

“Blood, Guts, and All: The Historical Dracula”

Jenna D. Hosier

Perhaps the most famous and terrifying story born from mere myth, the legend of the vampire has evolved and become institutionalized into the horror genre so completely that the fanged creature of the night has come to grace cereal boxes, television shows, and countless theatrical adaptations, thus proving its universal appeal and unrelenting pertinence to our deepest fears. Recently, historians have begun to look at the record of the vampyric legend and to trace its evolution in order to understand possible social and contextual issues pertaining to the myth itself. Often lost in such a discussion, the factor which contributed most to the widespread representation of the vampire was based on a historical man that led a life tantamount to the darkness and malevolence with which we regard the fictitious undead.

Vlad Tepeš, a fifteenth century prince of Wallachia, overcame various political difficulties to defend the independence of his principality and for his valiant, though ultimately unsuccessful effort, he is revered in his country as a national hero. This reverence is often a controversial topic because along with Vlad's desire to ensure autonomy for Wallachia, he is remembered for his harsh rule and atrocities against foreign and domestic enemies. Though he may be best remembered for his propensity to impale, Vlad also massacred men, women, and children by the thousands through burnings, decapitation, mutilation, starvation, and extreme fatigue. The final body count, estimated in the hundreds of thousands, surpasses the damage done by the most depraved leaders throughout history and therefore, Vlad's relative greatness as a defender of independence is lessened amid his cruelty.

Vlad Tepeš overcame foreign and domestic turmoil in order to reestablish control of Wallachia, and once he secured power, Vlad ruled with a strictness that earned him a reputation for malice, tyranny, and an unquenched lust for blood. This last characterization, as manipulated and fictionalized in Bram Stoker's timeless novel *Dracula*, catapulted Vlad Tepeš from a possible fate of obscurity into one of the most fascinating and feared historical characters, so that over five hundred years after his death, the world still associates the prince with facets of the vampire legend.

Because the history has been corrupted so greatly, the importance of Vlad Tepeš as a ruler is often overlooked by those who choose to focus on the connections between history and myth rather than on Vlad's controversial foreign and domestic policy and his efforts to maintain Wallachia's independence. In order to understand Vlad in the correct context, devoid of fictitious legends and blood consumption, it is important to remember that he fought valiantly and was successful in creating a society of law and order in which central power was strengthened and the Wallachian society stabilized. For these and many other reasons, Vlad Tepeš is an important historical character and one deserving of further discussion.

Even the most limited history of Vlad Tepeš must begin with the way in which he is referenced. At his birth, Vlad was named after his father who reigned as Vlad Dracul or Vlad II. Dracul, a Romanian translation of: *Order of the Dragon*, denoted Vlad II's participation in Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund's crusades against the Ottoman Turks. This membership in the Order, therefore, linked Vlad II's family name with Dracul and would ultimately lead Vlad Tepeš to take the name Vlad Dracula, or son of Dracul. Dracul could also be translated as devil so that Vlad Dracula could also mean son of the devil, though only those who want to associate him with satanic evil will make reference to Vlad as son of the devil, rather than the historically

accurate association with the Order of the Dragon. Because of his propensity to impale, Vlad is also known as Vlad Tepeș, or Vlad the Impaler, though he only came to be known as Tepeș after stories of his cruelty traveled west. In an attempt to separate him from connotations of the myth and his atrocities, many historians refer to him as simply Vlad III. Because he was never aware of any negative connotations regarding his inherited name, Vlad signed his own papers as Dracula, thus evoking the imagery of the Order of the Dragon and the continued fight against the Turkish onslaught.ⁱ

The great Ottoman Empire posed a grave threat to the autonomy of many eastern European principalities and Vlad wielded enough military prowess to defend Wallachia's independence while he reigned. Though much of his life would be dedicated to warfare with the Turks, Vlad and his younger brother Radu the Handsome, so named for his attractive features and almost feminine beauty, would spend their early years as political prisoners in the court of the Ottoman sultans Murad and Mohammed the Conqueror. Turned over by their father who hoped to show his allegiance to the Turks, Vlad and Radu continued to live as prisoners even after their father returned to Wallachia only to regroup and attack the Turks, thus honoring his membership in the Order of the Dragon. Though he knew that his sons might die because of his decision, Vlad II defended his actions. "Please understand that I have allowed my children to be butchered for the sake of the Christian peace, in order that both I and my country might continue to be vassals to the Holy Roman Emperor."ⁱⁱ Fortunately for Radu and Vlad, the sultan allowed the children to live in the hopes that they would one day take the Wallachian throne and rule as princes allied to the Ottoman Empire.

After years of imprisonment and political turmoil in Wallachia, Vlad Dracula was released from the Turkish court and encouraged by Murad to gain power and rule as prince of

Wallachia. After his father and brother had been assassinated, Vlad took the throne in 1448 but was quickly ousted by the powerful Vladislav II. Not until 1456 did Vlad return with enough support to launch a successful coup and take the throne for what would be his longest and most secure reign, lasting six years until his imprisonment in 1462.ⁱⁱⁱ The political turmoil created by the constant change of princes and fighting among the Wallachian Boyars was a major issue Vlad knew he had to deal with in order to maintain his hold on power. Vlad, in the hopes of centralizing his reign and instilling law and order within Wallachia, worked to change his society so as to garner political support from his subjects and to maintain the autonomy of Wallachia. Though he often wore a tyrannical crown, Vlad Dracula molded Wallachia into an ordered society so that law and order reigned supreme. Whoever held the ruling power in Wallachia did so by having the support of the Boyars because the line of succession to the throne was not automatically hereditary.

The Boyars, described as “nobility based on tenure,” rather than outright land ownership, wielded great power and had a strong hold on the politics of Wallachia.^{iv} Out of a need to suppress the political upheaval of the 14th and 15th centuries, Vlad often needed to suppress rebellion against his reign implemented by opposition Boyars. After inviting the Boyars to an Easter feast, Vlad questioned them as to how many princes they had lived under. Even the youngest had claimed at least seven changes had been made during his short life. After blaming the Boyars for this inconsistency because of their rebellion, Vlad had the oldest members impaled and took hostage the youngest—marching them over fifty miles to the site of his future castle where he had them work and toil until their clothes fell off and they died of hunger and exhaustion.^v With a good majority of the Boyars eradicated, Vlad set about to replace the fallen nobility, and in the process, was able to strengthen his domestic reign.

By replacing the killed and hostage Boyars, Vlad Dracula devised a plan to centralize his power and sure up political support from the people he chose to receive the confiscated lands and fortunes of the dead and disabled Boyars. For Vlad, the easiest way to be sure of allegiance was to create a new climate of support and thus, he divided the land and riches among those he knew would be favorable to him and would rely on him for the power they now held. Often times, the people rewarded were mere Plebeians who, because they were then dependent on Vlad for their upward social mobility, provided a stable political base on which Vlad executed his foreign policy.^{vi}

Vlad Dracula's foreign policy guaranteed him a place in history for his aptitude in battle and his successful campaigns against the conquering Ottoman Turks. Because Wallachia was located to the north of the Danube, it offered the Turks a strategic position to aid in their quest to expand their Empire. In order to fight the Turks, Vlad took an offensive position and attacked the Turkish holdings along the Danube and then followed that fight up with a defensive campaign to protect Wallachia from a Turkish invasion the following summer.^{vii} Vlad was especially apt at using guerilla warfare against the Turks. Because he had extensive knowledge of the areas surrounding Wallachia, especially the woods, Vlad led quick and pointed strikes against the Turks. These tactics were especially successful against the strict marching arrangements employed by Mohammad the Conqueror so that Vlad's forces could win using guerilla tactics rather than an open battle engagement with a much larger and better-qualified army of Turks.^{viii}

Another successful aspect of Vlad Dracula's campaign was his willingness to use a scorched earth policy that included burning villages and crops, as well as poisoning his own wells, killing inhabitants of Wallachia, and eliminating any other source of sustenance that might

aid the Turks. These actions, as well as the harsh weather, had the desired effect on the Ottoman army and the Turkish Chronicler Tursun-beg described the results. “There was not a drop of water to quench their thirst. The sun was so great that one could cook kebabs on the mail shirts of the soldiers.”^{ix} In addition to the devastating effects of the scorched earth policy, Vlad’s use of impalement also shocked the Turks so much that they were often too horrified to pursue the Wallachian army.

Vlad was successful at using impaled victims to warn the Turks of their impending doom should they fall into his hands as prisoners or defeated troops. Again, this unsettling facet of Vlad’s military plan had successful effects, as the Greek chronicler Chalkondyles described the reaction of the Ottoman army and their sultan when they attempted to catch the retreating Wallachian army and lay siege to Vlad’s capitol at Tirgoviste. Instead of barricading themselves in the city, Vlad destroyed the capitol and impaled multitudes, leaving their rotting corpses as a warning to the Turks. “And there were large stakes on which they could see the impaled bodies, about twenty thousand of them...The Emperor himself, in wonder, kept saying that he could not conquer the country of a man who could do such terrible and unnatural things.”^x

However grim such a sight would have been to the Turks, they would eventually emerge victorious over Vlad and his military policies. The defeat led to the ousting of Vlad as prince of Wallachia in favor of his brother Radu the Handsome who was strongly allied with the Ottoman sultan, as well as Vlad’s twelve-year imprisonment in Transylvania. After the release from his second long-term imprisonment, Vlad would regain the throne for a matter of months, only to die in battle against the Turks. After his death, “his head was chopped off, put in preservative honey and sent to the sultan, where it sat on the main parapet of his palace.”^{xi} Though this third reign would be Vlad’s doom, the fact that Wallachians supported Vlad in his various campaigns and

reaffirmed his authority demonstrated that Wallachians respected Dracula for his heroic foreign policy as well as a disciplined and ordered domestic rule.

Because his life read more like myth than reality, the true story of Vlad and his crimes against humanity are often more compelling, horrific, and fascinating than any fictitious account ever written. Though the entire history of Dracula is filled with atrocities, there remain nine universal anecdotes found in the three major areas of pertinent narrative history: Russian and German accounts and the Romanian oral traditions. These nine accounts are continually referenced when describing the law and order and the support and respect of his authority that remain continual themes of his reign.

In order to stabilize Wallachia and its economy, Dracula demanded security for all merchants and thus advocated adherence to his legal codes. The narrative that describes this best involves a merchant who parked his carriage full of treasure outside and awoke to find 160 ducats missing from his fortune. Not only did Dracula return the money from his own purse, but he also threatened to destroy the entire town if the thief was not found and the booty recovered. Vlad also returned an extra ducat to ensure the honesty of the merchant, who upon counting the money returned the extra ducat—thus saving himself from impalement. The thief, however, was not so fortunate. Narratives also describe the existence of a cup made from pure gold that remained by the town well, placed there by Dracula for thirsty people to drink from. Because of the promise of harsh punishment, no one dared to remove the cup.^{xii}

To demonstrate Vlad's demand for honesty, as well as a rhetoric flare, three narratives describe the fate of visitors to Vlad's court. When showed the rows of impaled victims, Vlad asked two monks what they thought of such sights. One untruthful monk replied that since God had bestowed the principality on Vlad, that all his decisions were just. The other monk replied

truthfully that Vlad's heart was evil and that he could not claim any grace or divine authority in his rule. Vlad rewarded the pleasing monk with impalement and the honest monk with a reprieve. When a Polish nobleman realized that a newly constructed pike was meant for him, he told Vlad that whatever he had done to offend the prince was rightly punishable by death, and gave an oratory pleasing enough to Vlad that he was also pardoned and left with his life.^{xiii} To add an extra aspect of viciousness, Vlad also punished those in his personal life for their dishonesty. When Dracula was in a particularly melancholy mood, his mistress, in attempt to cheer him, told Vlad that she was pregnant. After having a midwife check his mistress's condition only to find that she was not expecting, Dracula took his own knife and sliced her from her vagina to her neck, proclaiming as he went, "Let the world see where I have been and where my fruit lay."^{xiv}

Two other narratives provide excellent examples of the respect Vlad demanded while in his presence. When foreign ambassadors refused to remove their turbans, Vlad questioned the visitors as to why they dishonored him by keeping their heads covered. After they replied that it was their custom to do so, Vlad told them, "Well I want to strengthen you in your custom. Behave bravely," after which he had their turbans nailed to their heads.^{xv} An even worse fate met the Boyar who, when sitting among the rotting corpses of impaled victims, showed his displeasure by holding his nose so as to cease the putrid smell of decaying flesh. For this offense, Dracula had the nobleman impaled on the highest pike possible so that he would be above the smell.^{xvi}

To describe his disdain for the lazy and unproductive, the final two narratives extol Dracula's harsh punishment of the inactive. After inviting hundreds of poor and sick people of Wallachia to a feast, Vlad asked them if they would like to be free of care, and when met with

affirmative answers, Dracula ordered that the door to the church be chained and the building burned, so that no one survived. Vlad, riding through the country as he often did to ensure his policies, came upon a man working in his field who wore a shorter shirt than was customary. Vlad questioned the man as to why his shirt was so short and whether or not the man had a wife. The man answered that he did have a wife, at which time Vlad sent his executioner to impale the woman for her laziness. After providing the brokenhearted man with a new wife, Vlad warned her to avoid laziness and showed the impaled carcass of the former wife as a warning.^{xvii}

Another interesting theme that occurs in the study of the historical Dracula is the way in which he dealt with women. In various ways, Vlad often held women to higher standards and punished females with impunity when they dared to disobey his strict rules concerning chastity, piety, and loyalty. Vlad especially treated women as a group more viciously than men in that he tortured them as mothers and a German narrative testifies to this fact.

Once he had thought up terrifying and frightening and unspeakable tortures, so he had mothers impaled and nursing children, and he had one and two-year-old children impaled. He had children taken from their mothers' breasts, the mothers separated from the children. He also had the mothers' breasts cut out and their children's heads pushed through the holes in their mothers' bodies and then he impaled them.^{xviii}

Another German narrative explains the harsh treatment towards mothers, as Dracula often had children roasted and forced their mothers to eat them, after which he would cut off the breasts of the mothers and make their husbands eat the flesh.^{xix} Even those women who were not mothers were subject to Dracula's punishments and suffered for their promiscuity, infidelity, and deviation.

Even the Russian stories, which traditionally describe Vlad as harsh but just, make special mention of his behavior toward women.

If a married woman committed adultery Dracula ordered that her shameful parts be cut and she be skinned alive. Then he ordered that her skin be hung on a pole in the middle of the city at the marketplace. He did the same thing with young girls who had not preserved their virginity and also widows [who fornicated]. In some cases he cut the nipples off their breasts. In other cases he took the skins from their vagina and he rammed an iron poker, reddened by fire, up their vaginas so far upwards that the iron bar emerged from their mouths. They remained naked, tied to a pole until the flesh and bones detached themselves or served as food for the birds.^{xx}

. While it is understandable, if not excusable, that Vlad was not the only prince to use harsh tactics to ensure stability, nowhere else in Eastern Europe were women punished with such zeal as in Vlad's Wallachia. While killing women for being impious has been a common occurrence throughout history, nowhere were they skinned, impaled, forced to eat flesh, and endure the many tortures of Vlad as they were under the rule of Dracula. A short search for similar atrocities within Eastern Europe revealed that the only comparable persecution of women occurred beginning in 1450 when fear of witchcraft swept through the area, especially concentrated in Germany and Switzerland. Even this harsh treatment was generally secluded to women who challenged the patriarchy through various means and the end result, while certainly unpleasant, was limited to a punishment of being burned alive. While women have continually been victims of gendercide, nowhere was the torture and punishment as harsh as in Wallachia and at the hands of Vlad Dracula.

Though these narratives remind historians that Vlad was a harsh man with strict codes and swift punishments, no one can deny the existence of his persona as a national hero. Though he was most notorious for his horrific impalements and mass murder, Vlad Dracula has recently been studied for his contributions to the nationalism of Romania for his efforts to retain the autonomy of Wallachia in the 15th century. Today, as myth is stripped from reality, contemporary historians have begun to paint a picture of Vlad as a man of his times and one who, while exceedingly blood thirsty, executed a political strategy meant to centralize his power in a time of turmoil. Whether the punishment and treatment of his domestic and foreign enemies has caused western thinkers to discredit him as a hero, Romania heralds Vlad Dracula for his bravery in fighting the Turks and therefore often excuses his most grievous acts as mere byproducts of the times in which he reigned. Though the vast majority of society associates the name Dracula with a bloodthirsty creature of the night, and a frightening and timeless horror novel, what is often forgotten is the existence of a historical and more fascinating real life prince whose name will forever be sullied by the connotation of evil and darkness. Though such a reputation is certainly deserved for his many atrocities, contemporaries must not forget that to many people, especially Romanian nationalists, Vlad is a hero and remains as the last prince to stand against foreign invasion. Though the history of Vlad has recently come to light in a holistic and enlightening manner, a multitude of questions remain and deserve attention, for within the answers, a new facet of Dracula may emerge to change our opinion of the harsh ruler. Each aspect of Vlad that emerges from historical fact will help to remove him further from the shrouds of myth and place him in his proper historical role void of the corruption of the vampyric legend.

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- ⁱ Kurt W. Treptow, *Vlad III Dracula: The Life and Times of the Historical Dracula* (Iasi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2000), 8-10.
- ⁱⁱ Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces, His Life and His Times* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1989), 59.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kurt W. Treptow, *Vlad III Dracula*. 32-34.
- ^{iv} Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula: Prince of many Faces, His Life and His Times*, 31.
- ^v Ray Porter, “*The Historical Dracula.*”
- ^{vi} Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula: Prince of many Faces, His Life and His Times*, 92.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 8.
- ^{viii} Will Romano, “Vlad Dracula’s War on the Turks,” *Military History*, 20, no 4 (October 2003): 64.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 62.
- ^x *Ibid.*, 63.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 64.
- ^{xii} Ray Porter, “*The Historical Dracula.*”
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiv} Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu *In Search of Dracula: the History of Dracula and Vampires,*” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 196.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 200.
- ^{xvi} Ray Porter, “*The Historical Dracula.*”
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 195.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 198.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, 203.