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## The People of Bram Stoker's Transylvania

### Cover Page Footnote

Duncan Light is an associate professor of Geography at Liverpool Hope University (UK). He is currently investigating the development of "Dracula tourism" in Romania over the past four decades.

# The People of Bram Stoker's Transylvania

## Duncan Light

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One of the defining features of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the "specific and detailed geographical context that sets this novel apart from other gothic novels" (Florescu & McNally 5). Indeed, although Stoker had not visited Transylvania, he is known to have read widely in preparing *Dracula*.<sup>1</sup> While his historical research has come under particular scrutiny, little attention has been paid to his representation and understanding of the region's geography.<sup>2</sup> As a human geographer with research interests in Romania, I find that there is something not "quite right" about Stoker's Transylvania. In particular, where are the Romanians? And why are there so many Slovaks? And why has a Székler Count built his castle so far from the Szekely land?

My focus here is on the people of Bram Stoker's Transylvania and their geography. Through a consideration of census reports as well as Stoker's known sources, I examine the nature and distribution of Transylvania's population in the late nineteenth century and I argue that while Stoker clearly appreciated the multi-ethnic nature of Transylvania, his more detailed understanding of its population geography was patchy at best. Moreover, Stoker was selective in his representation of the various nationalities in Transylvania: some were highlighted for dramatic effect, whereas others were excluded altogether.

### Transylvania's Population in the late Nineteenth Century

Throughout its history one of the defining characteristics of Transylvania, the region lying to the west and north of the Carpathian Mountains, has been its ethnic diversity. For almost a millennium the region has been the home of at least three ethnic groups: the Romanians<sup>3</sup> or Wallachs (who claim continuity of occupation of the region since Roman times); the Magyars (Hungarians) who settled the area in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and ruled Transylvania for much of its history; and Saxons (Germans) who were invited by the Hungarians to settle and defend the southern frontier region. The area is also home to a fourth ethnic group, the Széklers who speak Hungarian but regard themselves as distinct from Magyars. Historically, these four ethnic groups have not enjoyed equal status: from the Middle Ages onwards the Hungarian nobles, Széklers and Saxons (the so-called "Three Nations") enjoyed special privileges, while Wallachs were excluded from the governance of the region and indeed enjoyed few privileges. In 1897, when Stoker wrote *Dracula*, Transylvania was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: it became Romanian territory in 1920.

Nineteenth-century travel accounts of Transylvania stressed – sometimes warily – the multi-ethnic character of the region. For example, Charles Boner and A.F. Crosse, two of Stoker's chief sources,

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed analyses of Stoker's sources for Transylvania, see the following: Christopher Frayling, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991); Clive Leatherdale, *The Origins of Dracula* (London: William Kimber, 1987); Elizabeth Miller, "Typing Transylvania," in *Reflections on Dracula* (White Rock, BC: Transylvania Press, 1997); and Miller, *Dracula: Sense & Nonsense* (Westcliff-on-Sea: Desert Island Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> One notable exception is Walker & Wright, "Locating *Dracula*: Contextualising the Geography of Transylvania."

<sup>3</sup> There are various spellings of this word: Romanian, Roumanian, Rumanian, etc. I adopt "Romanian" except when quoting from a source that specifically used a variant.

respectively spoke of the region's "hubbub of languages" and the "Babel of tongues" (587, 357). According to contemporary census reports undertaken by the Hungarian authorities<sup>4</sup> the relative size by percentage of the various linguistic groups (by mother tongue) in Transylvania was as follows:

|                   |                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Romanian:         | 56.98% (1880), 54.98% (1900) |
| Hungarian:        | 25.92% (1880), 29.54% (1900) |
| German:           | 12.45% (1880), 11.95% (1900) |
| Slovakian:        | 0.64% (1880), 0.61% (1900)   |
| Ruthenian:        | 0.42% (1880), 0.45% (1900)   |
| Serbian/Croatian: | 1.33% (1880), 1.42% (1900)   |
| Other:            | 2.26% (1880), 1.42% (1900)   |

The authors of various travel narratives of Transylvania (including those sources used by Stoker) also give details of the Transylvanian population. For example, in *Transylvania: Its Products and its People*, Boner (624) basing his work on that of Bielz gives the population of Transylvania as 2,062,379 with the proportion of each ethnic group as follows: Roumains (Romanians) 1,227,276 (59.51%); Hungarians 536,011 (25.98%); Germans 192,482 (9.33%); Gipsies 78,923 (3.83%); Jews 15,573 (0.76%); Armenians 7,600 (0.36%); Slavs 3,743 (0.18%) Greek, Italians and Others 771 (0.04%) Total: 2,062,379. Other writers report broadly similar figures, all in general accordance with official census reports.<sup>5</sup> All these sources agree that Romanians were the largest ethnic group in Transylvania (with around 55-60% of the population), followed by Hungarians (which included both Magyars and Széklers) with around 30%, Saxons (around 10%) with much smaller numbers of other ethnic groups.

## The People of Bram Stoker's Transylvania

Given the emphasis on diversity in Stoker's sources, he could hardly fail to appreciate the multi-ethnic character of the region. Indeed, Transylvania's tangle of peoples and languages was something that immediately established the region as "different" from Western Europe in the minds of his readership. Having undertaken research at the British Museum, Jonathan Harker identifies the Saxons, Wallachs, Magyars and Széklers as the principal nationalities of Transylvania. Similarly, Dracula himself speaks of the "Four Nations" of Transylvania (34)<sup>6</sup> but goes further, describing the area as a "whirlpool of European races" (33). The various nationalities of Transylvania do not, however, feature equally in *Dracula*. Confronted with Transylvania's ethnic diversity, Stoker seems to have made the decision to foreground particular nationalities while excluding or ignoring others. Here is a closer examination of how he represents the various groups.

### 1. Romanians / Wallachs

Somewhat surprisingly, given that all of Stoker's sources confirmed that Romanians were the majority population, Romanians (also known as Wallachs) are almost entirely absent from Stoker's Transylvania. Though their existence is briefly acknowledged at the start of the novel, they barely feature thereafter. There are isolated references to peasants in the region but their nationality is not specified. The only definite trace of the Romanians in Transylvania is the very occasional use of Romanian words such as

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<sup>4</sup> Census statistics are taken from Rotariu et al, 1997 and 1999.

<sup>5</sup> For example, E.C Johnson, *On the Track of the Crescent* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1885) and Emily Gerard, *The Land Beyond the Forest* (London: Blackwood, 1888).

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from *Dracula* are from the Norton Critical Edition (1997).

“mamaliga” (polenta) and “Stregoica” (which Harker’s polyglot dictionary translates as “witch” although “ghost” would be a more accurate translation).

Why are the Romanians – the majority of the region’s population – so obviously absent from Bram Stoker’s Transylvania? There are two considerations here: either Stoker simply did not know about them, or he chose to ignore them.

First, is it possible then that Stoker was unaware of the Romanians/Wallachs? Walker and Wright argue as follows: “Romanians, as well as Romania did not exist in Stoker’s perceptual geographic world... Romanians, the vast majority of the population are invisible... it seems likely that the state of Romania and the Vlach speakers were unknown to Stoker” (72). However, such a position is not tenable. Given that Stoker’s sources all stress the multi-ethnic character of Transylvania it is highly improbable that he was simply unaware of the Romanians. For example, we know that he made extensive use of the article “Transylvanian Superstitions” by Emily Gerard, in which there are repeated references to the Romanians. Moreover, Stoker clearly knew that Wallachs were found in the south of Transylvania.

Furthermore, Romanians are not entirely invisible in *Dracula*.<sup>7</sup> There are isolated references to “Roumanians” – although admittedly never in Transylvania itself. For example, Romanians are among the crew members on both the *Demeter* sailing to Whitby, and the *Czarina Catherine* sailing to Varna. In both cases they are represented as being highly superstitious (probably following Gerard’s account of the Romanian character). Similarly, Stoker had at least some notion of the existence of a Romanian state: when pursuing Dracula up the River Bistritza, Harker and Lord Godalming display a Romanian flag to speed their progress. However, Stoker’s knowledge of this state – and its location – seems to have been extremely hazy. As an independent state, Romania, comprising the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, was a recent addition to the European map. It attained independence in 1878, just over a decade before Stoker started work on *Dracula*. Significantly, some of Stoker’s important sources such as Boner (from which he used a map) and Crosse were written or published before Romania gained independence. For example, Stoker describes Castle Dracula as being “on the border of three states, Transylvania, Moldavia and Bucovina” (10), when in fact Moldavia was then part of the state of Romania. More generally, Stoker’s knowledge of what lay to the east and south of the Carpathians was equally vague. Stoker seems to have been similarly unaware of the existence of Bulgaria which also gained independence in 1878 and assumes that the Bulgarian port of Varna was a Russian territory (80, n7).

It may in fact be the case that Stoker was not aware that Wallachs and Romanians were the same people. Both terms are used in Stoker’s sources – although with varying degrees of clarity – for the speakers of the Latin-based Romanian language, both in Transylvania and across the Carpathians. Crosse for example clearly makes the point that the “Wallacks” are also called Romanians. By contrast, Johnson is more ambiguous: he confusingly states that the “Wallachs... are the descendents of the Dacians” and “Roumanians assert that they are the descendents of the Roman colonists” (107). Depending on how attentively a busy Stoker read these sources, he may have come to the conclusion that the Wallachs and Romanians were different peoples, the Wallachs being located in the south of Transylvania and the Romanians being located beyond the Carpathians in Romania itself.

Another explanation for the absence of Wallachs/Romanians may be that Stoker knew of them and deliberately chose to ignore them. Somewhat confusingly, this position is also advanced by Walker and Wright. They argue that “Unless he was going to incorporate the Romanians into the story, and clearly he did not have the need to do so, it seems to have been better just to ignore them” (72). They contend that the book already contained references to the region’s various ethnic groups (Germans, Magyars, Gypsies, Jews and Slovaks) and that to include the Romanians would simply confuse things.

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<sup>7</sup> See Miller, *Sense & Nonsense* 142-143.

There may be some merit to this argument. Stoker was at pains to emphasize the Otherness of Transylvania and represented it as a wild, remote and sinister place on the very edge of Europe. Perhaps the obviously Latinate word “Roumanian” with its associations with Rome sounded to Stoker too familiar and suggestive of links with Western “civilization.” On the other hand, the names of peoples such as Magyars and Slovaks may have sounded sufficiently unfamiliar so as to add a touch of exoticism to his novel. Thus, for Stoker, the decision of whom to include and whom to exclude was an important element in his construction of Transylvania as an imagined Other of the West. As a result he may have decided to dispense with the Romanians whilst foregrounding other ethnic groups.

There is, however, another possible explanation: Stoker knew of their existence but simply got their geography wrong. Jonathan Harker describes the population geography of Transylvania as follows: “In the population of Transylvania there are four distinct nationalities: Saxons in the south, and mixed with them the Wallachs, who are the descendents of the Dacians; Magyars in the west, and Szekelys in the east and north” (10). This material was clearly derived from Johnson: “This strange country ... is inhabited by Magyars, Saxons, Wallachs and Székelys. The Magyars inhabit the west, the Székelys the north and east, and the Saxons the south, with them the Wallachs – the descendents of the Dacians – being mixed in great numbers” (205). However, Johnson’s understanding of the population geography of Transylvania was itself flawed and he displays some major misunderstandings about the distribution of different ethnic groups in the region. For example, he talks about “Slavs or Slovaks” predominating in the Northeast and the Carpathian ranges (164) when in fact there were hardly any Slavs in Transylvania. Nineteenth-century ethnic maps of the region paint a different picture from that of Johnson. For example, Heinrich Kiepert’s map of 1886 indicates that, while the Saxons were indeed largely concentrated along the southern border of Transylvania, there were important concentrations in northern Transylvania most notably at Klausenberg (modern Cluj) and Bistritz. Johnson was accurate in locating the Magyars in the West but the Széklers (included as Hungarians on Kiepert’s map) were located more in the east, than the north of Transylvania.

Johnson’s most significant misunderstanding concerned the Wallachs/Romanians: far from being confined to the south, Romanians were distributed throughout Transylvania. They formed a majority of the population in much of northern and central Transylvania, but they were also present in areas where Germans or Magyars/ Széklers were the majority population. Since Stoker clearly borrowed a lot of material from Johnson it appears that he also adopted Johnson’s misunderstanding of the situation. Quite simply, Stoker got the geography wrong! He seems to have appreciated that Transylvania was a multi-ethnic region but came to the conclusion that each ethnic group was confined to a distinct part of Transylvania rather than being far more mixed up throughout the region. Thus, Stoker sets *Dracula* in a specific part of Transylvania which he understood from Johnson to be an area inhabited by Széklers; at the same time, assuming that there were no Wallachs in northeast Transylvania, he did not include them in his story.

## **2. Hungarians (Magyars and Széklers)**

There are slightly more references to Hungarians (Magyars or Széklers) in *Dracula*. The couple who run the Golden Crown Inn in Bistritz are probably Hungarian: they speak German as a second language and give Jonathan Harker a crucifix suggesting that they are Catholics (Transylvania’s Hungarian population are mostly Catholic). There are also isolated references to Hungarian words: Harker’s dictionary includes the words “Ordog” and “pokol.” And on his journey to the Borgo Pass Harker’s travelling companion points out ‘Isten szek’ (God’s seat).

The central figure in *Dracula* is a Hungarian-speaking Székler. Why did Stoker chose to make Dracula a Székler rather than a Romanian? For a start, his vampire needed to be an aristocrat and since there were no Romanians among Transylvania’s nobility, Dracula had to be a Hungarian. Stoker then had

the choice of making him either a Magyar or a Székler. There were various attributes of the Széklers that would have made them Stoker's preferred choice. On the one hand there was the exotic nature of the very word "Székler" (or Szekely). The Hungarian language, unrelated to any other in Europe except Finnish and characterized by "those tangles of Ss and Zs" (Fermour 34), would have appeared unfamiliar, mysterious, exotic – and Eastern – to a British readership. In addition, the Széklers' location on the eastern extremity of Transylvania within the Carpathian mountains placed them at the furthest extreme of the land beyond the forest – and therefore at the farthest margin of Europe. But perhaps most important was the nineteenth-century assumption (which Stoker took from Johnson) that the Széklers were the descendents of Attila the Hun. In the fifth century the Huns had appeared out of the East intent on ravaging Western civilization. They provided the perfect model for Dracula, so that Stoker makes his vampire Count a member of the ethnic group then assumed to be descended from the Huns.

Having read in Johnson that the Székler lived in the north and east of Transylvania, Stoker presumably looked for suitable locations in this region and selected the Borgo Pass, possibly because he simply liked the sound of the name. However, by placing a Székler aristocrat in the Borgo Pass, Stoker again was at odds with the population geography of this region. Kiepert's map indicates the Borgo Pass area to be an area with a majority Romanian population. Moreover, Boner reproduces detailed maps of the distribution of Transylvania's main ethnic group: these reveal that the 97% of the population in the Borgo Pass area were "Roumanians" – and 0% were Hungarians! Perhaps Dracula has deliberately chosen to isolate himself from his countrymen. Or perhaps his predations on the local people have depopulated the area of Széklers. Or perhaps, again, Stoker simply got the geography wrong.

### 3. *Germans*

Germans (or more correctly Saxons) are almost entirely absent from Stoker's Transylvania. Stoker seems again to have followed Johnson in assuming that the Saxons were established in southern Transylvania. In fact Kiepert's map shows a major concentration of Saxons in the Bistritz area: moreover, one of Boner's maps indicates that over 75% of the population of the Bistritz area were Saxons. But although Stoker uses the German spelling of the town's name (and indeed uses German names for other locations, such as Klausenberg and Hermanstadt), Germans appear to be absent from the many nationalities in the town. However, their language is ever present. Stoker would have known this from his sources: Crosse notes that the Hungarians of Transylvania spoke German, if somewhat reluctantly; and Johnson records that one could get by in Transylvania with faulty German.

As a Székler, Dracula's first language would be Hungarian but as an aristocrat he also speaks German fluently. Indeed, German appears to be his language of choice in his castle. Given that Harker (who evidently understands more than a "smattering" of German) can understand the dialogue between Dracula and the three vampire-women we can only assume that they were speaking in German, since Harker clearly does not understand Hungarian. Similarly, Stoker is able to understand the pleas of the mother of the child taken by Dracula, so again she was presumably speaking German. Were the vampire women ethnic Germans from the Bistritz area? Or since for purposes of the plot Harker needed to understand what was going on, perhaps Stoker did not worry too much about such details.

### 4. *Slovaks*

One of the more curious aspects of Stoker's Transylvania is the frequent reference to Slovaks. On his journey to Bistritz Jonathan Harker notes: "The strangest figures we saw were the Slovaks who were more barbarian than the rest, with their big cowboy hats, great baggy dirty-white trousers, white linen shirts, and enormous heavy leather belts... They are very picturesque but do not look prepossessing. On the stage they would be set down at once as some old Oriental band of brigands" (11). How Harker was able to recognize them as Slovaks is not made clear. However, there are further references to Slovaks

(and “Cszeks”) on the journey to the Borgo Pass. More Slovaks work for the Count at Castle Dracula. Moreover, Slovaks are not confined to Transylvania but are (improbably) also found across the Carpathians in Romania itself. Skinsky’s death in Galatz (in Romania) is attributed to “the work of a Slovak” (303) implying that the Slovaks have a villainous reputation despite Harker’s earlier claim that they are “very harmless.” Thereafter there are repeated references to Slovaks, both those taking the Count upriver on the Sereth and Bistritza and to other Slovak boatmen working on the river (who presumably speak German since Harker and Godalming are able to communicate with them).

Census data from the late nineteenth century show that Slovaks were in fact a tiny proportion of Transylvania’s population. In the 1880 census, only 25,196 Slovaks were recorded in the whole of Transylvania and over 90% of these were found in the Banat and Crişana regions to the West of Transylvania itself (where Slovak minorities remain today). Only 258 Slovaks were recorded in the whole of Bistriţa county. Evidently, in writing *Dracula*, Stoker has foregrounded the Slovaks in Transylvania out of all proportion to their actual numbers. Why?

Again, Stoker relied on Johnson for his information about Slovaks. Johnson’s account of Transylvania includes a description of Slovak raftsmen on the Maros/Mureş River (some 50km or so to the south of Bistritz). Johnson evidently treats the Slovaks as an exotic object of interest noting that “these apparently fierce individuals are among the mildest of mankind” (244) and includes a sketch of a Slovak boatman. His description certainly appealed to Stoker whose description of the Slovaks was taken almost verbatim from Johnson. Why did the Slovaks have such appeal to Stoker? Once again, it seems that they suited his purpose in emphasizing the Otherness of Transylvania. It may have been that the word “Slovak,” with its unfamiliar ring, conjured the images of a mysterious and exotic people. Moreover, in describing them as “more barbarian than the rest” and as similar to an “Oriental band of brigands” Stoker sets the Slovaks apart from the other four nations of Transylvania and presents them as the strangest, most uncivilized and most un-European of Transylvania’s inhabitants. As such, it is not surprising that they are frequently found assisting Dracula.

## **5. Gypsies**

Although more numerous than Slovaks, Gypsies (Szgany) were one of Transylvania’s smaller minority groups. Gypsies appear in *Dracula* only as servants of the Count. In this, Stoker seems to have noted Crosse’s observation that the Gypsies “prefer to be hangers-on at the castle of the Hungarian noble” (146-147). *Dracula*’s Gypsies work for him at the castle, they transport him to Varna, and they collect him from the Bistritz river. However, Stoker’s representation of the Gypsies is largely confined to stereotypes or caricatures. They are “despicable hirelings of the Count, taking Harker’s gold and then betraying him” (Leatherdale, *Novel & Legend* 212): moreover they desert the Count immediately on his death. The Gypsies in *Dracula* play little role other than to reinforce both the villainy of Dracula and the strangeness of Transylvania more generally.

## **Conclusions**

While the Transylvanian setting is a crucial element of the plot of *Dracula*, it is difficult to claim that Stoker had a detailed understanding of the region or its people. He clearly had a reasonable general appreciation of the Transylvanian population: he recognized the diversity of ethnic groups in the region and had a broad understanding about where each was located. But his knowledge of Transylvania’s people did not extend much beyond this and as a result his representation of the population geography of the region contains many inconsistencies. Some elements of Transylvania’s population are missing



altogether, while others were given a priority disproportionate to their numbers, or even placed in the wrong location.

Of course, none of this ultimately matters. That Stoker's understanding of the Transylvanian population does not strictly accord with the situation "on the ground" neither detracts from the novel nor from our enjoyment of it. However, this paper has lent support to other recent research on Stoker's working methods. Miller, for example, has argued that Stoker's research was more haphazard than scholarly: "What he used, he used 'as is,' errors and confusions included... Stoker seemed content to combine bits and pieces of information from his sources without any concern for accuracy" ("Filing for Divorce" 174).

This is certainly the case with Stoker's understanding of the Transylvanian people and their geography. He used what he needed from his various sources principally to create a dramatic effect: after all, his primary concern was to write a novel and not a geographical treatise. Stoker seems to have gone out of his way to present Transylvania as a remote and sinister location, somewhere on the very frontier of Europe and a place which was firmly Western Europe's Other. Some of Transylvania's population groups suited his purposes better than others and in emphasizing the region's Otherness he selected and placed centre stage certain nationalities, whilst overlooking or ignoring others. These were among the many elements which contributed to making Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania so vivid (even if not factually accurate). And since Stoker's understanding of Transylvania's people and geography was so patchy and selective, is there any reason to assume that his treatment of the area's history would be any different?

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