

Philippe Dolimier

Chantel Rodriguez

#0201

### Contemporary Living Dead Legends' Through a Historical Lens

A common theme among historical societies was to use legends and religion to craft solutions to questions that they had no certain answer to. Many of these legends involved what happened after death, including what happened to one's soul, where it went, and what it could do. In both the Ancient Greco-Roman World as well as the Middle Ages, the specific ways that their prospective societies treated their dead and perceived the afterlife explicitly created their contemporary legends of the 'living dead' through their burial practices, theories about the afterlife, and the common fears of their societies'.

One of the first civilizations with enough artifacts to be able to be studied, that had vivid 'living dead' legends is the Ancient Greco-Roman civilization. They believed everything rested in one singular natural plane of existence. The souls – the immortal spiritual or immaterial part of a human being- went to the underworld, a physical place, after one's death. In addition, they held a strong belief system on how one should treat their loved ones' bodies' upon their death.

Ancient literary sources emphasize the necessity of a proper burial and refer to the omission of burial rites as an insult to human dignity (*Iliad*, 23.71). A proper burial included laying out the dead in a process called prothesis, purifying the body. They would give them a coin to pay their way across the river Styx, a river in the underworld thought to have a toll to reach their final resting place. The entire procession lasted less than a week. The amount of effort put into caring for the passed away reflects the intensity of their beliefs in honoring their dead. They believed that an improper burial, unnatural death, or untimely death could lead souls to become restless, angered, and a potential hazard to the living.

We see the ideas of the importance of proper burials in many forms, but one of the strongest indicators of its true importance is seen in the story of 'Jason and the Golden Fleece' – Jason is sent on a mission by one of the Gods Pelias to retrieve the golden fleece of a holy Ram, one of Zeus's Rams, in hopes that Jason would be slain in the process. After an entire adventure Jason eventually receives the

Golden Fleece and is on a ship to return home. He is on a ship with Medea, a sorceress, and the daughter of a King who doesn't want Jason to succeed. In order to escape, Medea knows that 'an improper burial' is so important to their culture, that she does the following trick. She captures her brother, kills him and spread all of his pieces in the ocean, knowing her father would have to capture all of his pieces to give him a proper burial. (Apollonius, and E. V. Rieu). In the story, capturing Jason is of immense importance, but this just shows how much more important the proper burial was. This brutal example, being that it is a crucial part of the literature of their time, places the importance on a proper burial in their society.

Not only did the amount of effort put into caring for the passed away reflects the intensity of their beliefs in honoring their dead, but it also showed their fear of the dead affecting their lives. They believed burying the dead could affect how the dead would act, but they believed that their death affected it so heavily and so probably, that they took preventative measures for some burial cases. This is evident through modern excavation in Ancient burial grounds where rocks and weights were found on top of tombs as to 'lock' the dead body in if it were to attempt to escape. There were instances found where the dead bodies' limbs were tied together, preventing it from escaping should it re-animate. These practices not only reveal that re-animation was a true fear, but it highlights that the Ancient Greco-Romans' relationship with their ideas of a living dead directly affected how they treated their dead. We see how in legends such as the story of Philinnion, who dies immediately after being married, this untimely death and deviant burial reflect one of the important reasons why a dead might become restless. She returns to life and causes immense fear to her family when they eventually find out (Phlegon). This legend is an example of the fearful legends that stemmed exactly from their beliefs of how a deviant burial can cause dissatisfaction to the dead in the underworld.

These theories and stories are what shifted the entire societies beliefs. The fact that they truly acted out deviant burials in order to protect themselves from the dead rising from the underworld reveals that these living dead legends were about of their true beliefs, and not only stories.

This relationship outlined by a fear of the dead coming back leading to exemplary treatment and burials of the dead began the 'living dead legend' in their society. Their overwhelming fear of death, the

way they processed their dead, and their mythology of the afterlife is what led their storytellers to create these legends of how the dead could re-animate or become a revenant, and are what also led these stories to deeply embed into their culture.

Another society in which their religion, rituals, and fears led to their living legends was Late Medieval Europe during and after the Black Plague. The bubonic plague killed 30-60% of Europeans throughout the few hundred years that it affected them (1346-1750). Europe was predominantly Christian at the time, and since so many were dying, they believed the black plague to be the apocalypse, the end of the world that would end in them either going to heaven or hell. The fear of society as a whole was death, and what would happen to them- if they would go to heaven. This apocalyptic society led some to hold their faith, and strive to ensure their admittance to heaven, as others lost their faith and began to abandon their beliefs upon being tested in their minds about what was happening around them, they were unsure what to believe.

“The emphasis on judgment was, of course, purveyed by preachers, anxious to turn the worldly to virtue. In this "evangelism of fear," as the French historian Delumeau has called it, there was a strong element of social control and of psychological projection as well” (Bynum). This was a time when the ones who held their Christian faith felt fearful to follow the rules while destruction was surrounding them. This led to the Necromancy, not performed by the church to be seen as non-church authorized necromancy, which was viewed as non-Christian and satanic, but necromancy performed by clerics or monks to be prominently practiced, as a way for the church to adjust to the changing fears of society, and give society a comfort to hold. Necromancy, before the late Middle Ages, in the early and high Middle Ages, meant the conjuration of demons, since it was believed, correctly, that humans could not be brought back to life, and necromancers were bringing demon spirits into the bodies of the dead. When the late middle ages, and the plague, were prevalent, the term changed.

The changing fears in the wake of inconsistencies of judgment, and mass casualties of individuals is what sparked the hunger and fascination for re-animation, the term necromancer adjusted, with these fears of death, to stand for divination (mantia) by conjuring the spirits of the dead (nekroi) (Keickheffer).

It took a turn that allowed the Christian belief to remain holy if practiced under the right circumstances. Eventually, since so many were dying, society had to abandon their burial rituals. They would take all the bodies and put them in mass graves or burn them all immediately, disregarding proper burials led to less honorable deaths. These practices and fears of death, the beyond, and religious beliefs are what changed their contemporary living legends to be based on resurrection. Their legends and stories began to pertain to witchcraft or satanic necromancers because these are the fears they held as a society during a time where everyone they loved was dying before them of unknown disease. This is viewed in films such as “Black Death”, that exemplify the protrusion of necromancy as a witchcraft ritual, where the magic of the witch Langiva through a historical lens being seen as un-holy and against the church, can bring one back from the dead. The idea of a necromancer to create the ‘living dead’ legend, contemporarily stemmed from societies fear of death, judgment, and their strongly held Christian beliefs.

In essence, a societies stories and legends about the living dead stem specifically from their respective practices with their dead, theories about the afterlife, and the common fears of their societies’, as the current events of a time lead to the myths and stories embedded in that specific culture.

Bibliography

Apollonius, and E. V. Rieu. *Apollonius of Rhodes: "The voyage of Argo"- "The Arconautica"*.

Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. Print.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Journal." Diss. 1998. *Bynum Death and Resurrection in the Middle Ages*

(n.d.): n. pag. Print.

Hansen, William F., and Phlegon. *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of marvels*. Exeter: U of Exeter Press, 1996.

Print.

Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2014. Print.