

Dead Men Walking – an Overview and Reconstructions of Apotropaic Burials

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Introduction

We can say with absolute certainty that everyone who ever lived in the 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*. A burial that shows that these measures were employed is called an *apotropaic burial*.

In period fear of the walking dead was common and persistent. The accounts of the revenants come to us preserved in legends, but they can also be found in lives of saints, ecclesiastical writings, sagas, and chronicles. We are still fascinated with the concept of the reanimated dead, judging by popularity of the shows such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Walking Dead, and numerous remakes of Dracula.

From watching all these movies, we are very familiar with dealing with vampires and zombies - our versions of the medieval revenants. All of us can name a few vampire slaying techniques, such as staking or decapitation. Interestingly, these have not changed all that much, and many were used to deal with period revenants. However, what was also done frequently was to employ preventive measures, designed to prevent a suspicious corpse from rising as a revenant, rather than hunting it down and destroying it later.

As such, the corpses considered at risk for returning from the dead were buried differently from their normal mortal counterparts. These measures, called apotropaic measures, were thought decrease the probability that a body would rise after death. The apotropaic measures themselves were very similar to the techniques used to slay the revenants but were employed preventatively. Researchers seem to agree that these rites reflected the living's attitude towards the dead and were designed to render the suspicious corpses “safe”.¹

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Who was at risk? There were four possible outcomes: one could have lived a good life and died a good death, lived a bad life and died a bad death, lived a good life and died a bad death, and lived a bad life, and died a good death. Those living a good life and dying a good death were safe from post-mortem wanderings. Anyone else could rise after death and bother the living.

People who *lived a bad life and died a bad death* were the most obvious suspects. These included criminals, especially executed criminals, and a lot of burials with the apotropaic measures are from early period execution cemeteries². Sacrificial victims fell into the same category (as there is an overlap between criminals and sacrifices).

However, victims of accidents, epidemics, unexplained death, excommunicates, and people dying without proper last rites (people *who had a good life and had a bad death*) were also at risk.

People who lived non-normative lives, different in sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and such (considered to *have lead bad lives, though may have died a good death*), were also suspects.

Not all potential revenants were social outcasts. Sometimes respected members of the community were buried in a regular cemetery with proper respect, but still treated as a potential revenant.³

By teaching this class I hope to make it easier to understand variations on period funerary rites, which were employed on potential revenant corpses.

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 and decided not to delve into magical apotropaics, such as spells, special prayers, or rituals which may have been used in conjunction with these burials. 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 however included items interacting with the corpse itself, such as stakes and stones.

Decapitation

There is a significant overlap between apotropaic and judicial (punitive) decapitation, just as there is significant overlap between executed criminals and potential revenants. However, the 'safe' decapitated corpses would be buried in with the head in anatomic position, while the dangerous ones would have it placed elsewhere, or buried without the head.)⁴. In England, decapitations appear in the 5th, and become more common in the 6th and 7th centuries.⁵

Interestingly, this mode of burial was considered not only apotropaic, but also may have been derogatory: one of the early Norwegian laws states that “ if the head is severed from the body, and the head is placed between the feet, the wergild shall be doubled”.⁶

Prone (face down) burial.

Prone , or face-down burials are not limited to execution cemeteries, are sometimes encountered in consecrated ground. Prone burials are chronologically and geographically scattered, but, at least in England, are seen from 6-7th centuries.⁷ They are known from much earlier, and some burials, probably of social outcasts, from the Frattesina graveyards (near Verona, Italy), date from 12-10th c. B.C., and are also known from the Roman Period.⁸ Prone position is also found in some of the Bog bodies from Denmark, as late as the 14th c. A.D.⁹ .The prone position was employed to make it difficult for the spirit to return into the body. There is a 16th century account from a shepherd in Bavaria, who had out of body experiences, and commented it was harder to get back into his body, if it was face down.¹⁰ Additionally, the gaze of a corpse was considered dangerous, causing illness, death or possession, and turning it face down, limited its effect.^{11, 12, 13} Combination of prone burial and hands tied behind back is not infrequent. Hands tied behind the back is considered a sign of death by hanging.¹⁴

Leg Mutilation/Restraint.

Mutilation of the legs to prevent the dead from walking appears to be widespread. The degree of damage differs. In some Frattesina 12-10th c. B.C.E. burials in Italy¹⁵, and Anglo-Saxon England, the legs were bent backwards, and sometimes disarticulated.¹⁶ Broken tibias are seen in the bog bodies of Denmark, which span a 2000 year period, and go as late as the 14th c.¹⁷ Occasionally legs or feet are amputated completely, also in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁸ Alternatively, mutilation of the legs may be minimal. In *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, written about 430 B.C., Oedipus (whose name means “swollen foot”) was left out in the wilderness to die, with feet tied together and pierced by a thorn, to prevent the exposed infant from walking back as a revenant.¹⁹

Occasionally the legs are tied, which serves as a physical restraint designed to prevent the corpse from walking. In burials, the crossing of legs at the ankles is interpreted as previously tied extremities, as the ropes were usually made of organic material and decayed.²⁰

Stoning/partial stoning,

The placement of stones in graves presented a physical impediment to the dead rising. Bodies weighed down with stones, either across the chest, throat, or entire bodies, or found in graves filled with large rocks, are found throughout Europe.^{21, 22}

Related to the stoning of the body is the custom of placing stones on roadside cairns, which often housed the bodies of the dead travellers found by the side of the road or

criminals buried in liminal places. While it is still considered good luck to add a stone to the pile, in period the luck was more literal, as it was definitely lucky not be followed by a murderous revenant as one travels. The custom of placing small stones on the grave of one's loved ones in some cultures may be a remnant of the same superstition.

Sometimes, other objects, such as branches are also used, especially when stones were not available, but the stone mounds are better preserved.^{23, 24}

Placements of rock or bricks into the mouth, on throat or the chest of the potential revenants.

Placement of rocks or bricks in the mouth served a different purpose: it prevented the corpse from chewing on its shroud, itself and its neighbors, which would have caused the death of its family and friends, or caused epidemics.²⁵ (This belief was widespread in German speaking territories, and is even mentioned in *Malleum Maleficarum*.²⁶).

Alternatively, stuffing the mouth with rocks also prevented the spirit from returning into the body.²⁷

Staking.

Staking occurred either with metal or wooden stakes, or with sharp pieces of metal. The body may be staked through limbs, or through the heart or torso. There are regional variations, and the placement, number of stakes, and materials of the stakes vary. The places of burials also vary greatly. Some are on hard ground, and some are in bogs and rivers, which will be discussed later.

Staking had several functions – it physically pinned the body to the ground, in watery burials, stakes prevented the body from floating up, and staking through the heart prevented the dead from rising, a folklore motif well preserved to this day. If staking was through the legs, it served a dual function pinning the body down and leg mutilation discussed above. In 11th c. England, staking was employed specifically as an apotropaic measure in burials of unbaptized children, and women who died in childbirth.²⁸

It was also employed for suicides, where they were also buried at cross-roads. The latest documented occurrence of the staked suicide burial at cross-roads in England occurred in 1823, and this practice was outlawed by the *Burial of Suicides Act* Parliament later the same year.²⁹

There are well known Bulgarian 13th century burials, where the bodies were staked through the heart with broken ploughshares³⁰, and there are multiple examples of bodies buried within bogs, dating to the Iron age, which were staked to the turf with wooden stakes or wickets.³¹

The body of the Bocksten man, murdered and staked face down in a bog in Denmark around 1360. The stakes through the side and back may have been purely functional – pinning the body down in the turf, however the stake through the heart was to prevent the man from walking, as was burying him at the “meeting point of four parishes”.³²

There is a very late example of a burial in 19th century Lesbos, Greece, with iron stakes through the limbs.

A variant burial is with a sickle or a scythe fragment across its neck, or is known in eastern Europe.³³ This way, they would decapitate themselves when they rise out of the graves. It is possible that the widespread use of such burials contributed to the period depictions of death as a corpse with a sickle/scythe.³⁴

Liminal Burials

Liminal means occupying a position at, or on both sides of a boundary or threshold. Liminal burials include burials in non-normative locations. Burying outside of consecrated ground,³⁵ outside of the local district, or far away³⁶, at the borders of geographical or political entities, fall into this category. Liminal burial places include:

Bogs³⁷, ³⁸, tidal margins³⁹, ditches (indicate both the borders of human lands and water/earth border)⁴⁰, rivers⁴¹, ⁴², cross-roads.

As discussed above, suicides in England were customarily buried at cross-roads, and Aelfric of Eynsham refers to the witches raising the dead at cross rods at night.⁴³, ⁴⁴

Borders of parishes⁴⁵, river banks or river flood zones⁴⁶

Rivers as borders between the realms of the dead and the living is a common motif in folklore of multiple culture, and can be encountered in modern mythology and different media, such as Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* animated film, and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* book series.

“Between heaven and earth”

Elevated burials, or exposure of executed criminals, with eventual burial of the resulting skeleton.)⁴⁷

Execution cemeteries⁴⁸

Special places for keeping the unwanted/dangerous dead. Charnel houses would fall in the same category.

Please note that other apotropaic measures were often used in conjunction with liminal burials. Furthermore, not all liminal burials are apotropaic in nature: intent is important! Some unusual burials are due to hasty body disposal, or accidental death, and not motivated by fear of revenants.⁴⁹

Conclusion

While death, burials, and funerary culture are not commonly included in SCA activities, I believe it is important to be aware of them in period. The attitudes of the living towards the dead, and the processes of demonization of corpses are fascinating, and are reflected in many aspects of then contemporary culture, in miniatures, paintings, books, frescoes, chronicles, and folklore. The status of the *outsider*, or *other*, assigned to the revenant in

period, is very useful. These dead have created the negative spaces around living, which can sometimes tell us more about their society, than the people themselves. Even if we are not always aware of it, we have inherited this culture, which still permeates our lives, although, thankfully, mostly as entertainment.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid., 194.
- ⁴ Ibid., 34., describing a late seventh- early eighth c. anglo saxon burial.
- ⁵ Ibid., 89.
- ⁶ Anne Irene Riisøy, "Deviant Burials: Societal Exclusion of Dead Outlaws in Medieval Norway," (2015)., 69, quoting Larson, 1935, *The earliest Norwegian Laws, geing the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*.
- ⁷ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 89.
- ⁸ Zoe Devlin and Emma-Jayne Graham, *Death Embodied : Archaeological Approaches to the Treatment of the Corpse*, Studies in Funerary Archaeology (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015)., 145.
- ⁹ P. V. Glob, *The Bog People; Iron Age Man Preserved* (Ithaca, N.Y.,: Cornell University Press, 1969)., 149-151.
- ¹⁰ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 89.
- ¹¹ Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988)., 49.
- ¹² Nancy Caciola, *Afterlives : The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- ¹³ Riisøy, "Deviant Burials: Societal Exclusion of Dead Outlaws in Medieval Norway."
- ¹⁴ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 163.
- ¹⁵ Devlin and Graham, *Death Embodied : Archaeological Approaches to the Treatment of the Corpse*., 145-147.
- ¹⁶ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 163.
- ¹⁷ Glob, *The Bog People; Iron Age Man Preserved*.
- ¹⁸ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 93-94.
- ¹⁹ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality*., 61.
- ²⁰ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*., 40.
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- ²⁴ Claude Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead : Ghosts, Ancestors, and the Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind*, 1st U.S. ed. (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2009)., 23.
- ²⁵ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality*., 47.
- ²⁶ Heinrich Institoris, Jakob Sprenger, and Montague Summers, *Malleus Maleficarum* (New York,: B. Blom, 1970).

- ²⁷ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality.*, 47.
- ²⁸ Lecouteux, *The Return of the Dead : Ghosts, Ancestors, and the Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind.*, 38. From the *Decret* by Burchard of Worms, early 11th c.:
- If a very small child dies without baptis, they take the body into a secret place and pierce it through with a rod. They say that if they did not do this, a the chld would come back and could cause harm to a great many people. If a woman does not manage to give birth to her child and dies in labor, in the very grave both mother and child are pierced with a rod that nails them to the ground.*
- ²⁹ Mark Laskey, "Rites of Desecration: Suicide, Sacrilege and the Crossroads Burial," <http://www.cvltnation.com/rites-of-desecration-suicide-sacrilege-and-profane-burial-at-the-crossroads/>.
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- ³¹ Glob, *The Bog People; Iron Age Man Preserved.*
- ³² *Ibid.*, 149-151.
- ³³ Lesley A. Gregoricka et al., "Apotropaic Practices and the Undead: A Biogeochemical Assessment of Deviant Burials in Post-Medieval Poland," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 11 (2014).
- ³⁴ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality.*, 50-51.
- ³⁵ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs.*, 25.
- ³⁶ Caciola, *Afterlives : The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages.*, 213, in *Laxdaela Saga* Hrapp is far away in an attempt to stop him.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 237, 12th c. account of William of Malmesbury of a man weighed down in a bog to prevent wandering.
- ³⁸ Glob, *The Bog People; Iron Age Man Preserved.*
- ³⁹ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs.*
- ⁴⁰ Maura Farrell, "Prone, Stoned, and Losing the Head: Deviant Burials in Early Medieval Ireland in the 5th to 12th Centuries," *Trowel* (2012).
- ⁴¹ Caciola, *Afterlives : The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages.*, 237.
- ⁴² Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs.*, 24. In 10th c. England witches were punished by drowning or throwing into a river, which took care both of the execution and body disposal of a potential revenant.
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- ⁴⁷ Devlin and Graham, *Death Embodied : Archaeological Approaches to the Treatment of the Corpse.*, 64.
- ⁴⁸ Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs.*
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38