

## **Dead Men Walking – reconstruction of common types of apotropaic burials in Medieval Europe.**

### **What is it?**

These are models of apotropaic burials *in situ*, illustrating common measures of preventing post-mortem return of the dead in Medieval Europe.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this project is to familiarize people with a facet of funerary culture of Medieval Europe, an often ignored, topic in the SCA. We can say with absolute certainty that everyone who ever lived in SCA period of study has died, and their body was buried or otherwise disposed of in some way. The way it was done reflected on their contemporaries' attitude towards death, afterlife, religious belief or lack thereof, and now provides an interesting insight into their beliefs in general, and, in some cases, their definition of humanity.

For the most part, it was “business as usual”, the dead were accorded their rites, which varied greatly between times and places, and the living moved on. However, in a persistent minority of cases, the neat model of “dead and gone” broke down. A portion of the dead was feared as a potential threat to the living. Specifically, throughout Mediaeval Europe, from the fall of the Roman Empire to late Renaissance, there was a persistent belief that some dead will come back and will harm or kill their survivors. These dead were treated differently, and their burials reflect the preventive measures the living took to decrease the probability of their post-mortem return. These are known as apotropaic measures, and the dead coming back to life were referred to as the revenants.

### **Why I Did This**

An average modern person is much farther removed from the dead in their everyday life than an average medieval European, but we have remnants of these persistent beliefs and fear of post-mortem return in folklore and entertainment, as evidenced by our cyclical obsession with vampires, ghosts, zombies and such.

The ways modern fictional vampire hunters deal with revenants are similar to what was done in Medieval Europe. I wanted to show the persistence of this vestigial belief in our modern culture.

The evidence of differential treatment of corpses comes from medieval chronicles, where these walking dead are recorded as stories of everyday life, and from excavation of burials, which are distinctly different from the norm. In literature, these are called “deviant burials”.

These burials trickle into pop culture and media, usually under sensationalist headlines, such as “vampire grave discovered in Ireland”, and are often accompanied by pictures of Dracula, Buffy, and, if we’re lucky, a close up photo of staked skeletons.

There are archeological excavations, with detailed line drawings, and photographs, but these are usually not accessible to the general public without some hard-core digging, and are usually descriptions of things found, without interpretation of the burial in context. The line drawings can be hard to follow, and the photographs, especially of older excavations are of poor quality and may not show the details.

By making these models, I hope to make it easier to understand variations on period funerary rites, which were employed on potential revenant corpses.

### **How I Did This**

I have narrowed down the apotropaic measures to the most commonly employed. I made a conscious decision to limit these to the treatment of the corpse itself. I decided not to delve into magical apotropaics, such as spells, special prayers, or rituals which may have been used in conjunction with these burials, as these are ephemeral, and leave no material traces. I have also stayed away from apotropaic grave goods. These were many, varied greatly through time and place, and left a material, though incomplete archeological record. If these were made from material other than metal, bone, or pottery, they have decayed. I have included those items, rather than being placed in the grave together with the corpse, were interacting with the corpse itself, such as stakes or stones.

I researched available literature, including but not limited to, news releases, archeological surveys, books, etc., and accumulated a number of images of the apotropaic burials.

I have narrowed these to the representative burials, which demonstrate one or more apotropaic measures. In some cases, I have an incomplete record, such as only a detailed description of the burial from an article, or a partial burial picture. In these cases, I have used the evidence from similar burials to reconstruct the rest of the body.

### **Materials and Methods**

Due to numerous ethical, legal, sanitary, and financial constraints, no period materials or methods were used in the recreation of the burials.

I have used Halloween skeleton garlands, which I bought at RiteAid, self-drying terracotta clay I got on Amazon, aquarium pebbles, small stones from my back yard, toothpicks, and heavy duty tinfoil.

I have modified the skeletons according to the treatment of the corpses in the period burial, and have arranged them on rolled out clay tablets, to simulate an appearance of the

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skeleton *in situ*. Then, if there were other objects, such as stakes, stones, etc, these were also placed, according to the records. I let the clay dry, and then glued the skeletons and objects in place using Well-Bond glue.

I have written a short summary for each type of burial, and given some theories behind the method used and period examples.

I have also made a display illustrating common apotropaic burial methods. I have used the images of the excavated apotropaic burials I found during my research as well as period depictions of revenants and malevolent dead from period sources, mostly from the various books of hours, the stories of the three living and the three dead, and dance macabre engravings.

I have included the sources specific to the burials on the summary sheet, however, I have attached my full list of sources used for the display and the burials at the end.

### **What I Have Learned**

That the beliefs in the walking dead are remarkably persistent  
That the legends and the stories survive the events for centuries – modern people will readily recognize apotropaic measures used on the medieval corpses.  
That, just like the mediaeval people, we painstakingly chronicle our walking dead, but with much bigger budgets and better special effects.

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