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Counting the Stakes: A Reassessment of Vlad III Dracula's Practice of Collective Impalements in Fifteenth-Century South-eastern Europe

Dénes Harai 

Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, ITEM, Collège SSH, Pau, France

Email: denes.harai@univ-pau.fr

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Abstract

Dubbed 'the Impaler' by his contemporaries, Vlad III Dracula (c. 1431–76), was accused of the slaughter of between 40,000 and 100,000 individuals, 20,000 of them allegedly impaled at the Wallachian capital Targoviște. Although historians have often considered these figures inflated, none of the numerous studies dedicated to the *voivode* of Wallachia have undertaken a methodical evaluation of the extent of this exaggeration. This article takes up this historiographical challenge by examining all available documentation. In so doing, it provides a full reassessment of the practice of impalement in fifteenth-century south-eastern Europe. Contrary to assumptions of previous scholarship, Vlad's use of impalement was influenced simultaneously by pre-existing Hungarian and Ottoman practices. Quantitative analysis shows that only 7–10 per cent of the impalements claimed by sources can be considered plausible and proposes a new data-driven estimation of Vlad's impaled victims. Finally, a comparison with other rulers shows that, while Vlad ordered collective impalements more frequently, the average number of victims per impalement was similar to that elsewhere in south-eastern Europe.

Keywords: Vlad Țepeș; Dracula; Wallachia; Transylvania; impalement; execution; punishment

Vlad III Dracula (c. 1431–76), the three-time *voivode* (prince) of Wallachia (1448, 1456–62 and 1476) and the historical inspiration for Bram Stoker's famous novel, has been best known since the fifteenth century as Vlad the Impaler ('Țepeș' in Romanian and 'Kazıklı Voyvoda' in Ottoman Turkish). The violence and cruelty associated with his name by medieval chroniclers, pamphleteers and poets explains much of the fascination that Vlad has exercised on biographers and readers over the centuries. In order to portray the *voivode* and his violent conflicts with his subjects and neighbouring states, historians routinely cite the astonishing numbers given by Renaissance sources of impaled Wallachians, Saxons from Transylvania (an autonomous province within the kingdom of Hungary) and Ottomans. They generally do not, however, call

these numbers into question. In her 2021 article about ‘facts and myths from the life of Vlad III the Impaler’, Aleksandra Bartosiewicz, for instance, simply observes that, ‘according to various estimates, between 40,000 and 100,000 people were sentenced in this gruesome manner during the Impaler’s rule, of which approx. 20,000 were exposed to the public in the capital city of Targoviște’.¹

These grisly estimates derive from fifteenth-century accounts. Bishop Nicholas of Modruš (c. 1427–70) heard the figure of 40,000 victims at the court of Matthias Corvinus, the famous humanist king of Hungary from the Hunyadi family, where he was papal legate in 1463–4 and where Vlad was under house arrest between 1462 and 1476.² In 1476, Gabriele Rangoni, bishop of Eger (1475–86) and previously bishop of Transylvania (1472–75),³ put the total number of impalements at 100,000.⁴ The latter figure adds together various tallies of Vlad’s victims found in contemporary Transylvanian Saxon accounts.⁵ As for the 20,000 victims ‘exposed’ in Targoviște, this figure is provided by the *Historiarum demonstrationes*, a chronicle covering the last centuries of the Byzantine empire composed by Laonikos Chalkokondyles (c. 1423–74). According to historian Peter Mario Kreuter, this chronicler ‘was then obviously the source for other later Ottoman authors as he mentioned a kind of forest of 20,000 wooden pales found by Ottoman troops near Tîrgoviște [Targoviște], on which Vlad III allegedly fixed men, women, and even children’.⁶

These figures of 20,000, 40,000 and 100,000 victims were already quoted by Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally in their influential 1973 *Dracula* biography. Even if these scholars warn that ‘statistics are very difficult to establish, particularly for that period’ and acknowledge that other figures originating from Vlad’s adversaries ‘must be viewed with caution’, they nevertheless use them without any further attempt at verification. They only specify that the figure of 100,000 victims ‘undoubtedly includes’ Vlad’s ‘Turkish war victims as well’.⁷ As Aleksandra Bartosiewicz’s 2021 discussion shows, these figures continue to be reported with appropriate notes of caution, but they have in general proved simply too good to check.⁸

Attempts at verifying the figures have been few. In 2008, observing that ‘the mechanics of impalement are cumbersome’, Robert Easton suggested that ‘stories of Vlad’s impaling some 100,000 people in his lifetime are therefore highly improbable’ before adding: ‘If a tenth of the tales of his brutality deserve any credence, however, Vlad was one of the most barbaric men of the Middle Ages, and any gory scenes in

¹Aleksandra Bartosiewicz, ‘Dracula – non omnis moriar. Facts and Myths from the Life of Vlad III the Impaler’, *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych / Review of Historical Sciences*, 20 (2021), 19.

²Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler, 1431–1476* (New York, 1973), 77.

³Dénes Harai, ‘Le Conseil du roi de Hongrie (1458–1559)’, in *Conseils et conseillers dans l’Europe de la Renaissance, v.1450–v.1550*, ed. Cédric Michon (Rennes and Tours, 2012), 247–8, 268.

⁴Florescu and McNally, *Dracula*, 75; Ștefan Andreescu, *Vlad Țepeș Dracula: Între legendă și adevăr istoric* (Bucharest, 1976; repr. 2015), 158.

⁵Meirion James Trow, *Vlad the Impaler: In Search of the Real Dracula* (Stroud, 2004), 229.

⁶Peter Mario Kreuter, ‘How Ignorance Made a Monster, Or: Writing the History of Vlad the Impaler without the Use of Sources Leads to 20,000 Impaled Turks’, in *Disgust and Desire: The Paradox of the Monster*, ed. Kristen Wright (Leiden, 2018), 11.

⁷Florescu and McNally, *Dracula*, 75.

⁸An earlier critical approach can be found in Andreescu, *Vlad Țepeș Dracula*, 238.

Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* are the lightest of entertainments in comparison.⁹ In a similar vein, Meirion James Trow, Matei Cazacu and Peter Mario Kreuter have all urged scepticism.¹⁰ This article takes up the challenge that these scholars have put down by carrying out a reassessment of the voivode's impalements in fifteenth-century south-eastern Europe. The following pages demonstrate that Vlad's use of this punishment was simultaneously influenced by impalement practices and by legal frameworks that existed in both the neighbouring kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman empire. Furthermore, this article argues that it is possible to estimate the degree of literary exaggeration and provides the first plausible estimations of Vlad's impalements based on deep contextualisation and the critical comparison of multiple sources from different origins. This remains a daunting task: the surviving chronicles are steeped in sensationalist rhetoric and alternative sources are scarce – but they do exist and must be found.

Because 'Count Dracula and Vlad Țepeș' are 'intertwined within Western popular culture',¹¹ there is also more at stake than arriving at a precise body count. In turn, any reassessment of impalement will provide a more nuanced image of Vlad. Beyond its contribution to the historiography of Vlad III, this analysis may even have an impact beyond academia, given that 'the Impaler' is one of the two 'central characters of Dracula-tourism'.¹² As Tuomas Hovi observed in 2014, 'the history of Vlad the Impaler that is used in the tour-guide narrations, for example, is partly based on the legend tradition about Vlad, which, although to an extent based on historical events, has many fictitious elements in it'.¹³ Vlad's impalements, however, are *historical* events. Their reassessment is the key to discovering the extent of the reality behind the fiction.

The Hungarian and Ottoman influences on Vlad's use of impalements

On 25 November 1452, a ship 'bearing a cargo of grain for Constantinople' was sunk by the Ottomans. The vessel's Venetian captain Antonio Rizzo and crew 'were brought to Dimotika, where the sultan happened to be at the time': 'he had the sailors beheaded on the spot, and the captain was impaled'.¹⁴ This event caused considerable alarm in the territories neighbouring the expanding Ottoman empire. It also occupies a central position within the debate regarding the origin of this method among the capital punishments used by Vlad. In 1989, Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally explained that, during the final Ottoman siege of the Byzantine capital, 'this act was aimed at persuading the citizens' of Constantinople 'to surrender without a struggle; then, in accordance with custom, the Turks could show leniency toward the population'. They also added that 'the description of this gruesome scenario raised a few eyebrows, though impalement was known and used by the German Saxons as a form

⁹ Revd. Robert Easton, *The Good, the Bad and the Unready: The Curious Stories Behind Noble Nicknames* (2008), 128.

¹⁰ Trow, *Vlad the Impaler*, 228–30. Matei Cazacu, *Dracula*, ed. Stephen W. Reinert (Leiden and Boston, 2017), 117–24. Kreuter, 'How Ignorance Made a Monster', 3–19.

¹¹ Marius-Mircea Crișan and Duncan Light, 'Transylvanian Society of Dracula as a "Cultural Broker" in Romania', in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Vampire*, ed. Simon Bacon (Basingstoke, 2024), 1423.

¹² Tuomas Hovi, *Heritage through Fiction: Dracula Tourism in Romania* (Turku, 2014), 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹⁴ Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and his time*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Jersey, 1978), 78–9.

of punishment for capital offenses'.¹⁵ Meirion James Trow has similarly presented the event as 'a rare and perhaps even unique spectacle', maintaining that impalement 'was not a Turkish custom, even in a war of attrition'.¹⁶

If impalement was therefore apparently rare in Ottoman lands, where then did the practice originate? And how did Vlad come to embrace it? In his 2006 article, Constantin Rezachevici pinpointed one possible source. He argued that Vlad 'applied to foreign offenders the kind of punishment used in their country of origin rather than those provided by Romanian feudal law'.¹⁷ As for the Saxons of Transylvania, both those captured and impaled in Wallachia and the victims of Vlad's attack on Transylvania in 1459, the author observed that 'Vlad employed impalement on the legal provisions of the Saxon towns in Transylvania' where this punishment 'was done according to various German laws, mentioned in the Altenberg Codex – for killing of babies, rape, killing of relatives and adultery (when both partners shared one stake)'.¹⁸

As we shall see, the idea that Vlad drew exclusively on the Saxon use of impalement has to be nuanced and placed within a broader Hungarian context, given that the Saxon settlements of Transylvania (*Siebenbürgen*) were part of the kingdom of Hungary. As such, their judicial autonomy and law codes developed with the approval of the kings of Hungary, beginning with the *Andreaneum* (1224) issued by Andrew II (r. 1205–35). It is significant that the charter that grants privileges to the Saxons of Transylvania dates from the same period as the first recorded use of impalement in Hungary.

The first well-known case dates back to 1213 when one of the murderers of Gertrud of Merania, queen consort of Hungary (1205–13), was impaled.¹⁹ Impalement, however, was part of a range of capital punishments used in the kingdom of Hungary during both the medieval and early modern period. As Pál Engel, a leading historian of medieval Hungary, pointed out, both the royal tribunal and those run by the counts (*comes* in Latin) who headed every county (*comitatus*; the kingdom's basic administrative, judicial and political unit) 'had held the exclusive right to execute or mutilate criminals' until the early fourteenth century.²⁰ Landlords were also able to pronounce such sentences but were required to hand over the convict to the count's men for punishment. During the Anjou dynasty, royal authority – the king or the governor of the kingdom acting on behalf of the king – began extending the right to impose capital punishments ('right of the sword': *jus gladii* in Latin), including impalement, to noblemen and towns. In Hungarian, the generic name of this privilege (*pallosjog*) is even etymologically linked to impalement, given that *palus* (or *pallus* in Latin) meant 'stake'.²¹ Granting this privilege was a royal grace which acknowledged the important

¹⁵Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces: His Life and His Times* (New York, 1989), 76.

¹⁶Trow, *Vlad the Impaler*, 236.

¹⁷Constantin Rezachevici, 'Punishment with Vlad Tepes: Punishments in Europe Common and Differentiating Traits', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, 8 (2006), 2.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹Tamás Körmendi, 'A Gertrúd királyné elleni merénylet körülményei', in *Egy történelmi gyilkosság margójára: Merániai Gertrúd emlékezete, 1213–2013*, ed. Judit Majorossy (Szentendre, 2014), 95, 108, 121.

²⁰Pál Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526*, trans. Tamás Pálosfalvi (New York, 2001), 180.

²¹Imre Rácz, *Glossarium: Latin-magyar szójegyzék a canonica visitatio és a régi latin nyelvű okmányok fordításához* (Miskolc, 1998), 44.

services performed by noblemen and towns to the Hungarian crown. The first known concession of *jus gladii* dates back to the 1320s during the reign of Charles I Robert of Anjou (r. 1308–41). Such concessions have traditionally been considered quite rare. In his index of fourteenth-century diplomas published in 1835, György Fejér lists only eighteen between the 1320s and the end of the 1390s.²² Although Sándor Márki noted in 1885 that Mary of Anjou, queen of Hungary (r. 1382–85; 1386–95) and her husband, Sigismund of Luxemburg (r. 1387–1437), issued numerous *jus gladii* letters,²³ scholars did not examine these royal deeds until the twenty-first century.

In 2015, Rebeca Gliga counted thirty-nine patent letters granting *jus gladii* for the same period in a pioneering article that confirmed the increase of the number of *jus gladii* letters (twenty-one) during the reign of Louis I of Anjou (1342–1382) and especially (thirty-four) during the rule of Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387–1437).²⁴ My own examination of royal deeds issued by Sigismund has identified a total of forty-six during the period 1388–1418 alone.²⁵ The total of *jus gladii* letters increases to fifty if we also consider four deeds issued by Queen Mary in 1388, 1392 and 1393.²⁶ As Gliga observed, the use of the stake is not explicitly mentioned in these letters, which typically insist on the gallows as the main symbol of *jus gladii*. From the 1430s onwards, however, stakes become a prominent feature of the letters issued by Albert of Habsburg. Indeed, the impalement of nine peasant revolt leaders in Transylvania was a particularly notable event of the king's reign.²⁷

Gliga's statistics regarding the prominence of different types of capital punishment put stakes in a relatively modest third place, although they appear more frequently towards the end of the medieval period.²⁸ Indeed, the Hungarian royal deeds offer no shortage of examples of such grants for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On 31 August 1439, Albert granted to the Egervári family the right of installing and using the gibbet (*patibulum*), wheel (*rotas*), stake (*palos*) and other torture instruments to punish murderers, thieves, robbers, arsonists, etc. on their lands.²⁹ The same right is granted on 12 November 1447 by János Hunyadi, governor of the kingdom, to several members of the Vessződi family (Péter, Lőrinc and János) as well as to Tamás Bobai and Gergely Hidegvizi.³⁰ On 18 November 1452, the same governor granted a similar

²²György Fejér, *Index codicis diplomatici Hungariae ecclesiastici ac civilis: stirpis Arpadiano-Andegavensis: ab anno 1301–1400* (Buda, 1835), 15, 19, 39, 40, 46, 48, 56, 59–60, 65, 66, 75, 87, 90, 94, 100.

²³Sándor Márki, *Mária, Magyarország királynéja, 1370–1395* (Budapest, 1885), 171.

²⁴Rebeca Gliga, 'Ius gladii in Medieval Hungary', *Analele Universității București Istorie*, 64 (2015), 63.

²⁵*Zsigmondkori oklevéltár*, ed. Elemér Mályusz, I (Budapest, 1951), 38, 72, 74, 146, 151, 191, 348, 392, 450, 538, 571, 577, 607, 632, 677, 680, 681; II.1 (Budapest, 1956), 76, 101, 227, 573; II.2 (Budapest, 1958), 25, 228, 333; III (Budapest, 1993), 257, 382, 453, 489, 622; IV (Budapest, 1994), 110, 611, 616; V (Budapest, 1997), 162, 166, 262, 485; VI (Budapest, 1999), 124, 230, 283–284, 292–3, 421, 430, 443, 446, 523, 573.

²⁶*Zsigmondkori oklevéltár*, ed. Elemér Mályusz, I (Budapest, 1951), 280, 297, 336.

²⁷László Kővári, *Erdély régiségei* (Pest, 1852), 265. Jakab Elek, *Kolozsvár története* (Buda, 1870), 431. Ferencz Albin Gombos, *Az 1437-ik évi parasztlázadás története különös tekintettel a jobbágyi viszonyokra s a husszitzizmusnak hazánkban való elterjedésére* (Kolozsvár, 1898), 121. Lajos Demény, *Parasztfelkelés Erdélyben, 1437–1438* (Budapest, 1987), 191–2.

²⁸Gallows (95 mentions), breaking wheels (45 mentions), stakes (40 mentions). Gliga, 'Ius gladii in Medieval Hungary', 73.

²⁹Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár [hereafter MNL], DL-DF, document 13435.

³⁰MNL, DL-DF, document 67245.

right to members of the Tordai family (András, Miklós and Tamás) for their possessions in the county of Bihar.³¹ Hunyadi's son, King Mathias, granted the use of capital punishment not only to noblemen, such as the members of the Mérey family on their lands regardless of their location in the kingdom of Hungary (22 May 1475),³² but also to religious establishments exercising lordship, like the eremites of the St. Lawrence monastery (17 January 1466).³³ Mathias's successors continued to grant the privilege of *ius gladii* well into the sixteenth century.³⁴

Even if the number of beneficiaries of such royal deeds varied from one county to another, after several decades, the *jus gladii* exercised by counties and towns,³⁵ as well as by hundreds of noble families, notably increased the number of gallows and literally raised the stakes across the kingdom of Hungary. This was particularly the case in Transylvania. Major German-speaking Saxon towns could carry out capital punishments and even some smaller Saxon localities, such as Seiden³⁶ and Bulkesch,³⁷ received the *jus gladii* in 1448. Given this article's broader concerns, it is worth noting that Vlad spent time in Bulkesch in October 1475 where he received 200 florins³⁸ following an order issued by Matthias Corvinus on 21 September 1475.³⁹ He would have seen Bulkesch's stake just as he probably encountered the dozens of stakes belonging to other Transylvanian and Hungarian towns and lordships during the period 1462–76.

Stakes, then, were a prominent feature of the Transylvanian landscape and by extension of the Saxon settlements as well. Constantin Rezachevici is therefore certainly correct to present the Saxon use of impalement as a reference and possible inspiration for Vlad, but his interpretation overlooks the essential wider Hungarian context. Crucially, Rezachevici goes further than many earlier historians to rule out the possibility that Vlad could simultaneously also have been influenced by any Ottoman methods of execution. Indeed, he argues that it was instead Vlad who *introduced* impalement to the Ottomans: 'The Turks learned about it looking at the forest of the impaled Turkish prisoners, in the summer of 1462, set near Târgoviște to frighten and discourage the enemy'.⁴⁰

Other historians have taken a different view. According to Norman Housley, the Renaissance regarded impaling 'as a peculiarly Turkish manner of execution'.⁴¹

³¹MNL, DL-DF, document 26613.

³²MNL, DL-DF, document 49347.

³³MNL, DL-DF, document 16297.

³⁴Vladislas II: to the Gáspár and Bicsák families, 25 Apr. 1493, MNL, DL-DF, document 57795 and Gyula Benedek, 'Mohács előtti oklevelek Külső-Szolnok vármegye történetéből, 1330–1526', *Zounuk: A Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Levéltár Évkönyve* 9 (Szolnok, 1994), 279–80; to the Bothkai family Mihaly, 13 Sept. 1496, MNL, DL-DF, document 67139. Louis II Jagellon: to Mátyás Majláth (or Majlád) and his heirs regarding the land of Szunyogszeg and other family possessions, 15 Jun. 1516, MNL, DL-DF, document 31163; to the town of Miskolc, 16 Jun. 1519, MNL, DL-DF, document 248064.

³⁵Pál Szende, 'Magyar városok a középkor végén', *Huszadik Század*, 11–12 (1912), 680.

³⁶Jidvei in Romanian and Zsidve in Hungarian.

³⁷Bălcaci in Romanian and Bolkács in Hungarian.

³⁸Arhivele Naționale ale României (Sibiu) [hereafter ANR, Sibiu], Magistratul orașului și scaunului Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, Seria U II, Nr. 365. Edition: Gustav Gündisch, *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen*, VII (Bucharest, 1991), doc. 4070.

³⁹ANR, Sibiu, Magistratul orașului și scaunului Sibiu, Colecția de documente medievale, Seria U II, Nr. 361. Edition: Gustav Gündisch, *Urkundenbuch ...*, doc. 4067.

⁴⁰Rezachevici, 'Punishment', 4.

⁴¹Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400–1536* (Oxford, 2002), 134.

This historian attributes the wider spread of impalement to Ottoman influence: 'those Christian countries where it was practised, notably Hungary and Transylvania, had good reason to be familiar with Ottoman ways'.⁴² As we have seen, however, impalement had long been known in Hungary and in the voivodeship of Transylvania before the Ottoman empire became a perennial threat during the second half of the fifteenth century. Following the 1450s, the stakes – both literal and metaphorical – were raised, as confrontations between Hungary and the Ottoman empire became increasingly frequent. As a Wallachian ruler hemmed in between the Ottoman empire and the kingdom of Hungary, Vlad must have been exposed to the news and the practice of impalement from both sides.

Several prominent examples of impalement by Ottoman authorities disprove claims that impalement was unknown to the Ottomans until 1462. We have already mentioned the case of the Venetian captain impaled in 1452 at the beginning of this section. An even earlier example comes from Albania under Ottoman rule. After having spent almost twenty years in Ottoman service⁴³ and after participating in a raid on Transylvania in 1442,⁴⁴ Gjergj Kastrioti (c. 1405–68), alias Skanderbeg, deserted the sultan's army with his Albanian soldiers and took control of the town of Krujë on 28 November 1443. After massacring the Ottoman garrison, Scanderbeg converted from Islam to Catholicism, and, according to contemporary chroniclers, he ordered the impalement of those who did not follow his example.⁴⁵ While capital punishment was a regular feature of Albania's law codes,⁴⁶ impalement was an exceptional method of execution – one that Skanderbeg probably adopted from his erstwhile Ottoman paymasters.⁴⁷ Having been educated in the Ottoman empire, Skanderbeg both used and threatened to use impalement against the Ottomans in the Ottoman way.

Ten years later, as we already noted in passing, Mehmed II ordered several impalements during the siege of Constantinople. According to chronicler Kritovoulos, seventy-six Byzantine soldiers captured in the forts of Therapia (forty) and of Stoudios (thirty-six) were impaled on 11 April 1453.⁴⁸ A few weeks later, on 28 April 1453, the *fusta* (small galley) of twenty-four rowing benches commanded by Giacomo Coco was sunk by Ottoman artillery and the forty surviving crew members were impaled in front of Constantinople's walls.⁴⁹ The punishment was also used in other campaigns. Nikola Skobaljić, commander of a Serbian army, 'defeated the Turks advancing from Macedonia at Vranje (24 September 1454), but in a second battle further south was defeated (16 November), taken prisoner, and impaled alive'.⁵⁰ As

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania* (2nd edn; Lanham, 2010), 399.

⁴⁴Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Skanderbeg: Der neue Alexander auf dem Balkan* (Regensburg, 2009), 42.

⁴⁵John Van Antwerp Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest* (Ann Arbor, 1994), 556. Jean W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000–1500* (Seattle, 1994), 249.

⁴⁶Bashkim Rrahmani and Majlinda Belegu, *The State of Scanderbeg: Institutions and the Applied Law* (Bucharest, 2020), 43.

⁴⁷Kristo Frashëri, *Skënderbeu: Jeta dhe vepra* (Tirana, 2002), 133. Schmitt, *Skanderbeg*, 51.

⁴⁸Michael Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* by Kritovoulos, trans. by Charles T. Rigg, (Princeton, 1954), 47.

⁴⁹Gustave Schlumberger, *Le siège, la prise et le sac de Constantinople par les Turcs en 1453* (Paris, 1914), 181.

⁵⁰Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror*, 110.

historian Miloš Ivanović has shown, the uncle of Skobaljić was also impaled.⁵¹ In 1455, after successfully defending the Albanian town of Berat against Skanderbeg's troops, the Ottomans sold some prisoners into slavery and impaled others.⁵² In 1460, the soldiers defending the castle of Kastritzi (Çandarlı) were massacred. Another Byzantine chronicler, Georgios Sphrantzes (1401–c. 1478), reported that 'some' of them 'were decapitated and others were impaled'.⁵³

Given the handful of known examples of collective impalements before 1462, one may still be tempted to conclude that impalement was not widespread in the Ottoman empire during the first half of the fifteenth century. Certainly, it had not been regularly used during wartime. For instance, petitions to the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome by inhabitants of south-eastern Europe who witnessed Ottoman attacks do not mention impalement as an instrument of Ottoman terror.⁵⁴ Impalement was instead regarded as an exceptional tool for exceptional situations, to punish individuals who represented a threat to the empire. As Shadeen Ali has shown, obeying the principle to 'rule by [martial] custom' (*örf-i idare*), 'high-ranking military officials, primarily the grand vizier' could 'act on behalf of the sultan and impose so-called *siyaset* during military campaigns or armed conflict against rebels and bandits'.⁵⁵ According to Honey El-Moghazi, such discretionary punishments were meant to take on a particularly gruesome form, including 'capital or severe corporal punishments, which varied from execution, cutting off the hand, beard, male organs, nose, public scorn, to branding of the forehead'.⁵⁶ Gustav Bayerle commented that Ottoman executions 'usually took place by hanging though cases of beheading, impalement and strangling were also mentioned'.⁵⁷

Vlad's use of impalement was therefore influenced simultaneously by Hungarian and Ottoman practices. The voivode was born in Transylvania at a time when stakes were becoming an increasingly prominent element of the landscape from the 1430s onwards. Similarly, news of Skanderbeg's impalements in 1443 reached the Ottoman empire during Vlad's time there as hostage (1442–7).⁵⁸ We can make similar connections to other collective impalements. At the end of 1452, for instance, the news of Antonio Rizzo's impalement reached Transylvania during Vlad's stay

⁵¹Miloš Ivanović, 'The Image of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror in the Turkish Chronicle (Memoirs of a Janissary) of Konstantin Mihailović', *Иницијал: Часопис за средњовековне студије/Initial: A Review of Medieval Studies*, 9 (2021), 162.

⁵²Jeton Omari, 'Scanderbeg tra storia e storiografia' (Master's thesis, University of Padova, 2014), 134.

⁵³Georgios Sphrantzes, *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes, 1401–1477*, trans. Marios Philippides (Amherst, 1980), 81.

⁵⁴Arnold Esch, 'Le invasioni turche del Quattrocento nei destini individuali dalle suppliche nei registri della Penitenzieria Apostolica (1440–1500 ca.)', in *Von Aachen bis Akkon: Grenzüberschreitungen im Mittelalter. Festschrift für Hubert Houben zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Francesco Panarelli, Kristjan Toomaspoeg, Georg Vogeler and Kordula Wolf (Heidelberg, 2023), 87–109.

⁵⁵Shadeen Ali, 'Ottoman Laws of War', in *The Laws of Yesterday's Wars 3: From the Highlands of Papua New Guinea to the Island of Malta*, ed. Samuel C. Duckett White (Leiden, 2024), 113.

⁵⁶Honey El-Moghazi, 'The Innovations in the Ottoman Legal Administration: The 16th Century between Theory and Practice' (Master's thesis, the American University in Cairo, 2018), 38.

⁵⁷Gustav Bayerle, *Pashas, Begs, and Effendis: A Historical Dictionary of Titles and Terms in the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul, 2011; repr. of the 1st edn, 1997), 137.

⁵⁸Radu Cărciumaru, 'Vlad the Impaler, the Truth Behind the Myth: His Youth and Fight against the Ottoman Empire', *Open Journal for Studies in History*, 6 (2023), 2.

there between 1452 and 1456.⁵⁹ Word of other collective impalements – those during the siege of Constantinople (1453), the execution of Nikola Skobaljić (1454) and the Ottoman impalement of Skanderbeg's Albanian troops (1455) – also reached Transylvania during this period, either directly from Istanbul, the new Ottoman capital following the conquest of Constantinople, or via Moldavia, a territory with which the city of Braşov enjoyed an intensive correspondence.⁶⁰

Evaluating the number of victims of Vlad's collective impalements

In a 2018 chapter, Peter Mario Kreuter considers the 'forest' of 20,000 impaled Turks at or near Târgovişte to be 'an exaggerated literary episode' created by Vlad's enemies. In his view, the high number was intended to underline Vlad's cruelty and ruthlessness, and over time the figure merged with the sylvan metaphor, becoming part of the forest itself.⁶¹ Adrian Gheorghe's work, however, has uncovered invaluable Ottoman sources that independently corroborate the massacre. The chronicler Enveri, a participant in the 1462 Ottoman campaign against Vlad, had personally witnessed a full field of impaled Turks.⁶² Unfortunately, this rare eyewitness did not provide a figure. That Vlad captured both civilian and military opponents for impalement near the Wallachian capital during his deadly second reign (1456–62) is, however, well documented. It is the true size of this 'forest' that we will attempt to estimate in this section.

We do, in fact, have some figures for Vlad's casualties during his 1461–2 campaign against the Ottomans. Writing on 11 February 1462, from Giurgiu, in present-day southern Romania, Vlad himself provides Matthias Corvinus with detailed figures on the figure of Turks and Bulgarians who perished during his attacks along the Danube. Two manuscript versions of this Latin letter survive in libraries in Munich and Wolfenbüttel.⁶³ Both versions are followed by a note entitled 'A register of the locations and the number of people – Turks and Bulgarians, men and women – who were killed on this occasion in Turkey by Prince Vlad, voivode of the Transalpine regions.'⁶⁴ As Matei Cazacu has already warned, however, the figures recorded in the two manuscript copies of the letter are inconsistent – both with each other and internally. The Munich copy gives a total of 23,884 killed, but the sum of the local tallies only reaches 20,099. The Wolfenbüttel version reports 23,889 deaths, yet its internal totals add up to just 22,879.⁶⁵

Vlad's letter also includes a crucial detail about how the death toll was verified: 'And the figures given above represent the number of dead whose heads and "signs"

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁶⁰Ovidiu Cristea, 'News in Wallachia and Moldavia during the Ottoman Hegemony: Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', in *Tributaries and Peripheries of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Kármán (Leiden, 2015), 52.

⁶¹Kreuter, 'How Ignorance Made a Monster', 12–13.

⁶²Andreescu, *Vlad Ţepeş Dracula*, 123. Adrian Gheorghe, 'Understanding the Ottoman Campaign in Wallachia in the Summer of 1462. Numbers, Limits, Manoeuvres and Meanings', in *Vlad der Pfähler – Dracula Tyrann oder Volkstribun?*, ed. Thomas Bohn et al. (Wiesbaden, 2017), 159–88.

⁶³Ioan Bogdan, *Vlad Ţepeş şi narările germane şi ruseşti asupra lui* (Bucharest, 1896), 78–81. For archival details, see Cazacu, *Dracula*, 140; Alexandru Simon, *In the World of Vlad: The Lives and Times of a Warlord* (Berlin, 2021), 278.

⁶⁴Bogdan, *Vlad Ţepeş*, 81–2.

⁶⁵Cazacu, *Dracula*, 142; Simon, *In the World of Vlad*, 261.

were brought to our officers who were placed everywhere.⁶⁶ Cazacu usefully draws our attention to the contemporary recollections of a Serb who lived through these events as a janissary. Konstantin Mihailović's memoirs make it clear that Vlad's 'signs' were, in fact, slit noses: Vlad 'had the noses cut off all those living and dead, male and female' which he sent 'to Hungary, boasting that as many Turks had been defeated and killed as there were of these noses'.⁶⁷

A third, separate source conveys a figure that is not far from those found in the two registers. A report sent from Venice to Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga in Rome in March 1462 put the number of victims of Vlad's campaign at 21,660.⁶⁸ Crucially, notwithstanding the evident cruelties committed, none of these sources mentions the use of impalement. That detail appears only in the 1463 German pamphlet *Geschichte Dracole Waide* [The History of Voivode Dracula]. This lurid pamphlet alleged that Vlad 'had impaled all the people that he could come across' and that 'they numbered twenty-five thousand, besides those who perished by fire'.⁶⁹ Here we may observe the process of literary embellishment that Peter Mario Kreuter has noted in other contexts.

We should be careful, then, not to assume that Vlad invariably reached for the stake. Only a handful of historical records allow us to evaluate the actual number of impalements. During the first months of 1459, Vlad arrested merchants from Braşov and Burzenland in Wallachia and ordered the impaling of forty-one individuals,⁷⁰ probably at the same location. This information about the impaled Saxons comes from a contemporary letter by Dan III, Vlad's opponent then in hiding in Transylvania.⁷¹ The incident is also reported in the *Geschichte Dracole Waide*, the aforementioned German chronicle: 'Then he had impaled all the merchants, and others with merchandise – the entire body of merchants – from Burzenland to the Danube, near Brăila. They numbered six hundred, with all their goods, and these he confiscated.'⁷² As in other contexts, the tally figure of forty-one reported by a contemporary (but hostile) source increases to six hundred. In this instance, only 7 per cent of the impalements reported by the German pamphlet can be accepted as roughly accurate.

The *Geschichte* also claimed that on Easter of 1459 Vlad lured *boyars* (noblemen) who opposed him to a banquet in Târgovişte in order to eliminate them: the impaled lords supposedly numbered 500.⁷³ Fact checking this incident in 2004, Meirion James Trow commented that 'in reality, the whole party cannot have included more than 200 and the place of execution, the ruins of which still stand today, is only large enough to house about forty'.⁷⁴ Matei Cazacu has plausibly linked the incident to Vlad's efforts to eliminate opposition from within his regime, noting that eleven of the voivode's twenty-three known councillors 'completely disappear from the documents which is

⁶⁶Cazacu, *Dracula*, 142.

⁶⁷Konstantin Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, trans. Benjamin Stolz (Princeton, 2011), 65.

⁶⁸Simon, *In the World of Vlad*, 260–2.

⁶⁹Quoted in Cazacu, *Dracula*, 367.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 116.

⁷¹The letter was dated 2 Apr. 1459 and composed either at Feldioara, incorporated today into the community of Ucea, or Feldioara (Marienburg in German), both located today in the county (*judeţul*) of Braşov.

⁷²Cazacu, *Dracula*, 312.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁴Trow, *Vlad the Impaler*, 166.

a stunning percentage'.⁷⁵ Noting the size of the dining room – 'an unimpressive twelve meters long, and seven meters wide' – Cazacu puts the total number of victims, including boyars, at no 'more than fifty in all'.⁷⁶ Both Trow's and Cazacu's estimates, based on archaeological excavations, therefore enable a reasonable estimation of the Bloody Easter casualties of between forty and fifty impalements. Here, the number of impaled boyars in the forest at Târgoviște was probably less than 10 per cent of the figure reported by the *Geschichte Dracole Waide*.

The case of the impaled Saxon merchants and that of the Wallachian boyars impaled at Târgoviște indicate that the historical reality of Vlad's impalements may be estimated between 7 and 10 per cent of the figures contained in the German pamphlet of 1463. This ratio gives a good idea of the literary exaggeration used in the German chronicle – and very probably in others – that shaped Vlad's image for centuries. We can thus agree with Matei Cazacu that the figures for the 1459 episode and others are 'clearly exaggerated'. However, this inflation cannot be attributed to 'confusion with the prince's other violent actions': it is a literary exaggeration, the result of a systematic quantitative dramatisation of every violent act attributed to the voivode.⁷⁷

Analysis of a third episode reported in the *Geschichte Dracole Waide* provides some more speculative support for the argument that the chronicle deliberately overstated the number of impalements. On 24 August 1460, Vlad attacked the Wallachians of the duchy of Amlaș in punishment for harbouring his rival Dan. The chronicle claimed that Vlad had the population massacred and that the voivode 'brought home their chaplain and those he was not able to kill at that time, and had them impaled'.⁷⁸ The duchy of Amlaș covered eight localities⁷⁹ and had an estimated population of 1,190.⁸⁰ A 1488 census, a generation after the alleged incident, counted 219 households as well as nineteen empty houses.⁸¹ In the case of Amlaș, these empty houses – 8 per cent of the settlement – fall near the midpoint of the 7–10 per cent range, possibly suggesting that a similar percentage of the population may have been executed. Certainly, the overall census figures appear to rule out the indiscriminate massacre described by the 1463 chronicle and still accepted by Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally.⁸²

We could therefore adopt a plausibility rate of 8 to 8.5 per cent – that is, the proportion of executions, particularly impalements, reported in the *Geschichte* that were likely to have been carried out. In cases where other data are exceptionally scarce, the figure may indicate a reasonable upper limit of the likely number of casualties.

⁷⁵Cazacu, *Dracula*, 119.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁹Horațiu Pavel and András Barta, 'The Evolution of the Settlements System in the Amlaș County/Evoluția sistemului de așezări al Țării Amlașului', *Forum Geografic/Geographical Forum*, 5 (2006/5), 163.

⁸⁰If we accept the hypothesis of an average of five persons per household, Antal Lukács, *Țara Făgărașului în evul mediu, secolele XIII–XVI* (Bucharest, 1999), 96. Quoted by Ionel Boamfă, *Țara Oltului – studiu de geografie istorică cu privire specială asupra relațiilor cu toponimia* (Iași, 2007), 57.

⁸¹These are, in alphabetical order: Aciliu, Amlaș, Cacova, Galeș, Tilișca, Sibiel, Săliște, Vale. Albert Berger, 'Volkszählung in den 7 und 2 Stühlen, im Bistritzer und Kronstadter Distrikte vom Ende des XV und Anfang des XVI Jahrhunderts', *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins für siebenbürgische Landeskunde*, 6 (1894), 54.

⁸²Florescu and McNally, *Dracula*, 74.

For instance, in 1460, Vlad attacked the duchy of Făgăraş, where – according to the *Geschichte Dracole Waide* – he again resorted to his typical seize-and-impale strategy: ‘he rounded up [the population of] an entire region called Făgăraş, and led them to Wallachia, with women, men, and children, and had them impaled’.⁸³ This duchy’s estimated population was 10,000 inhabitants, but contemporary accounts suggest a more limited, though still intimidating, death toll. A royal deed of Matthias Corvinus, issued on 3 December 1462, indicates that at least two villages (Şercaia⁸⁴ and Părău⁸⁵) were depopulated due to Vlad’s devastating attack in 1460 – paradoxically, this very specificity makes a wider, more general massacre less credible.⁸⁶ As the duchy counted 65 villages, and therefore an average of around 150 inhabitants per village, this suggests at least 300 missing individuals.⁸⁷ In the absence of further evidence, the 8–8.5 per cent plausibility rate indicates a reasonable upper bound, pointing to an upper limit of between 800 and 850 victims.⁸⁸

We may apply the same approach to a smaller but related incident. The *Geschichte Dracole Waide* similarly claims that Vlad also targeted the Saxon possession of Talmesch (Tâlmăciu in Romanian) in the same region. Here too, its population was allegedly ‘brought to Wallachia, and these he had impaled cruelly and in various ways’.⁸⁹ Using the same assumptions, twelve or thirteen inhabitants of Talmesch may have joined Vlad’s forest of the impaled.

Other instances make clear that Vlad selected a representative – and usually high profile – sample of victims for transport and impalement at Târgovişte. For example, the list annexed to Vlad’s letter to Matthias Corvinus (11 February 1462) specifies that ‘at Giurgiu, on both sides [of the river], 6,414 were killed and the fortress on the other side of the Danube was conquered and occupied’ and that ‘the lord of the stronghold, the *subaşı*, was killed and it was there that Hamza Bey was captured’.⁹⁰ The *Historiarum demonstrationes* by Laonikos Chalkokondyles confirms that, during the winter campaign of 1461–2, Vlad captured Hamza Bey, governor of Nicopolis, and Thomas Katabolenos, the sultan’s Greek secretary, at Giurgiu⁹¹ and that, ‘after capturing them, he led them all away to be impaled, but first he cut off the men’s limbs’.⁹² According to the Serbian janissary Konstantin Mihailović, Vlad ‘had the emissary seized with all his servants – they were thirty in number – and he ordered him to be taken to a very secure stronghold isolated by waters, called Târgovişte’ and ‘he had Hamzabeg, the Emperor [i.e. sultan’s]’s emissary, impaled first, and around him all his servants’.⁹³

⁸³Cazacu, *Dracula*, 314.

⁸⁴Schirkanyen or Schirkengen in German and Sárkány in Hungarian.

⁸⁵Mikesdorf in German and Mikófalva in Hungarian.

⁸⁶Nicolae Stoicescu, *Vlad Ţepeş* (Bucharest, 1976), 82; Cazacu, *Dracula*, 129; Simon, *In the World of Vlad*, 185.

⁸⁷Lukács, *Țara Făgăraşului*, 92, 94. Cazacu, *Dracula*, 94.

⁸⁸Berger, ‘Volkszählung’, 73.

⁸⁹Cazacu, *Dracula*, 312.

⁹⁰Quoted in Cazacu, *Dracula*, 142.

⁹¹Meryem Kaçan Erdoğan, ‘XVI. Yüzyılda Kuzey Sınırında Bir Osmanlı Kalesi: Yergöğü’, *Araştırma Enstitüsü Dergisi/Journal of Balkan Research Institute*, 11 (2022), 132.

⁹²Quoted in Cazacu, *Dracula*, 349.

⁹³Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, 65.

The eventual impalement of Hamza Bey and the other Ottomans happened, according to sources analysed by one modern historian, beneath the palace windows at Târgoviște.⁹⁴ The fact that chronicles and pamphlets establish a connection between Vlad's residence and the site of impalement is not surprising because executions, as Bogdan Petru Maleon explains, 'were to be performed as to have maximum of visibility' and, 'in Moldavia as well as in Wallachia, they were made in front of the royal court and other highly frequented urban places, especially in fair days, when publicity was maximum'.⁹⁵ Execution sites located inside towns were often temporary, whereas those outside the city walls, in the vicinity of towns, were permanent.⁹⁶ The 'forest of the impaled' belonged to this second category. Due to its proximity to a major road used by travellers as well as by the Ottoman army in 1462, 'the sickening sight of the field of the impaled' could be interpreted by Meirion James Trow as 'the last straw in a psychological battle Țepeș had been waging since the previous year'.⁹⁷

To sum up, if we apply the 8–8.5 per cent plausibility rate to the 20,000 people who were said to be impaled at or near Târgoviște according to the chronicler Chalkokondyles, the number of impaled individuals on the field seen by the chronicler Enveri in 1462 was more likely to have been between 1,600 and 1,700. Of this estimate, two-thirds (c. 1,000–1,100) can be traced to events in the historical record, including those already discussed (see [Table 1 below](#)). In other words, the 'forest of the impaled' was the culmination of several years of impalements carried out from 1456 to 1462, with an annual average of just under 250 impalements a year.

To arrive at an overall estimate for Vlad's impaled victims, however, we must provide further evidence for collective impalements taking place beyond Târgoviște. Two such incidents survive in the sources. During the voivode's incursion into Transylvania, Saxons were impaled on the Tâmpa mountain outside the city of Brașov to intimidate the city's population. A chronicle kept by the monastery of Melk, in Austria, quoted by Matei Cazacu, reports 'that two hundred people were impaled near the chapel of St. James, and that the table on which Dracula [i.e., Vlad] took his breakfast was wrested from the chapel's main altar'.⁹⁸ In a letter sent to Venice on 28 July 1462, Domenico Balbi, the Venetian ambassador to Istanbul, relayed a rumour that an Ottoman contingent of 4,000 soldiers – left in Wallachia by Mehmed II to support Radu III the Handsome, Vlad's brother and rival – had been taken prisoner and impaled.⁹⁹ Much like the *Geschichte Dracole Waide*, these sources report uncertain events at a distance, relying on rounded figures and rumours of absolute punishment. If we were to apply the same plausibility rate developed earlier for the *Geschichte*, these two incidents would yield a further 330 to 360 victims. This would put the total number of impaled victims at just over 2,000. This estimate constitutes 'only' 5 per

⁹⁴Cazacu, *Dracula*, 141.

⁹⁵Bogdan Petru Maleon, 'Preliminary Notes on Public Exposure of Convicts' Corpses in Medieval Moldavia', *Istros*, 17 (2011), 290–1.

⁹⁶István Kovács, 'Középkori és 16–18. századi vesztőhelyek régészete Európában és Magyarországon', *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, 142 (2017), 173.

⁹⁷Trow, *Vlad the Impaler*, 214.

⁹⁸Cazacu, *Dracula*, 128.

⁹⁹*Magyar diplomáciai emlékek Mátyás király korából, 1458–1490*, I, ed. Iván Nagy and Albert B. Nyáry (Budapest, 1873), 168.

Table 1. Estimate of the number of impaled individuals at Târgoviște by Vlad III

1459	Saxon merchants arrested in Wallachia	41*
	Other Saxons arrested in Wallachia	24–26**
	Wallachian boyars arrested at Târgoviște	40–50**
1460	Wallachians from the duchy of Amlaș	95–101**
	Wallachians from the duchy of Făgăraș	800–850**
	Saxons from Tâlmesch (Tâlmăciu)	12–13**
1462	Ottomans captured at Giurgiu	31*
Total		1,043–1,112

*Data directly extracted from historical records.

**Estimate using an 8–8.5 per cent plausibility rate on numbers mentioned in historical records.

cent of the 40,000 victims reported by Nicholas of Modruš (1463–4) and 2 per cent of the 100,000 victims described by Gabriele Rangoni (1476). When we set it against Vlad's own estimates of the casualties of his anti-Ottoman campaign (between 20,099 and 23,889 deaths), impalement appears to be far from a routine punishment – perhaps inevitably so, given the time and resources required to carry it out on a large scale.

Conclusion

In 2016, James Waterson observed that 'whether the number killed [by Vlad] was 70,000 or 7,000 does not matter; the question of magnitude of terror depends on the number left *alive*, and the sources on the massacres in Transylvania make it very clear that this number was a fraction of those who died'.¹⁰⁰ This reassessment of Vlad III's impalement practices contradicts this assumption – the stakes were real and the number of victims does matter. While scholars such as Matei Cazacu and Peter Mario Kreuter have already identified the exaggeration encountered in sources, especially in the *Geschichte Dracole Waide* (1463), this article has attempted to estimate the true extent of Vlad's use of impalement.

In order to be able to evaluate the number of all of Vlad's impalements specified in fifteenth-century narrative sources, 8–8.5 per cent can be considered as a reasonable and justified plausibility rate. Thus, it is possible to estimate that 1,600–1,700 executed people made up the 'forest of the impaled' at Târgoviște rather than the 20,000 mentioned by the chronicler Laonikos Chalkokondyles. These figures certainly do not downplay the brutality of Vlad's rule, but, contrary to the popular legend and the sensationalist claims of some contemporary chroniclers, impalement was not a principal tool for mass killing.

Contrary to previous scholarship, Vlad's use of impalement did not have a singular source of influence (either Ottoman or Hungarian), but rather two major influences (Ottoman and Hungarian). Vlad was exposed to the news and perhaps also to the sight

¹⁰⁰James Waterson, *Dracula's Wars: Vlad the Impaler and His Rivals* (Cheltenham, 2019; 1st edn 2016), 157.

of the Ottoman practice of impalement while staying at the court of the sultan (1442–7) and during visits to pay annual tribute (1456–8). He probably heard about collective impalements perpetrated by Ottomans during his stay in Moldavia (1449–52). The voivode was also familiar with the Hungarian customs because of his contacts with and sojourn in Transylvania (1452–6). As we saw, a particularly notorious collective impalement had taken place there in 1438, during Vlad's childhood, and he would have witnessed first hand the growing number of permanent stakes which proclaimed the *jus gladii* of lordships and towns who had received this privilege from the king of Hungary. Several Transylvanian Saxon towns already used impalement before Vlad's lifetime, while some were granted the *jus gladii* during Vlad's stay in Hungary as Matthias Corvinus's hostage.

Vlad used collective impalements against Wallachians (both in Wallachia and in the duchies of Amlaş and Făgăraş), his former Saxon allies (especially in Burzenland), and even his Ottoman suzerains (notably the unfortunate Hamza Bey) – all of whom, he claimed, had betrayed him in one way or another. In this, however, he acted much like the king of Hungary, who (as we saw) had rebellious Transylvanian peasant leaders impaled, and the Ottoman sultan, who had ordered the same fate for Byzantine soldiers who resisted him. Vlad, then, adopted a known form of punishment and offered justifications very similar to those of his neighbours, while the scale of each collective punishment was often much the same. He simply carried out many more of them.

That said, as this article has also demonstrated, the death toll by impalement has been vastly inflated, often at the expense of other types of execution. The voivode's roughly 2,000 impaled victims – estimated and partly documented here – constitute a group eleven times smaller than the 23,889 individuals whose heads were counted in Vlad's letter to the king of Hungary on 11 February 1462.¹⁰¹ In light of this comparison and the fact that Vlad, according to contemporary narrative sources, clearly employed other execution methods, the strong emphasis on impalement in the numerous representations of the voivode is somewhat surprising. The cruelty of this form of capital punishment and the spectacle of its collective implementation are probably the main explanations. Our reassessment of Vlad's impalements in a wider fifteenth-century south-eastern European context reveals that the 'monstrous' nature of the voivode's image partly rests on this exaggerated – perhaps even hyperbolic – scale of impalements.

This, finally, brings us back to the central visual metaphor of the 'forest of the impaled'. In face of the Ottoman threat, as well as rival claimants to his throne, the site at Târgovişte was clearly designed by Vlad to demonstrate and proclaim his authority. Here too, however, he was copying and amplifying rather than innovating wholesale. Others had transformed impaled bodies into a demonstration of strength against the Ottomans before. On 12 June 1458, Roberto da Sanseverino and his companions visiting the island of Rhodes were invited by the Knights Hospitaller 'for the next day to see the execution of 250 Turkish prisoners that were to be cut to pieces or impaled'.¹⁰² In 1464, a few years after Vlad's forest, the Venetian admiral Orsato Giustiniani similarly ordered the execution by impalement or by hanging of 300 Ottoman soldiers captured

¹⁰¹ It is also important to not to forget that Vlad's actions also led to the death of many people by fire.

¹⁰² Tullio Vidoni, 'The Journal of Roberto da Sanseverino (1417–1487): A Study on Navigation and Seafaring in the Fifteenth Century' (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1993), 346.

at Mytilene on the island of Lesbos in a gruesome, visual display of anti-Ottoman defiance.¹⁰³ These figures, of course, pale in comparison to the 1,600–1,700 stakes raised at Târgoviște. This is, however, an already notable, indeed sobering, figure, even without the literary exaggeration of the chroniclers and pamphleteers. Just as the stakes once dominated Vlad's capital, they have also taken hold of our collective imagination, downplaying at the same time Vlad's extensive use of other methods of execution and the cruelties committed by his nearest contemporaries.

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¹⁰³Léon Galibert, *Histoire de la république de Venise* (Paris, 1854), 153.

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