



## Hunting for Vampires in Polish Folklore and Archaeology: The Problems and Possibilities of Retrospective Studies

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Almost any book on vampirism contains passages about Poland. It is often argued that throughout the centuries the people living in Central Europe were deeply superstitious and feared that some of their dead could return from their graves and pose a threat to the living. Extant textual sources show that the Slavs usually called these revenants *upiór* or *strzyga* and it seems that these beings were largely synonymous with the widely-known concept of a *vampire*. Folkloristic accounts from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland abound with descriptions of strange rituals conducted among rural communities with the intention to hold the dangerous dead in their graves. These acts often involved exhuming the bodies, turning them face down, staking, decapitation or burning the corpses to ashes to ensure the dead would never return. One of the many questions that bother scholars of these phenomena today is how deep in time do the roots of such apotropaic acts grow? Is it possible to find tangible traces of similar practices in more distant past and among the Slavic population that settled the Polish lands in the Early Middle Ages?

Archaeological excavations conducted at various sites that date from the late 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries provide startling examples of funerary behaviour that deviates considerably from what we would usually regard as a normative Christian burial. Some of the dead are found buried in a prone position or with their bodies covered with stones, while others have their heads cut off and placed at the feet. There are also instances of partial exhumation of the bones and their cremation *in situ*. For a long time such acts have been interpreted by Polish archaeologists in the light of ethnographic sources and seen as attempts to protect the living against the undesired activity of the dead. Even a special label “anti-vampire burials” has been coined for them. But is it really justified to interpret every single instance of an unusual burial as reflecting fear of vampires? Was the concept of a vampirism actually known among the medieval population of Poland? Can deviant burials signal other meanings than merely the intention of the mourners to hold the deceased in their graves? This paper will take a critical approach to funerary practices in medieval Poland and discuss the various methodological problems that archaeologists, historians and ethnographers should be critically aware of while dealing with the problem of vampirism in Central Europe.



**Suggested reading for the workshop:**

Leszek Gardela 2015: Vampire Burials in Medieval Poland. An Overview of Past Controversies and Recent Reevaluations. *Lund Archaeological Review* 21, pp. 107-126.

Leszek Gardela 2015: Face Down: The Phenomenon of Prone Burial in Early Medieval Poland. *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoiviensia* 10, pp. 99-136.

**Comparative perspectives:**

Leszek Gardela 2013: The Dangerous Dead? Rethinking Viking-Age Deviant Burials. In: *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, Slupecki, L., Simek, R. (eds.). *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 23. Vienna. Fassbaender, 96-136.

**Additional paper for discussion:**

Leszek Gardela 2013: 'Warrior-women' in Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary Archaeological Study. *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoiviensia* 8, pp. 273-314.