

**Vlad Tepes, his military campaign against the Ottoman Empire in
1462, and the forging of a Romanian national identity**

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Overview: The Political Situation of the Romanian Principalities in the Fifteenth Century

See map of Romanian provinces in the fifteenth century after bibliography

The status of Wallachia and the other Romanian provinces during the fifteenth century as both frontier and buffer zone is well illustrated by the circumstances of the 1462 clash between Vlad III Țepeș and Sultan Mehmed II. The body of this paper is a narrative and critical assessment of the actual military campaign. For a short event (only about 6 months) it was quite complex. Summarizing it too briefly does not give enough information to support my conclusions, so I have gone into detail as necessary to make my final arguments regarding the success or failure of the campaign, what it meant for Wallachia, and how the historiography has treated these events.

I spend some time describing and comparing the Ottoman and Wallachian forces; I believe this is necessary for a good understanding of the events, and to explain my conclusion. I have had to assemble this information from quite a few different sources in order to form a clear picture of what happened, and why. I found that it was the lack of just such information that led to faulty conclusions and an incomplete understanding of the events in other secondary sources. I do not want to make the same mistakes.

Primary sources for this period can be hard to come by. Fortunately, two works exist which provide a wealth of information on Vlad Țepeș, his time as voievod of Wallachia, and his military confrontation with the Ottoman Empire. The first of these sources is *The Histories*, written by the Byzantine Laonikos Chalkokondyles (many spelling variants of his name appear, but this is the one used in the copy of his works that I have, so I will use this spelling throughout the paper). He provides the most thorough narrative of the events of 1462. Also important is the work of Konstantin Mihailovic, *Memoirs of a Janissary*. Mihailovic was part of Sultan Mehmed's expedition to Wallachia, and is the only known first-hand account of these events.

I have two important secondary sources: Radu Florescu and Raymond McNally's influential book *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces*, and Kurt W. Treptow's *Vlad III Dracula: His Life and Times*. Florescu & McNally's work throughout the 1970s and 1980s set the stage for most subsequent English language scholarship on Vlad, but their conclusions run towards the romantic and nationalist. Treptow, in

my opinion, has far better evidence to support his arguments, and I agree with his assessment that the Ottoman campaign was a success.

There are other modern sources that I cite, but they are less important. I will show in my conclusion that I agree with many of the details of Treptow's assessment, but also that Vlad's ultimately futile attempt to resist the Ottoman Empire was important for the growing national identity of Wallachia and, later, ethnic Romanians.

There was, of course, no Romania at the time; what we know as the modern country only unified in the nineteenth century. There were, however, Romanians. We must remain aware that the modern idea about nationalities and ethnicities being almost interchangeable was not always the norm. We tend to think about Romanians as living in Romania, Hungarians in Hungary, and the same for the Germans, French, and so on. However, the current notion of the nation-state did not exist in the Europe of five hundred years ago, and the idea of national borders aligning with ethnic identity was also absent.

At the time, the ruler and his possessions provided the basis for a political entity. As an example, the Holy Roman Empire is roughly analogous to modern Germany, but it was a single political entity in name only. It had an Emperor, but it also had many lesser nobility, semi-autonomous cities, and a complex system of vassalage in which a subordinate state often owed allegiance to more than one ruler or larger state. Though most of its subjects spoke German, this alone did not identify them as a single political or social entity. People were more likely to describe themselves in terms of their locality, allegiance to their local ruler, or even religious affiliation. The idea of being “German” as a defining national characteristic simply did not exist at the time.

So it was for the principalities that now comprise modern Romania and Moldova. The three most important political entities of the time were Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia. There are also other terms for these areas, including Țara Românească, Ardeal, Muntenia, and Bessarabia, but this paper will limit itself to the more commonly recognized names, except when other names are used while quoting original sources. Each of these principalities was home to people who spoke the Romanian language, whom we would recognize as being ethnically Romanian. There were also, however, many inhabitants who were not ethnically Romanian: Hungarians, Szekely, Saxons and others who would nonetheless be identified primarily by the area in which they lived.

Transylvania was the most diverse of these principalities, and it remains so today. The Romanian inhabitants of Transylvania at the time were more likely to think of themselves first as Transylvanians rather than Romanians, having closer cultural ties with the Hungarians and Saxons in their own cities than with the ethnic Romanians living in other principalities, such as Wallachia. In fact, the term Wallachs or

Vlachs was usually used to describe the Romanian inhabitants of Wallachia, highlighting the basis of their identity as connected to the land, rather than their ethnicity. This is still true today, as popular souvenirs from Transylvania such as key chains or plaques declare “Above all else I am proud to be Transylvanian”, and these can be purchased with the motto in Romanian, Hungarian or German.¹

It is important that we keep these things in mind while considering the history of the region. It will help us to better understand the attitudes and actions of those who lived there, and of those who ruled. As we shall see, the relationships of these people and their rulers to each other were often not what we might expect, and become almost unintelligible if we try to view them through the filter of modern ideas of ethnic and national identity. Wallachia in the fifteenth century had its own concepts of self. These sprang from the traditions and culture of the people who lived there, and were further shaped by their relationships with their neighbors, in particular the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.

Vlad III Țepeș, also known as Vlad the Impaler or Vlad Dracula², was Voevod of Wallachia on three separate occasions (1448, 1456-62, and 1476). Currently, of course, his name usually conjures images of Transylvania and vampires, especially for those from the west, whose first exposure to the name Dracula was through Bram Stoker’s famous novel. There is no such association in modern Romania, except inasmuch as the locals are aware of many western tourists who are searching for sensational stories and vampire legends. This provides a brisk tourism industry, and the local population gladly caters to the tastes of foreigners who bring a considerable amount of money into the Romanian economy.

For those who live there, though, Vlad is very real, a figure from their past who is remembered first as a great leader and, to a lesser extent, as a symbol of Romanian nationalism. His legendary acts of cruelty are of secondary importance. What defines him in the minds of modern Romanians is his defiance of Ottoman rule, and his efforts to maintain Wallachia as an independent principality, despite the pressure of larger and more powerful neighbors on all sides. Busts and statues of Vlad can be found all over Romania today. In Bucharest, at the site of his court which first brought the current capital city to prominence, his likeness is carved in stone. At the Muzeul Militar National, a bust of Vlad stands beside those of Ștefan cel Mare and Janos Hunyadi, his contemporaries and rulers of Moldavia and Transylvania, respectively. M.J. Trow says of Vlad that even today, “He is still referred to there as Țepeș, the Impaler,

¹ In Romanian, “Mai presus de orice și ma mandresc sunt Ardelean”

² Vlad III is often confused with his father, Vlad II Dracul. The elder Vlad took the surname Dracul, meaning “dragon” after being inducted into the Order of the Dragon by Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund. The name Dracula is the diminutive, meaning “son of the dragon”. It is unclear if Vlad III ever used the name to refer to himself, but others used the name to refer to him. In any event, Vlad III was never inducted into the Order of the Dragon, and the name Dracul refers only to his father.

and seen by the Romanians almost as a badge of pride, a freedom-fighter and national hero.”³ Vlad’s defining effort in this capacity was his refusal to pay the customary tribute due from a vassal state to the Porte, and his further provocation of Ottoman wrath by killing those vassals sent to collect the tribute, culminating in a military clash in Wallachia in 1462.

The success or failure of this campaign has been argued from its own time to the present day. Probably the most popular view, at least in Romania, is that Vlad was successful in repelling the mighty Ottoman forces, resulting in not only continued autonomy for Wallachia, but a degree of protection for the rest of Europe. Florescu and McNally write that “There can be no question that Sultan Mehmed had suffered the most humiliating defeat of his career at the hands of Dracula, and that his plans to reduce Wallachia to a Turkish province had failed dismally...”⁴ This is certainly a romantic and appealing interpretation of events, especially for Romanians who like to view their country as carrying on a valiant stand against the incursions of a much larger empire, and in a sense being the guardians of European culture, and of the Orthodox Christian religion.

It is much closer to the truth to understand that both the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary perceived that Wallachia was most valuable and important as a buffer state. It is almost certain that if either of these larger powers wanted to bring Wallachia firmly into their respective spheres of influence, they had the means to do so. However, this was not in their interests. As Kurt Treptow observes, “...the Ottoman sources clearly state that the sultan’s intention was to change the ruling prince, not to transform the country into a pashalik.”⁵

With the limited autonomy of Wallachia, which often owed some debt of fealty to both Kingdom and Empire simultaneously, the two major players had room to act without precipitating armed conflict. The sultan was aware that Vlad, and rulers before him, had sworn oaths of loyalty and mutual assistance with Hungary. The Hungarian kings knew that Wallachia regularly paid tribute to the Porte, and sent young boys to be raised as janissaries.

Any of these actions could have easily been perceived as betrayals of one promise or another, and Wallachia taken by force. All this would accomplish, however, is to require greater attention, more resources, and likely a garrison of troops to hold an area that either power could currently move through freely and exploit for aid in time of need. By officially recognizing Wallachia as a client state, but allowing it self-rule, Hungary and the Ottomans enjoyed many of the benefits of having it as a vassal, with the added ability to simply ignore it when convenient to do so.

³ Trow, M. J. 2003. *Vlad the Impaler: in search of the real Dracula*, p.2

⁴ Florescu & McNally, *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces*, p.150

⁵ Treptow, *Vlad III Dracula: the life and times of the historical Dracula*, p.126

The rulers of Wallachia understood this situation during the fifteenth century. The most workable approach had been to strike a balance between the two powers. Vlad's father, Vlad Dracul, had done so with some success. He earned his surname by being inducted into the Order of the Dragon by Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund. This order of knighthood was created in order to defend Christendom from Turkish incursions. Hungary thus had a measure of assurance that Vlad Dracul would remain loyal to that kingdom, and act in its best interests. However, he also continued to pay tribute to the Porte, sending both money and young boys for the janissary corps. Further, he was required to send two of his sons, Vlad (who would later be known as Dracula), and his youngest son Radu, to the Sultan as hostages to ensure their father's continued cooperation. Kurt Treptow relates, "Dracul's sons Vlad and Radu remained as Ottoman prisoners in order to ensure their father's continued loyalty to the Porte. The young princes were imprisoned at Egrigöz in an isolated part of Anatolia."⁶

So it was that after the deaths of his father and older brother in a feud with Janos Hunyadi, the Governor of Transylvania, Vlad III was placed on the Wallachian throne with Turkish support.⁷ His position was tenuous, however, and he was quickly replaced by the pretender to the Wallachian throne, Vladislav II Danești, with the support of Hunyadi. Vlad's first reign was over in a matter of months.

This was not entirely unprecedented or unexpected. While in theory the voievod was an absolute ruler, this was not so in practice. The support of the boyars, the lesser nobility, was required to remain in power in Wallachia. The boyars, however, were a notoriously fractious and self-serving lot, who changed their loyalty frequently, and seemingly on a whim. During his second reign, from 1456-62, Vlad sought to consolidate his power first by establishing a loyal bodyguard of mercenaries, then eliminating troublesome boyars. Many stories of Vlad's atrocities in his bid to centralize power and eliminate his rivals are told in the German pamphlets, but these were purposely exaggerated in order to damage Vlad's reputation.⁸ Chalkokondyles, from whom so much of our knowledge of Vlad comes, tells us that "...he [Vlad] summoned separately each of the distinguished men of the realm who, it was believed, had committed treason during the transfer of power there. He killed them all by impalement, them and their sons, wives, and servants, so that this one man caused more murder than any other about whom we have been able to learn. In order to solidify his hold on power, they say that in a short time he killed twenty thousand men, women, and children."⁹ Even if this number is exaggerated, which seems likely, it is clear that Vlad went to great lengths to root out any boyars whom he felt he could not trust.

⁶ Treptow, p.47

⁷ Florescu & McNally, p.64-65

⁸ Examples in Treptow, Appendix IV, "The German Stories About Vlad III Dracula"

⁹ Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*, 9.83, p.369 [citations for this work are listed by book and passage number]

For the next eight years, the political situation in Wallachia continued to be volatile. Power in both Hungary and the Ottoman Empire changed hands. Janos Hunyadi died of the plague in 1456; his son Matthias Corvinus became king of Hungary two years later. Sultan Murad II suffered a fatal stroke, and was succeeded by his son Mehmed II. In 1453, Mehmed II would destroy the last vestiges of the Byzantine Empire by taking Constantinople, earning for himself the sobriquet “The Conqueror”.

Vlad, meanwhile, seems to almost disappear during this period. We know that he traveled between Moldavia and Transylvania, sometimes seeking support to retake the throne of Wallachia, sometimes on the run from his enemies. He finally succeeded in regaining power in 1456, the same year Hunyadi died. He invaded Wallachia and slew his rival Vladislav II, taking back the throne.¹⁰ He would reign for six tumultuous years, constantly trying to strike a balance between the two great powers on his borders, and so assure Wallachian autonomy. His greatest effort, and the defining episode of his rule, would come at the end, when he struck out at the Ottoman Empire with his army of hopelessly outclassed and outnumbered Wallachians. Aside from a brief episode at the outset, this was a defensive fight, designed to minimize Ottoman influence and control over Wallachia. Vlad certainly did not entertain any thoughts of toppling the Ottoman Empire, or even of organizing an offensive expedition. His goals, as we shall see, were simply to remain in power, and rule over an autonomous country. Too small to threaten its neighbors, the best Wallachia could hope for was to assert its right to self-rule, and maintain a degree of independence from its larger and more powerful neighbors.

Bringing War to the Turks

By the autumn of 1461, Vlad had reigned in Wallachia for five years. During this time he was constantly engaged in the political balancing act that was necessary in order to secure his throne. His relationship with the Ottoman Empire was relatively stable. Vlad paid his annual tribute to the Porte, and Mehmed II was content to leave Wallachia as a loose vassal state. Relationships with Hungary were considerably more problematic.

Culturally and socially, Wallachia was much closer with its Hungarian neighbors than to the Turks. The most important commercial ties it had were with the Saxon fortified towns in Transylvania. With Wallachia itself being relatively underdeveloped, it relied on regular trade with its more cosmopolitan northern neighbors. There were also noble families of Romanian descent within the Kingdom of Hungary and Moldavia. This closeness of contact resulted in more conflict, as the political and commercial interests of various towns and families were often at odds with each other.

¹⁰ Treptow, p.61

Political rivals for Vlad's throne had their own agendas, and were frequently supported by the king of Hungary or at least by his vassals. As far as Hungary was concerned, who ruled in Wallachia was irrelevant so long as they were likely to remain loyal to the crown, and foster good trade relations with the important merchant cities of Transylvania. There was, however, a rivalry between Vlad's family and the rival Danești family. As Vlad Dracul and Janos Hunyadi often found themselves at odds, Hunyadi supported the rival Danești family's claims to the throne of Wallachia, eventually resulting in Dracul's beheading by Vladislav II.¹¹ Janos Hunyadi himself had taken on the role of protector of Wallachia in 1447, in order to deny it to Vlad Dracul, before passing the title on to Vladislav II.¹²

Relationships between the leading noble families were often complex, and based on personal as well as political history. Vlad Dracul, and thus his son Vlad Țepeș, had a strained relationship with the Hunyadi dynasty. This might have ended with the deaths of John Hunyadi and Dracul, but Hunyadi's son Matthias Corvinus ascended to the Hungarian throne. At various times, Corvinus supported, undermined, and even actively opposed Vlad, as we shall see.

In 1456, Vlad helped put his cousin, Stephen the Great (Ștefan cel Mare) on the Moldavian throne. However, the two were often at odds on later dates, siding with the Turks or Hungarians against the other, as circumstances dictated.

The most serious political threat Vlad faced from Hungary was when Matthias Corvinus supported Dan III, pretender to the Wallachian throne, beginning in 1458.¹³ The Saxon leaders of Brașov, the most powerful fortified town in Transylvania, were in conflict with Vlad over commercial regulations and practices. Matthias ordered Brașov to stop exporting weapons to Wallachia, and dispatched Dan to the city to prepare for a military campaign to remove Vlad from power.¹⁴

This was unsuccessful, however. Dan III was defeated in a battle near Rucăr, and his fate described in a German pamphlet published shortly thereafter. "And then he [Vlad] captured Dan and forced him to dig his own grave and ordered that the funeral service be read according to the Christian rite, and then he had him beheaded next to his tomb."¹⁵ It is possible that Matthias could have continued to oppose Vlad by supporting another rival for his throne, but he did not have the opportunity. In the face of unstable relations with Emperor Frederick III, Corvinus decided he was better served by supporting stability in Wallachia, and directed Brașov to make peace with Vlad. A letter to the council of Brașov

¹¹ Trow, p.160

¹² Trow, p.150

¹³ Treptow, p.104

¹⁴ Gundisch, *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenburgen*, quoted in Treptow, p.105

¹⁵ Contemporary German pamphlet quoted in Treptow, p.112

delivered by the Hungarian official Nicolai of Ocna Sibiului directed the city “not to molest or hinder travelers from Wallachia.”¹⁶

Braşov, as already mentioned, was a fortified town in Transylvania. There were seven of such towns, each the stronghold of the Saxon merchant class. In fact, the German name for Transylvania was Siebenburgen, meaning “seven towns”. Each was an important metropolitan center, but Braşov, called by the Saxons Kronstadt, was the foremost of these. It is in the southeastern corner of Transylvania, placing it close to Wallachia and major trade routes farther east. As with each of the fortified towns, Braşov was ethnically diverse. Like the rest of Transylvania, the bulk of the population was made up of Romanian peasants. They were essential because they worked the land, but had little political presence. Ethnic Hungarians were also to be found throughout Transylvania. Broadly speaking, they enjoyed greater status than the Romanian peasants, and could be found in the cities and more rural areas. Those who were at the peak of Transylvanian society were the Saxon merchants. These ethnic Germans were wealthy, and erected the fortifications around their towns. They also served as the ruling council.

While they were within the boundaries of the Kingdom of Hungary, the rulers of these towns had a great degree of autonomy, and their local authority was rarely challenged. As Wallachia was relatively underdeveloped at the time, mercantile relations with Transylvania were essential for the prosperity of the more rural province. On many separate occasions, treaties were signed with one or another of these commercial centers which regulated trade with Wallachia. The free passage of merchants, the protections they were guaranteed under the law, and rates of taxation were frequently listed in these documents. There were often also other stipulations of a more political nature, requiring the town to pledge support to the other party (usually a voievod) against his rivals in exchange for commercial concessions.

Further complicating Vlad’s relationships with Hungary and the Transylvanian Saxons was the fact that he also had two small holdings in Transylvania. The duchies of Amlaş and Făgăraş had been ruled by Vlad Dracul, and so should have passed to Vlad Ţepeş. As it happened, they were gifted to others by the Hungarian crown while Vlad was in disfavor. Documents written during 1459, however, indicate that Vlad was at that time once again in possession of these two locations.¹⁷

This, of course, ensured that Vlad’s political situation was even more entangled with Transylvania. He now nominally owed fealty to the Hungarian crown as lord of these lands, and the populations of Amlaş and Făgăraş owed fealty to both Matthias Corvinus and to Vlad. As the two rulers

¹⁶ Treptow, p.114

¹⁷ Treptow, p.102

were not always in accord, this created potential difficulties for the merchants in these duchies. In looking out for their own interests, they were bound to anger one or another of their rulers.

Relations between Vlad and the Transylvanian Saxons would remain unstable. Usually calm prevailed, and trade was carried on without incident, but occasional episodes of violence and reprisals did occur. It is worth noting that it is these disagreements, and Vlad's punitive measures taken against the Saxons, that led to the stories of Vlad's infamous excess and cruelty becoming widely known. The Saxons had access to the printing press, and distributed pamphlets embellishing Vlad's fearsome reputation, and exaggerating the violence for which he was responsible. The legend of Dracula as bloodthirsty tyrant began during his own lifetime.

After 1460, tensions between Hungary and Wallachia faded. Dan III had been dispatched, Vlad was secure in his authority, and trade with Saxon Transylvania resumed. In short, the political situation to the north of Wallachia normalized. With no immediate threat from that direction, Vlad turned his attentions elsewhere.

It is unclear in exactly which year this happened, because contemporary accounts do not agree, but by no later than 1460 Vlad had stopped sending tribute to the Ottoman Empire. Up until this point, his relationship with Mehmed II had been unremarkable. Vlad paid his annual due, and the Sultan left him to rule Wallachia without interference.

Why Vlad stopped sending this tribute is unknown. With the relationship between Vlad and Matthias Corvinus stable but tenuous, it seems he should not have antagonized the empire on his southern border. Perhaps he thought the situation with Hungary was more secure than it was, or that he could further cement it by breaking off relations with their common enemy. Perhaps he felt that he had sufficient support from Hungary to break the Ottoman hold on Wallachia. In any event, this is just speculation. No documents exist which explain Vlad's motives, but his refusal to pay tribute significantly destabilized Wallachia's international relations.

The Sultan, of course, was aware of Vlad's refusal to pay tribute. Word also reached him in Constantinople that Vlad had made peace with Matthias Corvinus. Mehmed suspected an alliance between Wallachia and Hungary against the Ottoman Empire, and set about efforts to bring Wallachia more firmly under Ottoman influence. It was, after all, Ottoman support which allowed Vlad to assume power in this vassal state. If he was proving troublesome, there were others more sympathetic to the Sultan's cause who could be installed in his stead.

In an effort to bring Vlad to heel, Mehmed sent a secretary, Thomas Katabolinos, to escort him to Constantinople to pay the tribute owed. The message Katabolinos carried was that if Vlad went with him and willingly submitted to Ottoman authority once again, he would, according to Byzantine chronicler Laonikos Chalkokondyles, “suffer no harm at the hands of the sultan but rather would regain favor and blessing, and would not be overlooked by the sultan if he truly supported the sultan’s interests”.¹⁸ This offer of leniency, however, was insincere.

At the same time Mehmed sent Katabolinos to bring Vlad to the Porte willingly, he also secretly sent another emissary, Hamza Beg. The instructions he gave to Hamza were to capture Vlad by any means, and so bring him to the Porte as a prisoner. Hamza and Katabolinos conspired, and decided on a plan. Katabolinos would go to Vlad and present the sultan’s offer of safe passage and reconciliation. Once Vlad set out with the secretary, Katabolinos would send a signal to Hamza Beg, who waited in ambush.

Having met with Katabolinos, Vlad accepted the sultan’s request, and set off for Constantinople. At the signal from the secretary, Hamza Beg sprang his ambush. Vlad, however, immediately recognized the danger, and ordered his men to arrest the Ottoman emissaries. In the ensuing fight, some of the Ottoman soldiers were killed, others fled, and Katabolinos and Hamza Beg along with their remaining men were captured.

According to a letter Vlad sent to Matthias Corvinus, this incident took place near the fortress of Giurgiu, which Vlad’s forces subsequently captured and burned. In the letter, dated 11 February 1462, Vlad wrote, “...it was us who captured that Hamza-beg, in the Land and in the Turkish Country, near the fortress that is called Giurgiu; the Turks opened the gates of the fortress at the shouts of our men, thinking that only their men would get inside, but ours, mixing together with them, entered and conquered the fortress, which we burned down immediately.”¹⁹

Although this incident is mentioned in several sources, including Konstantin Mihailovic’s account, the chronicles of Chalkokondyles, and later writings by Turkish chroniclers, details are scarce, and it remains unclear exactly how Vlad’s men were able to mix with the Ottoman soldiers. One possibility is that they were indistinguishable from each other. Giurgiu is on the north bank of the Danube, in Wallachia. If the garrison was made up of local troops, they would have dressed and spoken in the same manner as Vlad’s Wallachian troops. There are other indications that Vlad had the gates opened by trickery. Florescu and McNally contend that Vlad dressed in the Turkish style for this purpose, and speaking fluent Turkish, commanded that the gates be opened, although they cite no source for this

¹⁸ Chalkokondyles, 9.84, p.371

¹⁹ Letter from Vlad to Matthias Corvinus, 11 February 1462, quoted in Treptow, p.184

information.²⁰ M.J. Trow argues that Vlad's men must have been armed and dressed as Turks, but again, cites no source.²¹ It is also likely the case that the population of Giurgiu would have had no way of knowing that Vlad was hostile to Ottoman interests, and would have recognized his troops as allies rather than enemies, regardless of their appearance. After all, until this attack, Wallachia had been a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. Unless further information becomes available, the exact means by which Giurgiu was taken will remain unknown. However, we can infer from the facts that the Wallachians, though acting in accordance with their own interests and under the orders of Vlad, did not by their appearance or the fact of their presence under arms at Giurgiu appear to be enemies of the Ottoman Empire.

Chalkokondyles describes what happened next. "After capturing them, he led them all away to be impaled, but first he cut off the men's limbs. He had Hamza impaled on a higher stake, and he treated their retainers in the same way as their own lords."²² This was typical of Vlad, who was accustomed to dealing harshly with his enemies. He must have also realized that this would anger Mehmed greatly, and amounted to a declaration of war. In any event, the ambush proved that the sultan already intended Vlad harm, so there was likely little he could do to avoid conflict with the Ottoman Empire.

Given the inevitability of Ottoman reprisal, Vlad decided to seize the initiative, and dictate the terms of the coming fight as much as he could. He gathered an army and commenced a raiding campaign on both banks of the Danube. There are several contemporary accounts which describe the destruction Vlad and his army wrought. The janissary Konstantin Mihailovic, who was part of Sultan Mehmed's excursion into Wallachia, and provides the only first-hand account we have of these events, writes that "Voivode Dracula the younger rode across the Danube on the ice with his whole army to the Emperor's land below Nikopolis. And there he released his men to plunder and kill both Turks and Christians in the villages and open towns. And there he did great damage to the Emperor, and he had the noses cut off all those living and dead, male and female. And he sent these noses to Hungary, boasting that as many Turks had been defeated and killed as there were of these noses."²³ Chalkokondyles, the Byzantine chronicler, tells us that Vlad "...prepared as large an army as he could and marched directly to the Danube, and crossed through the regions there by the Danube and the land that belonged to the sultan, killing everyone, women and children included. He burned the houses, setting fire wherever he moved. Having worked this great slaughter, he returned back to Wallachia."²⁴

²⁰ Florescu and McNally. 1989. *Dracula, prince of many faces: his life and his times*, p.133

²¹ Trow, p.184

²² Chalkokondyles, 9.86, p.373

²³ Mihailovic, Konstantin, and Benjamin A. Stolz. 2011. *Memoirs of a Janissary*, p.65

²⁴ Chalkokondyles, 9.86, p.373

Vlad was known for his ruthlessness, and this campaign was undeniably brutal, but this was not simply wanton destruction. This was a calculated effort to reduce the Ottoman ability to wage war on Wallachia. Vlad, having been raised in the court of the sultan, was familiar with the Ottoman method of waging war. Further, he had knowledge of previous expeditions across the Danube. This campaign of deliberate destruction was designed to make the time and place of the inevitable Ottoman attack predictable.

Being fully aware that his small Wallachian forces could not stand up to the Ottoman army in the field, Vlad had no intention of carrying on the fight alone. Since his relations with Corvinus were, for the moment, friendly, and the Ottomans were a common enemy, he appealed to the king of Hungary for military aid. He wrote a letter to Matthias in February of 1462, detailing his own campaign across the Danube, and laying out the probable Turkish response. “When the weather permits, that is to say in the Spring, they will come against us with evil intentions and with all their power. But they have no crossing points because we burned all of them, except for Vidin, and destroyed them and made them barren. Because they cannot harm us too much at the crossing point of Vidin, they should want to bring their ships from Constantinople and Gallipoli, across the sea, to the Danube.”²⁵

The annihilation of towns and villages, the destruction of crossing points, and the complete depopulation of the area south of the Danube along his border was designed to limit the Ottoman options for invasion, and to make them predictable and thus easier to defeat. In this, Vlad’s winter campaign was successful, and the Ottoman incursion in the spring conformed to his predictions.

The Ottoman Preparations

See illustrations of Ottoman soldiers of the fifteenth century after bibliography

In the spring of 1462, as Vlad had expected, the Ottomans launched an expedition into Wallachia. What Vlad may not have expected was the scale of the operation, that Sultan Mehmed II would lead the Ottoman forces himself, and that he would send Vlad’s younger brother, Radu cel Frumos (Radu the Handsome), to lead the vanguard.

Before examining the military campaign, however, we must understand the goals of each participant. This was not a simple fight for military supremacy over the lands north of the Danube. Certainly, military victories would assist each side in imposing its will on the other, but Vlad and

²⁵ Letter from Vlad Țepeș to Matthias Corvinus, 11 February 1462, quoted in Treptow, p.183

Mehmed did not fight over a single issue. Each had his own agenda, quite separate from the other, and his own idea of what victory looked like.

Vlad Țepeș, having initiated military action the previous winter, had a good idea of what the Ottoman effort would entail. His pre-emptive raid into Bulgaria would not have weakened Ottoman military capabilities, but would limit their options for launching an offensive into Wallachia. Leaving Vidin as the only viable crossing for the Danube, Vlad assured that the land forces of the sultan would be obliged to attempt a crossing there. In such an event, he would be prepared to hold the opposite bank against them. He could further be assured that because of the damage he had caused south of the Danube, the Turkish army would be either short on supplies, or hampered by an unusually cumbersome baggage train. Either would put logistical strain on the Ottoman forces, and weaken their ability to wage war.

As evidenced by his conduct in the ensuing conflict, Vlad was well aware that he could not win a direct confrontation with the Ottoman army, so he did not plan on initiating one. In fact, he did not need to defeat his enemies in open battle in order to secure victory. All he had to do was make their continued presence in Wallachia untenable. With an overextended supply line, no local resources to forage, and under constant harassment from Vlad's more mobile light cavalry, who also enjoyed an intimate familiarity with the terrain of their homeland, the Ottoman forces would be unable to maintain military pressure on Wallachia, and would be forced to withdraw.

Of course, if the opportunity arose to strike a critical blow at Mehmed's forces, Vlad would take advantage of this. To this end, he sent word to Matthias Corvinus of the inevitable Ottoman attack, and appealed for his help in defending Christian lands from Muslim invaders. In the same letter written in February of 1462, Vlad wrote "Your Majesty should know that we have broken our peace with them [the Ottomans], not for our own benefit, but for the honor of Your Majesty and the Holy Crown of Your Majesty, and for the preservation of Christianity and the strengthening of the Catholic faith."²⁶ This was a personal appeal to Corvinus, not only trying to frame the Ottoman offensive as being against Hungary, but against Catholicism. This is particularly significant as Wallachia adhered to the Orthodox faith. Hungary had for some time been at odds with Wallachia over the intended spread of Catholicism to their smaller southern neighbor, in an attempt to bring them more securely under Hungarian influence. This would not have been lost on Corvinus.

With such a letter and its implicit offer of religious expansion for the Catholic cause, and his continued friendly relations with Hungary, Vlad had good reason to expect help from that quarter, even if it was not, as he asked for, the king's entire army.

²⁶ Letter from Vlad Țepeș to Matthias Corvinus, 11 February 1462, quoted in Treptow, p.184

Sultan Mehmed, meanwhile, organized his own forces and sent them to Wallachia. He, too, knew that the Wallachian forces could not stand against the Ottoman army in direct conflict, so determined to send a force capable of overwhelming Vlad. However, his goal was not the destruction of Wallachia or its complete subjugation to his empire. The resources required to maintain direct control over Wallachia, and the length of the border with Hungary he would then be obliged to defend, were simply not worth the cost. Rather than overextend himself and expose the northern border of his empire to his enemies, he was better served simply bringing Wallachia back into the fold as the loose client vassal it had been in the past. The continued income from tribute, insulation from more formidable enemies, and ability to extend his influence as far as the Carpathians without exposing himself was far more favorable. If, at some point, Mehmed succeeded in conquering Hungary, he could consolidate his hold over Wallachia easily enough.

It was far easier to take advantage of the instability in Wallachia, and simply replace Vlad with a ruler more sympathetic to the Ottoman cause. This person was to be Vlad's younger brother Radu, who had also been sent by their father, Vlad Dracul, to be raised as a hostage in the sultan's court. At first, Radu was resistant to Ottoman influence and the attentions of Mehmed. He soon became reconciled with the sultan, however, and was known to be Mehmed's lover and among his favorites at court.²⁷ Even if he was clearly an Ottoman puppet, he had a legitimate claim to the rulership of Wallachia, and presented to the more rebellious boyars a welcome alternative to the ruthless and intractable Vlad Țepeș. By installing him in power, the sultan solved all the problems Vlad presented in Wallachia without having to win a major military victory, despoil his own lands, or become entangled with Hungary.

Before beginning military preparations for his campaign, Mehmed set the political stage. He invested Radu cel Frumos with the power of rule over Wallachia, legitimizing him as an Ottoman vassal before he even stepped foot outside Constantinople. The janissary Konstantin Mihailovic describes the ceremony: "Having risen, the emperor took him [Radu] by the hand and seated him alongside himself on the right side in another somewhat lower chair and ordered that a purple garment of gold cloth be brought and placed on him. Then he ordered that a red banner be brought, and he gave it to him and in addition money, horses, and tents, as befit a lord, and he immediately dispatched with him four thousand cavalry horses ahead to Nikopolis, in order that he await him there. And the Emperor having assembled an army without delay marched after him."²⁸

The cavalry which the sultan sent with Radu were the *akinci*, a Turkish term meaning literally "raiders". These were distinct not only because of their equipment and tactics, but also the terms of their employment. While employed by the Ottoman Empire, they were not a part of the formal army. They

²⁷ Chalkokondyles, 9.82, p.367

²⁸ Mihailovic, p.66

were not paid as regular troops, nor were they hired as mercenaries. Instead, when a call was sent for these raiders, they reported voluntarily. They were not paid, but were permitted to keep any booty they could take. Any prisoners they took were sold into slavery for profit, except for young boys, who were handed over to the sultan for his janissary corps.²⁹

The akinci were equipped for close combat, with lances, shields, axes, and other hand weapons, but this was not their primary mode of warfare, and they would only attack a markedly inferior force in this way. Their usual tactics were the same as those used by eastern horsemen for centuries- they served as mounted archers. They could harass enemy forces and flee on their faster horses before a counterattack could be organized. They raided civilian settlements, took many prisoners, destroyed anything they could not carry, and generally proved a nuisance to any enemy trying to organize in the area. They also served the essential role of reconnaissance troops, reporting back to the main body of the Ottoman army who followed in their wake.³⁰

The main body of troops was led by Mehmed II himself. It is interesting that he considered this campaign important enough to lead it in person rather than simply dispatching a force while he remained in Constantinople. It is reported by Chalkokondyles that the sultan took it quite personally when Vlad had his emissaries impaled. The sultan, of course, was well acquainted with Vlad himself, as they were raised through adolescence together at the court of Mehmed's father, Murad II. Given this, it is entirely possible that the Ottoman campaign was not merely a political effort, but one motivated by a personal need for revenge against Vlad for his perceived betrayal. If not for this, there seems to be no need for the sultan to put himself in harm's way for so minor an annoyance as Vlad represented. Wallachia posed little danger to the Ottoman Empire as a whole, and was only concerned with its own limited autonomy.

Konstantin Mihailovic describes in detail the composition and equipment of the sultan's army.³¹ It is, in fact, representative of the conventional force fielded by the Ottomans during this time. The elite corps of the army was the janissaries. These were infantry units who were raised from the captured sons of Mehmed's Christian vassals and enemies. They were slave soldiers trained from an early age in the arts of war, and converted to Islam. They were highly disciplined troops who were fanatically loyal to the sultan. Lightly armored, or even lacking armor altogether, janissaries were most frequently armed with sabres and bows, but by the late fifteenth century they also made use of the matchlock arquebus in great numbers.³²

²⁹ Mihailovic, p.89

³⁰ Mihailovic, p.89-91

³¹ Mihailovic, Ch.40, "Concerning Pitched Battle or Warfare and the Heathen Order of Battle", p.83-85

³² Goodwin, Godfrey, *The Janissaries*, ch.2, "The *Devşirme* or Christian Levy", p.32

The rest of the Ottoman infantry was made up of *azapi*, or footsoldiers. Often wearing mail or composite armor, they could be armed in a number of different ways. Spears and various polearms were common, as were both bows and swords. These conventional soldiers acted on the battlefield according to the manner in which each unit was equipped.³³

The bulk of the Turkish forces consisted of *sipahi* cavalry. These were more heavily armored than the *akinci*, but still far lighter and more maneuverable than their European counterparts. Even for these heavy Ottoman cavalry, mobility on the battlefield was key. Often armed with light lances and bows, they provided the flexible and mobile force that was essential for Ottoman tactics. Outflanking their enemies, they could dictate the terms of engagement, and force less mobile opponents to become caught between the *sipahi* and the Ottoman infantry.³⁴

Given the opportunity to prepare before battle, the Ottoman practice was to set a perimeter of wooden stakes around the infantry in the center of their line, forming an anchor for their mobile forces. This hastily erected palisade would be further supported by light cannon.³⁵ As Mihailovic notes, this tactic was consistently effective against the Ottomans more heavily armored and slower European adversaries. The Christian armies of Europe, trained and equipped to fight each other, suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Turks. This was an echo of earlier warfare, as the Mongols employed mounted archers to great effect in the centuries of their ascendancy. If European armies were to be successful against the Ottomans, they had to forego their reliance on heavy troops, especially their knightly cavalry.

The total size of the Ottoman force which undertook the expedition to Wallachia is not known for certain. Chalkokondyles wrote that “this army was huge, second in size only to the one that this sultan had led against Byzantion [meaning the siege of Constantinople in 1453]...and that its size was two hundred and fifty thousand men.”³⁶ This is unlikely, however, and more recent historiography estimates a force of approximately 90,000 men.

The Wallachian Resistance

See illustrations of Wallachian soldiers of the fifteenth century after bibliography

The army that Vlad led against the Ottoman force is less well documented. Contemporary sources were either Turkish, such as Konstantin Mihailovic, or Byzantine, such as Chalkokondyles. They were far more interested in the composition of the Ottoman army than those of the Wallachians they faced. What

³³ Mihailovic, p.89-91

³⁴ Mihailovic, p.89-91

³⁵ Mihailovic, p.93

³⁶ Chalkokondyles, 9.90, p.377

we know of Vlad's forces must be inferred from the little information we have from the chroniclers, and of other Wallachian, Moldavian and Transylvanian military campaigns of around the same time. There also exists material evidence in surviving weapons and armor from the period, so we can still form a picture of the army Vlad was able to field.

Chalkokondyles tells us that when Vlad came into power, his first order of business was to establish a loyal bodyguard of well-paid mercenaries. It was with the assistance of this force that he rooted out the more troublesome and treacherous boyars, reportedly impaling his victims. He then gave their titles and goods to his loyal retainers, establishing as securely as possible the stability of his relations with his remaining boyars.³⁷

Both German and Italian mercenaries were known to have served elsewhere in Eastern Europe during this time, so it is likely that Vlad's mercenary bodyguard would have consisted of such troops. Well-armed and armored in the fashion of European soldiers of the time, they would have looked very much like their western counterparts. Mail armor and brigandines would have been common, as would helmets of the sallet or celata style. Those who could afford it would likely have worn metal breastplates, or even heavier armor, though would not be as completely encased in steel as European knights of the period. Their weapons would most likely have been pikes, halberds or other polearms, well suited to fighting in large formations.³⁸

The boyars supporting Vlad can be most accurately described as being equipped in the Byzantine fashion. Contemporary illustrations show them mounted on sturdy horses, bearing lances and shields similar to those of Hungarian cavalry. Depicted wearing layered robes, they would have worn mail shirts underneath for protection. The overall impression would be a lighter cavalry than the knights found elsewhere in Europe. Particularly wealthy boyars might have appeared indistinguishable from German knights of the time, wearing full suits of gothic plate armor.³⁹ Janos Hunyadi and Matthias Corvinus, Vlad's Hungarian counterparts, are often depicted in such armor. It is reasonable to assume that Vlad himself had access to the same equipment, though there are also accounts of him fighting while dressed in the Turkish fashion. Having knowledge of the fighting conventions and equipment of both Europe and Anatolia, a mix of arms and armor was to be expected.

Wallachia was not a wealthy country, and in any event could not field very many boyars so equipped. Most cavalry at Vlad's disposal would have been much lighter, with considerably less armor.

³⁷ Chalkokondyles, 9.83, p.369

³⁸ Heath, Ian, *Armies of the Middle Ages. Vol 2*, p.56

³⁹ Heath, p.138

This was not a disadvantage, however. As already mentioned, European heavy cavalry tended to come off second best when faced with the more maneuverable Turkish horsemen.

Most of the Wallachian cavalry was thus equipped in a manner similar to the Ottoman Akinci described above. With little armor, armed with bows and light lances, they would have been ideally suited to the role of raiders and reconnaissance troops.⁴⁰ In addition, their horses would not have been the huge destriers of western knights, but a smaller, hardier breed of horses known locally as *huțul*, used to the difficult local terrain.⁴¹

The bulk of Vlad's forces would have been infantry levies. Not full-time or professional soldiers, these were made up of the local population, and only mustered in time of great need. They lacked the training, equipment and discipline of the professional soldiery. Their main advantage was in numbers, and intimate knowledge of the terrain on which they fought. This peasant militia would have dressed in the traditional manner of Wallachians- a costume which can still be found to this day in the more rural areas of Romania. High boots, with breeches tucked in, would be worn under long white tunics, reaching to the knees. This would be belted with a wide sash, and over all a long sheepskin vest was worn. Hats were also of sheepskin. If available, layers of leather or wool might also be worn as protection, but there would be no metal armor to speak of among these troops. The least expensive and easiest to manufacture weapons, and thus the most common, were spears and bows.⁴²

Wallachia, without assistance from allies such as Hungary, could not hope to raise a force the numerical equal of the Ottoman Empire. The best current estimates place Vlad's total army at approximately 30,000 men, only one third the strength of their Ottoman enemies. Such a force as has been described could be formidable under the right circumstances, but would have little chance in a large-scale, direct confrontation with the better equipped, trained and disciplined Ottoman army. Vlad was well aware of this, and did not plan on engaging in such a battle. He would attempt to secure victory through other means.

The Clash- Spring and Summer, 1462

As Vlad expected, the sultan launched an expedition into Wallachia as soon as the weather allowed. Having lost almost all the crossing points to Vlad's raiding campaign of the previous winter, Mehmed had little choice but to cross where Vlad expected him, at Vidin. With Vlad now controlling

⁴⁰ Heath, p.138

⁴¹ Trow, p.192

⁴² Heath, p.56

most of the Danube along the border, Mehmed could not use the full power of his navy to effect a landing and establish a secure beachhead on the Wallachian bank.

There were certainly some Ottoman ships available, but the sources do not agree. Chalkokondyles writes that the full strength of the Ottoman navy, over 150 ships, sailed up the Danube from the Black Sea, and supported the sultan's landing.⁴³ Mihailovic, however, indicates that once at Vidin, the sultan consulted with his janissaries on the best way to establish themselves on the far bank without the full support of the navy available to them.⁴⁴

Konstantin Mihailovic, having actually taken part in the campaign, describes in detail the Ottoman landing at Vidin. Vlad's army was encamped on the Wallachian side of the river, making good use of the marshy ground and forest to hold ground without unduly exposing itself to Ottoman attack. Under the circumstances, Mehmed could not bring his superior numbers to bear, and a conventional crossing of the river would likely have resulted in unsustainable casualties. Vlad was reported to have archers and some cannon which were able to fire upon the Turks to great effect each time they attempted a crossing.⁴⁵

The sultan maintained the bulk of his army at Vidin, but dispatched a force of janissaries to travel downstream some distance and attempt a smaller crossing under cover of darkness. This apparently surprised the Wallachians, and the janissaries were able to cross, although they did suffer casualties from Wallachian archers and cannon. Once a large enough force had landed on the Wallachian side, a hasty camp was established in the typical Ottoman fashion. Wooden palisades were erected, manned by janissaries, and supported by light cannon and other missile troops. This was sufficient to hold off the bulk of the Wallachian forces and bring the rest of the sultan's army into Wallachia. Wanting to avoid a direct confrontation with so sizeable an army, Vlad and his troops retreated into the dense terrain where the unwieldy Ottoman force could not pursue them.⁴⁶

Now having an enemy army fully in his own lands, Vlad's strategic withdrawal and the Ottoman pursuit began in earnest. This began a campaign of what is now termed *asymmetrical warfare*. This is more than simply a fight between more powerful and less powerful combatants; this is a clash between two greatly unequal forces, each of which defines victory on its own terms. Modern examples include the Vietnam War, and American military efforts against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. The concept is

⁴³ Chalkokondyles, 9.91, p.377

⁴⁴ Mihailovic, p.66

⁴⁵ Mihailovic, p.66-67

⁴⁶ Mihailovic, p.66-67

perhaps best explained in a quote from Henry Kissinger, who was referring to the Vietnam War when he said “The guerilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.”

This applies to Vlad’s military conflict in the way in which he attempted to achieve victory. Being unable to outfight his opponents, he attempted to wear them down, and render the Ottoman army unable to continue its military campaign in Wallachia. As long as his army remained in the field and threatened the larger Ottoman force through raids and skirmishes, the sultan could not claim victory. Having previously devastated both banks of the Danube, he denied the Ottoman army easy access to resources. There was nothing left to plunder; they would have to exist on that which they carried. This would hinder the progress of so large a force, which depended on significant logistical support to sustain itself in the field.

Vlad also resorted to scorched earth tactics. As he retreated through his own lands, he left similar destruction in his wake as at the Danube. Anything that could not be exploited was destroyed. Crops were taken or burned, wells were poisoned, and the local population was evacuated. The Turks had to continue their pursuit without being able to rest or resupply with local resources. Chalkokondyles records that “They brought their women and children to places of safety, placing some of them on Mount Brasso [Braşov] and others in a town...which is surrounded on all sides by a marsh which protected and guarded it and made it most secure, and this provides safety.”⁴⁷

Vlad used his superior knowledge of the local terrain to hide and give cover to his army, so that the Ottoman army could not force a battle by cornering the Wallachians. From the cover of forests and marshes, and often during the hours of darkness, Vlad sent raiding parties to harass the Ottoman column, and to pick off any stragglers or foraging parties who strayed too far from the main body of Ottoman troops. These tactics were apparently successful in causing fear in the Ottoman army, for as Mihailovic notes, “we were greatly afraid although the Wallachian voivode had a small army, and therefore we were always on the lookout for them and every night surrounded ourselves with stakes.”⁴⁸

Despite this apparent success, the initiative remained with the sultan. The Ottoman advance continued, though under pressure, and Vlad continued to retreat, raiding the enemy army when he could, inflicting some casualties and damaging Turkish morale. Had this been the extent of the conflict, it is possible that Vlad might have achieved his ends, and rendered the Ottoman army unable to continue, obliging them to withdraw and leaving him in power. As events transpired, however, Vlad had additional enemies to deal with.

⁴⁷ Chalkokondyles, 9.92, p.379

⁴⁸ Mihailovic, p.67

The fortress of Chilia stood next to the Danube along Wallachia's border with Moldavia. This Romanian province was ruled by Vlad's cousin Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), whom Vlad assisted in taking the throne of that land only a few years before. Now, however, the two were at odds. Wallachians garrisoned the fortress, and thus controlled the mouth of the Danube where it spilled into the Black Sea. Ștefan, however, apparently wanted this important fortification for himself. This was not unusual, as Moldavia and Wallachia had quarreled over this fortress before, and it had changed hands several times over the years. Most recently, in 1448 its ownership was given to Wallachia by Janos Hunyadi, who wanted to ensure that Hungarian interests in the area were maintained by manning it with his own soldiers.⁴⁹

If Chilia fell to Vlad's enemies, they would have easy access to the Danube, and destabilize the entire southern border of Wallachia. In addition, it would open up the way for Ștefan to attack overland from the east. Vlad was now obliged to divide his already outnumbered forces. He would send several thousand men to reinforce the area, and so protect against attack from Moldavia.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, further west, Sultan Mehmed continued his advance, and threatened Vlad's capital city at Targoviște. Vlad's effort to defend his capital would provide the defining moments of his military campaign, and in some ways would come to encapsulate his reputation as a whole.

Vlad's final attempt at securing victory through military means came on the night of 17 June, 1462. The sultan's army was continuing its march in the face of the raids and guerilla tactics of Vlad's Wallachians. It was now almost certain that they would advance as far as Targoviște. Vlad could not hope to win an open battle against so superior an army, so instead opted for something bold and entirely unexpected. He waited until after dark, and personally led a force of several thousand cavalry in an attack on the Ottoman camp, in an attempt to kill Sultan Mehmed himself. Several accounts of this attack and its effectiveness have survived, but they contradict each other, so while the general course of events is known, the details remain uncertain. We know that the attack was a surprise, that it was led by Vlad himself, and that it failed in its objective of killing Sultan Mehmed. We know also that some damage was caused to the sultan's camp and army, and that Vlad withdrew before daylight. The true effectiveness of the attack, though, cannot be gauged by the contemporary written documents.

The account of Konstantin Mihailovic, who was present in the sultan's camp, is actually quite brief. All he has to say is that "...striking us in the night they beat and killed men, horses, and camels and cut down tents, so that they killed several thousand Turks and did the Emperor great harm. And other

⁴⁹ Treptow, p.136

⁵⁰ Chalkokondyles, 9.92, p.379

Turks fleeing before them toward the Janissaries, the Janissaries also beat back and killed so as not to be trampled by them.”⁵¹ Judging by this account, it seems Vlad’s attack had significant consequences for the Ottoman army.

The account of Chalkokondyles, though longer, paints a different picture. He writes, “Vlad attacked the camp as quickly as he could, and he first encountered the army from Asia [Anatolia]. They fought briefly but they were routed and rushed away in groups in order to save themselves. Vlad had lit torches and fires and his army advanced in a most orderly and compact way against the enemy. [...] As they were fighting in an orderly and compact group, they suffered no losses worth mentioning; but if any group broke away, they would immediately fall on the spot at the hands of the Turks.[...] With the approach of dawn, Vlad withdrew from the camp, having lost very few men that night. It is said that few men were killed in the sultan’s camp as well.”⁵² If this is true, and few casualties were caused on either side, the effect would have been primarily psychological.

The Turkish account written by Tursun-Beg almost 40 years after the event indicates that it was a stunning Turkish victory, and that Vlad’s forces were routed after suffering significant casualties, having caused little damage to the sultan’s camp.⁵³ This account is likely the least accurate, however, having been written well after the event, and for the purpose of providing a pro-Turkish account for the sultan.

There are other accounts of less importance and more dubious provenance, but it is apparent that the story of Vlad’s night attack made enough of an impression to be recorded in numerous sources, and across time. As the Ottoman army was able to continue on its campaign in Wallachia, we must conclude that the primary effect was psychological. Vlad demonstrated that the Ottoman army was never safe, and that his Wallachians could strike at any time. It is fair to say that this must have had a significant negative effect on Turkish morale. The effect the attack had on the Wallachian forces is uncertain. No official or reliable records of Wallachian casualties exist, and the behavior of Vlad’s army does not change significantly following this attack. Both the Ottoman march and the Wallachian raids continued on much as before. Not long after this raid, the furthest extent of the Ottoman advance into Wallachia would bring the sultan and his army to Vlad’s capital at Targoviște, and a horrific scene of profound and lasting impact.

Vlad could not stop the Ottoman march through his country. Despite the letter he sent to Matthias Corvinus, no help had arrived from Hungary. Unable to defeat his enemy through the use of conventional or guerilla warfare, Vlad turned now to unprecedented means to deter further Ottoman military

⁵¹ Mihailovic, p.67

⁵² Chalkokondyles, 9.101, p.387

⁵³ Tursun-Beg, quoted in Treptow, p.190-196

domination of Wallachia. Advancing to Targoviște, Mehmed found little resistance at the city. Apparently prepared for a siege, the city was depopulated, and the walls were manned by only a few men with cannon. The gates were opened to the Ottomans, but having nothing to gain by remaining there, they moved on.⁵⁴

Chalkokondyles describes what the Turkish forces found waiting for them:

He continued on and, after advancing for twenty-seven stades [one stade is 600 feet, or 180 meters], they beheld their own men who had been impaled. The sultan's army entered into the area of the impalements, which was seventeen stades long and seven stades wide. There were large stakes there on which, as it was said, about twenty thousand men, women, and children had been spitted, quite a sight for the Turks and the sultan himself. The sultan was seized with amazement and said that it was not possible to deprive of his country a man who had done such great deeds, who had such a diabolical understanding of how to govern his realm and its people. And he said that a man who had done such things was worth much. The rest of the Turks were dumbfounded when they saw the multitude of men on the stakes. There were infants too affixed to their mothers on the stakes, and birds had made their nests in their entrails.⁵⁵

The sight of twenty thousand people impaled made an immediate impression on the sultan and his army. As might be expected, his men were dismayed, but Mehmed seemed to be more impressed than anything else. Accustomed to ruthlessness and violence himself, he recognized the lengths to which Vlad would go in order to secure his rule over Wallachia and its continued autonomy. Regardless of the sultan's apparent admiration, this act of extreme brutality cemented Vlad's reputation as a cruel and vicious tyrant. By this time he was known in his own language as *Țepeș*, and by the Turks as *Kazıklubey*, both of which terms mean the same thing. In English, this is translated as "The Impaler".

While we can make an educated guess at the effects of this on Vlad's Turkish enemies, as their reactions were recorded, the immediate effect on his Wallachian subjects has not been explored. Leaving aside for the moment the gruesome details and emotional component, we must consider the logistics of the so-called forest of the impaled. This was certainly done on Vlad's orders, but not by his own hand. The preparation of twenty thousand stakes alone is a significant undertaking, and must have involved a considerable amount of time and manpower. Once this was accomplished, the bodies- whether living or already dead- had to be impaled, and the stakes erected. Even if Vlad was inured to such outrageous violence, this had to take a toll on those who were made to carry out these orders. Even during the middle ages, such brutality as this was not commonplace, and there must have been psychological repercussions for those who committed these acts according to Vlad's instructions. In addition, it must have affected the

⁵⁴ Chalkokondyles, 9.103, p.391

⁵⁵ Chalkokondyles, 9.104, p.393

relationship between Vlad and his followers. It is all but certain that they feared their leader greatly, but what effect this had on their subsequent behavior is unknown. The terror Vlad inspired in his enemies is legendary, but its effect on his own subjects and allies has not been sufficiently explored.

Once again, we have the facts of what happened next, but motivations remain unclear. Mehmed turned his army around and marched back towards the Danube, leaving Vlad's brother Radu and a smaller body of Ottoman troops to sort out Wallachia. Along the way, the Ottoman rearguard was attacked by a detachment of Vlad's cavalry, who at first found great success. However, fearing reprisal from the sultan for fleeing the field, the Ottoman forces rallied and destroyed the attacking troops, scattering them. This was the last serious resistance the Turks faced.⁵⁶ Upon reaching the Danube, the sultan crossed back into his own lands, and the short conflict was over for him. Vlad's psychological warfare, however, had a lasting effect on the Turks. As Chalkokondyles writes, "The camp feared the Wallachians no less on account of the great daring they had displayed, and so they crossed in great haste."⁵⁷ The Turkish soldiers, without having suffered any great defeats at the hands of the Wallachians, were nonetheless afraid, and anxious to return to their own land.

Wallachia was still under threat, however, and Vlad had not secured his throne. His brother, with the support of the sultan, still remained in Wallachia, attempting to gather support. In addition, the fortress at Chilia was reported to be under siege by a coalition of Moldavian troops under Ștefan cel Mare, and a detachment of the Ottoman navy.⁵⁸ If this was not dealt with, Vlad would have to face a second invasion into Wallachia.

The detachment of cavalry that harassed the Ottoman rearguard was sent by Vlad to keep pressure on Mehmed while he himself took the bulk of his army east to Chilia. With orders only to continue with light raiding and see to any stragglers, his detachment disobeyed when they attacked the Ottoman column, were defeated, and ceased to be effective.⁵⁹ There is no way word of this could have reached Vlad in a timely manner, and in any event, he could not delay going to relieve the siege at Chilia. Upon arriving, Vlad's army sufficiently reinforced the garrison so that they were able to withstand the siege. A Venetian representative wrote to his Senate, "The naval fleet of the Sultan, together with the Prince of Moldavia, went to attack the fortress of Chilia; they stayed there for eight days but were unable

⁵⁶ Chalkokondyles, 9.105-106, p.395

⁵⁷ Chalkokondyles, 9.107, p.397

⁵⁸ Chalkokondyles, 9.105, p.393

⁵⁹ Chalkokondyles, 9.105, p.395

to do anything.”⁶⁰ Ștefan was wounded in the ankle during the siege, and this may have contributed to the relatively rapid withdrawal of Moldavian and Ottoman forces.

Arguably, this made two military victories for Vlad, as the sultan’s force had turned back, and the border with Moldavia was secured. However, Vlad was left in an untenable position. Victorious or not, his men no longer formed an effective fighting force. What little military strength he could field had been split, and a good number of his men scattered. Any significant threat could no longer be met with direct resistance by his remaining troops, no matter how tactically formidable Vlad might prove to be. His brother Radu roamed freely in the west and along the southern border, drumming up support for his own cause. Vlad’s realm was in disarray, and out of his control. If Vlad was to remain in power, he needed the assistance from Hungary that he had been waiting for. This assistance never came.

Radu cel Frumos, meanwhile, made appeals to the boyars of Wallachia. Once again, Chalkokondyles chronicled these events. He wrote:

Dracul the Younger [Radu] called on each man, saying, “O Wallachians, what do you think the future holds for you? Do you not know how much power the sultan has, that his armies will easily be able to reach you, plunder the land, and we will lose whatever we have left? Why do you not become friends of the sultan? There will then be a respite for you throughout the land and in your households. For you know that at the present there are no livestock or pack animals left. You have suffered all these horrible things on account of my brother, and you ingratiate yourselves with a most unholy man who has brought such harm upon Wallachia as we have not heard has been visited upon any other part of the earth.”⁶¹

Such a message must have resonated with the boyars and the people, as Radu gained enough support to remain, and challenge Vlad for the throne. Vlad was now on the run in his own land, in dire need of support. Matthias Corvinus was finally on the move, having delayed until after the threat of direct conflict with the Ottoman Empire had passed. Reaching as far as Brașov in southeastern Transylvania no sooner than November, Vlad met with him in that city in order to form an alliance and regain power. Instead of providing the expected assistance, however, Matthias ordered Vlad arrested.⁶²

Yet again, we are left to wonder about the motivations of the major participants. One would think that Matthias would rather have Vlad in power, who had gone to great lengths to resist Ottoman influence, rather than his brother Radu, who openly supported the sultan. Even at the time, Matthias’s reasons were not clear. As recorded by Antonius Bonfinus, chronicler of Matthias Corvinus, “The king said that he was going to Wallachia to free Dracula [...] On his way there, I do not know the reason why

⁶⁰ Letter of Domenico Balbi, 28 July 1462, quoted in Treptow, p.140

⁶¹ Chalkokondyles, 9.108, p.397

⁶² Treptow, p.153

because this was never understood clearly by anyone, he captured Dracula in Transylvania, but the other Dracula [Radu cel Frumos], whom the Turks had appointed Prince of that province, he approved of, against all expectations.”⁶³ Vlad’s second rule over Wallachia had now come to an end.

Victory or Defeat?

Vlad stood up to an Ottoman incursion into his lands, and went to the most extreme tactics in an effort to defeat Mehmed. The sultan had left Wallachia with his army, but Vlad was removed from power and imprisoned by the king of Hungary. How shall we assess the success or failure of Vlad’s campaign, or Mehmed’s? There can be no single criterion for victory or defeat. The goals of Vlad and those of the sultan were incompatible, but they each fought for their own reasons. We must judge the outcome only after careful consideration of the aims of both sides. What did each party want, and what did they achieve?

Vlad’s goals are perhaps the more easily understood. Having been the voievod of Wallachia for the previous six years, he intended to remain in power. He also wanted a degree of autonomy for Wallachia. On the first count, we can clearly judge his campaign a failure. Vlad was deposed and imprisoned, failing to maintain even his own freedom. That his imprisonment was at the hands of an expected ally does not absolve Vlad of all responsibility for this outcome. The violence he inflicted on his own population and the fear he inspired are well known. It would be naïve to think this had nothing to do with his removal from power. Having said this, Vlad also inspired great loyalty in his supporters. It is true that some boyars took up Radu’s cause, enough to prevent Vlad from retaking power. However, this shift in loyalties was not universal, and many of his retainers remained loyal to him even after his capture by Matthias Corvinus.

This should not be particularly surprising given the extent to which Vlad went to ensure loyalty among his retainers. Those who were openly rebellious or unreliable had long since been rooted out. Those who remained owed their continued power to Vlad, and their loyalty could easily be perceived as implying complicity in his excesses and cruelties. Those who supported Vlad during his reign would thus have at least some interest in his retention of authority.

Kurt Treptow points to the records of the *sfatul domnesc* (essentially the ruling council of boyars) as evidence of the loyalty shown by Vlad’s retainers. He points out that “on the final list of members of the *sfatul domnesc* which we possess from Dracula’s reign, there is not a single name to be found on the

⁶³ Antonius Bonfinus, as quoted in Treptow, p.224

first one that we possess from the reign of Radu cel Frumos, dated 12 November 1463. This is the only incident during the entire fifteenth century when no boyar serving on the council during the reign of the former prince is to be found on the *sfatul domnesc* at the beginning of the reign of the new prince, thus indicating a high degree of loyalty on the part of Dracula's boyars."⁶⁴

While this is certainly both interesting and significant, it cannot be said with certainty that the reason for this was the loyalty of these boyars to Dracula. It is equally plausible that the members of Vlad's council were excluded by Radu when forming his own. Maintaining prominent boyars from Vlad's reign may well have been perceived as implicit approval of the former voievod's practices, and could be expected to be equally unpopular among those Wallachians who were not enthusiastic supporters, and Radu's Ottoman sponsors. It is easy to understand why Radu would want to distance himself and his rule from that of his brother.

As to the matter of maintaining Wallachian autonomy, it can safely be said that Vlad's campaign did not achieve this end. Radu cel Frumos was a firm supporter of the Ottoman cause, and was well aware that he owed his rise to power to the sultan. The arguments he is reported to have used to sway boyars to his cause all involved making peace with Mehmed, and becoming his loyal retainers. Certainly, during Radu's tenure, Wallachia was more firmly an Ottoman vassal than had been the case under either his brother or father. Wallachia did retain a measure of self-rule, but this had more to do with Ottoman desires than it did with Wallachian efforts for autonomy. By the victory conditions that Vlad had set for himself, his campaign against the Ottomans ended in failure.

The Ottoman aims in embarking on a campaign in Wallachia were their own. They did not seek to conquer or subjugate the land north of the Danube, but to effect a regime change. As previously noted, to fully integrate Wallachia into the Ottoman Empire meant also to assume greater responsibility for it. This would mean greater effort and expense for the sultan, for little gain. Extending the Ottoman boundaries to the Carpathians would create a land isolated from the rest of the empire by the Danube. The empire would then border Moldavia, with whom they had an unstable relationship. More importantly, it would maintain constant contact with hostile Hungary, likely leading to frequent skirmishes, and the necessity to provide a significant number of troops to secure the border. As the land would belong directly to the sultan, no tribute would be forthcoming. Although the Ottoman Empire would expand its borders, to do so would prove to be more of a liability than a benefit.

It would be far better for Mehmed to place a sympathetic ruler in power, and continue to use Wallachia as a buffer state. Tribute would flow to the Porte, as well as young recruits for the janissary

⁶⁴ Treptow, p.148

corps. If Hungary thought of expansion, Wallachian soldiers would bear the cost. Wallachia could simultaneously shield the Ottoman Empire, and act as a proxy to further its goals in the region, all at little or no political or monetary cost to the sultan. Further, Mehmed already had a candidate for the Wallachian throne who could be relied upon to support the Ottoman cause. Radu cel Frumos was a favorite of the sultan, his occasional lover, and had no apparent interest in Wallachian independence.⁶⁵

We have already read Konstantin Mihailovic's description of Radu's investiture. This was done before setting out on the expedition, and indeed, before military preparations had been made. Also, as Kurt Treptow notes, "the Ottoman sources clearly state that the sultan's intention was to change the ruling prince, not to transform the country into a pashalik."⁶⁶ Treptow here is referring to the accounts of Tursun-Beg and the Byzantine Kritoboulos of Imbros, both of whose chronicles state clearly that the sultan's goal was to place Radu in power.⁶⁷

Conversely, there are no contemporary sources which attribute other motivations to Mehmed. His goals are clear. Later historiography, especially that of those with Romanian nationalist sympathies, would attribute to the sultan the desire to turn Wallachia into a pashalik, and thus praise Vlad's efforts in preventing this. Treptow cites the work of Mircea Iogaru as supporting this view, in his work *The Military History of the Romanian People*.⁶⁸ This view can also be found in Gheorghe Romanescu's *Pages From the History of the Romanian People* when he writes of "the defeat of the huge Ottoman army, by the small Romanian one".⁶⁹

Judging by these criteria, the Ottoman campaign must be seen as a success. Vlad was removed from power, and Wallachia was maintained as a loose client vassal. It is arguable that the military aspect of the expedition into Wallachia did not go according to the sultan's plans, as the Wallachian forces were never decisively defeated, but the ultimate goal of removing Vlad was achieved. The toll this took on the Ottoman army was not inconsiderable, however, and credit must be given to Vlad for presenting the dogged resistance that so vexed the sultan. Tursun-Beg, himself a chronicler for the Porte, could be expected to write pro-Ottoman accounts of events, so it is significant when he describes the Turkish advance in the following terms: "the front lines of the army announced that there was not a drop of water

⁶⁵ Chalkokondyles, 9.82, p.367-369

⁶⁶ Treptow, p.126

⁶⁷ Both quoted in Treptow, p.126-127

⁶⁸ Treptow, p.126

⁶⁹ Romanescu, Gheorghe *Pagini din Istoria Poporului Român = Pages from the History of the Romanian People*, p.76

to quench their thirst. All the carts and animals stopped there. The heat of the sun was so great that one could cook kebabs on the mail shirts of the gazis.”⁷⁰

The return of the Ottoman army to Anatolia was marked by Turkish chroniclers as a great victory. However, the condition and morale of the troops upon leaving Wallachia is not so certain. Konstantin Mihailovic says of the withdrawal, ‘Then the Turks began to tell the Emperor, “There were great defeats earlier in Wallachia and many Turks perished in them and therefore, consider that.’ And the Emperor replied, ‘So long as the Wallachians hold and command Chilia and Belgorod, and the Hungarians, Raskan Belgrade, we will not be able to defeat them.’ And so ended these discussions.”⁷¹ Tursun-Beg records that “The Turkish army, which had taken abundant plunder, prepared for feasts and each victorious soldier returned to his home.”⁷² Which version is to be believed? We know that Mehmed left Wallachia voluntarily, but that he did so under constant pressure from Vlad’s troops. Official celebrations of victory were held, yet we have descriptions of bedraggled Ottoman soldiers happy to be done with Wallachia. The sultan’s will was done, but his victory came at a cost.

After Victory: Consequences

For the Ottoman Empire, the expedition into Wallachia had been, by the measure of the most important results, a success. Vlad, who had displayed extraordinary temerity and tenacity in his defiance of the Ottoman Empire, had been dethroned. His brother, a favorite of the sultan, now ruled Wallachia. Things carried on much as they had before, with Wallachia securely within the Ottoman sphere of influence. Payment of tribute could be expected to resume, and the country to conform to Turkish rule. The trouble on the empire’s European border had been dealt with, and Mehmed was able to turn his attention elsewhere. As far as the Ottoman Empire was concerned, the whole unpleasant episode was over.

In Wallachia, though, the clash with the Ottoman Empire and the change of voievod was an ongoing issue. The scorched earth tactics used by Vlad had laid waste much of the country, and those who remained, whether loyal to Vlad or to Radu, had to continue on. In the long history of Wallachia’s conflicts with its neighbors, this was surely among the most costly. An army of invaders who wants a country for its wealth, resources and geographical advantages is not likely to destroy its intended prize. A desperate ruler, however, who would rather see his own land destroyed than concede control to a foreign

⁷⁰ Tursun-Beg, quoted in Treptow, p.147

⁷¹ Mihailovic, p.67

⁷² Tursun-Beg, quoted in Treptow, p.196

power, is not bound by such limitations. There must have been great efforts to recover and resume life as normal along the path of the Ottoman army's advance. Wallachian records from the time of Radu's rule make no mention of further suffering; apparently the damage was repaired, and events continued on much as they had in the past, but without the threat of sudden brutality that was the norm under Vlad.

Relations with the sultan were unremarkable, and the Danube border stabilized. Nor did hostilities with Hungary become a problem. This was not the first time that Wallachia accepted Ottoman suzerainty, and this state of affairs did not threaten the border with Hungary. Matthias Corvinus accepted Radu as voievod, and the following years were as peaceful as could be expected for a small country situated between two constantly warring powers. In short, other than for those who suffered personally during the war, things remained largely unchanged.

Had Mehmed sought to make a pashalik of Wallachia, or had Matthias come with his Hungarian army, things might have turned out differently. As it was, though, Wallachia remained both central and remote- central in that it was placed directly between two hostile states, remote in that it was established as firmly beyond the border of either. The reasons for the Ottoman desire to keep Wallachia as a buffer have already been explained. Hungary also benefited from this situation, but where the Turks could make use of the Danube to help secure their border, Matthias depended on the Carpathian Mountains to do the same for Transylvania. Either great power, in order to approach the other, had to cross the entire breadth of Wallachia, then face the natural barrier on the other side of it. The time and resources this would require would place the defender at a significant advantage in defending his own lands from the advances of the other. At the same time, it provided a 'soft border', where the Turks and Hungarians had room to move without immediately engaging in hostilities with each other.

This left Wallachia and the Wallachians firmly in the middle- geographically, politically and culturally. Yet this small country had an identity all its own. The influences of its more powerful neighbors were plain, but it maintained its own language, traditions and culture. They were not Turks; they were not Hungarians. As their dogged defense of their homeland under Vlad illustrated, they were very much their own people, and were willing to endure many hardships in order to perpetuate their own existence and autonomy, distinct from their more powerful neighbors. If Vlad's efforts to keep himself in power had been in vain, the determination of his people to defy the Ottoman Empire was not lost on their opponents or themselves. This defiance became integrated into the Wallachian consciousness, and helped to shape their identity as a people.

Conclusion: Long-Term Effects and the Growth of Romanian Nationalism

See photo of busts of Vlad Țepeș, Janos Hunyadi and Ștefan cel Mare after bibliography

Those who lived through it were probably not aware of the long-term repercussions of Vlad's rule, and of his defiance of Ottoman authority in Wallachia. As already noted, life continued on for the Wallachians as it had before Vlad. Tribute was paid to the Porte, and the Ottoman presence remained. Hungary was an on-again, off-again ally, and mercantile exchange with Saxon Transylvania carried on.

Although Vlad failed to secure the victory he sought, the significance of this outcome can be best understood as a personal defeat. Vlad failed and was imprisoned, but Wallachia was no worse off for the Ottoman incursion (except for the areas devastated by Vlad during his fighting retreat). There was no reprisal by a victorious Ottoman army, no negative political repercussions from either the Turks or Hungarians. It is arguable that Wallachia and its inhabitants gained a more subtle, but ultimately important, moral victory through their steadfast resistance. The Ottoman Empire was unable to impose its will on Wallachia through military means, and ultimately secured victory through political channels. Had Radu not been available as an acceptable candidate for the throne, it is uncertain what the sultan's next course of action might have been. As it was, Vlad's own brutality had a part in costing him victory, as a sufficient number of boyars were willing to accept Radu and the Ottoman suzerainty he represented rather than the continued terror of the Impaler's reign. Although the tales of terror as they have been handed down, especially through the German pamphlets⁷³, have no doubt been greatly exaggerated, it is certain that Vlad was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. Until his winter raid across the Danube in 1461-1462, the victims could only have been his own subjects. Little surprise, then, that some among the boyars supported yet another change in leadership.

The defense of their own land under Vlad had been accomplished alone, without the aid of Hungary or other allies. Whether the Turkish army was repulsed or simply left after setting in motion the events which saw Radu take the throne, the fight was purely a Wallachian one. It was also the Wallachians alone who successfully defended their eastern border at Chilia against a combined Moldavian-Ottoman alliance. Wallachia still existed as its own country, with its own Romanian leader. This is the best possible outcome for which the Wallachians could have hoped. Yes, renewed payments of tribute to the Porte were a burden they would have to bear, but this was nothing new. No pasha or other foreign ruler was set over them, and the nation and people survived. The military campaign of 1462 had disastrous consequences for Vlad, but his people prospered.

⁷³ See Treptow, Appendix IV, "The German Stories about Vlad Dracula", for a sample of these pamphlets

At this time, there was still no unity in what is today Romania. Wallachia was most closely allied with the Ottoman Empire, especially under Radu. Moldavia under Ștefan cel Mare was the most autonomous principality, and followed its own path. Transylvania, though the bulk of the population was made up of Romanian peasants, remained ethnically Hungarian and German as well, and within the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. Being Romanian meant sharing linguistic and cultural ties among these three principalities, but the concept of Romanians as a single people did not yet exist. The first ruler to achieve such unification was Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave), who united the three provinces for a period of about six months in 1600.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it was Vlad, over a hundred years earlier, who had set the stage for such an event, acting on Wallachian authority alone and demonstrating that a Romanian principality could exist on its own, without the support or approval of its larger neighbors.

When modern Romanians look to their past, there are a small number of individuals who represent the history of their nation. In antiquity, these are the Dacian leader Decebal and his Roman adversary, the Emperor Trajan. These two enemies are responsible for the syzygy of Roman and Dacian elements which together form the ancient origins of the Romanian people. The very term *Romania* refers back to the country's early Roman origins, and the legionaries who stayed behind to give the land its language and ties to western culture. Statues, busts and likenesses of Decebal and Trajan are to be found in many Romanian cities, and the two together are commonly recognized as the progenitors of Romania.

The next common point of reference in Romanian history is over a millennium later, during the fifteenth century. The ubiquity of Vlad's image among the souvenir shops and tourist destinations throughout the country is in no small part due to Bram Stoker's novel, but eliminate those things which are calculated to appeal to foreign tourists, and Vlad's presence is still strongly felt. Streets are named after him, and there is even a *Strada Vlad Țepeș* in Brașov, that city with which he had such significant disputes. The inaccessible island monastery of Snagov, where he is supposedly buried⁷⁵, is still home to monks who revere his memory. Statues and busts stand in places of significance to his rule, and his courts at Targoviște and in Bucharest have been partially restored. Perhaps most significantly, at the National Military Museum in Bucharest, a bust of Vlad stands alongside his contemporaries Ștefan cel Mare and Janos Hunyadi, a united Romania represented by the most notable leaders of its three principalities in the fifteenth century.

Vlad is remembered not as a Wallachian, but as a *Romanian* leader. He is no less familiar to the inhabitants of Transylvania or Moldavia than in the principality which he ruled. Of course, Romanians

⁷⁴ Romanescu, p.98

⁷⁵ Vlad's supposed grave at Snagov was opened in the 1970s, but was found to be empty. His final resting place remains unknown, but is still traditionally held to be at Snagov.

today are possessed of a nationalism that could not exist before the modern unification in 1859 produced the country of Romania. Among his contemporaries, though, Vlad alone is so well remembered in all areas within the modern border of Romania. The historiography concerned with Hunyadi is usually connected with Transylvania or the Kingdom of Hungary.⁷⁶ Ștefan is intimately connected to his rule of Moldavia. Outside their own spheres of influence, their presence in the memories of the Romanian people is significantly more limited than that of Vlad.

This is not to say that the average modern Romanian is intimately acquainted with the history of the fifteenth century or the specific events associated with Vlad's rule over Wallachia, or that Vlad is the most important figure in Romanian history, merely that Vlad himself is the touchstone for the earliest concept of modern Romanian identity. Before his time, there is neither any ruler nor event which so well represents the country in the minds of its inhabitants, other than Decebal and Trajan, as already mentioned. Even so, these ancient rulers are perceived as precursors to Romania- they gave rise to the people who came after from the melding of their two ancient cultures. During their time, there *were* no Romanians, there were Romans and Dacians who would become Romanians only after generations of intermarriage and the gradual development of a new, unified culture and identity.

Vlad, by contrast, was one of those people who were a product of this ancient heritage. He could be what Trajan and Decebal never could: Romanian. In this capacity, it is not his legendary cruelty that is at the fore, but his force of will and determination to see an autonomous Wallachia assert itself in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Romania, never one of the major European powers, can take pride in its ability to thrive even in the shadow of great empires, and to maintain its own cultural identity amid a sea of often hostile neighbors. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the episode of Vlad Țepeș and his bold defiance of the Ottoman Empire. This colorful and exceptional individual, despite the extremes to which he went and the excesses he is known for, is still, in his own way, a focus for the expression of Romanian national identity.

⁷⁶ Mureșanu, Camil, *John Hunyadi: Defender of Christendom*, Ch.1

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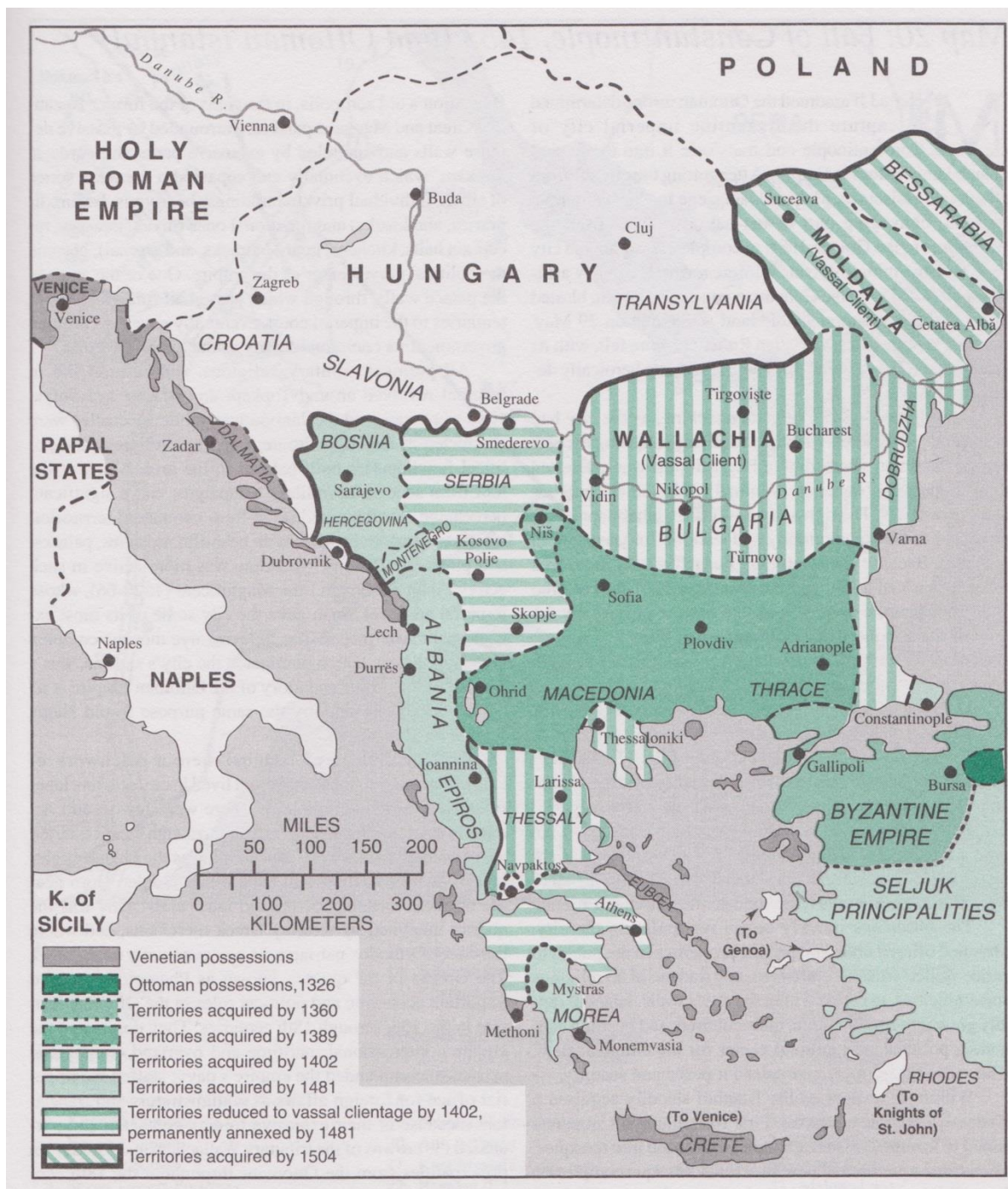
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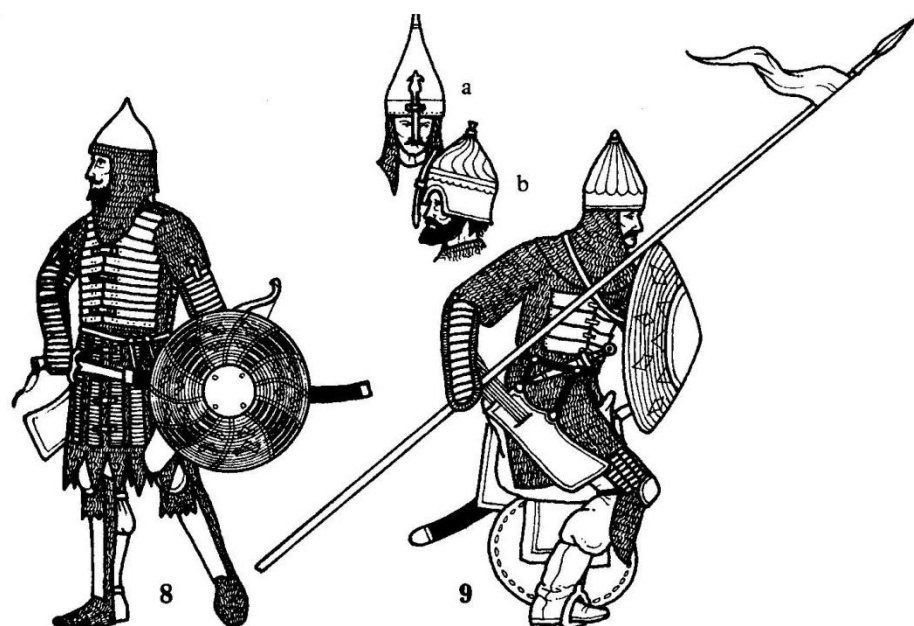
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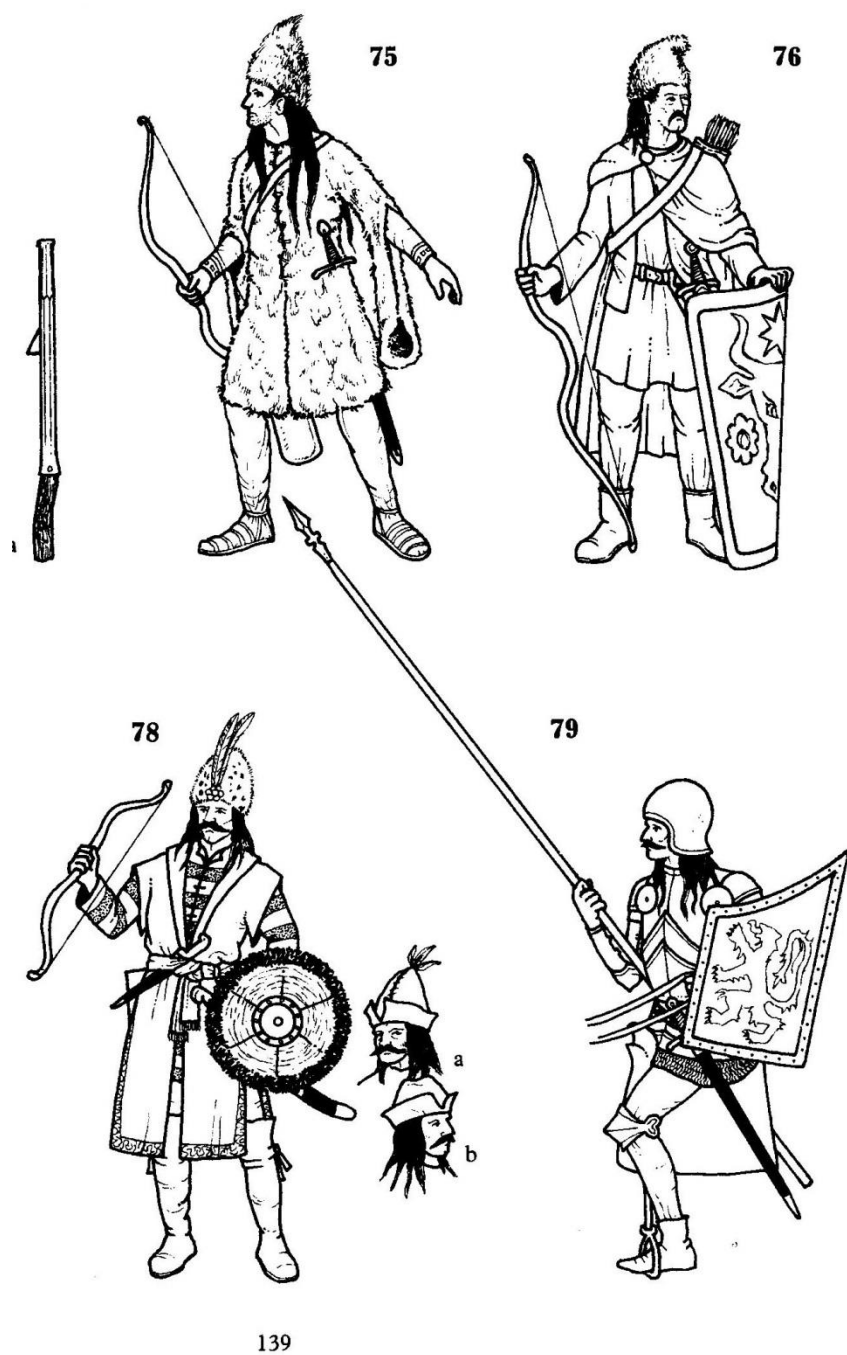
Map of Wallachia and surrounding area, from *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Balkans*



Ottoman heavy infantry and cavalry of the fifteenth century, from *Armies of the Middle Ages. Vol 2*



Ottoman archer and janissary of the fifteenth century, from *Armies of the Middle Ages. Vol 2*



Wallachian infantry (fig 75 & 76) and cavalry (fig 78 & 79) of the fifteenth century, from *Armies of the Middle Ages. Vol 2*



Busts of (from left) Janos Hunyadi, Ștefan cel Mare, and Vlad Țepeș at the Muzeul Militar National in Bucharest, Romania.