

St John the Baptist's bones 'found in Bulgarian monastery'

The remains of St John the Baptist have been found in an ancient reliquary in a 5th century monastery on Sveti Ivan (St.Ivan) Island in Bulgaria, archaeologists have claimed.



The urn, right, is thought to contain the bones of St. John the Baptist, left

By Nick Squires in Rome

The remains – small fragments of a skull, bones from a jaw and an arm, and a tooth – were discovered embedded in an altar in the ruins of the ancient monastery, on the island in the Black Sea.

A Greek inscription on the stone casque contains a reference to June 24 – the date on which John the Baptist is believed to have been born.

"We found the relics of St John the Baptist - exactly what the archaeologists had expected," said Bozhidar Dimitrov, Bulgaria's minister without portfolio and a former director of the country's National History Museum, who was present when the stone urn was opened.

"It has been confirmed that these are parts of his skeleton." Exactly how the relics ended up on the island is a mystery, but Mr Dimitrov said they may have been donated by the Christian Church in Constantinople when Bulgaria was part of the Byzantine Empire.

St John, who is especially revered by the Eastern Orthodox Church, foretold the coming of Christ before being beheaded on the orders of King Herod, with his head served up on a plate.

St. John The Baptist Relics Put Bulgaria's Sozopol in CNN Focus



The remains, believed to be John the Baptist's, were uncovered in July last year during the excavation of a fourth-century monastery on St. Ivan Island, off Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. Photo courtesy by K. Popkonstantinov
Last summer's remarkable archeological discovery of the **St. John the Baptist's relics** in Bulgaria's coastal town of **Sozopol** has attracted huge interest towards the town as a historical center of the country.

The statement was made Monday by **Sozopol's Mayor Panayot Reyzi** on the occasion of the official day of the town – the **Day of St. Marina**.

Prof. **Kazimir Popkonstantinov**, the person who is behind the discovery, announced that media such as **CNN** and **National Geographic** have focused on the ancient Bulgarian town on the Black Sea coast and have filmed the event.

Popkonstantinov was bestowed by Reyzi with the title "**Honorary Citizen of Sozopol**," and with an honorary sign for his contributions.

"It is a great honor to be **honorary citizen** of a town with a 2 621 years of history. I can compare this feeling only with the Award for the Study of European Culture I received in Vienna 7 years ago, and will remember this 2 moments all my live," the Professor said in his thank you address.

Reyzi voiced hope **Sozopol** will become also a center of congress **tourism** which will extend the summer season.

The remains believed to be **John the Baptist**, including a skull fragment and a tooth, were uncovered at the end of July last year during the excavation of a fourth-century monastery on St. Ivan Island, off Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. They were in a sealed **reliquary** buried next to a tiny urn inscribed with St. John's name and his birth date.

When Bulgarian **archaeologists** declared they had found **relics of John the Baptist**, one of the most significant early Christian saints, their discovery became the subject of huge interest, much skepticism and even scam allegations.

According to excavation leader Professor Popkonstantinov the Greek inscription on the tiny sandstone box, reading "God, save your servant Thomas. To St John. June 24", the date, celebrated by Christians as **John the Baptist's** nativity, is a very strong proof that the **relics of John the Baptist** are genuine, the key clue to their origin.

But the discovery on Sveti Ivan and the claims about the box-office draw of **Sozopol** as a center of religious **tourism** have been greeted with strong skepticism by some within Bulgaria's archaeological community.

While Popkonstantinov concedes that his case for the **relics** mixed fact with hypothesis, he enjoys the support of those experts, who say spirituality always rubs up against **archaeology**.

Bulgarian government plans to benefit from the box-office potential of the discovery, going as far as to say that **Sozopol** will be the new Jerusalem.

Officials of the recession-hit country believe that the purported **relics** will give a big boost to **tourism**, drawing believers from neighboring Orthodox Christian countries to this nearby resort town. They are looking at the **relics** to promote religious **tourism**, hoping for an economic salvation and miracle in polls.