

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING | November 2, 2013

Headless, and Not Just the Horseman

By AMANDA FOREMAN

Long before "Sleepy Hollow" was a television series on Fox, it was a ghost story in Washington Irving's 1820 "The Sketch

Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent."

Irving located his story about a headless horseman and

frightened schoolmaster in "Tarry

Town," north of New York City, as though it was fact rather than

fiction. The fate of the hapless

Ichabod Crane has fascinated

children ever since. Was Crane

attacked by a ghost? Or did

Crane's rival for the hand of the

lovely Katrina commit a

nefarious deed?



Irving hinted strongly that it was

human rather than spectral

agency that had it in for Crane.

His depiction of the schoolmaster

was anything but flattering. If

there was ever a person who deserved a pumpkin in the face,

it was Ichabod Crane, who brandished his cane like a "scepter of despotic power."

For the purveyors of spooky lore and all things uncanny, however, the attraction of Irving's headless horseman lies in its connection to humanity's ancient mysteries. The body-without-a-head motif is scattered (as it were) throughout history. Archaeologists have discovered that even the Cro-Magnons had their own version. The Oxford University Museum of Natural History is home to a 29,000-year-old headless Paleolithic corpse, dubbed the Red Lady by the Victorians. The body—which is actually male—is a fragile palimpsest of our earliest attitudes to mortality. The skeleton had been dyed red, the burial site decorated with ivory trinkets and periwinkle shells; but, most important, the head had been deliberately removed.

Twenty thousand years later, the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük in modern Turkey, the oldest Neolithic settlement in the world, were taking the headless motif even further. They not only had a penchant for burying headless corpses beneath their kitchens, but they were also given to swapping around the skulls and plastering them with soft clay to resemble human heads. The bodies stayed put in the ground, unlike the heads, which appear to have moved with the family from dwelling to dwelling.

These prehistoric "head fascinators" (if you will) were old hat by the time humanity had migrated from simple settlements to cities. The Greek equivalent of the headless horseman is Medusa, whose head retained its deadly power even after being lopped off by Perseus. The Romans discovered that the severed head of John the Baptist wielded even greater influence than when it was attached.

As the first millennium progressed, a headless anything spelled doom. The historian John of Ephesus, who died around 586, recorded that the spread of the first plague pandemic of 541-44 was accompanied by ghostly apparitions of copper boats that were manned by "headless black people."

The walking headless remained the stuff of dread until the rise of courtly love gave them a new role to play. The Arthurian poem of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" tells the story of the mysterious Green Knight who challenges the chivalric heroes of the Round Table to that popular medieval trope, the beheading game. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge and strikes a deadly blow, only for the head to carry on talking and leave under the arm of the Green Knight. Gawain is given a year and a day to face the Knight's return blow.

In the course of his trials against the Green Knight, Gawain meets his greatest threat in the form of a beautiful woman. Lady Bertilak tries three times to corrupt his honor. On the third trial Gawain partially succumbs. Though he survives the Knight's test, Gawain returns to Camelot a broken man. Could it be that Lady Bertilak, like Ichabod Crane's Katrina, symbolizes the danger that any man might lose his head over a woman? To some, the mere possibility is a fate worse than death. But perhaps, as our earliest ancestors once thought, it's better to have no head than no heart.