

Backward glances

by Rich Carriero

Mehmet the Conqueror vs. Dracula

Everyone knows Mehmet the Conqueror and Vlad Dracula but Rich Carriero explores how two of the most dramatic figures of the 15th Century knew each other.

1462. The Ottoman army advances through the Romanian countryside toward Târgoviște. They find a deserted capital and make their way through the town until, frozen in horror, they find impaled corpses lining the road for miles: men stuck through the abdomen; others killed by poles forced up through anus. They are mostly Turks. Hamza Pasha, a Turkish general, rots on the highest stake. Sultan Mehmet II, not a naturally squeamish man, turns over command to his generals with orders to withdraw. He's had enough of Vlad Dracula.

Since 1453 the only serious threat to Ottoman hegemony is the Kingdom of Hungary. Walachia's flat ground and location between the powers make the country an unwilling battleground. The Walachian ruling family, however, is accustomed to this precarious niche. Dracula's father, Vlad II, allied with the Turks in 1444, sending his two sons, Radu and Vlad as hostages, proof of vassalage to Sultan Murad II. Vlad Dracula was 13 when he was taken to Egrigoz in western Anatolia.

Though their lives depended on their father's loyalty, the princes were tutored in logic, fighting, Islamic theology and Turkish. They met figures of the Ottoman court—most importantly, Mehmet II. When he was born Mehmet was no one's pick to become Sultan at a time when one could reign only after all other heirs were dead. Murat didn't have many sons, however and Mehmet was elevated to Sultan in 1444. He was, however, twice removed from power by war and the intrigues of his viziers.

It must have been a bizarre introduction. Both men had an axe to grind: Mehmet because he had been deposed, Vlad because he was a prisoner of an Ottoman state that his father was not strong enough to fight. From the first they loathed each other.

Radu, however, enjoyed Ottoman life. He and Mehmet became fast friends and he even converted to Islam. In 1447 Vlad II was executed by pro-Hungarian boyars and the boys were released. Dracula was elevated by Murat to Prince of Walachia while

Radu chose to remain with the Ottomans. Prince Vlad would never forgive his brother for this defection.

The Hungarians immediately deposed Dracula. He regained again the throne by going to the Hungarians and proving 1) he hated the Ottomans and 2) he knew their ways well enough to defeat them in battle, particularly their new Sultan, Mehmet II. The Hungarians launched a joint expedition to oust the Turks from Serbia and Walachia in 1456 and after nine years Vlad regained the throne.

He moved restlessly about his realm, inflicting punishment. His cruelty is infamous. In addition to impaling he considered boiling, blinding, flaying and roasting as acceptable and effective means to administer justice. He never stayed in one place for long. "Dracula's Castle" is a stately edifice overlooking one of the most picturesque mountain passes in Romania. Just about all historians, however, assert that Dracula never lived there.

His preferred home in Târgoviste is a far less accessible ruin.

For the first three years of his reign Dracula maintained an icy peace with the Ottomans but in 1459 he stopped paying tribute to the Sultan. Retaliations quickly escalated and war became imminent. In the coming fight Dracula's leadership would prove his greatest asset. He grasped the terrain on which he was fighting. He understood the Ottomans. Once, when attacking the Ottoman stronghold of Giurgiu, he captured the town by ordering the defenders to open the gate in flawless Turkish.

In 1461 he killed every Turk and Muslim he could find. In a 1462 letter he claimed, "We killed 23,884 Turks and Bulgars without counting those whom we burned in homes or whose heads were not cut but our soldiers... thus I have broken the peace..."

Mehmet brought the largest army assembled since the fall of Constantinople to deal with the upstart.

Dracula resisted by burning crops and poisoning wells to deprive the Turks of any forage. Dracula had his men dig pitfalls and divert streams. He even tried his hand at bio-warfare, sending sick men amongst the Turks. Still Mehmet advanced and finally cornered Dracula in a mountain hideout near Târgoviște.

Dracula's response would be the highlight of his career. He once again donned a Turkish disguise and slipped into the enemy camp at night. He was able to discover the size and organization of Mehmet's army and most importantly that Mehmet had ordered his troops not to leave their tents at night in the unfamiliar and dangerous terrain. Returning to his own camp, Dracula formulated a plan still remembered for the havoc it created.

He struck after sunset on June 17th, 1462. The Walachians approached silently and then, coming upon the camp, shrieked, blew bugles and brandished torches as they came out of the darkness. They set fire to tents and defensive fortifications, killing anyone who ventured out into the night. They disappeared, regrouped and attacked all night. No one knows how many were killed but psychologically the Ottomans were terrified. The following day Mehmet pursued but when the Ottomans encountered the gruesome spectacle left for them in Târgoviște they promptly gave up the chase.

Tired of guerilla war, Mehmet decided to defeat Dracula through diplomacy. Dracula was deposed by his brother, Radu and imprisoned by the Hungarians, first in Bran and then later in the Hungarian town of Visegrad, a breathtaking hilltop citadel overlooking a bend in the Danube about thirty miles north of Budapest.

After 12 years in irons Dracula was able to sweet-talk the Hungarians into releasing him and seized the throne of Walachia a final time in 1476. The Turkish army swept in immediately and everyone abandoned Dracula to his fate. No one knows how Vlad Dracula met his end. Some say he fell in battle while others maintain that the Turks captured and beheaded him. Regardless of how it happened, when Mehmet learned of Dracula's fate he must have been relieved.

