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Political and Ethnic Geography of Croatia as Seen by German Pilgrims from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century

It was as early as the crusader period that pilgrims' writings started, but they reached their peak at the end of the fifteenth century. Since the majority of the pilgrims were German, most of their travel books were preserved. The journey started and finished in Venice and the travellers had to sail along the Croatian coast of the Adriatic Sea. It is obvious from their writings that they brought more or less knowledge from their own lands. Knowledge about Croatia improved due to political, cultural, economic and religious relations, and it was particularly broadened during the fights against the Ottoman Empire.

In spite of all this, most Germans did not understand the political borders at the time because they depended on Venetian guidebooks for pilgrims. They wrote, namely, in general about "Slavonia", which was an ethnic term, and not a political replacement name for the Croatian lands. The information from nautical charts or printed works of ancient cartographers was not much better. In this respect, the names of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia were confronted all the time. Only those pilgrims who came into direct contact with the Croatian population could get a better idea. The political status of the Croatian Kingdom as well as its Christian affiliation were much better known, and it is therefore understandable that the Germans sympathized with the Croats during the fights against the Turks. Later, we find information that some of them gave financial support for the defense.

The fact that Croatia was wrongly included in the Holy Roman Empire can be explained by the aspirations on part of the three emperors from the House of Habsburg who asserted this in their titles. In principle, the German pilgrims knew that the Venetian Republic gained rule over Dalmatian towns by purchase and conquest. The towns of Zadar and Dubrovnik made the strongest impressions on the travellers because of their secular as well as ecclesiastical buildings and sights. By the end of the sixteenth century the German pilgrimages had become very rare, and the Venetians were not as powerful as they had been. Due to the threat from the Turks Croatia grew more committed to Vienna.

Key words: the Middle Ages, Germany, Croatia, Dalmatia, Istria, pilgrims, political and ethnic geography