

Pestilence, riots, lynchings and desecration of corpses. The sleep of reason produces monsters

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SUMMARY

Vampirism has been a component of Central European and Balkan folklore since the Middle Ages and was often believed to be responsible for the transmission of serious infectious diseases such as plague and tuberculosis/consumption. Vampirism was believed to be spread within the same family or village and if the rite of the so-called second burial after death was not performed. The practice of second burial entailed exhumation of the body and the removal of the shroud from the mouth of the corpse, and a search for evidence if the corpse had chewed the cloth. If the shroud was chewed, a handful of earth or a brick was put into the body's mouth so that the vampire could no longer harm others. In some cases, the corpse was decapitated and an awl, made of ash, was thrust into its chest. Furthermore, the limbs were nailed down to prevent its movements. Remarkably, these beliefs were not restricted to the popular classes,

but were also debated by theologians, political scientists at the height of the eighteenth century (Enlightenment). In the Habsburg Empire, this question attained such important political, social as well as health connotations as to force the Empress Maria Theresa to entrust an ad hoc study to her personal physician Gerard van Swieten with a view to determining what was true about the apparitions of vampires that occurred throughout central Europe and in the Balkans. The result of this investigation led to a ban on the second burial rites. Despite this prohibition, the practice of necrophilia on the bodies of suspected people continued and both a cultured and popular literature on vampirism continued to flourish into the nineteenth century.

Keywords: vampirism, pestilence, revenants, anomalous burials.

INTRODUCTION

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

The Masque of the Red Death

Edgar A. Poe

Passage of time has marked indelible wounds on the body and spirit of mankind. As famine, war, pestilence have recurred with perfect and devastating precision, human society has responded often heroically to overcome these challenges. Yet, in the course of the wars, not infrequently during epidemics, the response of humans to unknown dangers often reverts to ancestral fears, which were nourished by ignorance and hunger, taking the upper hand over reason.

During the Middle Ages, epidemics that plagued Europe often gave birth to hysterical searches for a culprit; inducing violent and irrational behaviours against a minority or a single subject of the afflicted. Science could not give answers because the microbiological revolution had not yet opened up the horizons of the invisible, and the more arcane irrationality was an easy refuge. These irrational

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fires were flamed by religious extremism- In particular, processions, novenas, collective prayers such as *Te Deum* were very dangerous events, because they, inducing concentrations of people in physical restricted areas (cathedrals, shrines), further favoured the transmission of infection. The widespread deaths in a community upset economic and political stability, leading to riots that were frequently associated with lynchings.

Sooner or later the secular arm intervened, lawsuits against individuals or groups of people were organized and in the course of the investigations torture was often used to induce confessions from the suspected, with the justice process almost always ending with the burning of the convicted.

Groups of religious minorities were often targeted for spreading the Plague, particularly Jews and Gypsies. Beggars, wanderers, those with skeletal deformity, the mentally-ill, or those with epilepsy were also at risk to enter the vortex of suspicion. When the hysterical hunt for spreaders occurred, as it happened in Milan in 1630 at the time of the infamous column (Figure 1), all the individuals, even temporarily, were suspected to disseminate the infection and became easy targets for mob anger.

Some commercial activities by Jews in the Middle Ages, which may include buying and selling of belongings of deceased, further raised suspicious of their involvement in the spread of the plague. Merchants who reaped benefits through the trans-

actions of goods that had belonged to the dead individuals, were probably subjected to hate and resentment by the poorest classes. In several European countries, Jews were often forbidden from owning property, so their activities were concentrated in the financial sector. Although financial propensity was useful in economic terms, it did not promote good relations with Christians who considered their activities as usury. In addition, it has to be considered that since several centuries the Jews have been accused of the historical guilt of Christ's crucifixion, and in the Church - as it is known - many people fomented the marginalization of the Jewish community, therefore, it is clear that in certain historical periods pogroms were invoked by the people and by the establishment [1]. When the impact of the epidemic became deeper and deeper, individuals of the poorer social classes, who could not get out of the city to take refuge in isolated places, began to be victims of a blind hysterical exasperation. In the darkest periods, when cities were closed to external contacts and the burning of personal effects of the plague victims developed and filled the streets and neighbourhoods with smoke, everyone was suspected. The attention was drawn by subjects walking after the dark in unfrequented places or leaving a bag full of used clothes in front of a church or even just by foreign or an unknown person sitting in an inn. These situations triggered doubts and fears. The crowd in these situations could ei-



Figure 1 - Mora's torture. The Infamous Column. Milan 1630.

ther lynch the suspect individual, or threaten this subject by means of riots and acts of vandalism. This latter situation usually occurred if there was a suspicion that the guilty parties were members of the established local powers. A prevailing opinion in the lower classes was that there was a cruel desire to reduce the number of subjects belonging to the working class, which could be realized by either massacre or the spread of an epidemic.

■ PHENOMENON OF REVENANTS AND ANOMALOUS BURIALS

From the point of view of the external features, tuberculosis (TB), when an effective therapy was not yet available, was characterized by an emaciated appearance, by a pale and gaunt face, by sunken eyes, with the sclera showing a reddish colour, especially in the daytime, and by the progressive slimming of the body (Figure 2), while the mental attitude was characterized by apathy and by a persistent depression. In these chronically-ill subjects repeated episodes of haemoptysis occurred with coughing; they spitted mucus and saliva mixed with blood. Because of these characteristic symptoms, TB was also called consumption and affected people who often presented insomnia because of the frequent nocturnal coughing spells. In addition, they showed intense sweating with fever and not rarely haemoptysis with the expulsion also of necrotic tissue of pulmonary origin, which was mixed with clots, from the mouth.

Patients with TB infection were affected by insomnia and they got up out of bed in the hope of improving their dyspnea and of reducing the cough by which they were bothered; therefore, in this desperate condition they showed themselves to their family and neighbours with the clotted blood at the corners of the mouth. In the late sixteenth century, the appearance of TB patients found fertile ground in superstitions of central

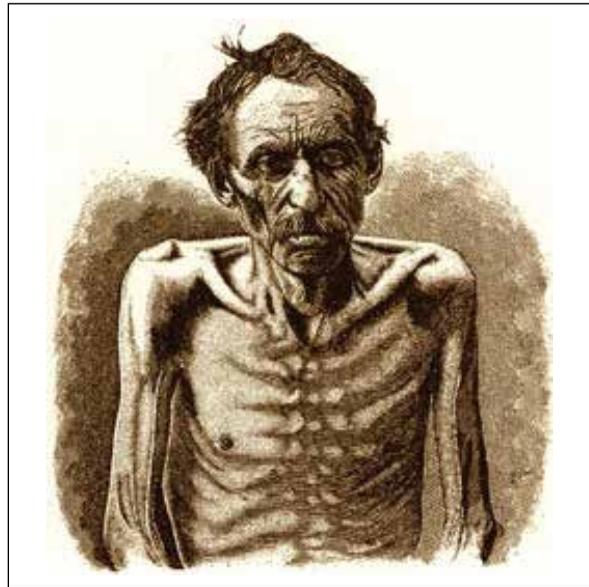


Figure 2 - Typical physical appearance of patients suffering from Tuberculosis (consumption) in pre-antibiotic era.

Europe: The cause of this evil was the presence beings who returned the night to feed on the blood of the living people, they were the revenants, or vampires¹. In the Western tradition the vampire was a sinister ghost, who was able to remove the vital energy to the living persons, sucking their blood [2].

In her ponderous *Encyclopedia of Fairies* (Pantheon Books 1976), Katharine Mary Briggs, an English scholar², confirms that TB was associated with vampirism in the past centuries, especially in certain parts of Europe, where this disease was particularly widespread, but later also in some eastern states of the USA [3].

But not only tuberculosis was associated with vampirism. In the period between the fourteenth and eighteenth century Europe was stricken with plague epidemics that cut down the pop-

¹The tradition of the belief that refers to the presence of evil beings, who are devoted to vampirism, is very old, there is evidence in the culture of the Babylonians and of the Assyrians, the vampires are also mentioned in the Bible and in the Qur'an. The Bible reports about a hell woman, Lilith, perhaps she was the first to whom the practice of vampirism may be ascribed. Lilith was, in the biblical view, the consort of Lucifer and, characteristically, not only fed on the blood but also on the semen. In addition, the Turkish tribes and Eastern Europe have a rich tradition of beliefs that go back to the culture of vampirism and to the practice of double burial (2).

²Katharine Briggs (1898-1980) was one of the greatest scholars on the meaning of the fairy-tale tradition, and she is regarded as the most famous author in the context of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic folklore.

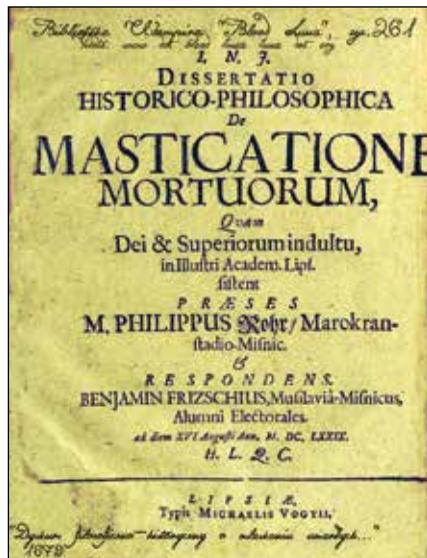


Figure 3 - Title page of Volume entitled: *Dissertatio historico-philosophica de masticatione mortuorum*, published by Philippus Rohr, 1679.

ulation, reducing the European population to a one-third. Superstition supported the idea that there was a particular form of vampires who, through their bite, spread the plague. In particular, vampire-women, called *nachzehers*, were able to transmit the disease. This name was adopted for the first time in Poland in the fourteenth century, and its meaning is clear: it would indicate that these beings would be devourers of the night or chewers of the shroud.

According to this superstition, the *nachzehers*, after being placed in the tomb, began to chew their shroud. Furthermore, when they succeeded to remove their shroud, they began to feed on the blood of the dead bodies of other plague-stricken people, who were buried in mass graves. After this phase that could be defined reconstructive, these beings would have acquired the opportunity to get out of the tomb and, according to superstition, they would have gone outside at dusk. According to the superstition about the vampires - who continued to feed on blood and who were free from any control - it was believed that individuals, who had been hit by vampirism and who practiced it in turn, would have contributed to the further expansion of the epidemic. In addition, in Central Europe the legend of *Schmatzende Tode* (the dead who chews) had

widely spread and the presence of these beings was reported with relative frequency in the sixteenth century, especially in the eastern Germany, Prussia, Poland and Bohemia.

Not only the people of lower classes were the victims of these beliefs, there are evidences that, in the eighteenth century, these superstitions had made inroads in certain educated environments typically characterized by an enlightened and rational vision of science. It should be underlined that already in 1679, the Protestant theologian Philippus Rohr presented a paper at the University of Leipzig, entitled *Dissertatio historico-philosophica de Masticatione mortuorum* (Figure 3) where the theory about the existence of *nachzehers* received theological support [4]. According to the thesis of this German scholar, following the uncovering of a tomb, which was suspected to host a vampire, whether the corpse (still intact) presented a swollen belly, it had to be concluded that the deceased person was a blood drinker. In addition, if the shroud was found to have been chewed and eaten at the height of the mouth, there would have been the evidence that the tomb housed a vampire.

There was also another aspect that contributed to the spread of this belief. The carrier of pneumonic plague showed, as it is well-known, a peculiar type of cough, which was characterized by a sputum rich in blood. While he was dying, this individual could show a characteristic trickle of blood on the sides of the mouth. The clinical form of pneumonic plague was considered among the most lethal disease with a mortality rate ranging from 97% to 100%. Pneumonic plague was contracted by the direct inhalation of bacilli, that were expelled into the air by another ill coughing subject, who suffered from a plague form, with pulmonary localization. In this case the typical symptoms of infection were associated with sepsis and with a characteristic productive cough, with a mucus-blood sputum. This infectious disease, with a primary pulmonary localization, within 2-4 days progressed rapidly and led to septic shock, the infected individual characteristically presented small coughs and accused sharp pains in the chest. The obvious consequence was that during epidemics of plague in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the vampire sightings multiplied.

During the eighteenth century, after the Philip-

pus Rohr's essay, other authors devoted their studies to these topics. In 1700, in Bremen, the book by Pierre De Tyraeus Neuss published a work entitled *De Terrificationibus Nocturnis* [5]. This work was followed, six years later, by the volume, entitled *Magia Posthuma* in which the author, Charles Ferdinand von Schertz, writes on a Bohemian vampire who killed, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the virgins of a village, only calling them by name [6]. In his essay, the author reports that the quiet was restored in the village only after the body of this person was unearthed and burned. With his statement, Von Schertz implicitly emphasized the following assumption: to counteract the phenomenon of vampirism, it was primarily necessary to recognize the deceased individual, who presented this condition, and then to proceed with the exhumation of his corpse.

These actions would have allowed to perform all the actions useful to prevent his awakening during the night.

Several decades later in Germany volumes entitled *Mautmassliche Gedanken von den Vampyren, oder Blutsougender Toten* by Johann Fritsche and *von dem Tractat Kauen Schmatzen det Totem und im der Graven* by Michel M. Raufft were published in Leipzig in 1732 and 1734, respectively.

The response that the people had conceived to prevent the spread of vampirism and of the associated epidemics was simple and effective: it was necessary to prevent that the corpse, which was suspected of belonging to a vampire, to be eaten. According to the beliefs of that time, if there was a doubt that the deceased could be a vampire, the tomb had to be uncovered, if the dead subject, belonging to the economically privileged class, had been buried in a sarcophagus, or, in the other cases, the corpse had to be unearthed. After the exhumation of the remains, it was necessary that the shroud was removed from the mouth, with the aim to determine whether it was chewed and to put a handful of earth, a brick or a stone in its place, as it was believed that the vampire, chewing them, would have broken both the teeth and the jaw. In some cases an ash-wood nail was inserted into the chest or the corpse was decapitated. This macabre ritual was called the *second burial*. The second burial rite originally belonged to the culture of the original tribes of Altaic mountains (Siberia), then it was transmitted

over time to the people who settled in Eastern Europe, in Central Europe and in the Balkans, in the late Middle Ages [2].

Chronicles from the eighteenth century (the Age of Enlightenment) report a marked increase in vampire sightings in Eastern Europe associated with real hysteria and the spread of the second burial rituals. As already mentioned, these necromantic practices during the night included the insertion of a wooden nail into the corpse (usually the ash-wood was preferred because it is particularly resistant) after the unearthing of the body remains with the aim to identify potential living dead because it was feared that these beings could return. It should be noted that in the German Kingdoms and in the Austrian Empire, also government officials participated in these surveys. Although the peak of the Enlightenment had been reached during the century, the

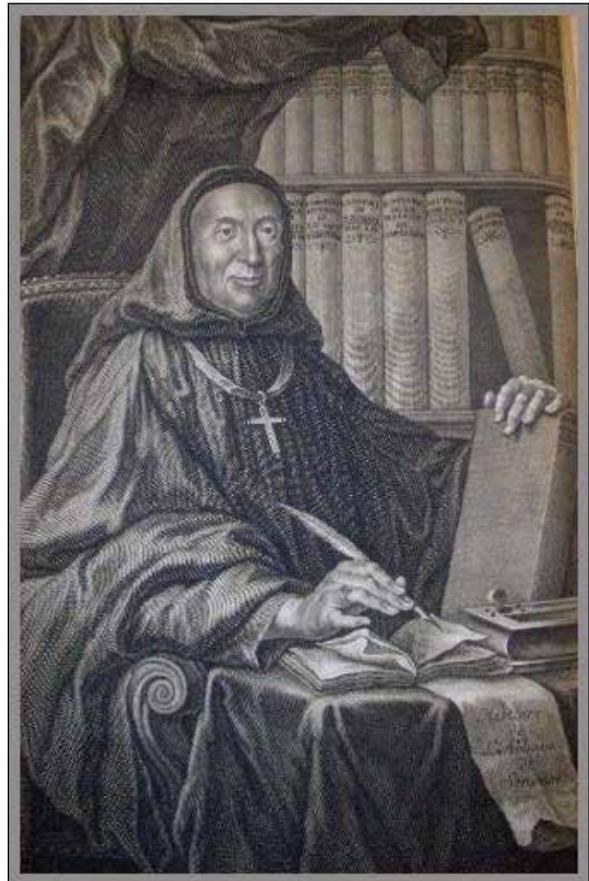


Figure 4 - Don Augustine Calmet.

superstition concerning the vampires increased dramatically in that period, causing a kind of insanity in European population. The panic increased when the news, concerning vampire attacks, spread in the Western Prussia in 1721 and in the Habsburg Empire in the period ranging from 1725 to 1734. Manifestations of collective irrationality persisted and in subsequent decades the sightings of vampires multiplied.

The rising irrational obsession fueled the debate in the more cultured classes, giving rise to what was called the dispute about vampires of the eighteenth century. The rural epidemics of infectious diseases that the people charged to the vampire attacks, promoted the superstition, which has already taken place in village communities.

The corpses, which were suspected to be vampires, were unearthed and pierced with wooden stakes, though many scholars denied the existence of vampires and tried to divert this hysterical interest to other causes, such as premature burial or presence of rabies³. Because of the uncertainty of medical science, which was unable to give credible answers to the spread of epidemics beyond the sanitary cordons, quarantines and infirmaries - it has to be underlined that in the

eighteenth century smallpox strongly scourged Europe -, even classes, relatively cultured of the nascent middle class, were tempted to take the refuge in superstition.

An eminent French theologian and scholar, Fr Augustine Calmet⁴, in 1746, wrote a comprehensive essay entitled *Dissertations sur les Apparitions des Anges des Démons et des Espits, et sur les revenants et de Vampires Hingrie, de Boheme, de Moravie, et de Slésie* (9) (Figure 4). In his paper Calmet remained ambiguous about the existence of vampires. The author in his research gathered evidences of accidents on vampires and several players, including Voltaire, one of the most important exponent of the Enlightenment, and other people, such as the more convinced members of the party of Demon, came to interpret this essay as a confirmation of the existence of vampires. It's interesting to note what Voltaire himself wrote in his *Philosophical Dictionary*:

These vampires were corpses, who went out of their graves at night to suck the blood of the living, either at their throats or stomachs, after which they returned to their cemeteries. The persons so sucked waned, grew pale, and fell into consumption; while the sucking corpses grew fat, got rosy, and enjoyed an excellent appetite. It was in Poland, Hungary, Silesia,



Figure 5 - Statue of the Physician Gerard van Swieten, in the monumental complex, that has been built in Vienna in honour of the Empress Maria Theresa of Habsburg.

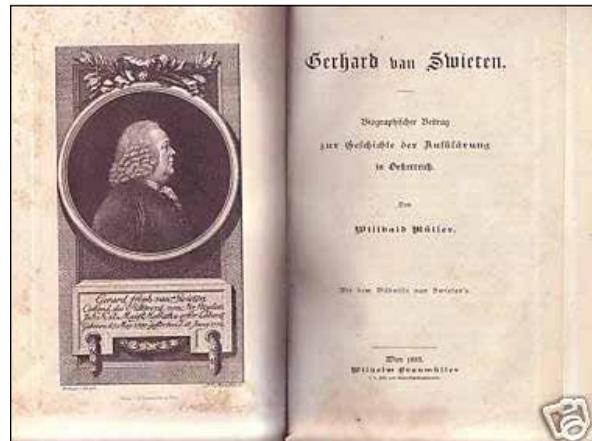


Figure 6 - Title page of Volume entitled: *Remarques sur le vampirisme* published by Gerard van Swieten, 1755.

³In the countryside, but also in the city, there were many stray dogs, carriers of rabies, they constituted a serious health problem.

⁴Antoine Calmet (1672-1757), who is known as Don Augustine, was considered, in France, as a scholar and an ideologue of the Inquisition in the eighteenth century. He was the father of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint-Maur.



Figure 7 - Empress Maria Theresa of Austria in a portrait by Martin van Meytens (1759). Inside front cover of Giuseppe Davanzati's volume.

Moravia, Austria, and Lorraine, that the dead made this good cheer [10].

In the Austrian Empire this controversy was concluded only when the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria ordered his personal physician, Dutchman Gerard van Swieten⁵, to investigate about the popular belief, which suggested that vampiric entities were responsible of the tuberculosis and the plague spread. Gerard van Swieten (Leiden 1700-1772) (Figure 5), discovered a series of more or less serious diseases (anemia, anger, cluster headache, porphyria, premature death) that the villagers mistook for vampirism and he

published in 1755 his relationship, entitled *Re-marches sur le vampirisme de l'ane 1755* (Figure 6) [11]. The Dutch scientist concluded in this work that vampires did not exist. On the basis of these investigations the enlightened Empress Maria Theresa (Figure 7) ratified a law that prohibited the opening of the graves and the desecration of the corpses. With this clear position taken by the Empress and by her eminent personal advisor the dispute was officially closed in central Europe. Despite this law, apparitions of vampires continued to rage, especially in rural areas, and illegal behavior of the people continued. In some cases necrophilia was practiced.

It has not been examined whether these beliefs have taken root in the popular classes in Italy, but during the eighteenth century, the intellectual class, in particular some Italian theologians and naturalists, showed interest in the *controversy about vampirism*. Giuseppe Davanzati (1665-1755) published in 1774 an essay entitled *Dissertation on the vampires of Giuseppe Davanzati, a Florentine nobleman and Trani, Knight of Jerusalem, Archbishop of Trani and Patriarch of Alexandria* (Figure 8) [12]. It is interesting to note that the volume was printed in Naples, one of the European capitals, but previously the text of the manuscript was available only to experts in medicine, theology and canon law. In addition this volume has circulated in some cultured circles already in the early forty of the eighteenth century. The Marquis Scipione Maffei (1675-1755)⁶, a knowledgeable scientist and a political philosopher in Verona, had been inspired by this volume in his reflections, and had obtained the cautious appreciation of Pope Benedict XIV. Maffei had lived in Florence and Venice, but he had also travelled in Central and Eastern Europe, where he had developed his curiosity about the popular belief on vampirism. This topic also caused serious problems of public

⁵He was a general inspector of medical education in Austria, founder of the Viennese medical school. His major work is represented by *Commentaria Boerhaavii Aphorismos* (1742-72). He developed the liquor van Swieten, once used in the treatment of syphilis.

⁶Maffei lived in Florence and Venice and travelled in Central and Eastern Europe, where he acquired the curiosity for the popular belief on vampirism. In the fifties of the eighteenth century Maffei, along with Ludovico Antonio Muratori, opened a debate on the relationship between magic and religion. Maffei contributed to this debate with his work entitled *The vanished magic Art*. In this essay, he brought to the light the incompatibility of Christianity that, in his opinion, was by now enlightened and rational with the persistence of the use of magic, and then he deepened the object of his reflections with his work entitled *The destroyed Magic Art*. Before his death, he would have drawn all the conclusions from the debate that he had created with his last book, entitled *The annihilated Magic Art*.

order and for this reason it assumed a significant political value. The scientist from Verona, as a serious exponent of the Enlightenment, denied the existence of vampires and contributed to reduce the impact of this superstition even in those more cultured classes, who had shown to be intrigued in some way.

The controversy about vampirism⁷ in the late eighteenth century and in the first decades of the nineteenth, however, continued to stimulate a debate in some intellectual circles in Vienna and Paris. In 1773 in the capital of the Austrian Empire the essay by John Christopher Heremberg, entitled *Philosophicae et de Christianae cogitationes Vampiririis* was printed. In addition, in Paris in 1820, during the post-Revolutionary period, Pierre Carmouch published the book entitled *The Vampire*.

The attention of certain marginal environments to this topic even in the nineteenth century did not decrease and involved not only Europe but also other continents (North America), and it still maintained, in some cases, those disquieting connotations, as the exhumation of corpses of suspected vampires to practice those lugubrious second burial rites, which had been banned in the eighteenth century by the Empress Maria Theresa of Habsburg [3].

In conclusion, going beyond the debate on Vampirism, it is important to note that in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, Edward Jenner achieved the great discovery of vaccination against smallpox. On 14 May 1796, after 20 years of research and studies, the great philanthropist and English doctor made his first experiment and vaccinated an eight year old boy, who had never been infected. It is interest-

ing to note that this scientific discovery, which had enormous revolutionary values, was accepted by a part of scientific world with doubts and misgivings and it was opposed in particular by philosophers and by some church leaders. It is not surprising that one of the most lucid minds in that century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant -author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* - did not agree with the method of vaccination in spite of the obvious success of the scientific experiment designed and carried out by the English scientist. In this revolutionary century, the arguments of reason, even if supported by experimental method, had still to compete, as we have seen, with metaphysical unresolved questions and only two centuries later they found a definitive conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Authors thank Professor Edward Lewis Russel, Policlinico S. Orsola-Malpighi, Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy, for his assistance in the editing of English form in their manuscript.

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⁷It has to be noted that, from the anthropological point of view, the belief that there may be beings destined to feed on the blood of living individuals has not affected only Europe. In other places of the planet, there are original and local reports from other cultures, reminiscence of what we have reported. It is not of interest in this article to speculate on a topic that would broaden the discourse to cultural anthropology. We only report that the stories about loogaroo are also popular in the Caribbean Islands and in Louisiana.

Female monsters are represented by the Soucouyants. They terrorized the island of Trinidad, as well as Tunda and Patasola are infernal beings that are found in Colombian folklore, while we find in the Chilean and Argentine ethnic group of the Mapuches, native of the South American continent, the story of Peuchen, a bloodsucker snake. It has to be underlined, however, that in these different traditions of folklores, if there are these entities, at the end, also the cure is conceived.

According to some South American beliefs, when the aloe vera is hanging in the front of the door, it prevents the enter of vampires. Finally, the Aztec mythology speaks on the Cihuateteo, they are spirits with skeletal face, coming from women who died during childbirth, who steal children and engage in sexual relations with the living individuals, at the end they bring them to the madness.

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