

Dracula: Hero or Villain?

Radu R. Florescu

Dracula is the real name of a Wallachian ruler, also known to Romanian chroniclers as Vlad the Impaler. *Dracula* is a derivative of his father's name, Dracul, which in Romanian means *the devil*. According to those more charitably inclined, the father was so known because he had been invested by the Holy Roman Emperor with the Order of the Dragon, dedicated to fighting "the Infidel." Dracula was, therefore, either the son of evil or the son of good, villain or hero.

Dracula ruled the Romanian principality of Wallachia on three separate occasions: in 1448, from 1456 to 1462, and, briefly, shortly before his assassination in 1476. These dates correspond to one of the most crucial periods in the country's history. Constantinople had fallen in 1453, most of the lands south of Wallachia had been converted into Turkish *pashaliks*, and the last hero of the Balkan crusades, John Hunyadi, had died in the plague of Belgrade in 1456. The Danube was thus the frontier of Christendom at a time when Mohammed the Conqueror was planning further Turkish inroads.

Little is really known about Dracula in the West beyond the best-selling Gothic novel written by Bram Stoker in 1897, which inspired innumerable Hollywood productions. The novel, partially set in Transylvania, contains three brief references to actual historical events and mentions the towns of Cluj, Bistrița, and the Borgo Pass — but the bloodsucking vampire is a clear distortion of the historical personage. The first Romanian



Left: Portrait of Dracula at Castle Ambras, near Innsbruck, Austria. The artist is unknown, but this appears to be a copy painted during the second half of the 16th century from an earlier original that was probably painted during Dracula's imprisonment at Buda or Visegrád after 1462.

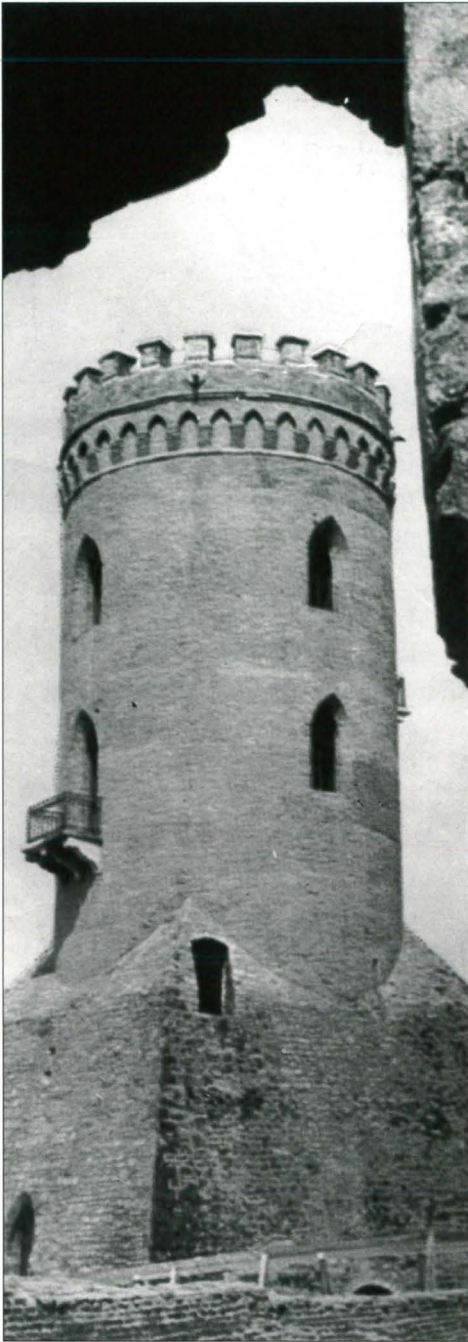
Right: The Chindia watchtower at Tirgoviște; a 19th-century reconstruction. Apart from its role as an observation post, it enabled Dracula to watch impalements in the courtyard below.

Images courtesy
Radu R. Florescu

chronicle which mentions Dracula, dating from almost a century after his death, labels him Vlad the Impaler and confines his notoriety to the building of the famous castle and the monastery of Snagov where presumably he lies buried, though his body has never been found.

Romanian historians have shied away from using the name Dracula, unlike most contemporary sources both in Eastern and Western Europe. It was as Dracula that he was known to the Byzantine, Turkish, Venetian, Hungarian,

Genoese, English, and French chroniclers of the 15th century. It is also in this guise that he is known in what might be described as the first Russian novel, entitled *Story about Prince Dracula*, appearing in over 11 versions from the 15th to the 18th centuries. German 15th-century stories also refer to the original name: Voievod Dracula. With the invention of printing, these narratives became best sellers by the standards of the period, four centuries before Stoker wrote his famous book. To these we may add a



rich compendium of Romanian folkloric material collected in the region of Dracula's castle.

Why should these tales have historical validity? The answer lies in a very simple fact: although they vary in some details and ethical interpretation, there is a remarkable coincidence between the German, Russian, and Romanian Dracula stories. While Germans and Russians use the name Dracula, the Romanian oral tradition labels the prince Vlad the Impaler, substantiating

the fact that Dracula and the Impaler were one and the same personage.

Hero or villain? The balance in 20th-century "vampire" parlance, with Bela Lugosi in mind (Lugosi, incidentally, was born in Lugoj, in Banat), accents the villainous aspects. Even the 15th- and 16th-century Russian and German stories about the man make a point of emphasizing Dracula's horrors, and the Romanian chroniclers have not labeled him the Impaler in vain. We are indeed far removed from the hero. Yet the interpretation of history is often a matter of the times, and moral standards are relative. Mass killings and torture of opponents were not Dracula's exclusive prerogatives. Impalement was an Asiatic method of torture widely practiced by the Turks. Moreover, before we study a historical character, we must take into account the historian's *parti pris*.

Let us recall that the more intimate details of Dracula's life were recorded by adversaries. The German pamphlets were written by émigré Catholic monks and Saxon merchants from Transylvanian townships that aroused Dracula's anger because they refused to pay tolls. Dracula attacked them, and a few escaped to the West. To dramatize their plight, they often exaggerated their misfortunes and besmirched Dracula's reputation. The author of the Russian narratives, a representative of the Grand Duke of Moscow at Buda, had a different reason for vilifying Dracula's character: terror was a useful tool in establishing future despots of Russia. Ivan the Terrible modeled some of his tortures on Dracula's (for instance, nailing the hats on the heads of impolite ambassadors). In the eyes of Orthodoxy, Dracula was anti-Christ, because, following his remarriage to a relative of King Mathias Corvinus of Hungary, he repudiated his traditional faith and converted to Catholicism. Thus the Russians hated Dracula on religious grounds (or stressed his villainous

aspects as a positive role model for rulers), the Germans because he massacred them, the Turks because he fought them — each group had an obvious reason for defaming him.

When historians quarrel, it is sometimes healthy to invoke the rough and ready sense of justice of the people, particularly when, in the absence of documents, we have no other recourse. More impartial than the chroniclers, the peasants had a definite feeling for this prince, and in their oral tradition they rationalized Dracula's crimes, aware of the great dangers their country was facing both from the West and more particularly from the East.

All contemporary sources looked upon Dracula as the only Christian crusader to answer the call of Pope Pius II, who dared single-handedly to challenge the power of the Turkish sultan Mohammed the Conqueror, he being intent upon weakening the remaining free Balkan states. Facing overwhelming forces (40,000 against an army of 100,000), Dracula had to stage a strategic retreat, relying on a scorched-earth policy and harrying tactics under cover of the vast forest of the Wallachian plain. Although the capital city of Tîrgoviște had to be abandoned, Dracula left thousands of impaled cadavers, picket-fence fashion, north of the city. This terror had its impact on the sultan, who cried out: "What can we do against a man who commits such deeds!"

Much ink has been spent on the idle controversy centering on the problem of who won the war. By November 1462, Dracula was compelled to abandon his throne in favor of his brother Radu the Handsome, a Turkish protégé. The Turks were war-weary, short of food, plague-ridden, threatened with Hungarian intervention from Transylvania (which Dracula had solicited), and, persuaded by the scale of Dracula's impalements, withdrew the bulk of their forces during the month of Ramadan in 1462. On the

"Impale Forest,"
engraving from a
German pamphlet
published in
Strassburg in 1500.



other hand, with most boyars rallying to Radu and his own army melting away, Dracula was forced to retreat to his castle in the Carpathians and thence threw himself on the tender mercies of King Mathias. The latter, instead of sending help, imprisoned Dracula in a tower of his Visegrád palace on the Danube, where Dracula was technically under "house arrest" for some 12 years. He died in December 1476, killed by a boyar opponent or a Turk who decapitated him and sent his head to Constantinople for all to see that the dreaded impaler was no more. His tragic end should not obscure the fact that his determined resistance helped preserve the integrity of the Wallachian state. This single service to the nation helps tilt the balance

in favor of Dracula "the hero."

It was upon reading the book of an obscure 19th-century English consul-historian which he found in the Whitby Library in England that Bram Stoker decided to change the title of his Gothic novel from *The Vampire Count* to *Dracula*. Then the name of an obscure Romanian prince gained world recognition by way of the silver screen. It is now up to the Romanians to use this unique and extraordinary accident of history to their advantage in an intelligent fashion.

Suggested Reading

- Florescu, Radu, and Raymond T. McNally. 1989. *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces: His Life and His Times*. Boston: Little Brown.
- _____. 1973. *Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler*. New York: Hawthorn Books.
- Giurescu, Constantin C. 1969. *The Life and Deeds of Vlad the Impaler: Draculea*. New York: Romanian Library.
- McNally, Raymond T., and Radu Florescu. 1994. *In Search of Dracula*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Roth, Phyllis A. 1982. *Bram Stoker*. Boston: Twayne.
- Stoicescu, Nicolae. 1978. *Vlad the Impaler*. Translated by Cristina Kriorian. Bucharest: Romanian Academy.

Radu R. Florescu is professor emeritus of history and director of the East European Research Center at Boston College and honorary consul of Romania. He holds degrees from Oxford and Indiana Universities and has published widely on Romanian history and Dracula.