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NARCIS DORIN ION

**QUEEN MARIE  
AT BRAN CASTLE**

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Cover 1: *Queen Marie in the park of Bran Castle* (colorized)

Cover 4: *Bran Castle* (Interwar period)

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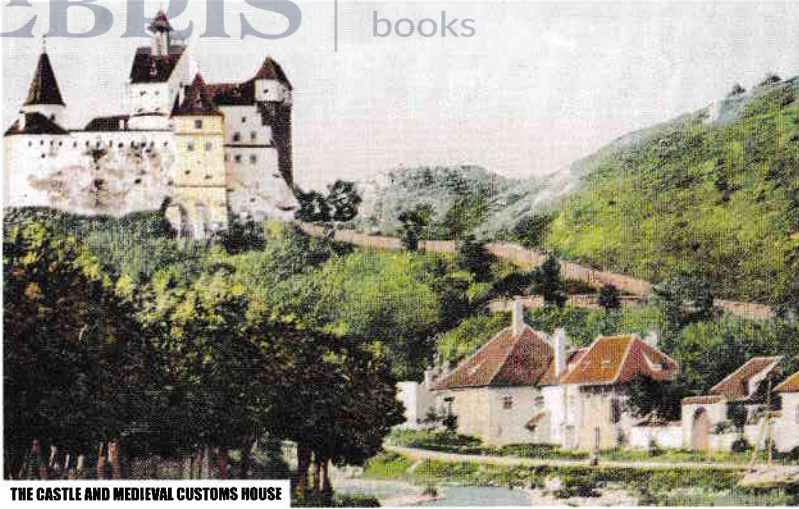
## MEDIEVAL AND MODERN BRAN

Built on a rocky outcrop (referred to in medieval documents as *lapis Theodorici* or *Dietrichstein*), guarded by two forested hills, Bran Castle dominates the mountain pass of the same name and a part of Țara Bârsei, opening – from its 60-meter height – a wide view toward the Bucegi Mountains to the east and the Pietra Craiului to the west. Seemingly emerging from the mountain itself, the castle attracted Queen Marie not only through its location, offering unique panoramas, but also for its medieval atmosphere, into which the sovereign blended perfectly. Queen Marie would later impose her style upon other castles and palaces – Pelișor, Balchik, Cotroceni – which were built or arranged according to her tastes and ideas, with several rooms and salons decorated in Romanian style.

Bran Castle was built by the people of Brașov, as a royal fortress, “of their own free will,” as stated in a diploma issued by King Louis I of Anjou of Hungary, dated November 19, 1377, at the castle in Zvolen (Slovakia). The royal privilege stated: “Not forced or coerced, but of their own free will, [the people of Brașov] generously and unanimously promised to build a new fortress in Bran (*novum castrum in lapide Tydrici aedificare*), to do it with their own labor and expense, to cut the forest there far and wide as we please, to clear and level the land, to bring and provide stone, cement, timber, and other materials needed for the construction of said fortress, and to hire and pay stonemasons, stonecutters, and carpenters at their own cost.”<sup>1</sup>

It is likely that the foundation stone of the new royal fortress was laid in the spring of 1378. The castle subsequently came under the control of Mircea the Elder (1412-1418) and John Hunyadi, who ordered repairs and fortifications. The presence of Vlad the Impaler (Dracula, as fictionalized by Bram Stoker) at the castle has not been historically documented.

From 1498 until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was under the control of the city of Brașov. Its military role faded, while its administrative and customs functions came to the forefront. It was primarily used as a customs outpost. The castle was administered by two castellans from Brașov, elected annually by the City Senate. As for the castle’s architecture,



THE CASTLE AND MEDIEVAL CUSTOMS HOUSE

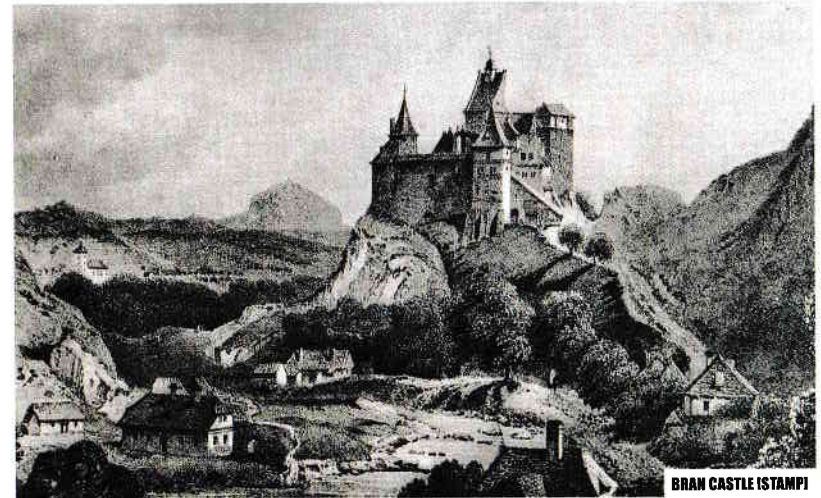
the northern keep is particularly notable – anchored into the rock, it has a watchtower at its peak. The castle also has a round tower, built in 1593 in the southwestern corner of the enclosure, and a gate tower, rectangular in shape, constructed between 1622-1625. During this same period, Gabriel Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania, built an additional tower with a square base<sup>2</sup>.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was occupied by an Austrian regiment until May 19, 1883, when it was returned to the city of Braşov. The Austrians also contributed 16,920 florins toward restoration works<sup>3</sup>. These lasted three years (until 1886), but the castle was only formally taken over by the city on July 22, 1888, and – until 1920 – was handed over to the county's forestry office as a residence<sup>4</sup>.

The turbulent years of the First World War brought a symbolic gesture into the history of Bran Castle, made by the Braşov authorities. On the occasion of the coronation of Emperor Charles I of Austria-Hungary as King of Hungary (under the name Charles IV) on December 30, 1916, the city officials intended to mark the event through a... donation. Two days before the great event, on December 28, 1916, the mayor of Braşov, Dr. Karl Schnell, justified this gesture before an assembly of city representatives: "We, from this free royal city, gathered for the first time since the beginning of the invasion by unfaithful neighbors, wish today

to greet His Royal and Apostolic Majesty from the bottom of our hearts. And if today we are allowed to express our esteem, loyalty, and love for His Majesty, with the truest of feelings, on this Coronation Day, we want to offer an unwavering token through a special gift from our city – one not valuable in material terms, but of great worth due to its historical age. It is the Bran Castle. We have today decided to respectfully ask His Majesty that, just like in the past, the castle on the old Dietrich rock return into the king's possession. And we offer this gift in faith, as steadfast subjects.<sup>5</sup>" Mayor Karl Schnell submitted the proposal to the city magistrate for approval and implementation. "With enthusiasm," he unanimously decided, "on behalf of the population," that: "On behalf of our city, we ask [Charles IV – ed.] to accept as a modest gift, the property of the city of Braşov, Bran Castle and its park."<sup>6</sup>

History, however, contradicted the expectations of the Braşov mayor. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy proved not to be invincible, and the "brilliant victories in the East" soon became mere memories. In these conditions, the emperor could not accept the gift, and after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the abdication of the sovereign, and the creation of Greater Romania on December 1, 1918, such a gesture no longer had any meaning. As a result, exactly two years after the Union, on December 1, 1920, the people of Braşov – through the voice of the



BRAN CASTLE I STAMP

same mayor, Karl Schnell – made a new gesture of courtesy toward the new sovereigns of Greater Romania, offering the castle to Queen Marie. In a way, it was also an attempt to win the goodwill of the Romanian Royal Family, whose summer residence was not far from Bran, in Sinaia. This became Bran Castle's chance to come back to life, as without the restoration ordered by the Queen and carried out by architect Karel Liman, the building would likely have shared the fate of other medieval monuments ruined by time and human indifference.

The text of the decision adopted by Braşov's City Council reflects the feelings of the people living at the foot of Mount Tâmpa towards Queen Marie of Greater Romania and explains the motives behind their gesture:

“Today, the City Council of Braşov – as the body endowed with the responsibilities of city representation – has unanimously decided in today's festive session to offer Her Majesty Queen Marie of Greater Romania the ancient castle of Bran, so rich in historical memories – the former *castrum in lapide Tydrici* – as a sign of deep veneration and unwavering dynastic feelings of our city.

This donation is intended above all as an expression of sincere reverence felt by our city's population for the great Queen who dries the tears of widows and orphans, gives courage to the hopeless, offers help and comfort to those in suffering, and spreads blessings wherever she walks – thus irresistibly conquering the hearts of people across the entire country.

This act of donation has been drawn up as the document of our unanimous decision.

From the session of December 1, 1920, of Braşov's City Council.”<sup>7</sup>

On December 1, 1920, Queen Marie recorded in her daily journal: “The municipality of Braşov telegraphed me offering the beautiful castle of Bran. I accepted with pleasure. Now Liman and I have something to play with.”<sup>8</sup> The Queen's formal takeover of the castle took place in the presence of the entire Bran community. It was a true celebration, later remembered in her magnificent work *The Country That I Love*, written five years later: “A miraculous moment followed, when I went to take possession of my little fortress. All the peasants from nearby villages rejoiced with me; my presence was a blessed event in their monotonous lives burdened with worry. Now the little solitary fortress, soulless and



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BRAN CASTLE - THE 30s

masterless, would awaken to life, look down from its rock, become all at once a center of gravity, a guardian watching over their destinies. They came in groups to welcome me, dressed in their festive costumes, wishing me luck, health, and long life; they came to show their joy that the castle had become mine. And, of course, they also came with their complaints and needs, and with petitions, for you cannot be Queen and mother of a people just to receive congratulations and hear words of gratitude.”<sup>9</sup>

Five years later, after extensive restoration and renovation work on the castle, in February 1930, the Queen nostalgically recalled the moment Bran – “the little forgotten fortress beyond the mountain passes” – entered her life<sup>10</sup>: “Many years have passed since, on a trip across the border, I had seen it standing in wild solitude on the rock where it rises. The thought flickered through my mind what a joy it would be to own such a fortress and turn it into a home. What a fairytale it would be to bring a little medieval castle to life – a true storybook dream. And the unbelievable happened: two years after the war, the authorities of the city of Braşov came to me in solemn delegation and offered me the castle of Bran, as a full gift, to be wholly mine.”<sup>11</sup>

Of all the royal residences in Romania, Bran Castle was Queen Marie’s favorite retreat<sup>12</sup>. On July 20, 1924, she expressed in a heartfelt tribute to the old fortress: “The joy of waking up at Bran, in beloved Bran, my one true caprice, my little private dwelling, so different from anything else, so bizarre and at the same time so beautiful – the most beautiful that could exist. (...) Every time, I feel the same joy upon waking. The joy of being there, the joy of being the sole and uncontested owner of this unimaginably wonderful castle.”<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, after many years spent at Bran, the Queen noted in her *Daily Journal*, on July 30, 1929: “Without a doubt, it is a beloved place and we are happy to live here. It is poetic and delightfully *gemütlich* [comfortable – in German]. The region is beautiful and cheerful, and you feel much less isolated than in Sinaia, as there are all sorts of access routes.”<sup>14</sup>

### THE CASTLE COMES BACK TO LIFE

After it came into Queen Marie’s possession, between 1920 and 1938, Bran Castle underwent a series of architectural transformations, as she wished to turn it into a modern summer residence. The works were overseen by the chief architect of the Royal House, the Czech Karel Liman, who had also worked on the Peleş and Peleşor castles. Under these circumstances, Bran Castle became the perfect setting for the collaboration between architect Karel Liman and Queen Marie of Romania, resulting in the materialization of the two artists’ creative vision. Years later, Queen Marie would remember with nostalgia those early moments of working together with architect Liman: “We had an old and dear architect of our House, inherited from the time of King Carol. And he had always dreamed that one day he might be allowed to restore an old castle; now this small and fantastic building had become his favorite work. He installed himself there, like an owl in an old wall, and put all his love, all his skill into making a real jewel of my little treasure. But we are in no hurry to finish the work, we are like children with a beloved toy, one we never tire of; each year we redo something, without ever allowing ourselves to alter the original look of the building. The little stronghold has remained powerful and proud.”<sup>15</sup>

One of the Royal Family’s closest collaborators, Eugeniu Arthur Buhman – who had “visited the place several times, in all its restoration