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‘Basarab’ Surname May Not Indicate Direct Relation to Vlad the Impaler

Genographic Project Study Gives Insight Into Romanian Royal Dynasty

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WASHINGTON—A study by the Genographic Project has shown that not all individuals carrying the Romanian “Basarab” surname, the first dynasty of Wallachian kings that included the real-life Dracula, can be direct biological descendants of the Basarab dynasty.

The Basarab dynasty ruled Wallachia, the historical and geographical southern region of present-day Romania, for almost three centuries (1330-1601) and had among its members Vlad III the Impaler, commonly known as Dracula. The ethnic origin of the Basarab family has long been a dispute among historians, with both an Indo-European/Romanian and an Asian Cuman/Turkic origin being suggested. Published today in the journal PLOS ONE, the research was led by Genographic Project Principal Investigator David Comas of the Genographic Project’s Western/Central Europe regional center.

The study analyzed the Y-chromosome diversity of 29 Romanian individuals carrying the Basarab surname and compared it with the diversity found in about 150 Romanians from different regions of the country and some 330 individuals from surrounding populations of Ukraine, Hungary and Bulgaria. Different Y-chromosome lineages were found among the individuals that currently carry the name Basarab, which indicates that not all of them could be direct descendants of the Basarab dynasty. Extra-pair paternity could explain the existence of different male lineages, but the high genetic diversity found in the Basarab individuals indicates that Basarab is most likely a polyphyletic name, with multiple unrelated male founders.

“Patrilineal surnames are common in most European countries and are useful markers for male ancestry to answer questions related to the history and structure of human populations. The study of the Y chromosome in males with the Basarab surname is the first genetic analysis on the surname of a royal dynasty,” said Comas.

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All Y-chromosome lineages identified in modern-day Romanians bearing the Basarab name have typical Eastern-European haplotypes that were earlier found in both Romanians and Cumans, a population of Asian origin, rather than carrying eastern Asian haplogroups more specific for Cumans. "The present study shows that genetic haplogroup composition of the Basarab is very similar to that of the general Romanian population, and none of the haplogroups they carry is of Central or East Asia. However, these results cannot definitively distinguish between a Cuman or a Romanian origin for the Basarab dynasty, and only genetic analysis of ancient DNA from the actual remains of the Wallachian kings will be able to give a definitive answer," said Genographic Romanian collaborator Mihai Netea.

One certain conclusion, however, based on the relative heterogeneity of Y-chromosome lineages in modern Basarab from Romania, is that the Basarab dynasty was successful in spreading its name beyond the spread of their genes.

Genographic Project Director and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Dr. Spencer Wells noted that while the current study failed to find a recent common origin for all of the Basarab men, "There were telltale signs of related lineages among some of the men that suggested a close relationship that probably predated the establishment of the Basarab dynasty. It would certainly be interesting to extend the study of present-day populations to known Basarab remains to see if they belong to these lineages. Although we didn't identify Vlad the Impaler's Y-chromosome signature in this study, it might still be lurking in the dataset, waiting to be teased out with additional analyses."

For more information on the study, visit http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0041803.

Background: The Genographic Project seeks to chart new knowledge about the migratory history of the human species and answer age-old questions surrounding the genetic diversity of humanity. The project is a nonprofit, multi-year, global research partnership of National Geographic and IBM with field support by the Waitt Family Foundation. At the core of the project is a global consortium of 11 regional scientific teams following an ethical and scientific framework and responsible for sample collection and analysis in their respective regions. Members of the public can participate in the Genographic Project by purchasing a public participation kit from the Genographic website (www.genographic.com), where they can also choose to donate their genetic results to the expanding database. Sales of the kits help fund research and support a Legacy Fund for indigenous and traditional peoples' community-led language revitalization and cultural projects.

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