

# Journal of Dracula Studies

---

Volume 8 2006

Article 4

---

2006

## Punishment with Vlad Tepes - Punishments in Europe Common and Differentiating Traits

Constantin Rezachevici

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rezachevici, Constantin (2006) "Punishment with Vlad Tepes - Punishments in Europe Common and Differentiating Traits," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol8/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dracula Studies by an authorized editor of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact [czerny@kutztown.edu](mailto:czerny@kutztown.edu).

**PUNISHMENTS WITH VLAD TEPES – PUNISHMENTS IN EUROPE  
COMMON AND DIFFERENTIATING TRAITS**

by Dr. Constantin Rezachevici

The fame of the cruelty of Vlad Tepes' punishments spread to Central and Eastern Europe, to Moscovite Russia, even to the Ottoman Empire. Surely anyone who punished in such a manner was a cruel man. Yet in the case of Vlad, he was unflinching, pardoning nobody guilty of misconduct toward himself or the juridical norms of the epoch. On the other hand he was just – nobody was punished without guilt. Antonio Bonfini, official historian of King Mathias Corvinus, described him as a cruel and just man. Tepes was never short of faithful followers, who fought with him against the Ottomans and who accompanied him in his exile in Buda.

Initially, the fame of his cruelty spread in the form of a political pamphlet, greatly exaggerated, generated and fostered by Mathias Corvinus himself. The "Tales of the King," outlining the unimaginable cruelties of Vlad, were heard by the Pope's envoy at the royal court in Buda, Niccolò de Modrussa, who then sent them in 1462-63 to his master, Pope Pius II (Enea Silvio Piccolomini). The Pope wrote them down in his famous "Commentaries," next to the German tales about the same cruelties – also stemming from Buda. Henceforth the pamphlets against Vlad Tepes spread to the German-Hungarian world and to the Russian one (here – more as a model of sharing justice than as a negative example); the pamphlets mushroomed via the newly-invented printing press, feeding an interest for this kind of sensational material toward the middle of the fifteenth century. But it did not stop there. In 1896 (one year before the publication of *Dracula*), historian and Slavic expert Ioan Bogdan from Brasov still accepted these pamphlets as genuine, referring to Vlad's "psychical degeneration," "moral insanity" and perverted mind.

We now know that Mathias Corvinus sullied and tarnished Vlad Tepes' reputation and credibility for a reason: to explain why he had not helped Vlad fight the Sultan in 1462, for which purpose he had received money from most Catholic states in Europe. Mathias employed the accusations brought by the Saxons of Southeastern Transylvania, especially the memorandum written by priest Johann Reudel of the Black

Church in Brasov, and produced fake letters of “treason” (written on 7 November 1462 – quite likely by the priest himself) – on the part of Vlad, addressed to the sultan, the visir and to Stephen the Great, voivode of Moldova. Vlad Tepes was charged with horrors and cruelties, with treason.

Regarding the punishments applied during Vlad’s reign in Walachia (1456-1462), I shall elaborate on two aspects: How and why did Vlad Tepes differ from other Romanian rulers? Was he unique amongst the rulers of mediaeval Europe? From the beginning it should be said that the Romanian mediaeval jurisprudence was far more lenient than that of Central and Western Europe. The Romanian body of law was based on “local tradition,” on the church laws of Roman-Byzantine origin and on Matei Vlastare’s “Sintagma” (1335) – used more like guidelines by the judges, who had broad room for interpretations.

Death sentences were by hanging for the rank-and-file and by beheading for the nobility. Only in exceptional cases were there punishments like burning alive (of Byzantine origin), burying alive, drowning or strangling (the last two of Turkish origin), or impaling. Rarely, mutilation by Byzantine standards was applied (blinding, limb-cutting, mark-cutting of the nose) to pretenders to the throne, so that they could be traced. The imperial envoy to Moldova, G. Reicherstorffer, by 1540, believed that voivode Petru Rares (1527-1538; 1540-1546) “applied harsh punishments even for minor offences,” as shown by the “multitudes of the blind or of the handless for their crimes”; true, said Reicherstorffer “the blind receive the voivode’s mercy at his court”, proving it was not cruelty on his part, but common punishments in Central Europe; they may have seemed “harsh” in the context of the otherwise permissive Romanian laws.

The Romanian Middle Ages recall only a few cases of executions accompanied by mutilations. Thus, Michael the Brave, voivode of Wallahia (1593-1601), first cut the right hand of dignitary (stolnic) Dima, the hand that wrote a treasonous letter, then beheaded him on 3 December 1594; Dima was pro-Turkish at a time Michael started his anti-Ottoman revolt. Also for treason, Michael the Brave executed dignitary (diac) Ioan Racz (Mako) in 1599: “This one had his both legs cut from the knee, and both arms cut from the elbow, before being hanged (in the forks) at Alba Iulia. But soon after he had one leg cut, he died.” The Romanian tradition would usually employ, with bandits, “marks by hot iron,” beating, forced labour in salt mines, jailing or exile. Even for very grave crimes – killing, incest, adultery, theft – one could get away by paying money, or in-kind. Many other documents reveal comparatively light punishments for all kinds of offences. Even treason toward the ruler of the country was punished in the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in Wallachia and Moldova, by only beheading and confiscation of the nobleman's property. The Byzantine law of the Holy Apostles, used in these two Romanian countries up to the sixteenth century, gave priests the right to judge. Their punishments were even more lenient: for the theft of wheat, for instance – 4 years of fasting and 100 offerings; for theft from the church – 50 blows of stick on the back, 24 on the belly and 3 years fasting; for child-killing, the murderous mother got 2 years fasting and 150 offerings to the church; for the killing of a person – 5 years of fasting and 150 prayers a day. By contrast, in Transylvania impalement was frequent – “by the tradition of the Fatherland”; even a Catholic priest in the village of Dupus could order the impalement of a “heretic” Romanian (of Orthodox religion) – a deed for which the priest was forgiven by the Pope.

Vlad Tepes ruled with a difference: he applied to foreign offenders the kind of punishment used in their country of origin rather than those provided by Romanian feudal law. Those kinds of punishments were detailed in the *Altenberger Codex* (chronicle) brought from Vienna to Sibiu in Transylvania at 1453. The Codex enumerated the punishments provided by laws in the South of Germany, the Law of Magdeburg – also used by the Saxons of Moldova, and the Law of Iglau – applied by the Saxons in Sibiu and in southeastern Transylvania. Besides, for commercial offenses in Transylvania, the law allowed beheading, blinding, cutting of limbs, death by the wheel; Vlad employed all but the last against the Saxon merchants who ignored his trading rules in Wallachia.

The main kind of punishment applied by Vlad, the one which brought about the Turkish nickname of Kazâkli (Tepes – the Impaler) was impalement. This punishment is of Asiatic origin; in Antiquity, the Assyrians used it to execute their prisoners, as shown by the bas-reliefs; Herodotus mentioned its use with the barbarians of Asia.

In Europe, the first mention of an impalement was made by Procopius of Caesarea, in his *About Wars* (VII, 38, 20) which told of terrible executions of prisoners by the Slavic invaders of the Byzantine empire in 550: burning, skinning, bone-breaking, impaling. At the time, the technique did not have a name, so Procopius described it in these terms: “Those who were apprehended were not killed by sword or spear, or some other usual way; they stuck sticks into the ground, well sharpened, then pressed the unhappy hard on them, setting the sharp point in the middle of the back, till it reached the entrails and thus killed them.” The Slavic Ants introduced this type of execution in Europe before 550; it was then taken over by the Byzantines, then spread unevenly across the continent, especially in Germanic territory; it survived in the

Hapsburg empire until the 18th century: in theory, mothers who killed their babies were subject to punishment by impalement. Under the same Hapsburg rule, in Transylvania, by 1785, Romanian participants in the anti-Hungarian revolted by Horea in 1784, were impaled in the counties of Alba and Cluj.

When did impalement reached Wallachia, and from where? Not from the Turks, who, until Vlad Tepes' epoch did not employ it. The Turks learned about it looking at the forest of the impaled Turkish prisoners, in the summer of 1462, set near Targoviste to frighten and discourage the enemy.

Vlad employed impalement from the legal provisions of the Saxon towns in Transylvania, which, in the fifteenth century officially endorsed this type of punishment. In Transylvania, impalement 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). Vlad punished by impalement citizens of Sibiu for baby-killing and adultery.

Initially, Vlad did not use impalement. When he broke the revolt of boyar Albu the Great, after 1457, Vlad “apprehended him and cut him and his all family.” It was not Vlad who started the impalements of the Saxons of Brasov. It was these Saxons who, together with fugitive adversaries of Vlad, impaled Vlad's followers who had fallen into their captivity. In a letter to the Brasovians, who supported the claims to Vlad's throne of Dan III after December 1456, dignitary (vornic) Neagu asked: “Remember, who started the impalements? The fugitives and yourselves, because you embraced Dan's cause. Then voivode Vlad angered about it and harmed you a lot, impaling people and setting you on fire.” Vlad reacted, not acted, employing the same kind of punishment – their own, as stipulated in their local law. Thus this form of punishment, of German-Transylvanian origin was for the first time introduced in Wallachia by Vlad Tepes. There are no known records regarding its use before.

Impalement was regarded as a degrading, infamous punishment. In the spring of 1459, after defeating Dan III, cousin and pretender to the throne, Vlad Tepes beheaded him (as mentioned above); he did not impale him. In fact Dan received an earnest burial because they were relatives and had a claim to the throne. Another voivode, Ieremia Movila of Moldova (1595-1606) did impale his rival, Stefan Razvan. But Razvan, although decreed a voivode, was a gypsy from the Ottoman Empire, therefore not of voivodal extraction. Razvan's was the only instance of death by impalement out of 200 voivodes in Wallachia and Moldova.

There is no written description of the manner of impalement, which made contemporary authors fantasize at will on the subject. But there is a Hungarian engraving of the seventeenth century showing Hungarian soldiers impaling Turkish prisoners. The well-sharpened stake lay flat on the ground. The condemned, also laid, had the sharpened point introduced through the posterior. His legs were tied to ropes. Three men started to pull at each rope, slowly pushing the stake along the spine, till it emerged at the back of the head, without killing him. To prevent the condemned from writhing, someone set a foot on his neck. Then the stake, with the impaled victim on it, was raised in a vertical position and firmly stuck into the ground. The operation required at least eight to nine people to perform and lasted a long time. So when large numbers of condemned were concerned – as in the case of prisoners of war – the bodies were pierced in a haste, at random, often through the stomach, which made them hang in weird positions, making the scene even harder to look at.

Of course, that was part of the purpose: that the enemy would think twice before invading the country which disposed of the prisoners in such a way. In 1462, at a time the Turks did not yet employ impalement, Sultan Mehmed II and his soldiers were shocked at the sight, near Targoviste, of the 20,000 impaled Turks, covering an area of 3 hectares. The Byzantine chronicler Chalcocondil believed that the show was specially prepared for the Turks, whose invasion Vlad Tepes had anticipated, to frighten them. Mehmed II did order the retreat from Wallachia, declaring that “he cannot take the country from a man capable of such extraordinary things.”

Actually, the spectacular aspects of mediaeval punishments, including those applied by Vlad Tepes, were largely due to their public display, meant to frighten, to terrorize the on-looker for a long time (the cadavers of those impaled or killed by other means were exhibited until putrefaction). As a rule, executions in the Middle Ages and even in the Modern Epoch did not take place in hidden places like jails, but in public, inviting as many on-lookers as possible, as a deterrent to would-be offenders.

Many other cruel punishments that Vlad Tepes was accused of, were quite frequent in contemporary Europe. Cutting the arm was stipulated in German, Serbian and Byzantine laws for money-forging, public violence, thefts of all kinds. Tougher than the rest, the 1508 law in the county of Fagaras provided for the burning of money-forgers. Central Europe used hanging for theft, while crushing by wheel (not used by Vlad Tepes) penalized banditry, assassination, arson, profaning graves, homosexuality, heresy, also fake envoys and treason. Burning at the stake was used in Fagaras to

punish rape and the killing of relatives; so Vlad Tepes employed this method against Fagaras culprits in 1460.

The Szeklers of Transylvania were punished by Tepes according to the provisions of their law. Because he broke his own law, a Szekler Franciscan monk – who was supposed to walk – was sentenced by the voivode to impalement, together with the donkey that he was riding. Skinning alive was a Szeckler punishment for those who did not heed the community laws they happened to be in. Quartering and boiling in oil or fat were not recorded with Tepes, but documents mention them being used against some Romanians in Brasov at 1534. The envoys that failed to meet the expectation of the voivode in their behaviour were executed on the base of the Hungarian law regarding insults brought to a Prince.

Vlad proved to be an unflinching adherent of the law, even fanatically so, well-versed in the provisions of the sophisticated German, Serbian, Byzantine and other laws – not to mention the local ones – the Saxon – in Southern Transylvania. This is a side of his personality almost completely ignored. In other words, his cruelty was the specific mediaeval cruelty of the punishments inscribed in alien, European laws, not Romanian, which the voivode applied “to the letter” to offenders from those European countries.

Furthermore, with respect to cruelty, was Vlad Tepes all that different from other mediaeval rulers, who were not the “beneficiaries” of the negative fame spread by pamphlets and poems? Of course not. Consider the terrifying provisions of the numerous treatises of torture and coercion published between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (which includes the Age of Enlightenment) such as the *Theresian Codex* of Empress Marie Theresa. If they were translated and published today, at a time when offenders have more comfortable jails, with TV sets and weekend leaves, they would no doubt provoke claims of obsessions and grave psychiatric afflictions. Mediaeval judges and executioners were almost inhumane, immune to the sufferings of others. Throughout mediaeval Europe executioners, better known than lawyers and judges because of the public character of their profession, were damned beings, living outside the confines of the society; in the Romanian lands, they were recruited from among the gypsy slaves up until the nineteenth century.

True, the fifteenth century brought a surplus of cruelty in order to check vagabondage and beggary, associated with theft, banditry and killings – which increased with the number of the poor. Let us recall that one of the Slavic “tales” about Vlad Tepes mentioned his gathering many “disabled” (handicapped), “poor” and

“vagabonds,” whom he set on fire in a “large house” – to stamp out poverty and helplessness in his country. The tale, written or copied in 1486, had its Romanian (probably Transylvanian) author look benevolently at Vlad Tepes’ action, according to the mentality of the epoch.

French historiography believes that Ludovic XI, Vlad Tepes’ contemporary (1461-1483) “got a cruel reputation because of legends,” as he was actually an intelligent, pious and avaricious man. The punishments used in his time are only mentioned in passing: the hanging condemned skinned alive, slashed, castrated, quartered, emptied of bowels, broken in pieces. The money-forgers and the homosexuals were boiled in oil; the common thieves had their eyes pulled out, along the nose, an ear or a hand, etc. Sometime the king “took delight in hearing the cries of his victims.” Justice worked along the same lines in other European states as well.

Stephen the Great, voivode of Moldova (1457-1504), whom seventeenth century chroniclers named “the Good” and who was ordained in 1993 as “The Rightful Voivode Stephen the Great and Saint,” was no less cruel than Vlad Tepes. After the victory in the battle near Vaslui, on 10 January 1475, he impaled almost all the Turkish prisoners, except the prominent ones: then he burned the corpses, leaving heaps of bones, according to Polish chronicler Jan Dlugosz. The same chronicler informed that during the battle at Lipnic, with the Tartars, Stephen the Great made the son of the Han (ruler) of Crimea his prisoner. The Han sent 100 envoys who demanded the release of his son – in a threatening, cheeky tone. Stephen ordered that the son be quartered, in the presence of the envoys, who were then impaled, except one – whose nose was cut, then sent to the Han to tell him what he had seen. It is difficult to believe that Tepes could have acted any more roughly.

The domestic chronicles in the Romanian lands were usually quiet about the cruelties of wars. Except the *Moldavian-German Chronicle*, written by a German soldier in Stephen the Great’s service; this one described them to the taste and traditions of Central Europe.

In fact the very Moldavian voivode sent it to Nuremberg in 1502. A physician, Hartmam Schedel, author of a popular *Cosmography*, copied it. But that did not bring Stephen the Great, in Germany, the fame of a bloody tyrant, as with Vlad Tepes, because Stephen was not subjected to a campaign of denigration. Yet, this chronicle mentioned that on February 27, 1470, Stephen attacked the Danubian port of Braila, in Valahia, where “he shed much blood and burnt the town to the ground, and left no-one alive, not even the children in the womb of their mothers”. Then again, after the victory

of November 28, 1473, against 13,000 Turks and 6,000 Valahians, “whoever fell alive in his hands he impaled – through the navels, one on top of the other – some 2300 of them. And he stood there in their midst for 2 days”. A nightmarish scene, worthy of Vlad Tepes, which looked normal to the author – undoubtedly, an eye-witness.

In March 1474, after another incursion in Valahia, Stephen the Great brought back with him to Suceava many prisoners, hanging 700 of them in front of the castle. Finally, during the same year, Stephen captured the fortress of Teleajen and a large number of gypsies “whom he cut, so the blood streamed outside the castle”.

Let us recall that Vlad was not the only one nicknamed Tepes (the Impaler). Basarab the Young, voyevode of Valahia (1477-1481), of the rival, Danesti family, was nicknamed “Tepelus” – possibly because of his preference given to impalement, or because of a likeness to Tepes. The diminutive (Tepelus) differentiated him from Tepes (he was also younger).

Much more cruel than Vlad Tepes was the first Czar of Russia – Ivan IV the Terrible – diagnosed as paranoid, with sexual aberrations – something Tepes, with whom he was compared – did not have. Ivan was said “to massacre whole towns, like Novgorod, and tortured the nobles he feared or suspected. He killed his own relatives and his own son. It is said he burnt people alive and fueled the fires himself. His cruelty gave birth to “tales” similar to Tepes’. One of them – about the French envoy who had his hat nailed to his skull, certainly took the tale about Tepes and the Turkish envoys as a model, as it circulated in a Russian translation. The difference was that while the tales about the terrible czar were confined to Russia, the tales about Tepes spread throughout Central Europe.

Let us also recall that scenes of atrocious cruelty were not alien to the rest of mediaeval Europe, many times worse than the ones reproached to Vlad Tepes. And I am not referring here to the tortures inside the jails of the Inquisition, but to public executions.

Joan d’Arc’s burning at the stake on 30 May 1431, at Rouen, as a result of a political trial – under the pretext of a religious offence (the accusation of heresy) – was but one of the thousands of usual executions in the Middle Ages. I mentioned this one for the abundance of records: the witnesses reported that on hearing the sentence “Joan started to groan so pitifully that everyone present, judges included, had tears in their eyes”. The same “pitifully groans” were uttered by the condemned all the way to the execution site. “According to the deposition of the executioner, in spite of the body being rapidly turned to ashes Joan’s heart was intact, full of blood”. The witnesses

described terrible scenes, the condemned screamed from among the flames, and an English soldier who came closer to fuel the fire, went sick looking at the burning body.

A case of uncommon cruelty, way beyond the desire to terrify the on-looker, pertaining to savage revenge, was displayed by the Hungarian nobility on the occasion of the execution of the leaders of a peasant uprising in 1514, in Hungary and Transylvania. On July 20, 1514, under the walls of the fortress of Timisoara, the main leader, a Szeckler called Gheorghe Doja (Dosza Gyorgy) was slowly burnt to death, seated, naked, on a hot iron throne; they placed on his head a hot iron crown. An engraving of Taurinus – *Stauromachia*, published in Vienna in 1519, depicted this very moment which punished the so-called attempt of Doja to take the throne of Hungary; the engraving also shows impaled leaders all around Doja; at Doja's feet there is another impaled, not yet raised to the vertical.

What the engraving did not show, but leaked from contemporary sources, was that the other condemned were forced to eat the roasted flesh of Doja, pinched by iron claws from his still live body. Then Doja was cut in four and exhibited at the gates of Buda, Pesta, Alba Iulia and Oradea; the head – at Seghedin. It was this enforced cannibalism that made the German humanist Johann Sommer exclaim: “We reached a climax that cannot be surpassed – if we feed people, against their will, with living human flesh”.

The Poles were also ready to resort to inhuman executions, sometime without real trials. Thus, after the sudden death (after a short and violent suffering) of cneaz (prince) Mihail Wisnowiecki on December 26, 1615, during the campaign in Moldova – to help enthrone his brother-in-law, Alexandru Movila (1615-1616), the Moldavian priest who offered him the communion was accused that he poisoned the prince (although his death could have been caused by something else). The priest was killed in a manner reminiscent of Doja's. A French mercenary in the Polish army, eye-witness, described what he saw: “the criminal was seated in a large chair made of wires, and tied to it. Then fires were lit all around, but at such a distance that one could still hear the screams after 12 hours”. This was a punishment reserved to those who threatened the life of a prince. Not even the priests were spared.

What about the cruelty of the executions of those who attempted to kill the kings of France, all the way to the Modern Epoch? Francois Ravailac, the one who killed king Henric IV on May 14, 1610, had his legs crushed first in torture boots, then executed in Place Greve, in Paris, like this: “his flesh was torn by red-hot pinchers – on the legs, arms, hips; the right hand, which held the knife of the crime was burnt with

sulphur; in the holes left by the pincers melted lead was poured, boiling oil, burning tar and wax and sulphur, mixed together. Then the body was dismembered by the pull of four horses, the limbs, the body burnt, turned into ash, thrown in the wind”. The terrible execution lasted several hours.

The same manner of execution was given to Robert Francois Damiens, who shallowly cut, with a pocketknife, King Louis XV. The atrocious torture lasted one hour and a quarter. And that happened at the peak of the Enlightenment in the country championing civilization – three centuries after Vlad Tepes’ reign.

The barbaric means of torture and execution prominent in the Middle Ages continued to be applied in Western and Central Europe throughout the 18th century. “Estrapada”, for instance, of Spanish origin, preferred by the Inquisition (hanging the condemned by the wrists tied behind, sometime with a weight added to the feet, led to the dislocation of the shoulders by brusque liftings and lowerings, many times to an agonizing death by asphyxia, just like the crucified in the Antiquity) was applied in the Austro-Hungarian army up until the first World War.

The eighteenth-century Austrian *Theresian Codex* finely details the types of tortures and executions, along the torture tools. Horia and Closca, leaders of the anti-Hungarian revolt of the Romanian peasants in Transylvania, in 1784, were executed by the provisions of this Codex at the express order of the “illuminated” emperor Joseph II, who demanded: “execute them in a spectacular manner, in a day announced in advance, in a public, important place where many subjects can assemble, hot-minded included”. The execution took place on February 28, 1785, on a small hill South of Alba Iulia – by breaking the limbs under the wheel, arms first, then cutting the bodies in four and their exhibition in public places; the hearts and the bowels were buried at the site of the execution.

This breaking-under-the-wheel was a frequent method used in Western and Central Europe, also in Transylvania – but not in Wallachia and Moldova. The condemned, with the four limbs set on sticks, had the bones crushed – in the interval between the stick – with an iron bar, in France, or with a heavy cart-wheel in Central Europe. Still alive, the condemned had his crushed limbs intertwined amid the spikes of the wheel, to increase the pain. Then the wheel, with the condemned on it, was raised on a long stick. The victim could still live for sometime, in plain view of the others – as these macabre wheels were raised by the gates of walled towns; lots of Western paintings are remindful of that.

As there are no reports that the Turks employed impalement before Vlad Tepes' time, it is possible that the sight of the forests of the impaled prisoners raised by the two Romanian voivodes gave the Ottomans the same idea. What is certain, is that after the landing of the Turks in Otranto (1480), in the kingdom of Naples, the Italian painters represented "The Martyrdom of the Innocent Saints" or "The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand" – a theme spreading throughout Europe; a Saxon painter from Medias, in the centre of Transylvania, was inspired by the Turkish executions of the Christian prisoners and painted impalements in multi-branched trees, with the condemned on the tips of the branches, impaled at random – just as is used to be with numerous prisoners.

Somehow, this random way of impalement was related to the preferred execution practiced by the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth century – that of throwing the condemned, from a wall, onto spears or hooks turned upwards; the condemned could die quickly, but the rule was that he lived days on end in agonizing pain. Such was the case of Dimitrie Wisniowiecki – a false pretender to the throne of Moldova, and of his lieutenant – Piasecki, who were handed over to the sultan in 1563; they were thrown "onto hooks from the wall of Galata and lived there till the third day, cursing Mahomed". Piasecki got away with it as the hooks were stuck in his hips, and by lowering the head he choked with blood. But Wisniowiecki hanged by his back and lived till the third day, when the Turks arrowed him because he cursed Mahomed" – reported a Polish chronicle.

To summarize, within the array of capital punishments applied to evil-doers and war prisoners in the Middle Ages and the Modern Epoch in Europe, Vlad Tepes' were generally the same as those of his contemporaries. What caused his cruelty fame, beginning 1462-63, was, first of all, the series of German pamphlets in the XV century, taken over and amplified from the biased reports of Mathias Corvinus, king of Hungary and of the South-Eastern Transylvanian Saxons. The taste for spine-chilling stories made these pamphlets and their illustration remain popular in the sixteenth century as well.

In a domestic context, Vlad Tepes ruled in a country governed by Roman-Byzantine laws, by far gentler than those in Central Europe. His reign did differ from his predecessors and followers by an unflinching sense of justice, a trait appreciated at the popular level, even in Russia, but assimilated with cruelty by the enemies. Another distinguishing factor of his reign was the application of punishments proper to the law of the country of the offender – much harsher than those in Valahia. Thus, voivode Vlad introduced punishment by impalement, adopted from the Saxons of Transylvania.

The third distinguishing trait was the scale of this punishment, impalement, meant to intimidate the enemy (forests of the impaled – something unseen before; impressed, the Turks adopted impalement themselves).

Cruel punishment was a characteristic of the Middle Ages and, partially, of the Modern Epoch in central and western Europe, meant not so much as a punitive measure, but as intimidation. Vlad was certainly not alone.