

Vampires – Separating Fiction from Fiction

(c) 2007-2116 Luceta di Cosimo, BMDL, Aethelmearc
dinaternullo@yahoo.com

Vampires are extraordinarily popular in modern Western pop-culture. Images of contemporary vampires are largely based on movie industry reinterpretation of the characters from the vampire fiction books, most famously “Dracula” by Stoker, originally published in 1897. However, there is a distinct folkloric tradition, which gave rise to the literary stereotypes in the first place, and has been in place for centuries, or perhaps, millennia before Stoker published his best-selling book.

We are going to examine the vampire from ancient to modern times, with emphasis on the folklore vampire.

Here is a much abridged “vampire timeline”, skipping all the 20th and 21st century

1897 – *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, with numerous theatrical adaptations

1896 – Vampires epidemic in New York and New England

1872 – *Carmilla* by Sheridan LeFanu

1847 – “*Varney the Vampire, or the Feast of Blood*”, by James Malcolm Rymer (originally attributed to Thomas Preskett Press)

1823 – a law passed in England, regarding interment of bodies of suicides “...without any stake being driven through the body of such person.”

1819 – Polidori’s “*The Vampyre*”, which introduced the literary vampire as we know it.

1728-1734– the introduction of Eastern European vampire phenomenon to the Western Europe, resulting in publication of multiple theological and pseudo-scientific treatises on vampires

1732 – “Vampire” was first used in English language from translation of Fluckenger’s report of Arnold Paole case of vampire infestation.

1700-1710 –resolution of Sorbonne, France prohibited cutting off heads and mutilating bodies of supposed revenants.

1591- a shoemaker of Breslau committed suicide, haunted his family and associates, exhumed, reburied, exhumed, put on display, and eventually burned, upon which the apparitions ceased.

1572 –English translation of Louis Lavater *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night*, where he debunks many contemporary supernatural beliefs, including vampires

1431-1476 – Historic Vlad Dracula, incidentally, not a vampire.

1459 – Polish reference to wykolek (meaning more vampire or werewolf)

14c. – *Grettir’s Saga* describes defeat of a revenant

1336- - *Summula chronicae tam Romanae quam Behemicarum* from 1355-1362 gives account of a vampire who called people to their deaths. (The only vampire on record who made a joke when being staked. He was finally cremated after several misadventures)

XIII-XIVcc. *Slovo ob Idolakh (A word on Idols)*, a Russian chronicle, mentions people making sacrifices to Upirs (vampires)

1262. Use of Vulkodlak in a Serbian *Nomokanon* manuscript to describe a monster that causes eclipses by eating the sun and the moon.

1150-1220-Saxo Grammaticus story of Mith-othin, who being a deceiver in life, was such a nuisance after death, that he was exhumed, decapitated, and staked.

1196- account of William of Newburgh, where a dead man from Buckinghamshire returned from his grave at night to suffocate his wife, and annoyed his neighbors and relatives. Townsfolk wanted to decapitate him and burn him, but eventually he was put to rest by an absolution from the Bishop.

1047 - A Novgorod Prince in a chronicle is called Upir’ Likhii (Wicked Vampire)

1031 – a body of an excommunicated knight in Limoges will not stay buried

775-790 – Charlemagne’s *Capitularies* –“If any one deceived by the devil shall have believed, after the manner of the pagans, that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and on this account shall have burned the person, or shall have given the person's flesh to others to eat, or shall have eaten it himself, let him be punished by a capital sentence.” “ If any one, in accordance with pagan rites, shall have caused the body of a dead man to be burned and shall have reduced his bones to ashes, let him be punished capitally.”

6thc. - Salic law imposes a fine of 187 sous on “a strigae who has eaten a man and has been convicted of the crime”

1st millennium B.C. – Greek Lamiae, Roman Lamiae, or striges (combination of witch and vampire). Numerous mentions of revenants in classical tradition: Philostratus, Apuleius, Homer, etc, etc, ...

Dracula 1431-1476

Not a vampire! Stoker fabricates the assertion that Dracula's contemporaries referred to him as such. Stoker used *Account of Walachia and Moldavia* by Wilkinson, 1820, as a reference, which says that Dracula means Devil in Romanian.

While *dracul* does mean devil in Romanian, the spelling of Vlad's name is Draculea, son of Dracul. He was son of Vlad III Dracul, so named after being inducted into the order of the Drac (Order of the Dragon), created to defend the Church against the Hussites) by Sigismund, Emperor of the Western Roman Empire in 1437. Ruled Muntenia from 1436 to 1444, and had a cross and a dragon on his arms. Dracula's real name was Vladislav Draculea, Vlad V (or IV, or III) called the Impaler, Voivod of Muntenia (a Wallachian principality) There were two branches in the family and both had princes named Vlad, so the numbering is inconsistent.

Vlad Tepes was a cruel and cunning ruler, talented leader and very effective guerilla fighter against the Turks. His exploits were legendary even during his life, and were in print, similar to modern tabloids. The earliest surviving pamphlets date from 1485, published in Lubeck. There were translated into several languages and were popular in Russia in 1530s and 1540s during the reign of Ivan the IV, probably making him seem less cruel by comparison. Additionally, Michael Beheim, a wandering minstrel, who worked at courts in Hungary and Germany, set Dracula's exploits to a very long song, which was quite popular as early as 1462. While there seems to be some truth to the stories, a lot of it was propaganda, as Vlad at one time or another made enemies of both the Turks, and the Hungarians, his former allies, There is some evidence that some of the pamphlets were distributed by orders of Matthias Corvinus, king of Hungary. In addition to the news-sheets, there existed, and still exists a cycle of Dracula stories, some similar to folktales from other countries. But, even though Dracula became his own horror genre during his lifetime, not once he is described as a vampire.

Erzebet (Elizabeth) Bathory – 1650-1614, a Hungarian noble woman, known for drinking blood and torturing to death 650 young women. Because of her high standing and political affiliation, despite overwhelming evidence of her guilt, she was confined to house arrest and died in 1614. She apparently needed blood to preserve her youth and beauty. She was afflicted by epilepsy, and probably was familiar with the blood cures, which survived in Hungary since the Roman times. May have been a prototype of the female vampire in LeFanu's *Carmilla*.

What are they called?

The word vampire was first used in English in 1732, and is derived from Slavic languages – many versions of the word exist – *upyr*, *upir*, *vampir*, *upierz*, *obur*, etc, depending on the region. Also, in addition to the native word, some languages borrowed back the Westernized form of "vampire" which is now mostly used for the literary version as opposed to the native folkloric type. Also, *volkodlak*, *vourdalak*, *wrykolakas* (original meaning wolf-skin), etc. is also used, although sometimes it means both a vampire and a werewolf.

Nosferatu – a corruption of a Romanian word, meaning unknown, borrowed by Stoker for this novel from Gerard's "Transylvanian Superstitions", not used in folklore. Romanians use *moroi* (dead vampire) and *strigoi* (live vampire)

A good generic term is *revenant* – a corpse that comes back to life.

Etymology of the word vampire is convoluted and uncertain.

I like the two versions – one derived from an ancient Slavic root of the verb *to drink*, and may be supported by the use of the word vampire in modern day to denote a heavy drinker or an alcoholic. Another version takes the origin even farther back, tracing it to the Indo European "pyr-" (as in modern day *pyre*) for *fire*, and using the *u-* prefix to denote negation, thus saying that vampire means unburned/uncremated corpse. This goes very well with Paul Barber's revenant theories (more later).

Significance of blood:

“Blood is life”: numerous references through Christianity, common belief that blood has healing/restorative properties, such as:

In the brothers’ Grimm Fairy Tales “*Faithful John*” blood of children revives a servant turned into a statue.

In the *Odyssey*, the shades in Hades drink the blood of sacrifices because it temporarily restores them to life.

Blood was believed to be curative of epilepsy (blood of executed criminals was used). Some evidence that Elizabeth Bathory was an epileptic and was familiar with blood cures.

Pliny says Pharaohs bathed in blood to cure leprosy, and Emperor Constantine was advised to use the cure for his disease as well, even after he converted to Christianity. In 12th c., writer Hartmann von Aue describes how physicians of Salerno obtained blood of virgins for leprosy cures. In Malory’s *Le morte D’Arthur*(1485), Perceval’s sister willingly gives her blood to cure a lady of the castle. Interestingly, she doesn’t decompose after death.

Vampires and Christianity

Vampires were a problem for church authorities because their very existence (or non-existence) was a perversion of fundamental concepts:

-of resurrection and eternal life of the soul (eternal life of the body and damnation of the soul)

- of transubstantiation (eating flesh and drinking blood of Christ with promise of eternal life, and absolution from sin. A vampire, a creature damned for eternity, eats flesh drinks blood of mortals to sustain its immortal body)

Multiple treatises written by theologians and church authorities, debating whether it’s an original soul returning to the body vs. a devil reanimating it.

Most sensationalized accounts of vampirism come from Eastern Europe, more specifically from the borders of major religions – Muslim/Christian, or Catholic/ Orthodox. Interestingly, the hallmark of vampirism in Orthodox Belief corresponds to the signs of sanctity in the Catholicism: uncorrupted body, liquid blood, supple flesh, no rigor mortis, etc.

According to Eastern European traditions, excommunicates and oath breakers will not decompose, but will become vampires. Martin Crusius (1526-1607) gives account of Sultan Mahomet II, testing the theory that excommunicated bodies do not decompose – found a body of an excommunicated sinner, whose body “was entire, but swollen like a drum”, woman was then absolved, and “her bones rattled and fell apart, upon which the sultan said ‘of a surety the Christian religion is true’”

There is also an 11th c. account of a Norwegian pirate excommunicated by St. Libentius, Archbishop of Bremen, who did not decompose for 70 years, until he received an absolution from Bishop of Alvareda.

Paul Barber’s theory on vampires

Soul does not completely leave the body until the corpse is inert, a.k.a decomposed/skeletal. Corpse in transition form body to skeleton is dangerous, as soul may reanimate it. Burial rights are designed to ease the transition – mummification, cremation, excarnation and embalming are all designed to render the corpse inert and static. Evidence of this belief or its remnants (such as excarnation, or removing flesh from bones, exhumation after decomposition and reburial) is present in many cultures, from ancient Celts, to Medieval Italy and Greece, and to modern New Orleans. Mourning lasts through the period of decomposition and is also done to render the mourners invisible/unrecognizable to the possible revenant and protect them.

Literature/Hollywood	Folklore
Traceable prototype: Lord Byron (thanks to Dr. Polidori’s “Vampyre”, 1819.)	Can be traced back to ancient civilizations: virtually all cultures have some form of a malevolent revenant.
Pale	Ruddy or dark
Thin	Fat and bloated
Old/ancient	Newly dead
Noble	Peasant
Lives in remote castle	Home village or nearby

Teeth	Not mentioned
Eyes	?
Fashion sense; penchant for formal wear	Chewed up tattered shroud
Cape	See above
Brooding	Nope
Suck blood	Sometimes, also haunts, suffocates, nightmares, kills, general nuisance, cause droughts
Deadly	Yep
Commands wolves	Associated and confused with werewolves
Vulnerable to sunlight	Not particularly
Regenerates with moonlight	No
Unable to cross running water	Yes
Victims – young attractive women, complete strangers who go places where they have no business going	Closest relatives and associates, regardless of gender
Lives marks over the jugular	Not
Need home soil	Does not
In the coffin: lies supine	Lies prone
Creates minions	Loner
Transylvanian	Eastern or southern European in general

How one becomes a vampire?

First victim in an epidemic
 Unnatural death (drowning, murder, etc)
 Social outcast in life
 Unusual birth – defects, cleft lip, teeth, bloody caul, etc
 Weaned from the breast twice
 Conceived between Christmas and Epiphany (these days were considered dangerous in general, when dead could walk among the living)
 Born on a Saturday
 Unusual appearance (red hair, blue eye – Greece), or a stranger/foreigner
 Red birthmark (hemangioma)
 Not buried in hallowed ground
 Suicide/murderer buried in hallowed ground
 Burial rights not performed or performed incorrectly
 Excommunicated
 Animal jumps over a dead body
 Sleepwalker
 Bitten by a vampire
 Eaten an animal killed by vampire
 Person with a stolen shadow (nailed to a building)
 Sorcerers, witches, werewolves become vampires after death
 If a dead body bloats, swells or changes color before burial.

How to prevent one from rising as a vampire?

Stake the corpse with an ash, rowan, or hawthorn stake
 Put spikes, millets seeds, fishing net into the grave (will compulsively count them all, or eat one a year)
 Bury face down
 Bury at crossroads
 Tie knees together or mutilate legs to prevent from walking
 Prevent shroud from covering face (belief that if corpse will chew the shroud, family members will die).
 Saw mouth shut, close mouth, prop it with brick or hymnal (either given something harmless to chew on, or prevent from chewing at all).
 Pierce tongue with thorn

Put thorns/sickle in coffin
Bury with a crucifix, or cross the arms
Put stakes/knives/thorns into the grave
Put flint on forehead – originally large rock to weight the body down/prevent animal's form unearthing it (in some cultures still put pebbles on tombstones) flint also has "fire potential", may represent token cremation)

How one recognizes a vampire in his/her grave?

If a virgin white horse with a virgin rider is walked through cemetery it will balk and not walk over the vampire graves.

Grave disturbed, or shallow or has a hole in it
Glow over the grave (photobacterium fischeri?)
Swollen, bigger than in life
Ruddy or dark skin
Liquid blood
No rigor mortis
No signs of decomposition
Open mouth and/or eyes
Bloody hands, mouth/nose/ears
Grown hair/nails
Changes position
Sounds emanating from grave

How to keep vampires away?

Garlic, or anything that smells bad – dung found at hawthorn bush, green walnuts, etc.
Sharp things
Crosses – not particularly efficacious, but sometimes work
Scissors – cross-shaped, sharp, made out of iron
Vampire's blood, dirt from grave or piece of shroud, protective if consumed

If all fails, how to kill one?

Cremation – sure fire method, expensive, time intensive, socially and emotionally cumbersome, hence more common in upper classes as burial method. Usually used as a last resort
Decapitation
Staking
Dismemberment
Taking out and burning/boiling of heart
Drag it out and dispose of in a remote desolate area or throw body into the river or swamp

Vampires and other supernatural beings:

lots of crossover traits exist between vampires and werewolves, witches, nightmares, mora (mara), and poltergeist.

werewolves

Some belief that vampires must turn into wolves for a period of time
The word Vukodlak (wolf pelt, wolf skin and its variants is used for both vampire and werewolf)
Wolves – associated with death, lead souls to after life (Odin is accompanied by wolves, mentions of the dead accompanied by wolves in Romanian funeral songs)
Werewolves turn into vampires after death.

Nightmare chokes and kills people in sleep

Mora is a witch that chokes people, spirit of an unbaptized dead infant or a sleepwalker, can be fought, not deadly, crawls through keyholes, is invisible, attack can be prevented by putting your shoes under the bed facing out. Experience: awakening at night, with sense of dread, unable to move, feeling something approach the bed, and feeling of oppression/crushing weight on the chest. Overall, similar to Old Hag, lamiae, strigae and Lilith tradition.

Poltergeist – in addition to killing, vampire breaks windows, throws rock into houses and on the roofs. Wreaks havoc in households, (some accounts of looting activity attributed to vampires in state of a general panic)

Similarities between witches and vampires

Word *stryx* (screeching owl, also a nighttime demon, who attacked children), gave rise to *strega* (witch) *strigoi* (Romanian for vampire),

Both may be born with a caul

Suck blood and suffocate people

Witches become vampires after death

Both make for dangerous corpses

Lucius Apuleius in *Golden Ass* has a story of blood-sucking witches; the motif is well preserved in Italian and Sicilian folktales.

Pseudo- and scientific theories on vampires

Porphyria

Infectious Epidemics

Coma or trance and burial alive

Periodic sleep paralysis

Sleep apnea

Nightmares

Heart attacks

Forensic science and debunking of “decomposition Myths”

Hallucinations

References (in no particular order)

Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, Yale University Press, New Heaven and London, 1988.

Jan L. Perlowski, *The Darkling, a Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, Slavica Publishers, Inc, Columbus, 1989

L.S. Klein, *Voskresheniye Peruna*, Yevraziya, St. Petersburg, 2004

Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil, edited by Peter Day, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2006

Dudley Wright, *Vampires and Vampirism*, Gordon Press, New York, 1973 (reprint, originally published in 1914)

Wayne Bartlett and Flavia Idriceanu, *Legends of Blood, The Vampire in History and Myth*, Praeger, Westport and London, 2006.

Gabriel Ronay, *The Truth about Dracula* Stein and day Publishers, New York, 1972.

Harry A Senn, *Were-Wolf and Vampire in Romania*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982

Montague Summers, *Vampire, His Kith and Kin*, E. P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1929.

Reynold T. McNally and Radu Florescu, *In Search of Dracula*, Galahad Books, new York, 1972

Vlad the Impaler, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlad_III_the_Impaler, retrieved 7/24/07

Issledovaniya v oblasti balto-slavyanskoy duhovnoy kultury: pogrebalniy obryad, red. V.V. Ivanov i L.G. Nevskaya, Moskva, Nauka, 1990.

(*Research in Baltic-Slavic spiritual Culture: Funerary Customs*, ed. By V.V. Ivanov, and L. G. Nevskaya, Moscow, Nauka, 1990.)

Claude Lecoutreux, *The Return of the Dead*, Inner Traditions, 2009.

Zelenin, D.K., *Ocherki Russkoy Mifologii: Umershiye Neyestestvennoy Smertyu I Rusalki*, Indrik, Moscow, 1995 (*Notes on Russian Mythology: Dead by Unnatural Death and Mermaids*, first edition published in 1916)