



IS IT A VAMPIRE?

RETHINKING NON-NORMATIVE BURIALS

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<https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/how-long-have-we-believed-vampires-009056>

ANTI-VAMPIRE BURIALS: WHAT ARE THEY?

'Anti-vampire' burials are a subsection of non-normative or deviant burials which "are considered to be cases where the individual has been buried in a different way relative to the norm for the period and/or the population under examination (Tsaliki, 1)." These burials are not only hard to identify in the archaeological record, but it is incredibly difficult to make any definitive conclusions about why the individual was buried the way that they were and what their burial might say about their social identity and societal treatment while they were alive. Certain ritual burial practices can correlate with necrophobia, a fear of the dead. These are the burials that are carelessly labeled 'anti-vampire' without a greater level of analysis or a clear communication of the nuance associated with identifying specific burial practices. The surface-level definition of an anti-vampire burial is a burial performed with the intention of preventing the deceased from re-animating in the form of a revenant or "vampire" or preventing a "vampire" from rising again.

In Pagan culture in Poland, it was believed that evil spirits could enter a recently deceased body and that they could cause harm to people's lives through crop failures, illness, and death. The Slavic belief was that during the liminal period of 40 days after your death, your soul separated from your body and remained among the living. Some of these souls would be "unclean" and were seen as dangerous while most souls caused no harm. Certain burial practices called Apotropaic were used in order to prevent the deceased from returning in this manner and they are different in every culture. There are a large number of deviant burials in Poland and there is debate over when and why these burials began. Some claim it was after the adoption of Christianity in the region, some claim that they are routed in pagan tradition, and some claim that they came out of the clash of changing religions.



There are many reasons that somebody may be buried in a non-normative way, whether it be to prevent them from rising from the dead or not. If it is assumed that they were buried with the intention of them not becoming a revenant then four categories can be used: predisposition, predestination, events, and nonevents.

Predisposition

Those who were “othered” by society because they behaved in a way that was not deemed socially acceptable. This would include those who were sinners in some way, like by practicing witchcraft, alcoholics, or those who committed suicide.

Predestination

Those who were predestined or born to be revenants. This included being born out of wedlock, being conceived during a holy period, or having a birth defect or abnormality. These people were also “othered” by society but not because of their own actions.

Event

Something specific happened to put this person at risk during their life or after their death. This could be a “vampire” bite, having an animal jump or fly over the corpse, being murdered, drowning, having a stroke, not being baptized, being the first to die of a disease, or having your body decompose in an ominous way, like bloating.

Non-event

If a person was not given the proper treatment after death or those that died young because of lack of care would be considered at risk. Improper treatment could include the corpse being left unattended or being left unburied.

REVENANT: "A person who returns from the dead; a reanimated corpse; a ghost."



<https://danarehn.com/2022/07/20/monstrous-births-and-their-uses/>



<https://blogs.letemps.ch/garry-littman/2020/10/23/switzerland-where-witch-trials-began-and-where-the-last-european-woman-was-executed-for-witchcraft/>



NON-NORMATIVE PRACTICES AND THEIR INTERPRETATIONS

Trends in Interpretation

Anti-vampire burials have become central to the study of burial practices in the area of Poland. Problematically non-normative burials are often classified as vampire burials without considering any broader context and examining other possibilities. After the adoption of Christianity in Poland the most common burials were inhumation in a supine position-oriented W-E and accompanied by grave goods. Anything else was rare and considered deviant these burials can be easily lumped into the category of 'anti-vampire.' In order to be sure that the rituals were intended in fear of a revenant scientists have considered looking at the quality of the rituals associated with the burial over the quantity, meaning that a burial is more likely to be 'anti-vampire' if it has just one very important characteristic than if it has a lot of less important ones. However, to archaeologists Leszek Gardela and Kamil Kajkowski, "...the 'quantitative criterion' proposed by Stanaszek (1998) and Zoll-Adamikowa (1971) and the 'qualitative criterion' proposed by Zydok (2004) are both too simplistic or reductionist to be followed, because they ignore the individuality and uniqueness of each burial and pay no regard to broader social, spatial and chronological contexts. Such views are characteristic of culture-historical approaches in archaeology and adhere to the conviction that graves and their contents directly 'mirror' the deceased person's status in life (Gardela and Kajkowski, 784)."

'Deviant' Burial Practices

- Decapitated burials
- Perforated/pierced skulls
- Knives, Stakes, or other sharp object stuck in body
- Object (like coin) in mouth
- Prone burials
- Stoned burials
- Flexed burials
- Broken or cut off limbs
- Burial in marginal area
- Lack of grave goods
- Unusual orientation
- Partial cremation
- Re-opened burials
- Tied body parts

Gardela and Kajkowski, Tsaliki

The way that somebody is buried does not necessarily accurately indicate who they were and how they were treated by society, like if they were considered to be at risk for becoming a vampire for any of the reasons discussed. Because of this, it is important to "...combine information derived from social, biological, and burial data...(Tsaliki, 4)." It is also important to remember that just because someone was likely buried as at risk for becoming a revenant the burial alone cannot always accurately determine why and it may not be because of their status or identity while alive but because of how they died or how their body was treated after death. That is why it is dangerous to put a label such as 'vampire' or 'revenant' on an individual without having a plethora of evidence that it is the most accurate descriptor. It is also important to note that the words vampire and revenant were not used during the period when these people lived so their modern definition and connotation effects how people perceive those given those labels.



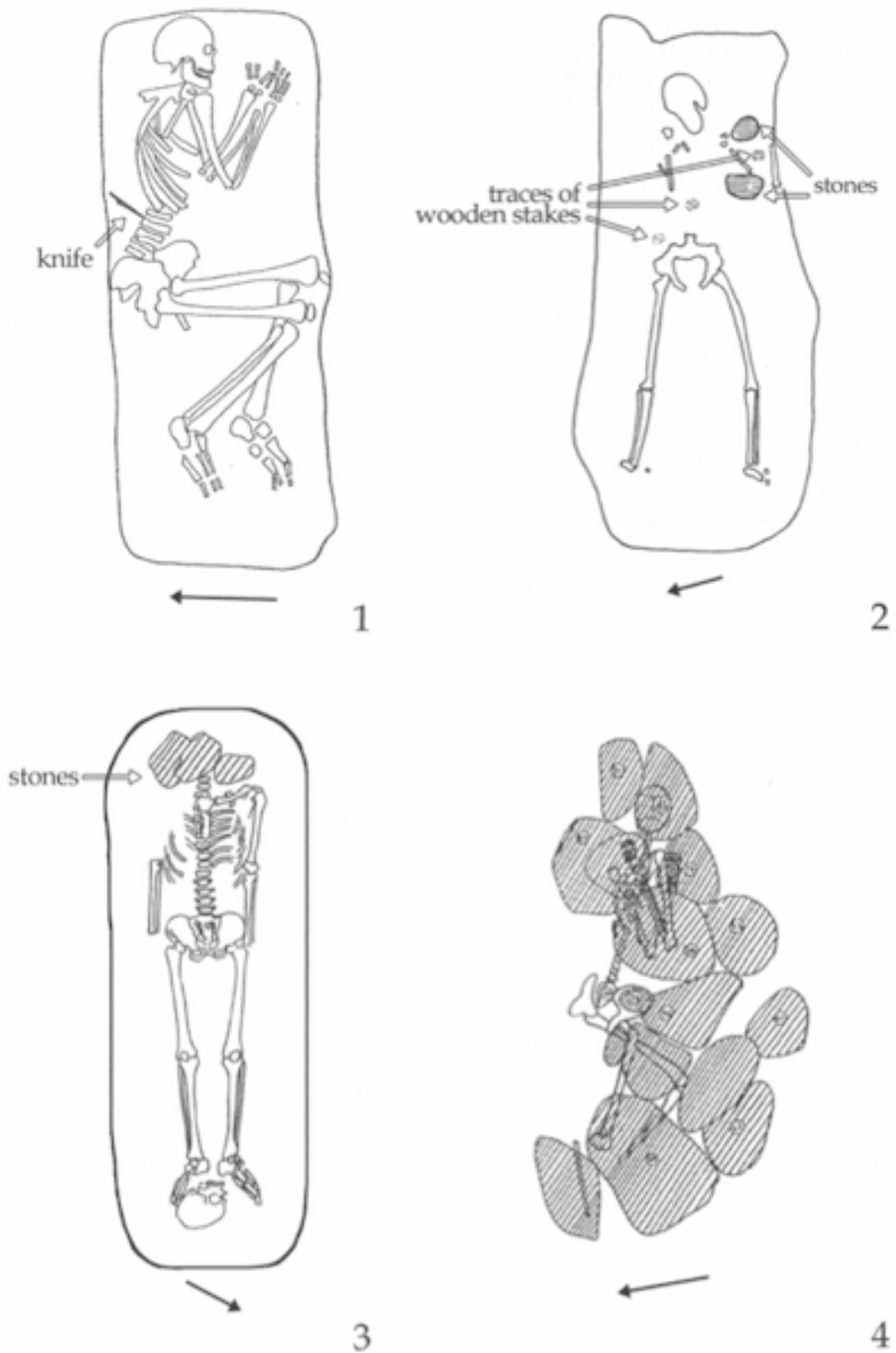


Figure 1 Selected 'deviant burials' from early medieval Poland: 1) Grave 3 from Złota Pińczowska: a man buried on the side with an iron knife stuck in his spine (redrawn after Miśkiewicz 1967, 98); 2) Grave 110 from Stary Zamek: a woman buried in a prone position and probably held down with wooden stakes (redrawn after Wachowski 1992, 90); 3) Grave 146 from Cedynia: a decapitated man with the head placed between the feet; notice the three stones in the head area (redrawn after Porzeziński 2008, 28); 4) Grave 47 from Radom: a man buried on the side and covered with large stones (redrawn after Gąssowski 1950, table 76).



ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS: WHAT IF IT ISN'T A VAMPIRE?

Prone Burials:

Prone burials are when the body is buried facedown which is commonly associated with individuals “whose return from the world of the dead was particularly feared...(Gardela and Kajkowski, 786).” Hiding the eyes could be an indicator of shame or that the dead person may have a “fatal gaze” that would kill anybody who saw it. However, a body ending up facedown could just be due to sloppy funerary procedures or contempt for the person being buried by the people burying them. This would be especially likely if the buried person was an executed criminal.

Decapitations:

Decapitation can be used as a way to ensure that the deceased will not become a revenant. Other explanations do exist like a criminal who was executed, or a slave ritually murdered and buried with their master (a common ritual in the Viking Age that may have continued).

Stoned Burials:

Stoning was a very dishonorable and shameful way to be killed. For example, in the Viking Age stoning was used as punishment for evil sorcery. Stones were likely also used to physically keep the dead from rising, however, there are other explanations. The stones could have been functional as they would protect the grave from animals or robbers. They could also have been used to orient the head so that it faced east to see the rising sun which is a symbol for Christ. Placing stones over the mouth was likely an attempt to keep it closed in order to keep spirits from entering and the body from becoming the ‘living dead.’

Re-opened or Disturbed Graves:

Graves that have been disturbed are often associated with an attempt to keep the evil spirit believed to be inhabiting the body from continuing to cause havoc or to take limbs that were believed to have supernatural qualities. However, these disturbances could simply be due to grave robbers.



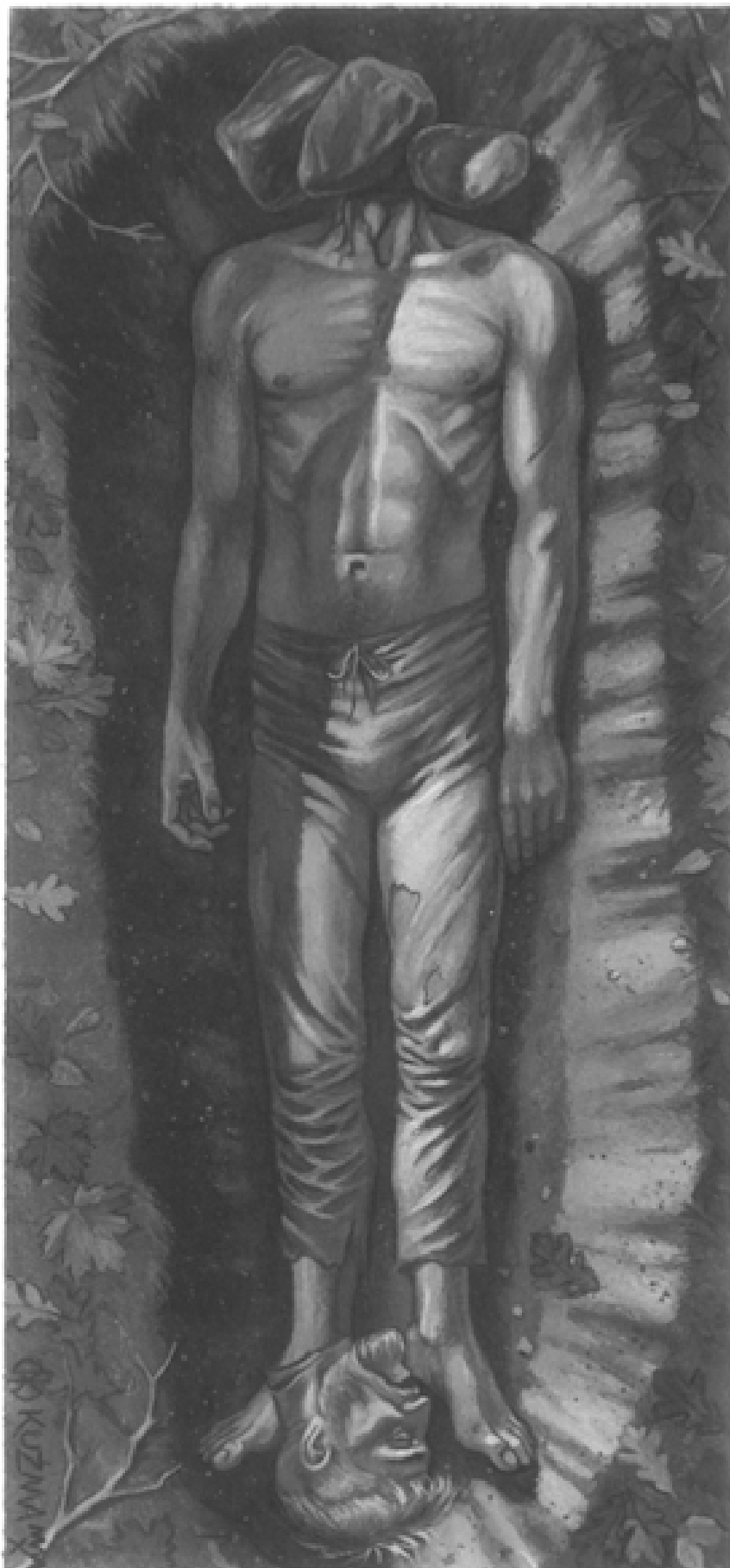


Figure 2 Artists' reconstruction of grave 146 from Cedynia (drawing by Mirosław Kuźma. © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma).



MEDIA FRENZY: VAMPIRES AS THE COMMON NARRATIVE

Categorizing non-normative burials as ‘anti-vampire’ is the default in Poland but because archaeological excavations and studies are ongoing and new work is always being done it is often found that initial assumptions were not accurate. Assuming that a burial is ‘anti-vampire’ is also perfect for the media, who love eye-catching headlines about new ‘vampires’ discovered. The default always seems to be about keeping the dead from rising instead of focusing on the non-normative practices that could be intended to benefit the dead and rid them of sin. As Stephen Gordan says, “...it is difficult to discern when innovations to the ‘ideal’ funerary rite constituted extra protection for the living instead of extra benefits for the dead (Gordan, 58).” As shown by the number of alternate interpretations that have been discussed, there is never a simple answer to what non-normative burials mean. Even in cases that are very likely ‘anti-vampire’ there are always questions that researchers are left wondering about and there is no way of being certain that their interpretations aren’t entirely wrong. To further muddle the waters media reports on archaeological finds, tend to take out a lot of this deliberation that researchers do and frame whatever conclusion is most likely as the one and only conclusion. This can be especially harmful in the case of ‘anti-vampire’ burials as it continues to strengthen the common ‘vampire’ narrative that has actual effects on the way the researchers frame their thinking when they find a non-normative burial.

NEWS How to Properly Bury a Vampire

SCIENCE NEWS

How to Properly Bury a Vampire

According to recent research published by forensic anthropologist Matteo Borrini, the remains of a woman who died during a 16th-century plague in Venice, Italy, might be the earliest known vampire burial yet found. The woman was apparently buried with a brick wedged in her mouth – which was one method popular in the Middle Ages of preventing suspected vampires from returning to prey on the living.

June 7, 2012, 6:30 PM EDT / Source: Life's Little Mysteries.com
By Benjamin Radford, Life's Little Mysteries Contributor

According to recent research published by forensic anthropologist Matteo Borrini, the remains of a woman who died during a 16th-century plague in Venice, Italy, might be the earliest known vampire burial yet found. The woman was apparently buried with a brick wedged in her mouth – which was one method popular in the Middle Ages of preventing suspected vampires from returning to prey on the living.

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Child 'vampire burial' found in Italy baby cemetery unearths 'eerie' discovery

Ashley May
USA TODAY

Published 8:11 a.m. ET Oct. 15, 2018 | Updated 12:03 p.m. ET Oct. 15, 2018

Excavation from the site of a 17th-century child in a cemetery in Italy. A brick was wedged in the child's mouth to prevent the dead from rising.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/10/15/italy-child-vampire-burial-eerie-ritual-prevent-malaria/1645690002/>

LIFESTYLE

DNA detectives identify very old 'vampire' buried in Connecticut

By Erin Keller
November 3, 2022 | 9:36pm | Updated

DNA detectives appear to have discovered the identity of a long-dead "vampire."

Parabon NanoLabs / SWNS

<https://nypost.com/2022/11/03/dna-detectives-identify-very-old-vampire-buried-in-connecticut/>



CASE STUDY: FEMALE 'VAMPIRE' BURIAL IN PIEN, POLAND

In September of 2022 researchers from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, led by Dariusz Polinski, discovered a 17th-century burial that they concluded was 'anti-vampire.' This skeleton was determined to be female and the primary deviant burial rituals that support the 'anti-vampire' conclusion are that a sickle was placed over her neck physically preventing her from being able to rise, and a padlock was placed on her toe.



MEDIA REPRESENTATION

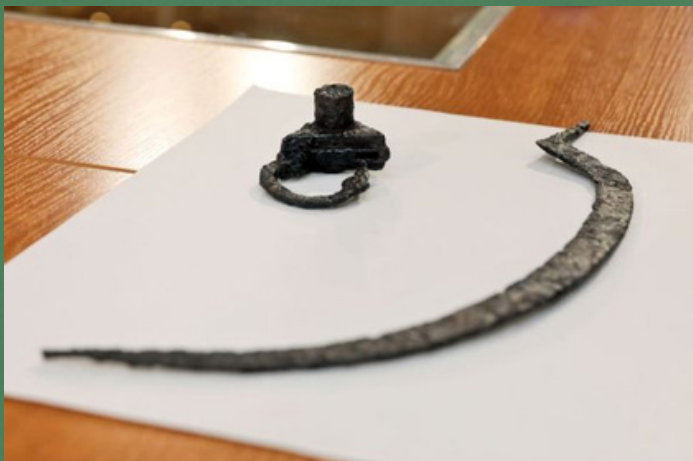
In the media, this woman was carelessly framed as being a vampire in headlines and in some analyses. Although articles threw around the term 'anti-vampire' burial they never took the time to define it thoroughly and make it clear that this woman's identity when she was living was not necessarily defined by her manner of death. An interesting detail about this burial is that she was buried with a silk cap and was buried with care which means she could have been more well-respected within the community and there is a missing piece in the narrative that led to her possibly being at risk for becoming a revenant. Skeletal evidence also points to her possibly having protruding front teeth which in the media is framed as being the reason for her being suspected to become a vampire. However, this is entirely speculative, even though it is possible, as there is no way of knowing for sure, and in this case, it is even more difficult as the 'anti-vampire' rituals contrast with the fact that she was buried with care.



SCHOLARLY SOURCE

"Keep Demons in the Grave." Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń News, 19 Sept. 2022, <https://portal.umk.pl/en/article/keep-demons-in-the-grave>.

Notably, there is an article published by Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń titled, "Keep demons in the grave", to counteract the media frenzy surrounding this find that labeled the woman a vampire. In it, the lead researcher Dariusz Polinski is quoted saying, "Our discovery does not necessarily indicate that a vampire was buried at that site. I would prefer to consider these practices as anti-vampire procedures. The woman could possibly have some physical impairment or mental disorder and was thus mistreated by her neighbors who thought she would scare them after death." This article is making a point to define what is meant by 'anti-vampire' burial but this definition, it is still lacking in any in-depth analysis of the issues with that label. That is likely because in this case the burial is pretty clearly 'anti-vampire' in nature but by not acknowledging the greater problems with interpreting non-normative burials this find is only adding to the uncritical 'anti-vampire' narrative.



(Gardela and Kajkowski, 785-789)

This article also presents information that the news sources either didn't report on or did not know. It discusses greenish spots on the skeleton's pallet that could indicate a coin was placed in her mouth, which is another common non-normative practice associated with 'anti-vampire' rituals. It also says that her bones indicate she was between 17 and 21 when she died and that she was buried with a pillow, a detail not included in other news sources, which indicates her high social status, along with the silk bonnet. The pillow also further supports her being buried with care which continues to contradict the idea that people theorized to return as vampires were always 'othered' by society. Another new detail that is a mystery to the research team is that the woman's left arm was turned left instead of being placed in its normal position along her body. One of the researchers importantly says that there is a lot more work to be done until they can figure out if there is any bodily evidence of her being "different." This means that they have yet to figure why she was perceived to be at risk by her community and at this point they can only theorize that it had something to do with her social role in the community. As has been discussed, the way somebody dies or what happens to their body after they die might also constitute 'anti-vampire' procedures. It would have added a lot of depth to the interpretation of this burial if researchers had communicated this possibility and emphasized that the woman's identity is not necessarily determined by her burial alone.



CONCLUSIONS

Modern archaeologists and scientists are taking more and more steps to look at the past more objectively and to consider numerous possibilities. That is why the 'anti-vampire' burial narrative is so frustrating and is in need of correction. To do this researchers must consider each case as its own and not immediately jump to the anti-vampire conclusion. They must consider all factors and refrain from assigning the buried person an identity solely based on how they were buried. As Gardela and Kajkowski say, "The 'vampiric' interpretations of unusual burials from Poland has become dogma and remains largely unchallenged (Gardela and Kajkowski, 781)." What must happen is that that interpretation must be challenged which is what they do in their article. More scholarship like theirs is incredibly important to changing the script and making changes for the future.



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