

Zorastra

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extract

CHAPTER 1

It was in one of the newly opened trenches that the first bone was found. At the time, there seemed to be nothing particularly remarkable about it. It was part of a human vertebra, and for the sake of completeness rather than anything more scientific, further careful excavation, it was hoped, would reveal the rest of the skeleton. Other skeletons had already been found in a mass grave to the south of the main archaeological site. The new skeleton, which was well away from the others, would be carefully surveyed in situ. Then, following its removal from the site, and if time and money would permit, it would be reconstructed in the laboratory and examined to establish if the cause of death, or other factors about the era, could be ascertained. Finally, when everything about the discovery had been painstakingly extracted, the skeleton would be placed in a box, catalogued, confined to an archive and, more than likely, forgotten.

At that time, during the summer of 1995, as I understand it, there were generally about fifteen to twenty people working on the site. Lazlo could still remember a few of them when I last spoke to him. However, he is old now, and his memory is not as sharp as it once was. Certainly, of those that he worked closely alongside, he could still remember their names, but the others, as he told me, there were many who just came and went. Quite a few of them were students, and during the short period that they assisted with the excavations over the summer, he hardly got to know them; and by then in any event, he was already very busy.

Unexpectedly, he found himself under a great deal of pressure, he was constrained by limited funds, and the licence to undertake the archaeological excavations had only until the end of the year to run. What made it worse, and what worried him so much, was that as quickly as they progressed, it became evident that they were only just beginning to understand the immensity of the discovery. Something that had originally

appeared as no more than an isolated find was rapidly growing into a major archaeological exploration of international importance.

During the course of that summer, the team was still largely scratching about on the surface, undertaking geophysical surveys, picking up the traces of solid structures beneath the ground and trying to obtain some understanding of what it was that they were looking at. He admitted to me that at that early stage, it was never very clear what it was that they were dealing with. He and his colleagues first conjectured that what had been discovered might have been a small settlement, then they believed that it was probably a palace perhaps associated with a temple. However, they were clutching at straws, and it was only much later that it became apparent what it most likely was. Even then, there remained residual doubts. Everything about the discovery was strange, not the least of which was the apparent age of the remains.

As with many archaeological finds it was discovered by chance. A development company had bought the site and had only just begun some of the preliminary groundwork. They were in the process of setting out, stripping topsoil, reducing levels, and generally preparing the site for a new building and its infrastructure. The site was located on the east facing slopes of a small hill on the Crimean peninsula overlooking the Black Sea. A local entrepreneur had obtained permission to build a luxury hotel with a swimming pool and sauna. Around the hotel, he had also planned to build a golf course in a landscaped estate and create an access to a private beach with a small marina. Of course, he was very keen to get on with the project and dismayed that the archaeological finds might introduce complications, resulting in inevitable delays.

In many respects, it was an ideal time to undertake his development. Labour and materials were cheap, as well as land. With the break up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Ukraine as an independent country there was every possibility that such an investment could reap significant financial returns in a relatively short time, and the development was in an area that had always been favoured as a holiday location.

Even the Tsars of Russia had their summer palaces on the Crimean coast as well as the nomenclature of the Soviet Union. However, following the collapse of the USSR, much wider, world markets appeared tantalisingly on the horizon and the developer had already initiated talks with American tour companies.

However, when the excavator exposed the mass grave, the authorities felt obliged to step in and the work was ordered to stop until a proper investigation could be carried out. Of course, the developer complained, but there was nothing he could do about it, at least, nothing initially. His hope was that the discovery would prove to be of little interest and that this temporary setback would be short-lived; but it wasn't destined to be quite like that.

At first, it was thought that the grave was probably recent, perhaps dating back to the Crimean War in the middle of

the 19th century, or even the Russo - Turkish War that took place a hundred years earlier, when the Crimea was annexed to Russia from the Ottoman Empire, under the rule of Catherine II. The carbon dating of some of the bones however, soon revealed that the site was much older, older in fact than the history of the peninsula; and that was strange. Up until that time, the earliest records indicated that the Crimean peninsula was first settled in about 15 BC. The mass grave appeared to predate this settlement by well over three thousand years.

This revelation was quite astonishing in itself. Initially the scientific results were thought to be unsound and the samples contaminated. The tests were run again however, and the second results were no different from the first. This threw the authorities into confusion and the archaeologists into consternation. Thus, it was quickly agreed that the site seemed to be sufficiently important to warrant being more carefully investigated. However, its real significance could hardly have been imagined at that time.

Professor Lazlo Kupan, an archaeologist of some repute, who held the Chair in Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology and Museology at the University of Kiev, was appointed to undertake general control of a preliminary archaeological survey of the site. At first, it had been generally assumed that the survey would be reasonably rapid. When he visited the site for the first time, Lazlo admitted that he also believed that this preliminary investigation would be relatively quick. Other than the mass grave, it was never anticipated that other more extensive remains would be discovered and certainly nothing of the scale that subsequently became apparent.

However, no sooner had the work begun, than it quickly became obvious that there was much more to the site than simply a mass grave. As the summer progressed and the apparent outline of the large complex of buildings emerged from the geophysical survey, Lazlo and his colleagues became increasingly excited and progressively more concerned at the scale of the project in relation to their programme and their limited resources.

As was to be expected, the site also began to attract a great deal of interest within the university, as well as within the wider archaeological community. Speculation might have become rife if the Ukrainian government hadn't reacted to suppress the information coming out of the site. It was reluctant to broadcast the discovery at the time, and an ethos of secrecy still pervades many aspects relating to the discovery, but for other reasons that I will expand on later. Nevertheless, to be fair, the government's initial reaction was as much a continuity of normal practice following decades of Soviet rule rather than anything more sinister. For a short while, interest in the site waned.

Then, when the first metal artefacts were uncovered, interest in the site rapidly mounted again. To say that these discoveries were unusual would not really do them justice. They were unique in every way. I remember Lazlo telling me that when he was shown the first metallic object, he was simply speechless. It was if, he said, he had missed a whole chapter in

his archaeological education. It corresponded with nothing he had ever seen before. It was alien in every respect. It belonged to a different culture, one that had not yet been discovered, at least, up until that point. Moreover, confusingly, the culture seemed to be so far in advance of anything that was even remotely contemporary that it was impossible to imagine from where this culture might have come, or how it could have developed.

The geometric decoration on the surface of the metal objects was so finely executed and so precise that it was difficult to believe that they could have been hand made. However, at that time, during this particular period of human development, how could it have been anything other than an artisanal production? It was the early Bronze Age, and experiments in copper alloys had only just begun. Most scholars believed that metallurgy in Europe had its origins in Anatolia in Turkey round about the same time. Geographically, Anatolia was near, but the product and the quality of the workmanship associated with the period was nothing compared to what they were beginning to unearth on this site.

Then, there was the discovery of this bone, this small piece of vertebrae, in one of the transverse trenches. As the trench was widened and deepened, the skeleton began to emerge. At the same time, the receptacle on which the body had been laid also began to be revealed and the excavation was widened again until the whole extent of the burial site was exposed.

The body had been placed with considerable care and reverence in the centre of a circular chamber that had only one entrance to it. It was a carefully constructed tomb of some sort, a mausoleum, and the person who had been entombed in the centre of it must have been someone of considerable importance.

As the earth was cleared, the detail of the receptacle and especially the quality of the workmanship became increasingly evident. It was quite extraordinary, Lazlo recounted. The receptacle, which was constructed in sheet metal, not insubstantial in thickness, was in the form of a shallow dish, and was very finely patterned. As it gradually emerged, it was also revealed that it appeared to have been made out of one piece. As more was uncovered, the actual size of the metal structure was realised. For an artefact of that period, it was huge. By the time a quarter of it was revealed, it tantalisingly glinted in the sunlight. In fact, the discovery of the metal receptacle rather distracted attention from the skeleton placed inside it, which appeared to be rather ordinary by comparison.

Nevertheless, in exactly the same manner as much of what was discovered in those excavations, there was nothing at all ordinary about the skeleton and, as eventually became apparent, it proved to be quite the opposite.

Lazlo had decided that as soon as all the bones had been exposed, the skeleton could be photographed in situ, surveyed, and then carefully placed in a box. Afterwards, the box, suitably labelled and catalogued, was taken into storage. It was placed on a wide shelf in the archive room, near to his

laboratory, in the University of Kiev. And there it rested undisturbed, until much, much later.

However, by then, a plethora of objects had been excavated from the site and all of them were fascinating in one-way or another. As quickly as they emerged, they also were catalogued, placed in boxes, and transferred to the basement of the University. Interestingly, Lazlo admitted that, in a way, they became so used to finding another inexplicable object, they didn't even bother to stop and speculate what it was, what its purpose might be, and how it might relate to the other things that they had found. And that, he told me candidly, was actually a large part of the problem. They just did not know what it was they were looking at. The more they found, the more it became an enigma, the greater the enigma became, and the more numerous the discoveries, the less time and fewer resources they had to deal with them properly.

The work continued throughout the autumn. More people were recruited to the site and gradually the form of the remains of the buildings began to take shape. There were clearly corridors that gave access to a variety of rooms. The floors, which were finished in marble tiles, had been laid with superb precision. Even the marble tiles themselves had been individually fashioned to a high degree of tolerance. Everywhere there were fragments of terracotta tiles, which had probably formed the roof covering and it appeared that the upper structure of the building would have probably been wood. There was evidence of charred wood in the excavations and it was suggested that the complex had been burnt down - whether it was by accident or not however, was not clear. Nevertheless, later evidence suggested, with a high degree of probability, that the complex had been very deliberately, methodically destroyed.

As the complex was uncovered, it clearly comprised a number of buildings with a variety of rooms but the functions of either buildings or the rooms were not evident. At one stage, it even began to look like a school, or perhaps a monastery, and there was some wild speculation that it could even have been a hospital; but any of these functions would have been most unlikely.

As Lazlo explained to me, it was only with the advent of the Bronze Age that stable urban communities started to be developed and the first forms of writing appeared. Up until then, nomadism was the most common way of life with social and tribal groups moving from site to site, following migrating animals and collecting nuts and berries. Any idea that this complex could have been associated with learning in such an organised and sophisticated way was completely anachronistic. As for the idea that it was a hospital or something similar, made absolutely no sense at all.

In a way, Lazlo thought that the complex had more the appearance of a small factory; a series of individual workshops, but that kind of organisation would have been two millennia and more before its time. Other questions naturally followed such as - what would they have been making and to whom would they sell it?

Meanwhile, negotiations between the developer and the local authority were not going well and the local authority was being put under considerable pressure to give permission for the development to recommence. Lazlo once suggested to me candidly that he thought the Ukrainian mafia were involved somewhere in the process. I didn't doubt him; and perhaps it was even their money that was financing the leisure complex. However, that disagreeable possibility wasn't the only sinister undercurrent L later learnt, although Lazlo was rather reluctant to be drawn into any further discussion.

Whether bribery was involved or not, I have no idea, but it seemed that a decision was suddenly taken that a deadline must be put on the archaeological dig and plans drafted to fill in the site. However, thankfully some kind of compromise was reached and the authorities required the developer to modify his proposals in order that the site would not be completely destroyed. Thus, it was agreed that rather than allowing it to be damaged by construction work, it was effectively mothballed. The archaeological site was carefully filled in with sand, covered in tarmac, and used for car parking. A future generation would be able to re-excavate and re-examine the ruins in the fullness of time.

By the spring of 1996, one year after the discovery work was already advanced on the building of the hotel. Lazlo admitted that he was both disappointed and immensely relieved. Overall, it wasn't that bad a solution. He had enough finds to keep him occupied for the rest of his life. It would take him years to analyse what they had collected and as it was, they hardly knew where to start.

However, Lazlo was particularly pleased that they had been able to complete their excavation of the area around the tomb. The removal of the metallic circular receptacle in which the skeleton had been laid out revealed more. Underneath, supporting the receptacle was a circular stone plinth constructed in white marble blocks. The blocks had been carefully worked so that the curve of the metal receptacle fitted precisely. In the centre of the plinth was a circular metal frame and set into the frame was a metal cover. In the middle of the cover, which displayed a sixteen-pointed star, was a recessed handle.

It took some time to remove the cover. It was a perfect fit and the detritus that had infiltrated the joint made it especially difficult to remove. Various suction devices were used to remove the fine material. It was even suggested that fine pressure water jet should be used, but Lazlo was concerned about water entering underneath the cover. Finally, working with a combination of compressed air and mechanical suction they managed to extract enough material for the cover to be rotated. Once it started to move the job of removing it became much easier and not long afterwards, amidst intense interest, it was extracted, probably for the first time in over five thousand years.

Its removal revealed a small chamber. Inside the chamber, there were two metal boxes in perfect condition. One was small and contained a ring, the larger one contained a kind of metallic ball. It appeared that the boxes had been wrapped in

some kind of coarse woven material, but over the passage of time, the material had disintegrated, and only the tattered remnants remained on the floor of the chamber. And, that was it; that was all that there was. It wasn't exactly a disappointment, but Lazlo had hoped that the circular hatch, albeit small in diameter, might have been the entrance to an underground chamber, or a complex of chambers, that would provided them with more useful information about the purpose of the structure. But it was no more than just a cache, a place for storing, possibly even hiding these other two artefacts underneath the body.

Like all the other artefacts that had been unearthed, they represented a quality of workmanship that would have been outstanding for the period. Just like all the other finds, they were photographed, catalogued, packed in boxes and taken back to be archived in the university's Archaeological Department.

By Christmas 1995, most of the remaining archaeological work on the site had finished and all the discoveries had been removed to the University. One of Lazlo's staff supervised the filling in of the final peripheral excavations and the site was left ready for the construction work on the hotel and its infrastructure.

And, apart from celebrating Christmas, still something of a novelty after soviet rule, it seemed that everyone finally breathed a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER 2

I first learnt about the site during the spring of 1996. It was completely new to me and I was entirely unaware of what the site represented, or how indeed I might become implicated in the project which followed.

Somewhat out of the blue, I received an invitation to participate in a symposium and workshop to study the archaeological finds. I was never exactly sure why I was selected to join the international team that was being assembled, but I was asked to attend a presentation that was to be given at the University of Kiev that summer. I suppose that someone in government must have known of my work in forensic pathology and my relative fluency in Russian. Nevertheless, I always felt that there must have been others better qualified who might have been more appropriate to attend. It's true that I had a good track record working alongside the police in some particularly interesting forensic cases, some of which had even gained public notoriety. However, it was possible that my interest in forensic archaeology was better recognised than I had thought it was, and perhaps it was that which tipped finally the balance in my favour.

Nevertheless, I must admit that apart from being somewhat flattered, I was also really quite delighted to accept the invitation. In any event, I'd hardly given any thought to summer holidays, and a 'temporary posting', as the Foreign Office called it, sounded quite acceptable. In addition, it was proposed that as well as a modest honorarium, my attendance would be all expenses paid. Why not, I thought; I might even have the opportunity to create a sightseeing tour around the event. Indeed, I found that I warmed to the idea very quickly, seeing all manner of interesting possibilities developing out the more official engagement.

Thus, during the following three months, I enthusiastically brushed up on my Russian during every spare moment, studied the geography and history of the Ukraine, and in particular the Crimean Peninsular, and generally wound

myself up into a state of modest excitement, which for me was something of a rarity. When July eventually arrived, June had seemed to really drag its heels, I boarded a plane at Heathrow and not long after, found myself congregated with a group of other so-called 'experts' at the University of Kiev, in the capital city of the Ukraine.

I had sort of expected, not unreasonably, I thought, that we would be pampered, accommodated in the best hotels, and well looked after in every respect. In my dreams, the reality was far from it; we were in student accommodation at the university and we ate in their canteen. On the morning of the first day, after breakfast in the refectory, (refectory, I think, sounds so much better than canteen), we made our way to the Department of Archaeology where the presentation was to be made. I remember being surprised by the actual number of people present, in all I suppose, upwards of about a hundred. Apart from the locals, and that included a strong Russian delegation, there were representatives from the States, from Germany, Italy, Greece, and China, as well as a small group from France, as well as two delegates from Turkey. As it transpired, I was the sole representative from the United Kingdom, or to be more precise, Scotland.

It was afterwards that I also found out that only a few of the delegates were actually staying on to work on the project. In fact, most of the attendees were there for only two or three days to listen to the presentations, and to visit the general location of the archaeological discovery. Of course, by that time, the site had already been cocooned and the construction work on the hotel complex was well underway. The site visit was therefore mostly contextual and the visit was relatively poorly attended.

The Conference opened the day after I arrived. At breakfast, delegates shuffled about, generally sticking to their own little groups. Not being particularly gregarious, I opted to find a space to myself and soon became absorbed in a copy of the local paper that I had bought at the airport the previous evening. Later, as we were ambling through to the conference hall, I pinned on the badge that I had been presented with in reception the previous evening. It was written in English and Russian. In the auditorium, I sat at the back, on the end of a row, next to a German who didn't speak English - perfect! I imagined that he had originated from the former German Democratic Republic and would have studied Russian as his second language.

Some aged, semi-decrepit, senior member of the university, probably the Chancellor, or the Ukrainian equivalent, drearily opened the Conference offering little to look forward to. It was an inauspicious and miserable start and I wondered immediately, having slept badly in a narrow student bed, shaved in lukewarm water and eaten a rather rubbery hard-boiled egg and tough black bread for breakfast, if I had made a big mistake in accepting the invitation. Fortunately, the Chancellor's uninspiring welcoming speech was relatively brief.

Then Lazlo took over. He stage-managed the spectacle that followed with great professionalism. I described it as a spectacle; well, that's what it was. What a contrast to the Chancellor's opening damp squib. It was a firework display, there's no other word for it; and for those of us who knew little or nothing about the dig, and the artefacts that had been unearthed, the presentation was almost beyond belief. We were all startled by what we saw. The German sitting next to me was on the edge of his seat, muttering a series of *Mein Gott*, followed by *Gott in Himmel*, or simply *unglaublich* – unbelievable!

I'm by no means an archaeologist, but I was equally impressed, I'd never seen anything like it. The pictures of the artefacts that we were shown looked as though the artefacts should have belonged to a late industrial age, even, I dare say - high-tech, never the beginning of the Bronze Age. I know that some of the jewellery produced by the Celts is quite amazing; their workmanship was intricate and very sophisticated, astonishing in fact, but this, this was something else. The conference hall buzzed.

During the second day of the conference, I met Lazlo properly for the first time. The meeting would be difficult to forget, as he impressed me so much. He was a man in his late fifties and I imagined that he was probably in his prime as an archaeologist. It was very evident that he was completely overwhelmed by the discoveries. Despite his bright sparkling blue eyes and his obviously enquiring mind, I had the impression immediately that the project had aged him prematurely. I don't know why, but I imagined him to be suffering from the responsibility of having managed this extraordinary find, coupled with his disappointment, as well as his apparent failure, to neither make head nor tail of it. There was a sense of intense frustration in everything that he said and did concerning the discovery and, despite his obvious enthusiasm, his anxiety was plainly transparent. However, there were other matters that were also worrying him of which I was wholly ignorant at that time.

Indeed, it was exactly their failure to get to grips with their discovery, which provoked the urgent need to consult more widely. It was, in effect, the principal reason why the conference had been organised and why we had been invited to participate. After nearly nine month's work there appeared to be very little that they knew about the civilisation they had discovered. Perhaps the word civilisation is an inaccurate description and maybe an overstatement. Maybe, civilisation is too grand an idea, because there was nothing other than this one discovery to support the idea of a more widespread culture. It was more like an erratic in space and time. There was no indication where it came from, how it developed, what it actually represented, or even what had eventually happened to it. It was quite simply, a mystery.

During that first day, following the presentation, there was no end to the questions posed by the audience. Delegates stood up in relays to ask Lazlo to explain something more, or to

simply comment. He did his best to deal with the questions, but I could see that it wasn't easy.

'Is there any possibility that this could be a hoax?' a member of the American team had asked. Fair question, I suppose. There are several well-known examples of archaeological hoaxes, to give them a kind name, or frauds, to be more precise - the history of 'Pitdown Man' was one of the most infamous of all time.

'You know,' replied Lazlo, with an air of patience, 'it was one of the first questions that I asked myself. I wondered if we were the subjects of some elaborate prank. Nevertheless, all our investigations and studies; such as the carbon dating, and the metallic analysis, could not have been faked. The results that we assembled, however unlikely they seemed, or astounding they were, were real. After all the tests we undertook, we double checked and there was never any variation, there was absolutely no doubt that what we had was quite genuine.'

Moreover, that was another thing - it was true, even during the Bronze Age there were complex experiments being carried out in metallurgy. Samples of bronzes found in the Aegean, although slightly later than this discovery, showed through isotope analysis that tin mined in Cornwall in the British Isles, was transported to the Eastern Mediterranean to make bronze alloys. Imagine that, five thousand years ago! Copper was mined in Cyprus, Egypt and further east, in present day Iraq and Iran. There was also a contemporary Bronze Age culture developing in China and Korea, but the origin of some of the metals used there is unknown.

And that, raised another question; was the development in Asia linked to that in Europe, or was it wholly coincidental that two isolated groups of peoples projected themselves into the Bronze Age at virtually the same time? I must say that it seemed to me to be too much of a coincidence. We continue to under-estimate the ability of primitive people to travel huge distances and exchange knowledge, as well as trade, and whilst perhaps not widespread, contact could well have taken place. But all the questions that were posed that day concentrated more on what was going on in Asia Minor at the time and with the possible relationship with other ancient cultures in the region.

'Have you investigated any possible relationship with the Maykop Culture, Professor Kupan?'

'It's a good question,' Lazlo admitted. 'The Transcaucasian Culture was largely based on the settlement of the Taman Peninsula. Along with the Crimean Peninsula, these two projections of land practically enclosed the Sea of Azov. Between them is the Strait of Kerch, sometimes known as the Cimmerian Bosphorus. From our archaeological site, it would have been possible to look eastwards towards the Taman Peninsula. Thus, it is impossible to believe that there would not have been some kind of intercommunication between the two areas. In addition, the Transcaucasian Culture seems to have its origins round about 3500 BC. This, as you already know, corresponds roughly with our discovery and raises certain other

questions. Was the Bronze Age Maykop Culture already in existence when our site came into being, or was our site actually instrumental in the rise of the Early Bronze Age Cultures in this part of the world? If the answer is that metallurgical practices were already being undertaken close by, then was our site established where it was, because of that? If, however, it was the presence of our site that stimulated the whole development of the Bronze Age in the region, where did our people get their technology from?’

‘What’s your opinion Professor? Do have any initial thoughts?’

‘I do, and I don’t,’ Lazlo responded with the hint of a smile on his face. ‘I’ll explain. The technology associated with our site is without doubt extremely sophisticated and the artefacts discovered are by no means the result of an embryonic metallurgical industry. The artefacts demonstrate knowledge far, far in advance of anything contemporary. The analyses of the metallurgy - the alloys, indicate a complexity, which did not exist, indeed still doesn’t exist currently, anywhere in our world. Clearly, this suggests that the technology was not being imported locally, and that it was rather more likely that whatever our site was, the Maykop Culture developed in this locality not simply because some of the raw materials were to be found in this locality and but because there was also an embryonic industry already established here.’

‘If that is the case, can you think of any reason why the site wasn’t established on the Taman Peninsula, where these essential minerals are found?’

‘Well, that’s another good question. All the evidence that we have had until the present suggests that the Crimean Peninsula was uninhabited during this period. Indeed, it doesn’t appear that the Peninsula was inhabited until at least three thousand years later. Imagine, if you were a member of an advanced culture, which needed access to scarce mineral reserves that were already being exploited by a less advanced culture, where would you set yourself up - next door, where it might be difficult to defend yourself, or just across the sea, where you could trade, but keep yourself rather more secure? It’s just an idea and I accept that it poses rather more questions than answering any of the strictly fundamental ones. We simply don’t have any answers at present to any of these questions and that is really the root of our deep frustration.’

‘Professor, the artefacts are highly decorated, are there any inscriptions? Is there any indication of a written language on the objects?’

I remember Lazlo looking intently at the questioner before replying. He scratched his head, his frustration again very evident. I think that it came from his inability to answer the question as he would perhaps have liked.

‘Let me tell you.’ He paused whilst he framed his answer. ‘There are lots of symbols, there is a complex geometry, but there is nothing that we have so far that we have been able to identify as a language. That is not to say that there is no indication of a written language, more that we have not

been able to decipher what we have been looking at. Any more questions?’

Well of course, there were lots. I can’t remember them now, but they are all written down. You can read them if you like, they make fascinating reading. As an observer, I found it a very engaging presentation. There was a transcript produced of the conference, which followed the professor’s presentation. There were many interesting points of view expressed, and certainly, there were some useful avenues of investigation suggested, that did help to bring some focus to part of the subsequent work.

Lazlo was clearly quite exhausted at the end of that first day and I decided not to try and discuss matters with him. It could wait until the next day. I wasn’t in a rush, I was due to spend several days in Kiev, and there would be other opportunities. In any event, I had agreed to have dinner with a French forensic scientist.

I was informed at lunchtime that we had been selected to work together on the human remains that had been discovered on the archaeological site and, to be perfectly honest I was quite looking forward to getting stuck in, so to speak. As it happened, I had a passing acquaintance with the person who had been chosen to work with me. I have to say though, that I was completely taken by surprise; I had no idea that she would be attending the Conference. In my self-imposed isolation at the back of the hall, I hadn’t spotted her either. She was what the French call a *medecin legiste* and she was, I recalled, rather good-looking.

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I knew that she must have been about ten years younger than I was and that she had studied medicine at the *CHU Centre Hospitalier Universitaire* in Grenoble, in southeast France. We had met briefly on one previous occasion before the conference in Kiev. During lunch, one of Lazlo’s assistants managed to get us together. Meeting her again was such a surprise and I would have to admit to feeling delighted, although I tried not to show it too much. It was also a relief as I had half-expected that I would be teaming up with some aged, wizened spinster, or a grumpy old man. However, I also have to admit that I had forgotten her first name; that is if I ever knew it. And so, whilst I was very pleased to renew our acquaintance, and looked forward to the prospect of our working together, I was most embarrassed to be stumbling over her name. She helped me of course, as the French do when they are introduced to someone.

‘Natalie Duvalier,’ she said, holding out her hand, her eyes smiling with the kind of self-assurance that I have felt always to lack.

‘Robert Buchanan,’ I replied, relieved to have been let off the hook so lightly.

Her easy way inspired confidence in me and, later that afternoon, I don’t know why I was so bold, normally I’m quite

timid, I asked if she would like to dine with me that evening. Very much to my surprise, she agreed. Her warm smile stayed with me the rest of the day.

I didn't know Kiev at all; it was the first time that I had ever visited the city. In fact, I had visited the Ukraine only once previously, when I spent a week in Odessa. Kiev, of course, was quite different, and a much larger city. The Faculty of History, which included the Archaeological Department, was situated on the main university campus, on the west side of the River Dnieper. The student accommodation where we were both staying was near to the campus and so I agreed to meet Natalie at the entrance to the Shevchenko Park across the road from the main entrance to the University buildings.

It was early July and I remember that it was a warm, sunny evening. I had expected to have to wait for her to arrive, as one often does with the French, but she was right on time and waved at me as she approached. I can't recall if we said much to each other when we met, but after having been cooped up all day in the University, it was simply a pleasant relief to saunter through the park. I also don't recollect whether there were many people in the park, I expect that there were, but I do remember suddenly feeling quite shy and rather tongue-tied. As a result, we didn't say a great deal to each other to start with. As it turned out, it seemed to suit Natalie, and I think we would both have admitted to feeling somewhat tired after the travelling, the long day, and the extraordinary presentation.

After we left the park, we didn't really explore the city. We walked only a couple of blocks before we found an interesting little restaurant that specialised in fish dishes. It was somewhere near a cinema, I seem to remember, and not very crowded. We treated each other to aperitifs whilst we looked at the menu and she began to tell me a bit about herself.

Her family came from Chambéry, the principal town of the Savoie. It was where her father had practised. His *cabinet*, where he practised as a *médecin généraliste*, was situated near to the centre of the old quarter of the town, and was located in a period residential building underneath which, at street level, there were a number of boutiques. Both of her parents were still alive at that time, as were her grandparents who lived in a little village in the mountains near Grenoble. Medicine clearly interested her and her father was keen to encourage her. However, she had no desire to follow closely in his footsteps, she had observed enough of general practice to last her for a lifetime, and knew that it would not suit her. Thus, as her studies progressed, she began to specialise in pathology, moving eventually into forensic science.

The teaching hospital at Grenoble was very convenient for her. It was less than an hour's drive from her home, and there was the advantage of a regular train service between Chambéry and Grenoble. She lived at home most of the time, but whenever the opportunity arose, she told me that she went walking in the mountains in the summer and autumn, and skiing in the winter and the spring. Sometimes at the weekends, she would visit her grandparents and other members of the extended family in the village where they lived.

Whilst at University she joined the ski touring club and, as the activity was considerably cheaper than visiting the ski resorts, she was able to take advantage of organised trips especially to the Massif des Ecrins, Belladone, and the Bauges to spend the days climbing mountains on skis, and the nights in some mountain refuge. Natalie asked me if I skied.

I had to admit that I didn't. Indeed, as I explained to her, I was never very sporty, and those activities that I had tried had proved my general incompetence in such matters. Compared to her excursions in the mountains, my life seemed to have been very much devoid of adventure, although to be fair to myself, I had spent some summers sailing in the Western Isles. I remember thinking at the time that I must have seemed like a very boring person. If anything, I was probably more than a bit bookish. Nothing pleased me more than to sit in front of a log fire in the winter, curled up with a good book. There was an undeniable comfort and security associated with it. In addition, I had all the adventures I ever desired between the pages of a captivating thriller. The idea of venturing out onto winter snows just did not appeal, but then Scotland in winter is not quite the same as the Alps in spring.

Nevertheless, I'm pleased to say that despite my lack of daring do, our evening together seemed to go remarkably well. To be honest, rather better than I expected it would, which in itself was also a relief. I had no particular expectations of how it might turn out but, we had to work together and, if the evening had been a disaster, it would have been a poor start to our association. As it turned out, it wasn't a disaster at all. Our conversation flowed easily and it proved to be an ideal introduction to our temporary working partnership.

Inevitably, however, over dinner, we began to speculate about the background to the project. It was difficult not to talk about it. Anxious to keep an open mind on the subject until we started our own contribution to the investigations, I was diffident in expressing any strong opinion other than to express my amazement. Natalie on the other hand, was full of ideas. Where half of them came from, I have no idea. I thought that she must have a very vivid imagination and as soon as she had introduced one idea, she dropped it and came up with another. As a brainstorming session, it was absolutely fabulous, except there seemed to be only one brain that was doing the storming.

When she asked me what I thought, I was always very measured in my response and she would usually politely agree with me and then go off on another wild exploration. It was fun however, and it caused me to begin to think about the wide range of possible scenarios that might confront us when we started our investigations proper. I think that I knew right then that we would make an excellent team. We were rather like chalk and cheese. We complemented each other tremendously. She wanted to run everywhere, explore everything, and she was always full of ideas. I was slower, more methodical, and was generally walking somewhere behind; more controlled, my hand on my chin, with my eyes regarding the ground. This is not to say that Natalie was unmethodical, or that she wasn't thorough, its just that it seemed that she was always somewhere

ahead of me. I think that she could see the patterns before I could, and, she seemed to have a much clearer vision of where she was going and what she needed to do next.

Initially, I worried that Natalie would find it rather frustrating working with me. Compared to her, I was such a plodder. Happily, she didn't seem to mind at all. As she said, she needed someone to clean up behind her, to sift through, and order the debris, before discarding the rubbish. It was something, I'm happy to admit, that I became very good at.

At the end of the evening we shared the cost of the meal, she insisted, and then we walked back to the University. For me the walk was far too short. I could have walked around Kiev all night with her. Her conversation was so stimulating that I felt that I could have listened to her forever. When we arrived back, we parted, but not until she had embraced me on both cheeks. She was French, and of course, for her, it was perfectly normal. It wasn't normal for me however, and my cheeks burnt for hours afterwards, whilst my nostrils played with the scent that she casually left on my face. To be candid with you, I didn't wash my face that night and went to sleep savouring the faint smell of musk!

When morning arrived, however, all trace of her perfume had dissipated. I was quite disappointed and tried to recreate it in my mind. Unfortunately, the task was far beyond my mental capabilities. Still, I reflected with some borrowed Gallic pragmatism, I had something special to look forward to, which more than lightened my slightly sombre mood.

I was rarely good getting up in the morning. It usually took me a while to come round, but that morning was different. I experienced a real sense of anticipation as we were due to start our work together, and I realised that I could hardly wait for the moment to arrive. I don't think that I had felt such enthusiasm for a very long time and it took me back to being almost adolescent again. I must admit that I felt really quite rejuvenated; even the idea of more rubbery, hard-boiled eggs and black bread, failed to depress my uplifted spirit.

CHAPTER 3

When I arrived at the laboratory, one of Lazlo's assistants, a woman called Anechka Leschenko, was already talking to Natalie. Natalie greeted me enthusiastically, rather like a long lost friend I thought, and planted more kisses on my cheek. I think I probably blushed; I certainly felt as if I did. I simply wasn't used to being greeted as such in my home, never mind in my work place – Scotland is not quite so warm as France in many respects, other than just its climate. It's not that we're standoffish; we're simply rather more reserved.

Anechka, who was tall, blue-eyed, with blonde short-cropped hair, was almost the antithesis of Natalie. By contrast, Natalie displayed the very recognisable Latin features of a true descendant of the Mediterranean. Her sparkling brown eyes and olive complexion complemented her long dark wavy hair. As I discovered as we got to know each other, Natalie employed a multitude of methods of tying her hair back to keep it out of her face, most of which, sooner or later, failed.

Natalie introduced me to Anechka. We shook hands; it was a cooler, rather more formal greeting and for a somewhat diffident Scot, comfortably reassuring.

'Shall we go through?' Anechka suggested, leading the way into another smaller laboratory. 'I have already laid out the first skeleton for you to examine.'

'Yes, of course,' I said, still feeling slightly distracted by the presence of Natalie. In time, I thought, I would probably get used to her intimate form of greeting, although, that degree of familiarity might ultimately be a disappointing loss.

We passed through a set of double doors into the next room. It was smaller, quite plain, painted in proletariat cream, and echoed many years of relative austerity. In the centre of the room was a large table, and on it, neatly arranged on a black sheet, was the skeleton.

'Is this the one that was discovered in the circular tomb?' Natalie asked, bending over the table to look at the organised collection of bones.

'Yes,' replied Anechka. 'I set it out yesterday. It's the first time its been out of the box since it was brought from the site last summer.'

Once in the laboratory, we dressed appropriately for the examination, white coats, rubber gloves, facemasks, and hats. Our principle concern was not for our health, but rather to avoid any unnecessary contamination of the subject.

At first glance, anatomically speaking, all the bones appeared to have been arranged correctly, and so it seemed that it would be a fairly straightforward process of examining individual bones, working through them methodically looking for damage of one sort or another, caused either by injury or disease.

Natalie and I briefly discussed our methodology before commencing and we agreed that were two principal objectives that we should seek to follow. The first was to find out as much as we could about the person that we were examining, and the second was to discover if there were any clues that would help to establish the cause of death.

‘Shall we start at the head and work our way down?’
Natalie suggested.

‘Yes, why not. Do you mind if we use this?’ I asked producing a small cassette recorder. ‘It’ll be easier than taking notes.’

‘Not at all - are you going to speak into it, though?’

‘Yes, I can,’ I replied, adding, ‘if you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind at all,’ Natalie confirmed with a smile.

‘Have you made any assessment yet of the height of the subject?’ I asked Anechka.

‘No, not yet,’ she replied, ‘but I had the impression that for that period the subject appeared to be very tall.’

‘It was why I asked the question. Just looking at the length of the femur the subject would have probably been well over one metre eighty tall, and as you say, for that period, that’s rather unusual.’

Now, before I go any further I should explain some basic anatomy to you. First, in the normal adult human body, there are about one hundred and eighty bones; minor variations account for the imprecision in this number. For example, in an infant, there are more bones, but many fuse during childhood and adolescence. This process of fusion however, is not entirely uniform, which leaves us with the variation that I have just mentioned. Second, there are two principal parts to a skeleton. The axial skeleton, which comprises the skull, the spine, the ribs and the sternum, which altogether contain eighty bones; and the appendicular skeleton, that includes the two limb girdles, the shoulders, and the pelvis, as well of course, the arms and the legs. These bones comprise the rest. Of course, in this broad analysis, I’m not counting the little bones that form part of the ear and there are other variations, which occur from time to time, that also appear in normal adults, but I won’t bore you with the causes of these.

‘You appear to be familiar with the human anatomy,’ Natalie commented looking at the skeleton arranged in front of her. ‘Have you assembled many skeletons?’

‘Several,’ replied Anechka, modestly; she had probably done lots. ‘I thought it might help if I prepared this one for you.’

‘Thank you, that was kind of you. I see there are tags on each of the bones. Is this the way they were discovered on site.’

‘Yes, they were all tagged on site. From the photographs, the skeleton seemed to be largely undisturbed. The ribs and sternum had fallen into the chest cavity. The subject was lying on his side with his knees bent up in a foetal position.’

‘*Her* knees,’ corrected Natalie, pointing at the pelvis, ‘and the last bones that were tagged are these on the left foot. Correct?’

‘Yes, that’s correct.’ Anechka looked a little embarrassed that she had sexed the skeleton incorrectly and appeared concerned that her careful work might be further examined to find other faults.

Natalie bent down to look at the tag.

‘Interesting,’ she said, reading the label. I wasn’t sure what she was referring to and I moved across to join her.

‘What do you think?’ I looked more intently at where she was pointing, at the vertebrae in the neck, and remember thinking immediately that it was somewhat odd, then looking closer, and deciding that it was definitely peculiar.

‘I think we had better start from scratch Natalie, it looks as though there is something rather strange here.’

‘Have I done something wrong?’ Anechka asked, clearly concerned.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I replied quickly, to reassure her. ‘It’s just something odd in the anatomy that’s confusing us. What do you think, Natalie?’

‘I agree, Robert,’ she said, abandoning her plan to start a closer examination of the cranium. It was back to basics. I think it was also the first time that I remember her calling me by my name. It had a strange effect on me. Maybe it was her French accent but there was something very exotic about it. Perhaps it was the silent ‘T’, or the way it seemed to emerge from the back of her mouth, I don’t know, but my reaction to her speaking my name also intrigued me. It was different. I remember I used to hang on to her words waiting for her to say it again and when she did, well, it affected me in a strange way, and surprisingly, quite profoundly.

‘You said that there are photographs of the skeleton taken in situ before it was removed?’ Natalie turned to Anechka.

‘Yes,’ she replied. She seemed to be slightly subdued. I thought she was still feeling embarrassed that she hadn’t spotted the anomaly, nor recognised the fact that the skeleton was that of a woman, but I didn’t really know.

‘Would it be possible to have a look at them please, Anechka?’ Natalie asked, looking intently at the spinal column and shrugging her shoulders again.

‘Is there any chance that this skeleton could have been contaminated, Anechka?’

‘No, not that I am aware of; Professor Kupan was present when the skeleton was removed and I’m sure that it would have been carried out with the utmost care.’

‘Good,’ said Natalie, ‘then we’ll have to be especially diligent that we don’t make any mistakes in our analysis.’

So, after we had examined the photographs, we started to take the skeleton apart and reassemble it again, checking each bone as we went. Well, we ran into difficulties almost immediately and in a way, after what we had already seen, it was not entirely surprising.

The spinal column, which was odd, was beginning to give us a lot of problems. We started as one normally would, C1, atlas, and the first vertebra at the top of the spinal column that supports the head, and carried on working through to C8,C9/T1? There are normally seven cervical vertebrae, followed by twelve thoracic, five lumbar, followed by the sacrum and the coccyx. That makes twenty-seven. We had twenty-nine. Allowing for lumbar variations, where sometimes non-fused vertebrae occur, we still appeared to have two bones too many. From their appearance, the two extra ones also appeared to be either in the first group, the cervical vertebrae; or in the second group, the thoracic vertebrae, although there was

no indication of facets where the ribs would have attached. It was all very strange

It reminded me immediately that the way that anatomists had traditionally treated their area of expertise was also quite bizarre. I had often wondered whether they had intended to make it confusing for medical students. Let me explain.

Cervical nerve roots exit above their corresponding vertebra, whereas the thoracic, lumbar and sacral nerve roots exit below the corresponding vertebra. So, there are eight cervical nerve roots but only seven cervical vertebrae. However, given what we appeared to have, it was considerably more confusing.

'I don't get this,' Natalie said, 'this is really, very odd. It's clear that the specimen has not been contaminated because all the bones fit together very neatly, none of them are damaged, but it is definitely quite abnormal.'

I don't remember passing an opinion at that stage. We looked again at the arrangement, but there seemed nothing wrong with the way that we had fitted the spine together. In fact, if we removed one of the vertebrae, its neighbours fitted together so awkwardly that the bone that had been removed had to be a part of this spinal column - it simply could not belong anywhere else.

'The subject must have had an unusually long neck,' I said. I think it sounded rather flippant, but it wasn't really that, which was principally occupying my mind. It was more a question of functionality that was beginning to intrigue me. It was obviously beginning to tax Natalie as well.

'So our subject is clinically abnormal in terms of anatomy. Question - is she a genetic mutation, a sport like a spontaneous mutation, or is she something stranger, a completely different genotype? The latter would seem to be highly unlikely, but in either case, the question that follows is - did the additional vertebrae give her something advantageous over her fellow humans?'

Natalie was asking the questions and answering some of them before I had a chance to intervene. 'Certainly, from her special burial, she appeared to have been revered and, if she did have something advantageous, what was it - strength, intellect, intelligence, sensory perception, special powers, what?'

Natalie was already off, exploring the unknown, her imagination running wild. However, first, we had to complete the task, so the plodder took over. By lunchtime we had checked and rechecked our work and were finally satisfied that the only skeletal abnormalities concerned the two bones, the one definitely in the neck and the other, possibly in the thorax, although somehow I already doubted that. To my mind, both bones belonged in the neck. Temporarily, we named the bones C8 and C9 because it was somewhere within, or at the end of the cervical vertebrae, that the anomaly seemed to be located.

Of course, because the spine seemed perfectly formed, if not a little long, we did not have any idea where within the cervical vertebrae, the additional bones really fitted. The extra bones could in fact have been positioned anywhere between C2 and T1. However, here's the rest of the conundrum - apart from

the additional vertebrae, most likely along with the bones there would also have been additional cervical nerves. Now, that was a very interesting concept indeed! Let me explain more.

Between each of the bones there are nerve roots connecting the spinal cord to the peripheral nervous system. Some of the roots provide specific muscular and sensory control, whilst others combine to provide functionality. Wherever these extra bones fitted, there would have also been nerves emerging, and the only conclusion we could arrive at was that these additional nerves would also have some specific function. It was quite bizarre.

‘I think we should organise some DNA testing,’ Natalie suggested. ‘We ought to take a sample from the other human remains that were found on the site at the same time. See if they come from the same gene stock.’

So, we arranged with Anechka to take samples and send them off for analysis as quickly as possible. And, well, that was the morning gone. In the afternoon, we planned to start the work that Natalie had contemplated commencing earlier that day before the complication of the bones arose.

Lunch was in the University’s refectory. It was not far from where we were working and I could see that Natalie was quite excited by our strange discovery. As for me, excited was hardly the word; intrigued would be closer; and quite confused, rather more accurate.

Normally, macro mutations, particularly where the skeleton is involved, result in disadvantageous abnormalities, so much so, that they often lead to the infant dying, or in earlier, more primitive times, particularly if the mutation resulted in some kind of disfigurement, of the infant even being put to death. Subsequently, the mutation, whatever it was, was not passed on to future generations because the subjects, in whom the mutation first occurred, never reach reproductive age - Darwinism – survival of the fittest, the fittest being those that did not display any abnormalities.

It’s true that certain minor structural abnormalities reappear from time to time. There are children that are born with six digits rather than the normal five and even some with short tails. However, in this present time, normally, these kinds of anomalies are removed surgically, to avoid as much as anything, embarrassment in later life. As such, these kinds of abnormalities will always continue to reoccur from time to time, simply because the chromosomes associated with their development remain in the gene bank. Nonetheless, thankfully, they remain relatively uncommon.

The abnormality, which presented with this skeleton, was much more extraordinary and posed many other questions that would be impossible to answer without any of the remaining soft tissue to examine. Natalie and I discussed the issue on the way back from lunch.

‘Do you imagine that these extra vertebrae merely doubled up some function, so there would be two sets of nerves going to the same place rather than one, or, do you think that some other, quite separate function was being served?’

‘Well, to my mind the former would be much easier to understand,’ I suggested. ‘Its a bit like a hiccup, or leaning on the key of a computer keyboard. A repeat version is just inserted accidentally. It could even be that during the development of the embryo a division took place at an early stage where normally no division occurs and the two elements progressed side by side without compromising each other.’

‘But twice?’ Natalie questioned.

‘Well, if there was something causing the rupture at an early stage, say some kind of external stimulus on the system, for example, poisoning of some sort or other, it could happen more than once, I suppose.’

‘But wouldn’t the duplicate be identical? The bones are not identical, they appear quite clearly as intermediate vertebrae.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘that does rather suggest something else.’

‘And what about the possibility of these supplementary vertebrae providing for an additional functionality?’

‘That I would find especially difficult, because then, apart from the structural abnormality represented by the bones, we would have a complex bisymmetrical development of soft tissue. Apart from blood supply and nerves, could this soft tissue also include different, modified, or even additional organs? It’s difficult to see where that would have come from in terms of evolutionary development, and seems to me to be far too complex to be associated with mutation, even with an exceptional macro-mutation.’

‘We should at least do an analysis to see if there are abnormal quantities of metals such as lead, antimony, cadmium in the bones. From what Lazlo was saying their metallurgical culture seemed to be far in advance of what was beginning to develop in the early Bronze Age and that at least would suggest the presence of minerals or heavy metals that are now known to have deleterious effects especially on the development of embryos.’

I agreed. In fact, I had already considered that it would be crucially important to undertake these tests; and, if the results confirmed an abnormality, at least it would give us more of an idea in what direction we were actually heading.

CHAPTER 4

Now here's something interesting - I was quite astonished by Lazlo's reaction to our news. Rather than being fascinated and excited by what we had to tell him, he seemed the opposite. He was clearly quite disheartened and I even had the impression that he would have been much happier if we had found nothing at all abnormal. At least then perhaps, it would have been one part of the puzzle that he would have been able to draw a line under. However, it wasn't. On the contrary, clearly it was something that he would have preferred to do without; indeed, it complicated matters further. It was almost like us arriving in his office and saying tauntingly - 'we've looked at your problem and guess what - we've come up with a whole new set of problems for you to consider!' Lazlo was not very happy; it didn't help him in the least. I decided to change the subject quickly moving away from our curious skeleton.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the presentation that we had been treated to the previous day concerned the decorations or engravings found on the metal objects. I felt that it was a good opportunity to ask Lazlo about them, take his mind off his new problem, so to speak.

'I'll tell you about the dish before I describe the other main artefacts.' He used the term dish to describe the receptacle that the body of the woman had been laid on in the burial chamber. The dish was over one metre in diameter, Lazlo explained. When it was discovered, it was dirty and slightly tarnished, but otherwise, it was in an exceptional state of preservation. There was no oxidation and the tarnish proved only to be superficial. The decoration on the concave surface, on which the body had been placed, comprised a sixteen-pointed star. The same basic decoration was also engraved on the metal cover that was found underneath the dish. It was similar to a compass rose and all sixteen divisions were equal.

There were also two outer concentric rings, which were divided by the sixteen points surrounding the centrepiece. This decoration overall looked like a star with the radii converging at

the central point. As Lazlo was talking, he sketched the arrangement, demonstrating how the rings fitted together. I copied it afterwards in order to understand the geometry better.

‘The middle star shape arose from the intersection of the radial features to give the overall impression of a fiery sun,’ Lazlo further explained. ‘In the remaining spaces in the outside ring there are a series of symbols. Altogether there were sixteen of them. The same elongated pointed triangular shapes that were used to form the points of the star were also used to form the symbols. And then, intertwined through the spokes of the star, was what appeared to be a dragon, or a serpent with a long tail.’

I was intrigued looking at his sketch. ‘What did you make of these symbols?’ I asked Lazlo.

‘Well, my initial thought was that they were pictograms of some sort; a bit like the signs of the zodiac.’

‘When you say pictograms, what message did you think they might convey?’ Natalie asked.

‘We never got as far as discerning any kind of meaning, but I felt quite convinced at the time that this was their function. You know, you don’t have to use letters, or words, to describe what something is, or its function, or its significance - you can simply use an image to convey meaning. If you like, imagine an icon on a computer screen. On a daily basis, we now use a much more complex range of hieroglyphics in modern technology than other earlier societies did. One of the principal advantages of modern icons is that such hieroglyphics transcend language barriers. If you see a wastepaper, or trash container, on a computer screen then you know immediately where to put your rubbish. So these pictograms which we are accustomed to using convey something universally to our twentieth century society because we all use computers and we all use rubbish bins.’

‘So what’s your point, Lazlo?’ Natalie asked, impatient that he should get to the point.

‘The icons, or pictograms that are shown on the metal disc are there to convey something, I don’t believe for one moment that they are simply there for decoration.’

‘But, didn’t you say these symbols appeared at a time when written language had hardly begun to be developed?’ I asked.

‘Yes, exactly,’ Lazlo replied, an enigmatic smile on his face, ‘and that’s another problem. These ideograms are very sophisticated. One would imagine that they would have developed over a long period of time. Someone had time to think about them, to design them, and then even perhaps to refine them.’

‘Do these hieroglyphics appear to have any relationship with any other written form of language that came later?’ Natalie asked.

‘There are some similarities with cuneiform, but we think that this is more associated with the manner of producing the letters or symbols rather than the meaning of the words or icons.’

‘How do you mean, can you explain that more simply?’

‘I’ll give you an analogy. You can use ordinary letters of the alphabet to form words and you can use the same letters to form quadratic equations, but the meanings are completely different. I can find an icon in cuneiform, which represents a bushel of corn. It’s identifiable because it relates to their society, which we know something about. I can find an almost identical symbol here but I have absolutely no idea what it means except that I’m convinced that it doesn’t represent a bushel of corn. Do you see what I mean?’

‘Yes, I do,’ I said.

‘So do you think there is a relationship between cuneiform and what you have here?’ Natalie asked, pursuing her point.

‘I would be astonished if there was not some kind of link, but you have to remember that cuneiform was a written language that used a reed stick and clay tablets as a medium to write on, much as we use ink and paper, although the technologies are completely different. If the Sumerians wanted to keep what had been written for a long time, the clay tablet could be fired in much the same way as a terracotta tile. However, whilst the technology for producing the icons or pictograms on the metal is quite different, I do believe that it is quite possible that the concept of written communication is linked between the two cultures, but what that relationship might have been is impossible to say at this stage. At a basic level, it could be no more than a style that adapted easily to a more primitive technology. Cuneiform could have simply copied the style of the hieroglyphics whilst transporting none of the original meaning. Curious isn’t it?’

‘Very.’ It was all I could think of to say at the time.

My mind was spinning with everything I had been shown the day before and the discovery that we had made that morning. I began to empathise with Lazlo. He had been living with this enigma for nearly a year. One day and one morning had completely confused me! None of it seemed to make much sense and I was sliding back to the thought that it must be some gigantic hoax and I knew that the thought must have occurred to Lazlo on more than one occasion.

‘There were all sorts of other artefacts that were discovered that were also more or less unique. Pottery, glass and what appear to be precision tools.’ Lazlo mentioned it in a sort of off-hand way.

‘You mentioned that in passing yesterday,’ Natalie said.

‘Well, the pottery is not so surprising although the style is unique and the quality of the workmanship is exceptional. Unfortunately, everything that was found was broken. As for the glass, it’s unusual to find glass in this period, but if they were involved in metallurgy, the high temperatures would have easily produced glass from any silicates that were present in the process. There was no evidence that they were especially interested in developing the discovery however, although there are some pieces, which look as though they might have been used as lenses. They have the capacity to magnify, but we haven’t found any evidence that indicates that they transformed the raw material specifically for this purpose. One of the other

problems that confronts us also was that either before, or after the apparent fire, which destroyed the complex, it appears that the whole place was ransacked.'

'What about the metal tools then?'

'Well, I described them as tools because I cannot imagine any other function for them unless they were components being manufactured for something. I've got some of them here,' Lazlo bent over in his chair, opened a drawer in his desk and extracted a small box. He spilled the contents across his desk.

'May I,' I asked hesitating to take one of the pieces off the table.

'Of course,' Lazlo said, 'please, help yourself.'

Natalie and I picked up some of the pieces and began to look at the engineering. It was quite delicately made and extremely fine, but I had no idea what it was that I was looking at.

'You would have imagined that to make something as precise as this one would have needed a magnifying glass!'

'As I said, it's not out of the question. The fact that we didn't find anything more convincing doesn't mean that they didn't have access to the technology. Overall, they seemed so advanced that it would be difficult to believe that they hadn't mastered that element of science as well. It may simply be that, if there were any magnifying glasses, they could have been stolen when the complex was overrun. The pieces we have left are incomplete and maybe they were left because they represented no interest to the people who ransacked the site.'

Our discussion with Lazlo was abruptly concluded when one of his colleagues interrupted our informal meeting. They were soon deep in conversation and Lazlo apologised and made it clear that we should leave. We made our way back to the laboratory to restart where we had left off before lunch. This time we were able to follow Natalie's original plan without interruption. She made a preliminary examination of each part of the skeleton, and then passed the bone to me to confirm her findings or to look at something particular, which might require further investigation. I recorded our findings and our brief discussions on various aspects of the investigation in English. I had plenty of blank cassettes so there was no immediate need to transcribe everything. Later, when we had time, and having concluded our report in English, we would have it translated into Ukrainian.

Starting with the cranium, there did not seem to be any abnormalities, no indications of fractures, scarring and the like. If anything, I had the impression that for its size it was slightly heavy and when we weighed it, considering the time it had been buried and that all we were looking at was an empty bone structure it was quite heavy. It appeared however that the bone might have been laid down quite densely rather than there being an unusual increased thickness of the skull. Other bones displayed similar characteristics. This was also slightly unusual as there is a tendency, especially in women, for bones to become less dense and more porous as the person ages. Nevertheless, the phenomena of the density of the bones might well have been a reflection of her life style, or even her diet, but

not her age. She wasn't a young woman when she died, that was clear, although we had made no scientific assessment of her age at that point. We continued.

The upper jaw and lower mandible contained a full set of teeth and although there was evidence of some wear, they were not excessively ground down. This was another interesting fact, and one, which perhaps pointed to and confirmed a different and possibly more refined diet than that which would have been generally expected for the era. It would have been certainly more usual during that period to see well-worn teeth as a result of diet. By then, cereals were being quite widely grown and the basic diet was generally based on bread type products. The bread, however, often contained hard mineral material from the grinding process that was used to produce the flour. The abrasive result of this unavoidable addition to the diet normally had a marked eroding effect on teeth; but not so in this case, or so it appeared. Perhaps she only ate fish, I wondered; the site was close to the sea.

Given our rather hesitant start in the morning, we were unable to complete our task of examining all the bones of this first skeleton that day. Nevertheless, we were already beginning to build-up a fascinating picture of the person. And that was exactly what she was beginning to become, a person. Natalie started casually referring to her as Clara, why, I have no idea, but I found myself quickly doing the same thing. Well, it was less impersonal than referring to *the skeleton*, or *the specimen*, and anyway it was easier to refer to 'Clara's tibia' - so, Clara she became.

Her rib cage seemed relatively normal and the juxtaposition of the ribs rather confirmed our first thought that the additional bones were both cervical rather than thoracic. Progress of sorts I suppose!

Clara must have been an impressive woman in her time. She would have been rather tall in comparison to her contemporaries. I imagined that she must also have been remarkably elegant. Natalie and I discussed the possibility that she might have been a princess, or a queen, or even perhaps a priestess, and of course, she could well have been a combination of any of these. That she had a privileged life and that she seemed to be revered, or perhaps feared, seemed equally clear from the burial she had been given.

At 6.00 p.m. we decided to finish for the day. After clearing up and completing our notes, we washed up and left Anechka to lock up the laboratory. Natalie suggested that we should dine together again and I was delighted to accept her invitation.

I think that we were probably more exhausted than we thought. It had been a long day and when it came to going out, we were not very adventurous. That evening we visited the same restaurant that we had tried the previous evening. We knew that it wouldn't take too long to walk across the park and as both of us were tired, it seemed like an easy solution. We remembered that the menu was reasonably extensive and we had the opportunity to try something different. I felt rather more comfortable in Natalie's company that second night. I

don't know if it was the result of feeling satisfied after a good day's work, although I think when I say *good*, I mean *exhausting*, or whether I was simply just more relaxed with Natalie. Thankfully, I found that she was very easy to get on with and that meant a lot if we were working together.

The restaurateur recognized us from the previous night and treated us like long lost friends. Natalie appreciated the attention that he gave us. I wasn't bothered, but I did notice that she liked being made a fuss of and made a mental note.

It was not long however, before we started to discuss Clara again. As you can imagine, it was difficult to leave work behind us. Not that it bothered me; it was the thing that united us. It gave us a common purpose, and it was of course, the reason for our being there together.

'How old do you think Clara was when she died, Robert?' Natalie asked.

'She must have been a mature woman maybe in her fifties, or even sixties,' I replied. I had been wondering about the question all afternoon. Life at that time would have been hard for most and I suspect that the average life span would have been no more than about forty or forty-five years. For those people who knew her then, she might have seemed to have an ageless quality. She still had all her own teeth, which appeared in good condition, she would have been tall and elegant, and she displayed no physical problems such as curvature of the spine, or arthritic joints. In all, even by present day standards, she looked in pretty good condition for her age.

'I was also beginning to wonder if she might perhaps have been considered more than a queen, or a priestess, perhaps even a deity of some sort, maybe even a goddess. What do you think, Natalie?'

'To be frank with you, I was wondering the same thing. She would have probably outlived most, if not all of her contemporaries. She was certainly strange, well if not strange, unusual, exotic, even perhaps alien in a sense, and being taller and possibly heavier than the average male, she must therefore have presented quite a commanding figure. She would have had a presence that distinguished her from other people, that's for sure. It's possible that she may not even have been related to the group that was found around her, those found in the mass grave. The DNA testing will hopefully help us with that though.'

'When did Anechka say the results would be available?'

'Wednesday.'

'That's pretty rapid. So, we have another day's work without that information,' I reflected. 'Well, we still have a lot of donkey work to do.'

'I think that suits you doesn't it?' Natalie asked, smiling, reassuring me that it wasn't a criticism, or that she wasn't teasing me, or even suggesting that I was some kind of ass!

'I like to be methodical. Normally, I find all the bits start to fall into place as the facts are revealed.'

'I'm more the opposite,' Natalie admitted.

'I've noticed,' I replied.

‘It doesn’t bother you does it?’ I was surprised how concerned she seemed to be that I might find her *modus operandi* unacceptable, or irritating.

‘No, in fact, quite the reverse,’ I replied, ‘I find it refreshing. I was thinking that you must find it more frustrating working with me. I must seem so slow, so pedestrian.’ I realised that I was fishing for compliments and stopped immediately. It seemed so naïve, rather childish even. I don’t know why I did it. I think I wanted her to show some affection towards me. It worked though.

Natalie put her hand on mine. ‘I think we make a good team,’ she said, as she patted it. I blushed again. It was the second time in two days and probably twenty years. I was relieved that the restaurant was so dimly lit; I could feel my face glowing.

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