

THE DEMISE OF THE WALKING DEAD:
THE RISE OF PURGATORY AND THE END OF REVENANCY

A Master's Thesis

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To my family

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ABSTRACT

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Folklore and popular belief strongly affect human behavior in any age, showing how people think, what they fear and how they react. The belief in the existence of the walking dead, that is, revenants, is no exception. Here, the possible reasons for the prevalence of the belief in the walking dead, as well as its comfortable existence within human culture are examined. The existence of the belief in these very corporal monsters, persevering at least into the thirteenth century in north-western Europe, cannot be disputed. However, subsequently, it diminished and then virtually disappeared. What force could be effective and widespread enough to remove this perception of the very physical threat of the dead bodily walking again among the living? Here, it is argued that it was the effects of the emergence of Purgatory that lead to the extinction of the revenant. Using various texts mainly from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, this study aims to capture this process of change within the folkloric beliefs of the people, to follow the procession of revenants into oblivion.

Keywords: Walking Dead, Revenant, Revenancy, Purgatory

ÖZET

YAŞAYAN ÖLÜLER:

ARAF İNANCININ DOĞUŞU VE YAŞAYAN ÖLÜLERİN SONU

Boyacıođlu, Elif

Yüksek Lisans, Tarih Bölümü

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Folklorik ve popüler inançlar kuşkusuz ki insan davranışlarını her çağda etkilemiştir; ikiside, insanların düşünce biçimlerini açıkca yansıtır, nelerden korktuklarını ve nasıl tepki verdiklerini açığa çıkarırlar. Yaşayan ölülerin varlığına yönelik inanç da bu bağlamda bir istisna değildir. Bu tezde yaşayan ölülere inancın yaygınlığının olası nedenleri ve insanların inanışları içindeki konumu incelenmiştir. Bu cismi canavarlara inancın Kuzey-Batı Avrupa’da en az onüçüncü yüzyıla dek sürdüğü tartışılmaz bir gerçektir, ancak bu noktadan sonra yaygınlığı azalmış ve kaybolmuştur. Ölülerin fiziksel olarak bedenleri ile yaşayan insanların arasına geri dönebileceği tehdidini yokedeabilecek kadar geniş ve etkili bu değişimin ne olduğu önemli bir soru olarak karşımıza çıkmıştır. Bu çalışmada, Araf kavramının ortaya çıkmasının yaşayan ölülerin soyunun tükenmesine neden olduğu fikri ortaya atılmaktadır. İnsanların folklorik ve popüler inançlarında meydana gelen bu değişim süreci ve yaşayan ölülerin giderek yokolması, özellikle onikinci ve ondördüncü yüzyıllardan olmak üzere çeşitli kaynaklar üzerinden araştırılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşayan Ölüler, Araf

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the big screen the sight of a half-decomposed corpse crawling out of a grave is a common enough event nowadays. Zombies and groaning, virus-infected corpses stumbling around, targeting the few left living have come to comprise a specific genre within the horror industry. There is a reason why these commercial representations of the walking dead are such a success; they manage yet to instill a certain fear and disquiet within their audience. The walking dead and their representation speak to a very primal and deep set fear in human beings, a fear that has probably existed as long as man himself has done.

Imagine a time when people actually believed in the existence of revenants, that is, the walking dead; there are records of people having heard them, seen them and partaken in countermeasures against these monsters, or at least those who recorded the stories fully believed the people who said that they had. The threat of the walking dead was very much present in the mind of these people: “Belief in corpses coming back to life is well attested for parts of medieval Europe, most notably Iceland, but also England, the Low Countries, northern France and parts of Germany,”¹ though the belief was by no means limited to these areas. It is important

¹ Nancy Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in the Middle Culture,” *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 15.

to emphasize that for the people of the time these accounts represented an actual belief; “all these stories, without exception, were told as being absolutely and historically true.”²

The question here is not whether revenants actually walked in Europe in the early and high Middle Ages; it is the fact that people believed them to have done so and acted accordingly, leaving behind evidence of the belief, some physical, but most explicitly written. The current study will focus mainly, but not exclusively, on the British side of the story. This is more a matter of convenience than anything else, the majority of sources available to me having come from this area. It should not be taken for granted that belief in revenants was most active there. The thesis will also primarily concern the period from the twelfth century to the end of the fourteenth. This again, in one sense, is partly a matter of sources, but I shall also argue that it is a period of profound significance for the belief in revenants.

The fact that folklore, popular belief, has been transmitted to the present mostly through written sources complicates its study considerably. Arguably at least, the lore itself was essentially oral in nature. Thus, what one gets from written sources is generally at least second-hand information and, what makes it even more problematic, second-hand interpretation of the phenomena. Still, as the “sources for the written tradition of the Middle Ages lie overwhelmingly in the sphere of oral tradition, folklore,”³ there is a possibility of extracting the properties and nuances of the belief from the sources, which are sometimes obscure in their revelations and sometimes quite direct.

² R.A. Bowyer, “The Role of the Ghost-Story in Medieval Christianity,” In *The Folklore of Ghosts*, ed. H.R. Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1981), 178.

³ Aaron J. Gurevich, “Oral and Written Culture of the Middle Ages: Two ‘Peasant Visions’ of the Late Twelfth-Early Thirteenth Centuries,” *New Literary History* 16, no.1 *Oral and Written Traditions in the Middle Ages* (1984): 52.

These properties must be borne in mind with respect to all written sources about revenants. The authors function as commentators and interpreters of the tales that they “heard” from “reliable” sources and collected. Thus what the sources offer comprises not only the tales themselves, but also the authors’ own interpretations. These interpretations should be regarded as equally important to the stories themselves. Partly, this is because it is of inherent interest to see the opinion about the popular belief held by an author, who, as recorder of the story, necessarily had to have a higher education than the general population from whose ranks the story might be presumed to have originated. Partly this opinion is of interest because we can see the story only as filtered through that opinion. At times it is easy to grasp the approval or displeasure of the author as to how things were handled within the anecdote.

The impossibility of capturing the original oral sources of the stories in the period that are of concern here results in there remaining “only the faintest traces of beliefs and practices... [that] ...seldom survive in sufficient concentrations to allow us to describe the beliefs and practices of any single community or even a particular region.”⁴ This thesis is blessed by the fact that three of the four primary sources, which will be described below, were composed in Britain, while two of them were recorded in a single region, Yorkshire. The differences in date of the sources and the resultant variety embodied within them makes them only more valuable for the study. Still, the fact remains that, for a comprehensive understanding of a folk belief, one is forced to look for various examples that range over regions and dates, as individual sources can only give a fragmentary reflection of a widespread

⁴ Carl Watkins, “‘Folklore’ and ‘Popular Religion’ in Britain during the Middle Ages,” *Folklore* 115, no.2 (2004), Looksmart: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2386/is_2_115/ai_n8693725 (accessed July 02, 2007).

folkloric belief. Thus one has to look at the “bigger picture”, that is, to try to establish the existence of the belief with its variations, supported by as many sources as possible so as to be able to glimpse the extent of the belief.⁵ This is certainly true of an attempt to trace and explain a belief as old and complex as that in revenants.

There is no attempt to argue here that England or Britain was peculiar, except perhaps in the richness of the material preserved. There are many sources indicating that the belief in the walking dead had been widespread geographically and chronologically. Thus the current study, especially in the first chapter, while not pretending to be a comprehensive survey, chooses to follow the belief wherever it seems to surface or take hold, through sources that range over different regions and periods, establishing the existence of the said belief in the minds of the people, with its broad extent and variations. Purgatory too, which it is argued here had such an important effect on belief in revenants, had become, by the late Middle Ages, an almost universal property for Catholic Christians. This was thus an effect that paid no regard to the borders of individual countries.

The relationship between the dead and the living in the Middle Ages and before loses nothing of the complexity of human behavior and interaction, even though, as we would interpret it today, one of the parties was literally defunct; the modern assumption that being dead would preclude human interaction was lacking. The dead were a formidable force to reckon with; they could and did, according to the belief of the people, return to the realm of the living in several capacities. “Intimacy between the living and the dead was possible because death was not

⁵ Ibid.

envisaged as a full extinguishing of either body or spirit.”⁶ This was a more or less universal approach; people needed to believe in a continuity and they did so using the two most powerful properties they believed they had, the physical body and the “soul”, the latter including the character and personality of the person. It was this continuous and close relationship between the living and the dead that formed the foundations of the belief that will be discussed here. As in all beliefs, there was an underlying logic to it, regardless how illogical the belief itself may seem to us.

The dead, with all their activities, have come to be a serious subject within history; they can no longer be regarded as mere figments of imagination or representing mass hysteria. Regardless of the reality of the dead’s activities, we should acknowledge that they convey and represent certain properties of the human mind and of belief that prove to be important to the study of human history. The walking dead, one has to state, were a minority among the frequent visitors from the otherworld, and no doubt contemporaries were very grateful for that. Their bizarre properties though, make them stand out among the crowd of otherworldly visitors; they were walking the earth in their own bodies. Though several historians have mentioned revenants or told the stories of them, two in particular, Jacqueline Simpson and Nancy Caciola, have researched and written specifically on these strange dead. Their works are invaluable to the flow and structure of this thesis.

It was through Simpson’s work that the subject of this thesis was constructed. She suggests at one point in her article, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England,” that the emergence of Purgatory may have had an effect on revenants: “The urge to reopen graves in order to seek and destroy any undecayed and blood-filled corpses is never recorded

⁶ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 7.

again... This change may well be due to the more spiritual theology of Purgatory.”⁷ Her statement, though, was mainly concerned with a change in the attitude of the people towards revenants rather than an inherent change in the nature of the visitors from the afterlife in which people believed. In her opinion, late fourteenth-century ghost stories were still examples of revenants rather than restless spirits that had a very different nature. One of the main disagreements here with Simpson’s view concerns the very basis of the nature of revenants. True revenants, I shall argue, had to return in their own bodies to be revenants; they had to be literally walking corpses. For Simpson, any display of physical presence and corporeality was enough to classify these spirits as “walking corpses”.⁸ Nancy Caciola seems to agree with Simpson on this.⁹ The argument of this thesis is based on the supposition that revenants, as literal walking corpses, virtually disappeared sometime after the thirteenth century, in a process that had started as early as the twelfth. It is argued here that this disappearance has a direct connection with the emergence of the doctrine of Purgatory, which made the continued existence of revenants close to impossible, leaving only remnants of the old folklore behind.

This clarification in the definition of revenants allows the possibility of studying the history of revenants and their fate as a comprehensive whole, though concentrating for most of the study on a particular, crucial period. The first chapter, however, as I have indicated, is more wide ranging. It tries to establish the existence of revenant belief within the minds of people through written sources and physical indications such as burial practices. The chapter tackles the people’s understanding as to how the phenomena came to be, the reasons for a body to up and leave the

⁷ Jacqueline Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England,” *Folklore* 114 (2003): 394.

⁸ *Ibid.* 396.

⁹ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 22.

grave, often linked to the manner or type of death that had been undergone, and the possible ways of preventing such an event.

Once the presence of revenants and certain ground rules concerning them have been established, in the second chapter the first set of primary sources that contain several clear-cut revenant accounts is analyzed. Dated to the late twelfth century, both the *De Nugis Curialium* by Walter Map and the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* by William of Newburgh, have extensive and detailed accounts of phenomena concerning the dead restless enough to leave their graves.¹⁰ The twelfth-century revenant, with the abundance of anecdotes, thus provides the most detailed reflection of the belief. These twelfth-century stories clearly support the fact that revenants were indeed corpses leaving their grave to mingle with the living, and this mingling most of the time brought about heavy causalities among the living.

One has to state though that these sources are from a time when the features of the otherworld were starting to change. These changes are detectable in the anecdotes and in the comments of the authors on them and can allow one to deduce both the still existent norm and some abnormalities that surface within these accounts. Additionally Map, with the wide diversity of his anecdotes, allows one to glimpse some of the several variations in the belief that the dead could walk. Thus both William of Newburgh's and Walter Map's accounts are invaluable, in the sense they give both the accepted and "normal" revenant lore and the slowly expanding ripples of the effects of the emergence of Purgatory.

¹⁰ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. by M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book De Nugis Curialium (Courtiers' Trifles)*, trans. Frederick Tupper and Marbury Bladen Ogle (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1924).

And William of Newburgh, *The History of William of Newburgh*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1996). William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum: Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II., and Richard I.: Vol II*, ed. from Manuscript Richard Howlett (Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint Ltd. 1964 - Org. London: HerMajesty's Stationary Office 1885).

The third chapter is concerned with the emergence and development of Purgatory itself. The concept of Purgatory, or rather the coming into being of this concept, changed considerably the face of the Christian afterlife and the after-death expectations of the Christian people. It did away with certain fears, such as what was happening to those who died suddenly without preparation, or simply where these souls went after their death until the awaited Judgment Day. To this of course, one needs to add the very human fear-for-self and the desire for self preservation. The idea that there was some sort of purgation and punishment after death was existent at least as early as the fourth century, but though the idea was there, there was no consensus on either the belief or the properties of such a purgation. Towards the end of the twelfth century, such matters began to change and the otherworld was transformed geographically and ideologically. Purgatory managed to acquire its “reality” within the otherworld and perhaps just as importantly in this world. People with less than pristine souls now had a definite place to which they would go when they died, regardless of the type of death they had undergone. People now went immediately either to hell or purgatory, or in the rare and extreme cases of saints and martyrs, to heaven. The otherworld had become strictly organized, with each person having their designated destination; there could be next to no unauthorized wanderings.

Needless to say, such a great change within the nature of the otherworld would affect the beliefs and superstitions of the people still among the living. Once Purgatory was officially accepted as a doctrine, and perhaps before to some extent, the Church also initiated its efforts to preach and spread the belief. They used sermons and exempla for this purpose, telling of spirits returning from the otherworld to beg for absolution and ask for prayers and masses to lighten their lot

of punishment to be suffered in Purgatory. With the Church now actively supporting and promoting such ghost stories, they started to form a purgatorial stencil for such stories, which designated how such encounters should be. This stencil would become the main format of ghost stories from the thirteenth century onwards, and the revenants would slowly be consumed into this new norm. The souls now had business other than reanimating their corpses.

The fourth chapter analyzes a second pair of primary sources from a later period, to ascertain the differences the emergence of Purgatory had wrought in encounters with those from the otherworld: the *Dialogus miraculorum* (c. 1219-1223) by Caesarius of Heisterbach and the anonymously authored Byland Abbey Ghost Stories (c.1400).¹¹As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to draw geographical boundaries around either the belief in revenants or the effect of the doctrine of Purgatory. Therefore, there seems little reason not to include a continental source together with the three English sources used in this study. Indeed, Caesarius valuably fills an important chronological gap. In Caesarius's record, being earlier in date than the Byland stories and much closer to the emergence of Purgatory, one can glimpse the still heavy influence of earlier folklore, somewhat unconvincingly and clumsily mixed with the emerging purgatorial ghost stories that demonstrated most of the stencil that would become the norm.

In the Byland Abbey Ghost Stories, one can similarly distinguish a much stronger influence of Purgatorial ideas, as Purgatory by that time had become

¹¹Caesarius von Heisterbach, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern des Caesarius von Heisterbach: Ein Lesebuch Von Helmut Herles*, ed. and trans. into German Helmut Herles (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1991). Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis, *Dialogus miraculorum: Textum ad Quatuor Codicum Maniscriptorum Editionisque Principis Fidem* Volume II, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne: H. Lempertz & comp., 1891).
And M.R. James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories," *English Historical Review* 37 (1922): 413-422.
M.R. James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories," In *M.R. James—Book of the Supernatural*, ed. Peter Haining, trans. Pamela Chamberlaine (London: Foulsham, 1979), 34-49.

widespread and deeply rooted within the minds of the people. The Byland collection mostly conforms to the new purgatorial stencil concerning ghosts and their reason for returning to the earthly realm. However, being a direct recording of anecdotes of local belief instead of a carefully composed set of exempla, the stories allow one to understand the strong presence of certain folkloric properties that continued to exist side by side with Purgatorial doctrine, indicating that Purgatory had gained acceptance from the people and was merging with their folkloric beliefs to form a strange, but quite well integrated mixture, which was nevertheless based largely on Purgatorial ideas and norms. However, within these folkloric properties, true revenancy forms only a small and less well integrated part. Though there are clear traces of revenant lore within both Caesarius and the Byland Ghost Stories, they can be classified, particularly in the Byland case, as mere remnants and indicate the slow disappearance of a once strong and terrifying belief from the minds of the people.

It is the argument of this study that revenants were directly affected by the emergence of Purgatory and the resultant changes that surfaced in the organization and perception of the otherworld. As Purgatory affected the status and abilities of the dead, creating the new stencil that now determined the shape and manner of ghostly encounters, it inevitably affected the revenant lore. The diverse accounts used here which range through centuries and sometimes regions do indicate a definite change in the perception of “revenants,” “ghosts” and “spirits” as well as their capabilities and powers. That there remained what could only be a residue of revenant lore in the later accounts seems to ratify this theory. Purgatory took some time to be fully integrated into the consciousness of the people, though in the end it was, completely. It was a long process, but from the very start it had some effect on

the beliefs of the people and thus the walking dead. Purgatory moved the focus from desperation and damnation to a possibility and hope of absolution and salvation. These purgatorial ghosts represented a fate that one should avoid if possible, but even for them there was indeed hope. Ghosts had become things to be pitied; revenants, the terrifying walking corpses, that had effectively spread fear and disease for centuries were lost to obscurity.

CHAPTER II

THE LIVING, THE DEAD AND THE LIVING DEAD

The attitude of people towards the dead was based on several factors: “official doctrine about the afterlife, folkloric ghost beliefs, natural affection for the deceased, horror of the corpse, the obligation to remember and the impulse to forget.”¹² The relationship between the dead and the living, and the underlying fears and logic, is as old as mankind. People’s reactions are to an extent universal, a part of human nature. The specific dead that are of concern here are in a sense no different. Thus it is impossible, as one shall see, to tie the belief in the walking dead to a single belief system or religion; it lies in the very nature of mankind, the fear as fundamental as the will to live. The fear of the newly dead “is something deeply rooted in men’s minds, undoubtedly antedating Christianity.”¹³ It was such a formidable factor that, even as the religion of societies changed, the belief insinuated itself into the very cracks of whatever religion was current. “In most communities, while the dead are mourned, there is still an underlying hope that,

¹² Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, “Introduction: Placing the Dead in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” In *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8. In general this thesis will avoid routinely qualifying statements with phrases such as ‘the people believed’. As the sources relate the stories as something real, it would be tiresome not to follow them. This, needless to say, is not a comment on the actual reality of the phenomena.

¹³ H.R. Ellis Davidson, “The Restless Dead: an Icelandic Ghost Story,” In *The Folklore of Ghosts*, ed. H.R. Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1981), 173.

once dead, they will not only remain dead but also in the grave.”¹⁴ This explains the predicament of the people perfectly. The dead remained a part of the functioning society; thus relations with the defunct also remained active.

“It does not seem reasonable to seek a definite fixed origin for such traditions, either in one geographical area or in any particular culture; they are probably as old as the practice of burial itself.”¹⁵ Burials offer a window for one to understand and perceive how the people of the time perceived their dead. Thus a belief as strong and terrifying as the possibility of the revenancy of some corpses has left some indicative evidence of the treatment of the said corpses. Burial practices, indeed, show how early the belief may have surfaced: there were examples in “Celtic sites from the Iron Age: tying the body, prone burial, displacing parts of the skeleton, partial cremations, weighing the body down with large blocks of rock, orienting or positioning the grave differently, special burial places, placing wooden stakes across the body, including charms in the grave.”¹⁶ Similarly, in a burial site “thirty-two of eighty-nine skeletons were missing the skull and others in which the skull was present but separated from the trunk, where there was no reason to believe that the grave had been disturbed.”¹⁷ Though these examples are certainly not conclusive proof of the existence of the belief in the dead walking, they certainly indicate at least the possibility of such a belief.

Similar practices that point to the belief of the existence of a not only sentient but physically active corpse within the grave were also evident in some of the burial practices in Ancient Greece and Rome. It was believed that the dead

¹⁴ Timothy R. Tangherlini, “Who Ya Gonna Call?: Ministers and the Mediation of Ghostly Threat in Danish Legend Tradition,” *Western Folklore* 57, no. 2/3 (1998): 153.

¹⁵ Davidson, “The Restless Dead,” 173.

¹⁶ Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

could be pacified through food. “Indeed the Greek and Roman dead were fed in more direct ways as well; food was left on tombs, libations were poured there, and tubes were sometimes left in graves directly over the mouths of corpses.”¹⁸ This was certainly a more lenient, even caring procedure, but it still expresses a concern for the after-life of the corpse, helping to make it happy with its lot, and therefore perhaps happy to remain in its grave.¹⁹ The Ancient Greeks had experience with the dead venturing out of their tombs, though their versions seem to be less violent than the medieval examples we shall hear of later.²⁰ Thus it would be safe to state that there were many variations in this kind of belief from region to region and from period to period. It would be illogical to try to tie all these threads to a single origin, belief system or even culture.

In north-western Europe, the belief in the walking dead emerges in the sources most clearly in the twelfth century, when the sources seem to multiply, though there is some evidence that it was not a completely new phenomenon.²¹ The pattern was quite straightforward. Some men, and it was generally men who walked, especially if their intentions were evil (evil seems to be reserved generally to men), were prone to dig themselves out of their graves, to then harass and harm the people once close to them, and haunt locations native to them. These revenants were very physical beings. Apart from physically walking on earth and among their fellow men, their assaults in most cases were physical as well. Additionally, they were believed to be connected to plagues and diseases, or were even seen as the direct cause. They were, to state it simply, bad news. To get rid of a revenant was

¹⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 53.

¹⁹ W.M.S. Russel, “Greek and Roman Ghosts,” In *The Folklore of Ghosts*, ed. H.R. Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1981), 198.

²⁰ John Cuthbert Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 414.

²¹ For this earlier evidence, see below.

not especially easy. According to the belief it was imperative to destroy the corpse, either by catching the revenant while walking or by opening the grave after the revenant had reentered it. The people would dismember it and then burn the pieces; this was the general norm as the twelfth century sources indicate.²² Revenants, the walking dead, are best seen as a very particular kind of “returning dead”, a much wider category with many variations. Here, the term “revenant” or “walking dead” will be used only if a direct connection is made in the account between the apparition and the corpse or its disposal.²³ This allows us to distinguish revenants from ghosts, who were also clearly, in a sense, “returning dead”, though I do not here intend to deal generally with the very broad question of ghosts.

“Untimely” death is a recurring and prominent property of revenant lore; regardless of geography or period, almost all revenants died “bad” deaths. The differentiation made between a “good” and “bad” death was probably a way to mitigate and try to control a situation, death, which was inherently terrifying, unpredictable and uncontrollable: “The good death is thus the one which suggests some degree of mastery over the arbitrariness of the biological occurrence by replicating a prototype to which all such deaths conform.”²⁴ Those that did not conform were bad deaths, which generally were distinguished through their untimeliness. Once Christianity came into the picture, the categorization was modified to accommodate Christian practices. Thus in Christian culture good and

²² See Chapter 2.

²³ “The word vampire was introduced to English literature in 1734 in the journal of an English traveler who was making the grand tour in Germany.” (Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 135) The phenomena represented by the word predate it by at least a millennium in Slavonic/Magyar areas of Europe, but unless a reference is specifically concerned with the living dead in these areas, the use of ‘vampire’ is more confusing than helpful and therefore will not be used here. As it is common among some researchers to dub revenants, the living dead, ‘vampires’, this word, in any such quotation will be replaced with [revenant].

²⁴ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, “Introduction,” In *Death & the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15.

bad death was not only designated through the kind of death one died, sudden, by accident, murder, sudden illness, stroke, and so on — basically untimely — but also by the religious readiness of the individual for the said death. This of course may always have been so to some extent, with differing required rites. This property affected the afterlife of the person, something that was of immense importance in a religion and culture as focused on the afterlife and the otherworld as Christianity. Though the idea was quite old, it was Caesarius of Heisterbach²⁵ in the thirteenth century who worded the theory most comprehensively, in his *Dialogue on Miracles*. He “enumerated four different kinds of death: that of those who live and die well; that of those who live well and die badly; that of those who live badly but die well; and that of those who both live and die badly.”²⁶

Revenants were generally described as wicked men having come to a wicked end.²⁷ In the Early Middle Ages, as people’s life expectancy was generally short and precarious, a bad death was something of concern to many. There was a certain anxiety about all the souls that inescapably died in an untimely fashion or, in other words, bad deaths; about where they were until the “timely” date of their death was reached. Paradoxically, those who died bad deaths, regardless of the life they had lived, were looked upon as suspect, as a bad death could be taken to indicate wickedness, be the victim a baby or a suspicious stranger: “Those who die badly, through violence or guile, are shown as unquiet souls, wandering the earth either as maleficent spirits, or as corporeal revenants.”²⁸ Bad deaths were mainly categorized by their suddenness and unexpectedness, though there were a lot of

²⁵ See Chapter 4 for more indebt information on Caesarius of Heisterbach

²⁶ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁸ Caciola, “Spirits Seeking Bodies: Death, Possession and Communal Memory in the Middle Ages,” In *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 76.

circumstances that could qualify a death as such: “the secret death that is without witness or ceremony: the death of the traveler on the road, or the man who drowns in a river, or the stranger whose body is found at the edge of a field, or even a neighbor who is struck down for no reason.”²⁹ All unlucky enough to die alone or without preparation were deemed to have died bad deaths, not being able to receive the last sacraments and probably unconfessed.³⁰ In this, one could say that Christianity played right into the hands of the revenant lore, Christianizing the lore to some extent and Christianizing the fear, but not weakening it.

Death, or rather a good death, was something of a ritual; there were certain things to be done, the most prominent and important being confession and absolution so as to ready the soul for passing: “Knowing that his end was near, the dying person prepared for death.”³¹ Anyone who died unexpectedly was left bereft of these preparations and thus seen as being in a precarious state at best. Though society saw death as a transition to eternity under God’s gaze, any glitch in the pre-arranged process, such as an unplanned and unprepared-for death, was enough to put all in jeopardy. The “future” of such a person, regardless of the life they had lived, would then be uncertain. They had failed to die at the time appointed to them by God, though it is unclear how God could miss a loose shingle or a flood, or how this might be reconciled with God’s omniscience and omnipotence. “The distinction between a “good” and a “bad” death was widespread throughout medieval society (as it is cross-culturally) and was thought to provide a vital clue to the ultimate fate

²⁹ Philippe Aries, *The Hour of our Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 11.

³⁰ Edelgard E. DuBruck, “Introduction,” In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Land Publishing, 1999), 24.

³¹ Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 7.

of the deceased.”³² Some believed these souls who had died early were in limbo until their true time of death; some thought the souls lost. Thus bad death was a problem for society. Though it was believed that bad people (with no salvageable properties) were directly damned to hell after their death without waiting for Judgment Day, a bad death disrupted this calming belief, as the question arose whether or not they would wait around till their proper time of death.

Revenants are in some ways close to certain other “miraculous” resurrections described in connection with saints. Some of these hagiographical accounts will be recounted here for the sake of demonstrating the relationship between the belief in the possibility of the dead walking, or moving and talking, with the system of Christian belief. Still, it has to be stated that the saints form a separate group: the “very special dead”.³³ They were not perceived by the people to be a threat and were thus treated differently, even though saints and sanctified resurrections could actually be quite violent. This apparent difference in reception, as well as the religious inclinations of the saints, set them apart and therefore they will not be treated or classified as revenants, if only to avoid getting into the decidedly deep waters of hagiography and sainthood.

Though apparently a pagan belief in its simple logic and physical attributes, the belief in revenants clearly felt at home within the Christian world, though it is hard to say it was welcomed with open arms. Christianity, at its very foundation had already unwittingly provided the revenants with an entry: “The idea that the dead could live again was a central tenet of the Christian belief system because Jesus was

³² Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 27.

³³ This phrase was first designated by Peter Brown (Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 69.)

resurrected and assured humanity that the same was in store for them.”³⁴ Thus resurrection was not a foreign concept to Christianity. It can thus be argued that the salvation of the soul was not the only concern of Christian man, the condition of the body left behind, with its future resurrection, seemed to be of almost equal importance.³⁵ The body and soul, though they were separated at death, were still seen as part of a whole. It was this lingering connection of the body to the “person”, the “self”, that lies at the basis of both the idea of Christian resurrection and, ironically, the belief in revenants.³⁶ Revenants could only exist because the possibility of the person returning through his or her own body to the earthly realm was believed to be valid. These concurring elements allowed revenants into the systematic world of Christianity.

The existence and continued existence of the revenant was connected to the at least relative completeness of the corpse. This property is also in evidence in saints’ stories, as the incorruptibility of the body was understood as a sign of sanctity. This, as we shall see, was not the only aspect that formed a grey area between the walking dead and the stories of saints. Gregory of Tours in the seventh century recorded miraculous if brief resurrections on the part of saints in his works. One such interesting anecdote concerns Saint Heliuss, bishop of Lyons.

He died and was buried by believers. On the following night a pagan came, pushed back the stone that covered the sarcophagus, and attempted to rob the body of the saint that he had propped against himself. But the saint extended his arms and tightly embraced the man who was pressed against him. In this way the saint held the wretched man in his arms, as if he had been restrained by straps, until morning.³⁷

³⁴ Martha Rampton, “Up From the Dead: Magic and Miracle,” In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Egelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Land Publishing, 1999), 276.

³⁵ Michael Frassetto, “Resurrection of the Body: Eleventh-Century Evidence from the Sermons of Ademar of Chabannes,” *The Journal of Religious History* 26, no.3 (2002): 235-236.

³⁶ Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 13.

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Confessors*, trans. Raymond Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), cap.61, 45.

The man, after being thoroughly terrified, is then released without further punishment. Even if the main actor is a saint, this anecdote indicates that people were not unfamiliar with the idea of such activity from within a grave. Also notice that the reason for the resurrection is personal at one level: the protection of the saint's tomb, and teaching a lesson to a pagan brave enough to venture into it.

Similarly, and much earlier, in the *Vitae Patrum*, a collection of stories which are dated to AD 250-500,³⁸ two stories concerning brief resurrections are included. The first one is told by a blind man, explaining the reason for his blindness:

I went in to the tomb and pulled off all the rich clothing, leaving nothing but a linen cloth. As I was on my way out of the tomb, loaded up with many bundles, a wicked thought said to me, 'Take the linen cloth as well, it is such a good one.' Alas, I went back and took the linen cloth also, leaving the body quite naked. The dead man suddenly sat up before my very eyes, thrust out his hands towards me and gouged out my eyes. Terrified, I dropped everything, and found my way out of the tomb with great danger and difficulty.³⁹

The dead man is not announced to be a saint at any point, though as it is the sin of the narrator that is implicitly condemned, rather than the attack on him, it seems likely that either the dead man or his resting place was deemed sanctified. The reason for the dead man's awakening again seems to be personal, a reaction to a wrong done to him by the robber. The physical attack here is quite in tune with the twelfth-century revenant lore.

A similar anecdote directly follows the blind man's story, this one too being told by the victim of the suddenly active dead. A youth comes to Abbot Johannes of the monastery of Gigantum, in a panic. He had, having heard of the death of a rich

³⁸ R.C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 45.

³⁹ *Vitae Patrum*, Book 10, cap. lxxvii, <http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk/page147.html>. The *Vitae Patrum*, trans. Reverend Benedict Baker. <http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk/> (accessed: August 23, 2007).

young girl, decided to rob the goods she would be buried with.

I went by night to the tomb, went in and set about robbing her. I took everything she wore off her, not even sparing her loincloth, which I also removed, leaving her naked as the day she was born. I had begun to leave the tomb when she suddenly sat up in front of me, stretched out her left hand and seized my right hand and said 'You most wicked man, aren't you ashamed to have stripped me bare?'⁴⁰

The dead girl admonishes the youth quite harshly and threatens a slow painful death, it is only after he begs forgiveness to her satisfaction and promises to become a monk that she lets him go and has him re-dress her, after which she lies down and is dead again. Her second death is quite peaceful unlike the effort-demanding disposals used against twelfth-century revenants. Although again it is not indicated whether there is any sanctity on the girl's part, her story being recorded in this source at least indicates the additional wrong of trying to commit robbery in a sanctified place. Her reason for returning is again personal, the restoration of her dignity, righting a wrong done to her. These stories seem to suggest that the resurrections are a reaction to outside infringement of the tombs and contain the moral lesson that it is especially wicked to rob tombs, which are presumably in consecrated and sanctified graveyards. It was after all the saint's authority that backed up the protection of the graveyard. Saints themselves were "often envisaged literally climbing out of, and back into, their coffins, or complaining of uncouth pilgrims who scraped muddy clogs on their tombs or — even worse — spat, bled and vomited all over their graves."⁴¹

Resurrection, at least for the learned, had become a thing concerning saints; any deviation from this would be seen as an abnormality, just the kind of abnormality that would be represented by the twelfth-century revenant lore.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Book 10, cap. lxxviii.

⁴¹ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 75.

However, stories of angry, revived saints may have represented a special part of the existence of the revenant lore among the people and may also have contributed to its survival, as a general acceptance of the possibility of such a return was needed for the lore to survive. Also, there was the possibility of confusing those who were saints and those who were not. In the eighth-century *Indiculus Superstitionum et Paganiarum*, written against superstitions and misconceptions concerning religion, there is a complaint that the people “imagine any kind of dead to be saints”⁴² If saints could resurrect or cause resurrection, and if saints could be confused with those who were not saints, non-saintly revenants could hardly be ruled out. Likewise, revenants could be confused with saints; any unusually active dead might be mistaken for a saint.

If both revenants and revived saints were distinguished from the normal dead by the functional incorruption of their bodies, later twelfth-century sources would seem to indicate that it was usually hard to mis-identify a true revenant.⁴³ The way they are most often described leads one to think that they could not be perceived as “perfectly” revived people; rather they were walking corpses. In one sense, revenants could be seen as parodies of the “real thing”, the sanctified “perfect” resurrection of saints. Thus the Church was adamant about distinguishing the two, as well as about removing the “imitation” if possible. However, there is no doubt that revenancy succeeded in co-existing with Christianity and, a little later, I shall deal with some of the specifically Christian thoughts on the subject.

Uneasiness in the early and high Middle Ages about corpses returning from

⁴² “Sibi sanctos fingunt quoslibet mortuos”: Albin Saupe, *Der Indiculus Superstitionum et Paganiarum, ein Verzeichnis Heidnischer und Aberglaebischer Gebraeuche und Meinungen aus der Zeit Karls des Grossen, aus Zumeist Gleichzeitigen Schriften Erlaeutert* (Leipzig: R.G. Treubner, 1891), 30.

⁴³ See Chapter 2.

the grave resulted in several bizarre burial practices, which echo if do not exactly replicate the iron-age burial anomalies that were referred to above. It is understandable that the people sought to take preventive measures against revenants, and to do this at the most logical place and time, the burial; for what better opportunity to make sure a body would stay put. Better safe than sorry could be one way of putting these preventive measures. Burying the corpse face-down was one such interesting practice, with the assumption that it would dig itself deeper, if it were to try to escape.⁴⁴ Those who did this clearly did not perceive revenants as intelligent, but more as brutes moving through ill will. As evidence below and in the next chapter will demonstrate, these kinds of practices would appear also in written sources from the eleventh century to the thirteenth. Such precautions may well have been of some antiquity in north-west Europe: “A good many Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burials have been found where corpses were decapitated (the head often being placed between the feet), or laid face down, crushed under boulders, bound, or dismembered.”⁴⁵ These burial rites attest that the belief in the walking dead was somewhat persistent and could indicate that the belief “was indigenous to Britain long before Viking settlement,” a point of some relevance, as we shall see. They also certainly continued, particularly in the case of criminals, at least up until the eleventh century.⁴⁶

In the eleventh century, Bishop Burchard of Worms (d. 1025), in his *Decretum*, admonished behavior towards specific corpses that was abhorrent to him.

He condemns the contemporary superstitions of

those women who go to the graves and transfix with a stake the bodies of children who died without baptism or the bodies of women who died in

⁴⁴ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?”, 390.

⁴⁵Ibid. 390.

⁴⁶Ibid. 390. See below for Viking *draugrs*.

childbirth so that the dead cannot return and harm the living.⁴⁷

This is indicative of the fact that there was then a belief in unholy resurrections quite close to the form they would take around the twelfth century. These corpses were definitely not being confused with saints. They were seen, due to the manner of their deaths, as a threat and were treated as such. That Burchard bothers to complain of these activities suggests that they may have been widespread.

Given that most of the sources dealt with in this thesis come from England, the question of the similarity of the lore to the Scandinavian walking dead arises. However, it should not be assumed that any one of these beliefs either came first or was imperative in the formation of the other. In Iceland, perhaps the most prominent and glaring examples of revenants are recorded within the sagas, around the middle of the thirteenth century.⁴⁸ These stories to some extent derive from long standing oral traditions, though as it always is in such cases, it is difficult to gauge how much of the lore remained unchanged up to the time of being recorded in writing. In these stories, “*draugr* is the word used for the animated corpse that comes forth from its grave-mound or shows restlessness on the road to burial.”⁴⁹ As is the case with revenants, it is untimely or violent deaths that trigger any walking on the *draugr*’s part. “Death at the hands of a *draugr*,” was a sure way to end up as one.⁵⁰ The walking of these dead is also generally tied in the sagas to a certain perceived or existent slight to them by the living. The idea that the grave-mound housed a sentient being, the corpse of the dead person, lies at the basis of this

⁴⁷ Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, xix. 5, ed. J.-P. Migne, P.L., cxi, col. 974. as translated in Rampton, “Up From the Dead,” 285.

⁴⁸ Davidson, “The Restless Dead,” 155.

⁴⁹ Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 80.

⁵⁰ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 28.

belief.⁵¹ Proper burial comes in here too, as it is seen as one of the main ways to appease the dead: “Immense importance is always laid on carrying out the correct rites when dealing with the dead.”⁵² Thus meeting one’s end out at sea, with no corpse left behind, was an especially bad way to go. They differ from their brethren only in the fact that they leave puddles when they walk. It is believed that the corpses come out of the water back to their homes.

One example of a *draugr* is Hrappr, in the Laxdaela Saga, who insisted on coming out of his grave. Olaf Pai,

attacking Hrappr and wrestling with him until the *draugr* took refuge in the ground, after which he dug up the body – still undecayed and with the spearhead he had lost in the previous fight beside it — and burnt it on a pyre; and from that time no one had any trouble from Hrappr’s walking.⁵³

The sequence of events is very similar to those of other recorded revenant phenomena. The physical struggle of the hero with the walking dead, the resulting escape underground, the digging up of the corpse and the ultimate proof in the grave that it was the corpse that was walking around — even the method of disposal — is identical to the revenant lore recorded in England in the twelfth century. “The means of dealing with the restless dead was to overcome them by force, cut off their heads, and finally destroy the bodies by burning.”⁵⁴

Such revenants were perceived to be motivated by the envy they felt towards the living for being alive, choosing their victims from close proximity and from relatives: “A death before the end of one’s natural lifetime leads to aggression against the places and people of one’s life.”⁵⁵ The *draugr*, like the twelfth-century revenants we shall see in the next chapter, were generally violent and destructive

⁵¹ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 96.

⁵² Davidson, “The Restless Dead,” 160.

⁵³ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 93.

⁵⁴ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 122.

⁵⁵ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 29.

against the living, though here it has to be stated that this behavioral pattern is connected within the sagas more closely to the character of the dead person than to the phenomena itself. It was assumed “that those evil and violent in life might cause trouble after death.”⁵⁶ The only exception is in the Eyrbyggja Saga, where Thorgunna, an elderly woman who returns after her death. This is the only case “where the *draugr*, the restless corpse, walks again for any reason other than a destructive or vengeful one.”⁵⁷ Whether this has a connection to the fact that Thorgunna was a woman is open to argument, though one should indicate that in England too, and generally, females ended up as strangely non-violent revenants. In Iceland though, unlike the twelfth-century revenants, *draugrs* did not lose “their former personality and become wholly and hideously inhuman. Even personal relationships are unchanged.”⁵⁸ There are quite a large number of “*draugr* who are as individual after death as they have been in life.”⁵⁹ While the twelfth-century English revenants to be examined in the next chapter did not entirely lose their individuality, the physical descriptions are somewhat different and the personality less pronounced. The Viking Sagas then may indicate the existence of a different kind of walking dead, though the special nature of the saga genre must be taken into account.

William of Malmesbury, writing in England in the early twelfth century, stated that it was widely known that the devil could cause the corpses of evil men to walk.⁶⁰ In continental Europe, later, one also finds accounts of the “evil” walking

⁵⁶ Davidson, “The Restless Dead,” 173.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 160.

⁵⁸ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 148. There is only one exception to this, in Egil’s Saga Asmundr “becomes as inhuman as the most bloodthirsty of vampires, and there is no remnant of his former affection for his foster-brother.” (Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 148)

⁵⁹ Ibid. 92.

⁶⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Rerum Anglicarum – The History of English Kings*, Introduction and commentary by R. M. Thomson (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1999) Book II cap. 4.

dead explained through the action of the devil or demons. In the mid-thirteenth century, Thomas of Cantimpré, Augustinian canon and theologian born in Sint-Pieters Leeuw (Belgium), has records of revenants in his *Bonum Universale de apibus*. One concerns

the animate corpse of a knight who appears to his former servant, asks him to remove from his wound the point of the lance that killed him (as verification of his own materiality).⁶¹

Thomas himself is a devout believer in the argument that it was not the soul of the deceased that reanimated the body, as was the case in folkloric belief, but a demon, and he argues as such within his work. Still one can state that every single word spoken against revenants or their existence, or concerning their nature, is evidence of the widespread belief in them. The second anecdote Thomas includes is similar in nature to the first and conforms with his arguments. It is about a pious virgin, who one morning, having entered the church for morning prayers, comes upon a dead body laid out for later burial, she continues her routine and starts to pray.

When the Devil saw this he looked upon her with malice (invidet), and entering the dead body he moved it at first in the coffin.⁶²

The virgin strikes the dead body down and it stays down. The wording of the story is clearly indicative as to who is doing the moving, the body only an object to be used. “Neither the flesh nor the spirit of the dead man is an active principle.”⁶³

The vitality left behind in the corpse makes it more susceptible, according to this theory, to the control of a demon, which then is responsible for the revenant phenomena, rather than the spirit of the dead person as was the folkloric belief.

⁶¹ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 14.

⁶² Thomas of Cantimpré, *Bonum Universale de apibus*, ii.57.8:Thomae Cantimpratani, S. Th. Doctoris, Ordinis S. Dominici, et Episcopi Suffraganei Cameracensis, *Miraculorum et exemplorum memorabilium sui temporis, libri duo* (Douai, 1597), 452 as quoted in Nancy Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 11.

⁶³ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 12.

Another such narration is found in the *Life* of Ida of Louvain, dated again to the thirteenth century:

Leaping into it, the skinchanging inventor of all evil stood the body on its feet, and thus moving forward inside it and together with it.⁶⁴

One of the main foundations of the folkloric belief is denied, though the gist of the accounts still reflect the revenant lore to the letter, the only distinction being the added presence of the demon. The thirteenth-century French Dominican Jean de Mailly recounts a story with similar properties. A story of

a demon animating the corpse of a beautiful young woman in order to tempt a pious man... the girl's body turns putrid as soon as the demon leaves it.⁶⁵

In all these accounts, the theory of demonic possession as the reason of the reanimation of corpses is used to deny that any real reanimation is taking place. This theory is based mainly on Augustine theories on the possible return of the dead. He had argued that "it was neither the body not even the soul of the dead person that appeared but only the "spiritual image"; these "spiritual images" were quite often introduced by demons."⁶⁶ His discarding of the possibility of the body of the dead being involved in anyway is quite interesting. It might suggest that others thought otherwise. On the question of the resurrection of bodies, he stated that "revivification was possible only through the power of God, as exercised by a man or woman sanctified by the church."⁶⁷ This was supported with the resurrections on the part of saints, but revenants simply did not fit in with that crowd. Any resurrection was scheduled at the end of human history with the second coming of Christ, not before, and certainly not without being sanctioned by divine power. The

⁶⁴ Ibid. 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 14.

⁶⁶ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 17.

⁶⁷ Rampton, "Up From the Dead," 86.

demon here could then be seen as a compromise, a force behind a pretended reanimation, from the spiritual world, albeit perverse. The purely demonic explanation of revenants, though, despite its Augustinian backing, was not universally adopted. “Texts such as chronicles and histories, which lack the same didactic agenda as exempla collections or hagiographies, universally reject or ignore the possibility of demonic animation in regard to revenants.”⁶⁸ Thus this interpretation of revenants as demon-possessed bodies, though surfacing in sources could not displace the folklore.

“The attribution of some degree of sentience or ‘life-force’ to the corpses of the recently deceased was a very long-standing popular intuition.”⁶⁹ The “unplanned,” early departure of the soul from the body due to an untimely death must have caused the body to be regarded as more habitable for the soul should it choose to return. “The underlying logic of belief in revenants is that of a remaining life-force in the bodies of those who projected strong ill will, or who died too suddenly.”⁷⁰ This was what lay at the basis of the folkloric belief, though it was similarly used for the demonic possession theory, with the argument that the demon could inhabit such bodies much more easily. Corpses were already seen as having a life span of their own. “The ‘life’ of the corpse tends to correspond to the period during which it is still changing and developing, and it ceases to be frightening after its second ‘death’.”⁷¹ Once the skeleton was exposed and no flesh remained, the corpse was believed to have died again. The danger of walking seems to have been limited to the amount of time it took for the bones to be exposed: “The question of a

⁶⁸ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 19.

⁶⁹ Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, “Introduction,” 7.

⁷⁰ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 19.

⁷¹ Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, 141.

reanimated skeleton is never raised: there must be flesh upon the bone.”⁷²

The belief in revenants was then common indeed, even evidenced by explanations directed against the existence of true revenancy. Essentially, people were not averse to the idea of the return of the dead; it was not uncommon for saints to resurrect dead people or to be resurrected themselves. Still, in all such cases the resurrection was performed by someone of sanctity and, when it was spontaneous, it had the indicated consent of the divine. That someone without that sanctity or divinity could resurrect the dead or that the dead could walk at their own volition was disquieting indeed. It attributed too much power to the human soul. What was it about revenants that made them into the embodiment of fear and terror among the people? The answer is, of course, quite glaringly obvious: the revenants were re-animated corpses; they moved in their own “dead” bodies, thus breaking back into the realm of the living, seemingly trying, if unsuccessfully, to shed their designation as dead. Thus they became abominations in the eyes of a society which seems to have been used to close encounters with the dead, as long as everyone knew their place. This infraction must have seemed to the people nothing less than horrifying, thus removing the revenants from the category enjoyed by the saints or more commonplace ghosts: “The revenant’s duality, its share in the powers of the supernatural world along with its continued link to its original humanity, explains its fearsomeness for humans.”⁷³ It has to be emphasized though, that the said link was a perverted one. Any connection with the corpse left behind, without divine permission of any sort, made the dead take on an “unnatural” form, something uncanny and unclassified and thus disturbing.

⁷² Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 32.

⁷³ Carol L. Edwards, review of *The Folklore of Ghosts*, by H.R. Ellis Davidson (ed.), *The American Journal of Folklore*.96, no.381 (1983): 359.

As the listed accounts and anecdotes indicate, one cannot argue that the belief in walking corpses made its first appearance with the emergence of vampire lore with the later Slavic outbreak of vampire accounts. Burial practices in eleventh-century Europe as well as the twelfth-century British sources and other evidence indicate that the belief was certainly active there from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century and probably before that period, even though textual references are largely lacking in the early Middle Ages. That accounts multiply in the late twelfth century is an interesting fact. It could be tied to the then current debate on the afterlife and the fate of the soul, which would make superstitions and folk beliefs on the subject interesting enough for writers to record. As we shall see, the sources to be dealt with in the next chapter paint a quite clear and consistent picture of the lore in question, albeit with some variation and exceptions.

It was during and after the thirteenth century that things start to change for the revenants, and the nature of that change is a major concern of this thesis. “One result of the introduction of Christian teaching and classical learning, however, may have been a gradual change from the idea of the restless corpse to that of the wandering disembodied spirit.”⁷⁴ This statement, taken as it is, is not valid; revenants clearly survived Christianity even when it became one of the very foundations of society. Still, something did happen in the thirteenth century, something that removed the revenants as a clear and present danger from the people’s minds at least in some western parts of Europe; a shift within Christian belief that affected both the earthly realm and the afterlife. In the course of the next two chapters we shall see, both the early signs of change and what was primarily responsible: Purgatory was on the verge of emerging.

⁷⁴ Davidson, “The Restless Dead,” 173.

CHAPTER III

SOURCES ON REVENANTS IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY: WALTER MAP'S *DE NUGIS CURIALIUM* AND WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH'S *HISTORIA RERUM ANGLICARUM*

Belief in the walking dead, or revenants, was common among the English people in the twelfth century. As the examples that will follow demonstrate, the belief was existent in several layers of the society, indicating that it was old and deep set. To be able to perceive the changes wrought by the development of Purgatorial belief on the lore concerning revenants, one first has to understand the status of the belief in revenants as it was before most of the changes start to affect and alter it. As one will see, the anecdotes and sources chosen belong to a period when Purgatory as a place was on the brink of existence, thus enabling us to perceive the very beginning of the effects that were to occur over the next century or so. As such they could be seen as representing both the earlier lore and a transitory phase. There are two main primary sources, the *De Nugis Curialium* by Walter Map (hereafter *De Nugis*) and the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* by William of Newburgh. These authors deemed the walking dead an imperative enough subject to spare several pages on the phenomena. This indicates, in and of itself, that the belief was alive and kicking at the time, and that the authors themselves were interested

enough in the phenomena and the reason and causes surrounding the said phenomena to look into it through several differing anecdotes.⁷⁵

Walter Map's *De Nugis* devotes considerable interest and space to the supernatural, especially the revenant stories. Walter's revenant accounts let the reader glimpse the existent variety in the lore. Walter, the self-styled "hunter of stories", was a believer in the phenomena and his voice and narration play an important role. Although, as we have seen, Walter's accounts of revenants can hardly be said to present the starting point of the belief in England, he has been hailed as the first to record revenants, and he definitely reflected the belief as it was at the time.⁷⁶ Thus what he records on the belief is of importance, if one is aiming to find out exactly what changes were to occur to the belief with the emergence of Purgatory. Walter Map chose to record as many diverse properties of the belief as possible. This allows one to perceive the fact that the belief in revenants, though a whole in its own right, had several differing characteristics. His approach allows one not only a general glimpse of the revenant lore, but also different perspectives on the revenants and the Church. There are, in *De Nugis*, four accounts of people who come back from the dead.

The other main primary source to be used is William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (hereafter *Historia*), which also contains four accounts of revenants in its fifth and final book. The *Historia* is one of the richest sources for revenants. So much so that, in the eighteenth century, it was William's revenants that caught the attention of the French cleric Dom Augustine Calmet as he was writing his *Treatise on Vampires & Revenants* which chiefly concerns the

⁷⁵ Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 394.

⁷⁶ Monica Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 124; Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 136.

superstitions that Calmet saw as spreading like wildfire across Slavonic Europe at the time.⁷⁷ It is not only the fact that William's *Historia* itself has four complete and detailed anecdotes concerning revenants that makes it of interest here, but also William's approach to the said stories. William either inadvertently or quite consciously gives one a glimpse of the social aspect of the phenomena, the fears and beliefs of the people and how they tackle a problem as alarming as a corpse crawling out of its grave. The general style and perception of the historian affect the four revenant accounts within the *Historia* — the revenants of Buckinghamshire, Berwick, Melrose Abbey and the castle of "Anantis" — enhancing the accounts and making them all the richer and more interesting to look into.

William's as well as Walter's tendency to collect potent and popular anecdotes on the supernatural and particularly on the walking dead was only limited by what they and the people believed; they recorded only what would be deemed believable. The existence of these anecdotes can thus be perceived as a direct testimony to the existence of the belief. Their diverse accounts, differing from one author to the other, but also from story to story, clearly follow a belief pattern, a pattern that would disappear with the development of Purgatorial belief. Thus it is important to analyze the anecdotes collected by Walter and William in order to try to perceive the revenant lore of the time, so as to establish a basis for pinpointing the changes that were to appear after the elaboration of Purgatory.

⁷⁷ Dom Augustine Calmet, *Treatise on Vampires & Revenants: The Phantom World*, trans. Rev. Henry Christmas, ed. Dr. Clive Leatherdale (Brighton: Desert Island Books 1993.) Originally published in 1746 in French.

3.1 Walter Map and the *De Nugis Curialium*

Walter Map is thought to have been born around 1140.⁷⁸ He attained a position as a clerk at Henry II's court soon after 1160.⁷⁹ He was also a canon of the Hereford cathedral, from around 1158 to 1185.⁸⁰ "There is small doubt that he was from the Hereford neighbourhood; and hence, as he calls himself, 'a marcher of Wales,' hailing Welshmen as 'our fellow-countrymen,' but drawing of them a picture unflatteringly realistic."⁸¹ Before taking up his position at court, he had received part of his education in Paris.⁸² He was "part of a relatively new phenomenon; a community of highly educated but mostly secular cleric-courtiers, some of noble origin, others not."⁸³ He had a high standing at court: "He went on a mission to the court of King Louis VII and probably attended the Lateran Council in 1179 as Henry II's representative."⁸⁴ His life at court would shape the style and narration of the *De Nugis*. He left the court after Henry II's death in 1189.⁸⁵ "From c.1189 he was precentor, probably at Lincoln Cathedral, and in 1196 or 1197, Hugh bishop of Lincoln, later St Hugh, moved him once more, this time to the archdeaconry of Oxford."⁸⁶ When Walter Map died is not quite certain, but it is believed to be around 1208-1210.⁸⁷

De Nugis is his only surviving work.⁸⁸ It is believed to have been written in

⁷⁸ Frederick Tupper and Marbury Bladen Ogle, Introduction, xi, Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book De Nugis Curialium (Courtiers' Trifles)*, trans. Frederick Tupper and Marbury Bladen Ogle (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1924).

⁷⁹ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1996), 242.

⁸⁰ M. R. James, Introduction, xv. Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*. ed. and trans. M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

⁸¹ Tupper and Ogle, Introduction, xi.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xi.

⁸³ Otter, *Inventiones*, 125.

⁸⁴ Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 243.

⁸⁵ James, Introduction, xvii.

⁸⁶ His precentorship was at Lincoln (*Ibid.*, xviii).

⁸⁷ Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 243.

⁸⁸ The 'Dissuasio' which Walter Map is believed to have written under an ancient alias, circulated separately from the *De Nugis* and survived pretty well in many manuscripts on its own, but was also

intermediate stages between about 1181 and 1192,⁸⁹ though “the bulk of it was drafted in 1181 and 1182.”⁹⁰ It is generally accepted that *De Nugis* was incomplete.⁹¹ Hinton argued that Walter Map left the work only as fragments and that “the compilation of Map’s fragments [was] not accomplished until some time after his generation.”⁹² Similarly the rubrics were the work of a later editor, who, it is generally agreed upon, did a poor job of it. It “apparently did not circulate in the Middle Ages at all; it survives only in the late fourteenth-century manuscript Bodley 851.”⁹³ This lack of circulation could be the reason why William of Newburgh was not aware of Walter’s revenant accounts, though it could also be due to the fact that in Yorkshire William was unlikely to have heard of a book circulating within the king’s court, which did not venture north that often.

Walter, as his life indicates, was not a historian by calling. Still, Walter is keenly “interested in the definitions of history, and his ambition in *De Nugis* is to be a chronicler of sorts, though primarily of *modernitas*, not of the past.”⁹⁴ Thus the work he left is full of historical material, which makes it, in the present, as valuable as any chronicle; more so, as one will see, in this case. “He is a spirited narrator, with a curt, rapid style, and a natural felicity in words.”⁹⁵ Walter did not avoid criticism. On the contrary he has been described as a “witty and original” practitioner of the satiric tradition.⁹⁶ His voice reflects this to the reader even after

included by him into the *De Nugis Curialium*. (Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, eds. *Jakyn’s Book of Wikked Wyves* (Athens : University of Georgia Press, 1997), 44.)

⁸⁹ Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 243.

⁹⁰ James, Introduction, xxix.

⁹¹ Otter, *Inventiones*, 112.

⁹² James Hinton, “Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*: Its Plan and Composition,” *PMLA* 32, no.1 (1917): 83.

⁹³ Hanna III, and Lawler, eds., *Jakyn’s Book*, 44.

⁹⁴ Otter, *Inventiones*, 111-112.

⁹⁵ Hinton, “Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*,” 131.

⁹⁶ Rodney M. Thomson, “England and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance,” *Past and Present* 101 (1983): 21.

centuries. Walter “wrote stories well because he told stories well; his best style has something of the informality of speech,”⁹⁷ He internalized any source he used into the weave of the *De Nugis*. He, “treated evidence creatively, blending oral and literary sources together to produce a literary narrative, and did not copy sources almost word for word.”⁹⁸

Walter “wrote willingly upon whatever occurred to his mind, careless of the drift of his discourse,”⁹⁹ which led to *De Nugis* coming across to the reader as a slightly disorganized compilation of the author’s thoughts. Walter seems to be aware of this disposition; thus it is safe to state that he was aware of having drifted from the main subject, but could not bring himself to disregard the point that had caught his attention at the time.¹⁰⁰ The whims of the author are easily felt within the narration. “Its arrangement is desultory; he compares it with ‘a forest or a timber yard’.”¹⁰¹ However, it has to be stated that when the anecdotes are considered one at a time, Map’s narration creates short, to the point and detailed stories, simple in their make-up, but clear in meaning and well assimilated into the whole work.

De Nugis is a collection of anecdotes that the author deemed interesting, strange and of importance enough to record. Quite a number of these anecdotes were about the uncanny which “illustrate[s] his love of the supernatural.”¹⁰² Walter Map thrived on the telling of these stories. The fact that he chose to record as many of them with such a variety indicates that they fascinated him no end. His “reading” and comments on the phenomena, as well as the stories he chose to record are significant in and of themselves. As one reads the stories, one becomes aware of the

⁹⁷ Hinton, “Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*,” 132.

⁹⁸ Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 221.

⁹⁹ Hinton, “Walter Map’s *De Nugis Curialium*,” 116.

¹⁰⁰ Otter, *Inventiones*, 113.

¹⁰¹ Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 243.

¹⁰² Tupper and Ogle, Introduction, xviii.

fact that, although Walter was not at great pains to point out the authenticity of his stories or the reasons behind such phenomena, his recording of the said stories makes it apparent that he believed in their reality. This attitude is as important as the contents of the stories he recorded, for that in itself is indicative of the existence and reality of the folkloric belief. Of all these supernatural accounts, the four that describe the walking dead are of interest here.

His first revenant story is perhaps the most ambiguous when it comes to classification. Walter's placement of this story is of importance, as it allows one to perceive its similarities with other stories. This revenant story is first mentioned within an explanatory chapter on the nature of strange phenomena which follows two anecdotes on fairies.¹⁰³ It must have been quite intriguing for Walter, as later in *De Nugis* he once again and with more detail records this event.¹⁰⁴ To understand the connection between the recorded lore (fairy and revenant) one should first look at the basic properties of the fairy anecdotes, as they display a certain pattern. A man manages to snatch a fairy from a circle dance. The women in question, within the fairy anecdotes, are definitely fairies as they both abide by the fairy rules, that is, they accept their abductors as husbands on a condition, which when broken (not if mind you), absolves them of the bond. According to Map, both women had borne children, and thus left corporeal evidence of their physical existence. This disturbs him no end.

This was probably why Walter added the explanatory chapter wherein he explores the nature of "apparitions," that is, ghosts and phantoms. His description is clear and without doubt.

¹⁰³ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. M. R. James. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 149-159.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 344-345.

Fantasma is derived from *fantasia*, i.e. a passing apparition, for the appearances which occasionally devils make to some by their own power (first receiving leave of God), pass by with or without doing harm, according as the Lord who brings them either protects or forsakes us or allows us to be tempted.¹⁰⁵

Walter inserts that God is the utmost authority and that any mischief on the demon's part has first to be authorized by him. It is quite apparent that Walter here, essentially following Augustine, meant the more "ethereal" kinds of apparitions, something he himself was aware would fall short of phenomena where, as in the case of Walter's fairies and revenants, there is the existence of a body of flesh. Thus he inserted an abridged version of the revenant story into the explanation, after a resounding "But",

a knight is said to have buried his wife, who was really dead, and to have recovered her by snatching her out of a dance, and after that to have got sons and grandsons by her, and that the line lasts to this day, and those who come of it have grown to a great number and are in consequence called 'sons of the dead mother'.¹⁰⁶

The story is short and to the point. Here the connection with fairy lore is made mainly through the circle dance, which was one of the main properties of the two previous fairy anecdotes that Walter recorded. One has to add that in the second, longer version Walter actually mentions "fairies"; "He could not trust his eyes, and doubted what the fairies (*fates*) could be doing."¹⁰⁷ There is additionally a link through the descendants to the fairy stories – normal revenants don't have children. "Map's tone suggests an utter lack of surprise at someone finding the dead dancing in this way. The fact that the woman dies, and that her husband then snatches her back from a dance, is presented as entirely logical, in no need of further

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 160-161.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 160-161. On pages 344-345 Walter adds further details to the anecdote.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 344-345.

explanation.”¹⁰⁸ It is Walter who is careful to emphasize the condition of the wife. There was no doubt that she was dead, and if his words are to be taken literally, the knight himself had buried her. The dead woman is simply that, dead; she is not a fairy bound to the “rules of fairy engagement”.

“The sons of the dead wife” anecdote reflects a certain connection between the dead and fairies: a “belief that the premature dead were ‘abducted’ into fairy land. The fairy beliefs ... may be seen as a strategy to deal with untimely and therefore stressful death.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, one has to keep in mind the similar element in revenant lore, where untimely death makes one a likely candidate for revenancy. Additionally, just as “the line was not always sharp between witches, fairies, ghosts and minor spiritual beings of various backgrounds,” one could easily add revenants to this list.¹¹⁰ On a side note, one can see that as generations seem to have passed, that this story and revenant are quite a bit older than Walter’s other examples.

“Female revenants, though rare among the individual, hostile variety of the undead, seem to have been common as dancers.”¹¹¹ The dancing dead thus form a different category of revenants, a less malevolent one and a mainly female one at that: “Since sources on the dances of the dead do not give information on the manner of life (or of death) of the dancers, one might speculate that these revenants lived and died less spectacularly than their more aggressive counterparts.”¹¹² Women are indeed next to nonexistent among the mainstream, malevolent revenants. This is plausible in so far as the life of women in that age should generally have been less violent than men’s, though the dancers glimpsed by the

¹⁰⁸ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 38.

¹⁰⁹ Juliette Wood, “The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales,” *Folklore* 103, no.1 (1992): 59.

¹¹⁰ J. S. P. Tatlock, “Geoffrey and King Arthur in ‘Notmannicus Draco’ (Concluded.)” *Modern Philology* 31, no.2 (1933): 114.

¹¹¹ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 38.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 38.

living were not always female. The dance of the dead was also recorded in the thirteenth-century *Historiae Memorabiles*, wherein the rector of the church in Basel, in the middle of the night, glimpses from the window “many men in the cemetery, running to and fro with little torches and lamps, while others were performing a circle-dance and singing.”¹¹³ Additionally in the iconography of the *Danse Macabre*, which appears on grave walls after the fifteenth century, “the bodies of the dead ... also perform a circle-dance.”¹¹⁴ As the deep connection existent between the circle dance and the dead cannot be disputed, the “dead wife” can be accepted as a revenant, albeit a different, less ominous one.

Walter is puzzled by the whole thing, enough so that he continues his explanatory chapter, though his speculations, as one can see, offer little in the way of explanation beyond assuring his readers that everything was under God’s control.

Surely the acts and permissions of the Lord are to be hearkened to with all patience, and he is to be praised in every one of them; for as he is incomprehensible, so his works transcend our questioning and escape our discussion, and whatever can be thought or known by us about his purity (if we know anything at all) he is seen to possess, since he is wholly true purity and pure truth.¹¹⁵

The second revenant story that Walter Map records is of the most common kind, a man venturing forth from his grave to wreak havoc on the surrounding area. The story itself had originated in Wales. The main character in the anecdote is William Laudun, an English soldier, who approaches Gilbert Foliot, the then Bishop of Hereford. Map gives substance to the reality of his story by stating the names of the people and places in question, furthering this by adding the current location and

¹¹³ *Historiae Memorabiles: Zur Dominikanerliteratur und Kulturgeschichte des 13. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1974), 72 as quoted and translated in Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 39.

¹¹⁴ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 40.

¹¹⁵ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 160-161.

office of Gilbert Foliot; he had become the bishop of London.¹¹⁶ In all of Walter's revenant stories, except for the "dead wife", as we shall see, the Church plays some part. William Laudun was looking for advice from the bishop, as he had a very physical problem with a dead Welshman:

A Welshman of evil life died of late unchristianly enough in my village, and straightway after four nights took to coming back every night to the village, and will not desist from summoning singly and by name his fellow-villagers, who upon being called at once fall sick and die within three days, so that now there are very few of them left.¹¹⁷

Walter's passage reveals a considerable extent of general revenant lore. The dead Welshman had an "evil life" and died "unchristianly", both of which automatically place him in the category of those who "walk" after a wicked former life: "Map's dead Welshman is 'evil'."¹¹⁸ Walter's narration is detailed, giving precise periods of time as to the happenings of the events. He states exactly how long after death the revenant "walked", and also how the victims of the revenant met their demise. The victims, one can assume, were known to the revenant while he was alive. Thus the victimology is consistent with revenant lore, wherein the dead man's spirit would come after kin and acquaintances in its envy of their being alive. Another important point here is that Walter indicates the connection perceived between a revenant and disease, though it is unusual that here the revenant himself initiates the disease very actively, by specifically calling out the names of the victims. It has to be stated though that there seems to be no physical, hands-on violence on the revenant's part, which was generally the norm with revenant lore. It is debatable whether this calling out of names could be seen as communication, but if accepted as such this revenant is, among the sources here, the first to communicate with the living,

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 202-203. As Gilbert Foliot, became the bishop of Hereford in 1148 and became bishop of London in 1163, this dates the anecdote to a certain extent.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 202-203.

¹¹⁸ Caciola, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual," 28.

though it was decidedly one sided.

The bishop, after hearing William Laudun's story, deduces that demons were at play:

Peradventure the Lord has given power to the evil angel of that lost soul¹¹⁹ to move about in the dead corpse. However, let the body be exhumed, cut the neck through with a spade, and sprinkle the body and the grave well with holy water, and replace it.¹²⁰

Though the wording certainly suggests that the antagonist is a demon, and that the body is a mere tool, it is also ambiguous enough, stating that it is the man's "evil angel" that is rendering "the man" restless within his own dead body; both a demon and the man's soul seem to be present. Still it would be plausible to suggest that the bishop believed in the demonic possession of the corpse; the remedy too seems more in tune with exorcism rather than the laying to rest of the restless dead. However, the counter measures recommended by the bishop fail. This and the way the victims had a relationship with the dead man could mean that the revenant recorded here fits better with the popular revenant lore of the original spirit returning to the body, rather than a case of demonic possession of the corpse. "The revenant continues its nightly visits, demonstrating that an indwelling demon is not the source of the problem. The corpse moves under its own power."¹²¹ The fact that the holy water had failed seems to indicate the absence of demons.

The action then taken by William and its success, are more in tune with the folkloric norm that the soul itself returns to the body.

So one night when the summoner had now left but few alive, he called William himself, citing him thrice. He, however, bold and quick as he was, and awake to the situation, darted out with his sword drawn, and chased the

¹¹⁹ Notice that the word translated as 'lost soul' is *perditi* which was translated as 'wretch' in Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book De Nugis Curialium (Courtiers' Trifles)*, trans. Frederick Tupper and Marbury Bladen Ogle, 125.

¹²⁰ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 202- 203.

¹²¹ Caciola, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual," 20.

demon, who fled, up to the grave, and there, as he fell into it, clave his head to the neck. From that hour the ravages of that wandering pestilence ceased...¹²²

The use of the word “demon” here is probably simply to underline the evil nature of the revenant, rather than literarily meaning that a demon was on stage. William’s use of violence worked well, as effectively it seems as other normal remedies — dismemberment or fire. The revenant was vulnerable to physical force. This prompts the question of whether the bishop had meant decapitation as a remedy, or a simple cutting of the neck that would not and did not do the job. Walter’s narration definitely avoids pointing to a precise explanation for the phenomenon, though it seems that the story speaks for itself, with the failing of the bishop’s remedy: “The manner of this thing we know; of its cause we are ignorant.”¹²³ Thus it is clear that Map was unable or unwilling to connect the revenant to his explanation about phantoms.

The third revenant anecdote resembles the previous one and Map follows a similar pattern while telling this anecdote:

In the time of Bishop Roger of Worcester, a man, reported to have died in unchristianly, for a month or more wandered about in his shroud both at night and also in open day, till the whole population of the neighbourhood laid siege to him in an orchard, and there he remained exposed to view, it is said, for three days.¹²⁴

Though the anecdote itself is quite short, Walter manages to insert all kinds of interesting information; establishing the time period in which the event took place as well as the location. Roger bishop of Worcester¹²⁵ is identified as one of the main characters, thereby giving the anecdote more credibility. Again the dead man’s state

¹²² Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 202-203.

¹²³ Walter Map, *Master Walter Map’s Book De Nugis Curialium*, 26.

¹²⁴ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 204-205.

¹²⁵ Roger was bishop of Worcester in 1164-1179 (Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 204) which again dates the story to some extent.

of belief or rather unbelief is testified to: he was wicked. What is different about the narration of this story, though, is the fact that Map goes about telling it with a heavy usage of phrases such as “it is said”. In the previous revenant account the narration and recording of the story was much more straightforward, as though the information he had gathered, or rather the account given to him, was first hand knowledge.

This third revenant, as is the case with some others, wandered both day and night. What makes it peculiar was that the revenant wandered for about a month before any measures were taken. This could be mainly due to the fact that there seem to have been no obvious victims in this account; thus the revenant posed as more of a nuisance than a danger to the people. There seem to have been no physical beatings, nor were the people terribly alarmed by the possibility of a plague due to the wandering of the corpse, which might be expected to putrefy the air. The sequence of the events is as precise as in the first story: a month it wandered, and it remained in the orchard for three days. In this story the presence of the Church is heavy, dominating everything else:

Roger ordered a cross to be laid upon the grave of the wretch, and the man himself to be let go¹²⁶ [his spirit to be laid].¹²⁷

This order seems to indicate that the spirit of the man was seen to be the moving force behind the phenomenon. The bishop seems to aim at laying the man and his spirit to rest, and that this would stop the revenant from arising again. Also the raising of a cross on his grave could indicate that his death in unbelief seems to have prompted the people to bury him without raising one. The wording of the next few sentences, however, confuses the situation:

¹²⁶ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 204-205.

¹²⁷ Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book*, 126. Here the phrase “*ipsumque dimitti*” is translated thus, and will be taken as the main translation.

When, followed by the people, he came to the grave, he started back, apparently at the sight of the cross, and ran in another direction. Whereupon they wisely removed the cross: he sank into the grave, the earth closed over him, the cross was laid upon it and he remained quiet¹²⁸ [lay in peace].¹²⁹

The usage of the word demon could be, as in the previous story, simply descriptive of any evil monster. “Only after the corpse receives a proper burial... does it cease its wandering”;¹³⁰ that the man “lay in peace” when he was given a proper burial supports the theory that the revenant walked at the stirrings of the man’s own spirit. The common belief that without a proper burial the dead could not rest is thus worked into the revenant lore.

In this anecdote, in contrast to the previous one, the bishop analyzed the situation “correctly” and his remedy proved effective, or at least when properly timed. It could be that Map chose to record this one to balance out the previous one, or that this bishop, by ascertaining the need to lay the man to rest, had reached, in Map’s eyes, the right decision. Bishop Roger, it seems, had ignored the possibility of demonic possession. This revenant story ends a great deal less violently, as there is no dismembering of the corpse, even when it was cornered by the towns people at the orchard. This and the fact that the revenant here was almost harmless in comparison to the other’s murderous spreading of disease, also indicate that Walter was of a mind to collect differing accounts of the same lore.

The last revenant account, while less of an oddity than the first, displays decided differences from the second and third.

A knight of Northumberland was seated alone in his house after [lunch] in summer about the tenth hour, and lo! his father, who had died long before, approached him clad in a foul and ragged shroud. He thought the appearance

¹²⁸ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 204-205.

¹²⁹ Walter Map, *Master Walter Map’s Book*, 126. Again, here the word “*quieuit*” was translated thus and will be taken as the main translation.

¹³⁰ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 20.

was a devil and drove it back from the threshold.¹³¹

Unlike the other two revenant stories, the precise walking schedule of the revenant is not present here. There is, on the contrary, a certain ambiguity as to when the man died and when he walked. Walter states that it was daytime, and his having included two such instances in the *De Nugis* seems to testify that it was believed that these kinds of things did indeed happen.

But his father said: 'Dearest son, fear not. I am your father, and I bring you no ill; but call the priest and you shall learn the reason of my coming.' He was summoned, and a crowd ran to the spot.¹³²

This revenant actually speaks with the living. This behavior is not normal in mainstream revenant lore. As in the case of Walter's third revenant, this revenant is of the peaceful sort; there are no casualties nor is there disease. But here, more explicitly, the revenant needs something from the living and chooses rational communication as the means to get it. This pattern of lucid speaking to the living in order to obtain something from them was to become normal in ghost stories later on. It may be that this anecdote shows the change that was linked, as argued in this thesis, to the development of purgatorial ideas, starting to seep in. It should be added that the ambiguity of the schedule of the walking also speaks for this effect, as the later ghost stories generally have considerable gaps between the death and return of the ghosts.

That the revenant asks his son to summon a priest is most interesting, as even while the revenant speaks to his son, he is not himself willing to give the son his reason for walking. And promptly, the Church presence is established, designated as the valid associate in such a dialogue. The Church is seen playing the

¹³¹ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 206-207. The word "*prandium*" is lunch not dinner, and the tenth hour is according to Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book*, 127, three o'clock.

¹³² Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 206-207.

role of both objective and interpreter here:

Falling at his feet the [ghost] said: 'I am that wretch whom long since you excommunicated unnamed, with many more, for unrighteous withholding of tithes; but the common prayers of the church and the alms of the faithful have by God's grace so helped me that I am permitted to ask for absolution.'¹³³

The man is exposed as "wicked," having died with an excommunication on his head, a bad death one could say. "The revenant was identified, walking not through demonic power, but for the benign purpose of seeking aid from the living."¹³⁴ The man is allowed to seek absolution only through the prayers of the living. This practice, as well as post-mortem absolution, were not as of yet established as common during Walter Map's time. These concepts would find their places within Church policies during and after the time Purgatory emerged as a place within Christian belief. That Walter chose to record this story should come as no surprise, as such an event must have been rare indeed in those days.

The only reason this man is assumed to be a revenant is this last passage within Walter's account.

So being absolved he went, with a great train of people following, to his grave and sank into it, and it closed over him of its own accord. This case has introduced a new subject of discussion into the books of divinity.¹³⁵

He physically returns to his grave, a grave that opens and closes for him, a bit of revenant lore that was quite popular. All the other properties this phenomenon displays, however, fit the later ghost stories. It is this "revenant" part though that makes it special, something that is suspended between what was and what would be in the beliefs concerning the otherworld and the supernatural. Walter similarly

¹³³ Ibid. 206-207. There is no corresponding word in the Latin text for the word "ghost," only "*ipse*" is used.

¹³⁴ C. S. Watkins, "Sin, Penance and Purgatory in the Anglo-Norman Realm: The Evidence of Visions and Ghost Stories," *Past and Present* 175 (2002): 25.

¹³⁵ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. James, 206-207.

seems aware of this, and indicates that this specific event prompted new discussions, something he emphasizes with the last sentence. Though it is not really clear, one could suppose that the discussion on the Holy Writ may have been connected with the emerging concept of Purgatory; as this story carries within it several properties that would become popular due to the effects of the development of purgatorial thought, such as alms-giving and prayers influencing the fate of a dead person, or the possibility of post-mortem absolution.

Walter's revenant accounts thus represent several different facets of the lore. These differences allow one to perceive the vastness of the lore itself, and to understand that no single lore could remain unaffected by the other beliefs the people shared. In three of his stories the Church has a strong presence either as advisor or absolver. Though it has to be said that Walter seems to be leaning away from the possibility of demon possession, for him it was the living and the spirits of the dead, not demons requiring to be vanquished, that needed Church intervention. Walter was a collector of stories and "most of his material is oral, 'not previously committed to writing.'"¹³⁶ Though Walter does not seem particularly to feel the urge to "prove" the genuineness of these happenings, it is clear that he was recording something in the reality of which he believed. For him, as for others in his time, these phenomena were real. This makes his record of them and his approach to them invaluable for anyone looking into revenant lore.

3.2 William of Newburgh and the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*

William of Newburgh left decidedly little information about himself and his life within the pages of the *Historia*. Nevertheless, it has to be said that whatever is

¹³⁶ Otter, *Inventiones*, 124.

known about him comes from the bits and pieces he inserted within the *Historia*. It is, for example, known that he was born *ca.* 1136,¹³⁷ in Bridlington.¹³⁸ He is identified as “William Parvus” and as “Master William Parvus canon of Newburgh.”¹³⁹ When William entered Newburgh Priory¹⁴⁰ is not exactly known, though the author states that it was there that he was educated as a boy.¹⁴¹

On the dating of the *Historia*, Howlett formerly stated that it “was begun in or before 1196, and that shortly after May 1198, William of Newburgh went to his rest, leaving his work unrevised.”¹⁴² The general consensus though seems to have moved on to agree with Kate Norgate’s findings, who pointed to “the spring of 1199 and the autumn of 1201 as the limits of time within which”¹⁴³ the *Historia* was composed. Thus the date of William’s death has been pushed back to 1201.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ It is Richard Howlett editor of the Rolls series, who fixes the date. Howlett, introduction xviii, xxvi, William of Newburgh, *The History of William of Newburgh*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1996), 402.

¹³⁸ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 55.

¹³⁹ This was the discovery of John Gorman, the editor of William’s commentary on the Song of Songs. “postscripts and an incipit to two of the three manuscript copies of William’s *Explanatio sacri epithalamii*, which identify him as ‘William Parvus’ and as ‘Master William Parvus canon of Newburgh’.” (*William of Newburgh’s Explanatio sacri epithalamii in matrem sponsi, A Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, ed. John Gorman as cited in Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 54). Whether Parvus actually represented a surname remains unclear as it could simply be a descriptive nickname, which too was common.

¹⁴⁰ Newburgh Priory was established 1142-3, by Roger de Mowbray. P. G. Walsh, and M. J. Kennedy, eds, Introduction, 2, William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs: Book I*, ed. P. G. Walsh, and M. J. Kennedy (Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips ltd., 1988).

¹⁴¹ William of Newburgh, *The History of William of Newburgh*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1996), 418. There have been attempts to shed further light on the pre-religious life of the historian. It was H. E. Salter, in 1907, who, through the usage of several charters in the Cotton Manuscript, identified William of Newburgh as ‘William son of Elyas’, or more precisely Elyas de Meisnilhermer. He argued that if William was indeed the son of Elyas, he was a layman and only entered the Newburgh Priory after 1182 (H. E. Salter, “William of Newburgh,” *The English Historical Review* 22, no.87). As it were the theory failed to gather acknowledgement as renowned historians disputed it, such as C. N. L. Brooke, Review of *William of Newburgh’s Explanatio Sacri Epithalamii in Matrem Sponsi*. *The English Historical Review* 77, no.304 (1962): 554, and Gransden, *Historical Writing*, 263.

¹⁴² Howlett, Introduction, xxiv. Gransden (*Historical Writing*, 263), as well as John Gillingham (John Gillingham, “Two Yorkshire Historians Compared: Roger Howden and William of Newburgh,” *Haskins Society Journal* 12 (2002): 15-37.) were in complete agreement with him.

¹⁴³ Kate Norgate, “The Date of Composition of William of Newburgh’s History.” *The English Historical Review* 19, no.74 (1904): 295.

¹⁴⁴ Her main argument is William’s statement on the Abbot of Byland, Roger. “Roger, a man of singular integrity, who still survives in a fruitful old age, having nearly completed the fifty-seventh year of his administration.” (William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 420) There is

Gorman, too, stated that “William could have died no earlier than the summer of 1199,”¹⁴⁵ as the necessary amount of time for the completion of the *Historia* had to be taken into account.

If the date of William’s death remains in some doubt, all seem agreed on the belief that the *Historia*, as it was preserved, was a first draft. It was commissioned by Abbot Ernald of Rievaulx, as William himself writes within the dedication.¹⁴⁶ William seems to have had close relations with the Cistercians of Yorkshire; the language of his dedication indicates something close to friendship. The original manuscript of the *Historia*, written by William of Newburgh himself, has not survived. The main manuscript used by the historians was “a manuscript which belonged to Newburgh priory [...] presumably copied directly from William’s own manuscript.”¹⁴⁷ It was Howlett who dated the manuscript to around the year 1200.¹⁴⁸

The *Historia* covers a time frame that stretches from the Norman Conquest, 1066, to 1197, some 131 years. The work itself is based on a chronological flow. The way William read and presented his accounts, especially of supernatural phenomena, is of utmost importance. His narration is descriptive and full of details, even if the anecdote itself is quite short. He is clearly the guide within the pages, as well as the interpreter. “William’s sense of his own voice was so powerful that it led him to re-write his sources thoroughly – so thoroughly indeed that until the late

more detailed information on Roger, the Abbot of Byland, in a chronicle written on the Abbey of Byland itself, by Roger’s successor Abbot Philip. In Philip’s chronicle it is stated that Roger, indeed, had resigned after fifty-four years, but had continued to live in the abbacy three more years (Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 55). Thus Abbot Roger seems to have been hale and alive at the time of William’s statement. “Since Roger was alive and in his last year when William was writing Book I of the *Historia*, the work must have been begun late in 1198” (Partner, 55).

¹⁴⁵ Gorman, Introduction, 10. as quoted in Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 55.

¹⁴⁶ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 397.

¹⁴⁷ Walsh and Kennedy, introduction 19.

¹⁴⁸ Howlett, Introduction, xi-xii.

nineteenth century it was believed that his history was an entirely independent creation.”¹⁴⁹ In the dedication letter to Abbot Ernard of Rievaulx, William refers to “history as a relaxation from the weightier disciplines of theology and scriptural study, although he was to demonstrate throughout the History how seriously he took the historian’s task.”¹⁵⁰ This indicates a certain enjoyment and freedom on the author’s part while writing the histories. It was William himself who set the bar high for his own work, taking care with the testimonies and witnesses he used, and to explain and record the events.

All these have led to certain feelings of kinship in the modern historian, which have caused some to go a step further while interpreting William’s work, especially concerning the revenants and prodigies which - at least until recently - would have no place at all in a “modern” work of history. There have been attempts to identify William’s revenants as simple metaphors of the Longbeard story that precedes them.¹⁵¹ “These marvels, therefore, both the ones that are capable of rational explanation and those that work well on a metaphorical level, pose no real threat to William’s rationality and explanatory categories.”¹⁵² Trying to turn Newburgh into an actual “Modern Historian” with modern values — the first he was not; the second he did not have — is doomed from the very start. Once William was convinced that an event was supernatural and authentic, like Walter, he

¹⁴⁹ Gillingham, “Two Yorkshire Historians Compared,” 19.

¹⁵⁰ Walsh and Kennedy, Introduction, 6.

¹⁵¹ Longbeard was a rebel and conspirator who ‘inflamed the needy and moderately wealthy with a desire for unbounded liberty and happiness, and allured the many, and held them fascinated.’ The man is later killed but William hastens to add that he had committed murder and fornication in a church before being executed. To say the least William did not paint a nice picture of this man. (William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 652-655.) The man is celebrated as a saint for sometime after his death before this mistake is rectified (William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 655-656). It is this rising popularity of Longbeard after his death that Otter reads as a metaphor for walking after death. (Otter, *Inventiones*, 103)

¹⁵² Otter, *Inventiones*, 103. By pointing out this parallel, Monica Otter, attempts to state that the revenant stories could be rationalized.

“believed”, a belief one should take at face value as it reflects the popular common belief of the people. Trying to explain away these records would simply be to disregard a genuine belief among the people, and reduce folklore from the vast web of belief it represents to a rhetorical tool of narration. This would be a mistake.

William was quite fascinated by the supernatural and the possible insights to be gained from such phenomena; which was why “he does give so much space and obvious effort to very peculiar things” in the *Historia*.¹⁵³ The focus here will be on his accounts of revenants, four of them to be precise, compiled towards the end of the fifth book, before the entries of the year 1196, though, as one shall see later on, the placing of the passages is hardly concrete evidence as to their dates. William seems to have collected such stories for sometime, though he “knew no special name for the things and simply described them at length”.¹⁵⁴ For the sake of remaining comprehensible, William’s walking dead will be called revenants, throughout this study, as is the norm nowadays. “William selects a few of the stories he had acquired (he refers often to the many examples known) and arranges them to illustrate the consistency in appearance and behavior from one [revenant] to another and thus creates a category for them.”¹⁵⁵

William approached these anecdotes with his usual critical stance, not critical *per se* in the sense that he disbelieved the stories once he was convinced of the authenticity of the sources, but as to their nature and what they revealed. What worried him was that he could neither determine nor explain the nature of these “prodigies” for sure. There is no doubt that he was equally frustrated and fascinated by these events. William seems to be hesitant to attribute any one reason to the

¹⁵³ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 114.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 134.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 139-140. Nancy Partner in her book labels these walking dead as ‘vampires,’ to avoid any confusion the word was replaced with [revenant].

walking dead. Though the demonic possession theory was popular, that is, with the churchmen who recorded the said events, it will become apparent that William's stance changes from story to story, probably in connection with who his sources were and how they told him the story. "The explanation that demons possess dead bodies and move them does not entirely satisfy him",¹⁵⁶ though he did not avoid indications when it came down to it.

William in his first revenant story starts immediately by pointing out his sources and indicating that the same information had been gathered from different sources; there was more than one source and they all agreed.

In these days a wonderful event befell in the country of Buckingham, which I, in the first instance, partially heard from certain friends, and was afterwards more fully informed by Stephen, the venerable archdeacon of that province.¹⁵⁷

William thus personally ratifies the anecdote through someone of authority and stature connected to the region where the event took place. Though there is no precise information as to how the man who became the revenant died, William gives quite a lot of details. The man,

was laid in the tomb on the eve of the Lord's Ascension. On the following night, however, having entered the bed where his wife was reposing, he not only terrified her on awaking, but nearly crushed her by the insupportable weight of his body. The next night, also, he afflicted the astonished woman in the same manner, who, frightened at the danger, as the struggle of the third night drew near, took care to remain awake herself, and surround herself with watchful companions. Still he came; but being repulsed by the shouts of the watchers, and seeing that he was prevented from doing mischief, he departed. Thus driven from his wife, he harassed, in a similar manner, his own brothers, who were dwelling in the same street.¹⁵⁸

William does not label this man as evil, nor does he mention the manner of the man's death. The revenant returns the night after the burial. Interestingly, the

¹⁵⁶ Caciola, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual," 22

¹⁵⁷ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 656.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 656.

revenant seems to be shy of crowds and turns towards easier prey. The brothers follow the wife's example, which leads the revenant to rampage among animals. Animals, in nearly all revenant stories react to the presence of the walking dead, most of the time noisily and with agitation. Additionally it should be stated that the victims of revenants are generally the kin or neighbors of the dead person. Here also, William establishes that all the victims were somehow connected to the revenant. This could be indicative that the spirit that "walked" the revenant in actuality belonged to the dead man himself, which would make seeking out his kin more plausible, than if an unconnected demon was doing it.

He began to wander abroad in daylight, formidable, indeed, to all, but visible only to a few; for oftentimes, on his encountering a number of persons, he would appear to one or two only, though at same time his presence was not concealed from the rest.¹⁵⁹

That the revenant was walking in daylight is interesting, but, as we have seen, not unique. The strangeness here lies in the selective visibility, but more general perception of the revenant by the villagers. A touch of hysteria might be involved here, but it still has to be taken into account, as it seems unique to this revenant alone.

The people involved, having been quite terrorized, decide to approach the Church for advice. The representative they approach is William's own authoritative source, Stephen the Archdeacon, as well as the clergy he presides over. Stephen in turn opts to contact the Bishop of Lincoln.¹⁶⁰

The bishop being amazed at his account, held a searching investigation with his companions; and there were some who said that such things had often befallen in England, and cited frequent examples to show that tranquility could not be restored to the people until the body of this most wretched man

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 657.

¹⁶⁰ Partner has suggested 'the Carthusian Hugh' as the bishop in question (*Serious Entertainments*, 138). Hugh became the bishop of Lincoln in 1181 and died in 1200.

were dug up and burnt.¹⁶¹

The companions here are probably the bishop's staff. William with this passage at once testifies that these events were common in England, and that the Church was very much aware of such a belief, as well as of the established ways of getting rid of revenants. "Does it mean that these companions of the bishop, who presumably were clerics, shared the belief of the laity in the efficiency of burning? Or were they just warning him that in such cases local people never felt safe unless this was done?"¹⁶² Regardless of the answer, the fact that the companions suggest such a remedy indicates that it was commonplace, and the response the people expected. If they themselves genuinely believed in the remedy — as the Melrose revenant story to be dealt with below will suggest — is quite possible — it would mean that this belief was spread throughout society clerical as well as lay.

This proceeding, however, appeared indecent and improper in the last degree to the reverend bishop, who shortly after addressed a letter of absolution, written with his own hand, to the archdeacon, in order that it might be demonstrated by the inspection in what state the body of that man really was, and he commanded his tomb to be opened, and the letter having been laid upon his breast, to be again closed.¹⁶³

This statement, when taken into account with the counsel given by the bishop's companions and the actions taken in the other revenant stories that were collected by William of Newburgh, indicates that what the bishop did was neither common nor customary. What the bishop proposed was a new and unheard of way of disposing of revenants, but it did work.

So the sepulchre having been opened, the corpse was found as it had been placed there, and the charter of absolution having been deposited upon its breast, the tomb once more closed, he was thenceforth never more seen to wander, nor permitted to inflict annoyance or terror upon any one.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 657.

¹⁶² Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 391.

¹⁶³ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 657.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 657.

The body is not described as gory, though this may be due to the fact that no one attacks the revenant with objects, blunt or sharp, as was often the case against revenants. The absence of these elements though might help to explain why the man is seen as capable of being absolved. Also, another important point would be the fact that the absolution worked. This would indicate that the revenant was not a corpse possessed by a demon, but a restless spirit come-back to the world in its own flesh, indeed the exact thing that was the basis of revenant lore.

This revenant anecdote, as was Walter's last one, is quite special. It carries within it elements such as port-mortem absolution that would later — with the development and spread of the belief in Purgatory — become commonplace. Still one can perceive that as yet such measures were neither common nor widespread. It is quite possible that the bishop of Lincoln had come into contact with theological discussions of Purgatory, which would allow him to make the leap of logic and try to absolve the trouble-maker. It should be emphasized that, unlike in the later “ghost stories” that would spread with the elaboration of purgatorial ideas, or Walter's last revenant, there was no plea for absolution on the revenant's part. The revenant's actions are in direct harmony with revenant lore. Thus it could be said that this anecdote is one of the early indications that change was on its way.

The second revenant account has a slightly different approach to it. William states that this revenant incident in Berwick “happened around the same time”¹⁶⁵ as the Buckinghamshire one, which makes the apparent differences all the more interesting.

In this town a certain man, very wealthy, but, as it afterwards appeared, a great rogue, having been buried, after his death sallied forth (by the contrivance, as it is believed, of Satan) out of his grave by night borne hither and thither, pursued by a pack of dogs with loud barkings; this striking great

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 657.

terror into the neighbors and returning to his tomb before daylight.¹⁶⁶

All this in one breath. In this single sentence, William confirms that most of the revenant lore was present in this instance. The man, as William states, turned out to be a “great rogue”, which makes it apparent that one had to have been “wicked” in some way to become a revenant. Here, the fact that the man “walked” seems to have been testimony enough to his wickedness, rather than any specific properties of his wickedness being testified beforehand. The animals, as was the case in the previous story, react to the revenant with agitation.

The main difference between the Berwick and Buckinghamshire revenants is the fact that here William is not at all sure as to the nature of phenomenon, though clearly it was a corpse walking. The force behind it is left somewhat obscure. William uses the phrase “it is believed” when he mentions the involvement of Satan, and he does this seemingly as a side note. This could be taken as an indication that William was not ready completely to commit himself to this explanation, though the usage of phrases such as “borne hither and thither” might also suggest demonic possession, wherein the corpse becomes the object, being used and moved by an external force. However one has to state that this does not necessarily exclude a role for the man’s soul. Another plausible explanation, here, could be that William’s source was one that perceived the phenomenon as demonic possession, which would lead William to avoid changing any information given by his source as to the nature of the event, even if he himself was unsure of how to explain it.

the higher and middle classes of the people held a necessary investigation into what was requisite to be done; the more simple among them fearing, in the event of negligence, to be soundly beaten by this prodigy of the grave; but the wiser shrewdly concluding that were a remedy further delayed, the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 657.

atmosphere, infected and corrupted by the constant whirlings through it of the pestiferous corpse, would engender disease and death to a great extent; the necessity of providing against which was shown by frequent examples in similar cases.¹⁶⁷

The reaction and fear, as William demonstrates, differs among different groups of people, showing “how social and educational differences affected reactions to the specter’s activities.”¹⁶⁸ The story also points to the fact that the connection between revenants and disease was clearly commonplace knowledge amongst the “wiser” people, knowledge drawn from other examples known to them, leading them to advise urgency in the disposal of the revenant.

All in all this revenant has none of the personal touches that the Buckinghamshire revenant sported; the victims are not identified as was the case with the Buckinghamshire revenant where the victims were immediate family. This impersonality of the revenant is in harmony with the walking being the devil’s work.

They, therefore procured ten young men renowned for boldness, who were to dig up the horrible carcass, and, having cut it limb from limb, reduce it into food and fuel for the flames. When this was done, the commotion ceased. Moreover, it is stated that the monster, while it was being borne about (as it is said) by Satan, had told certain persons whom it had by chance encountered, that as long as it remained unburnt the people should have no peace.¹⁶⁹

Here it should be pointed out that the additional measure of dismemberment is added to the burning of the corpse. This “hinting” at its own destruction could be seen as communication, as had been the case in one of Walter’s accounts, though it should be stated that it reminds one also of the typical “fable” villain/monster giving away the method of its own demise. Though dismemberment is quite the norm in the general revenant lore, William seems to have chosen stories where the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 657-658.

¹⁶⁸ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 392.

¹⁶⁹ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 658.

main act of disposal is burning. Satan is again mentioned as the one moving the corpse around, but William cannot seem to avoid the usage of “as it is stated” once again as a side note. Revenant lore, if this story is taken as a basis, was also self-sufficient in providing information on revenants and how to dispose of them; the Berwick revenant itself gives away the method of its destruction. Still, as it turned out, there was a slight glitch:

Being burnt, tranquility appeared to be restored to them; a pestilence, which arose in consequence, carried off the greater portion of them.¹⁷⁰

William seems to tie this after effect of the revenant’s existence to the delay in the undertaking of the precautions and remedies.

William inserts a little passage of reassurance after the Berwick anecdote. This little interruption is probably to reassure both himself and his audience that he was still strictly controlling what he was writing, that no unauthenticated stories are slipping through, that indeed, as strange and bizarre as it sounded, these things were real, as would be the stories that would follow:

It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their grave, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony.¹⁷¹

William expresses the reasonableness of doubt about such events, doubt that could only be overcome by the evidence for their truth. William “offers these prodigious events to his readers with questions, hesitations, and doubt.”¹⁷² This indicates that belief in revenants was a subject that spurred discussions for it as well as against it. William, by recording and presenting the event to the reader, attests his own belief

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 658.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 658.

¹⁷² Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 115.

in the event, a belief that came only through the convincing of the author by the evidence. The placement of this passage is telling; the Buckinghamshire and Berwick anecdotes represented two wildly different views as to the “how” of the walking. William seems not yet ready completely to accept one or the other as the explanation, as the phrase “I know not what agency” would suggest. This strengthens the possibility that William was satisfied with narrating the stories as they had come to him, avoiding to delve into the intricacies of the cause of the walking, or trying to explain; though he hastens to add that he has researched these phenomena.

It would be strange if such things should have happened formerly, since we can find no evidence of them in the works of ancient authors, whose vast labour it was to commit to writing every occurrence worthy of memory; for if they never neglected to register even events of moderate interest, how could they have suppressed a fact at once so amazing and horrible, supposing it to have happened in their day?¹⁷³

It is easy to perceive the uneasiness William felt about not finding any evidence to support the existence of such phenomena in the past. Finding such would have been reassuring, as this would mean that the walking dead were not something new. New things to the medieval mind could hardly mean anything good. Of course, as the previous chapter discussed, the belief in revenants cannot be limited to any particular time and place; Walter Map had already recorded three certain instances a few years earlier than William’s accounts, but one would guess that William was after more reliable Classical or Christian ratification than an court cleric not averse to criticizing Cistercians, even if he were to have had access to Walter Map’s writing.

As William proposed to write only what he “believed” and had “verified” to be genuine, would seem to indicate that he had examined a lot more than just four

¹⁷³ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 658.

stories. This would mean that “anecdotes testifying to belief in the walking dead were circulating actively in the 1190s.”¹⁷⁴ All in all, William decided to limit himself:

Moreover, were I to write down all the instances of this kind which I have ascertained to have befallen in our times, the undertaking would be beyond measure laborious and troublesome; so I will fain to add two more only (and these of recent occurrence) to those I have already narrated, and insert them in our history, as occasion offers, as a warning to posterity.¹⁷⁵

This would suggest that the first two, that is the Buckinghamshire and Berwick revenants may be dated sometime before the second pair of stories. Thus the fact that all the revenant stories were given in the section where William was dealing with the year 1196 does not seem to imply as fixed a dating as one would have thought. In all probability William himself came to the knowledge of these stories, or became attracted to the subject, while he was writing that section.

The opening statement of the third revenant story from the abbey of Melrose puts this into sharper focus. The death of this particular revenant is already a few years back. As revenants tended to walk soon after death, the story itself would also likely be a few years old, which may push the first two stories further back.

A few years ago the chaplain of a certain illustrious lady, casting off mortality, was consigned to the tomb in that noble monastery which is called Melrose. This man having little respect for the sacred order to which he belonged, was excessively secular in his pursuits, and — what especially blackens his reputation as a minister of the holy sacrament- so addicted to the vanity of the chase as to be designated by many by the infamous title of ‘Hundeprest,’ or the dog-priest; and this occupation, during his lifetime, was either laughed at by men, or considered in a worldly view; but after his death — as the event showed — the guiltiness of it was brought to light.¹⁷⁶

This man’s wickedness and revenancy would have special importance for William in that the man was a priest. Again the indication that becoming a revenant was and

¹⁷⁴ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 391.

¹⁷⁵ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 658.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 658-659.

had to be the direct result of wickedness on the dead man's part is prominent. William aimed to hold everyone and every event to a moral high ground: "He judged men by strict Christian moral standards – and did so even-handedly."¹⁷⁷ In the case of the Melrose Abbey revenant, William's narration comes across indignant; he seems to have felt the need to draw the lines quite clearly.

The revenant, unable to pester the inhabitants of the Abbey itself, busies himself with his former mistress. He does this by hanging around outside her bed chamber. The victim here was again familiar to the revenant. The mistress asks for help from a certain brother who on his return to the monastery gathers another brother and two young men, of the bold variety of course. They go to guard the cemetery where the body was buried. In the course of the night, the brother is left alone by his companions, as is frequently the case in such stories.

As soon as the man was left alone in this place, the devil, imagining that he had found the right moment for breaking his courage, incontinently roused up his own chosen vessel.¹⁷⁸

The wording here is peculiar to and suggestive of the demonic possession theory. The presence of the devil as the manipulator of the vessel, that is, the revenant, speaks for itself. The brother, turning out to be a harder nut to crack than the devil thought, strikes the revenant with an axe and when the revenant flees, sets off in hot pursuit. Revenants, as they were physical, actual bodies walking, were vulnerable to physical attack.¹⁷⁹ The physical struggle of the living with the dead was common in revenant lore. The revenant makes it to its grave, which:

opening of its own accord, and receiving its guest from the advance of the pursuer, immediately appeared to close again with the same facility. In the meantime, they who impatient of the coldness of the night, had retreated to

¹⁷⁷ John Gillingham, "The Historian as Judge: William of Newburgh and Hubert Walter," *The English Historical Review* 119, no.484 (2004): 1275-1276.

¹⁷⁸ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 659

¹⁷⁹ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 137.

the fire ran up though somewhat too late, and, having heard what had happened, rendered needful assistance in digging up and removing from the midst of the tomb the accursed corpse at the earliest dawn. When they had divested it of the clay cast forth with it, they found the huge wound it had received, and a great quantity of gore which had flowed from it in the sepulchre.¹⁸⁰

Finding gore in a revenant's grave was a common occurrence, though it did not always happen. Decomposition may explain the misperception or more horrifyingly, the man might have been alive. This presence of gore was, in any case, one of the reasons that many modern historians came to label these phenomena as vampires.

Having carried it away beyond the walls of the monastery and burnt it, they scattered the ashes to the winds. These things I have explained in a simple narration, as I myself heard them recounted by religious men.¹⁸¹

Thus in Melrose too the ultimate remedy for revenants is burning. William's closing comment could indicate that the properties of demonic possession recorded within the story may have come from the sources. William himself seems still reluctant to come out and say it clearly, and the association of the revenant with his former mistress may argue against it.

An interesting fact about the story of the revenant of Melrose Abbey is that nearly all the roles in the story are connected to men of religion: "The drama was played out entirely within a monastic community, yet a physical solution was adopted, apparently without hesitation or debate."¹⁸² Though the revenant chaplain and his mistress were clearly not part of the monastery, the revenant was a priest, and in the end it was disposed of by the residents of the monastery. The actions taken against the revenant, the exhumation and the burning, seem to have been the norm when people chanced upon the unusually active dead. Interestingly, the fact

¹⁸⁰ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 659.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* 659.

¹⁸² Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 392.

that the approach here did not differ indicates that the belief in revenants and how they were to be disposed of were indeed also at home within those of a religious profession. This would further the conclusion that the belief was indeed potent.

The fourth and last revenant story that William opted to include in the *Historia* occurs in a castle called “Anantis.”¹⁸³

As I have heard from an aged monk who lived in honour and authority in those parts, who related this event as having occurred in his own presence. A certain man of evil conduct flying, through fear of his enemies or the law, out of the province of York, to the lord of the before mentioned castle, took up his abode there, and having cast upon service befitting his humour, laboured hard to increase rather than correct his own evil propensities.¹⁸⁴

As always, William starts by stating his source and the trustworthiness of the said source, as well as it being a first-hand experience for the source. William himself sets this story apart as more malicious in nature, and it is the most detailed yet when it comes to the information about the man who became the revenant, his wickedness and the way he died.

The man marries and, after hearing rumors about his wife’s infidelity, decides to find out for sure. He pretends to leave on a journey that would take him several days to return from, then hides on a beam above his wife’s bedroom. Of course the wife is indeed unfaithful and the man in his rage falls down from the beam. Though the fall did not kill him,

being much shaken by the fall, and his whole body stupefied, he was attacked with a disease, in so much that the man whom I have mentioned as having related these facts to me visiting him in the pious discharge of his duties, admonished him to make confession of his sins, and receive the Christian eucharist in proper form.¹⁸⁵

Of course the man was a bit preoccupied, what with the wife’s adultery, the fall and

¹⁸³ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 660. Joseph Stevenson here proposes this castle to be Annand or Annan, in Dumfriesshire (660n.)

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 660.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 660.

her seeming casualness about the whole thing. William's narration insinuates that it is quite fitting that the reason for the man's literal downfall was his wife, or rather a woman; that they deserved each other, in a sense.

William's source is a direct participant within this narration, his knowledge on the subject is proven:

The next night destitute of Christian grace, and prey to his well-earned misfortunes, he shared the deep slumber of death. A Christian burial, indeed, he received, though unworthy of it; but it did not much benefit him: for issuing, by the handiwork of Satan, from his grave at night-time., and pursued by a pack of dogs with horrible barkings, he wandered through the courts and around the houses...¹⁸⁶

The man's death is without doubt a "bad" one. It is sudden and untimely, due to the fall, but he himself brings it upon himself by not confessing and readying himself for death as the old monk had suggested. So he is established as a "bad" man, who has brought upon himself a bad death. His walking is labeled as the "handiwork of Satan", giving a clear indication as to the leaning of William in this story as to the reason of the walking.

All men made fast their doors, and did not dare to go abroad on any errand whatever from the beginning of the night until the sunrise, for fear of meeting and being beaten black and blue by this vagrant monster. But these precautions were of no avail; for the atmosphere, poisoned by the vagaries of this foul carcass, filled every house with disease and death by its pestiferous breath.¹⁸⁷

The revenant's victims are not mentioned. Presumably they were not kin, or the revenant had not actually managed to hurt anyone physically as of yet, though the people certainly fear the possibility. William's source, the monk seems to be aware of the real danger though. The said monk

applied himself to summon a meeting of wise and religious men on that sacred day which is called Palm-Sunday, in order that they might impart

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 660.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 660.

healthful counsel in so great a dilemma.¹⁸⁸

This indicates that he was of a mind to debate a way to get rid of the revenant. Still, while all these people were dining over at the priest's house, two brothers decide to grab the problem by the throat, so to say. They had a personal grudge to settle, as their father had fallen victim to the plague.

'There is no one to hinder us; for in the priest's house a feast is in progress, and the whole town is as silent as if deserted, let us dig up this baneful pest, and burn it with fire.'¹⁸⁹

That the two brothers go at their plan in secrecy indicates a certain cloak and dagger quality to their venture, which could mean that their action would have been perceived as hasty by the group at the priest's house. It also indicates that this time there was no consensus in the town whereas, bishops excepted, there had been no indication of disagreement in the other revenant stories. The brothers start to dig, and find the corpse closer to the surface than they thought it would be. The brothers

inflicted a wound upon the senseless carcase, out of which incontinently flowed such a stream of blood, that it might have been taken for a leech filled with the blood of many persons. Then, dragging it beyond the village, they speedily constructed a funeral pile; and upon one of them saying that the pestilential body would not burn unless its heart were torn out, the other laid open its side by repeated blows of the blunted spade, and, thrusting in his hand, dragged out the accursed heart. This being torn to piecemeal, and the body now consigned to the flames, it was announced to the guests what was going on, who, running thither, enabled themselves to testify henceforth to the circumstances. When the infernal hell-hound had thus been destroyed, the pestilence which was rife among the people ceased.¹⁹⁰

In the end, it seems that everyone agreed with the actions of the youths. Still, the young men seem to be the embodiment of impatient youth in their dealing with the problem; hasty and trying to make sure of every possibility by taking every measure they could, and accommodating any superstition they could think of, such as the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 661.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 661.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 661.

business with the heart. All in all, William seems to approve of the haste of the brothers, as he cautions that such prodigies had to be dealt with fast and effectively to avoid any disease, without descending into endless debate.

In nearly all his revenant accounts, William's narration testifies to the easy belief of the people involved within the events. What is interesting though is that everyone regardless of religious office or standing "accepted the [revenants], it appears, as completely as the susceptible villagers with whom the stories originated."¹⁹¹ This clearly establishes that the belief had had a long existence in England, to be as widespread within the society as it was. Additionally "William's accounts are also rich in social context, enabling us to observe debates in which interpretations of perceived supernatural events are negotiated."¹⁹² All except the Buckinghamshire revenant are disposed of through fire. Thus it could be said that "in William's experience, many clerics and laymen were broadly in agreement on the nature of the walking dead, and the best ways of tackling them"¹⁹³ The lore itself seems to have been settled in several such properties: "wicked" man, "wicked" death, physical attacks, the possibility of disease, and disposal through fire or dismemberment. William's revenants were all only recently dead, and wandered forth from their graves quite soon after burial.

After narrating these four revenant stories, William continues: "These facts having been thus expounded, let us return to the regular thread of history."¹⁹⁴ It almost seems that even with his interest in the supernatural, he feels a relief at returning to the normal flow of events. It is as though these stories are things that he feels the need to get off of his chest. It was probably not the peculiarity of the

¹⁹¹ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 139.

¹⁹² Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 391.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 393.

¹⁹⁴ William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 661.

accounts that discomfited William, but that he was unable to find a completely satisfying answer to the questions “why” and “how”. William was inclined to connect these phenomena firmly to the divine, the one and only power that he believed encompassed everything and had control over every living thing. The demonic possession theory would thus have been tempting for him, though he does not seem to commit himself to any one explanation. He seems not exactly sure as to how to fit the lore into the explanation of demonic possession. His approach was mainly to examine them rationally and record them for “instruction rather than curiosity”.¹⁹⁵ “He subjected preternatural phenomena to careful critical examination, and was willing on occasion to admit that he could provide no explanation for them.”¹⁹⁶ Thus in cases such as the revenant accounts, it is perceptible that there comes a place where he seems to give up and shake his head in exasperation.

Both Walter Map and William of Newburgh, in their collections of revenant stories, have left behind a treasure trove of details on the belief in revenants and revenant lore. As is apparent though, from the anecdotes themselves, Walter Map and William of Newburgh’s approach differed to a certain extent, be it in their choice of representative revenant stories, or the conclusions they reached on the causes of revenant phenomena or on the reasons such phenomena existed. Both authors through their narration seem to express that such phenomena were common events in their period. Additionally, they are concerned about establishing the stories as real in the eyes of the audience. Though William is more specific and

¹⁹⁵ Walsh and Kennedy, introduction, 14.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 8.

vocal about what he is doing, Walter too is careful to insert certain details such as the name of a bishop here, the name of a location there, or precise details of the duration of the “walking” and its relation in time to the burial.

Walter and William include several diverse stories that reflected the variety existent in the lore itself, though it has to be stated that their choices of anecdotes also reflected their own beliefs and understandings of the lore they recorded. Walter, for example, chose three revenant stories, in all of which there is a clear Church presence. It plays the authority figure within the stories, the adviser. Though controversially he also adds diversity here: in the second revenant story he records, the bishop’s advice fails to work, it is the knight who, on his own, manages to dispose of the revenant, in a very direct way, while in the other two the Church is correct in its advice and action. William does not seem to feel the need to restrict himself to anecdotes where the Church is present. He does, however, seem to try to include stories where the participants are from different layers of society, the monks (or lay-brothers) of Melrose Abbey, the townspeople in Berwick and Buckinghamshire, the villagers and monk of Castle “Anantis”. Through these people William reflects the different interpretations of revenant lore.

The connection of disease, plague and revenants was an inherent part of the lore. Both William and Walter have such accounts. Still, even though both authors drew attention to the connection between diseases and revenants, their narration and description of the connection is quite different. Whereas Walter’s revenant is active in the spreading of the disease — he calls out the names of people, who then sicken and die, the revenant using the disease as he would any other physical attack — in both of William’s cases the disease seems to be an automatic and direct byproduct of the revenant phenomena, but there seems to be no conscious action on the part of

the revenant. It is the mere presence of the rotting corpse that putrefies the air and causes the disease.

In William's accounts, burning and dismemberment appear as the well established methods of disposing of revenants. The one post-mortem absolution in Buckinghamshire represents an exceptional method, and even in this case the initial reaction of the bishop's entourage reflected the norm rather than the exceptional solution arrived at by Bishop Hugh. In Walter's accounts there is no single remedy or disposal method that comes to the fore as normal; in all four there are different remedies. Actually, concerning the female revenant, there is no need for a remedy at all. Similarly, while William concerns himself with a particular category of revenant, with certain traits and behavioral patterns, and with the methods of disposing revenants of that category, Walter was decidedly curious to record the variety he had come to hear of. This might also indicate that William's generalization of the disposal method did not fully represent the wide variety of reactions and remedies to the walking dead. William's stories also reflect more strongly than Walter's the supposed role of demons in "walkings", though he professes puzzlement as to the true nature of the revenants. Walter is also at a loss as to explain the phenomena, but is less worried by this inability; his interest was chiefly in recording these bizarre and interesting events.

The two post-mortem absolutions in Walter and William's accounts, though equally bizarre in their existence and novelty, do not completely concur. In William, the post-mortem absolution is completely and only the bishop's remedy; it is clearly an innovation on his part, whereas in Walter's story, the initiative is taken by the revenant. The revenant actually rationally communicates its needs and pleads for the absolution in question; he asks specifically for the priest, thereby

determining his liaison in the earthly realm as the Church. This revenant is the only one in all of William's and Walter's accounts of malicious revenants actually to communicate rationally with the living to solve his problem. The rest just seem to wander around and wreak havoc until they are disposed of or laid to rest, and such was the norm for revenants. Walter's "knight's father" displays many properties that would only later become common lore in the later ghost stories, due to the influence and emergence of Purgatory as a particular location in the geography of the otherworld. Similarly, though less so in its nature and properties, William's Buckinghamshire revenant, with its post-mortem absolution and innovative Bishop, also indicates that the whiff of change was in the air, a change that would go as far as to dissolve the fleshy corporeality of revenants, leaving them as nothing more than spirits, albeit often with physical properties, in need of human help and pity. The revenants that were feared and who terrorized people regularly would become nothing more than apparitions to be pitied, demonstrating fates to avoid. The revenant, as recorded in Walter and William's anecdotes, would disappear into obscurity.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOUL OTHERWISE ENGAGED IN PURGATORY

As the previous chapter demonstrated, change was on its way, already affecting the late twelfth-century revenant accounts. That both Walter Map and William of Newburgh had an example of a revenant laid to rest through port-mortem absolution indicates that Purgatory, even before the belief was spread effectively among the population, had had a certain influence on the beliefs of at least some of the people. Though one has to remember that these two anecdotes were only a taste of what was to come, Purgatory in all its glory would spread throughout the Catholic Christian world, integrating itself into the beliefs of the masses. However, as we shall see, the process of this spread was a long one.

The fear and perceived possibility of the return of the restless dead, in whatever capacity, was not the only consequence of the existent anxiety felt among the living concerning the rather uncertain period to be spent between death and the Last Judgment. Another and much more clearly defined result surfaced in the twelfth century, completely and irreversibly changing the otherworld in the eyes of the people, creating a whole new geography and perception of the afterlife: the emergence of Purgatory. What is of interest here is not only the fact that the restless dead and Purgatory share in their causes the same deep set fear, but also that

Purgatory had quite an interesting and growing effect on the fate of the walking dead.¹⁹⁷ It is argued here that the seemingly mysterious absence of clear cases of the walking dead from sources dated after the thirteenth century — and even “unclear” ones are rare — and the thus hinted disappearance of the revenant lore as an active and perturbing belief from the consciousness of the people, is directly connected with the emergence of Purgatory as a place in the otherworld. Once the Church took active part in the spreading and elaboration of the said doctrine, there was no longer any room for revenants.

Purgatory can be stated to be a direct result of the anxiety that existed due to the unknown fate of the souls in the otherworld and the ensuing attempts to relieve that fear and shed further light on the dealings of the otherworld: “It was a logical step for the idea of Purgatory as a place, rather than just a concept, to develop at a time when there was increasing interest in what happened to the soul after death and before the Last Judgment.”¹⁹⁸ This anxiety, though nothing new, and certainly no stranger to the people and the theologians of Christianity, came to a head around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Though this deep set anxiety was evident among the common people and thus reflected in the writings and debates in pre-twelfth century theology, it was even more in evidence in the first half of the twelfth century when theologians focused explicitly on this question.¹⁹⁹

Looked at from a simple cause and effect point of view it is not difficult to

¹⁹⁷ Jacqueline Simpson, in her article “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England,” suggested that the spiritual properties introduced by the doctrine of Purgatory from the thirteenth century on could have been effective in the ‘changes’ that became evident in revenant lore (Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 394). Here, on the other hand, it is argued that the doctrine of Purgatory actually removed the physical revenant and its folklore from England, at the very least replacing it with its own ‘ghost stories.’

¹⁹⁸ Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England: 1066-1550* (London: Routledge, 1997), 178.

¹⁹⁹ A.J. Gurevich, “Popular and Scholarly Traditions: Notes on the Margin of Jacques Le Goff’s Book,” *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 73.

deduce that Purgatory was the answer to certain questions that had become urgent and important enough to warrant some concrete answers. It has to be stated, though, that a fully formed Purgatory did not surface spontaneously; there first emerged by slow evolution a less well defined concept of purgatory. The question of the fate of souls after death had occupied the minds of the people from the earliest times, and it turned out that, even with as systemized a religion as Christianity, there were still ambiguities to be resolved, “since the Bible and Christian theology were far from clear on this score.”²⁰⁰

One of the main reasons for this ambiguity was the fact that for the early Christians the Last Judgment, the second coming of Christ and the end of days were not events dated far, far away from their own lifespan, but just around the corner. Thus any theological debate as to what happened to the dead before the Last Judgment seems to have been a moot point for the first theologians that they were content to leave undecided: “To the early Fathers the millennium was not long distant, and the mediate period therefore one of short duration, whose nature they were content to leave imprecise.”²⁰¹ As it were, in the early period, the span between death and Last Judgment was perceived to be quite short. “Thoroughly imbued with millenarian thought and believing, more or less confusedly, that the Last Judgment was imminent, late Roman society was little inclined to refine its thinking about the interval between death and eternity.”²⁰²

As this work is more concerned with the beliefs of the common people, one could speculate that the people of the period, being affected by tradition and

²⁰⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), 48.

²⁰¹ T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgment and Remembrance* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), 46.

²⁰² Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 62.

folklore, would still have carried within them a certain fear of the dead, and of the possibility of them walking, regardless of the end of the world being nigh. Nevertheless, the uncertainty and ambiguity was an open door through which beliefs such as those concerning revenants could enter. One of the reasons as to why revenant accounts seem to surface more around the twelfth and thirteenth century could be due to them finally having gained the interest of the clergy, the ongoing speculations on the nature of the otherworld moving them to a point of interest.

This interest was not limited to revenants. Peter the Venerable, in his *De Miraculis* (1145-1156), stated that there was an increase in the number of apparitions.²⁰³ This increase of apparitions or ghosts, and the increased interest in them, leading them to be recorded more often, attests to the uncertainty felt where the afterlife was concerned. Additionally, once it became apparent that the world was not in a hurry to come to an end, trying to explain and understand where all those souls and sinners were became an important concern. Guaranteed salvation was granted only to saints and martyrs; this did not offer much hope to the less than perfect souls of common people. The speculations that would lead to the development of the conception of Purgatory “did not result from the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, which did not envisage the existence of Purgatory; they were dictated instead by the preoccupations of people in the Middle Ages; their fear of the eternal torments of hell.”²⁰⁴ Self-preservation, even after one’s death, was a strong motivation. Thus from the twelfth century on there would surface a possibility or rather an opportunity for the salvation of those who were less than perfect; this change was both a reason for the creation of Purgatory and a result of the changes it wrought. It would become unacceptable that only monks or people

²⁰³ Ibid. 180.

²⁰⁴ Gurevich. “Popular and Scholarly Traditions,” 78.

living like monks could attain salvation and thus heaven. The focus of the people and the Church was moving to those within the society that were “salvageable”.

There were several beliefs and ideas as to where the dead resided in the period between death and Last Judgment. “The most popular was the bosom of Abraham, the authority for which ultimately came from the Bible.”²⁰⁵ Also identified with the *refrigerium*, the bosom of Abraham was a place designated for the pure, righteous and pious. It was a “place of refreshment and peace.”²⁰⁶ So what happened to the more tarnished souls of normal people; what was their designated place? The ecclesiastical idea was that the dead awaited the Last Judgment “either in the grave or in some dark but neutral region, such as the *Sheol* of the Old Testament, which as not distinguished from the grave.”²⁰⁷ One could say that the answer given was neither too comforting nor too illuminating, and this prompted further speculation and elaboration on the topic.

It could thus be argued that there was no clear picture as to either the whereabouts of the souls of the dead or their condition in the otherworld, until the coming of the Last Judgment, a “day of whose coming no man knew, when the blessed would be received into Paradise and the wicked pass to everlasting damnation.”²⁰⁸ This uncertainty led to another effective notion that lay at the roots of the creation of Purgatory: the instinct of self-preservation of human beings. As it were, for the everyday man, who could not claim sainthood, there was no clear way to attain salvation and the promised land of heaven. One has to imagine all the things that were perceived to be sins: laughing at unsuitable moments, loving your

²⁰⁵ Daniell, *Death and Burial*, 176

²⁰⁶ Andrew Skotnicki, “God’s Prisoners: Penal Confinement and the Creation of Purgatory,” *Modern Theology* 22, no.1 (2006): 92.

²⁰⁷ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 133.

²⁰⁸ Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages*, 19.

family too much, inane chattering; no one could really claim to be sinless. “For ordinary mortals the choice lay starkly open between Heaven and Hell, with the strong likelihood of the latter.”²⁰⁹

It was this problem that caused, as early as the third century, ideas to surface, that would, eventually after a slow and hardly linear process, lead to the creation of the doctrine of Purgatory. This process is the emergence of the concept of purgatory which would evolve into Purgatory as a place in the otherworld. “The idea that the chastisement inflicted by the gods is not punishment but rather a means of education and salvation, part of a process of purification,”²¹⁰ borrowed from Platonian thought, lay at the basis of the concept. As such, this thought allowed there to be a different result other than the immediate salvation or damnation that the Christians faced as a result of the Last Judgment.

It was the fate of those common people who were neither pure saints nor completely evil or infidels in a system that had no space for any intermediate groups between those two that prompted the search. The situation of the souls that fell in between these two groups was one of the main reasons for the emergence of a certain change in the classification of souls beyond death. “Clement of Alexandria was the first to distinguish two categories of sinners and two categories of punishments in this life and in the life to come”: those to be chastised and educated and those to be penalized.²¹¹

Similarly Ambrosiaster, who lived around the first half of the fourth century, pointed out three categories; “the saints and the righteous, who will go directly to heaven at the time of resurrection; the ungodly, apostates, infidels, and atheists, who

²⁰⁹ R.W.Southern, “Between Heaven and Hell,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 June 1982, 651.

²¹⁰ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 52

²¹¹ Clement of Alexandria died before 215 (Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 54).

will go directly into the fiery torments of Hell; and the ordinary Christians, who though sinners, will first pay their debt and for a time be purified by fire then go to Paradise, because they had the faith.”²¹² Here, it is important to point out that though the word “directly” is used, it is used in connection with the phrase “at the time of resurrection”. Thus, though this mitigated to some extent the existent anxiety as far as the salvation of the ordinary people was concerned, it did not answer the question of where those souls would be until the Last Judgment. The exact schedule or organization remained obscure.

The idea that a certain kind of purification of the tarnished but righteous souls in the otherworld was existent from quite an early time on, so as to allow the salvation of the believers that were neither martyrs nor saints. This idea, though it lacked specifics, would grow and evolve into the doctrine of Purgatory around the twelfth century. Before that, however, there were no set beliefs as to when and where this purification was to take place. When revenants are considered in this light, a further uncertainty surfaces. Though being generally described as bad people having come to a bad end, this sometimes involved the more “petty” kind of evil. Thus it is hard to determine whether they would fit any particular category. Even if they did fit in with the damned, one needs to consider how their untimely deaths would figure into this categorization.

The categorization of souls would come to a head with Augustine’s interpretation. Le Goff argues that Augustine divided men into four categories. The first two were the godless and evil people who ended up directly in hell; and the exact opposite, saints and martyrs and righteous people who went to heaven even if they had slight, mind, very slight tarnishes. The interesting part is how he treats

²¹² Ibid. 61.

those who do not fall into these two categories. “Between these two extremes are those who are not altogether good or altogether wicked. Those who are not altogether wicked are destined to go to Hell: the best that can be hoped for them is a ‘more tolerable’ Hell... This leaves souls that are not altogether good. These can (perhaps) be saved by passing through a purgatorial fire.”²¹³ Purgatory would be based on the existence of these categories, albeit with some heavy modification. The point would be Augustine’s somewhat hesitant acceptance of the possibility of post-mortem purification through fire, and its possible recipients. Augustine argued that the good and the wicked were sorted out immediately; unlike Ambrosiaster he does not tie this purification to the Last Judgment. Thus, “with St. Augustine the doctrine of purifying and expiatory pain between death and judgment was established.”²¹⁴ It was still not exactly clear when these people were sorted out into their categories, nor when and where they are purified. Augustine even argued that this process began in the earthly realm.²¹⁵

Augustine’s categories should be seen alongside the four “good”/“bad” life/death categories explained in the first chapter, as these too affected the fate of the dead in the eyes of the living. In addition, setting aside the two extremes of good life and good death and bad life and bad death, the intermediate two categories were like Augustine’s, ambiguous in nature. One could live a good life but have it nullified by a sudden, violent bad death, whereas a bad life could be mitigated through a good Christian death, with all its accessories ranging from confession and penance to absolution. Still it has to be stressed that the four categories of life and death, with that lack of control over the manner of death, must have seemed much

²¹³ Ibid. 69.

²¹⁴ Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages*, 46.

²¹⁵ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 70.

more random and frightening to the people than Augustine's four categories.

It was Augustine's four categories that would reign over at least ecclesiastical and academic ideas about the otherworld and its envisaged topography until the twelfth century. That a purgatorial process existed was not doubted at this point, biblically supported, if somewhat dubiously, as they were by "St. Paul's words about a man's works in wood, hay and stubble being burnt, while the man himself was saved."²¹⁶ This process of purification was not yet separated from Hell; the fact that the purification process was inherently tied to the image of fire created an intricate bond between the images of purification and hell. Thus, hell in early visionary literature is commonly described as having several layers; mostly these were designated as the upper and lower hell: "The infernal part is often subdivided into an upper gehenna through which the visionary travels and a lower gehenna of which the traveler only sees the opening, the terrifying mouth of the pit."²¹⁷

That divisions as such existed in a pre-Purgatory otherworld could be seen as an indication that a search for the possibility of the salvation of the imperfect was not a stranger to men. As it were, this division did not ensure, as Purgatory later would, certain salvation; it was hell after all. The Apocalypse of Paul, composed in the third century, "was the first to introduce the distinction between an upper and a lower Hell."²¹⁸ Though between the sixth and twelfth centuries not much was clarified theologically, the visionary literature speaks of the continuous existence of a purgatorial concept. However, "the visions still represent the world beyond the

²¹⁶ Southern, "Between Heaven and Hell," 651.

²¹⁷ Jacques Le Goff, "The Learned and Popular Dimensions of Journeys in the Otherworld in the Middle Ages," In *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (New York: Moutan Publishers, 1984), 24.

²¹⁸ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 35.

grave as more or less amorphous; it was not rigidly structured.”²¹⁹

A vision recorded by St. Boniface in the early eighth century could be used as an example. The visionary was an English monk:

At first he saw terrible flames, in which the sinners’ souls like black birds were falling into wells. An angel who accompanied this wanderer explained to him: the brief instant, in which the souls escape from the fire-breathing wells and rest in peace, signifies that on the coming day of judgment the Lord will grant them deliverance from suffering and give them eternal peace.²²⁰

The visionary is then shown the “lower hell” where other souls are tortured, though it is made clear that these would be damned forever. Thus, though the concept of purgation in the afterlife was a possibility, as of yet the concept was not mature enough to warrant its own space; it is described as an “upper hell” where light at the end of the tunnel was possible.

The vision of Drythelm, dated 735, recorded within Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, for the first time described “a specific place set apart for purgation in the other world through which the hero is traveling.”²²¹ What one finds seems to be created with the four classifications of Augustine in mind. Drythelm is shown souls undergoing torment through cold and fire, which leads him to deduce that this place must be hell, upon which his guide replies that this was actually not hell as he thought. Seemingly to reinforce this comment Drythelm comes upon the entrance to hell actual. A similar episode is described upon the touring of a paradise-like place. The guide then explains;

The valley that you saw, with its awful fire and freezing cold, is the place in which those souls have to be tried and chastened who delayed to confess and make restitution for the sins they had committed until they were on the point of death; and so they died. But because they did repent and confess, even though on their deathbed, they will all come to the kingdom of heaven on

²¹⁹ Gurevich. “Popular and Scholarly Traditions,” 83.

²²⁰ Ibid. 81.

²²¹ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 110.

judgement day; and the prayers of those who are still alive, their alms and fasting and specially the celebration of masses, help many of them to get free even before the day of judgement... This flowery place in which you see a fair and youthful company, so joyous and bright, is where the souls are received of those who depart from the body practicing good works; but they are not in such a state of perfection as that they deserve to be received immediately into the kingdom of heaven.²²²

Similarly, the vision of Wetti, dated 824: the monk, having fallen ill, is treated to a journey through the otherworld, under the guidance of an angel. Wetti

saw there a certain building like a castle, built very irregularly with wood and stone and discolored by soot, with smoke rising out of it. When he asked what it was, the angel said that this was the dwelling place of monks from different places and regions gathered together for their purgation.²²³

Note that here the only ones qualified for any purgation seem to be monks; one could connect this to the fact that the visionary himself was a monk, although other visions propose a larger quantity of souls of no certain occupation to be saved.

These evident ideas of purgation, even though quite developed, have no uniform manifestation; the accounts differ and as such they cannot signify the existence of a matured and shaped belief system. It is as of yet still being shaped. These accounts do however point to one notion that seems to have been becoming a set belief; they “relate the idea of judgment of the soul occurring immediately after the death of each person.”²²⁴ Still, one has to state that if this had not been the case, then there would have been nothing for the visionary to see or tell of if everyone were to be suspended in waiting for the coming of Judgment Day. It is understandable that the visionary literature adopted this belief.

Within historical studies there are cases where it was argued that that Purgatory as a place within the geography of the otherworld existed from early

²²² Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle Bede's Letter to Egbert*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 256.

²²³ Eileen Gardiner, ed., *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica Press, 1989), 69.

²²⁴ Gurevich. “Popular and Scholarly Traditions,” 82.

Christianity onwards, using the purgatorial process being described, albeit timidly, as evidence to its existence. In the light of the study of Jacques Le Goff, one is recommended to use caution. Trying with hindsight to unearth the previous existence of a current term would be erroneous here. For the people at the time, the described places of torture and purgation could be perceived as little more than mere layers of hell and nothing more. This only implies that the concept of postmortem purification was in existence. A layered hell would become an indispensable part of the visionary literature, integrating into the minds of the people the possibility of salvation. “Hell in this period is still not conceived of purely as a place where deliverance from its torments is impossible.”²²⁵ It was only with the “invention” of Purgatory as a separate entity and place, that the distinction from hell became definite, though the, at times mentioned, separate layers of hell would prove to be the foundations of Purgatory as a separate place in its own right. The earlier visionary accounts point to the significant string of ideas, beliefs and images that would in time lead to the “invention” and “unification” of the concept of Purgatory, as it would come to be known after the end of the twelfth century, molded under that name into Purgatory itself.

There are other strands to this story. Gregory the Great was another influential figure who played a part within the development of the concept of Purgatory. His ideas were similar to those of Augustine, though he focused on the kinds of sins that would warrant purgation: “‘slight, petty, minor’ sins, which he specifies, and he clearly states that the action of the fire will take place only after death,”²²⁶ removing Augustine’s suggestion that purgation could start within the earthly realm. It is not only Gregory’s theoretical arguments on the concept of

²²⁵ Ibid. 81

²²⁶ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 91.

purification that are of interest here. To support his theories, Gregory included in his *Dialogues* (593-594) several anecdotes on ghosts, who came back to earth to be purged of their sins. These anecdotes would provide a certain stencil for later ghost stories that involve purgatorial belief, and of course the tales used within the exempla and sermons by the Church to further the belief of Purgatory, once it was officially accepted as a doctrine. One of these was an encounter in a bathing house, where a priest is served by some unknown attendant, who, it turns out, is the very much dead former master of the baths, doing penance by serving. “He begs the priest instead to offer the bread in the sacrifice for his sins, and when the priest returned to the baths he found him no longer there.”²²⁷ Thus Gregory tied together the possibility of postmortem purification with the mitigating effect of the mass performed by the living on the condition of the dead. By implication perhaps, this also spoke to the effectiveness of the prayers of the living, which can also be glimpsed in Drythelm’s vision. This idea is the third main concept upon which Purgatory would be founded.

“Christians seem to have acquired the habit of praying for their dead at a very early date.”²²⁸ This custom, having become lodged into systematized Christianity, brought on arguments about how the dead would be able to benefit from the masses, alms and prayers of the living. This custom was also supported by the Fathers of the Church: “Augustine thought that prayers and alms for the dead were worth while.”²²⁹ Similarly, Gregory’s anecdotes indicate that intervention on the part of the living could indeed be of use to the dead. The concern of the living about the condition and suffering of the dead was thus of the utmost importance in

²²⁷ R.R. Atwell, “From Augustine to Gregory the Great: an Evaluation of the Emergence of the Doctrine of Purgatory,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38, no.2 (1987): 181.

²²⁸ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 45.

²²⁹ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 36.

the emergence of the doctrine of Purgatory. The concept of purgatorial punishment actually ratified the effectiveness of the prayers of the living, even while the prayers and desire of the living to be able to help the dead in some way ratified the concept of purgatorial punishment. The two were tied inherently to one another. If the prayers of the living were effective for the dead, which of the dead could benefit? Certainly not the damned, as they were beyond any help mortal or divine; nor those who were categorized as pure and completely good; they were already in heaven or on the way, so they would need no encouragement from their living brethren. Who then would qualify? Who else was left but Augustine's intermediate categories, or at least the better of them?

Purification was achieved through fire. It was as essential for the imaginings of the purgatorial process as it was for hell. Here, though, it took on a function that surpassed being a simple tool of torment; it was purifying. The distinction between hellfire and purgatorial fire was that purgatorial fire, while as painful as the former, was temporary in nature and offered the chance of salvation and thus hope, while hellfire was the embodiment of eternal torture and despair. Here, on a side note, it would be useful to remember that fire was seen as one of the main methods of disposal for the walking dead. People may have sought the purification of the corpse, or in an unexpected bout of logical thinking they may have simply seen fire as the most effective way to destroy the body.

With the concept of purgatory gaining strength and its further development, it was accepted that the judgment of individuals had to figure somewhere in the afterlife, ensuring everyone got what was due to them. Still the uncertainty as to the time of Last Judgment would remain until the official emergence of the doctrine of Purgatory, which pushed it far from the minds of the people. The teachings of the

Church remained “that the Last Judgment divided humanity into two classes.”²³⁰ Due to these conflicts it would be valid to state that indeed Purgatory as a place in the otherworld was slow to evolve. This may probably be due to the fact that it lacked the clear backing of scripture, and that the belief itself required a whole new structuring in the geography of the otherworld. As such it would have been nigh impossible to bring about such a change without a period of deliberation. For Purgatory to fully develop, it had to first detach itself from hell and then surpass the “in-between” places already in existence within the minds of the people; i.e. the *refrigerium* and the bosom of Abraham.²³¹ Purgatory, apart from its effects on the afterlife, would also have effects on the earthly realm, giving more power (as well as wealth) to the Church and changing the people’s approach to and perception of death. The very gradualness of the process may have aided its complete acceptance by the people.

The basic properties of the future place Purgatory started to be worked out with the coming of the twelfth century, when once again the interest and anxiety of the people seems to have peaked enough to stimulate the interest of theologians. A space such as Purgatory “would not have been invented in the twelfth century unless humankind had felt the need to alleviate the contrast between the two extremes and to pray for souls whose fates were deemed undecided.”²³² The arguments, apart from the nature of purgatorial fire, focused on the types of sin: what was pardonable after death and what was not. “The expression ‘venial sin’ belongs to that group of notions and words that emerged in the twelfth century

²³⁰ Skotnicki, “God’s Prisoners,” 91.

²³¹ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 6.

²³² DuBruck, “Introduction,” 11

along with purgatory.”²³³ Venial sins, as it were, once they were deliberated through debate and arguments, became an inherent part of the system of Purgatory. Once it all started to become systematized, the Church as well as the population began to be reeducated; the differences of the types of sins that existed were being explained to the common people. If one was careful and knowledgeable as to what to avoid, salvation was a viable option.

Some conception of pardonable, unabsolved sins had been around as long as some conception of purgatorial fire. Caesarius of Arles (d.542) had categorized sins into *criminal capitalia* and a pardonable group for which he designated no single name, but called them *parva* (petty), *quotidiana* (routine), *minuta* (trifling).²³⁴ The term venial would come to encompass all these slight sins once it emerged. These sins were indispensable for the purgatorial system as their designation made salvation possible for the ordinary man. They, as well as the intervention of the living in the form of prayers, were effective in the determination of how long the dead person was to suffer in Purgatory.²³⁵

Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109) insisted on the implicit role of the ignorance of a person who sinned. In his *Cur Deus homo*, he stated that a sin, regardless of how horrible it was, was venial if committed in ignorance, and thus it could be purged.²³⁶ Peter Lombard, in his *Sentences* (c.1157), touched on a similarly interesting point. He brought forth the importance of the conscience of the individual. He “declared that *any* sin truly repented is remitted by purgatorial pains after death, and that minor (venial) sins are purged even if they have not been

²³³ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 217.

²³⁴ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 87.

²³⁵ Gurevich. “Popular and Scholarly Traditions,” 74.

²³⁶ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 214.

repented.”²³⁷ Thus the morality and conscience of the individual came to play an important role in their designation after death in the otherworld. As such, repentance became a strong tool, if one was sincere enough, it could turn a mortal sin pardonable. This continued even after the “invention” of Purgatory, as the doctrine was being shaped and formed through the discussions of theologians. Sin, ignorance, morality, intention and where these would land one in the otherworld were all being deliberated.

During the course of the twelfth century the four categories of Augustine were melted down to three, the damned, the saved and the mediocre, which one way or another had the chance of being purified within the purgatorial fires.²³⁸ This had the effect of widening the category of the salvageable. Purgatory was thus established to host this middling group of people who were neither completely wicked nor completely good; and this place was subordinate neither to heaven nor to hell. Le Goff argues that to pinpoint the exact “birth” of Purgatory as a place within the geography of the otherworld, one has to find out when it was “named”; without the noun *purgatorium*, Purgatory itself, was not born.²³⁹ It was Peter Comestor (d. c. 1178), who first used the noun *purgatorium*; thus Le Goff places the “birth” in the decade 1170-1180, crediting the Notre-Dame school with it.²⁴⁰

Still it has to be stated, that there have been several disagreements as to Le Goff’s argument. R.W. Southern stated that due to his attempt to tie the doctrine of Purgatory to the usage of the noun, Le Goff had estimated the development of Purgatory some fifty years later than its actual emergence; Southern argued that the

²³⁷ Southern, “Between Heaven and Hell,” 651.

²³⁸ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 222.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* 3.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 157.

noun was more convenience than invention.²⁴¹ Moreover, Gurevich has argued that Purgatory was not invented but merely given shape and form by theologians, making its existence official.²⁴² On the other hand, the surfacing of the noun has also been interpreted as “crucial as a linguistic badge for the new ideas about sin and penance.”²⁴³ While due regard should be given to the pre-existing ideas and their development, it is difficult to dispute that the first usage of the noun signified an important milestone within the elaborations on Purgatory as a place.

For the purpose of this work, the fact that Purgatory started to take a uniform shape and form within the geography of the otherworld within the twelfth century is enough. “The doctrine received its first papal recognition in a letter of Pope Innocent IV in 1254 to the Greeks in Cyprus,”²⁴⁴ where he explained the gist of the doctrine:

“The souls who died having repented but not having fulfilled their penance or who died with only venial but not mortal sins on their souls are purged and can be helped by the suffrages of the church.”²⁴⁵

This letter acknowledged Purgatory as a place. The official acceptance of the doctrine of Purgatory into the Catholic Church was at the council of Lyons in 1274.²⁴⁶ Once the Church accepted the doctrine, it began actively to teach and practice it, thus exposing the common people quite strongly to this new realm of possibility. It started to take hold in the minds of the people, so much so that it started to change their deep set fears and beliefs, a fact of considerable importance here.

The Church came to be keen on propagating the belief in Purgatory and all

²⁴¹ Southern, “Between Heaven and Hell,” 652.

²⁴² Gurevich. “Popular and Scholarly Traditions,” 88.

²⁴³ Watkins, “Sin, Penance and Purgatory,” 32.

²⁴⁴ Skotnicki, “God’s Prisoners,” 87-88.

²⁴⁵ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 287-88.

²⁴⁶ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 285.

the practices that went with it. When taking into account the amount of power and profit the Church gained from this doctrine this enthusiasm should not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, Purgatory “filled a very important area in men’s lives and gave great emotional satisfaction. When a man died, his relatives had a clear and purposive picture of his condition.”²⁴⁷ Additionally the relatives now had the power to be of some help to the dead person. It was “widely accepted by the thirteenth century, that praying for the dead means praying specifically for the souls in purgatory.”²⁴⁸ Still one should also acknowledge that Purgatory was an answer to the self-preservative instincts of the people who at any cost wanted to avoid damnation. There were ways to foresee the amount of time one had to suffer and take counter measures to shorten this span. “For those afraid of purgatory, indulgences offered a shorter path to heaven.”²⁴⁹ Also, through Purgatory the Church had a firm connection with and control over the relationship between the living and the dead.

It is difficult to pinpoint how quickly Purgatory was popularized, though it is impossible to reject the fact that it was, and that thereafter it became an integral part, not only of the afterlife, but of the everyday lives of people. “The deceased made their own wills, in a testament brought before a notary, leaving sums of money intended to buy, in as many churches as possible, the greatest number of masses likely to hasten a definite escape from purgatory.”²⁵⁰ This striving for easing the path to salvation was steadily becoming an economic force in and of itself. The

²⁴⁷ Theo Brown, *The Fate of the Dead: A Study in Folk-Eschatology in the West Country After the Reformation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd., 1979), 15.

²⁴⁸ Anca Bratu-Minott, “From the Bosom of Abraham to the Beatific Vision: On Some Medieval Images of the Soul’s Journey to Heaven,” In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 192.

²⁴⁹ Thomas Worcester, “In the Face of Death: Jean Delumeau on Late-Medieval Fears and Hopes,” In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 164.

²⁵⁰ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 126.

choice between eternal damnation and eternal blissful life was not something to leave in the hands of fickle fate. It is a measure of the spreading popularity of the idea of Purgatory among the people that “chantries and the hiring of priests to sing Masses for the souls of the deceased founder and his family, or for the members of a guild or other corporation, became familiar in the religious landscape after 1300.”²⁵¹ Thus one could argue that once the Church got actively involved in the propagation of the doctrine, it spread like wildfire among the people. In the minds of Catholics, Purgatory became “universal from about 1400 until the Reformation”.²⁵² People who had formerly not been able to entertain any notions of possible salvation for themselves or their relatives were now “encouraged” to make active preparation for Purgatory and to assist those already there through prayers and masses. The period after death was no longer one of stasis; what happened there was now capable of being changed.²⁵³

The Church used exempla, sermons and tales of visions of the otherworld to spread the new doctrine among the many. Here, it is necessary to focus more on the visitations from the otherworld as they represent a turning point in the history of the dead. The pattern that Gregory I had created for apparitions held true with only a few minor changes. The Church was for the first time taking an active role in the spreading the exemplary tales of ghosts to further the consciousness of “caring for the dead” through alms and masses, as well as to settle the doctrine of Purgatory in the minds of the people, adapting a genre they were familiar with: ghosts that came back from Purgatory, to tell of it to the living: “The revelation that the dead themselves made concerning the places in the hereafter led to a nuancing of the

²⁵¹ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 54.

²⁵² Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 394.

²⁵³ Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 282.

more coherent and stable image of purgatory as given by the theoreticians, theologians, and preachers in their concern with imposing the new doctrine.”²⁵⁴

With the acceptance of Purgatory as a separate place in the otherworld, the judgment of individuals at the time of death came to surpass the Last Judgment in the minds of the people. Judgment was pulled forward, thus avoiding any souls waiting around in an unclearly specified place until the end of time, prone to come back to harass the living. Immediate categorization of the dead was thus possible; one could go directly to heaven, hell or Purgatory. This was one of the reasons why the doctrine of Purgatory was capable of removing the belief in revenants from the picture. Of course it has to be stated that a new doctrine or system of belief would take time to settle within the mind of the common man, but once this was achieved, the only dead in contact with the living would be those that resided in Purgatory. Any physicality that would be attributed to these purgatorial ghosts resided in the firm connection in the mind of the period between reality and physicality. For something to be believable and real it ought to be tangible. The purgatorial ghosts were physical in the sense that they were undergoing bodily tortures as disembodied spirits.²⁵⁵ This bizarre property was discussed heartily by theologians. Still, most of them agreed that the punishments in Purgatory, through fire, had to be corporeal in nature. Thus it was no big leap of imagination for the people to perceive them as tangible in their earthly visitations. This tangibility though was far from the physicality of revenants, who were literally walking corpses.

Everyone was designated their place at that moment immediately after death. No longer did uncertainty plague the people about where the souls had gone, where they were waiting, whether they had been judged or punished, or under what

²⁵⁴ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 180-181.

²⁵⁵ Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 281.

supervision they were. The fear that their spirits lingered around their corpses or graves was mitigated; thus people perceived less danger (of the physical, groaning and strangling kind) from the dead. They were waiting in a specific place, quite occupied with their purifying punishment and with no probable reason to envy or hate the living, nor doubtless with any time to do anything about it, unless specifically released for some time for a good purpose.

The immediate judgment of individuals also had an added effect on one of the basics of revenant lore, that of the “bad” death: sudden, violent and without warning. It seems the perceived danger of dying a bad death changed its nature somewhat. Purgatory acted as a safety net of sorts, where it seems agony and penance was done and felt in a “safe” place, the ambiguities removed. Now, with immediate judgment, there was no slipping through the weaving, just because one died an untimely death. Rather than “walking”, the danger with a bad death now was an unpreparedness for immediate judgment or for Purgatory, thus entailing a lengthening of one’s sentence. Thus a bad death became something to avoid for one’s own sake; it no longer spelled disaster for the community to the extent that they had to take countermeasures. What was once a recipe for revenancy, now became one for a soul that needed rescue from Purgatory.

The bad death, though still a worry, was frightening now for a different reason, the question of where one would end up in the otherworld. There were now a limited amount of mandatory fates. Even if souls that would formally have become revenants did not qualify to go to Purgatory when they died, because they were too wicked, their destination was clear and immediate: hell. If not in Purgatory, it was in an even less savory, but still secure place. It could be said that not only did Purgatory rearrange and organize the otherworld; it also gave firm

control back to the divine. There were no more uncontrolled revolving doors between the earthly realm and the afterlife. Purgatory might allow the tarnished souls within brief sojourns in the physical realm, but it could be assumed that the returning souls were deserving of help and thus may have been less “evil”.

“Purgatory would become the prison in which ghosts were normally incarcerated, though they might be allowed to escape now and then to briefly haunt those of the living whose zeal in their behalf was insufficient.”²⁵⁶ They only escape with permission. The beliefs that those inflicting the torture could have been demons or angels were integrated into the prison analogy, as they were the guards that made sure no one slipped past. There were even some reported cases of demons accompanying ghosts as guardians on their venture to the world of the living.²⁵⁷ Stray spirits raising their own bodies from their graves were now a slimmer possibility. The returnees, as it were, seem to have been of a more spiritual kind, albeit sometimes with some physicality, seeking absolution and release from Purgatory rather than revenge on the living. Thus any frowned upon and “unnatural” relation with their flesh would be out of the question. Additionally, the return of the dead was also controlled with respect to the reasons for it; they came to beg for assistance or as horrifying exemplars to warn the living off the path they were walking. Especially “in England the terminology for Purgatory was much more prison-like: indeed many writers described it as a ‘prison’ or incarceration.”²⁵⁸ This analogy must have assisted further the designation of the dead in the afterworld, thereby removing the fear of any unauthorized strolls.

The stencil for ghost stories first created by Gregory I and later promoted by

²⁵⁶ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 82.

²⁵⁷ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 88.

²⁵⁸ Daniell, *Death and Burial*, 11.

the Church was simple. A short time after death the soul would appear to someone. This person might be a relative or friend, or in some cases a priest. The ghost would tell of its woes and why it was suffering as it did in Purgatory and ask the person to intervene on its behalf, with prayers, alms or masses.²⁵⁹ In the early days of the doctrine of Purgatory, a detailed description of the otherworld was also among the things the ghosts imparted. These stories generally had two stages, the first was the plea; the second, the visible proof of the process of betterment or complete salvation from purgatorial punishments, displayed for the benefit of the person to whom the ghost appeared, and of course for the listeners to the tales.²⁶⁰

“The dead were sometimes given a chance to confess and receive postmortem absolution.”²⁶¹ When the nature of these accounts is taken into consideration, this should not come as a surprise to the reader. The stories were exempla indicating what was absolvable and what not. When one of the parties was dead, then post-mortem absolution would not be that far off. One example would be

a dead knight, who appears to a priest named Stephen and asks him to repair two wrongs that he, the knight, had committed and forgotten to confess. The knight then returns a second time to thank Stephen for freeing him from the punishment he had been subjected to.²⁶²

Post-mortem confession and absolution would become a part of the stenciled Purgatory ghost stories. The strength of this idea can be glimpsed from the fact that post-mortem absolution had already infiltrated some of the revenant stories even before the end of the twelfth century. William and Walter’s exceptional revenants, given in the previous chapter, thus seem to have stepped over into a separate lore (or a separate lore had stepped into their stories), borrowing properties which would

²⁵⁹ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 294

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 294.

²⁶¹ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 61

²⁶² Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 180.

later overwhelm and replace most of the revenant lore. Ironically, William's Buckinghamshire revenant could thus be read as an "official" solution to a folkloric incident, the interesting part being that it worked, whereas in Walter's analogous anecdote it did not.

Le Goff, discussing the firm control the Church took over Purgatory, asks, "Why not leave the dead to wander as they will, or to rest in peace?"²⁶³ In the light of what we have seen here, one could state with some seriousness, that this phrase may have had a much more literal and physical meaning for the people of the Middle Ages than Le Goff might have designated for it. This was another reason for the Church to be keen to secure its hold over the connections between the earthly realm and the otherworld, to regulate and organize them. Ghosts and the supernatural, as well as revenants, were in a sense tamed. They no longer were a cause of abject fear; they became a focus for pity. The Church, supporting the spread of these tales as a carrier for its doctrine, caused these ghosts slowly to overtake the rest of the beliefs that concerned the dead. "The wanderings of ghosts were therefore channeled but not denied, since never had ghosts, or at least the texts that mentioned them, been so large in number."²⁶⁴

Ghosts now had a function; they were no longer the simple manifestation of folk belief; they had a special function to fulfill, the spreading of the doctrine and the lessons it carried. They were also seen by the people as proof of the existence of Purgatory.²⁶⁵ This was not the case with revenants, these ghosts thus became an intricate part of the structure of the official belief. "They not only justified Church teachings and Christian morality, but also quelled anxious doubts about the

²⁶³ Ibid. 2.

²⁶⁴ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 125-126.

²⁶⁵ Gurevich. "Popular and Scholarly Traditions," 76.

afterlife.”²⁶⁶ They were part of a new genre of ghosts that would consume revenants before long, leaving only remnants connected to the revenant lore such as physicality in spiritual ghosts, as will be discussed in the next chapter. With sermons and exempla these ghosts gained an authority that far surpassed folklore and a spread and distribution that overflowed regions. This belief was not limited by locality. This was why there were no more anecdotes of revenants in England as well as in Western Europe.²⁶⁷

Only a certain type of ghost remained, those undergoing purgatorial punishment and asking for help; the rest were pushed aside in favor of this genre; they became secondary or were merged into it. What remained were only some familiar properties from a lore that was once widespread and a terrifyingly real threat to the living. Purgatory had effectively established that every soul had its place within the afterworld. That place was a secure prison with no chance of unlicensed escape. Revenants no longer had the freedom to roam; if not in heaven or damned eternally to hell, the soul was otherwise engaged in Purgatory.

²⁶⁶ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 75

²⁶⁷ Brown, *The Fate of the Dead*, 35.

CHAPTER V

THE *DIALOGUS MIRACULORUM* BY CAESARIUS OF HEISTERBACH AND THE BYLAND ABBEY GHOST STORIES

The changes wrought on the perception of the supernatural, described in the previous chapter, are most clearly understandable through the anecdotes that tell of apparitions. The accounts paint a picture of the development and spreading of the belief in Purgatory among the people and of its effects. They reflect plainly that Purgatory as a place with its rules and borders did not surface clearly at once, but was a process, one of deliberation and exploration, as it always must be as concerns widespread human belief. Two sources will be examined; their accounts on ghosts and the relations between the living and the dead will be recounted so as to clarify the changes wrought by the developing purgatorial ideas, and their reflections on the lore concerning the returning dead. It will at times be possible to glimpse certain properties that belonged to the older revenant lore that was slowly but surely being replaced by the stenciled ghosts of Purgatory.

The two sources are important in the sense that they still retain a certain element of folkloric belief, which attests to the transitional nature of the period and accounts in question. Revenants, and other folkloric beliefs, were too deep set to be overwhelmed immediately by the purgatorial doctrine, even though this in its own

right would become immensely popular among the people. A certain bizarreness further distinguishes these sources, as a testimony to what had been and what would come to be in the landscape of the people's belief.

A more or less chronological approach seems to be most appropriate so as to glimpse any additional differences between the two sources themselves, as a gap of nearly two centuries of continued purgatorial development separates them. In addition, the intrinsic properties of the types of sources will have to be taken into account, as they effect and influence the selection of included anecdotes, as well as their perception by the authors themselves.

The first source to be examined is the *Dialogus miraculorum* by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Caesarius was born circa 1180 in Cologne, where he studied.²⁶⁸ He became a Cistercian monk in 1199 at Heisterbach, taking over the education of the novices.²⁶⁹ This was probably why he chose the style in which he wrote the *Dialogus*: a dialogue between Master and Novice. The work is believed to have been written between 1219 and 1223.²⁷⁰ In 1227 Caesarius would become the prior of Heisterbach, and later died around 1240.²⁷¹

It is not only the date that distinguishes the *Dialogus*, being in the midst of the period in which Purgatory was being molded into a comprehensive doctrine, but also the nature of the work itself. The *Dialogus* is in all its essence intended for instruction on the changing landscape of the otherworld and its connections to the living. It was in its foundation a collection of *exempla*, that is, exemplary tales that were recorded and used so as to further certain beliefs in its audience. "The work

²⁶⁸ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 127.

²⁶⁹ Caesarius von Heisterbach, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern des Caesarius von Heisterbach: Ein Lesebuch Von Helmut Herles*, ed. and trans. into German Helmut Herles (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1991), 298.

²⁷⁰ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 127.

²⁷¹ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 298-230.

was almost immediately used by other preachers, both secular and mendicant, as one of the primary sources of *exempla* to pad sermons addressed to laypeople and no longer just to monks.”²⁷² Thus Caesarius’s tales are important, exceptionally so, as they themselves would become tools for the further spreading of the ideas and patterns presented within them. The widespread usage of the *Dialogus* as a source for other *exempla* and sermons allowed it to have a considerable influence, if only in the amount of people that were exposed to its anecdotes. This interestingly makes the seemingly strange “transitional” anecdotes within the work, ones which do not comfortably seem to fit anywhere, doubly important here. *Exempla* were created for a certain purpose; to achieve it “the tales must have been rooted in widely-accepted attitudes, expectations and beliefs.”²⁷³ Caesarius thus conveys within his anecdotes a mixture of the emerging doctrine of Purgatory that would in short order be accepted officially by the Church, and its local reflections within the mind of everyday people. As was the case with the previous accounts, Caesarius has no doubts as to the authenticity and truth of these happenings, and gladly explains to his novice the significance of such events in the grander scheme of things. He states in the first person “that it is indeed he who gathered and transcribed the tales, then composed the work.”²⁷⁴

Even though the *Dialogus* predates by at least nearly fifty years the Lyons Council that represented the official acceptance of the doctrine of Purgatory, the ideas on Purgatory and the resultant stencil within the ghost stories are in evidence. “Out of 746 chapters and an almost equal number of tales, the collection includes

²⁷² Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 124.

²⁷³ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 60.

²⁷⁴ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 129.

fifty ghost tales.”²⁷⁵ As there is such a large number, the anecdotes to be examined here will be elected according to their connection to the subject matter at hand. The work itself “is arranged as a pilgrimage of the Christian toward the Last Things.”²⁷⁶ It is divided into twelve books, all of which represent a stage within the pilgrimage: conversion, contrition, confession, temptation, demons, simplicity, the Virgin Mary, vision, the Eucharist, miracles, the dying, and the reward of the dead.²⁷⁷ The fifty ghost stories are spread throughout these sections, though most of those of particular interest here reside within the last book.

In most of the chosen anecdotes, the properties of Purgatory are evident. Among some of these anecdotes it is relatively easy to distinguish the stencil that would come to dominate any contact with the otherworld, though equally important are the parts that do not fit into this stencil. They represent most probably the existent folk beliefs that affected how purgatory and ghosts were perceived by the people. Caciola states that “the thirteenth-century Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach provides an illuminating glimpse into the dominant themes of local revenant belief in his *Dialogus miraculorum*.”²⁷⁸ As we shall see, Caesarius does indeed allow one to glimpse some remnants of revenant lore within the traditions of the people, but with the exception of two anecdotes, none of the ghosts within the stories — and they are indeed ghosts — can be called revenants with conviction. The apparitions are simply too affected by the ongoing theological developments and changes within the beliefs of the people to still be classified as revenants. However, it is of interest here to pinpoint the surviving traits of revenant lore and

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 128.

²⁷⁶ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 300.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 300. In Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, the German phrase used for simplicity is “Von der Einfalt” which could similarly mean innocence or simple-mindedness (175).

²⁷⁸ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 18.

indicate any connection with the development of purgatory, as it will allow an understanding of the process of change in evidence within the beliefs of the people.

The first anecdote I shall give is concerned with postmortem absolution and the importance of proper confession. Caesarius states:

M: So useful is confession so that even the spirits of the dead make use of it. Often I have learnt that the dead have appeared to the living in sleep, and confessed their sins for which they were held in punishment, through what kindness they could be absolved was truly demonstrated.²⁷⁹

Postmortem absolution was one of the main properties of purgatorial *exempla* as due to the nature of the genre they had to be demonstrative of the possibilities of salvation. Here, it is important to point out that the receivers of such pleas were, according to Caesarius, generally dreaming at the time of “contact”, though as later accounts will indicate this will cease to be a necessity once the spirits become more assertive in their demand for salvation. One of the anecdotes Caesarius used to support the importance of absolution and confession was the following:

A youngster was accepted into one of our houses as a novice. A short time later he fell ill and was dying. But he had as of yet not, as was the custom of the order, performed a general-confession to the Abbot, as the Abbot was absent. He waited with great longing for his return, but as the Abbot did not come, the novice confessed his doings to the Prior. And thus before the Abbot could arrive he departed from this realm. In the same night the ghost of the departed novice, appeared at the bedside of the Abbot, who was unaware of his passing, and asked humbly that the Abbot accept his confession.²⁸⁰

The abbot agrees to listen to the novice, who with great remorse and tears confessed as he had to the Prior. In this story the focus seems to be more on the conscientiousness of the youngster in fulfilling the customs of his new order, rather

²⁷⁹ “Monachus: Tantum bonum est confession, ut etiam eo utantur spiritus mortuorum. Saepius percepi mutuos vivos apparuisse in somnis, et ob quae peccate detinerentur in peonis, confessos fuisse, et quibus beneficiis liberari possent, veraciter indicasse.” Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis, *Dialogus miraculorum: Textum ad Quatuor Codicum Maniscriptorum Editionisque Principis Fidem* Volume II, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne: H. Lempertz & comp., 1891), III, chapter 24, 141.

²⁸⁰ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 118.

than any real danger of punishment, as the confession to the Prior in normal circumstances would have been quite valid. The abbot, Caesarius inserts, is said to be Saint Hugo of Bonnevaux, which adds a certain authenticity to the anecdote. The abbot in this story is asleep while he meets the ghost, though once he wakes up he finds the evidence of the ghost's tears on his clothes. This is important as it points out a certain trait of the mind of the period, which will also be of much effect in the later anecdotes: the connection of apparitions and physicality; the ghost, though it was glimpsed within a dream, left physical evidence of its existence and visit. This connection of physicality and ghosts has often been perceived by historians as a link to revenant lore, though as one shall see in anecdotes such as this one, it would be farfetched to argue any revenancy on the ghost's part.

A similar story also calls attention to the possibility of salvation for those seemingly beyond hope: this new hope was only due to the creation of Purgatory as a place. For Caesarius, Purgatory reflected hope. The anecdote concerns a young nun from Zion in Frisia, who, having been seduced by a priest, returned to her family and died in childbirth. The sin was such that her family upon her death felt that prayers would have been of no use. The fact that she was with her family while giving birth could indicate that she had removed herself from the immediate vicinity of her "sisters" in the order. It is this lack of prayers for the dead nun that prompts the appearance of the ghost, to a complete stranger no less, a Cistercian abbot. This anecdote indicates that there was here a certain idea within the minds of the people of what was pardonable and what not; the nun here in her relatives' eyes clearly was damned without a way out. Which sins would lead one to purgatory and which to damnation in hell would be something on which the common people would take a position, perhaps even irrespective of confession and absolution, though as this

anecdote shows, nothing as of yet was definite. Additionally, the idea that ghosts when pleading for help would normally appear to relatives and acquaintances also seems to be established, as the surprised reaction of the abbot would indicate.

The abbot in question was wide awake during his exchange with the ghost.

While in his guest room in a nunnery,

He heard painful sighing and groaning: but looking around with care could see no one there. When he continued to hear the sighs he wondered at the reason, thus he said: I urge you through our Lord Jesus Christ to declare who you are to me. When he heard no response, he repeated the adjuration a second time. Then feeling as if someone was coming closer, nevertheless seeing nothing, he heard this response: 'I am a miserable soul'. And he said: 'you groan wretchedly enough, while still I am ignorant of the cause of your misery.' It responded: 'I am being harshly punished.' ...The abbot asked: 'Are you male or female?' She responded: 'Female.' And when he asked: 'What is your name?' She said 'Maria.'²⁸¹

The abbot later finds out the whole sad story and the soul is saved. It is worth noting that the abbot, before the ghost is persuaded to explain herself, has to conjure her first. This, as we shall see, is a common trait within the Byland Abbey ghost stories, and has a certain folkloric flavor to it. The ghost is only slowly coaxed out for the abbot to see and receive her requests. In the end the effects of the seemingly unforgivable sin are mitigated through the intervention of the abbot and the living relatives. That the ghost appeared to a member of the Church instead of to her own relatives is telling. The Church was becoming the intermediary between the living and the dead, even if the percipient of the ghost was lay, the "saving" was reserved to the Church. Most of the purgatorial stencil was already existent within this story,

²⁸¹ The speech quotations were added to make for easier understanding. "Gravissima susoiria et gemitus audivit; sed cum diligentius circumspexisset, neminem ibidem videre potuit. Cumque audita suspiria durarent, causam admirans, sic ait: Adiuro te per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum, ut quid tu sis edicas mihi. Cuius cum nullum audisset responsum, adiurationem iteravit. Tunc quasi aliquid accedere propius sentiens, nil tamen videns, huiusmodi audivit responsum: Ego sum una misera anime. Et ille: Satis misere gemis, cum tamen ignorem quae sit causa tuae miseriae. Respondit illa: in acerbissimis sum poenis. ... Et ille: Fuisti mas an femina? Respondit; Femina. Et quod, inquit, tibi nomen? Dicente illa, Maria..." Caesarii Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*: Volume II, XII, chapter 26, 337.

the main aim of the apparition being relief and possible release from punishment.

An anecdote that takes most of its properties from purgatory, but works equally as a ratification of it, is the one that focuses on a schoolmaster-come-monk of the monastery of Pruilly. As is wont in these stories the monk dies and then appears to his abbot one night in the church stalls.

Thereupon the abbot remembering the stubbornness of the teacher questioned him saying: 'How are you?' He answered: 'well'; the abbot then added: 'Now you are not suffering for your disobedience?' 'Actually,' [the dead man] said, 'many and great torments. But as my intention was good, this indiscretion was excused; the Lord showed me mercy, I was not damned.' ... Wishing to leave behind a sign of his presence, the teacher kicked the choristers' podium so strongly that it shattered. Then he vanished.²⁸²

Caesarius demonstrates, thus, that good intentions in this new otherworld could mean the difference between salvation and damnation. The ghost clearly returns not for absolution but for something equally important within the purgatorial stencil, the informing of the living as to the affairs of the otherworld, so as to instruct or warn them.

The eagerness of the mind of the period for proof in the physical is quite apparent in this anecdote. The ghost intends to leave irrefutable proof which could be seen and touched. This need was not new, to say the least; most visionary literature offers "proof" in the shape of scars left from punishments in the otherworld. "Those who return from near death are sometimes said to manifest in their resumed earthly bodies the marks of what has happened to them on their voyage beyond this life."²⁸³ The perhaps most famous one would be Bede's account

²⁸²“Tunc Abbas memor pertinaciae scholastici, interrogavit eum dicens: Quomodo habes? Respondente illo, bene; mox subiunxit: Numquid aliquid passus es pro inobedientia tua? Etiam, inquit, multa et maxima tormenta. Sed quia intentio mea bona licet indiscreta fuerit, Dominus mei misertus est, nec sum damnatus. ... scholasticus signa suae praesentiae ibi relinquere volens, tabulam pedibus psallentium substratam, tam fortiter calce percussit, ut frangeretur. Sic disparuit.” Caesarii Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum* olume II, XII, chapter 29, 340.

²⁸³ Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 295.

of the Vision of Fursa (Fursy), who “bore for the rest of his life the marks of the burns which he had suffered while a disembodied spirit; they were visible to all on his shoulder and jaw.”²⁸⁴ A peasant named Gottschalk in Holstein who had a vision in 1189, also brought back his own scars as proof of his endeavor into the otherworld, though the sufferer of the injuries was not his earthly body, the assumption seems to be that any “body” must necessarily be corporeal.²⁸⁵ Similarly, if some important person was seen in a vision, for example Mary, then she would look just like her statue in the church, having the exact same face, after all that was how the visionary recognized her.²⁸⁶ There thus needed to be certain touching points in “reality” in order to create or to be able to perceive the “other”. That the entrance of St. Patrick’s Purgatory was believed to be on earth and visionaries were said physically to enter the realm further attests to the importance of physicality as far as believability went.

One of the main properties that distinguishes the *Dialogus* as a source for this study is the fact that alongside with anecdotes diffused with the new purgatorial ideas, Caesarius also includes within his work the bizarre and seemingly inexplicable. There are several anecdotes that concern and have properties inherent to different but most probably widespread beliefs among the people. These anecdotes thus carry within them something of folklore and folk belief. One such belief is of apparitions being connected to or foretelling sudden deaths within the vicinity of the phenomenon.

Caesarius has two such anecdotes, though here only one will be examined.

²⁸⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 142.

²⁸⁵ Peter M. De Wilde, “Between Life and Death: the Journey in the Otherworld,” In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Egelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Land Publishing, 1999), 179.

²⁸⁶ Gurevich, “Oral and Written Culture in the Middle Ages,” 53.

In a village named Stammheim, within the diocese of Cologne, a maidservant was watching over her charges, the children of a knight called Gunther, at night while they were answering the call of nature.

As she was standing by them she saw the figure of a woman dressed in a snow-white garb with a pale visage that was looking at them over the fence. Without a word, while the maidservant was struck with horror, the ghost moved over to the house of Hugo, which was very close, and looked over the fence exactly as she had done before, then it went back to the churchyard where it had come from.²⁸⁷

A few days later the elder boy sickens and foretells his own as well as his siblings deaths, which is then followed by the mother and the maidservant; the neighboring house is similarly beset, Hugo and his son dying around the same time.²⁸⁸ It seems only Gunther, who was abroad at the time, was saved from the calamity. The indications of a connection between apparitions and death existed within folklore, though here these ghosts seem to have become death personified rather than simply the dead.

Revenant lore could be connected with these anecdotes that Caesarius gives. They are, indeed, quite similar to revenants in some contexts; they are seen coming out of cemeteries, as in the story just given; they precede deaths which seem to be directly tied to their appearance. They are reminiscent of Walter Map's account, wherein one revenant actively calls out the names of those to die, or William of Newburgh's account where the mere existence of the revenant is enough to spread a plague in two cases.²⁸⁹ Thus one could argue that these anecdotes could be perceived as remnants of revenant lore, albeit perhaps modified before inclusion in

²⁸⁷ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 277.

²⁸⁸ The translation Nancy Caciola uses in her article has remarkable differences from this version. The maidservant sees the ghost entering the neighbor's house before returning to the cemetery and it is the neighbor's entire family that dies rather than Gunther's ("Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in the Middle Culture," 18). The original Latin supports the German translation. (Caesarii Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*, Volume II, XI, chapter 63, 313.

²⁸⁹ Walter Map, *Master Walter Map's Book*, 125. The Berwick revenant, and Anantis revenant. William of Newburgh, *History of William of Newburgh*, 657, 660.

the *Diologus*, or perhaps simply as curious examples of widespread belief.

An equally strange stance is apparent in two other anecdotes. These two could be seen as connected to revenancy or at least to the discussions and speculations made about it; the idea that demons could animate corpses. That it was possible for “evil spirits” to reside in dead bodies and animate them was, as we have seen, a familiar theory brought up by several churchmen as an answer to what revenants really were and how they moved. Caesarius has two anecdotes on this subject. One concerns a pious priest praying for an evil man named Hermann, upon which a saint of unknown identity admonishes him for praying for a damned man.

The Saint said: Stop praying for him, as he was dead for a whole year before he was buried, and his body was inhabited by an evil spirit instead of a soul.²⁹⁰

As the novice expresses incredulity Caesarius goes on to give a previous example.

M: One reads something similar in the life of Saint Patrick, the Irish Bishop, about a man who had killed his charioteer. In his body there lived a demon instead of a soul for many years and as he was banished by the Saint and left him, the body collapsed and become ash.²⁹¹

Caesarius’s second anecdote seems to follow the shape of this older story. It is about a clerk who had a wonderful voice, which was bliss to listen to. One day a pious man comes along and upon listening to the cleric’s voice states that it is the voice of a demon:

As everyone was astonished, he banished the demon, and it exited the body, upon which the corpse immediately broke down and started to stink. And everyone realized that a demon had long played its tricks with this body.²⁹²

In both cases the “evil spirit” actually takes the place of the soul and continues to live on the life of the dead person, no one realizing the difference without outside guidance. This, one should remember, was not the case with revenants: there was no

²⁹⁰ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 279.

²⁹¹ Ibid. 279.

²⁹² Ibid. 279.

doubt as to what they are. The evil spirit seems to be the life-giving factor in this story as its departure seems to trigger the rapid decomposition of the body. These anecdotes, thus, have some common elements with revenant lore, though with some difference, and could be seen as connected to it. It is telling that Caesarius listed these stories not under the fifth book on demons, but within the twelfth book that concerns the rewards of the dead; he must have believed that they were closer to the dead in classification than simply demons.

Another haunt that seems to be similarly avoiding the purgatorial stencil is that of the knight Heinrich. Very early in the anecdote it is established that he was quite an unsavory character.

He was very malicious and considered rape, adultery, incest, perjury and such to be virtues. When he died in the countryside of Menevelt (Mayenfeld), he appeared to many in a sheepskin that he was known to wear while alive, and especially frequented the house of his daughter. Often they hit him with swords, but could not wound him; he gave off a sound as though one was hitting a soft bed.²⁹³

In the end Bishop Johannes of Trier was consulted, who advised the use of water filtered over the “Nail of the Lord”, a relic, and thus sanctified. The remedy worked and the ghost did not appear again. Here it is important to point out that though the anecdote, with the statement of the man’s evil character, and physical presence could have been that of a revenant, the remedy that is used to dispose of the ghost, with its religious nature, as well as the description of the haunt disqualifies it from being a traditional revenant. The people cannot wound the ghost, something which was easily done to revenants, making them lose copious amounts of blood. Similarly, the described strange sound the ghost emits when hit strengthens the argument that it was more a physically manifest ghost than a walking corpse. Even if one could argue that this physicality itself could be seen as an effect of lingering

²⁹³ Ibid. 284.

revenant lore within the beliefs of the people, the properties of that lore seem to have been corrupted. The nature of this man, who seemed reluctant to let go of his living daughter, and stubborn enough about it to take on living men with swords, would certainly not be amiss among the earlier collections of Walter or William. Although he is clearly not a “normal” revenant, he seems to have his share of folkloric properties. He clearly was not part of the new purgatorial stencil, even though he was in the end subdued through religious/spiritual means.

The next anecdote is of similar nature; there is no real connection between the ghost and any wish or plea to be absolved or helped. It is about a dead knight who was known to be a usurer:

One night he knocked loudly on the door, and as a boy came and asked, why he was knocking, he answered: Let me in, I am the lord of this holding, and named himself. The boy peeked through the hole in the door, and as he recognized the man, said: Certainly my lord is dead, I will not let you in. The Dead man did not stop knocking, but as it did no good, he said at last: bring these fish, which are my nourishment, to my son. See, I’m hanging them onto the door. When they came out in the morning, they found a lot of frogs and snakes. Indeed these were Hellish food which is boiled with hellfire.²⁹⁴

The ghost itself seems harmless enough, though one is left with foreboding as to what would have happened had it gained access into the house. The usurer seems to be damned to hell, if his nourishment is any indication. He does not ask for help, nor does the story indicate he would be able to benefit from any prayers. This ghost, as the one before, seems to be physically present, though once again there is no concrete connection to the corpse. Both the usurer and knight Henry “are presented as ill-intentioned from their own desires or instinct.”²⁹⁵ Thus for these two anecdotes, their lack of possible salvation, their lack of an expressed desire for the said salvation and their decidedly unfriendly intentions could be reminiscent of

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 285.

²⁹⁵ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 19.

revenant lore. One should also notice that no one wishes to conjure them or ask as to their problems or wishes, though the ghosts do not seem to invite or encourage any inquiry of that nature.

In the following anecdote there is another ghost who does not ask for any help. Indeed it seems he is well aware that there is no way for him to be saved. Read through the purgatorial stencil, it is quite apparent that he was assigned a set place in the otherworld. Not many years after his death, a rich commissioner of the duke of Bavaria, visits his wife:

One night the castle within which his wife slept shook to such an extent that it was thought to be an earthquake. And see, the door of the room she lay in burst open and her husband entered, led by a pitch black giant that was gripping him by the shoulder. As she saw and recognized him, she let him sit on her bed. She was not scared in the least, and as it was cold and she was only clothed in a shirt, she draped the blanket over his shoulders. As she inquired as to his condition, he answered sad: I am damned to eternal pain.²⁹⁶

To say the least she is astounded, as he was a man known for his almsgiving. The ghost explains that all his good deeds were of no use, as he did them all in the search for glory rather than true good will. This anecdote indicates that even the damned had their places determined. The companion of the ghost, is in all probability his guardian, which underlines the fact that even the damned were under tight control. The wife's relaxed attitude could indicate that such happenings were perceived as possible and plausible at the time. This anecdote thus can be seen as representative of the purgatorial stencil, as it demonstrated what happened to those who were not worthy of purgatory. The existence of the guardian also points in that direction. Caesarius most probably chose to record it so as to show that those who were not sincere in their "good" deeds were not above damnation.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and intriguing anecdotes that Caesarius

²⁹⁶ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 286.

collected also includes the existence of a demon-like character. It is about the concubine of a priest who, as she lay dying, asked urgently for new sturdy shoes to be buried in. In the following night, a traveling knight comes upon the very woman, dressed only in a shirt and her new shoes. The woman asks desperately for help, upon which the knight dismounts and draws his sword. They hear a hunting horn which only agitates the woman further. The knight,

wound her hair on his left arm and held in his right his drawn sword. As the infernal hunter came closer, said the woman to the knight: Let me run, let me run! See, there he comes. The knight held her with all his might, as the unfortunate woman tried to get loose, at last she ripped her hair asunder and escaped. The devil, chasing her, caught her and threw her over the back of the horse and left... They opened the grave and found, that the woman had lost her hair.²⁹⁷

The fact that, once the knight notifies the village and is met with disbelief, the first reaction is to open her grave, should be of interest here. The fact that they found a bald corpse within the grave further strengthens this connection. Though the story also seems to indicate that there is no escape from one's designated place in the otherworld, one of the main ideas that put an end to the walking of the revenants, it is equally of note that the link perceived by the people between apparitions and the corpse was still quite strong. Thus the anecdote itself could be read as an uncomfortable merger between the purgatorial stencil though in this case it was focused more on hell, and revenant lore.

The one anecdote that most certainly does seem to tell of an actual revenant, and thus an exception within the *Dialogus*, is about a knight called Everhard.

At the same time, another knight called Everhard died, in the same province, and he [was] a criminal ... In the middle of the night the devil erecting his corpse on the bier, instilled terror in all who were present. Fearing the mockery of his demon friends, they tied the body, burying it before Mass.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Ibid. 287.

²⁹⁸ Caesarii Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*, Volume II, XII, Chapter 11, 324.

Everhard is established as a criminal and thus, within revenant lore, a candidate for walking. It is even indicated that the devil had a hand in the raising. The tying of the body indicates a very basic need felt by the people for it not to move, though it is interesting that even in such a blatantly obvious case of revenancy, the people deem it enough just to tie and bury the body as soon as possible. Though one may interpret it as an instance when a person was disagreeing to their pronouncement as deceased, the people clearly saw it as a case where the body refused to stay still, and they acted in accordance with that assumption. They probably saw it as convenient that the revenant had moved early enough, before being buried, so that preventive measures could be taken to avoid any leaving of the grave. This anecdote certainly indicates that the deep set traditions that stemmed from primal fears were hard to overcome all at once, that they changed only slowly and bit by bit. Hands-on methods of disposal were, as of the early thirteenth century, still effective as this anecdote, as well as that of the priest's concubine, where the opening of the grave seemed a natural precaution, demonstrates. Here though, the fact that the people did not hack the body into little pieces and light a bonfire to burn it indicates that purgatory and its connected belief system were slowly but surely gaining strength among the people. This account, thus, can be labeled as the only revenant case, as it adheres in its basics to the pre-existent revenant lore; a moving corpse, and haste among the living to be rid of it, albeit mitigated in their reaction to it. That they had no qualms about approaching and tying the body though indicates a certain lack of fear among the people towards these dead.

A somewhat similar case is reported by Caesarius, though this one is less connected to revenant lore, while indeed about bodies that refused to stay put. In the diocese of Cologne, there were two feuding clans of farmers. The two heads of

these clans were especially troublesome, spurring on the enmities between the clans. These men happen to die on the same day, and as they shared a parish they were to be buried within the same grave (pit).

In front of everyone, the two corpses turned their backs on one another, and with their heads, heels and backs hit each other, with such vehemence that they resembled untamed horses. Thereupon one was taken out and buried in another grave farther away. And from the fight among the dead grew peace and harmony among the living.²⁹⁹

Though this story is actually about moving corpses, one hardly finds any of the properties that made up revenant lore. The living involved seem to deem it enough of a measure simply to remove one corpse from the grave in question; no one seems to be leery about coming into close contact with such an energetic corpse. There is no panic as to the repercussions or meanings of such behavior on the part of the deceased, and certainly no doubt that they would be still once separated. Thus it could be said that in the bodily sense Caesarius has only two revenant accounts within his *Dialogus*, only one of which still retained properties of the older lore.

All the anecdotes within the *Dialogus* tell of a variety of beliefs that were popular at the time. The fact that Caesarius included as many strange and seemingly non-purgatorial ghost accounts should not come as a surprise to the reader. Caesarius was writing at a time when the idea of Purgatory was still being given shape, be it in theological discussions or within the minds of the people, lingering and mixing with their preexistent beliefs and traditions. Regardless how different these anecdotes are, most of them fit Caesarius's moral compass and his ideas on Purgatory and the otherworld, be it at times unforgiving or seemingly lenient; those that do not fit in anyway must have seemed too bizarre not to record. It is important to remember that only a select number of anecdotes have been mentioned here, and

²⁹⁹ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 276.

the selection has been more in favor of the bizarre than the more common stenciled ghost stories. The exceptional stories are strange and wild, displaying their folkloric foundations, more in league with the genre of stories that were concerned with the unexplained and clearly supernatural, whereas those of the more common type, fitting the stencil of Purgatory, are clearly *exempla* “in keeping with the new spirit of the times to relate the geography of the other world to the various categories of sin,”³⁰⁰ Thus Caesarius allows one to glimpse the existent folkloric beliefs of the people and how they had started to intermingle with the developing ideas of Purgatory and a more organized otherworld, where there was scarcely a place for revenants. The mere traces that remained of the lore were merely that: traces. This fact is much more apparent in the Byland Abbey ghost stories, which were recorded nearly two centuries after the *Dialogus*. Thus a closer look into the Byland Abbey ghost stories is needed.

They were first published by M.R. James in 1922,³⁰¹ who found them on a manuscript that once belonged to the Byland Abbey, Yorkshire. “The Source is the Royal MS. 15. A. xx in the British Museum. It is a fine volume of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries containing some tracts of Cicero and *Elucidarium*.”³⁰² The twelve ghost stories of interest had no relationship to the main part of the manuscript, having been added later to blank pages. They were recorded in Latin by an anonymous monk of the Cistercian Byland Abbey.³⁰³ M.R. James dated this addition to circa 1400.³⁰⁴ As the title indicates, these stories are ghost-tales, a dozen of them that had captured the attention of said monk enough for him to deem them

³⁰⁰ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 303.

³⁰¹ Jacqueline Simpson, “The Rules of Folklore in the Ghost Stories of M.R. James,” Presidential address given to the Folklore Society, 22 March 1996, *Folklore* 108 (1997): 9.

³⁰² M.R. James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” *English Historical Review* 37 (1922): 414.

³⁰³ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 142.

³⁰⁴ “(c, 1400 is the estimate in the catalogue). Richard II’s reign is referred to as past.” James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 414.

worthy of recording. It is plausible to assume that the monk had heard them told in the region, as “the scenes are laid in his own neighbourhood.”³⁰⁵ They are strong in local colour, and though occasionally confused, incoherent and unduly compressed, evidently represent the words of the narrators with some approach to fidelity.”³⁰⁶ This makes the collection of stories all the more interesting, as they tell of what the people believed they had experienced, and what that said experience meant in the grander scheme of things.

The fact that purgatorial teaching lies at the foundation of nearly every story in the collection indicates that by then purgatory and the properties that went with it had become a norm for the people in their dealings with and understanding of the otherworld. The traditional beliefs of the people seem to have merged without seam with the purgatorial teachings of the Church to form a hybrid lore. This lore, while adhering mostly to the stencil of purgatorial ghosts, still retained a bizarreness that was inherent to folkloric belief. The monk was “recording the beliefs and the practices in which teachings of the church were inextricably mixed with traditions.”³⁰⁷ Thus the stories allow one a glimpse of what remained of the once dominant folklore, and how this and the official doctrine of Purgatory and the changes it wrought had intermingled.

The Byland Abbey stories are acknowledged as exceptional tales that represent the relatively unembellished beliefs of the people about the otherworld and otherworldly visitations from beyond the grave, and as such are different from most exempla that sermonizers collected.³⁰⁸ Though the stories indeed carry some exemplary properties — they “would make excellent material for sermons on the

³⁰⁵ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 142.

³⁰⁶ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 414.

³⁰⁷ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 177.

³⁰⁸ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 60.

need to pray for the dead and prepare for one's own death"³⁰⁹ — it seems the main objective of the monk was the mere recording of these stories. He “declares himself concerned with reporting exactly either public rumor... or the testimony of the ‘ancients.’”³¹⁰ Whereas most of the characters in Caesarius's anecdotes were monks, here in the Byland Abbey stories they mostly concerned lay people, be they the percipients or the ghosts themselves. This further indicates that the belief recorded belonged more to the local area than to the abbey where they were recorded. Note that Byland Abbey is very close to Newburgh Priory where William of Newburgh's were recorded, a mere two miles away.³¹¹ This should offer some indication as to how much the local belief had changed in two centuries in the region.

The ghosts within the stories do not appear to the living in visions or dreams, but while they are awake and lucid. The ghosts physically manifest themselves; they are corporeal in their dealings with the living and most do not hesitate to make this known to the percipient. “The dead seem to be as substantial as any living being.”³¹² That these ghosts had such a physical presence, as argued before, was due to both the mindset of the people — what they accepted as believable — and the connected existence of previous traditions, such as revenant lore, that had underlined physicality as a principle in dealings with the dead. This apparent physicality has led some to classify these Byland Abbey ghosts as revenants. Simpson states that “most of them manifest themselves in physical forms, so it is still justifiable to call them walking corpses.”³¹³ In the light of the current study, one cannot agree with this statement. As was demonstrated in

³⁰⁹ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 395.

³¹⁰ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 143.

³¹¹ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 395.

³¹² Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 83.

³¹³ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 396. Caciola similarly calls these ghosts revenants “A Yorkshire collection of twelve revenant stories.” Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 22.

previous chapters, revenants were literally walking corpses; they were not classified as such simply because they were physically manifest; they actually crawled out of their graves bodily.

The previous accounts of Caesarius and other ghost stories similarly indicate that there need not be a corpse involved for the ghost to physically manifest itself. As it were, people expected physical proof of otherworldly happenstances. “Compared with apparitions of later centuries, however, it can safely be asserted that medieval ghosts presented a far more concrete figure to the percipient.”³¹⁴ The dead continued to exist in society; they were literally a part of the society.³¹⁵ Thus, as there is no concrete mention of any reanimation of bodies involved, these ghosts will be classified as such: ghosts, albeit physically present and assertive ghosts. The word used in Latin for these apparitions is “spirit” (*spiritus*).³¹⁶ As one shall see, only two anecdotes within the Byland Abbey ghost stories, Stories III and IV, come even remotely close to being classifiable as revenants, and even then there are some concerns to be addressed as to their natures.

Of the twelve stories, eleven are of interest. Story X concerns witchcraft and will be omitted here. The stories vary in length and detail, though it is quite apparent that the author took care to pinpoint the properties that identified these stories as local: village names, names of people, etc. “The casual way in which people are named suggests that their lives and deaths were still within living memory.”³¹⁷ These accounts were contemporary for the local people, and thus must represent valid beliefs of the time. I shall consider these stories one by one.

³¹⁴ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 81.

³¹⁵ Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2.

³¹⁶ Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual,” 22.

³¹⁷ Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 395.

Story I: “Concerning the ghost of a certain hireling of Ryevall [presumably Rievaulx Abbey] who helped a man to carry some beans.”³¹⁸

In the very first story one of the main bizarre folkloric properties is in evidence; the ability of the ghost to shape-shift. A man transporting a pack of beans is forced to carry it himself when his horse breaks a leg. After some time he comes upon something that “looks like” a rearing horse. Being terrified the man invokes the name of Christ so as to avoid any harm to his person, upon which the creature docilely remained a horse and went along, but then shape-shifts into

a rolling truss of hay with a light in the middle of it. The man said to it: ‘Go away, because you will bring me ill-luck.’ But as soon as he said this the apparition turned into human form. Then the spirit told him his name and the reason for his haunting, and how he could be helped, and added: ‘Allow me to carry the beans and help you.’ And so he did, as far as the river, but he would not cross over... After this he had the spirit absolved and masses sung, and thus freed him from his ghostly state.³¹⁹

The man’s reaction to the apparition is most peculiar, after the first panicked invocation of the Lord’s name, he seems to accept the company of the “creature” without much wariness. It is only after a blatant exhibition of shape-shifting that he tries to get rid of it. And once he is faced with a human form the phrasing insinuates that it is only natural that he listen to what the ghost had to say.

As with shape-shifting, the fact that the ghost cannot or will not cross over a moving body of water is a common element of folkloric belief, as bodies of water, especially running water signified boundaries. Similarly, in nearly all the Byland stories, there is a certain code of conduct to follow: “it was essential that the percipient address the ghost first after which the phantom was able to state his

³¹⁸ M.R. James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James—Book of the Supernatural*, ed. Peter Haining, trans. Pamela Chamberlaine (London: Foulsham, 1979), 36.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.* 36.

name, difficulty and needs.”³²⁰ What makes the Byland stories special is the fact that all these folkloric properties are settled within a framework based on the doctrine of purgatory. The object of the ghost is to gain the attention of a human being, so that it can tell its woes and gain postmortem absolution. Lastly, though there are many folkloric aspects to the tale, these cannot really be traced back to revenant lore. Even though the ghost physically carried the beans, its description underlines that this was by no means a traditional revenant. Revenants had already started their journey towards obscurity, and aside from a few startling and terrifying hiccups caused by remnant properties of the lore, there would be no stopping the process.

Story II: “Concerning a marvelous discussion between a ghost and a living man in the time of King Richard II.”³²¹

Similarly to the previous example, this story displays folkloric elements. Dated in its title, it is of exceptional length, which could indicate that it would have been of interest and thus familiar to locals. A tailor, by the name of Snawball is returning at night from Gilling to his home in Ampleforth, when he glimpses a crow, seemingly dying, land on the ground.

The tailor dismounted to pick up the crow and as he did so he saw sparks of fire coming out of the sides of this same crow. Then he made the sign of the cross and begged the crow, in the name of God, not to bring him any misfortune along that road.³²²

Upon which the crow takes flight to some distance away. The description of the crow indicates that the spirit in question was once again a shape-shifter. The man’s invocation of God’s name seems to work at first — notice that the protection is

³²⁰ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 82.

³²¹ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 36.

³²² *Ibid.* 36-37.

against misfortune rather than any physical harm coming directly from the spirit.

This is unfortunate for the man, as we shall see.

The man mounted his horse again and shortly afterwards the aforesaid crow flew towards him and struck him in the side, knocking him off his horse, and flat on the ground... He fought the crow with his sword until he was weary, and it seemed to him as if he was striking a peat-sack in a marsh, so he held him off, and in the name of God said: 'Protect me from whatever power this thing possesses to harm me, and make it go away.'³²³

This makes the crow take flight again. Notice that the ghost is corporeal enough to have wounded the man in question, but, as a crow, is certainly no walking corpse.

One interesting point in this passage is the fact that what the man felt when hitting the crow with his sword was quite similar to the description of Caesarius's account of the striking of Knight Henry.³²⁴ Additionally, the tailor seems as of yet uncertain about how to extricate himself from the whole thing. Only after the spirit appears to him for the third time, this time in the shape of a dog with a chain on its neck, does he gather his faith and decide to inquire as to the wishes of the spirit:

'I will beg him in the name of the Holy Trinity, and by the power of the blood of Jesus Christ of the five wounds, to speak to me and not to harm me in any way, but to stand still and answer my questions and tell me his name and the cause of his trouble and a suitable remedy.'³²⁵

The understanding seems to be that once the man has listened to the spirit and fulfilled its wishes, it would leave him alone. Upon the invocation the man got an immediate reply from the ghost. It turns out that after committing horrible acts it was excommunicated, and thus asks the tailor to go to a specific priest — probably the one that had excommunicated him — and ask for absolution. The ghost even mentions the exact number of masses that were needed for his salvation. If the tailor were to do as he was asked, and only then, would the ghost tell him how the wound

³²³ Ibid. 37.

³²⁴ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 146. Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 284.

³²⁵ James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories," In *M.R. James*, 37-38.

inflicted by it could be healed:

or your flesh will putrefy and your skin will weaken and fall away from you completely in a short time. You shall know, therefore, that because you have not heard mass nor the gospel of John 'In the beginning...' and have not seen the consecration of the body and blood of Christ, I have been able to appear to you now, otherwise I would not have the power to do so.³²⁶

This ghost is pushy to say the least, as he downright forces the man to help it with an explicit "or else". And it seems to be the man's own fault and lax behavior that has allowed the ghost appear to him. The description of the ghost is once again bizarre:

As he spoke with the tailor, the ghost appeared as if burning with fire, and the man could see through its mouth and into its inside, as it formed its words in the intestines, and did not speak with its tongue.³²⁷

This form is more in tune with the spirit from the first story than revenants. The fire could be interpreted as the purgatorial fire that the ghost is suffering, or simply theatrical enhancement, so as to make it appear more fearsome.

Once an agreement is reached, the man conjures the ghost away to Bilandbank; such conjurations of ghosts to far away places were done, so as to remove the ghost for the time being from a specific location; it was not a permanent solution. The priest, surprisingly perhaps, is not amicable to the absolution of the ghost; he calls in others for consultation, though at long last the tailor receives the letter of absolution, which he buries in the tomb as he was instructed. "The reluctance of the priest at York to absolve, and the number of advisers called in, testify to the importance of the case."³²⁸ In all probability the ghost in question was an important and known man. The name was not mentioned however, which supports the possibility that, were the name of the man to be mentioned, quite a few

³²⁶ Ibid. 38.

³²⁷ Ibid. 38.

³²⁸ James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories," 416. n.2

people would have recognized it. This carries with it the indication that, even without the name some of the audience would be able to guess the identity of the person. The percipient, after fulfilling his task, returns to the place he first happened upon the ghost and is told how to heal his wounds and thus is saved. An interesting connection is made between the apparition of the ghost and the illness suffered by the percipient, though it was by no ways fatal, as had been the case with revenants and plague. “This strange account indicates that the possibility of salvation was still open even for dead excommunicates.”³²⁹ This was a possibility connected to purgatorial development and doctrine, albeit one that clearly raised the priest’s eyebrows. This was, as one should remember, an older trait of the purgatorial process, already glimpsed in Walter Map’s revenant anecdote on the soldier’s father, who was absolved after dying excommunicate.³³⁰

Story III: “Concerning the ghost of Robert, the son of Robert de Bolteby of Killeburne, who was captured in a cemetery.”³³¹

This anecdote and the next are the two closest to revenant lore within the Byland stories. It is about Robert, who after dying and being buried in the cemetery, used to leave his grave at night and disturb and frighten the townsfolk, causing the dogs of the town to follow him and bark at him furiously.³³²

The phrasing alone is reminiscent of William and Walter’s more traditional revenant accounts. The dogs add another notch of similarity to the tale, as they were known to react in just such a way towards revenants. Even the way the “ghost” is tackled is similar to the flow of a revenant account. Some youths decide to tackle

³²⁹ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 64.

³³⁰ Walter Map, *Master Walter Map’s Book*, 127.

³³¹ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 42.

³³² *Ibid.* 42.

the problem head on, but when it comes to acting, only two maintain their stance,

one of whom, called Robert Foxton, caught this figure as he was going out of the cemetery and held him on the lych gate, while the other shouted bravely: 'Hold him fast till I get to you.' At this his companion replied: 'You had better go to the parish priest and bring him, for with the help of God, whatever it is I have I will hold on to fast until the priest comes.' And indeed the parish priest hurried with all speed, and conjured him in the holy name of the Trinity and by the virtue of Jesus Christ to answer to his questions.³³³

This is where the similarity to revenancy ends. Although the youth is grappling with a physical being, one from a grave indeed, their remedy for its disposal does not lie in dismemberment and fire. Instead they call the priest; for him to handle the situation seems to be the obvious solution. The priest, and thus the Church, is seen as *the* agent to deal with the situation. The priest, as is the case with most of the stories, has to first conjure the spirit, for it to explain itself. "Speech prohibitions and rituals are common in the domain of folklore; here the invoking of Christ served to protect the percipient, to banish possible demons, and to give a limited degree of power over the apparition."³³⁴ However here, with the priest using the same method to control the situation, one could argue that conjuring a ghost was accepted as the way to proceed by everyone involved, be they clergy or not. Upon the conjuration,

the ghost spoke in his entails and not with his tongue, as if in an empty jar, and confessed his various misdeeds. When he heard these, the priest absolved him, but ordered the captors not to reveal anything of the ghost's confession, and ever afterwards he rested in peace, God willing.³³⁵

Once again the ghost is described in such a way that assuming it to be a typical revenant becomes problematic. There is no explicit mention of his corpse, nor does Robert seem overly threatening in his nightly ventures. In the original text Robert is

³³³ Ibid. 42.

³³⁴ Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 82.

³³⁵ James, "Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories," In *M.R. James*, 42.

identified as a ghost rather than a walking corpse: “*De spiritu Roberti*”.³³⁶ Still the anecdote itself follows the revenant lore too closely to dismiss it easily, though the purgatorial beliefs, as the confession, absolution and the resulting peace indicate, have managed to infiltrate the belief, Robert seems to be a little different from the rest of the restless spirits described here; he is a direct example of what was left of the revenant lore. Simpson’s argument that Purgatorial belief had the effect of changing revenant lore thus is supported; the perception of the living and their attitude towards the dead was changing. What is doubly important, though, is that this anecdote also supports the argument of this thesis, mainly that it was not only the attitudes of the people, with their choice of disposal methods becoming more spiritual, but also that there is the presence of a similar change in the revenant/ghost itself: when it is asked, it answers, and it asks for absolution. The very nature of revenants was changing and such a change would end only with their disappearance, as walking dead, from the minds and beliefs of the people.

Though there was a warning not to mention the confession or the crime of the ghost,³³⁷ the author cannot seem to help himself from adding the rumored crime of the ghost, that he had been responsible for the murder of a certain man, and other wicked deeds. The readers seem to have been likely to know the said events, and have their own opinions as to what transpired. It is perhaps the most detailed identification of a spirit in these stories, the name, the family, the town, and later the suspected sin are all included. This further indicates that Robert the ghost must have been a known person in the region. It was not uncommon that famous or known people were used in purgatorial *exempla*, so as to make them stronger in effect; government officials or even kings could end up burning in purgatory at various

³³⁶ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 418.

³³⁷ Ibid. 418 n.3.

times for the sake of an *exemplum*. The author also inserts that

before the absolution the ghost would stand under the windows of houses, as if listening. Perhaps waiting to see if someone came out, so as to beg that person to help him in his need.³³⁸

The monk thus emphasizes the purgatorial reasoning of the story, and that these ghosts, regardless of the way they acted, were in need of help from the living.

Story IV: “About a [ghost] that put out the eye of a concubine.”³³⁹

This story is the closest of all to revenant lore, and one should add that the original Latin version does not use the word *spiritus* for the main character, Jacob Tankerlay.³⁴⁰ The author also states that this tale is told by old men. Jacob Tankerlay, the Rector of Kirby, had died and was buried,

“but thereafter used to go out by darkness and one night he put out the eye of his concubine. And it is said that the abbot had his body removed from its grave complete with its coffin, and ordered Roger Wayneman to convey it to Gormyre. While this man was throwing the coffin into the river the oxen almost sank into the water in fear. May I not be in any danger for writing this, for I have written it just as I heard it from the elders. May the Almighty have mercy on Jacob Tankerlay, if indeed he was one of those predestined to salvation.”³⁴¹

This response to the post-mortem, post-burial activities of Jacob, with its focus on the body in the coffin in the grave, together with the abbot’s disposal technique — water being an alternative purifier to fire — and the fear of the oxen, all point towards revenancy, even if Jacob is not explicitly described as a walking corpse. “In

³³⁸ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 42.

³³⁹ *Ibid.* 42. The original Latin text does not have separate titles, in respect to Tankerlay, the word “*quidam*” is used (James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 418).

³⁴⁰ *Iterum tradunt veteres quod quidam nomine Iacobus Tankerlay quondam Rector de Kereby sepeliebatur coram capitulo Bellelande et solebat egredi in noctibus vsque kereby et quadam nocte exsufflauit oculum concubine sue ibidem et dicitur quod abbas et conuentus fecerunt corpus eius effodi de tumulo cum cista sua et coegerunt Rogerum Wayneman cariare illum vaque ad Gormyr[e] et dum iactaret predictam cistam in aquam fer[e] pre timore boues demergerentur. Absit quod ego teliter scribens sim in aliquot periculo, quia sicut audiui a senioribus ita scripsi. Misereatur ei omnipotens, sit amen fuerit de numero saluandorum (James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 418).*

³⁴¹ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 43.

the 'making of the image' of purgatory, the double purification through water and fire will play a role until late in the fourteenth century, and beyond."³⁴² Jacob was aggressive and physically attacked someone who had been close to him in life. There was no plea for absolution, there was no attempt at spiritual rescue and no one seems to have tried to conjure him.

The author seems somewhat shaken by the story as his last sentences indicate. For someone who lived in a society where people were infused with the teachings of the purgatorial doctrine and thus first and foremost believed that ghosts returned to seek absolution and help, this story must have seemed horrifying. The author is not keen on taking any responsibility at all as to the content of the tale. "It is significant that in this instance the writer is not describing a contemporary event, but one which occurred a good many years previously."³⁴³ From the way the monk ends the whole set of anecdotes it is apparent that, at the time of writing, apparitions of the dead were no longer perceived as a threat to the surrounding area or people, whereas within this particular story the speedy decision for disposal by the abbot speaks of a familiarity with the dangers of revenants. The story, told by old men, is most probably the oldest among all the twelve and thus retains the strongest traces of the older lore. Thus one could suggest that the revenant lore was active to an extent at the time of the incident, which would mean that the lore was slow to dissipate from the minds of the people.

³⁴² Bratu-Minott, "From the Bosom of Abraham to the Beatific Vision," 191.

³⁴³ Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 396.

Story V: “The story of a woman with a ghost on her back.”³⁴⁴

The title is straightforward enough. This anecdote, quite short and lacking in detail, concerns a woman who carried a ghost on her back to her house. One of the witnesses

“related that he saw the woman’s hand sink deeply into the ghost’s flesh, as if the flesh of the said ghost was rotten, and not solid, but an illusion.”³⁴⁵

The interesting point for this study, of course lies in the description of the physical “flesh” of the ghost. There is no doubt that the ghost was physically manifest, how else could the woman carry it otherwise? The flesh, though, is described as something bizarre and otherworldly; the description of the witness contradicting itself. The story in and of itself gives no more clues as to the reasons behind the woman’s actions or the goals of the ghost. There is no indication of purgatorial doctrine being active, but Simpson argued that this story rested on a legend common in Scandinavia, the framework of which contained purgatorial elements.³⁴⁶ If this argument is valid, then it does explain as to why the monk chose to include said story within his collection. As it were, the monk had squeezed it in on to a small blank space within the manuscript, hence possibly the lack of detail.³⁴⁷

Story VI: “Concerning a certain canon of Newbury, seized after his death.”³⁴⁸

A man from Newbury and a ploughman happened upon a ghost while walking in the field. The ploughman escapes in terror, while the man is attacked physically by the ghost, his clothes torn. The man at last manages to conjure the

³⁴⁴ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 43.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 43.

³⁴⁶ “A servant-girl who prides herself on her courage accepts a challenge to go into a church at midnight and fetch a sack of unburied bones, or a skeleton, left lying around there. But the skeleton takes offence and leaps onto her back, forcing her to carry it to a priest, or to someone it had wronged, to obtain forgiveness” (Simpson, “Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?” 397).

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 397.

³⁴⁸ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 43.

ghost and thus force it to explain itself.

“The ghost confessed that it had been a canon of Newbury and had been excommunicated for stealing some silver spoons which it had hidden in a certain place. The spirit therefore made the living man promise to go to this place and fetch the silver spoons, and take them to his prior and seek absolution for it.”³⁴⁹

Once these acts had been carried out, the ghost rested peacefully. In this story once again the association is made between illness and ghostly encounters; the percipient falling ill after meeting this spirit albeit not mortally so. This seeming side effect of meeting a ghost is not uncommon in folklore. The pattern of this anecdote is simple to say the least. Apart from the slight glitch at the start, with the ghost physically attacking the man until it was conjured, the story conforms to most of the purgatorial stencil of ghost stories, and how ghosts should act in general. The whole confession-absolution is done through a go-between. There seems to be no need for a personal confession by the ghost. On a strange note, the ghost seems to be a day-walker,³⁵⁰ a trait that some revenants also shared.

Story VII: “Of a ghost which begged indulgence for its misdeeds.”³⁵¹

This anecdote is in complete harmony with the purgatorial stencil. The ghost of a servant conveys that he is being punished for a number of seemingly petty crimes, that range from stealing sheaves of corn to fatten his cattle, and not ploughing his land deeply enough in order to keep his oxen plump. The ghost asks for the indulgence of his master so as to gain relief and absolution from punishment. This story was probably added to scare similar petty miscreants. The only interesting point would be that the indulgence from the master was enough for a

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 43.

³⁵⁰ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories,” 419. n.2.

³⁵¹ James, “Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories,” In *M.R. James*, 44.

mitigation of punishment, or direct relief from it; there is no active role especially mentioned that is played by any churchman.

Story VIII: “Concerning the ghost that followed William of Bradeforth and howled for three nights”³⁵²

Now this ghost was insistent, as it pestered poor William for three nights, howling and following him on the road to Ampleforth. It was on the fourth night at a crossroads that the ghost at last makes its appearance, giving quite a scare to William and his dog. As the setting of a deserted crossroad also hints, the ghost has folkloric properties: it is a shape-shifter.

“And at last he saw a white horse. At this his dog barked a little, but was terribly frightened and hid between his legs. Upon which William enjoined the same ghost in the name of the Lord and by virtue of the blood of Jesus Christ to go away and not block his road. On hearing this the ghost took the form of a revolving wine-vat with four angles and rolled away. From which it was assumed that the ghost longed clearly to be questioned and effectively helped.”³⁵³

The last sentence is clearly the author’s insertion. He seems to be keen to keep the purgatorial stencil in place. However, it is baffling that the ghost, if it was longing to be helped and insistent enough to pester the man for days on end, simply left upon being conjured. One would wonder whether William’s banishing words were effective or powerful enough to budge so persistent a ghost as this one from its goal of salvation, as the author suggests. The story itself is heavy with folkloric elements, which may be one reason for the abrupt and unabsolved end of the story.

³⁵² Ibid. 44.

³⁵³ Ibid. 44-45.

Story IX “A story about the ghost of a man from Aton in Clyveland.”³⁵⁴

Here is another determined ghost, though this one indeed managed to get what it wanted in the end.

“A ghost followed for eighty miles a man who might conjure and help him. And when he had been addressed, the spirit confessed that he had been excommunicated for a certain matter of six denarii, but after he was absolved and had made amends he rested in peace.”³⁵⁵

Unlike in the other anecdotes, the author adds his own interpretation on postmortem absolution and absolution in general within this anecdote, stating that the making of amends was of utmost importance, as it could mean salvation. An interesting point to mention would be that this ghost, just as the ghost in Story II did, bullied the man in question so as to make him help. It “threw the man over the hedge and caught him coming down on the other side.”³⁵⁶ After being helped, the ghost indicates that it was the man who forced it to act in such a way as the man was too panicked to sit still and listen.

Story X: “How a penitent thief after his confession vanished from the sight of the devil.”³⁵⁷

As the confessor in the story was and remained healthy and hale, and the main supernatural element was witchcraft, this story will not be analyzed here.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 45.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 45.

³⁵⁶ Ibid. 45.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. 45.

Story XI: “Of a marvelous work of God who can call up things that do not exist.”³⁵⁸

A Richard Rountree of Clyveland, leaving behind his pregnant wife, set out on a journey towards the tomb of St. Jacob. At night when he was on guard duty, he heard a great host traveling by on the road. It was a procession of the dead, wherein a multitude of ghosts were seen to pass by as a host. This phenomenon is common in folkloric tales.³⁵⁹ Glimpsing an infant struggling along in a sort of shoe, he approaches and asks who it was, and why it was in such a state. The infant answers:

‘You should not ask me, for you are my father and I am your son born prematurely, buried without baptism and without name.’ When he heard this, the traveler took off his shirt and put it on his son, and christened him in the name of the holy Trinity, and took with him that old shoe as a testimony of this incident. And indeed the child, when thus named, rejoiced greatly and even stood upright on his feet instead of rolling on the ground as before.³⁶⁰

The story continues with the father, upon returning, discovering the fact that indeed his son had been stillborn and then buried with the shoe without baptism in secret by the midwife, who when shown the shoe in question confesses the deed. The fact that the ghost left behind a corporeal object is worth noting. Additionally this father and son are the only relatives, alive and dead, within the Byland stories, although stories about relatives were generally common in ghost stories of the purgatorial stencil. This story is also exceptional in that it allows for postmortem baptism and thus absolution of stillborn children, souls that were normally destined for limbo, instead of purgatory and thus eventual salvation. This origin of this attitude may lie in popular feeling, in this instance mitigating stricter canonical Church rules.

³⁵⁸ Ibid. 47.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. 47 n.16.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. 47-48.

Story XII: “Concerning the sister of old Adam de Lond, seized after death according to the account of the ancients.”³⁶¹

A dead woman was caught walking at night in Ampleforth by William Trower. It turned out that she could not rest because she had given several documents, which were meant for her husband, to her brother, Adam. She did this possibly out of spite as she had had an argument with her husband, probably the reason why she was suffering in the first place. The brother had ill-used the documents to the harm of her family, taking their land from them and she begs for the situation to be rectified. She does not seem to be aggressive in any way, as some of the other ghosts had been. This may be due to her being a woman. Females were generally perceived to be gentler in life and death. The interesting part starts hereafter, as when William approaches the brother, he flat out refuses, claiming disbelief. To prove his point, the next night William

caught her and took her to the room of Adam, and she talked with him. But according to some, the hard-hearted brother replied: ‘If you were to walk for ever I would still not give back those documents.’ And she replied with a groan: ‘Let God judge between you and me on this matter. You shall know therefore that I cannot rest until your death, but after your death you will walk instead of me.’ It is said that after that his right hand hung down and was quite black... at last the sister was constrained to lie at peace because the people of the town were frightened at night by these terrors. And it is said that Adam de Lond the younger partly satisfied the heirs after the death of Adam the elder by making restitution.³⁶²

This ghost is the only one to be refused its relief, and possible absolution, though the brother’s son eventually does partial justice. Still the due punishment of the brother both in life and in death (or at least the threat of it) is recounted, warning enough it seems to any listeners as to the consequences of such actions. One should wonder how the townspeople “constrained” her to lie in peace. The phrasing itself is

³⁶¹ Ibid. 48.

³⁶² Ibid. 49.

reminiscent of revenant lore, though one would have thought that disposal by burning or other drastic means might have been mentioned. Thus it should be assumed that she was constrained by more spiritual methods; holy water as in the case of Caesarius's Knight Henry comes to mind.³⁶³ The mention of the name of the family and the involved members, as well as the first percipient of the apparition, leads one to conclude that the family at least was locally known to people.

The general pattern of purgatorial ghosts is quite apparent within nearly all the Byland stories, simple as it is. "They are the souls in purgatory, whom the living 'conjure up' ritually to tell their 'name,' the cause (of their apparition), and the 'remedy' (that they need) (*nomen, causam, remedium*). This 'remedy' is usually 'absolution' by a priest."³⁶⁴ The difference that makes these stories stand out lies in their more bizarre properties due to an admixture of folkloric elements. The ghosts, until being conjured, are generally quite aggressive. They literally ambush most of their victims/helpers, who generally happen to be complete strangers, on deserted roads, fields, crossroads etc, all of which often are stages that host folkloric tales.

Still more bizarre are the shape-shifters among the ghosts. Shape-shifters were in actuality part of an independent folkloric strain: "collectors classified them as 'sprites' or 'hobgoblins' and linked them to the more alarming types of mischievous fairy."³⁶⁵ That ghosts were associated with such properties attests to the influence of folkloric belief. The purgatorial stencil of ghosts in the minds of the people had been reshaped and merged with their previous beliefs and traditions, be

³⁶³ Caesarius, *Von Geheimnissen und Wundern*, 284.

³⁶⁴ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 143-144.

³⁶⁵ Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse?" 399.

it revenant lore or other traditions. Nevertheless, these folkloric beliefs, though retaining some vitality, were being slowly absorbed into the stencil. This seems to be particularly so in the case of revenant lore, as most of its aspects and properties did not fit well with the purgatorial stencil, as the reaction of the Byland monk to Story IV underlines.

These Byland ghosts were more physically present than most. Once conjured though, they revert to the main pattern of purgatorial ghosts docilely divulging their names, their problem and what they need to get it fixed. Apparitions or strange happenstances were “described in terms drawn from the belief-system of the perceiver and his or her community.”³⁶⁶ Once purgatorial teachings had permeated the society, the percipients themselves would identify these spirits as ghosts in need of help. It was both the stencil and the minds and understanding of people that shaped these stories into what they are.

That there are differences between Caesarius’s anecdotes in the *Dialogus* and the Byland stories, in the way they approach the apparitions, is clear. The reason for these differences is simple: they represent the mindset of different periods within the development and spread of purgatorial ideas and also to a certain extent some difference of local context and folklore. At their very basis one can still perceive that, even though they are separated by nearly two centuries, they demonstrate the same system at work. Caesarius writes for the furthering of a specific doctrine that is in the process of elaboration, its borders being only recently set. On the other hand, the Byland monk allows more a folkloric flavor to seep into the stories, being more concerned with the recording of “events” or happenstances than ratification of the official doctrine through the exemplary properties of the

³⁶⁶ Ibid. 399.

stories. This is probably due to the fact that by 1400 the monk did not need to be concerned with the promotion of an already established and widespread system of belief.

In the *Dialogus* the gulf between the anecdotes concerning purgatorial belief and those of a folkloric flavor is quite wide, a clumsy merging at best. In the Byland stories, on the other hand, once purgatorial doctrine and ideas had spread, folklore and purgatorial theology balanced one another and intermingled within the same anecdotes, seemingly merging without creating any discrepancies within the flow or logic of the stories. “On the whole, the reasons and goals of the apparitions conformed with the usual schemas of ecclesiastical ideology. Spirits manifested themselves because of sins that had not been expiated.”³⁶⁷ The framework of details in the stories though, with all their reasoning, relies heavily on folkloric belief. These ghosts are astoundingly assertive and aggressive; they are not the contrite, timid and pitiable spirits that *exempla* normally host.

The Byland stories thus represent not the pure exemplary stories and stencil that the Church advocated, but the way the doctrine of purgatory had been understood and integrated by common people into their existent belief on the dead and the otherworld. Of course these changes were great enough to bring to an end as strong a lore as the revenant lore, replacing and diffusing it to such an extent that only memories and remnants of what had once been a potent belief were left. Both the *Dialogus*, but especially the Byland stories, are more important and telling than the more sterilized and stenciled kind of Church-supported stories in testifying to popular beliefs and the change in them, especially when compared to the older lores such as revenancy. Still, one must keep in mind that it was the Church-supported

³⁶⁷ Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 143.

exempla and stenciled ghost stories that had wrought the first change, which led to the developments witnessed in the *Dialogus* and the Byland Abbey ghost stories. This change would dissipate the very physical threat revenants represented in the conscious mind of the people.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the belief in the walking dead was a near constant companion to people from Ancient times onwards; there seems little point in trying to pinpoint a particular cultural origin for it. Be it through records directed against the belief or accounts describing them, the near continuous presence of the walking dead within the flow of history is witnessed through the sources. The dead had been a part of society so much so that it is difficult for us to comprehend the extent, and the resultant practices that resided in these societies. While its particular form might vary, the universality of the belief was essentially due to the fact that every human being feared the end, and the vast unknown that was waiting beyond the moment the heart stopped.

Though the systemized comprehensiveness of Christianity in the matters of the otherworld mitigated these fears to some extent, Christianity itself became the source of new uncertainties that allowed the continued existence of belief in revenants even in as controlled an environment of belief as that which Christianity offered to its followers. Some of the inherent properties and beliefs within Christianity allowed the people to continue to believe that the dead could return; after all, resurrection lay at the core of Christian belief. The body was seen as an

inherent part of the equation that formed a human being. Even when left behind, it continued to be regarded as important, as it was that very body which would be resurrected at the end of time. The people perceived the body as continuing its existence as an entity even after the soul left it; its “life” even continued in the grave until it became a skeleton. It is understandable that the next step could surface, the belief that the body could then be re-used, rather as the body itself could re-surface. The belief in saints’ resurrections must have bolstered the belief further, as possible if not entirely desirable. In this friendly environment the belief that the dead could return flourished, both in the miraculous versions of saints and in terror-inspiring revenants. The latter were indeed made still more disturbing by the belief in saintly resurrection, as this highlighted the lack of divine sanction. They were an abomination of what was miraculous, and they refused to stay where they ought, among the dead.

The late twelfth-century primary sources analyzed in the second chapter allow one a glimpse of the revenant lore in its prime. Revenants were common knowledge; similarly, the methods of disposal seem also to have been widely known and used by the people. The return of the dead seems to come not as a surprise to the people dealing with them, but is regarded as a threatening and at times lethal nuisance to be dealt with as effectively as possible. This attitude is reflected by both of the authors and indicates the revenants were not a new phenomenon, in spite of William of Newburgh’s opinion otherwise. Apart from giving the main aspects of the lore and how it was perceived by the people, the sources also have individual properties that make them even more valuable to the study of revenants. William of Newburgh allows one, with his anecdotes, to perceive the extent of the social penetration of the belief that the dead could bodily

walk, whereas Walter Map offers several different variations of the belief in his records.

Though these twelfth-century revenants, as stated before, were at their most prominent, they were also on the cusp of a change that would remove them from the beliefs of the people. Both William and Walter's work contains accounts that bear witness to this. These accounts indicate that something was already changing by the time the phenomena they describe happened. The examples of postmortem absolution, though apparently a rarity for both William and Walter, were the vanguard of an oncoming change of a much larger scale. Thus these sources are doubly important in that they record what revenants were in their prime, but are also heralds of what was to come. Purgatory was slowly opening its way into the beliefs of the people.

Both the revenants and Purgatory as a place had their roots in the exact same fear that people felt about the otherworld and the uncertainties that shrouded it. There had been no clear organization or schedule as to what happened there, at least not one that was disclosed to mortal humans. Thus as a response to these unknowns, theories started to surface from as early as the third century on: a search for a remedy or explanation. Once the idea emerged it led to the full birth of Purgatory as a place. Purgatory was a remedy for the very uncertainties and ambiguities that had allowed revenants to cross over into Christian belief. Thus once it fully emerged, it should not come as a surprise that it affected the belief in revenants considerably and, it is argued here, even removed revenancy as an individual lore from the landscape of folkloric belief.

It was of course not only the appeasement of these fears by Purgatory that affected the revenants, but also the consequence of the Church's policy of using

exemplary ghost tales to further spread the doctrine of Purgatory among the people. These ghosts, allowing the people to perceive hope in a previously helpless and hopeless situation, would come to be accepted as the norm in dealings with the defunct. The stencil constructed for these ghost stories would fashion the relations with the otherworld, and thus put considerable obstacles in the way of apparitions that did not fit.

Purgatory settled completely into the belief system of the people. It became not only part of the otherworld, but also of the everyday lives of the people. Everyone had a place in the otherworld, a place where they were sent immediately after death, thus removing any harassment of the living by any homeless dead. It was only those who were allowed who could visit the earthly realm now, and those, most of the time, came from Purgatory. A result of the Church's need to establish Purgatory as a place in the minds of the people, and to establish itself as the intermediary between the dead or the living, this came to be accepted by the people as the truth of the matter. Purgatory had arranged and organized the otherworld, resulting in the belief that a firm control was extended over all the regions of the netherworld and its contact with the realm of the living.

The stencil promoted by the Church was simple: a soul would appear to someone, most of the time a relative; it would tell of the horrid sufferings it had had to go through as a result of this or that sin or crime, and would ask the percipient to help it through prayers, alms or masses, or in more extreme cases ask for absolution. Here, as one can see, all the remedies go through the Church's hands; the Church is in firm control of the relations between the living and the dead. The relative almost always approaches the Church to fulfill the request, as the Church is perceived and represented as the only authority in this situation. Post-mortem

confession and absolution is an inherent part of the stenciled Purgatory ghost stories. It is an aspect that had already somewhat infiltrated revenant lore by the end of the twelfth century, as the exceptional revenant anecdotes of William of Newburgh and Walter Map indicate.

Thus, with the support of the Church, these ghosts came to dominate the beliefs of the people about visitations from the otherworld. Stories were no mere reflections of folk belief, but a tool for the further spreading of the doctrine of Purgatory. These ghosts unlike the terror-inspiring revenants, were pitiful things to be helped. The tales of these stenciled ghosts continued to spread among the people, pushing other older lore to secondary positions.

There were few who could escape the prison of Purgatory. Still, as the fourth chapter indicates, some folkloric beliefs continued to have a certain sway over the people. In cases where the stories were not simply exempla, but reflected genuine folk belief, as was the case in the Byland Abbey Ghost Stories and some of the anecdotes within Caesarius's *Dialogus*, the result was a hybrid lore, though purgatorial ghosts came to be the dominant ingredient.

Both the *Dialogus* and the Byland stories bear witness to the development, spread and effect of Purgatory on the belief of the people. The discrepancies, especially noticeable in the *Dialogus*, are indicative of the fact that, early in its emergence, the effect of Purgatory was sporadic in its influence on the people. Apart from the exemplary tales that Caesarius records, he also points out several anecdotes that do not seem to have even traces of purgatorial ideas. As the *Dialogus* was written early in the thirteenth century, this should not come as a surprise. Purgatory, with all its rules and concepts, did not emerge all at once; its emergence was a process.

Thus the stories that do not seem to fit the stencil tell an equally important and interesting side of these developments. Older folk beliefs continued to be powerful in the minds of the people. This indicates that some of the folkloric beliefs were too deep set to be simply overwhelmed immediately by these stenciled ghost stories. The anecdote concerning the knight called Everhard, who refused to stay dead, could definitely be classified as a revenant, though even here, there are certain changes that were most probably due to the effect of purgatory on the beliefs of the people. Additionally several bizarre anecdotes do have properties that one could tie into revenant lore, such as spirits embodying death, or the bodies that were taken over by demons and continued to live among humans until exposed.

There are also the more exemplary stories that completely overlap with the burgeoning stencil of purgatorial ghosts, such as the nun of Zion, the youngster who died shortly after entering his order, or the monk that returned to chat about the otherworld and left physical “evidence” of his return. On the other hand, there are some anecdotes that fall between these two categories, neither completely part of the purgatorial stencil nor completely unstained by it. That the idea of Purgatory was still being given shape is quite apparent from the *Dialogus*, be it in theological discussions or within the minds of the people, the idea coexisting and mixing, sometimes uneasily, with their preexistent beliefs and traditions. Thus the *Dialogus* is quite important in its reflections of an as yet incomplete process of integrating beliefs.

Nearly two centuries after the *Dialogus*, the *Byland Abbey Stories*, although not designed as exempla, a characteristic that makes them significant in their reflection of the inherent and current belief of the people, demonstrate how much these beliefs had successfully intermingled, even if the mixture was dominated by

purgatorial ideas. Regardless how folkloric these stories were, nearly all of them were based on purgatorial ideas. Purgatory had become the very stencil through which the people dealt with any visitations from the dead; the percipient did not doubt that the soul needed help, that there was a rational and not intrinsically malicious reason for it to have come.

The spirits, who manifested themselves quite physically — this was why Simpson chose to classify them as revenants — had quite obvious folkloric properties. Some shape-shifted; nearly all were quite aggressive until they were conjured; they waylaid their targets on deserted roads. All these qualities were the result of the heavy influence of the inherent folklore of the region. One has to state, though, that these were indeed only physically manifest spirits, rather than walking corpses. Only two Byland stories, numbers III and IV, recount plausible revenants. Even here, in number III, the story of Robert is clearly contaminated with purgatorial beliefs, as it is through spiritual means, namely confession and post-mortem absolution, that Robert is laid to rest. As for story number IV, the reaction of the author clearly indicates that, at the time of its recording, it was by no ways the norm to dispose of the body in such a physical way, without any attempt at salvation of the soul in question. The rest of the stories show a heavy reliance on the purgatorial stencil.

Thus both the *Dialogus* and the Byland Ghost Stories reflect the progress that purgatorial ideas had made, and show how the stencil of purgatorial ghosts had advanced in the period between the two sources. One interesting point would be that, while the *Dialogus* reflects a certain discrepancy between folkloric belief and the purgatorial stencil, in the Byland Abbey stories one witnesses a near perfect merger of folklore and purgatorial ideas. The purgatorial stencil seems to have been

accepted into the local folklore without any jagged edges remaining, so much so that this stencil came to dominate and lead the folkloric properties within the stories. What was left of revenants was miniscule. The reign of the revenants had been overthrown by the more fleeting purgatorial ghost that awakened pity rather than terror in the minds of the people.

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