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THE RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN BULGARIA

Based on the World Cultural and National Inheritance Convention UNESCO has taken under its protection 150 monuments in 73 countries. Eight of them are of Bulgarian address. On one hand, during the period of transition to free market economy undergone by the Bulgarian society nowadays, it has become extremely difficult for Bulgarian official authorities to take care of the restoration and conservation even of the most important and valuable of these cultural monuments. On the other hand, the development of transport and communication between countries has led to increasing flows of tourists wishing to satisfy their specific cultural and religious interests. As the telecommunications specialize in providing comprehensive information on the cultures and religions of different countries, the number of tourists wishing to travel in order to enrich their culture is increasing constantly. Bulgaria is not an exception of this trend.

Situated in the Balkans, in the South-East of Europe, Bulgarian territory has constituted since the early ages a contact zone for many peoples and their religions and cultures. Being a cross-point between Europe and Asia, Bulgarian lands have preserved the historical memory of the past times in terms of archeological monuments of the tribes who used to inhabit these regions ever since the Eneolithic times. The Bronze Age, the Critho-Mikean epoque, the Thracian period, and more lately the nomadic tribes like the Protobulgarians have added to the rich religious and cultural picture of the peninsula. The Balkans has witnessed the invading wars of Darius of Persia, Phillip of Macedonia, Alexander the Great, and Xerx. Their territories have been turned into Moesia, a province of the Roman Empire, and have been crossed by the ancient road of "Via Egnatia".

Bulgarian state, one of the oldest in Europe was founded in 681 as a result of the union of Protobulgarian and Slavic tribes. The first came to Europe from Middle Asia during 7th century A.D. when the second have been already taken the lands along the lower Danube. Both peoples have settled on the lands which have been since the period of antiquity a homeland to ancient Thracians and Greeks with their sacral places, temples and gods.

Until recently not much was known about the original places of residence of Protobulgarians before their invasion to the West in 3-4th centuries A.D. Even less data was available about the links between their original religion and the Buddhism in China. However, in Chinese Buddhist books as well as in the chronicles of some Chinese dynasties from 4th

century, the term *Tuo-Hu-Lo* has been used to denominate a country and its people which inhabited a land bordered by Pamir mountain to the East, the Iranian Empire to the West, the Mountains of Hindu-Kush to the South and The Iron gate (Jhungaria) to the North. The same people have been described by some western historians from the antiquity like Strabon as *Toharians*. Their history has been revealed again in some Chinese sources where they have been described as connected to the tribe of *Yueh- Chih* people, who in their turn were pushed westwards by the Hunes.

Contemporary research on that matter come later to prove that the *Toharians* or *Yueh-Chih* people were of Indo-European origin and their language had a relative closeness to the Keltish and the Etruscan languages. Their state was for a certain period of time located in what is today North Afghanistan. In 1979 in these lands, well known in the ancient times under the name of Bactria, the treasure of Shibargan was found to prove that many cultures and peoples have created there a syncretic artistic style. Figures and symbols from the classical Greek mythology blended with Chinese, Indian and Partian motives, all of them surrendering to the artistic laws of the nomadic art of the steppes. It became obvious that the same trade roads of silk and spices had led to that place the Indians, Mongols, Parts (a people from the Persian linguistic group), together with the nomadic tribes from the European lands, and even the Romans. All of these cultural interactions had reached their pike during the Hellenic conquest of Bactria by Alexander the Great and later under the state of Seleukides during 4th century B.C. Later the same kingdom was conquered by the Parts in alliance with five nomadic Asian tribes called *Yueh-Chih*.

Many centuries afterwards well preserved monuments in the shape of stone columns with engraved runic inscriptions on them were excavated in the North-East of Bulgaria to prove that during their movement to the West Protobulgarians used the same script as they did in their previous two states in Asia (The Volgian Bulgaria and The Bosporian Bulgaria). There is no doubt that the Protobulgarians, in their way to the West, have been in close contacts with the tribes and peoples from Middle Asia following more or less the directions that has later become famous as The Silk Road.

The Protobulgarians had brought to the Balkans the worship of Tahgra as their main god. But the historians have discovered that many religious forms of totemism, the shamanistic rituals and pagan rites characterized their beliefs. The calendar of Protobulgarians was borrowed by the Chinese culture. The lunar zodiac cycle consisted of 12 years each one being named after one specific animal regarded as object of worship. The religions of *Tanghra*, *Zoroaster* and *Buddha* are integral parts of the same religious syncretism. Their

similarities, of course, need a comprehensive and scientific explanation. For the purposes of this colloquium however, enough is to mention that *Jamshid*, the first man and monarch in the history of Iran, had his analogue in the Indian tradition under the name of *Yama*, son of *Vivasvant*, represented as the immortal man, who became a god. He has found lately his divineness in his death – a clear proof of the links between the religions of Hinduism and the Christianity. *Jamshid* was also connected to the magic sacral bowl which was reflecting in itself the Universe (or *Tangra*) – a symbolical theme which has found its place in the folklore of the people in the Third Bulgarian State (created by Protobulgarians on the banks of lower Danube). Amazing similarity was also found between the rock carvings of *Madar* (a settlement near Balch, a main trade centre connecting the roads to India China Sogdiana (Choresm and Iran) and *Madara*, a settlement in Bulgarian state on the Danube. The image of the rocky horseman from *Madara* in Bulgaria, which has been declared by UNESCO a monument with value for the history of the mankind, has a pronounced Protobulgarian character. That fact is also evident from the accompanying inscriptions found there. Due to some reasons of political character until recently the theory of the Slavic dominance was prevailing in Bulgarian historiography when explaining facts of the past, pertaining to the origin of Bulgarian culture. In spite of that trend, Bulgarian historians have recently published new research studies in which new evidence on the Asian past of the Protobulgarians was put on the clear. They have proved in their studies that there existed similarity between Protobulgarians and the peoples with which they had come into contact in terms of religious, artistic and linguistic likeness. For example, the ancient Greek names of *Varna* and *Kavarna* (two cities on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast) were *Odessos* and *Karvuna*. Their Protobulgarian names, which are still in use today, are both connected with the meaning of the God of the Sea, or God of the Water (*Aruna*) in the history of Indians and Hittites with the Protobulgarians have come in contact during their movements from Asia to Europe. As *Aruna* means also big salt lake in the language of the Hittites this term corresponds to the name of *Varna* where same big salt lake exists.

The sacral places which were chosen to become places of worship during the antiquity and under the Protobulgarians have not lost their importance later during the time of medieval history of Bulgarian Kingdom. In spite of the fact that they represented the minority in the newly formed state with regard to the Slavs, the Protobulgarians imposed their ethnic name and syncretic religion to the rest of the population. Their sacral beliefs were added to the religious dogmas of the Orthodox Christianity and preserved even during the times of close influence of the Byzantine Empire. Their places of worship were especially chosen to built

churches and monasteries after the adoption of Christianity.

Bulgarian monasteries have a long history, inevitably connected with the history of the Bulgarian state. They have always been regarded as an important factor in the cultural and public life. Immediately after the voluntary conversion of Bulgarians to Christianity in 865 the country witnessed a flowering of church architecture. Along with the numerous churches the first monasteries were built around the two centers of the first Bulgarian Kingdom – Ochrid and Preslav. Unfortunately today we have only descriptions of the most of monasteries and churches from that time. However, the best preserved monument from that time is the Rila Monastery, founded in the 10th century A. D. near the place where the Bulgarian Hermit St. John of Rila had settled in the mountains. The second largest monastery in Bulgaria was founded in Batchkovo, near Plovdiv, during the Byzantine domination over the country and preserves beautiful murals dating from the 11th, 12th and 14th century. They are connected with the Byzantine art from the period of the Comnenes, one of the peaks of orthodox art in general. When the city of Tumorovo became the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom a chain of monasteries were built around forming a center of rich cultural life, brilliant literature and art connected with the works of Patriarch Eutimius, Theodosius of Tumorovo and their disciples. During 12th and 13th centuries some 40 monasteries around today capital Sofia and the region formed an exceptional complex of monuments of art and architecture.

The year 1393 marked the end of the Bulgarian state with the conquest of the Balkans by the Ottomans. Many monasteries were robbed and destroyed. However, many buildings from that time, although not so large and beautifully decorated have preserved the spirit of the Christianity and have fulfilled their mission of being cultural and educational centres. The monasteries from that time like the Arbanassy monastery and the above mentioned Rila monastery kept manuscripts, icons and medieval murals becoming later a source of ideas and art and sheltered writers and artists. Some of them had workshops for prints and developed as the first centers of the Bulgarian National Revival during 17th and 18th centuries.

Today when the tourists have the chance to see the treasures preserved in the Bulgarian monasteries through the centuries they can easily understand the enormous role and the importance of these "strongholds of the national spirit" in Bulgarian history.

The monasteries, churches and convents represent a wealth of great value both in Bulgarian and in European historical heritage. Being depositories of religious art, architectural traditions and cross-point of cultural interactions they treasure important information for specialists in history of religions and in fine and applied arts. However, the state of this valuable wealth arouses alarm nowadays. More than 1000 monasteries, churches and convents

in Bulgaria need urgent help. In terms of preservation of the icons, murals or architectural restoration of these objects the importance of the international religious tourism is enormous. In other words, in the present situation when the state authorities are unable to provide funds for the restoration and maintenance of the historical sites the tourism can help both the national economy and encouragement of scientific research in the field of religious and cultural contacts. The revenue from tourist visits is not only an important source for the state budget but can help for preserving this heritage and bring to the world the valuable objects and examples of cultural and religious influences between countries and peoples along the centuries. In this regard the tourist policy of Greece, Italy, Egypt and some other countries represent a good example. This is why the idea of proper and reliable evaluation of Bulgaria's cultural heritage and its presentation to the public worldwide is considered a must for the development of international tourism in this country.

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