Vlad the Impaler: The Real Dracula?

The inspiration behind numerous films, TV programmes and novels, Count Dracula is one of the most fearsome fictional characters ever created. However, did you know that the character of Dracula is thought by many to be based on a real person with an equally terrifying reputation?

The writer Bram Stoker created Dracula in 1897 as the main character in his novel bearing the same name. He is thought to have named his villain after the Wallachian Prince, Vlad III – more commonly known as 'Vlad the Impaler', owing to his unusual way of dealing with any opposition. However, other than sharing a name and having a liking for blood, the two Draculas have little else in common.

Early Life

Vlad III Dracula was born in 1431 in Transylvania, modern-day Romania. The name 'Dracula' means 'son of Dracul'. Vlad's father came to be known as 'Dracul', meaning 'dragon', after he joined the Order of the Dragon. This was an organisation established to defend Christian Europe against the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

In 1436, Vlad moved to Târgoviște, Wallachia. In 1442, Vlad and his younger brother, Radu, accompanied their father to a diplomatic meeting with the Ottoman Sultan, Murad II, which turned out to be a trap. All three were captured and the older Vlad was set free as long as he left his two sons behind as an incentive for him to support Ottoman policies. At the Sultan's palace, the young Vlad was taught to be a skilled horseman and fighter; but whilst his brother went over to the Turkish side, Vlad harboured resentment for being held captive.

The Battle for the Throne

Vlad returned to Wallachia in 1448, when he discovered that his father and older brother had been assassinated by Wallachian boyars (noblemen) a year earlier. Vlad soon launched a campaign to regain his father's seat from Vladislav II, fighting against the boyars and his younger brother, who was supported by the Ottoman Sultan. Initially, he was successful, but his reign lasted for only two months before Vladislav took back the throne. It was only after another eight years of fierce fighting that Vlad finally reclaimed his father's seat.

In 1456, Vlad was proclaimed 'voivode' (or ruler) of Wallachia, after which he committed a series of violent acts which earned him his blood-thirsty reputation. In 1462, for example, he retreated from a battlefield which he left filled with thousands of soldiers impaled on stakes in the ground left to die as a warning to his Ottoman enemies. It was this brutal method of torture which earned him his nickname of 'Vlad the Impaler' (or Vlad Tepes in Romanian).

According to local legend, Vlad invited hundreds of boyars to a huge banquet and had his guests stabbed and impaled on spikes in order to consolidate his power.

Another legend tells how Vlad was visited by a group of Ottoman diplomats, who, according to religious custom, refused to remove their turbans. Allegedly, Vlad commended them for their religious devotion and ensured that their turbans would be forever attached to their heads by having them nailed to their skulls!

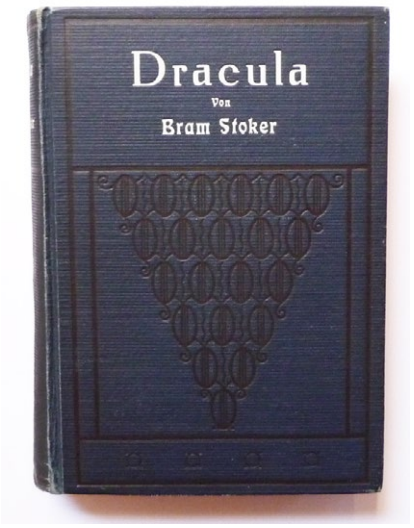
A further gruesome tale tells how Vlad invited all of Wallachia's poor and homeless people to a huge banquet and, while they were eating, locked the doors and burnt the building down.

Death of a Monster

In 1462, Vlad narrowly avoided capture by the Ottomans, only to be captured and imprisoned by another enemy – Matthias I of Hungary – who held him captive for a number of years. His brother Radu took over the throne during this time, but after Radu's death in 1475, Vlad successfully reclaimed his title as ruler of Wallachia with the support of the local boyars. However, his reign was short lived; in 1476, he was killed shortly after in battle with the Ottoman claimant to Wallachia. His body was allegedly found face-down in a bog, left there to rot by the very people he terrorised. He was later decapitated by the Turks and his head displayed on a pike in Constantinople as proof that the blood-thirsty Vlad the Impaler was finally dead.

The Inspiration Behind Count Dracula?

Whether Bram Stoker's fictional character was actually based on the life of Vlad the Impaler or not is debatable. Stoker's son said that his father created the terrifying count following a nightmare after eating 'too much dressed crab.' It seems likely, however, that the name of the character did indeed come from Vlad III Dracula. Stoker probably didn't know a great deal about Vlad or his gruesome deeds, but his notes for the novel do show that he read a book called 'An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia'. This contained a short section about the ruler Dracula who had battled against the Ottomans. The book had contained a footnote saying that Dracula means 'devil', which, while not strictly true, the writer copied into his notes and used the name for his main character as well as setting the novel in Vlad's birthplace of Transylvania.



The Medical Facts behind the Vampire Myth

The first mention of the word 'vampire' in the English language appeared in the 1730s, well over 100 years before Bram Stoker's famous novel was published. However, stories of terrible monsters, including vampires, have been in existence all over the world since much, much earlier. They date from times when science and medicine were in their infancy and when diseases could strike without warning and cause devastating effects to their victims. With little knowledge of the causes or treatment of these ailments, people often turned to the supernatural to explain their existence and it is thought that one disease in particular may have given rise to the vampire myth.

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Dr David Dolphin, a biochemist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, pointed out a number of similarities between the symptoms of porphyria and the features of vampirism back in 1985. Porphyria is the name given to a group of rare blood diseases, which are usually inherited. The disease is a metabolic disorder affecting the body's production of heme, which is needed to make haemoglobin to transport oxygen in the blood, resulting in numerous serious symptoms. These symptoms, along with other factors listed below, make it plausible that porphyria was actually the inspiration behind some of the more memorable vampire myths:

1. **Extreme sensitivity to sunlight.**
   Porphyria can cause a sufferer's skin to be incredibly sensitive to sunlight. Even mild sunlight can cause damage to the skin, such as itching, rashes and blistering. This leads to scarring and, in the most severe cases, facial disfigurement. This can even lead to the nose or fingers falling off! Excessive sunlight can also cause excessive hair growth, which may also have led to numerous werewolf stories. Porphyria also causes the skin to become incredibly taut and the gums to recede, making the teeth look far more prominent and take on the appearance of fangs. Consequently, many sufferers avoid direct sunlight like vampires, who only come out at night because sunlight can hurt or kill them. Avoiding sunlight can also result in a deathly pale complexion, like that of Bram Stoker's Dracula – as can anaemia, which is another common complaint in many porphyria victims.

2. **No Reflection**
   If they had perhaps lost their nose, had excessive hair growth and receding gums, it stands to reason that some porphyria victims may well have wanted to avoid looking at their own reflection. This rather sad fact may well have been portrayed more dramatically in vampire legends as the creatures simply having no reflection at all.

3. **Purple Urine**
   The name 'porphyria' comes from the Greek word 'porphura', meaning purple. This is owing to the fact that the disease can cause patients' urine to turn purple. This happens when naturally-occurring chemicals, called porphyrins, build up in the body. To superstitious people living many years ago, this oddly-coloured urine may well have looked like recently digested blood, again giving rise to the vampire myth.

4. **Drinking Blood**
   One of the modern treatments for porphyria is to inject the patient with certain blood products to limit the body's production of porphyrins. However, centuries ago, patients may well have been advised to drink blood (though possibly the blood of animals, rather than humans) to help alleviate their symptoms. Before modern medicine was able to provide them with the missing elements of their blood, sufferers may have instinctively craved healthy blood in order to keep them well.

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5. **An Aversion to Garlic**
   It is thought that garlic contains a substance that worsens some of the symptoms of porphyria. In some sufferers, garlic is thought to cause severe pain, thus some patients avoid it out of necessity.

6. **Aggressiveness**
   One of the most distressing aspects of severe porphyria is the mental changes it can cause. Some patients find that the disease causes anxiety, disorientation, hallucinations and paranoia. Left untreated, this can often cause the patient to behave aggressively and become violent, impulsive and incoherent.

7. **Being Repelled by Crucifixes**
   In many vampire stories, a simple way to scare one away is to brandish a crucifix – the idea being that God's power is stronger than evil. However, it is thought that the real reason behind vampires' fear of the cross is actually a fear of the church. Centuries ago, some porphyria sufferers – particularly if they were exhibiting mental changes – would have been dealt with by the local church. This would result in many of them being burnt at the stake or facing other punishments reserved for people thought to be evil or possessed by the devil. It is hardly surprising, then, that many 'vampires' or porphyria victims would be terrified of anything related to the church, which is often symbolised by the crucifix.

8. **Rising from the Dead**
   In rural areas when disasters like plague struck, it was the custom to blame an undead spirit casting a curse on the village. Consequently, the last person to die in the village was often dug up in order to try to break the curse. With medicine being in its infancy, some illnesses which would make a pulse difficult to detect would often go unnoticed, resulting in the victim being buried alive. Occasionally, the victim would awake and be driven mad by terror and hunger. Sometimes, they would bite themselves and then be discovered covered in fresh blood. This is thought to have given rise to the myth of the vampire rising from the dead at night to feast on human blood.

9. **Eastern European 'Vampires'**
   Although porphyria is relatively rare these days, it is thought that centuries ago it may well have been much more common. This was the case in more remote rural communities, where people rarely travelled outside of their own village and the gene pool was much smaller. People often married close family members, so the chances of inheriting a disease were much higher. Farming villages in areas like rural Transylvania, where many of the original vampire myths originated, fit this bill perfectly.