

The Making of a Vampire: Demonic Burials and Social Order in Christian Cultures

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This paper aims to better understand the conflicting relationship between European folkloric tradition and dominant Christian culture that gripped the continent from the fall of The Roman Empire to the 19th century. This is done through an analysis of historical and ecclesiastical documentation, as well as in-depth case studies from the archaeological record across European regions and into North America. The first of these cases is a 15th century plague burial in Northern Italy, where a young woman was interred with a sizeable brick in her oral cavity. The ritual aspect of this action speaks to the great cultural importance that it must have had in Venice in a time of rampant disease. The pattern of epidemic disease coinciding with vampiric and apotropaic burials is a ubiquitous theme throughout the cases discussed in this paper.

Introduction

The modern concept of “vampire” immediately conjures images of white faced spectres with blood red fangs and thick Slavic accents. With the publication of Bram Stoker’s iconic book *Dracula*, the modern incarnation of the vampire myth was reborn. This vampiric persona swept through literature and Hollywood as an allegorical enforcement emulating Western society’s cultural concepts of morality and health.

Stoker’s Romanian villain, however, was hardly conceived in a cultural vacuum. For millennia, regional variations of a folkloric creature who rises from the grave to consume the living has been highly prevalent. The ‘vampire’ is represented in oral traditions¹, medieval ecclesiastical documents², and in the burial practices of many cultures.³ This is a worldwide phenomenon and has been documented in Haiti,⁴ Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines,⁵ and Greece.⁶ The best recognized of these regions, however, is undeniably in the cluster of interconnected Christian cultures within Southern and Eastern Europe. This paper focuses on instances of so-called vampirism in Historic-period Christian burials from Italy, Poland, and the United States.

Vampires, Demons, and the Roman Catholic Church

The etymology of the word “vampire” consists of a highly contested lineage of linguistic shifts. A commonly accepted theory is that the root of the word lies in Turkish with “uber”, meaning “witch.”⁷ The word “vampire” itself, however, arrives rather late in the regional languages of Europe.⁸ A theory suggesting that “vampire” has its roots in the Serbian word “bamiup”, or in the Polish “upior,”⁹ is also prevalent in linguistic communities.¹⁰ In the year 1721,¹¹ the first use of the Polish “upior” appeared in a German publication documenting

the details of supposed vampiric attacks that had occurred in 17th century Poland, Russia, and Lithuania, possibly providing evidence to either theory, as well as marking the beginning of the “vampire” in European documents.¹²

The historic record provides documentary evidence of “vampiric attacks” prior to the use of “upior” in Germany, with French documentation of such events at the end of the 1600s.¹³ Throughout the 18th century, however, the prevalence of a deep belief in vampires and the harm that they could inflict on living populations throughout Europe became a clear element of the folklore of the continent. In 1737,¹⁴ the *Lettres Juives* in France included an account of two vampiric episodes in Kisilova, Serbia.¹⁵

Serbia and Romania are both recognized for being the countries most closely associated with the vampire myth. While Romania celebrates being home to Vlad Tepes-otherwise known as the historical inspiration for Bram Stoker’s Hollywood vampire-Serbia has been home to numerous superstitious events and ideologies that provide foundation for the universal attributes of the vampire.

In Carniola, Serbia, vampires are described as the bodies of deceased persons animated by evil spirits which rise from their graves and suck the blood of the living “thereby destroying them.”¹⁶ This description was contemporary with an epidemic of “vampire” attacks in Medwegya, Serbia during the winter of 1731-1732.¹⁷ The events of that winter resulted in the entry of “vampiric” deaths into the academic and media spheres of the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁸ The events at Medwegya marked the first time in the historical record in which vampirism could be spread as if it were a communicable disease.¹⁹ This became a key aspect of vampire symbolism as the myth evolved.

In the 18th century, acts of grave

disturbance and corpse mutilation prompted the Vatican to respond to the notion of so-called ‘vampires’.²⁰ Their response to the exhumation and ritual mutilation of these “vampiric” corpses across Eastern Europe was to have Pope Benedict XIV issue an official condemnation of those committing these desecrations in 1749.²¹ The decree against the vampire myth—and other unofficial regional versions of Christianity in Europe-- was not uniformly observed by members of the clergy at all levels.²² Some clergy members accepted and embraced local, and regional folkloric traditions integrating them into Catholic ritual.²³

Evidence of the blending of church law and regional folkloric traditions can be seen in personal records of clergy officials at varying levels within the medieval Roman Catholic hierarchy, as well as the persistence of demonic or ‘vampire’ burials from the medieval to early modern eras of the archaeological record.

The Medieval Church

The structure of the medieval and early modern Church throughout European history has been immortalized by today’s media as an omnipresent, restrictive element of daily life in all Christian countries. However, the relationship between all communities and Church authority was much more complex and nuanced than what is portrayed in the popular narrative that Hollywood supports. Jacques Le Goff, in a study of Medieval Europe, writes that Europe was still a “mission country” in the year 1500.²⁴ Ecclesiastical documentation by priests in regions throughout the continent provides support for Le Goff’s assessment that a large swath of European towns and cities were more heavily influenced by older folkloric traditions than the teachings of Church-approved rituals, rendering the separation between Medieval Christianity and Paganism an arbitrary distinction in some regions.

Law codes from Macedonia describe strange burial practices undertaken in response to specific situations, often involving sudden death or death by disease. For example, there are historic descriptions of the corpses of individuals being staked in their graves, as well as secondary funeral rites in which the bones were cleaned and reinterred. These became relatively commonplace.²⁵ This is also seen in the Balkan peninsula, where a child must be immediately baptized in case of an early death outside of the Christian faith, as a preventative measure.²⁶

Across medieval Europe, numerous belief systems considered to be outside the Christian faith persisted well into the Christian period. These ritual practices were a part of daily life and often derived from Christianity itself. In the interest of serving the immediate, largely illiterate peasant and middle class communities, Christian and folkloric rituals were rooted in shrines, images, saints, and relics. It was not an uncommon occurrence for communion wafers to be crumbled over fields in an attempt to ensure a good harvest.²⁷ In Wales, the historical record supports instances of ritual dancing in mimicry of the sowing and reaping of a harvest.²⁸ There are additional records by a monk traveling through Ireland in the early 10th century, who documented an account of a ritual animal sacrifice in Kirkcudbright, Galloway, dedicated to the Catholic Saint Cuthbert.²⁹

This example from Kirkcudbright in Scotland not only provides evidence for the syncretic nature of medieval European Christianity with older folklore, but the records also provide evidence of the regionalization of ecclesiastical practice to fit local belief systems. The documentation by monks and other clergy in the medieval period no longer simply state legal doctrines and condemn so-called “Pagan” rituals. Religious members recorded older oral traditions, such as epics and chronicles based in pre-Christian ideologies. These mythologies included those of the tales of

dead individuals who rose from the grave at night. While the practices remained largely illegal in the eyes of the church, they were not consistently condemned in practice. Many priests outside of Christian city centers and in smaller, poorer, villages began to adapt to the regional practices of their parishes. In doing so, the clergy began to disseminate Christianized incarnations of older myths like that of the Vampire.

The highly regionalized religious rituals and tales of European Christianity were orally articulated for centuries before the clergy began to document these traditions. Depending on the mode of literature by which the churchmen were describing these traditions, different levels of sympathy for diversity in religious expression began to present themselves. These conflicts between Church law and the traditions of the clergy become particularly evident when comparing the experiences of Burchard of Worms, and Guibert of Nogent. Worms, otherwise referred to as “The Corrector”, was documented to have criticized a community of individuals in a legal letter to his superiors, stating that these individuals obeyed the superstition of not leaving the house before the cockcrow to avoid the evil spirits of the night.³⁰ Nogent, another educated churchman, actually believed in evil folk spirits himself, keeping a lit lamp by his bedside to keep the evil at bay.³¹ While Worms followed ecclesiastical law, Nogent embraced local tradition. This example highlights the variability in clerical adherence to canon law, and to the occasional overpowering nature of local folk belief.

Nowhere is the dualistic nature of folk belief versus institutionalized religion more visible than in the discovery of “vampire burials” within Christian cemeteries. These burials provide insight into this ‘blending’ of folk belief and the practices of the Roman Catholic Church from the Renaissance in Italy to Colonial America.

Case Studies

Vampires of Venice

The Nuovo Lazzaretto plague cemetery in Venice, Italy, was excavated from 2006 to 2007.³² Consecutive outbreaks of an unspecified pestilence in 1576 and 1600³³ resulted in a densely packed cemetery where graves were frequently intercut and overlapping.

Burial ID6 is that of an adult female which dates to the earlier, 1576, outbreak of plague at Nuovo Lazaretto.³⁴ ID6 was buried in supine position with textile remains suggestive of a burial shroud.³⁵ The grave was intercut by a later burial resulting in the loss of all skeletal material below the middle of the torso in line with the distal humeral diaphyses.³⁶ Dental wear suggests that this individual was approximately 61 years old at the time of her death and burial.³⁷ What makes ID6 unique is the nature of the burial. Despite a lack of any sizeable rocky inclusions in the soil of the grave, a large brick was found inside the oral cavity of ID6.³⁸ The brick appears to have been purposefully placed in the oral cavity before decomposition began, possibly during the initial inhumation or shortly after.³⁹

This is the only instance of a ‘deviation’ from traditional Christian burial practice within the Nuovo Lazzaretto cemetery.⁴⁰ In this case the brick is believed to have symbolic and ritual value in the prevention of vampirism.⁴¹ The presence of the brick in the oral cavity suggests a deep folkloric connection between the vampire myth and the mouth. This case suggests a link between outbreaks of vampirism and outbreaks of epidemic disease which are mirrored in all cases discussed in this paper.

Poltergeists of Poland

The archaeological site of Drawsko 1 is located in the northwestern Polish region of

Pomerania, along the Notec River. This 17th to 18th century cemetery was originally excavated in 1929. However, developments stemming from excavations in 2008 brought new discoveries to light regarding the folklore that informed the nature of six of the burials.⁴²

There is no known church or religious structure associated with the graves at Drawsko 1, and the cemetery is located outside the boundary of the settlement itself. Of the over 300 burials that have been excavated at Drawsko 1, six members of the population were found to include apotropaic objects in the contexts of their graves.⁴³ These apotropaic grave goods such as coins, sickles, and stones are included in burials with the intention of staving off evil, preventing the reanimation of a corpse, or to satisfy the spirit of the deceased so they will not attempt to return.⁴⁴ The coins were believed to act as a protective talisman, preventing disruption of the deceased by evil forces, and the sickles and other sharp implements were intended to prevent the rise of the deceased from the grave, effectively popping them if they get too swollen.⁴⁵

The potential ritual activities surrounding the burials of these six individuals are categorized as “demonic” or “vampiristic”. They provide potentially strong evidence for Vampire folklore overtaking institutionalized Catholic tradition in Pomerania.

All of the individuals with evidence of demonic burial were found to be buried supine, in discrete graves, with an east-west orientation that corresponds to all other individuals buried at the site.⁴⁶ Burials 28/2008, 24/2009, 6/2012, and Burial 49/2012, were uncovered with metal sickles placed across their necks and under their chins.⁴⁷ Burial 29/2008 had two large stones beneath its chin, presumably used to keep the jaw shut after death.⁴⁸ Burial 60/2010 was also found with a stone under the chin and a sickle across the abdomen.⁴⁹

The use of these particular apotropaic talismans speaks volumes about the community that buried these individuals. Relying on a mostly agrarian economy, the people of Drawsko must have had a reason to bury important farm implements with their dead.⁵⁰ As well as the restrictive use of the stones, placed clearly under the jaw as if to prevent the opening of the mouth. The community of Drawsko, like the individuals who placed the brick in the mouth of ID6 in Venice, made personal sacrifices for the sake of protecting their community from cultural monsters.

Again we see an association between outbreaks of little-understood epidemic disease and the presence of vampire burials. In the case of Drawsko there may have been an outbreak of cholera or another high mortality infectious disease that are not visible on human bone.⁵¹ Outbreaks of cholera are historically recorded during the period that the Drawsko cemetery was in use in the 17th and 18th century.⁵²

A Haunting in Connecticut

The cultures and customs of Europe emigrated to the Americas with their people, bringing the European concept of the ‘vampire’ with them across the ocean. Evidence of colonial vampirism in New England is often found in historic medical records corresponding to outbreaks of diseases like tuberculosis. The unknown nature of the disease, like that of the plague in Venice and cholera in Pomerania, spread panic through many populations in the northeastern United States. Widely known as ‘consumption’ due to the emaciated appearance of the afflicted individuals this disease was, in some cases, compared to that of vampirism.

Walton Cemetery, in Griswold, Connecticut, was the burial ground of a European American farmstead owned by the Walton family from 1690 until the 1750s.⁵³ After its abandonment in the 18th-19th centuries,

it was re-discovered by archaeologists in 1990.⁵⁴ For a family farm cemetery the size of the cemetery population is relatively small. Overall there were 15 sub-adults, six adult males and eight adult females.⁵⁵ They were interred in wooden coffins, some including identification on the lids in the form of tacks pressed into the shape of initials and numbers.⁵⁶

The evidence of a vampiric influence within the community is found in burial JB-55.⁵⁷ JB-55 is the burial of an adult male approximately 50 years of age who was interred in a coffin marked with the initials JB and the number 55.⁵⁸ Unlike any other individuals in the Walton Cemetery, JB-55 was buried in a stone-lined grave.⁵⁹

The skeletal remains of JB-55 show evidence of numerous healed fractures, mild osteoarthritis in the hips, knees, and shoulders, as well as Schmorl's nodes of the vertebral bodies.⁶⁰ This evidence suggests that JB-55 lived a life in which he participated in extended periods of hard labor, not uncommon in colonial farm life. What sets this individual apart from the others interred at Walton Cemetery are the indicators of infectious disease and the peculiar post-mortem positioning of the body.

Lesions identified on the visceral surface of the left 2nd, 3rd, and 4th ribs are gray and pitted in the areas adjacent to the pleura, indicative of pulmonary tuberculosis or another infectious respiratory disease such as brucellosis.⁶¹ Whatever the actual underlying bacterial cause this respiratory disease would likely have been interpreted by JB-55's contemporary physicians as consumption,⁶² otherwise known as tuberculosis.

The positioning of the remains, however, indicates a burial steeped in European folk beliefs. JB-55 was exhumed after an extended period of decay when the body was mostly, if not completely,

skeletonized.⁶³ Both femora were displaced from anatomical position and crossed over the thoracic cavity.⁶⁴ The cranium was also disarticulated from the mandible and placed over the crossed femora creating a 'Jolly Roger' or skull and crossbones shape.⁶⁵ The exhumation of the body in and of itself is unusual in traditional Christian burial. The additional rearrangements of the skeleton are further evidence that indicates a ritual purpose to JB-55's burial and reburial.

Given contemporary historical accounts of vampirism in nearby Norwich, Connecticut, as well as in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Vermont all connected to 'consumption' it is possible that JB-55 is an archaeologically visible case of colonial American vampirism.⁶⁶

Discussion: Making a Vampire

A 'vampire', as it pertains to the European myth, is a creature comparable to many other variations of the undead, who rise from their graves. For this reason, it is a commonly drawn conclusion that burials including grave goods such as stakes, sickles or other apotropaic items could be considered 'vampiric' in the context of Western Judeo-Christian societies.⁶⁷ An understanding of the historical context and demography of the burial site where the 'vampire' is found are also instrumental in deciphering the folklore that surrounds the nature of these graves.⁶⁸ Beliefs of the undead and evil spirits rising from the grave persisted through centuries of Christian tradition, as evidenced by the cases illustrated above. However, elements such as Church participation and fear of epidemic disease also drove these communities to differentiate from typical burial practices.

The relationship between Christian communities participating in these 'vampiric' burial rites, while contentious, was also complex and highly syncretic. By the time ID6 was buried at Nuovo

Lazarretto in Venice, older folkloric practices and superstitions like those surrounding vampires were largely absorbed into European Christianity. This, however, was not necessarily indicative of approval from the Church itself. While many educated clergy members proceeded to document the ‘simple mindedness’ and ‘ignorance’ of these superstitions,⁶⁹ they also routinely presided over the rituals and reburials that defied Christian tradition. Many clergy, such as Guibert of Nogent, began to believe in those same myths, while others systematically profited from the fears that the vampire myth represented to those who believed.⁷⁰

The incorporation of these vampire myths into Christianity can be evidenced by the documentation of the clergy, and the nature of burials such as ID6, Drawsko 1, and JB-55. Not only were these individuals provided with special burial practices or instances of reburial, they all corresponded with outbreaks of epidemic disease.⁷¹ In deeply religious communities across Europe and New England throughout the Renaissance and early modern periods, the connection between disease and ‘unclean’ or ‘ungodly’ souls furthered the myth of the vampire in conjunction with spreading the word of Christianity.

Drawsko 1 and JB-55 both correspond with outbreaks of epidemic disease that provided an emaciated appearance to the afflicted. This, in New England in particular, supported an already prominent belief that vampires were responsible for the spread of the disease.⁷² Twenty five percent of deaths in the region were attributed to tuberculosis by the year 1800,⁷³ and the panic surrounding the disease found a scapegoat in age-old folkloric beliefs like the vampire, which had made the transition from a pagan concept to a Christian one in Europe centuries before.

Conclusion

Bram Stoker’s iconic literary vampire was not conceived in a cultural vacuum, but rather the opposite, resting on the shoulders of a millennia’s worth of influence from historic and folkloric beliefs across Europe. The modern incarnation of this subversive creature of the night, however, may never have seen the light of day without the reluctant syncretism between ancient pagan beliefs and the Christian establishment across the centuries.

The conflicting relationship between dominant religious powers and the older folkloric traditions of Europe manifest in the evidence of both primary documentation by clergy, and in ‘vampire burials’ in the archaeological record. The grudging tolerance for these burials by the institution of the Church was prompted not only by the leniency of certain clergymen like Guibert of Nogent, but by a symbiotic relationship that rose to benefit them. Monetary contributions and the heightened fanaticism for their faith exhibited by communities who feared the vampire led the Church to humor their superstitions, rather than take legal action against them.

Fear of disease and fear of death outside of the Christian faith maintained the vampire myth in the minds of Europeans from 1576, with the burial of ID6 in Venice, to the “Jolly Roger” formation of the bones of JB-55 in Griswold, Connecticut. The presence of apotropaic items and rearrangement of skeletonized remains in the graves of the individuals at Nuovo Lazarretto, Drawsko 1, and Walton Cemetery speak to a deep folkloric belief embedded in their cultures.

Endnotes:

- 1 Audikos 2013, 310-312.
- 2 Wilson 1985, 582.
- 3 Hodgson 2013, 5-6.
- 4 Charlier 2017.
- 5 Nadeau 2011, 252.
- 6 Avdikos 2013.
- 7 Wilson 1985, 577.
- 8 Stachowski and Stachowski 2017, 683.
- 9 Wilson 1985, 577.
- 10 Wilson 1985, 577-578.
- 11 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 12 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 13 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 14 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 15 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 16 Wilson 1985, 581.
- 17 Braunlein 2012, 714.
- 18 Braunlein 2012, 714.
- 19 Wilson 1985, 579.
- 20 Wilson 1985, 582.
- 21 Wilson 1985, 582.
- 22 Watkins 2004, 144-147.
- 23 Watkins 2004, 142.
- 24 Van Engen 1986, 522.
- 25 Braunlein 2012, 715.
- 26 Nestor 2014, 107.
- 27 Watkins 2004, 140.
- 28 Watkins 2004, 142-143.
- 29 Watkins 2004, 144-145.
- 30 Watkins 2004, 142.
- 31 Watkins 2004, 142.
- 32 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1634.
- 33 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1635.
- 34 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1635.
- 35 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1635.
- 36 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1635.
- 37 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1636.
- 38 Nuzzolese and Borrini: 2010, 1635.
- 39 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1636-1637.
- 40 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1634.
- 41 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1636.
- 42 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 468.
- 43 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 470.
- 44 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 470-471.
- 45 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 470.
- 46 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 468.
- 47 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 471.
- 48 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 471.
- 49 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 471.
- 50 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 474.
- 51 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 468.
- 52 Betsinger and Scott 2014, 468.
- 53 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 54 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 55 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270 .
- 56 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 57 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 58 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 59 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 60 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270.
- 61 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270-271.
- 62 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 271.
- 63 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270-271.
- 64 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270-271.
- 65 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270-271.
- 66 Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 272.
- 67 Hodgson 2013, 4.
- 68 Hodgson 2013, 4.
- 69 Braunlein 2012, 715.
- 70 Braunlein 2012, 715.
- 71 Nuzzolese and Borrini 2010, 1635; Betsinger and Scott 2014, 468; Sledzik and Bellatoni 1994, 270-271.
- 72 Lauer 2017, 64.
- 73 Lauer 2017, 64.

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