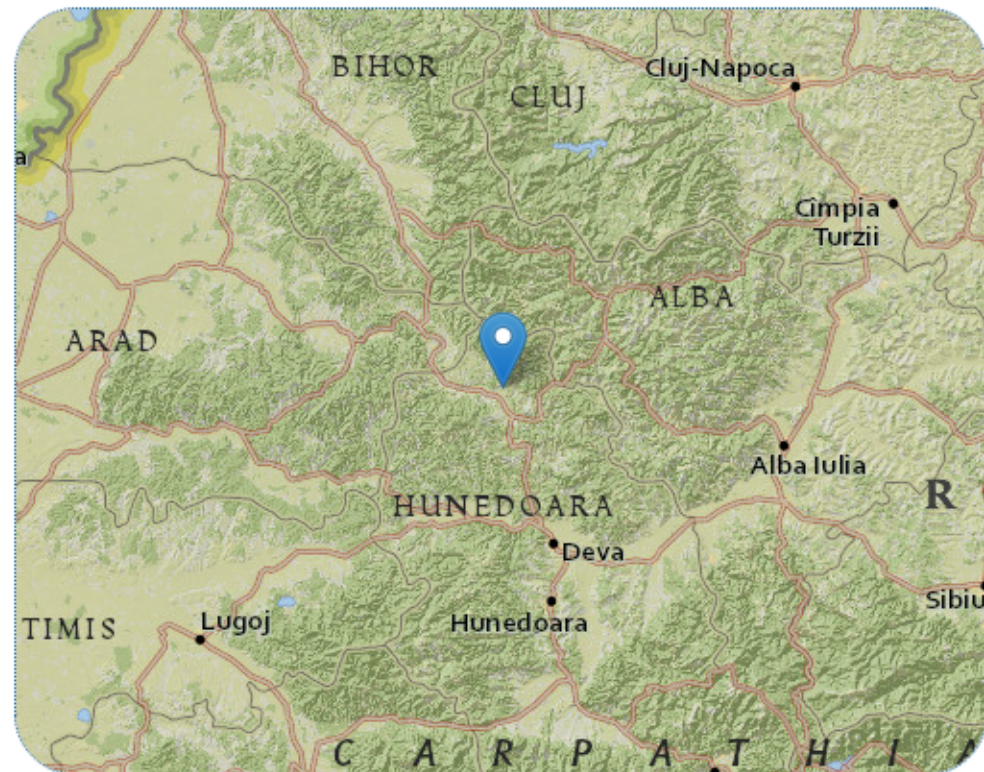


## The St. Nicholas Church in Ribița, Hunedoara County

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**Description**

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The Church of St. Nicholas in Ribița is currently located in Hunedoara County (Romania), which belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary (Zaránd County) during the Middle Ages. It was most likely built during the second half of the 14th century, according to a typology often encountered in the region's religious architecture derived from both Orthodox and Catholic models. The rectangular, vaulted sanctuary is separated from the nave by a built iconostasis, whereas the single-nave structure is dominated by a tall tower at the west end. Only a few stone carvings displaying unpretentious Gothic forms attest today to the medieval origin of the monument, which houses inside a rich and valuable ensemble of Byzantine frescoes.

These wall paintings were affected by major architectural changes to the church in 1869–70 (partially removed in 1994–95, when the building was consolidated) and their restoration is not yet completed (the murals' uncovering from under multiple paint layers was discontinuous: 1994, 1995–99, and 2009–11). Nevertheless, the church's late-medieval iconographic program can be reconstructed to a great extent. Holy bishops with scrolls and deacon-archangels with censers stand on both sides of the *Melismos* found in the eastern axis of the altar (the *Melismos* is the image of the sacrificed Christ on the altar or paten, symbolizing the Transubstantiation that occurs during the Liturgy). Writing Evangelists and seraphs make the transition from the register of holy bishops to the very fragmentary image of Christ in Glory on the vault. Scenes of Christ's Life and Passion decorate the upper register of the nave, whereas the Last Judgment consists of episodes randomly disposed in different areas inside the nave and the room below the western tower. The lower register of standing figures of saints contains also the votive composition (incompletely preserved), which shows the founders offering the model of the church to its patron, St. Nicholas. Belonging to the local noble family, these founders are brothers Vladislavu and Miclăușu of Ribița together with their wives (Stana and Sora, respectively) and little Ana, Vladislavu and Stana's daughter, who is represented below the model of the church. The dedicatory inscription in Church Slavonic is fragmentary (one of the missing elements is precisely the year in the dating) and various dates have been proposed for the execution of the Byzantine frescoes: 1404, 1407, 1414/15, or 1417. Additionally, a smaller dedicatory inscription (again fragmentary) on the northern wall of the sanctuary recorded the feast of the Ascension of Christ and another date, probably 15 May 1393. Another votive inscription is located on the image of St. John the Baptist on the southern wall of the nave and this implies that a certain Dobroslavu and his unnamed wife acted as minor donors for the church's murals.

## Significance

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As it often happens in the region, the architecture of St. Nicholas Church in Ribița has Western appearance, but its fresco decoration displays Byzantine features. This is a common trait of religious art commissioned by Orthodox Romanians in late-medieval Transylvania and, therefore, does not fit into the traditional East and West divide. Generally, the frescoes' style and iconography can be safely labeled as "Byzantine," but many Western elements can be identified in both the form and content of the mural decoration. This eclecticism is a general feature of 14th- and 15th-century religious art in the area and it is most likely a consequence of Transylvania's major role as a contact zone between the Slavic and Latin cultural spheres.

Although the church has a prevailing Western appearance conferred by its tall, western tower and Gothic stonework, this religious edifice actually served the Eastern Orthodox rite. Surprising as it may be, this feature is in fact a common trait of religious architecture commissioned during the 14th and 15th centuries by Orthodox Romanians, who resorted often to local builders active in the neighboring Catholic regions.

In contrast with its outer appearance, the whole interior of the church was decorated with frescoes displaying a Byzantine morphology. Stylistically, they are similar with the murals of the neighboring church in Crișcior, commissioned probably in 1411 by another Romanian Orthodox noble family.

Byzantine in essence, the iconographic program of the church displays features that are characteristic of programs ideated both on the periphery of Byzantium and in late-medieval Transylvania. Having been produced in a zone of contact between Eastern and Western cultural traditions, the religious painting of Orthodox Romanians was highly receptive to themes and motifs typical of Western/Catholic iconography. On the one hand, as it often happens in Byzantine churches without a dome or in churches built in the eastern periphery of Byzantium (e.g., Cappadocia or Georgia), the customary image of the Virgin with the Christ Child in the sanctuary's conch was replaced by that of Christ. However, the *Pantokrator* type occurs only in the mid-15th century frescoes in the sanctuary of Densuș, whereas in the remaining cases (e.g., Hălmagiu, Strei, Streisângeorgiu) the Western iconography of Christ in Glory (*Maiestas Domini*) was selected.

As customarily in Byzantine sanctuaries, in the church in Ribița holy bishops and deacons with scrolls, along with archangels with censers, stand to either side of the *Melismos*. Among these holy bishops, St. Nicholas of Myra, who is also the patron saint of the church, is ascribed a special place on the western side of the sanctuary's southern wall. He is depicted in the proximity of a chalice placed on an altar table covered by a ciborium, and the accompanying inscription mentions the heretic Arius, St. Nicholas' opponent during the First Council of Nicea (325), who preached the anti-Homoousian heresy stating that God the Father was unique and the Son was subordinated to the Father. In the lower part of the altar table, the bent figure of Arius himself is depicted falling down. This image with Eucharistic and anti-heretical content – which uses the compositional scheme of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria, but substitutes the figure of the Alexandrian bishop with that of St. Nicholas – is an entirely original iconography encountered nowhere else but in the sanctuaries of Ribița and Hălmagiu, whose programs have been designed and painted around 1400.

Finally, in addition to holy warriors on horseback, pillar and martyr saints, and other saints that were widely venerated in the East (e.g., Sts. Helena, Nicholas, John the Baptist, Panteleimon, etc.), the register of standing figures in the nave contains also the Catholic Holy Kings of Hungary. Encountered in the neighboring Orthodox church in Crișcior, the three royal saints (i.e., Sts. Stephen, Emeric, and Ladislas) are in close iconographic relationship with the neighboring military saints on horseback and St. Helena in the scene of the Finding of the Holy Cross, as well as with the *ktetors'* votive composition on the opposing, southern wall. This iconographic setting recalls the complex *mise-en-scène* of the founders' and rulers' portraits encountered in Byzantine, Balkan, and Carpathian monumental painting and reflects faithfully the political and social reality of the founders in Ribița (and Crișcior). These were Romanian Orthodox noblemen living in the Catholic Kingdom of Hungary, and they sought the recognition of their legal rights by the kingdom's sources of power. Additionally, the phenomenon of shared devotion of Latin saints by Eastern-rite Christians occurs sometimes in those territories found under Latin rule (e.g., the representations of St. Francis of Assisi in the Orthodox churches of Venetian-ruled Crete) and they illustrate that medieval devotional practices transgressed at times the rigid confessional borders.

Another interesting aspect of this church is that the votive composition and the church inscriptions in Church Slavonic shed light on the model of patronage practiced by Orthodox Romanians in the 14th and 15th centuries. In addition to the main *ktetors* depicted in the nave together with their families and offering the church to St. Nicholas, there are other fragmentary inscriptions implying that the church was decorated into two distinct phases and that other minor donors supported its decoration with murals. The shorter and fragmentary inscription uncovered in 1994 on the northern wall of the sanctuary recorded another important event for the church in Ribița. Occurring on the feast of the Ascension of Christ, probably on 15 May 1393, this event was most likely the foundation of the church and the decoration of its sanctuary. The short prayer inscribed on St. John the Baptist's votive image on the southern wall of the nave names a certain Dobroslavu and his wife, implying that they, too, supported to a lesser extent the nave's decoration with murals. This model of religious foundation and artistic patronage is associative and cumulative in its nature, and presupposes the joint involvement of multiple donors, who contributed at different stages and to various degrees – each one according to his/her own financial ability – to the construction and decoration of a church.

### Further Reading

Agrigoroaei, Vladimir. "An *Interpretatio Wallachica* of Serbian Patterns: The Cases of Ribița, Streisângeorgiu and Crișcior (but also Râmeț)." *Acta Universitatis Apulensis. Series Historica* 16, no. 2 (2012): 105–135.

## Further Reading

Agrigoroaei, Vladimir. "An *Interpretatio Wallachica* of Serbian Patterns: The Cases of Ribița, Streisângeorgiu and Crișcior (but also Râmeț)." *Acta Universitatis Apulensis. Series Historica* 16, no. 2 (2012): 105–135.

This essay examines a group of Orthodox murals of late-medieval Transylvania (churches in Crișcior, Râmeț, Ribița, and Streisângeorgiu), highlighting the elements of cultural transfer (of stimulus-diffusion type) from medieval Serbia to Transylvania. Special attention is paid to church inscriptions and various representations (*ktetors*, military saints on horseback, Hungary's Holy Kings).

Năstăsoiu, Dragoș Gh. "The Social Status of Romanian Orthodox Noblemen in Late-medieval Transylvania According to Donor Portraits and Church Inscriptions." In *Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines*, edited by Nicolae-Șerban Tanașoca and Alexandru Madgearu, vol. VII, 205–264. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române and Muzeul Brăilei "Carol I" -Editura Istros, 2016.

Using as source material donor portraits and church inscriptions preserved in Orthodox churches of late-medieval Transylvania, this essay highlights the economic and social aspects behind religious foundations. It establishes that the Transylvanian model of religious foundations was both associative and cumulative, patrons seeking thus to express their real and desired social status.

Năstăsoiu, Dragoș Gh., and Anna Adashinskaya. "New Information on the Dating of the Murals of St. Nicholas Church in Ribița: A Hypothesis." *MuseIKON. A Journal of Religious Art and Culture / Revue d'Art et de Culture Religieuse* 1 (2017): 25–44.

By reexamining critically the epigraphic material in Church Slavonic of St. Nicholas Church in Ribița, this essay evaluates the murals' previous dating hypotheses (1404, 1407, 1414/15, 1417) and proposes a new one for the paintings in the sanctuary (1393). The inscriptions' paleographical examination identified at least two individual hands of scribes.

Năstăsoiu, Dragoș-Gheorghe. "Between Personal Devotion and Political Propaganda: Iconographic Aspects in the Representation of the *sancti reges Hungariae* in Church Mural Painting (14th Century – Early-16th Century)," 226–306 ("Hybrid Art and Hybrid Piety – Transgression of Artistic and Confessional Borders by the *sancti reges Hungariae*"). PhD Dissertation. Budapest: Central European University, 2018.

This chapter analyzes a number of hybrid representations of the Catholic Holy Kings of Hungary, including those in the Orthodox churches of Ribița and Crișcior, which are interpreted as sources of legal and political legitimacy for the church founders, who were Romanian Orthodox noblemen living under Latin (Catholic) rule.

Prioteasa, Elena Dana. "Medieval Wall Paintings in Transylvanian Orthodox Churches and Their Donors," 146–181 ("Painting in the Sanctuaries"). PhD Dissertation. Budapest: Central European University, 2011.

This chapter analyzes the iconographic program of the sanctuary in the Orthodox churches of late-medieval Transylvania, highlighting first its compliance with the iconographic canon of Byzantine monumental painting and then its original features deriving from Western iconographic influences. Various aspects of the donors' religious life are also touched upon.

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