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Mathias Rex of Hungary, Stephen the Great of Moldavia, and Vlad the Impaler of Walachia – History and Legend

The three feudal rulers mentioned in the title of my paper reigned at approximately the same time, had close relationships, be these friendly or not, confronted the same enemy (chiefly the Ottoman Empire, as they ruled immediately after the fall of Constantinople in 1453), and faced the same dangers. All three entered history either as valiant defenders of their countries' freedom, or as merciless punishers of their enemies.

Probably the most famous, in this last respect, was Vlad III the Impaler, also known as (Count) Dracula, although his contemporaries were no less cruel or sanguinary. A recent study on Stephen the Great, who, in official history, is regarded as a symbol of the Moldavians' (Romanians') struggle for freedom and independence, and who was later even canonised, depicts the feudal ruler as a "Dracula the Westerners missed".

All three are doubly reflected in official history and in popular (folk) tradition, mainly in folk-legends and historical anecdotes, but also in folk-ballads and songs. Remembering them now offers an opportunity to revisit some old topics in folkloric studies, such as the relationship between historical truth and fictive truth, or the treatment of a historical character in various genres of folklore.

In many cases, the historical facts have been coined according to the mythical logic that leads to a general model, multiplied in time and space according to the vision of the local creators and to their position regarding the historical personages about whom they narrate.

In terms of their biographies, the oldest was Vlad III, who was born in November or December of **1431**, in Sighisoara, Transylvania, where his father, Vlad II (Vlad Dracul), acted as the military governor of the province, having been assigned to this post by King Sigismund. The house where he was born still stands. It was located in a prosperous neighbourhood, surrounded by the dwellings of Saxon and Magyar merchants and the townhouses of the nobility. The second oldest was the Moldavian Prince, Stephen the Great, born in Borzesti, Moldavia, in **1433** (or 1434 – the exact date of his birth is still controversial). And the youngest was King Mathias, born in Cluj, Transylvania, in **1443**. Some biographers stress the idea that

King Matthias' grandmother, Erzsébet Morzsinai, was the daughter of a Walachian voivod (kenéz), which means that some Romanian blood flowed in his veins. Not only were they closely related by their deeds, but also by kinship, given that, according to some historians (see, for instance, Giurescu, 1971, apud Ștefan Andreescu, 1999: 85, note 12), "Vlad the Impaler was, on his mother's side, the nephew of Bogdan II, and the cousin of Stephen the Great". On the other hand, as some historians argue, the wife of Vlad III, later Vlad the Impaler, was a relative, if not even the sister of Matthias Corvin. This network of alliances governed relationships between the feudal states, established on the general rule of exogamy, the limits (ethnic, linguistic, religious etc.) of which were sometimes transgressed in the name of prevailing political factors.

All three belonged to the royal families of the feudal states of that time. Vlad III, who was to become "the Impaler", was the son of Vlad Dracul, voivod of Walachia, from whom he inherited the nickname "Dracul" or "Dracula", i.e. a Dragon Knight, given that the word for dragon in Romanian is "drac", from the Greek "drakô"; from this to "Dracula", Count Dracula, the main character of Bram Stoker's novel, was just a short step. Vlad Dracul, Vlad the Impaler's father, was not content to serve as mere governor, and so gathered supporters for his plan to seize the throne of Walachia from its then occupant, Alexandru I, a Danesti prince. In 1436 he succeeded in his plan, killing Alexandru and becoming Vlad II. In 1443 Vlad regained the Wallachian throne with Turkish support, but on the condition that he would send yearly a contingent of Wallachian boys to join the Sultan's Janissaries. In 1444, to further assure the Sultan of his good faith, Vlad sent his two younger sons - Vlad III and Radu the Fair - to Adrianopolis as hostages. Vlad III remained a hostage in Adrianopolis until 1448, a detail we shall look at below.

Matthias Corvinus (*Matthias the Just*; February 23, 1443 - April 6, 1490; King of Hungary 1458-1490; King of Croatia 1458-1490; King of Bohemia, 1469-1490), the second son of John Hunyadi, was born in the house currently known as the "Matthias Corvinus House", in Kolozsvár/Klausenburg (the present-day Cluj-Napoca), Transylvania. He was King of Hungary, reigning between 1458 and 1490. He was also crowned King of Bohemia in 1469 and ruled Moravia, Silesia, and Lusatia; from 1486, Matthias was Duke of Austria. The epithet *Corvinus* was coined by Matthias' biographer, the Italian Antonio Bonfini, who claimed that the Hunyadi family (whose coat of arms depicts a raven—*corvus* in Latin) descended from the ancient Roman *gens* of the *Corvini*. The bird depicted on the coat of arms of the Hunyadies is supported by a widespread legend. In his turn, Stephen (the Great) was the son of a voivod of Moldavia and the grandson of Alexander the Good, from a famous Moldavian ruling family.

This means that the model followed in establishing the ruler (be the king, voivod/prince, or head of state) was the hereditary one, in accordance with German, Roman and Byzantine traditions, although none of these offered a true and

reliable example. The Germans “were drawn to the hereditary right, but they could not escape the elective system, often utilized for designating the king within a single family”; the Roman traditions “provide a great example of a monarchic continuity, expressed by a constant discontinuity”; and Constantinople offers the unique image of a monarchy that was firmly anchored, stable, and perfectly legitimate, but in which violence, assassinations and coups would be the major and sometimes sole cause whereby ephemeral princes or dynasties were elevated to the throne” (Roux, [1995] 1998: 337- 340; English version is mine – N. C.).

This was the case with Vlad III who, at the age of seventeen, after the death of his father and supported by the Turks, seized, for a short time, the Walachian throne. However, within two months, Hunyadi forced him to abdicate the throne and flee to his cousin, the Prince of Moldavia. Nevertheless, in different historical circumstances, after the fall of Constantinople (1453), it was he the same Hunyadi that supported Vlad III, who succeeded in killing Vladislav II and taking back the throne of Walachia (1456-1462). His rather short reign was accompanied by a series of contemporary accounts, created and spread by printed materials that circulated throughout Europe in Slavonic and German versions of Byzantine and Turkish sources. Some of these anecdotes or legends – in fact, given they were written and circulated during or shortly after the facts they recount, they might be named *contemporary legends* of the period – mention the relationship of Vlad III the Impaler with his protector, brother-in-law and, at the same time, enemy, King Mathias.

Real, historical facts and legendary, one might say fictional, deeds intermingle in stories, anecdotes and historical accounts concerning the lives of these three feudal rulers. On more than one occasion, they are found together as actors, as personages in a drama or comedy, as may actually have happened or merely have been imagined by storytellers, firstly in the oral narratives that were taken for granted by later chroniclers and writers.

Analysing a large number of legends about Vlad the Impaler, which circulated in the Byzantine and Ottoman world, Stefan Andreescu comes to the conclusion that the oral traditions about Vlad the Impaler depicted him if not in glowing then at least in light colours, whereas the official Ottoman written sources constantly “blacken the image of the Wallachian voivode to the best of their ability” (Andreescu, 1999: 194). The favourable or unfavourable point of view depends upon the position of the chronicler in relation to the real characters he depicts. Antonio Bonfini, who was a resident chronicler at the Court of Matthias Corvin, retold an episode which occurred at the Hungarian court in 1468 and which was circulated in the Ottoman world. I quote from Stefan Andreescu’s book: “An Ottoman embassy came to King Mathias Corvinus to negotiate an armistice with Sultan Mehmed II. The latter was actually consolidating his position in Europe, while preparations were under way for a campaign in Asia Minor. But Matthias Corvinus, says Bonfinus, would only receive Turkish messengers ‘in the presence of his prisoner,

Dracula, the deadly and awe-inspiring foe of the Turks. The former voivode who had caused them such great and terrible suffering, and who had so often defeated and routed them, was viewed by the Turks with fear, and they became all the more determined in their resolve to sign the armistice” (Andreescu, 1999: 194-5). The court chronicler has hit two birds with one stone, because he has placed in a better light not only the capacity of the Hungarian king to negotiate with his enemies, but also the “diplomatic” weapon he wielded in order to frighten the Ottoman soldiers.

It is obvious that in many cases the written sources remain closer to the historical facts, and are, in this respect, a species of “contemporary legend” from the period, as I have stated above, while the oral traditions, collected and published much later, belong to the “classical” forms of folk-prose, be they legends or even fairy-tales. Although the story collected and published by Arthur Schott in German review *Hausblätter* in 1858, (vol. 4, p. 367-371), entitled *The History/Story of Emperor Matthias Corvin*, is placed by the editors in the “legends” section, the text also contains many fairy-tale episodes. It is defined as “a ‘bariolate’ (=combined, mixed) narrative that combines funambulesque episodes of fairy-tale with legendary motifs and personages” (Niscov, 2003: 416). In fact, “The story of Emperor Matthias Corvinus” begins with the ‘interdiction’ the chemist imposes upon the young Matei (the Romanian name for Matthias), his adopted son and apprentice, to drink a special potion which enables the master to comprehend the tongues of beasts and birds. As usual in fairy tales, the apprentice disobeys the interdiction, drinks the potion, and is dismissed by his master. He is hired by a farmer and, while ploughing, listens to two ravens who reveal that he must go to the assembly where the new emperor is to be elected and crowned. The young man tells his master of his decision, but the farmer derides him, saying that Matei will become an emperor when the wooden part of the ploughshare will turn green. Soon afterwards, the farmer allows him to go to town. After three attempts, the crown is bestowed upon the young Matthias, who becomes the king (‘emperor’) in Buda. All three sequences in the first part of the story clearly belong to the fairy-tale scenery. This leads us to the conclusion that the story belongs to the AT 517 type, “The Boy who Learned Many Things”. This is true of the first episode of the tale, in which the following universal motifs appear: “B215.1 - Bird language; B216 - Knowledge of animal language; B143 - Prophetic bird; N451 - Secret overheard from an animal (demon) conversation; and M312.0.2 - Prophecy of future greatness given by animals. Not a single Romanian version is given in Aarne-Thompson, *The Types of Folktale* (1964), although the story of Emperor Matei Corvin might have been known to the editors, given that it was published by Arthur Schott in *Hausblätter*, 1858, vol. 4, p. 367-371 (Cf. Niscov, 2003: 416), while the Arthur and Albert Schott collection was published in German, in 1845 (Schott, 1845).

The first part of this Romanian tale from nineteenth-century Transylvania confirms the *pattern* elaborated by Ildikó Kríza on the basis of historical songs and legends which portray Matthias Corvinus as a “sacral king” and her conclusion that “folklore regarding the selection of a king, thought to be a Southern Slav, can characteristically be found among all the ethnic groups of the Carpathian Basin” (Kríza, 2002: 339), which would thus include the Romanians, although they are not mentioned in the article.

As for the motif of election of the king (“the crown tossed into the air falls on the chosen head by divine decision”), Arthur Schott provides an interesting account of the way in which the outlaws of Banat (in the south-western part of today’s Romania), near the Danube River, used to select their leader. It was, in fact, the same procedure, but the crown, made of hazelnut branches, was tossed by the youngest and purest member of the band, while the chief of the group became the one closest to whom the crown landed (Cf. Niscov, 2003: 414, note 14).

The second part of the story introduces the young Matei established as king (“emperor”) in Buda, where he performs his duties by resorting to his magic powers, for, as the story goes, he had learned, besides language of birds, “powerful witchcraft”. He travels by magic to Tsarigrad (the old Slavic name for Constantinople, the Tsar/Emperor’s Town), to see his “neighbour”, Tsar Constantine. Having disguised himself as a fiddler, he is easily recognised by Tsar Constantine, a powerful wizard in his own right. Matthias escapes from prison by magic, in the guise of a fly, returns to his palace, and brings Tsar Constantine and his family, including the Tsarina Elena and their children (!), “in an hour, by night ... in their beds, and without them noticing”, to Buda. In the end, the two leaders become friends and are given as an example of a good relationship between two great rulers and head of states. The second part of the Transylvanian story about King Matthias can be taken as a medieval *exemplum*, in which two historical personages meet and interact, despite the rather large amount of time which separates, in fact, their real biographies.

We can only assume, for the collector gives not the slightest shred of information about his informant, that the story comes from a written source, as the story-teller ends his account by saying, “You have certainly read about that wonderful procession (whereby Tsar Constantine was returned home) in books, but it was precisely this that was the real event that produced it (the story told in books)” (Schott, 2003: 416; English version is mine – N.C.).

The folk-narratives, collected at a much later date than the story published by Saxon folklorist Arthur Schott, belong largely to the legend genre. Tony Brill registers in his *Typology ...*, under **V. Matei Corvin**, seven types (14632-14637) and ten variants, all from Transylvania (Brill, 2006 II: 295-298). Most of them, collected, we assume, from lower class people, shed a favourable light on the King, who is seen as a folk hero, defending the rights of the poor and punishing the noblemen

who oppressed them. A common motif in this type of legends is that of the king travelling in disguise to different towns, entering the houses of the rich and the poor, rewarding those who treat him well and punishing the injustices and the misdeeds of the others.

The plot of type **14633** in *Matei Corvin si primarul din Cluj (Matthias Corvinus and the Mayor of Cluj)* (Brill, 2006 II: 295) can be easily found, with very few changes, in legends about his contemporaries, Vlad the Impaler and Stephen the Great. Close to this story can be situated those about Vlad who, seeing a ploughman/peasant with a torn and dirty shirt, orders that man's wife be impaled, and gives him a new wife, who, of course, will work hard in order to please her master. Similarly, a legend written down some hundreds years after the death of the voivod, recounts that one Sunday morning, while going to the church to attend the mass, Stephen the Great hears a man (again a ploughman) yelling at his oxen. When he asks him "in a terrible voice" why he is ploughing on a Sunday, the man answers that he has no beasts of burden and that these are his brother's oxen. The voivod tooks the plough away from the rich brother and gives it to the poor brother.

It is not the real facts that might stand at the foundation of these stories that are important here, but rather the model of a good ruler whose deeds satisfy the poor and give them the hope that someone up there is protecting them. Where this attitude comes from is also less important, although some historians of mentalities think that the folk attitude towards Vlad the Impaler corresponds to the position of the Byzantine chroniclers. One of the two Catholic monks, interrogated by the Prince/Voivoda of Walachia, answers, in a Slavonic version of the anecdote, in these terms: "You, lord, have been assigned by God as a ruler to punish those who commit crimes and to reward those who do good". "Such an attitude might be traced back to the imperial Byzantine tradition, in whose name Vlad the Impaler was the first Romanian voivoda to rise up in arms after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453" (Andreescu, 1999: 262). In not such a different context, Matthias King is seen as "the chosen ruler" who "is expected to defend the interests of the poor against the nobility and at the same time to represent an idealised patriarchal society" (Kríza, 2002: 340), while Stephen the Great, in spite of his crimes, has been canonised by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Adopted by the folk, this attitude places all three feudal rulers in the same category, treating them as "righteous kings/voivodas, brave defenders of the country and of the people", a formula that later had a career in the political discourse of the national communism.

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