RILA MONASTERY: A TREASURE WITH OVER A THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY

Deep in the magnificent forests of the highest mountain in Bulgaria, shrouded in mysteries and legends, keeping pieces of glorious history and defended by feats of faith, there is a place which for centuries has been one of the holiest and most dearly revered sites for the Bulgarian people.

The Rila Monastery is among the greatest landmarks of Bulgaria, an unquenchable spiritual beacon throughout the ages, and one of the most precious treasures of the rich historical and cultural heritage of the country.

Rila Monastery is located about 120 km southwest of the Bulgarian capital Sofia, around a 2-hour drive. The monastery is situated at an altitude of 1147 meters in the heart of Rila and is named after this majestic mountain. It is the largest Christian monastery in Bulgaria, with over a thousand years of history.

With its 2925 meters, Rila is the highest mountain in Bulgaria, as well as on the Balkan Peninsula. It is commonly known that the word “Rila” is of Thracian origin and means

“abundance of water” or “a lot of water”, which not only reflects the fact that the mountain is full of lakes, rivers, and mineral springs, but also makes an interesting association with the spiritual power of this extraordinary place.

The monastery was founded in the first half of the 10th century by the great hermit Ioan Rilski, one of the most revered saints in the country and patron of the Bulgarian people.

The lifetime of St. Ioan, popularly known also as Ivan, coincided with one of the most glorious periods in Bulgarian history – an age of impressive political and spiritual might of the country, huge territorial expansion, big military victories, remarkable cultural and literary renaissance, great prosperity , as well as pivotal changes and upheavals.

St. Ivan was born in a turbulent time for Bulgaria, shortly after the country, on official level, accepted the Byzantine Orthodoxy in 864-865. Until then, the Bulgarians were Christians, following and practicing the original Apostolic Christianity, accepted by the population in these lands in the 1st century. In the course of time, however, the Bulgarian Christianity started to be considered heretical by the Imperial Church in Constantinople, as well as by Rome. Therefore, the Bulgarian King Boris I, in search of bigger international recognition, decided to make a major political move, aiming to be more closely integrated among the monarchs of the mainstream Christianity at that time and to have stronger positions and influence in the medieval world. This momentous change happened in the second half of the 9th century, when Bulgaria was one of the great powers in Europe, along with the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Roman Empire.

As a result, a new and very powerful spiritual movement emerged in Bulgaria in the 10th century. It was a reaction and opposition to the imposition of the Byzantine Orthodoxy in the country. This movement was known as Bogomilism, and its

followers – as Bogomils (meaning “Dear to God”). Gradually, it spread outside Bulgaria – first to the neighbouring coutries in the Western Balkans, later to Central and Western Europe, including the territories of present-day France, Spain, Germany, Italy, England, and Belgium. In Europe, the Bogomils were known with different names: Cathars, Albigensians, Patarenes, Bougres, Bulgars. Bogomilism later played an important role for the European Renaissance and Reformation.

The authentic Christian faith of the Bulgarians, however, was not erased by the administrative introduction of the Byzantine version of Christianity. The old Bulgarian faith, known even until today as Orphic Christianity, continued to exist and to be practiced by those people who wanted to be faithful to the original knowledge and teaching of God the Word and who refused to accept the Imperial Religion. This authentic faith, although at times persecuted by the official church and secular authorities, has been preserved over the centuries in the Bulgarian traditions, folklore, customs, rites, holidays, festive calendar, tales, legends, art, culture, and everyday life. The original Christian faith of the Bulgarians, along with the Bulgarian language and writing system, has played a crucial role for preserving the national identity and civilizational uniqueness of the Bulgarian people, despite the periods of foreign rule, slavery or ideological regimes. Bulgaria still has a strong tradition of home churches, where believers gather to practice their faith and worship God in free communities, independent of the control of secular authorities or official religious institutions.

According to some opinions, the imposition of the Byzantine Christianity and the abandonment of the authentic Bulgarian Christianity by the official authorities in Bulgaria in the 9th century was a big mistake, which led to a strengthening of the Byzantine influence and the infiltration of imperial intrigues and policies into the royal court and the Church in Bulgaria. As a result, about 150 years later, Bulgaria fell

under Byzantine rule, which lasted for almost two centuries.

There are over a dozen hagiographic works about St. Ivan, as well as numerous legends and stories telling of his life and miracles.

There are also some versions about the life of St. Ivan suggesting that he was not a common man but had a noble origin. According to them, he was a brother of King Peter and a son of King Simeon I (893-927), one of the greatest Bulgarian monarchs, whose reign was known as the Golden Age.

Simeon the Great had four sons – Mikhail, Peter, Ivan and Boyan. After Simeon's death, Peter succeeded him to the throne. Two of Peter's brothers, Mikhail and Ivan, organized conspiracies against the new king during the early years of his rule. The rebellions were suppressed and Peter consolidated his power. Mikhail died during the rebellion. According to historical sources, Ivan was punished and forced to become a monk. It is supposed that this was the same Ivan (or Ioan) who became a hermit in the Rila Mountains and later founded the Rila Monastery as a spiritual center of Bulgarian Christianity, independent of the official authorities, at a time when the Byzantine Empire was establishing ever-stronger control over the Bulgarian state and church.

Peter, who was born of Simeon's second marriage, was neither the eldest son nor the official heir to the throne, but he became king as a result of court intrigues and power struggles in which the most influential figure was his mother's brother. Peter married a Byzantine princess and allowed Bulgaria to be heavily infiltrated by foreign influence. This policy of his was probably the main reason for the uprisings against his rule, led by Mikhail and Ivan, which, although unsuccessful, enjoyed considerable popular support. And the forth brother – Boyan, became one of the leaders of the Bogomil movement, which sought to preserve the authentic Bulgarian Christianity and to resist the imposition of Byzantine Orthodoxy in the

country.

The fascinating story of St. Ivan didn’t finish with his departure from this world. The mysteries and wonders related to this remarkable person continued in the next decades and centuries. Especially interesting was the fate of his physical remains and the miracles attributed to them.

The Rila Monastery is a real treasury keeping enormous amount of various valuables: silver and wooden reliquaries, church utensils and vestments, liturgical fabrics, antique jewelry, coins, etc. It is a unique architectural complex of church, residential and farm buildings, repeatedly rebuilt, destroyed and reconstructed again over the centuries. The monastery is the largest cultural and religious centre in the Bulgarian lands. Valuable artefacts from thousands of years of Bulgarian history have been created, collected and preserved there: manuscripts and old printed books, royal charters, historical documents, rich collections of icons and church utensils, carvings, ethnographic objects, and others.

The oldest preserved building in the Rila Monastery is the Hrelyo’s Tower, built in 1335. The construction of the tower is associated with the name of the local ruler Stefan Hrelyo Dragovol, who became a donor to the Rila Monastery and contributed to its enlargement in the 14th century. On the top floor of the tower is the chapel “Transfiguration of the Lord”, where some of the oldest frescoes in Bulgaria are preserved. In 1343, Hrelyo Dragovol also built a small church, enlarged and renovated in the 18th century. In the 1830s, it was replaced by the present large church “Nativity of the Holy Mother of God”.

In its present form, the Rila Monastery was built after the great fire of January 1833. The old parts of the eastern, northern and western wings were built in the period 1816-1819. The construction of the southern wing began in the spring of 1845 and continued until 1847. Part of the new eastern wing

began to be built in 1961 in place of the old one.

The main church of the monastery was built in the 19th century, at the place of the small medieval church from the 14th century. The construction of the temple continued from 1834 to 1837. The frescoes, woodcarvings and interior were finished in 1860. The mural decoration of the church was the work of some of the greatest icon painters of the 19th century.

In 1943, the Bulgarian King Boris III was buried in the monastery's church. Three years later, in 1946, the human remains of the late monarch were exhumed by the communist regime established in Bulgaria in 1944. The remains were transferred from the Rila Monastery to the Vrana Palace near Sofia, and later the chapel where they were placed was blown up. In the 1990s, a vessel with the heart of King Boris III was discovered at the place where he was reburied at Vrana Palace. The tomb of the late monarch in the Rila Monastery was restored, and the heart, embalmed after his death, was placed there.

In the 1960s, during the communist regime in Bulgaria, the Rila Monastery was nationalized and turned into a museum. On the orders of the leadership of the communist party, the monks were expelled and all church activities were suspended there. The decision was taken in 1961, and for a period of seven years there was not a single monk in the monastery. In 1968, some of the monks were allowed to return to the monastery. In 1991, after the end of the communist regime, the Bulgarian authorities restored the monastic status of the monastery.

Since 1983, the Rila Monastery has been recognized as a site of world cultural value and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

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