

1

00:00:00,408 --> 00:00:07,411

This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture.

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00:00:07,411 --> 00:00:18,417

The producer's purpose is to suggest some possible explanations but not necessarily the only ones to the mysteries we will examine.

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00:00:18,417 --> 00:00:32,424

From Rome to Damascus, from Florence to Samaria, holy places are reserved for the scattered remains of a body believed to be John the Baptist.

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00:00:32,424 --> 00:00:36,426

These fragments have been worshipped for centuries.

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00:00:37,426 --> 00:00:48,432

Far from Europe's civilized centers, from a desert populated mostly by nomads, comes a discovery which may shake the Church of Rome.

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00:00:48,432 --> 00:00:54,435

A remote monastery of the Coptic Church holds a mysterious link to John the Baptist.

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00:00:54,435 --> 00:01:01,438

It's monks still practice ceremonies which date back to the very time of St. John.

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00:01:06,440 --> 00:01:16,445

Here, never before photographed, is the underground vault which concealed an amazing burial.

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00:01:16,445 --> 00:01:24,449

Could isolated monks have found the real bones of John the Baptist and cast doubt on the claims of Rome?

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00:01:36,455 --> 00:01:49,461

Sealed by the Vatican in a gold and silver case, this relic is believed to be the actual mummified head of John the Baptist.

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00:01:49,461 --> 00:01:57,465

In Catholic tradition, every altar must contain a relic. Relic has a specific meaning, part of the body of a saint.

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00:01:57,465 --> 00:02:06,470

From the smallest piece of bone to bottles of blood, bits of clothing, limbs, or an entire body, relics have always performed an important function.

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00:02:06,470 --> 00:02:15,474

Before a person can be declared a saint, Church officials must determine if his or her relics have inspired a miracle.

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00:02:16,475 --> 00:02:28,481

This small fragment, about one inch square, is believed to be part of the jaw bone of John the Baptist.

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00:02:28,481 --> 00:02:38,486

Many relics of John are displayed in Florence. Teaching there is an American professor of art and theology, Michael Petrucci.

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00:02:38,486 --> 00:02:53,493

Now when we walk in as foreigners to a European church and see the head, the arm, the leg of a saint, it disgusts us, but we forget that the teachings of Christianity are that the body is not important after life, that dust to dust.

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00:02:53,493 --> 00:03:02,497

Many display cases are works of fine art. This reliquary contains what may be John's right index finger.

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00:03:02,497 --> 00:03:18,505

What is the value of a relic to a traditional Christian? There is no value of the relic in itself.

The teachings of the Church are that one looks at a relic, not in veneration of the piece of bone, a piece of flesh, or article of clothing,

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00:03:18,505 --> 00:03:28,510

but to remember through the example that comes to one's mind, for example, of Saint John, of his great dedication to Christ, his careful following of the new order as established by Christ,

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00:03:28,510 --> 00:03:34,513

that the Christian then has a good example. Remember, I must be like Saint John, and that's why that relic is there.

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00:03:34,513 --> 00:03:46,519

Throughout Europe, magnificent cathedrals were constructed to house these remains. Statues of John stand in almost every public square.

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00:03:46,519 --> 00:03:55,523

A mystery in his own time, John was an even greater enigma after his bloody execution.

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00:03:55,523 --> 00:04:07,529

It's rarely mentioned that John the Baptist and Jesus were second cousins. According to the New Testament, there is a fascinating parallel in their births.

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00:04:07,529 --> 00:04:22,537

Mary, young and virginal, was told by an angel she would bear a child, Jesus. Mary's cousin Elizabeth, old and barren, had been told by the same angel she would have a child, John.

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00:04:22,537 --> 00:04:35,543

Christians believe John was the last prophet of the old order, and Jesus the first of the new.

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00:04:35,543 --> 00:04:46,548

As a young man, John went to live as a hermit, dressed like the old prophet Elijah in animal skins.

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00:04:46,548 --> 00:05:00,555

The son of a high Judea priest, he could have enjoyed a life of wealth and prestige.

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00:05:00,555 --> 00:05:05,558

His food was locusts.

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00:05:05,558 --> 00:05:16,563

It's not common knowledge, but five varieties of locusts are kosher, and two are non-kosher.

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00:05:16,563 --> 00:05:24,567

A better source of protein than beef, locusts are also free of disease and parasites.

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00:05:24,567 --> 00:05:33,571

For a desert dessert, John ate wild honey.

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00:05:33,571 --> 00:05:43,576

Rumors spread about this strange wild man. People asked, are you the prophet Elijah who promised to come back from the dead? Are you the Messiah?

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00:05:43,576 --> 00:05:57,583

John replied, I am a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing a way for the Lord, making straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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00:05:57,583 --> 00:06:02,586

There have been a number of speculations as to why John may have gone into the wilderness.

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00:06:02,586 --> 00:06:13,591

Perhaps the most romantic one tells of his rejection as a lover by Salome and him going into the wilderness to get over his thwarted love.

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00:06:13,591 --> 00:06:18,594

John LaRue is professor of religion at the University of Southern California.

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00:06:18,594 --> 00:06:21,595

Another idea came when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

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00:06:21,595 --> 00:06:31,600

It was suggested that perhaps John had been a member of this escenar Dead Sea community and had left and had gone into the wilderness to proclaim the kingdom of God on his own.

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00:06:31,600 --> 00:06:39,604

But again, there is no definite evidence of this, no roster of membership and no concrete way to link John to this community.

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00:06:39,604 --> 00:06:44,606

There is a better explanation, and it fits into the Jewish tradition.

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00:06:44,606 --> 00:06:50,609

From time immemorial, Jewish holy men had gone into the desert to find the way of God.

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00:06:50,609 --> 00:07:03,616

We have the example of Moses and Elijah, and there is no reason why we can't speculate that John,

following in that tradition, went out into desert places not only to find God but to proclaim the way of God.

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00:07:03,616 --> 00:07:07,618

John began to preach the coming of the end of the world.

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00:07:07,618 --> 00:07:16,622

He expected the prophecy of Isaiah would soon be fulfilled, that every valley shall be raised up and every mountain leveled.

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00:07:30,629 --> 00:07:34,631

John performed ritual bathing as a sign of repentance.

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00:07:35,631 --> 00:07:40,634

This rite came to be called baptism, and John was named the Baptist.

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00:07:43,635 --> 00:07:51,639

Among the thousands who flocked to the river Jordan, John's younger cousin, an unknown carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth.

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00:07:54,641 --> 00:08:00,644

John said Jesus was the promised Messiah, and the Christian religion began.

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00:08:05,646 --> 00:08:22,654

A few months later, John denounced King Herod for the sin of wife swapping, and John was arrested and dragged before the king.

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00:08:23,655 --> 00:08:29,658

Surprisingly, King Herod listened to John's preaching.

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00:08:29,658 --> 00:08:35,661

The queen, Herodias however, had no intention of losing her influence to a desert prophet.

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00:08:35,661 --> 00:08:43,665

Using her daughter Salome, the queen tricked Herod into promising her anything, and she demanded that she be a prophet.

53

00:08:43,665 --> 00:08:54,670

Using her daughter Salome, the queen tricked Herod into promising her anything, and she demanded John's head on a plate.

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00:09:14,680 --> 00:09:27,686

As Christianity spread throughout the world, John was revered as the first Christian martyr.

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00:09:27,686 --> 00:09:36,691

A search for his remains began in the early centuries of the new era, and may have just ended in a remote Egyptian monastery.

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00:09:37,691 --> 00:09:47,696

Is it possible that the remains of John the Baptist were smuggled for safekeeping somewhere into the Egyptian desert?

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00:09:47,696 --> 00:09:55,700

The Sahara has been called a land without time. To those who live here, the first century is yesterday.

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00:09:56,701 --> 00:10:10,707

Near an oasis called Wadi El Natroon, monks of the Coptic or Egyptian Orthodox Church still follow a tradition which began with John the Baptist.

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00:10:10,707 --> 00:10:18,711

Each of the monks at one time in his life retreats alone into the desert.

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00:10:19,712 --> 00:10:33,719

The new hermit may not see another human for years. As strange as this life may seem, many of the monks claim it gives a feeling of limitless freedom.

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00:10:33,719 --> 00:10:40,722

For millennia, the oasis has been a gathering place for holy men.

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00:10:41,723 --> 00:10:51,728

Near broken tiles and ruins from the dim past, the Coptic Church built the monastery of Saint Macarius in 360 AD.

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00:10:51,728 --> 00:11:20,742

The monastery of Saint Macarius is a place where the monks of the Coptic Church still follow the demanding discipline which regulates their lives, arising at 4 a.m. and praying until dawn.

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00:11:22,743 --> 00:11:40,752

Father Yacobus El-Mikari came here in 1969. Before taking monastic vows, he was a professional architect and was therefore assigned to supervise maintenance on the monastery.

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00:11:40,752 --> 00:11:47,755

What was to become a most unusual detective story began with routine renovation.

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00:11:48,755 --> 00:12:05,764

Because the old church was not sufficient for the new increasing number of the monks, they became excavating a debris of about 1 meter height.

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00:12:05,764 --> 00:12:15,769

We began digging because we must build a strong foundation for the new constructions.

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00:12:18,770 --> 00:12:32,777

The grounds had to be enlarged and cleared of tons of rubble. Several times since the 4th century, the monastery had been sacked by marauding tribes, then leveled by an earthquake.

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00:12:36,779 --> 00:12:48,785

Buried in the debris, hundreds of old columns, some still showing intriguing fragments of names, 16 centuries, however, had eroded most of the information.

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00:12:50,786 --> 00:12:56,789

One source of information had not decayed over the years, oral history.

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00:12:57,789 --> 00:13:03,792

In this secluded monastery, the practice of memorized verbal history has strong roots.

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00:13:04,793 --> 00:13:11,796

Father Yacobus heard the older monks reciting a story which had been told and retold for 80 generations.

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00:13:13,797 --> 00:13:20,801

According to this account, the bones of John the Baptist had been brought to this monastery and hidden somewhere on the grounds.

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00:13:22,802 --> 00:13:25,803

Until this decade, however, no one had tried to find them.

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00:13:26,804 --> 00:13:34,807

Yacobus began sifting through old Coptic texts to see if other accounts would corroborate the oral tradition.

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00:13:37,809 --> 00:13:48,814

According to several independent sources, the bones of John had been smuggled out of the Holy Land to Alexandria, where for a time they were safe from desecration.

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00:13:49,815 --> 00:13:58,819

Yacobus read that in the 10th century, the bones were secretly moved again to the monastery of Saint Macarius.

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00:13:59,820 --> 00:14:06,823

He searched the books for mention of a specific hiding place. None was written down.

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00:14:09,825 --> 00:14:15,828

Could the monks have been walking over the remains of Saint John somewhere on the grounds?

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00:14:16,828 --> 00:14:18,829

Then a clue.

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00:14:19,830 --> 00:14:25,833

Most Coptic churches have small satellite rooms called sanctuaries for celebration of Mass.

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00:14:26,833 --> 00:14:34,837

These sanctuaries are named for various saints and Coptic tradition regarding their placement is normally very strict.

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00:14:35,837 --> 00:14:49,844

In any church, if you wish to build or to consecrate a sanctuary for Saint John the Baptist, it must be to the south of the main sanctuary.

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00:14:50,845 --> 00:15:01,850

But here in the church of Saint Macarius, you see the opposite. The sanctuary of Saint John the Baptist is to the left side, to the north. Why?

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00:15:02,851 --> 00:15:11,855

In the dim past of the monastery, someone had broken the ironclad Coptic tradition and built this sanctuary of Saint John to the north.

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00:15:14,857 --> 00:15:25,862

As the restoration approached this area, Yacobus could sense something special might be uncovered. Perhaps the actual remains of Saint John?

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00:15:26,862 --> 00:15:44,871

The monks realized their search was treading on fragile glass. Since the irreparable split between Catholic and Eastern Christianity 900 years ago, much blood has been spilled over far less important relics.

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00:15:45,872 --> 00:16:01,880

They knew the Eastern church would hesitate to challenge Rome's claim of the true remains of Saint John. If the bones were here, maybe it was best to let them lie in an unmarked, unknown grave.

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00:16:02,880 --> 00:16:11,885

Yacobus ultimately decided to trust in God and seek the truth, regardless of political consequences.

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00:16:19,888 --> 00:16:26,892

Older monks had hinted at a special link between a small column in the unique north sanctuary and John the Baptist.

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00:16:27,892 --> 00:16:31,894

Then, another custom peculiar to this monastery.

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00:16:38,898 --> 00:16:45,901

It had always been a tradition to offer incense to Saint John near the base of that same column.

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00:16:45,901 --> 00:17:05,911

Finally, excavation work began in this area. It may be only coincidence, but the monks emphasized that what happened next took place during the most holy season of Lent during a period of intense fasting and prayer.

94

00:17:15,916 --> 00:17:22,919

The casket, which they removed and respectfully covered, held the remains of an 18th century patriarch.

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00:17:23,920 --> 00:17:41,929

Under the casket, however, was a much more startling find. In an older layer of dirt, they uncovered a burial vault, and in the vault, schematans, placed according to very old custom in bare earth with the head towards the west.

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00:17:46,931 --> 00:17:52,934

There's no way of proving that bones belong to any particular individual.

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00:17:52,934 --> 00:18:05,941

I suppose we could carbon-date the bones, and that would tell us the period they came from, and would perhaps prove that they were not John the Baptist's bones, if they came from a different period.

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00:18:06,941 --> 00:18:15,945

But even if they proved to be from the John the Baptist period, there'd be no way of identifying them precisely as the bones of John.

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00:18:15,945 --> 00:18:25,950

I don't think the importance of the bones lies in whether or not we can prove precisely that they belong to John. They may, they may not.

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00:18:25,950 --> 00:18:37,956

What is important is what these bones as a symbol mean for believers. Here is a place of pilgrimage, here is a place of renewal of self, here is a place of identity with the past.

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00:18:37,956 --> 00:18:48,962

And when people come here, they don't worry about whether scientists can prove these are John's bones. They are concerned with their faith and what this does to them.

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00:18:49,962 --> 00:18:57,966

This is the first film ever taken of the cleared vault, which has been preserved as evidence of the discovery.

103

00:19:02,968 --> 00:19:06,970

A modern reliquary was carved to house the bones.

104

00:19:07,971 --> 00:19:20,977

They are now wrapped in a special ritual cloth, which is never unrolled and covered according to Coptic tradition, with a handful of dust.

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00:19:24,979 --> 00:19:31,983

After the bones were found, the Coptic Pope made a special journey from Cairo to study the question.

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00:19:32,983 --> 00:19:37,986

He advised the monks for the time being not to formally announce their discovery.

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00:19:38,986 --> 00:19:43,989

Jacobus and his brothers obeyed. They have avoided seeking any publicity.

108

00:19:44,989 --> 00:19:51,993

Until this in search of program, no substantial film report has been made about the monastery's discovery.

109

00:19:53,994 --> 00:19:58,996

Is this the final resting place of the wandering prophet of the desert, John the Baptist?

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00:20:02,998 --> 00:20:09,001

If so, one small band of monks have dropped the stone into the well of history,

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00:20:09,001 --> 00:20:18,005

and waves will inevitably spread from this monastery, beyond the borders of Egypt to the Holy Land, Rome, and the entire world.

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00:20:27,010 --> 00:20:31,012

Pilgrims from around the world now visit the monastery of Saint Macarius.

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00:20:33,013 --> 00:20:41,017

Groups travel to this isolated religious outpost to worship what they deeply believe are the relics

of John the Baptist.

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00:20:41,017 --> 00:20:55,023

When you visit the church and when you come to the relics themselves, you feel by a mystical element that there is something spiritual in the matter.

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00:20:56,024 --> 00:21:05,028

When you come to the coffin themselves, you shall find it is impossible for you not to believe.

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00:21:05,028 --> 00:21:13,032

How? It is not a matter of the mind, but it is the matter of the heart and the faith.

117

00:21:26,039 --> 00:21:35,043

Coming up next, agents hunt for the brilliant mastermind of a mass convict escape on FBI The Untold Stories.

118

00:21:35,043 --> 00:21:45,048

Then history's crimes and trials brings you the case of the suave and deadly British butler Roy Fontaine.

119

00:21:45,048 --> 00:21:51,051

And later tonight, a celebrity-filled great American history quiz tests your knowledge about the pursuit of happiness.

120

00:21:51,051 --> 00:21:55,053

Edit here on the History Channel, where the past comes alive.