

Croats and the «Portuguese Indies»

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The article that follows discusses two manuscripts relating to Portuguese discoveries and the conquest of parts of the Indian subcontinent by the Portuguese: Messer's *Viaggi dè Portogesi in India* and Hus's account of the voyage to the Indies entitled *Georgii Hus peregrinatio hierosolimitana*. Both of them date back to the sixteenth century and are unknown to the general public.

During the decade in which we commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of major overseas discoveries, and on the eve of the forthcoming jubilee anniversary of the discovery of the sea passage to India effected by Vasco da Gama, we would like to draw attention to two very interesting cultural and historical documents relating to Portuguese discoveries and the conquest of parts of the Indian subcontinent by the Portuguese. The two manuscripts from the sixteenth century, hitherto virtually unknown to the general public, undoubtedly form a constituent part of Croatian cultural history, either by virtue of their authorship or else their place of origin. At the same time, however, their historical interest goes far beyond any limited national context and may be looked upon as part of our common cultural heritage.

The first document is entitled *Viaggi dè Portogesi in India* and its author was the Italian, Leonardo da ca di Masser. It dates back to the middle, or possibly the first half of the sixteenth century and was first mentioned on the territory of what is now Croatia in an autonomous settlement /i. e. principality or republic / called Poljice / near Split.¹

¹ The constitution of Poljice as a self-governing community within the Croatian state dates from the period between the eleventh and the fourteenth century. In 1444 Poljice became an integral part of the Venetian Republic, although it still retained its measure of domestic selfgovernment. In the course of the second third of the sixteenth century Poljice was conquered by the Turks. During the seventeenth century the people of Poljice frequently rose in rebellion against the Turkish authorities. In 1699 Poljice was once again incorporated into the Venetian Republic. In 1797 it became part of the Austrian state, and in 1805 it became subject to France. It rose in rebellion against the French administration in 1807, but the rising was suppressed with considerable bloodshed by the French army. This episode in fact put an end to several centuries of autonomy under a grande duke. Besides the Statute of Poljice, one of the most important documents embodying ancient Croatian law, we ought also to number amongst major cultural monuments Leonardo da ca di Masser's accounts of journeys and voyages.

The evidence that Masser's book was preserved in the Republic of Poljice is to be found in the work itself. Apart from Masser's text (72 pages in all), the volume also contains notes by one of its former owners, the parish priest of Poljice, Antun Vulić.² The book, which belonged to Vulić, is now lodged in the Zagreb National and University Library / in the Collection of Old and Rare Books / under the shelf-mark R 6489.³ It is described in the catalogue as follows: «Leonarado da ca di Masser. 1. Viaggi de Portogesi in India. 2. Antun Vulić, List of Debtors relating to Loans made by me. Ca. first half of the sixteenth century, paper, 21 x 14,8 cms, 1 + 115, 1 + 31, 4 pcs written in an official humanistic hand, with notes and the second document in a Poljice version of Bosnian Cyrillic script, on 1. 2r the title of the first part is inscribed in gilt letters on a crimson background, framed in an ornamental Renaissance border with a silver coat of arms – a shield rampant on a black and gold field flanked by the initials S. F. / superscriptions.»

Leonardo da ca di Masser (Lunardo Masser) has left us a manuscript of 72 pages. The first chapter of the manuscript / pp. 1-21 / describes nine Portuguese voyages to India. The first of these voyages, led by Vasco da Gama, dates from 1497; the second, led by Pedro Alvaro, took place in 1500; the third in 1501; the fourth once more led by da Gama, in 1502; the fifth is dated 1503; the sixth 1504; the seventh is dated 25 March 1505; the eighth is dated 17 November of the same year; and the ninth April 1606. The author describes the voyages from various points of view (nautical, geographical, historical), and the length of the description varies from one expedition to the other. The longest description deals with the final expedition, and it takes up almost half of the first part of Masser's book – pp. 11-20, to be precise. Apart from this chapter dealing with Portuguese voyages to India, Masser's work also contains the following chapters: «Ordene particular dele spetie» (pp. 21-29), «Sinistra sorte de Milunar do Masser in Lisbona» (pp. 29-31) and «Description particular del Regno di Portogalo» (pp. 31-72).

The most interesting question concerning Masser's book, *Viaggi de Portogesi in India*, is undoubtedly how it came to be in Poljice, through whose agency and to what end. Today, unfortunately, we can only speculate, since it is scarcely possible to trace the history of Masser's manuscript in Poljice, or in Croatia, considering the frequent changes of ownership, the winds of war and the other historical upheavals that have affected the former self-governing community of Poljice. Still, it may well be assumed that the manuscript, although there is no evidence of the place or time of its origin, was probably produced in Venice (or possibly in some other Italian town), that it found its way to the autonomous principality of Poljice at a time when it was still within the Republic of St. Mark, although it would not be surprising, considering Poljice's century-old geographical and historical links with Venice and Italy in general, if Masser's work was conveyed to Poljice during the period of Austrian rule, or even at a time when the territory was under Turkish government. In any case, it might be worth

² The notes, written in a local Poljice version of Bosnian Cyrillic script, are in fact a register of debts, in which all those who had borrowed money from the above-mentioned priest are listed, along with their outstanding debts.

³ Inspection of the accessions register revealed that Masser's manuscript had been bought on 7 July 1954 in Zagreb from a student, Henrik Nadović. Apart from these details concerning the previous owner whom, unfortunately, I was unable to contact, in spite of strenuous efforts, it appears that the manuscript had once been put on display (although there is no indication of the theme of the exhibition) and that it originated from Omiš, a small town not far from the former Republic of Poljice.

carrying out some research into Masser's possible presence in Poljice, in the interests of Portuguese as well as of Croatian literary history.

The second manuscript, dealing mainly with Portuguese conquests in India, more specifically with the town of Diu does belong to the body of Croatian literature. Its author was in fact a Croat – Juraj Hus, who came from a place called Rasinja, not far from the Croatian town of Varaždin. But Hus was not the first Croat to be caught on the territory of the Hindu subcontinent on the opposite side to the Portuguese. According to research pursued by the most capable Croatian scholar investigating Portuguese–Croatian encounters in the Indies, Vladimir Mažuranić, a significant number of Croats were employed either as traders or soldiers by Hindu or Muslim potentates.⁴ Most of the Croatian merchants or soldiers came from the coastal region, mainly from Dubrovnik and its environs. Since Dubrovnik (Ragusa) was at that time under Turkish protection, its citizens enjoyed certain privileges – above all, free passage, not only through the entire Turkish Empire, but also through other Muslim countries as far as the Indies. When the Portuguese began to annex certain parts of the vast Hindu territory, the Muslim rulers fighting in wars against them employed, along with other European mercenaries and adventurers, a number of Croats who had been attracted by the prospect of quick and easy profits. There is reliable data about some of them, for instance, about a couple of Croatian cannon founders, whose expedition was sought by the Portuguese during one of their expeditions under the leadership of L. Soarez.⁵ Most of the Croatian mercenaries fighting against the Portuguese were engaged in the defence of the Hindu town and port of Diu. The Portuguese tried a number of times in fact to sieze this wealthy city which was defended on two occasions by the Egyptian and Turkish navy. It was these two Egyptian or Turkish visits to Diu, made with the intention of assisting their Muslim brothers, that constitute the most interesting feature of the connections between the Croats and the Portuguese in the context of the Indies. The first incident occurred in 1509. In that year Francisco de Almeida, hitherto Portuguese viceroy in the Indies, set out for Diu with a fleet of 20 ships. The Portuguese intention to attack the town had been known in advance, so that an Egyptian fleet was already there with the aim of assisting the defenders of the city. The majority of the seamen and soldiers in the Egyptian fleet perished, only a few of them being able to save themselves by swimming to the shore. The event is of interest to us, because a very eminent portuguese historian, Bishop Jerónimo Osório, tells us in his Latin chronicle, *De rebus Emmanuelis virtute et auspicio gestis*, amongst other things, that some books in the Croatian language (dalmatico sermone)⁶ have been found on one of the Egyptian ships, which suggests that Croatian soldiers were present on this occasion. Mažuranić speaks of them in a somewhat off-hand way: «Those who went to war were not the best element of our people, but attention should be drawn to the enormous economic damage that would

⁴ Cf. Mažuranić, Vladimir: *Melek »Jaša Dubrovčanin« u Indiji godine 1480-1528. i njegovi prethodnici u Islamu prije deset stoljeća (Melek »Jaša Dubrovčanin« in the Indies, 1480-1528, and his forerunners in Islam ten centuries ago)*, in: *Zbornik kralja Tomislava u spomen tisućugodišnjice Hrvatskog kraljevstva (The Anthology of King Tomislav commemorating the Millenium of the Croatian Kingdom)*, JAZU, Zagreb, 1925.

⁵ Op. cit. p. 243, p. 579.

⁶ »Erat autem exercitus hostis ex tam diversis gentibus conflatus, ut in classe multi libri latino et hetrusco, et dalmatico, galico et hispano serm one conscripti invenirentur.« (cf. op. cit., p. 591).

be done to the Mediterranean world by any disruption of sea-borne trade. This anxiety explains the evident eagerness for battle on the part of our Croats and the other Christian seamen, of which Bishop Osório complains with good reason.»⁷ It is interesting that in his book Mažuranić generally takes any chance he can to excuse himself on account of acts by his fellow-countymen, who were unfortunately on the opposite side to the Portuguese in the course of history. However, the Croats on the territory of the Indian subcontinent found themselves opposing the Portuguese, not by their own choice, but simply because they had been compulsorily mobilized. It was compulsory recruitment that kept most of the Croatian seamen and soldiers in Diu during the second campaign of a combined Turkish-Egyptian fleet against the town in 1538. In the fleet of 72 vessels led by Suleiman Pasha that set sail from Egypt for the Indies in that year there were a good many Croats (mostly seamen), some of them brought over from Venetian galleons – pressganged, or tempted by fraudulent promises of high wages – others recruited from among the sailors of Dubrovnik (Ragusa). The Pasha of Egypt in fact detained Ragusan ships that were berthed in the port of Alexandria and embarked their crews on ships that were being fitted out in Suez. It was only a year later that the ships returned from the Indies, and the Ragusan crews and their ships were released, so that the Republic of Dubrovnik was involved willy-nilly, in the Hindu-Portuguese war for Diu, whose participant was also Juraj Hus.

Following this brief historical digression, it may now be a good deal easier to understand the Hindu episode described in the two accounts of it which we have from a Vatican and a Viennese sources. Hus's manuscript was first discussed by the Croatian historian Franjo Rački (1828-1894). His paper was based on the Vatican manuscript (the Viennese manuscript was not known at that time) and was first published in the magazine «Neven» in 1858 (pp. 485-489 and 501-504). Apart from Rački, it was the geographer Petar Matković (1830-1898) who published Hus's manuscript in the series *Starine* (Antiquities), volume 13, under the title *Descriptio peregrinationis Georgii Huszthi* and who wrote the hitherto most extensive account of Hus and his work: «Gjuro Hus, a Croat from Rasinja, a celebrated traveller from the Sixteenth Century», published in «Rad JAZU» (Publications of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences), volume 55, Zagreb, 1881. As far as we know, these are the only major works devoted to Hus in the Croatian area, while, in the Portuguese area, a Croatian travel writer by the name of Hus is totally unknown.⁸

The Viennese manuscript first studied by Petar Matković himself, and the existence of which was reported to Matković by a friend in Vienna, is older than the Vatican manuscript and is entitled *Georgii Hus peregrinatio hierosolimitana*. Hus's account of his travels is a manuscript from the Royal Imperial Library in Vienna, written in Latin on paper and comprising 10 folio pages, which, judging by appearances, undoubtedly belongs to the first half of the sixteenth century and is hence contemporary with its author. It was written in Bratislava (Pressburg) on 10 November 1548. The author is

⁷ Ibid, p. 239.

⁸ I have carefully scrutinised the very full bibliography of sources to Godinho, Magalhães Vitorino: *Os Descobrimentos e a Economia Mundial* (Editorial Presença, Lisboa, 1983), especially the chapter »Viagens pelo (e ao) Oriente, séculos XVI e XVII (vol. IV, p. 263 et seq.), but I have not found Hus's description of his journey to the Indies mentioned anywhere.

recorded as Georgius Hwz (Huz) rascinyus and his account of his travels is dedicated to *domino Michaeli de Rowen, judici curie atque regni Sclavonie protonotario*. In the title the author stresses that he is a Croat born and bred (*ex regionibus Sclavonicis descenderem*), i. e. from Northern Croatia between the rivers Drave and Kupa.⁹

The Vatican manuscript was produced at the end of the sixteenth century. It, too, is written in Latin on paper, has 30 sheets or 60 pages in quarto. Its text differs significantly from that of the Viennese manuscript. The name of the author is given as *Georgius Huszty de Raszinya*. According to Matković, this Vatican manuscript is a rewriting or, more precisely, a second edition of the Viennese text, the Viennese manuscript having been considerably extended and amended. The two manuscripts differ in content as well as in form.

Very little is known of Hus's life from the periods that preceded and followed his years in Turkish slavery, and even those details we do know are mostly deduced from the manuscript itself. But we cannot tell from the manuscript when the Croatian author was born or when he died. From the title-page of the manuscript it may be deduced that he was alive during 1566. It is known with certainty, however, that the Turks took him prisoner and enslaved him in his native village, because he mentions this in his manuscript (p. 122-3). From there, not far from Varaždin, he was deported along with many other slaves to Constantinople. We may also rely on Hus's statement in his manuscript that, immediately before falling into bondage, he had completed Latin schools in Kewzogh (*Quinque ecclesiis*). This is, however, the only information that the author offers concerning his life before he was captured. Continuing his account of his travels, Hus describes the four years he spent in Constantinople.¹⁰ Having changed masters a number of times, he finally came under the direct authority of the Sultan himself, who freed him, but forbade him to leave Constantinople. After he had been set free he was soon hired by an Arabian sea-captain who had come from Egypt to ask about the war that the Turks were preparing to wage against the Portuguese. In this way Juraj Hus travelled from Constantinople to Alexandria. He lived in Egypt for two years while ships for a Hindu campaign were being built in the Red Sea.

The most interesting part of the narrative now follows - Hus's account of the voyage to the Hindu theatre of war, a description that is, in general, «the most interesting episode in his account of his travels, for here Hus speaks as an eye-witness who had actually taken part in the war as a trumpeter on board the pasha's ship. Since Western sources relating to this historical episode are distinctly lacking in detail, this section of the narrative is of historical importance, and it also provides us with important geographical evidence.»¹¹ At the end of the chapter concerning the campaign against the Hindu town of Diu, Hus refers to the evidence of some Venetians whose ships had been blocked in the harbour of Alexandria and who were also taken to the Indies. «Let the story be told by those who are more eloquent than I am, because I had not been sent

⁹ Cf. the article by Matković quoted above in: »Rad JAZU«.

¹⁰ Amongst the misfortunes that befell him there, he seems to have been most upset by the persistent efforts of his captors to convert him from Christianity to Islam. To escape this kind of persecution he sought permission to learn to play a musical instrument and subsequently joined the army, hoping that he might escape from his slavery.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 129f.

there to describe what was happening, but spent all my time thinking how I might make my escape.»¹² According to Matković, Hus's remark might have been prompted by seeing one of the Venetians writing in a diary, for a diary written by an anonymous author actually existed, describing the above-mentioned expedition to the Indies: it was entitled *Viaggio de un comito Veneziano, da Alessandria a Diu*.¹³ In spite of his constant thoughts of escape, however, during his long residence in Egypt and on the voyage to Diu, Hus still found time to make careful notes on the natural and historical features of the places he passed through, as well as the military and political events in which he was involved. Thus, he was to note later on: «Finally, on the orders of the Sultan, this Indian campaign against the Portuguese was begun. Somewhat earlier the Portuguese had defeated the pagan royal prince and had taken the royal town called by them Deu, or in Portuguese Diu. When the pagan prince realized that he was no match for the enemy, he set out, first to his friend Suleiman Pasha in Memphis (Cairo), and then to the Sultan in Constantinople, asking for aid. Thus there came about this war, which had long been planned, not without deceit on the part of the court.»¹⁴

Hus goes on to list events that happened on the way to the Indies starting with the feast of St. John (24 June) 1538, when the Turkish fleet set sail for the East, putting in at the ports of Toro and Gida and taking the Arabian town of Aden. He then continues: «Embarking additional troops and loading the ships with ample supplies, they then set sail for the open sea and travelled with the aid of strong winds for nineteen days and nights, passing the time on the voyage just like those of whom Virgil tells us (*Aeneid*, Canto 1, III, 190-193, ed. c. p. 130, 131/. Setting course by the island of Ormosat (Ormus), which they sighted on the port side, they reached the frontier of Kalikuta (Kalekuth). There the pasha launched his attack on the Portuguese: he was said to be a fierce and bloodthirsty individual, but he opened his campaign in a relatively civilized manner, ordering the siege of the royal and defiant city of Diu (Deu) which had already been taken and occupied by the Portuguese. Disembarking cannon from his ships, he began to besiege the town, battering its walls furiously and assualting it for almost 40 days. The same was done from the sea by the captain, but the Portuguese defended themselves valiantly, fighting off the Turks in the besieged town, so that many Turks were killed without any gain having been made. Suleiman Pasha, looking at the host of his wounded and exhausted soldiers, began to exhort them in the following terms: 'Oh, Osmalnis, warriors and friends who must live and whom every honour of our country awaits, and sure hope of reward, for this is for us the sole honour: approach the rear bastion (the citadel), now show your mettle, for we have no choice but to force the town to surrender or to die.' Having spoken thus, he ordered the army to advance. Finally they approached the bastion or citadel, which was some two 'stadia' distant from the town, serving it as an advanced outpost and manned by about 80 Portuguese soldiers.

But, after two months Portuguese ships appeared, coming to the aid of their fellow-countrymen, the pasha took fright, especially after he found out from a spy that the Portuguese were superior in numbers and that he would not be able to prevail against them. The cannons were already thundering and both parties were seized by fear,

¹² *Ibid*, p. 130.

¹³ Venezia, in casa dei figliuoli d'Aldo 1543, Venezia, 1545.

¹⁴ Cf. Matković, *op. cit.*, p. 131f.

although they had not yet come to grips, for everything seemed set for a bloody battle. For the pasha could see that, given a favourable wind, the Portuguese ships might easily attack and defeat him, and the impending danger of death filled every heart with fear. Having assembled his people, he gave vent to words similar to those of the poet (Virgil, 1, V., v. 22., ed. c. p. 218). Shortly afterwards he ordered them to embark and take water on board, as if there was to be a battle against the enemy, but when the trumpet sounded in the evening the Turk took to his heels, raising the siege. The pasha took 80 slaves with him to Aden, and not far from the town of Zebet (Zebid) he took them down to the beach, and within an hour all of them had been put to death by an executioner. The Turks had no victory in the Indies other than this: this was simply vainglory obtained through the treachery of war. As was always the case, they boasted manfully, but with no reason at all.»¹⁵

According to Hus, this was the inglorious end of the expedition that was meant to be the beginning of the end of the Portuguese presence in the Indies. The Turks attempted to make up for their shameful defeat at the hands of the Portuguese, the Croatian author states, by the merciless conquest of the Arab town of Zebeth. From Zebeth the rest of the Turkish fleet returned to Gida, and from there finally to the town of Toro, from where they had set out one year previously. Thus ends Hus's account of the voyage to the Indies, which, according to Matković, was entirely reliable, because it supports other historical sources, and because its author was actually an eye-witness of the events he describes. Compared with the journal of the anonymous Venetian, for example, the account of the voyage given by Hus, Matković emphasizes,¹⁶ is more complete as regards the description of the battle in the Indies and the siege of the town of Diu, above all in its form, as well its findings, and in any case coincides by and large with the account of the anonymous Venetian. «Hus's observations and ideas concerning particular incidents are very much to the point and astute and reveal a very talented author with deep insight into the Turkish mentality and the relations between different peoples.»¹⁷

In conclusion it should perhaps be noted that Hus, as far as we can tell, never thought during his travels that he would ever have a chance to describe his experiences, otherwise he would have noted down his observations on the spot, or would have collected material for this purpose, as he mentioned in his description of the Indian war, when he referred to the unknown Venetian who was keeping a diary of the voyage. According to Matković, Hus's manuscript very probably originated from memories, as might be discerned from the content and form of the older and the more recent manuscript of his travel journal. But although he is describing in retrospect events in which he was involved and lands he had travelled through, his reconstruction, even of the most minute details regarding the campaign of Diu and the battles against the Portuguese is so authentic and graphic that the reader has the impression that he is reading descriptions from a diary written down at the same time as the events described. The admiration the author feels for the brave Portuguese seems to be intended to make up for the negative emotions that his compatriots nourished (for money!) against their

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 135-137.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 148.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 148.

Portugueses coreligionists. It would be remarkably interesting to pursue research into available documents in the archives (especially those relating to the former Portuguese colony of Goa, where wealthy merchants from Dubrovnik were very active for many years in the colony they called St. Blasius), in order to establish that such feelings were in most cases not in fact hostile. On the contrary! But this would go beyond the scope of this brief sketch as a basis for possible future research into Croatian and Portuguese relationships in the Indies and in connection with the Indies.

HRVATI I »PORTUGALSKE INDIJE«

U članku je riječ o dva gotovo nepoznata rukopisa iz šesnaestog stoljeća koji se bave portugalskim otkrićima u Indiji: o Masserovoj knjizi *Viaggi de Portogesi in India* i o Husovom putopisu naslovljenom *Georgii Hus peregrinatio hierosolimitana*.