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'The vampire hypothesis': from fingernails to ministering angels – the first Swedish debunker

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ABSTRACT

The following article consists of an introduction by the first author, an annotated translation by the second, and then an analysis by the first, of the earliest known Scandinavian response to the Vampire phenomenon of Medvedia in 1732 by Nicolaus Boye, a state-employed physician residing in Stockholm. The translation shows that Boye's own article, which constitutes a complete refutation of Johann Flückinger's claims, was meticulously organised, abstracting and arguing against the major themes which he observed in the *Visum et Repertum*, while the analysis shows that Boye was working under the topical medical theories of the Dutch botanist and physician Herman Boerhaave. The analysis also demonstrates the extent to which Boye's rationalism in refuting the *Visum at Repertum* is informed by his Lutheranism and belief in the Day of Judgement, and concludes by showing examples of the impact his work exerted on other academics in the 1730s.

KEYWORDS

Vampires; enlightenment;
Sweden; Medicine;
Lutheranism; familiars

1. Introduction

Nicolaus Boye, a state-sponsored physician residing in Stockholm, writes one of the very first pieces on vampires reacting to the *Visum et Repertum* of Johann Flückinger (first distributed in German on January 26th, 1732), in an issue of *Acta Literaria et Scientiarum Sveciae* for 1731, which was given to the journal by the young Nils Rosén de Rosenstein. This dating anomaly could be explained either by the fact that it was a late back issue of a volume that should have been published the year before, into which Boye was allowed to include a late piece, or rather that it was dated in accordance with the Lady Day calendar, in which the numerical year came to an end on the 24th of March, although this practice was only upheld in England and Wales at the time. Whatever the case, Boye's piece refuting the findings within the *Visum et Repertum* was certainly one of the very first to do so, and was probably published simultaneously to the *Opinion* of Johann Frisch, Augustin Buddeus and Daniel Jablonski, commissioned by Friedrich-Willhelm I of Prussia. Certainly, errors of citation and reference in the work demonstrate that he was probably working at speed to publish his refutation, although we cannot be sure which version of the *Visum et Repertum* he actually read. Like the three sceptics in Prussia, Boye presents arguments that refute any non-natural, demonic or occult cause for the vampire phenomenon, although he works from a more medically-oriented perspective than Jablonski et al, whose argument was also based on the legal inviability of the witness statements.¹ In neither refutation, however, is there an acknowledgement of the fact that Flückinger presents vampirism as simply a hypothetical and potential cause for the anomalies found in the Medvedia corpses, rather than as a proven truth that he and his fellow examiners believed in. Thus the refutation of Boye should really be seen as a refutation of the Serbian

villagers' superstitions and not as a condemnation of Flückinger's own beliefs, a point which is easily forgotten when reading this and other such works of the time, although was surely implicit to Boye's and the others' arguments.

We know very little about Boye compared to some of his contemporaries like Kilean Stobaeus, probably because he was a civil servant and not attached to a university. As the first Swedish academic to broach the *Visum et Repertum* of January 26th (January 14th by the calendar still favoured by England and Sweden at that time),² Nicolaus Boye certainly appears to have exerted influence on later Swedish academics at Lund considering the vampire, notably Nils Retzius, who in 1737 referenced Boye's work glowingly in his own doctoral presentation, before refuting the reality of vampirism using arguments which were themselves ignored by Boye, and later Johann Leche, whose 1739 treatise on the Egyptian mummy (one of which had been brought to Lund by the university rector Carl Gyllenborg),³ also references Boye in relation to the preservation of corpses. Thus Boye's refutation of vampirism, while not perhaps as thorough as that of Retzius some four and a half years later, is important, and certainly broaches several arguments for the very first time. These arguments include seeing vampirism as a disease, the role of superstition in obscuring proper medical investigation, the theological impossibility of the soul reuniting with the body after death until the Day of Judgement, and the consequent impossibility of vampires leaving their tombs without the help of another. While Boye may not have developed these ideas to any great degree, their ramifications for the whole debate appear to have been picked up on by others later.

In what follows there will be a reproduction of the entire article by Boye translated from Latin into English, followed by an analysis of the stages of his argument, which will include both the methods he uses to debunk vampirism and the likely medical theories which animated his view. It will be shown that both Boye's Lutheran faith and probable adherence to the humour-based and largely anti-spiritualist medical theories of Herman Boerhaave, whose work was extremely popular in Sweden at the time,⁴ condition his debunking of vampirism as anything other than a local problem of the Austrian borderland, but that his refutation also depends on using other examples from his own vicinity through analogy, which serve to substitute his own obvious lack of first-hand evidence from the corpses. His sceptical approach would seem to eschew some of the occult claims of earlier medical theorists like Paracelsus and the Neoplatonist Henry More, even if he does not mention these figures by name.

II. Translation

Nils Boye, M.D. Reg. Colleg. Med. Assessor and Poliater of Stockholm. *Thoughts on the Bloodsucking Men, called Vampires, together with observations about the incorruptibility of their bodies*. Communicated by Nils Rosen, Med., D. & Reg. Soc. Lit & Scient. Socio.⁵

In these latter times, let it be argued, that one can assert that there were diseases not known to our ancestors; or, not inappropriately, that the writers on ancient medicine would not have omitted to insert even the slightest mention of them, while, as far as history and symptoms are concerned, they actually have delineated accurately all the rest.

Thus, the disease, called the French disease (oh the pain!) is now everywhere, more frequent and known than it was 200 years ago, because it was entirely unknown in European countries at that time. This disease, which is said to be of the family of endemic disease, Christopher Columbus brought back from the West Indies, in the year 1493, with some infected men and women from the new world. It was first imported into Barcelona,⁶ thence spread into Italy to the Spanish [mercenaries], and from them, on the occasion of the Gallic expedition under Charles VIII, to the French, who had surrendered to the lusts of Naples. And they became such participants in the same evil, that they spread that plague right back into their native land, and from there scattered it more widely abroad, as is evidenced by Jean de Boussiers in his *French History*.⁷

And although all men of whatever nationality have been exposed indiscriminately in all regions to diseases called sporadic, such as pleuritis, cholic, phthisis, dropsy, and fever, etc., there are some