

Countess Elizabeth Báthory



(*Báthory Erzsébet* in Hungarian),

7 August 1560 – 21 August 1614, was a Hungarian countess from the renowned Báthory family. She is possibly the most prolific female serial killer in history and is remembered as the "Blood Countess" and as the "**Bloody Lady of Čachtice**", after the castle near Trenčín, at that time in Kingdom of Hungary, where she spent most of her adult life.

PENALTY: house arrest killings
NUMBER OF VICTIMS: unknown
SPAN OF KILLINGS: 1590 – 1610
COUNTRY: Kingdom of Hungary
DATE APREHENDED: 30 December 1610

The Báthory family is famous for defending Hungary against the Ottoman Turks.

After her husband's death, she and four collaborators were accused of torturing and killing hundreds of girls and young women, with one witness attributing to them over 600 victims, though she was only convicted on 80 counts. In 1610, she was imprisoned in **Čachtice Castle**, where she remained bricked in a set of rooms until her death four years later. She was never formally tried in court.

The case has led to false, but legendary accounts of the Countess bathing in the blood of virgins in order to retain her youth. These stories have led to comparisons with **Vlad III the Impaler of Wallachia**, on whom the fictional Count Dracula is partly based, and to modern nicknames of *the Blood Countess* and *Countess Dracula*.

Life

Early years

Elizabeth Báthory was born on a family estate in Nyírbátor, at that time Kingdom of Hungary, and spent her childhood at **Ecsed Castle**. Her father was George Báthory of the Ecsed branch of the family, a brother of Andrew Bonaventura Báthory, who had been Voivod of Transylvania, while her mother was Anna Báthory (1539–1570), daughter of Stephen Báthory, another Voivod of Transylvania, of the Somlyó branch. Through her mother, she was the niece of Stefan Báthory, **King of Poland**.

Married life

At the age of 15, Báthory was engaged to Ferenc Nádasdy and moved to Nádasdy Castle in Sárvár, at that time Kingdom of Hungary. In 1575, she married Nádasdy in Varannó. Nádasdy's wedding gift to Báthory was his home, Čachtice Castle, situated in the Little Carpathians, together with the Čachtice country house and 17 adjacent villages. The castle itself was surrounded by a village and agricultural lands, bordered by outcrops of the Little Carpathians.

In 1578, Nádasdy became the chief commander of Hungarian troops, leading them to war against the Ottomans. With her husband away at war, Elizabeth Báthory managed business affairs and the estates. That role usually included providing for the Hungarian and Slovak peasants, even medical care.

Her husband died in 1604 at the age of 47. His death is commonly reported as resulting from an injury sustained in battle.

She was an educated woman who could read and write in four languages.

Arrest: Early investigation

Between 1602 and 1604, Lutheran minister István Magyari complained about atrocities both publicly and with the court in Vienna, after rumors had spread.

The Hungarian authorities took some time to respond to Magyari's complaints. Finally, in 1610, King Matthias assigned Juraj Thurzo, the Palatine of Hungary, to investigate. Thurzo ordered two notaries to collect evidence in March 1610. Even before obtaining the results, Thurzó debated further proceedings with Elizabeth's son Paul and two of her sons-in-law. A trial and execution would have caused a public scandal and disgraced a noble and influential family (which at the time ruled Transylvania), and Elizabeth's considerable property would have been seized by the crown. Thurzo, along with Paul and her two sons-in-law, originally planned for Elizabeth to be secreted to a nunnery, but as accounts of her murder of the daughters of lesser nobility spread, it was agreed that Elizabeth Báthory should be kept under strict house arrest, but that further punishment should be avoided. It was also determined that Matthias did not have to repay a large debt for which he lacked sufficient funds.

Arrest and trial

Thurzó went to Čachtice Castle on 30 December 1610 and arrested Báthory and four of her servants, who were accused of being her accomplices. Thurzó's men reportedly found one girl dead and one dying. Another woman was found wounded, others locked up.

While the countess was put under house arrest (and remained so from that point on), King Matthias requested that Elizabeth be sentenced to death. However, Thurzo successfully convinced the King that such an act would negatively affect the nobility. Hence, a trial was postponed indefinitely.

The countess' associates however were brought to court. A trial was held in 1611, presided over by Royal Supreme Court judge and 20 associate judges. Bathory herself did not appear at the trial.

The defendants at that trial were Dorottya Szentes, also referred to as Dorko, Ilona Jó, Katarína Benická, and János Újváry ("Ibis" or Ficko).

Dorko, Ilona and Ficko were found guilty and put to death on the spot. Dorko and Ilona had their fingernails ripped out before they were thrown into a fire, while Ficko, who was deemed less guilty, was beheaded before being consigned to the flames. A public scaffold was erected near the castle to show the public that justice had been done. Katarína Benická was sentenced to life imprisonment, as she only acted under the domination and bullying by the other women, as implied by recorded testimony.

Last years and death

During the trial of her primary servants, Báthory had been placed under house arrest in a walled up set of rooms. She remained there for four years, until her death.

King Matthias had urged Thurzo to bring her to court and two notaries were sent to collect further evidence, but in the end no court proceedings against her were ever commenced.

On 21 August 1614, Elizabeth Báthory was found dead in her castle. Since there were several plates of food untouched, her actual date of death is unknown. She was buried in the church of Čachtice, but due to the villagers' uproar over having "The Tigress of Čachtice" buried in their cemetery, her body was moved to her birthhome at Nagyecsed in Kingdom of Hungary, where it is interred at the Báthory family crypt.

Accusations

In 1610 and 1611 the notaries collected testimonies from more than 300 witness accounts. Trial records include testimonies of the four defendants, as well as 13 more witnesses. Priests, noblemen and commoners were questioned. Witnesses included the castellan and other personnel of Sárvár castle. However, trial processes did not follow modern judicial standards and included intimidation and torture.

According to these testimonies, her initial victims were local peasant girls, many of whom were lured to Čachtice by offers of well-paid work as maidservants in the castle. Later she is said to have begun to kill daughters of lower gentry, who were sent to her *gynaecium* by their parents to learn courtly etiquette. Abductions were said to have occurred as well. At the trial there were accusations of pagan practices and witchcraft.

The descriptions of torture that emerged during the trials were often based on hearsay. The atrocities described most consistently included:

severe beatings over extended periods of time, often leading to death.

burning or mutilation of hands, sometimes also of faces and genitalia.

biting the flesh off the faces, arms and other bodily parts.

freezing to death.

bad surgery on victims, often leading to death.

starving of victims.

The use of needles was also mentioned by the collaborators in court.

Some witnesses named relatives who died while at the gynaeceum. Others reported having seen traces of torture on dead bodies, some of which were buried in graveyards, and others in unmarked locations. According to testimonies by the defendants, Elizabeth Báthory tortured and killed her victims not only at Čachtice but also on her properties in Sárvár, Sopronkeresztúr, Bratislava and Vienna, and even between these locations. In addition to the defendants, several people were named for supplying Elizabeth Báthory with young women. The girls had been procured either by deception or by force.

The number of young women tortured and killed by Elizabeth Báthory is unknown, though it is often cited as being in the hundreds, between the years 1585 and 1610. The estimates differ greatly. During the trial and before their execution, Szentes and Ficko reported 36 and 37 respectively, during their periods of service. The other defendants estimated a number of 50 or higher. Many Sárvár castle personnel estimated the number of bodies removed from the castle at between 100 to 200. One witness who spoke at the trial mentioned a book in which a total of over 650 victims was supposed to have been listed by Báthory herself. This number became part of the legend surrounding Báthory. Reportedly, diaries in Báthory's hand are kept in the State Archives in Budapest.

László Nagy has argued that Elizabeth Báthory was a victim of a **conspiracy**, a view opposed by others. Nagy argued that the proceedings were largely politically motivated. However the conspiracy theory is consistent with Hungarian history at that time.

Folklore, literature and popular culture

The case of Elizabeth Báthory inspired numerous stories during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most common motif of these works was that of the countess bathing in her victims' blood in order to retain beauty or youth.

This legend appeared in print for the first time in 1729, in the Jesuit scholar László Turóczi's *Tragica Historia*, the first written account of the Báthory case. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this certainty was questioned, and **sadistic** pleasure was considered a far more plausible motive for Elizabeth Báthory's crimes. In 1817, the witness accounts (which had surfaced in 1765) were published for the first time, demonstrating that the bloodbaths, for the purpose of preserving her youth, were legend rather than fact. The legend nonetheless persisted in the **popular imagination**. Some versions of the story were told with the purpose of denouncing female vanity, while other versions aimed to entertain or thrill their audience. During the twentieth and twenty first centuries, Elizabeth Báthory has continued to appear as a character in music, film, plays, books, games and toys and to serve as an inspiration for similar characters.

The 2006 movie **"STAY ALIVE"** is based on the 'Blood Countess,' depicted as a sadist who killed young girls and bathed in their blood to preserve her youth. Bathory, referenced by her name, is said to have fled from Hungary to avoid persecution. No accounts of such have been found.

References

1. "Countess Elizabeth Bathory - The Blood Countess." *The Crime Library*.
2. Farin, *Heroine des Grauens*, p. 234-237.
3. Letters from Thurzó to both men on 5 March 1610, printed in Farin, *Heroine des Grauens*, p. 265-266, 276-278.
4. On 19 September 1610, Andreas of Keresztúr sent 34 witness accounts to Thurzo. On 27 October 1610, Mózes Cziráky sent 18 accounts.
5. Letter from 12 December 1610 by Elizabeth's son-in-law Zrinyi to Thurzo refers to agreement made earlier. See Farin, *Heroine des Grauens*, p. 291.
6. McNally, Raymond T. (1983). *Dracula Was a Woman: In Search of the Blood Countess of Transylvania*. New York: McGraw Hill.
7. 224 Witness accounts were sent to Matthias on 28 July 1611 by A. of Keresztúr, 12 by M. Cziraky on 14 December 1611,

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Vlad III the Impaler



Vlad III the Impaler
Prince of Wallachia

Earliest known picture of VLAD THE IMPALER, 1560

Reign: 1448; 1456-1462; 1476

Born: Sigisoara, Transylvania, 1431

Died: Bucharest, Wallachia, December 1476

Father: Vlad II Dracul

Mother: Princess Cneajna of Wallachia

Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia called "Vlad the Impaler", also known as Vlad Dracula or simply Dracula, in Romanian Drăculea; is known for the exceedingly cruel punishments he imposed during his reign.

In the English-speaking world, Vlad III is perhaps most commonly known for inspiring the name of the vampire in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel Dracula.

As prince, Vlad maintained an independent policy in relation to the Ottoman Empire and was a defender of Wallachia against Ottoman expansionism.

Names

His Romanian surname Drăculea means 'son of Dracul' and is derived from his father's title, Vlad the Dragon, a member of the Order of the Dragon. The word "drac" means "the Devil" or "demon" in modern Romanian but in Vlad's day also meant "dragon". The suffix "ulea" can be translated as "son of".

His post-mortem moniker of Țepeș (Impaler) originated in his preferred method for executing his opponents, impalement—as popularized by medieval Transylvanian pamphlets.

Legacy

The legacy and the legend of Vlad Țepeș is mostly the result of different stories about him. The Romanian, German, and the Russian stories all have their origins in the 15th century. Besides the written stories the Romanian oral tradition provides another important source for the life of Vlad the Impaler: legends and tales concerning the Impaler have remained a part of folklore among the Romanian peasantry. These tales have been passed down from generation to generation for five hundred years. Through constant retelling they have become somewhat garbled and confused and they have gradually been forgotten in later years. However, they still provide valuable information about Dracula and his relationship with his people.

Many of the tales contained in the pamphlets are also found in the oral tradition, though with a somewhat different emphasis. Among the Romanian peasantry, Vlad Țepeș was remembered as a just prince who defended his people from foreign aggression, whether those foreigners were Turkish invaders or German merchants.

However, despite the more positive interpretation, the Romanian oral tradition also remembers Vlad as an exceptionally cruel and often capricious ruler. There are several events that are common to all the pamphlets, regardless of their nation of origin. Many of these events are also found in the Romanian oral tradition. Specific details may vary among the different versions of these anecdotes but the general course of events usually agrees to a remarkable extent.

Vlad immediately had all the assembled nobles arrested. The older boyars and their families were impaled on the spot. The younger and healthier nobles and their families were marched north from Târgoviște to the ruins of Poienari Castle in the mountains above the Argeș River. Vlad the Impaler was determined to rebuild this ancient fortress as his own stronghold and refuge. The enslaved boyars and their families were forced to labour for months rebuilding the old castle with materials from another nearby ruin. According to the stories, they labored until the clothes fell off their bodies and then were forced to continue working naked. Very few of the old gentry survived the ordeal of building Vlad's castle.

Throughout his reign, Vlad systematically eradicated the old boyar class of Wallachia. The old boyars had repeatedly undermined the power of the prince during previous reigns and had been responsible for the violent overthrow of several princes. Apparently Vlad Țepeș was determined that his own power be on a modern and thoroughly secure footing. In place of the executed boyars, Vlad promoted new men from among the free peasantry and middle class; men who would be loyal only to their prince.

German stories about Vlad Țepeș

The German stories circulated first in manuscript form in the late 15th century and the first manuscript was probably written in 1462 before Vlad's arrest.

All of the Stories start with the episode telling how the old governor (meaning John Hunyadi) had Vlad's father killed and how Vlad and his brother renounced their old religion and swore to protect and uphold the Christian faith. After this the order of the episodes differs in the different manuscripts and editions of the pamphlets. The title of the German stories varies in different manuscripts, incunabula and pamphlets with mainly three different titles with variations.

The German stories about Vlad Țepeș were written most likely for political reasons, especially to blacken the image of the Wallachian ruler. The first version of the German text was probably written in Brașov by a Saxon scholar. According to some researchers the writer of the text did little else than mirror the state of mind of the Saxons in Brașov and Sibiu who had borne the brunt of Vlad's wrath in 1456–1457 and again in 1458–1459 and 1460.

The purpose of the stories soon changed from propaganda to literature and became very popular, best-sellers of their time, in the German world in the 15th and 16th centuries. Part of the reason for this success was the newly invented printing press, which allowed the texts to filter to a wide audience.

Vlad's atrocities against the people of Wallachia have been interpreted as attempts to enforce his own moral code upon his country. According to the pamphlets, he appears to have been particularly concerned with female chastity. Maidens who lost their virginity, adulterous wives, and unchaste widows were all targets of Vlad's cruelty. Such women often had their sexual organs cut out or their breasts cut off. They were also often impaled through the vagina on red-hot stakes that were forced through the body until they emerged from the mouth. One report tells of the execution of an unfaithful wife. The woman's breasts were cut off, then she was skinned and impaled in a square in Târgoviște with her skin lying on a nearby table. Vlad also insisted that his people be honest and hard-working.

Merchants who cheated their customers were likely to find themselves mounted on a stake beside common thieves. Vlad also viewed the poor, sick and beggars as thieves. One horrific tale tells of him inviting all the sick and poor in the area to a large dinner only to have them locked inside and the building burned.

Russian stories about Vlad Țepeș

There are 19 episodes or anecdotes in the Tale about Voivode Dracula and they are longer and more constructed than the German stories. The Tale itself can be divided into two sections. The first 13 episodes are more or less non chronological events and are most likely closer to the original folkloric oral tradition about Vlad. The last six episodes are thought to have been written by a scholar who had the idea of collecting the anecdotes because they are chronological and seem to be more structured. The Tale about Voivode Dracula starts with a short introduction and then with the story about the nailing of hats to ambassadors heads and it ends with the death of Vlad Țepeș and information about Vlad's family.

Out of the 19 episodes there are ten that are almost the same as in the German stories. Although there are similarities between the Russian and the German stories about Țepeș there is a clear distinction with the attitude towards Vlad Țepeș in these stories.

Unlike in the German stories the Russian stories tend to give a more positive image of Vlad. He is seen as a great ruler, a brave soldier and a just sovereign. There are also tales about atrocities but even most of them seem to be justified as the actions of a strong one-man ruler. Out of the 19 episodes only four seem to be exaggerated with violence. Some elements of the episodes of the Tale about Voivode Dracula were later added to Russian stories about Ivan IV of Russia.

The nationality and identity of the original writer of the Tale about Voivode Dracula is disputed. The two most plausible explanations are that the writer was either a Romanian priest or a monk somewhere in Transylvania or a Romanian or Moldavian from the court of Stephen the Great in Moldova. One theory is also that the writer would have been a Russian diplomat named Fedor Kuritsyn but it is very unlikely that we can find a name to the real writer of the Tale.

Vampire legend and Romanian attitudes

It is most likely that Bram Stoker found the name for his vampire from William Wilkinson's book, *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia: with various Political Observations Relating to Them*. It is known that Stoker made notes about this book. It is also suggested by some that because Stoker was a friend of a Hungarian professor, Vlad's name might have been mentioned by this friend. Regardless of how the name came to Stoker's attention, the cruel history of the Impaler would have readily lent itself to Stoker's purposes.

However, recent research suggests that Stoker actually knew little about the Prince of Wallachia. Some have claimed that the novel owes more to the legends about Elizabeth Báthory, a 16th century Hungarian countess who murdered hundreds of her servants.

Given the history of the vampire legend in Europe, it is perhaps natural that Stoker should place his great vampire in the heart of the region that gave birth to the story. Once Stoker had determined on a locality, Vlad Dracula would stand out as one of the most notorious rulers of the selected region. He was obscure enough that few would recognize the name and those who did would know him for his acts of brutal cruelty; Dracula was a natural candidate for vampirism.

Tales of vampires are still widespread in Eastern Europe. Similarly, the name of Dracula is still remembered in the Romanian oral tradition but that is the end of any connection between Dracula and the folkloric vampire. Outside of Stoker's novel the name of Dracula was never linked with the vampires encountered in the folklore. Despite his alleged inhuman cruelty, in Romania Dracula is remembered as a national hero who resisted the Turkish conquerors and asserted Romanian national sovereignty against the powerful Hungarian kingdom. He is also remembered in a similar manner in other Balkan countries, as he fought against the Turks.

Romanian folklore and poetry, on the other hand, paints Vlad Țepeș as a hero. His favorite weapon being the stake, coupled with his reputation in his native country as a man who stood up to both foreign and domestic enemies, gives him the virtual opposite symbolism of Stoker's vampire.

A description of Vlad Dracula survives courtesy of Nicholas of Modrussa, who wrote:

"He was not very tall, but very stocky and strong, with a cruel and terrible appearance, a long straight nose, distended nostrils, a thin and reddish face in which the large wide-open green eyes were enframed by bushy black eyebrows, which made them appear threatening. His face and chin were shaven but for a moustache. The swollen temples increased the bulk of his head. A bull's neck supported the head, from which black curly locks were falling to his wide-shouldered person".

All accounts of his life describe him as ruthless, but only the ones originating from his Saxon detractors paint him as sadistic or insane. These pamphlets continued to be published long after his death, though usually for lurid entertainment rather than propaganda purposes.