

*THE PATH OF THE HOLY MAN, MIHAIL VOYN, BULGARIAN
WARRIOR, FROM THE RHODOPE MOUNTAINS TO TARNOVO*

By Svilen Topchiev

When and how did St. Mihail Voyn (Warrior) become a spiritual patron of Bulgaria?

The restoration of the Bulgarian state after its liberation from the Byzantine Empire, which lasted about two centuries, connects the Northwestern Rhodopes with Tarnovo in one meaningful way. The connection is the Asen Dynasty who restored the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Since those times this part of the Rhodopes has been known as Slavievi Gori after the ruler Alexiy Slav, son of the sister of Theodor (Petar), Asen (Ivan-Asen I) and Ioanitsa (Kaloyan).

In the autumn of 1185 the brothers Theodor, Asen and Kaloyan led an uprising against Byzantium as a result of which the oldest brother, Theodor, was crowned king taking the name Peter IV (1185 – 1197). The act of assuming the name Peter is indicative of the new king to be recognized as the successor of King Peter I, son of King Simeon. The rebel armies headed for Veliki Preslav, the capital of Bulgaria under kings Simeon and Peter I. The city turned out better defended than they thought and the rebels could not capture it. This made King Peter IV head for the “original rebel city” Tarnovgrad. Thus, Tarnovo became the capital of the Second Bulgarian

Kingdom. The Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelos launched a campaign and in the summer of 1186 his armies reached Moesia. There, they were met up by envoys of King Peter IV, who reassured him that the Bulgarian king was ready to submit to the Emperor. Isaac II Angelos, who could not believe that the Bulgarians were capable of opposing him returned to his capital Constantinople. At that time, the younger brother, Asen, was north of the Danube seeking help. When he returned with a large Cuman army, he was joined by Peter IV who announced his intention to restore the old Bulgarian kingdom, which encompassed the provinces of Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia.

Over the course of the next several years, Peter, who had an injury to his leg, gradually faded to the background as his brother Asen started to gain prominence. Peter remained on the throne until 1190 when he was officially succeeded by his brother, Asen, who took the name Ivan-Asen

I. In 1196, Ivan-Asen I was killed by his cousin Ivanko who, with support from Byzantium, captured the capital of Tarnovo. The old king, Peter IV, together with the youngest brother, Kaloyan, besieged Tarnovo. Byzantium had promised Ivanko assistance, but did not deliver on their promises so he had to flee to Constantinople. Quite possibly in a yet another Byzantine-backed plot, at the start of 1197 King Peter IV was „slain by the sword of one of his compatriots”.¹ Kaloyan was born in

¹ Yordan Andreev and Andrey Pantev. Български ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Борис III. Велико Търново, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 138.

1168-1169 and was given the name Ioan. At an early age, he was called Ioanitsa. One of the clauses of the peace treaty of Lovech of 1187 between Byzantium and Bulgaria, which was tantamount to recognizing the restoration of the Bulgarian state, called for Ioanitsa to live in Constantinople as a hostage. He lived in Constantinople until 1189 when he managed to escape.

Since that until the death of his older brother, Asen kept him in his inner circle. Having retaken the throne in 1196, his oldest brother, Peter, took as Ioanitsa an assistant in his administrative and state affairs.

After the death of Peter in 1197, Ioanitsa was crowned king and given the name Kaloyan. At the time he was 28-29 years old, tall and strong, at times short-tempered and hotheaded but very handsome (Kalo-Ioan – „Ioan the beautiful”). His participation along with his brothers in the conduct of state affairs and in battles over the past 6-7 years gave him significant military and diplomatic experience. During his time in Constantinople, he experienced firsthand the treachery and furtiveness of the Byzantine court, which led him to develop a lifelong hatred for Byzantium. Later, as Basil II the Bulgar Slayer, he wanted to be known as the „Byzantine Slayer“. In the eyes of Byzantine historians, he was a cruel and bloodthirsty ruler who, at times, succumbed to fits of madness.

His skull was discovered during excavations at the „Holy Forty Martyrs“ Church in Tarnovo. Forensic studies revealed that he stood at 2 meters tall. His skull bears signs of significant trauma sustained from a battle axe in his younger years. „The blow was very heavy and had permanent effects. Touching the inside of the skull, one could feel a pronounced ridge, which put considerable pressure on Kaloyan’s brain. Anthropologists were unanimous in their assessment that this pressure must have caused pain significant enough to cause fits. It was probably those fits that Byzantine historians mentioned about Kaloyan. As significant as they must have been, these episodes cannot be used as the sole basis on which his character should be judged as Kaloyan is described as extraordinarily fair especial in his treatment of his people”.²

Kaloyan was fearsome and merciless to the Byzantine aristocracy but was also a talented general and excellent diplomat. After reinforcing his position in Tarnovo and imposing his authority on the boyars, he fixed his gaze on the Bulgarian lands that still remained part of Byzantium. His wisdom as a statesman is evidenced by the fact that he accepted the offer for cooperation of his brother Asen’s murderer, Ivanko, whom Emperor Alexios III Angelos had appointed lord of Plovdiv Province as a reward for his treachery. In 1197-1198 Ivanko convinced the Emperor to allow him to rebuild the fortresses along the northern slopes of the Western Rhodope, including the fortresses above the village of Rakovitsa and Goliamo Belovo (presentday town of Belovo), Batkunion near the village of Batkun (in the present-day village of Patalenitsa) and Tsepina near the present-day village of Dorkovo. As previously agreed upon with King Kaloyan, Ivanko rebelled in 1198 and seceded Plovdiv Province from Byzantium. Protostrator Manuil Kamitsa was sent to punish the rebellious Ivanko, but the latter defeated his army and captured Manuil Kamitsa

² Yordan Andreev and Andrey Pantev. Български ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Борис III. Велико Тарново, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 167.

near Batkunion and surrendered him to Kaloyan. Ivanko patrolled the Northwestern Rhodopes, where the Chepino area is located. Emperor Alexios III Angelos was not seeking to meet with him but Ivanko, who was afraid for his own safety, wanted the Emperor to issue a chrysobull (decree), to send to him his underage fiancé, Theodora, daughter of Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos, and to take an oath on the holy Bible that he would do no harm to him. The Emperor promised to fulfil all of these conditions but during the meeting he captured Ivanko and jailed him (most likely at the fortress near Asenovgrad), where he died about three years later.

At this point in time Kaloyan faced a new enemy – the Latin knights of the 4th crusade, but he crushed them in 1205 near Adrianopol (Erdine). On 14 April 1205 Western Europe lost its best knights. A year after the capture of Constantinople the days of the Latin Empire were numbered. In such an environment, surrounded by enemies on all sides, including the dreaded Byzantines and Latins, the target of cloak-and-dagger plots such as those that claimed the lives of his brothers, Kaloyan showed no mercy to the Byzantine and Latin aristocracy. Ever since 1205, at the request of Plovdivians, especially the Bogomils and the Paulicians of the city, he focused his attention on it. The Byzantine aristocracy put up a fight, but the city was ultimately captured and looted. The fortifications were torn down. Then it was time to go after the fortresses in the northern foothills of the Western Rhodopes.

The regional scholar Stefan Zahariev writes „The Hellenes of Batkun, according to ancient records, survived until the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Kalo-Ivanitsa, whom local Bulgarians referred to as Kaliyancho, as he captured and demolished the fortresses at Batkun and Plovdiv”.³ Having captured the fortress in the northern foothills of the Western Rhodopes, upon his arrival at Chepino, Kaloyan heard of Saint Mihail Voyn, a native Bulgarian from the town of Potuka. As a statesman, he felt he needed to show that Bulgarians had their warriors not only on the field of battle but also on the spiritual plane. Kaloyan had a personal motive to want to interact with the saint as Mihail Voyn was also a source of healing. Word had spread that the relics of the saint cured many people.

Who is Mihail Voyn and why Kaloyan showed interest in the saint in the year that marked the crushing defeat of the Latins?

The key records that detail the life of Mihail Voyn are his „Prolonged passionate“ („Проложно житие“), poems from the „Winter poetic Prologue“ („Зимския стишен пролог“) and the „Encomium“ („Похвално слово“) dedicated to the saint by Bulgarian Patriarch Evtimiy Tarnovski. Saint Mihail is celebrated on 22 November, a fourteen days after the Day of Archangel Michael, 8 November. The connection between the angel and the saint goes beyond their names and can also be traced in their deeds. Archangel Michael defeated Celestial Satan and saint Mihail defeated a dragon on Earth. Because Saint Mihail Voyn defeated a serpent, he is also called

³ Stefan Zahariev. Географико историко статистическо описание на Татар Пазарджишката кааза, photocopied edition with commentary, published by of the journal „Отечествен фронт“, 1973, p 60.

Bulgaria's Saint George.

Saint Mihail Voyn is also celebrated in Russia. „Talk of the miracle of Mihail Voyn of Potuka in the battle against the dragon“ reached all the way to Kyiv. The Bulgarian saint is featured in the Russian historical epos as Mihaylo Potyik. Alongh with Ilya Muromets and Dobrynya Nikitich, Mihaylo Potyik is one of the most famous early Russian epic heroes, defenders of the Kyivan Rus. According to Russian authors [Anikin, V. Русский богатырский эпос. Moscow, 1964, p. 40-48]: „Mihaylo Potyik and Saint Mihail Voyn of Potuka share an undisputable connection”.⁴

In 1205, after the defeat of the Latin Knights at Adrianopolis (present-day Edirne), King Kaloyan found the relics of Saint Mihail Voyn, a native Bulgarian from the Rhodope Mountains, who lived in the 9th century and was a contemporary of the great Kniaz Boris I Mihail. Kaloyan took this as a sign from God and by moving the saint's relics to Tarnovo, made a symbolic confirmation of the fact that the Second Bulgarian Kingdom was the rightful successor of the First Bulgarian Kingdom. Thus, from a locally important saint Mihail Voyn became the patron saint of Tarnovo Bulgaria.

On the town of Potuka

There are many theories as to the place of birth of Mihail Voyn, the town of Potuka, which are fueled by the scarcity of available evidence. The book „История на Българската църква“ („History of the Bulgarian Church“) by Dimitar Tshlev includes passionals of Christian saints. This is what the „Brief passional of Mihail Voyn“ has to say about the matter: *„Saint Mihail Warrior of Bulgaria was a native of the town of Potuk (most likely town of Batak). He lived a holy life and was therefore dubbed “holy child”. With his brave actions and brave words, he fought the enemies of the Christian faith. He died in the year 867. The lord blessed him with impersishable and miracle-working relics.“*

Historical records describing the Islamization of the Chepino region in the second half of the 17th century (according to P. Petrov the Islamization process took place in 1666, whereas Vera Mutafchieva opines that it was undertaken between 1657 and 1658) contain information on the establishment of the town of Batak. This means that Batak could not be identified as Potuka, since it was established several centuries later.

However, later research has revealed a rock inscription of the name Batak that was dated back a century earlier than the Islamization of Chepino, i.e. to the end of the 16th century. According to the official history of the town of Batak: *„A very important clue, which confirms the existence of the settlement, is the inscription on one of the stones of the drinking fountain near the Krichim Monastery of the „Nativity of the Virgin Mary“ which contained the name of the town of Batak and a list of its citizens who built the drinking fountain in 1592.“*⁵ The inscription,

⁴ <http://www.protobulgarians.com/StaraZagoraistoriya/MihailVoinotPotuka.htm>.

⁵ History of Batak, Wikipedia.

however, cannot, on its own, support the hypothesis that Potuka became Batak as a town by the name of „Potuka“ existed much earlier and is traced to a settlement and a castle that were destroyed as early as in the 14th century according to John Kantakouzenos, who writes as follows:

„At the same time Svetoslav [the Bulgarian king Theodor Svetoslav, son of George I Terter – note by Sv. T.] ⁶, king of the Moeasians, who was married to the sister of the young Emperor [Andronikos III], fell ill and died [1321]. George Terter [George II Terter], his son, succeeded him to the Moesian throne. While the war between the emperors [Andronikos II and his grandson, Andronikos III] was still raging when Andronikos Palaiologos, governor of the territories of the Rhodope Mountains that were under Byzantine control, betrayed the young and switched to the side of the old Emperor, Terter, raiding these towns and laying waste to the others, captured Philippopolis, a large and populous city with convenient location that made it the most self-sufficient city on the continent. He captured Philippopolis as follows. One of his cohorts from Constantinople, driven by his hate for the young Emperor, told him in confidence that many of the citizens of Philippopolis had gone to war with the young Emperor while the rest were busy with the harvest. Thus, if he were to attack, he would be able to capture the city as it would be defended by fewer men. Following this intimation, he [Terter], easily took the city because it did not have enough defenders.” ⁷

The excerpt refers to the belt of Rhodopean fortresses including Stanimaka (Asenovgrad) on the northern slopes of the Western Rhodopes, Batkunion (Batkun, presently a district of the village of Patalenitsa), Tsepina, Rakovitsa (a fortress overlooking the village of Belovo, currently a neighborhood of the town of Belovo) and the Trayanovi Vrata fortress near Kostenets (on the Suki pass, controlling the ancient Via Militaris road), which were captured by Bulgarian king George Terter along with Philippopolis. As a result, the Bulgarian state regained control over the Western Rhodopes and the better part of the Thracian plain. Unfortunately, George II Terter died soon after, possibly in November or December of 1322. Despite his young age, he had the foresight to leave a significant garrison in Plovdiv (1,000 cavalry men from the Alani and Moesian tribes along with 2,000 heavily armed infantrymen under the command of Ivan the Russian [Ioan Rusina]).

After the death of George II Terter, the young Emperor Andronikos III immediately headed toward Philippopolis in order to regain control of the city and the Western Rhodopes. He was aided by Despot Voysil, the youngest brother of the Bulgarian king Smilets (1292-1298), who had retaken his domains between Stilbnos (Sliven) and Kopsis (present-day Anevo village near Sopot).

⁶ From this point forward, the author of this article has included clarifying notes in brackets [].

⁷ Selected records from Bulgarian history, „Българските държави и българите през Средновековието“, vol. II. Publishing house ТАНГРА ТанНарПа, Sofia, 2004, p. 225-226.

Despite their efforts, the city of Philippopolis, which was surrounded on all four sides did not give. The hastily built five-storey siege tower capable of carrying 100 soldiers did not help either. Despite the failure, the siege of Philippopolis allowed Andronikos III to take the mountain fortresses on the northern slopes of the Western Rhodopes from Stanimaka to Tsepina, which most likely surrendered without a fight as they did not have their own garrisons.

While Andronikos III and Voysil laid siege to Philippopolis, boyars from Tarnovo decided to offer the king's throne to the despot of Vidin, Mihail, son of despot Shishman since George II Terter, due to his young age, did not have a male heir of his own. Mihail had received his title of despot from King Theodor Svetoslav, who was his fraternal cousin. The new king, under the name of Mihail III Shishman, decided to retake from the Byzantines the part of Stara Planina between Serdika and Kopsis and the areas toward the northwestern Rhodope Mountains. John Kantakouzenos writes the following on this subject:

*„Meanwhile the Moesian lords, after their king [George II] Terter had died heirless, hailed and proclaimed Mihail their king, who was the ruler of Vidin and son of their despot, Stratsimir, a descendant of a Moesian and Sitapian house, and gave him Tarnovo where their palaces were located and the rest of the symbols and instruments of power. He, having summoned his army and quite a few allied Ugrovlachi troops as well as Scythian forces, decided he should not attack the Byzantine Emperor, who besieged Philippopolis, because he felt he was not strong enough to face him. Instead, he rode onto the towns that after the death of Terter had switched sides joining the Byzantines. They were in the mountains, which protected his allies, Scythian and other archers. He attacked and laid waste to the lands before besieging the cities. Word on this got to the Emperor [Andronikos III] and he, having sought the advice of his dignitaries, decided to give up on taking Philippopolis and to head toward Mihail and fight him. Having made up his mind, the Emperor ordered the Moesian despot Voysil, who was close by, to return to his land. From there, having prepared himself and his forces for battle, he was to arrive three days later at **Potuka** a town that was apparently laid waste to by some army. It was a day away from the location where Mihail had set up camp. The Emperor would wait for him there. Voysil left for his native Kopsis [village of Anevo near Sopot] where he was supposed to prepare for battle. The Emperor appointed George Vrienii Strategus of Stanimaka and Tsepina and left a sufficiently sized garrison to protect the land from any attacking Philippopolians. **Then the emperor left with his army for Potuka, where he was to meet up with Voysil.**”⁸*

After the death of George II Terter, the Black Sea towns from Mesembria (Nessebar) to Stilbnos (Sliven) voluntarily switched sides and joined the Byzantines. However, these towns submitted to the authority of the old emperor, Andronikos II. There is no evidence to suggest that Andronikos II dispatched his forces against the new Bulgarian King, Mihail III Shishman. On the contrary, John

⁸ Selected records from Bulgarian history, „Българските държави и българите през Средновековието”, vol. II. Publishing house ТАНГПА ТанХакПа, Sofia, 2004, p. 227.

Kantakouzenos claims that Mihail was confronted by the forces of the young Emperor Andronikos III, who were located at Philippopolis and in the northwestern Rhodopes. In all likelihood, the Bulgarian King Mihail entered the Rhodope Mountains in the area of the Suki pass at Trayanovi Vrata and built his camp near the Chepino hollow, in the area of the Rakovitsa Fortress overlooking Belovo, which is present-day Yundola. According to Kantakouzenos, *„the Byzantine army was not equal to their opposing force, firstly because the latter occupied the higher ground and had deep trenches surrounding it from where its many archers could inflict great damages to the enemy, and secondly because a substantial part of the Byzantine force, which was supposed to join the battle had not arrived. It could not be counted that the soldiers under the command of Voysil, which were about three thousand, would show up after the eventual death of Voysil. Besides, the battles at Philippopolis had left many wounded (no more than three were killed) and they went home to tend to their injuries. Furthermore, many soldiers were left with Vrienii to defend Stanimaka and the other towns. Due to all of this, the Emperor decided to turn back without a fight.“*⁹

The text above suggests that Andronikos III lifted the siege of Philippopolis and headed to the mountainous region of the Northwestern Rhodopes. He set up camp at the town of Potuka and, in order to secure his rear, he left armed forces in the fortresses on the northern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains from Stanimaka (Asenovgrad) to Tsepina under the command of George Vrienii. The forces of Bulgarian King Mihail III were one day away from him. To put pressure on the rear of Mihail III's forces, the Emperor ordered despot Voysil to approach with a force of 3,000 from his domain at Kopsis (Anevo near Sopot) three days later. However, instead of the despot, three messengers arrived, bringing news of Voysil's death (he was not dead, he had eaten contaminated pigeons which caused cardiac failure and for three days he experienced heavy lethargy and appeared to be dying). Andronikos III decided it would be impossible to crush the well-fortified and battle-ready forces of King Mihail III Shishman so he bypassed Philippopolis and returned to Adrianopolis (Erdine). Following the emperor's retreat, the forces of Mihail III captured the fortresses on the northern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains and headed for Philippopolis. In the meantime, George Vrienii captured Philippopolis by managing to outwit its defenders.

The paragraph above locates the town of Potuka somewhere in the Rhodope Mountains between Belovo and Rakitovo. The nearest fortress to Belovo was Rakovitsa, but the rear of Andronikos III's forces could not have been defended from there from the forces of Ioan Rusina, which were located at Philippopolis, because they could have advanced through Belovo Gorge and attack him from behind. This leaves the area of Rakitovo as the more likely location. If we exclude Tsepina, where at the time George Vrienii's garrison was stationed, there is one ancient to medieval fortress near Rakitovo that could be the answer. Referred to as Kulata-Gradot, it was near an old abandoned settlement. It was thus the place where Emperor Andronikos III had set up camp while he awaited despot Voysil and his army. The distance between it and Tsepina was a day's march and there was a clear line of sight between them. This enabled Andronikos III and George Vrienii to come to one another's aid if either one was attacked by Mihail III Shishman or Ioan Rusina from Philippopolis.

History of Potuka

The fortress at Potuka overlooking the modern town of Rakitovo, along with other fortresses and temples, is located on the ancestral land of the Thracian tribe of the Bessi, which Roman historians referred to as „Terra Bessica“. In 28 BC, the Roman Consul Marcus Licinius Crassus gifted to the Odrysian Kingdom the holy land of the Bessi (*Terra Bessica*).

Feeling that their land and temples had come under a threat, during the reign of the high priest Vologez, 15 – 14 BC, the Bessi rebelled against the Romans and the Odrysians. The Bessi warriors quickly dispatched the army of the Odrysian king, Rascypolis II, and even killed the king himself. The warriors of Vologez reached Chersonesus (Gallipoli). The Odrysian king Rhoemetalces I, uncle to the late Rascypolis II, got help from Lucius Piso (Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi), who was at the time the governor of the Province of Pamphylia (Asia Minor). His campaign against the Bessi between 13 and 11 BC ended in a devastating defeat for the Thracian tribe as Lucius Piso ordered the forests they were hiding in to be burned to the ground.

9 Пак там.

Vologez managed to hide the Central Temple of Dionysus to prevent it from being destroyed. Vologez, like many of the Bessi, was killed. Many of his people were sold into slavery. The Rhodope Mountains would remain quiet for two to three decades.

In 26 AD, when Gnaeus Lentulus Gaetulicus and Gaius Sabinus were the Roman consuls, there was another rebellion by mountain-dwelling Thracians. Professor Velizar Velkov believes that these were none other than the Bessi. They rebelled because they did not want to send their young men to fight in the Roman army in distant lands. It had become commonplace for the Romans to use young Thracians as legionnaires, along with representatives of other nations, and dispatch them to distant parts of the world. This practice contradicted the old traditions according to which, when recruited to help, Thracians fought in their own detachments led by Thracian commanders. The Bessi rose up because they did not want to be split up and assimilated. This time around the Romans sent two legions against them, which meant that a force of more than 10 thousand well trained soldiers was bearing down towards them. The rebels, who also faced Sapaeans, one of the allied tribes of the Bessi Union, and Odrysian forces, were massacred. The Sapaeans, who knew their way around the Rhodope Mountains served as scouts for the legionnaires.

Velizar Velkov, quoting the Roman historian Tacitus, has described the last days of the last Bessi settlement. According to the description and location, there is high likelihood it was Potuka or the present-day fortress of Kulata-Gradot overlooking modern town of Rakitovo. The results of the emergency excavations conducted at the fortress in 2009 were described as follows:

*„The Thracian fortress of **Kulata/Gradot**, which dates back to Late Antiquity early Middle Ages stands 3.49 km southwest from the center of the town of Rakitovo by air and 8 km by road. The fortress complex, which includes a Christian church, storage rooms and towers covers an area of*

approximately 4 decares at an elevation of 1303 meters above sea level... The complex, which was built at a considerable elevation of 1298-1303 meters above sea level and is oriented longitudinally northeast to southwest, is surrounded by stone walls built from split gneiss rock held together with white mortar. Only 43 meters of the wall have survived to this day, mainly from the east and southeast. In places, its current height reaches 5 to 6 meters and its width, 1.5 to 1.65 meters. The south-facing tower, the western face and a section of the northeast wall were demolished. Along the external wall and inside the fortress there are a multitude of illegal excavations. In the northern end of the walled-in compound there are foundations of a rectangular building with three square chambers – two from the side of the south wall and one from the side of the west wall. The walls were built with split rock and clay. The site is littered with fragments of pithoi and household ceramics from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the western corner of the fortress a section of the external wall is visible from the inside. Coming in at an astute angle to it is a 3.4-meter-long wall, which is 0.6 meters wide and is also made from split rock held together with clay. Occupying the highest ground at the center of the fortress was a single-nave church oriented longitudinally almost perfectly in the east-west direction... Other artifacts discovered during the archaeological excavations as well as fragments of secondary use from the plastic altar screen suggest earlier dating, which is yet to be determined precisely. The ceramics discovered at the site, although severely fragmented, is exceptionally diverse (Paleolithic, Thracian, imported Roman, from Late Antiquity and Medieval, including from the Second Bulgarian Kingdom) suggesting a wide chronological range. This corroborates the assumption that the Chepino hollow has been continuously inhabited for millennia all the way till present day. Religious monuments from the present-day town itself [Rakitovo] suggest that an organized Christian community and a bishopric existed here [the Nikolitsa three-nave cross-dome early Byzantine church] as early as the 5th century.“¹⁰

¹⁰ Part of the results from the emergency excavation in 2009 under Research Associate Dr Andrey Aladzhov and Senior Research Assistant Dr Emil Ivanov from Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“, Faculty of History. – As published at www.bulgarian.iastles.com for the Kulata/Gradot fortress.

Until as late as 1946-49 there were remains of rock foundations of houses where the large lawn now stands next to the remnants of the Kulata-Gradot fortress. Acting on orders by the municipality of the village of Rakitovo, local volunteers from the Communist Brigadier Youth Movement removed the rock to use for the construction of a gravel road from the village to the Blatsa locality which is about 5 kilometers away. The old rocks were crushed manually using hammers and were transported on bullock carts to the road construction site. This road has been known for decades as the White Road because of the color of the rock used to build it (white marble). In the 1970s the road was covered with asphalt. Once the rock was removed, the meadow was ploughed so that it could be used to grow flax. There are still local people that remember the removal of the rock and the sowing of flax. The author of this article has interviewed Ilia Batashki, who passed away in 2019 and was 10 years old at the time of the Brigadier Movement's intervention.

The preeminent expert in Thracian language, Professor Vladimir Georgiev, claims that *bessa* meant „faith“. The Bessi were known as religious people and keepers of the old faith. The land of the Bessi in the first century BC and the first several centuries AD (the land inhabited by the tribes of the Bessi Tribal Union: Dii, Diobessi, Trausi, Triali and Bessi) is located the Central Sanctuary of Dionysus, which is the prototype of the Hellenic sanctuaries in Delphi, Dodona, etc. The Bessi worshipped Siva, whom the Hellenes (Greeks) called Dionysus Sabazios or Dionysus Zagreus. Because of the enormous influence wielded by Bessi priests in antiquity, the Bessi were believed to be the sole intermediaries between people and the gods. The sanctuary at Delphi was run by priests called Thracids (i.e. Thracian priests).

The echoes of the centuries have reached us through the songs of the „Veda Slovena“ performed by the locals living in the vicinity of the Rhodopean mount Syutka (Razlog and Chepino). During his travels before the liberation of Bulgaria (1850 – 1860), while researching material for his book on Tatar Pazardzhik, which was submitted for publication in 1865 and published in 1870 in Vienna, the local historian Stefan Zahariev from Pazardzhik wrote the following for the Muslim people from the Chepino region:

*„5. The Bessi... were more learned and better educated than their fellow Thracians... they built a Oracle (Μαντεϊον) [Divination – note by editor V. Y.] on the tallest peak of the Rhodope Mountains to praise God Siva, or Dionysus (this mountain's tallest peak is located in Pazardzhik Province and the Turkish call it Gioz Tepe because of the panoramic views it offers far to the south, east and north, and because there are glorious remains of marble buildings with mosaic floors, which were probably once the Oracle of ours ancestors), which, as Herodotus claims, was no less important or less magnificent than the famed Oracle at Delphi...“*¹¹

The straight-line distance between peak Syutka and the location of Kulata-Gradot is about 5 km or 6-7 kilometers by way of the old winding paths (**photo 1**). This suggests that the settlement of Potuka was central and one of the most important centers in the lands of the Bessi. It was most likely the headquarters of the main garrison protecting the Oracle (Divination) of Dionysus in the foothills of the peak.

Hiding the Central Sanctuary of Dionysus from the rest of the world, the High Priest of the Bessi, Vologez, doomed both it and the nearby settlement of Potuka to oblivion.

¹¹ Photocopied edition with commentary, a publication by the journal „Otechestven Front“, 1973. The quoted publication is „Географикоисторико-статистическо описание на Татар-Пазарджишката кааза...“, p. 6-7.



Photo 1. Panoramic view from Kulata-Gradot. The medieval castle is located at the base of the summit that dominates the skyline. Photo by Svilen Topchiev.

There are several theories as to the origin of the name of *Potuka*. Some scholars believe it was related to the idea of *подтик* („urge“), transcendence. This is based on the Slavic pronunciation of *Потык* and the Russian name of Mihail Voyn, Mihaylo Potyik. In Russia it was related to the old Russian word *пѣтка* (bird) and the saint is always depicted accompanied by a swan. Without detracting from the arguments above, it should be noted that for the Bessi water was sacred. Many toponyms are related to the names of rivers and springs.

The very name of the Rhodope is related to the idea of water and river. The verb *rod* – to „flow“, has Indo-European origin. According to a hypothesis that has been gaining prominence recently, Rhodope, which meant „reddish or dark-red“, was the name of a river and later was transferred to the whole mountain.¹² Similarly, the name of mount Sutka (Syutka) came from the name of a spring at the base of the summit. The Thracologist Professor Vladimir Georgiev translates this name as *tsepka* („check“), *tsepina* („crevice“) or „maiden“. Today the spring is known as Momin Kladenets („Maiden’s well“).

At the base of the Kulata-Gradot hill, between the castle and the fortified temple, which locals call *Imaneto* („The treasure“), there is also a spring. Its name is *Vtori Dol* („Second ravine“). There is also *Parvi Dol* („First ravine“) and *Treti Dol* („Third ravine“), however, the *Vtori Dol* spring has the same flow rate in the winter and in the summer, and is very well liked by the locals. If the word *dol* („ravine“) is substituted with the more popular word *potok*, then Kulata-Gradot becomes the fortress, settlement next to the creek (*potok*), and later it was simply *Potoka* (*Potuka*). When the spread of Christianity began in the second half of the 1st century AD, Apostle Paul came to the settlement of Philippi (near present-day Drama and Kavala) in 52 and set up the first Christian community in the area. The citizens of Philippi were Thracian, therefore the message „To the Philippians“ was a message for Thracians. The Bessi did not accept that. However, Apostle Paul knew that if the Bessi decided to accept Christianity, all Thracian nations would so he persisted. He personally set up a Christian community in a village near present-day

Garmen, where a bit later, in 102, Emperor Trajan would build Nicopolis ad Nestum. His move from Philippi to the area of present-day Garmen (town Gotse Delchev) indicates that Paul visited places outside the lands of the Bessi but was not welcomed by them. However, he arranged for Christian missionaries to always be present among the Bessi. In 67 in Rome Apostle Peter was slain and Apostle Paul was crucified upside down by Emperor Nero.

¹² Historical Museum of Pazardzhik, Славиеви гори, vol. I, Pazardzhik, 1994, p. 5-6.

The legacy of Paul was fulfilled. Many missionaries, including Karpus and Ermus, preached in the area of Philippopolis. Later, in the second half of the 4th century, the Bishop of Dacia, Nicetas of Remesiana, preached in the Northwestern Rhodopes. He spoke the language of the Bessi and preached Christianity in Thracian. This allowed the priests to see that the new religion was based on the concept of the holy trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father was the creator of the material world and the Son was the pathway between him and the Holy Spirit. If we compare this model of the world to the songs of „Veda Slovena“, a collection of folklore containing legends from Pre-Christian times, published in 1874, we will see that the protagonist seeks help from the gods of the sacred triad, God Vishna, God Siva (God Gray) and God Bela (God White). Vishna was the Almighty, the Pure Spirit. Bela was the maker of the tangible universe and the one who brought light onto the world. Siva was the Son of God, the one who stands between the Pure Spirit and the Light (*belota* or whiteness).

Realizing this conceptual similarity to the Thracian view of the world, against the background of cruel persecution against them since 391 (Emperor Theodosius I signed an edict in 391 forbidding all other religions besides Christianity, which resulted in the destruction of pagan sanctuaries and persecution of shamans and priests), the Bessi converted to Christianity in 396. The hardest part to accept for the Bessi was the idea that God can be worshipped in temples that were not created by nature but were made by men. The first churches were built on the sites of local temples. They were three-nave buildings to reflect the Thracian view of the trinity of the world. The Bessi knew that God, who was omniscient and merciful, would recognize them for the purity of their faith. Сив

We should explain where approximately the borders of the lands of the Bessi lay. From Stanimaka (Asenovgrad) they reached Arda River Diovlen (Devin) to the north. From there they went to Dospat, Suki Pass (Trajan's Gates pass and fortress near Kostenets), Goliamo Belovo (Belovo), the upper Maritsa river, Besaparski hills and back to Stanimaka.

It is interesting to compare the lands of the Bessi and the lands that were converted to Islam in 1666 in the Chepino area and the wider region. According to the Chronicle of Belovo, of which two rewrites still survive (Popkonstantinov and Popgeorgiev), after the conversion to Isla, many churches and monasteries in the Chepino area were demolished: „... *they allowed them to demolish churches and monasteries at will. And they did so from Stanimaka to Banya of Samokov [near Kostenets], 218 churches and 32 monasteries with churches in total.*“¹³

Evidently, when overlaid, the lands of the Bessi, as of 1st century AD, are a perfect match to the territory described in the Belovo Chronicle in the 17th century.

This was the Sacred land of Dionysus centered around mount Syutka where, in ancient times according to local legends they worshipped God Siva.

Despite its relatively small area, there were at least two bishoprics in the region, Leuca which was headquartered in Spasova Church, currently known as „Church of the Resurrection of Christ“ (three-nave church in Belovo) and Vleptos (Vlepti/Blepti), headquartered at the three-nave crossdome basilica „Nikolitsa“ in Rakitovo town. „Nikolitsa“ is 1.5 hours away, by foot, from the settlement of Potuka (Kulata-Gradot).

The settlement of Potuka was in ruins as early as at the time of Emperor Andronikos III, who in 1323 spent three days there waiting for despot Voysil of Kopsis to attack from the rear the army of King Mihail III with some 3,000 soldiers. Archaeological expeditions have revealed that the fortified settlement had Thracian, Late Antiquity and Medieval features. The main wall, which was 1.50 to 1.65 meters thick was built to a high standard of quality using mortar, which was laid down most likely while still hot. In this method, unquenched lime is quenched with water and applied while still hot. The quality of craftsmanship evident in the wall suggests that it was built

13 http://ald-bg.narod.ru/biblioteka/bg_srednovekovie/bg_letopisi/goljamo-belovski_let.htm.

during the reign of Iustinianus I the Great in the middle of the 6th century to defend the region from Slavic raids. The wall was demolished and then rebuilt and the repaired areas are visibly more crudely built. In 1205 King Kaloyan destroyed fortresses in Plovdiv and Batkunion so that they could not be used by the Byzantines. The fortress at Potuka was most likely destroyed then. A century later, Andronikos III, whilst waiting for the arrival of his ally, despot Voysil of Kopsis (Anevo), saw only the ruins of the fortress.

Why and how Kaloyan took the relics of Mihail Voyn of Bulgaria ?

After the successful uprising and reinstatement of the Bulgarian Kingdom by his elder brothers, Peter and Ivan Asen I, it was the turn of the third brother Kaloyan to strengthen and defend Bulgaria from the Byzantines and the new threat, the knights of the 4th Crusade. Apart from an army, which it needed in order to regain the territories captured by Byzantium, the new Bulgarian kingdom sought recognition. No one seemed to want to recognize the king, nor the patriarchship of the head of the Bulgarian church. Both the king and the patriarch of the Bulgarian nation were looked upon by the rest of the world as impostors. In a very complicated diplomatic environment, Kaloyan managed to stand at equal distance from Constantinople and Rome. To hurt the Byzantines and to recruit Kaloyan to his cause, in 1204 Pope Innocent III sent Cardinal Leo to Bulgaria on a special mission: *„On 15 October Cardinal Leo arrived in Tarnovo. On 7 November he anointed Archbishop Vasilij to serve as the Primate of Bulgarian Church. On the next day [8 November 1204], an official ceremony was held on which the Bulgarian ruler was crowned where on behalf of the Pope, Cardinal Leo pronounced Kaloyan king [rex] and placed on his head a royal crown and handed to him a sceptre and a flag.“*¹⁴

The Union between Bulgaria and Rome recognized the primacy of the Pope but did not affect in any way the orthodox rituals of Bulgarians. Thus, Bulgaria, Kaloyan and Vasiliy were recognized in the eyes of the world. Ultimately, Kaloyan managed to attain what his brothers, Peter and Ivan Asen I, were denied.

After a grandiose victory in April 1205, when the Bulgarian army, assisted by Cuman cavalry, decimated the best of the knight army, Bulgaria secured its place among European Christian nations for a long time. However, the king understood that his country and its church needed their own heroes. Like in the summer of 1205, with the help of the Paulicians, Kaloyan captured Plovdiv, destroyed the city walls and the walls of Batkun Castle so that they could not be used by the Byzantines and the Latins. It was then, most likely, that Kaloyan and his sister's son, Alexiy Slav, whom he appointed to govern Plovdiv Province and the Northwestern Rhodopes, he learned of the feats of Mihail Voyn, a native Bulgarian. With the halo of a true Bessi warrior he demonstrated unequalled courage on the battlefield. Accepted as a saint since childhood, Mihail was an inspiration example for Bulgarians. What could have touched Kaloyan on a personal level, however, was the belief that the saint's relics had curative power. The excruciating pain in the back of the head that sometimes drove the king to the brink of insanity made him look for hope of relief through the holy relics.

By the beginning of the 13th century, Mihail Voyn had gained the reputation of being a dragon slayer. The legend of his battle with the lake monster from Chepino had spread through word of mouth. Songs were sung to celebrate his supernatural power that was fueled by his faith in the Lord. He was the personification of the memory of the Bessi, who were once the sole intermediaries between people and the cosmos. He was the protector of the poor. Kaloyan saw the potential of Saint Mihail becoming the protector of Bulgaria and serving as a bridge between the illustrious past and the glorious future of Bulgarians.

¹⁴ Yordan Andreev, Andrey Pantev. Българските ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Борис III. Veliko Tarnovo, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 156.

Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn, Bulgarian

„Въ тѣ(ж)де днѣ [22 November] успеніе стѣо и праведнаго Mihaila Тѣи стѣи бжѣи Mihailъ. Бѣше вѣлѣта блѣочѣстивааго црѣ Mihaila. Ѣ гра(д) Пот[у]кы. Рѣ(д)м сѣи блѣгаринъ. Не нѣкако ѿ нижнии(х). Нѣ вѣсечѣстна блѣовѣрна рода сѣи. И прѣвѣ ѿ прѣворѣ(д)нии(х) хр(с)тіанъ. Его же нарекошѣ рѣ(д)ителіе его и инѣ мнѣси стѣе дѣта. Юн[у] ¹⁵ же сѣи. Иже из младанства своего чисто поживѣ житіе. И бжѣи стра(х) прѣ(д) очима имѣа. Милостыѣми же и пощеніемъ и къ нищѣимъ рѣкоподатель и посѣтителъ болащѣимъ. Кроткѣ и смѣренъ. И вѣськими добродѣлѣми [у]крашенъ. Доше(д) вѣзраста к, и, сѣмъ лѣтѣ(м). И по чи[у]н воинскому избранъ примѣкирѣсѣи, надѣ вои волными. Бы(с) же вѣз(д)виженіе

ефѣѡплѣнѡмъ и агарѣнѡ(м) на римскыи градъ. И нарѡдъ хр(с)тіанскыа дръжавы и цр(с)тво. Въз(д)вигошѣ же сѧ и римлѣистїи людїе. Съ мнѡгыимъ мнѡжъство(м) и на агарѣны поше(д)ше. И мнѡжъство бывши агарѣн[y]скѡм[y] азык[y]. Видѣвше же римлане [y]ко поси́лѧт сѧ агарѣне. И еѡѡплѣне. На скѡрѣ въси въ горы бѣжахѣ и скѡзѣ скровнаа мѣста. Стѣи же Мѣилѣ ни [y]боасѧ. Нѣ своѧ лю(д)и непрѣстанно потврѣж(д)ааше. Видѣвъ [y] ко въси римлѣне бѣжашѧ. Абїе прослѣзив сѧ паде ницѣ на землѧ. Мола сѧ бг[ѣ] въ хр(с)тіанѣ(х) глѧ. Гѣѣ хеѣбеѣ въседръжителю. И прочее. И скончавъ млѣвѣж [y] стрѣми сѧ на иноазычники съ своими вои. И въше(д) посрѣ(д) бесчисльнаго мнѡжъства агарѣнѣ і еѡѡплѣнѣ. И всѣ(х) побѣдивъ разгна. Сам же тѣи и въси вои его ни единъ неврѣж(д)енъ бы(с). И възвратив сѧ ѡ рати тож. Шестѣе нача(т) творити къ двѡм[y] своем[y]. И приспѣвъ до тираискаго мѣста и въсхѡтѣ почитити т[y]. Бѣше въ мѣстѣ тѡмъ. Езеро велико. Исхѡж(д)ааше изъ езера то(г) зѣмїи и по[y]дааше члѣбы и скѡты. Видѣвъ же рабъ его дымъ при езерѣ. И прїемъ наскѡрѣ [y]стїе и иде тамо идеже бѣше дымъ исхѡда. И обрѣте двѣж сѣдашѣ. И наченъ рабъ онъ въпраша(ти) двѣж. Она же сказа ем[y] о зѣмїи тѡмъ. Гѡному же на на възирааш[y]. И възнимааш[y]. Бесѣды еж. Прикадишѣ сѧ [y]стїа господина его. И принесе [y]стїа къ раб[y] бжїю Мѣилѣ. И въпроси его. Почто [y]мо[y]дѣль еси и прикадишѣ сѧ [y]стїа господина его ѡповѣда емо[y] въсѣ [y]же слыша ѡ двѣж. Раб же бжїи Мѣилѣ сѧ слышавъ. И понѣдивъ своѧ рабы ити съ нимъ. Гѡни же не въсхѡтѣшѧ. Блѣженныи же помолив сѧ, и сътвори знаменїе чс(т)наго кр(с)та на лицѣ своемъ. И въсѣде на конъ свои. И поемъ раба своего болшааго. И дош(д)ше на(д) езеро идеже бѣше двѣа. И въпроси а ѡ всемъ и како пришла еси само. Она же прѣщааше ем[y] отити ради. Зѣврскааго сѣнѣденїа. И сказа емо[y] како имѣше обычѣи градъ тѣи. Давати дѣти своѧ на изѣденїе зѣмї[y]. И повелѣ рабо[y] своему[y] отити съ конемъ и стоати далече. Рабъ же бжїи паде ницѣ на земли. И помли сѧ бо[г]у по млѣвѣ же въставъ и се зѣмїи. [y]ви сѧ посрѣдѣ езера. Сѡистаѧ. И възвышааше сѧ. Быа его ѡ езера сѣженеи двадесате. Опашъ же его биашѣ по водѣ идѣаше лактеи чѣтыридесате. И ѡврѣзъ тро[y] [y]ста. Стѣи же приемъ щитъ и мечъ. И ѡсѣче лѣжавому, глѣвы, привидѣнныа. Зѣмїи же свивъ опашъ [y]дари стѣо въ деснѣа ланитѣ. И въ лѣвѣа рѣжѣ. И ранѣ емоу сътвори. И мало безд[y]шѣствовавъ. Паки скоро вѣста. Рабъ же его таковое чюдо видѣвъ. Тече въ гра(д) и възвѣсти бывшаа. Граж(д)ане же изше(д)ше изъ града съ свѣщами и кадилына срѣтенїе стѣо славаще бѧ. Двѣж же прѣдасть рѡдителяма еѧ. Стѣи пѣ(т)шеств[y]а прїиде въ двѡмъ свои. И прѣбывъ мало днїи. Прѣдасть блѣженѣа своѣ дшѣ гѣи. Его же измлада възлюби. И прѣиде въ нб(с)ное цр(с) тво. Знаменїа же и чюдеса мнѡгаа твора. Цѣлебныа дары даѧ притѣкаѡщїимъ къ немо[y]. Съ вѣроѧ и цр(с)тв[y]ащ[y] великѡм[y]

¹⁵ In this text, the character [y] has been inserted in place of the original character for the letter „y” for technical reasons.

Црѣо Калѡѡѡн[y]. И прѣавшом[y] пот[y]кѣ. Прѣнесе стѣо Мѣила. И слышавъ патрїархъ Василїе изыде съ всѣмъ причѣтѡ(м) и болѣры на срѣтенїе стѣо. Съ свѣщами и кадилы. Приемше же црѣ, Калѡѡѡн и

патріархъ възнесоша ст҃го въ бг҃сп(с)ныи цр҃игра(д) Трънѡвъ. И
положихъ его въ велицѣи патріархи цр҃кѣ ст҃го възне(с)ніа. Въ рацѣ новѣ.
Его же млѣтвами г҃ѣ бг҃ѣ, нашѣ да спо(д)бит ны цр(с)твї[у] своем[у]. Ами(н).“
16

This is how the Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn sounded in mass. This modern abridgement of the text above is presented for ease of understanding:

„ON THE SAME DAY. DORMITION OF THE HOLY AND RIGHTEOUS
MIHAIL VOYN

This saint of the Christ, Mihail, lived during the reign of the pious King Mihail¹⁷ in the town of Potuka, a native Bulgarian. He was not of humble origin but came from an honest and faithful family, first among first-born Christians. His parents and many others called him a holy child. Ever since his youth he lived a pure life and had inside him the fear of God, he gave to charities, fasted, and would extend a helping hand to the poor; visited with the ill, was meek and humble and all manner of virtues adorned his beautiful soul. When he turned 25 years of age, as was the military custom, he was appointed primicure of the free soldiers.

It so happened that the Ethiopians and the Hagars rebelled against the Roman city and against the people of the Christian state and kingdom. So rose the Romans and great many of them headed toward the Hagars. Because the Hagar nation is large, the Romans, seeing that the Ethiopians and the Hagars were getting the best of them, fled and sought refuge in the mountains and in places that were hard to reach. Saint Mihail never succumbed to fear but instead incessantly called on his men. Seeing how all the Romans fled, with tears in his eyes, he knelt and prayed to the Lord for the Christians: Dear Lord, Christ Almighty... and so on. Upon completing his prayer, he marched toward the foreigners surrounded by his warriors. He was in the thick against the multitude of Hagars and Ethiopians and vanquished and scattered them all and neither him nor his men suffered any damage.

When he returned from the war, he headed for home. Upon reaching Tirais, he wished to rest there. There was a large lake there and in the lake lived a great dragon which would climb out of the water and eat cattle and men alike. His servant, seeing smoke rising from the lake, quickly took his meal and went to the place where the smoke was rising, where he found a maiden. He started questioning the maiden and she informed him about the dragon. While he was looking at her and listening her story, the meal of his master got burned. He took the meal to Mihail and Mihail asked him: “Why are you late and why are the meals burnt?” And the servant told his master the story of the maiden. When Mihail, servant of the Lord, heard the story, he asked his subordinates to follow him. They refused. The blessed one prayed the Lord, made the sign of the cross on his forehead and climbed on his horse. He took his servant with him and when the two reached the lake where the maiden was, he asked her many questions including how she got there. She, in turn, got mad at him and told him to go away or else he would be eaten by the beast. She told him that it was a custom for the town to feed its children to the dragon. Mihail ordered his servant to retreat on horseback and stay away. He, himself, knelt and prayed to the Lord. When he rose to his feet after the prayer, the dragon appeared in the middle of the lake and hissed. Its neck rose 20 sazhen (70 meters) above the surface of the water and its tail bashed the water forty lakets (28

meters) behind, and all three mouths of the beast were gaping. The saint took a shield and a sword, with which he cut off all three ghostly heads of the wicked monster. The dragon whipped his tail around and hit the man on his right cheek and wounded his left arm. Losing conscience for a moment, the man jumped to his feet. His servant, witnessing the feat, ran to town and told the story. The townsfolk, with candles and censers in hand, welcomed the saint at the

¹⁶ <http://scripta-bulgaria.eu/bg/sources/prolozhno-zhitie-na-sv-mihail-voyn>.

¹⁷ It has been assumed that this was Kniaz Boris I Mihail.

Edge of town, all the while praising the Lord. He sent the maiden to her parents. The saint returned home where, having lived for not too many days, surrendered his blessed soul to the Lord, whom he had loved since youth, and ascended to heaven. He worked many miracles and omens and gave healing gifts to everyone who came to him with faith.

During his reign, the great King Kaloyan captured Potuka and took the holy relics of Mihail. Upon hearing about that, Patriarch Vasiliy took his clergymen and all the boyars to welcome the saint with candles and censers in hand. King Kaloyan and the Patriarch took the saint and brought him inside the blessed city of Tsarevgrad Tarnov, where they laid him inside the great church of the Holy Ascension of the Patriarch in a new coffin. May, with his prayers, the Lord Almighty open the gates to his kingdom for us, Amen!”¹⁸

Analyzing the text of the Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn is important because it can provide context for the times of the saint. The events described took place during the reign of *the pious King Mihail*. Who was this pious king, a Bulgarian ruler or a Byzantine Emperor? Based on words like „first among first-born Christians”, it can be inferred that the saint was a contemporary of Kniaz Boris I Mihail. There were several Byzantine emperors by the name of Mihail before the relics of the saint were moved from Potuka to Tarnovo by King Kaloyan in 1205. These were Michael I Rangabe (811-813); Michael II (820-829); Michael III (842-867), who was in power at the time of the Bulgarian people’s conversion to Christianity; Michael IV the Paphlagonian (1034-1041); Michael V Kalaphates (1041-1042); Michael VI Stratiotikos (1056-1057) and Michael VII Ducas (1071-1078). Evidently, they ruled in the 9th and 11th century, far later than the 4th-5th century when Byzantium converted to Christianity. Christianity was adopted in the 9th century in Bulgaria and the king who converted the Bulgarian people was none other than Boris I. Because Emperor Mihail III was Boris’s Christian sponsor, Boris I took the name Boris I Mihail. The expression

„first among first-born Christians” means that there were “second-born”, later Christians. Who were then the first Christians and who were the second ones in the context of the time and place of Mihail Voyn? Because Potuka is in the Northwestern Rhodopes, near present-day Rakitovo, in the lands of the Bessi, which converted to Christianity at the end of the 4th century, they were apparently the old Christians within the borders of the Bulgarian Kingdom during the reign of Boris I Mihail. For this conclusion to be true, one would have to prove that the Northwestern Rhodopes were part of the Bulgarian Kingdom during the reign of Boris I.

The Suleiman-Keui inscription of Kan Omurtag delineates the Bulgarian borders as set by the 30-year peace agreement between Byzantium and Bulgaria of 815. „It starts at Debeli then reaches Maritsa River (at present-day Simeonovgrad) and from there runs along the eastern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains.“¹⁹ At the settlement of Makriliada (present-day Uzundzhovo) the border turns north towards Hemus (Stara Planina). „Onward, the border follows Sredna Gora Mountain (Sredna Gora Proper, West Sredna Gora and Ihtimanska Sredna Gora) to include Sofia Valley, which was added to the kingdom by Kan Krum. Anything south of Trayanovi Vrata and Suki pass was part of Byzantium.“²⁰

Kan Omurtag chose as his heir his third-born son, Malamir, who was the youngest among his brothers. Malamir was underage in 831 when he took over for his father and Kavkan Isbul served as his regent and co-ruler. In 836, at the 20th anniversary of the peace accord, the Byzantine Emperor Theophilos (829 – 842) decided that with the underage King Malamir in power, Bulgaria would be an easy target and raided the town and villages near the shared border. The response followed quickly. Kan Malamir and Kavkan Isbul led the Bulgarian army on a devastating raid laying waste to the area of Erdine before heading for Plovdiv. The Greek garrison fled the city.

¹⁸ [http://ald-](http://ald-bg.narod.ru/biblioteka/bg_srednovekovie/jitija/mihail_potuka/jitie_prolog/st_mihail_potuka_prolog.htm)

[bg.narod.ru/biblioteka/bg_srednovekovie/jitija/mihail_potuka/jitie_prolog/st_mihail_potuka_prolog.htm](http://ald-bg.narod.ru/biblioteka/bg_srednovekovie/jitija/mihail_potuka/jitie_prolog/st_mihail_potuka_prolog.htm).

¹⁹ Yordan Andreev, Andrey Pantev. Българските ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Борис III. Veliko Tarnovo, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 55.

²⁰ Peter Koledarov. Политическа география на средновековната българска държава, Part I, from 681 to 1018.

„And having performed all manner of glorious feats he came to Philippopolis which made the Greeks run. And then Kavkan Isbul along with his glorious master [Kan Malamir] negotiated with the citizens of Philippopolis.“²¹ Apparently they discussed the terms of surrender. Thus, Plovdiv became part of the Bulgarian Kingdom. However, the fortresses on the northwestern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains remained under the control of Byzantium.

The same year, 836, Kan Malamir passed away without leaving a heir and was succeeded by his nephew, Presian, who was the son of Zvinitza, Omurtag's second-born child. Presian was underage so Kavkan Isbul again served as regent and co-ruler.

In 837 there was a large-scale rebellion by the Smoliani Slavs who lived in the lands around Thessaloniki. At the time Emperor Theophilos (829 – 842) was waging war in Asia Minor against the Arabs. To divert the attention of the Bulgarians away from Macedonia, he urged the Byzantine captives, whom Kan Krum had forcibly moved north of the Danube, to rebel. The Byzantine navy entered the Danube's delta and the local Bulgarian governor could not prevent these captives from being returned to Byzantium. Kan Presian saw this intervention by the Byzantines as a breach of the peace accord and in response dispatched Kavkan Isbul and a large military contingent south in 837. The Bulgarian forces reached the Aegean and sacked the town of Philippi (north of presentday Kavala).

An inscription was left in the church at Philippi at the behest of Presian which reads:

„I. Presian, by the grace of God ruler of many Bulgarians, sent Kavkan Isbul, and gave him an army, the ichirgu boile and the kana boile kolabar, and the Kavkan [went] to the Smoliani [tribe] ...

II. If anyone spoke the truth, the Lord saw. And if anyone told a lie, the Lord saw.

*The Bulgarians did many good deeds for the Christians [Byzantines], but the Christians forgot. But the Lord seeth.“*²²

Evidently, Presian blamed the Christians (Byzantines) for breaching the peace accord. As a result of his successful campaign „...Presian added to the territory of his kingdom the Western Rhodopes, which was inhabited by the Slavic Smoliani tribe.“²³

Chepino hollow, which was inhabited by Slavs from the Dragovichi tribe (Dragoviti), as part of the wider Western Rhodope region, became a part of the Bulgarian Kingdom in 837 during the reign of Kan Presian.

During the reign of Kan Boris (852-889), son of Kan Presian, Bulgarian society experienced major transformations. To overcome major internal divisions, Boris decided to convert the country to Christianity. His dilemma, however, was which center of Christianity to choose as his country's model, Rome or Constantinople. Initially, Boris was equidistant to Eastern and Western Christianity. Boris knew perfectly well that Christianity was going to be a major conduit for foreign influence. In 863 he believed that it was more advantageous and safer to accept the Western model of Christianity and committed to this before King Louis the German.

²¹ **Летопис на кан Маламир.** Selected Bulgarian historical records, vol. II: „Българските държави и българите през Средновековието“. Sofia, published by „Tangra TaNakRa“, 2004, p. 86-87.

²² **Presian's Inscription.** Select Bulgarian Historical Records, vol. II: „Българските държави и българите през Средновековието“. Sofia, published by „Tangra TanNakRa“, 2004, p. 87.

²³ **Yordan Andreev, Andrey Pantev.** Българските ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Boris III. Veliko Tarnovo, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 65-66.

Upon realizing the intentions of the Bulgarians „a decision was made in Constantinople to implement decisive measures and in the autumn of 863 Byzantine armies invaded Bulgaria. It so happened that at the time Bulgaria was struck by a series of catastrophic events. A succession of earthquakes that lasted for 40 days hit the country which was already suffering from the effects of a lean year due to an infestation of grasshoppers which destroyed a large portion of the crops starving the population. Taken by surprise by these developments, Boris had no choice but to open negotiations with Byzantium, which resulted in an accord for „comprehensive“ peace between the two nations.

Despite its military victory, Byzantium agreed to making certain territorial compromises as a result of which Boris annexed Stara Zagora province. In exchange for this Emperor Mihail III had only one condition, Bulgarians must be converted to Christianity under the patronage of the Church of Constantinople. In early 864, Byzantine clergymen arrived in Pliska and converted Boris, his entire

family and those among the Bulgarians „who came from houses of prominence and wealth”. The Byzantine emperor became the Bulgarian kan’s Christian sponsor and Boris took the Christian name Mihail. The pagan title of kan was replaced with the Slavic title of Kniaz.”²⁴

Peter Koledarov, who researched these events, write:

„T. Vasilevski is justified to insist that the political border between Bulgaria and Byzantium during the reign of Kniaz Boris I coincided with the border of the Bulgarian Church which was established in 870. V. N. Zlatarski, who used a list of the Bulgarian eparchies to trace the southern border between Bulgaria and the Empire, was right to assume that Plovdiv and the surrounding region of Borui (present-day Stara Zagora) did not belong to Byzantium because the Patriarchy would not have otherwise missed the opportunity to reinstate the Metropolitan cathedrals in such important Christian centers. To maintain its claim over the annexed lands, the Byzantine state and church continued to view them as parts of the diocese of the Patriarchy of Constantinople.

The eparchy, which was subordinate to the Metropolitan Bishop of Philippopolis, and which by tradition and in conjunction with the separation of provinces since Antiquity was called Thrace, in the second half of the 9th century included the Agathonice (present-day Oriahovo and Haskovo Region), Lyutitsa (present-day village of Ludzha near Ivaylovgrad), Scutharion (present-day Skutare, Plovdiv region), Leuca (mount Spasovitsa and present-day village of Goliamo Belovo, Pazardzhik region), Vleptos (present-day village of Kostandovo, Peshtera area, Pazardzhik region), Dramitsa (between present-day village of Drama and Malak Manastir, Yambol region), Ioanitsa or Yanitsa (Kilimite area near the town of Elhovo), Constantia (present-day town of Maritsa), Velikia (western Rhodope Mountains) and Bukovo (present-day village of Pilashevo, Plovdiv region).“²⁵

The three bishoprics during the second half of the 9th century in the Western Rhodopes were Velikia, Leuca –Belovo and Vleptos – Kostandovo.

The present-day town of Kostandovo is 3 kilometers away from town of Rakitovo where the remnants of three Early-Christian single-nave basilicas were found. The remnants of the EarlyChristian, three-nave, cross-dome basilica of „Nikolitsa“ were also discovered in Rakitovo. It was the largest three-nave basilica from the 5th – 6th century to have been discovered anywhere in the Rhodope Mountains.

²⁴ Yordan Andreev, Andrey Pantev. Българските ханове и царе от хан Кубрат до цар Boris III. Veliko Tarnovo, published by „Абагар“, 2015, p. 70-71.

²⁵ Peter Koledarov. Политическа география на средновековната българска държава, part I, from 681 to 1018.

The report from the archaeological studies of the „Nikolitsa“ site of June of 2015 by archaeologist Asen Salkin reads: *„During cleaning of the central apse we found an additional mortar wall doubling the internal face. It is possible this was a*

Sanhedrin, which would mean that the temple was an episcopal basilica.“ This fact along with the baptistery with piscine discovered in the 1970s in the side room to the north leads to the conclusion that this church was the headquarters of the Vleptos Bishopric. The basilica survived until the 17th century when it was destroyed in the wake of the conversion to Islam of the people in Chepino region. According to local legends, the religious objects from the basilica were hidden inside an underground chamber at the fortress of Kulata – Gradot (the ancient town of Potuka). The area surrounding „Nikolitsa“ was used until the 19th century for burials. The remains of a saint have been recovered from inside the basilica, but his identity remains unknown. It is possible that this unknown saint was the missionary Nicetas of Remesiana, who was the one who convinced the Bessi to convert to Christianity at the end of the 4th century. The basilica and the area where it was built were referred to by the locals until recently as „Saint Nikola“ Monastery. In 2015, archaeologist Salkin discovered a 2-meter wide pathway paved with slabs leading to the site of the present-day stadium in Rakitovo. He believes there were the living quarters of the Bishop and that can be proved with new archaeological digs in the direction of the stadium.

Embedding the relics of saints was a widespread practice in the construction of Early-Christian temples. It is possible that at the altar of „Nikolitsa“ there were relics of saints, including Saint Mihail Voyn. If this was the case, a logical question would be why the basilica was not named after him? A possible answer would be that at the time of Mihail Voyn’s death in the 9th century, the temple was widely known by the name „Nikolitsa“. However, the relics of the saint could still have been embedded in the single-nave church at Kulata – Gradot, which was built in the 9th or 10th century. What is more, this temple could have been precisely in honor of the saint Mihail Voyn, because the locals’ devotion to him was especially strong during this period. This is evident in the text of the Prolonged Passional where he is referred to as „first among first-born Christians” and was described as „... a native Bulgarian, he was not of humble origin but came from an honest and faithful family”. He was known to „extend a helping hand to the poor” and spend his time fasting and praying. All of this explains why his parents and fellow citizens of Potuka and the area called him „holy child.” It makes sense that in *Terra Bessica*, the land of the faithful, purity of soul and powerful and sincere faith were held in high regard. Furthermore, he was not of „humble” origin but came from a noble family, and maybe the ancient blood of Bessi priests was running in his veins. It also explains why he was chosen to serve as „primicure of the free soldiers”. Primicures were secondary military commanders who were in charge of leading separate units. In 836 Kan Malamir took Plovdiv, but the bishoprics in the Rhodope Mountains, which were included in the territory of the Plovdiv Metropolis, remained in confines of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 837 Kan Presian annexed the Western Rhodopes, where some of the mountain bishoprics of Plovdiv Metropolis were located. Regardless, until the rein of Kan Boris, the Plovdiv remained under the authority of the Constantinople Patriarchy. This changed after the comprehensive peace accord of 863, on the basis of which Boris, his family and his boyars converted to Christianity in 864. Under the new name of Kniaz Boris I Mihail, he opposed the rebellion of the boyars and ordered the execution of 52 noblemen along with their entire extended families in 865, when Bulgaria as a nation took a decisive step towards Christianity. Over the course of the next several

years, Kniaz Boris did his best to ensure the independence of the Bulgarian church. A gifted diplomat, he was equidistant to the envoys of Photios I of Constantinople and Pope Nicholas I. After the conversion to Christianity, Bulgaria was inundated by Greek and Latin priests. The matter was resolved decisively on 4 March 870, when the Synod held at the capital of Byzantium placed the territory of the Bulgarian Kingdom under the auspices of the Church of Constantinople, which gained its independence. Based on this decision, Kniaz Boris I Mihail organized the Bulgarian Church. After 870, the eparchies of Plovdiv and Stara Zagora joined the Bulgarian Patriarchy, although formally Byzantines still considered them part of the Constantinople Patriarchy, as demonstrated by the fact that the Greek Metropolitan Cathedrals were not reinstated in either of the eparchies.

Why Mihail Voyn Went to War against Ethiopians and Hagars?

The „Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn“ makes it clear that he took part in the war against the Ethiopians and Hagars. Ethiopians was a name used to refer to African Arabs. Hagars is a term that was used to refer to the Arabs from Asia Minor. The passional reads: *„It so happened that the Ethiopians and the Hagars rebelled against the Roman city and against the people of the Christian state and kingdom. So rose the Romans and great many of them headed toward the Hagars. Because the Hagar nation is large, the Romans, seeing that the Ethiopians and the Hagars were getting the best of them, fled and sought refuge in the mountains and in places that were hard to reach.“* The term Roman City refers to Constantinople. Initially, its name was Byzantion and in the 16th century the term Byzantium was coined to refer to the Eastern Roman Empire. Because only Rome was a Christian country, especially in the 1st millennium AD, when ancient authors used the term Cristian state, they meant it. In the described war, the Roman people confronted the Hagars. Because the Roman people were the citizens of the Roman Empire, some authors believe that at the time the town of Potuka was a Roman settlement. Yet, the paragraphs above delineate the border of Bulgaria during the period between 815 and 870, and after. After 837, the mountain towns in the Northwestern Rhodopes became part of the Bulgarian kingdom. Yet, the bishops of the Plovdiv eparchy until 870 were part of the Constantinople Patriarchy.

Mihail III became emperor when he was just 2 years old following the death of his father, Theophilos, in January 842. Initially, his administrative duties were performed by his mother, Empress Theodora II and her brother, Caesar Bardas. A devout Christian with a passion for icons, Theodora II convened a Synod in 843 to fight against iconoclasts. Iconoclasts were proclaimed heretics and coins were once again adorned with the likeness of the Christ. In 843/44 Theodora II waged war against the Paulicianist sect, whose members were dualists and iconoclasts. Thousands of them died slain by Roman soldiers. More than 100 thousand men, women and children were blinded. Some of the Paulicians were forcibly moved to the Balkan Peninsula and settled in the area of Thessaloniki and Philippopolis (Plovdiv). Others ran southeast and in 843/844 founded their own state at the border between Syria and the Empire. When in 856 the underage Mihail III, with the help of Caesar Bardas, removed his mother, Theodora II, from the throne and sent her to a monastery, he waged war with the Paulician state. Paulicians were supported by

Syria, which was enough for the author of the Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn to claim that the war was against the Ethiopians and the Hagars. Evidently, the author viewed Paulicianism as an entirely different religion.

In 856, the Plovdiv Eparchy, to which the Rhodopean bishoprics of Vleptos (centered in Potuka, present-day Rakitovo) and Leuca (centered in present-day Belovo) belonged, was under the auspices of the Constantinople Patriarchy. Because the war with the Paulicians was in fact a religious war, the Christian citizens of Potuka heeded the call to take part in it as Roman people, despite the fact that this territory was now part of Bulgaria. The Passional states that Mihail Voyn „was appointed primacure of the free soldiers“. They were free because they had volunteered.

The involvement of Bessi-Thracians in the defense of Orthodox Christian values and symbols in the war against the Paulicians illustrates their exceptional attitude towards faith. The Bessi have been known for zealously defending their faith before. In 513/514, they joined the army of the rebel leader Vitalian against Emperor Anastasius I Dicorus. In essence, the Vitalian rebellion was insurrection on the part of soldiers who did not receive their pay. However, for the Bessi, it was a war against the Monophysitist beliefs of the Emperor, who at the time was 82/83 years old. By supporting the Monophysitistes, Anastasius I Dicorus turned against a central concept of

Christianity, the Holy Trinity. The rebellion was unsuccessful because the emperor essentially bribed Vitalian, appointing him governor of the province of Thrace and giving him 5,000 litres of gold (three liters are approximately equal to 1 kilogram). It is very telling that the successor of Anastasius I Dicorus, the Thracian Justin I (518-527) opposed the Monophysitistes (Arians). For the Bessi of Potuka, Mihail was a „holy child“, „a Bulgarian not of humble origin but came from an honest and faithful family“. Despite his youth, as he was 25 years old at the time, he was given command (appointed primicure) of the soldiers from the Potuka region. Facing numerically superior enemy in the face of Ethiopians and Hagars in a mountainous terrain, Byzantine soldiers fled. Seeing this, Mihail „... knelt and prayed to the Lord for the Christians, saying Dear Lord, Christ Almighty... and so on. Upon completing his prayer, he marched toward the foreigners surrounded by his warriors.“⁹

The saint turned to Christ for help. As we know, Paulicians did not accept the figure of Christ but instead worshiped Archangel Michael and Apostle Paul. Maybe because Mihail Voyn was namesake to Archangel Michael, some researchers believe that Paulicians from Plovdiv at the start of the 13th century, during the reign of King Kaloyan, celebrated Mihail Voyn. However, they forget that Saint Mihail went to war against the Paulicians in the 9th century. Besides, on his way home, before confronting the dragon of the lake, he again prayed and „made the sign of the cross on his forehead“.

Evidently, the Paulicians did not accept the cross as a symbol. In other words, it would have been highly unlikely for the Paulicians to celebrate Mihail Voyn given the magnitude of the differences between them and the Bessi, from whom Saint Mihail hailed. It is not a coincidence that the author of the „Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn“ refers to the Paulicians and the Hagars as infidels.

⁹ Prolonged passional of Mihail Voyn.

²⁷ http://www.pravoslavieto.com/life/11.22_sv_Mihail_Voin.htm.

This is what Patriarch Euthymius of Tarnovo said about the battle in which Mihail Voyn took part in his „Encomium to the Saint“:

„When the two sides clashed in battle, the Romans found themselves outmatched and ran right away. Upon seeing this, the god-like Mihail, stunned by the unexpected retreat, held his arms and gaze high toward the sky and said: To you, who lives in the heavens, I lift my gaze... Having made the sign of the cross over his face, he urged his men to fight. Those who were with Mihail fought bravely and vanquished their enemies bravely; the infidel, leaning on his numerical superiority, fought for a long time... When the saint saw his enemies tainted by eternal disgrace and his soldiers, by the grace of God, safe and sound, he returned to his homeland bringing glorious victory.“

27

The very fact that Euthymius wrote the „Encomium to the saint“ suggests that Mihail Voyn was well accepted by the official Orthodox Church.

Where is the Tirais place, where Mihail Voyn fought the water serpent?

In the Christian tradition, there have been three saints who slayed dragons: Saint George, the Victory Bearer, Saint Theodore Tiron and Saint Mihail Voyn. The difference between them is that Saint George and Saint Theodore Tiron lived in the second century AD and were killed and martyred at the start of the 3rd century. Saint George died on 23 April 303 in Nicomedia, a Medieval town near Constantinople on the Sea of Marmara. Saint Theodore Tiron died on 17 February 306 in Amasya, present-day Turkey. The passionals of the two saints (Saint George and Saint Theodore) mention no word of slaying dragons whilst they were alive. It was as late as the 11th or 12th century that they became known as dragon slayers. In contrast, Saint Mihail Voyn, who lived in the 9th century, died from wounds sustained in the fight against the water serpent.

After the victory of the *servant of the God Mihail* against the *infidel*, where he did not lose any of his soldiers, he headed home. We know that the war Emperor Mihail III waged against the Ethiopians and the Hagars took place between 856 and 863/864. Upon his return home, in the area of the Tirais place, where there was a lake, *the servant of the Lord Mihail* learned of the maiden and the dragon. The lake should be located somewhere between the Roman City (Constantinople) and Potuka (near Rakitovo). Chepino hollow fits this requirement. There are three separate legends according to which there was a lake there, but there is no evidence it was called Tirais lake. Why did the author of the „Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn“ refer to it that way?

In the book of the local historian Stefan Zahariev submitted for publication in 1860/65 and published in 1870 in Vienna, the author describes rice paddies in the area of the settlement of Sarahan. The regional governor, Ali Bei was required to build rice paddies on the king's land and was obliged to donate half of the rice harvest to the royal kitchen, keeping the other half for himself. Later, the settlement was called Sarahan Beilyu or Sarahane (present-day town of Septemvri, Pazardzhik province). Bulgarians called it Zagorovo. ²⁸

„There did not use to be rice paddies in this area, but the aforementioned governor, Ali Bei, asked and received permission to stay at Sarahan and build

*rice fields under the condition that one half of his crops should be sent to the royal kitchen and keep the other half for himself so that he could then build more rice paddies.“*²⁹

To be able to flood the rice fields, winding canals were built to carry water to the highest point of the field and flood it from there once the rice was seeded and until it was ready to harvest. To retain water in the fields, embankments were built from below, which are called *tir*. A field is seeded with rice for 3 to 5 years depending on soil conditions, and then rice is rotated with wheat to improve the soil. Then the field is left to rest for one year. To sow wheat, the embankments (*tirs*) are destroyed. When it is time to seed rice again, the *tirs* are put back in place.

*„It is necessary, once the rice is harvested, to break the tirs (embankments) and to level them thoroughly so that next season wheat can be sowed. One year before the fields are turned into rice paddies, they are left empty. Because this is hard work for the farmers, there are many fields at any one time that remain empty.“*¹⁰

The text quoted above indicates that in the area of Pazardzhik and Chepino the word *tir* was used to denote embankment. In the case of rice paddies these were earthen embankments. Stefan Zahariev mentions the legend of Chepino Lake:

*„Old legends of Tsepina prove that this place, centuries ago, was a lake and some subterranean fire or earthquake split the ridge at the mouth of the pass from where Tsepino's rivers flow out. When the waters of the lake spilled onto the fields, they flooded many villages. The flood carried such a great amount of rock that to this day people still quarry rocks there when they have the need for them and it does not look like rocks will run out any time soon. From the flowing water a giant water serpent emerged which looked like a whale (harhariah in Greek). This beast, when the water receded, was left grounded between the villages of Elli Dere [present-day village of Vetren Dol] and Kyusemuratlu [present-day village of Bratatitsa] and died and the village dogs came and ate his flesh and since that time the area was known as Pse Pole. The area to the side was called Harhariy, which then the Turks distorted into Karkaria, and this name remains to this day.“*¹¹

²⁸ Photocopied edition with commentary, a publication by the newspaper „Otechestven Front“, 1973. The quoted publication is „Географикоисторико-статистическо описание на Татар-пазарджишката кааза...“, p. 56. ²⁹ Same source, p. 44.

Tirais place therefore means „dammed place“. The waters of the ancient river of Matnitsa that springs from Batak swamp and enters Chepina hollow near present-day Dorkovo, and the waters of the Yagodinka (present-day Stara Reka in Rakitovo) and Bistritsa River (present-day Chepinska River) from Velingrad were dammed by some sort of barrier. This could have resulted from a rock slide at the mouth of the river into the gorge leading to the villages near Pazardzhik. The floor of Chepino hollow was therefore flooded turning the area into a lake, which the author of the

¹⁰ Same source, p. 45.

¹¹ Photocopied edition with commentary, a publication by the newspaper „Otechestven Front“, 1973. The quoted publication is „Географикоисторико-статистическо описание на Татар-пазарджишката кааза...“, p. 64.

„Prolonged Passional of Mihail Voyn“ called *Tirais place* („dammed place“). The flooding of

Chepino hollow caused the lake (Tirais Lake) to connect to Batak Swamp via Matnitsa River (Dorkovska Reka) which still exists. The large animal described by Stefan Zahariev most likely entered the lake through the river. A subsequent earthquake destroyed the dam at the entrance to the gorge toward Pazardzhik and the beast was carried by the water toward the villages of Vetren Dol and Bratanitsa.

Today, Batak Swamp is at the bottom of Batak Dam. The swamp still existed in 1956 when the dam was built. It had claimed the lives of many travelers who tried to traverse it.

„One and a quarter hours on foot west of Batak, there is a low-lying plane that stretches between the foothills of Rila Mountain [S. Zahariev is wrong to assume that Rila begins from Batak Swamp instead from the area of Yundola and Cherna Mesta river], where the village meadows are, in the northern corner there is a large and deep lake, half an hour wide and one and a half hours long, which collects the waters of all the creeks and rivers in the area. The villagers call it a bog because most of its surface is covered by a type of weed (grass) with tangled roots, making it appear as a meadow. There, many poor souls had drowned because they were not familiar with the local terrain. This lake, inaccessible to humans and large animals, teems with large fish. Some say that in times of drought, people approached the water and managed to kill some of the fish with guns. They dragged them out to shore with long kandzhi (hooks) but could not eat them because their flesh was chewy and foulsmelling. The area around the lake is home to birds such as wild ducks (ördek), wild geese, cranes and so on and also wolves, foxes, rabbits and so on. The lake drains to the northwest between two hills into Tsepina River, which at Korova [present-day village of Draginovo] flows into Bistritsa [Chepinska Reka from Velingrad] and Yagodina [Stara Reka from Rakitovo], as we said above.“¹²

According to the geologist Professor Todor Nikolov, the two large depressions, Dospat Hollow and Chepino hollow, along with the Batak plane were formed at the start of the Miocene (23.5 million years ago):

„Geological data from the Miocene until present day suggests that Chepino hollow along with its surrounding heights rose up by about 500 meters. Therefore, at the end of the Miocene and the start of the Pliocene [5.5 million years ago] the average elevation of the Chepino hollow stood at 250-300 meters above sea level.“¹³

Some 4-5 million years ago, the prevailing climate was subtropical. The Matnitsa river (Dorkovska Reka) flowed through what could be described as a savannah

¹² Photocopied edition with commentary, a publication by the newspaper „Otechestven Front“, 1973. The quoted publication is „Географикоисторико-статистическо описание на Татар-пазарджишката кааза...“, p. 70.

¹³ Peter Gelin. Слоновата кост. Published by АДГ – Plovdiv sity, 2007, p. 81-82.

covered with tall grass which gradually changed into jungle along the base of the hills. During a Bulgarian-French paleontological expedition in 1985/87, scientists discovered a location containing bone fragments from 34 species, 70% of which are now extinct. The savannah and the jungles around Dorkovo (Chepino hollow and Batak plane) was home to mastodons of the *anancus arvernensis* species, two types of monkeys, sabretooth tigers, proto-bears, antelopes, zebras, three-toed hipparion horses, lions and white rhinos among others. The river was wide, shallow and meandering. Subtropical climates are characterized by a wet season with large quantities of precipitation but also by droughts.

After the climate shifted to moderate continental, many of these species disappeared. Yet, some of the water-dwelling animals mentioned in the account of the local historian Stefan Zahariev based on interviews with locals in the 19th century, were still present in Batak swamp. It was probably one of those large creatures that Mihail Voyn encountered.

Mihail Voyn's battle with the dragon

When Mihail and his soldiers were on their way back to their hometown of Potuka, upon reaching the Tirais place, Mihail let his soldiers break formation and, left with only his servants accompanying him, decided to rest. One of his servants saw smoke in the distance. He took with him the food he was supposed to prepare for his master and went to investigate the source of the smoke. He encountered a maiden, who was crying. While she was telling him how a serpent that lived in the lake was eating humans and animals, the primicure's meal got burned. Upon returning to Mihail, the servant-cook retold the story of the maiden and explained the reason for the burned meal. Mihail asked his other servants to go to the maiden but they refused. Then he took with him his big servant (page) and went there. The maiden was scared and begged them to leave so that their lives will not be taken by the serpent that would appear shortly. The serpent was fed maidens from the village and now it was this maiden's turn. Mihail sent back his main servant and his horse. He knelt and prayed and upon finishing his prayer made the sign of the cross. He took his shield and sword (the swords of the Bessi were long and were called *rhomphaia*). It was at that moment that the serpent emerged from the waters of the lake. Its head was 20 sazhen (approximately 40 meters) in the air its tail was 40 lakets (about 20 meters) long. It had three heads, but they were only apparitions, only Mihail, servant of the Lord, was able to see them. A possible explanation of the smoke billowing from the lake was offered by Konstantin Irechek, who, travelling from the village of Ludzhene to Kamenitsa, on a cold day, saw smoke rising from the grasslands. It turned out that this was vapor from the Vlasa hot mineral spring. The water from that spring comes out at 85°C. Locals told the traveler that the spring was very old and that they sometimes boiled eggs in its waters, which took only about 10 minutes. Irechek wrote that „*this spring had the*

*highest water temperature of all of the known springs at the time, not only in Chepino but in the entire kingdom“.*¹⁴

The mention of Mihail Voyn's burned meal is another detail that sets his Passional apart from those of Saint George and Saint Theodore Tiron. The explanation of this detail is related to the special nature of the Tirais area in the Chepino valley.

The serpent eats men and animals. To quench its hunger, the locals sent maidens from the village to be eaten. One of the legends of Chepino lake has it that when it was the turn came for a maiden to be fed to the beast, a young shepherd who was in love with her went to the beast in her stead. He took with him his mule, which was burdened with sacks filled with amadou (material from the core of mature tree fungus that smolders when burnt and is used to light fire). The shepherd lit the amadou before the serpent came. When the serpent arrived, he asked it to wait for the maiden he loved, as she was getting ready. To compensate him for the wait, the shepherd offered the serpent his mule. The serpent agreed because this way it would get to eat a mule and a maiden. However, when it swallowed the mule and the sacks full of amadou, a fire broke out in its stomach. The serpent died in horrible agony and the shepherd saved his beloved.

Another version of this legend tells the story how after swallowing the mule laden with sacks of burning amadou, the serpent thrashed around trying to disgorge the mule but could not. As it was doing that, it stuck the hill between Kirkaria and Alabak and split it in half. This let the water of the lake flow out toward the villages around Pazardzhik and took the serpent with it. There, the serpent died in great agony and dogs feasted on its flesh for months on end. Thus, the shepherd managed to save the life of his beloved but also of many other people and animals.

The fact that Mihail's servants did not come with him and later he sent his *big servant* back with his horse is an interesting detail. At that moment, the maiden was far away and out of sight. There were only the saint and the serpent. A noble warrior against the personification of evil. The two battled for the life of the maiden, who in Christian culture is a symbol of the soul. A battle for the soul. The warrior cut off with his sword the three heads of the serpent, which were apparitions. The saint was simultaneously fighting in three worlds: the underworld – the domain of the dead, on earth, and in heaven, the domain of souls. He was victorious but wounded by the tail of the serpent. His right cheek and left arm are damaged. There are those who believe that the left arm directs a person “beyond” to the domain of God. In this sense, a wounded left arm means that the Servant of the Lord Mihail completed his mission and was ready to transcend „beyond“. The Passional reads:

„The saint took a shield and a sword, with which he cut off all three ghostly heads of the wicked monster. The dragon whipped his tail around and hit the man on his right cheek and wounded his left arm. Losing conscience for a moment, the man jumped to his feet. His servant, witnessing the feat, ran to town and told the story. The townsfolk, with candles and censers in hand,

¹⁴ Сборник за народни умотворения (Collection of folk arts), Vol. XXVI, p. 64.

welcomed the saint at the edge of town, all the while praising the Lord. He sent the maiden to her parents.“

This part of the *passional* of Mihail indicates that the people from the Maiden's village were Christians. They praised the Lord with candles and censers. This is another detail that rings true for the region of Chepino, where the Bessi converted to Christianity as early as at the end of the

4th century. The saint's victory over the serpent from the lake was a ray of hope for them. They did not witness the battle but instinctively felt the parallel between it and Archangel Michael with Satan in the Kingdom of Heaven. A connection between the two battles is the size of the serpent. Mihail Voyn faced Satan in the form of a serpent, which stood 20 sazhen = 80 lakets above water and 40 lakets in the water, which makes its total length of 120 lakets (60 meters). Bulgarian Patriarch Euthymius' „Encomium for Saint Mihail“ states a different size. In the Encomium, the serpent is said to be 3-4 sazhen or 6 to 8 meters long. Even with such a significant adjustment, the beast is still enormous given that facing it was a lone warrior holding a sword and a shield.

Last days and dormition of Mihail Voyn

In those times of long ago, roads did not follow rivers and people's homes were not built in the low-lying lands near the rivers. Roads followed the crests of mountains and hills and settlements were nestled up in the mountains because that offered better protection. The road to Chepino hollow did not go through the Eli Dere gorge (present-day Chepinska river), but came through Batkun (Batkunion fortress), crossed Karkaria ridge opposite Tsepina castle, went around following the crest to the left trough mount Mel and the Harmani, mount Domuzalan, where it bifurcated with one path leading to the Thracian temple and fortress Pashino bardo and Kulata-Gradot (Potuka), and one leading to Mantaritsa (*Manna terra* – holy land, land of foreseers) and mount Sutka (present day Goliama Syutka peak which according to the 19th century local historian Stefan Zahariev was where the *Central sanctuary to God Siva* was located and where the Bessi priests resided).

Alternatively, the road could have followed the crest to the right of Eli Dere through present day village of Varvara, present-day Ravno Bore mountain lodge, along the Thracian temple at Milevi Skali, along the village of Korovo (present-day Draginovo), village of Kamenitsa (presently a residential district of Velingrad), along the village of Banya (currently known as Chepino district of Velingrad) and then on to Mount Syutka or Kulata-Gradot (Potuka). At the time when Mihail Voyn was on his way home from the war with the *infidel* (the second half of the 10th century, 865-866), Chepino hollow was flooded with water and evidently, at a later time the „underground fire, or powerful earthquake“, mentioned by Stefan Zahariev, split the ridge between Karkaria and Alabak and the water drained toward the villages of Pazardzhik revealing the large water beast, which looked like a whale. Mihail, accompanied by his servants or slaves, as described in the *Prolonged Passional*, is more likely to have passed by the temple at Milevi Skali, because his troops saw the smoke on the lake from a close distance (most likely vapor rising from the Vlasa geothermal spring near Kamenitsa village). In this case, this would make the maiden a citizen of Korovo (present-day Draginovo) or of Kamenitsa.

The time Mihail spent fighting the Ethiopians and Hagars could have been 9 to 10 years (from 856, when Emperor Mihail III launched his war against the Paulicians, supported by Ethiopians and Hagars from Syria, till 865/866). His final battle with the serpent from the watery depths would be a worthy finale of his illustrious life. The author of Prolonged Passional puts the size of the serpent at 120 lakets (60 meters), which, in Kabbalah Numerology, echoes the victory of Archangel Michael over Satan, the end of Satan's days in heaven and his fall to earth. Patriarch Euthymius reduced the size of the serpent that Saint Mihail fought to 3-4 sazhen (6-8 meters), which in Kabbalah Numerology means change. Indeed, in the lifetime of Mihail Voyn (867) a great change took place in Bulgaria as it departed from its pagan past and embraced Christianity. In the encomium to the saint, Patriarch Euthymius writes: „*It is not a day for weeping or mourning, but a day to be merry and rejoice! Because a holy man was praised, people will rejoice!*“¹⁵ Having returned to his hometown of Potuka, Mihail soon succumbed to the wounds inflicted on him by the serpent. His passional describes this moment as follows: „*The saint continued on his way and returned home where, having lived for not too many days, surrendered his blessed soul to the Lord, whom he had loved since youth, and ascended to heaven. He worked many miracles and omens and gave healing gifts to everyone who came to him with faith.*“

His relics gained curative power. The saint became the heavenly patron of the Western Rhodopes, the land of the Bessi. They attracted sick people who came to seek healing and hope.

„*An extremely wide range of illnesses and ailments did Mihail Voyn heal through his relics according to the Mass [prologue in verse] – from a multitude of disabilities of the soul and the body, to the blind, he gave light, to the lame [limping] – healing, to the bedridden [as if] by an outpouring of good will [he sent] bliss, and to the restless [he gave] Salvation, and to the suffering from headaches [these paragraphs are not included in the ModernBulgarian translation of the Mass and are therefore presented here as they appeared originally]. The sufferers of headaches and the bedridden, whom the saint helped, soon included King Kaloyan himself, who also received healing.*“³⁶

King Kaloyan was crowned on 8 November – Archangel's Day. By choosing this particular day, Kaloyan projected himself as a successor of Kniaz Boris I Mihail, who three centuries earlier also stood equidistant to the interests of the Constantinople Patriarchy and the Pope of Rome. Kaloyan accepted Archangel Michael as his personal patron, which is evident from his actions. Having taken the relics of Saint Mihail Voyn from Potuka to the Rhodopes, the procession, headed By the king himself, left for Tarnovo. On their way, the

15

http://www.pravoslavieto.com/life/11.22_sv_Mihail_Voin.htm.³⁶
<https://liternet.bg/publish/akaloianov/stb/mihail.htm#20>.

travelling party spent a night near Drianovska River in the area of the ancient fortress of Gradot, near today's town of Dryanovo. According to the tradition, this place was later selected to build a monastery (present-day Drianoivo Monastery) named after „St. Archangel Michael“.

The Prolonged Passional describes the moment Mihail Voyn's relics entered Tarnovo as follows:

„During his reign, the Great King Kaloyan took Potuka and moved Saint Mihail. Upon hearing of this, Patriarch Vasiliy stood with his clergymen and all the boyars at the entrance to the city, candles and censers in hand, to welcome the saint. King Kaloyan and the Patriarch took the saint and brought him inside the blessed city of Tsarevgrad Tarnov and laid him in the Great church of the Patriarchy of the „Holy Ascension“ in a new casket.“

It is easy to imagine the festive atmosphere in the autumn of 1205 when Kaloyan, who defeated the Latins near Adrianopolis (Edirne) effectively wiping out the best and the brightest of the Western knights and capturing Emperor Baldwin of Flanders, and who took Philippopolis and many other towns and fortresses in the Western Rhodopes (Batkunion, Tsepina, Potuka), destroying their fortified walls so that they could not be used against the reinstated Bulgarian Kingdom, appeared at the gates of his capital, Tarnovo, bringing the relics of the saint. He was met by the Patriarch, the boyars and the citizens of Tarnovo. The procession headed for the Church of the Patriarchy of the „Holy Ascension of the Christ“ where Kaloyan and Patriarch Vasiliy brought the relics of Saint Mihail Voyn inside the temple. Along with Archangel Michael, Saint Mihail Voyn became patron and protector of Tarnovo Bulgaria. The relics of the saint stayed in the Church of the „Holy Ascension of the Christ“ for nearly two centuries. They were still there at the time of Patriarch Euthymius of Tarnovo at the end of the 14th century when Euthymius wrote his „Encomium of Saint Mihail“.

In 1393, the Ottoman invaders transformed the Church of the Patriarchy into a mosque and Patriarch Euthymius moved his headquarters to the Church of „St. St. Peter and Paul“. Most likely, Euthymius had the more valuable books and the relics of Saint Mihail moved to that church. The Patriarchal library, hidden by Euthymius in 1393-1396 in the same church, was accidentally found during repairs in 1831. The national revolutionary Petko Slaveykov wrote about this in his memoirs /**Collected Works**, 1979, vol. IV, p. 186/, that when breaking a wall of the church „St. St. Peter and Paul“ the walled Patriarchal Library was opened, along with the skull of St. Michael from Potuka. It was said that Metropolitan bishop Hilarion of Crete ordered the books to be burned, and the relics were sold to a Greek taxidiot who took them to Wallachia.

Despite these data, it is possible hypothesis that the relics of St. Michael the Warrior remained in Tarnovo. It is possible that they are still there, waiting to be discovered. The spiritual patron of King Kaloyan and of Tarnovo Bulgaria made the journey from the town of Potuka (Rakitovo) to the capital of Tarnovo in the fateful 1205. Today he may take the fateful journey through time and reach his compatriots in Bulgaria and abroad who need his spiritual protection yet again.