

These are the Notes for episode 23 – “Dracula, Vlad the Impaler and the Jews”, of the “History of the Romanian Jews” podcast.

At the beginning of the episode, you’ve listened to the “Vlad The Impaler” a Wallachian medieval song. Here is a link to the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfLtwKsVbtM>



Vlad Dracula painting in the library of state of Württemberg, Stuttgart, Germany



Vlad Tepes painting known as the “Ambras Portrait” second half of the 16th century, now in the Castle Ambras in Innsbruck, Austria



The house in Sighișoara where Vlad II Dracul dwelt bet. 1431–1436, and where Dracula presumably was born



Snagov Monastery where Vlad Dracula most likely was buried





Vlad Dracula Poenari castle today



Vlad Dracula Poenari castle reconstructed



Vlad's legendary cruelty may have given rise to the Dracula legends. His piercing eyes and long nose gave him the look of a vampire





Vlad the Impaler feasts amid his victims in this 15th-century German woodcut





**Mehmed II** was Ottoman sultan from 1444 to 1446 and from 1451 to 1481. A great military leader, he captured Constantinople and conquered the territories in Anatolia and the Balkans that constituted the eventual Ottoman Empire





Abraham Stoker in 1906

## **JUDAISM and EARLY VAMPIRES**

### **EARLY VAMPIRES**

Believe it or not, Jews were among the first cultures in history to talk about vampires. In fact, some of the earliest texts that deal with vampires were written in Hebrew. The first Jewish vampire, Alukah, appears in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). Later Jewish writings regarding vampires were written in the Middle Ages, around a thousand years ago.

The first of the Medieval Jewish texts dealing with vampires is the Midrash Shmuel, though there is only a vague reference, a statement made by Rabbi Aivo, where he calls creatures known as “terafim”, translated as “idols ” or “household gods, ” “ nikorim of vrokali. ” This reference confused scholars for centuries, until 2004, when professor and rabbi Daniel Sperber of Bar Ilan University suggested that Rabbi Aivo was talking about vampires that Michal piled under King David’s bed so that the followers of her father, King Saul, wouldn’t know that King David had escaped. This isn’t the only time that “terafim” are referred to as supernatural beings. Another example is found in the Midrash Tanhuma, where, according to its writings, you can make terafim speak by using a corpse, salt, incense, and a spell.

### **ALUKAH**

“Alukah” is a kind of Jewish vampire which appears in Biblical texts, specifically in the Proverbs of Solomon. “Alukah” means horse leech, a leech with many teeth that can feed on the throats of animals. In the Proverbs of Solomon, Alukah is referred to as a female demon possibly related to Lilith; it’s also possible that Alukah is an alternate name for Lilith. Alukah is able to curse a pregnant womb. The Sefer Hasidim refers to the Alukah as a living human being that can shape-shift into a wolf. It can fly and it must feed on blood to survive. When it dies, its mouth must be stuffed with dirt to prevent it from becoming a demon.

### **STRIYA; ESTRIES**

Estries, the plural word for “striya”, are female vampires in Medieval Jewish folklore that are believed to prey on Hebrew citizens. The word comes from the French word “strix”, meaning night owl. It’s likely that Medieval Jewish writers were influenced by their non-Jewish neighbors to believe in estries, as there are no references to them in the Tanakh, Mishnah, or Talmud. For example, Romanians believed in living dead creatures known as “strigoi.” Similarly, Albanians believed in “shtriga” and Poles in “strzyga.”

According to the Sefer Hasidim, estries prefer the night, though it’s unclear whether they can also roam during the day, unlike the archetypical European vampire. Estries are not deterred by religious iconography and can walk freely into holy places. They can seek healing and prayer from unsuspecting religious people trying to do good, though blessing estries is considered an evil act. Injured estries can heal by drinking blood or eating bread and salt from the person who caused the injury. Estries can kill pregnant women and babies out of spite or jealousy and can seduce or sexually assault men. They can also exist as non-human spirits and transform into non-human animals. Estries can be decapitated or burned. In later mythology, estries are depicted more like European vampires; for example, they become vulnerable to silver bullets, wooden stakes, blessed weapons, and holy water.

### **SEFER HASIDIM**

The second of the Medieval Jewish texts dealing with vampires is the Sefer Hasidim, written by Jews in Germany during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While the Midrash Shmuel’s reference to vampires is rather vague, the Sefer Hasidim is far more explicit, stating the following: “There was once a woman that was a striya and was very sick, and there were two women with her at night — one sleeping and one awake. And that same sick woman stood before her and crackled her hair and wanted to fly and wanted to suck the blood of the sleeping woman. And the one that was awake woke up the one who was asleep, and they grabbed the striya. And the one that slept, slept more and the one that was awake didn’t sleep. And since she couldn’t do harm, the striya died because she needed that which comes from the blood, to swallow the blood and the flesh.”

### **SEFER HAROKEAH**

The third Medieval Jewish text dealing with vampires is the Sefer HaRokeah, which was also written in Germany. This book lists precautions to prevent a striya — a vampire in Jewish folklore — from coming back from the dead. Before she is buried, the undertaker must examine her mouth. The text goes on to say, “If it is open, it is clear that she will harm again a year after she died, and he should fill her mouth with an ample amount of earth so she will harm no more.”

**Bibliography:**

Author	Title	Year Published	Language
Radu Florescu, Raymond McNally	Dracula, Prince of Many Faces	1989	English
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Matei Cazacu	Dracula	2011	English
The Gothic Wanderer website	Dracula: The New Wandering Jew and Anti-Semitism	2014	English
Hey Alma website	The Antisemitic History of Vampires	2021	English
Roots Metals website	Judaism and Vampires	2023	English
Saul Jay Singer	The Antisemitism And Jewish Origins Of Dracula	2023	English
Alice Isabella Sullivan	Vlad Dracula The Prince Who Became a Vampire	2023	English

For questions or comments please contact us at [historyofromanianjews@gmail.com](mailto:historyofromanianjews@gmail.com)