CHAPTER 1

Exile As a Way of Life

“A Fortress on the Water”

Vlad Dracula\(^1\) was born sometime between 1429–1430 and 1436, most likely in Schässburg, today Sighișoara, a German city in the center of Romania, in the province of Transylvania. First recorded in 1280 as *Castrum Sex*, the form Schässburg appears a few years later, in 1298. Nicknamed “the Saxon Nuremberg,” Sighișoara achieved a certain fame in 2003 when the minister of Romanian Tourism announced that a “Dracula Land” theme park would be built nearby. After numerous protests, this project was finally abandoned. The city has preserved its ancient walls, watch towers, narrow streets, and fifteenth and sixteenth century houses. In 1938, the *Enciclopedia României* described the city as follows:

Imagine that from the depths of the sea a coral island, on which light gently rains, appears before your eyes. Behold Sighișoara. Contemplating it, you truly have the illusion of a fortress on the water. Its gray walls, over which a crown of red ivies tumbles down; the winding streets; the slender flowering towers at dawn, their thresholds glistening with the colors of the night’s cool dew; the belts of green walkways surrounding the cemetery and the old town center; [...] the moody shadows ... It all resembles a game of sea crystals, the gentle plash of pensive waters. The somber, rough Saxon architecture [...] is here sublime, with its sharply angular towers and multi-colored houses. Nature in Transylvania generously extends herself everywhere, with rugged forests enveloping the dream-like citadel with warm intimacy, as if to re-establish harmonious union between creation and the work of man. The city is caressed by the sweet banks of the Târnava River, with its gently moving, languid waters. The overall feeling is of abundance, and of full surrender to the rhythms of nature. Still in all, Sighișoara remains serene and unruffled. Stranger to the rich landscape of the surrounding forests, Sighișoara leads its ascetic existence in the milieu of a complex Gothic style, with soaring lines

\(^{1}\) Before 1475, Dracula signed his name simply as “Vlad.” From 1475, however, he uses the form *Ladislaus Dragwlyya* (or *Dragkwlya, Drakulya*), which likewise appears on his seal. Cf. Bogdan, *Documente privitoare la relațiile*, nos. CLXVI–CLXVII, pp. 323–324.
in silent longing for the absolute. And yet, viewed from the south in the morning, she appears to shimmer in the mist caressed air, ready to sail forth, smiling like a city by the sea.\(^2\)

The house where Dracula was presumably born, a massive but inelegant building, still exists in the old (or upper) city (figs. 1 and 2). An inscription placed in 1976 attests that this, indeed, is where the Impaler was born.\(^3\) Heretofore, however, the house was noted only for having functioned as a mint, between 1433 and 1436. Scholars agree that Vlad the Impaler was probably born during his father’s exile in Transylvania. We also know that between 1431 and 1436 Vlad Dracul had, as a source of revenue, minting of coins in Sighișoara. It is highly probable, therefore, that Vlad was born in this house. Even so, the 1976 inscription is hardly justified in eliminating all doubt.

In reality, we don’t know where Vlad’s father lived before February of 1431. Possibly in Constantinople, then still Byzantine, or somewhere else in Transylvania? If Vlad was born before 1431, his place of birth remains unknown. But from 1431 to the autumn of 1436, there is, of course, the house in Sighișoara. From the autumn of 1436, his father occupied the throne of Wallachia, where Vlad may have been born if he had come into the world at the end of this year.

We do, however, know that his older brother, Mircea, their father’s first born, was aged thirteen or fourteen in 1443. A Burgundian knight, Jehan de Wavrin, confirms this in his account of Vlad Dracul’s captivity among the Turks in 1442:

> At this time, the Lord of Wallachia had only a single son, aged between thirteen and fourteen, who was not capable of governing such a kingdom, and especially not in time of war.\(^4\)

Since Mircea was born in 1428–1429, we may plausibly deduce that his brother Vlad could not have been born before 1429–1430. In addition, once he was on the throne of Wallachia, Vlad Dracul mentions his two “first born” sons in a charter dated August 10, 1437. All in all, the evidence strongly supports Sighișoara as Vlad’s birthplace.

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\(^3\) The inscription is in Romanian: “În această casă a locuit / între anii 1431–1435 / domnitorul Țării Românești / VLAD DRACUL, / fiul lui / Mircea cel Bătrân.” In English: “In this house [there] lived, between the years 1431–1435, the ruler of Romania, Vlad Dracul, the son of Mircea the Elder.”

\(^4\) De Wavrin, trans. Imber, 108. For the original French, see De Wavrin, ed. Iorga, 7.