BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
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Representations of Vlad III Țepeș Drăculea

in European Painting?

A Discussion Regarding Crypto-Portraits and the Portraits in

Imperial and Aristocratic Collections (15th–17th Centuries)

-SUMMARY-

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The Subject of the Thesis

The doctoral thesis entitled *"Representations of Vlad III Țepeș Drăculea in European Painting? A Discussion Regarding Crypto-Portraits and Portraits in Imperial and Aristocratic Collections (15th–17th Centuries)"* examines visual representations executed in pictorial media and identified in the historiography of images of voivode Vlad Țepeș (1448; 1456–1462; 1476). It explores both crypto-portraits and portraits preserved in imperial and aristocratic collections, produced within the territories of the Habsburg Monarchy.The Wallachian ruler was the subject of several types of representations created outside the Romanian cultural sphere, at the initiative of diverse patrons: crypto-portraits, stylistically dated ca. 1460–1480 and inserted into religious scenes (decorating polyptychs placed within the sacred spaces of churches in medieval Vienna); engravings illustrating printed narratives about the "tyrant voivode" (1488-ca.1568); and portraits incorporated into imperial and aristocratic collections (16th-17th centuries). The interrogative form of the dissertation's title signals from the outset the study's critical stance toward the presumed certainty with which pictorial representations of Vlad Țepeș have been identified in historiography.

The engraved portraits that appeared on the covers of the well-known printed pamphlets containing defamatory narratives about the "tyrant" Drăculea have been excluded both from the analysis of visual sources and from the examination of the discourses produced around them. This decision is grounded in the fact that these images were created with the explicit intention of representing the ruler, even if only on a symbolic level. This intention is attested by the titles engraved on the covers, which include the name of the protagonis *Die Geschicht Dracole Wayde* placed alongside the portrait image. It must be emphasized that these unequivocal representations of the voivode are not equivalent to likeness in the sense of a photographically faithful, anatomically precise rendering of the historical individual. Rather, they correspond to a typology that became fixed in the collective imagination as recognizably associated with this personality and was disseminated as such across the centuries. Vlad Țepeș's image in the West was profoundly shaped by these visual constructions and by the horror narratives that circulated in the German-speaking lands beginning in 1462–1463 and continuing into the second half of the sixteenth century.

In contrast to these inscribed engravings, the crypto-portraits and the portraits preserved in imperial and aristocratic collections bear no identifying inscriptions, and the bibliography devoted to Vlad Țepeș's portraiture contains no research demonstrating with certainty that they were created with the intention of representing the voivode. The absence of an explicit image - word association

is problematic and leaves room for interpretation. However, the historiography of the subject does not explicitly characterize these images as uncertain representations of Vlad Țepeș; on the contrary, in some cases ambiguity persists, while in others the images are presented as unquestionable portraits of one of the most renowned Romanian rulers. Although these visual sources have been mentioned in previous scholarship, the novelty of the present research lies in their reassessment, contextualization, and critical analysis.

Visual Sources

In the first part of the study, three religious scenes presumed to contain crypto-portraits of Vlad Țepeș are examined: *Christ before Pilate*, currently exhibited at the National Gallery in Ljubljana; *The Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*, displayed in the Medieval Gallery of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna; and *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, which forms part of a polyptych still in use today in the Church of Maria am Gestade in Vienna. These visual sources are difficult to investigate, given that they are panels originally belonging to medieval altarpieces for which no surviving documentation exists regarding their dating, patrons, or artists. In the second part, four portraits identified in imperial collections and in scholarly albums are analyzed. These include the well-known portrait from Ambras Castle, together with a similar miniature portrait originating from the same castle—both executed in the second half of the sixteenth century at the commission of Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol (1525–1595). The third portrait is a watercolor included in an album that belonged to the scholar Hieronymus Beck von Leopolsdorf (1525–1596), a compilation of portraits of the most prominent rulers of Europe and the Ottoman Empire up to the sixteenth century. The fourth portrait, the only one depicting the voivode at full scale as a standing figure, is displayed at Forchtenstein Castle in Eisenstadt; it was commissioned at the end of the seventeenth century by Prince and composer Pál Esterházy of Galántha (1635–1713).

Historiography

Historians' interest in the image of rulers - and, implicitly, in Vlad Țepeș's portrait, intensified in the context of the construction of the national identity of the Romanian state and culture. This process could be achieved primarily through education, and especially through history textbooks. Such textbooks became a useful instrument for disseminating representative images of Romanian rulers and their biographies, thereby shaping, at the level of collective mentality, a shared

Romanian identity. In this regard, it became necessary for the images of former rulers to be identified - or, more precisely, established and universally accepted.

Personalities such as Dimitrie A. Sturdza (1833–1914) searched for images of the rulers' likenesses in archives both in Romania and abroad, particularly in cases where no votive portraits existed, in order to distinguish them from one another and individualize them within the collective imagination. In the effort to identify a portrait of Vlad Țepeș that would be as faithful as possible - one that could be popularized and disseminated, including through school textbooks - researchers observed that, unlike other rulers such as Stephen the Great, no votive portrait commissioned by Vlad Țepeș during his lifetime is known. This apparently minor absence has significant methodological consequences, as it precludes the existence of a so-called "authentic portrait," that is, a portrait sanctioned by the historical figure it represents. Nevertheless, it must be noted that there exists a historical image universally recognized as symbolizing Vlad Țepeș: the portrait from Ambras Castle. Thus, in the absence of a reference portrait, the distinction between portrait, type, and symbolic figure becomes essential for the analysis of the representations under discussion. A portrait presupposes the explicit intention to individualize a historical personality by emphasizing features regarded as recognizable, even if such individualization does not entail anatomical fidelity. The type functions as a conventional visual construct, based on recurring features and pre-existing models, through which the individual is subsumed under a broader social, political, or moral category. The symbolic figure, by contrast, suspends individual reference altogether, employing the image as a vehicle for values or moral judgments.

The relevant scholarly literature underpinning the present study devotes limited space to the analysis of the voivode's portraits, with some contributions confined to a few pages or even to brief, incidental references. Rather than engaging in a detailed examination of symbolic elements within the relationship between subject and artistic representation, historiography has tended to privilege general discussions of mimesis, emphasizing either the resemblance of the portraits to one another or their resemblance to the historical figure, based on a description of the voivode's physical appearance recorded by Cardinal Niccolò de Modrussa in 1462 at the court of Buda. This unsystematic and cursory approach reflects a superficial treatment of the portraits, insufficiently grounded in art history and theory. The analysis generally remains at a descriptive and generalized level, the portraits being discussed primarily in passing within biographical works devoted to this historical personality and only rarely addressed as autonomous objects of study. Historians such as

Bogdan Petriceicu-Hașdeu (1863), Ioan Bogdan (1896), Dimitrie A. Sturdza (1897), Nicolae Iorga (1930), Constantin Karadja (1931), Alexandru Duțu (1981), and Ștefan Andreescu (the portraits being mentioned only in the revised 2015 edition of his 1976 biography of the voivode) have been chiefly concerned with mimesis - that is, with the degree of fidelity with which the figure was rendered in painted portraiture in relation to engraved representations. Most of these historians have relied on the argument of resemblance between the features depicted in paintings and those appearing in the engravings accompanying printed texts, which constitute certain representations of the voivode. In this manner, a discourse was constructed - without solid arguments - linking these two types of representations, despite the fact that, unlike the engravings, the painted portraits bear no inscriptions revealing the identity of the figure depicted. Consequently, research on the portraits of this ruler remained, until 2008, short and descriptive in character, focusing primarily on issues of dating, on debates concerning the extent to which the images reflect the ruler's personality, and especially on the resemblance among the portraits that might constitute a corpus of images of the voivode.

With regard to the description and dating of the portraits, art historian Günther Heinz proposed, in 1975, a perspective distinct from that of earlier scholarship. He was the first to express reservations concerning the identification of the watercolor portrait in the *Portrait Book* commissioned by Hieronymus Beck von Leopoldsdorf in the sixteenth century as representing Vlad Țepeș. Despite certain similarities in costume and hairstyle with the portraits at Ambras and Forchtenstein, Heinz considered the identification doubtful in the absence of a contemporary inscription and interpreted the image instead as a generic representation of an Oriental ruler. In 2015, Levente Nagy analyzed the portrait of Vlad Țepeș at Forchtenstein (Fraknó) Castle in Eisenstadt, confirming the late dating previously proposed and contributing to a clearer understanding of the interests of its patron, Pál Esterházy, who constructed a fictitious genealogy in order to claim a supposed kinship with Vlad Țepeș.

A second theme explored in the historiography of the voivode's portraits emerged in the 1970s, when historians Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu (1973), followed later by Konrad Klein (2002), shifted attention to a new category of representations that they helped popularize, namely hidden portraits. These images were designated as "crypto-portraits" only in 2008, in a study by Erwin Pokorny.

Interest in Dracula's crypto-portraits increased significantly in 2010 with the studies of the philologist Thomas Schares (2010–2013). Thereafter, such images were sought with particular zeal beyond Vienna, even within religious scenes embedded in medieval altarpieces in Transylvania, and were interpretatively compared to the message of the German narratives. The discourse surrounding crypto-portraits reached a peak of overinterpretation in 2013, when the historian Florin Stroe asserted that, in the collective mentality of the fifteenth century, Dracula was regarded as the equivalent of the Antichrist. The generally descriptive approach to these images was partially refined and nuanced in 2008 in the study by Erwin Pokorny. The art historian focused primarily on the issue of resemblance among the portraits themselves, rather than on their likeness to the historical individual. He introduced the concept of the "crypto-portrait" and suggested the possible existence of a pattern or prototype in such cases - namely, a model bearing a face identified as that of the voivode, which church painters may have employed in the role of a negative character without necessarily knowing whom it represented.

Although Pokorny's study refers to nearly all known portraits of Drăculea, it does not acknowledge the contributions of Romanian scholars to the subject, nor those of the earliest Austrian historians. In this respect, Pokorny contributed to the consolidation of a corpus of images, but not to the development of a corresponding bibliographic corpus. For example, Austrian historians identified the figure in the Vienna miniature as Țepeș on the basis of an inscription on the miniature, deciphered in the nineteenth century; they subsequently identified the figure in the Ambras portrait by comparing it to this miniature and noting their resemblance.

A final theme generally addressed in the historiography of Vlad Țepeș's portraits, in an effort to explain the connections among the various types of images, is the hypothesis of the existence of an original fifteenth-century portrait painted from life. This presumed prototype would have served as the source of inspiration both for the painting at Ambras Castle (Austria) and for the so-called crypto-portraits. Although, in the physical absence of such a portrait, the hypothesis cannot be supported by concrete evidence, it has nevertheless been treated by some authors as a certainty rather than as an unverifiable assumption.

With the exception of Thomas Schares (2010), who neither analyzes this discontinuity nor refers to a "missing link" portrait, historians Ioan Bogdan (1896), Ion Stăvăruș (1978), Emil Stoian (1989), Konrad Klein (2002), Erwin Pokorny (2008), Florin Stroe (2013), and Ștefan Andreescu (1976/2015) concur with the hypothesis that the emblematic portrait is a sixteenth-century copy of

a lost fifteenth-century original. According to this interpretation, Vlad Țepeș would have "posed" at the court of King Matthias, following his arrest in 1462, in order to be immortalized as a prince shortly after entering the royal family through marriage.

Thus, nearly all scholars who have addressed the subject assume, at least tacitly, the existence of an original and identify Vlad in fifteenth-century panels - fragments of medieval polyptychs - on the basis of similarities in anatomical features, proportions, facial expression, and the form of accessories (symbols of power) to those of the figure depicted in the oil painting on canvas at Ambras. However, the Ambras painting was produced in the sixteenth century and, therefore, could not have served as the source of inspiration for the so-called crypto-portraits, which are dated to the fifteenth century. Although the painting at Ambras is internationally recognized as a princely portrait of Vlad Țepeș, no attempt had been made - prior to 2024 (Andreea Pocol) - to reconstruct historiographically how this conclusion was reached, or to assess whether the arguments advanced by Romanian and Austrian cultural figures involved in the decision-making process were indeed persuasive.

The most recent research, dating from 2025 and currently still in progress, is being conducted by Adrian Gheorghe and Albert Weber within the framework of the project *Corpus Draculianum*, in the chapter dedicated to visual sources. This undertaking aims to produce the first comprehensive repertory of portraits identified as representations of Vlad Țepeș, bringing together high-resolution images, critical commentary, and schematic reconstructions of the chronology of the discovery of the portraits and crypto-portraits—including those not unanimously accepted—as well as their lines of transmission.

Research Questions and Objectives

The present research originated in the desire to investigate the arguments on the basis of which the aforementioned historians have almost automatically identified the figure represented in these portraits as ruler Vlad Țepeș. The analysis seeks to provide a critical evaluation of the validity of these arguments and to reconsider the hypotheses advanced in historiography, proposing new interpretative methods and alternative suggestions for identifying the depicted figures.

The dissertation is guided by the following research questions: What types of representations of Vlad Țepeș existed? Who commissioned them, and for what purpose? By whom, and in what manner, were they received? In light of the concerns of local historiography - marked

by a preoccupation with the accuracy of representation and with the chronological evolution of the sitter's appearance, based on the assumption of faithful depiction - the present study proposes instead an evaluation of Vlad Țepeș's portraits through an examination of the contexts in which they were produced and received. Accordingly, the research focuses on the relationship between patrons and artists, the messages conveyed by the images, the liturgical function of the artefacts in which some of these images were embedded, and the broader historical contexts in which such representations were created.

The aim is to reconstruct an alternative perspective that of the patrons who commissioned representations of Vlad Țepeș as a type of princely authority and as a model for its exercise in the Late Middle Ages. The object of the research thus consists of the visual fictions constructed around Vlad Țepeș, representations that integrate and transmit the patrons' own conceptions of authority. This approach therefore seeks to articulate a new perspective on the voivode, a viewpoint of the "Other," shaped by the contexts in which these images were created. Ultimately, the purpose of the study is to explore the status of these images and to define their symbolic value, deconstructing the fiction of likeness while examining the multiple facets of representation and the dissemination of images.

Methodology

The analysis of the images is conducted from an interdisciplinary perspective, grounded in the iconographic tradition inaugurated by Aby Warburg and systematized by Erwin Panofsky, yet applied critically and adapted to the specific corpus of paintings under examination. This approach is complemented by the concept of serial iconography, formulated by Jérôme Baschet, which enables the study of images as a whole by tracing the repetition, variation, and circulation of visual motifs across different historical contexts. The methodological framework follows Panofsky's tripartite structure: pre-iconographical, iconographical, and iconological - integrating formal description, the interpretation of motifs in relation to cultural codes, and the contextual analysis of social, political, and ideological meanings, while remaining aware of the limitations of a method originally devised for the study of sacred art. Within this framework, the investigation of representations of Vlad Țepeș is based on correlating historical sources with art-historical analysis and insights from cultural anthropology, in order to clarify the motivations of the patrons, the contexts in which the images were produced, the messages they conveyed, and the ways in which they have been interpreted over time.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured in two parts, each comprising three chapters that examine the visual documents, the relationship between patron and artist, and the messages conveyed by the artefacts. The first part investigates the concept of the crypto-portrait in the broader history of art and assesses its validity in the case of three fifteenth-century religious scenes that have been presumed to contain hidden portraits of the voivode, at times leading to overinterpretations that associate the image of the Christian ruler with the Antichrist. Although certain morphological similarities exist between the alleged crypto-portraits and the portraits under discussion, the analysis has shown that these representations more plausibly symbolize tyrannical secular authority, their function being to critique the political realities of the Holy Roman Empire at the time. A major contribution of the first part consists in the reinterpretation of two of these crypto-portraits and the identification of the figures as Emperor Frederick III of Habsburg, rather than Vlad Țepeș, as they have been almost automatically associated in historiography on the basis of mere visual similarities. The proposed reinterpretation is supported by the argument that the famous crimson cap adorned with pearls - previously linked to Vlad Țepeș on account of its resemblance to the headdress in the sixteenth-century portrait at Ambras Castle - may in fact represent a stylized crown of a member of the Habsburg dynasty. This perspective anchors the message of these religious scenes in the contemporary context of their painters, namely the political conflicts involving Emperor Frederick III, King Matthias Corvinus, and segments of the nobility of the period. The new identification thus offers an alternative interpretation of the patrons' intentions, who had in fact commissioned an altarpiece comprising multiple religious scenes, rather than a single panel containing a religious scene with a crypto-portrait. In light of this argument of major significance, I have observed that these crypto-portraits are discussed in the historiography of the subject as if they were portraits detached from their original context, although they formed part of medieval polyptychs installed in churches and fulfilled clear liturgical and devotional functions. A thorough analysis of the context in which these medieval altarpieces were produced - of their patrons and of the limited audience for whom they were intended - has revealed that the widely accepted hypothesis according to which Matthias Corvinus commissioned these religious scenes in order to defame Vlad Țepeș is not supported by evidence.

Instead, I have identified and presented arguments suggesting that Matthias Corvinus may have been the patron of the medieval altarpiece from which the religious scene *The Crucifixion of*

Saint Andrew, originating from the Cistercian Abbey of Lilienfeld, once formed part, and that this scene may contain a crypto-portrait of his political adversary, Frederick III. In support of this claim, I have established that during the years in which this altarpiece is presumed to have been created for the Abbey of Lilienfeld, King Matthias reached this very locality in the course of his military campaign against Frederick III for the conquest of Vienna.

Given that these "coded messages", the crypto-portraits, were addressed to a restricted audience, namely the faithful attending the church, it becomes evident that such images cannot be interpreted as "anti-Dracula manifestos" intended for a broad public, as has previously been suggested. Such a polemical function would have been ineffective for this purpose in the context of medieval Vienna, where Dracula was most likely unknown to the majority of the faithful, even after the wide circulation of the defamatory poem of one thousand verses composed by the troubadour Michel Beheim. I therefore contend that these images do not depict Dracula, but may instead represent concealed portrayals of political authorities within the Empire, such as Emperor Frederick III, who was sharply criticized by certain factions. In support of this identification, I have presented both political and symbolic arguments, comparing and demonstrating the evident similarity between the symbols of authority associated with the figures in the two crypto-portraits and those of the emperor in imperial portraiture, including the crown, sceptre, and ring.

Another important and original aspect of this part of the research consists in the contextualization of the three religious scenes through an exploration of the liturgical, Eucharistic, and devotional functions of medieval altarpieces. This approach takes into account the fact that the three religious scenes analyzed, each presumed to contain a crypto-portrait, were in fact panels forming part of such altarpieces, which were actively employed within Christian ritual practice.

The second part of the research examined four portraits from imperial and aristocratic collections conventionally regarded in historiography as representations of Vlad Țepeș, with particular emphasis on the celebrated painting at Ambras Castle. It calls into question the solidity of the arguments advanced by Romanian and Austrian scholars who support the identification of the depicted figure with the Romanian voivode.

I have demonstrated that this identification is problematic, given that the inscription on the Vienna miniature similar to the Ambras portrait and serving as the original basis for identifying the figure as Țepeș does not in fact mention the voivode's name, as was initially suggested in the first

decipherment of the inscription. The reading "Aveida dux Vala" was interpreted as "[Dracul]a veida dux Wala[chiae]," yet this interpretation is philologically and epigraphically questionable.

Furthermore, I contend that the Ambras portrait almost certainly contains one or more inscriptions concealed beneath the white overpaint in the lower register an area consistently cropped out of published reproductions of the painting, with the exception of Pokorny's study. In order to decipher the inscription(s) and thereby establish the correct identification of the depicted figure, I submitted a formal request to the administration of the Ambras Castle Museum, seeking permission, at my own expense, to conduct X-ray and reflectographic analyses of the portrait. Such investigations would enable a more definitive identification. The museum declined my request, justifying the refusal on the grounds of insufficient staff resources at the Vienna Museum of Art's conservation laboratory and the prioritization of other projects. It also cited the logistical and insurance requirements involved in transporting the painting from Innsbruck to Vienna and back.

In the absence of laboratory-based confirmation, I have advanced, at the present stage of the research, a hypothesis identifying the figure not as Vlad Țepeș but as a member of the Habsburg dynasty, namely Archduke Ferdinand II's son, Andreas of Austria (1558–1600), Margrave of Burgau and cardinal.

The first argument rests on a proposed re-reading of the inscription "Aveida dux Vala" on the Vienna miniature - depicting the same figure as the Ambras portrait - as meaning "the duke was lost." The second argument relates to the fact that Andreas was born of a morganatic marriage and therefore did not receive the right to inherit Habsburg territories and titles from his father. On this basis, the absence of a personal name in the inscription and the emphasis instead on the loss of ducal status may be interpreted as alluding to this dynastic circumstance.

Under these conditions, it appears more plausible that Ferdinand II would have commissioned a portrait of his eldest son Andreas rather than of Vlad Țepeș, thereby securing for him a place in family memory and in perpetuity. Andreas is depicted with prognathism (a genetic trait characteristic of many members of the Habsburg dynasty) even if he may not have actually exhibited it, precisely in order to signal his belonging to the dynasty.

Should my request for technical examination be approved in the near future, reflectographic and X-ray analyses will either confirm or refute this hypothesis. In conclusion, although I have proposed a new identification for the celebrated portrait, I reaffirm that, until evidence to the

contrary emerges, the portrait at Ambras - widely disseminated in history textbooks - remains, by traditional historiographical convention, the established image of Vlad Țepeș.

In the case of the portrait at Forchtenstein Castle, the intention to identify the figure as Vlad Țepeș is supported by the presence of a nominal inscription. However, the representation adopts an earlier visual pattern derived from a portrait lacking such an inscription. The portrait should therefore be understood less as evidence of a secure historical identification and more as the reprise and adaptation of a circulating visual model. The watercolor from the Beck collection functions as an intermediary link of inspiration between the two representations the portrait at Ambras and that at Forchtenstein.

The research has highlighted the role of portraiture as an instrument of legitimacy, prestige, and memory among the sovereigns and aristocrats who collected the portraits under examination. The motivations of collectors such as Archduke Ferdinand II, Hieronymus Beck von Leopoldsdorf, and Prince Pál Esterházy have been explored, beginning from the established premise that these were indeed portraits of the voivode and demonstrating that the interest in collecting images of Țepeș forms part of a broader cultural phenomenon, namely the collection of portraits of distinguished military leaders. For example, Ferdinand II's interest in Țepeș was linked both to admiration for anti-Ottoman resistance and to a fascination with bizarre and monstrous figures, given the voivode's dual reputation as a tyrant and an exceptional military commander. In the case of Prince Pál Esterházy, the portrait functioned as a means of genealogical legitimation for his family. The Latin inscription: *"Dracula Waida Princeps et Waiuoda Walachiae Transalpinae hostis Turcarum infestissimus 1.4.66."* emphasizes Țepeș's role as a defender of Christendom; however, the portrait itself dates from the late seventeenth century, even though the inscription indicates the year 1466.

In conclusion, the research reveals the ways in which perceptions of the uncertain visual representations of Vlad Țepeș have evolved and proposes a more nuanced interpretation through the reassessment of existing hypotheses and the analytical contextualization of the portraits.

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