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DRACULA IN COMICS

with a historical study by NICOLAE PEPENE

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THE IMMORTAL DRACULA

Nicolae PEPENE

Dracul

"Dracul" is an archaic Romanian term for "the dragon", guardian of hidden treasures. As such, the dragon stands as the adversary that must be defeated in order to claim them.¹ In the legend of Siegfried, the treasure guarded by the dragon is none other than immortality.

The ruler of Wallachia, Vlad "Dracul," a knight of the Order of the Dragon, left both his throne and his name as a legacy to his son, Vlad. Historically defeated, Dracula has become, in our present day, a treasure in himself. His name, borrowed by a novel now considered part of humanity's cultural heritage, appears to be immortal.

... and Dragul

In the case of Vlad Dracul and his son, Dracula, the shift of a single consonant transforms the name's entire meaning. If the "c" becomes a "g," then Dracul becomes Dragul, a name that existed in the medieval Romanian world, and a word that in Slavic languages, as in Romanian, refers to something or someone beloved, precious, or noble.

Nearly five and a half centuries after the end of his reign, Vlad III Dracula is seen in Romania as both precious and noble. Whether as myth or historical reality, Vlad Dracula - also known as Țepeș - inspires the arts, serves as a source of wealth, and more importantly, has come to symbolize the ideal ruler.

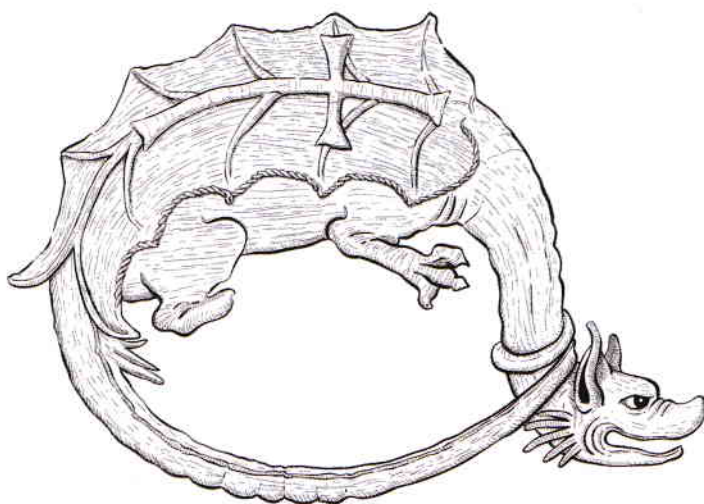
Even abroad, though he often remains in the shadow of the vampire count, the prince Dracula has gained recognition. King Charles III of the United Kingdom, who cherishes Transylvania, even claims him as an ancestor and has chosen to call this "land of Dracula" his home as well.

Of the Dragon

The Order of the Dragon (*Societas Draconistarum*) was founded in 1408² by Sigismund of Luxembourg, King of Hungary (1387-1437) and later Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (1433-1437). This chivalric monarchical order served a dual purpose: defending the Christian faith and forging political ties between its members and the order's founder.

These were not merely bonds between a sovereign and his princely vassals. Among the first lay members of the Order were kings themselves: Henry V of England (1413-1422), Ferdinand I of Aragon (1412-1416), and Alfonso V of Aragon (1416-1458), who was also King of the Two Sicilies (1442-1458).

The emblem of the Order is a winged dragon with four legs, marked on its back by a red cross, its tail coiled three times around its neck. The dragon, subdued by the cross, symbolizes the triumph of Christ over sin and death.



Emblem of the Order of the Dragon
(reproduction by Octav Ungureanu / source:
A heraldika kézikönyve műszótárral, Hungarian
Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 1897)

For Sigismund of Luxembourg, evil was embodied by the Turks, who had defeated him at the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396. Determined to secure the southern border of his kingdom against the advancing Ottoman threat, the king worked to bring the Christian states of the Balkans under his suzerainty. Thus, alongside nobles from Central Europe, Germany, Italy, and Spain, several Balkan leaders were also invited to join the Order, including Hrvoje Vukčić Hrvatinić, Grand Duke of Bosnia (1380–1416), Stefan Lazarević, Despot of Serbia (1402–1427), and Vlad II Basarab, who at the time of the induction ceremony in early 1431 in Nuremberg was a claimant to the throne of Wallachia.

Many members of the Order incorporated the dragon into their heraldic emblems and even on their coins.³ In Latin, the language of medieval European royal chanceries, the word for dragon is *draco*, and so Vlad II, as a knight of the *Societas Draconistarum*, came to be known as Vlad Dracul. For a Christian prince, such a nickname was far from desirable. Foreign historians who later came to Romania in search of Dracula have argued that the sinister connotations associated with his name were added much later by political enemies. The strongest evidence that the Drăculești family did not consider the epithet offensive lies in the fact that they adopted it permanently and signed their names with it.⁴

On February 8, 1431, while in Nuremberg at the court of King Sigismund for “matters of great importance,” Vlad, son of Mircea the Elder, was already recognized by Sigismund as ruler of Ungro-Wallachia, referring to the king as his “natural overlord.” In connection with the Catholic faith of his suzerain, Vlad II issued a charter granting the Franciscan monks (the Order of Friars Minor) the right to freely practice Catholicism in Wallachia.⁵ However, before Vlad could claim the throne, the king altered his plans, and his vassal had to settle for a military role defending Transylvania’s southern borders. Even so, he was active in the region near his homeland. He was also granted the right to mint coins - a significant source of revenue reserved for those specially chosen by the sovereign.

Vlad II finally began his reign at the end of 1436, with the support of both the Kingdom of Hungary and the local boyars. Yet in his very first year as ruler, the Wallachian knight of the Order of the Dragon acknowledged the suzerainty of Sultan Murad II. He agreed to pay tribute and, as a guarantee of his oath of loyalty, sent his sons Vlad and Radu to the court of the Ottoman ruler. In 1447, Vlad Dracul was captured and executed by order of the Hungarian governor John Hunyadi (Iancu de Hunedoara). At the same time, Mircea, the eldest of Dracul’s sons, was also killed. A year later, the Sultan sent his army to place the second son of his former vassal on the throne of Wallachia. Thus, Vlad the son of Dracul became the voivode Dracula. His first reign was very brief - only two months.

In 1453, exactly one hundred years after the Ottomans had seized Gallipoli in 1354 - opening the gateway into Europe - they conquered Constantinople, the center of Eastern Christian civilization. Three years later, Sultan Mehmed II’s armies stood at the gates of Belgrade, the key to entering Central Europe from the Balkans.

On June 8, 1456, a comet* appeared in the sky over Europe and remained visible for an entire month. The Turks were defeated, but on August 11, John Hunyadi succumbed to the plague that had first broken out in the enemy camp. During the battle, Dracula was in Braşov. Not long after learning of the death of the man who had ordered his father’s execution, Vlad III Dracula crossed the Carpathians to claim his paternal inheritance. “*With God’s help, we have obtained the throne without anyone’s assistance*”, Dracula wrote to the Saxons of Sibiu.

* Cometa Halley.

In six years of rule, Dracula worked to bring order both within his country and along its borders. He restricted the privileges of foreign merchants and punished the dishonest with ruthless severity. Many boyars lost their heads to the executioner's axe. Claimants to the throne were hunted down, and the Saxons who protected them faced punitive expeditions.

In 1459, Dan, one of Dracula's rivals for the throne, accused him of being in league with the Turks and claimed he was advised by the devil himself. This accusation echoed the complaints made by the Saxons, who objected to Dracula's confiscation of the goods of Braşov merchants caught in Wallachian territory, the impalement of 41 individuals, and a more diabolical act still: the execution of 300 boys from Braşov and Ţara Bârsei, arrested in towns under his rule.⁶

In the early years of his reign, Vlad III Dracula paid the annual tribute to the Ottoman Sultan. But in 1459, he ceased all payments. More than that, in the winter of 1461 to 1462, his Wallachian army crossed the frozen Danube and launched attacks on Turkish and Bulgarian settlements from the river's mouths all the way to the Jiu. In a report to King Matthias Corvinus, Dracula recorded the death toll from his campaign: 23,883 victims, "not counting those burned alive in their homes." He wrote, "Men, women, and children, both young and old, even infants - they were all slain."⁷

In the summer of 1462, an Ottoman invasion led by Sultan Mehmed II himself, combined with the betrayal of Wallachian boyars, brought an end to Vlad III's reign. He was replaced on the throne by his half-brother Radu, remembered in history as Radu the Handsome. To the Turks, Vlad Dracula was known as Kazıklı Bey ("the Impaler"). The historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles, a contemporary of Vlad, described the infamous "forest of the impaled" near Târgovişte:

"The emperor's army came upon the impaled, stretched over a distance of seventeen stadia [about 3 kilometers] in length and seven stadia [a little over 1 kilometer] in width. The stakes were tall, and on them were impaled men, women, and children, around 20,000, it is said. What a sight it was for the Turks and for the sultan himself!"⁸

Despite his undeniable heroism in fighting the Turks, King Matthias had Dracula arrested on charges of treason. By removing the man who had challenged Sultan Mehmed II to battle, Matthias - son of the brave John Hunyadi - also postponed the burden of organizing an anti-Ottoman crusade. The "evidence" presented against Dracula consisted of three letters allegedly sent to the sultan, a pasha [likely the grand vizier], and a prince [possibly Stephen the Great of Moldavia]. These letters were forgeries, produced either by the king's men or the Saxons, who were eager to take revenge and rid themselves of a volatile neighbor.

From 1462 to 1475, Dracula was held captive in Visegrád. During his imprisonment, he converted to Catholicism and became related to the Hungarian king through marriage to a Hungarian princess. He regained the throne of Wallachia only in November 1476. On two of his final documents, Vlad signed his name as Vlad "Dragul" - Wladislaus Dragwilya and Ladislaus Dragkwilya.⁹

His third reign was extremely brief. It is said the prince was killed around Christmas. Dracula's head - or rather, the skin of his face and scalp -¹⁰ was sent to Sultan Mehmed II, while his body was buried, legend says, at the monastery on the island of Snagov Lake, near Bucharest, the town he had chosen in 1459 as the site for a new princely residence.

Vlad III Dracula Ţepeş died at around the age of 45. His life, like those of many of his contemporaries across Europe, was short and brutal, regardless of social rank.

In the modern era, the connection between the name Dracul and the insignia of the Order of the Dragon was first proposed in 1804 by the Austrian historian Johann Christian Engel¹¹, a proponent of the immigration theory. Perhaps because he mixed history with politics in a way unfavorable to the Romanians, Engel confused Vlad Dracul with his son Vlad Dracula, attributing the son's cruel deeds to the father. He thus claimed that the member of the Order of the Dragon had "earned" his name "once more, this time through the cruelty of his actions"¹².

* The charter issued in Bucharest by Vlad Ţepeş on September 20, 1459, is the first documented mention of the city of Bucharest.

Portraits of Dracula

As the papal legate of Pope Pius II [1458–1464] at the court of Matthias Corvinus, the bishop Nicola of Modruš [Dalmatia] visited Dracula in prison in the years 1463 and 1464. He described him as follows:

“He was not very tall, but strong and well-built, with a cruel and fearsome appearance, a large, hawk-like nose, flared nostrils, a fine and ruddy complexion, very long eyelashes framing wide, green eyes made menacing by his thick, black eyebrows. His face and beard were clean-shaven, save for the mustache. His protruding temples gave the impression of an enlarged head. A bull-like neck connected his large nape to broad shoulders, over which fell thick, curly black hair.”¹³

The cleric learned from Matthias Corvinus himself that the Wallachian tyrant Dracula - “through whom they also refer to the devil” - had, by the king’s own account, executed 40,000 people¹⁴, primarily by impalement, and often through the most ingenious tortures. The enthusiasm with which the king and his courtiers recounted Vlad’s atrocities lends weight to the suspicion that the royal chancery in Buda was involved in a propaganda campaign meant to justify Dracula’s arrest and the abandonment of the anti-Ottoman crusade.

In the summer of 1463, precisely during the time when a delegation from King Matthias

Corvinus was present at the court of Emperor Frederick III in Wiener Neustadt, a pamphlet titled *The Story of Voivode Dracula* was printed in Vienna, in German. This six-page publication, featuring a portrait of Vlad on the title page, was the first anti-Dracula pamphlet. It contained a series of blood-soaked anecdotes, drawing on details that could only have been known by the Saxons.¹⁵

This story was quickly copied into other works. Thomas Ebendorfer, a professor at the University of Vienna, included it in the chronicle he published later that same year. The former mercenary Michael Beheim composed a poem based on the pamphlet’s text, to which he added two stories he had heard from the Franciscan monk Jacob, who had been expelled from Wallachia by Dracula.

Pope Pius II, in his own memoirs, described Dracula as “a well-formed man, handsome in body and in face, worthy of a ruler’s stature.”¹⁶

From the period of Dracula’s captivity in Hungary survive several portraits of him painted in religious scenes. He has been identified as Pontius Pilate in a wood panel painting from the Viennese circle dated to 1462–1465; as a soldier at the Crucifixion of Christ on a 1475 altar panel attributed to the Master of Schottenkirche; and as the governor of Patras who ordered the crucifixion of Saint Andrew, in a panel from 1470–1480 originating from the monastery of Lilienfeld, Lower Austria.¹⁷

However, the most well-known image of Vlad III Dracula is a 16th-century copy of a now-lost original made during his captivity in Buda. The oil on canvas portrait has been preserved for over 400 years at Ambras Castle in Innsbruck.¹⁸

In a chronicle of the city of Konstanz, published before 1472, Vlad III Dracula is referred to as “the son of the devil” and “the tyrant who committed deeds more cruel, more bloody, and more devoid of humanity than any ever heard or written about another tyrant.”

He was accused of horrific punishments and tortures, some inspired by the enemies of Christianity - Herod, Nero, and Diocletian - and others invented by Dracula himself, inspired by the devil.¹⁹



Portrait of Vlad Tepeș - From a German pamphlet of the 15th–16th century, preserved in the Imperial Library of Berlin.



Portrait of Vlad Tepeș - Version preserved in the Library of the Romanian Academy.

[Source: Ioan Bogdan, *Vlad Tepeș in the German and Russian Accounts*, Bucharest, SOCEC & Co. Publishing, 1896]

Indeed, the demonization of the prince who had dared to confront Mehmed II the Conqueror, and who had placed trust in the word of King Matthias Corvinus without sufficient caution, was largely the work of German authors.

The epic-scale cruelties attributed to Dracula were recorded in multiple manuscripts and printed texts published after his death. The earliest preserved editions of *Dracole waida* [Voivode Dracula] appeared between 1488 and 1493.²⁰

Each of these editions begins with a title-page portrait of Dracula. The first preserved edition was printed by Marx Ayrer in Nuremberg, on October 14, 1488. The woodcut illustration likely drew on an original likeness of the ruler: Dracula is depicted with a prominent chin with a dimple, long and thick hair, well-defined mustache and eyebrows, and an elegant bonnet adorned with pearls.

In contrast, in the 1493 Leipzig edition, the prince is shown without long hair, with a hairy mole on his chin, and wearing a small hat instead of a bonnet. In the editions printed in Nuremberg (1499) and Strasbourg (1500), the cover illustration depicts a gruesome scene: "the wild and bloodthirsty tyrant Voivode Dracula" feasting while watching victims impaled and slaughtered by an executioner near a town identified as Braşov.

Editions of *Dracole* continued to appear until the mid-16th century. The fear stirred by the Ottoman advance to the walls of Vienna (1529) and the turmoil of the Reformation were fertile ground for spreading terrifying anecdotes that exploited public interest in fearful and sensational stories.

The Wallachian voivode was also written about by Feodor Kuritsyn, one of the advisors to Grand Prince Ivan III of Moscow. Kuritsyn collected accounts of Dracula during a diplomatic mission to Hungary between 1482 and 1483. The Russian version takes on a different tone from the German pamphlets, resembling more a political manual for the ruler of Moscow.²¹ Although it was never printed, the *Tale about Voivode Dracula* circulated widely in Russia through manuscript copies that spread until the end of the 18th century.

Among the final medieval portraits of Dracula, one stands out in the genealogical register of Nikolaus Ochsenbach, captain of the guard at Tübingen Castle. The miniature, painted between 1596 and 1626, clearly identifies him with the inscription:

"VLADISLAVS DRACVLA, VOIVODE OF WALLACHIA."

The only known life-sized historical portrait of Dracula was completed around the year 1700. He is depicted in a fur-trimmed cloak, wearing a pearl-adorned bonnet, and armed with a mace and sword. The painting was commissioned from an unknown artist by Prince Paul I Esterházy for his ancestral gallery at Burg Forchtenstein. In the upper-left corner of the painting appears the Latin inscription: "Dracula Vaida, Prince and Voivode of Transalpine Wallachia, the fiercest enemy of the Turks."²²

Four hundred years after Dracula's death, the monks of Snagov Monastery showed visitors a tombstone embedded in the church floor, in front of the royal doors of the altar. Though the inscription had been erased, they claimed it was the gravestone of "a cruel and lawless lord" - of Ţepeş himself. The Metropolitan Filaret (1792-1794) is said to have ordered the name of the ruler to be erased and the stone placed there as a form of eternal punishment, or perhaps as an act of mercy for the condemned soul - so that the name of the tyrant would lie beneath the feet of the priest as he exited with the Holy Gifts.²³



Portrait of Vlad Ţepeş - From an oil painting copy held at the museum of Ambras Castle in Tyrol.



Also: miniature from the Cabinet of Coins, Medals, and Antiquities in the Imperial Museums of Vienna.

[Source: Ioan Bogdan, *Vlad Ţepeş și narațiunile germane și rusești asupra lui*, Bucharest, SOCEC & Co. Publishing, 1896]



Vlad III Dracula
(Ambras Castle, Innsbruck)

This tradition was recorded by Al. Odobescu in the year 1862.²⁴ However, during the archaeological excavations conducted in 1933, it was found that the tomb was empty.²⁵ Researchers extended their excavations and, near the entrance of the church, at a depth of three meters, they discovered an intact stone crypt. The slab in front of the altar fit perfectly over the crypt.

When they opened the tomb, by the light of lanterns, they discovered an oak coffin, covered with a purple fabric embroidered with gold thread, which held the remains of a man dressed in Western-style garments, fastened with gilded silver-thread buttons, and belted at the waist with a girdle made of rhombus-shaped silver plaques. His face was covered with a silk cloth, and on his pinky finger was a princely gold ring,²⁶ "richly adorned with finely crafted ornaments, bearing the engraved coat of arms of Wallachia: a raven holding a cross in its beak, flanked by a crescent moon and the sun." Next to the deceased's hands was placed a tournament victor's crown, made of gold.²⁷ The leader of the archaeological research, Dinu Rosetti, was convinced that the tomb represented the final resting place of Dracula.²⁸

Upon contact with air, the body decomposed within minutes, before the archaeologists were able to photograph the face.²⁹

* Important Archaeological Discoveries at Snagov Monastery", *Curentul*, Year VI, No. 2013, September 9, 1933, p. 6.

The author of the article, an eyewitness to the opening of the tombs in the church's nave, claimed that four princely burial chambers were examined. The silk brocade remnants and the princely ring were found together in one grave, but "remains of princely silk garments, adorned with gold-thread embroidery, and at the neck and sleeves, gold buttons," were discovered separately.

“Why Do You Not Come, Tepeș, Lord?”*

The myth of the Devil is closely related to the myths of the Dragon and the Serpent, and to the symbolism of thresholds and enclosure. To cross the forbidden threshold means to be either cursed or sanctified, a victim of the Devil or the chosen of God: it is a fall - or an ascent!³⁰

Through his deeds, Vlad Dracula Tepeș crossed that “forbidden threshold.” Although he founded Orthodox churches, he was treated in his own time and in the immediate aftermath as one who was cursed.³¹

In the modern era, the memory of Tepeș began to take form for Romanians four centuries after the ruler’s death, in the poem *Țiganiada* (*The Gypsyiad* or *The Gypsies’ Camp*), composed by Ioan Budai-Deleanu, for whom Vlad Tepeș, Lord of the Land, was “worthy to be called a hero.”

Ioan Budai-Deleanu was the son of a Transylvanian priest. He studied theology in Blaj and Vienna. *Țiganiada* was most likely written during the reign of Emperor Joseph II [1765–1790], a liberal, enlightened monarch with ideas far ahead of his time. A “Josephinist,” Budai-Deleanu fell into conflict with the bishop of Blaj and eventually left for Galicia, where he worked as a clerk at the provincial tribunal. The poem was published posthumously in Bucharest in 1877.³²

In this “heroic-comic-satirical poem,” Budai-Deleanu describes an expedition of gypsies, organized by Vlad Tepeș as a separate army, against the invading Turks of Sultan Mehmed. The war waged by the Romanian voivode and the gypsy expedition is accompanied by two secondary plots, skillfully woven into the main narrative. On the one hand, there is the battle of the saints, who come to aid the Christians against the devils led by Satan, who support the pagans; and on the other, the adventures of a Hungarian nobleman in search of his beloved, whom he believes has been kidnapped by *zmei* (the Romanian folkloric term for dragons).

These heroic episodes end with the victory of Vlad Vodă and the saints over the Turks and the devils, and with the gypsies’ failure to establish a state - as Satan urges them to do - because they quarrel and fight over the choice of their leader. Among those who accompany “Satan the Rebellious” are also “unclean spirits, who even then did not sleep, but flew through the night in all directions.”³³ God sends the archangel Michael to command the condemned spirits to return to hell.

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, Gheorghe Șincai, of the Transylvanian School, and the historian Johann Christian Engel - both citizens of the Austrian Empire - presented Vlad Dracula as “a cruel tyrant and a monster of humanity.” A future foreign minister of the United Principalities, Mihail Kogălniceanu, described Dracula in 1837 as “*le plus grand monstre de la nature et l’horreur de l’humanité*” (*the greatest monster of nature and the horror of humanity*). Later, a few verses written in French by Victor Hugo in 1859 would mark Vlad Tepeș’s entry into world literature - but as *Vlad, known as Belzebuth*.

If Budai-Deleanu saw Vlad Vodă as a hero worthy of being aided by saints and protected by unclean spirits, Romanian Romantic historiography of the 19th century elevated Vlad Dracula Tepeș into the pantheon of a nation striving to unify into a modern, independent state.

Ottoman chroniclers gave Vlad III the nickname *Țepeș* (“the Impaler”). The epithet was embraced by Romanian historiography, even though there is no evidence that Vlad ever called himself by that name, or that his subjects would have dared to associate their ruler’s name with the stake.

Moreover, the use of the Ottoman nickname in modern times carried a positive connotation for most Romanians. In fact, the stake became the foundation of the myth of the hero as both savior (through battles with the Turks) and civilizer (through a political and moral order superior to the old one). August Treboniu Laurian described Vlad Tepeș in his *History of the Romanians*, published in Iași in 1853, as follows:

“Despot in heart and in his dealings with others, yet a lover of national independence and courageous to the point of recklessness. Vlad was ready to sacrifice everything for the salvation of the country from the imposition of a foreign yoke.”³⁴

*Mihail Eminescu, *Third Epistle, Convorbiri literare*, year XV, no. 2, May 1, 1881, p. 60.



The Portrait of Țepeș in Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu, *Filosofia portretului lui Țepeș. Schiță iconografică*, [The Philosophy of Țepeș's Portrait. An Iconographic Sketch], 1864 [Reproduced in Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu, "Filosofia portretului lui Țepeș. Schiță iconografică," in *Scrieri literare, morale și politice* [Literary, Moral, and Political Writings], critical edition with notes and variants by Mircea Eliade, vol. II, Foundation for Literature and Art "King Carol II," Bucharest, 1937.]

In 1864, Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu developed a philosophy of Vlad Țepeș's portrait, which he described as "a first iconographic attempt."³⁵ The romantic historian used "the icon of Vlad Țepeș, also called Dracu-Vodă, alongside an old Saxon tale about this prince's cruelties," drawn from the writings of Johann Christian Engel. The prince's high forehead, he argued, revealed "a most vigorous intelligence." The distance between the eyebrows and the furrows of the brow indicated "individualization" - memory and an eye for detail. "The eyes and nose betray the innate cruelty of Țepeș": the root of the nose "protrudes from beneath the arch of the brow - the sign of a strong will"; the tip of the nose "is sharp without being thin: the sign of a keen intelligence, joined with great self-confidence"; the large nostrils denote intense passions. "The lower lip, much wider and more prominent than the upper one, reveals a scornful character." "The inclination toward cruelty is seen in the depth of the curved line at the center of the mouth," while "the strength of will is clearly shown in the tightness of the lips." "Irony, a misanthropic scorn, cruelty, and a will of iron - these are what we find in the study of Țepeș's mouth." "In the prince's chin, we note especially the mark of voluptuousness." As for the prince's eyes, Hasdeu exclaims: "Look closely into Țepeș's eyes. Know nothing of the other features of his face, and be entirely unaware of the biography of the voivode - even so! From the mere study of these eyes alone, you could reconstruct the entire figure. (...) The gentlest expression in such eyes can only be irony!"

In 1882, the newspaper *Familia* in Oradea published a historical sketch of Vlad Țepeș, "a heroic man whom all foreign historians, and even some of our own, have slandered."³⁶

Even in the modern school textbooks of the late nineteenth century, Vlad Țepeș was presented as one of "the most prominent rulers of our land": "high-spirited, just, an unrelenting enemy of lies, theft, flattery, and even idleness - to the point of tyranny - but a great warrior and a great patriot, for although he was indeed very cruel toward his enemies, not even a tigress defends her cubs with more fiery zeal than Țepeș defended the Romanians, their homeland, their national identity, and their religion against foreign corruption."³⁷ Such portrayals impressed generations of students in Romania, from the reign of King Carol I up to the present day, and transformed Vlad Țepeș into a historical figure with moral authority and a political model.

A serious opponent of Vlad Țepeș's "elevation" into the national pantheon was Ioan Bogdan of Brașov, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, philologist, and historian. In 1896, in his critical study *Vlad Țepeș and the German and Russian Narratives about Him*,³⁸ the scholar launched a sharp attack: "Perhaps none of the figures with which our past takes pride has been so idealized in the imagination of the people and of historians as that of Vlad Țepeș. The blood-drenched halo surrounding this name has made its bearer into a legendary lord and loaded him with virtues he never possessed. The people endowed him with a character that was cruel but just; the poets followed the people [a reference to the national poet Mihai Eminescu - ed.], and the historians, swept away by the desire to glorify the people of the past, sought to turn Vlad Țepeș into a great genius, a great national hero, a ruler who fought the Turks for the country's independence from without, and for the reign of justice and order from within. (...) And yet, from the entirety of this cruel tyrant's rule, we know only acts of bestial cruelty."

I. Bogdan pushed his critical demonstration to the extreme, ultimately asserting that Vlad Călugărul (Vlad the Monk) and Mihnea cel Rău (Mihnea the Evil), both rulers of Wallachia, were the sons of Vlad Țepeș. This identification of descent, he claimed, offered "further support for the view that the children of this prince showed various signs of degeneration: one with religious mania, the other with a mania for cruelty - and that, therefore, he himself must have been, from a psychological standpoint, a degenerate, in the sense given to that word by modern psychiatric science."³⁹



"Vlad Tepeș's Tower. The Romanian General Exhibition"
 Illustration in *Dimineața*, May 4, 1906
 [*Dimineața*, Year III, no. 803, May 4, 1906]



"Vlad Tepeș's Castle at the National Exhibition"
 Illustration in the newspaper *Universul*, May 22, 1906
 [*Universul*, Year XXIV, no. 137, May 22, 1906]

In 1906, Romania celebrated its king, Carol I, on the fortieth anniversary of his reign. A National Exhibition was organized in the capital of the kingdom. Among the buildings set up on the Filaret Plain stood "Vlad Tepeș's Castle," a fanciful reproduction of the Poenari fortress.* On July 8/21, 1906, during the historical pageants held at the Roman Arenas and directed by Al. Davilla, General Director of Theatres, a "distinct impression" was made by "the appearance of Vlad Tepeș, in the splendid costume of the era." But the scene from the show *The Story of the Romanian People* that "moved the audience tremendously" was the reenactment entitled *The Steel Royal Crown*: "A woman, Romania, walks majestically, holding in her hand the Steel Crown adorned with a wreath of laurel. She is escorted by four great figures from national history: Mircea the Elder, Vlad Tepeș, Stephen the Great, and Michael the Brave."⁴⁰ This symbolic presence before the royal box consecrated the prominent place held by Vlad Tepeș in the national mythology - now sanctioned at the highest level of the Romanian state.

A Damned Count

In 1890, Abraham Stoker, a passionate 43-year-old clerk from Dublin with a talent for business and a position as theatre manager in London, began working on a novel about vampires. His original title was *Count Wampyr*.

For his research, the author was assisted by an adventurer of Slovak origin, Hermann Weinberger (1832–1913), a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the first professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Budapest, who had changed his name to Arminius Vámbéry.⁴¹

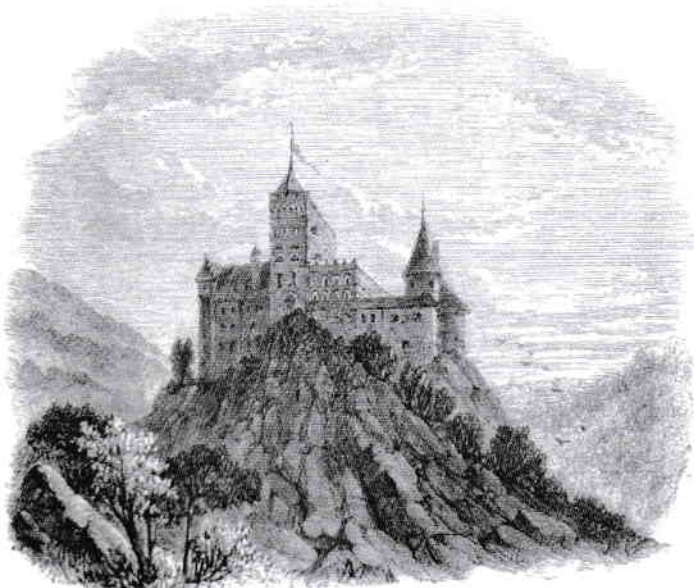
According to Stoker's working notes,⁴² two books contributed to the framework of his novel: *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia* (London, 1820), written by the English diplomat William Wilkinson, stationed in Istanbul and Bucharest between 1812 and 1818, and *The Land Beyond the Forest: Facts, Figures, and Fancies from Transylvania* (New York, 1888), written by the Scotswoman Emily de Laszowska Gerard (1849–1905), the wife of a Polish officer serving in southern Transylvania in the service of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austro-Hungary.

* The building, constructed of natural stone and brick (architect: Sc. Petculescu), was originally intended as a "Water Castle." After the First World War, it was transformed into a barracks for the guard corps stationed near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. (Grigore Ionescu, Bucharest. A Historical and Artistic Guide, Foundation for Literature and Art "King Carol II," Bucharest, 1938, p. 264.)



Attila

La Hongrie ancienne et moderne: histoire, arts, littérature, monuments, by a Society of Writers, edited by M. J. Boldenyi, H. Lebrun, Libraire-Éditeur, Paris, 1851.



Bran Castle in the mid-nineteenth century
[Charles Boner, *Transylvania: Its Products and Its People*, Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, London, 1865]

In the first book, Stoker discovered the history of the voivode Dracula; in the second, he found the ideal setting for a lost world- mysterious, supernatural - as well as the story of the origin of the Székely people, proud “for the warm blood of the Huns runs in their veins.”⁴³

A footnote in Wilkinson's book seems to have changed the protagonist's name from Wampyr to Dracula: “Dracula means in the Wallachian language ‘Devil.’ The Wallachians at that time, and even now, had the custom of giving this nickname to those who stood out through courage, acts of cruelty, or cunning.”⁴⁴ Stoker incorporated this information into the novel as follows: “Surely it was that Voivode Dracula who won his name by fighting against the Turks. [...] If this be so, then he was no common man, for in that time, and even later, down through the centuries, he was spoken of as the cleverest and most cunning, as well as the bravest of the sons of the land beyond the forest.”⁴⁵

The English consul made no mention of Dracula's notorious practice of impalement. As a result, Stoker omits that medieval punishment entirely. What he borrowed was the historical name and the story of the Drăculești lineage's battles against the Turks.⁴⁶ However, in Stoker's narrative, it is Attila's blood that flows through Count Dracula's veins.⁴⁷ The Drăculești, in this telling, are not of Romanian stock. They are “the heart, the spirit, and the sword” of the Székelys. Most likely, this idea of a Székely ancestry was influenced by Arminius Vámbéry.

Whether documented or imagined, Stoker sought to justify the connection between his vampire and the historical figure. Though “the family of Dracula was of noble and distinguished origin,” there were “certain branches of whom it was said by contemporaries that they had dealings with the Evil One.”⁴⁸

The castle of Count Dracula was placed in Transylvania, at the *Borgo* Pass (identified with the Bârgău Pass), near Bistrița, close to the border with Bukovina, in the heart of the Carpathians, “one of the wildest and least known parts of Europe,” as Stoker described the region.⁴⁹ The fortress of Bran is the closest match to the description of the romantic fiction's residence.⁵⁰ No concrete evidence links Bran to Bram Stoker, but it is not impossible that among the works he consulted at the British Museum was the travel book by Charles Boner, *Transylvania: Its Products and Its People* (1865),⁵¹ in which the castle nestled in the Southern Carpathian pass receives special attention: “Nothing can be more romantic than the castle; its position among the solitary rocks, its architecture, and its apparent inaccessibility,” writes Boner. “A path winds up the crags to the entrance. [...] Inside are narrow corridors and galleries, strange corners and zig-zag staircases, and irresistibly attractive shadowy nooks; and in the thick wall there is a low prison into which no ray of light could ever enter.” The Gothic atmosphere, charged with potential for terror, prompts the Englishman to draw a link between nobility and villainy: the castle of Bran “might well have been the dwelling of some robber-knight or of Bluebeard himself.”⁵²