

Dracula

Prince of Many Faces

by Thomas Lera

Vampires have appeared in the folklore and legends of many cultures from ancient times. Interest in the English-speaking world can be traced back to 1732, when the word “vampyre” first appeared in our language. In the late nineteenth century, “Dracula” became synonymous with the King of Vampires and the world of nightmares has not been the same since.

Yes, there was a real Dracula, a true prince of darkness. He was Prince Vlad III Dracula of Wallachia (1431–1476), also known to the chroniclers of the time as Vlad Tepes, meaning “Vlad the Impaler.” He was born and spent his childhood in Transylvania, which at that time was ruled by Hungary; however, the throne of Wallachia (now southern Romania) was not necessarily hereditary — its princes were elected by the land-owning nobles, the boyars.

Vlad’s father was one of several contenders claiming the right to rule the province, but he was backed by Sigismund, the Holy Roman Emperor. While in an earlier exile at Sigismund’s court, the elder Vlad had been with the elite Order of the Dragon, a military order charged with the defense of the Holy Roman Empire against the Ottoman Empire. It is interesting to note that the ceremonial costume of the Order of the Dragon was a red garment draped with a long black



The Romanian stamp (Scott C71) issued in 1959 in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the founding of Bucharest, featured a medieval portrait of Prince Vlad Tepes.



Transylvania was the birthplace of Dracula in fact and fiction. Its recovery and the return of King Carlos I to Bucharest following the First World War were celebrated with the issuance of three 1919 overprints, of which the black (Romania Scott 245) and rose (Scott 247) versions are shown.

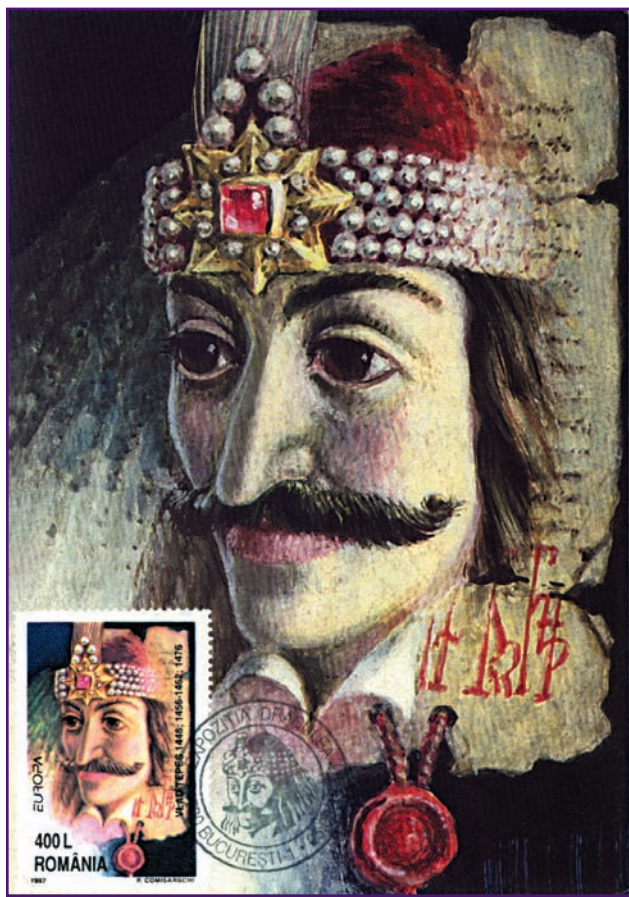
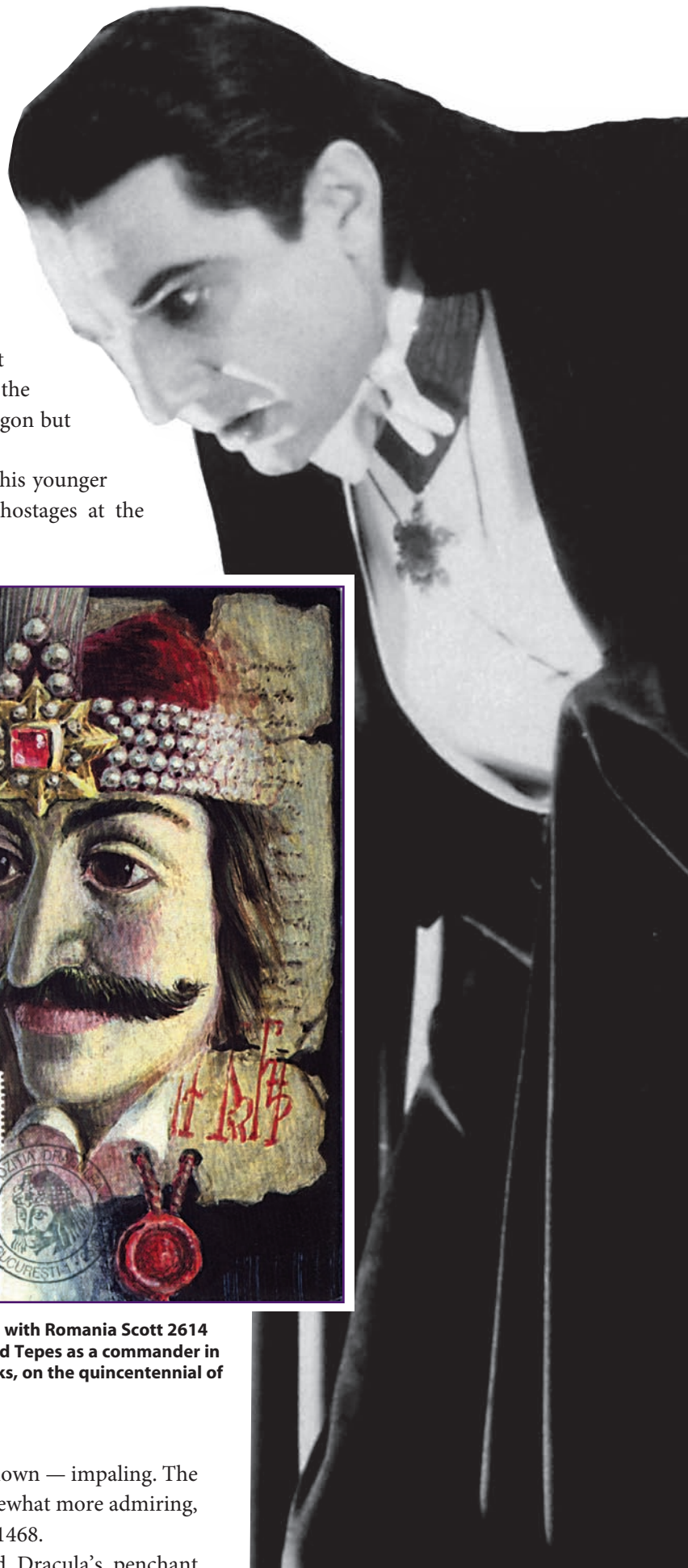
cape. When he gained the throne of Wallachia Vlad II used the name Vlad Dracul, which could mean either “dragon” or “devil.” After the death of Vlad II, his son, Vlad III, added the suffix “-a,” meaning “son of,” to his father’s name, becoming Prince Vlad Dracula.

It was an era when great cruelties were accepted of kings and nobles as a matter of course (Vlad’s older brother was said to have been buried alive), but the excesses of Vlad Dracula were to leave such a mark that by the time Bram Stoker wrote his novel on the king of the vampires, the name of Dracula no longer referred to a dragon but to the Devil.

Vlad III actually ruled Wallachia three times. He and his younger brother Radu “the Handsome” were living as political hostages at the court of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire when their father and older brother Mircea were killed in 1447. The Turks released Vlad in 1448 to take his father’s place but the 17-year-old only ruled for a brief two months before being replaced by a claimant favored by the powerful King of Hungary. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, Vlad renegotiated an alliance with Hungary and, in 1456, was returned to the throne of Wallachia. This time he ruled for six years, from 1456 to 1462, when most of the atrocities with which he is charged were committed.

During 1459–60 a series of ferocious raids against German (Saxon) settlers living in southern Transylvania left some 40,000 men, women, and children dead. This led to the publication in 1463 of a German book, *Geschichte Dracole Waide*, which illustrated in gruesome detail the cruelties of the Wallachian ruler. The catalogue of his tortures and means of putting enemies to death was long: skinning, boiling, decapitating, blinding, strangling, hanging, nailing, burying alive, stabbing, roasting, hacking, and the one for which he became best known — impaling. The book was republished several times, and a similar, but somewhat more admiring, version has circulated in manuscript form in Russia since 1468.

Two of the most widely-repeated stories about Vlad Dracula’s penchant



Romanian maxicard with Romania Scott 2614 honoring Prince Vlad Tepes as a commander in war against the Turks, on the quincentennial of his death in 1476.



Romania 2359 shows the Castle Bran, popularly but incorrectly identified as the home of Dracula.

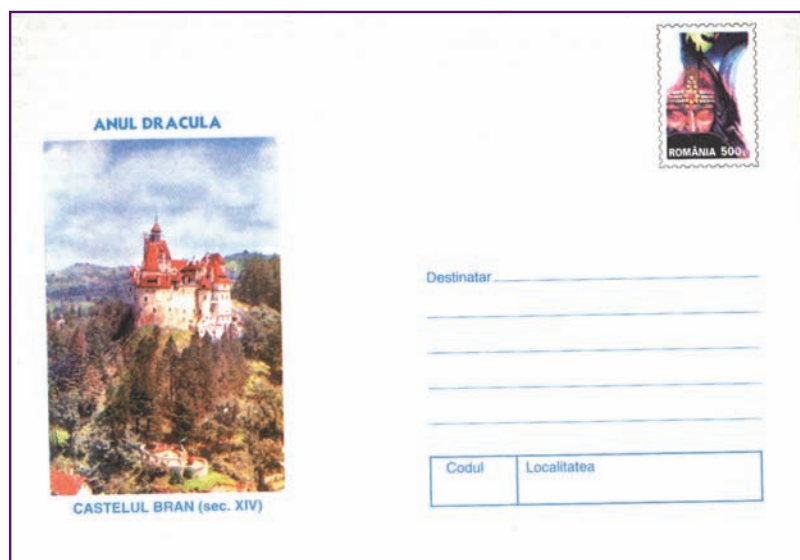
for mass executions have some basis in fact. He was insistent on certain standards of honesty (especially in monetary matters) and virtue (particularly in women), and had an abhorrence of non-productive members of society, whom he considered “thieves.” Transgressions were met with torture and, most often, death by impaling. On at least one occasion, he dealt with matters in

a more sweeping manner. A story relates how, after becoming prince of Wallachia, he invited many beggars, the poor, the sick, and the elderly to a great banquet. When they had finished their meal and drunk a toast to him, the Prince asked, “Would you like to be without cares, lacking nothing in this world?” When they responded with an enthusiastic “Yes,” he had the wooden banquet hall locked and set on fire. “I did this so that no one will be poor in my realm,” he is reported to have said.

Another such murderous banquet was held on Easter Sunday 1459. Vlad Dracula invited the boyars living in Tirgoviste to a holiday banquet, during the course of which he asked them how many princes had ruled in their lifetimes. When they complacently replied that they had lived through several princely reigns, Vlad accused them of having plotted against their rulers and arrested them all. The older noblemen were impaled; those young enough to work were marched fifty miles to the village of Poenari, near the Transylvanian border, where they were forced to reconstruct a mountaintop fortress from the ruins of an older castle. According to legend, they worked until their clothes fell into rags and then were forced to work naked until the new castle was completed. The move served two purposes: It eliminated the boyars who were suspected of complicity in the deaths of Vlad’s father and brother in 1447, and it created an open field for the appointment of new nobles who would owe their prosperity directly to Vlad himself.

Poenari fortress, a small stone castle, fell into disuse shortly after Vlad’s death. It was partially restored in the latter half of the twentieth century and opened to visitors, who can reach the ruins after crossing a little bridge and climbing nearly 1,500 steps. It is one of several places referred to as Castle Dracula. Another is medieval Castle Bran, near the town of Brasov; however, although Dracula stayed there on occasion, it was never his home.

To many in modern day Romania, the historic Vlad Dracula is a heroic figure who successfully fended off powerful Hungarian neighbors to the north and Turkish enemies to the south, either through warfare or a changing and complex series of alliances. It is noteworthy that most of his excesses were committed



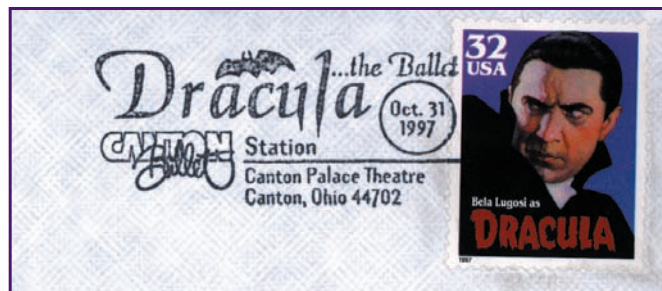
Romanian cover with cachet of Castle Bran and 1997 stamp showing Dracula as vampire (Scott 4158).

against these two groups (the German settlers mentioned earlier were in Transylvania with Hungarian permission). After a surprise raid along the south bank of the Danube during the winter of 1462, Vlad wrote to the King of Hungary asking for military aid. In his letter he boasted: "I have killed men and women, old and young ... 23,884 Turks and Bulgarians without counting those whom we burned alive in their homes or whose heads were not chopped off by our soldiers...." Counting heads was his standard means of accounting for slain enemies.

The Turkish Sultan, Mohammed II, followed this raid with a punitive expedition of his own, and Vlad burned his own people's villages and poisoned their wells to deny water and supplies to the advancing Turkish army. When the Sultan approached the Wallachian capital of Tirgoviste, according to a Turkish chronicler, they found: "In front of the wooden fortress where he had his residence he set up at a distance of six leagues [anywhere between 14.4 and 27.6 miles] two rows of fences with impaled Hungarians, Moldavians and Wallachians. In addition, since the neighbouring area was forested, innumerable people were hanging from each tree branch...." Among these people were Turkish prisoners, but it was the number of Vlad's own people among the dead that gave the Sultan pause.

The Turkish army finally withdrew from the field, but the boyars turned their support to Vlad's brother Radu, deposing their prince in favor of the younger brother. Vlad's wife is said to have committed suicide by throwing herself from a castle tower, while he himself fled north to seek help from Hungary. Instead of the expected support, however, he was held in detention for a number of years at the royal castle of Visegrad, outside modern-day Budapest. Eventually Vlad regained political favor, even marrying into the royal family, but he was not reinstated as the ruler of Wallachia until the fall of 1476, several years after Radu's death. His own death in December of that same year is shrouded in rumor. Vlad Tepes was killed in battle — perhaps assassinated by one of his own soldiers, perhaps by a spy in the pay of the Sultan — in a forest near Bucharest. His head was cut off and carried in triumph to Constantinople, where the Sultan had it displayed on a stake. Vlad's body was said to have been buried in the church at Snagov monastery, one of the many different monasteries he had founded,

Canada's 1997 stamp series on the supernatural included a portrait of a vampire (Scott 1665) dressed very much like the character played by Bela Lugosi.



Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula was featured in the U.S. Classic Movie Monsters series (Scott 3169), issued in 1998. The stamp has a scrambled indicia encoding three bats. Lugosi himself was an avid stamp collector and APS member



The Whitby Dracula Society in Great Britain had a special cancel prepared for the 100th anniversary of the publication of Bram Stoker's Dracula. It was at Whitby that the fictional Dracula's coffin first came ashore in England.



Great Britain's 1998 Stories and Legends series included a stamp honoring the earliest movie version of Count Dracula (Scott 1755).



but archaeological excavations in 1931 failed to locate his grave.

If Transylvania is a region that has become synonymous with vampires for many Westerners, it is largely due to the work of one man, author Bram Stoker, whose novel *Dracula* was first published in 1897 and has remained in print ever since. Stoker already had written a number of works dealing with evil and the supernatural before turning to the universal legend of the vampire. He originally had planned to have his vampire come from Austria; however, during his research he came across an article entitled “Transylvanian Superstitions.” It included references to beliefs in vampires in that particular part of Eastern Europe and sufficiently intrigued Stoker for him to change the locale of his horror story to Transylvania (Latin for “the land beyond the forest”).

Stoker actually knew very little about the real Dracula. He found the name in an obscure history book he had borrowed from the Whitby Public Library, an English resort where he spent a summer vacation in 1890. He had already selected a name for his evil Count — Wampyr — when he ran across William Wilkinson’s *An Account of Wallachia and Moldavia* (1820) and discovered the name “Dracula,” with a footnote suggesting that it came from the Romanian name for the Devil. This fit neatly into Stoker’s conception of a vampire nobleman as the epitome of evil, and he promptly appropriated the name.

Dracula became the yardstick by which all future vampires in both literature and film would be measured. Despite the fact that scant favorable attention was paid to the novel when it first appeared, the figure of Count Dracula became an integral part of popular culture in the twentieth century — from movies, to the ballet, to Count Chocula breakfast cereal. As a result of the novel and the proliferation of Dracula movies, the vampire image has become codified: a dark, spectral man, dressed in black, often of an old, aristocratic, and usually foreign, family.

There lay the Count, but looking as if his youth had been half-renewed, for the white



Romania has mixed feelings about the popularization of “Count Dracula.” A 1997 stamp set showed both an idealized version of the single known historical portrait of Vlad Tepes and an eerie evocation of the vampire count (Scott 4157–

hair and mustache were changed to dark iron-gray; the cheeks were fuller and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were signs of fresh blood.

(Bram Stoker, *Dracula*)

The accepted attributes of a male vampire include two sharp fangs, unusual physical strength, and a strong seductive power over women. The victim’s response to a vampire often is ambivalent, alternating between attraction and repulsion. The vampire has the ability to shape-shift into animal form, usually a wolf and/or a bat, but also a rat, cat, spider, raven, or even a cloud of mist. He casts no shadow and has no reflection in a mirror because he has no soul. He cannot enter a home unless invited in, is repelled by garlic and holy objects — but only if the victim has a strong faith as well — and must sleep in

his coffin filled with soil from his native land. He can be destroyed only if a wooden stake is driven through his heart or he is exposed to direct sunlight.

Unfortunately, Stoker did not live long enough to see the tremendous success of his novel, which came about primarily through its depiction in the movies. The first film adaptation was the 1922 German production “Nosferatu,” but it was Universal Studio’s 1931 production, starring Bela Lugosi, that ensured Dracula’s immortality. Although Lugosi’s voice and physical appearance were very unlike those of the Stoke’s Count, he shaped the image for the twentieth century and set the standard for all other Dracula movies. On a note closer to home, Lugosi was an avid stamp collector and a member of the American Philatelic Society.

The 1929 stamp set issued by Romania to commemorate its union with Transylvania (Scott 347–52) included a view of Castle Bran. Originally built by the Knights of the Teutonic Order in 1212, it is popularly, if incorrectly, known as Dracula’ castle.

In 1997, the one hundredth anniversary of *Dracula* was celebrated with the production of “Dracula, the Ballet” and with the issuance of postage stamps by Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, and Romania. The interesting feature of the

Romanian stamps is their depiction of Vlad Tepes both as the Prince of Wallachia and as an ominous vampire. The gutter panes between the stamps show the ruins of the castle, and the castle in its days of power — shown under a full moon, with the wings of a bat spread behind it.

Halloween is always a Dracula event and there have been many Dracula and/or vampire cancellations on that day — 1997 alone had no fewer than fifteen.

What is it about vampires, Count Dracula in particular, that continues to fascinate us? The vampire epitomizes the breaking of taboos, the challenging of authority, the fine line between power and passion, and the search for immortality and eternal youth. While Stoker's Dracula was the embodiment of evil, by the end of the twentieth century the vampire had evolved into a more ambivalent creature, a clear reflection of the blurring of the boundaries between good and evil in our increasingly secular world.

The word vampire has also been attached to other entities, with more or less relevance. One creature with a clear connection to the old Count is the vampire bat, *Desmodus rotundus*, found throughout Mexico, Central, and South America. This bat is active only during the darkest periods of the night when it is most likely to avoid being caught by nocturnal predators such as owls. Using its chisel-like incisor teeth, the bat makes a small incision in a sleeping animal's (or human's) skin, then drinks the blood that flows from the wound.

Other personae are the Dracula orchid, found from Costa Rica to Colombia, which blooms both by night and day; the British jet fighter De Havilland DH-100 Vampire; the German Vampyr Glider (1921); and the steam launch *The Vampire*, which delivered mail to ports on the Gambia River from 1917 to 1939.

In his article in *Mekeel's*, "Count Dracula — A Philatelic Retrospective," John Semeniuk wrote, "Stamp collectors finally have something to sink their teeth into, philatelically speaking, of course." Fiction has made Vlad Dracula something he never was in life, a vampire, and has thus granted him, like his fictional counterpart, immortality.

Recommended Reading

Belford, Barbara. *Bram Stoker: A Biography of the Author of Dracula* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986). The life of the man who



A Bahamas stamp marking the 75th anniversary of Great Britain's Royal Air Force (1918–1993) featured a De Havilland DH-100 Vampire (Scott 773)



A Berlin semipostal from 1979 featured a Vampyr Glider, 1921 (Germany Scott 9NB153).



Even a postal steam launch, *The Vampire*, which delivered mail along the Gambia River from 1917 to 1939, reflected the dread Count (The Gambia Scott 408, issued 1980).



The dreaded vampire bat of legend comes to life in Central and South America and is featured on Belize Scott 1029 and Trinidad & Tobago Scott 246.

turned Prince Dracula into a vampire.

McNally, Raymond T., and Radu Florescu. *In Search of Dracula: The History of Dracula and Vampires* (Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1994).

This book explores the connections between the real Dracula and Bram Stoker's fictional vampire.

Maccetti Manuela Dunn. *Vampire, the Complete Guide to the World of the Undead* (Viking Studio Books, Penguin Group, 1992).

Miller, Elizabeth. "Dracula: The History of Myth and the Myth of History," *Journal of the Dark* (November 9, 1996).

Semeniuk, John. "Count Dracula — A Philatelic Retrospective," *Mekeel's & Stamps Magazine* (October 31, 1997): 22–23.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula* (Archibald Constable and Company, Westminster, England, 1897). The novel that immortalized Dracula.

Vampire Book Bibliography at www.afn.org/~vampiries/bkslist.html

The Author

Thomas Lera collects the topics of caves and bats. His exhibit "Masters of the Night" won the Grand at the 1999 Topical Stamp Show. His other exhibit, "Celebrated American Caves," is a display class exhibit.