True blood: The real vampire slayers

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THE stories must have sent a chill through Paris's elegant society. Beginning in March 1693, a genteel literary journal called Mercure Galant published a series of macabre articles documenting a plague of undead corpses in Poland and Russia. "This reviving being… comes out of his grave, or a demon in his likeness, [and] goes by night to embrace his near relations or his friends," Pierre Des Noyers, a scholar and former secretary to Queen Marie-Louise of Poland, reported in their May issue. It then "sucks their blood so much as to weaken and attenuate them, and at last cause their death".

The only solution was to behead the corpse and drive a stake through its heart, Des Noyers wrote. These creatures, so filled with stolen blood that it poured out of their ears and eyes, went by a name that sounds strangely familiar today: oupires.

Long before vampires became the dashing stars of Victorian fiction, these creatures were a serious concern for scholars like Des Noyers. If their theories seem senseless in the light of modern science, it is important to remember just how eerie a decaying body can appear. A corpse's lips can be specked with blood, for example, and the torso can appear bloated, as if they have just eaten (see "Diary of death and decay"). Thanks to modern forensic science, we now know that this is caused by a build-up of gas in the bowels, which pushes blood up through the lungs and out of the mouth. In medieval and early modern Europe, however, these processes were far from obvious.

"Belief in vampires at the time was not necessarily 'irrational' or 'superstitious'," says Koen Vermeir, a historian at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in Paris, France. "The scientific and religious background beliefs were very different from today."

Vermeir first chanced upon the Mercure Galant articles while researching the peculiar claims of a mystic "able to find criminals with his divining rod". Intrigued that serious scholars had entertained the subject of vampirism, he has since combed through their work to see when and why they abandoned their supernatural beliefs for a more modern understanding of the reports.

Vampire-like phenomena were already deeply embedded in folklore by the time of the Mercure Galant stories. William of Newburgh, a 12th-century English historian and canon, was one of the first to chronicle the belief, with an account of an apparent rampage near Anantis Castle (possibly in Dumfriesshire, Scotland). Villagers, he wrote, were "beaten black and blue by this vagrant monster". Searching for the source of the attacks, they exhumed a corpse "suffused with blood… It might have been taken for a leech". A brave

villager, William records, then "laid open its side by repeated blows of the blunted spade, and thrusting in his hand, dragged out the accursed heart".

The creatures portrayed in these early reports weren't yet the bloodsuckers of Des Noyers's article, though. The blood around the corpse's lips was instead believed to be a consequence of their tendency to feed on bodies in the neighbouring graves. Terrified locals sometimes took drastic action to quell this habit; recent excavations near Venice, Italy, found a 16th-century female corpse with a brick jammed between her teeth, apparently to prevent her from snacking on neighbours. When it came to their living victims, however, these creatures were thought to be more likely to hit people than to bite them.

Even the later reports, beginning with the Mercure Galant stories, describe very different creatures from the glamorous vampires that grace modern films. For one thing, they weren't mysterious nobility like Dracula, but an undead version of the fellow down the block you never got on with. They could also enjoy the midday sun without turning into ash, and, in a blow to their modern reputation as meticulous preeners, they smelled awful.

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