Received: 2016-10-19
Original scientific article
DOI 10.19233/AH.2017.07

THE REVENGE OF THE DEAD. FEUD, LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE UNTAMEABLE

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ABSTRACT

During the High Middle Ages, Church authorities tried to restrict feuds amongst the nobility. This led to a gradual shift in mentality, and one aspect of this process is scrutinised here. Since feuding was less encouraged, the hypothesis of this paper is that tales of the returning dead are reflecting this shift in attitudes. By closely looking into medieval tales about the dead, it is shown that such tales only partially show such an approach, trying to persuade noblemen to refrain from feuding. The harming dead, however, are of another nature, inverting the cult of saints and reflecting the medieval model of the afterlife.

Keywords: Feud, Ghosts, Dead, Afterlife, Middle Ages, William of Newburgh

LA VENDETTA DEI MORTI. FAIDA, APPLICAZIONE DELLA LEGGE E GLI INDOMABILI

SINTESI

Nel alto medioevo, le autorità ecclesiastiche cercavano di limitare la faida tra i nobili. In conseguenza, si cambiava la mentalità della società. Un aspetto di questo cambiamento é esaminato in questo articolo, cioè come le narrazioni dei morti che tornano per interferire con i vivi riflettino questo cambiamento negli atteggiamenti. Analizzando questi episodi nelle cronache medievali, si può dimostrare che soltanto una parte di queste storie cercava di convincere i nobili di omettere la faida. I morti che nocciono sono di un'altra natura, e specchiano sia il culto dei santi sia il concetto medievale dell'aldilà.

Parole chiave: faida, fantasmi, morti, aldilà, medioevo, Guglielmo di Newburgh

That the corpses of the dead, moved by some kind of spirit, leave their graves and wander around as the cause of danger and terror to the living before going back to tombs which open up to receive them, is not something which would be easily believed, were it not for the fact that there have been clear examples in our own time, with abundant accounts of such events. Nothing of the sort is reported in books of former times, which those of us who are inclined to study might meditate upon, and surely, since these ancient books recorded the everyday and matter-of-fact events of former times, they would not have been able to suppress accounts of stupefying and horrible events if indeed they had occured (William of Newburg, 1856, vol. 2, 185–186).[1]

This quotation, taken from the twelfth century English chronicler William of Newburgh, is striking for two reasons. First, he stresses a picture very familiar to our own imagination: tombs opening up to receive vampires, mummies or bloodthirsty undead are part of our popular image of the returning dead. Secondly, William stresses that such stories are new to him. In an age where tradition is cherished and the ways of the old are venerated, it is remarkable that a chronicler of the Middle Ages tells us that something is new, unheard of, and a recent development. Without a doubt, William wants to stress how disturbing these stories really are. Something is changing in his world, and in this article I would like to try to uncover what it was.

Working for my last book on the history of the corpse in the Middle Ages, I noticed that the Dead gradually become more cruel, more involved in the matters of the living during a slow process starting from during the twelfth century (Schmitz-Esser, 2014). Reflecting on it, I posed myself a rather simple question: Could there be a relation between the eleventh and twelfth century curtailment of feuds and the development of more violence among the Dead? The basic theory is rather simple: since it is well established that ideas of *Treuga Dei*, Gottes- and Landfrieden developed in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, and that they were followed by new laws stressing the central authority of Popes, Emperors, and Kings all over Europe, it might well be that nobles felt it to be more difficult to resort to private violence to resolve their disagreements and to re-establish offended honour. Or, to be more precise, it was the result of the separation of the private and public spheres and their functioning together, itself a process of modernisation, if we like the old-fashioned teleological view. Such limitations by a society which sought new ways to solve conflicts must have caused discussion between different generations as well as ill-feelings, and problems within daily life. So, maybe, the older ways of dealing with things supposedly persisted in the liminal spheres of medieval culture. It is easy to imagine that a nobleman unable to settle his scores by force due to restrictions of new laws and the need to comply with Church norms, was still apparently capable to do so after his death and to return in order to interfere in this world without regard for modern rules of society. Thus, the taming of the living resulted in the appearance of the untameable dead. That such a return of the

1 English translation by Joynes, 2006, 137, who provides English translations to many of the texts quoted here in their Latin edition.

dead would be theoretically possible, is part of medieval beliefs of the afterlife and of an ongoing relationship between body and soul after death.

Unfortunately, the more I thought about the concept and the more I searched to gather the sources for my argument, the more complex the picture became. Although such a development may have been a reason for the change in attitudes toward the dead, it certainly was only part of a series of changes that helped to create a picture of the returning dead that is still very much the basis of our own fiction about the undead. I'll try to summarise my findings here and would like to open up a discussion on this relationship between feud and the untameable dead.

So, what kind of stories was it that William of Newburgh found disturbingly new? Of his four accounts, I would like to cite just the most important one for our discussion (William of Newburg, 1856, vol. 2, 182–190; translated in Joynes, 2006, 134–142; cf. Schürmann, 2009; Schmitz-Esser, 2014, 454–459; Gordon, 2015). It is the tale from a castle in Yorkshire. We are told that there was a wicked officer, jealous of his wife. One day, he pretended to be away from home and hid in the house to watch his wife committing adultery with his neighbour. He watched them from a beam in the roof which cracked. He not only caught her red handed, but also seriously injured himself, as he fell. The wife, tried to explain away his story of her adultery to him and others as part of a feverish dream. However he could not be cured and unfortunately, the man refused the last ointment and communion offered by a priest. Therefore, when he died of his wounds, he was properly buried, but soon the parishioners realised that he was wandering around at night, followed by howling dogs and spreading a disease which killed many of the villagers. Finally, two brothers, who had lost their father due to this illness, took their mattocks and opened the grave, found the body full of blood, dismembered the corpse, took the heart out of the body and burnt it on a pile outside of the town.

The dead man actually has two good reasons for coming back from the afterlife: neither the *rite de passage* was done properly, nor could he reasonably feel satisfied with the wrong that was done to him by his wife. If one turns to the stories of the returning dead, these are two of the five major reasons for their unrest. The five are: (1) Unfulfilled duties of the living towards the dead person - like a last will not executed, especially if linked to a religious institution that should pray for the soul: An example is the story of Herveus, narrated by a Chronicler from Marmoutier (De rebus gestis in majori monasterio saeculo XI, 1853, 409–411, ch. 8); (2) unfulfilled duties of the dead person (which particularly interests us in our context here); (3) the announcement of death: many early and high medieval writers – like Bede (Beda Venerabilis, 2005, 1, 242–246, b. 4, ch. 9, and 2, 50–56, b. 5, ch. 9), Thietmar of Merseburg (Thietmar von Merseburg, 1935, 18–19, b. 1, ch. 13), Rodulfus Glaber (Rodulfus Glaber, 1989, 222, b. 5, ch. 1,6), Peter the Venerable (Peter the Venerable, 1854, 876, b. 1, ch. 11), or Caesarius of Heisterbach (Caesarius von Heisterbach, 2009, vol. 5, 2170–2174, b. 10, ch. 62–64) – state that an encounter with the dead announces the death of the person meeting them; (4) an unnatural or untimely death; or (5) an incorrect *rite de passage*, like in the quoted case of the castle's official.

One of the remarkable aspects of William of Newburgh's story lies in the physicality of the dead body which is described in such a detail that I am inclined to believe the story really

did take place in twelfth century Yorkshire and was not mere fiction. Moreover, the dead man is described as a "sanguisuga" [leech], sucking the blood of the living; he is not only advising the living or reprimanding them, but actively attacking their health and killing them. It is the first time that European tales of the undead give such a clear reference to a vampire, although our modern idea and the term itself are only starting to evolve during the early modern period (cf. Lecouteux, 2001; Seipel, 2008). Bram Stoker and the gothic novel of the nineteenth century are yet to come, but the idea of a bloodsucking undead is already mentioned here. There have been older stories of encounters with the dead in the Christian tradition, but they are of a different nature. Normally, the dead return because they have to interfere on their own behalf, be it to admonish the living about not properly carrying out their last will, or be it to ask for prayers and offerings for their soul. The living and dead were not distinguished in quite the same way in premodern society as they do today: in a medieval perspective, they still had a very real and consequential connection to one another. Gregory the Great, for example, recounted stories of the dead serving in a public bath for their sins and asking for prayers and offerings for their soul, so that they could be released from their punishment (e.g. Gregory the Great, 1980, 3, 184–188, b. 4, ch. 57). When William of Newburgh referred to the books he read, we can almost be certain that the "Dialogues" of Gregory the Great have been part of this library; the Church father's writings were widely copied and easily available, and he is the only major authority who talks about the dead in great detail, distinguishing himself in his graphic detail from the influential, but rather theoretical teachings of Augustine on the topic.

However, if we can exclude an older Christian tradition, where did the idea of the harmful dead come from? One has often argued that an older, pagan tradition may have played a role. Are these not stories of the dead, of ghosts and the returning, all folklore and sign of the old, pagan believes of simple people not yet readily Christianised? Historians, such as Jean-Claude Schmitt, have already remarked how similar stories are transmitted to us: in Latin, in written texts, mainly by Christian clerics, often from noble background and well educated (for a more complex discussion, cf. Schmitt, 1994). Thus, it seems highly improbable to suggest their tales are closely linked to the commoners of the epoch. The romantic view of an old, pagan, "Germanic" world of "the people" on the one side and the Christian, erudite world of a politically influential, Latin elite on the other, is an *idée fixe* of nineteenth and twentieth century thought. Since ideologies of both the left and the right have made ample use of it, one can not stress enough how uncritical such a reading of our sources is. Nevertheless, most reflections on Ghosts and the Dead take such a contradistinction as given and as their parting point for any discussion. On the contrary, I want to show that the world of the elite played a major role in the development of new attitudes towards the dead during the High and Late Medieval Period.

Coming back to the argumentation of Jean-Claude Schmitt, one can stress that the authors of our ghost tales are themselves pretty much part of the medieval elite. If they insist on the possibility of the dead returning, they often do so to promote their own ideas about society. It is no wonder, then, that we enter the realm of normative discourse here, and, consequentially, to end feuds was one of the major themes included in such high medieval ghost stories. In a collection of miracles from the monastery of Sainte-Foy in Sélestat in the Alsace region, we are told the tale of Walter of Diebolsheim. During a

miraculous incident, Walter encountered two groups of dead persons, one clad in white robes, the other one in red. He learns that the white are waiting for their final relief and a place in heaven, and Walter finds among them count Conrad, his former lord, who had died in the year 1094. The souls in red are waiting for their place in hell and are described as suffering because of their lack of good deeds and penitence during their lifetime. Amongst them are nobles who had died in battle without being able to repent their evildoings (De fundatione monasterii S. Fidis Sletstatensis, 1888, 997–1000; cf. Schmitt, 1994, 125–130; Schmitz-Esser, 2014, 521). The story coincides with the restrictions of private warfare in canon law: In 1119, the council of Reims not only threatened those who offended the peace within the diocese with excommunication, but also it explicitly forbade their Christian burial (Schmitz-Esser, 2014, 516). Tales like those of the vision of Walter of Diebolsheim underline the need for lay noblemen to obey these rules and to refrain from violence.

Other authors of accounts about the returning dead are even clearer in their disdain of feuds. In the first half of the twelfth century, Peter the Venerable, the famous abbot of the monastery at Cluny, included the story of the noblemen Bernard le Gros into his "De miraculis". Bernard, who during his lifetime frequently raided the abbey's territory, finally converted and repented his ill doings, made a vow to become monk and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. Since he died on the way, he was not able to return and take monastic orders at Cluny during his lifetime. However, some years later, he appeared to one of the stewards of the monastery and asked the favour of the monks' and the abbot's prayer for his soul (Peter the Venerable, 1854, 874–876, b. 1, ch. 11). The morale of the story is apparent: instead of feuding with monasteries, lay noblemen should revert themselves to the ways of a virtuous life and stop fighting their neighbours. To make this argument against feuds more colourful and to advertise a virtuous lifestyle, Peter added the detail of a fox-furred cloak that Bernard was wearing during his apparition: as we learn during the tale, it was once given by him to a poor man as a gift, so it now gives him comfort in the afterlife.

One may add Caesarius of Heisterbach's story of Frederic of Kelle, a knight who appeared to Erkenbert, a father of a fellow friar at Heisterbach. Tormented by sheep-skins that burnt him and a heavy slab of earth to bend his back, the knight was quite literally tortured by his sins: he had stolen the sheep-skins from a widow and acquired land unlawfully, asking his kin to return this property. However, his heirs decided to leave him to his torment and to hold on to their possessions (Caesarius of Heisterbach, 2009, vol. 5, 2210–2212, b. 12, ch. 14). A third story of this kind, slightly earlier and dating to the eleventh century, is told by Otloh of St. Emmeram. It is the tale of two knights meeting the ghost of their father, tormented by armour burning him on every touch, imploring them to give back land to a monastery he once stole from the monks. This time, the sons were more generous than their peers in Caesarius' story. Remarkably, Otloh ascribes his story to Pope Leo IX himself, who is said to have met the brothers on one of his visits to Germany and retold their story as an example for the protection of monastic property (Othloh von St. Emmeram, 1989, 67–69, ch. 7). All three stories are therefore directly linked to Church and monastic reformers: To Pope Leo in the case of

Otloh in the eleventh century, to Cluny in the case of Peter the Venerable in the twelfth century, and to the young Cistercian order and their branch at Heisterbach in the case of Caesarius in the early thirteenth century. It is not simply a coincidence: well known as an effect in the case of medieval charters, often invented by monastic communities to defend their claims, ghost stories were part of their use of the pen to counteract the swords of their noble neighbours threatening their many riches and maybe their very existence. In this light, ghost stories are part of a feuding society. They are a reflex of the learned and the religious to disabuse and to obstruct lay noblemen from such practices by appealing to their bad conscience.

By looking at the examples of Otloh of St. Emmeram, Peter the Venerable, and Caesarius of Heisterbach, we saw a group of stories recounting the return of the dead in the context of feuds. They are against such conflicts, and there is little doubt that they are the one-sided by-product of the feuds between monasteries and lay noblemen. The feuding aristocrats were not writing down their claims, and the deeds of their swords are only known to us if they made it into the writings of the clerical elite. From here, another kind of story evolved, featuring the dead knight in his role of perpetrator and evildoer, but unlike the miracle of Sainte-Foy, they were not returning as a single individual, but in the context of a whole army. The anglo-norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis tells the story of a priest named Walchelin who encountered such an army of the dead. Of course, it is just during his conversations with the strange knights he encounters that he finds out about them; trying to steal one of their horses, it is the nobleman William of Glos who tries to persuade Walchelin to bring his message to his son and wife. He is part of this host and tortured for his many sins, and the biggest one of them is the unrightful appropriation of a mill his heirs should return to their rightful owners. But Walchelin does not want to help the sinner, and he is approached by another knight, Robert, his own brother, recently died on an expedition in England. Becoming a priest and praying for his father and his brother, Walchelin is assured that his offerings already have lightened the burden of his brother and helped to save his father from further punishment. There is no doubt that the message of the story is to frighten and to instruct noble knights not to steal, to be impartial and to refrain from vain and proud behaviour. As part of his punishment, Walchelin's brother Robert has flames bound to his feet that not only burn him constantly, but feel heavy as Mont Saint-Michel. They are in the place he always wore shining pointed spurs. The direct monastic attack to the living style of the aristocracy couldn't be more striking. To make his point more convincing, Orderic names several other noblemen from the retinue of Herlequin, the strange name given to this appearance, thus making clear to his audience that this apparition is made up from real men. Landry of Orbec, for example, is said to have tried to shout out loud to ask Walchelin for help, but his companions shouted louder. Thus, he is adequately punished, as Orderic explains: Never listening to the witnesses in court seriously if it was not to his own favour as a very partial judge, he is condemned not to be heard now suffering in the afterlife (Orderic Vitalis, 1973, 4, 236–250, b. 8, ch. 17; cf. Schmitt, 1994, 115–145). Although this kind of story is new, the morale is not. In our context, the idea of restraining violence by the nobility is striking, but, as I have already stressed, this fits well within the context of the individual knights we have seen

returning before. The returning dead are again part of a normative discourse, illustrating the importance of compliance with the ideas of Christian virtue for lay people, especially if they are mighty, influential and, above all, well armed.

So, if this wave of such ghost stories are inspired by the battle for a reduction of feuds led by erudite monks, familiar with the lay aristocracy's way of life, what about the violent returners like the Yorkshire officer described by William of Newburgh? This appearance of the dead as avenging themselves, of evil dead that harm the living, does not seem to be connected to feuds, as I suggested in the first place. Looking at the evidence, a clear connection to feuding does not exist, there is a clear distinction with the returning knights of the tales I quoted before. All of these stories relate to the dead in a state of "in-betweenness", waiting for their judgement in the afterlife. They are punished, but the reason for their appearance is to ask for the help of the living. This is true, for example, in the case of Walter of Diebolsheim, meeting his former lord, Count Conrad. The distinction of the dead in between Heaven and Hell into two categories, the white and the red, reflects Augustine's ideas of the *non valde boni* and *non valde mali*, the "not so good" and the "not so bad". But the *sanguisuga* of William of Newburgh is not one of these. He is part of the *valde mali*, the "very bad", whose place is in Hell (Augustine, 1969, 108; as to the Augustinian distinction of the souls in Afterlife and Christian ideas about the Eschata, cf. Le Goff, 1984; Bynum, 1995; Dinzelbacher, 1999; Angenendt, 2007, 104–106; Schmitz-Esser, 2014, 25–32). As I have argued elsewhere, during the eleventh and twelfth century, the idea developed, that these very bad persons had similar characteristics as their counterpart, the "very good". Since these saints lived in their relics and could provide miracles, it was only logical to assume that the "very bad" could do similar things. Burning their corpses was a consequent development, and it was one of the reasons for the punishment of heretics and witches by burning them (Schmitz-Esser, 2015).

It is revealing that there is no or little connection to feuding in this latter group of the "very bad" such as we saw for those in between Hell and Heaven: Feuds were thought to be part of the daily practice of the aristocracy, and although it could be interpreted as a crime, an offence and an unchristian behaviour, it nevertheless felt like a minor sin, punished by the lord, but not automatically resulting in eternal damnation. This somewhat ambivalent approach towards a fighting elite is not untypical for medieval society. Another example may confirm: Although jousting and tournament were forbidden by canon law and resulted in the excommunication and eventually the non-burial of knights that died during this martial activity, normally such a verdict would not be enforced in practice, or at least not consequently enforced (Beaulande, 2006; Schmitz-Esser, 2014, 520–525; on medieval excommunication, cf. Jaser, 2013). When Geoffrey, the brother of Richard Lionheart and John Lackland, died in a tournament, he was interred at Notre-Dame de Paris, in the very presence of the King of France himself (Rigord, 1882, 68–69). For a church relying on the force and the donations of the lay aristocracy, it was impossible to really enforce ideas of peace, harmlessness and virtuous behaviour in knights of the epoch. However, to threaten those breaking these rules, especially if they damaged the Church's property, was a comfortable way to encourage doubt about such acts of violence, eventually resulting in conversion and donation. This only made sense if the dead of the

elite were thought to be in the position of Purgatory, punished, but not in hell, redeemable, but not yet redeemed. Stories of the returning dead could therefore be part of a spectre of the punishments of an afterlife, keeping noblemen under control and helping the Church institutions to establish their position as the only brokers of salvation. The dead became part of this endeavour, although the stories of the very wicked, those who come back, suck our blood, and harm the living, are not the direct result of a feuding society. It was only with the gothic novel, the vision of premodern Eastern Europe by Bram Stoker, that feuds and undead were coming together once again.

MAŠČEVANJE MRTVIH. FAJDA, KAZENSKI PREGON IN NEUKROTLJIVI

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POVZETEK

William Newburgh je bil prvi srednjeveški avtor, ki je v 12. stoletju pripovedoval zgodbo o pivcu krvi ("sanguisuga"), to je mrtvec, ki se škodoželjno vrne k življenju, da bi sesal energijo iz živečih. Pri tem pravi, da gre za nov pojav; po analizi srednjeveških pripovedi o vrnitvi mrtvecev tudi sicer lahko trdimo, da je to zelo verjetno res. Starejše zgodbe o mrtvih poudarjajo njihovo stanje gorja med peklom in nebesi in napeljujejo k usmiljenju in molitvi zanje s strani živečih. Ker so bile napisane s strani klerikov, je namen teh pripovedi precej očiten: Plemeniti aristokrati so pozvani k izpolnjevanju idealov harmonične družbe, da si po svojih najboljših močeh prizadevajo h krepostnemu življenju in podpirajo meniške redove ter tako zaščitijo svoje duše in pomagajo Cerkvi pri gradnji krščanske skupnosti. Po drugi strani so pripovedi škodoželjnih mrtvecev Williama Newburgha povsem druge narave: Te potrjujejo misel, da so duše hudobnih že tekom življenja v Peklu. Ti, torej, ne morejo biti odrešeni. Te zgodbe torej niso primerne za to, da bi napeljevale k vzdržnosti pred maščevanjem, saj ne ponujajo možnosti za izboljšanje ali spremembo načina življenja aristokratske elite.

Ključne besede: fajda, duh, mrtvec, posmrtno življenje, srednji vek, William Newburgh

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