

THE CHILDREN WHO STAYED OLD

Towards the end of 1590, in the area of Oltenia* Agen, on the bank of the Danube that faces Carpathia, between the fiefdom of Prince Magdorz and the county of Linesku, there was a remote, isolated village, the inhabitants of which all appeared prematurely old. While the body and mainly their complexions seemed withered, their behaviour was youthful and they were only just able to live up to their social responsibilities.

The only existing complete testimony about Voronecz – the name of the village – and its strange inhabitants belongs to Ivan the monk in his treaty “The Christianisation of the Villages South of the Danube”.

This manuscript was found a few years after it had been written in the small library of the Agen monastery and was then moved to Roman Eastern Papal Institute, where it is today at the disposal of scholars. Great dispute between Jesuit scholars and secular researchers arose in the 17th century concerning this testimony, which seems objective and unencumbered by superstition. The reverberations of this dispute can be found in the religious publications of the time.

According to Ivan the monk, the inhabitants of Voronecz were slight and diminutive with thinning, white hair, deep facial wrinkles and a vacant look in their eyes. They had a limited vocabulary and difficulty with their motor skills. In general they were not self-sufficient. All the productive work was carried out by a small group of younger individuals ranging between 20 and 40 years of age, physically larger in size, which made up approximately 10% of the population. The adolescents and the children could be counted on the fingers of both hands while the author of the treaty was unable to locate even one baby or old person in the whole of the village.

The dispute that arose approximately fifty years after the treaty was published lasted for a century and came close leading the church to excommunicating certain individuals, as the Jesuits supported that the inhabitants of Voronecz that had been located by Ivan the monk were prototypes of humans, something like angels that had fallen to earth. Others compared them to elves and even aliens, who had in some unknown manner invaded human civilisation. Others still contended that they were God's playthings with which He teased the rationality of humankind.

The question was why these humanoid beings, who seemed to have some fundamental connection with the rest of society, without actually being a product of it, behaved like children when they were biologically worn and wizened.

The Jesuit priest Jeronimo presented a two-prong theory: either the inhabitants of Voronecz were essentially old people who had remained – for reasons unknown to us – childlike in behaviour or they were in fact children whose bodies had aged prematurely.

Neither of these views answered certain basic questions such as why these beings, if they were old, were physically smaller than most adults and behaved like children. Nor did Jeronimo's theory answer why the distribution of the population was so contrary to the norm, i.e. the 'immature elderly' made up 90% of the total population. Where were the babies, the young adults and the truly old people of the village? Perhaps something even stranger, more curious and inexplicable was at large here.

One of the most daring yet convincing theories was put forth in 1731 by the philosopher Salvio Neri, then advisor to the Bishop of Sienna Raphaele Sera. At a later date, Neri turned to alchemy and was prosecuted by the Great Inquisition.

Neri supported that in the village of Voronecz time, as we know it, was inverted. Neri points out that Ivan himself was not able to discover how and when children were born in Voronecz or – if his theory is held to be true – how the elderly were born. In this case, this did not mean that these people lived their whole life backwards nor that they underwent some kind of gradual decay, nor that those who lived long enough ended up as fetuses. It merely meant that for some unknown reason they were born old as they progressed in years, they became younger.

The population of Voronecz was not always so singular. This strange situation did not exist until Ivan the monk discovered it. Statistically such a coincidence is rare.

According to the above-mentioned theory, the next generations in Voronecz would experience certain pages of history from back to front. When Neri travelled to Voronecz with the financial support of his powerful patron and accompanied by monks and scholars of the time, he discovered that the village had been uninhabited since the 14th century. This discovery only served to support his theory. Two Swiss scholars who accompanied him pointed out that in this case, since time had been inverted, the village had in fact been uninhabited since the 21st century and not the 14th.

In the end, certain questions remained unanswered. The first concerned the diminutive size of the inhabitants of Voronecz in the first years of their lives, which were in fact their last years. In addition, the beginning and end of their biological course remained a mystery since there was no trace of a cemetery near the village.

Who were the inhabitants of Voronecz? Tiny, old people or elderly people who gradually grew younger? In any case, apart from Neri's theories, they cannot have been old or born old or, to put it more simply, children who were born old. Worth mentioning at this point is the view expressed in 1953 by Lev Stanish,

professor of molecular biology at the University of Carrridge in South Carolina. After an on-site investigation of Voronecz and a thorough analysis of a partially destroyed page of Ivan's manuscript, Stanish concluded that these strange beings that lived without dying in Voronecz around 1590 were in reality children who remained old. And this because they appeared at the very moment and spot that the pendulum of time and place was reversed.

* an area in what is now called Romania