



# AN UNDYING STORY

Every culture has its ghost stories

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**ABOVE** Person buried near Drawsko, Poland was an Individual (#49/2012, a 30–39 year old female) with a sickle placed across the neck. The cemetery dates to the 17th to 18th century. Six of the 285 burials had sickles, chains, padlocks, or other measures to prevent their escaping the grave. This was one of 14 European cemeteries studied with these sorts of measures. —S. Wilson based on Gregoricka et al. 2014.

**BETWEEN 1725 AND 1755**, a great vampire epidemic hit eastern Europe. The dead were coming back to life and haunting, terrifying, and killing people across the countryside. Vampires were thought to return to their graves between attacks, and this led to a wave of gruesome exhumations in which corpses would be dismembered, burned, or reburied with stakes of wood, iron, or silver driven through their hearts. Graves were filled with garlic and surrounded with salt—both ancient practices associated with keeping the dead at rest. Some bodies, even those of children, were chained and locked into their coffins or their heads were removed. Even as diseases brought waves of death across what is now Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, and Poland, people were terrified to attend rites to properly put the dead to rest, because vampires were thought to be attracted to funerals and other rituals separating death from life.

At the time of this vampire episode (one of many), eastern Europe was a borderland between Christian and Muslim Europe. The Ottoman Turkish Empire conquered the Byzantine capital at Constantinople in 1453 and had captured most of the Balkans by the early 1500s. The ruler Suleiman the Magnificent (1494–1566) tried to extend those victories far into central Europe. He besieged Vienna, in what is today Austria, in 1529 and again in 1532, but was unable to take it. The Turks occupied and made tributary states of most of the Balkans from eastern Italy to the Black Sea, but tolerated religious diversity, so Christian and Jewish communities remained intact. The northern part of the region was fought over off and on for more than a century before being ceded to the Habsburg monarchy in Vienna in the late 1600s. Even today much of the Balkans are a mosaic of different cultures and religions, which contributed to the unrest in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. World War I was sparked by conflict between Serbian nationalists and the Austrian-Hungarian state.



Count Dracula, played by Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi in 1931, Universal Pictures, Public Domain

With the reports of vampires in the early 1700s, the Austrian government sent a contingent led by former military surgeon Johannes Flüchinger to investigate. He sent his report to Vienna and Belgrade in 1732: “After it had been reported that in the village of Medvegia [in modern Serbia] the so-called vampires had killed some people by sucking their blood, I was, by high decree of a local Honorable Supreme Command, sent there to investigate the matter thoroughly.” He was there some years after these events, however. Villagers described a man named Arnod Paole, who had been troubled by vampires in his own life, and who had died in a fall and was buried. According to the local people, “In twenty or thirty days after his death some people complained that they were being

bothered by this same Arnod Paole; and in fact four people were killed by him.” The people had known stories of vampires for centuries and had folk traditions about dealing with them, so they dug up the body, and found him “quite complete and undecayed” but very bloody. His fingernails had grown long and he had blood in his mouth. So, finding him, indeed, to be a vampire, they drove a stake through his heart, “according to their custom,” and burned his body, throwing his ashes back in the grave. They exhumed the bodies of the people he had supposedly killed and treated them the same way. The accounts said he had also drained the blood from cattle, and that, “in a period of three months, seventeen young and old people died, among them some who, with no previous

illness, died in two or at the most three days.” Hearing of new incidents of vampirism at the time of their visit, the military surgeons observed or participated in some of the excavations and heard accounts of many more.

During this frenzy of concern for vampires in eastern Europe there was not a great deal of official or ecclesiastical concern on the part of the Church. In France, Dominican abbot Augustin Calmet (1672–1757) studied the theology on the subject and wrote a treatise in 1746 and an expanded two-volume, “Treatise on the Apparitions of Spirits and on Vampires” in 1751. He discussed the many scriptural incidents of the dead returning, but also suggested that these incidents might also be explained as mass delusions. The Church’s stance was to take no theological position on these matters, but to allow local communities to perform practices of the sort that Flüchinger described. The Austrian empire also dealt with it as a matter of local superstition. That was the way the Ottoman Empire dealt with it as well; although Islamic theology did recognize vampires, it was considered a matter of local superstition and left to local communities.

### CREATURES THAT BEHAVE

like vampires appear again and again in human folklore all over the world. The wide variety of stories share several recurring characteristics: The vampires are hungry for the blood, or life-force, of the living and create new vampires with their bite. They roam about at night, are strong and sometimes seductive, and can at times shape-shift and become animals such as bats, owls, or wolves. They fear the daylight and are afraid of mirrors. Sometimes they appear in the form of people still living. Often they have come back to life because of a violent death or because of improperly performed burial rituals. And there are actions that can be taken so they no longer trouble the living.

A classic European version of the

shape-shifting creature that is neither dead nor alive is told in Irish writer Bram Stoker (1847–1912)’s 1897 Gothic horror novel *Dracula*. It has been adapted and retold over 700 times in movies, plays, books, and every other medium.

The most common form of a vampire-like creature in Chinese folklore is the Jiāngshī (“stiff corpse” or “hopping corpse”), of whom stories have been told for centuries. In the late 1700s, a Qing dynasty (1644–1912) scholar named Ji Yun (1724–1805) wrote a treatise about reanimated spirits, in which he said mirrors could be used to scare away the Jiangshi because they were afraid of their own reflection. Like European vampires, the Jiangshi roamed at night seeking to drain the Qi, or life force, from people.

In both the Aztec and Maya traditions in Mesoamerica, the Tlahelpuchi were said to roam at night and suck blood and life from the living, especially children. They could turn into bats or owls to find victims. The Maya bat god, Camazotz, appears in the Maya sacred text the *Popul Vuh*. The god demanded blood sacrifices and flew about draining the blood from its victims.

In North African and Middle Eastern folklore, ghouls (from the Arabic word *ghūl*) were a special form of djinn that were malevolent, strong, deceptive, and driven by bloodlust and cannibalism.

**THERE IS A WIDESPREAD** cultural association of mirrors with spirits and death. Many groups pay attention to mirrors during mourning. Ashkenazi Jews have the custom of covering mirrors during the period of Shiva. It is also practiced by Taoists and in traditional Chinese households, reportedly to avoid catching sight of the dead, or attracting them to a household. In some Hindu communities, mirrors are covered to ease the dead’s transition to the afterlife and prevent them from being trapped in the reflective mirror. The Roma or Romani in Europe have the same

practice, turning mirrors to the wall after the death of a loved one. People in West Africa and some in the African diaspora in the Americas cover mirrors with black or white cloth, or turn them to the wall, again to avoid trapping a spirit or catching sight of one. While the use of mirrors—polished metal or obsidian—go back at least 5,000 years in many parts of the world, they were only possessed by the elite until recently.

How can the world be as full of vampires and zombies as folklore suggests? The answer may have less to do with vampires and more with certain universals in human psychology. Every folklore tradition contains frightening ghost stories. The oldest written documents ever created, wherever they appear, contain descriptions of the returned dead and accounts of their terror. Scary stories—and few are scarier than dead people crawling out of the grave to suck the blood from the living—are human universals. Psychologists theorize that stories such as these allow us to experience the emotional rush of fear, the racing hearts and adrenalin surges, in relative safety. Marvin Zuckerman (1928–2018), Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Delaware, observed that some of us crave the intense feelings that come with experiences that are risky or a little dangerous, or with anything offering novel and rich experiences. Zuckerman and his colleagues created a “sensation seeking scale” and found that while most of us enjoy exciting things, some people are strongly attracted to intensely scary experiences. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, agreeing with Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), finds the most powerfully terrifying subjects are the ones that get into taboo areas where the boundary between the cultural world and ancient unnamable fears break down.

According to folktales, the best way to speed the deceased to the afterlife for good is to observe burial traditions carefully, and to properly usher the



Cremation pyres at the Manikarnika ghat at Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Hindus believe that cremation on the banks of the sacred Ganges River at Varanasi releases a soul from the cycle of death and rebirth (the Samsara —ImagesofIndia/Shutterstock)

dead to the next life. Those who died by violence or suicide, or who were buried without the proper rituals, were seen as the most dangerous. During the vampire epidemics in eastern Europe one of the most distressing things was that fear kept people away from funerals and interments, or otherwise disturbed the required steps in helping loved ones to move on. For many, any lack of care in funeral rituals gave rise to new vampires. In Hindu tradition, mourning rituals are performed on the third, tenth, and thirteenth days after cremation. The Tehravin rite on the thirteenth day ends the formal period of mourning. For Japanese Buddhists every seventh day is observed until the seventh cycle or forty-ninth day, when the soul is reborn to a new existence. Traditional Roman Catholic observance calls for masses on the third and seventh days, and the thirtieth day marks the end of mourning. In Islam, Sharia law does not dictate specific time periods for rites, but Arab tradition calls for prayers on the third, seventh, and fortieth days. The treatment of the body is also prescribed in every culture—how it is washed, dressed, visited, and

finally buried, cremated, or ritually left to the elements.

In nearly all cultures there is an annual celebration of the dead. These pay respect to the departed and keep them resting in peace. In American culture there is an official holiday, Memorial Day, that began after the Civil War. But the traditional observance is All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. Halloween evolved from the ancient Celtic tradition of *Samhain* (pronounced SOW-in), marking the end of harvest and the beginning of winter. The night of October 31 was seen as the time when the boundary between the living and spirit worlds was most permeable. It was a time to make offerings of food to the dead, but also to take precautions against malicious acts they might commit. Bonfires were built to keep spirits away, and in some Scottish traditions disguising oneself as a supernatural being allowed people to move about without being disturbed by the spirits. As Christianity came to traditionally Celtic populations, All Saints and All Souls days emerged as syncretic substitutes for the Pagan holiday. In pre-Christian Germanic tradition this

thinning of the boundary between the living and spirit world occurred in the spring on Walpurgis Night (April 30–May 1), and was similarly a time when bonfires were built and supernatural beings were said to be about.

In the end, Abbot Calmet's 1746 treatise concluded that despite the volumes of evidence he recounted of the dead and their "return to life; of their apparition, and the confusion which they cause in the towns and country places; of their killing people by sucking their blood..." that the stories were false. Calmet was an Enlightenment thinker, an early adopter of a scientific methodology, and he concluded that in the light of day, "all those things are mere illusions, and the consequence of a heated and prejudiced imagination."

And yet, as with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, no matter how dead the issue may seem to be, in every generation stories of the living dead come springing back to life.

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