



A Shrub as a Message

Ukraine

A long, long time ago, the kings of Poland and Hungary made a pact whereby they would join their armies to invade and divide up the territories of Galicia-Volhynia, in what is now western Ukraine.

In early summer, when the kings found it less irksome to undertake military campaigns, the two armies arrived in the vicinity of Dorohobuzh, a heavily walled town. Faced with the prospect of having to stage a siege that would delay their plans, the kings thought it best to send an emissary with a letter, offering the defenders to spare the lives of the inhabitants of the town on condition that they open the gates of the walls, leave the town unarmed and surrender. Otherwise, they warned, they would set fire to the town and the entire population would be put to the sword.

They were given two days to consider their decision.

Once the stipulated time had passed, a messenger left through a postern in the wall and headed towards the royal pavilions of the invading army, positioned on a nearby hill. After being stopped by the soldiers of the advanced guard, the messenger was escorted to the place where the two kings were.

‘I bring the answer to your offer of surrender,’ said the messenger, bowing to the sovereigns.

He then handed them the stem of a shrub with ash-like leaves and a beautiful cluster of pale pink flowers at the top.

The kings looked at each other in confusion.

'Is that all?' they asked.

'The council of elders has merely instructed me to give you this,' replied the emissary, 'and they also told me that, if this stalk is not enough for you, you have many more in the bushes that flourish all around you on the hill.'

And, bowing to them again in respect, he added:

'I cannot and would not be able to tell you anything more.'

The kings of Poland and Hungary let the messenger go and pondered together what the defenders of the city might have meant by sending them the stem of a bush that was indeed everywhere in the vicinity.

Finally, not being able to discern the message, they called in their most learned and wise men, to see if they could find any symbolism in the shrub. But they too were in confusion, throwing out possible answers almost at random and trying not to appear useless to those who were paying them for their indolence. And so they pondered, until one of them seemed to come up with the solution.

'I was wondering why this plant looked so familiar to me,' he said, raising an eyebrow. 'It's a plant that, even if you set fire to it, doesn't burn.'

And, without further explanation, he took a burning stick from one of the cook fires and went to the nearest bush of the bizarre plant. He put the flame to it and, almost immediately, the whole bush burst into a bluish green flame. But after a few moments the flame was extinguished, and the shrub was left unharmed, as if no fire had passed through it, with its beautiful flower clusters standing insolently upright.

Both the kings and their entourages, as well as the soldiers of the guard, were astonished at what they had seen, and some began to murmur among themselves what they thought the council of town elders had meant to convey to them.

The Hungarian king lowered his head and shook it slowly from side to side, as if dejected.

‘What did you understand?’ asked the Polish king when he saw him discouraged without explanation.

The Hungarian king raised his head and replied in a deep voice:

‘That we will never conquer this land.’

The Polish monarch made a puzzled, uncomprehending gesture.

‘I shall go back home with my army,’ continued the Hungarian, ‘and I would recommend you to do the same, for you will not subdue this people.’

This took place many centuries ago, and since then Ukraine has been invaded a dozen times. Throughout history, these lands have been burned, plundered and razed to the ground by various invaders, who have forbidden their people to speak their own language and to pass on their traditions and culture. And yet their invaders have always left with a bitter taste on their lips, never really savouring victory.

In the end, the Ukrainian spirit has smiled again under the sun, like the clusters of pale pink flowers on that incombustible shrub with its ash-like leaves. And the yellow fields of grain and the deep blue skies of that land have shone again, reminding all its oppressors of the indestructibility of the people who populate Ukraine. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2024).

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Comments

Both imperialist thought and its younger brother, colonialist thought, are the cause of an inexhaustible tide of suffering in human history. The impulse of domination that animates them is one of the most perverse and abominable tendencies that have driven the human species for millennia.

In Europe – only in Europe – an act was signed in 1975 – unfortunately not binding, in a continent so prone to colonisation. It was the Helsinki Declaration. According to it all European countries – including the USSR and Turkey – plus the United States and Canada, undertook to respect the sovereign rights of peoples, the non-use of force, the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of states, not to mention respect for human rights and the self-determination of peoples. That is why the invasion of another country by force of arms and violence must be considered a very serious breach of international law, whoever the perpetrator country may be. This should be an inviolable and binding element that all countries in the world should abide by, if we truly want to embark on the path that will lead us, one day, to a world without war and violence.

Clearly, we still have a long way to go.

The message shrub in this Ukrainian story is a Rutaceae plant of the genus *Dictamnus* L. And of the two species of this genus growing in the Ukraine, *Dictamnus albus* L. and *Dictamnus gymnostylis* Steven, the protagonist of the legend would probably be the first of them, the *Dictamnus albus*. Although both species of *Dictamnus* could fit the properties attributed to it in this story, *D. albus* seems to be the most suitable in this case as it is mainly distributed in the western regions of Ukraine – where the territories of Galicia-Volhynia are located – whereas *D. gymnostylis* is mainly distributed in the eastern part of Ukraine and in Crimea (Gnatiuk, 2019).

El *Dictamnus albus* is called burning bush in English because it has been associated with the burning bush in the biblical passage of Moses, where it says:

The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up. (Ex. 3:2)

The description of this plant – and that of its sister *D. gymnostylis* (Fleisher and Fleisher, 2004) – fits in with the story and also with the fact that they catch fire quickly and quickly extinguish within a few moments without affecting the plant. This is because these *Dictamnus* exude

flammable oils which protect them from insects, but which, at high temperatures, turn into gas, specifically isoprene, a gas with a boiling temperature of 34°C (93.2°F). Thus, on hot days, these plants are enveloped in a cloud of flammable gas which, by simply bringing a match close to it, can ignite immediately. But this fire is extinguished moments later when the gas is consumed, leaving the plant unharmed after the blaze that has enveloped it.

Sources

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- McAllister, M. (2022 Jun 3). *Ukrainian stories and legends in English*. The Museum of Childhood Ireland.
<https://museumofchildhood.ie/ukrainian-stories-and-legends-in-english/>
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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – The Global Situation: Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Preamble – The Challenges Ahead: Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

