The Vampire

The suave, pale, bloodsucking vampire that is most familiar to us first burst onto the scene in the works of 19th century Western authors such John Polidori’s *Vampyre* (1819) or in the much better known *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. The folkloric vampire of the peoples of Eastern Europe differs quite a bit from this popular literary depiction. The Balkan and Carpathian beings featured in this exhibit form a complex of basically three major ghouls. These beings are common to the Slavs, and the non-Slavic Albanians, Romanians, Greeks, and Romanies (i.e. Gypsies). In some cases the names of these ghouls are synonymous, and in other cases there are fine distinctions between them or overlap in their characteristics.

Regrettably, the true origin of the name of the widely recognized word *vampire* is probably irretrievably lost in the mists of time. Linguists have puzzled over the origin of this word for more than a century, but without much success. This word, for a variety of historical linguistic reasons, cannot have ever been an originally Slavic word. Nevertheless, this word must have been borrowed from an unknown language very early, as all Slavic languages share very similar forms of the name, to mention a few (with many minor dialect variations): *vampir* (Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian), *upyr’, upir’* (Russian), *upiór* (Polish), *upír* (Czech and Slovak). The original pre-historical Slavic form was most like something like *wɔpir* (the ō being a nasal vowel as in French *bon*), which would have naturally involved in *vampir* in the Balkan Slavic languages and forms such as *upir, upyr’* in the others.
The Albanian word corresponding most closely to the Slavic vampire is *luvugat* (more below), however the Albanians also have the intriguing word *dhampir* (*dh* being pronounced like consonant in “the”), meaning “son of a vampire.” While perhaps a loan word from the Slavic languages, *dhampir* superficially seems to derive from Gheg dialect of Albanian *dhamb* “tooth” and *pir* “to drink, or suck.”

**The Werewolf**

Unlike *vampire*, the term that corresponds to what we know as *werewolf* (which itself come from the Old English meaning “man wolf”), is not linguistically problematic in the Balkan languages. The Slavic name (with minor variations) *vukodlak, volkodlak, vurkolak* is formed from the roots *volk*, the common Slavic word for “wolf” and *dlak-*, an archaic Slavic word meaning “covering” or “hair.” The Albanian word *luvgat* or *lugat*, which really corresponded more closely in meaning to “vampire,” is thought to be a corruption of the Latin *lupus peccatus* or “sin wolf.” The Romansians use the word *vârcolac*, which is a loanword from Slavic, or *pricolici*, which appears to be possibly Slavic in origin, but has no known counterpart in the Slavic languages. In Romanian folklore the *vârcolac* seems to correspond most closely to the vampire, as does *strigoi* (see Witches), whereas the *pricolici* seems to have some of the more stereotypical features of the werewolf.

**The Witch**

Our third being, the *witch*, in some contexts also overlaps with *vampire* in the Balkans and Carpathians. Among the Slavs, the *witch* (Russian *ved’ma* (ведьма), Serbian, Croatian *uještica*) will be familiar to us as the stereotypical practitioner of arcane magic. In fact, the root of the Slavic words for *witch, ved-*, means “to know,” as does the English root (cf. *wit*).

However among the non-Slavic Albanians and Romanian, the word that means *witch* overlaps considerably with the concept of *vampire*. A number of the non-Slavs as well as Slavs have a word for *witch/vampire* apparently originating from the Greek word *striks* (στρίξ), meaning “screech owl” also borrowed by the Romans as *striga*, in the meaning of an evil spirit that howls in the night, or a vampire. *Strega* still means “witch” in Italian to this day. Polish has *strzyga*
(feminine) and *strzygoś* (masculine) for *vampire*, especially in the 18th century. Dialects of Croatian and Slovenian have *štriga*. Romanian has the words *strigă* and *strigoi*. The Albanians also have a *witch/vampire* called *shtrigë*.

**Vampire in Literature, Media, and Metaphor**

While the Vampire has become a staple in 20-21st century literature and media, it has also been belonged to a field of serious literary scholarship for the past hundred years. In addition the Vampire is often employed for purely metaphorical purposes

**Works Exhibited or Consulted**

All items are located in Watson Library at the call number given unless otherwise indicated.


In this engrossing work, Beresford chronicles the evolution of the folkloric vampire, going back to as far as Greek and Roman mythology, through the Balkans and Europe of the Middle Ages, to the Vampire of 19th century Gothic literature, and finally the contemporary vampire in works of authors such as Ann Rice and Elizabeth Kostova.


*Baba-Yaga* is the most “beloved” witch of Slavic folklore. She was reputed to kidnap and eat small children and lived in a little wooden hut with chicken legs in lieu of stilts. Despite these ghoulish aspects of her personality, she was also sometimes sought out for her esoteric knowledge, a gift which is often seen in other other European witch tales.

Next to the **Vampire**, the **Werewolf** is undoubtedly the most beloved creature of the night, in both literature and cinema, but for some curious reason, humans seem to be able to identify a little more personally with the **Werewolf**. Bourgault du Coudray makes a convincing why this might be the case:

“The werewolf has given metaphorical expression to the tenacious concept of the ‘beast within’, and idea which has been supported by philosophical, religious, evolutionary, psychiatric and popular narratives in the Western world.”


Edith Durham (1863-1944), called “Queen of the Highlanders” by the Albanians, was a British writer who travelled extensively throughout Albania and Kosovo at the turn of the 20th century. Even at this late date, Durham recounts in *High Albania* the fervent belief in vampire-witches, or **Shtrigat**, among the highland Albanians. **Shtrigat** were
believed to suck the blood of children and bewitch grown folk. In many Balkan areas, the concept of vampire and witch overlap significantly.

Durham reports the belief that to safeguard against a bewitching becoming permanent, one must secretly follow the shtrigë at night. “If she has been sucking blood, she goes out stealthily to vomit it, where no one sees. You must scrape up some of the vomited blood on a silver coin, wrap it up and wear it always, and no Shtriga will have power over you.”


The Curious Case of Peter Plogojovitz

In 1725 soon after the Austro-Hungarians had taken over Serbia from the Ottomans, an Austrian administrator was sent to the village of Kisolova (probably really Kislovo or Kisiljevo) to investigate reports of buried corpses being dug up and “rekill.” Family members of one Peter Plogojovitz (probably correctly spelled Blagojević) were reported to have taken ill and died 40 days after his death. According the Serbian folk customs, 40 days was significantly the amount of time required to incubate a vampire.

The administrator, named Frombald, accompanied a local Orthodox priest to Blagojević's grave, where he was exumed and reported to be undecomposed, his hair and nails having grown, and was found to have fresh blood in his mouth.

Upon discovering the corpse in this condition, they did the only thing one can naturally do with a vampire: they drove a hawthorn stake through his heart and then burned the body. Reports of this case were to create a period of temporary „vampire panic“ in Europe.
The more common Russian version of the werewolf is called *oboroten’* (‘one who changes’). The term corresponding to the Balkan term, *volkolak*, exists but is less common. It is often depicted, as can be expected, as a wolf-like creature of some sort. In the Russian tradition men can become werewolves of their own will, as well as against their wills, in which case, the term *volkolak* is in some areas more applicable.

As these illustrations show, the concept seems to range from something like a large shaggy, unkempt poodle, to a fire-breathing *Saint Christopher*, with horns on his head.

Some writers have seen a first written glimpse of the Slavic werewolf in the great Russian epic poem “Slovo o polku Igoreve” or “Tale of Igor’s Campaign” written sometime in the 12th century. Written in Old Russian, the tale recounts the tale of Prince Igor Sviatovich against the Polovtsians, a Turkic people in the Don region of Russia in 1185.

Regrettably this is most likely a mistranslation. In the several passages mentioning the word *viłk* “wolf”, the more natural translation that fits the context is “like a wolf”, i.e. “stealthfully,” as correctly rendered in this translation by Dmitrii Likhachev.
No discussion of vampires is likely to forgo mentioning the historical Dracula, Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia (1431-1476) aka Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler). He was also sometimes known as Dracula, because of his association with the Order of the Dragon (Dracul meaning “the dragon” in Romanian).

Vlad was known for his fierce opposition to the Ottoman expansion into the Carpathians, and for his exceedingly cruel punishment of captured enemies. Nevertheless, during his life he was never associated with vampires. He only later became a literary inspiration for the 1897 novel Dracula by Bram Stoker.

Perhaps to the consternation of Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight fans, among the southern Slavs in the Balkans, the beings we know as vampires (vampiri) and werewolves (vukodlaci) are essentially one in the same creature. Their defining characteristics are being undead shape-shifters who drink blood from the living, although the vukodlak was sometimes also known to be distinctively covered in wolf’s hair, hence this word which means “wolf hair” or “wolf clothing.”

Vampirism supposedly affected those that had succumbed to a violent death or some natural catastrophe, such as plague. When they first left the grave, for a period they would live unbeknownst among their living
kin, stealthily drinking their blood, male vampires even occasionally siring children, and eventually turning their prey as well unless stopped.


The renowned Serbian philologist Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864) discusses in his ethnological works on the Serbs the concept of *vukodlak* ("werewolf" but for the South Slavs mostly synonymous with "vampire"). In this interesting passage he even refers to the creature as *vukodlak* "werewolf," while using the verb *povampiriti se*, i.e. "to become a werewolf/vampire", or "vampirizing." He states:

"The *vukodlak* is a person, who according to folk beliefs, 40 days after death is invaded by a demonic spirit, bringing him back to life (i.e. vampirizing him). The *vukodlak* then leaves the grave at night and strangles people in their homes and drinks their blood. A honorable person cannot be vampirized unless a bird or some other kind of animal flies or jumps over his corpse. So the corpse must be protected so this does not occur. *Vukodlaks* usually appear in winter, from Christmas till Easter). As people begin dying in the village, the villagers begin to talk of there being a *vukodlak* in a grave, and try to discover who had been vampirized.”—translation G. Husic.


Among the Eastern Slavs (the Russians, Ukrainian, and Belarusians) the earliest mention of the Eastern Slavic version of the word vampire, *upyr’* occurs in Church chronicles from the 1200s which criticize the continued paganistic practices of the Slavs. The *upyr’* is often placed aside a host of other supernatural creatures, often those associated with water. The *upyr’* is mentioned alongside the *bereginia*, a benevolent female spirit that inhabited riverbanks. The chronicles criticize the pagans for worshiping these deities.


**Videos Exhibited**


Summary: A group of strangers are all quarantined inside the same house after an outbreak of the plague


This Chinese cult comedy movie from Hong Kong presents a kind of vampire who emerges after the death of a recently deceased wealth man. Similar in many respects to representations of the “Western vampire”, these creatures, *jiangshi* (Mandarin), *geungsi* (Cantonese) arise after death, afflict the living, and can infect other humans with vampirism.
For Western viewers, the novel aspect of the Chinese vampire is that he hops!


Released in 1979, _Nosferatu, the Vampyre_, set in 19th century Germany and Transylvania (a province of Romania) was a remake of the 1922 German Dracula film _Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens_.

Summary: Jonathan Harker, against the wishes of his wife, departs on a journey over the Carpathian Mountains to arrange a real estate transaction for Count Dracula, with tragic results.


Summary: The German director F.W. Murnau hires Max Schreck, the "ultimate method actor," to play Count Orlock in his vampire masterpiece _Nosferatu_. In Murnau’s quest for realism, the movie is filmed at night in Czechoslovakia and Schreck appears only in character and full makeup. As cast and crew begin to disappear, it seems that Murnau has made a devil’s bargain with Schreck, whose performance is too authentic.

**Linguistics Resources Consulted**


—. *Zivot I Običaji Naroda Srpskoga*. U Beču [Vienna]: A. Karacić, 1867. SPENCER RESEARCH LIBRARY KOWEY C5023


Exhibit Images

Case 1 (The Vampire)
Case 2 (The Werewolf and Witch)
Case 3 (Vampire in Media and Metaphor)