

## THE REVENANT ON THE THRESHOLD

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**Abstract:** This study explores accounts of the revenant, the walking dead in medieval Britain through the concept of a failure in the ritual process that surrounded death. This concept is used to explore the rituals leading to, surrounding, and following death, as well as the consequences of their perceived failure. The study of folklore and supernatural beliefs provides a unique insight into the perception of the failed ritual process of death and its consequences, as well as how the community dealt with them. Thus the nature of the revenant and the conditions that lead to its existence as a consequence of a ritual failure will be explored. It is identified as a stagnated presence, divorced from its ritual context, with no foreseeable end. The revenant threatens the community as a whole, be it through physical violence or contagion; it needs to be excised to protect the community and its members.

**Keywords:** Arnold Van Gennep, death, death as ritual process, revenants, rites of passage, ritual failure, stagnated presence, the walking dead, Walter Map, William of Newburgh

### INTRODUCTION

“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”, would not be remiss in a dark theatre, mesmerising the audience watching with bated breath (Newburgh 1996 [1856]: 658). The vision of a corpse digging itself out of its grave and proceeding to attack those once familiar to it in life was such a strong image that it is still made good use of within the entertainment industry with a whole genre of its own. The thrill of the silver screen aside, however, the quote is from an authentic late twelfth-century historical source. Accounts of revenants were recorded by chroniclers and perceived as intriguing, if worrying curiosities and historically true. As such, the revenant, an interesting topic of study and a vigorous and horrid presence to its percipients, often attracts the attention of scholars who focus on the interaction of the living with the dead. The revenant has been identified as a phenomenon that stands apart from conventional perceptions of ghosts; an unusual grouping of

dead inhabiting specific anecdotes (Caciola 1996: 15–37; Schmitt 1998: 61–62, 82–83; Simpson 2003: 389–394). Even with only a limited number of revenant anecdotes extant, quite a few academic studies have been produced, varyingly holding light up to the entirety or parts of the spectrum of phenomena, allowing for a clearer picture to be drawn. The narrations of the sources most of the time suggest a prevalent common belief, wherein the percipients, including the victims, are generally aware of the proper conduct and the necessary counter-measures when faced with one of the dead walking.

The revenant was thus, rather than a horrifying exception to the rule, the result of a culmination of specific conditions that allowed it to come forth from its grave. The utilisation of the sources, William of Newburgh and Walter Map, who immediately come to mind where revenants are concerned, is almost a foregone conclusion, as they offer perhaps the most rounded examples of revenant accounts. A few other less familiar sources will be brought into play here as well, but Newburgh and Map have been presented again and again, familiar by now to any that are interested in revenant-lore. This very familiarity is important for the reading and framework proposed in this study, which is a reading of the said phenomena as a consequence of a failure of death as a ritual process. The folkloric approach – that of supernatural belief – allows, it is argued here, for a unique insight into how the failed ritual process of death was perceived and how the consequences for the individual and the community were dealt with. This perspective similarly allows for an unhindered view into consequences perceived as very real by the community that would otherwise remain mythic or theoretical at best, obscuring any possible understanding or reading of the phenomena the way the community experienced it. In a culture where the dead were actually believed to walk, the efficacy and success of the ritual process that was death became of the utmost importance. Dismissing the adverse effects of such failure here as magical, psychological, or imagined would diminish and hinder a direct reading and analysis of the ritual process as perceived by the people of the time.

A clear picture of the revenant and its properties is thus needed to allow for the definition and identification of the conditions that allowed it to come forth. An anthropological approach allows one to read and perceive the phenomena in their entirety, together with their connection to society and its perception of death. It is argued here that if the reading of the revenant as a consequence of the failure in the ritual process of death is indeed applicable, it would indicate that it was perhaps not so isolated a phenomenon as its limited sources from a specific period would indicate, and that the returning presence, in one form or another, was indeed a natural part of the structure that made up the perception

of death and the process of dying. Indeed, changes in the structure and form of the ritual process that treated death as a threshold from one state to another, as would be evidenced in the Reformation period, would have unavoidable effects on the returning presence, influencing its very nature, manifestations, and motivations.<sup>1</sup>

The revenant-lore, for want of a better name, is in most cases easy to trace within these anecdotes. This lore, it is argued here, was connected to the relations between the living and the dead; relations that were inherent in the social and communal structure, a matter more fundamental than mere organised religion. The revenant was the embodiment of a divergence from a pattern, the failure of a long established and effective process that ensured the continuance of normal communal life when faced with the disruptive forces of death. The revenant represented a most pure example of the consequences of failure in the ritual process that marked the transition of death. It was a presence that struck fear into the hearts of the living, not only through its actions but also through what it represented: the ultimate bad end, stuck between the living and the dead, identified as neither, identity and personality lost, but a corpse with a familiar face. "The exploration of underlying values and the process of evaluation are [---] central issues when studying rituals that have gone wrong" (Hüsken 2007: 339). In other words, how the revenant came into existence, and how the ritual process failed, become equally important questions as they inform us of the community's reaction to the failure and to the existence of the revenant. This in turn tells us about the importance placed on the ritual process itself, the successful integration of the dying person as one of the community's dead, as well as the place of the ritual process in making this transition possible.

In medieval Europe people lived together with their dead, their presence and remembrance very much in evidence in the everyday dealings of the society: "The dead are present among the living" (Oexle 1983: 22). The dead were a veritable age class within society (Geary 1994: 36). In such an environment where the dead existed comfortably in such close proximity to the living, the revenant poses an interesting question by its very existence. What exactly was it that could turn a benign co-existence, which was in all senses expected and the norm, into a source of terror? What was it that called forth the revenant from its grave to haunt and attack the living?

## **DEATH AND THE COMMUNITY**

The answer to the question posed above lies in how the community regarded death and the process of dying. Death, biologically an inescapable event, is every living organism's common fate. However, for humanity, "to the organic event is added a complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities which give it its distinctive character" (Hertz 1960: 27). Death is doubtless the most unsettling event for the human mind to contemplate. This, regardless of the promises of religion and the afterlife, was no different in the Middle Ages. The community, society, and people had no choice but to manage with the existence and proximity of death and the dead.

Thus there were, in the understanding of the times, two basic types of death; the most basic classifications ('good' and 'bad') that human beings bestow upon almost everything are also valid here: "The Good Death is a moral dying, a dying that can be done well or badly as a social performance" (Kellehear 2007: 85–86). The type of death one underwent could very well lead to damnation or salvation, and both of these, as will be discussed below, inherently had both a religious aspect and a social one. Death had to be controlled as much as possible, to follow a pre-set stencil that would indicate and ensure a 'good' death wherein everything was as it should be and nothing deviated from its designated path.

## **DEATH AS A RITUAL PROCESS**

Control of death was possible through the use of ritual, which would ready both the dying subject and the community for the coming loss: "One of the main functions of ritual is to create and recreate the social and cosmic order [---] as modes of action to cope with disorders such as crises or transitional stages" (Buss 2007: 180). In this sense rituals and ritualisation are indeed strategic acts that are governed by the social situation (Bell 1992: 67). As such, the socio-cultural context becomes inseparable from the ritual itself. Similarly, its purpose is deeply connected to the expected efficacy, social and religious. It constitutes an action with a specific goal to accomplish. A smooth transition in that dual religious and social sense was thus what was sought after when it came to death: "[---] the dead did not cease to be members of the human community. Death marked a transition, a change in status, but not an end" (Geary 1994: 2). However, death was still a break in the normal flow of everyday life, a crisis to be overcome, not only for the individual but also for the community: "Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them" (Doug-

las 1966: 63). Perceived ritual failure could at times bring down disaster upon the community. In the case of medieval death a ritual process was utilised to sooth the upheaval in the community resulting from the loss or expected loss of a member. The term *ritual process* is used for the period before, during, and after death, and contains a number of rituals with varying aims and properties that contribute to the perception of a successful death. This was primarily a social endeavour, though it employs rituals not only social but also religious in nature, and indeed has influence on the religious/spiritual perception of the fate of the soul as well. "Ritual is consistently depicted as a mechanistically discrete and pragmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation" (Bell 1992: 16). In this case it was used to transform a dying member of the community into one of the community's dead, so as to allow for continued peaceful coexistence; this was attained not only through the perception of the religious efficacy of the ritual process, but also, and perhaps even more so, through the perceived social efficacy.

Death posed as one threshold that affected the individual as well as the whole community. The schema of the Rites of Passage, first identified in the very early twentieth century by the scholar Arnold Van Gennep, as the rites that marked thresholds in the course of a person's life within the community thus cannot be ignored (Van Gennep 1960). Formed out of the very idea of transition from one stage to another, the schema fits death in the Middle Ages uncannily: "Death relates to life: to the recent life of the deceased, and to the life he or she has procreated and now leaves behind" (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 108). The simplified tripartite structure of the schema of the Rites of Passage, while indeed very structural, suits the transitional purpose of the ritual process that surrounded death: "The tripartite scheme persists because it is convenient" (Grimes 2000: 148). It is actually this clear structure that makes this schema an extremely useful tool when dissecting the complex collection of rituals, both secular and religious in nature, that over a period of time aimed to accomplish differing things that all build up to a single result, the transition of death. There are, however, issues that call for caution. For Van Gennep himself the focus seems to be primarily on mortuary rituals; as such his focus perhaps inescapably lay with the living of the society and how they were affected by the death. Death in the Middle Ages, however, started when the subject was alive; it was literally the process of dying; separation from life here is placed before biological death. Thus the folkloric approach with its focus on the dead as a more active party in the process necessitates a careful reading of the utilisation and perceived effects of the ritual process and the rituals it contained, with the dying person as the subject rather than the bereaved. An even more literal approach

to Van Gennep's theory is proposed here, where the dead are read to have as much faculty as any initiate transitioning from boyhood to adulthood. Thus any failure in the ritual process would initiate a very real perceived danger to the community. This is especially so in the pre-modern era due to the perceived proximity of the dead to the society itself. Death, the inescapable threshold, had specific implications in a society where the dead did not disappear.

Van Gennep subdivided the Rites of Passage into the *rites of separation*, *transition rites* or *liminal rites*, and *rites of incorporation* (Van Gennep 1960: 11). The theory itself is based on the idea of transition, "which centres on the idea of 'liminality' (from the Latin *limen*, 'threshold')" (Binski 1996: 29). The Rites of Passage were thus made up of three stages: the separation stage, the liminal/transitional stage, and the reintegration stage. However, as Metcalf and Huntington (1991: 112) warn, Van Gennep's schema remains a vague truism unless one connects it to the values of the culture in question. At the same time, if connected in such a way, it provides insight into the culture's perceptions of death and the ritual process it implements for the transition. The rites surrounding death were concerned first with the life about to be left behind. Hence the resonance is strong with the schema that Van Gennep proposed. This ritual process was in place not only for the sake of the individual though; it was there equally to ensure the continued existence and peace of the community, in overcoming the temporary – even in the case of death – loss of one of its members. A good death gave sufficient warning, allowing enough time for preparations to be completed and the rites to be fulfilled.

In this sense the ritual process that surrounded death was a social event with a single subject at the centre. The dying person, in the best of conditions, would be in the sick bed surrounded by family and neighbours, and be visited by the priest (Wieck 1999: 437; Westerhof 2008: 18). The last rites would be administered and the person would die repentant and absolved. Certain rituals were used to bring about separation and the completion of the ritual process. These rituals were mostly religious in their nature, their source the Church itself. Confession of sins, absolution, and extreme unction – all concerned the salvation of the soul. Within the sick room and the eyes of the community, however, they took on social connotations and came to signify the rituals necessary for the surmounting of the threshold of death. It was in part about readying the member of the community for death, making sure of the readiness of the individual to let go of their previous life and identity. Sudden death and consequent unpreparedness were not only a cause for becoming stuck as a liminal presence, in the transitional phase of the Rites of Passage, between the strata of the living and the dead, but also brought with them suspicion in the eyes of the community and the possibility of the damnation of the individual. The ritu-

als provided by the Church thus fulfilled double functions, religious and social. The perception created by the ritual process of death thus similarly affected the individual's fate, in both religious and communal terms.

The dying person was encouraged to disentangle all the strands that connected him/her to family, friends, community, society, and the earthly realm. This function was in part fulfilled by confession and absolution, in part by removing any quarrels and exercising forgiveness and thus achieving separation from the community and the current identity of the subject. All ties of affection or enmity were to be discarded. Sins at their very basis were connections to the earthly realm, to family and community that could prove dangerous if left tethered. Geertz describes something similar in a Javanese funeral; emotional distancing is paramount: "[---] it is a calm, undemonstrative, almost languid letting go, a brief ritualized relinquishment of a relationship no longer possible. Tears are not approved of and certainly not encouraged" (Geertz 1973: 153).

In the medieval ritual process the material and economic side of these connections were also considered important and were dealt with through the will and testament; the family that was to be bereaved were taken care of to the best possible extent where the future was concerned, the continuity of the flow of everyday life for the community secured. Any ties, emotional, economical, spiritual, even religious, to those familiar to the dying person, as well as to the community, were cut. Thus this formed the separation stage wherein the subject severed all ties to the community and their identity in preparation for the transition. The subject's own willingness and readiness would play a great role in the perceived success of this stage, as examples given below will indicate.

Binski too, applying the concept of Rites of Passage to the medieval process of dying, and to the rituals surrounding death, indicated that "anointing was the most final ritual statement: the anointing or unction of the dying [---] was a ritually transformative act from which there was no return" (Binski 1996: 29). His concern lay, however, with the ritual process itself and less with the possible consequences of the failure of such a process. Extreme unction was believed to bring about a complete separation from the physical. Its administration to the dying person meant that all hope was abandoned. Extreme unction thus became the beginning of the end of the separation stage in the Rites of Passage that surrounded death. After the administration of extreme unction the subject, "while not literally dead, was considered to have entered a shadow world between life and death, a world of unclear boundaries" (Dinn 1992: 153–154). The subject thus entered the second stage of the Rites of Passage and took on liminal qualities. Survivors after extreme unction, the community believed, were no longer of the living; they were effectively the living dead, outcasts from the living world. They became something other, something liminal that existed

between the living and the dead: “They would have to live thereafter as a sort of animated corpse” (Duffy 1992: 313), a mirror image of the revenant, one could argue. None of these consequences of course were dictated by the Church; on the contrary, the Church disputed such beliefs, labelling them superstitious and groundless (Thomas 1978 [1971]: 44).

The liminal stage thus commenced during the phase of separation, the death-bed becoming a liminal space that was engaged fully at the point of biological death, when the separation of the dying person from life was complete. The liminal stage, a natural part of the procession of the Rites of Passage that constituted death, and a phase that had to be overcome by both the subject and the community, reflected specific discomforts felt by the community when faced with death. The fear of the newly dead “is something deeply rooted in men’s minds, undoubtedly antedating Christianity” (Ellis Davidson 1981: 173). However, these dead would cease to be fearful once they had overcome the liminal stage. Once reintegration was complete, the dead person would become part of the community again under a new identity as one of the community’s dead. Similar to the individual dead becoming one of the ancestors (Grimes 2006: 388), here, while individual identity is shed, a collective group is entered, that of the community’s dead. Reintegration started with the funeral, the deceased being interred with the others of the community’s dead, and was ended, for the most part, either on the seventh or thirtieth day of commemoration after death, these constituting stages of mourning in their own right. The stages of the Rites of Passage – separation, transition, and reintegration – thus provided in death the roadmap for the dying and the dead to follow so as to reaffirm the wholeness of the community even in the face of loss. As such, one can state that the schema of the Rites of Passage is indeed applicable to the much more complex workings of medieval death. It provides a route within the ritual process that the subject going through it takes. The focus here, however, is on what happens when this process fails and is disrupted.

## **THE REVENANT, LIMINALITY, STAGNATED PASSAGE, AND RITUAL FAILURE**

Revenants thus were the very embodiment of something amiss within this process: the roadmap lost, the subject cast adrift. Revenants were the dead that could not move beyond the liminal stage, and thus inherently personified the very properties of the said stage. The anthropologist Victor Turner, working on the schema of Van Gennep’s Rites of Passage, delved further into the concept of liminality, namely the properties of the liminal, threshold phase. It is Turner



who describes the subjects, while they are in the liminal phase, as *'liminal personae'* or *'threshold people'* (Turner 1991: 95). These subjects, liminal presences, take on the full meaning of the liminal, the other, that which is isolated and removed from the community, separated but not reintegrated, a source of danger and ambiguity with their lack of identity: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (ibid.). In this sense the use of Turner's elaboration of the liminal presence, while self-evident, nevertheless provides a structural shape to what it is that makes the failure of the ritual process as disturbing and dangerous as it was for the community. Where death as a transition from one stage to another was concerned, revenants were by definition beyond the natural order of things; they ended up belonging neither to the living nor to the dead.

"Ideas about contagion can certainly be traced to reaction to anomaly" (Douglas 1966: 5). As such it is not surprising that the liminal personae were also perceived as pollutants, contagious even, poisonous to the whole community, to be avoided at all cost (Turner 1967: 97). However, here too, as the name would imply, the presence is transitional, ephemeral even, the stage has a perceived and foreseeable end. In Turner's approach to the liminal personae the subjects in question are all still within the process of transition, wherein they are being readied for the new state they are to transition into. The only point where Turner tentatively identifies a liminality that is detached from the transitional process is when he is contemplating "the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions" (ibid.: 107). However, here one has to insert that the "monastic and mendicant states" that are entered into become their own stable and recognised stages. As such, there can be no comparison with the dangerous and uncanny liminal personae cut loose from the ritual process in which they originated. To take Turner's and Van Gennep's theories a step further, the position of the revenant was one of stagnation. Once the ritual process failed, the resultant presence was divorced from its ritual context, and it no longer had a foreseeable end. Thus the revenant becomes not a liminal presence, but a stagnated presence, which displays liminal properties but is no longer transitional or finite. The stagnated presence is thus something incomplete, uncanny, unfinished, and half transformed; that which needs to be excised to protect the community and its members. It is the embodiment of "the fear of those already 'dead' but still reckoned to be a threat to the living" (Davies 2007 [2005]: 131). The reactions this presence provoked from the community, and the countermeasures that were used against it would indicate that this presence, once stagnated, became extremely dangerous, a contagion, the liminal properties amplified: it could not co-exist with the community. While life and death can co-exist, the other, the stagnated presence is in an untenable position. It is

by its nature destructive and anathema to the society. This would argue that the failed ritual process, at least where death is concerned, is similarly unacceptable and needs vigorous counteraction.

“Most rituals are staged to achieve an end, so there is always something at stake in performances. Because the outcome cannot be known in advance, success and failure [---] are contingent. Ritual is therefore inherently risky” (Howe 2000: 67). The revenant is perhaps the best representation of the consequences of failure and the risk inherent in the ritual process that surrounds death. It is not the mere salvation or damnation of the soul, but the very existence of the social community that is at risk. One could argue that the more vital the ritual for the community, the more dire the consequence of failure. Here, the term failure indicates that the ritual has failed to bring about the expected and hoped for results. There have been theories on the failure of ritual that indicate that it is the performance of the partakers that fails rather than the ritual itself: “[---] a ritual is a divine action; a divine action is divine because it is by definition perfect, therefore no ritual can fail” (Polit 2007: 200). In the case of medieval death, as one shall see, however, there are a great number of conditions that could influence the outcome of the ritual, most of which may be outside of the control of the dying subject.

The failure of the ritual process was first and foremost connected to a ‘bad death’. A bad death, as it was understood in the Middle Ages, was a sudden death, one that gave no warning to the dying person, thus no chance for preparation and rituals. The subject would thus face death without any of the rites that would normally ease its way. Sudden, violent, obscure deaths, the death of the traveller alone, out in the wilderness without anyone to bear witness – all were deaths to be avoided if possible. A bad death was thus “the secret death that is without witness or ceremony”, a death for which neither the subject nor the community could prepare themselves (Ariès 1982: 11). These people died without receiving the last sacraments and presumably died unconfessed (DuBruck 1999: 24). They were left bereft of rituals, a death uncontrolled and unprepared. “Bad deaths promote disorder”, not only as far as the probable fate of the dead person is concerned but also for the community that suffers the said loss (Kellehear 2007: 94). An untimely death was perceived as a primary reason for ritual failure, as there was no opportunity for the ritual process to be commenced properly.

Geertz, again looking at a Javanese funeral, in the aftermath of a rather untimely death of a young boy, identifies the reason for the failure of the ritual to provide the community with closure in the results of social change and social conflict resulting from a discontinuity between the forms of integration of the

socio-structural and cultural dimensions (Geertz 1973: 164). However, where the phenomenon of the revenant is concerned, it is really impossible, given the nature and the amount of evidence in this period, to speculate, one way or the other, on the effect of any kind of wider socio-structural, cultural, or religious change on the frequency of the perception of failure in the ritual process. As it were, there is little obvious sign of such an effect in the anecdotes. However, as some of the anecdotes shall indicate, while the perception of failure appears to have remained unaffected, there seems to be some correlation between the gradually increasing prevalence of purgatorial ideas and disputes over the kinds of remedies to be utilised against the consequences of such failure.

Within the revenant lore the bad death was one of the main foundations; revenants have almost always died bad deaths. They, unlike the normal dead of the community, refused to stay put in their graves and to co-exist peacefully with the living in the community. They became instigators of chaos within the community, disrupting the community itself. The inability to take their rightful place within the community left the liminal presences as dangerous and uncanny entities in the earthly realm, once familiar and then not familiar strangers. Those that suffered bad deaths could not go through the orderly path of the ritual process; they did not have the opportunity to sever their ties to the living and prepare the community for their loss, be it emotionally, economically, spiritually, or religiously. To this matter of suddenness is also added the common belief that bad people died bad deaths: that the death suffered was indicative of the individual's true nature. This calls forth a link between the failed ritual process and the quality of the individual, in a way that can also be linked to the willingness or unwillingness of the individual to let go of life and the grudges it held.

Thus the ritual process becomes something of a test. Similarly, Howe proposes a reading of the ritual in connection with the inherent risk he perceives in any given ritual: seeing ritual action as a "test, trial, examination" (Howe 2000: 76). The subject thus has to fulfil the conditions of the ritual process, withstanding and passing the test would mean becoming one of the community's dead. The material risk is a community broken by loss, the heirs bereft of economic and parental support. Beneath it, however, is the supernatural risk, not that of damnation – though that too weighted on the relatives – but that of being unable to become one of the community's dead, that is, the proper dead, but to be left as something other, neither living nor dead, something that carried the power to destroy the community utterly, be it through murder or contagion.

## **THE STAGNATED PRESENCE AND THE CORPSE**

The folkloric approach allows one actually to trace belief through the believed consequence, the revenant. As belief made flesh, the revenant phenomenon provides a clear narrative as to how the community reacted to the failure of the ritual process and also provides a surprising insight into the consequence of failure and what it indicates about the ritual process itself. It turns out that, at least where death is concerned, once the presence, in the form of the revenant, stagnates and gains independence from the ritual process, existing outside of it, it becomes an untenable presence for the community. It becomes a choice between the community and the stagnated presence. This contradicts how Turner gifted the liminal stage with a certain autonomy from the Rites of Passage (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 32). The liminal presence could not be allowed to exist on its own when reintegration within the ritual process was no longer a prospect. As such, when the failure of the ritual process that was death could be identified, pre-emptive countermeasures had to be taken.

The ambivalence of bad deaths and failed ritual processes, which concerned both the eternal fate of the soul and the shaken and fractured community that was left behind, was the most potent factor in the making of the ‘suspect’ dead, in the creation of the stagnated presence. The suspect dead, when identified, were perceived as potentially dangerous. They were refused burial among the dead of the community, that is, in the graveyard. Suspect dead were thus “condemned to a pitiable existence, since they are never able to enter the world of the dead or to become incorporated in the society established there. These are the most dangerous dead” (Van Gennep 1960: 160). Within the medieval community in Britain most of these dead, with regard to the perceived danger they posed, were buried as far away as possible from the community of the living, as well as from the community of the reintegrated dead: at crossroads, or on roadsides or boundaries. These were places that belonged to no one; they were in a sense liminal themselves, in-between spaces that were to be avoided. This refusal of a proper burial could either be a result of a perceived failure of the subject in the ritual process, or a punishment for crimes against the community, such as excommunication or suicide. Thus the reaction of the community could be gauged by the place of burial: “The sanctified ground in the churchyard was contrasted with the limbo of evil spirits at the crossroads” (Parker Pearson 1993: 207).

However, it was not only the place of burial but also what the living did to these corpses; these dead were mutilated. The living would sometimes stake the corpse into the grave; remove the head and place it between its legs or bury it separately; crush the head after decapitation; crush the body under a heavy boulder; remove the legs; bury the corpse deeper than usual; throw some into

bogs or rivers, or bind the hands and feet (Reynolds 1998: 8–9; Simpson 2003: 390). Some were buried face down (Gordon & Marshall 2000: 7). These burial practices were not novel in nature; such burial sites were discovered at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Sutton Hoo, and at other archaeological sites as old as the Iron Age (Barber 1988: 79; Carver 1998: 138–9; Daniell 2007: 118). These seem to indicate that the need and urge to practice such gruesome customs on some of the dead had long existed, divorced from any specific religion or even region.

These dead, by having failed the ritual process of death, and to some extent by the impossibility, inability, or unwillingness of the community to bury and reintegrate them properly, were condemned to remain as stagnated presences. In the eyes of the community at least they were clearly a source of danger that had to be dealt with before things got out of hand: “They would like to be reincorporated into the world of the living, and since they cannot be, they behave like hostile strangers toward it” (Van Gennep 1960: 160). The community, when it could identify a failure in the ritual process, aimed to make the corpse stay put in its grave, a sinister indication that the body, the corpse itself, was perceived as a source of danger, a threat.

In the minds of the members of the community, the existence of revenants was first and foremost connected to the dead body left behind, as it was the activity of these physical bodies that set apart these particular stagnated presences. The body, after death, was believed to retain a certain essence of life, which made it a possible threat for a certain period of time, until the complete decomposition of the flesh. This perceived suspect period concerning the body is also connected, in a sense, to the Rites of Passage, though this particular theory belongs to Robert Hertz. Hertz studied the practice of two-fold funerals, which indicate a two-staged death, in certain near-contemporary communities of Indonesian people, particularly in upriver Borneo (Hertz 1960: 28–29). The person effectively dies twice. The first death is the biological death, which leaves behind the fleshy remains, upon which the corpse is interred temporarily and is regarded as liminal and dangerous, indicative of a liminal ambiguous period, wherein the community has to guard against the newly dead. During this time, “it ‘returns’ of its own initiative through necessity or through malice, and its untimely appearance spreads terror” (Hertz 1960: 37). This period is believed to end only after the complete decomposition of flesh, whereby the body dies its second death, which indicates the safe passage of the dying person into the community of the dead (Barber 1988: 141). The remains at this point are dry remains, mere bones, and are once again, and this time permanently, interred in their final resting place. Van Gennep similarly points to this connection between the flesh and the transitional period during his discussion of funerals

(Van Gennep 1960: 148). This perception was equally true of the medieval revenant: “The question of a reanimated skeleton is never raised: there must be flesh upon the bone” (Caciola 1996: 32).

For Hertz’s subjects, the danger of the dead harassing the living during that particular period seems to have existed for all the dead, as long as they were in this in-between stage wherein the corpse remained intact, a kind of normal liminal phase one could say. However, those that had died bad deaths were perceived quite differently: “It seems, in the most typical cases at least, that the transitory period extends indefinitely for these victims of a special malediction and that their death has no end” (Hertz 1960: 85). Thus, if one combines the perception of the condition of the corpse with the failed ritual process of death, it explains why the intact body featured so heavily in the revenant lore. These stagnated presences were thus pushed outside even of the dominion of nature, rejected by the very soil. They did not seem able to decompose and follow the natural order of things.

Literally trapped between the living and the dead, due to their failure of the ritual process, the revenants walked the earthly realm in their own bodies; they refused to remain in their graves and roamed places familiar to them. They were, in a sense, horrible imitations of the life they had lost. Previous attachments still seem to guide and motivate the revenant, as most of the time their targets are familiar people, loved ones, the bereaved. One argument may well be that the revenant in its own violent way seeks to remove the attachments that the failed ritual process had left behind, or to take these very people with it to the grave. The living have no way of peacefully mitigating the situation, as the revenant seems to act under motivations that have nothing to do with the personality of the living person before their death. They thus become an abomination to the community, estranged members that nevertheless cannot be separated from their previous roles as loved community members, but are lethal monsters nonetheless. The dead in question seem to be warped by the failed ritual process. They are the ‘hostile strangers’ (Van Gennep 1960: 160). Attachments in this case become a source of danger for the living, no longer a point of comfort. The revenants thus represented the very thing the community would hope to avoid by the ritual process that surrounded death.

## EXAMPLES OF THE STAGNATED PRESENCE IN ITS REVENANT INCARNATION

The graphically described revenant has been captured in the pages of twelfth- and early thirteenth-century chronicles, allowing a glimpse into its nature. William of Newburgh, Walter Map, Geoffrey of Burton, the anonymous recorder of the Lanercost Chronicle, all spared attention and time to record these entities. They were baffled at times by the reports they heard of revenants, but did not doubt their authenticity. William of Newburgh, in his *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, indicated that there was an abundance of examples, perhaps linked in Newburgh's mind to apocalyptic concerns, but in general his anecdotes seem to be cautionary in nature, providing an insight into revenant lore and the perception of the liminal presence within the community (Newburgh 1996 [1856]: 658).

The following anecdote is, as are the others, set only a few years prior to Newburgh's writing. In a monastery at Melrose a revenant makes its presence known. He is identified as a chaplain of an illustrious lady, buried in the said monastery. The circumstances of the man's death are left unclear. However, suspicion is cast upon him through his way of life, which it turns out is indicative enough: "After his death – as the event showed – the guiltiness of it was brought to light" (ibid.: 658–659). As such one can understand that revenancy was perceived as indicative of a bad life. Here surfaces the link between the failure of the subject in its ritual process and the perceived quality of the said individual and the kind of life they had lived, the ritual process becoming a trial that the subject had failed. The haunt of the revenant, as prescribed by liminality, is a ground familiar to him. After an attempt at hounding the inhabitants of the monastery, the revenant turned its sights on its former mistress; previous attachments, still unbroken, were at play.

The degeneration of the stagnated presence from one of the community's dead, albeit one that had lacked morality in life, to a danger, is indicative of the transformation undergone by the Melrose revenant. It does not communicate nor would it seem that any interaction would benefit the living. The revenant's end comes in a physical altercation wherein a brother of the monastery "struck the axe which he wielded in his hand deep into his body" (ibid.: 659). The presence seems vulnerable to physical attack, retreating back into the grave once wounded. The corpse was dug up and, "having carried it away beyond the walls of the monastery and burnt it, they scattered the ashes to the winds" (ibid.). The complete destruction of the corpse is the way to divest the community of this unwanted stagnated presence. It seems that it does not matter whether the setting is a monastery or a village; the way to deal with a stagnated presence walking in its own body was through the destruction of the corpse.

Newburgh's revenant at Berwick on Tweed displays similar properties, though the consequences for the community were even direr. A revenant wandered forth from his grave in the town. The man, though wealthy in life, was proven to have been a rogue in the eyes of the community through his post-mortem actions (ibid.: 657). The danger posed by this stagnated presence to the community engenders a communal response, a meeting of sorts. Communal solidarity seems to be one reaction towards such presences; the community in some cases clearly banded together to deal with the problem. The threat was not limited to physical altercations, as had been the case in Melrose. The wiser members of the community were aware that a speedy solution to the situation was necessary, or else "the 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" (ibid.: 657–658). The presence was believed to be able to infect and corrupt the very air, the very community. The stagnated entity here was present in all its glory.

It was capable of physically laying hands on the members of the community, beating them black and blue, threatening their very lives (ibid.: 660). At the same time its contagious nature presented a wider threat to the whole community. As with Turner's liminal personae, this presence was perceived as contagious, a pollutant; the revenant seen as a source of plagues. However, unlike the liminal personae, the revenant is there to stay. With its unclean presence due to the failed ritual process and its inability to become one of the dead of the community, and thus an outsider, it became a pollutant that had to be removed. The offhand reference to other such happenings, where indeed the pollution of the stagnated presence had proved harmful to the community and its members, indicates that the belief was not uncommon. Similarly, the countermeasures taken against the revenant seem to come from a community well-versed in how to deal with such occurrences. They dig up the body and, "having cut it limb from limb, reduce it into food and fuel for the flames. When this was done, the commotion ceased", though the remedy seems to have been too late, as "a pestilence, which arose in consequence, carried off the greater portion of them" (ibid.: 658). This rather bleak ending would seem to ratify the 'wiser' opinion that all haste is necessary when dealing with the stagnated presence.

In response to the revenant's walking, the community at Berwick took physical action as in the Melrose example. The countermeasure of dismemberment and the complete destruction of the body through fire came from the community. It seems the very connection of the returning dead to the community – the corpse – had to be destroyed to rid the community of this unwanted 'stranger',



the community thereby closing its ranks and boundaries to further invasion. This destruction may well be read as a complete refusal of reintegration, and at the same time a forceful and final separation of the presence from its original community and any vestiges of identity. As previously mentioned, the stagnated presence thus divorced from its ritual context cannot be allowed to exist if the community is to survive.

Newburgh continues with another anecdote that underlines the rather sinister properties of the revenant, this time located at a castle called Anantis (*ibid.*: 660).<sup>2</sup> The man's position in life is made clear at the very beginning. He was already a rather disreputable sort, having come to this particular castle to escape a shady past and, according to Newburgh, still embracing his 'evil propensities'. Trying to catch his wife in the act of adultery, the man fell from the beams of his bedroom, where indeed the wife was engaged in the said activity. Though the man did not die immediately with the fall, the fall opened the path for his death, and his failed ritual process. The circumstances of his situation were all around unsavoury, the results even more so.

A priest was called for the man who was lingering on death's doorstep. The priest "admonished him to make confession of his sins, and receive the Christian Eucharist in proper form" (*ibid.*: 660). The man, however, preoccupied with his wife's unfaithfulness, did not confess or receive absolution. He "put off the wholesome advice until the morrow – that morrow which in this world he was fated never to behold" (*ibid.*: 660). One would deduce from this that he refused to undergo the last rites, or extreme unction; he wilfully refused to partake in the ritual process, unable to let go emotionally, spiritually, and religiously. This, added to his rather misspent life, made the man a perfect candidate for revenancy.

This particular man provides the very representation of a bad death: a ritual process that was almost wilfully failed. Even though he seemed to get a second chance of putting his own death in order, he did not take it. It could thus be argued that the state of mind of the dying, if there is indeed time for consideration, is of utmost importance to the success of the ritual process. The subject undergoing the process is perhaps the most influential factor in the whole process. The Christian burial, an attempt at reintegration, was unsuccessful. Like the Melrose revenant, one would assume, he was given proper burial rites, but this only emphasises the importance placed by the community on the ritual process itself.

Once the dead man walked, the main concern of the community at first was an attempt to isolate themselves physically from the stagnated presence, the revenant, by locking themselves in their houses. Their first fear was the physi-

cal aspect of the revenant. However, as is generally the case with stagnated presences, something much more insidious was working its way through the community.

*For the atmosphere, poisoned by the vagaries of this foul carcass, filled every house with disease and death by its pestiferous breath. Already did the town, which but a short time ago was populous, appear almost deserted; while those of its inhabitants who had escaped destruction migrated to other parts of the country, lest they, too, should die. (ibid.: 660)*

Thus a single stagnated presence, left to its own devices, was enough to destroy a whole community; the ties of the community unravelled due to the threat represented by continued deaths and emigration.

In the end, two young men took it upon themselves to rid the town of the presence. Their idea of a remedy was similar to the previous cases: the mutilation and complete destruction of the body. They dug up the body and “then, dragging it beyond the village, they speedily constructed a funeral pile” (ibid.: 661). The fact that the people were eager to remove corpses from the community’s space, even for destruction, is telling. All traces of the presence, even of its destruction and destroyed remains, were to be exiled. In this anecdote there is the added detail that they remove the heart and shred it to pieces to allow the body to burn: “this being torn to piecemeal, and the body now consigned to the flames” (ibid.: 661). The successful destruction of the stagnated presence brings immediate relief to the community: “When that infernal hell-hound had thus been destroyed, the pestilence which was rife among the people ceased” (ibid.: 661).

The Anantis revenant is perhaps the best example of the revenant as a stagnated presence that had incorporated the properties of a liminal presence, as Newburgh gives the most detail on the man before, during, and after his death, and on the rites that were supposed to be performed. This allows one to see how the ritual process had failed and had even deliberately been compromised by the man himself, as well as the consequences thereof. This would indicate that the two revenants cited earlier did go through the normal religious rituals surrounding death; the failure of the ritual process was literally the failure of the individual to let go and separate itself from the life it was to leave behind. Here again surfaces the perception of the ritual process as a trial, a test for the subject to pass. The fact that the narration of the Melrose and Berwick anecdotes puts more emphasis on the type of life that these men had led, rather than their deaths, is also of interest. The fact that some revenants seem to have been buried initially among the dead of the community indicates that, at

first, their deaths, their ritual process, had been perceived as formally fulfilled. In such cases it is the revenant, the stagnated presence walking, that clearly identifies the actual failure of the ritual process. The ‘badness’ of their death, the failure of their ritual process, was thus rooted in their inability or unwillingness to let go. It is perhaps important to indicate that the ritual process, while it encompassed the rituals surrounding death, proposed by the Church and used by the community, was not limited to the physical rituals alone. As it were, the ritual process was literally a journey for the individual to undertake, fraught with dangers, the possibility of failure always there. Hence it was not only circumstance and fate that created the framework for a bad death and the failure of the ritual process, but it was also deeply rooted in the individual’s own preparedness. As such, the folkloric approach provides its own evidence of ritual failure; the very existence of the revenant is what marks the ritual process as failed and one is brought face to face with the direct consequence of such failure.

Another anecdote shares many common points with that of the revenant of Anantis. It was recorded in the first half of the twelfth century, thus relatively early, by Geoffrey of Burton in his *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, but set considerably earlier, during the period 1085–1094, when Geoffrey Malaterra was abbot of Burton (Burton 2002: xxix). While, in the study of the walking dead, saints indeed present difficult issues too tangled to discuss here, this particular anecdote is worth discussing. It is recorded in the section of the book on posthumous miracles, wherein the author recorded local beliefs that were in any way connected to the shrine where the bones of the saint were supposedly at rest.

It concerned two revenants rather than one. These two runaway peasants had caused an inordinate amount of trouble for the abbey, and were suddenly struck down dead. As one can guess, it was this point that tied the anecdote to the saint; it was deemed as just punishment, though the saint is not mentioned at all. The two peasants were buried in the churchyard but were then seen, “while the sun was still up, at Drakelow, carrying on their shoulders the wooden coffins in which they had been buried”, almost as if they had been expelled from the churchyard, coffin and all (ibid.: 195–197). The peasants then started to display the notorious properties of the stagnated presence, wandering around, calling out to people. However, it was not physical violence that threatened the community so much as illness: “Such a disease afflicted the village that all the peasants fell into desperate straits” (ibid.: 195–197). The polluting presence of the stagnated entities had poisoned the village.

The threat that the entire village might perish prompted three brave men who were still healthy to take action, at the very least to save themselves. They

went about it in the traditional way, targeting the bodies of the revenants: “They received permission from the bishop to go to their graves and dig them up” (ibid.: 197). That the bishop granted his permission seems to indicate that in such situations opening the grave and dealing with the corpse was the normal thing to be done. That there were graves to dig would seem to indicate that the corpses were still in the churchyard. Having found the corpses intact, rejected, it seems, by death itself, “they cut off the men’s heads and placed them in their graves between their legs, tore out the hearts from their corpses, and covered the bodies with earth again” (ibid.: 197). The hearts, as in the Anantis case, were treated to a special fate and burned, and while an evil spirit was described to have flown out of the hearts, there was no talk of purification, prayers, or the saint. While the runaways’ original ‘bad death’ might have been linked to their offences against the saint, the remedy for the revenancy lay with the community taking familiar action.

The corpses, typical of the restless dead, were found intact, the period identified by Hertz as most dangerous. Thus it seems that in the case of the revenant the normal procession of death and decomposition was halted, had literally stagnated, through the sudden death and the implied failure of the ritual process, and the consequent continued existence of the dead as a revenant. The bodies of those that die bad deaths, those that fail the ritual process, “inspire the most intense horror and are got rid of precipitately; furthermore, their bones are not laid with those of other deceased members of the group who have died a normal death. Their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth for ever” (Hertz 1960: 85).

In Christian society, the cemetery was to be off-limits to the suspect dead. The mis-burial of the two culprits is the first statement made. The anecdote also reinforces the idea that “the fate of the soul was linked to that of the corpse”, both in burial, it seems, and in its actual condition (Finucane 1981: 60).

The precautions that the peasants take with the decapitation and the placement of the head are very familiar, though in this study this is the only example – and thus doubly important – in that it actually connects this specific burial custom with revenants, whereby it could be argued that, where such graves are found unexplained, it may indicate both precautions against suspect dead, and, to a lesser extent, remedies in the face of such restlessness. The very matter-of-fact actions of the peasants indicate that they were no strangers as to what remedies were to be effective. In the end the sick peasants recovered, and everyone left Drakelow. This anecdote provides the best evidence of how a stagnated entity was capable of destroying a whole community. The stagnated presence, outside of its ritual context, endangers the whole community. The

perceived danger, which is emphasised through the consequences recounted in the anecdotes, underlines this fact. Similarly, the removal of the presence after destruction allows no leeway for reconciliation of the presence with either its former identity or its proposed identity as one of the community's dead, one of the ancestors, so to say. Thus, where death is concerned, the liminal presence cannot be allowed to exist independently of the ritual process that gave birth to it.

The previous anecdotes stress the otherness of the stagnated presence, both where the personality of the dead person is concerned, but also the threat the revenant posed to the community. The members of the communities do not seem to be in any way surprised that the revenant is the reason for sustained death and destruction within the community, and they are ready to act in order to stop it. No one seems to need a manual on how one is to deal with such occurrences. However, the next anecdote, from Newburgh's *Historia*, introduces a different aspect to the whole idea, the hint of a possibility that something else could at times be a viable option when one is dealing with a stagnated presence.

Newburgh's Buckingham anecdote represents the most positive outcome of all his anecdotes, as well as the only one where the effectiveness of clerical measures seems to put the divine and the Church to the fore. The story begins similarly to the others: a man died and refused to stay put in his grave. The night after burial, "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" (Newburgh 1996 [1856]: 656). In this rather horrifying imitation of life, the wife got a healthy scare rather than physical injuries, but decided to surround herself with other people to avoid a repeat of the situation. Consequently, the revenant moved on to approach his brothers. Thus his points of interest and interaction were all those who were once closest to him in life.

As with the other anecdotes, the community seems to have come together in the face of this invader and at long last went to the Church for advice. The Bishop of Lincoln, fascinated by the story, decided to look closer into things; some of his companions indicated that commotions like this were common in England and "that tranquillity could not be restored to the people until the body of this most wretched man were dug up and burnt" (ibid.: 657). Thus the normal remedy to a stagnated presence, a revenant walking, was immediately suggested. As was the case with the Melrose monks, the general knowledge of how to get rid of such a danger to the community, whether it was subscribed to or not, was far from limited to the vulgar and ignorant, though the narration seems to suggest that the bishop himself, the Burgundian-born Hugh of Avalon, is unfamiliar with it, which may explain to an extent why, in this anecdote, the

bishop veers off the beaten path. This deviation, one could argue, may also well flow from a change that was already underway, something that would change the perception of the stagnated presence and the consequences of a failed ritual process. These changes, the effects of which would become more apparent further down the line, were brought on primarily by the emergence and spread of more clearly elaborated purgatorial ideas. These were to introduce the possibility of change to the religious and social status of the 'dead', of reintegration even of the revenant, allowing the living to have a role in this possibility. The bishop thus had other ideas as to how to approach this dead man walking: he "addressed a letter of absolution", which was then placed into the opened grave wherein "the corpse was found as it had been placed there" (ibid.: 657).

The body, as was the case with other revenants, had remained untouched by decomposition, a good indication of stagnation and revenancy, where "the cadaver [...] was condemned not to decompose in the ground" (Schmitt 1998: 200). The surprising thing in this anecdote would be that the letter actually worked, absolving the victim of whichever crimes and sins and thereby completing the separation phase of the dead man, albeit post-mortem, thereby ending his stagnation. The reburial or closing of the grave would then represent the onset of the reintegration stage. Thus the man rested, at last completing his ritual process successfully, albeit after a terrifying detour. However, there are a few important points one must emphasise while taking into account this success. Unlike other revenants and stagnated presences, this revenant claimed no victims, either through lethal physical assault or contagion. This lack of pollution may have been why the bishop deemed this particular man worthy of salvation, or at least helped him come to this conclusion. All in all, the dead man's worst effect on the community was terror, sleepless nights, and the disruption of daily life. As such he was much less of a threat than the others. It may have been this moderation that specified this particular revenant as salvageable.

Walter Map too reserved a place for revenants in his *De Nugis Curialium*, believed to have been written in stages between about 1181 and 1192 (Gransden 1996: 243). Three such revenant anecdotes are of interest here, in the first of which, in contrast to Newburgh's Buckingham anecdote, the advice of a bishop went awry. An English knight by the name of William Laudun came for help to Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of Hereford (bishop 1148–1163). William's problem was a dead Welshman, who had died in an unchristian manner, one would guess without last rites, suggesting a bad death, and failed the Rites of Passage. The Welshman was wandering from his grave and calling out the names of people of the village, "who upon being called at once fall sick and die within three days, so that now there are very few of them left" (Map 2002: 202–203).

Here, unlike in the previous case, the revenant was aggressive, even if not physically, and infectious, dragging its victims away from life itself and almost completely eradicating the community. The bishop's conclusion was that there was a divine struggle at work. To remove the evil angel, he advised that they "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" (*ibid.*: 202–203). Unlike the bishop in the Buckingham anecdote, Gilbert Foliot did make some concession to the common belief that the remedy for such presences involved at least a measure of dismemberment – the cutting of the neck – if not the complete destruction of the body. His other remedy was more spiritual, but did not point to a troubled soul in the afterlife, as the Bishop of Lincoln's response had, but rather to the role of evil spirits, demons, against which holy water would be thought effective, a purification in any case. The Bishop of Hereford's recommendations, however, failed to have an effect on the revenant. When William Laudun had his own name called by the revenant, he was forced to take action the old-fashioned way. He went on the counter-offensive, chasing the presence back to its grave where he "clave his head to the neck. From that hour the ravages of that wandering pestilence ceased" (*ibid.*: 202–203). The rather more rigorous attempt at damaging the body of the revenant seems to have worked. However, whereas in Newburgh's accounts, the more physical response to revenants was successfully adopted in all but the Buckingham anecdote, in Map's collection of revenants the Herefordshire revenant's violent end was the exception.

A pattern similar to that of Newburgh's Buckingham anecdote is followed in Map's next anecdote. In this, "a man, reported to have died unchristianly, for a month or more wandered about in his shroud both at night and also in open day" (*ibid.*: 204–205). The neighbourhood then came together and trapped him in an orchard. That they allowed the presence to roam for a month before taking action is telling. It seems that this one, as in the case of the Buckingham revenant, was relatively harmless to its surroundings and the community. There are no reported victims, and once again no contagion. The Church, through the agency of Roger, Bishop of Worcester (bishop 1163–1179), is apparently called in to help: "Roger ordered a cross to be laid upon the grave of the wretch, and the man himself to be let go" (*ibid.*: 204–205). Again, it may have been the lack of victims or the perceived nature of the dead man that made the bishop's advice acceptable in this case.

The laying of the spirit here needed no destruction or removal; rather it seems to indicate reintegration, the return of the formerly stagnated presence to its proper place among the dead of the community. The raising of the cross

may well suggest that a proper ritual process had been denied to the man the first time around, and that by the order of the bishop the reintegration stage was to be recommenced and completed at this later date. Once the revenant was in the grave and the cross was raised on top of it, “he remained quiet” (ibid.: 204–205). As such, a post-mortem change in the affairs of the living and the dead had thus been effected, very much as in the Buckingham case.

Map’s final anecdote is similarly constructed and the change from the threatening revenants that needed violent and extreme measures is clear. It concerned a knight and his late father. The dead man on his return was very articulate and once he convinced the son that he was indeed his father, he asked for a priest to be called (ibid.: 206–207). His demeanour was not threatening and he was actually communicating with his son rather than attacking him as would have been the norm. His actions seemed to inspire pity rather than fear; he was in dire need of something only the living could offer, being very clear as to what, or rather whom, it needed: “I am that wretch whom long since you excommunicated unnamed [---] I am permitted to ask for absolution” (ibid.: 206–207). The man had died excommunicate, and as such was a prime example of a failed ritual process. The subject is, in a sense, exiled and isolated from the community even while alive, a condition which continued on into death. That he was excommunicated anonymously may indicate that the community, even conceivably the man himself, was not aware of his condition until it was presumably too late. This would perhaps argue that such a person, already marked out for stagnation, could not benefit from the normal flow of the religious rites and the ritual process in general, which, even if carried out normally, would be doomed from the start.

How was it then that this man could return, in possession of his faculties, and ask for the correction of the ritual process, when the stagnated presence should have been the embodiment of hostility for the community? It is the revenant himself that gives the answer: “The common prayers of the Church and the alms of the faithful have by God’s grace so helped me” (ibid.: 206–207). It seems the living had thus accomplished something previously unattainable for a stagnated presence: they had influenced the very nature of this revenant, and allowed him to return in a fashion that would, rather than lead to complete destruction and an eternal lack of reintegration, attain the very opposite, a post-mortem absolution, that would allow the man to be reclaimed as one of the community, as one of the community’s dead: “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” (ibid.: 204–205).



The man thus is reinterred and reintegrated among the dead with many witnesses including the local community. Map states that “this new case has introduced a new subject of discussion into the books of divinity”, emphasising that the event and the story had implications for the afterlife and the fate of the soul, and for the stagnant dead and their relationship to the community, which were as yet novel and unexplored (ibid.: 206–207). This anecdote again provides a strong example that the more elaborate purgatorial ideas were becoming more prevalent.

Roughly contemporary, *De Nugis* and *Historia*, with their differing ratios of destroyed or dismembered revenants to those revenants who were saved or reintegrated, suggest that both outcomes were present in that period and of interest to the writers. Stagnated presences were undergoing a change, becoming more talkative for one, and aware of their own motivations. They could now communicate these motivations to the living, and it seems they were becoming less lethal, if not less disturbing, for the community. This change, however, was not in any way uniform, nor does it seem linear, as would be indicated by an anecdote from the *Chronicon de Lanercost*, the relevant part of which, concerning the late thirteenth century, seems to have been written by a Franciscan friar (Stevenson 1839: iii-iv). In Clydesdale, south-western Scotland, a man who had “lived wickedly and died most wretchedly” and had also been excommunicated, returns, physically assaulting people, and ends up killing the son of a knight (Stevenson 1839: 163–164; Maxwell 2001 [1913]: 118–119). This source, while relatively late, still seems to retain intact the idea of the uncommunicative, violent, even deadly revenant. It may also argue, together with the properties displayed by the more peaceful revenants recounted here, that the perceived quality of the individual in life may also have affected the way the revenant acted and its possibility of reintegration and salvation.

## CONCLUSION

The successful reading of a belief such as that in the revenant through the anthropological concept of failed ritual process, and its resultant identification as an embodiment of the stagnated presence, provides a framework that explains why such phenomena exist, in context with the community and society in which they surface. On the other hand, the study of the revenant also holds up a mirror to the anthropological approach itself. As it were, the very nature of the revenant as a stagnated presence, as well as the anecdotes about revenants, seem to indicate that the transitional-liminal presence can only be

tolerated by the community as a finite part of the transitional ritual process. Once independence is declared through failure of the ritual process, the subject, the stagnated presence, the other, is no longer a tolerable presence. Only complete destruction of the presence can remedy the situation and salvage the community. Similarly, this framework, while allowing for the revenant to be identified as a stagnated presence, a transitional stage out of its ritual context, provides a broader perspective that indicates that the precise form of that presence was forged through religious and other cultural developments that were open to change.

Newburgh's Buckingham revenant and Map's Worcestershire revenant, as well as the latter's account of the knight's father, and the treatment these particular stagnated entities received, herald ideas that were to become more prevalent, bringing with them change: "We can detect in the ghost stories of the chronicles an intensifying desire to reinterpret the returning dead as souls in need of aid" (Watkins 2009 [2007]: 185). However, the potency of liminal properties and the stagnated presence should not be underestimated. Not all revenants seemed to wish for or were even capable of wishing for reintegration and salvation. As the Clydesdale revenant indicates, the change in ideas and the penetration of new ideas into popular belief may well have been decidedly patchy.

Just before focusing on the 'doctrine of purgatory' under its own heading, Jacqueline Simpson, noting the disappearance of the revenant from British legend, states: "This change may well be due to the more spiritual theology of Purgatory" (Simpson 2003: 394). One can argue that what changed the revenant was less the doctrine of purgatory itself, and more the spread of purgatorial ideas. These implied that post-mortem intervention and alteration of the circumstances of the dead were possible, but not all of them corresponded to a set doctrine. These ideas would translate into the possibility of the reintegration of the lost stagnated presence into the community as one of the dead.

Revenants for a time had been the very embodiment of the stagnated presence, an offshoot of the liminal presence with all its inherent properties: the way they came into existence and the way they interacted with the living of the community; their behaviour, as well as the actions the community took against them, both preventative in nature and as countermeasures after their walking. However, as factors such as the effectiveness of purgatorial ideas changed the society and community, as well as the course of the ritual process and the perception of its failure, stagnated presences were hesitantly starting to go through their own metamorphoses. They seem to become less dangerous, less physical in their attacks; they start to speak, and make sense; their

motivations become comprehensible to the living, allowing them a way to help, to try and repair failed ritual processes that had previously presented an irredeemable situation. Their dangerous properties and stagnated position were tempered by the possibility of a happy end. The reasons for the existence of the stagnated presence, the failed ritual process, however, would remain as valid as ever. Thus the stagnated presence stubbornly remained within the workings of the community, even while the revenant, once its perfect incarnation, violent and deadly, seemed to be gradually disappearing, leaving its place to another form. The ritual process could still fail and this failure would continue to spawn stagnated presences.

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## **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Further research on this subject, the effects of the Reformation period on the returning dead and their manifestations, form part of my ongoing doctoral work.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Stevenson proposes this castle to be Annand or Annan, in Dumfriesshire (Newburgh 1996 [1856]: 660).

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