

Classical Reception in Croatia

An Introduction

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Abstract

The essay outlines the historical reasons for continuous Croatian engagement with Greek and Roman civilization: the Balkan regions in which the Slavs settled were part of the Roman Empire; the region of Dalmatia in particular preserved continuity of urban and religious life during the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages; and the medieval Kingdom of Croatia and Dalmatia came into existence thanks to the Pope's recognition and general support of the Church in Rome. Marko Marulić (1450–1524) from the city of Split, the author of the first epic poem in the Croatian vernacular, serves as an example of Croatian interactions with classical antiquity. Elements of antiquity were incorporated into Croatian identities at different levels—national, local, religious. Material remains and ancient texts stimulated literary activity. Geographical, political, and cultural closeness to Italy meant that Croatian reinterpretations of antiquity engaged with events across the Adriatic. From the nineteenth century, German cultural modes join the dialogue, and, after World War II, the classical tradition was increasingly refracted through global popular culture.

Keywords: continuity; Dalmatia; epic poetry; inscriptions; Marko Marulić; material culture; national identity; political history; theater; translation

A Civilization and a Takeover

In the middle of the sixth century, when the Slavs began to settle the zone of contact between Pannonia and the Mediterranean, from the river Drava to the Adriatic, they found Roman civilization there. Roman Pannonia has been erased by the invasions, but enclaves of the urban and religious life in Dalmatia endured into the Middle Ages (Caldwell III 2012). The most famous of such enclaves was the city of Split, founded in the erstwhile palace of the emperor Diocletian (245–311); inhabitants of

nearby Salona, the largest city in Dalmatia and the center of the prefecture of Illyricum, fled to the palace when the city fell, sometime after 612. Croatia was established as a kingdom in 924, when Tomislav assumed the title of King of Croatia and Dalmatia, and the coronation was recognized by the Pope. The brief period of independence ended in 1102; with the throne vacant, the nobles decided that Croatia should enter into a personal union with Hungary (its king was to be crowned separately as the King of Croatia). Thereafter, for eight centuries Croatian regions were provinces on the periphery of the Republic of Venice, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy, and the Ottoman Empire—to form eventually, after World War I, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, an unequal partnership of the war-winning Kingdom of Serbia and Southern Slavic parts of the disintegrated Austria-Hungary (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia); World War II led to socialist Yugoslavia, a federation of six national states under the rule of the Communist Party and its leader, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980); in 1990s, in a series of ugly wars, Yugoslavia broke up into what eventually became seven independent national states (Bartlett 2002; Bellamy 2003).

A Father and a Metonymy

A metonymy for the interplay between the Croatian people and classical antiquity, an ebb and flow of attraction and aversion, immediacy and interference, reproduction and transformation, may be provided by the figure of the “father of Croatian literature,” Marko Marulić (1450–1524) from the city of Split. On April 22, 1501—careful recording of the date made by Marulić himself suggests he must have felt that the event was of great importance—he finished his epic poem, a retelling of the biblical story of Judith, by proclaiming in the preface, *inter alia*:

Evo bo historiju tuj svedoh u versih po običaju naših začinjavac i jošće po zakonu onih starih poet, kim ni zadovoljno počitati kako je dilo prošlo, da mnoge načine obkladaju, neka je vičnije onim ki budu čtiti.

Thus, behold, I have put this history into verses, according to the custom of our old artificers and to the laws of those ancient poets, who are not satisfied just to tell how something went, but use many devices to please the readers.

Although it took 20 years for the poem to appear in print (in Venice in 1522), its importance was immediately recognized and never afterwards disputed. As all Croatian high school students have to learn today, the *Libar Marka Marula Splitsanina u kom se uzdarži istorija svete udovice Judit u versih harvacki složena* (*The book of Marko Marulić of Split containing the history of the holy widow Judith written in verses in the Croatian style*) is the first epic written in Croatian language by an author—the *author* in the most traditional sense of the word, a singular and sovereign master of words.

When Marulić mentions “the laws of the ancient poets,” he means the poets of classical antiquity. *Judith* indeed takes pains to obey their laws, to have everything an

epic should have: an invocation (which addresses God, and expressly rejects Apollo and the Muses) and six cantos; a challenging metrical form (doubly rhymed 12-syllable verse); elevated diction and similes; speeches and catalogs (all carefully signaled by the marginal titles); a number of classical examples culled mostly from Plutarch and Ovid—among them a strange version of the story of Hecuba in which the enslaved queen cuts off Polymestor’s nose instead of gouging out his eyes (probably reflecting a specific manuscript version of the *Metamorphoses*; Wasserstein 2011). The author prepared himself well for the daunting task: in Marulić’s library there were at least 200 titles, more than half of them by Greek and Roman authors (he read the Greeks in Latin translation), all carefully annotated and excerpted (Marulić’s handwritten commonplace book, the *Repertorium*, survives; Marulić 1998–2000). Immediately after *Judith*, Marulić compiled a Latin commentary on Catullus—writing on the pages of what is today Bibl. Lat. Nat. 7989, the famous manuscript with the only surviving copy of the *Cena Trimalchionis* (Lučin 2007b)—and moved on to compose *In epigrammata prisorum commentarius*, one of the earliest annotated compilations of Latin inscriptions (some of which came from the ruins of nearby Salona and were on display in the collection of Marulić’s friend Dominik Papalić).

As can be seen, Marulić’s uses of antiquity were multiple and various: the author from Split learned from pagan antiquity and rejected it; he collected ancient texts and reshaped them; he gave classical forms to Christian substance and to vernacular linguistic material; he cherished and interpreted ancient texts both local (inscriptions from Salona) and universal (Catullus).

The Illyrians and Saint Jerome

Classical reception played a role in the political history of Croatia too. Elements of Croatian identity came into existence mainly in opposition to the ruling empires. One interpretation of this identity saw Croats as arrivals in post-Roman Illyricum, as stated above. There was, however, another interpretation, the so-called Illyrian one, which linked early modern Slav identities with the ancient entity of Illyricum and with the ancient perception of the indigenous population as “Illyrians” to whom the seventh-century migrations brought the Slavic language (which was, consequently, sometimes also called “Illyrian”; Džino 2010). In circulation at least from the Renaissance onward, this emphasis on continuity with antiquity influenced—among other historical decisions—Napoleon’s choice of “Illyrian provinces” as an administrative term for parts of Slovenia and Croatia (including Dubrovnik) that the French controlled from 1809 to 1813; however brief and partial, it was the first unification of Southern Slav territories. Soon afterwards, the term appears in the name of the Illyrian movement, the key nineteenth-century Croatian cultural and national initiative from the 1830s and 1840s, which opposed the Magyar national program and promoted the Croatian language as a linguistic alternative to both Magyar and Latin (the official language in Croatia until 1847).

A similar reliance on ancient roots occurs on a smaller scale during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when Croatian cities—mainly those in Istria and Dalmatia: Pula, Zadar, Trogir, Split—presented themselves as direct successors of Roman settlements (respectively, Pola, Iader/Iadera, Tragurium, Spalatum/Salona; Gudelj 2014). The continuity was especially prominent in Split, former palace of a Roman emperor refurbished into a medieval city, where the Mausoleum of Diocletian became a Christian cathedral, the temple of Jupiter a baptistery. In such context an absence of continuity seemed problematic: Dubrovnik, the Eastern Adriatic city-state that retained its independence (both from Venice and from the Ottomans) the longest, from 1358 to 1808—was, at the same time, a city which lacked material evidence of its connection to antiquity, so its founding myths stressed again and again how the first settlers moved there from Epidaurum (modern Cavtat, 15 kilometers to the south; Jovanović 2012).

Less influential politically, but of lasting cultural importance, was the appropriation of Saint Jerome—one of the greatest figures of Christian antiquity, born c.347 in Stridon in Dalmatia (“*Dalmatiae quondam Pannoniaeque confinium*” were Jerome’s own words in the *De viris illustribus*). From the thirteenth century onward, in the Balkans, Bohemia, Silesia, and Poland, Jerome was seen as the patron of the Glagolitic script—used for several Slavic languages—and as the protector of the Roman Slavonic rite; thus, Jerome also became a Slav and a Croat (Marulić 2011; Verkholantsev 2014).

Aristotle, Olympiad, Sarcophagus, Pirates

From discovery and interpretation of Greek and Roman culture there is a small step to its reproduction and refashioning. Classical texts were copied (such as William of Moerbeke’s translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, copied in Zadar in 1393, today in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale IV 460, or Aesop’s fables and other texts in Greek, copied in Dubrovnik by Ivan Gučetić before 1502, today in the Bodleian Library, Laud MS 9), and some led their scribes to try their own hand as authors (such as the Propertius MS Vat. lat. 5174, copied by Ivan Lipavić from Trogir in 1464, which contains Lipavić’s Latin elegy on the return from Venice to his native city; or Boethius’ *De consolazione philosophie* in University of Notre Dame, MS 53, in which a commentary, written after 1484 by the Dominican Philip of Zadar, overflows into elegiac complaints against all Philip’s enemies; Ives 1943; Novaković 1999). Classicizing inscriptions were composed: Petar Kršava (d.1447), abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Zadar, in 1434 recorded his restoration of a Roman triumphal arch in an inscription dated “DLIII Olympiadis anno II” (“in the second year of the 553th Olympiad”; Brunelli 1913: 127); a nobleman from the island of Hvar, Petar Hektorović (1487–1572), adorned the private space of his summer house with several dozens of inscriptions in Latin, Croatian, and Italian (proudly describing it in his poetic travelogue

Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje [Fishing and fishermen's dialogue] 1568; Hektorović 1979); Christian inscriptions from antiquity were reinterpreted as well—the priest and archaeologist don Frane Bulić (1846–1934; Baric 2011), director of excavations of ancient Salona, chose to be buried on the site, in a replica of an ancient sarcophagus for which he composed a Latin epitaph—a cento of inscriptions he had found or interpreted during his career.

Classical texts were also appropriated by translation or paraphrase (in 1528, the aforementioned Hektorović translated Ovid's *Remedia amoris* into Croatian verse; Dubrovnik poet Dinko Ranjina, 1536–1607, paraphrased Tibullus, Martial, Propertius, Moschus, and epigrams from the Palatine Anthology; Miletich 2009, Božanić and Kisić-Božić 2013), and by theatrical adaptations (Bubrin and Grubišić 2006): famous Renaissance playwright Marin Držić (Dubrovnik, 1508–1567) wrote and produced a version of Plautus' *Aulularia* (*Skup—The Miser*, 1554; Reeder 1977), and a *Hekuba* (1558) in which he reinterpreted *Ecube* (1543) of the Venetian Lodovico Dolce as well as Euripides' *Hecuba*.

As suggested by the last example, classical material also reached Croatia through an intermediary culture. In the period 1400–1800 intermediaries were predominantly Italian (Croats studied in Italy and many of their teachers were Italians; Torbarina 1931, Golenishchev-Kutuzov 1973); in the nineteenth century the mix was enriched by German, and especially Austrian, approaches and practices (there is Croatian painting in the style of historicism, poetry in dialogue with the Wiener Moderne, classicizing accentual-syllabic versification modeled on Voss, Klopstock, and Goethe). After World War II, the classical tradition is increasingly refracted through a prism of global popular culture, both in its higher forms—for example, in Pavo Marinković's (b.1967) play *Filip Oktet i čarobna truba* (*Philip Octet and his magic horn*) (1990), a jazzy theatrical variation on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (Zlatar 1996)—and as a commodified tourist spectacle: if you come to Split during the summer, from 2004 you may take part in the annual kitschy *Diocletian Days* and watch the costumed pirates from Omiš abduct the emperor's wife Prisca. This part of the story, as well as a comprehensive overview of classical reception in Croatia, remains to be told.

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