

# The reflection of folk beliefs in burial customs in the Early Modern period in northern Croatia

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## Summary

During the Early Modern period, the population of northern Croatia was largely Roman Catholic. Thus, the deceased members of the community were buried in parish cemeteries, in and around the church. The typical burial rite was an inhumation in a supine position with extended legs and with the west-eastern orientation of the body. The graves are usually without grave goods, but sometimes they contain parts of clothing, jewellery and objects of personal devotion such as rosaries, small medals and crosses. However, in some cases there are exceptions and one finds so-called deviant or unusual burials. On the Torčec-Cirkvišće, Crkvari and Nova Rača sites, four skeletons in prone position were found during archaeological investigations. Such

burials have been, until recently, interpreted as resulting from the fear of the dead. Among other things, a prone position of the deceased was a way of preventing the dead from returning from their graves after death and hurting the living. Several different explanations have been offered in the last decade, but from historical and ethnological literature, it is evident that the folk belief in revenants (vampires) was growing during the Early Modern period. In this paper I will try to interpret prone burials found on northern Croatian archaeological sites and establish whether they can be linked to the growth of folk beliefs in the undead.

**Keywords:** burial customs, prone position, folk beliefs, revenants, fear of the dead

## 1. Introduction

The rural population of northern Croatia, i.e. of the area bounded by the Drava, Danube and Sava rivers, was mainly Roman Catholic in the Early Modern period. The parish cemeteries located on a consecrated space around the church and including the interior of the building were the only places where the deceased could be buried.<sup>1</sup> The usual funeral rite involved an west-east oriented burial, with the deceased laid on his/her back and with the legs extended. The deceased were laid in the grave in a wooden coffin or wrapped in a shroud. The position of the arms varied. We find them stretched alongside the body, on the pelvis, on the abdomen or on the chest. Finds in graves are rare, but occasionally clothes, jewellery and items of personal devotion such as rosaries, medals, crosses and breviaries can be found. Sometimes, however, due to certain circumstances, there is deviation from this common ritual and individuals are buried in ways which do not conform to common social norms. Unusual burials occur during different time periods among numerous societies in different parts of the world. Numerous variations that occur in different geo-

graphical areas, periods, and religious and cultural contexts do not allow their precise interpretation. In 2008, Edeltraud ASPÖCK brings the following, rather broad, but generally acceptable definition:

“[...] the minimal definition of ‘deviant burials’ that most archaeologists would agree to is that they are burials different from the normative burial ritual of the respective period, region and/or cemetery. These differences may occur in body position or treatment, location or construction of the grave or types of grave goods.”<sup>2</sup>

While in the European literature there are numerous discussions and arguments about the causes and interpretation of such special burials,<sup>3</sup> in Croatian archaeology it is a completely marginalized topic on which only a few papers have been published.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In certain cases, individual monasteries also had the right to have cemeteries.

<sup>2</sup> ASPÖCK 2008, 17.

<sup>3</sup> See BRUNDKE 2013; DUMA 2010; DUMA 2015; GARDELA 2011; GARDELA 2013; GARDELA 2015a; GARDELA 2015b; GARDELA 2017; GARDELA and KAJKOWSKI 2013; MURPHY 2008; REYNOLDS 2009; UNGER 2006.

<sup>4</sup> FILIPEC 2016; KRZNAR and BEDIĆ 2016; KRZNAR and TKALČEC 2017.

Tajana SEKELJ IVANČAN, Tatjana TKALČEC and Juraj BELAJ (eds), *Groblja i pogrebni običaji u srednjem i ranom novom vijeku na prostoru sjeverne Hrvatske*. Zagreb 2016, 161–201.

UNGER 2006

Josef UNGER, *Pohřební ritus 1. až 20. století v Evropě z antropologicko-archeologické Perspektivy*. Panoráma biologické a sociokulturní antropologie 25, Brno 2006.

## Figure references

Fig. 1–4: Siniša KRZNAR

Fig. 5: Damir DORAČIĆ

Fig. 6: Hrvoje JAMBREK

## Überlegungen zu Hinweisen auf Elemente von Volksglauben in Bestattungsbräuchen in der frühen Neuzeit im Norden Kroatiens

In der frühen Neuzeit war die Bevölkerung im Norden Kroatiens größtenteils römisch-katholisch. So wurden die verstorbenen Mitglieder der Gemeinschaft auf Friedhöfen innerhalb und außerhalb der Kirche begraben. Ein typischer Bestattungsritus war die Bestattung in Rückenlage mit gestreckten Beinen in West-Ost-Orientierung. Die Gräber enthalten normalerweise keine Grabausstattung, aber manchmal enthalten sie Kleidungsstücke, Schmuck und persönliche Andachtsgegenstände, wie Rosenkränze, kleine Medaillen und Kreuze. In einigen Fällen gab es jedoch Ausnahmen und es gibt sogenannte abweichende oder ungewöhnliche Bestattungen. Bei archäologischen Untersuchungen wurden an den Fundorten Torčec-Cirkvišće, Crkvari und Nova Rača insgesamt vier Skelette in Bauchlage gefunden. Solche Sonderbestattungen wurden bis vor kurzem als Folge der Angst vor den Toten interpretiert.

Unter anderem war die Bauchlage des Verstorbenen eine Möglichkeit, um zu verhindern, dass die Toten aus ihren Gräbern zurückkehren und die Lebenden bedrohen oder verletzen. Im letzten Jahrzehnt gab es verschiedene Erklärungen für solche Bestattungen. Laut historischer und ethnologischer Literatur ist es jedoch offensichtlich, dass in der frühen Neuzeit der Volksglaube an Wiedergänger (Vampire) wächst. In diesem Beitrag werde ich versuchen, die Bestattungen in Bauchlage an archäologischen Fundorten im Norden Kroatiens zu interpretieren und festzustellen, ob sie mit dem wachsenden Volksglauben an Untote in Verbindung stehen können.

**Schlagnworte:** Bestattungsritus, Bauchlage, Volksglaube, Wiedergänger, Angst vor den Toten

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