



NFJA Notes

Vampirism, Porphyria, and Deformity: How the Mythical Reflects Reality

Samantha M. McCrane¹ and Megan Hanna Fry¹

¹University of Florida, Department of Anthropology

Medicalization changes sociocultural perceptions about the body (Turner and Stagg, 2006), which are reflected in socially perpetuated myths and legends. The link between vampirism and Porphyria presents a case study of this phenomenon. The evolution of vampires in popular media mirrors the evolution of Western thinking regarding medical conditions that cause physical deformity, such as Congenital Erythropoietic Porphyria, from monstrous to mundane.

In the early 20th century, vampires were depicted as deformed and evil. Representations include creatures such as Count Orlock from the 1922 film *Nosferatu*, with a hunchback, sharp protruding teeth, pointed ears, and bald misshapen head. His outward appearance reflects his sinister nature as a murderer and demonic servant. Similarly, Count Dracula in *Dracula* (1931 & 1992), Kurt Barlow in *Salem's Lot* (1979), and Jerry Dandrige in *Fright Night* (1985), among others, display hideous physical traits that reflected their monstrous inner natures. This association between physical deformity and evil has existed for centuries. Disfigured individuals were ostracized, as their appearance was thought to be the product of divine punishment for sinful behaviors (Turner and Stagg 2006).

Congenital Erythropoietic Porphyria (CEP) is the disorder frequently cited to explain historic accusations of vampirism. CEP affects the heme biosynthesis pathway, and porphyrins (heme precursors) become elevated and damage tissues. Individuals with CEP experience hemolytic anemia, often requiring frequent blood transfusions. Heme-degrading enzymes can worsen this anemia and foods that induce these enzymes should be avoided- such as garlic. Porphyrin accumulation in teeth and bones can cause red discoloration of the teeth, illusory of blood drinking. Furthermore, accumulation of porphyrins in the skin can cause extreme photosensitivity that manifests as blistering or skin fragility, feeding the notion of vampires' skin burning in the sun. Infections may occur secondary to these injuries, leading to scarring or deformation over time, often beginning in infancy. In extreme cases, bone damage and loss of digits can also occur (Maas and Voets, 2014; Erwin and Desnik 2019). The deformations that marked individuals suffering from this disorder, like folklore vampires, were associated with evil, creating fear and inducing social alienation.

It was not until the 1800's that Western social perceptions regarding deformed and/or disabled individuals began to shift with policies encouraging medical treatment and educational initiatives aimed at rehabilitation (Turner and Stagg 2006). Over time, this led to greater social acceptance of deformed individuals, which is reflected in vampire depictions in recent popular culture: corporeally flawless and alluring, as illustrated by film



vampires such as Lestat and Louis in *Interview with a Vampire* (1994), Akasha and Lestat in *Queen of the Damned* (2002), the Cullen family in the *Twilight* movies (2008-2012), Roman and Olivia Godfrey in *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015), and Eric Northman in *Trueblood* (2008-2014), among others. Just as medical maladies can explain physical features associated with vampirism, so may vampirism explain social beliefs associated with deformity.

Turner, D.M. & Stagg, K. (Eds.) (2006) *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences* (1st ed). Routledge.

Maas, R.P.P.W.M. & Voets P.J.G.M. (2014) The Vampire in Medical Perspective: Myth or Malady? *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*, 107(11), 945-946. DOI: [10.1093/qjmed/hcu159](https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcu159)

Erwin, A.L. & Desnik R.J. (2019) Congenital Erythropoietic Porphyria: Recent Advances. *Molecular Genetics and Metabolism*, 128(3), 288-297. DOI: [10.1016/j.ymgme.2018.12.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ymgme.2018.12.008)