

Marta Jurković: “Review of R. Kurelić, *Daily Life on the Istrian Frontier. Living on a Borderland in the Sixteenth Century*”

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Robert Kurelić, *Daily Life on the Istrian Frontier. Living on a Borderland in the Sixteenth Century*. Studies in the History of Daily Life (800-1600) 7. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2019; VIII+232 pp., 6 b/w ill., 2 b/w tables; hb 75EUR; ISBN: 9782503551869.

As the title of the volume suggests, *Daily Life on the Istrian Frontier. Living on a Borderland in the Sixteenth Century*, penned by historian Robert Kurelić, explores the daily life on the Istrian frontier in the 16th century. The book consists of an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. It also contains a number of maps and tables, as well as a list of works cited, two appendices (Glossary; Gazetteer of Place Names in and Close to Istria), and an index.

In the Introduction (p. 1-28), the author puts forth the goals of the book: the volume explores the relationships between the inhabitants of rural Istria, the migrations that took place in the 16th century, and the numerous boundary conflicts which were further aggravated by the Austro-Venetian rivalry in the Adriatic. Kurelić then gives an overview of Istrian history from antiquity through to the early modern period. In depicting how the region changed hands, the volume shows how the interior (the Austrian as well as the Venetian) came to differ from the coast in character, tradition, and ethnic makeup. The book stresses the shared identity of Slavic-speaking rural Istrians, focusing on their relationships and livelihoods. It leaves aside high politics, addressing it only inasmuch as it affected the region. One such case is the economy, which stagnated not only owing to Istria's peripheral position, but also due to the vagaries of frontier life. Finally, the Introduction is brought to a close with a short note on terminology (frontier vs. boundary, zones of influence vs. measurable lines).

The first chapter, 'Ties That Bind' (p. 30-70), delves deeper into the

relationships within and between rural communities, seeking to answer whether the frontier allowed for cooperation and integration between the Benečani and Kraljevci (Venetian and Austrian rural subjects respectively). As explained in the Introduction, the cultural line was not in fact drawn at the frontier, but rather between the coast and the hinterland. Keeping in mind the continuous Slavic presence in rural areas, it follows that the Benečani and Kraljevci encountered no significant difficulties when crossing the boundary and settling in a new community, as they shared what the author singles out as touchstones of group identity: language, values, and beliefs. After making claims for the durability of Glagolitic culture, tribal organization, and shared customs and superstitions, Kurelić applies his findings to the Austrian-ruled community of Boljun. He does so by analysing social relations, having scanned parish records for exogamous marriages and fraternity account books for information on members. Finally, the case for cooperation, integration, and social mobility is made by recounting the story of the Belvederi family, who climbed ranks in the local hierarchy despite their Venetian ties and background. The author, therefore, argues that no prejudice was to be observed at the individual level, as newcomers from across the boundary were easily assimilated into communities, sometimes even assuming public office.

The next chapter, 'New Blood' (p. 71-132), examines 'the Morlak question', i.e. how (un)planned immigration from the Dalmatian hinterland affected life in Istria. The author begins the chapter by analysing the term 'Morlak'. For contemporary Istrian officials and literati, a Morlak (or *Ćić*) was a Slavic-speaking refugee from the Dalmatian hinterland, an area which was, at the time, under Ottoman threat. Although Dalmatian refugees had been trickling into Istria since the 14th century, organised settlement of larger groups began during the 1520s at the incentive of Venetian and Austrian authorities. In their eyes, the advantage was twofold: the Morlaks would not only repopulate areas stricken by famine, disease, and war, but also join the *cernide*, i.e. peasant militias employed in frontier conflicts. What the authorities failed to consider, however, was the fact that the same belligerency which made the Morlaks fierce soldiers also made them averse to control and prone to relocation. Used to a precarious existence in their native Dalmatia, the Morlaks retained the same tribal lifestyle and customs in Istria: sources bring news of criminal activity (such as theft) and blood feuds (*vražde*). It is for this reason, Kurelić suggests, that the newcomers chose to settle in rural areas, away from the authorities. Another reason might have been the cultural divide: records show that in rural areas the term Morlak soon went out of use, leading to the conclusion that the Morlaks were easily integrated into local rural communities (or left Istria once the war in Dalmatia had died down, which was also not uncommon). However, what holds true is that the presence of Morlak newcomers spurred the boundary conflicts, leading to their escalation in the 16th century.

The third and final chapter, 'What Drives Apart' (p. 133-96), addresses the symbolism of and rituals pertaining to boundaries, as well as the disputes which arose when one of the parties failed to observe them. The first section of the chapter deals with the conceptualisation and (re)definition of boundaries through history, explaining terms such as allocation, delimitation, and demarcation. The author then proceeds to explore the role of memory and intent as significant factors in the establishment of boundaries, stressing the precedence of oral testimonies over written ones. Witnesses were often called upon in these tempestuous times, as the 16th century saw an explosion in boundary conflicts. Such developments were the result of the militarisation of the subject population and a shift in power dynamics between the Habsburgs and the Serenissima. Following the War of the League of Cambrai, Venice could no longer lay claim to uncontested power in the region, especially as the Habsburgs, who faced Ottoman invasion, adopted a more aggressive approach in dealings with foreign powers. Neither power was ready to concede territory, as admitting defeat was paramount to loss of face. Instead, local officials were left to play the blame game, perpetuating the conflict in order to preserve their sovereign's honour. This was done at the expense of the common folk, who took to reprisals as a means of recompense when peace-making rituals yielded no result. In order to illustrate the different mechanisms which were at work in solving (or glossing over) boundary disputes, the author analyses the Valbona dispute, thereby concluding the final chapter.

The final pages of the volume bring the critical apparatus. The bibliography is extensive and features works written in several languages, showing that the author is well-acquainted with current trends in historiography and frontier studies, as well as widely read in all relevant national histories (Croatian, Italian, Austrian, Slovenian). The various theoretical and historical concepts pertaining to the volume's subject-matter are listed and explained in the Glossary (p. 219-21), whereas the 'Gazetteer of Place Names in and Close to Istria' (p. 222-24) lists the place names in Croatian/Slovenian, Italian, and German. Tables and maps must also be remarked upon, as they clearly present the relevant data and make light of the sources, which are not only transcribed verbatim (whether it be in Italian, German, Latin, or Croatian), but also adeptly translated and analysed. Finally, the many case studies which feature in the volume bring the tumultuous frontier, with its inhabitants and attendant complexities, to life.

In conclusion, *Daily Life on the Istrian Frontier* is a textbook example of what a study should be: theoretically informed, based on and critical of sources, and, finally, an engaging and stimulating read. Time will undoubtedly show that this volume is a great contribution to the study of everyday life. After all, its merit was recognised by none other than the famed publisher Brepols.