

## Vlad the Impaler

The man known to history as Vlad the Impaler, also called Vlad III, Vlad Dracula, Kaziklu or Kazikli Bey, Prince Vlad III, Dracula, or Vlad Țepeș,\* was the fabled and notorious inspiration for the villainous vampire in Bram Stoker's gothic novel *Dracula*. He was born sometime between November and December of 1431 in the Citadel of Sighișoara,\* in the Principality of Wallachia, a voivodeship\* (or a principality) of Transylvania in the Kingdom of Hungary or modern-day Romania.

Vlad's father was Prince Vlad II, ruler of Wallachia, \* the bastard son of voivod\* (prince) of Mircea I the Brave of Wallachia. Vlad II's early years are not well documented but most likely was kept as a hostage, a show of good faith, in the care of the Hungarian and German courts of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund I. Vlad II was educated as a nobleman in the Hungarian court, and most likely converted from Eastern Orthodoxy to Catholicism, the standard faith of the Holy Roman Empire, while he was staying in Hungary or the German states.

Hostages were given freely as it was seen as an important aspect of medieval European society used to secure fair or mutually beneficial dealings in the courts of aristocracy. This was a way to maintain the association between noble families and build relationships. For Vlad the Impaler's grandfather, Mircea I, it permitted the Wallachian prince to gain further access to the royal courts of Hungary and the Holy Roman Empire, as well as securing a more opportunistic future for his illegitimate son Vlad II.

After Mircea's death in 1418, Vlad II was no longer required to remain in the court of Emperor Sigismund but chose instead to stay on as the emperor's page, allowing him to further his chivalric and aristocratic education. After the death of Mircea's heir and Vlad's half-brother Mihail (Michael I) in 1420, Vlad turned his focus on taking the throne of Wallachia for himself, competing with his surviving family members and the other illegitimate children of Mircea, for the crown of Wallachia.

As an illegitimate son of Mircea I, Vlad II was not directly in line for the throne of Wallachia, but he would ultimately reign as voivode twice, first from 1436 till 1442 and again from 1443 until his death in 1447. At the time of Vlad III's birth, Vlad II was assigned by the Hungarian nobles to serve at Sighișoara as the commander. His task was to defend the mountain passes from Transylvania into Wallachia from enemy raids, particularly from the Ottoman Empire, a powerful Islamic realm.

In 1431, the same year Vlad the Impaler was born, his father was inducted into the Chivalric Order of the Dragon, a military Order founded by Emperor Sigismund in 1408. The Order was responsible with protecting Christian lands from their many enemies, particularly from the Muslim Ottoman Turks to the southeast in lands of the former Byzantine Empire. Vlad II received the cognomen *Dracul*, derived from the word *drac*, or dragon, although in modern Romanian, *drac* translates to the word devil.

Vlad Dracul would have several children, three legitimate sons, Mircea II, Vlad III, and Radu the Handsome, and at least one illegitimate son, Vlad the Monk. The sons all received the sobriquet

name Dracula, meaning “son of the dragon,” after Vlad II had been inducted into the Order of the Dragon. Dracula would become a synonymous moniker for Vlad the Impaler and a title he would proudly bear throughout his life. In modern times, the name Dracula became synonymous with evil and atrocity.

Who Vlad the Impaler’s mother was is not explicitly known but many historians believe she was Vlad II’s first wife Cneajna\* (also called Eupraxia\*) of Moldavia, the eldest daughter of Prince Alexander the Good of Moldavia. The identity of his mother is still heavily debated; Vlad the Impaler could have been conceived by one of Vlad II’s mistresses, but there is no discernible way to adequately distinguish Vlad the Impaler’s mother from the myths. Regardless of who his mother really was, Vlad was regarded as a legitimate son of Vlad Dracul.

Vlad Dracula was born into a divided Europe, one broken up by religious ideology and warring factions of aristocrats battling for land, power, and political favor. Vlad’s homeland was the Principality of Wallachia of the Kingdom of Hungary, lying between the borders of Christian Europe, the remnants of the Byzantine Empire, and the Islamic Ottoman Empire. It was a diverse land carved by the Carpathian Mountains, thick and lush forests, rich grasslands, and rolling hills, guarding the northwest corridor of the Black Sea.

Political intrigue, manipulation, opinion, and alliances in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were fleeting, ever changing, and tumultuous at best. An old alliance could be broken by new acquisitions of land, a new alliance, or a marriage. An ally could become enemy over borders, an adversary could be a friend in a war against a common foe, religious issues could be the root of war, and an uneasy truce could hold off a total war in exchange for a diplomatic arrangement. Trade was balanced by the thread of a governmental ordinance, and subject to change with the whim of a ruler.

The population of the Principality of Wallachia was just as distinctive as its geography, made up of different cultures, including Transylvanians, Slovaks, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Roma, Slavs, Jews, and Turks, and various religions consisting of Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, Jewish, Islam, pagans, and Catholics. The land and its people were battle-scarred, hardened by the continual fighting, external pressures, and internal upheaval, serving as the field upon which wars were fought by the Islamic and Christian armies for the fate of Europe.

The Ottoman Turks, who had conquered much of the Middle East and Southeast Europe at the time of Vlad Dracula’s birth, had acquired most of the Byzantine Empire, giving them access to some of the wealthiest and most powerful regions on the European continent. Although it had been over a hundred years since the last Crusade to the Levant, the sting of its failure was still sharp in the minds of Catholic Europe, and the threat of the Muslim Turks on their borders were putting extraordinary pressures on the realms of Eastern and Central Europe.

If Wallachia fell to the Ottoman threat, this would potentially open the rest of Europe to a massive assault by the Islamic forces, weakening the Christian states. Upon coming to power in 1436, Vlad II found himself at a precarious crossroads, his Principality torn between the growing strength of the Islamic Ottomans and the divisive factions of the Catholic European court. Vlad Dracul was expected to side with his fellow Christians against the Turks, who had already taken much of the Orthodox lands of the Byzantine Empire.

At the age of five, Vlad Dracula began training for knighthood at Tîrogoviște,\* learning the skills expected of a boyar's son, including jousting, horsemanship, court etiquette, archery, strategy, swimming, hunting, tracking, and combat training. Vlad excelled at these activities and seemed to thrive during the intensive physical training, building the foundation for his upcoming military profession. It would serve him well in his future career as Prince of Wallachia and as a commander leading soldiers and volunteers against his many enemies.

As the second son of Vlad II, the young Vlad Dracula was raised in an aristocratic household alongside his siblings, educated as was appropriate for all young boyars\* or nobles of the period, studying reading, philosophy, writing, mathematics, the classics, and different languages under the tutelage of noblewomen, tutors, and courtiers. Vlad was most likely raised under the Eastern Orthodox faith and was also taught history, politics, and the delicate nature of Wallachia and its place in the larger scheme of matters of land, faith, and war.

Following the death of Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary Albert II on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1439, the Hungarian nobles voted Władysław\* III of Poland in as the new King of Hungary the following year. Władysław chose Hungarian boyar and military commander John Hunyadi (also known as Iancu of Hunedoara) to serve as voivode of Transylvania. Hunyadi sought to continue Hungarian influence in Wallachia and Hunyadi demanded Vlad II take part in his Crusade against the Ottoman Empire and put an end to their efforts in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Turks sought to invade Transylvania and asked the Wallachians to assist them, but Vlad II ignored the Ottomans, turning to serve alongside the Hungarians and Transylvanians. John Hunyadi, Vlad II, and their allies successfully pacified the eastern counties, pushing the Turks back and ultimately reinstating the protection of Hungary's southern border in March 1442. Vlad was promptly accused of treason by the Ottomans for helping the Hungarians and was required to prove himself to the Sultan or face recompense.

Shortly after his shared victory over the Turks, Vlad Dracul brought his sons Vlad and Radu to the court of Sultan Murad II and all of them were immediately imprisoned by the Ottomans, held until a new alliance could be arranged between Vlad II and the Turks. The Sultan demanded payment and a show his loyalty so Vlad Dracul could redeem himself in the eyes of the Turks for his efforts. He reluctantly agreed, handing over his sons to the Sultan as hostages until the debt was repaid to the Ottomans.

Vlad II returned to Wallachia to find he had been replaced with Basarab, Dracul's cousin, by John Hunyadi during his absence. Hunyadi then turned his focus on the approaching Ottoman army and defeated them in August 1442 following the Turk attempt to annex the Principality. Vlad Dracul tried to remain neutral during the period of his sons' imprisonment and hoped to see his sons released shortly after and sought to build a relationship between the Turks and the Christians of Wallachia and Hungary.

The discovery of Vlad Dracul's alliance with the Ottomans was eventually uncovered, infuriating the Hungarians who, under the command of Hunyadi, led an attack against Vlad II, forcing his eldest son Mircea to flee. With the aid of the Ottomans, Vlad II was able to overthrow

the Hungarians and retake Wallachia, but his success was short lived. The boyars overthrew him and sought to gain aid from John Hunyadi to prevent Vlad Dracul from returning.

The coup by the boyars resulted in Vlad II having to raise an army with the help of the Ottomans who had remained behind and recruit from Wallachia. Hunyadi and his forces arrived and in 1447, the Transylvanians defeated Vlad Dracul and Mircea's armies, capturing Mircea. Mircea subsequently had his eyes burned out, was tortured, and then was buried alive. Vlad Dracul returned to avenge his son but was captured and executed shortly after, most likely either beheaded or burned at the stake.

Vlad III and Radu had been left in the care of Sultan Murad II, who treated the children well despite their status as prisoners. The boys most likely witnessed the brutality the Turks could inflict on their captives and were advised to remain obedient. Vlad and Radu were, according to many historical sources, regarded as guests of the Sultan and treated well. This would, theoretically, help to quell any potential uprisings from the boys when they grew up. Vlad would prove to be an exception to the rule.

Vlad and Radu Dracula continued their studies in the Ottoman court at the Eğriğöz\* Citadel in the Anatolian Plateau, located in what is today in central Turkey. The brothers learned the Qu'ran, Persian, literature, and the Turkish language as well as the traditional nobleman education, including logic, warfare, philosophy, combat, and horseback riding. Vlad threw himself into the fighting arts, his hatred for the Turks seemed to drive his training and allowing him to hyperfocus on his goals: become sovereign of Wallachia and annihilate the Ottomans.

Despite the Ottomans' efforts to control the Wallachian princes, Vlad fiercely resisted and was then subjected to brutal punishment. Radu, conversely, embraced his experience with the Turks, converting to Islam, and later volunteering to serve as a Janissary, an exclusive, well trained, and incredibly effective infantry brigade comprised of slaves and conscripts in the Ottoman Army. Radu grew close to the Sultan's son and heir, Mehmed II, who he would go on to serve later in his life, and due to how close they became during their lives, rumors spread the two were lovers.

Radu's conversion, closeness with Mehmed II, and admiration for Ottoman culture, infuriated Vlad Dracula and fueled his hate for the Ottomans. After the death of his father and older brother at the hands of the Hungarians, Vlad Dracula now found himself to be the heir to the Wallachian voivodeship. The death of his father released Vlad and Radu from their captors, but Radu remained behind to continue his service with the Turks. Vlad swore to avenge his family, but he needed an army; the Ottomans provided.

To prevent the Hungarians from taking over Wallachia following Vlad II's death, the Turks provided Vlad an army. With the Ottoman support, Vlad was able to take power in Wallachia in 1448 at the age of 17, successfully deposing his cousin Vladislav II while Vladislav was away on Crusade against the Ottomans to the south. One of Vlad's first fabled acts as Prince was to invite boyars who may have been involved in his father and brother's death to a feast. He then had his men stab them and take them to be impaled as a show of strength. It is not known if this is true.

Vlad Dracula was only in power for a couple of months as Prince of Wallachia when he was ousted by the Hungarians and Transylvanians as well as his cousin Vladislav when he had returned from Crusade and retaken the Wallachian throne. Vlad was forced into exile, settling in neighboring Moldova to avoid further problems at home. While in Moldova, Vlad spent time in the company of his uncle Prince Bogdan II and his cousin Prince Stephen until Bogdan was assassinated in October of 1451 by Petru Aron, Bogdan's brother.

Vlad and Stephen fled to Transylvania through the Borgo Pass where the two men eventually fell into the care of John Hunyadi and Prince of Hungary Ladislaus. Hunyadi had previously suffered some significant losses in Kosovo and Varna over the course of the past couple years, costing him influence, power, and prestige. He had lost two of his titles, viceroy of Hungary and governor of Transylvania, and was facing further distrust from the Hungarian Diet, or assembly. He maintained several estates throughout his domain and was still held a mighty military force.

Hunyadi showed Vlad mercy, knowing Dracula's hatred could be useful and would serve better to be targeted at the Turks. Vlad's intimate knowledge of the Ottoman Empire would make him a significant and invaluable advisor for Hunyadi. The shared hatred for the Turks and the growing disillusionment between Hunyadi and Vladislav may have also been a contributing factor of the truce. Hunyadi, who was of course responsible for Vlad's father and brother's deaths, needed allies, and Vlad needed protection; one could provide the other exactly what they required.

It is not completely known if the peace was the case or a mere mutual understanding of Vlad and Hunyadi's need for each other. Mehmed II ascended the Ottoman throne in January of 1451, and Vladislav II sent congratulations to the new sultan and restarted the two-sided alliance between Wallachia and its neighbors: extending its hospitality and service to both the enemy realms of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. This arrangement both protected and threatened Wallachia but gave Hunyadi an opportunity to extend to Vlad Dracula: help him fight the Turks.

Vlad was offered a military posting under Hunyadi and granted a place in his court. Hunyadi brought the young man with him to the Hungarian Diet and continued to instruct him in the arts of war and further his nobleman's education. Dracula swore fealty to Ladislaus when he was coronated King of Hungary and Hunyadi was able to make peace with his former enemy Count Ulrich Cilli, a supporter of the new Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III and relative of the previous Emperor Sigismund.

Vladislav II, following his removal of Vlad, had been able to resume his control as Prince of Wallachia and came into conflict with John Hunyadi when Hunyadi did not take part in aiding Vladislav in the Battle of Kosovo in 1448, giving Hunyadi the ability to take back a large territory in Transylvania, including Brasov County. Vladislav, in turn, put a trade embargo against the region, which was quickly lifted after negotiations. Vladislav led an assault on the fortress of Făgăraș, burning villages to retake lands in Hunyadi's territory.

On May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1453, under the command of Sultan Mehmed II, the Ottoman Empire conquered the city of Constantinople, ultimately destroying the remnants of the Byzantine Empire and establishing the Ottoman Empire's capital there. The Turks wielded a mighty army that went unrivaled across the continent, and further threatened the European lands with their strength.

John Hunyadi was advised that because of Vladislav's relationship with the Sultan, the next assault on European lands would fall on Belgrade, outside of the grasp of the Transylvanians.

The Moldavian Prince Petru Anton had sworn allegiance to Sultan Mehmed II, guaranteeing the Ottomans protection during their assault, which targeted the fortress in what is now modern-day Serbia. The fortress was situated between the Sava and Danube rivers, giving access to the southwestern borders of Wallachia and the southern border of Hungary. Hunyadi's brother-in-law, Mihály Szilágy, was in command of the fortress and held only a small force of around 5,000 to 6,000 men and were not being reinforced by the local population.

If Belgrade fell, this would open the Kingdom of Hungary to further assaults by the Turks, especially their navies could use the Danube to sail into the city of Vienna or Buda. In the winter of 1455-1456, the Ottoman army was raised near the fortress of Adrianople, or what is today Edirne in the northwest Turkey. Saint John of Capistrano, a Minorite Franciscan monk who would later be canonized by the Catholic Church, spoke at Győr, Hungary and inspired others to action against the Ottomans, exclaiming, "God wills it that we chase the Turks out of Europe."

Such words had rallied millions to Crusade over the course of the past four centuries, and Hunyadi, Vlad, and Hunyadi's son Laszlo had been in attendance, moved by the call for a new Crusade against the impending invasion of the Ottomans. Vlad was instructed to stay in Transylvania and given permission to launch attacks against Vladislav II, which would potentially alleviate pressures on Belgrade and pull Ottoman focus away from their objectives in Belgrade. Vlad was more than happy to oblige.

Vlad led several excursions throughout Wallachia and Transylvania to harass and overwhelm Vladislav, who found himself combatting both the standing armies and recuperating from the small skirmishes. In one famous story, Vlad the Impaler met Vladislav on the field of battle, their armies prepared to battle one another when Vlad rode across the field and challenged his foe to a hand-to-hand fight. Vladislav agreed and concluded with Dracula killing Vladislav II. By August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1456, Vlad had regained the throne of Wallachia and became the Prince of Wallachia.

Upon taking up the crown of Wallachia, Vlad took the title "Prince Vlad, son of Vlad the Great, sovereign, and ruler of Ungro-Wallachia and the Duchies of Amlaş and Făgăraş." The Duchies had been granted to him by King Ladislaus for returning to his favor. He worked with local mayors in Transylvania and Hunyadi's son Laszlo, new commander of Belgrade, to establish a relationship with them and protect his borders. To the North, he tried to incite the boyars to revolt against his Moldavian enemy, Petru Aron.

In 1457, Vlad's cousin Stephen was successfully installed to the Moldavian throne thanks to the dissidence Vlad had aroused with the boyars and a troop of around 6,000 Wallachians. Vlad began to form his identity as both a violent and strict leader as well as a strong commander with a mind for social and economic preservation of the Wallachian state. He bolstered the military and the agrarian market and rebuilt villages to allow for local merchants to thrive, restricting foreign trade to help the local market thrive and grow.

The Ottomans sent emissaries to Vlad Dracula to try and acquire tribute and a free passage through Wallachia as a show of loyalty to the Turks, but Vlad refused to travel to Constantinople to pay homage to the Sultan. It was around this time he rebuilt some of the walls around his cities and fortifications and also began to embrace the practice of impalement as punishment at this time, a common practice used to execute prisoners and traitors of the Ottoman Empire, something he must have witnessed as a young hostage.

The first targets of Vlad's wrath were those responsible for the death of his brother and father, particularly the boyars in Wallachia and Transylvania. He seized their assets, lands, and other commodities, which he then redistributed to his allies, and captured his enemies and brought into his custody. The boyars were then executed, mainly through the process of impalement, and their bodies were propped up around his realm as a warning. His methods were both a message for his foes and a means to eliminate those who had dared to challenge him.

To impale someone "correctly," it requires a rather macabre finesse, a cruel streak, and some rudimentary knowledge of human anatomy. The torturous death of impalement involves penetrating the flesh with an object and pushing it so the inserted edge would exit through the opposing side of the body. There were two ways that were used to impale someone: through the chest, either directly from the back so it would come out of the front, or through the groin, and allowing gravity to do the rest of the work.

Vlad made the practice an art form, earning his cognomen as he is thought to have impaled well over a hundred thousand people during his reigns of Wallachia. Vlad seemed to favor the more agonizing process, prolonging the death of his victims. He had the victim to lie on the ground with either leg tied to a horse or held by guards, and had a long, dulled stake laid between the victim's legs, aimed at their anal or vaginal cavity, which would be cut to allow for easier access. The stake would then be slowly pushed forward or hammered into the body from the far end.

The lack of sharpness of the stake allowed for a longer period of suffering, and when it had reached a significant place in the body, usually around the mid abdomen, Vlad would have the stake lifted so the individual's weight would push the stake further and further into the body slowly but surely. If done "right," the tip of the stake would exit through the front of the chest cavity, the throat, out the back between the shoulder blades, or the mouth. It could take hours to days for a victim to die if the impalement was done "properly."

Other methods of torturous death Vlad had carried out included allowing animals to feast on them, exposing them to the elements, burning someone alive, cutting off body parts such as fingers, toes, limbs, eyes, ears, noses, tongues, breasts, nipples, penises, etc., skinning them alive, and boiling. It was said he would sometimes feast while people were impaled or tortured, reveling while people died around him. His cruelty seemed to know no bounds and would establish him into the history books as one of the most violent and vicious men in history.

Women were subjected to some of the worst abuses at the hands of the prince, particularly with respect towards the sexual fidelity of a woman. If a woman was discovered to have had an affair while married or had been promiscuous while unmarried or widowed, Vlad treated them to especially severe punishments, including breast and vaginal mutilation and impalement on a hot

poker while their lovers watched in horror. The paramours would often be made to be involved in the torture, forced to consume the mutilated body parts while their partner bled out.

Vlad's violence was without bounds, especially if it was a foreigner. There were populations of Saxons, or Germans from the southeastern region bordering on what is today Poland and Czech Republic, who settled throughout the Wallachian Principality and served as a separate community within the realm. In one notable story, Vlad learned a Wallachian merchant in the city of Brasov had his goods taken by Saxon merchants who had refused to pay him. Vlad had all the Saxons in Brasov rounded up and impaled for their treachery towards a Wallachian citizen.

Legends surround Vlad Dracula pertaining to his cruelties but also about how much his own people feared his wrath. One famous story regarded the "golden cup," a magnificent chalice that was put into the town square of his capital, Tîrogoviște (also written as Targoviste), in plain view of all who passed by. The statute of the golden goblet was simple: anyone could use it to drink from, but the cup could never leave the confines of the square. At the time, there were around 60,000 individuals living in Tîrogoviște, the cup was never taken during Vlad's reign.

Vlad was also faced with a large population of poor and had to come up with a means of ending poverty in Wallachia. To do so, Vlad supposedly invited hundreds of the impoverished from Tîrogoviște to a massive feast where they reveled in the generosity of their Prince and ate and drank to their hearts' content. Vlad responded by locking the doors of the hall and setting it ablaze. No one escaped. These stories became common place and were sensationalized by the Turks, Saxons, Hungarians, Transylvanians, and other enemies made over the course of his life.

While his subjects became all too familiar with his punishments, Vlad the Impaler also showed a deep devotion to military and political deeds, such as helping his cousin Prince Stephen take the Moldavian throne in 1457, providing about 6,000 cavalymen to fight against Petru Aron, Stephen's uncle and father's assassin. Stephen, in return, helped Vlad combat the continual raids and attacks led by the Ottomans, a response to the new Crusade declared by Pope Pius II in January 1460 and commanded by John Hunyadi's son, Matthias Corvinus.

Vlad Dracula joined the effort, allying himself with Corvinus to combat the Ottomans. Mehmed II took the last independent city in Serbia, Smederevo in a violent assault that resulted in the capture of Vlad's ally, Hungarian general Mihály Szilágyi, who was sawed in half, and torturous executions of his men. The Sultan then took several cities in Greece and threatened to return to Wallachia unless tribute, called *jizya*, \* was paid to him. Envoys were sent to Vlad's court to collect both the money and some men for their Janissary forces.

Vlad Dracula decided to make it clear regarding his position towards any relationship with the Turks. When the emissaries arrived, he asked them to take off their turbans, part of the traditional wardrobe of an Ottoman, because removing the hat in the presence of a Wallachian prince, especially in his court, was customary and expected. The diplomats refused as it was part of their attire. Vlad informed them he would not give the Sultan anything, would not negotiate, and promptly had the representatives' turbans nailed to their heads.



The Turks began recruiting troops as they crossed the Danube and led assaults against the Transylvanians, which Vlad promptly responded by impaling any prisoners his men took in the conflict. In November 1461, he wrote to the Sultan explaining he was unable pay tribute due to financial issues, noting he would be willing to go to Constantinople and negotiate a deal. The Sultan heard of the alliance with Corvinus and tried to lure Vlad into a trap and capture him to bring him to Constantinople in chains instead.

Vlad learned of the plot, and he set his own trap for the Sultan's bey, or leader or chieftain, of Nicopolis, Hamza Pasha, and his men in a narrow pass north of Giurgiu, using gunpowder to easily overpower the Turks. The bey and his men were quickly surrounded and defeated by the Transylvanian army. Vlad the Impaler then had most of the Turkish troops killed, impaling them. He had Pasha skewered on a stake that would stand taller than his men to be able to signify his rank and place over his men. He had the staked bodies placed in a field, forming a "forest."

Because of his fluency in Turkish, Vlad was able to then infiltrate the Ottoman territories on the other side of the Danube, leading his forces through the Turkish occupied regions of Bulgaria in between the Black Sea and Serbia. He would demand the gates to open for him and once they did, he would lead an army into the fray. Vlad the Impaler executed every soldier and Ottoman sympathizer, traveling over 800 kilometers over the course of two weeks. They killed well over 23,000 Turks and allies, impaling them, and leaving their bodies on the stakes for others to see.

The Sultan sent his men to destroy the port of Brăila in Wallachia, but the 18,000-man force he had sent under his vizier Mahmud were defeated by Vlad and his troops, leaving only around 8,000 Ottomans alive. These victories solidified Vlad's place in Europe as a successful Crusader, a fearsome defender of Europe, a victorious slayer of Turks, and defender of the Christians (both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox). He was celebrated and revered by the Pope and gained a reputation that was revered by the Christians but feared by the Muslims.

The Sultan grew infuriated at the news of Vlad the Impaler's success and turned to deal with the prince himself and both men prepared an army for the upcoming conflict. He raised an army of between 150,000 to 300,000 men, comprised of the sultan's bodyguards, engineers, women (for comfort), priests, astrologers, riflemen, pikemen, cannons, slave soldiers, archers, infantry, Janissaries, and cavalry. Dracula's brother Radu served as a part of the mustered Turkish forces, commanding around 4,000 cavalymen.

Vlad rallied a significantly smaller force, especially since Corvinus did not aid him despite Dracula's request for assistance. Men, women, and children (12-18) were recruited, including Roma slaves and farmers, building an army of around 30,000 poorly trained, armed, and armored Transylvanians. Even though he was vastly outnumbered, Vlad the Impaler and his force was able to kill around 300 Janissaries after the Sultan left Vidin and knew the only way to win was to do unthinkable and vicious acts.

The Prince of Wallachia ordered the evacuation of the neighboring territories, removing the people and animals from the land as the Sultan's army moved forward. He poisoned the rivers and lakes with bodies of animals and humans and burned farmland to destroy crops in a scorched earth tactic. This would leave nothing for the advancing Turks and leave barren fields. Knowing

his army would be no match to the Ottomans, Vlad resorted to guerrilla tactics and night raids to harass the Ottomans.

Vlad ordered men, women, and children who were suffering from contagious diseases, such as the Bubonic Plague, leprosy, tuberculosis, or cholera, travel to the Ottoman camps or to stay in villages that would be in the path of the invaders. This would potentially infect the area and help contaminate the Turks with the illnesses. Vlad essentially used germ warfare to slow down the Turk forces. These efforts were clandestine and incredibly effective to cause problems for the Ottomans in their attempts to take Wallachia.

The capital of Wallachia, the city of Târgoviște, home to Vlad Dracula's Poienari Castle, were met with the advancing Turkish troops, who, previously, had been unable to take either the island of Snagov or the fortress in Bucharest. Vlad ordered his 24,000 men to take refuge in mountains near the capital as the Ottomans reached the city limits. Knowing that he and his men would either die at the hands of the Sultan's army or from starvation should they hunker down in the mountains, Vlad the Impaler implemented his education and past experiences to escape.

Vlad disguised himself once more and snuck into the Ottoman army camp, passing by unnoticed thanks to his mastery of the Turkish language, and made his way through the tents. He discovered the Sultan had ordered his men to remain in their tents to keep them from losing their nerve should they fall under attack. He uncovered the location of the Sultan's tent and then slipped back to his camp in the mountains to plan an attack on Mehmed's men and assassinate the Sultan in his tent later.

On the evening of June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1462, the Prince of Wallachia split his men into two divisions and had them set to attack from either side of the camp, using their Turkish prisoners to help them infiltrate the camp's outskirts. The first wave hit and rolled through the camp; the opposite side did not act. The Wallachians slayed around 15,000 Ottomans, losing only around 5,000 men in the process. Vlad Dracula inadvertently entered the wrong tent; had he been in the right one, he may have been able to carry out his original plan to kill the Turkish king.

As dawn arose, Vlad the Impaler and his men retreated to the mountains and escaped without any pursuers. The Ottomans, the Sultan included, were disheartened, and wanted to head back towards the Ottoman lands, but Mehmed sought to continue his mission. The Turks arrived at the open gates of Târgoviște, left abandoned and open to the Ottomans and decorated with the bodies of Hamza Pasha and his 20,000-man army. The Turks were both shocked and horrified by the scene. The Sultan ordered his men back, leaving Radu with his Janissaries on June 22<sup>nd</sup> behind.

There is a myth that Dracula's first wife, a woman who has never been officially named and has been left to the legends of Romanian history about her identity, saw the arrival of Radu and his men surround the base of the castle, perched up high on the cliffs overlooking Târgoviște and the Argeș River. Despite having one son, Mihnea the Bad, with Vlad the Impaler, specifics remain unknown. At the sight of the Ottomans, Vlad's wife is said to have remarked she would rather feed the fish than be taken by the Turks, throwing herself to her death to the waters below.

Radu established himself as the new ruler of Wallachia while the Ottomans moved on to burn the city of Brăila. Radu Dracula led several attacks throughout Wallachia while his brother and the remnants of Vlad's forces hurried to the town of Chilia, which had been besieged by Stephen III of Moldavia. Vlad and his army successfully repelled the Stephen and his forces, including injuring Stephen in the process, and Vlad fled to Hungary to seek aid from Matthias Corvinus to plan future battles and strategies.

By autumn of 1462, Vlad the Impaler assumed he had successfully acquired Hungarian support to launch to attack against the Ottomans, but Corvinus had planned a trap at Castle King's Rock, capturing Vlad just as he crossed into Wallachia. Why Corvinus betrayed Vlad is not explicitly known, although it has been suggested Corvinus hoped to be named Holy Roman Emperor and it would be in his best favor and interest to end any aggression with the Ottomans. Corvinus would not be named Holy Roman Emperor but in 1464, he was dubbed King Matthias of Hungary.

Due to the many discrepancies between Vlad and his political enemies in Hungary, Dracula dealt with accusations throughout his life for being affiliated with the Turks, despite his vehement hatred and extreme violence that he showed towards the Ottomans. Approximately between 1462 and 1466, Vlad was kept imprisoned first in Orateia Fortress (located in Podu Dâmboviței today) then in Visegrád. Over the course of this period, King Matthias and Vlad's relationship grew more favorable and admirable.

Vlad Dracula converted to Catholicism and married Ilona Szilágyi, cousin to King Matthias, and was released around this time in about 1466. Vlad and Ilona were gifted a home in Pest and had two sons, Vlad IV Tepelus and Mircea. Vlad Dracula sought to retake Wallachia for himself, reaching out to Stephen V Bathory, a prominent military commander, future voivode of Transylvania, Hungarian judge royal, and ally of King Matthias, to help with the task, building an army comprising of Moldavian, Hungarian, Transylvanian, and Wallachians.

The mission for Stephen and Vlad were simple: take the Wallachia from Prince Basarab; he had managed to take the throne from Radu the Handsome and repel his forces twice after his ascension before Radu passed away suddenly in 1475, leaving Vlad to be the only Dracula to seek the position. Vlad and Stephen's forces arrived and met no resistance, Basarab's army fled and allowed Dracula to resume his rule over Wallachia. Stephen returned to Transylvania, leaving Vlad alone to defend his land from any threat.

Not long after his reestablishment on the Wallachian throne on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1476, Vlad's lands were besieged by a large Ottoman Turks once again. Vlad found he had only around 4,000 men to fight the Ottomans who relatively easily crushed Vlad the Impaler's men. The exact date and details of his death are not known, though it was known he was dead by January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1477. He could have died on the field of battle against the Turks or betrayed by his Wallachian boyar enemies and murdered or was injured in a hunting accident that led to his death.

There are several myths regarding Vlad Dracula's death have helped fuel the mythos of Dracula throughout the world. A few believe Dracula was not killed during this period, instead being captured and ransomed, then moved to Italy and remained there until his death and was buried at Santa Maria Nova Church in Naples. This theory has frequently been disputed and contested by

other archaeologists, historians, and researchers who found the evidence supporting this notion lacking and unsubstantiated.

The most commonly accepted story about his death says that Vlad the Impaler met his end at the hands of the Ottomans, either being captured by the Turks, beheaded, had his head preserved in honey, and then put on a pike to be brought to Istanbul as evidence of his death, or he was impaled in the same manner he had become infamous for doing to the Ottomans and his own people. Either way, the lore of his reign and life were the stuff of legend and became intermixed with the truth of his life and being.

It is not known exactly where Dracula was buried, although there were rumors that he was interred callously by his adversary Basarab the Elder at the Comana monastery, which Vlad had established and constructed. In 1931, archaeologists found a casket, draped with a purple and gold veil, at the Snagov monastery in Bucharest. Aside from a skeleton, the coffin contained pieces of a silk brocade, a ring like one worn by members of the Order of the Dragon, and a crown reminiscent of an oil painting of Vlad the Impaler. Was this Vlad himself?

The contents of the grave of Snagov were taken to the History Museum of Bucharest to be studied but all the artifacts and bones promptly vanished, adding further to the mystery and legend of Vlad Dracula and the whereabouts of his corpse. Poenari Castle stands in ruins today on Mount Cetatea near Arefu, Romania, having been abandoned about a few years after Dracula's death. The ruins have been a popular tourist attraction for centuries and are thought to be haunted.

Today, Vlad the Impaler has a dual persona, being perceived very differently according to region and who is telling the story. In modern day Romania, Vlad Dracula has a reputation for protecting the borders and lands from the Ottoman Turks. To many Romanians, Vlad's memory, while reflective of the bloody late medieval period, has been thought to be of a great liberator and guardian of the Romanian lands instead of a psychopathic bloodthirsty murderer as his reputation was made by the Turks and his European enemies.

Vlad Dracula is frequently considered to be a prime example of human embodiment of evil, his violence and cruelties towards his own people and enemies became synonymous with his name. His most famous portrayal came in the form of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic novel told from the letters of different characters regarding their interactions with a strange man, Count Dracula, who is later revealed to be a vampire. Stoker took its inspiration from Vlad's name but mainly from the mythology of Romania and the vampiric lore.

Vlad the Impaler's name, in association with Bram Stoker's novel, helped to feed a great interest into the life of the man in the last century. Vlad gained the reputation as a vampire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sparking questions and interest into the life of the real Dracula, seeking to uncover the truth about him. To many, he was seen as a real-life vampire, driven by bloodlust and hunger for death. Vlad the Impaler was, in many ways, a glamorized hero to the Romanians and a great and terrible monster to the Turks, which was incredibly like the Dracula of stage and film.

While there is a lot about Vlad the Impaler that is not expressly known even today, due to many of the facts lacking evidence, exaggeration, and ambiguity found in contemporary sources, it has only promoted the mystery of the man himself. His name, Dracula, embodies the ideals of a terrible monster, made famous throughout the pages of literature, theater, and movies. Today, Vlad the Impaler has become known as one in the same as his vampiric interpretation, and while it is his most famous portrayal, it is a pale shadow in comparison to the deeds of the real man.

What do you think of Vlad the Impaler? Was he a grim hero and protector of Romania or a bloodthirsty madman that exemplified the worst parts of humanity? Let us know your thoughts in the comments below. Thanks for watching.

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