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THE UNDYING MYSTERIES OF DRACULA'S CASTLE

The way to Poenari Castler (Dracula's REAL castle for the uninitiated) is more than 2,860 feet up . . . as the bat flies. At the halfway point of the trail, I almost wished a blood-sucking Chiroptera would alight to transform me. Climbing 1,482 steep stone steps to the ruins of Poenari Fortress is not for the faint of heart, or the physically undead, er, unfit.

However, these steps are the ONLY way to reach the top; there are no tourist-bus-friendly roads. So if you want to visit the castle that Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia, aka Vlad Drăculea, actually called home, you have to walk. Few people do. My guide told me that only ten percent of his clients bother to make the climb. The few other tourists I passed on the trail were Romanian, some of them in flip-flops, one fellow in bare feet.

Panting my way up the serpentine stairs as they crisscrossed the 800-meter cliff, part of the Făgăraș mountains (of the better-known Carpathian range) of central Romania, I could understand why most foreigners opt to visit Bran Castle instead. The latter is a restored castle, a national monument, historically significant (at least to Romanians) and half an hour by road from the charming medieval city of Brașov. It draws more than half a million visitors a year, making the site the most visited attraction in all of Romania. Sixty percent are Romanian, who come because of the castle's relevance to their national history. The rest come because of Dracula.

The problem is that Bran Castle has nothing to do with Dracula. At all. Neither the historical figure of the 15th century nor the fictional creation of Bram Stoker, a 19th century Irish writer who—by the way—never visited Romania. The real Vlad Drăculea may have fought some of his interminable battles against the Turks in the area near the castle and possibly may have stayed there one night in his life, but that is about it.

No wonder many of that castle's visitors each year come away disapppointed. They are looking for blood and vampires, cobwebs and crawly things; they find a 14th century structure (thick walls, low ceilings) softened by the tastes of a 20th century royal, Queen Marie, who added elevators, plumbing, and electric lights to the homey furniture.

The association between Bran Castle and Vlad III was fabricated in the 1970s as tourism took hold in the country and visitors, especially English tourists, wanted to see the castle that had inspired the book. Bran Castle looks the part: its imposing limestone walls are punctuated with small

mostly vertical windows and topped by dark red pointed spires, all set on a high hill overlooking the border between Wallachia and Transylvania. To meet the grim expectations of paying tourists, the castle's managers added a torture musuem that is appropriately appalling, but no more so than torture museums anywhere.

Poenari Castle is more than 2.5 hours north of Bucharest, near the small town of Curtea de Arges. It is a ruined fortress, destroyed by time, neglect, and natural disasters (earthquakes and mudslides) in 1888 and 1915. Aside one cafe *cum* tourist stand at the base, it lacks the accouterments of a true tourist destination—poor lighting, little signage, and not a Dracula mug or magnet in sight. Plus those daunting steps.

More than Bran Castle, Poenari was built with military considerations in mind. The orignal donjon tower was constructed in the 13th century as a military outpost—no surprise, given its commanding view of the surrounding countryside. This strategic position is probably what caught the eye of Vlad Tepes a century later and prompted him to expand the fortress, adding walls and two Byzantine-influenced semicircular towers. How this came about is the source of legend, contributing to the reputation of Vlad III as a merciless despot.

In 1447, the nearby city of Târgoviște was the seat of a rebellion against Vlad's father as ruler of Wallachia. Both Vlad's father and his older half-brother were killed. Some years later, when Vlad had consodlidated his power, he decided to punish the boyars (the local elite) for their disloyalty, He supposedly insited that they march 85 miles to the site of Poenari Castle without adequate clothing, footwear, or provisions. Those who didn't die en route were forced to aid in the construction of the new fortress, after which they would be set free. Conveniently they all died before completion in 1457.

What the castle may have looked like in its glory days is not apparent when you reach the entrance. In its heyday, the structure occupied the entire top of Poenari, approximately 180 feet long and 30 feet wide. When you break through the woods near the end of the stairway, the steps stop zig-zagging and lead more or less straight (but still up) to massive stone walls nine feet thick. First there is a modern-day Romanian flag, then a small entrance booth where you are asked to pay a few lei for the privilege of trapsing through the ruins. Then comes the one and only reminder that this is DRACULA's citadel, and not the ruins of just any old medieval castle. First a high-mounted pillory, designed either for very tall prisoners or very brutal punishment. Behind that two life-size mannequins impaled on stakes, Vlad Impaler style, with red drool painted around their mouths, in case you didn't get the idea.

That Vlad favored impalling his victims is a matter of record. Documents describe cases of hundreds of impaled vicitms lined up along roads to intimidate would-be dissenters. Yet modern historians point out that impaling was not uncommon back then, and torture was socially acceptable.

Today, Romanians are taught that Vlad Tepes was a courageous, albeit cruel, defender of his country against invaders from the East. He was feared, yes, but this was a good thing in a violent era. He was also respected. One apocryphal tale describes a foreign merchant who is robbed of his money by a Romanian thief. The merchant goes to Vlad and asks for help in finding the thief. A week later the merchant is summoned to court, when he finds Vlad sitting in front of a drawn curtain. Vlad hands him a bag of money and says, "If this is yours, count it to make sure it is right." The merchant counts and sees that the sum is correct. He is tempted to claim more, but decides to accept exactly what had been stolen. "Good," says Vlad, and waves to have the curtain opened. Behind him is the body of the thief, tied to the ground, his body split open. "If you had claimed more than you were due, this is how you would have ended," says Vlad.

Entering the castle ruins proper, visitors can wander at will, scrambling over original stones. No unworldly explanation for the durability; rather, the stones were bound with lime mortar, more flexible than cement and more resistant to seismic activity. The foundation and lower part of the walls are built of medieval stone; the upper walls are made of brick, giving the structure a reddish tinge. Historians conjecture that the bricks were used to replace stones shattered during sieges of the fortress—none of them successful.

You can admire the views, and squint at the small information plaques written in English as well as Romanian. No bats or werewolves the day I visited, but a small grey-and white mutt, conspicuously pregnant, was napping beside an interior wall.

One view with a guardrail looks down to a sliver of water, the Râul Doamnei, a tributary of the Argeș River. Gripping the guardrail tightly, I looked down to the “river of the princess” far below. The name makes sense to anyone who saw Martin Scorsese’s 1992 version of *Dracula.* In that film, as in local folklore, the then-wife of Vlad III, Jusztina Szilagyi of Moldavia, jumped from the castle into the river rather than be captured by the Turks during a siege in 1462.

That siege had been led by Vlad’s real life brother-turned enemy, Radu Bey.

Neither brother had a happy ending. Radu Bey died “suddenly” at the age of 40, perhaps of syphilis. Vlad was 46 when he died a violent death, betrayed by his supporters as payback for his unrelenting cruelty. He was decapitated and his head sent to Constantinople for display.

No such spectacle awaits the tourist who makes it to the top of Poenari. Aside those fake-looking mannequins at the entrance, the most disturbing thing about the castle is the knowledge that Vlad Tepes was real. His his taste for torture and his history of violence, betrayal, death, and dismemberment actually happened. That is the scariest thing you are left with as you make your way down those 1,482 steps.