

Revenants and Civil Unrest in Ancient Greece and Rome

The “walking dead” have maintained popularity in modern times thanks to multiple video games, tv shows, novels, and movies. George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* (and his subsequent related films) may have been the catalyst for the increasing popularity of revenants over the last several decades, with the walking dead lending themselves easily to various timely allegorical interpretations, such as consumerism (e.g., *Dawn of the Dead*) or the dangers of biological experimentation and/or willful disregard of climate change (e.g., *The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*; see Bishop 2015, Hubner 2015, Lauro 2017). But what about the earliest stories of reanimated corpses, those dating back to classical antiquity?

From at least the fifth century BCE on, the Greeks and Romans told stories of revenants, and such stories reflected various cultural concerns of the times. This paper takes a narratological approach to revenant stories from antiquity to examine three questions: first, what the ancient stories have in common with each other and how they differ; second, what these stories have in common as well as where they depart from modern narratives (across various media) of the walking dead; and third, the significance of these two sets of observations.

Many of the earliest revenant stories suggest that the dead return corporeally, by unexplained means, in an attempt to procreate, having been denied the opportunity to do so while alive. This includes, for example, Herodotus’s story of Astrabacus, who impregnates a Spartan woman (6.69); Pausanias’s legend of the so-called “Hero of Temesa,” the revenant of a dead man appeased only by an annual “sacrifice” of a maiden (6.6.7-9); and Phlegon of Tralles’ story of the girl Philinnion, who shocks not only her parents but the entire city when she returns from the dead to have sex with a young man (*Mir.* 1; see Hansen 1996, Stramaglia 2011, Doroszewska

2016). Alternatively, classical literature includes tales of revenants who subsist on human flesh, thus more closely resembling the modern “walking dead,” such as Phlegon’s story of Polykritos, who returned from the dead to devour his young son, with the notable exception of the boy’s head/brains (*Mir.* 2; see Hansen 1996). Finally, we have several stories about witches reanimating corpses for their own nefarious purposes, such as revenge against the living (e.g., Apuleius, *Met.* 1.15–19) or as part of necromantic ceremonies in which, rather than simply summoning the spirit of a dead person to foretell the future, the witch imbues a corpse with breath so that the physical body can utter a prophecy (e.g., Lucan, *Phars.* 6.588–830). Examples are also adduced from Plato (*Rep.* 10.614b), Pliny the Elder (*NH* 7.52), and others (see Joynes 2001, Ogden 2009, Gordon 2020).

In nearly all of the cases from antiquity, the living are horrified by the (re)appearance of a loved one they saw die, and they make a priority of trapping and (re?)killing the revenant, usually by burning the body, to ensure that the unnatural creature will not return yet again. Because so many of the stories are set in times of civil unrest and impending war (and, in the case of Plato’s myth of Er, actual war), the townspeople also use the horrifying event as an opportunity to examine their own behavior in the hope that they might modify it to avoid a recurrence of what they see as an extraordinarily bad omen or as a punishment from the gods. In this respect, revenant tales from antiquity differ very little from modern stories, except that in antiquity the people were foresighted enough to avoid a plague of zombies—and the subsequent destruction of civilization.

Bibliography

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