How the belief in vampirism originated?

The origins, although of course very shadowy, may probably be said to go back to the earliest times when primitive man observed the mysterious relations between soul and body. Observation, however crude and rough, of the phenomenon of unconsciousness as exhibited in sleep, and more particularly in death. The question was an eternal one. It was, moreover, a personal one which concerned him most intimately since it related to an experience he could not hope to escape. Death was merely a passage to another world.

The divine command in Leviticus xvii. 10-14:

"If any man whosoever of the house of Israel, and of the strangers that sojourn among them, eat blood I will set my face against his soul, and will cut him off from among his people: Because the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you, that you may make atonement with it upon the altar for your souls, and the blood may be for an expiation for the soul. Therefore I have said to the children of Israel: No soul of you, nor of the strangers that sojourn among you, shall eat blood. Any man whatsoever of the children of Israel, and of the strangers that sojourn among you, if by hunting or by fowling, he take a wild beast or a bird, which is lawful to eat, let him pour out its blood and cover it with earth."

The very essence of life, and even more the spirit or the soul, in some mysterious way lies in the blood. Explanation of why the vampire should seek to vitalize and rejuvenate his own dead body by draining the blood from the veins of his victims. Vampire (also vampyre) is from the Magyar vampir, a word of Slavonic origin occurring in the same form in Russian,
Polish, Czech, Serbian and Bulgarian. The word is apparently unknown in Greece and the general modern term is *vrykolakas*. This must undoubtedly be identified with a word common to the whole Slavonic group of languages, and is the equivalent of the English "werewolf"; Scotch "warwulf"; German "Werwolf" and French "loup-garou."

The one language in which the word does not bear this interpretation is the Serbian, for here it signifies "vampire." But it should be remarked that the Serbian people believe that a man who has been a werewolf in life will become a vampire after death, and so the two are very closely related.

It was even thought in some districts that those who ate the flesh of a sheep killed by a wolf might become vampires after death. However, it must be remembered that although the superstitions of the werewolf and the vampire in many respects agree, there is, especially in Slavonic tradition, a very great distinction, for there the vampire is precisely defined as the incorrupt and re-animated body which returns from its grave.

The first example of the use of the word vampire in literature seems to be in *The Travels of Three English Gentlemen* (1734):

"We must not omit Observing here, that our Landlord [at Laubach] seems to pay some regard to what Baron Valvasor has related of the *Vampyres* said to infest some Parts of this Country. These *Vampyres* are supposed to be the Bodies of deceased Persons, animated by evil Spirits, which come out of the Graves in the Night-time, suck the Blood of many of the Living and thereby destroy them"

The word and the idea soon became quite familiar, and in his *Citizen of the World* (1760) Oliver Goldsmith writes in everyday phrase: "From a meal he advances to a surfeit,
and at last sucks blood like a vampire."

*Dissertazione sopra I Vampiri* (1744) of Gioseppe Davanzati, Archbishop of Trani. Davanzati commences by relating various well-known and authenticated cases of vampires, especially those which had recently occurred in Germany during the years 1720-39.

Good knowledge of the literature of his subject, and decides that the phenomena cannot enter into the category of apparitions and ghosts but must be explained in a very different way.


In his preface Dom Calmet tells us the reasons which induced him to undertake this examination. He emphasizes that vampires particularly infest Slavonic countries, and it does not appear that this species of apparition was well known in western Europe until towards the end of the seventeenth century.

There undoubtedly were cases of vampirism, as will be recorded in their due order, but the fuller knowledge of these horrors reached western Europe only during the eighteenth century. It at once threw very considerable light upon unrelated cases that had been recorded from time to time, but which appeared isolated and belonging to no particular category.

Dom Augustin Calmet, *Dissertations sur les Apparitions des Anges, des Demons et des Esprit et sur les Revenants et Vampires*

“In this present age and for about sixty years past, we have been the hearers and the witnesses of a new series of
extraordinary incidents and occurrences. Hungary, Moravia, Silesia, Poland, are the principal theatre of these happenings. For here we are told that dead men, men who have been dead for several months, I say, return from the tomb, are heard to speak, walk about, infest hamlets and villages, injure both men and animals, whose blood they drain thereby making them sick and ill, and at length actually causing death. Nor can men deliver themselves from these terrible visitations, nor secure themselves from these horrid attacks, unless they dig the corpses up from the graves, drive a sharp stake through these bodies, cut off the heads, tear out the hearts; or else they burn the bodies to ashes.

"The name given to these ghosts is Oupires, or Vampires, that is to say blood-suckers, and the particulars which are related of them are so singular, so detailed, accompanied with circumstances so probable and so likely, as well as with the most weighty and well-attested legal deposition that it seems impossible not to subscribe to the belief which prevails in those countries that these Apparitions do actually come forth from their graves and that they are able to produce the terrible effects which are so widely and so positively attributed to them."

The birth of the Vampire in Eastern Europe

16th Century: Nachzehrer = "after" (nach) “living off” (zehre)

Leone Allacci, *De Graecorum hodie quorundam opinationibus*, Cologne 1645:

"The vrykolakas is the body of a man of wicked and debauched life, very often of one who has been excommunicated by his bishop. Such bodies do not like other corpses suffer decomposition after burial nor fall to dust, but having, so it seems, a skin of extreme toughness becomes swollen and distended all over, so that the joints can scarcely be bent; the skin becomes stretched like the parchment of a drum, and when struck gives out the same sound."
According to this author a demon takes possession of such a body, which issues from the tomb and, generally at night, goes about the streets of a village, knocking sharply upon doors and summoning one of the household by name. If that person unwittingly answers he is sure to die on the following day. Yet a vrykolakas never cries out a name twice and so the people of Chios, at all events, always wait to hear the summons repeated before they reply to anyone who raps at their door of a night. "This monster is said to be so fearfully destructive to men that it actually makes its appearance in the daytime, even at high noon, nor does it then confine its visits to houses, but even in the fields and in hedged vineyards and upon the open highway it will suddenly advance upon persons who are labouring, or travellers as they walk along, and by the horror of its hideous aspect it will slay them without laying hold on them or even speaking a word."

John Heinrich Zopfius, *Dissertation on Serbian Vampires, 1733*

"Vampires issue forth from their graves in the night, attack people sleeping quietly in their beds, suck out all the blood from their bodies and destroy them. They beset men, women and children alike, sparing neither age nor sex. Those who are under the fatal malignity of their influence complain of suffocation and a total deficiency of spirits, after which they soon expire. Some who, when at the point of death, have been asked if they can tell what is causing their decease, reply that such and such persons, lately dead, have risen from the tomb to torment and torture them."

Vampire cases that took place in 1725 in the Eastern part of the Habsburg Empire.

1732 and 1734 editions of the book: supposed vampire cases occurred between 1731 and 1732 in Serbia.

Many cases of "vampirus serviensis" were reported in those years from the eastern frontiers of the Habsburg Empire,
i.e. from Slavonia to Bukovina.

Two main cases: Peter Plogojowitz (Serbian: Petar Blagojević) occurred in 1725 in a village named Kisilova, possibly the modern Kisiljevo, and Arnold Paole – an early German rendition of a Serbian name, perhaps, Arnaut Pavle – in 1732 in Medveđa, located at the Morava river near the town of Paraćin.

Magia Posthuma is the title of a book written by the Catholic lawyer Karl Ferdinand von Schertz in 1704. Schertz examines the case of a spectre that roamed about and harmed the living. Several of these cases were known in Moravia where von Schertz published his book, as well as in neighbouring areas. Only two decades later, a similar case was investigated by Austrian officials in North Eastern Serbia. The local people called the spectre a vampire.

This incident inspired the deacon Michael Ranft to publish a study on the mastication of the dead. Just a few years later, in 1732, another case of vampirism was investigated in Serbia. Reports of this investigation were published throughout Europe with the consequence that the interest in vampires exploded.

Vampires became the topic of numerous learned articles and books. Cases of magia posthuma or vampirism, however, kept occurring. In 1755 empress Maria Theresa aided by her court physician Gerard van Swieten began passing laws against the exhumation and destruction of corpses as well as other acts of superstition.

Within decades, however, vampires caught the imagination of poets and authors of gothic fiction. Subsequently popularized by Bram Stoker in his 1897 novel Dracula and numerous movies, vampires have become part of everyday modern mythology, but the historical and cultural background has not yet been fully explored and understood.

On several occasions, particularly on the periphery of the Habsburg Empire during the 17th and 18th centuries, dead people were suspected of being revenants or vampires, and consequently dug up and destroyed. Some contemporary authors named this phenomenon Magia
Posthuma.

Germany: *Leipziger Vampirdebatte*: the scientific, medical, and theological “debate on the vampire” that took place in Leipzig around Plogojowitz’s and Paole’s cases.

Austria: Imperial Provisor Frombald von Gradiska. His report, written on April 6 and published on July 21 1725 in the *Wienerisches Diarium*, argued that the bloodsucking Peter Plogojowitz was responsible for the death of eight people who passed away within 24 hours after they contracted a misterious infection.

His body was exhumated and burned because his corpse revealed all features of the vampire.

Features of the vampire: his beard, hair and nails had grown after death, but above all Plogojowitz’s “body, a part from the fallen off nose, [was] almost fresh” (Frombald, ‘Copia eines Schreibens aus dem Gradisker District in Ungarn’, *Wienerisches Diarium*, 21.^07.^1725, pp. 11–12).

Blood got out of his mouth, a clear evidence of his nightly visit to the inhabitants of the village.

According to the traditional rite against vampires, his heart was thus penetrated with a wooden stake and, as a further evidence for his vampiric nature, it began to bleed.