



**БЪЛГАРИСТИКАТА
В ЗОРАТА
НА ДВАДЕСЕТ И ПЪРВИ ВЕК:
БЪЛГАРО - АМЕРИКАНСКАТА
ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ЗА
НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ**

**BULGARIAN STUDIES AT
THE DAWN OF
THE 21st CENTURY:
A BULGARIAN-AMERICAN
PERSPECTIVE**

ИК • ГУТЕНБЕРГ •

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БЪЛАРО-АМЕРИКАНСКАТА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА
ЗА НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ**

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**BULGARIAN STUDIES AT THE DAWN
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PAGANS OR HERETICS? THE SCAPEGOAT PROCESS, *NEZHIT* AND THE BULGARIAN FOLKLORIC VAMPIRE

Bruce A. McClelland

From this folk medicinal recipe, we may infer that a century ago, the condition known in Bulgarian as *nezhit* was, if not exactly a mild condition, certainly nothing fatal. Yet the name of this disease alone suggests something much more nefarious: etymologically, *nezhit* would seem to designate a condition from which one does not recover. How, we may reasonably ask, does it happen that a serious, perhaps deadly disease comes to be associated with an unpleasant, but not life-threatening gum disorder?

If we go back no further than about two centuries before Ginčov's field report, we find prayers against a personified disease, also known as *nezhit*, whose symptoms were much more aggressive. In a seventeenth century prayerbook, for example, we find a very curious prayer against the accursed *nezhit*. Here, *nezhit* is thought to "suck out brains, destroy the teeth, break jaws, cause deafness and blindness, lock the mouth, block the nose and cause continual headaches." (MS No. 622, 133, NBKM) Considering such a painful array of symptoms, it is no wonder the disease would be called *nezhit*: for anyone stricken with such a disease would certainly not feel like living, and it is hard to imagine how anyone could really recover. Ivanička Georgieva is of the opinion that *nezhit* personified Death itself. "In all probability, *nezhit* was an evil spirit of unclear origin and countenance, a personification of a seriously diseased condition, the cause of all diseases." (Georgieva, 170) Conev, meanwhile, in describing these early manuscripts, goes so far as to consider *nezhit* the greatest enemy to a person's health, and even links it with the *vampire*, "the soul of a dead relative, who walks around the house at night, attacks sleeping people, *sucks out their brains*, or causes them to be possessed by sickness and become incapable of work." (Conev, 310) This link between *nezhit* and the vampire, as we shall see, is not simply a casual association. The connection between the vampire and *nezhit* goes much deeper.

In the last decade, texts from curses against the *nezhit* from early leaden amulets have been published by Popkonstantinov, along with Konstantinova and Kronsteiner. These amulets, uncovered around northeastern Bulgaria, have been claimed to date from the tenth century, although no convincing evidence for such an early date has yet been put forth. In any case, the amulets are certainly several centuries older than

the prayers included in the seventeenth century manuscripts, and thus allow us to see the evolution, if we wish to call it that, of this bit of medical folklore over eight or nine centuries. Between the texts of the tenth or eleventh century and those of the seventeenth, there is a surprising degree of constancy with regard to the content and structure of the narratives.

In both the prayers or, rather, curses, and the amulets, the story of the personified disease, *nezhit*, is clearly apocryphal. In the most general version that we can reconstruct, *nezhit* meets on the road Jesus, who has just descended from (seventh) heaven. Since this encounter seems to take place at an early stage of human history, it clearly possesses cosmogonic attributes, and is in all likelihood an etiological myth accounting for the spread of disease into the world. Thus *nezhit* perhaps originally designated fatal disease in the abstract, rather than a particular condition, and only later, perhaps in the XVII century, became associated with a particular diagnosis.

The encounter between Jesus and *nezhit* described on the amulets from Dobričko and Prcuiul lui Soare, which differ only in detail, seems to represent the central story about *nezhit*. Later versions are, naturally, more elaborate, and embellish significantly upon the same conversation between Jesus and the demon that we find in the late medieval amulets. Whether, however, the story of *nezhit* and Jesus existed in a more elaborate form in the tenth and eleventh centuries, we are not in a position to tell. Interpolating from the published early texts, then, the base story goes something like this:

Jesus has just come down to earth from heaven, where he encounters *nezhit* face to face. [*Nezhit* is not described, but is capable of speech.] Jesus asks *nezhit* where he is going, to which *nezhit* frankly answers that he is going into man's head, there to suck out his brains, shorten his bones, and shed his blood. Upon hearing of *nezhit's* foul intentions, Jesus curses him and commands *nezhit* not to go into man's head, but rather he must go into a *deserted mountain* and there enter the heads of deer and sheep, since they are better able to withstand the pain of this disease.

The amulet from Prcuiul lui Soare, an island in the Danube, adds to the list of *nezhit*-induced symptoms deafness and blindness, but otherwise, the amuletic prayers are quite similar.

If this episode indeed forms the core myth of the *nezhit*, it raises a logical, or perhaps theological, problem which we will mention but not attempt to resolve here: Jesus commands *nezhit* to go into an empty place and enter the heads of innocent and peaceful animals. Thus we should expect that, had *nezhit* actually obeyed Jesus' command, the disease would never have affected mankind, and therefore there would be no reason to create an amulet or prayer against it. The fact that the prayers exist underscores the inescapable conclusion that Jesus was disobeyed. It is not at all clear what we should make of that.

Perhaps we can account for this logical lapse by examining how this early Bulgarian apocryphal tale is linked to a New Testament story. Although we cannot establish a direct link between the story of the *nezhit* and a biblical story, the features held in common between the tenth century stories and the tale of Jesus and the demons of Gerasa, also known as the tale of the Gadarene Démoniac, which is found in Mark 5:1-17. We repeat an excerpt from that passage here for the sake of comparison:

[Jesus] said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country.

Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding. And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine; and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and were choked in the sea.

In both the apocryphal and biblical stories, Jesus encounters a disease-causing demon who is personified (that is, it has a name and can talk). In the biblical story, the disease in question is actually of a psychological nature, a form of demonic “possession,” while the symptoms caused by *nezhit*, as we have seen, are quite physical. Nevertheless, in both tales, the personified disease is banished by Jesus into animals grazing in the *mountains*.¹ In the New Testament story, after the demon called Legion distributes itself among the swine, they run off a cliff and drown in the sea. In the early apocryphal tale of *nezhit*, however, little attention is paid to the fates of the deer and sheep into whose heads the demon has been commanded. Indeed, in no version of the Bulgarian story are we provided with any information regarding what happens to the sheep or deer; it is never explicitly stated that Jesus’ command is ever obeyed.

Despite the differences between these tales, the general pattern of an encounter between Jesus and a demon is so similar that we may be confident that the apocryphal tale of *nezhit* is based to some degree upon the Gospel story of Jesus and the demons of Gerasa. The most salient shift in the structure of the story between the earlier and later versions of this episode is the lack of attention to the fate of the animals after Jesus’ commandment. In the earliest Bulgarian versions, it is precisely because the animals can *withstand* the effects of *nezhit* that Jesus commands *nezhit* to enter their heads rather than man’s.

In his book *The Scapegoat*, René Girard devotes an entire chapter to the story of Jesus and the Gadarene demoniac to demonstrate the inversion of the process of scapegoating as it is encountered in the New Testament. As Girard puts it, “demons cannot exist in [Jesus’] presence,” (182) and their ultimate banishment “into the abyss” keeps them from remaining incarnate. Although the later apocryphal story would seem to be based directly upon the story in the book of Mark, the relationship of Jesus to the demon and the ultimate fate of the demons differ in emphasis from the narrative in the Gospels to that inscribed on the amulets and in the much later prayerbooks. The physical transfer of the disease from the human community to the undifferentiated world (in the case of the Bulgarian story, the deserted mountain or forest) nevertheless repeats the process found in the tale found in Leviticus, where sin is transferred to a goat, which is then sent from the community to the wilderness. The New Testament story quite clearly refers to the Old Testament notion of a scapegoat, and we may assume that the Bulgarian story of *nezhit* also refers to this ritual.

The prayers against *nezhit* call upon Christ almost in the role of a magician with the power to transfer a very serious human disease across the boundary from the differentiated human world into the undifferentiated world of animals, where the

disease can do no harm. The message of the amulets, however, also contains some moral compensation for the animals, which are the objects of the transferred disease. Jesus insists that *nezhit* transfer his symptoms to deer and sheep not so they will suffer *instead of* man, but because they are *better able to bear* the symptoms that *nezhit* induces. The effects of *nezhit*, in other words, are weakened as a result of Jesus redirecting the demon to wreak its havoc among such docile creatures as deer and sheep. In that domain, *nezhit* is not, apparently, as virulent.

The process of weakening of *nezhit*'s powers that is implied in the curses against the demon is paralleled by the weakening of the symptoms associated with *nezhit* over the period from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. Whatever disease complex *nezhit* may have originally represented, it was eventually reduced in the popular mind to a painful but not fatal gum disease. From an epidemiological perspective, the reduction in virulence in the folklore might simply correspond to a reduction in the incidence of a certain disease within the Bulgarian countryside. For example, it is not difficult to imagine that the disease whose symptoms are those of *nezhit* might have been the vitamin C deficiency known as scurvy. Scurvy, according to the symptoms listed in Taber's *Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, has the following symptomatology:

Sallow complexion; *loss of energy; pains in legs, limbs, and joints. Anemia; great weakness; spongy, bleeding gums; fetor of breath; loosening of teeth; subcutaneous hemorrhages and hemorrhages from mucous membranes; painful, brawny indurations of muscles.*

This description of the signs and symptoms of scurvy corresponds quite closely with the list of problems caused by *nezhit*, especially in the more detailed texts from the seventeenth century. Although *nezhit* may not have been a singular disease originally, in the case of a disease such as scurvy, we can imagine that, as vitamin C deficiency became a less widespread public health problem in Bulgarian villages and indeed Europe, folklore about *nezhit* would tend to reduce its virulence concomitantly, so that ultimately *nezhit* became associated with only one of its original symptoms, namely problems of the teeth and jaw.

Yet how does it happen that a demon whose name is associated unequivocally with death and that once personified the origin of all diseases is barely mentioned in the folklore by the end of the nineteenth century? What happened to the other symptoms? *Nezhit*, after all, was accused of sucking out the blood or the marrow of an individual, in effect draining his energy. In the seventeenth century "Molitva ot prokletago nezhit," *nezhit* even tells Jesus that he is going into man to *drink his blood*. (MS 622, 133, NBKM) Blood drinking, as we know, is more often associated with the vampire, although folklore about the vampire drinking blood does not occur until after the sixteenth century. On the contrary: in the middle of the sixteenth century, according to one report, the vampire's activity was to infect and poison the victim. (Ireček, 43) The early folkloric vampire was someone who had been excommunicated, and whose body had not decayed. The association with blood-drinking occurs later, and is widespread by the nineteenth century.

The increase in the aggressiveness of the vampire seems to occur over roughly the same period as the decrease in the aggressiveness of *nezhit*. In the sixteenth century, the vampire was already associated with disease and infection, while in the seventeenth century, both the vampire and *nezhit* are linked to blood drinking. Conev's definition

of the *nezhit* as a vampire is of course an attempt to explain a lesser known demon by a more well known one. Clearly, by the late nineteenth century, vampire folklore was very widespread, while folk medicinal reports of *nezhit* were fading into oblivion. It is as if the vampire, in its own fashion, sucked the energy from the *nezhit*. But what is the link between these two entities? How are they related?

We have already noted that the earliest apocryphal prayers against the *nezhit* refer not only to the New Testament tale of Jesus and the Demons of Gerasa, but also to the Old Testament story of Moses and Aaron and the sin offering found in Leviticus. The story of the encounter between *nezhit* and Jesus is thus quite clearly intended to demonstrate a mechanism for transferring a deadly disease out of the human community: the prayers recite a pathway by which a calamity can be transferred to deer and sheep, which function as scapegoats. The idea that sheep and deer do not suffer as much as man reveals a medieval view of the sentience of these docile victims, which in fact are sacrificed in order that man not suffer. That is to say, animals are beneath man in the natural hierarchy, and thus are preferable hosts for the disease. This hierarchical arrangement of power, whereby those lower on the scale serve as victims for those higher up, is a general feature of sacrifice, and the amuletic texts against *nezhit* magically transfer the disease from the higher to the lower beings. But unlike the story of the demons of Gerasa, by the time of the earliest *nezhit* texts, a different morality is in force: while the swine that are entered by the demons at the command of Jesus eventually jump off a cliff, the amulets tell us that the deer and sheep are actually well able to endure this incursion of *nezhit*. There would seem to be here a tendency to move away from actually killing these animals, a movement which seems to continue a gradual shift away from blood sacrifice over the history of Christianity.

The story of *nezhit* is essentially a story about the scapegoating process. But the vampire is also a scapegoat. In the village setting, certain types of events are attributed to a vampire in order that the members of the community not accuse each other or otherwise initiate a cycle of retribution that Girard terms the "sacrificial crisis." Inexplicable weakening affecting livestock, noises in the attic or other possible transgressions of the household space, or even transgressions of personal space, such as pregnancy in a widow, may all be caused by a vampire, the reanimated corpse of someone who has recently died.

Deeds ranging in severity from mischief to personal attacks upon people — usually while they are asleep — may be attributed to a vampire. The vampire himself is usually considered to have been evil, or to have lived a bad life, but in the village, a mechanism exists for "creating" a vampire if the social situation demands it but a suitable corpse is not available. A vampire can come into existence if, some time between death and burial, a cat or some other domestic animal jumps over the body, or even if some casual transaction takes place in the space around the dead body.

It is quite true that concern over the dead and the propriety of funeral rituals is quite widespread, but in the case of the vampire, the high probability of transgression of some taboo may be used to confer upon the deceased the status of VAMPIRE, who is then held responsible for certain types of events where no other cause can be found, or where the allocation of blame would provoke social hostilities.

The scapegoat aspect of the vampire is perhaps the most common function of vampire folklore, but as I have shown elsewhere (McClelland 1999), historically this function derives from a time when the word *vampir* did not designate a supernatural

demon, but rather an individual who refused to abandon the practice of ritual sacrifice in the face of strong hostility from the Orthodox Church. Perhaps around the same time as our earliest texts against the *nezhit*, the vampire was a person who was marginalized for maintaining adherence to pre-Christian ritual, in particular blood sacrifice and libation (*pirshestvo*). Gradually, as paganism was replaced by heresy as the greater threat to the conversion effort, the meaning of the word *vampir* was probably extended to include Bogomils or indeed any apostate or excommunicated individual.

Looking again at the parallel development of the vampire and the *nezhit*, we may conclude that around the eleventh century, *nezhit* was an archetypal, personified disease, while the vampire was an individual who remained outside the Church's efforts to convert the Balkan populace to Orthodoxy. As both paganism and organized heretical sects went underground, the failure of these un-Christian attitudes to die out became symbolized by the notion of a corpse that would not lie still. The vampire thus moved from the human to the inhuman, the natural to the unnatural, and from weakness to strength. The vampire, as a scapegoat, began to be associated with disease as well as social calamity, and was eventually thought capable of causing the sort of wasting that is exemplified by blood drinking.

Meanwhile, we would speculate, the disease complex represented by *nezhit* over time became less prevalent, less virulent, or both. The attribution of blood drinking, once a characteristic solely of *nezhit*, was gradually transferred to the vampire, who was becoming more visible as a generalized scapegoat. Some time in the seventeenth century, or a little later, the vampire finished the job of sucking the blood out of *nezhit*, and himself became undead, but not alive.

NOTES

¹ The word *gora* is used in both the early amulets and later Bulgarian versions of the story. The original word thus persists, despite the shift in meaning in Bulgarian from "mountain" to "forest."