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*The Return of the Dead: Ghosts, Ancestors, and the
Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind* (review)

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Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural, Volume
1, Number 1, 2012, pp. 160-163 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Lecouteux, Claude. *The Return of the Dead: Ghosts, Ancestors, and the Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind*. Translated by Jon. E. Graham. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-1594773181.

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This recent English translation of Claude Lecouteux's 1986 publication *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Age* is a welcome addition to what has proved a rather sparse body of research into the medieval conception of the revenant—that is, the walking dead. With the notable exception of Nancy Caciola's "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture" (*Past and Present*, 1996), no scholar has truly attempted a detailed investigation of the subject and, indeed, the extent to which pre-Christian beliefs influenced the perception and management of troublesome corpses in this era. As an attempt to chart the transmission, adoption, and transformation of beliefs about the walking dead, this translation is certainly overdue.

Beginning with a brief overview of Roman, Germanic, and Norse attitudes toward death prior to their Christian conversion, the first chapter reiterates the commonly held thesis that contravening the prevailing habitus of the community (social or physical "otherness") or suffering a "bad" death (e.g., unpreparedness, poor funerary performance), were the two main factors that compelled the dead to rise. Referencing Tacitus's observation that "the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices, is plunged into the mire of the morass with a hurdle put over him" (21), Lecouteux argues that archaeological data such as a bog body can help substantiate the fears described in the literary sources. If the dead enjoyed a second life in the grave, as written records attest, could the disarticulation of the body, staking, or the construction of a weighty burial mound be iterations of a desire to keep the dead in their rightful place? Although Lecouteux's suggestion may sound spurious coming from a non-archaeologist, it is interesting to note that Andrew Reynolds devotes considerable attention to the relationship between revenant narratives and unusual burial practices in his recent *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Having established that the fear of the revenant was a pervading belief in pre-conversion-era Europe, the second chapter details the ways in which the pagan

Norse burial rite was designed to protect the living by benefiting and assuaging the dead. A “good” death performance included the trimming of the corpse’s nails, the management of thresholds (e.g., stuffing of the orifices, removal of the corpse through a hole cut into the household’s wall), the burning of the bed linen, and the binding of the arms and legs. Such prohibitions fortified the living against the deceased’s return and ensured a successful rite of passage.

Shifting the focus to southern Europe and the consolidation of Christian practice in late antiquity, the third chapter provides a survey of how the church fathers interpreted pagan accounts of ghost and revenant encounters. Whereas Tertullian’s *On the Soul* (ca. 211) and Augustine’s *On the Care of the Dead* (ca. 421) treat the returning dead as mere tricks of the senses, illusions wrought by angels or demons, Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* (ca. 590), makes the assertion that the dead, under special dispensation from God, could return and ask for suffrage. Despite this, revenants—that is, *embodied* ghosts—still proved difficult to categorize within the context of church teaching. The belief that under certain circumstances God could authorize the demonic reanimation of the corpse was an acceptable compromise. It is unfortunate that Lecouteux fails to build on this line of reasoning and analyze the uncertainty that gripped clerical thought in the late twelfth century, when the walking dead were beginning to be perceived not as devils in disguise, but as souls seeking absolution. This conceptual shift has been given a much fuller treatment by Caciola, Jacqueline Simpson (“Repentant Soul and Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England,” *Folklore*, 2000), and Carl Watkins (*History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press, 2007), each of whom offers a wider range of primary sources and supporting material than Lecouteux does here.

Thus, having established disparities between Christian and pagan conceptions of the dead, the fourth and fifth chapters represent the most intriguing part of this volume: a comprehensive review of revenant narratives from medieval Icelandic sagas. Although such noted scholars as Hilda Ellis-Davidson (“The Restless Dead: An Icelandic Ghost Story,” in *The Folklore of Ghosts*, Brewer, 1981) have long recognized the prevalence of ghost stories in Icelandic lore, Lecouteux’s success lies in his ability to synthesize the stories from the *Eybyggja Saga*, *Grettir’s Saga*, *Laxdaela Saga*, and *The Saga of the People of Floi*, among others, into two easily assimilable and highly illustrative chapters. Less successful, however, is his survey of English revenant narratives, which he offers at the end of Chapter 5. Not only does Lecouteux make but passing reference to the revenant stories in Walter Map’s *de Nugis Curialium* (ca. 1182), he neglects to mention

perhaps the most famous of all twelfth-century English chroniclers, William of Newburgh, whose *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (ca. 1198) contains a rich collection of revenant encounters from the north of England and Scotland (book V, chaps. XXII–XXIV). Considering the Nordic cultural influence on this part of the British Isles, it is surprising they did not warrant inclusion in Lecouteux's survey. Where English revenants are mentioned, in the ghost stories transcribed by an anonymous monk at Byland Abbey, Yorkshire (ca. 1400), Lecouteux correctly notes that local beliefs concerning the agency of the corpse had syncretized with Church teachings on penance and purgatory. The idea that the dead could walk with the permission of God found expression within an entrenched cultural milieu. As Karen Jolly notes with regard to medieval conversion practices in her article "Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices" in the edited collection *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), the macrocosm may have changed, but the microcosm—that is, everyday practice and experience—stayed more or less the same.

The sixth chapter devotes considerable attention to the etymology of the restless dead. In the space of a few pages, Lecouteux expertly summarizes the linguistic shifts that occurred in Latin, Old English, and German as the dead became demonic and illusory as a reaction to developments within the Church. Lecouteux notices, however, a distinct lack of acculturation in Norse-language roots, which allows for a reading of revenants as they were perceived by the local pagan populace. Of particular interest are the appellation *vafa* and the related verbs *vafla* (to wander) and *vafra* (move in all directions). Combined with references to *draugr* (a dead person, deriving from the Indo-European "to harm") and its cognate *draughús* (house of the *draugr*, or burial mound), the embodied, restless, and often violent nature of the revenant becomes clear. The seventh chapter, although brief, offers concise reiterations of points made earlier in the volume, including the reasons why the dead returned (e.g., vengeance, as a portent of future death), the nature of their appearance (e.g., at night during winter months, in the vicinity of their tomb), and the correct method of disposal (e.g., decapitation, Christian prayer).

Using Norse mythology and historical texts as a framing device, Lecouteux spends chapters 8–10 attempting to locate the phenomenon of the revenant within the pagan conceptions of the afterlife and the social function of the dead. Within this context he tries to answer a question that had been puzzling chroniclers since the time of William of Newburgh: what mechanism, if not the will of God, caused the dead to rise? The answer, Lecouteux believes, resides in the Norse understanding of the soul. The vital principle for life (Latin: *animus*;

Norse: *hugr*) was said to remain attached to the body should death be abnormal or ill prepared, arresting the normal processes of decay. The increased strength and metamorphic properties of certain revenants—for example, the giant-like Glam in *Grettir's Saga*—can be attributed to another facet of the soul, the *hamr*, which he describes as “an inner shape that determines outside appearance” (169). Destruction of the flesh through cremation, or else decapitation, was the means of freeing these vital spirits and putting the dead to rest.

“Disguised Revenants” is the title given to the eleventh chapter, describing the processes by which the walking dead, under increasing duress from Christianity, became “hidden” in medieval literature and folklore. Indeed, the similarities between Grendel in *Beowulf* and Glam in *Grettir's Saga*, not to mention the parallels in narrative structure, are striking. Although the revenant-like properties of Grendel and the relationship between the monster's lair and the burial mound have been noted by Hilda Ellis-Davidson (“The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology,” *Folklore*, 1950) and Sarah Semple (“A Fear of the Past: The Place of the Prehistoric Burial Mound in the Ideology of Middle and Later Anglo Saxon England,” *World Archaeology*, 1998), among others, Lecouteux succeeds in making explicit the theory that monster and revenant narratives derived from a common experiential tradition. Expanding on this thesis and with reference to etymological shifts, he explains how giants, trolls, dwarves, and elves may also be manifestations of the dead. The final chapter, meanwhile, looks beyond the investigation's medieval time frame to gauge how far the fear of the walking dead influenced folk practices in the early modern period and beyond.

While *The Return of the Dead* operates as a useful introduction to the topic of the medieval revenant, certain issues prevent it from becoming a key English-language text. Although Lecouteux is obviously well versed in Norse literature and history—his chapters on Icelandic revenants and Scandinavian cosmology are particularly erudite—the sections of the investigation that attempt to include English and Germanic sources do not enjoy the same level of scholarship. The chapters themselves are too brief to allow for proper engagement with the material, while awkward translations from the French sometimes hinder the nuance of Lecouteux's argument. Despite such issues, I would highly recommend this book for casual readers or scholars looking for a concise overview of the topic. The analysis of Icelandic revenant encounters, for instance, warrants particular praise. Through the continued research of Claude Lecouteux and his contemporaries, accounts of the walking dead will continue to provide insight into local religious belief in the medieval West.