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psychiatry in history

An 18th-century view of demonomania. 2: Vampirism – introduction

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Martinus Martini’s 1782 dissertation on demonomania includes a considerable section on vampirism, on which topic more of his own original thought is evident, although the stories themselves are the usual ones found in other sources. For vampirism as a variety of insanity Martini is somewhat muddled as to whom should be diagnosed – the alleged vampire, the victims or the believers. I present here some of his observations in my own translation of the Latin. He begins:

I shall describe how to understand the madness of those who persuade themselves that the ghosts of dead men or the recently dead themselves go out at night from the tomb and leap on the sleeping, whom they drag to death by draining their blood.

As for the name, he notes that:

There is a certain species of bat in Brazil which at night opens the veins of sleeping men and animals, and sucks the blood. It is called the Vampire Bat by Linnaeus . . . This name seems to take its origin from the Slavonic language, from the word ‘ulpir’, or ‘vampir’, which signifies bloodsucker.

Martini recounts several vampire stories, which he acknowledges are largely taken from Augustin Calmet, a French Benedictine prior and theologian, whose *Treaty on the Apparitions of Spirits and Vampires, or ghosts of Hungary, Moravia, & c.*, was published in 1751 and is still used as a major reference for vampire lore.

‘Vampirism – Stories’ and ‘Vampirism – Explanation’ will be published in subsequent issues of the *BJPsych*.

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