

# VLAD DRACULA



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From *VILLAINS*

Work in Progress

**F**ORGET EVERY HORROR MOVIE YOU EVER SAW. Real evil is much scarier. Face to face with the historic Vlad Dracula, the Bela Lugosi character in the classic movies would run crying to his mommy. So would the Wolfman, Frankenstein's monster, and probably Godzilla, if they had any sense.

Prince Vlad Dracula of Wallachia, born in 1431, was handsome, intelligent, well educated, courageous, soft-spoken and patriotic. He was also one of history's most brutal mass murderers. Yet he is still called the "Savior of Romania." Hero or villain? This is the most disturbing lesson we can learn from meeting villains: sometimes they are both.

Vlad was the second son of the warlord Dracul (*Dracula* means "the son of Dracul"), prince of Wallachia. His father was a Knight of the Secret Society of the Dragon, pledged to defend the Orthodox Christian Church for the Holy Roman Emperor.

In the 1400's, this meant battling the Turks. The fiery faith of Islam had dominated great parts of Africa and Asia. This Turkish-led Ottoman Empire was now chewing at the southeastern edge of Europe. It was led by Murmad II, a nephew of the Islamic warrior emperor, Suleiman the Magnificent.

In 1437, Dracula's father was caught between two brutal and powerful forces. The Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund, and his German lords were nibbling at his country from the north. Murmad was raiding his southern border. Weighing one danger against another, Dracul joined Murmad. In 1438 Dracul roared through neighboring Transylvania with his oldest son Mircea and Murmad's troops, pillaging and burning German merchant towns.

Dracul was trying to play on both teams, Holy Roman and Islamic, Sultan Murmad didn't trust him. He seized Dracul and his family and threw them into prison until the warlord swore obedience. Murmad kept Dracul's younger sons, Dracula and Radu, as hostages.

As princely hostages, they were treated well and educated. Radu enjoyed the comfortable Turkish life. Not Dracula. He was a quick learner but cold and defiant. His teachers and guards feared him.

Their father, angry at being imprisoned, joined Sigismund's war chief, John Hunyadi, and attacked the Turks. How would you feel if you were Radu or Dracula, knowing your father had abandoned you to torture or death?

Curiously, Murmad did not harm the boys. He had other plans.

Dracul and Mircea fought fiercely for Hunyadi but Hunyadi was suspicious of the side-switching Dragon. In 1471 he trapped both of them in the dismal Wallachian marshes. He murdered Dracul outright. Mircea was blinded with red-hot iron stakes, then buried alive.

When Vlad Dracula heard of his father's death his obligation as a hostage was over. He escaped. Some say he simply walked away because his guards were too afraid to stop him. He traveled north to the Moldavian Mountains and the palace of King Bogdan for refuge. He became a close friend with Bogdan's son, Prince Stephan.

In 1451, King Bogdan was assassinated. Dracula had no prince to protect him. It's hard for us to understand but Dracula went to the strongest figure in his world: his father's murderer, John Hunyadi. Dracula asked to become his pupil. Impressed by the young man's boldness, Hunyadi accepted him. For five years, until Hunyadi died of the Black Plague, Dracula learned military tactics, political maneuvering and the duties of a prince. When his teacher died in 1456, he used the lessons well and successfully swept away the warlord who had taken his father's throne.

Once in power Prince Vlad Dracula of Wallachia faithfully helped Prince Stephan to win back his father's Moldavian throne.

Dracula ruled Wallachia with a strong hand but he was dangerously unpredictable. He hated the rich German merchants and noble families – the *boyars*. He held a great feast and asked his boyar guests how many rulers they had seen come and go. Wanting to impress the young prince with their power they answered, “dozens.”

“There will be only one ruler of Wallachia, now,” Vlad Dracula said mildly, and ordered all of the boyars present – six hundred men and women – to be executed in a way that became his cruel symbol: they were *impaled*. A gruesome death! A tall wooden stake was sharpened, and its point thrust into the victim's bottom. The stake was set into the ground, then the victim was pulled down until the point pushed through the upper body.

A grisly forest of stakes and their impaled victims expanded along the shoulders of a ravine near Dracula's palace. Sometimes, Dracula would set his table to eat among the decaying bodies of his victims. Once a visiting boyar chieftain wrinkled his nose and asked, "How can you stand the smell?"

"You do not like it?" Dracula asked. The chieftain shook his head, No. "Then you belong up there where the smell will not reach you," the Prince said, and had him impaled immediately as the dinner continued.

Dracula "cleaned up" his kingdom. He assembled a thousand or more beggars, cripples, and diseased folk at a great Feast for the Poor. At the end of a hearty meal their princely host asked them, "Would you like me to make you free of all earthly troubles?"

"Yes, Lord Dracula!" they answered in a loud cheer. Dracula nodded and left the hall. His soldiers sealed the doors and burned the hall to the ground.

Turkish ambassadors came from Murmad's son, Mehmed II, to demand a tribute in gold as a recognition of Mehmed's power. Dracula commented that the emissaries did not take off their turbans, while everyone else took off their hats in respect to him. They replied proudly that they never removed their turbans to anyone. "Very well," Dracula said, "let it be so," and ordered his soldiers to fasten their turbans to their heads with iron nails before sending them back to Mehmed. Without the gold.

We would call Dracula a "law and order" ruler. A visiting merchant came to Dracula one morning and said "While I was your guest at dinner last night, a thief took 100 gold coins from my pack saddle."

"This shall be made right," the Prince promised. That hour he called the town council to him: either produce the thief and the coins or the entire town would be burned to the ground. The thief was quickly found. But Dracula added a single coin to the bag of a hundred. As the thief was hoisted screaming onto his impaling stake in the square, Vlad Dracula asked, "Is everything that is yours returned?"

"Yes, my lord," the wise merchant replied, "but there is one coin more, one gold piece that is not mine."

Dracula took it with a cold smile; "It is good that you are an honest man. If you had not mentioned this little coin," he gestured with it to the dying agonies of the impaled thief, "you would be writhing on the stake beside him at this moment."

Ruthless cruelty did reduce the crime rate. Dracula had a golden cup placed at the city fountain at Tirgoviste, so that any passer-by could drink from gold. It was never stolen.

Murmad died, but his son Mehmed continued to harry the southern border and he demanded another tribute – not only gold but 500 children. The Sultan’s most feared and loyal warriors, the Janissaries, were children given in tribute, then raised as Moslem soldiers. Dracula agreed. Mehmed, however, did not trust the dark prince and sent two famous assassins, Hamza Pasha and Thomas Catavolinos to snare Dracula at the meeting. The trap was ready. Dracula arrived – not with little children but with a furious Wallachian army. Hamza Pasha and Catavolinos disappeared and more than 28,000 Turks were slaughtered as he pursued their fleeing forces all the way to the Black Sea.

In fury, Sultan Mehmed mounted a great army and invaded Wallachia. He meant to set up Dracula’s brother, now called Radu the Handsome, as the new Turkish ruler. Dracula fought a vicious delaying action, waiting for a Christian army promised by King Matthias of Hungary. Matthias betrayed him and sent no one.

Dracula’s retreat was bitter and harsh. He left nothing behind for the enemy. Towns were burned, wells were poisoned, crops destroyed. Dracula snatched Turkish stragglers and impaled them on the road. He sent murderers from prison and even diseased Wallachians in Turkish disguise to mix with the invading army – one of the earliest instances of “germ warfare.” It was a hard, hot march for Mehmed. The night of June 17, 1462 is now called the Night of Terror. Dracula and his mounted troops burst into the sleeping Turkish camp with unearthly howls, riding and cutting, striking for the Sultan’s tent at the center. They killed over a thousand Turks and slashed a bloody path that faltered within a stone’s throw of Mehmed’s head. Only a suicidal counterattack by the Janissaries saved him. Dracula cut his way out and disappeared.

One of Dracula’s men was captured but would reveal nothing, even when he was sawn in half. Did he refuse out of loyalty in the face of death and pain, or was his fear of Dracula greater than his fear of death? This thought worried Mehmed as he continued north.

The army arrived at Tirgoviste. Its buildings were smoldering, its shops bare, its wells poisoned by dead animals, its golden cup finally gone. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink. They pushed on a little farther. Then they found a place that robbed the bravest Turk of his courage. A gorge just north of the city was banked on both sides with a forest of stakes, each bearing the body of an impaled victim. Carpathian vultures wheeled about them, ravens nested within their ribcages. A few were recently impaled Turkish soldiers; most were boyars or Wallachian criminals. There were more than 20,000 corpses in all. On two higher stakes, close to Sultan Mehmed’s route of march, hung the rotting bodies of Hamza Pasha and Thomas Catavolinos.

The Sultan ordered a halt to the march and heavily fortified his camp with ditches and walls that night. He whispered to his chief advisor, “This Dracula is capable of a horror like this against his own people! What inhuman treatment awaits us?” The next day, the Ottoman army turned back. In this way Wallachia was saved from the Turks by Vlad Dracula’s ruthlessness.

In a few years, though, Vlad lost his throne to Radu, who made an alliance between the Turks and the hated boyars. Dracula appealed to his friend Prince Stephan for help. He was betrayed again; Stephan joined his enemies.

A great army surrounded Vlad Dracula in his castle on the Arges River. Dracula’s wife, a beautiful Wallachian peasant woman, cried out that she would sooner die in the river than become their prisoner. She bolted to the highest tower and leaped to her death. That part of the river is now known as *Riul Doamni*, the Princess’s River.

A heartsick Vlad escaped with a few lieutenants through a secret castle tunnel into the wild Carpathian Mountains and across to Hungary where, once again, he was betrayed.

King Matthias seized and imprisoned Vlad Dracula. The prince was too famous as a Christian warrior against the Turks to kill or throw into a dungeon. The King gave him a house in the town of Pest, where he was confined under guard until 1476, when Mathhias had a use for him.

Fortune seemed to turn back toward Dracula. Matthias drove Radu from the throne and Vlad Dracula the Impaler was once again the Prince of Wallachia. Prince Stephan pledged his friendship again and, together, they began to attack the Turks.

This second reign lasted only a short year. During a night battle in 1477, a dozen assassins ambushed Dracula. Doubtless, he fought like a cornered beast but Prince Dracula was murdered. His head was taken to Mehmed so the Turkish ruler could at last sleep easily, knowing that no opponent so fierce as Vlad the Impaler still existed. Not then, and perhaps never since.



Vlad Dracula lived in a time when life was cheap and short. The Black Death that killed John Hunyadi had also swept away nearly half the population of Europe. Any sunrise could bring disease, a horde of ravaging soldiers, hunger or slavery. The loss of life in those years may have seemed unimportant. They were hard times when bitter people found it easy to abandon their morals and beliefs in order to protect themselves or grasp a moment of pleasure at anyone’s expense.

Rulers sat uneasily on their thrones. They feared betrayal from every side. Vlad was abandoned to the Turks by his father, betrayed by his best friend Stephan, attacked by his younger brother Radu, and trapped like a wolf by King Matthias. Perhaps his warrior soul was robbed of any belief in good. He replaced it with the naked power of terror. He acted without mercy, afraid that kindness could be a signal of weakness. Swift, terrible lessons, like impalement, might be remembered longer than compassion. Was killing a few thousand Wallachians – even on the gruesome stake – better than losing the kingdom? A few years later the Italian writer Machiavelli would ask the same question: Which is more reliable? Loyalty or fear?

We can't look back on 15th century deeds with 20th century eyes and understand Vlad's motives. Was he a hero? He saved his country from the Turks. He tried to free his people from the boyars. He was brave. Even when every hand was against him, he was faithful to his word.

The real Dracula was a man of learning and honor, not a blood-sucking fiend. But this cannot excuse him. He was a true villain: strong, but not strong enough to keep his compassion. He became crueler than his enemies. Did he save Wallachia? For a few years he frightened the boyars and beat back the Turks but look at the terrible price! How many years was it before his people could rebuild their villages, restore their wells, replant their fields, forget the loss of their sons and daughters? How many people – Wallachians, Turks, and boyars – died for Vlad Dracula's idea of law and order and for his fearsome reputation?

The fictional vampire Dracula in storybook tales killed a few high-class folks, set up his own blood bank, and frightened some peasants. The real Dracula believed in an old wicked lie, something far more gruesome and false than Bram Stoker's vampire tale: The End Justifies the Means. He believed that his "noble" goal was more important than the cruelty he used to reach the goal. He was wrong.

It's possible that force and perhaps even war are sometimes necessary to push back evil. But we must always ask, "Whose evil, and at what price?" The loss of sense and decency and compassion is always too much to pay.

A VAMPIRE is, in folklore, a powerful and violent creature of the night who sucks blood from his victims, though you can keep him (or her) away with a necklace of garlic. Some doctors believe this tale ... or at least a part of it. It is possible that vampire legends grew out of murders committed by real people with a rare blood disease, *porphyria*. In the small, isolated villages in the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, where many families are closely related, this disease recurred every generation or so. The blood of porphyria sufferers will

not carry enough oxygen to their brains. They lose their reason, often becoming violently insane. At the same time, they crave red meat and blood for its oxygen-carrying properties. They have been known to rip into victims in a fit of pain and drink their blood. Other symptoms complete the tie with folklore: the skin of porphyrics becomes painfully sensitive to sunlight, so they come out only after sundown; enzymes in garlic can cause them terrible pain; a skin condition related to porphyria is excess hairiness on the face and limbs and even the palms of the hands, which could also explain the werewolf legends, too. Sleep well. Was that a growl in the closet?