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BATS AND FOLKLORE □

part five in a series about bats in North American and European folklore

by Gary F. McCracken

A prominent part of modern folklore about bats imagines them as the transformed bodies or souls of dead people who are not at peace and who prowl the night sucking the blood of human victims: Vampires! This folklore undoubtedly is responsible for much of the fear and dread that people have of bats, and those of us who engage in public education programs about bats invariably expect questions about vampires □ the real bats, or otherwise.

Folklore linking bats and vampires is particularly intriguing because there are, in reality, three species of bats that subsist on the blood of birds and mammals. All three are restricted exclusively to New World tropical regions where their main prey are domestic livestock, primarily cattle, and fowl [*BATS*, Spring 1991, "Vampires: The Real Story"].

In the Neotropics, there are a variety of folktales about bats thirsty for blood. Folklore from the Arawak Indians of Guyana tell of bats sucking the blood of both men and their fowl. Guyanese Indians also maintain that oil from the seeds of a liana (called "bat's bane" by Creoles) will cause attacking bats to die. Legends of large bats that kill and, in some cases, eat people occur in folklore throughout much of South America, as well as from the Mayas of Mesoamerica. Effigies on pre-Columbian ceremonial knives and other artifacts also show that bats were closely associated with ritual sacrifices, usually through decapitation, in which human blood was offered to appease and nourish the gods [*BATS*, Spring 1991, "Bats and South American Folklore"]. The real vampire bats of the New World tropics may have inspired these myths and the pre-Columbian association of bats with blood sacrifice. However, the bat-vampire lore that is so prominent in modern books, pulp magazines, and movies* is not based on myths from South and Central America. Dracula, Barnabas, Vampirella, and the others were born in vampire traditions from Europe.

The existence of blood-eating bats in the New World tropics was first made known to Europeans by the explorer F. De Oviedo y Valdes with the publication of his *Sumario de la natural historio de las Indias* in 1526. Shortly afterward, in 1565, M.G. Benzoni (*La historio del mundo nuevo*) provided a graphic description of his toes being bitten by bats while he was asleep in what is present-day Costa Rica (vampire bats were not formally described in the scientific literature until 1810).

The earliest known Old World myths about vampires date from ancient Babylonia, millennia before the earliest European reports of blood-eating bats. Ancient myths about vampires also come from Assyria, Greece, China, and India. Montague Summers (*The Vampire in Europe*) and Anthony Masters (*The Natural History of the Vampire*), both scholars of vampire lore, note that almost no culture is free from superstitions of blood-sucking ghosts. A rich vampire folklore among various gypsy groups of eastern Europe apparently originated from India where Bhuta, Brahmaparusha, and Rakshara roamed at night, killing and sucking the blood of humans.

Vampires in folklore traditions from India and from the gypsies also had the ability to transform into various animals, including chickens, horses, dogs, cats, snakes, fleas, and even into fruits (pumpkins and watermelons) and household tools. However, while folklore throughout the world has long associated bats with the souls of the dead and with demons [BATS, Summer 1993, "Bats and the Netherworld"], I have found no Old World mythology where vampires take the form of a bat. Prior, that is, to the publication of Bram Stokers' novel, *Dracula*, in 1897.

The word "vampir" meaning "blood drunkenness" is of Slavic origin, and during the late 17th and 18th centuries, vampirism was a near obsession in much of eastern Europe. Pamphlets and newspapers dealt extensively with incidents of vampirism. Romantic authors of this period also published vampire stories (Ossenfelder's *Der Vampir*, 1748; Burger's *Lenore*, 1773; Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth*, 1797). Between 1642 and 1772, sovereigns sent delegations to investigate at least nine "vampire epidemics" in Istria, East Prussia, Hungary, Serbia, Silesia, Russia, and Wallachia.

This was a time of political unrest among ethnic groups. Neighbor distrusted neighbor, and they attributed the vilest activities to one another. It was also a time of mysterious, devastating epidemic diseases, notably black plague and smallpox, that were often believed to be of supernatural origin. This all created a climate for, and fueled, the popular vampire hysteria, but bats were not seen as vampires.

Although Scotland had the Baobham, which took the form of beautiful girls that drained victims of their blood, England was relatively free of vampire mythology. Stories from the Continent and the translation of German novels, however, soon inspired English authors and the first English vampire novel, *Varney the Vampire*, was published in the 1840s. While the cover of an early Varney edition shows bats overhead, Varney did not transform into one. That feat was left to the most famous of all vampires, Dracula.

In *Dracula*, Bram Stoker not only coupled bats with vampires, but also coupled eastern European vampire mythology with a real person, Vlad Tepes ("Vlad the Impaler"), a Wallachian (Romanian) prince who lived from 1430 or '31 to 1476. Vlad Tepes was the son of Vlad Dracul.** The younger Vlad called himself Dracula ("Son of Dracul"). During a period of bloodthirsty princes, Vlad Tepes was famously bloodthirsty, reputedly ordering the deaths of 100,000 people, many his own subjects. There is no evidence that Vlad drank the blood of his victims, but he was an expert at torture. During his life, Vlad Tepes had allegiances at various times with both Christians and the Moslems, with the result that he was distrusted by all sides. With the invention of the printing press, handbills and pamphlets recounting, and perhaps exaggerating, his misdeeds were widely circulated by the German press. Vlad Tepes became infamous throughout Europe—one of the first people whose image was made by the media. He came to the attention of Bram Stoker.

The existence of vampire bats was well known in Europe by the 1890s, but whether Bram Stoker knew of them or not is uncertain. Stoker may simply have borrowed from and given a new twist to the folktales that associate bats with death. We *can* be certain of two things: that the vampire bats of the New World never lived in Vlad Tepes' castle and that vampire bats were not the source of Old World vampire myths.

(Bio)

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NEXT: Folklore and the origins of bats

(Footnote 1)

* The popularity of vampires in modern folklore is astounding. From the 1840s and publication of *Varney the Vampire* to 1983, vampires were the subject of 232 novels, 172 short stories, 23 children's books, and 196 movies. (Source: Riccardo, M.V. 1983. *Vampires Unearthed: The Complete Multi-media Vampire and Dracula Bibliography*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York)

(Footnote 2)

** Dracul means "The Order of the Dragon," awarded by the Catholic Church.



The cover to Varney the Vampire, published in the 1840s, clearly shows bats, but it was no more than an artist's conception of the lore associating bats with the netherworld. No mythology apparently exists where vampires actually took the form of a bat until Dracula was published.

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