

Articles

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

The Wars with Wallachia (1461-1462)

During the first three years of his reign, Vlad Dracula paid tribute to the Ottomans in order to focus on his domestic problems. By 1459, Wallachia was no longer paying any tribute nor was it allowing the Ottomans to take its young men to serve in the Janissaries. The Ottomans began raiding the borders of Wallachia. According to legend, Dracula received a delegation from the Ottomans demanding their tribute. Dracula politely refused their request and asked that the envoys remove their turbans while addressing him. The envoys responded that they would not do so for both religious and cultural reasons. Dracula informed them that he was always respectful of others' cultural traditions and wanted to help them continue in their beliefs. He had their turbans nailed to their heads. The Ottoman Royal Court was not amused by Vlad's attempt at this cultural exchange.



Pope Pius II announced a three year crusade against the Ottomans on January 14, 1460. The call went unanswered among most of the leadership of Western Europe and in the Balkan areas that were busy with their own wars. The call was ironically answered in the least expected quarters. The eastern Muslims saw Mehmed the Conqueror as a direct threat to their own interests. The Ottomans wanted one large Islamic tent under which everyone could sit. It was a tent that would be owned and operated by the Ottomans. Uzan Hazan of the White Sheep Turcomans of Iran promised Pope Pius 5,000 troops. Other Muslim Kings on the Black Sea offered additional troops. In Wallachia, the son of the Devil took the Cross and became a Crusader against the Ottoman Empire.

Dracula's army went on campaign in 1461 and crushed all who opposed it. Dracula continued his practice of impaling all surviving Ottomans in his wake. Mehmed II decided to rid himself of this nuisance. He authorized his Grand Vizier, Mahmud, to lead an army to seize Braila, one of the largest Wallachian ports on the Danube. Dracula's army quickly mauled a good portion of this army and left the rest fleeing back to Ottoman controlled territory. Many in the Balkans and in Western Europe began to believe that a new warlord was on the rise that could help liberate the area. Mehmed the Conqueror knew he had to crush this upstart before things got out of hand and decided to

personally become involved in ridding himself of this menace. He launched a full scale invasion of Wallachia in May of 1462. The army marched with a small contingent of Wallacians, including Radu, Vlad's own brother, who had been promised the throne of Wallachia upon his brother's death.

Dracula's army was heavily outnumbered and the Ottomans' use of artillery reduced the chances of any type of victory in a stand-up fight. In response, Vlad Dracula adopted the hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare as well as a scorched earth policy that left nothing for the Ottomans to use against him. As the Ottoman army advanced through Wallachia, it found little drinkable well water and even fewer crops and food. Dracula's army conducted a campaign of terror and attrition. His cavalry appeared and disappeared at will. Ottoman stragglers, who were cut off from their army, were impaled. Dracula also used a form of germ warfare unheard of during medieval times. He encouraged those suffering from diseases such as leprosy and the bubonic plague to dress in Ottoman clothing and mingle with the Ottoman army. The Ottomans called Dracula "Kazight Bey" (Lord Impaler). Their fears of the man were justified.

On June 17, 1462, Dracula's army became involved in a skirmish that would become known as the "Night of Terror". The Ottoman army was camped at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. A force of Wallachian cavalry attacked the camp near dusk and continued to attack until almost four the next morning. The result was devastating. Mehmed was saved by his Janissary bodyguards and the Wallachians melted away in the early morning light. A few days later, the advance guard of the Ottoman army reached a site sixty miles north of Tirgoviste, the Wallachian capitol. They stopped dead in their tracks. They came across thousands of stakes of varying heights which held the remains of impaled Ottoman captives. Although historical estimates vary, some accounts indicate that as many of 20,000 Ottomans had been left impaled upon the field. Even Mehmed the Conqueror was impressed and declared that he "could not take the land away from a man who does such marvelous things and can exploit his rule and his subjects in this way". Mehmed ordered a retreat from Wallachia. Vlad Dracula had repelled the Ottomans from his homeland.

The End of Vlad Dracula

Mehmed was impressed but he wasn't finished with Dracula. He decided upon a time honored tactic. What he couldn't obtain by direct military action, he would obtain by other means. He gave Radu military command of a segment of his army and sent Radu in pursuit of his brother with the promise of the throne. The Boyars and their troops correctly guessed which side was likely to win and deserted Vlad Dracula in the hopes of obtaining a better deal with Radu and the Ottomans. Dracula retreated into the Carpathian Mountains followed by Radu's forces. Dracula's own wife threw herself from the battlements of their castle and into the Arges River rather than face capture by his brother and his Ottoman troops. Dracula escaped to Hungary. Unfortunately, King Matthias Corvinus was still attempting to secure his Hungarian throne against efforts being made by Frederick III of the Austrian Empire. Frederick's subjects were the very Saxon merchants who had borne the brunt of Dracula's wrath during the first three years

of his reign. In the world of national power politics, Dracula had gone too far. In an effort to suppress his critics, King Matthias had Dracula imprisoned as an enemy of humanity. Dracula's excesses provided grounds for this charge. Dracula would remain a political prisoner in Hungary for 12 years (1462-1474). Radu was crowned as the Prince of Wallachia and ruled until his death in the Spring of 1473. Radu's policies were decidedly pro-Ottoman.

Wallachia had not heard the last of Vlad Dracula. During his "imprisonment", which was probably more like a house arrest, he married Countess Ilona Szilagy, King Mathias' cousin and a member of the royal family. They would have two sons, Vlad and Mikhail. In 1474, Vlad Dracula became a Crusader again and served in the Hungarian army under King Stephen of Moldavia, his cousin, in his battles against the Ottomans.

Dracula was briefly restored to the throne of Wallachia for a third time in 1476 and was supported by both the Hungarians and the Moldavians. The Moldavians were led by Stephen Bathory, an ancestor of Elizabeth Bathory, the infamous Blood Countess who would later be accused of bathing in the blood of her victims. However, this last reign would be short-lived. King Stephen's forces returned to Moldavia. The Ottomans again threatened Wallachia. The Boyars refused to come to Dracula's aid.

Vlad Dracula was killed in battle in December of 1476. The exact cause of his death remains a mystery. One account indicates that he may have been killed by his own Boyars. Another account indicates he died at the hands of the Ottomans. Still another account indicates that he was accidentally killed by one of his own men. The one thing that is certain is that his head was sent to Constantinople where the Sultan had it displayed on a stake as proof that Kaziglu Bey was dead. Dracula's body was reportedly buried at Snagov, an island monastery near Bucharest. His wife and two sons survived and continued to live in Hungary. The last direct descendant of Dracula died in the 1650s. The Ottomans took over Wallachia in 1477 where it would remain a part of their domains until the 18th century.

Vlad Dracula is still remembered among Romanians as a Prince who defended his people from the Ottomans and as a champion of the common man against the oppression of the Boyars who weakened Wallachia and allowed them to ultimately be conquered by the Ottomans.

Sources: Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, **Dracula, Prince of Many Faces** (Little, Brown & Company, 1989); Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu, **In Search of Dracula** (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994); Norman Housley, **The Latter Crusades** (Oxford University Press, 1992); M.S. Trow, **Vlad the Impaler, the Search for the Real Dracula** (Sutton Publishing, 2003).