

Elizabeth Báthory

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Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed (Hungarian: *Báthory Erzsébet*, Slovak: *Alžbeta Bátoriová* ; 7 August 1560 – 21 August 1614)^[2] was a Hungarian noblewoman and alleged serial killer from the Báthory family of nobility in the Kingdom of Hungary. She has been labelled by Guinness World Records as the most prolific female murderer,^[3] though the precise number of her victims is debated. Báthory and four collaborators were accused of torturing and killing hundreds of young women between 1585 and 1609.^[4] The highest number of victims cited during Báthory's trial was 650. However, this number comes from the claim by a serving girl named Susannah that Jakab Szilvássy, Countess Báthory's court official, had seen the figure in one of Báthory's private books. The book was never revealed, and Szilvássy never mentioned it in his testimony.^[5] Despite the evidence against Elizabeth, her family's influence kept her from facing trial. She was imprisoned in December 1609 within Csetje Castle, Upper Hungary (now in Slovakia), and held in solitary confinement in a room whose windows were walled up where she remained imprisoned until her death five years later.

The stories of her serial murders and brutality are verified by the testimony of more than 300 witnesses and survivors as well as physical evidence and the presence of horribly mutilated dead, dying and imprisoned girls found at the time of her arrest.^[6] Stories which ascribe to her vampire-like tendencies (most famously the tale that she bathed in the blood of virgins to retain her youth) were generally recorded years after her death and are considered unreliable. Her story quickly became part of national folklore, and her infamy persists to this day.^[7] She is often compared with Vlad III the Impaler of Wallachia, on whom the fictional Count Dracula is partly based (having contributed some of the mythos herself), and has been nicknamed *The Blood Countess* and *Countess Dracula*.

Contents

- 1 Early years

Elizabeth Báthory



Copy of the lost 1585 original portrait of Elizabeth Báthory

Born	Erzsébet Báthory 7 August 1560 Nyírbátor, Kingdom of Hungary
Died	21 August 1614 (aged 54) Csejte, Kingdom of Hungary (today Čachtice, Slovakia)
Other names	The Blood Countess The Bloody Lady of Csejte The Tigress of Csejte
Criminal penalty	Confinement until death
Spouse(s)	Ferenc Nádasdy
Children	Paul Andrew Anna Ursula Catherine
	Killings
Victims	Purported over 650 ^[1]

Nádasdy's wedding gift to Báthory was his household, Csejte Castle.^[11] The castle had been bought by his mother in 1569 and given to Nádasdy, who transferred it to Elizabeth during their nuptials^{[9]:35} situated in the Little Carpathians near Trencsén (now Trenčín), together with the Csejte country house and 17 adjacent villages.^[11] The castle was surrounded by a village and agricultural lands, bordered by outcrops of the Little Carpathians.

In 1578, Nádasdy became the chief commander of Hungarian troops, leading them to war against the Ottomans.^[12] With her husband away at war, Elizabeth Báthory managed business affairs and the estates. That role usually included responsibility for the Hungarian and Slovak people, even providing medical care.^[13]

During the Long War (1593–1606), Elizabeth was charged with the defense of her husband's estates, which lay on the route to Vienna.^[8] The threat was significant, for the village of Csejte had previously been plundered by the Ottomans while Sárvár, located near the border that divided Royal Hungary and Ottoman-occupied Hungary, was in even greater danger. She was an educated woman who could read and write in four languages.^[8] There were several instances where she intervened on behalf of destitute women, including a woman whose husband was captured by the Turks and a woman whose daughter was raped and impregnated.^[13]

Her child, Anna Nádasdy, was born in 1585 and was later to become the wife of Nikola VI Zrinski. Her other known children include Orsolya (Orsika) Nádasdy (b. 1590 - d. unknown) who would later become the wife of István II Benyó, Katalin (Kata or Katherina) Nádasdy (b.1594 - d. unknown), András Nádasdy (b.1596 - d.1603 at the age of 7), and Pál (Paul) Nádasdy (b.1598 - d. 1650), father of Ferenc II Nádasdy.

Some chronicles also indicate that the couple had another son, albeit a lesser known child, named Miklós Nádasdy, although this cannot be confirmed, and could be that he was simply a cousin as he is not named in the 1610 will of the Countess. György Nádasdy is also a name that is indicated as being one of the deceased Nádasdy infants, but nothing can be confirmed. All of Elizabeth's children were cared for by governesses, as Elizabeth had been.^{[14][15][16]}

Elizabeth's husband, Ferenc Nádasdy, died on 4 January 1604 at the age of 48. Although the exact nature of the illness which led to his death is unknown, it seems to have started in 1601, and initially caused debilitating pain in his legs. From that time, he never fully recovered, and in 1603 became permanently disabled.^[17] The couple had been married for 29 years. Before dying, Ferenc Nádasdy entrusted his heirs and widow to György Thurzó, who would eventually lead the investigation into Elizabeth's crimes.^[9]

Accusation



Aerial view of Čachtice (Csejte) Castle



Main tower at Čachtice Castle, Slovakia

Investigation

Between 1602 and 1604, after rumors of Báthory's atrocities had spread through the kingdom, Lutheran minister István Magyari made complaints against her, both publicly and at the court in Vienna.^[18] The Hungarian authorities took some time to respond to Magyari's complaints. Finally, in 1610, King Matthias II assigned György Thurzó, the Palatine of Hungary, to investigate. Thurzó ordered two notaries to collect evidence in March 1610.^[19] In 1610 and 1611, the notaries collected testimony from more than 300 witnesses. The trial records include the testimony of the four defendants, as well as thirteen witnesses. Priests, noblemen and commoners were questioned. Witnesses included the castellan and other personnel of Sárvár castle.

According to all testimony, Báthory's initial victims were the adolescent daughters of local peasants, many of whom were lured to Csejte by offers of well paid work as maidservants in the castle. Later, she is said to have begun to kill daughters of the lesser gentry, who were sent to her *gynaecium* by their parents to learn courtly etiquette. Abductions were said to have occurred as well.^[20] The atrocities described most consistently included severe beatings, burning or mutilation of hands, biting the flesh off the faces, arms and other body parts, freezing or starving to death.^[20] The use of needles was also mentioned by the collaborators in court.

Some witnesses named relatives who died while at the *gynaecium*. Others reported having seen traces of torture on dead bodies, some of which were buried in graveyards, and others in unmarked locations. However, two witnesses (court officials Benedek Deseő and Jakab Szilvássy) actually saw the Countess torture and kill young servant girls.^{[9]:96–99} According to the testimony of the defendants, Elizabeth Báthory tortured and killed her victims not only at Csejte but also on her properties in Sárvár, Németkeresztúr, Pozsony (today Bratislava), and Vienna, and elsewhere. In addition to the defendants, several people were named for supplying Elizabeth Báthory with young women, procured either by deception or by force.

Arrest

Thurzó went to Csejte Castle on 30 December 1610 and arrested Báthory and four of her servants, who were accused of being her accomplices: Dorotyá Semtész, Ilona Jó, Katarína Benická, and János Újváry ("Ibis" or Fickó). Thurzó's men reportedly found one girl dead and one dying and reported that another woman was found wounded while others were locked up.^[6] The countess was put under house arrest.

Although it is commonly believed that Báthory was caught in the act of torture, there is little evidence to support this. Initially, Thurzó made the declaration to Báthory's guests and village people that he had caught her red-handed. However, she was arrested and detained prior to the discovery or presentation of the victims. It seems most likely that the whole idea of Thurzó discovering Báthory covered in blood has been the embellishment of fictionalized accounts.^[21]

Thurzó debated further proceedings with Elizabeth's son Paul and two of her sons-in-law. A trial and execution would have caused a public scandal and disgraced a noble and influential family (which at the time ruled Transylvania), and Elizabeth's considerable property would have been seized by the crown. Thurzó, along with Paul and her two sons-in-law, originally planned for Elizabeth to be spirited away to a nunnery, but as accounts of her murder of the daughters of lesser nobility spread, it was agreed that Elizabeth Báthory should be kept under strict house arrest and that further punishment should be avoided.^[22]

King Matthias urged Thurzó to bring Elizabeth to trial and suggested she be sentenced to death, but Thurzó successfully convinced the king that such an act would adversely affect the nobility. Thurzó's motivation for such an intervention is debated by scholars. It was decided that Matthias would not have to repay his large debt to Elizabeth.^[23]

Trial

The trial of Báthory's accomplices began on 2 January 1611 at Bytča (Bicse), presided over by Royal Supreme Court judge Theodosios Syrmiensis de Szulo and 20 associate judges. Dozens of witnesses and survivors, sometimes up to 35 a day, testified. All but one of the Countess's servants testified against her. In addition to the testimony, the court also examined the skeletons and cadaver parts found as evidence.

The exact number of Elizabeth Báthory's victims is unknown, and even contemporary estimates differed greatly. During the trial, Szentes and Ficko reported 36 and 37 victims respectively, during their periods of service. The other defendants estimated a number of 50 or higher. Many Sárvár castle personnel estimated the number of bodies removed from the castle at between 100 and 200. One witness, a woman named Susannah, who spoke at the trial mentioned a book in which Báthory supposedly kept a list of a total of over 650 victims, and this number has passed into legend.^[5] As the number of 650 could not be proven, the official count remained at 80.^[4] Reportedly, the location of the diaries is unknown but 32 letters written by Báthory are stored in the Hungarian state archives in Budapest.^[8]

Three of the defendants, Semtész, József, and Ficko, were condemned to death and their sentences carried out immediately. Before being burned at the stake, Semtész and József had their fingers ripped off their hands with hot pincers. Ficko, who was deemed less culpable, was beheaded, and his body burned. Benická was sentenced to life imprisonment, since testimony indicated that she was dominated and bullied by the other women.

Following the trial, a red gallows was erected near the castle to show the public that justice had been done.

Prison and death

Báthory was imprisoned in Csejte Castle and placed in solitary confinement.^[24] She was kept bricked in a set of rooms, with only small slits left open for ventilation and the passing of food. She remained there for four years, until her death. On the evening of 21 August 1614, Báthory complained to her bodyguard that her hands were cold, whereupon he replied "It's nothing Mistress. Just go lie down." She went to sleep and was found dead the following morning.^[25] She was buried in the church of Csejte on 25 November 1614,^[25] but according to some sources due to the villagers' uproar over having "The Tigress of Csejte" buried in their cemetery, her body was moved to her birth home at Ecsed, where it was interred at the Báthory family crypt.^[26] The location of her body today is unknown.^[27]

Reputation

Several authors such as László Nagy and Dr. Irma Szádeczky-Kardoss have argued that Elizabeth Báthory was a victim of a conspiracy.^{[28][29]} Nagy argued that the proceedings against Báthory were largely politically motivated. The theory is consistent with Hungarian history at that time, which included religious and political

conflict, especially relating to the wars with the Ottoman Empire, the spread of Protestantism and the extension of Habsburg power over Hungary.^[30]

There are numerous counter-arguments made against this theory;^[31] The investigation into Báthory's crimes was sparked by complaints from a Lutheran minister, István Magyari.^[18] This does not contribute to the notion of a Catholic/Habsburg plot against the Protestant Báthory, although religious tension is still a possible source of conflict as Báthory was raised Calvinist, not Lutheran.^[32] Any attempt to cast Báthory as innocent requires considering the testimony of around 300 witnesses who testified ^{[9]:96–99} as being motivated by moral panic. The physical evidence collected by the investigators, including numerous bodies and dead and dying girls found when the castle was entered by Thurzó, would also have to be addressed or disputed.^[6] Szádeczky-Kardoss argues the physical evidence was exaggerated and Thurzó misrepresented dead and wounded patients as victims of Báthory, as disgracing her would greatly benefit his political ambitions.^[29]

Torture

Various torturous acts have been attributed to Báthory, although many claims are probably exaggerations of pop culture. Claims were made accusing Báthory of stripping servants of their clothing and forcing them to stand in the freezing cold until they died from hypothermia.

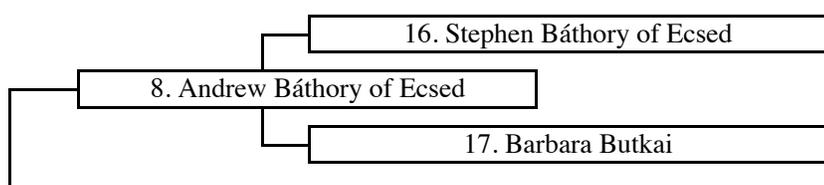
Folklore and popular culture

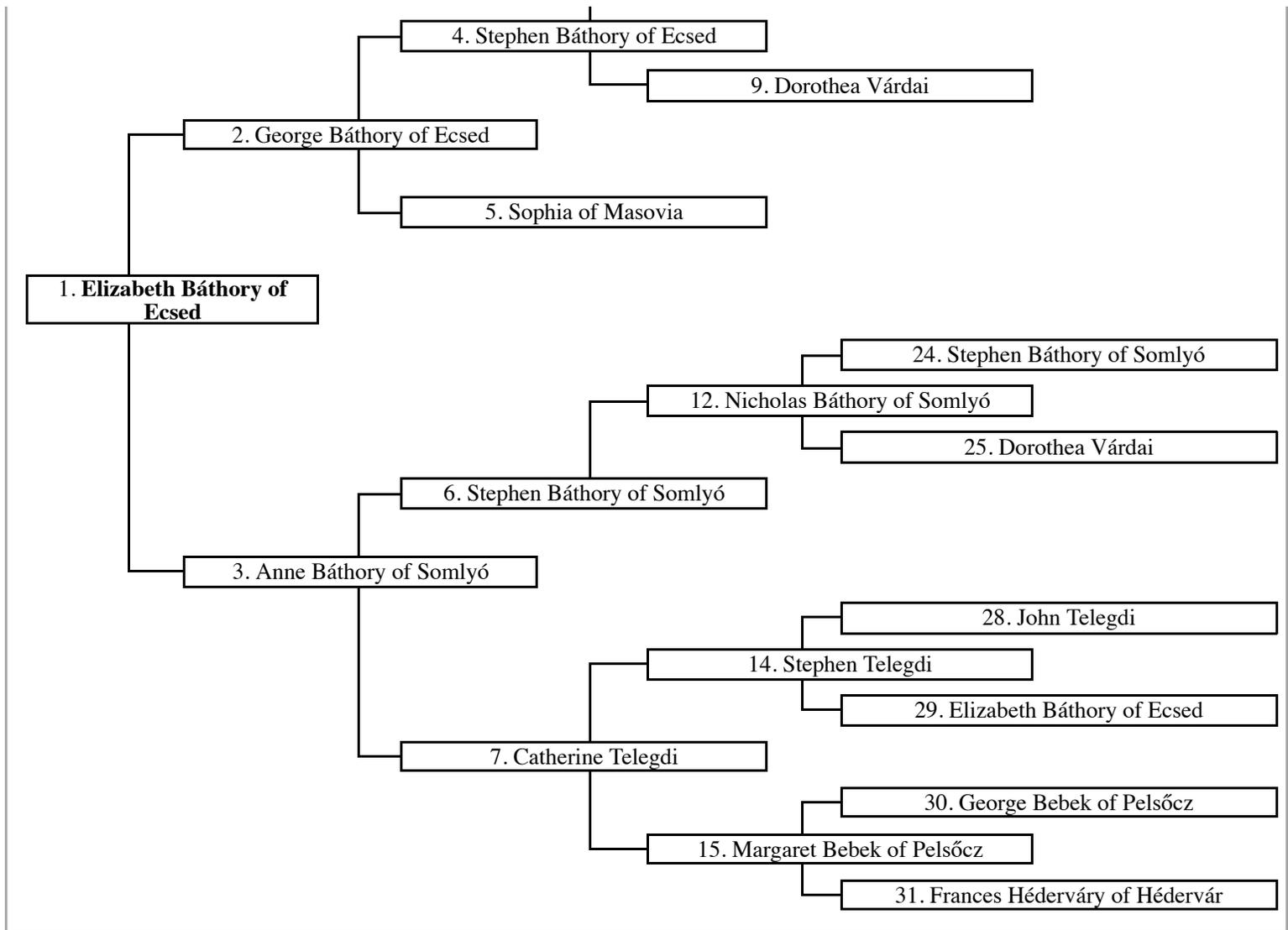
The case of Elizabeth Báthory inspired numerous stories during the 18th and 19th centuries. The most common motif of these works was that of the countess bathing in her victims' blood to retain beauty or youth. This legend appeared in print for the first time in 1729, in the Jesuit scholar László Turóczi's *Tragica Historia*, the first written account of the Báthory case.^[33] The story came into question in 1817, when the witness accounts (which had surfaced in 1765) were published for the first time. They included no references to blood baths.^[34] In his book *Hungary and Transylvania*, published in 1850, John Paget describes the supposed origins of Báthory's blood-bathing, although his tale seems to be a fictionalized recitation of oral history from the area.^[35] It is difficult to know how accurate his account of events are. Sadistic pleasure is considered a far more plausible motive for Elizabeth Báthory's crimes.^[36]

The legend nonetheless persisted in the popular imagination, perhaps in part because of Báthory's connection to Transylvania and vampire lore. Some versions of the story were told with the purpose of denouncing female vanity, while other versions aimed to entertain or thrill their audience.

Ancestry

Ancestors of Elizabeth Báthory^{[37][38]}





See also

- Gilles de Rais
- Delphine LaLaurie
- La Quintrala
- Darya Nikolayevna Saltykova
- Countess Dracula - 1971 Hammer fictionalization of the countess
- Immoral Tales (film) - 1973 portmanteau film, the third story is 'Erzsébet Báthory'
- Bathory (film) - 2008 historical drama written and directed by Juraj Jakubisko
- Stephen Báthory (1555–1605)

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3. Most prolific female murderer (<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-prolific-female-murderer>): *The most prolific female murderer and the most prolific murderer of the western world, was Elizabeth Bathori, who practised vampirism on girls and young women. Described as the most vicious female serial killer of all time, the facts and fiction on the events that occurred behind the deaths of these young girls are blurred. Throughout the 15th century,*

- she is alleged to have killed more than 600 virgins
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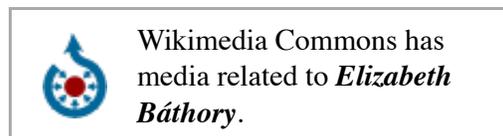
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