICI, *Istoria Sfintei Cuvioase Teofana Basarab* (The History of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2022, p. 6.

⁴ † Varlaam PLOIEȘTEANUL, Episcop-vicar patriarhal, „Sfântul Ierarh Iachint și Sfânta Teofana Basarab, doi isihăști contemporani”, in *Ziarul Lumina*, 28 Octombrie 2024, <https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/mesaje-si-cuvantari/sfantul-ierarh-iachint-si-sfanta-teofana-basarab-doi-isihasti-contemporani-193451.html>.

Bulgaria on the verge of its subsequent collapse: the flourishing preceding the catastrophe.⁵ The period during which Teodora was Tsarina of Bulgaria (1331-1345) was marked by a cultural and religious activity of a remarkable intensity. At the Court of Tarnovo, she generously supported the development of schools of copyists, which produced numerous manuscripts of high artistic and theological quality. Under her patronage, translations of several important Byzantine texts have been achieved, contributing to the improvement of the Church Slavonic literary patrimony. Among the edifices she founded, there are numerous places of worship, of which the most representative remains the Church of Saint Teodor Tiron and Saint Teodor Stratilat, a true masterpiece for the religious architecture of the Middle Ages.

The Kuklen Psalter, drafted in 1337 on her order, constitutes an exceptional contemporary testimony of her activity. This manuscript, kept today at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences of Sofia, attests not only her devotion to the Orthodox faith, but also her active role in the cultural life of her epoch.⁶

The confrontation with the heretic trends of those times represented another fundamental and constant aspect of her activity. In front of the alarming expansion of Bogomilism, with its dualist roots in Manicheism, in front of the Messalianism undermining the authority of the ecclesial Mysteries and in front of the Adamism with its extreme gnostic practices, Teodora actively fought in defense of the Orthodoxy. As Dimitri Obolensky pertinently underlines in his fundamental work on the Bogomils, this systematic and well coordinated reaction significantly contributed not just to keep the unity of the church in the region, but also to consolidate the position of the Orthodox Church in front of other confessions of faith. Teodora understood that the fight against heresies could not possibly be purely theological, but had to include cultural, educative and social dimensions as well.⁷

2. THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE PIOUS SAINT TEOFANA BASARAB

The matrimonial crisis of 1345 (or 1352, according to certain more recent sources) marked a decisive turning point in her life. Her repudiation by Ivan Alexander, who chose to marry a noble Jewish lady converted to Christianity under the name of Teodora, had complex reasons, both personal and political. The event is put down accurately by the Byzantine chronicler Nicephorus Gregoras: "Alexander sent away his first wife during her life and married another lady, from among the Jews".⁸

Entering the monastic life under the name of Teofana, she opened a new and fruitful period of her life. Her withdrawal to the rock-hewn monastery of Ivanovo, with its hermit cells, and later on her settlement at Albotina Monastery, near Vidin, were marked by a profound commitment in support of the hesychastic spiritual trend that marked her epoch. Her spiritual connections to Saint Theodosius of Tarnovo, as her confessor even since the period when she was Tsarina, then with Saint Gregory of Sinai and with Saint Nicodemus of Tismana, shaped an authentic and deep spiritual living for her. *The Sbornic* (The Anthology)

⁵ Димо ЧЕШМЕДЖИЕВ, "Цар Йоан Александър Асен (1331–1371) – Разцвет преди катастрофата" in *Религиозен Разцвет България XIII – XV В. Доклади от Международната научна конференция София, 12 – 13 юли 2019 г.*, Кирило-Методиевски научен център, Sofia, 2021, p. 13.

⁶ Gheorghiță CIUCIOI, "Sfânta Teofana Basarab - împărăteasa pustnică" (Saint Teofana Basarab – the hermit empress), in *Lumea Credinței*, no. 3 (221), March 2022, p. 14.

⁷ Dimitri OBOLENSKY, *The Bogomils: a study in Balkan neo-Manichaeism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1948, pp. 230-231.

⁸ Димо ЧЕШМЕДЖИЕВ, "Цар Йоан Александър Асен (1331--1371) -- Разцвет преди катастрофата", p. 30.

of Vidin, completed in 1360 during the period of her stay in Albotina, represents one of the most valuable and complex testimonies of this period, a true treasure of the Bulgarian spiritual literature of the Middle Ages.

As Fr. Al. Stănciulescu-Bârda accurately emphasizes in his ample studies on the respective period, Saint Teofana “remains as a symbol of the Romanian people, modest, humble, hard-working, faithful, cult, with a lot of good sense and with longing for the celestial heights”.⁹

Her personality transcends the centuries, embodying the spiritual strength of a woman who lived with dignity and hope in God, facing with humility and courage all the tests of life. Her example remains a landmark for assuming life in Christ, in the mystery of incessant prayer and of the faith working through love”.¹⁰

3. THE ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES OF IVANOVO

The complex of rock-hewn churches and monasteries of Ivanovo, situated on the riversides of Lom River in north-east Bulgaria, in which the Pious Saint lived during the first period of her heremitic withdrawal represents one of the most remarkable achievements of the Orthodox monasticism in the Balkans during the Middle Ages. This complex, often called “the Danubian Athos”¹¹ or “the hesychast university of the Middle Ages”, was included in the UNESCO world patrimony due to its historical, artistic and spiritual value. The complex comprises over 40 churches and 300 hermit cells, situated on several levels along a rocky zone of approximately 5 kilometers.

The beginnings of the complex are related to the activity of Patriarch Joachim I of Tarnovo (1235-1246), who, after his return from Mount Athos, dug a small rock-hewn church for ascetic life. The subsequent development was supported by Tsar Ivan Asen II (1218-1241), who turned the place into an important monastic centre. As the historic sources mention: “The Tsar endowed the monastery with rich gifts that led to the enlargement of the complex by several places of worship of monastic living.”¹²

Among the most important structures of the complex, there are: the Buried-Under Church dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, The Baptisterium, The Narrow Valley of the Lord, The Church of Saint Teodor Tiron and Saint Teodor Stratilat, as well as The Church of the Most Holy Mother of the Lord. Each of them presents unique architectonic and artistic features. In the 14th century, the complex became a major centre for Hesychasm, a spiritual movement promoting incessant prayer and contemplation. During that period, this teaching, underlining the growth in spiritual inwardness by solitude and contemplation, was acknowledged officially in Byzantium and Bulgaria.

The rock-hewn churches of Ivanovo are closely related to the figure of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab. After her separation from Tsar Ivan Alexander in 1345, Teofana

⁹ Pr. Al. STĂNCIULESCU-BÂRDA, *Viața Cuvioasei Teofana Basarab* (The Life of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab), Editura Cuget Românesc, 2023, p. 183.

¹⁰ † Varlaam PLOIEȘTEANUL, Episcop-vicar patriarhal, „Sfântul Ierarh Iachint și Sfânta Teofana Basarab, doi isihăști contemporani”, in *Ziarul Lumina*, 28 Octombrie 2024, <https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/mesaje-si-cuvantari/sfantul-ierarh-iachint-si-sfanta-teofana-basarab-doi-isihasti-contemporani-193451.html>.

¹¹ Florian SAIU, „Poveștile Sfântului Dimitrie, ocrotitorul Bucureștilor. Episodul în care bulgarii au furat moaștele”, 26 Octombrie 2023, <https://jurnalul.ro/special-jurnalul/interviuri/povesti-sfant-dimitrie-ocrotitor-bucuresti-946624.html>.

¹² Evgeni GEORGIEV, Rock monasteries on Rusensky Lom, Regional Historical Museum, Rus, 2022, p. 3.

withdrew to Ivanovo, where she founded The Church of Saint Teodor Tiron and Saint Teodor Stratilat, according to the traditions of the area. The fresco depicting her with the church shrine in her hands, surrounded by an aureola, represents one of the few iconographic representations of her image.

The frescoes in the big and smaller churches of Ivanovo are considered masterpieces of the Palaeologan art. The Church of the Most Holy Theotokos hosts biblical scenes such as The Mystery Supper and The Entry in Jerusalem, realized in a style combining Byzantine elements with early Renaissance influences. The Buried-Under Church keeps fragments of fresco from the 14th century illustrating “The Archangels’ Assembly” and “The Healing of the Paralyzed”.¹³ A special hypothesis related to this place of worship is supported by the Bulgarian iconographer Dr. Alexandar Stoykov. He affirms that it is very likely that The Church of the complex of Ivanovo may have hosted one of the most valuable Christian relics, namely the Ilton of Christ, for which the Roman soldiers drew sorts at the foot of the Cross. After having studied the church frescoes for many years, Dr. Stoykov reconstituted the scenes, as just a small part of the frescoes survived, and noticed several particular features. One of the scenes on the rocks was misinterpreted by the previous researchers as “The Whipping of Christ”, but, in his opinion, this represents the sharing of the apparel of Christ because the soldiers are not whipping Christ, but are turned with their backs toward him – the soldier on the right is leaning down and, most likely, is tearing a piece of garment, while the one on the left is folding the Ilton. He considers that this scene, rarely represented, is found here in large dimensions, and this can only be in connection to the content of the Western absid – the relic.¹⁴ After the Ottoman conquest at the end of the 14th century, the complex of Ivanovo gradually knew a period of decline. Most of the monasteries in the area were abandoned, and the local monastic life disappeared almost completely. However, some churches continued to be used during the first centuries of Ottoman dominion, as the conservation state of certain frescoes indicates.

The scientific rediscovery of the complex began in the 20th century, with the Czech researcher Karel Škorpil and the French researchers Gabriel Millet and André Grabar. They analyzed and dated the frescoes, identifying them as being representative for the late Byzantine art. Grabar, in his work “Peinture religieuse en Bulgarie au moyen âge” (1928), compared them to other examples known from the Balkans.

The identity of the main founders was subject of debate among the historians. The inscriptions discovered suggest that Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371) played an important role in the development of the complex, although some parts had been founded previously by Tsar Ivan Asen II. The portraits of founders preserved on the frescoes confirm the participation of the ruling family in supporting this spiritual centre.

Today, the monastic complex of Ivanovo remains a symbol of the Orthodox spiritual resilience in front of the vicissitudes of history. Its frescoes, although partly deteriorated, continue to attest the artistic and spiritual richness of the 14th century period. As part of the UNESCO world heritage, this rock-hewn complex constitutes a unique testimony of the monastic life of the Balkans of the Middle Ages and of its contribution to the safeguarding of the Orthodox Christian culture.

¹³ Evgeni GEORGIEV, *Rock monasteries in Rusenski Lom* p. 4.

¹⁴ Yordanova, Zhaneta, “Ivanovo Rock Churches – a Mystery from the Middle Ages!”, in *Telegraf*, 09 May, 2024, <https://telegraph.bg/telegraphplus/novini/ivanovskite-skalni-cyrkvi-tajnstvo-ot-srednovekovieto-monasite-izdylbavali-estestvenite-skalni-nishi-i-gi-prevryshtali-v-kilii-paraklisi-i-cyrkvi-413426>

The monastic complex of Ivanovo safeguards a rare and valuable iconographic treasure for the history of the Orthodox art and spirituality of SE Europe. The frescoes in the caves and churches of this complex, stylistically, belong to the Comnen (the 11th-13th centuries) and the Palaeologan influences (the 14th century). These two styles define both the aesthetic and the spiritual direction of the representations.

The style of the Comnenos dynasty is found in the frescoes of the Buried-Under Church, the Great Lavra, the small church The Narrow Valley of the Lord and the Church with Great Aureola. This style is sober, faithful to the Byzantine rigor, accentuating the verticality and immobility of the Saints, in a logic of Transfiguration.

On the other hand, the Palaeologan style, specific of the 14th century and visible in the Collapsed Church, brings on a new air of those times: the images acquire realistic features, the characters become dynamic, tridimensional and delineate landscapes with complex architectural backgrounds, in a manner inspired by the Hellenistic art. Human emotion and naturalistic details intertwine here with the spiritual message in an ineffable manner for the classical Byzantine iconography.

To this artistic context belongs the representation of Saint Teofana Basarab, figure of a major importance, both spiritually and culturally. In the Collapsed Church of Ivanovo, she is represented offering the church shrine to the Saints Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat, protectors of this place of worship. The votive portrait shows her with aureola, a gesture expressing not just her quality of founder, but also the recognition of her sainthood even since the time of her life. This representation can be considered one of the earliest forms of monastic feminine iconographic profiles in the Romanian-Bulgarian space.

Another remarkable iconographic element is the miniature from *The Manasses Chronicle*, a work illustrated in the 14th century at Tarnovo. Here, Teofana is represented as a mother in pain, at the head of her son Ioan Asan, after his death.¹⁵ The miniature, kept today at the Library of the Vatican Museum, offers not just an artistic element, but also a deeply emotional and spiritual documentation on her profile.

By means of the frescoes and manuscripts, the memory of Saint Teofana was transmitted with piety and faithfulness, offering not just an exemple of holiness, but also an important contribution to the Orthodox cultural patrimony of the Orthodox churches of the Balkans.¹⁶

The Church of the Most Holy Mother of The Lord shelters some of the most valuable frescoes of the Bulgarian art of the Middle Ages. Although its authors remain unknown, their artistic craft is obvious. The frescoes, deeply influenced by the hesychast spirituality, render evangelical scenes such as: The Annunciation, The Birth of the Lord, The Transfiguration, The Mystery Supper, The Entry in Jerusalem, The Passions of Jesus Christ, but also representations of the Saints and of the Apostles. Among the notable scenes there are The Washing of the Apostle's feet – achieved with a special naturalness – and Judas' Betrayal, rendered with great emotional tension. A unique ensemble is the cycle dedicated to Saint Gerasimus of the Jordan, present in the small church. The central element of the painting is the votive portrait of a reigning couple with haloes, holding the church shrine. The man was identified as Tsar Ivan Alexander, and the woman – partly preserved – is, the most likely, the

¹⁵ Gheorghită CIOCIOI, *Hagealături balcanice* (Balkan Pilgrimages), Editura Lumea credinței, București, 2019, p. 123.

¹⁶ Răzvan Mihai CLIPICI, *Istoria Sfintei Cuvioase Teofana Basarab* (The History of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab), pp. 6-7.

Tsarina Teodora Basarab, the Tsar's first wife. This identification is supported by the majority of the researchers.

The frescoes stand out by the tension of the scenes and the characters' strong gestures, being among the best preserved in the medieval Balkan area. The architectural details painted reflect influences of the Palaeologan Renaissance, but also the artistic taste of the epoch. The chromatic style, with sophisticated harmonies, highlights an incipient humanist trend in the Orthodox painting from the beginning of the 14th century.

The Church reflects the artistic and spiritual connection with the painting school of Tarnovo, and some historians consider that the painters of Ivanovo would have belonged to this cultural environment. Unfortunately, the artistic bloom stopped as soon as the political decline of the end of the 14th century settled in.

The Buried-Under Church – the Lavra of the Archangel Michael is the main Church of the Lavra, having a rich painting, preserved partly in situ and partly in the Museum of Ruse. On the northern wall one can find the large fresco The Assembly of the Archangels, and on the Western wall there are scenes such as Jesus Christ Meeting the Myrrh-Bearers and The Healing of the Paralyzed from Bethesda.

The blocks collapsed from the ceiling preserved nine other scenes, of which remarkable are: Abraham's Hospitality, James' Dream and The Ascent of Jesus Christ. At the same time, in the naos and in the narthex appear two scenes dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, Tsar Ivan Alexander' protector, whose portrait is painted on the northern wall.

The frescoes on the lateral walls illustrate Old Testament themes (Joshua, Moses, Aaron, The Arch of the Covenant), but also New Testament episodes: The Crucifixion, The Descent from the Cross, Thomas the Unbeliever.

Stylistically, the frescoes in the chapel of Michal the Archangel represent a stage of transition between the late Period of the Comneni and the Palaeologan Period, and the mixed technique (fresco + tempera) and the specific chromatics suggests a date in the 13th century. The scene Saint Peter of Alexandria's Vision and the image of Saint Panteleimon are among the few preserved intact.

The Church known under the name of The Narrow Valley of The Lord is one of the best preserved in the whole monastic complex of Ivanovo, keeping stylistic features characteristic of the late Comnen art. The painting, achieved in mixed technique – fresco and tempera –, was better preserved on the ceiling and the eastern and northern walls. The most important fresco that survived to this day is the one depicting Christ – The Ancient of Days. Other iconographic fragments include The Dormition of the Mother of the Lord, the Saints Modest, Nicholas, Spyridon, Cyril of Alexandria, Germanos, Vlasios (Blaise) of Sevastia (Sebaste), Cosmas and Damianos. On top of the altar niche are rendered two "acheropite" (not made by human hand) images of Christ – The Mandylion and The Keramidion. On the ceiling are partly preserved the scenes The Descent into Hell and The Ascension of the Lord.

The chapel painting stands out by luminosity, freshness and a dynamic chromatism. Although the stylistic elements make it similar to the Byzantine iconographic tradition of the 12th century, the realistic and expressive manner of rendering the characters, along with the vitality of the compositions, situate it in the context of the innovating artistic trends of the beginning of the 13th century, developed in the environments of the medieval Constantinople. The analysis of the Cyrillic inscriptions preserved supports the appartenance of these frescoes to this period of transition. The Collapsed Church, dedicated to Saint Teodor Tiron, keeps important fragments from the original frescoes. They can still be found

on the northern and eastern walls of the naos, while other elements have been transferred in the Regional Museum of Ruse. The iconographic compositions are partly illegible, yet coherent enough to allow the identification of the stylistic features and of the iconographic program. To the west, an impressive votive scene is preserved: a woman in monastic apparel offers the church shrine to the two military patron saints – Saint Teodor Tiron and Saint Teodor Stratilat. This woman has been identified as the Tsarina Teodora Basarab, who had become nun Teofana after her tonsure in monasticism in the year 1347. In the past, it was believed that the figure represented Tsar Ivan Alexander's second wife, Sara. However, the monastic apparel and the presence of the aureola suggest unequivocally the identity of the first wife, Teodora, making this fresco the first iconographic representation of the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab.

On the church ceiling are preserved the traces of a register of the Great Feasts: to the east are rendered The Annunciation, The Birth of the Lord, The Meeting of the Lord at the Temple; in the center – the Baptism of the Lord, The Transfiguration, and Lazarus' Resurrection; and to the west – The Lord's Entry in Jerusalem, The Crucifixion and The Descent to Hell. On the eastern wall of the pronaos, there is a well-preserved fresco of the Pentecost, considered of a later date and belonging to a stage following the Ottoman dominion. This painting, although realized in a more modest manner, indicates the survival of the spiritual life in Ivanovo also during the Turkish dominion.

"It is generally accepted by all the researchers of the complex of Ivanovo that the icon artists trained in Tsar Ivan Alexander's workshops of Tarnovo and hired by the Tsar to work on the places of worship founded by him followed the rules and principles of the Constantinopolitan school of iconography. This aspect clearly results as well from the two manuscripts preserved to this day, illustrated especially for him: *The Four Gospels* from the British Museum and *The Chronicle of Constantine Manasses* from Vatican. Surely these are copies of Constantinopolitan works."¹⁷

After her withdrawal from the political life, the Pious Saint Teofana became a nun at the Ivanovo Monastery, where she led a hesychastic life, then at Albotina, another rock-hewn monastic center, where she continued to exert a spiritual and cultural influence on the Court of her son, Ivan Stratimir. According to Stoyan Yordanov's research works, the village Basarabovo, situated nearby, was, maybe, in the 15th century, a Wallachian dominion, preserving a tradition of possession related to the family of the Bassarabs and, implicitly, to Teofana. The Large Church and the space symbolically called The Palace represents central elements of the monastic complex of Ivanovo, illustrating both the artistic bloom of the Palaeologan period, and the active participation of the politic and spiritual elites in support of the monastic life. The frescoes preserved in this space, although most of them deteriorated, highlight an iconographic and stylistic continuity reflecting direct connexions to the Constantinopolitan art and the Byzantine Renaissance of the 14th century. Among the few fragments preserved in this ensemble are the scene of Saint Peter of Alexandria's Vision and the image of a healing Saint. The degradation of the monuments began after the monastic life stopped, being aggravated by partial collapses of the walls and a lack of restoring interventions until the 20th century. It is only in 1979 that the complex was included in the list of the UNESCO World Patrimony, a fact that boosted its cultural protection and capitalization.

¹⁷ Асен ЧИЛИНГИРОВ, *Ивановските стенописи и техният дарител*, Sofia 2011, p. 9.

Of all the personalities involved in the artistic development of Ivanovo, Tsar Ioan Alexander (1331–1371) holds a central place. He was not just a supporter of the monumental painting but also a promoter of the written culture, commissioning valuable manuscripts such as *The Four Gospels* kept at British Museum or *The Chronicle* of Constantine Manasses. Both works, realized for the royal court of Tarnovo, are strongly influenced by the Constantinopolitan iconography, which confirms that the Ivanovo frescoes belong to this style. I.D. Ștefănescu remarks, as well, in the Balkan iconography, the Hellenistic substratum reinforced, on the verge and during the Byzantine Renaissance, by what was called the return to the Antiquity¹⁸, a fact noticed by Gabriel Millet, too, in his analysis of the frescoes in the complex of Ivanovo in 1935. The preiconoclastic elements prove, in their turn, an ancient Christian tradition.¹⁹

The frescoes' style is refined and full of innovation. Despite the lack of a rigorous scientific perspective during the first stages of the research, subsequent studies showed that the Ivanovo frescoes stand out by the chromatic array inspired by the art of the Antiquity, reminding of the painting of Santa Maria di Castelseprio Church and of the Kariye Camii (Chora) decorations in Istanbul. The frescoes present Hellenistic, pre-iconoclastic influences and decorative motives taken over from the Byzantine miniatures, such as *Codex Parisinus graecus 1242*.²⁰

This artistic effervescence was, nevertheless, cut short by the Ottoman occupation from the end of the 14th century. Bulgaria, which was in a period of relative peace under Ioan Alexander's dominion, lived a remarkable spiritual and cultural vivification, expressed in the monumental painting and illuminated manuscripts. Unfortunately, a large part of these masterpieces were lost during the four hundred years of Turkish dominion.

Yet, some monuments survives. The painting of these places of worship proves the spiritual flourishing of the Hesychasm and the links between Bulgaria and Byzantium, especially by means of the painting workshops and by means of the monastic life.²¹ The architectural representations – such as the Atlanteans supporting the entablature – and scenes such as Judas' Kiss, with clear influences from the artistic repertory of the Antiquity, remind of the same classical heritage taken over by the Palaeologan School. These frescoes are comparable with the paintings of Mistras and with the works of Theophanes the Greek's discipleship, the artist who contributed to the transmission of the Byzantine style to the Slavic and Russian world.

CONCLUSIONS

First of all, we can state that the iconography and the style of the Ivanovo frescoes highlights that they are at the same time typical of the Palaeologan painting but also exceptional from certain perspectives.²²

Secondly, the Pious Saint Teofana Basarab, in particular, remained vivid in the

¹⁸ I.D. ȘTEFĂNESCU, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești* (The Iconography of the Byzantine art and of the Romanian feudal painting), Editura Meridiane, București, 1973, p. 244.

¹⁹ I.D. ȘTEFĂNESCU, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești*, p. 244.

²⁰ Tania VELMANS, "Les Fresques d'Ivanovo et la peinture byzantine à la fin du Moyen Âge", *Journal des savants*, no. 1 (1965), p. 400.

²¹ Stoyan YORDANOV, *Скалнияят манастир "Свети Архангел Михаил" при село Иваново*, Slavena, Varna, 2004, p. 15.

²² Tania VELMANS, "Les Fresques d'Ivanovo et la peinture byzantine à la fin du Moyen Âge", p. 1.

religious and cultural conscience of the Romanians and Bulgarians alike. The frescoes of Ivanovo, in which she is painted, confirm that she was honoured locally long before her official canonization in 2022.

Especially in the monasteries for nuns of southern Romania, Moldavia and in the Romanian historic communities of Timoc, the icons and frescoes depicting her consolidated the image of a saint who was a role model of ascetic life and abnegation.

In Vidin, a cultural institute bears her name, which attests the continuity of the piety to Saint Teofana Basarab, who united spiritually two Orthodox peoples, the Romanian people and the Bulgarian people.

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