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The Meaning of the Name Dracula (and Dracul) and Its Reconstruction

Abstract

This article deals with the analysis of the meaning and the origin of the proper name *Dracula*, belonging to the well-known vampire created by Bram Stoker, from an etymological point of view. Indeed, *Dracula* is not a fictitious proper name, but it is the epithet of Vlad III ("the Impaler"), ruler of Wallachia in 15th century. The reconstruction of the etymology of this name, which can be analysed as *drac + -ul + -a*, has triggered a great discussion among scholars, who gave two different meanings to this sobriquet: 'the devil' or 'the son of the dragon'. The name *Dracula* appears to be a derivative from the sobriquet *Dracul*, which belonged to Vlad III's father, Vlad II, a member of the Order of the Dragon. Therefore, discussed in a new light in this paper is the hypothesis that the sobriquets Dracul and Dracula are Latinisms from Lat. *draco* 'dragon, (mythological) huge-sized serpent' with the addition of the Romanian postpositive article *-ul* 'the' and, in the case of Dracula, the addition of the ending *-a* with the meaning 'the son of'. An important role in this etymological inquiry is also played by extra-linguistic factors, such as textual and material sources and historical background.

1. Introduction

The present research aims to analyze the etymology and the meaning of the proper name *Dracula*, which has been the source of great discussion among scholars for years. Indeed, it is well known that Count Dracula is the title-character of the epistolary gothic horror "Dracula", written by Bram Stoker in 1867. Not only is "Dracula" a famous piece of English literature, but also, as observed by Gutia (1976, p. 13), the character of Count Dracula has become rooted in the collective imagination.

In this respect, Nandriş (1959, p. 371) asserts that at that time, from a linguistic point of view, the name *Dracula* almost became an English word with the generic meaning of 'monster', whereas Migliorini (1963, p. 98) points out that the name *Dracula* was used to address the bloodsucking character starring in horror movies. Nevertheless, differently from what used to be thought for a long time, *Dracula* is not a fictitious proper name, but has a historical reality behind it; as a matter of fact, this name is the epithet of Vlad III ("the Impaler"), ruler of Wallachia[1] in the 15th century (Cazacu, 2017, p. XIV). Lőrinczi (1997) underlines that it seems that Bram Stoker might have blended the historical name *Dracula* and the literary figure of the vampire when he created the main character of his novel (p. 149).

In our belief, it seems possible to present the analysis of the proper name *Dracula* in a new light, with regard both to the historical background behind it and to the semantics and the etymology of the sobriquet *Dracula* that belonged to Vlad III.

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[1] Wallachia is a historical and geographical region of Romania, situated north of the Lower Danube and south of the Southern Carpathians.

2. The historical background

Before proceeding with the linguistic analysis of the name *Dracula*, it seems necessary to look at the historical sources about the Wallachian ruler which Stoker had available at the time, in order to try to discern which ones the author may have got his information from.

Vlad III – who was given the sobriquet *Dracula* – was born sometime between 1429 and 1436 in Schäßburg (province of Transylvania) and became ruler (i.e., Voivode)[2] of Wallachia three times between 1448 and 1476. In the Romanian historiography, Vlad III was also given the sobriquet Rom. *Țepeș* (Eng. 'Impaler'), because impalement was his preferred method of execution. As a matter of fact, this ruler is remembered, on the one hand, for being a cruel and bloodthirsty man, and, on the other, for protecting the Romanian people between the north and the south of the Danube and fighting against the Ottoman army.

Therefore, Vlad III was regarded as both a folk hero and a cruel ruler in the region (Cazacu, 2017; Pallardy, n.d.). The first mention of the epithet *Dracula* can be found in an anonymous pamphlet entitled "Geschichte Dracole Waide", printed in Wien by Ulrich Han. In fact, there were more mentions of Vlad III's biography and adventures in other 15th century pamphlets, including (1) "Von ainem wutrich der hies Trakle waida von der Walachei", written by Michael Beheim and printed in 1463 or 1466, (2) "Historiarum Demonstrationes", written by Laonikos Chalkokondyles and printed in the second half of the century, (3) "Skazanie o Drakule voevode", written by Fyodor Kuritsyn and printed in 1486, (4) "Die Geschicht Dracole Waide", by an unknown author and printed in 1488.

Bram Stoker's notes for "Dracula" indicate that the inspiration for the name of the title-character came to the author from the work entitled "An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia", dated 1820 and written by the British consul William Wilkinson. Indeed, the following passage can be found in this monograph:

> Dracula in the Wallachian language means Devil. The Wallachians were, at that time, as they are at present, used to give this as a surname to any person

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[2] Voivode is a title given to local governors or rulers in central or eastern Europe.

who rendered himself conspicuous either by courage, cruel actions, or cunning. (Wilkinson, 1820, p. 19)

This last mention – and not the late Renaissance texts – is mostly believed by scholars to be Stoker's source for the name and the character of Count Dracula, based on the historical figure of Vlad III. Moreover, Stoker had received other information about Vlad III and his dynasty from Arminius Vambery, who was a Hungarian Turkologist and traveler who gave Stoker precious erudite indications for his novel. In particular, Vambery wrote an account in which he presented the Draculas as a group in strict contact with Satan (Cain, 2006, pp. 86ff.).

In addition, the historical background, on the basis of which the character of Count Dracula is based on Vlad III, might also be confirmed by the following passage of Stoker's novel:

Who was it, but one of my own race as Voivode crossed the Danube and beat the Turk on his own ground! This was a Dracula indeed. Who was it that his own unworthy brother, when he had fallen, sold his People to the Turk and brought the shame of slavery upon them! Was it not this Dracula, indeed, who inspired that other of his race who in a later age again and again brought his force over the great river into Turkeyland (Stoker, 1993, p. 30).

Indeed, this passage is a quotation from Count Dracula, who is talking about one of his ancestors, whose biography is based on events that actually occurred in Vlad III's life, that is, the crossing of the Danube and the battle against the Turkish army.

3. Etymological hypotheses for the proper name Dracula

As aforementioned, the origin of the epithet *Dracula* – which first belonged to Vlad III (Figure 1) and later to the vampire created by Stoker (Figure 2) – has been debated among scholars for decades. The only thing on which scholars seem to agree is that, as observed by Nandriş (1959, p. 371), the name *Dracula* – attested also in the variants *Dracole*, *Dracle*, *Trakle* and *Dracol* – must be analysed as *drac + -ul + -a*.

Figure 1. Portrait of Vlad III (1460) by Ambras Castle

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vlad_Tepes_002.jpg

Figure 2. Bela Lugosi starring as Count Dracula in the 1931 movie "Dracula"

Source: https://movieplayer.it/foto/bela-lugosi-e-il-fascinoso-conte-dracula_5345/

Among the many etymological proposals suggested for the name *Dracula*, we present here the main two hypotheses according to which it might be analysed as a name meaning (1) 'the devil' or (2) 'the son of the dragon'.

3.1. First hypothesis: *Dracula* 'the devil'

According to the first hypothesis, the proper name *Dracula* might correspond to the Romanian word *dracul*, which is composed by the substantive *drac* 'devil' and the postpositive Romanian article *-ul* 'the'. In this hypothesis, no reason was given to explain the fact that *Dracula* ended in *-a*, except that it was proposed that the name *Drăculea* – which is regarded the same as *Dracula* in Romanian from a linguistic point of view – might be a popular variant for *Dracul* (Bogdan, 1896, p. 61; Vasmer, 1953, p. 367; Sulzberg, 1977; McNally & Florescu, 1994, p. 8). Regarding this issue, we shall see that the forms *Dracula* and *Dracul* are not the same thing, linguistically speaking, despite what it

might seem. Indeed, the epithet of *Dracul* actually belonged to Vlad III's father, Vlad II, voivode of Wallachia from 1436 to 1442 and again from 1443 to 1447; moreover, Vlad II is the progenitor of the Drăculești dynasty.

In any case, there seems to be no doubt that Stoker used the name *Dracula* for the title-character of his novel assuming that it had the meaning of 'devil', as evident from two factors. First, Miller (1999) remarks that Stoker was attracted by Wilkinson's interpretation of the noun (cf. *supra*) as demonstrated by the fact that Stoker himself copied the quotation "Dracula in Wallachian language means DEVIL" in his own notes (p. 190). Second, in the novel Count Dracula is given the nickname "de Ville" – which is a play on words based on Eng. *devil* – which the Count uses to purchase multiple estates.

On the one hand, accepting this hypothesis would not be problematic from a linguistic point of view. In this case, the proper name *Dracula* would have a transparent meaning ('the devil') and would be a transparent form (Rom. *drac* 'devil' + *-ul* 'the') if it had to be identified with Rom. *dracul*. On the other, it seems difficult to believe that Vlad II and Vlad III – and so their entire dynasty – were designated by a reference to the devil, especially when they were still alive (cf. Nandriş, 1959, p. 372). This might also be confirmed by the fact that Vlad II gained his epithet of *Dracul* as soon as he entered politics (Lőrinczi, 1993, p. 41), so he did not have even the time to gain the infamous reputation of being 'the devil'. Last but not least, the descendants of Vlad III – such as Vlad V – used the epithet *Dracula* as well, and it seems unlikely that they were all known as devils.

3.2. Second hypothesis: *Dracula* 'the son of the dragon'

In contrast, we present here the second main etymological explanation that was proposed to interpret the name *Dracula*. Indeed, we intend to enrich and support this hypothesis in our analysis of the sobriquet. According to this proposal, the epithet *Dracula* would indicate the membership of Vlad III's father, Vlad II, to the Order of the Dragon (cf. *infra*), also known as Lat. *Societas draconistarum* or *Ordo draconis* (Nandriş, 1959, p. 373; McNally & Florescu, 1994, p. 9; Rezachevici, 1999, pp. 3ff.; Pallardy, 2021). It is our belief that it is necessary to look at the history of both the Romanian word *drac* and of the biographies of Vlad II Dracul and Vlad III in order to proceed with the analysis.

First, in his etymological dictionary of the Romanian language, Alexander Cioranescu (1966) remarks that there seems to be no doubt that Rom. *drac* "demonio, diablo, espíritu maligno (i.e. devil)" (*DER*, 298). derives from the Latin word *draco*, which has the meaning of 'dragon, (mythological) large serpent' (cf. *DELL*, p. 184; *Elem*. Lewis, p. 262; *TLL* V, pp. 2060–2065). Indeed, in the Greek and Roman worlds – and so in other Indo-European cultures – dragons and serpents were regarded as very similar creatures; dragons were not imagined as the winged fire-breathing fantastic animals that became popular at the beginning of the Middle Ages, but as huge-sized serpents – with no wings and no ability of spitting fire at all – that were the protagonists of myths and legends (Griffiths 1996, pp. 2ff.; Ogden 2013, pp. 2ff.). Romanian seems to be the unique Romance language in which Lat. *draco* did not derive a noun meaning 'dragon, (mythological) large serpent', but only 'devil' (cf. *REW*, p. 213). With respect to this last meaning, already according to early Christianity *dracones* were a symbol of Satan, so that in late-Latin the word *draco* had changed its meaning of '(mythological) large serpent' into 'devil' (*Du Cange* III, p. 194), as testified to, for example, by Saint Augustine, according to whom "[diabolus] dictus est et leo et draco" (Saint Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis tractatus centum viginti quatuor*, X 1). Furthermore, Christian tradition depicted dragons as evil beings that were rivals of Christian heroes, such as the dragon slayed by Saint George. Conversely, the meaning of '(mythological) huge sized-serpent' belonging to Lat. *draco* is found in Romanian in the noun *balaur* "monstru fantastic din basme, imaginat ca un șarpe, adesea înaripat, cu mai multe capete" (*DLRLC*, 49). This noun is probably related to Alb. *boljë* 'snake' and *buljar* 'water-snake', and Ser.-Cr. *bla*(*v*)*or* 'snake' (*DER*, p. 61).

At this point, we can examine the historical background of the sobriquets *Dracul* (of Vlad II) and *Dracula* (of Vlad III) themselves. As a matter of fact, in 1408 the Order of the Dragon – that is a monarchical chivalric order – was founded by the emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg. The symbol of this Order of the Dragon – which, as aforementioned, was named in Latin *Societas Draconistarum* or *Ordo draconis* – was the *draco* (i.e. a dragon, see Figure 3), that had already been the military standard of the Roman cavalry since the 4th century AD. Since Vlad II was a member of this Order, he was regarded as a *draco* himself. In the light of this, we believe it possible that the epithet *Dracul* belonging to Vlad II goes back to the Latin noun *draco* 'dragon', to which the Romanian postpositive article -*ul* 'the' was added. In this way, the name *Dracul* is formally identical to Rom. *dracul* 'the devil', but it would be

a Latinism and not a noun derived from Romanian. Furthermore, the connection between the sobriquet *Dracul* and the *dracones* might be also backed up by the fact that the German poet Hermann von Sachsenheim (1365–1458) defined Vlad II "der Naterspan",[3] i.e. the dragon master,[4] in his work *Die Mörin* (1453). In this respect, the quote of the Hungarian historian Johann Christian Engel seems meaningful:

> Wlad II., zubenamt Drakul, ein grausamer Fürst, 1431–1445. (…) Den Namen Drakul bekam er vielleicht zunächst von den Insignien des Drachen-Ordens (…), dann verdiente er denselben durch seine Grausamkeit. (…) Drakul heißt bey den Walachen Teufel (Engel, 1804, p. 167).[5]

Figure 3. Symbol of the Order of the Dragon

Source: http://www.holyromanempireassociation.com/order-of-the-dragon-Ordo-Draconum.html

In addition to this, Chihaia (1964, pp. 151ff.) and Lőrinczi (1993, p. 44) observe that Vlad II commissioned monuments, coins and seals, in which the *draco* was represented, such as a low relief on the bell tower of a church in Curtea de Argeș, which portrays a *draco* fighting against another fantastic animal.

Therefore, according to this view the sobriquet *Dracul* seems to be the chivalric title that indicates Vlad II's membership to the Order of the Dragon, so that the proper name *Dracul* could have the meaning of 'the *draco*, the

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[3] Sachsenheim, *Die Mörin*, v. 4494.
[4] On this cf. Cazacu (1974, p. 279).
[5] "Vlad II, nicknamed Dracul, a cruel prince, 1431–1445. (…) He received the name *Dracula* maybe because of the insignia of the Order of the Dragon (…), then he gained it through his cruelty (…) *Dracul* means by the Wallachian people devil" (translation by V. Fagiolo).

dragon'. So, with reference to the connection between the sobriquets *Dracul* belonging to Vlad II and *Dracula* belonging to Vlad III, it seems likely, on the one hand, that the epithet *Dracula* highlighted Vlad III's father's association to the Order of the Dragon and that it might be derived, linguistically speaking, from *Dracul*, but, on the other, it remains to be seen how this might have happened. Indeed, even if, in the opinion of Bogdan (1869, p. 61), the name *Dracula* (< *Drăculea*) was the vernacular Romanian form *Dracul*, we prefer to agree with Nandriş (1959, p. 372) that the ending *-a* of *Dracula* could be the Slavonic genitive of the *-o-* stems and that this ending had the meaning of 'the son of (*Dracul*)',[6] as pointed out, among others, by Rezachevici (1999, p. 3), Light (2007, p. 750) and Pallardy (2021). Thus, the suffix *-a* has the same function as Fr. *de* and Ger. *von* in labelling a person the son of someone (e.g., an ancestor of rank).

Therefore, with respect to these points, in our opinion the epithet *Dracula* could have the meaning of 'son of the *draco*, son of the dragon, son of Dracul', in consideration of both (1) the semantics of Lat. *draco* – from which the Latinisms *Dracul* and *Dracula* derived their meaning – and (2) the historical reasons behind this sobriquet. As clear from the above, this result was also reached by taking into account textual and material sources of the time.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, in our opinion it seems likely that the sobriquets *Dracul* 'the *draco*, the dragon' (of Vlad II) and *Dracula* 'the son of the *draco*, the son of the dragon, the son of Dracul' (of Vlad III) are Latinisms from Lat. *draco* 'dragon, (mythological) huge-sized serpent', to which the Romanian postpositive article and, in the case of *Dracula*, the ending *-a* with the meaning of 'the son of' were added. Therefore, these epithets seem to be resulting from the membership to the Order of the Dragon. However, it is not possible to exclude that the name *Dracula* was re-analysed at a later stage and confused by the people

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[6] Cf. OCS Radul *Mihalcea* (Radul, son of Mihail) and Stroe *Hiera* (Stroe, son of Her-ul).

with Rom. *dracul* 'the devil', because of the cruelty of the ruler (cf. Andreescu, 1976, pp. 149ff.; Percivaldi, 2010, p. 20).

However, a crucial role in this etymological inquiry was played by extra-linguistic factors, such as (1) textual sources, (2) material sources (e.g., monuments, coins and seals commissioned by the rulers) and (3) the historical background surrounding the origins of these epithets. Therefore, this analysis appears to reinforce the idea that, when it is about etymological analyses, the field of linguistics must cooperate with other ones. In any case, it seems undeniable that the main victim of this confusion between the meanings of 'devil' and 'dragon' of the sobriquets *Dracul* and *Dracula* was Bram Stoker.

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