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Introduction

The reader may or may not find persuasive any of the various theoretical attempts to illuminate the vampire of tradition. But at the very least, the reader may come to understand that the vampire is much more than simply a scary creature of the human imagination. . . . It is truly a matter of life and death!

—ALAN DUNDES

IN MARCH 1732, English men and women sat down to their morning papers and read of lurid events in Serbia. Suspicious villagers had dug up several corpses, and had found them undecayed and bloated with blood. Recognizing the marks of vampirism, they had mutilated them in various ways and had then burned them (p. 376).

In fact, such episodes were not rare in the Carpathians and Balkans. What made this case different was that the Habsburg military authorities had investigated it, and had produced a report. That brought the Serbian vampires to the attention of the Austrian and German press, and thus to newspapers in Paris and London.

Released on the world, the story had an impact that would transform sensational popular literature over the next two centuries. Those first readers must have been most struck by its sheer exotic weirdness: a bizarre transaction across the boundary between life and death, in a wild zone of Europe about which they knew nothing. Surely it could never have happened in civilized England?

To see how wrong they were, let us go back six centuries, to a churchyard near Burton-upon-Trent in Staffordshire around the year 1090 (p. 253). The villagers stand nervously beside the graves of two recently buried men who have been seen wandering around with their coffins on their backs, banging on doors, and summoning the inhabitants to sickness and death. The graves are opened, and as the coffin-lids are wrenched off, expectations of an unholy continuing life seem to be horribly confirmed: the corpses have resisted the natural processes of decay, and the cloths over their faces are stained with blood. The dead stand condemned, and the living proceed at once to execution. The heads of the corpses are cut off and placed between their legs, their hearts are torn from their chests, and the graves are backfilled. The hearts are carried across the running water of the Trent and burned on a hilltop. As the smoke rises, the vampires' victims recover but a black crow flies up from the flames.

If that leaves any room for doubt, we can go back another four centuries: to Ely, in the fenland of eastern England, around the year 680 (pp. 207–211). Near the richly furnished grave of a girl, a young woman has been buried with a bag of amulets and other magical objects. But something is wrong: people see her walking around, or perhaps they blame sickness or bad luck on evil power emanating from her grave. Her corpse is dug up, and, although in reality starting to decompose, it looks uncannily intact: drastic measures are needed. Someone wrenches her torso towards one side of the grave, twists it over, pulls off the head, throws the jawbone to the end of the grave, and places the cranium level with her chest.

As these two stories illustrate, there was once a time when people in England believed in restless and dangerous corpses. So why did the stories that trickled in from the Balkans in the 1730s find no local resonance? This amnesia illustrates how belief in the unquiet dead is capable of fading away as well as emerging. Nor is England unique in that. Although this belief-system has indeed been very widespread across the globe, it cannot be found everywhere. It was much stronger at some times, and in some places, than others, and it could take some very different forms. There have been patterns of ebb and flow, which, on occasion, could reach epidemic proportions.

Since corpses do not in reality climb out of their graves and walk around, or become bloated with the blood of living victims, the question remains why people sometimes think that they do. Here is a puzzle worth exploring.

Many books have been written about vampires in sensational literature.¹ There are many others about vampires in actual human belief, but in one way or another they leave something missing. The various popular and encyclopaedic works² are essential reading for anyone who tries to get to grips with the subject on a global scale, and I could scarcely have managed without them, but they can lack coherence and critical analysis. Occasional anthropologists have engaged with living cultures of vampire belief, but work of that kind is all too rare. Archaeology refreshes the subject by contributing 'deviant' burials, of which growing numbers are excavated as the years pass, but analysis lags behind data-collection. So perhaps there is room for a book like this, which tries to make some coherent sense—on both general and local scales—of this strange belief and why people held it.

There are significant omissions. I say little about vampire fiction from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and nothing about that from after 1900. (For earlier periods, the line between folklore and fiction is harder to draw: people told stories about things they believed in, and often believed the stories they heard.) More surprisingly, to some readers, the events of the 1730s, and vampire folklore from the more easterly parts of Europe since 1800, only get summary treatment. These rich, abundant, and compelling stories have been discussed many times in print, to the exclusion of much else. To emphasise them here would have been distorting as well as unnecessary: earlier (otherwise excellent) authors have generalised unjustifiably to the whole belief-system from this very specific context, and I want to avoid that trap.

Starting from problems of perception and definition, I trace how the 'European vampire' is just one species within a large family of predatory supernatural entities, including the female flying demons of South-east

Asia and the lustful *yoginīs* of India. After visiting the shamanic circum-polar zone, the Assyrian Middle East, and China, the book concentrates on Europe. Inevitably, that reflects my own historical and linguistic range: whole books could be written about the dangerous dead in Asia, for instance. But I hope that future scholars of other regions will find my approaches useful, not least because I did my best to establish consistent definitions. This book (like the occasional vampire) feeds on itself: general problems and approaches must be clarified first, and readers eager for the specific case-studies are asked to be patient.

The issue of gender, barely considered in previous works, is thrown into sharp relief by the two examples just mentioned: revived corpses were almost entirely female in seventh-century England, largely male in the eleventh to twelfth centuries. If belief in the undead reflects underlying fears or resentments, there must be social and cultural explanations for why those emotions were sometimes focused on men and sometimes on women. A recurrent strand identifies these supernatural yet physical beings as female, starting with the predatory flying monsters that emerge from a deep layer in the human imagination, continuing through the *lamiae* of the Graeco-Roman world, and culminating in the wise-women and witches of medieval and post-medieval Europe. When it comes to legacies in imaginative fiction, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* embodies a more genuine tradition than Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*, though we will also meet plenty of troublesome corpses that are male.

Vampires were not killed by science or modernity. In Europe east of the Elbe, dramatic manifestations of the belief continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in a region of southern Romania, they continue still. The human tragedies of colonialism and slavery generated some distinctive if contained episodes in Australia and West Africa, and to the African diaspora in the Caribbean we owe that distinctive oddity, the Haitian *zombi*: undead but not dead. Strangest of all, perhaps, is New England between the 1780s and 1890s, where European folklore and popular medicine fused with the psychological trauma of tuberculosis deaths to create a distinctively modern kind of vampire.

While historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, and psychologists have all suggested theoretical models, this book is concrete and (literally) down-to-earth. I am certainly not averse to using theoretical approaches when they seem helpful and appropriate, but I prefer to start from hard evidence. My approach is pragmatic, and not beholden to any particular school or fashion. It is often functionalist, while also laying much emphasis on the power of inherited culture: as one scholar puts it, ‘as anthropological interpretations, function and culture are hardly incompatible.’³

I have tried to be broad in scope, in the hope that light may be thrown in dark places by breaking down the boundaries of regional intellectual traditions as well as disciplinary ones. For example, English historians and archaeologists—tacitly reluctant to acknowledge forms of ‘irrationality’ in past world-views—have been remarkably resistant to the plain message of the evidence. That stands in sharp contrast to regions like Serbia or Poland, where the reality of beliefs in the dangerous dead is taken completely for granted because they are within recent experience. Cross-cultural analogies can be over-worked, but it is perverse to ignore them when they make coherent sense of what is otherwise baffling.

Although this book is not about fictional vampires, they cast a long, dark shadow over it. The subject’s lurid overtones have attracted a diverse range of commentary and discussion: sometimes scholarly and effective, sometimes the opposite. Folklore and literature have it in common that they both tell stories, but the stories (at least in origin) are qualitatively different. Some recent books treat ethnographic field reports and *Dracula* as though they were sources of like kind. This habit of mind is hard to take seriously, but it is deep-rooted and goes back centuries. The labyrinth of borrowings and muddles, repeated from source to source and sometimes infecting supposedly objective reports, is hard to negotiate and full of snares. It is too much to hope that I have avoided them all, but I have done my best.

The theme is a difficult one for modern and rational people to discuss, and there will still be those who view it as bizarre, unhealthy, or

repulsive. But nothing that was important to people in the past is off-limits for historians. Our own society keeps the physicality of death at a distance, but for many past societies it was a normal and familiar part of life: belief in animated corpses is only repellant from a sanitized modern perspective. Nor is it necessarily pathological or harmful: indeed, I want to argue that it has positive outcomes. The ‘vampire epidemics’ discussed in this book occurred at traumatic junctures, of the kind that have often turned communities against marginalized groups within them. By mirroring the distinctive anxieties of the societies that generated them, they provided a therapeutic, largely innocuous outlet for impulses of fear, hatred, and paranoia. Killing the dead is better than killing the living.

A Note on European Geography and Place-Names

A substantial part of this book deals with the eastern half of Continental Europe. That presents a practical problem: many places that had German names at the time of the events discussed (and in the sources that discuss them) now have Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian, or Ukrainian names, and lie within the boundaries of post-1918 nation-states. It also presents the moral problem of avoiding vocabulary that seems to ascribe peripheral, colonial, or dependent status to places or ethnic groups within that zone. On the first count, I have initially given names in dual form (thus ‘Lemberg / Lviv’, ‘Groß-Mochbern / Muchobór’); thereafter I give them in the German form when early modern texts are being cited, but in the modern form when the reference is to archaeological rather than documentary data. On the second count, it is not always possible to avoid using terms like ‘central Europe’ or ‘eastern Europe’ (though with lower-case initials), but readers must understand these as descriptions of physical location and nothing more.

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