

## THE DAGGER OF OMAHUNDRO

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As the most senior members of my research group, I can trust you with the secret I am about to tell. I was there when Apostle Professor Zogodrov made his now universally-known announcement: he had found the legendary Dagger of Omahundro. I stood not five feet away from him when, at that very same press conference and as proof of the Dagger's veracity, he brutally killed Apostle Misha Wagner, a long-time rival. You have heard about these events as history, but there is so much more to heaven and earth than is found in history. If I am discovered here, if I suddenly disappear, I want you to know why, and I want you to carry on my mission. The truth must be spoken, and I will speak it now.

More than anything else, that day is etched into my memory with crisp edges. Zogodrov stood outside the Holy Temple of The Faith of The Will behind a podium perfectly framed for the cameras. The newly risen sun was all the lighting he needed to set the stage for what he must have thought would be his ascension. I was just grateful that the sun offered me some warmth on that cold morning. I cannot help but think that he chose that morning deliberately, it being the eve of the annual Red Dawn celebration, but perhaps it was divine will.

You might wonder at my presence, that I was part of a world-historical event, but life is funny that way. Though now an obscure professor of anthropology, I was then a sacred archaeologist who had just completed my doctoral studies and was serving as one of Zogodrov's research assistants on the search that uncovered the dagger he believed to be the sacred Dagger of Omahundro.

I stood there near Apostle Professor Zogodrov as he explained the significance of his find with great solemnity: "The Faith of The Will is unusual to outsiders," he said motioning to the press that had been called to attendance, "I see many foreigners in the ranks of the journalists here today. I thank you, as I thank all of you, for taking an interest in the religious history and—I think it only right to say—in the religious present and future of our nation.

"Our most holy faith is founded on the idea of the immortal and perfectible nature of humanity's collective will. Through this will's strength,

our nation stepped over ignorant poverty to become the people of pure power and action that you know today. Our faith's doctrines made this possible. The most central artifact of our religion is the Dagger of Omahundro: it was instrumental in the very birth of our religion. With it, our founding father Omahundro killed the man who blocked his way to this very site on which we now stand, the Holy Temple grounds. The aftermath of this event was miraculous because the people of Rotzlia, the name of Marchtsatsia before its awakening on The Red Dawn, firmly believed in the immorality of killing another human being. Yet, the people witnessed this killing and did nothing. Indeed, they not only ignored the killing but also rose up to follow Omahundro as Apostles of The Red Dawn.

“Our most sacred scriptures declare that anyone who possesses this sacred Dagger of Omahundro may kill with impunity, provided he uses the Dagger to do so. I am humbled by the spirit of our savior, that man of greatness, Omahundro that I have been led to this legendary Dagger and may now present it to his people's eyes once more for the first time in one thousand years!”

Zogodrov unveiled the Dagger to the crowd, pulling it from the breast pocket of his overcoat. It had a simple design with a curved blade and a serpentine handle that fit through the fingers, interlocking the Dagger with one's hand. He held it up like any precious artifact and then locked his fingers around it as Omahundro must have done all those years ago—if this dagger proved authentic.

Suddenly from the crowd, a confident voice rose up above the camera clicks and reverent mumbling: “What evidence do you have that it is the real Dagger?”

“I'm so glad! You anticipated the next part of my announcement!” came the jovial reply from Zogodrov. “As you would see upon inspection, the metal alloy matches those used at the time, it was dug from the same layer of sediment that matches the first Red Dawn, and it was unearthed in the region of Marchtsatsia from which Omahundro came. It only makes sense that it would be returned there in reverence for its own burial when he died.”

The voice rose from the crowd again. This time, the people around where it came from parted to reveal Misha Wagner: “But, Apostle Professor Zogodrov, why would they separate the Dagger from the most holy body of Omahundro? Why would the Dagger be transported back to the region of his birth and only then buried if it was yet extant at his death? How can you

explain the absence of the Dagger from the burial items left in the actual tomb of Omahundro in the crypt of the Holy Temple?”

I noted a slight tone of annoyance in Zogodrov’s voice as he responded: “Apostle Wagner, as with all matters pertaining to the actions of great men in the past, no one yet living can say confidently why things are done in this or that way, but all of this item’s material circumstances match the legendary Dagger, including its physical appearance, which we can now match to the description cryptically given in the scriptures: ‘like a beast without limbs, it binds itself fast to the will of the bearer, a blade that opens the way to his stepping over.’”

Wagner advanced toward the podium where Zogodrov and I were standing, along with the other two research assistants. He spoke as he ascended the steps: “Why can you not simply admit, Apostle Professor Zogodrov, that your evidence is not definitive and cannot be? The Dagger legend surely represents not a literal dagger but an idea, the one that gave birth to our glorious religion. We already have the Dagger: it is in our scriptures.” Wagner chuckled slightly as he finished his statement.

The Dagger still interlocking his fingers by its undulating hilt, Zogodrov stood silent for a moment and then smiled. Chuckling, he began to move toward Wagner with his arms outstretched: “Perhaps you are right, my old friend. We are of two minds, but one religion.” He stopped one step above Wagner’s and, looking down at him, rested his hands on his shoulders, the dagger still fastened around his fingers. “I have yet more evidence for you to consider,” said Zogodrov with a diminishing tone as he looked deeply into Wagner’s eyes. Like a snake’s lunging strike at its handler’s gentle hand, Zogodrov reared back and plunged the Dagger into Wagner’s middle. Save for Zogodrov, all in attendance mirrored the look of surprise and pain on Misha’s face.

Like lightning, this moment instantly struck every Apostle who stood there on the steps of the Holy Temple. The dilemma was simple: if this really was the Dagger of Omahundro, then Zogodrov’s action must be met with impunity. But, if the dagger wrapped around Zogodrov’s fingers was not that of Omahundro, then he had just committed murder and must be arrested. Reality hinged on our reaction. If we did nothing to detain Zogodrov, then the dagger would have to be considered real, and if it was indeed the Dagger, we should do nothing. On the other hand, if anyone attempted to detain Zogodrov, then that would be a sign that the dagger was not Omahundro’s, but could it not also be a sign that those attempting to stop him lacked the true faith, as the

enemies of Omahundro fought back against him and his Apostles as The Red Dawn swept over our land? The foreigners chattered in confusion and disbelief; we Apostles met Medusa's gaze.

Misha's body tumbled down the steps of the Holy Temple. Zogodrov produced a kerchief and wiped the dagger's blade as he slowly walked back to the podium: "As you all can see," he said with a long draw, "the Dagger has been used to kill with impunity. No other dagger in the world has this property. Thus, it is without a doubt the legendary and most holy Dagger of Omahundro!" Zogodrov raised the dagger in his hand above his head in triumph, smiling with innocent enthusiasm.

I ran down the steps to Apostle Wagner's body. He might need help, might still live, I thought. If I couldn't decide what to do about Zogodrov, I could at least help the man he stabbed. I wondered if this would be seen as a sign of apostasy, but a human life—how could I stand by and watch it slip away?

Members of the foreign press noticed my intent and some moved with me to check on Misha. Others stood dumbfounded or filmed and gleefully took pictures. I rolled Misha over and searched for a pulse. None. I checked his breathing. None. I realized a man had just been killed for his ideas: murdered because he stood in the way. A man was killed, and I couldn't even say if it was salvation or sin.

With a moral battle raging in my soul, my mind struggled to make sense of this situation in the sight of Wagner's pitiful form. Then spoke Salchinski, another of Zogodrov's research assistants and someone I knew from personal experience to be a political climber. He cried out with sudden joy: "the savior reborn! Witness the new Omahundro!" Then he knelt in reverence to Zogodrov. Every Apostle in the area looked with frantic fear to see what the others were doing. I must confess that I did so as well.

Either this was the Dagger or it wasn't. It was either heaven or hell for Zogodrov, no more or less. But, I had no idea which he deserved. My faith was strong, and this situation was not simply a matter of deciding what I wanted in this situation and choosing to do it. It was not a matter of politics. I needed to know the truth. Salchinski was not a devout Apostle; I couldn't rely on his actions, and every other Apostle there to whom he wasn't a stranger knew this as well.

I can only attest with certainty to my own thoughts at the time, but I strongly suspected that every other Apostle of true faith in the crowd was also

having trouble reconciling Zogodrov's behavior, petty and self-aggrandizing, with the idea that he was somehow the wielder of our religion's holiest relic. Even beyond his behavior in this moment, I had worked with Zogodrov for years, and I knew he was no world-historical man, no man of universal will. He was small-minded, good at advancing himself.

No other Apostles moved to join Salchinski, and this swept the smile from his face. He looked around with comic surprise, like a man proposing marriage who receives no reply, and started to step up and away from Zogodrov. At the same time, one other Apostle, a skinny man unfamiliar with Salchinski, took and quickly aborted a step forward, as if to indicate that he was about to join Salchinski but hesitated at the latter's withdrawal. Seeing this, Salchinski lunged forward again to his former position, but seeing the scrawny man stop, he pretended like he was tying his shoe and then stood up.

Just then, when every Apostle in the crowd would have rather died than remain where they stood, two temple guards, having seen the incident play out, arrived on the scene and began to assess the situation. They instinctively identified Zogodrov as the one who killed Misha and moved to each side of the dagger-wielding Apostle to restrain him. Noticing this, Zogodrov thrust the dagger into the air and said, "Apostle guardsmen, this dagger is the Dagger of Omahundro rediscovered! I have killed with impunity to show its veracity!" His confidence somewhat shaken at the imminent threat of arrest, Zogodrov managed to assert his message credibly enough to check the temple guards briefly.

Both guards looked to one another for an indication of what to do. Like the rest of us Apostles in the crowd, they too met Medusa's gaze, that is, until a voice rang out over their radios saying, "Bring them. Zogodrov and his assistants." Four more temple guards had arrived.

We three assistants and Zogodrov were brought into the Holy Temple, past all of the places I had been before. We moved down corridors that I didn't even know existed, until we arrived in what appeared to be a meeting room, nestled high in one of the minarets of the structure. There was a long, wooden table in the shape of a dagger, and around it sat six individuals: three men and three women. Then, I understood clearly that this was the meeting room of the High Council of Apostles. High Council members are revealed to the public at the next Red Dawn after a current Council member dies. Yet, they are not elected or chosen by the current members of the Council but are revealed through the Holy Spirit of Omahundro. It has been curious, however, that they always manage to come from the same six families.

“Leave them with us,” said a young woman who rose from her seat nearest the door and moved in our direction, stopping in front of Zogodrov. “What happened outside on the steps just now?”

“High Apostle Junko, it is an honor to meet you in person. I am Apostle Professor Zogodrov, and I am honored to announce that I have found the legendary Dagger of Omahundro!” he said triumphantly as he raised it, still woven around his hand. The smile on his face gradually faded as he noticed that the face of High Apostle Junko remained as unmoving marble.

“Let me see this dagger,” said Junko with all the emotion of a cactus. Zogodrov handed her the dagger, uncoiling it awkwardly from his hand. High Apostle Junko was from the family that claims, though the Bastoks dispute it, that their ancestor was the first to follow Omahundro in the first Red Dawn. Her father had been a High Apostle before her, and by the grace of Omahundro, she was revealed as his replacement soon after his death.

“Why do you say this is *the* Dagger?” High Apostle Junko looked over every aspect of the dagger as Zogodrov explained. “...and as I just demonstrated outside a moment ago, I have used the Dagger to kill with impunity, which means that it must be the Dagger of Omahundro!” His enthusiasm childlike, his eyes aflame, Zogodrov stood in ecstasy as he awaited the devotion of the High Council.

“I am afraid,” said High Apostle Junko with a long draw, “I find it hard to believe.”

High Apostle Junko continued to turn the dagger over in her hands. She felt the sharpness of the blade; she ran her finger along the course of the undulating hilt, tracing it from tip to tip. Zogodrov looked at me for the first time since the press conference had begun, and I saw the brightness in his eyes as he continued to smile.

High Apostle Junko slipped the dagger onto her hand: “I’m afraid that this cannot be the Dagger of Omahundro.”

“But what makes you say that, most esteemed High Apostle Junko?” said Zogodrov with quiet quickness.

“Because,” she said as she put her hand on Zogodrov’s shoulder and patted it three times, “we are the Dagger of Omahundro.” She suddenly thrust the dagger into Zogodrov’s chest, like a cat meets kindness with claws.

I had already seen one murder that day, but it shocked me anew the second time to see a High Apostle kill my research team leader so gruesomely. I froze, just as we all had done after Zogodrov stabbed Misha.

“This man,” High Apostle Junko said loudly as Zogodrov fell to his knees and then onto his side, “is a murderer and has been condemned.” She looked at me and the other two research assistants, but her eyes rested on mine as she said, “Condemned by the state. The state is the Dagger of Omahundro: Only the state can kill with impunity.” She smiled at the conclusion of her words, a smile so warm and honest that it made me want to be anywhere else.

I cannot explain how I summoned the courage to say this, but I managed to eke out a low, steady tone and say, “How can you know that the state is the Dagger of Omahundro? Current scholarship is divided on the truth of the matter, and...” I trailed off when my mind caught up to my words, “...this dagger does meet all of the...necessary...criteria...” Instinct brought my arms forward in a prayerful gesture.

“You may be right,” said High Apostle Junko as she bent down and wiped the dagger on Zogodrov’s jacket; “this may be the actual Dagger of Omahundro. That I killed Apostle Professor Zogodrov is no detraction, as I am not a true believer in the Will. I’m sure you understand what it means that I have admitted this to you. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if this is the true Dagger, as this trinket has been lost for a thousand years, and in that time we, the High Council, not this piece of metal, attractive as it is, have kept this religion and this state moving ever onward and upward toward the fulfillment of human perfectibility.” Smiling the whole time, she walked over to the table and sat the dagger down then turned and leaned back on the table as she gently crossed her ankles.

One of the other six High Apostles, this one a young man, suddenly said, “We on this side of the table are true believers, but we have plausible deniability in this instance, since High Apostle Junko was the one who killed Zogodrov. And, if no one ever uses the dagger again, we’ll have no way of knowing if it is real.” Then, I recognized the young man as High Apostle Feraponte. He had grown a beard since he was installed on the Council two years ago.

“Why...” I hesitated, but, assuming I was about to be killed anyway, I summoned what courage I had left at least to seek the truth of the matter: “Why would true believers work with atheists?”

At that moment, Salchinski had also found enough courage to be himself: "I, for one," he said, falling to his knees in supplication, "thank this most High Council and especially High Apostle Junko for bringing justice to this murderer! Omahundro be praised! The state be praised! I will say only this much to any who ask!" He smiled as one who finding an unexpected treasure will marvel at it in his hands.

High Apostle Feraponte ignored Salchinski and continued to address me: "Who can say how the Will moves in time? We do what we must for the greater good. Is it not noble for us to look past differences to work together?" He too smiled at me as he stroked his beard from chin to chest.

"I have dedicated my life to seeking the truth of our religion's past. I...begrudge you not your duty and obligations, but I must know what is true about this dagger. I must know if Zogodrov was a murderer or a prophet." I found some comfort and resolve in my selfless zeal; I fully expected it to lead to my death. As I said this, Apostle Assistant Delev, who had done nothing at all up to this point, began to move erratically, looking back and forth from me to Salchinski. After I had finished my words, he fell to his knees and repeated Salchinski's words like a prayer he had learned by heart as a child.

"What is your name, Apostle Professor...," said High Apostle Junko as she picked up the dagger, re-threaded her fingers through it, and walked toward me.

"I am Apostle Assistant Doctor Karamazov, not yet an Apostle Professor, High Apostle Junko." If death would be mine today, I would at least die like a man.

"Oh, no, Apostle Professor Karamazov, you are an Apostle Professor, or you will join Zogodrov," said High Apostle Junko as she put her hand on my shoulder and smiled. She patted me three times and winked. I did my best to acquit myself in a way I would like to be remembered, even if this story never was to be told truly. She walked over to Salchinski and patted him on the head. "You are so afraid to die that you would agree to anything." She looked at him and Delev as they simpered and nodded their heads. Like a combine catching a coat, she seized Salchinski's hair and dragged his neck to the knife, cutting his jugular in one swift motion. Delev fell backward and began to retreat from her with one arm forward.

"You disgusting worm," said High Apostle Ballenev, who sat on the side of the non-believers, as he briskly walked to Delev's right side from across the room and began striking him in the head. Once Delev ceased to fight back,



High Apostle Junko stepped up, and with a nod of thanks and a smile to High Apostle Ballenev, she reached down and sliced Delev's neck.

"The dagger may yet be real," said High Apostle Junko with her characteristic smile, "for I have just killed with impunity twice!" She chuckled as she again wiped the dagger clean, this time on Delev's coat, and she and High Apostle Ballenev returned to the table.

"They died because they had no principles," said High Apostle Feraponte with a good-natured smile. "They only seek to benefit themselves. When they see an opportunity to betray, they take it. You are not that kind of man. You would die for what you believe. You, we can use. You, we can work with. You know what will happen if you betray us."

Having put the dagger on the table again, High Apostle Junko walked back to me, standing face-to-face. She put her hands on my shoulders, and as she smiled and cocked her head to the side, she pulled me into a hug and kissed me on both cheeks. "You will serve the greater good, the perfection of human Will, will you not? It is already the commandment of your religion; you need only to accept that you do not know if the dagger is real, and cannot know. You need only to tell the people that Zogodrov was a murderer and that he had been brought to justice. You will continue to look for the Dagger, but you will never find it. You will become wealthy, you will be given a beautiful wife, your children will live a life of joy and strength, and in some generations, your people may mix with our people and become a part of the High Council. You have shown us your worth, and the strength of your will shall be rewarded." All of the members of the High Council tipped their glasses to me, and High Apostle Junko gazed expectantly into my eyes with her arms still on my shoulders.

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Later that day, I stood on the steps of the Holy Temple at the same podium where Zogodrov had stood. The reporters swarmed and took their pictures as they waited for my announcement. My research assistants, newly arrived from the University, all stood beaming at the honor. I looked up at the setting sun and said, "Apostle Professor Zogodrov has been found guilty of murder, and his punishment has been swift. The evidence we have suggests that the dagger he found was not the Dagger of Omahundro. We will continue the search, and if Omahundro wills it, we will one day find this legendary and most holy item. Thank you; that is all."

Almost immediately after the press conference was over, and I had spoken with my assistants and some members of the press, I began to plan my escape. I contrived a research expedition to a neighboring nation, one unofficially run by the High Council of Marctsatsia as a client state but ostensibly independent and open to heretic states. We were sent with a government minder to ensure our return, but I managed to lose all members of my expedition party—they had unexpected car trouble—in a remote location. I needed then only to board a train to freedom: this was before the digital age made tracking someone effortless, and after much additional travail, I ended up here where I started my life anew.

This is my story, my dear students. I have not given up on my religion, but I have come to the conclusion that the true Faith of The Will has not yet been realized on earth. It was corrupted immediately after Omahundro's death. But, in this new land, I have worked tirelessly to spread the faith to you in secret, my new Apostles. Together, when the time is right, and it is too late to stop us, we will find the Dagger of Omahundro and bring about a new Red Dawn. Where your parents were taught to hate my faith, I have taught you to cherish it. We cannot know the truth, I've made peace with that now. Omahundro set this dilemma before me to prove that it was impossible to make the right choice on the basis of the truth, for the truth can only come from knowing the future. Instead, he showed me that I have the Will, my will, and this faith in myself will lead us to perfect the will of mankind and bring about a heaven on earth. I will not be corrupted by the greater good. I am a far better man than those who sit on the high council. I will make my own truth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Arthur Mann's recent research focuses on early modern England and includes articles and presentations on music as ethical instruction, the political power of praising music, musical literature, and the use of music as political propaganda, which he discusses in his monograph, *Printed Musical Propaganda in Early Modern England*, the inaugural title in NABMSA and Clemson University's new Studies in British Musical Cultures series. His other scholarly and fiction works can be found in *Musica Disciplina*, *The Musical Times*, and *AcademFic*. You can find his music and commentary on YouTube @Harmonianism and @GreatBooks-GoodLife.