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Martin Kasarda
ORCID: 0000-0001-9295-9697
Pan-European University, Bratislava, Slovakia

How the Slovaks Helped Count Dracula: Stereotypes of the Late 19th Century

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Summary

Bram Stoker's iconic horror novel is heavily influenced by Central and Eastern European mythological pre-Christian stories about the undead, people undergoing lycanthropic metamorphoses, and vampires. However, the focus of this article is placed not on the interpretation of the Dracula phenomenon, but on a specific problem: the Slovaks (as an ethnic group) being presented as a sort of collective character in the novel. They are portrayed in a stereotypical manner as shepherds and rafters, one of several peoples who inhabit the Transylvanian region, and one whose reputation is not exactly spotless. It is clear that when Bram Stoker was creating the character of count Dracula, he used the information he had from the Hungarian orientalist Ármin Vambéry, who was a native of the multicultural Hungarian (now Slovak) town of Svätý Jur and studied in the other Slovak cities — Dunajská Streda and Bratislava. The study deals mainly with this Slovak, Slavic and Hungarian footprint in Stoker's work.

Introduction

Bram Stoker's (1847–1912) iconic vampire novel *Dracula* has existed on the margins of literary interest as part of the horror circuit, and therefore unserious, pulp literary production in the first years since its publication in 1897. The creator of the character of the vampiric count Dracula, Bram Stoker (1847–1912), suffered a stroke and subsisted only because of the support extended to him by the

Royal Literary Academy.[1] But his undead literary child has taken root in a genre that in its very core relies on sensory shock and obfuscation, shadowplay and the illogical sphere of illusions, dreams and nightmares. Stoker himself would be quite surprised that, more than 120 years later, his Dracula, the godfather of the entire vampire world, is still very much alive, both as a character and as a nexus of a constantly evolving narrative tradition.

However, the objective this article is not set on evaluating *Dracula* as a novel or a psychonautical adventure, recreating the struggles of the distant, long-lost world of blood-sucking vampires, or its relations with modern transfusion medicine, with which Bram Stoker was thoroughly acquainted due to his younger brother George Stoker.[2] Nor does this it pay much attention to *Dracula*'s film adaptations and the transformation of the vampire archetype from a terrifying, coffin-bound, monstrous character with pointed teeth to a rather cuddly, love-struck 'goth' figure in teen films inspired by Stephanie Meyer's romance stories.

The actual goal of our paper is to point out the interesting connection between the classic English horror story and Central Europe, the Balkans, and Slovakia in particular. Thanks to Bram Stoker and his encounter with monsters and ghouls coming from this part of the world, local folk narratives were introduced to the wider world of popular culture and, on another note, regional stereotypes of the 'uncivilized' part of Europe were integrated into the Western European civilizational circle. Reading *Dracula* in Central and Eastern Europe is also interesting because Stoker drew on the sources of Balkan and Slavic mythologies thanks to the conveyance of information through Ármin Vambéry, who himself was native to the region of present-day Slovakia and an interesting presence on the Hungarian cultural and political landscape of the second half of the 19th century.

The hermeneutic interpretation of any literary work can never be completed, simply because with each subsequent interpretation new possibilities for understanding the individual components of the story open up. In this study, I will primarily focus not on the motif of vampirism and vampires and the interpretation of this phenomenon, but on a peculiar collective character — the Slovaks.

Slovaks in the Story

Any Slovak reader who skimmed through Bram Stoker's *Dracula* must have had at least a moment's pause realizing that Slovaks not only appear in this vampire classic, but they are introduced in the very first chapter — and not in a particularly flattering light at that. Bram Stoker (through Harker's journal) portrays them as follows:

[1] P. Uličný, 'Athenaeum', [in:] B. Stoker, *Dracula*, transl. K. Slugeňová-Cockrell, M. Plch, Bratislava 2018, p. 459.

[2] B. Belford, *Bram Stoker and the Man Who Was Dracula*, Cambridge 2002, p. 84.

> The strangest figures we saw were the Slovaks, who are more barbarian than the rest, with their big cowboy hats, great baggy dirty-white trousers, white linen shirts, and enormous heavy, leather belts, nearly a foot wide, all studded over with brass nails. […] They are very picturesque, but do not look prepossessing. On the stage they would set down at once as some old Oriental band of brigands. They are, however, I am told, very harmless and rather wanting in natural self-assertion.[3]

In the novel, Slovaks appear a total of eighteen times. First as colourful characters in the stereotypically peasant-shepherd milieu, very much in the background of events, in fact almost as elements of the scenery. They also cross the path of the narrator of the first chapter, Jonathan Harker, near Dracula's castle — they are the group that supplies coffins to count's Transylvanian retreat, in which clay (and the Undead himself, Nosferatu, Dracula) is to be transported. They also help facilitate his return to the castle as rafters.

But how did Slovaks end up in this story? How was Bram Stoker, an Irish gentleman who worked as manager of the then famous actor sir Henry Irving, and director of the Irving Lyceum in London, so knowledgeable about Transylvania, the Slovaks, and the typical vampire legend? And if he was indeed well-informed, then by whom?

One can find a certain clue hidden in the passage in which the scholar-cum-crusader Van Helsing mentions the advice and information given to him by someone only referred to by his first name: 'I have asked my friend Arminius, of Buda-Pesth University, to make his record; and, from all the means that are, he tell me of what he has been. He must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkey-land.'[4] This scholar, well-versed in arcane lore but mentioned only in passing, bears a name uncannily similar to one Ármin Vambéry (1832–1913) — also a professor from Budapest, whose name is borne by the main square in the Slovak town of Dunajská Streda.

Why bring up two seemingly unrelated issues of a Budapest-based orientalist and the Slovaks in an article ostensibly about *Dracula*, of all places? Was Ármin Vambéry, a native of the picturesque Hungarian village of Szentgyörg[5] (today's town of Svätý Jur in Slovakia), the one who led Bram Stoker on the 'Slovak' or even 'vampire' trail?

Bram Stoker must have met the eccentric Hungarian orientalist. Indeed, it seems that much of the mythological imagery that made up the background of the novel, as well as the geographic description of Transylvania provided by Van Helsing, Balkan folk re-tellings of the story of Vlad Tepes, a cruel ruler who warred against the Turks and was nicknamed 'Dracul' (eng. 'The Devil,' 'The Dragon') was conveyed to the father of modern vampire fiction by Vambéry. He

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[3] B. Stoker, *Dracula*, Oxford–New York 1992, p. 3.

[4] Ibid., p. 240.

[5] A. Vambéry, *Moje životné zápasy*, transl. P. Kálmán, Dunajská Streda 2022, p. 21.

was also one of the sources from which *Dracula* takes much of ethnographic detail that helped Stoker paint such a vivid image of the little-known and untamed Balkan countryside

In this sense, through the figures of the collective character of the Slovaks and the references to the orientalist Vambéry, we can also point to the issue of the transmission of cultural information.

Who Was Ármin Vambéry?

The Story of My Struggles, the memoir penned by the Hungarian adventurer, writer and orientalist, offers a thrilling story about a man who uplifted himself from a humble background of a Jewish family in Svätý Jur and, and, after several years of wandering of through Central Asia in the guise of a dervish, ended up in the opulent salons and finally the royal court in London. He was undoubtedly extremely gifted linguistically, being able to speak and write in more than twenty languages, including Arabic, Turkish and other Central Asian languages.

In large part thanks to his penchant for language and writing, as he came to London in 1864, he was feted as one of the adventurer-travellers of the time. Vambéry's travels in Central Asia were exceptional in that, being disguised as a poor dervish, he was also able to reach places that would be otherwise inaccessible to a 'European gentleman.' He moved in merchant caravans, and his impersonating a holy man also earned him the opportunity to meet several Central Asian men of influence and power. His knowledge of the exotic Orient captivated British high society, and during his repeated London stays he also reached Queen Victoria and the court of her successor to the throne, including her son Edward VII.

Vambéry's fame as a traveller was equaled by his reputation as a good storyteller, who knew how to colourfully describe his peregrinations and encounters with the savage and mystical world from the Balkans all the way to Samarkand, as during his journey he crossed Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and other Central Asian states.

In his memoirs, Ármin Vambéry does not directly mention the fact that he met Bram Stoker, nor has any correspondence between the two gentlemen survived. However, one document attests that Vambéry personally met the writer at a dinner in the Beefsteak Room, which, according to Bram Stoker's biographer Daniel Faser, was held on April 13, 1890.[6] The Beefsteak Room was an arts club based at actor Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre in central London, which was managed by Stoker. The mentioned document is a seating chart published in 2018 in the afterword to the book *Dracul*, penned by Bram Stoker's great-nephew Dacre

[6] D. Farson, *The Man Who Wrote Dracula: A Biography of Bram Stoker*, New York 1975, p. 47.

Stoker along with J.D. Barker.[7] He even claimed that Vambéry was one of the regular guests of this club. According to D. Farson, Stoker must have seen in person in 1892, when Vambéry received an honorary doctorate from the University of Dublin.

Interestingly, Ármin Vambéry appears in Drace Stoker's *Dracul* as one of the characters who initiates young Bram Stoker in the secrets of protection from vampires in 1868. If, as Drace Stoker himself claims, he had access to many domestic and private documents that are not accessible to the public, we can also see this fictious account as a reference to a relationship that is well known to information researches — one between the author (Bram Stoker) and his inspiration and informant (Ármin Vambéry).

Bram Stoker, who was also interested in the spiritualist movement (which was very much *en vogue* at the time), as well as other mysterious and mystical issues, and was probably also a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, obtained from Vambéry the information he conveys in the narrative using the character of Van Helsing: the story of Vlad Tepes III, a cruel count of Transylvania who guarded the land from Ottoman invaders in the 15th century. Bloody tales of how he impaled enemies alive on stakes and intoxicated himself with their blood reinforced Stoker's inspiration. And since Vambéry was extremely linguistically proficient, it was most likely he who explained to Stoker that Dracul, the terrifying Romanian sobriquet of Vlad Tepes III, means 'The Devil.' Stoker's vampire character, who will see the light of day (although not literally, as the daylight is well known to be lethal to vampires) seven years after this encounter, seems to have gotten his name then and there. According to other documents, which are also available on the website of The Bram Stoker Estate, the novel was originally supposed to be called *Undead* back in 1890, and the antagonist was supposed to be an Austrian count called 'Wampyr.'[8]

Vambéry, Vampires and a Name for Dracula

Vambéry, who was most likely the source of information about Vlad Tepes III and inspired the name of the Transylvanian count, spoke Slovak as one of his mother tongues, among many other languages. As he recalls in his memoir, he remembers knowing Hungarian, Slovak, German and Yiddish since his childhood years. We can assume that he was at the very least spurred Bram Stoker's interest in the east of Europe and, in addition to inspiring the renaming of the Austrian count Wampyr to count Dracula of Transylvania, he also helped him come up with a more ethnographically accurate localization of vampire and vampire legends.

[7] D. Stoker, J.D. Barker, *Dracul*, New York 2018, p. 412.

[8] 'The Life of Bram Stoker', The Bram Stoker Estate, https://tiny.pl/swt_yytm (accessed: 04.06.2024).

However, if I am allowed a small ethnographic digression here: Slovak and generally Slavic mythological narratives are filled with tales that speak about dark forces, mysterious spirits who come from the world of the dead, especially those that originate from people who were killed, drowned, murdered or committed suicide. As Aleksander Gieysztor notes in his study, the mythology of the Slavs recognizes a number of demons hostile to human society, and between the witches and ghouls there are many a vampire and werewolf.[9]

The symptoms we commonly associate with vampirism (photophobia, avoidance of daylight, having no reflection in mirrors or not casting a shadow, lycanthrophy or the ability to transform into a bat) were not typically ascribed to Western European vampires until the birth of Dracula.[10] Moreso, one cannot help but feel that Bram Stoker also took a strong inspiration from Vambéry to look for and appropriate other stories from the Balkans and other Slavic language areas regarding strange undead beings. According to Czech authors Vladimír Vondráček and František Holub, the first demonstrable use of the word 'vampire' occured in the 14th century in a text preserved in the Paisievsko-Galician Monastery in Russia, located northeast of Moscow. Sometimes the Russian anti-pagan treatise *The Oration of Saint Gregory* is cited as its first use, mentioning that pagans worship vampires. This document probably dates from the 11th or 12th century, and while no physical copy of the volume survived it can be found on the Paisiev list preserved in the Kirillo-Belozersky male Orthodox monastery, which is one of the centres of Russian Orthodox life.[11]

This fact also proves that the bloodthirsty vampire who feeds on human blood belongs to the pre-Christian pagan Slavic mythological tradition — although blood-sucking beings are also known in other cultural-mythological backgrounds.

Of course, Bram Stoker did not draw his vampire knowledge from Vambéry alone, the phenomenon of the undead being who sucks the blood of the living was already known in literature at that time — the short story 'The Vampire' by John William Polidori in 1819, or the famous 'penny dreadful' novel *Varney the Vampire; Or, the Feast of Blood* by Thomas Prest and James Rymer from 1847 belonged to the classics of the entertainment genre.[12] In addition, similar stories about werewolves or vampires were prevalent in ethnographic literature describing the untamed regions of the Balkans and Transylvania.

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[9] A. Gieysztor, *Mytologie Slovanů*, transl. H. Komárková, Praha 2020, pp. 206–209.

[10] Zob. J. Likavec, *Bytosti na pomezí*, Praha 2016, p. 123.

[11] V. Vondráček, F. Holub, *Fantastické a magické z hladiska psychiatrie*, Praha 1968, pp. 134–135 .

[12] T.P. Prest, J.M. Rymer, *Varney the Vampire; Or, The Feast of Blood*, London 1847, https://tiny.pl/6kbwnzsk (accessed: 4.06.2024).

Slovaks in Transylvania

Transylvania, a wild mountainous region in the eastern part of the Carpathian range, seemed at the time of writing *Dracula* as an unexplored land, beyond the borders of 'civilized' Europe. It was comprised eastern frontier of the Habsburg monarchy and as such was the buffer zone between the domain of the Muslim Ottomans and Christianity. The traditional view of the region at the time was imagined it as a country of bears, wolves and hardy border-folk such as the Wallachians, Hungarians, Szekelyis, people of often uncertain origin and uncertain faith, even 'natural' peoples (in J.G. Frazer's typology laid out in *The Golden Bough*) — such as the Roma, who also appear in *Dracula* as Szgany (a bastardized form of the traditional name of the Gypsies). Among these 'savage and uncouth' peoples of Transylvania, Czechs and Slovaks also have a home.

In the very beginning of *Dracula*, in the May 5 record, when Jonathan Harker reflects on what his stagecoach driver is talking about, he demonstrates a level of linguistic (particularly etymological) knowledge that was very characteristic of Vambéry. (Old) Slovak terms for werewolves or vampires (*vrolok*, *vrkoslak*, *ordog*) are mentioned here. The traveller Harker introduces picturesque, but strange Slovak shepherds in the book's opening chapter as a stereotypical folkloristic element of set dressing. The Slovaks appear again in the record from June 17, when they bring empty coffins to Dracula's castle, only to be taken away with the Szgany a few days later. They were filled with clay and, in one case, a little something extra.[13]

The Szgany and their Slovak collaborators act as people who are willing to do even the strangest things in exchange for money. They do not ask when they are to be paid, and rather loyally serve the master who pays them, but at the same time they are independent and 'sceptical,' they are not afraid, or rather — they have their own world of superstitions and rules. Since they are a collective entity, they do not have individual identities or personalities, they are a group, a bunch. This also makes them a kind of unknown, hostile quantity for the English gentleman, one that has pagan features, is uneducated, foreign. As for the reader, the collective character is supposed to help them ascribe a face, or at least a corporeal form, to the thus far unnamed evil — a dark, featureless army of minions, henchmen though whom this dark presence enacts its will.

Interestingly, Transylvania is not the homeland of Slovaks, although in the 18th and 19th centuries men from Slovakia often did travel to work in the Western Balkans and created Slovak enclaves in the areas of Vojvodina and Banat, i.e. regions not far from Transylvania. The narrator Harker (or rather Bram Stoker) was correct in not perceiving the Slovaks as natives, but as one of the groups that work

[13] B. Stoker, *Dracula*, pp. 47–48

for the 'Master.' The fact that it was a 'task force' is also evidenced by the fact that Stoker speaks only about stout men, not about families, women, children, but about a typical group of people who earn a living… And work for the highest bidder.

We will meet the Slovaks in the text only after more than three hundred pages of Dracula's sojourn in London. They appear again in Jonathan Harker's writing, in a situation where the vampire hunter Van Helsing, accompanied by other gentlemen, listen to the story of transporting the coffin by boat and with the help of rafters — and these rafters are once again the Slovaks. Rafting, particularly river rafting, is perceived as a traditional trade in Slovakia.

In the final passage, one of the traffickers is found dead and a woman in the crowd shouts: 'This is the work of a Slovak!'[14] The connection between diabolical darkness, death and Slovaks thus reappears in *Dracula* and does not exactly contribute to the best reputation of the ethnic group. A few pages later, Mina Harker writes: 'In my husband's diary, Skinsky is mentioned as dealing with the Slovaks who trade down the river to the port; and the a man's remark, that the murder was the work of a Slovak — showed the general feeling against his class.'[15] When the group decides to go in search of a coffin sailing on the river, the Slovaks are described as strong and ruthless, with whom it will be necessary to fight and get the vampire in the coffin. The last mention of Slovaks is from November 4, when Dr Steward states that while their steamer had problems with rapids on the river, the Slovaks showed themselves to be masters of local waterways and escaped with a coffin with a certain count inside… So there's at least something positive the Slovak have to show for themselves — their rafting skills.

Cinematic *Dracula* and Slovakia

The Slovak footprint that shadowed the infamous count survived the death of his creator (in 1912) and followed him to *Dracula*'s film adaptations. Not blood, but the film reel keeps the story of the vampiric count from final death.

The first film adaptation and one of the first horror films ever, a silent film heavily inspired by *Dracula*, was the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu — Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) and was shot largely in Slovakia. Orava Castle, located on a high rock above the Orava River in northern Slovakia, was depicted by the German director as a fitting residence for the ghastly count. The character of the bloodthirsty Nosferatu was played by Max Schreck, an actor whose face became the perfect icon of the bloodthirsty aristocrat.

This Slovak footprint was also honored by creators Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat in the latest (but not very successful, truth be told) adaptation in the form

[14] Ibid., p. 349.
[15] Ibid., p. 352.

of the series *Dracula* produced by Netflix. Once again Orava Castle was chosen as the backdrop, as was the open-air museum of the Slovak village of Zuberec and localities in Banská Štiavnica. Of course, these 'movie backdrops' did not lead to the volume of tourism that Transylvania has, where the legend of Dracula was appropriated by Bran Castle, which had historical links to the original Vlad Tepes III.

Conclusion: Stoker and His Slovak World

From the text of the novel *Dracula*, it is clear that Bram Stoker perceived the Balkans and Eastern Europe as an exotic enough place to revive a scary character and the horror of a folk story. At the same time, we can trace certain inspirations from the life of Bram Stoker himself, who was very well versed in literature (vampire stories had already appeared on the scene before Stoker) or with medical parallels (blood transfusion was a fairly recent invention at the time of writing).

The Slovak footprint in *Dracula* is conventional, stereotyped as a contemporary image of the gross, underdeveloped, barbaric ethnic groups inhabiting the Balkans. Slovaks also became part of this folklore thanks to a Hungarian scientist, linguist and traveller, with whom Stoker was most likely acquainted with.

Bram Stoker perceived this world of vampires and dark forces as a sort of period set piece, not knowing that his work would become open the way for various tropes potent codified by the film industry, like the modern, teen-romance vampires. Mythological and folk tales have thus successfully transformed into a phenomenon, which today is undoubtedly still an exciting prospect for other speculative and fantastical works that try to attract readers with their exoticism.

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