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Who's Afraid of Vampire/Werewolf?: Unearthing the Serbian Blood-sucking, Shape-shifting Creatures

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Abstract | This paper wishes to excavate the long-forgotten and dormant vampires that once used to frighten the living daylight out of people from Eastern and Central Serbia, so as to explain who they were/are as well as how they operated within their respective societies. Marija Šarović, a contemporary Serbian scholar on the subject of vampires, observes that in Serbian literature, the vampire appears only in realistic prose during the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, although there were earlier traces of the same. Moreover, the oldest existing document where the term *vampire* is mentioned in Serbia, she adds, dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century. The terms *werewolf* and *vampire* were identical in Serbia, as defined by the entry “vukodlak” (werewolf) in the first Serbian dictionary written by the father of modern Serbian language, Vuk Stefanović-Karadžić, in 1818.

Vampire slaying is a practice that goes far back in the past. Even though the belief in vampires can be found in many cultures throughout the world, the most detailed and the most famous accounts of vampire epidemics came from the eighteenth-century Serbia, thus perhaps introducing the term *vampire* to the western world.

Keywords | Vampire, Serbia, Folklore, Literature, Supernatural



Resumo | Este artigo pretende desenterrar os muito esquecidos e adormecidos vampiros que outrora aterrorizavam os vivos da zona leste e central da Sérvia, no

intuito de explicar quem eles eram/são e ainda como estes atuavam dentro das suas comunidades. Marija Šarović, uma das académicas contemporâneas sérvias que se debruçou sobre o tema vampiros, observou que, na literatura sérvia, os vampiros aparecem apenas na prosa realística durante as últimas décadas do século XIX, embora existam vestígios anteriores. Além disso, o registo documental mais antigo onde o termo *vampiro* é mencionado na Sérvia, acrescenta Marija Šarović, data da segunda parte do século XIII. Os termos *lobisomem* e *vampiro* eram idênticos na Sérvia, definidos pela palavra “vukodlak” (lobisomem) no primeiro dicionário sérvio, escrito por Vuk Stefanović-Karadžić, pai da língua sérvia moderna, em 1818.

A caça aos vampiros é uma prática que remonta aos tempos mais antigos. Embora a crença em vampiros possa ser encontrada em muitas culturas do mundo, os registos mais famosos de epidemias vampíricas são da Sérvia do século XVIII, o que talvez explique a introdução do termo *vampiro* no mundo ocidental.

Palavras-chave | Vampiro, Sérvia, Folclore, Literatura, Sobrenatural



All sorts of old superstitions die very hard in this delightful mediaeval country. All except a few lawyers and bagmen believe in vampires, who may be charmed with an amulet of garlic; and in the *vile* or spirits of the mountains, rivers, earth, and air. (Herbert Vivian 188)

Art and literature are increasingly exploiting the vampire theme nowadays. Even in the past, many literatures were tackling the subject. Some of the first literary attempts were H.A. Ossenfelder's *The Vampire* (1748), the first poem featuring a vampire, S. T. Coleridge's unfinished poem *Christabel* (written in 1800), J. W. Polidori's novella *The Vampyre* (1819), S. Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872), and perhaps the most famous one, B. Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Readers' interest in vampires was responsible for the introduction of the theme into major European literatures at the end of the eighteenth century. The vampires in today's popular works of art and literature have evolved and, therefore, have distanced themselves so much from their centuries-old ancestors that the original idea behind the vampire concept has begun to fade.

This paper wishes to excavate the long-forgotten and dormant vampires that once used to frighten the living daylight out of people from Eastern and Central Serbia, so as to explain who they were/are as well as how they operated within their respective societies. The most logical way to do so was to return to the very source – Serbia, in search of the first cases of vampirism reported under the name *vampire*.

The material I gathered while doing my research in Serbia proved to be helpful in understanding vampires' powers over people. It also opened the possibility for establishing the links between Serbian and European vampires, not only connecting them in historical terms but also in modern ones.

In Serbian literature, even though there are earlier traces as general/typological occurrences, the vampire, as a relatively independent and complete motive, appears only in realistic prose, more precisely during the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century. However, the oldest existing document where the term *vampire* is mentioned in Serbia dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century, where in a nomocanon dated from 1262 a priest denounces peasants' superstitious belief that the eclipses of the sun and the moon happen when they get eaten by a werewolf/vampire (Šarović 15). These two terms were identical in Serbia, as defined by the entry "vukodlak" (werewolf) in the first Serbian dictionary written by the father of modern Serbian language, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, in 1818:

Werewolf is the name for a man who, within 40 days upon his death, gets possessed by some devil's spirit, and thus revived (vampired). Then the werewolf leaves his grave at night and suffocates people in their homes and drinks their blood. An honest man cannot become a vampire, except if a bird flies over his dead body or if some other animal passes over it. Werewolves most often appear in winter (between Christmas and Ascension Day). As the number of deaths increases in a village, people start saying that a werewolf is at the graveyard (some even report seeing him with a shroud over his shoulder at night) and begin guessing who it may be. Sometimes they take a young and spotless black horse to the graveyard and lead him over the suspected werewolf's grave: for they say that such a horse neither will, nor could dare cross over a werewolf. Should they decide to dig one up, then all the villagers gather with hawthorn stakes (for he is only afraid of the hawthorn stake: that is why, upon mentioning his name in the house, they say: "Let madder and hawthorn thorns be on his path"), open the grave, and if they find a man not decomposed therein, they stab him with the stake and throw him into the fire to burn. They say that such a werewolf is bloated and reddened in his grave due to the human blood he consumed ("as red as a vampire"). Werewolf sometimes even visits his wife (especially if she is young and attractive) and sleeps with her; and it is also said that a child fathered by a werewolf has no bones. Moreover, in times of famine, he is frequently seen around watermills, barns, blockhouses and baskets of maize. He is said to roam with his shroud thrown over his shoulder. He can pass through the smallest crack; therefore, there is no use closing doors as a defence from neither him nor witches. (Karadžić XI, 132, *our translation*)

As shown above, Karadžić uses the terms *werewolf* and *vampire* interchangeably in Serbian, offering an in-depth description of the instructions for the proper killing of vampires. However, the practice of killing the revenants had been a part of Serbian folklore even before Karadžić's nineteenth century description. Dr Radovan N. Kazimirović observed in his 1941 publication, *Тајанствене појаве у нашем народу/Tajanstvene pojave u našem narodu (Mysterious Phenomena in our Folk)*, that as early as the fourteenth century, Serbs were prone to the said practice. He quotes the famous article 20 from the Prizren transcript of Serbia's Tsar Stephen Uroš IV Dušan's Code (1349), which states the following: "Када се деси да се мађионством људи из гробова ваде те сажигу, оно село које би то учинило, платиће вражду, а распопиће се поп који је дошао на то" (*Kada se desi da se mađionstvom ljudi iz grobova vade te sažigu, ono selo koje bi to učinilo, platiće vraždu, a raspopiće se pop koji je došao na to/When people are taken out of the graves by sorcery and burnt, any village that does this shall pay a fine, and if any priest shall come to it, let his priesthood be taken from him*) (70). As it can be seen from the above quote, vampire slaying is a practice that goes far back in the past, centuries before the appearance of Bram Stoker's famous 1897 example, and before Herbert Vivian's account of the same year, quoted at the beginning of this essay.

Another clue that serves as evidence for the extended presence of vampires in Serbian folklore, which complements the prohibitions against the belief in and killing of vampires mentioned above, involves other repeated official bans throughout the history of Serbs. Tihomir R. Đorđević elaborated on them in his 1952 publication entitled, *Вампир и друга бића у нашем народном веровању и предању/Vampir i druga bića u našem narodnom verovanju i predanju (Vampire and Other Beings in our Folklore and Myth)*. After acknowledging that all practices involving vampires had been banned and/or sanctioned both by secular and ecclesiastical authorities, the author continued with an extended list of recorded historical cases of the same. Thus, he mentioned the years 1666, 1730, 1820, 1833, 1838, 1844, as the ones in which individuals who participated in the ritualistic exhumation and desecration of the purported vampires were either imprisoned or fined. Those were also the cases in which the people were continuously warned to abstain from performing such rites (216-19).

Even though the belief in vampires can be found in many cultures throughout the world, the first, most detailed, and most famous accounts of massive vampire

epidemics around the world came precisely from the eighteenth-century Serbia, thus perhaps introducing the term *vampire* to the western world. I say *perhaps*, simply because the precise etymology of the word is hard to determine due to its similarity in many Slavic languages. One of the few literary texts, however, which defines the *vampire* as a Serbian term is a short story *Four Wooden Stakes* by Victor Rowan, published for the first time in “Weird Tales”, vol. 5, issue 2, in February 1925. In it, the main character (the narrator) reads the entry from an old encyclopaedia, “*Vampire*. A term apparently of Serbian origin originally applied in Eastern Europe to blood-sucking ghosts” (248).

Professor Katharina M. Wilson identifies “four schools of thought on the etymology of *vampire*” (3): Turkish, Greek, Slavic, and Hungarian. The first one was defended by a nineteenth-century Austrian linguist, Franz Miklosich, and his supporters. They argued that the term itself, as well as all the other Slavic cognates, *vampir*, *upir*, *upior*, *upyr*, *uper*, etc., all stemmed from the Turkish *uber*, meaning witch. The second supports the idea that the term *vampire* comes from the Greek verb πῖ (to drink) (4). Curiously, however, the Serbian verb *piti* (to drink) has the form *pij* as the second person singular imperative. It is worth noting that upon my investigation into the Turkish origin Professor Wilson mentioned, I failed to identify any existence of such a term – *uber*. There is a possibility, though, that the school supporting the Turkish origin had in mind the proto-Turkish origins of the word, but this would then be too far-fetched an explanation. Petar Skok, one of the most famous Croatian linguists and onomastics experts, says that the term *ubyr* comes from Northern-Turkish (basing this on Miklosich’s supposition). The third school, the one whose theory has been generally recognised as the most probable nowadays, claims the term is of Slavic origin, its root being the Serbian word *vamnup/vampir*. Among those who supported this theory were Kluge, Falk and Torp, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (London, 1903), and the Spanish *Encyclopedia Universal Illustrada* (Madrid, 1930-33), to name but a few. Others, however, are more inclined to say that the term originated from Bulgarian or Polish. Finally, the fourth school, consisting particularly of American and English writers, somehow keeps insisting on the Hungarian origin, even though, as Professor Wilson points out, the term in Hungarian occurred more than a century after it had been adopted by the vast majority of western languages (5). One of the reasons for this insistence, perhaps, is the fact that the

famous reports came from eighteenth-century Serbia, which was under the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time – hence, the Hungarian origin hypothesis.

Furthermore, the etymology of the noun *vampire* is not the only concept wrapped up in mystery. The history of the introduction of the term into the vocabularies and literatures of the major western languages is also controversial. The general position¹ is that the earliest records point to Poland, Russia and Macedonia, prior to the vampire-craze of the third decade of the eighteenth-century Serbia. Nevertheless, the later stage of the introduction of the word into German, French and English, from the reports of the vampire epidemics of 1725-1732 in Serbia, proved to be the most influential for the widest recognition of the term *vampire* as a Serbian word, used as such in the Serbian language to this day.

What is perhaps the most important observation regarding the connection between Serbia and modern European literary vampirism is the fact that vampires, at their prime in the first half of the nineteenth-century European literary productions, originated in Serbian folkloric tradition. As part of my investigation, I have visited Kisiljevo and Medveđa (among other places where the belief in vampires is still very strong), and spoken to the authorities there. The following accounts on the vampirisms of Petar Blagojević and Arnaut Pavle were confirmed then as part of the folklore of their respective villages, which have kept the stories alive to this day. It is worth mentioning that, even though we live in a highly modern and intellectually advanced society, I encountered people in both Kisiljevo and Medveđa, respectively, who refused to talk about their famous blood-sucking villagers out of sheer dread.

It all started at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the Treaty of Požarevac in 1718. It was a peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Republic of Venice. A part of the Serbian territory, which had been under the Ottomans, was now handed over to Austria that, naturally, replaced the Turkish officials for its own. It was during this brief interval under the Austrian rule (between 1718 and 1739) that the rumours of alleged cases of vampirism in Serbia reached the court of Charles VI. The authorities decided to send the two physicians and officers, Glaser and Johann Flückinger, to the newly-gained territories to investigate the cases. Their report presents a remarkable document for anyone interested in the subject. By confirming the existence of vampires, after having

¹ As stated by Katharina M. Wilson, 9.

investigated the cases of vampire epidemics on the territories where the Serbian plain folk lived, this document directly influenced the Western European population, thus “spreading the virus” of truthfulness of vampire existence into the West. Clearly, from our point of view, the advancement of medical science easily deconstructs this myth, attributing the symptoms the corpses exhibited to the natural process of decomposition. However, due to the lack of the knowledge in the field, nineteenth-century Europe was swept over by the bone-chilling discoveries from the southeastern corner of the continent.

One of the first cases of vampirism and certainly the most thoroughly-documented one can be attributed to one Petar Blagojević, a Serbian peasant, who officially died in 1725. He lived in Kisiljevo, a village in eastern Serbia, and was believed to have turned into a vampire upon his death. Consequently, after having died, he supposedly returned as a vampire, causing nine deaths in his village. This case was documented in the report signed by the Imperial Provisor Frombald, who was an official of the Austrian administration, present at the staking of Petar Blagojević. The sensationalism of his testimony was beyond anyone’s expectations.

The hysterical finger-pointing commenced when the nine mentioned deaths in Kisiljevo were all attributed to Petar Blagojević. The people had claimed (while still alive) that he was visiting them at night trying to strangle them. Dr Radovan N. Kazimirović also mentions the case, noting that even Petar Blagojević’s wife had to flee from the village after having reported the strange occurrences involving her late husband who had supposedly visited her at night (71). After the ninth supposed victim had passed away², the villagers decided to perform the exhumation of Blagojević’s body to see if he had turned into a vampire. According to the popular belief, one would definitely be deemed a vampire if exhibiting the following symptoms: bloated body, traces of blood seeping through the orifices (eyes, nose, mouth), long hair/beard/nails, and the overall absence of decay. Therefore, the Provisor and the Orthodox priest were summoned to witness the exhumation. In spite of the Provisor’s advice that the permission be sought from higher officials, the villagers decided not to wait any longer. The reason for this, as they said, was in the fact that prolonging the onset of the proceedings would create new deaths, as it had happened before. Thus, so as not to flee the village due to the imminent danger, accompanied by the Provisor

² No medical records exist to explain these occurrences, leaving the nine deaths under the veil of mystery.

and the priest, the alleged vampire's body was dug up, and the villagers' fears were confirmed. Petar Blagojević's body *did* exhibit all the conventional signs of vampirism. They then continued with the staking ritual – driving a hawthorn stake through the vampire's heart, upon which Blagojević's blood oozed through his ears and mouth. After having performed this, they moved on to the next stage, i.e. burning the corpse. In his concluding remarks, the Provisor distanced himself from this ritual (should it turn out to be erroneous), as he was not completely convinced in the veridicality of the whole spectacle he was witnessing. His report was consequently published in *Wienerisches Diarium*, a Viennese newspaper, which is known as the modern-day *Die Wiener Zeitung*. The authorities in Kisiljevo, however, pointed out that the existing members of the only Blagojević family in Kisiljevo nowadays, when asked, did not recall of any relations to the (in)famous Petar.

A year or so after Petar Blagojević's death, another case of vampire epidemics happened. This time a man called Arnaut Pavle died not that far away from Kisiljevo, most probably in 1726³. He was a Serbian hajduk⁴, in those days quite a normal profession to have. His death preceded the deaths of over sixteen of his fellow-villagers in Medveđa, a village near the town of Paraćin (present-day Central Serbia). One of the reasons he was believed to have become a vampire was the fact that he had spent a part of his life in the Turkish part of Serbia (Kosovo), where he had supposedly come in contact with vampires. After returning to Medveđa, he had an accident and died suddenly. His grave was dug up after ten days because of the growing complaints from the people who claimed that he had been visiting them, after which they rapidly died. Similarly to the previous case of vampirism, upon excavation, Pavle's corpse exhibited the same symptoms as Blagojević's. As customary, his corpse was staked and burnt. Curiously, the witnesses reported a strange groaning sound emitted from Pavle's corpse after having been perforated through the heart by the stake. Lest the ones who had died from Pavle's attacks should turn as well, the villagers disinterred them and performed the same ritual on them.

However, the story of Pavle's vampirism did not end there. It was roughly 1931, about five to six years after the original case, when people suddenly started

³ The year of his actual death is not known. Some authors suggest 1725 as well. See Dickens 2011, 314.

⁴ There is a variety of different spelling possibilities for the term *hajduk*, including this one, which is the original spelling in Serbian, therefore kept here as such. The term itself denotes an outlaw, or a bandit, who fought on the side of the plain folk against the Ottoman oppressors.

dying in the village. The red herring was the fact that they all died not far apart from each other in a short period of time. After more than ten people had died under curious circumstances (no apparent signs of illness were discovered), an infectious disease specialist was called for, who did not detect anything related to infectious diseases, although he did state that the deaths could probably be attributed to the Orthodox fasting customs resulting in malnutrition. Be as it may, the people refused to accept the specialist's findings and demanded the ritualistic killing of the vampires. What followed was almost the same as in all the previous cases. The majority of the exhumed bodies showed very few or no signs of decomposition at all. There was fresh blood present on both the shrouds and the bloated bodies, new skin was formed, nails and hair were longer than usual, etc. The final stage of the ritual was performed as usual and the official report deeming the corpses as being in the vampiric state was signed on 26 January, 1732.



Figure 1: Medveđa, Serbia. Old, abandoned graveyard where vampire Arnaut Pavle was purportedly buried (c. 1726).
Author: Milan Jovanović, July 2011.

Perhaps the most famous of all is the vampirism of Sava Savanović who died in 1724. The legend tells he used to live in an old watermill on the Rogačica, in the

village of Zarožje in Western Serbia. The mill in question was operational until the end of 1950s. After that, it became a tourist attraction, which it has remained ever since, especially in modern-day Serbia due to the expansion of the global vampire-craze. Sava Savanović appears in the story *Posle devedeset godina* (*After Ninety Years*, 1880) – published 17 years before Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) – written by the Serbian writer Milovan Glišić (1847–1908), as well as in the horror film *Leptirica* (*The She-Butterfly*, 1973), inspired by Glišić's story. He also appears in the novel *Strah i njegov sluga* (*Fear and Servant*, 2000), written by Mirjana Novaković (1966).

Friedrich S. Krauss (1859-1938), Freud's correspondent and a pioneer figure in the history of folkloristics, wrote two short texts on vampires: one a collection of vampire sightings, and the other dealing with the measures one needs to take so as to assure protection against vampires. I found it rather interesting to learn that some of the rituals he reported were actually depicted in the above mentioned story and film, namely, while staking a vampire, one should be careful not to let the butterfly, which comes out of the grave upon opening the coffin, escape. It should be burnt afterwards along with the body because it is only then that a vampire can truly be destroyed. If not, the vampire's vengeance should be expected upon the villagers for the next seven years. The butterfly detail was the one that provided the title for the film, shot at the original location of Sava's watermill. Unfortunately, as I was preparing this essay, I learned that the famous watermill had collapsed only three days before after centuries of defiance against the odds. Curiously enough, the news was first published in Britain, and only then in Serbia.

As it can be seen from all the above, vampire belief was quite widespread in Serbia, especially in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The mentioned documents are but a few which show how not only illiterate peasants, but also the clergy believed in vampires. Thus, the issue was not about whether or not vampires were real, but actually about how to deal with them. Interestingly enough, such beliefs still permeate modern day Serbia. Old people in rural areas still recount vampire stories, whereas the life and times of the most famous of all the vampires in Serbia – Sava Savanović, immortalised by Glišić, was dealt with in a film called *The She-Butterfly* (1973), which spread the fear even farther from the epicentre. Moreover, the present echoes of the vampire lore in Serbia are at times so powerful that many people feel ill at ease

when asked to talk about the subject, a reaction I came across on numerous occasions while conducting interviews with people in Kisiljevo, Medveđa, and Zarožje.

While I was conducting the field research in Serbia, I interviewed people about the subject of vampires, and one of them, in the Eastern Serbian village of Štubik, not far from my hometown, provided me with a very useful and insightful material he himself had gathered and published in 1998. It involves his fellow villagers' testimonies and stories, which illustrate some of the universally accepted beliefs regarding vampires. The people he interviewed were almost exclusively over seventy/eighty-year-olds, and the majority of their accounts happened in their youth, which points to the first half of the twentieth century. Their stories (some passed on from generation to generation, others first-hand accounts) included the following: to quiet a vampire one should identify the grave using a horse, walk around the coffin thrice, straddle it and drive a stake/a metal nail through the vampire's heart, pour mulled wine, garlic and frankincense in its mouth, drive a knife into the household door and flip the broom upside down; if encountered with a vampire, the possible victim should swear and curse aloud; the places usually visited by vampires include open, desolate roads and crossroads, woods, bridges, houses, attics, stables, watermills; typically, vampires visit their family members entering the house through the windows, keyholes, down chimneys trying to hurt them in different ways and frequently making sexual advances on their victims, pulling the sheets off them, making noise in the kitchen and in the attic, generally frightening people and domestic animals. These vampiric activities would generally stop with the cockcrowing at dawn.

Judging from the cases presented, vampires came into the Western European public eye during the first half of the eighteenth century. There, they quickly became increasingly popular especially in English, German, and French literatures. Afterwards, in the nineteenth-century Serbia, on the brink of the liberation from the Ottomans, adorned by the newly-created national characteristic – its own standard, official, and internationally praised idiom, Serbian literature (influenced by European tastes) imports that which had belonged to it in the first place – the vampire. Serbian literature had to turn to already enlightened Europe so as to recognise the treasures of its own culture. Thus, leading European literatures “returned” vampires to their ancestral origins.



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