

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cimetière du Père-Lachaise. Bats and vampires in French RomanticismJens Rydell^{1,*}, Johan Eklöf², Marco Riccucci³

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ABSTRACT

The bats' elusive life style and unusual appearance have always stimulated peoples' imagination, perhaps more so than any other animal. Since medieval times the church has associated bats with the Devil as well as death, darkness and the underground, and, not surprisingly, bats have obtained a given place in folklore, art and fiction. In this paper, we present a remarkable display of bats in *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise* (the *Père Lachaise* cemetery) in Paris. The bats are symbolic and occur on vaults from the Romantic period (1820-1850), a passage of European history when bats were quite popular ingredients in artwork and literature, particularly in France. Most of the bat sculptures in *Père Lachaise* are quite realistic and apparently without any intent to invoke fear or send evil messages. They are typically displayed on the steel gates of the tombs and symbolise death and the long night before the flight to heaven. They often occur in association with an hourglass, a winged skull and/or an ouroboros, icons of the ephemeral nature of life and the eternal cycle of life and death, respectively. We speculate that the bat symbols could also have an apotropaic function, protecting the tomb and its inhabitants from evil forces and/or bad luck. The reputation of bats in Europe has not always been as negative as it is today, and those at *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise* illustrate its diversity and complexity. The tombs with bats in this cemetery are exclusive and exceptional items of human cultural history and we would strongly appreciate if they would be preserved for future studies and enlightenment.

INTRODUCTION

Bats typically symbolize death, darkness and the underground (Allen 1939, McCracken 1993) and, indeed, have a long and diverse career in religion, myths and folklore in many parts of the world, e.g. in central and southern Europe (Tupinier 1989), Scandinavia (Rääf 1957), tropical Africa (Knappert 1995), East Asia (Volker 1975), America (Benson 1987, Brady & Coltman 2016) and Australia (Richards et al. 2012). In Europe bats have occurred in religious contexts at least since medieval times, often in the form of devils or demons with bat wings (Rumpler 1996, Lorenzi 2006). Simultaneously and thus contemporary with the beginning of the Great Explorations in the 14th century, slightly more realistic bats appeared in so called bestiaries, which showed strange animals and monsters, some of which were believed to exist in other yet unexplored parts of the world (Leclercq-Marx 2016). Bats in the form of fanciful wooden figures were sometimes carved on the underside of the foldable choir seats, the so called Misericordia, in several medieval cathedrals (Remnant 1969). Similar wooden sculptures of bats occasionally decorate other parts of old churches as well (Fig. 1).

The symbolic bats from the Middle Ages made a dramatic transition in the Renaissance (in the 16th century), when Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer and their contemporaries mostly in Italy, used bats

in very different and apparently non-religious contexts in architecture, drawings and sculptures (Riccucci & Rydell 2017). The bat symbols then made another transition during the Baroque (in the 17th and 18th centuries), when they appeared on gravestones and tombs as symbols of death and thus again conveyed a religious message, which persisted throughout the Romantic period (in the 19th century) (Rumpler 2001, 2003, 2005).

In European traditional medicine bats have been used for many purposes at least since the Roman times (Riccucci 2012). Recently, draculin, the glycoprotein found in vampire bat saliva and which prevents blood from coagulating, has become a potentially effective treatment against strokes and heart-attacks (Riccucci 2012), and has greatly influenced the perception of vampires and other bats worldwide. Real or perceived vampires have also been used in forensic science on skeletal remains in Venice (Tsaliki 1999, Nuzzolese et al. 2013). Bats are sometimes the final messengers of death in contemporary fiction, particularly in the context of serious illness (Bernhardsson 2010).

In the literature, bats appeared already in the fables of Aesops more than five hundred years BC (Anon 2018) and, of course, they were also treated in Aristotle's work *De Animalibus* (On animals) in the 3rd century BC. Bats were quite accurately described in 77 AD by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (English translation 1967),



Fig. 1 - A carved wooden bat inside Nôtre Dame de Paris. Photo J. Rydell 2018.

but, nevertheless, they were believed to be birds yet for a long time, even in *Historiae Animalium* by Gessner (1555), the most important zoological work of the Renaissance. At the very end of that period, finally, a British priest John Swan realized that bats are in fact mammals (Swan 1635), although the credit for this insight is usually given to another Englishman, the biologist John Ray (1693). Bats were finally described and classified scientifically and given Latin names by Linnaeus (1758). Hence the belief that bats are birds remained long after the Renaissance, and this bird/beast dualism has always been an important trade mark of the bats in religion, art and literature (Leclercq-Marx 2016). In the 19th century, vampire tales and artwork became very popular in Europe, and this interest still remains (Guiley 2005, Melton 2011).

The poor reputation of bats prevailing in many countries at present, recently enhanced by exaggerated reports on deadly virus infections believed to be transmitted to humans by bats (Tuttle 2018), results in fear of these animals, and this may destroy the effects of decades of dedicated conservation work by scientists and others (López-Baucells et al. 2018). However, as we shall see, the reputation of bats in Europe has not always been negative. In this note, we present a remarkable display of bat symbols from French Romanticism. It provides a different view and highlights that human perception of bats has a long and complex history.

THE SETTING

Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, in the middle of Paris, was founded by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1804 and is still used for its original purpose. About a million Paris residents have been buried there, on top of each other, and there are many more in the columbarium, which holds the remains of those who were cremated. The tombs of many cultural celebrities can be found in *Père Lachaise*, including Maria Callas, Fryderyk Chopin, Gioacchino Rossini, Edith Piaf, Oscar Wilde, Gustave Doré, Molière and many others (Keister 2013). The place is large enough (44 ha) to be a green and quiet oasis in the middle of the capital, and it is functionally also a nature reserve or park. It attracts about 3.5 million visitors per year, locals as well as tourists, photographers and bird watchers (Fonseca et al. 2015).



Fig. 2 - Les lumières leur font peur (The lights scare them). Plate XXXVII in *Les Metamorphoses du jour* (Grandville 1829).

The cemetery is also home to bats of a sort rarely seen in other places. In general, bat symbols are not common in cemeteries, but *Père Lachaise* is unique in this respect, as bat icons are rather frequent and diverse, occurring in several different designs.

BATS IN FRENCH ROMANTIC LITERATURE

After the Middle Ages, bats turned up in French literature notably during the 17th century in *Fables de La Fontaine* (the Fables of La Fontaine), first published in 12 volumes between 1668 and 1694. Bats are essential figures in *La Chauve-souris et les deux Belettes* and *La Chauve-souris, le Buisson et le Canard* (The Bat and the two Weasels and The Bat, the Bush and the Duck, respectively; English translation 1884). Later, during the Romantic period, and contemporary with the construction of the vaults in the *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise*, the main theme of this paper, bats became quite popular figures among French writers and artists, apparently more so than in other European countries. The following account is based partly on the review by Tupinier (1989).

Bats were depicted several times in the beautiful caricatures of J.J. Grandville, e.g. in *Les Metamorphoses du jour* (Metamorphoses of today) published in 1829 (Fig. 2), *Scènes de la vie Privée et Publiques des Animaux* (Scenes from the Private and Public life of Animals; 1842) and of course, in his illustrations of *Fables de La Fontaine* (Lafontaine & Grandville 1868).

Bats also became important figures in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1857), including *Les Fleurs du mal* (Flowers of evil), one of the most important collections of poems of all time. In this work, the bat belongs to the dark, wet and most depressing of scenes:

*Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle
Sur l'esprit gémissant en proie aux longs ennuis,
Et que de l'horizon embrassant tout le cercle
Il nous verse un jour noir plus triste que les nuits;
Quand la terre est changée en un cachot humide,
Où l'Espérance, comme une chauve-souris,
S'en va battant les murs de son aile timide*

*Et se cognant la tête à des plafonds pourris;
Quand la pluie étalant ses immenses traînées
D'une vaste prison imite les barreaux,
Et qu'un peuple muet d'infâmes araignées
Vient tendre ses filets au fond de nos cerveaux,*

*Des cloches tout à coup sautent avec furie
Et lancent vers le ciel un affreux hurlement,
Ainsi que des esprits errants et sans patrie
Qui se mettent à geindre opiniâtement.*

— *Et de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique,
Défilent lentement dans mon âme; l'Espoir,
Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique,
Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir.*

Spleen - Charles Baudelaire (1857)

During the Renaissance the bats were associated with Melancholia, one of the four temperaments, and consequently also with an excess of black bile, the melancholy fluid, which was believed to be excreted by the spleen (Eisler 1991). This explains the title of the previous poem.

In *Les Fleurs du mal* Baudelaire also used the vampire, albeit as a metaphor, in other poems - *Le Vampire* (The Vampire) and *Les Métamorphoses du vampire* (Metamorphoses of a Vampire):

*Toi qui, comme un coup de couteau,
Dans mon coeur plaintif es entrée;
Toi qui, forte comme un troupeau
De démons, vins, folle et parée,*

*De mon esprit humilié
Faire ton lit et ton domaine;
— Infâme à qui je suis lié
Comme le forçat à la chaîne,*

*Comme au jeu le joueur têtue,
Comme à la bouteille l'ivrogne,
Comme aux vermines la charogne
— Maudite, maudite sois-tu!*

*J'ai prié le glaive rapide
De conquérir ma liberté,
Et j'ai dit au poison perfide
De secourir ma lâcheté.*

*Hélas! le poison et le glaive
M'ont pris en dédain et m'ont dit:
«Tu n'es pas digne qu'on t'enlève
À ton esclavage maudit,*

*Imbécile! — de son empire
Si nos efforts te délivraient,
Tes baisers ressusciteraient
Le cadavre de ton vampire!*

Le Vampire - Charles Baudelaire (1857)

This piece was part of a European “vampire boom” in the 19th century (Praz 1951, Twitchell 1981), which also included, for example, the novel *Le Vampire* (The

Return of Lord Ruthven) by Alexander Dumas, first performed in theatre in 1851 and later published in his collected plays (Dumas 1865). In the early vampire stories, such as those about Lord Ruthven/Lord Byron (Polidori 1819), the vampires had nothing to do with bats, but the two were merged shortly afterwards in *Pepopukin* in Corsica (Young 1826). Suddenly, vampires got wings and could fly. They had become bats and hence legitimate features of this paper.

The French poet Robert de Montesquiou (1893) also used bats in his works, and even published a collection of poems under the title *Les Chauves-souris* (The Bats). This collection included *Les silencieux* (The quiet People), illustrating his fascination over the perceived silence of bats:

O Chauves-souris!

*Guepes
Des nuits,
Crepes
D'ennuis*

O chauves-souris!

*Malsains
Essaims
Valeurs
Pris*

Dans les Brises,

*Filez,
Frôlez,
Volez,*

O mes soeurs

*Grises!
Guepes
Des nuits*

Tournoiments,

*Frôlements,
Sans nuls bruits,*

*Guepes
Des nuits!*

O Chauves-souris

*Malsains
Essaims
Valeurs
Pris*

*Dans les
Brises,
Filez,*

Frôlez, Volez

O mes soeurs

*Grises!
Crêpes
D'ennuis!*

*Déroulés,
Envolés*

Des esprits

Sans couleurs, sans cris,

*Crepes
D'ennuis!*

Les silencieux — Robert de Montesquiou (1893)

Bats flutter by here and there in other Romantic classics as well. For example, they are ephemeral but quite essential ingredients in the novels *Nôtre Dame de Paris* (The Hunch-back of Nôtre Dame) by Victor Hugo (1831) and in Flaubert's (1862) *Salambo* (Salambô). In the latter, bats appear in thousands, darkening the evening sky above the besieged Cartago.

THE BATS OF CIMETIÈRE DU PÈRE-LACHAISE

Most of the bats of the *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise* consist of forged sculptures that are parts of the steel-gates on front of the chapel-like tombs or vaults (Fig. 3). They are usually about twice the natural size of real bats and are consistently displayed with spread wings. They were made between ca. 1820 and 1850, according to the inscriptions of the tombs, i.e. during the height of the Romantic period. The bat symbols in some cases occur in pairs or triplets above or beside each other on the gates. Some of them have long narrow wings, reminiscent of noctules *Nyctalus noctula*, or, in some cases, serotines *Eptesicus serotinus* (Fig. 4), while others have broader wings and larger ears, and are more like mouse-eared bats *Myotis* spp. or even long-eared bats *Plecotus* spp. (Fig. 5). However, the similarity to real bat species is presumably a coincidence.

The tomb bats are quite realistic and their faces are totally without ugly or evil expressions, and, in fact, are quite reminiscent of the wooden bat in the



Fig. 3 - A typical vault with the steel gate showing a symbolic bat on top. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.

Nôtre Dame (Fig. 1). The similarity can, of course, be a coincidence, although it seems likely that the wooden bat in the church was there long before the steel gates were made, and therefore could have been used as a model. The proportions of the bats are reasonably correct and, in most cases, they show the right number of fingers located in the correct place, as well as realistic ears and tail membranes. The bats shown in Fig. 5a and 5b are the main exceptions, as they have fingers in the wrong place. Incidentally, this also applies to one pair of fingers of the *Nôtre Dame* bat (Fig. 1).

There are supposed to be 14 bat-gates with 30-40 bats in total in the cemetery (Atlas Obscura 2018). In some cases, the same type of bat symbol appears on



Fig. 4 - Four examples of tomb bats associated with an hourglass. In three of them (a-c) the glass connects a pair of bird wings. In (b) the hourglass is also surrounded by an ouroboros, a symbolic snake biting its tail. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.



Fig. 5 - Four unusual examples of tomb bats, two of them (c) and (d) are probably unique. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.

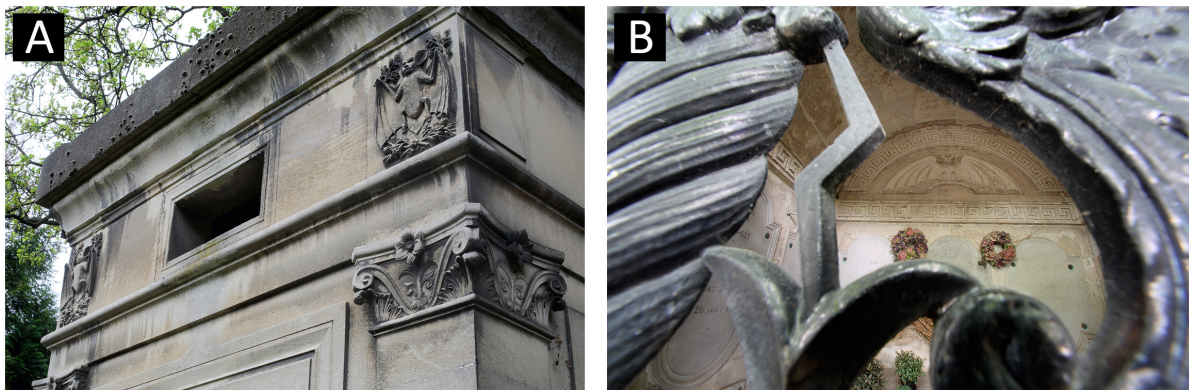


Fig. 6 - Carved bats on the outer (a) and inner (b) walls of tombs, the latter seen through the steel gate. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.

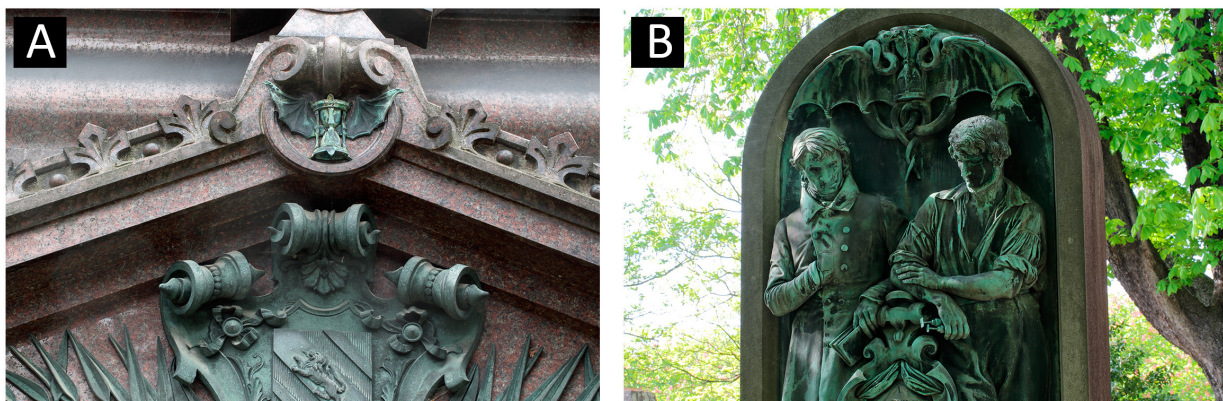


Fig. 7 - Hourglasses with pairs of bat wings. These icons are made in bronze. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.



Fig. 8. -Winged skulls on the upper corners of a vault, all carved in stone. Père Lachaise cemetery. Photo J. Rydell 2018.

different gates but there are also bats that seem to be unique (Fig. 5). Clearly, several artists have been involved in the design of the gates and the bats. In addition to the steel bats on the gates, there are a few examples of carved (in stone) bats decorating either the outer or the inner walls of the tombs, but as far as we could see, they are rare and there is no consistent pattern among them (Fig. 6).

Hourglasses are common symbols on the steel gates and, indeed, accompany many of the bats (Fig. 4). They often connect a pair of bird- or bat-wings (Fig. 3a-c) and in some cases the hourglass and the bats occur in association with an ouroboros, a snake forming a circle, while biting its tail (Fig. 4b). There are also a few cases where an hourglass holding a pair of bat wings is the main figure of the tomb (Fig. 7), and the entire figures are then made of bronze rather than steel. In addition, there is at least one case where four skulls with bat wings carved in stone are displayed in the upper corners of a vault (Fig. 8).

DISCUSSION

Bat was called *nukteris* in Greek and *vespertilio* by the Romans, in both cases referring to the night (*Nycteris* is now the generic name of the slit-faced bats and *Vespertilio* is the name of the parti-coloured bats; Ferber 2007, Tommasi 2011). The bats' apparent fear of light and their elusive and nocturnal habits (Rydell & Speakman 1995) have often evoked negative images among humans, and this applies even today. According to the Bible, for example, the bat, being neither bird nor beast, is associated with darkness, and it is also an explicitly unclean creature which should not be eaten or even touched (*Leviticus* 11:1-47, about clean and unclean animals).

This view dominated people's perception of bats from the medieval times in Europe. The association with the underground and the Devil was established in early literature, including the first part *Inferno* (Hell) of Dante Alighieri's *Comedia* (later renamed *Divina Commedia*), written in 1317. It is illustrated in many church frescos and paintings with devils and demons equipped with bat wings and sometimes also bat-ears

and sharp teeth (Rumpler 1996, Lorenzi 2006). The association with the Devil has been maintained by the church and obviously has had a strong influence with important negative consequences for bats.

However, the bats of *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise*, particularly their realistic faces, are more like the wooden bat in the *Nôtre Dame* (Fig. 1) and also reminiscent of some of the misericords that can be seen in other cathedrals in Europe, which originated in the Middle Ages (Remnant 1969). Similar bat symbols also occur on graves in other places in France, e.g. in *Cimetière des Péjoces* in Dijon (Chabot 2009, p. 167), but are by no means common.

Bats were popular items in the Romantic literature and artwork. On tombs they symbolise aspects of life and death. The hourglass holding pairs of bat- or bird-wings, or sometimes (in other places) one wing of each (Rumpler 2003), appeared on graves and tombstones in Europe during the Baroque (17th and 18th century) and was also used later during the Romantic period (Rumpler 2005). The hourglass was sometimes replaced by a winged skull, and both types are found in the *Père Lachaise* cemetery, although not as frequently as the steel bats. The hourglass, with or without the metaphoric wings, symbolises the ephemeral nature of life, while the associated ouroboros is an ancient symbol of eternity or the cyclic nature of life and death. Likewise, the bat icons refer to the darkness of death and the subsequent flight to heaven (Biedermann 1992, Werness 2004, Chabot 2009).

It remains speculative but quite possible that the bat symbols appearing in the Romantic artwork also had additional properties. Bats are sometimes associated with witchcraft and superstition (Dayrell 1910) and are important creatures in folklore (Kunz 1984, McCracken 1992, Green 1997). Their wings, eyes and particularly the blood were essential ingredients in hell broths and magic drinks, as illustrated in, for example, Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, first published in 1623 (Shakespeare 1998). According to Scandinavian folklore, bats have only three drops of blood, but, on the other hand, these rare drops possess magic properties and are extremely useful in many different contexts such as in love affairs, hunting and fishing, and perhaps most importantly, to defeat or stop evil forces and protect against bad luck (Edqvist & Eklöf 2018).

During the Renaissance, carved and artistically refined bats, sometimes with grotesque faces, symbolised melancholy and also cultural or intellectual darkness or ignorance (Riccucci & Rydell 2017). However, bat icons probably had apotropaic characteristics as well and could be used for protective purposes. Several such bats are found on the entrances and window sills of Renaissance palaces and churches in Florence (Panofsky 2009). It seems likely that their function was to stop evil forces from entering the building, just as in Scandinavia. This

habit is also common in China, from where it probably originated (Biederman 1992). Since the *Père Lachaise* bats usually are placed on top of the door of the vaults, a position also found in China, Florence and Scandinavia, they could also have the same function.

Romanticism turned into Art Nouveau around 1890, a cultural movement where artists looked for new sources of inspiration, especially natural forms such as curved lines of plants and flowers. Bats were still employed however, e.g. as decorations on buildings as well as on ceramics and jewellery. The use of bats for artistic decorations of tombs during the Romantic period may hence be viewed as a transition between the Classicism and the Art Nouveau.

REMARKS

The cemetery at *Père Lachaise* is still used as a cemetery and because it is overcrowded with tombs and many of them no longer have living descendants to take care of the facilities, some of the old tombs with bats may be at risk of being taken down to give space to new ones. However, the tombs with bats in *Père Lachaise* are unique and also remarkable pieces of cultural history. It would be strongly appreciated if they were preserved for future studies and enlightenment. We have deliberately avoided displaying the names and dates that appear on the tombs as well as the residents' history and religion.

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