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FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



IN THE SHADOW of VLAD THE IMPALER

EXPLORING BRAN, BRAȘOV, AND BUCHAREST

by Garry Shaw

Climbing up to 'Dracula's' Castle

We cannot say that Vlad the Impaler was entirely sane, but he is a great hero to us,' said Andrei, my guide, as we departed Bucharest, driving north out of the Romanian capital. The car pulling away, I watched a black cat delicately pick its way across a window ledge on a distant neoclassical building, like a passing shadow. This wasn't the only dark omen. A couple of hours later, leaving sunny Wallachia Province behind, we entered Transylvania. The weather abruptly changed. Mist rose. Snow fell. The sky darkened. The car bumped along a potholed road. A Roma village, full of colourful wooden houses, bounced by. In the distance, a fortress perched upon a craggy mountain. 'A peasant fortress,' Andrei explained, pointing. 'The people ran there in times of trouble.' Just the type of thing you want to hear on the way to the famed 'Dracula Castle,' I thought, increasingly convinced that the Romanian tourist board had staged it all.

I'd entered Romania to learn more about Vlad the Impaler, but had quickly found that the relationship between the 15th century Wallachian ruler (the third Vlad in his line) and Dracula, the creation of 19th century Irish author Bram Stoker, was hard to disentangle. Throughout the country, their stories feed off one another, each building upon the other's myth. Despite the claims of the promotional material, the simple reality is that Stoker's main interest in Vlad began and ended with the title 'Dracula,' a word meaning 'Son of the Dragon.' He held this title because his father, also called Vlad, had been a member of the Order of the Dragon, a chivalric movement opposed to the Ottomans. Stoker, like any good writer onto a good thing, took the title 'Dracula' and made it his own; beforehand, he'd wanted to name his titular character the wimpy-sounding Count Wampyre. How different literature could have been.

Unlike his less PR-friendly epithet 'the impaler,' Vlad used the title Dracula in his lifetime, and because of this, any place that he touched in Romania, even momentarily, is now irrevocably associated with the Dracula story. This recent association has led to some confusing national hero worship. Can your country's best-known mascot really be an impaling, bloodthirsty creature of the night? Seemingly so. Upon arrival at the airport you're immediately met with child vampires, fangs protruding from their smiling faces, decorating commemorative plates and chocolate boxes, stacked beside Vlad the Impaler wine stoppers (impalers?), and Vlad-covered glasses cases emblazoned with the uplifting words 'live your dreams.' Of impaling? It isn't made clear.

Despite admitting Vlad's insanity, Andrei was obviously a fan. 'He made things equal in society,' he explained. 'Vlad said that one crime, one cut to the hand. Two crimes, you get impaled.' He waited for my approval. It didn't arrive. As we bounced along an old road, passing fields now sprinkled with snow, Andrei went on to relate Vlad's life story. At the time of Vlad's birth in 1431

(not certain), possibly in Sighișoara, where his soldier father had been stationed, Wallachia was a vassal of the Ottoman empire. To appease the Sultan and ease tensions, in 1442 Vlad's father, now governor of Wallachia, sent him, along with his younger brother Radu, to the Ottoman court as prisoners. They were only released after their father's assassination. Ragu, having converted to Islam, chose to remain in Turkey, but Vlad returned to Wallachia to fight for his throne. He achieved his goal in 1448, and discovered that scheming nobles at the capital city Târgoviște had been responsible for his father's death. In retribution, Vlad had them impaled, beginning his life-long love affair with sharp, pointed sticks.

After further political shenanigans, in which Vlad again lost power, he finally secured his position as governor of Wallachia in 1456. Much of his life would now be dedicated to keeping the Ottomans at bay, particularly after he decided to stop sending tribute to the Sultan's court. In the end, insulted, the Ottomans sent a large force into Vlad's domain. In 1462, Mehmet II and his army approached Târgoviște, only to find a forest of impaled Ottoman bodies - former prisoners of war taken in earlier scuffles. But this didn't put the sultan off. The Ottoman army continued their march, leaving Vlad, outmanned, to flee into Hungarian controlled Transylvania, where he was captured. The Sultan subsequently put Ragu in charge of Wallachia and Vlad remained imprisoned for fourteen years. It was in this time that Vlad spent about two months locked in Bran Castle, my current destination, often touted as 'Dracula's Castle' - a location that nicely encapsulates Romania's confusion on how to deal with the Vlad/Dracula association.

Exploring Bran Castle

'Bran was a village of shepherds,' Andrei said, as we drove along a street of yellow, white, and pink painted houses. 'The villagers were already well-off during the communist era. They had lots of sheep, which they kept on the high mountain where no government people wanted to go to count them. After the revolution they made guesthouses and developed tourism, particularly ecotourism. Some now still keep sheep as a hobby. They make sausages and cheese and are famous for their plum alcohol.' It was all becoming rather sensible, until we passed a sign reading, 'Vampire Camping.'

Shortly afterwards, at the foot of Bran Castle, we were met with a sea of vampire kitsch. Market stands sold Dracula related tat. Vampire-themed restaurants tempted hungry tourists. In front of the ticket office, stalls sold balls of cheese, rugs, coats, horned masks, swords, pots, and postcards. One place proudly proclaimed that it was a 'haunted mansion.' To emphasize its claim, a waist-coated red devil perched over the doorway. A skeleton dressed as a Roman centurion with an axe for an arm sat on the other side; to lighten the mood, an illuminated shooting star was attached

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Photographs © Garry Shaw

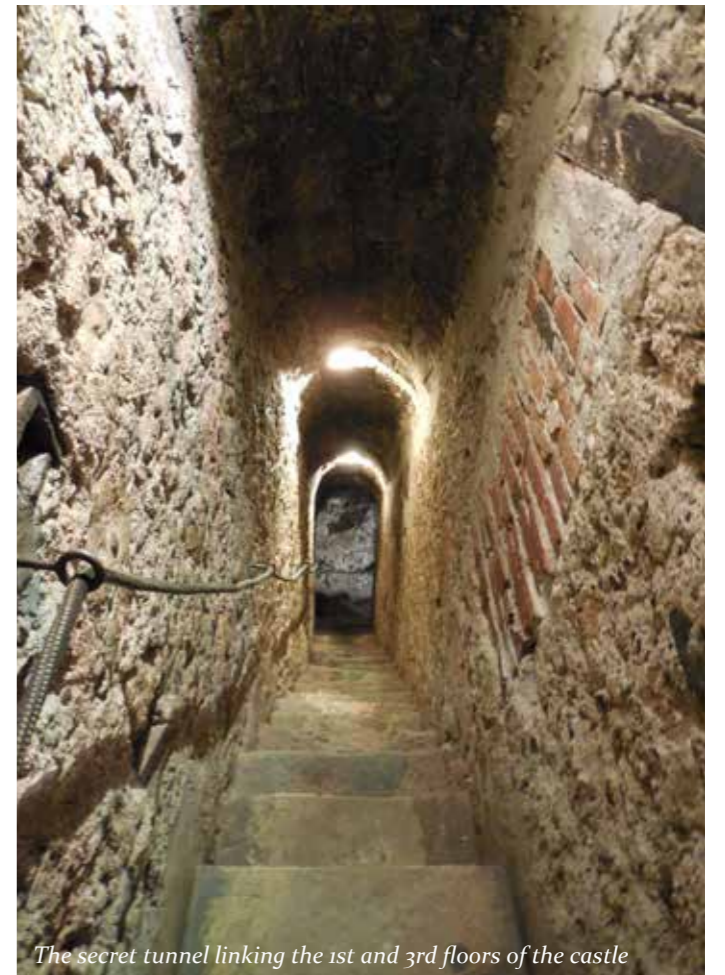
Interior of Bran Castle

to the wall beside him. Whether on purpose or not, Bran Castle's entrance sign continued the dark theme: apparently free entry was given to 'institutionalized' people, bringing to mind Renfield, Dracula's unfortunate assistant.

Beyond the tat, the path sloped upwards, providing the first dramatic view of the castle: it rose high on a bluff, clinging to its peak; it was hard to tell where the castle ended and the bluff began, the hillside appeared to be swallowing its picturesque burden. The castle's tall whitewashed walls were topped by salmon roof tiles, arranged as cones or as sheer slopes. Small windows broke its clean surfaces. From the path, steps led up towards the castle, passing a grave marked by a cross, intricately carved with esoteric symbols.

Within the castle, to my surprise, the decoration was rather plain. The whitewashed walls contrasted with dark wooden ceilings. Small informative panels, attached to the walls, related the castle's royal connections, in particular its recent inhabitants, Prince Nicholas and Queen Marie, who owned the castle in the early 20th century. Their furniture still adorned the rooms: heavy wooden desks and chairs, traditional Wallachian carpets, ornate caskets, clocks, and weapons. A secret staircase connected the castle's 1st and 3rd floors. Beyond there was a music hall and library, where a bear lay deflated on the floor, near a piano made in Dresden. It was all rather normal, the type of interior decoration found in historic properties the world over. All very non-supernatural. Not a blood dripping fang in sight.

Constructed in the late 14th century, Bran Castle was designed to protect Bran Pass, the main route into Transylvania. Local people were made to build and finance the operation, and once construction was complete, they also had to work there to protect the border. From that time, the castle's management



The secret tunnel linking the 1st and 3rd floors of the castle



the life of Bram Stoker, as well as various stories about Vlad's assassination in 1476 (the year of his release from prison), a topic so well-covered, you get the feeling that the curators also wish they could stake him through the heart.

Braşov - City of merchants

Our next stop was the city of Braşov, less than an hour away from Bran. With a long history interconnected with the Vlad story, and famous for its beauty, it was a must-see destination. Entering the city's environs, we passed communist-era blocks, concrete and grey, each with rows of shops at street level and apartments above. These gave way to Saxon-inspired architecture, the result of 13th century immigrants from Saxony leaving their mark on the city. I passed houses of yellow and green with roofs like ski-slopes, now aptly covered in snow. 'The houses in Braşov are like little fortresses,' Andrei said, 'They have high windows and gates on the doors. This was all to protect them during attack. About a third of the people living in Braşov still have this heritage.' The need for protection was further emphasized as we entered the old town: it was still surrounded by its medieval wall, erected to keep the Ottomans out. Different sectors of the wall were overseen by town guilds, Andrei told me; the austere White Tower, for example, peeking out above the multicolour buildings as I stood in Piata Sfatului (the city's main centre), was protected by the tin and coppersmiths, who were expected to ring the bell at the first sign of attack. It was constructed in 1494.

A market hummed with life at the centre of Piata Sfatului, where red and white covered stalls sold all sorts of snacks, including sweets, chocolates, and Romanian crepes. Another sold jars of jam of all kinds, forming a sort of rainbow collage along its stall-front. Overlooking it all, high in the surrounding hills was a large white sign, imitating LA's Hollywood sign, spelling out 'Braşov,' just in case you were lost. Beside the square was the Black Church, constructed between 1383 and 1480. 'This once marked the centre of the town,' said Andrei. 'The black walls are due to smoke from a fire, when the Austrian army set it alight in 1689. It is famous for its large pipe organ and the Anatolian carpets in the church; these were given as thanks to the church for its help to traders.'

Traders were key to Braşov's success, but sometimes they also created problems. The powerful Saxon merchants of Braşov had been hostile to Vlad since his sacking of the Transylvanian city of Bistrita in 1457. Worried about their own future, they began to make a deal with Dan, a contender for the Wallachian throne from a rival dynasty, in the hope of ousting Vlad in favour of someone more agreeable. Not a man to take such conspiracies lightly, Vlad first broke his trade agreements with Braşov, and later impaled a number of Saxon merchants in Wallachia. His demand that the Saxon merchants hand over Dan (now announcing himself as Dan III of Wallachia) having failed, in 1459, he marched his troops to Braşov, entering the surrounding area at night and capturing and impaling local people at the foot of the hill beside the chapel of St Jacob; according to a 1499 woodcut, as well as impaling the

Above and below:
picturesque buildings in
Braşov old town



passed through numerous hands, until it was placed under the jurisdiction of the people of nearby Braşov; from the customs house, still standing at the foot of Bran, they levied a 3.3% tax on goods passing between Wallachia and Transylvania, making everyone involved rather wealthy. By the 18th century, the castle had lost much of its strategic importance, and in 1920, Braşov council gave it to Queen Marie (a granddaughter of Queen Victoria), whose heart would later be kept in a niche opposite the castle, and is now in the National History Museum in Bucharest. Renovated, the castle passed down the royal family line until the rise of the communists, who opened it as a museum in 1957.

It would all be fascinating stuff, if not for the shadow of Dracula. Tour groups sweep through the castle's corridors at high speed, searching for anything of gothic interest, but quickly become irritated by the tenuous association with the eternal count; it's a bit like arriving at a Hollywood celebrity's house party, only to find that the host is absent. You didn't come for the house. As Andrei admitted, 'It is not the house of Dracula. It was used by Hollywood producers because of its dramatic location, particularly when shot from below. Bram Stoker set Dracula's castle in the north of Romania.' It is possible, however, that Stoker used an illustration of Bran Castle as an inspiration for his description of Castle Dracula, which is described as 'on the very edge of a terrific precipice.'

Given the castle's evident pride in its true history, it is almost with a sense of heavy duty mixed with embarrassment that one small room, easy to miss up a set of stairs, is dedicated to Vlad the Impaler and the tale of Dracula. Within, a painting of Vlad hangs beside a window - the same c. 1560 painting found across the country that shows a man with Brian May hair seemingly balancing a chocolate bar on his upper lip. The room explains



Basement of Old Princely Court



Bucharest old town in the summer

townsfolk, he roasted them, boiled their heads in a kettle, skinned them, and hacked them into pieces like cabbage. Vlad also burnt the surrounding neighbourhood, before looting and setting fire to the 13th century church of St. Bartholomew. Undoubtedly concerned for his life, Dan escaped Braşov, only to be captured and killed by Vlad's army a year later. The merchants of Braşov had learnt their lesson for the time being, but they would have the last laugh: in 1462, when Vlad was fleeing the Ottoman advance led by his brother, Ragu, it was near Braşov that he was captured by the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus, leading to his fourteen year incarceration.

Bucharest - The Old Princely Court

The next day, back in Bucharest, a place where neoclassical buildings, built in the early 20th century, mingle with grey communist blocks, and revellers party the night away in the revamped Old Town, I decided to visit another location connected with Vlad the Impaler: The Old Princely Court. On the edge of the Old Town, the Old Princely Court has only recently reopened to the public, after being closed for some time for renovation; perhaps because of this, at the site gate, I was met by a surprised security guard, who led me to a tiny prefab, used as a makeshift ticket office, where an equally surprised tourism official sold me my ticket and personally led me to a descending set of steps, leading below the streets of Bucharest.

Left alone in a subterranean world, I was faced with long rows of high redbrick arches, apparently the basement and cellars of the old palace. From what I could see, much of it was reconstructed: a line of white tiles snaked along the walls, marking where the original walls ended. It was on this spot that Vlad built one of his residences between 1458 and 1459: the original Old Princely Court - Bucharest's first stone citadel - to better enable him to monitor the movement of the Ottomans further south (so said a helpful information panel, on which Vlad had been referred to as "Dracula", later crossed out by some anonymous editor and replaced in blue ink with 'Vlad Tepes,' Tepes meaning 'the Impaler'). The general shape of the basement still matches that of his residence, and the foundations and some of the walls remain from Vlad's time. The court is also mentioned on a document signed by Vlad on September 20th 1459; incidentally, it also includes the first known reference to Bucharest by name.

The Old Princely Court was rebuilt and remodelled many times

after its founding by Vlad, particularly under Mircea Ciobanu in the 16th century, when the surrounding streets became a centre of commerce; many of the street names still reflect the occupations of these past traders. At the same time, Bucharest became capital of Wallachia. Over the years, the court was damaged by fires, earthquakes, and robberies, and was eventually replaced by a new royal court. Much of it was torn down after 1798, when it was sold at auction, though some of the newly built buildings incorporated parts of the palace walls.

I returned above ground to find that parts of the court's higher levels were also preserved, though much of it appeared like a building site. Additional redbrick arches were spread over various levels, where half-preserved columns sat before crumbling walls. Sudden drops were blocked off by red and white cordons, whiteboards, or benches. Scaffolding supported some of the roofs. Originally, these spaces had been princely apartments and a throne hall, but little attested to its earlier grandeur beyond a single tall and majestic column. A black and white cat calmly munched on some grass in a sunny corner.

Because of its history, and despite its current state, the Old Princely Court is probably one of the most atmospheric, easily accessible, and, perhaps most importantly, true sites connected with Vlad in Romania. It was thus all the more ironic then that unlike the other locations I'd visited, where the tourists flow by the busload, I was totally alone. From the palace's highest point, I watched a nearby street, where people from across the world were going about their business, just as I imagined they had done 500 years ago. Pastry shops sold doughnuts stuffed with chocolate, fruit, or vanilla. The bars were starting to fill up with people and smoke. A nearby store sold antiques.

None of this would have been happening if Vlad hadn't constructed his court here nearly 600 years earlier; Bucharest developed because of him. And so, in the end, perhaps it is this city, built around the Old Princely Court, that is the greatest and most visible symbol of his impact on history. More-so than Bran and Braşov. More-so than Sighişoara, where a restaurant and small museum now stand on the spot assumed to be the impaler's birthplace. More-so maybe than the Princely Court at Vlad's main residence Târgovişte, and Poienari Castle, a fortress expanded and used by Vlad, which are both in ruins today. And certainly more-so than any tenuous link with Stoker's Dracula story. Perhaps it's time to put a stake in that one. ●

Getting there

Flying

Numerous carriers fly to Bucharest, including British Airways, KLM, Lufthansa, Air France, Ryanair, and Germanwings. Romania's national airline, Tarom, also flies between Bucharest and cities in Europe.

Border crossings

Romania shares borders with Ukraine, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Moldova. The country can be entered by car from each of these locations. Car ferries also allow access from Bulgaria.

Visas

Members of the EU do not require a visa to visit Romania. Those from Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as some other countries, can also enter without a visa, as long as they stay for less than 90 days. For more information visit: <http://mae.ro/en/node/2035>

Getting around

Most of Romania is covered by a train network, though services run slow. Buses are also reliable, with routes, times, and fares searchable on <http://www.autogari.ro/>. Local minibuses and the smaller maxitaxis are also options. Domestic flights operate between major cities.

Holidays

(In 2015): January 1st (New Year's Day), January 2nd (Day after New Year's Day), January 24th (Unification Day), April 12th-April 13th (Easter holiday), May 1st (Labour Day), May 31st (Orthodox Pentecost), June 1st (Orthodox Pentecost Monday), August 15th (Assumption of Mary), November 30th (St Andrew's Day), December 1st (Romanian National Day) December 25th (Christmas Day), December 26th (Second Day of Christmas).

See <http://romaniatourism.com> for more information

Money

Currency: Although Romania is in the EU, it has its own currency which is the leu, called lei in plural. You'll also find it referred to as RON. Notes are in denominations of 1 leu, 5 lei, 10 lei, 50 lei, 100 lei, 200 lei and 500 lei. There are 100 bani in one leu, which come as 50 bani and 10 bani coins.

ATMs are available throughout Romania.

Credit cards are widely accepted across Romania.



Interior of Bran Castle

Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 2

Language: Romanian is the official language of Romania, but English is also widely spoken. Romanian is the only Romance language spoken in eastern Europe, though many words are also derived from nearby Slavic languages.

Electrical current/ plugs: 230V/50Hz plugs of the rounded two-pronged variety.

Water: Tap water in Romania is generally safe to drink.

Politics: Romania is a semi-presidential republic. It has a democratically elected president, who serves as head of state, and a prime minister, who serves as head of government.

Religion: Over 81% of Romanians are Christian Orthodox.

Weather

The weather is quite changeable across Romania; it can be a sunny April day in Bucharest and snowing a few hours north in the mountains of Transylvania - so if travelling, you should pack accordingly. On the whole though, Romania's climate is temperate, with temperatures reaching -3 degrees Celsius in Bucharest in January, and rising as high as 22 degrees Celsius in July.

Short history of Romania

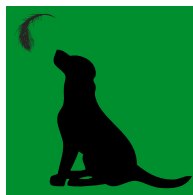
One of the earliest groups to live in the geographical region today known as Romania were the Dacians, who became distinct from other associated tribes in around 500 BCE. The Roman Emperor Trajan entered the Dacian kingdom in 101 and 102 CE, and added it to the Roman Empire (an event marked by Trajan's intricately sculpted column, which can now be seen in Bucharest's National History Museum).

The Romans retreated south in 271 CE, but left their mark on the language of Romania to this day. Over the following centuries, various groups invaded Dacia, with the Hungarians taking control of Transylvania in the early second Millennium. In the 13th century, the region became an autonomous principality controlled by the Hungarian king. Wallachia, location of modern capital Bucharest, became its own independent principality in the 14th century, but became a vassal of the Ottoman empire in 1417.

The Ottomans took Hungary in the 16th century, making Transylvania a vassal of Constantinople. Though Transylvania suffered over the succeeding centuries, Wallachia prospered. The United Romanian Principalities, consisting of Wallachia and Moldavia, came into existence in 1861, and by 1881, Romania, as it was now called, was independent of the Ottoman empire and had crowned its first king, Carol I.

Following the defeat of Austria-Hungary in 1918, Transylvania became part of Romania, along with various other nearby territories. After World War II, Romania became a communist state, heavily influenced by Moscow and part of the Eastern Bloc. In this time, Nicolae Ceauşescu came to power, reigning with a paranoid iron fist until the 1989 revolution and his execution. Since, though the road has been rocky, Romania has joined NATO and the EU, and is increasingly becoming a popular tourist destination.

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