

ARCHEOLOGY

Nada returned to the house with flowers and songs. The commander, still sitting in the communications room, didn't hear her right away. Upon hearing her, he got up so quickly that it throbbed in his temples, smiled the stupid smile of someone in love and walked towards her.

"Fedya, Fedyenka," she spoke as he approached, "did you hear the news? A shell hit the heap at night, there, on the road, on the road to Shakhtyorsk, you know? So, yeah. The explosion burst apart the slag heap, and it turned out that this was not a slag heap at all, but a kurgan¹, the grave of some ancient prince. There, in short, a skeleton in armor and a lot of other antique stuff was uncovered from under ground. And a ship, can you imagine, a ship, here, in the middle of the steppe. From the morning on the museum guys have been excavating, they found a gold monisto², and a gold sword, and a crown - in short, some two buckets full of gold. The director of the museum has now appealed to you on TV so that you give a command to cordon off the place, so nobody can make off with anything, it's a priceless finding, he says. Let's go look at it, huh? Come on, pleaaaaaase! I don't want any movies, I don't want any theater, let's just go there right now, huh?"

According to her tone, he realized that it would be difficult to shake her off, a refusal would result in an eternal grudge, and actually he became curious himself. It's necessary, he thought, to have a look, gold is an entertaining thing, and they'll plunder it, if left to their own accord, if not ours, so the civilians; could even publicly show myself, demonstrate respect and interest in the local history, which is pretty, in essence, bland, but seems like they almost found Troy here, okay. He gave orders, Gaff reported that everything is ready, Nada dressed up a little nicer, and off they were.

The curfew had been postponed due to the sun rising back up again, the streets were crowded. Closer to the place, the movement became thicker and unidirectional, everyone hurried to the place of the sensational finding. Due to Gaff's efforts, the cordon was already unfolding, the crowd of curious people around the kurgan was pushed back and streamlined.

Windbreaker was already on location with a camera crew. He introduced the commander to a two-meter person in jeans and a tight-fitting T-shirt, which was covering the unorderedly arranged, as if somehow piled upon the body, muscles. The expression on his face, also very muscular, was somewhat worried, like that of many people who knew to themselves that they could kill anyone with a single punch, and therefore constantly as if pondering how not to kill anyone.

"Comrade commander," said Dancer, "let me introduce: the director of the museum of local lore, Artem Andreyevich Artem."

"Thank you for your support, Comrade Commander," said Artem. - "An amazing,

¹a type of tumulus constructed over a grave, often containing a single body along with various grave goods

²traditional necklace jewelry, often made from coins

fu, event. I grew up around, fu, here. Always everyone, fu, thought it was a, fu, heap. And here's, fu, such a... Here's my colleague, Fira, fu, Moiseyevna, she'll explain it better. I'm more about the, fu, administration of the, fu, museum, she's all about the, fu, science..."

An elderly round-faced woman, a not at all Jewish looking Jewess, came out from behind the director, and explained:

"Let's move here, closer, right here, comrade commander, the whole excavation site is clearly visible from here. The explosion worked over there, and over here we did, but we already managed to collect everything that was scattered by the explosion and restored the grave to, you could say, its original form."

BURIAL BOAT

The spectacle was both majestic and miserable at the same time. In the middle of the excavation site above the heaps of earth and clay, as above waves, a large ageworn wooden boat lifted up its broken bow. Inside it, skeletons lay in orderly rows, as well as reddish rusted iron and imperishable gold.

"It is obvious that this is the burial place of an eminent Viking. The custom of burying the chieftain in a boat was widespread among the Norse tribes in the eighth to eleventh centuries," - Fira Moiseyevna kept going. - "We see a typical burial boat. The skeleton in the middle of the boat is, without a doubt, the remains of the king, the Varangian prince. You can see lying next to him a sword, yes, that strip of rust is a sword. And the chain mail is well preserved, not everyone could afford one, only the nobles, that chain mail is a very expensive accessory. The fact that the ship was discovered here in the steppe, far from the sea, finally proves the theory expressed by academic Zeletsky that the Kalmius River had a much higher water level in the early Middle Ages and flowed along a different river bed, exactly around here."

"Why are there multiple skeletons in the ship? Was there an epidemic or something? Or did they all die in a battle?" - asked Nada.

"Good question!" - Fira Moiseyevna was delighted. - "No, there was no epidemic. It was customary to bury his wife along with the king. We see her to the right of the chieftain and can recognize her by a golden necklace of Byzantine coins, golden bracelets and clasps. The remaining buried most likely were slaves, bound to serve the noble warrior and his wife in the afterlife."

"How did they die? Voluntarily?"

"Hard to say... it's unlikely they had a choice..."

"So they were killed?" - Nada was horrified.

"The sources do not contain a clear description. The customs were cruel. They were killed, that's for sure. The question is how exactly they were killed. Maybe the chieftain's girlfriend took poison by her own accord. The rest however... It's better not to think about it, although your curiosity is understandable, and the science does require rigor. We'll examine the bones properly, and try to understand..."

The commander listened inattentively. He was skeptical of historical science,

which describes most civilizations without any other material information other than the contents of tombs and burials - this is as if to judge Moscow by visiting only the Troyekurovskoye Cemetery. He interrupted impatiently:

“Where are the buckets?”

“What buckets, Comrade Commander?” - Fira Moiseyevna was confused.

“The two buckets,” Fraiser specified. “The two buckets full of gold found here. With a sword, a crown, a monisto and so on.”

“Come on, please, Comrade Commander. You can see all the gold, as I said, on the warrior’s wife. The monisto, yes, there it is, on the cervical vertebrae. . . But the sword is made from iron, just a pile of rust left. And there is no crown at all. . .”

“Are you sure?” - Fraiser menacingly turned to Artem.

“Yes sir, there’s little gold. More, fu, talk. They people say what they, fu, want. One talks about two buckets full of gold, another talks about a chest full of silver. It’s all, fu, talk.”

“Make an inventory of everything you found. God forbid, you hide anything. Does the museum have a reliable storage space?”

“Not at all,” answered Artem Andreyevich.

“Everything valuable, first of all the gold, should be transferred today to the premises of the former Zhilsotsbank³. It’s still empty anyway. Write everything down, seal it, put up security,” - the commander muttered past Artem in Gaff’s direction, and then to Nada: - “Let’s go home.”

“A few words for the television, a few words, it’s very, very necessary, Comrade Commander,” Dancer clung to him again.

Fraiser said on the go, without looking at the camera:

“Congratulations to the scientists of Donetsk for this wonderful discovery. The land of Donbass is rich not only in coal, but also in priceless testimonies of the past that speak of the turbulent history of the region, its significance and special contribution to the development of civilization, as well as. . .”

He didn’t finish, got stuck, as if his words had tripped over some thought. Putting his right foot on the step of the jeep, he jumped into the front seat, frowning farewell at the crowd. Various faces looked at him from the crowd, they looked into the car interior, trying to see through the tinted glass, as if not having seen enough of the commander and Nada. The expression on their faces was almost the same, common for most local faces: it seemed that these people wanted to beg for something or say something very sycophantic, but as if at the same time they were not at all against stabbing you down.

“It’s fine, it’s fine, that’s enough, we will edit it, polish it, thank you, thank you,” rattled Windbreaker after his boss. “How so? Why to the bank? What about the museum? It would be nice to organize an exhibition in the museum so that people could look at it,” Fira Moiseyevna started begging, but when she saw that no one was looking at her now, she humbly fell silent.

³bank for financing of municipal and housing construction during USSR times

PHILOSOPHY

Almost all the way home, Nada and Fraiser were silent, but when they turned onto the boulevard behind the city park, a sharp splinter of sun flare, having ricocheted off the window of the samogon bar “Chervona Ruta”⁴, slashed along the side window, and Nada, as if awakened by it, spoke:

“What a fucking terrible custom. Wow. The prince dies and drags all the living into the grave along with him. His wife, maybe a young woman, but either way. Like, your man died, so you’re not allowed live. And no one is allowed to live. How little love, how much hate is needed. . . How did this prince from the kurgan become so fixated on himself just like: if I can’t escape death, then let everyone else die too, so I’m not alone. . . So that they won’t live without me, won’t laugh, won’t breathe, won’t fuck. . . What ferocious resentment must there be towards everyone alive so that: ahh, you thought you’ll bury me and that’ll be it? And you’ll continue to live? Without me? Maybe even better than with me? Fuck you, brothers and sisters! Mine, mine, you’re all mine, everyone into the grave, otherwise it’s frustrating and boring for me here, all alone. . .”

Nada sat behind Fraiser, talking to the back of his head, it was easier for her than towards his face. To his face, she could’ve never said such a thing:

“Fedya, Fedya, you know, I looked at these bones there and kept thinking about you and me. You are a prince, a king, a warrior. And you took me because you are used to taking anything you want. And you won’t let me go alive. Huh? Isn’t that the way it is, Fedya? You are well over fifty. Or almost sixty? You have gray hair. . . all over your body. . . you get tired quickly, you are bored, everything is boring to you because you feel the approach of old age. You secretly measure your pressure, I know it, I know it. You won’t die yet, of course, but you’re getting closer to death. . . And you went to war, because you feel the end is near, you’ll vanish anyway, and it’s much more fun and wicked that way, rather than becoming sick all alone. . . so you can display your strength one last time, enjoy your yet unbroken body, while your waning power hasn’t fully waned. And to show everyone that you still can, - and the Ukrs, and your own, and the civilians, and the authorities, and to show me that you still can. You can still live, show off, torture people, hurt people, so that through their screams and cries you can convince yourself that you still are, still exist, have not ceased. But you know that you’ll end, you’ll end anyway, if not today, then tomorrow. And that’s why you want a great war, not only to immolate yourself, but also burn as many as possible of your soldiers, and enemies, and civilians. And everyone else, as many as possible. And you drag me along with everybody into your funeral boat. This is what your war is for, and not for honor, not for money, not for the Russian world, or whatever else you thought up for yourself. . .”

Nada went silent. The spiky back of the commander’s head seemed grim and ruthless to her. She imagined that right now “Fedya” would turn around, and on

⁴samogon: lit. “self-distilled”, i.e. Russian moonshine; Chervona Ruta: lit. “red rue”, a mythological flower, there is also a popular Ukrainian folk song titled after it

the other side there would be no face either, but the same impenetrable, bristled back of the head. He did not turn around.

“Let me go, Fedyenka, let me go home,” she sobbed and started crying, “I want to live.”

They arrived, Fraiser menacingly went to sleep alone, in the banya⁵. He changed into a bathrobe and fell on the sofa in front of the TV. Turned on something about the war. He struggled to fall asleep if he did not hear the roar of the cannonade or at least the rattling of machine guns. The commander was very angry, but, knowing that getting angry that late was as unhealthy as eating before bed, so he decided to get angry tomorrow, with a fresh mind.

Gaff lay in the dressing room, without undressing and having put a birch broom under his head. When they were driving, he was sitting at the wheel and involuntarily heard what Nada was saying. “Keeps on nagging and nagging,” he was amazed not so much at her words, the meaning of which he did not quite understand, but at the lack of a reaction from his boss to them. “He tolerated it, or what? Can’t be! Must be waiting it out, for sure.”

Twisting from side to side on the tough bench, Gaff, accustomed to the homelessness of marching, finally found a comfortable sleeping position and took out D. Headrick’s book “Power Over Peoples”⁶ from his tactical vest. Knowing that the commander does not encourage intellectual development, Gaff always read secretly. However, he didn’t really get smarter from reading, rather the opposite. But the realization of his intellectual worthlessness when confronted with other people’s deep thoughts led him to a wild delight, as if looking into an abyss. “Natives from many tribes love war for the sake of war itself. And they’re not at all opposed to being killed,” he read. And he thought: “Woah” Then he thought about what else to think about what he read, and again thought: “Woah”. And fell asleep.

⁵Eastern Slavic steam bath with a wood stove, important in Russian culture, often placed in a separate building

⁶Daniel R. Headrick - *Power Over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present*, Princeton University Press, 2010