

Articles

The Strange Life and Times of Vlad Dracula (Or How Dracula became a Crusader)

In an area known for the savagery of its conflicts, the war in Wallachia was brutal even by medieval Balkan standards. Wallachia encompassed present day Romania. It was bordered by Serbia and Bulgaria to the South, Moldavia to the East, Poland to the North and Hungary to the West. The Boyars (land-owning nobles) of Wallachia had long fought against each other for the title of "Voivode" or Prince. They played a dangerous game balancing the interests of the Ottoman Empire on one hand against the interests of Hungary, their powerful northern neighbor, while trying to jockey for power against each other in an attempt to ensure their independence and survival.

In one of the ironic turns of fate, a man legendary for his brutality and blood-thirsty behavior became an honored crusader against the Ottoman Empire. His name was Vlad Dracula and he was born in 1431, the same year that Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.



Prologue

Dracula's family had long been associated with the crusading movement. Mircea the Great, Dracula's grandfather, participated in the battle of Nicopolis with King Sigismund of Hungary. He ruled Wallachia from 1386 to 1418. Vlad II, Dracula's father, was a crusader in the Hussite Wars and was inducted into the Order of the Dragon. The Order, founded by King Sigismund of Hungary, was dedicated to the defense of the Catholic faith and to the fight against the Ottoman Empire. Both Vlad II and his son had the same name. In Romanian, Dracul means "devil" or "dragon". Dracula means "Son of the Devil" or "Son of the Dragon". Vlad II was known as Vlad Dracul in honor of his membership in the Order. Vlad III or Vlad Dracula was known as the son of the Devil or son of the Dragon. Depending upon one's viewpoint, either interpretation was valid. He also became known as Vlad Tepes (or "the Impaler"). His mother was Princess Cheajna of Moldavia. His family ties on his mother's side would later save Vlad Dracula's life on more than one occasion.

In 1436-1437, Vlad II became the ruler of Walachia by fighting and defeating the local Ottoman Beys with the help of Hungarian forces sent by Sigismund of Hungary. In December of 1437, Sigismund's death triggered a battle of succession between Albert II and his wife Elisabeth of Bohemia on the one hand and Vladislaus III of Varna on the other. The Ottomans quickly moved in and attacked Serbia and Bulgaria. Vlad II signed an alliance with the Ottomans in order to protect his throne. Despite this alliance, he and

his two younger sons, Dracula and Radu, were summoned to meet Murad II, the Sultan of the Ottomans, and were subsequently imprisoned because of suspicions concerning their loyalty. Vlad II was released but his sons, Dracula, age 11, and Radu, age 7, were kept as hostages in order to ensure their father's good behavior. Murad II was correct in his suspicions concerning Vlad II's loyalty. Vlad II sent a small contingent of Wallachians cavalry, under Mircea, his older son, to Janos Hunyadi during the Varna campaign. Vlad II refused to bear arms against the Ottomans in the hope of ensuring his younger sons' safety. The Crusaders were crushed at the Battle of Varna and Dracul signed another treaty with the Ottomans in an attempt to continue to play both ends against the middle. This fence-sitting didn't play well with the Hungarians who had fought and bled at Varna. In response to this treaty, a segment of Janos Hunyadi's army, led by Vladislev II, came to Walachia and killed Vlad II. Mircea, Vlad Dracula's oldest brother, was blinded and then buried alive. Vladislev II claimed the throne of Walachia for himself.

The Release of Vlad Dracula

If the Ottomans thought that their hospitality would make Vlad Dracula think better of them, they were sadly mistaken. Vlad Dracula spent most of his teenage years as a "guest" of the Ottoman Empire. He didn't speak their language. He didn't share their religion. He grew up in the shadow of imminent death if his family failed to meet Ottoman's expectations. However, he and his brother were brought up and tutored by the Ottomans in the hopes of installing a sense of loyalty to the Empire. In Vlad's case, it didn't work. Unlike his younger brother Radu, Vlad Dracula was a difficult "guest" and was frequently beaten into submission. Vlad developed a reputation among his hosts as cunning, brutal, suspicious, and vengeful. On the other hand, Radu was handsome and was extremely favored among the members of the Ottoman Court. Radu was well treated and would remain with the Ottomans until 1462.

Vlad Dracula was released by the Ottomans in the hopes that he would sow discord in Wallachia and destabilize the area. They were correct in the short run. In the long run, they should have killed him and sent the more pliable Radu instead. While the armies of Hungarians and Wallachians fought at the Second Battle of Kosovo in 1448, Vlad Dracula seized the throne of Wallachia as his birthright. Upon Vladislav's return, Dracula went into exile in Moldavia and was befriended by Prince Stephen, his cousin. They developed a close friendship. Meanwhile, Vladislav II adopted a pro-Ottoman policy in Wallachia. It was the same type of policy which had lead to the deaths of Vlad II and Dracula's older brother. Dracula went to Hungary in 1451 in the hopes of finding support for his future ambitions. From 1451-1456, Dracula became Janos Hunyadi's military pupil and protégé. Hunyadi introduced Dracula to the Court of Ladislav V, the current King of Hungary. He fought with Hunyadi in various campaigns against the Ottomans and officially became the Hungarian-supported heir to the throne of Wallachia. Shortly after Hunyadi's death in 1456, Dracula marched into Wallachia with the aid of the Hungarians, killed Vladislav II, and reclaimed the throne of Wallachia.

Vlad Dracula began his second six-year reign of Wallachia in 1456, the same time that the Houses of Lancaster and York began the War of the Roses in England. The fate of

his father and older brother taught him about the need to stop the endless scheming among the Boyars. He quickly moved to address this concern. In 1457, he invited the Boyars to his castle at Tirgoviste. Many of the Boyars came expecting concessions and gifts in return for their support of his reign. They received neither. Dracula had them removed one by one and killed within sight of the castle walls. They were replaced by individuals loyal to Dracula.

Accounts of Dracula's brutality during his second six-year reign are legendary. Most of the horror stories about Dracula came from the Saxon (German) pamphlets made possible by the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg. These pamphlets portrayed Dracula as a demented psychopath who dipped his bread in the blood of his victims or drank their blood outright. The legends later formed the backdrop of Brian Stoker's novel, *Dracula*. Horror stories made good press even in medieval times. The legends of Dracula were bestsellers in the Western Europe during his lifetime second only to the Bible in some places.

While there is little doubt that many of these legends had a core of truth, they are also widely inaccurate. Wallachia was approximately 48,000 square miles (roughly the size of New York State) with approximately 3,220 towns at the time of Dracula's second reign. Most historians agree that the total population of Wallachia was about 500,000. There is no question that Dracula used torture and terror as instruments of public policy. There is no question that he violently attacked the Saxon (German) merchants whom he believed were taking economic advantage of his people as well as the scheming Boyars who helped murder his father and brother. However, the Saxon accounts of Dracula killing upwards of 100,000 of his own people, or approximately 20% of the total population of his country, in under three years using impalement as the primary method of killing are unbelievable even by medieval standards.

While Dracula was probably psychotic, he was also a Machiavellian prince. He used torture and terror as instruments of public policy. However, his actions were motivated by purposes other than mere insanity. He was likely motivated by the need for revenge for the murder of his father and brother by the Boyars, or the perceived need to protect the common welfare of his country against foreigners, or the actual need for the establishment of his personal authority which greatly aided in the reduction of crime in his country. He created an officer corps from among the small landowning peasants whose positions were highly dependent upon their personal loyalty. He also demonstrated remarkable piety and built or founded five monasteries and gave away large tracts of land to various religious orders. While opinions regarding Dracula were mixed during his lifetime, one thing remained constant. Dracula was loyal to King Ladislas of Hungary and, upon Ladislas' death, he remained loyal to King Matthias, Janos Hunyadi's son.

Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

(Continued in the August Blade.)