

= Battle of Vaslui =

The Battle of Vaslui (also referred to as the Battle of Podul Înalt or the Battle of Racova) was fought on January 10 , 1475 , between Stephen III of Moldavia and the Ottoman governor of Rumelia , Hadım Suleiman Pasha . The battle took place at Podul Înalt (the High Bridge) , near the town of Vaslui , in Moldavia (now part of eastern Romania) . The Ottoman troops numbered up to 120 000 , facing about 40 000 Moldavian troops , plus smaller numbers of allied and mercenary troops .

Stephen inflicted a decisive defeat on the Ottomans , described as " the greatest ever secured by the Cross against Islam , " with casualties , according to Venetian and Polish records , reaching beyond 40 000 on the Ottoman side . Mara Brankovic (Mara Hatun) , the former younger wife of Murad II , told a Venetian envoy that the invasion had been worst ever defeat for the Ottomans . Stephen was later awarded the title " Athleta Christi " (Champion of Christ) by Pope Sixtus IV , who referred to him as " verus christianae fidei athleta " (" the true defender of the Christian faith ") .

According to the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz , Stephen did not celebrate his victory ; instead , he fasted for forty days on bread and water and forbade anyone to attribute the victory to him , insisting that credit be given only to the Lord .

= = Background = =

The conflict between Stephen and Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II worsened when both laid their claims to the historical region of Bessarabia , now known under the name of Budjak . The region had belonged to Wallachia , but later succumbed to Moldavian influence under Petru I of Moldavia and was possibly annexed to Moldavia in the late 14th century by Roman I of Moldavia . Under Alexandru cel Bun , it had become an integral part of Moldavia and was successfully defended in 1420 against the first Ottoman attempt to capture castle Chilia . The ports of Chilia and Akkerman (Romanian : Cetatea Albă) were essential for Moldavian commerce . The old trade route from Caffa , Akkerman , and Chilia passed through Suceava in Moldavia and Lwow in Poland (now in Ukraine) .

Both Poland and Hungary had previously made attempts to control the region , but had failed ; and for the Ottomans , " the control of these two ports and of Caffa was as much an economic as a political necessity , " as it would also give them a better grip on Moldavia and serve as a valuable strategic point from which naval attacks could be launched against the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania . This is confirmed by a German chronicle which explains that Mehmet wanted to turn Moldavia into " some kind of fortress , " and from there , to launch attacks against Poland and Hungary . The Ottomans also feared the strategic position of Moldavia , from whence it would only take 15 to 20 days to reach Constantinople .

In 1448 , Petru II of Moldavia awarded Chilia to John Hunyadi , the governor of Transylvania ; and in effect , it gave Hungary control of the strategic area on the Danube , with access to the Black Sea . With the assassination of Bogdan II of Moldavia in 1451 by his brother Petru Aron , the country fell into civil war , as two pretenders fought for the throne : Aron and Alexandrel . Bogdan 's son , Stephen , fled Moldavia together with his cousin , Vlad Dracula , who had sought protection at the Moldavian court to Transylvania , at the court of Hunyadi . Even though Hungary had made peace with the Turks in 1451 , Hunyadi wanted to transform Wallachia and Moldavia into a barrier that would protect the kingdom from Ottoman expansion . In the fall of 1453 , after the Ottoman capture of Constantinople , Moldavia received an ultimatum to start paying tribute to the Porte ; two years later , on October 5 , 1455 , Aron sent the first Moldavian tribute to the Porte : a payment of 2 000 ducats . With both Wallachia and Moldavia conducting a pro Ottoman policy , the plan to install Vlad Țepeș as prince of Wallachia began to take shape . Sometime between April to July 1456 , with the support of a few Hungarian troops and Wallachian boyars , Prince Vladislav II was dethroned and slain , as Vlad Țepeș took possession of the Wallachian throne ; and as such , Chilia became a shared Wallachian and Hungarian possession . In April 1457 , Vlad Țepeș supported Stephen with 6 000 horsemen , which the latter used to invade Moldavia and occupy the

Moldavian throne , ending the civil war as Aron fled to Poland . The new prince continued sending the tribute that his uncle and Mehmed had agreed upon , and in such way , avoided any premature confrontation with his enemy . His first priority was to strengthen the country and to retrieve its lost territory . Because Aron resided in Poland , Stephen made a few incursions in southern Poland . The hostilities ended on April 4 , 1459 , when in a new treaty between the two countries , Moldavia accepted vassalage and Poland returned Hotin back to Moldavia ; the latter also assumed the obligation to support Moldavia in retrieving Chilia and Cetatea Albă . It was also in the interest of Poland to have the area belonging to Moldavia , as it would increase their commerce in the region . On March 2 , 1462 , in a renewed treaty between the two countries , it was agreed that no Moldavian territory should remain under foreign rulership , and if such territory was under foreign rulership , that territory should be regained . Later that year , it is believed that Stephen asked Vlad to return Chilia back to Moldavia ? a demand which was most likely refused .

On June 22 , when Vlad was fighting Mehmed , Stephen allied himself with the Sultan and with some Turkish assistance , he launched an attack on Chilia . The fortress , defended by tall stone walls and 12 cannons , was in the middle of the 15th century the strongest fortification located in the Danube area . The Wallachians rushed to the scene with 7 @, @ 000 men , and together with the Hungarian garrison battled the Moldavians and the Turks for eight days . They managed to defend the town , while wounding Stephen in his foot with a shrapnel . In 1465 , while Vlad was imprisoned in Hungary , Stephen again advanced towards Chilia with a large force and siege weapons ; but instead of besieging the fortress , he showed the garrison ? who favoured the Polish King ? a letter in which the King required them to surrender the fortress . This they did , and Stephen entered the fortress where he found " its two captains , rather tipsy , for they have been to a wedding . " Mehmed was furious about the news and claimed Chilia for being a part of Wallachia ? which now was a vassal to the Porte ? and demanded Stephen to give it over to him . The latter refused , however , and recruited an army , forcing Mehmed ? who was not yet ready to wage war ? to accept the situation , if only for the time being . The Moldavian prince , realizing that a future war with Mehmed could not be avoided , tried to gain time by increasing his tribute to the Porte by 50 percent (to 3 @, @ 000 ducats) ; and also sent an envoy to Constantinople with gifts for the sultan . In 1467 , Matthias Corvinus of Hungary launched an expedition against Moldavia in order to punish Stephen for annexing the region . The invasion ended in a disaster for the Hungarians as they suffered a bitter defeat at the Battle of Baia , where Corvinus was thrice wounded by arrows and had to be ? carried from the battlefield on a stretcher , to avoid him falling into the hands of the enemy . ?

In order to secure his southern frontier from Ottoman threats , Stephen wanted to liberate Wallachia ? where the hostile Radu the Handsome , the halfbrother of Vlad ?epe? ruled ? from Ottoman dominion . In 1470 , he invaded the country and burned down the town of Br?ila and in 1471 , Stephen and Radu confronted each other in Moldavia , where the latter was defeated . Meanwhile , Genoa , which possessed several colonies in the Crimea , began to worry about Stephen 's growing influence in the region ; and ordered her colonies to do whatever was needed to revenge past mischief from which allegedly , the Genovese had suffered . The colonies in turn pursued the Tatars to attack Moldavia . Later that year , the Tatars invaded the country from the north , causing great damage to the land and enslaving many . Stephen replied by invading Tatar territory with Polish assistance . In 1472 , Uzun Hassan of Ak Koyunlu invaded the Ottoman Empire from the east , causing a great crisis to the empire . He was defeated the following year , but this unexpected event , as it is explained in a contemporary source , encouraged Venice and Hungary to renew their war on the Ottomans , and Moldavia to free herself from any Ottoman influence . In 1473 , Stephen stopped paying the annual tribute to the Porte and as a reaction to this , an Italian letter , dated from 1473 to Bartolomeo Scala , secretary of the Republic of Florence , reveals that Mehmed had left Constantinople on April 13 and was planning to invade Moldavia from land and sea . Stephen still hoped to make peace with Radu and asked the Polish king to work as mediator . The peace attempts failed and the conflict intensified with three leaders challenging each other for the Wallachian throne : Radu , who was supported by Mehmed ; the seemingly loyal Basarab Laiot? , who at first was supported by Stephen ; and Basarab ?epelu? cel Tân?r ? who would gain the support of Stephen after Laiot? 's betrayal . A series of " absurd " clashes followed , starting with

another confrontation between Stephen and Radu on November 18 ? 20 , at Râmnicu S?rat , where the latter suffered his second defeat at the hands of the Moldavian " warlike " prince . A few days later , on November 28 , the Ottomans intervened with an army consisting of 12 @,@ 000 Ottomans and 6 @,@ 000 Wallachians , but " they incurred heavy losses and fled across the Danube . " After capturing the castle of Bucharest , Stephen put Laiot? on the throne , but on December 31 , a new Ottoman army of 17 @,@ 000 set camp around river Bârlad , laying waste to the countryside , and intimidating the new prince into abandoning his Wallachian throne and fleeing to Moldavia . In the spring of 1474 , Laiot? took the Wallachian throne for the second time ; and in June , he made the decision to betray his protégé by submitting to Mehmet . Stephen then invested his support into a new candidate , named ?epelu? (little spear) , but his reign was even shorter , as it only lasted a few weeks after being defeated by Laiot? in battle on October 5 . Two weeks later , Stephen returned to Wallachia and forced Laiot? to flee . Mehmed , tired of what transpired in Wallachia , gave Stephen an ultimatum to forfeit Chilia to the Porte , to abolish his aggressive policy in Wallachia , and to come to Constantinople with his delayed homage . The Prince refused and in November 1474 , he wrote to the Pope to warn him of further Ottoman expansion , and to ask him for support .

= = Preparations for war = =

= = = Ottomans = = =

Mehmed ordered his general , Suleiman Pasha , to end the siege of Venetian @-@ controlled Shkodër (now in Albania) , to assemble his troops in Sofia , and from there to advance with additional troops towards Moldavia . For these already exhausted Ottoman troops , who had besieged the city from May 17 to August 15 , the transit from Shkodër to Moldavia was a month 's journey through bad weather and difficult terrain . According to D?ugosz , Suleiman was also ordered that after inflicting defeat on Stephen , he was to advance towards Poland , set camp for the winter , then invade Hungary in spring , and unite his forces with the army of the Sultan . The Ottoman army consisted of Janissaries and heavy infantry , which were supported by the heavy cavalry sipahis and by the light cavalry (akinci) , who would scout ahead . There were also Tatar cavalry and other troops (such as the Timariots) from vassal states . Twenty thousand Bulgarian peasants were also included in the army ; their main tasks were to clear the way for the rest of the army by building bridges over waters and removing snow from the roads , and to drive supply wagons . In total , the Ottoman cavalry numbered 30 @,@ 000 . In September 1474 , the Ottoman army gathered in Sofia , and from there , Suleiman marched towards Moldavia by crossing the frozen Danube on foot . His first stop was Wallachia , which he entered via Vidin and Nicopolis . His army rested in Wallachia for two weeks , and was later met by a Wallachian contingent of 17 @,@ 000 under Basarab Laiot? , who had changed sides to join the Ottomans .

= = = Moldavians = = =

Stephen was hoping to gain support from the West , and more specifically from the Pope . However , the help that he received was modest in numbers . The Hungarian Kingdom sent 1 @,@ 800 Hungarians , while Poland sent 2 @,@ 000 horsemen . Stephen recruited 5 @,@ 000 Székely soldiers . The Moldavian army consisted of twenty cannon ; light cavalry (C?l?ra?i) ; elite , heavy cavalry ? named Viteji , Curteni , and Boyars ? and professional foot soldiers . The army reached a strength of up to 40 @,@ 000 , of whom 10 @,@ 000 to 15 @,@ 000 comprised the standing army . The remainder consisted of 30 @,@ 000 peasants armed with maces , bows , and other home @-@ made weapons . They were recruited into Oastea Mare (the Great Army) , into which all able @-@ bodied free men over the age of 14 were conscripted .

= = Battle = =

The invading army entered Moldavia in December 1474 . In order to fatigue the Ottomans , Stephen had instituted a policy of scorched earth and poisoned waters . Troops who specialised in setting ambushes harassed the advancing Ottomans . The population and livestock were evacuated to the north of the country into the mountains .

Ottoman scouts reported to Suleiman that there were untouched villages near Vaslui , and the Ottomans headed for that region . The winter made it difficult to set camp , which forced the Ottomans to move quickly and head for the Moldavian capital , Suceava . In order to reach Vaslui , where the Moldavian army had its main camp , they needed to cross Podul Înalt over the Bârlad River . The bridge was made of wood and not suitable for heavy transportation of troops . Stephen chose that area for the battle ? the same location where his father , Bogdan II , had defeated the Poles in 1450 ; and where he , at an age of 17 , had fought side @-@ by @-@ side with Vlad ' the Impaler ' . The area was ideal for the defenders : the valley was a semi @-@ oval surrounded on all sides by hills covered by forest . Inside the valley , the terrain was marshy , which restricted troop movement . Suleiman had full confidence in his troops and made few efforts to scout the area . On January 10 , on a dark and misty Tuesday morning , the battle began . The weather was frigid , and a dense fog limited vision . The Ottoman troops were exhausted , and the torrent made them look like " plucked chickens . " Stephen fortified the bridge , while setting and aiming his cannons at the structure . Peasants and archers were hidden in the forest , together with their Prince and his boyar cavalry .

The Moldavians made the first move by sending musicians to the middle of the valley . The sound of drums and bugles made Suleiman think that the entire Moldavian army awaited him there . Instead , the centre of the valley held the Székely forces and the Moldavian professional army , which were ordered to make a slow retreat when they encountered the enemy . Suleiman ordered his troops to advance and , when they made enough progress , the Moldavian artillery started to fire , followed by archers and handgunners firing from three different directions . The archers could not see the enemy for the fog , and , instead , had to follow the noise of their footsteps . The Moldavian light cavalry then helped to lure the Ottoman troops into the valley by making hit @-@ and @-@ run attacks . Ottoman cavalry tried to cross the wooden bridge , causing it to collapse . Those Ottoman soldiers who had managed to survive the attacks from the artillery and the archers , and who did not get caught in the marshes , had to confront the Moldavian army , together with the Székely soldiers further up the valley . The 5 @,@ 000 Székely soldiers were successful in repelling the 7 @,@ 000 Ottoman infantrymen . Thereafter , they made a slow retreat , as instructed by Stephen , but were later routed by the Ottoman sipahi , while the remaining Ottoman infantry attacked the Moldavian flanks .

Suleiman tried to reinforce his offensive , not knowing what had happened in the valley , but then Stephen , with the full support of his boyars , ordered a major attack . All his troops , together with peasants and heavy cavalry , attacked from all sides . Simultaneously , Moldavian buglers concealed behind Ottoman lines started to sound their bugles , and in great confusion some Ottoman units changed direction to face the sound . When the Moldavian army hit , Suleiman lost control of his army . He desperately tried to regain control , but was later forced to signal a retreat . The battle lasted for four days ; with the last three days seeing the fleeing Ottoman army being pursued by the Moldavian light cavalry and the 2 @,@ 000 @-@ strong Polish cavalry until they reached the town of Obluci?a (now Isaccea , Romania) , in Dobruja .

The Wallachians fled the field without joining battle and Laiot? now turned his sword against the Turks , who had hoped for a safe passage in Wallachia ; on January 20 , he exited his castle and confronted some of the Turks that were lurking on his land . Thereafter , he took one of their flags and sent it to a Hungarian friend as proof of his bravery . The Ottoman casualties were counted as 45 @,@ 000 , including four Pashas killed and a hundred standards taken . Jan D?ugosz writes that " all but the most eminent of the Turkish prisoners are impaled " , and their corpses burned . Only one was spared ? the only son of the Ottoman general Isaac Bey , of the Gazi Evrenos family , whose father had fought with Mircea the Old . Another Polish chronicler reported that on the spot of the battle rested huge piles of bones upon each other , next to three immured crosses .

= = Aftermath = =

After the battle , Stephen sent " four of the captured Turkish commanders , together with thirty @-@ six of their standards and much splendid booty , to King Casimir in Poland " , and implored him to provide troops and money to support the Moldavians in the struggle against the Ottomans . He also sent letters and a few prisoners and Turkish standards to the Pope and Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus , asking for support . In response , " the arrogant Matthias writes to the Pope , the Emperor and other kings and princes , telling them that he has defeated a large Turkish army with his own forces under the Voivode of Wallachia . " The Pope 's reply to Stephen denied him help , but awarded him with the " Athleta Christi " , while King Casimir pleaded " poverty both in money and men " and did nothing ; his own men then accused him of sloth , and advised him to change his shameful behaviour or hand over his rule to someone else . Chronicler Jan D?ugosz hailed Stephen for his victory in the battle :

Hassan tried to create a new coalition with the European powers , arguing that Mehmed 's best troops were lost at Vaslui . Upon hearing about the devastating defeat , Mehmed refused for several days to give audience to anyone ; his other plans of expansion were put to rest as he planned revenge on Stephen . In the following year , Mehmed invaded the country with an army of 150 @,@ 000 , which was joined by 10 @,@ 000 Wallachians under Laiot? and 30 @,@ 000 Tatars under Meñli I Giray . The Tatars , who called for a Holy War , attacked with their cavalry from the north and started to pillage the country . The Moldavians took chase after them , and routed and killed most of them . " The fleeing Tatars discard their weapons , their saddles and clothes , while some , as though crazed , jump into the River Dniepr . " Giray wrote to Mehmed that he could not wage more war against Stephen , as he had lost his son and two brothers , and had returned with only one horse .

In July 1476 , after killing 30 @,@ 000 Ottomans , Stephen was defeated at the Battle of Valea Alb? . However , the Ottomans were unsuccessful in their siege of the Suceava citadel and the Neam? fortress , while Laiot? was forced to retreat back to Wallachia when Vlad and Stefan Báthory , Voivode of Transylvania , gave chase with an army of 30 @,@ 000 . Stephen assembled his army and invaded Wallachia from the north , while Vlad and Báthory invaded from the west . Laiot? fled , and in November , Vlad ?epe? was installed on the Wallachian throne . He received 200 loyal knights from Stephen to serve as his loyal bodyguards , but his army remained small .

When Laiot? returned , Vlad Tepes went to battle and was killed by the Janissaries near Bucharest in December 1476 . Laiot? again occupied the Wallachian throne , which urged Stephen to make another return to Wallachia and dethrone Laiot? for the fifth and last time , while a D?ne?ti , ?epelu? , was established as ruler of the country .

In 1484 , the Ottomans under Bayezid II , managed to conquer Chilia and Cetatea Alb? and incorporate it into their empire under the name of Budjak , leaving Moldavia a landlocked principality for many years to come .

Between May and September 1488 , Stephen built the Vorone? Monastery to commemorate the victory at Vaslui ; " the exterior walls ? including a representation of the Last Judgment on the west wall ? were painted in 1547 with a background of vivid cerulean blue . This is so vibrant that art historians refer to Vorone? blue the same way they do Titian red . " In 1490 , he extended his work by building another monastery of Saint John the Baptist . These monasteries served as cultural centres ; today , they are on UNESCO 's World Heritage List . Stephen 's victory at Vaslui is considered one of the greatest Moldavian victories over the Ottomans , and as such " played a role in universal history " by securing the " culture and civilization of the Christian West from the onslaught of Islam . "