

## ***The Rock Monasteries near Rouse***

The rock monasteries give real cultural and historical importance to the area along the Lom River. Their ruins only remain, still they characterize the rock formations of the entire river valley and keep alive the memory of this famous centre of high spirituality, literature and high art.

Its construction started in the beginning of 13th century inspired and led by Patriarch Joachim. "Grammarians" from all over the country streamed down to the monastic complex founded by the Bulgarian Tsars and supported by the Bulgarian royal institution within the next two hundred years. Its contribution to the strengthening of the Bulgarian spiritual traditions and to the development of the Bulgarian culture of the Middle Ages is significant. It continued functioning in the first centuries of Ottoman rule but then declined gradually and was abandoned.

The "Holy Virgin Mother of God" rock church is part of the larger "St. Archangel Michael" monastery complex situated only 22 km southwest of the town of Rouse on the Danube. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12-14th c.) it was an important and popular spiritual, religious and cultural center enjoying special attention and care by the Bulgarian Tsars and Patriarchs. The murals surviving until today in six churches and chapels are the reason for the monastery to be included in the World Cultural Heritage list by UNESCO.

All the structures have been cut in the vertical cliffs of the countryside area of Pismata, not far away from the village of Ivanovo. They form several complexes as part of the biggest Bulgarian chain of monasteries spreading far south to the capital Turnovo.

Today the monastery is famous for the preserved frescoes in its temples. Frescoes in the temples of "St. Archangel Michael" and God's Gorge have been created within the first half of the 13th century. They represent the basic tendencies in the development of Bulgarian religious art during the period and are distinguished by their gentle tonality, finesse and classic beauty.

The "Holy Virgin" church was built and decorated with frescoes through the financial support by Tsar Ivan Alexander. It is located 38 meters above the main road level, is 16 meters long, 4 m. wide and the ceiling is 2.5 m. high. The surrounding cliffs hide some 300 and more monastic cells.

The murals in the church are the most important preserved testimony of the achievement of the medieval Bulgarian art in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. They are a work by unknown artists from the Turnovo Art School, who apparently had great creative potential. The images on the walls and on the ceiling depict scenes from the Passion Week and from the life of St. John the Baptist. In the nartex are the portraits of the donors, among them of Tsar Ivan Alexander and Tsarina Theodora, as well as images of saints. The murals in the chapel feature scenes from the life of early Christian hermits from Syria. The medieval murals in the Holy Virgin rock church are brilliant example of the high level of development reached by the culture during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom.

The frescoes in the churches of Saint Theodore and Saint Virgin Mary are from the middle of the 14th century and are one of the most representative originals for the ruling "Paleolog" style within Balkan art in these times. Their subject reflects Hesychast impact, which was acquired then by the monastery's dwellers.

The murals on the walls and ceiling are beautiful, vivid and expressive. They demonstrate perfect sense of composition and colour. They reflect the never-fading power of the ancient tradition, and on the other hand embody the humanism and the tendency towards realistic art typical for that epoch.

The Nature Park of Rusenski Lom is one of eleven nature parks of Bulgaria. It is situated along the canyon-like valley of the Rusenski Lom river - the last feeder of the Danube river on the east of the country. The Park has been announced protected area in 1970 and embraces a territory of 3408 hectares.

The Park is recognized as an interesting and precious site of high aesthetic value featuring beautiful riverside terraces, meanders, high vertical rocks, areas of rich variety of species, caves, rock formations, historical monuments of national and international significance. The Park responds to the need of people for recreation and gives an opportunity for scientific research and exploration activities.