

# *Real Vampires*

In the early 1700s Europe experienced a vampire mania. All the newspapers of the age talked about them. A respected Biblical scholar named Dom Augustin Calmet (1672-1757) published an enormous book on vampires in 1746, and even though he did not exactly say that they really existed, he did not exactly say that they didn't exist either. The famous philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) referred to them ironically. The great French biologist Comte de Buffon (1707-88) called a South American bat a 'vampire bat'. Then the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) even wrote that there was every kind of proof to show that vampires really existed – there were government reports, church reports, legal documents and medical reports about vampires. And the really strange thing is, Rousseau was right – there really were hundreds of official reports of all kinds talking about vampires. For example, in 1731 Johannes Fluchinger, a medical officer of the Austrian army, was sent to investigate a case of vampires in the village of Medvegia in Serbia. In his report he wrote:

'I carried out the investigation with the assistance of two other doctors and a captain of the local infantry unit. They told me that a local soldier named Arnold Paole had said several times that a vampire had bitten him in Serbian Turkey. To free himself from the effect of the vampire he had eaten some of the earth from the vampire's grave and washed himself with its blood. Then, twenty days after Arnold Paole's death, various people said that he had come back from the grave to torment them, and four of these people actually died. So, following the advice of a local government official,



Lon Chaney as a vampire in the 1943 film **Son of Dracula**, directed by Robert Siodmak.

who was an expert in vampires, the villagers dug up Paole forty days after his death. They found his body intact. Fresh blood came from his eyes, nose, ears and mouth. His shirt, shroud <sup>1</sup> and the coffin were all filled with blood. The nails of the hands and feet had fallen off with the old skin, but new skin and nails had grown in their place.

1. **shroud** : a cloth used for wrapping a dead body.

From this they deduced that Arnold Paole was a vampire. According to the local custom, a stake was driven into his heart and in that moment he made a sad, low sound, and blood spurted forth from his body. The same day the body was burned to ashes. But that was not the end because one night a girl named Stanacka woke up at midnight screaming. She said that a man named Milloe, who had died nine weeks earlier, had attacked her. Three days later, the girl died. So some soldiers of Medvegia and I entered the cemetery and all the suspicious graves were opened and the bodies exposed. To the horror and wonder of everybody, almost all the bodies were perfectly preserved and had fresh blood on their faces, and they were fatter and redder than usual. So, we cut off their heads and then burned the bodies.'

These and similar reports by the highly respected Austrian army created a big sensation. In a certain sense, they still do because many books and Internet sites talk about these reports as proof of the existence of vampires. This is, of course, ridiculous, but the truth is much more fascinating.

First we should notice that a belief in vampires was certainly real, but it was only in the early 1700s that the major capitals of Europe began to learn about it. This was because Austria added parts of present-day Serbia and Romania to its empire in 1718. After this, Austrian officials began to hear about the strange local custom of digging up dead bodies and 'killing' them.

Actually, a belief in vampires had always existed there, and similar beliefs have always existed in different forms all over the world. A belief in vampires existed before people knew about the real causes of death and disease. They saw epidemics as personal events, and



Gary Oldman as Count Dracula in the 1992 film version of **Dracula** directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

they blamed the dead for death. So, the first person to die in an epidemic was then blamed for causing the epidemic that followed. It is impossible for us to imagine the terror people felt when, for some unknown reason, people began dying in great numbers. The folklorist Paul Barber wrote: 'Without any knowledge of physiology, pathology and immunology, how could people explain disease and death? The most common way was to blame death on the dead. They thought that the dead must be pacified and calmed and laid to rest

correctly, and when nothing else worked, they killed the dead a second time.'

Then, as in the report quoted above, the villagers often dug up the grave of the dead person they thought was killing other people (or, in other words, the vampire). Then, they found a body much different from a living body. But they did not attribute these changes to decomposition as we would today. They saw them as proof that the body in the grave was the body of a vampire.

Any medical examiner today would tell you that Johannes Fluchinger's description of the vampire is a perfect description of a decomposing body. Again, we must remember that people once had much different ideas about death. They did not see the decomposing body as dead: they saw it as still dying. The process of dying was not as simple as we now see it: for them dying was a slow process of change from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

Of course, the huge interest in Vienna, Paris, London and the other important European cities in this strange belief from the wild parts of Europe eventually inspired writers. The first vampire poems appeared in German in the 1730s. The word 'vampire' entered the English language in 1734. These literary vampires had less and less to do with the vampires of folklore. In the end, literary vampires became tall, thin, pale and aristocratic. But the typical vampire of East European folklore was a robust, reddish-coloured peasant. Many other subconscious fears began to be associated with vampires. In short, Count Dracula and all his descendants in books and films have very little in common with the ones villagers and peasants of Transylvania looked for in their local graveyards.

### 1 Comprehension check

Say whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F), and then correct the false ones.

- |   | T                        | F                        |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 In the early 1700s there was a veritable vampire mania in the big cities of Europe.                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 The Europeans did not take much interest in the stories of vampires coming from the East.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 The Swiss philosopher Rousseau did not think there were any good reasons to believe in vampires.                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 The Austrian government did not take very seriously the various beliefs in vampires.                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 A belief in vampires was limited to Eastern Europe.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 Fluchinger's description of Arnold Paole's dead body is still difficult for scientists to explain.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 People used to think that the first person who died of a contagious disease was responsible for the deaths that followed. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 People once thought that the decomposing body was, in a certain sense, still dying.                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 The first poems about vampires were written in English.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 Dracula was the first literary vampire.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 The vampires of books, poems and films have very little in common with the vampires of folklore.                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |