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multimedia



NESTINARI (FIRE DANCERS)



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Nestinarstvo, or the ritual fire dancing on live coals, is an ancient Bulgarian custom, which has both Christian and pagan elements. It is believed to originate from the Thracians, and more accurately from their sun worship.

Only fire dancers (nestinari) can dance over the coals - people, dedicated to the mystery of the ritual. In some villages the fire dancing has been hereditary, but in others fire dancers came from a so-called fire-dancers community. Dancers can be both men and women.

The ritual is practiced only in the region of Strandzha mountain. In the past it was common in the region of Aegean Thrace.

Although fire dancing is associated with perennial ritual practices, its peak time is on 3 June, when Bulgarians celebrate the day of



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St. Constantine and St. Helena (old calender). These saints are considered patrons of fire dancers.

On the day of the holiday ritual icons of both patrons are covered with special decoration and, with a solemn procession, they are brought to a spring and sprayed with holy water. In the evening the dancers, led by the Churchwarden, head to the chapel of St. Constantine, where they incense, light

candles and pray before the icons.

Meanwhile the coils are prepared at the square of the village. A large fire is set at noon and is maintained until the evening. After that the accumulated coals are spread in the form of a regular circle, where the villagers gather later.

When it gets dark, the dancers, accompanied by a drummer and a bagpiper, head to the



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village. The musicians perform three types of music. The first melody accompanies the procession from the chapel to the coals.

The main fire dancer starts the ritual. Intoxicated by the rhythm of the drum, he is the first to enter the coal circle and to cross it. The other fire-dancers follow him. Their fire dancing is characteristic with its small steps. During the dance the musicians perform their second fire-dancing song.

The culmination of the festival





is the so-called Kostadinsko Horo, which is danced under the sounds of the third melody.



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This dance is very different from all other dances in Bulgaria. It starts with left foot, which is very unusual for the Bulgarian dances. The dance is played by the whole village for health.

 *The fire dancer traditions are*
 *most preserved in the village*
 *of Balgari.*

Although the custom is tied to a specific date, restorations of the custom are made throughout the summer in the villages of Strandzha. They attract many Bulgarian and foreign guests.



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