Timea Solyomvari, *Returning dead in the late eighteenth-century Transylvanian communities*

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Note: As this article contains a wealth of primary sources in Hungarian, the editors have opted to retain the author's full footnotes in order that these sources may be more easily located for those unfamiliar with the language or material.

Abstract

In Transylvania, vampirism was understood within a disease-based explanatory system in the context of epidemics for hundreds of years. In the time of plague, cholera, or swine fever, with the agreement of the village, corpses were destroyed by means of specific rituals. The landscape, language and collective memory of the region cultivated the belief in the existence of the vampire for generations. The fear of the supernatural, that plagued the small Transylvanian communities derived from a syncretism that had developed over time: old belief systems and religious ideas that shaped the community's own response to the undead. This paper will demonstrate how religious emotions shaped community belief about the presence and power of the supernatural. The central question will be what role religion played in shaping emotions, including the interpretation of belief in a physical rather than spiritual afterlife, especially from the point of view of the challenge of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Also, this paper will assess the specific physiological dimension of the belief of the dead returning to life and will situate the debate on the physiology of superstitious fear in the wider context of the German Enlightenment.

The Weberian concept of 'Disenchantment of the World' has been under criticism for some time. Rather than apply it to a long-term process, perhaps this theory can be tested on a smaller scale, for instance to study the decline

in certain aspects of supernatural belief.[1] Disenchantment, therefore, can help us find the causes behind the decline in beliefs in communities at different times. In East-Central Europe, while some published cases provide us with some useful insights about the opinions of the elite, we still do not know enough about how, in local communities, belief in the returning dead (revenants) and witches could make the difference between life or death. This article will investigate the social, religious, personal, and emotional dynamics that characterized eighteenth-century accounts of undead phenomena in Transylvania. By using local priest`s records, I aim to uncover what debates about the undead can reveal of the social and intellectual *milieu* in which they arose, but also what they tell us about personal emotions and spiritual consequences for the local communities that still believed in the returning dead. I will first concentrate on what the late eighteenth-century pastors considered to be superstitious, even pagan beliefs among their flock, before turning to the community of believers at a later stage of my research.

European culture provides us with a variety of supernatural phenomena: possessed corpses, ghosts, and witches that can do harm even beyond the grave. One of the difficulties in assessing executions of the returning dead and persecutions of dead witches is that they often overlap. It has been suggested that until the sixteenth and seventeenth century, revenant executions had a separate history from witchcraft. At the height of witch-hunting, however, the two traditions merged with each other before

[1] Richard Jenkins, 'Disenchantment, Enchantment, and re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the millennium', *Max Weber Studies 1.* (2000) 11-32.

separating again in the eighteenth century.[2] Ideas and practices relating to the harmful dead already had a long history in Europe that was grounded on the understanding that the living and the dead, together, formed a single community. Assessing sources about how people in the past understood death is challenging, however, as many factors influence their experience of death, especially the surrounding community they belonged to. During the Enlightenment, reforms were implemented by rulers that directly challenged belief in witchcraft and revenants, thereby attempting to impose correct behaviour towards the dead.[3] These beliefs also formed part of a budding scientific debate about the passage from life to death that shifted from purely theoretical considerations to experimental case study. The secular outlook of enlightened intellectuals did not mean that they turned away from theology altogether, and indeed many priests also took part in the Enlightenment debate about the retuning dead. Priests offered their own theoretical explanations about the revenants' phenomena and investigated local traditions on their own initiative and often equipped with new knowledge, they sought to put new ideas to good use at the service of reforming the Church.

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[2] See: Gábor Klaniczay, 'Decline of Witches and Rise of Vampires in 18th Century Habsburg Monarchy, *Ethnologia Europaea,* 1987, 165 – 180.; Winfried Irgang, 'Die Stellung des Deutschen Ordens zum Aberglauben am Beispiel der Herrschaften Freudental und Eulenberg' in: *Von Akkon Bis Wien: Studien zur Deutschordengeschichte vom 13.bis zum 20. Jahrhundert- Festschrift zum 90. Geburtstag von Althochmeister P. Dr.Marian Tumler O.T.am 21.Oktober 1977*, ed. Udo Arnold (Marburg: Elwert, 1978) 269-270.

[3] Péter Tóth G. 'The Decriminalization of Magic and the Fight Against Superstition in Hungary and Transylvania, 1740-1848' in: *Witchcraft and Demonology in Hungary and Transylvania,* ed: Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs, Plagave Macmillan, 2017. 291-318.

This can be seen in a circular letter written by Michael Brukenthal, commissioner of the Transylvanian district of Fogaras, in 1789, in which he sought answers to that very question: what superstitious beliefs and rites existed among the people of the region? He received answers from three Saxon Lutheran pastors, three Calvinists, one Unitarian minister, and one Greek Catholic priest.[4] Ambrus Miskolczy published these letters in 2016, rejecting the idea that the letter was written at the request of the monarch, Emperor Joseph II. Indeed, that same year (1789), a handbook was issued to district officials confirming an order dating from 1787, that was probably an inquiry into popular superstitions and their origin. Although this order was specifically issued for Galicia (divided today between Poland and Ukraine) we do not know if Joseph II also asked for a similar report on superstition in Hungary and Transylvania.[5]

Michael Brukenthal followed in his uncle's footsteps, Samuel Brukenthal, who was governor of the Habsburg Grand Principality of Transylvania between 1774 and 1787. From an early age, Samuel's travels and sojourns abroad gave him the opportunity to meet influential scholars who were involved in the funding of a Masonic Lodge in Halle and he was a Freemason all his life. He was also a leading figure of the Masonic lodge of Nagyszeben (Sibiu) in Transylvania. He travelled back to Transylvania with knowledge that he had acquired in German societies and Universities, and he had far-reaching connections throughout Europe. Samuel's nephew, Michael

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[4] The letters published in: Miskolczy Amburs, *Felvilágosodás és Babonaság, Erdélyi néphihedelem-gyűjtés 1789-90*. (PTE Néprajz-Kultúrális Antropológiai Tanszék, 2006).

[5] Ibid. 61-62.

Brukenthal, joined the Masonic lodge in 1789, and soon began to collect superstitious beliefs and rites among the multi-cultural people of Transylvania. His letter collection is enormous and deals with all kinds of superstitious beliefs, such as magic and healing. I only analyse here the pastor's answers to Brukenthal's request:

> 'what kind of superstitious beliefs exist among people, even today and how deeply they believe the wonder of the soul of the dead at night; *vulgo Vampir,* in latin *Sanguisugae* or ghosts, *Lüdértz* (Lidérc) and their appearance to people, superstitious signs, with which the troubled souls torture people at night […]'.[6]

This collection, therefore, gives us a great insight into how the elite responded to belief in the returning dead that they heard about from pastors, priests and ministers who provided them with first-hand information about the superstition that held sway in their communities.

The first letter to answer the request is from Bodros Samuel Köpeczi, a Calvinist pastor, who mentions Joseph II numerous times in his letter, which suggests that he was a loyal supporter of the monarch. In the preface to his letter, he noted: 'in my county, [the] priest before me […] gave more credit to the words of the midwives than to the words of the wise men'.[7] Köpeczi's report is the most thorough, which suggests that he was particularly interested

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[6] Michael von Brukenthal: 'Kívánvá tudni, mitsoda babonaságok és bal vélekedések uralkodjanak...', Segesvár 26. April. 1789; in German: 'Da mir daran gelegen ist zu viβen waβ für Vorurtheile und Aberglauben noch unter dem gemeinen Mann herschen...' in: Miskolczy Amburs*, Felvilágosodás és babonaság*, 131-136.

[7] Köpetzi Bodos Sámuel, '...igyekeztem fizetés igéréssel is...' in: Miskolczy Amburs*, Felvilágosodás és babonaság*136-161.

in reforming the superstitious beliefs of his flock at the time. Following a Christian tradition for which all belief in the supernatural is the work of the Devil, describes at length fear of ghosts, belief in witches and fortune tellers' tales as superstitious activity. He talks about the witches who can harm from the grave, and the belief that if someone is weak and thin, it is a sign that the evil spirit *"gonoszok"* has drunk their blood.[8] Köpeczi also notes that:

> Witches take and kill not only in life. They harm in their death, they come back from the grave and take people with them. The only way to make sure they stay in the grave is to dig up the grave, turn the corpse face down and pin it down.

He also mentions the children of an old gypsy woman who wanted to execute her corpse believing she was a witch, but that he had managed to convince against doing such a thing.[9]

Executing corpses that were deemed 'harmful' in Central Europe was common practice within Habsburg territories. In fact, several cases date back to the Ottoman rule, when the locals turned to the Turkish magistrate for permission to execute the corpse of a witch, as they believed that it was harmful beyond the grave. Permission was often granted as Muslims believed all Christians went to Hell anyway, so why not allow them to execute corpses as well![10] The first known record in Transylvania dates back to 1709, in the

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[8] Ibid. 150.

[9] Ibid. 152.

[10] For example: 'Cántor Jánosné és Paija Czoitos Margith boszorkányok haláluk utáni elégetéséről';
'Cántor Jánosné és Czortos Margith boszoikányok sírból való felásásáról' in: Sugár István: *Bűbájosok, ördöngösök, boszorkányok Heves és külső Szolnok vármegyében* , Boszorkányperek (1645-1814), 23.

village of *Kis-Kerék*, where the whole village collectively dug up the corpses of a man, two women and a young girl as they believed them to be 'vampires' and the cause of some deaths that had occurred in the village.[11] In order to kill the 'vampires', the villagers wedged stones into their mouths and drove a stake into their hearts. According to the records the same thing was done in four other villages, where the corpses were executed in the same way:

> The news is spreading across the province, the belief that plague is caused in many places by evil spirits through the souls of many. Reports have stated that, in many places, to stop the epidemic, locals have used the effective antidote of excavating suspected corpses, mutilating them, and stabbing them in the middle of their chest.[12]

Similar executions can be found in court records, for instance in an account from the Transylvanian village of *Dés* from 1723, where a woman who had died at a time of plague was accused by her own daughter of having come back from the dead to take children and adults away. The court record states that the body was dug up; however, the corpse's state of decay contrasted with the belief that revenants did not rot. Therefore, the magistrates stated

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[11] The word vampire was not used at this time. The first known appearance the 'Vampyr' word is in: 'Copia eines Schreibens aus dem Gradiscker District in Ungarn'. *Wienerisches Diarium* 58, 21.07.1725. For works on vampire see: Mézes Ádám, 'Georg Tallar and the 1753 Vampire Hunt - Administration, medicine and the returning dead in the Habsburg Banat' In: Éva Pócs (ed): *Magical and sacred medical world.*
Notions of the ethnology of religion with an interdisciplinary approach. (Cambridge Scholars,2019) 93-136.

[12] Samuelis Köleseri de Keres-Eer*, Pestis Dacicae anni MDCCIX scrutinium et cura* (Heltzdörffer: Cibinii, 1709) 111-113.

that they were given false information.[13] It is notable that these cases were always limited to certain communities and did not spread further at the regional level, but also that these rites were often authorized by town magistrates and clergymen.

The next entry in Brukenthal's report is a letter from the Protestant minister Bálint Baló. The tone of the letter is extremely emotional, and it becomes clear that its author was embarrassed about writing about such a topic. He tells an interesting story that happened to him 'a few years back':

> I was here in *Fagaras* in a lodge, and one of us (who we all believed was an intelligent man) would swear that one night a Spirit (*Lélek*) appeared in front of him. He was extremely scared of the Spirit and started to pray devoutly. However, the Spirit encouraged him, and started to talk to him about important issues […] and forbid him to talk to anyone about that conversation. The others knew that I did not believe in such things, and some of them said: […] "Who would not see it clearly? the appearance of the dead`s spirits is only the Devil`s work, who appears in human form […] his aim is to take possession of people in any way that he can".[14]

Baló did not deny the possibility that the spirit of the dead could come back, even in physical form, just that it was the Devil's work. His account is filled

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[13] 'A meny, Mezei Ferencné hiresítette azt, hogy anyósa: Mezei Péterné hazajáró és az gyermekeket hordgya, már a nagy embereket is hordani kezdette' 25.06.1723 in: *Boszorkányok, kuruzslók, szalmakoszorús paráznák*, ed: Kiss András (Kriterion: Kolozsvár, 2004) 161-164.

[14] Baló Bálint, „...a' magam tulajdon tapasztalásaival, egy Rendbeszedett Írással, Excellentziádnak igen alázatoson udvarolnék", in : Miskolczy Ambrus, *Felvilágosodás és Babonaság*, 167-187.

with personal anecdotes, in which he often argues that it was the lack of education, especially teaching younger children, that explained the spread of irrational beliefs.

The Unitarian minister, János Bodor, for his part answered Brukenthal's request with a letter in four parts entitled: "*A description of all the superstitions spread among the foolish people in 1789, including a systematic account of the supposed antidotes by methodology*". Part one dealt with *De Crassioribus Supersitionibus*, such as witches; the second part is about *De Incubus deu Ephialtibus,* such as *Lidércz* [15],the third part is about wandering dead spirits *De vagis seu Errantibus mortuorum Animabus,* and the fourth and part, *De Spectris Seu Phantasiis* is about ghosts. He discusses these beliefs in detail and lists the antidotes that people of the village believed they could use against these supernatural creatures without making any personal comments.[16] Interestingly, these antidotes include food made with garlic, garlic kept in bed, and wearing crucifixes around the neck; all elements familiar to anyone versed in Vampire lore.

The next entry- in what seems a glossary of East-Central Europe's religious diversity- is provided by the Romanian Orthodox priest, Ioan Halmaghi, who stated that belief in ghosts was due to irrational beliefs passed on from parents to children; for him, therefore, superstitious belief had deep

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[15] A *Lidércz* is a unique supernatural being of Hungarian folklore. See: Éva Pócs, 'We, Too, Have Seen a Great Miracle`: Conversations and Narratives on the Supernatural Among Hungarian-Speaking Catholics in a Romanian Village' in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday life. Expressions of Belief,* ed. Mario Bowman and Ülo Valk (London& New York: Routledge, 2012) 246-280.

[16] Bodor János, '…amit cask a' lényegről megtudtam, leírtam…' in: Miskolczy Ambrus, *Felvilágosodás és Babonaság,* 161-167.

roots in people's minds, as intractable as nursery rhymes. Christianity was supposed to be a cure for superstitious beliefs, although some of them were kept alive by the people, and due to poor education, they were still in wide circulation. He also argued that the creation of educational centres was important in order to keep the younger generations under control by means of uninterrupted education.[17] He clearly took advantage of Brukenthal's request to emphasize the need for education in his community. He also mentioned that many priests were at one with their people in their belief in the supernatural, and that 'they are not distinguished from the people by anything except the knowledge of reading, singing, and the knowledge of worshiping sacraments'.[18]

Finally, there is not much to say about the three Saxon Lutheran pastors' letters as they report no first-hand experience of superstitious beliefs in their communities but rather quoted from contemporary literature. Johann Gottfried Schenker, for instance, clearly tailored his answer to Brukenthal's request, entitled *Wamyren oder Blutsäuger*, (Vampires or Blood-suckers), from publicly available contemporary sources. Strangely enough, he even concluded his discourse on the execution of corpses with the innocuous words: *Ruhe sanft, armer Vampyr!* (Rest gently, poor vampire!).[19]

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[17] 'Superstitionum Omnium in Genere Anno 1789. adhuc in rudi Populo crassantium genuima observatio, inque certis Sectionibus et Articulis cum Opinatis Anthidotis Methodica Realtio' in: Miskolczy Ambrus, *Felvilágosodás és Babonaság*, 161-167. Translated to Hungarian by Fazekas István, 198-208.

[18] Ibid. 203.

[19] Johann Gottfried Schenker 'Uiber Vorurtheil und Aberglauben in Siebenbürgern', in: Miskolczy Ambrus, *Felvilágosodás és Babonaság*, 274.

Notwithstanding the variety of responses to Brukenthal's enquiry from these respective clergymen, we know that these beliefs and practices were common even during the nineteenth century; just as local communities re-interpreted the undead or harming witches in the context of epidemics and a disease-based explanatory system. For example, in 1861, Orczy Lőrinc, the cholera commissioner, reported to the Royal court that the people from the village of Arad had dug up the corpses of victims of cholera, because they believed that the disease was spread by the returning dead.[20] As late as 1899, the inhabitants of the village of Krassova went to the cemetery at night, dug up corpses, cut then up with wooden axes and put them back in the grave. They did this to stop the swine-fever epidemic, as if it had been caused by what they believed were 'vampires'.[21]

Authorities had reacted early to these beliefs and practices and actions had been taken by the Catholic Church and the political elite. For instance, Empress Maria Theresa issued a decree in 1766 forbidding "posthumous magic" the full title of which was: the *Imperial and Royal Law Designed to Uproot Superstition and to Promote the Rational Judgement of Crimes Involving Magic and Sorcery.*[22] However, these measures were not successful, as the closed communities passed on their belief system from one generation to the next. To paraphrase the Orthodox priest mentioned above,

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[20] Franciscus Xav. Linzbauer, *Codex sanitario-medicinalis Hungariae III*, Sectio 4 (Budae: Typis Regiae Scientiarum Universitatis Hungariace, 1861) 315.

[21] *Ethnographia* 10. Évf. Ed: Munkácsi Bernát and Sebestyén Gyula (Budapest: A Magyar Néprajzi Társaság Kiadása, 1899), 334, 415.

[22] 'Lex caesareo-regia ad exstirpandaiu superstitionem ac rationalem judicationem criminalem Magiae, Sortilégii' (1766). Edited in: Franciscus Xav Linzbauer: *Codex Sanitario-Medicinalis Hungariae 1* (Budae, 1852-1856), 776.

the problem came from the fact that parents pass on these superstitious beliefs to their children. Of course, we cannot know for certain how reliable the clergymen's answers to Brukenthal's request really were. Judging by the tone of the letters, these members of the cloth may have been ashamed, but they still provided detailed information. This provides us, therefore, with a great insight into how these shepherds judged their flock's belief-system. Fear of the supernatural, that plagued these small Transylvanian communities derived from a syncretism that had developed over time: a mixture of old belief systems and religious ideas that had shaped the community's idiosyncratic response to the undead.

Religion, as it has been established in recent historiography, played a key role in shaping emotions, including the interpretation of beliefs in a physical rather than spiritual afterlife, especially in the context of the Protestant challenge of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Examples of the interplay between new theological ideas and popular beliefs are numerous throughout Christian Europe.[23] Within Catholicism, the theology of Purgatory had provided a channel of communication with the souls of the dead for centuries. Its challenge by Protestantism, that demonized the waning economy of salvation it enabled, meant in practice several ways to deal with the fear of death and grief for the dead were no longer available in Protestant communities.[24] People's beliefs about the dead nonetheless survived the

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[23] Bruce Gordon, *The Place of the Dead in Late Mediaeval and Early Modern Europe*, edited with Peter Marshall (Cambridge University Press, 2000)

[24] Craig M. Koslofsky: 'Souls: the Death of Purgatory and the Reformation' in: *The Reformation of the Dead, Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)19-39.

spiritual upheaval of the Reformation, and possibly the Turkish reconquest, in spite of theological shifts and attempts at reform on the part of different Christian denominations, that were enumerated above in response to Brukenthal's request. The Protestant Church, in particular, was faced with a considerable challenge to fulfil the spiritual needs of communities that had been deprived of legitimate channels for their fears (purgatory) and often resorted to superstition.[25]

Moreover, not all members of the clergy thought that belief in the returning dead was anti-Christian but rather understood it as the work of the Christian Devil. As the spiritual leaders of their community, they were perhaps ashamed to admit that they had failed in their mission and that some of their flock did not follow Christian faith to the letter and chose to describe belief in supernatural phenomena as the Devil`s work rather than admit these beliefs had a pagan origin. Harming witches, both alive and dead, physical ghosts and blood-sucking spirits were common currency in many communities. Priests, pastors, and ministers, instead of denying them, used the opportunity offered by Brukenthal's request to highlight the need for education, building schools and so on. In fact, the diverse elements of popular culture highlighted here, including pagan and folkish, were not that different from the Christian and Classical beliefs of the governing elites from antiquity onwards. The insight into these beliefs provided by these small village communities clearly shows that, the 'disenchantment of the world' never entirely took over ancient beliefs. The concerns of the pastors that repeatedly

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[25] Ulrich L. Lerhner, *The Catholic Enlightement-Forgotten History of Global Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

called for reform and education for their flock, are a useful source for the study of popular religion if we accept the possibility that they reflect real beliefs or practices, at least to some extent, if not entirely accurately.

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