IN THIS ISSUE:

Dinu Matei discusses the stamps and the historical truth behind Dracula and Vlad the Impaler. The postmark at right commemorates the 550th anniversary of Vlad's successful campaign against the Sultan Mehmet II Fatih in 1462. The postmark below notes the 100th anniversary of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, first published in 1897.

DRACULA: BETWEEN FICTION AND HISTORY
by Dinu Matei

Vlad Tepes, pronounced 'tzepesh', or Vlad the Impaler, ruled the Principality of Wallachia (part of Romania) in 1448, 1456-1462, and 1476. Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, published in 1887, made this Romanian prince famous worldwide and attributed to him an exaggerated cruelty. In *Dracula*, Vlad Tepes was portrayed differently from the real Vlad of history.

Vlad Tepes was born in 1428 in Sighisoara, Transylvania. His father is known in history under the name Vlad Dracul. In Romanian, 'drac' means evil. However, there are no documents reporting how evil he was. The nickname 'Dracul' came from his membership in the Order of the Dragon. This was a military and religious brotherhood founded by the Sigismund of Luxembourg (King of Hungary) with the objective to protect the church against heresy and the Turks. In German the order is named Drachenorders, while in Latin Societates draconistarum. Members of this order wore a black cape and a medallion depicting a dragon. In the Middle Ages it was easy for ordinary people, extremely religious, to mistake the dragon with the evil, so from this confusion came the name Dracul. Vlad Tepes inherited this name from his father, and his descendants bear it as a family name. Real descendants of this family still exist today. The nickname 'the Impaler' came from the fact that Vlad Tepes used to impale his enemies. Reputed to be an evil and bloodthirsty man, he was just one of several more-or-less fierce leaders in a time when cruelty was the norm.

Figure 1: The house in Sighisoara, Transylvania, Romania, where Vlad the Impaler was born, depicted on a 1997 Romanian stamp.

Romanian principalities Wallachia and Moldova shared a border with the Ottoman Empire in the Middle Ages. This empire was one of the most powerful in the world and was trying to expand towards Europe. In order to gain trust from the Sultans, many children from the noble Romanian families were sent voluntarily to Istanbul as hostages. Vlad and one of his brothers were no exceptions. Vlad Tepes returned to Wallachia after his father was killed and another brother was blinded with a burning stake and buried alive. These two facts are said to be the origin of Vlad Tepes' cruelty. As mentioned earlier, torture and cruelty was normal in the whole Europe during the Middle Ages.

Figure 2: Two special postmarks commemorating 550 years since Vlad Tepes' father Vlad Dracul was killed.

Other cruelties attributed to Vlad Tepes were killing 'unchaste' women and 'bad' wives, killing entire families suspected of disloyalty, killing poor, blind, crippled, sick, vagabonds, and beggars, nailing hats to heads of disrespectful visitors, and cannibalism. This came from an intense propaganda campaign launched by Matei Corvin (King of Hungary at that time and one of his big enemies) due to envy of Vlad's successes against the Turks, and by German merchants from the city of Brasov (Kronstadt in German) who were opponents to Vlad Tepes' economic politics. Turk and Russian traditions also depict Vlad Tepes as a cruel and bloodthirsty man.

During Vlad Tepes' time, Wallachia was a crime-free country. The Turks wanted to invade the country but were defeated several times and kept at the south of the Danube River (in Bulgaria nowadays). For his successful military campaigns against the Turks, Vlad Tepes was named "magnifico Vlad voivoda" in an Italian document. He was not considered a vampire during his time, but a hero and strong ruler of his country. He is first mentioned as an extremely cruel man in a book published at Lubeck, Germany, in 1471.

Figure 3: First appearance of Vlad the Impaler on a stamp. A miniature sheet and this stamp from a set issued in 1959 in Romania commemorate the 500th anniversary of the city of Bucharest.

Bram Stoker never visited Romania. He was inspired by the evil deeds of Countess Elizabeth Bathory who lived in Transylvania about 150 years later than Vlad Tepes. She used to kill young girls and used their fresh blood to take baths, hoping this would help her to remain forever young. For these crimes she was sentenced to death and walled alive into a castle room in 1610. For similar accusations a French nobleman was beheaded in France during the same period.

Vlad Tepes' tumultuous life as well as the harshness of his punishments tempted many writers. A fashion of Dracula the Vampire Count was born with great success, and many books and more than 100 movies were done on the subject. We can assume that Count Dracula was created thanks to the inspiration provided by Transylvanian history, where very old castles such as the one attributed to Dracula set the mood for bloody ghosts and terrifying vampires. Bram Stoker possibly chose the name Dracula because it suggested the macabre. He needed a male hero for his novel, published at a time when the crimes committed by Jack the Ripper in London were on the front pages of British newspapers. The novel *Dracula* has very few historical truths in it. Bram Stoker himself knew very little about the real Vlad Tepes. The action of the book takes place in Transylvania, but he never ruled that province, just Wallachia. The title of Count did not exist for Romanian noblemen during the Middle Ages; Vlad Tepes was in fact a Royal Prince. However, Bram Stoker's descriptions of the Romanian localities and many geographical places are real.

Located on a cliff in the Carpathians, 'Dracula's Castle' is actually named Bran Castle, after a pass between Transylvania and Wallachia. It was built by the German merchants from Brasov in 1377 to keep under control the inland and outland commercial traffic. Restored several times, in this century the castle was the residence of Queen Maria of Romania in the 1920s, and is now converted into a museum.

Vlad Tepes was depicted on Romanian stamps on several occasions. First was in 1959 when Bucharest, the capital of Romania, celebrated 500 years since it was for the first time mentioned in a document, signed by Vlad Tepes himself. This document is kept in the National History Museum of Romania, in Bucharest. It, along with the portrait of Vlad, is depicted on a beautiful engraved miniature sheet issued by the Romanian Postal Administration. This portrait is the only known portrait of Vlad and is kept in an Austrian monastery in the Tirol. Based on the same painting, Vlad Tepes' figure appeared on a stamp issued by Romania in 1976, when 500 years since his death were commemorated. Two more stamps were issued in Romania in 1997, one depicting him as a Prince of Wallachia and another depicting him as Dracula. Bran Castle and Poenari Castle (one of the real residences of Vlad, now in ruins) are depicted on two labels that separate the stamps. Bran Castle was depicted also on a stamp issued in 1929, while images from Vlad Tepes' home town appear on a set issued in 1997. Several special postmarks, postal stationery, and postcards depicting him and/or Bran Castle were issued over the years. Matei Corvin, King of Hungary, who kept Vlad Tepes imprisoned for ten years and who finally executed him, is pictured on several stamps issued in Hungary. Vlad Tepes is buried at the Snagov Monastery, near Bucharest.