



Pathology & Biology Section – 2008

G68 Death of a Vampire?: Case of Exhumation and Mutilation of a Corpse in Rural Romania

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding on how the mis-interpretation of decompositional artifacts have contributed to beliefs, superstitions and the myth about the existence of vampires. Attendees will be shown a video clip of the actual forensic grave side examination of a reported “vampire” who was put to his final death by family members.

Even before the famous classic tale of horror “Dracula”, written by Bram Stoker in 1897, the belief of vampires can be traced back as far as the fifteenth century to various parts of Europe. Of all the various countries and regions steeped in the belief of vampires and the undead, none run so deep as in the country of Romania. The belief in vampires is rooted in many cultural beliefs regarding the after life such as the acknowledgement of Satan and his monstrous minions. Another important aspect of the belief in vampires is based on the mis-understanding of the changes that occur to the body as the result of the decompositional process. Misunderstood changes include the postmortem purging of bloody fluids from mouth and nose which were thought to be evidence of recent feeding, and the appearance that the hair and nails continue to grow after death. Other examples of mis-conception include the presence of guttural sounds from the deceased as the result of expelled post mortem gases, and the postmortem pink and reddish discolorization of the skin which gave the appearance that a corpse had returned to life.

A prime example of the deep seated cultural belief in vampires in parts of rural Romania is demonstrated in a recent case which involves the exhumation, and mutilation of a corpse. In December of 2003 a seventy-six year old retired school teacher in the rural Romanian village of Marotinu de Sus died. At his death, the elderly male was placed in a simple wooden coffin, which was then buried in a shallow grave located below a make shift stone vault. Later in time various relatives of the deceased begin to fall ill and claimed to have had dreams in which the deceased had risen from the dead as a vampire to drink their blood. As a result of the unexplained illnesses, and terrifying dreams, several family members made the decision to follow the ancient cultural tradition, and destroy their now believed undead family member.

In July of 2005 six family members traveled to the cemetery under darkness, and exhumed the body of their deceased relative. Waiting to the stroke of midnight a member of the group drove a pitchfork into the chest of the corpse, and then opened the chest cavity with a large knife, and removed the heart. The corpse was then repeatedly stabbed in various locations with wooden stakes, and garlic sprinkled over the body. The group departed the cemetery with the heart impaled on the pitchfork, and proceeded to a near by crossroads. At the crossroads, the family members burned the heart, then mixed the ashes with peppermint schnapps, and drank the concoction. As a result of their actions, they no longer felt ill, and their terrible dreams of their vampire relative were no repeated.

Later in time, word of this macabre ritualistic act made its way to the daughter of the deceased, and local authorities. A second exhumation of the corpse was ordered by authorities investigating the horrific act, in which a grave side forensic examination was conducted by a forensic pathology team. The grave side examination by the forensic pathology team corroborated the story of the mutilation, including the removal of the heart. A video clip of the actual grave side examination will be presented.

As a result of the seemingly indignant and horrid act, the six family members who had participated in the mutilation of the corpse were arrested and sentenced to six months in jail. The arrest of the family members, greatly angered local villagers who indicated that this was a practice that been conducted by locals for many centuries. Many villagers praised the action carried out by the six, noting that it was a great thing to take out his heart as the people were in danger. Other villagers confessed to have taken the hearts from the dead many times before, and to have drunk a solution containing the ashes of the heart. In their own defense, the leader of the six family members pleaded innocent, having done nothing wrong. The leader informed the police that when they exhumed the corpse he had blood surrounding his mouth, and that he moaned when they stabbed him with the pitch fork. Pleading with authorities the head family member stated that if he hadn't conducted the ritual, that his son, wife, and daughter-in-law would have died.

Decomposition, Postmortem Mutilation, Ritual