

Saint Ivan of Rila

St. Ivan was born in 876 AD in the village of Skrino, Doupnitsa region, the Samokov Diocese. He dies in 946 AD and is buried next to the cave in the Rila Mountain where he lived in reclusion.

Soon after his death, a small church bearing his name – *St. Ivan of Rila* was consecrated in Sofia to shelter his mortal remains, which have been transferred there.

In 1183 AD King Bela III of Hungary, who fought against Byzantium, conquered Sofia (Bulgaria was under Byzantium rule). He took possession of the relics of St. Ivan and brought them to Hungary.

In 1187 AD King Bela had a dream, suggesting he must return the relics to where they were taken from, otherwise his family and his kingdom will suffer and perish. Scared, the King ordered a coffin gilded from inside for the relics to be made, so they have been returned to Sofia.

After Bulgaria was liberated from Byzantium rule in 1195 AD, Tzar Ivan Assen I asked the Patriarch Vassilius to transfer the relics to the new Bulgarian capital Veliko Turnovo. The Patriarch, escorted by 300 soldiers, carried the relics to Turnovo, where they remained until 1469 AD.

The monks of the Rila Monastery asked permission from the Ottoman authorities to transfer the relics from Turnovo to the Holy Rila Monastery (their final resting place until today).

Back then the Ottoman ruler is Sultan Mohamed II (the same who conquered Constantinople on May 29, 1453). His wife Mara Brankovich (Mara Hatun or Sultana Maria also known as *Kala Maria "Mary the Good"*), a fervent Christian helped the monastery to obtain the permission by the Sultan.

Largely known is the untrue historical legend, stating that the woman Maria, who helped the transfer of the relics is the sister of Bulgarian Tzar Ivan Shishman. In fact, the sister Maria (sung in many songs until present day), prisoner of Sultan Bayezid I *Yildirim ("Lightning, Thunderbolt")* leaves the Turkish capital Odrin (Edirne, Adrianopolis) allowed by the Sultan and settles in the Bitola Region (today's Republic of Macedonia). The region is named after her by the locals – Mاريو. The legend doesn't hold because in 1469 AD the Tzar's sister Maria would be 120 years old and Bayezid dies before that, in 1402 AD as a prisoner of the Mongolian military leader Tamerlane.

Vassil Popvassilev (after notes by Nikola Shaykov (1912-1996)).

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