

Vampirism and Disease: An Anthropological Analysis

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Figure 1. Subadult, 12-15 years, unknown sex with stones under chin (Burial 29/2008)



Figure 2. Adult female, 35-39 years with sickle across throat (Burial 24/2009)

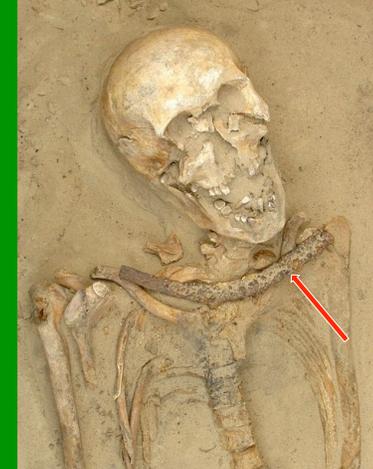


Figure 3. Adult male, 35-44 years with sickle across throat (Burial 28/2008)



Figure 4. Adult female, 45-59 years with stone under chin and sickle across body (Burial 60/2010)

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Introduction

Vampires have become a media sensation through popular books, movies, and television shows. The vampire legend, however, is not new. The poem "Der Vampyre" first appeared in 1748, followed by "The Bride of Corinth" in 1797 (Day, 2002). It would be another 100 years before the publication of the quintessential vampire story, *Dracula*, (Day, 2002) from which all other modern vampire stories originate. These fictional stories, however, developed out of a very real historical folk belief found in many countries around the world. The origins of such beliefs have been traced to the medieval period (Halsall, 2000). More established folk accounts emerge during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in Eastern Europe and in Slavic countries (Barber, 1988). These notions were pervasive in Slavic communities, and people took steps to protect themselves from vampires and vampirism. Many of these anti-vampirism measures have left tell-tale signs in the archaeological record, enabling modern anthropologists to explore the connections between vampirism, disease, and overall community health.

Brief History of Vampires and Vampirism

In the Slavic belief system, the soul and the human body were considered two separate entities. Upon death, the soul and the body would separate, but the soul could re-enter the deceased and re-animate the individual, especially at night (Perkowski, 1976). Souls were thought to remain on earth for forty days following death, the majority of which were seen as beneficial to the living; however, the souls of "sorcerers or grievous sinners" caused problems such as illness and droughts (Perkowski, 1976: 24). These "unclean" souls included those who committed murder or suicide, practiced witchcraft, died violently, or were unbaptized. The concept of the "vampir" or vampire was the culmination of this early belief system (Barber, 1988).

In response to the threat of vampires and vampirism, communities often took action to protect themselves and their loved ones from the problems the vampires could cause. Apotropaics, or methods of preventing evil, became

commonplace (Barber, 1988). Apotropaics were often placed with the deceased to either prevent them from returning or to satisfy them so they would not need to return. For example, stones could be placed on the chest beneath the chin, keeping the mouth closed, thereby preventing the vampire from being able to bite and suck blood from the living. Additionally, pegs could be thrust into the chest or head of the dead, and the corpse could be buried face down so they would not find their way to the surface. In some cases, a sickle or scythe could be placed across the neck of the deceased to cut off its head if it tried to rise from the grave (Barber, 1988).

The Drawsko Site

The settlement of Drawsko is located in the Noteć River Valley of west-central Poland (see map). The village was established and utilized before the Middle Ages through the modern era (Wyrwa, 2005). The 17th-18th century cemetery, designated Drawsko 1, was initially excavated in 1929, with follow-up excavations conducted in 2002 and 2003. Beginning in 2008, systematic excavation of the cemetery was carried out as part of an archaeological field school, which continues today. To date, 154 human skeletal remains have been recovered, four of which have been designated "vampires" (See Figures 1-4).

Vampirism and Disease

Excavations at Drawsko 1 have uncovered a number of artifacts, including coins. One such coin was dated to the year A.D. 1661, the period of a known cholera epidemic in the region (Wyrwa, 2004). Cholera is a waterborne infectious disease that can rapidly result in death if left untreated (WHO, 2010). This evidence, in conjunction with the location of the cemetery outside the settlement and away from a church (the normal placement for community cemeteries) have led some archaeologists to conclude that this is a cholera epidemic cemetery (Wyrwa, 2005; Polcyn, 2010). While most epidemic cemeteries involve mass graves, reflecting the hurried nature of interment, the Drawsko cemetery includes only individual burials. However, the lack of mass grave does not exclude the possibility that this is, indeed, an epidemic cemetery, as supported by other evidence. For example, many of the individuals are buried in ill-fitting coffins; they are either too long or too short, which may reflect quick burial and a lack of time to produce specific coffins for each individual. Moreover, the haphazard organization of the cemetery indicates a lack of overall planning; in other words, people may have been quickly buried, which would not be unexpected during an epidemic.

The presence of anti-vampirism measures can also be viewed as evidence of an epidemic. Prior to the understanding of disease and germ theories, people would have been at a loss to explain why community members were suddenly dying. A common human response to epidemics is to place blame on someone or something (Hewlett and Hewlett, 2008). In a Slavic community such as Drawsko, it would make sense that the disease outbreak would be attributed to vampires. Similarly, an association between vampirism and tuberculosis has been established in historic New England (Sledzik and Bellantoni, 1994). In response to the epidemic, community members may have been careful to stop vampires, thereby bringing an end to the disease outbreak. In fact, as people who have been exposed either die, recover, or do not develop symptoms, the number of susceptible people decreases and the epidemic eventually ends. People at this time may have concluded that the cessation of the outbreak was the direct result of their anti-vampirism measures rather than the natural epidemic cycle.



Map of Poland showing location of Drawsko.