



Lutherans and vampires, medicine and faith: an early dissertation on the bloodsucking at Medvedia (1732)

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ABSTRACT

One of the earliest refutations of the *Visum et Repertum* (1732) by Johann Flückinger was from Johann Wilhelm Nöbling, a young student of philosophy and theology at the University of Jena, who attacked the findings from a position of scientific scepticism enshrouded with Lutheran theology in his thesis *Concerning the Blood-Sucking Corpses of those so-called Vampires or People-Suckers*. While he is best remembered for first proposing the *incubus* or nightmare of sleep paralysis as being the real cause of the superstition, his major contribution was theological, concerning the relation between body and soul. And yet while Nöbling provides a rigorous, scripture-based denial of vampirism, his framework necessarily accommodates contemporary medical theory, demonstrating both the adaptation of theology to science and the extent to which pneumatology still inhered in scientific enquiry.

KEYWORDS

Lutheranism; vampires;
medical history;
pneumatology

1. Introduction

If the thesis on blood-sucking and vampires defended in May 1732 by Johann Wilhelm Nöbling is not well known in relation to that author's name, then that is because it is understood and referred to universally as the work of Johann Christian Stock.¹ As per the practices relating to Middle European dissertations at the time, the examiner or *praeses* of the thesis was attributed with its authorship in later references, while the *respondent* or defending candidate was humbled into anonymity by scholarly hierarchy until themselves in a position to examine and coopt the labour of others. In the case of Nöbling, however, this necessary apprenticeship might have been a somewhat bitter pill, since he defended a further thesis on the dual composition of living beings before the same examiner in August of the same year,² only to disappear after this and never resurface in either the University of Jena or any other academic establishment. By contrast his *praeses* Stock (himself only 25 at the time of the first defence), went on to an expansive career as both Professor of philosophy and of Medicine before dying in 1758.

Nöbling's thesis is one of many published in 1732 and the two subsequent years concerning the vampire occurrences at Medvedia which had been analysed and reported on by Johann Flückinger, an army surgeon, in the *Visum et Repertum* (26th January 1732). The conclusions that the bodies exhumed did indeed indicate the possibility of vampirism charged and challenged the courts and intellectual centres of Enlightenment Europe to the point of fever-pitch, with varied princes, such as Charles Alexander of Wurttemberg (who employed Flückinger) and the sceptical prince of Prussia Frederick Wilhelm (who sponsored a prominent debunking of Flückinger's conclusions at his own Prussian Academy of Science in March 1732), taking sides arguing over the rushed analyses of the scientists.³ The debate reached as far as Sweden, where a Government doctor, Nicolaus