

JOSIP BRATULIĆ  
Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

## SOME MEDITERRANEAN COMPONENTS OF THE CROATIAN WRITTEN AND ORAL LITERATURE

Croatian indented shape spreads the country throughout wide areas of the Mediterranean, Dinaric and Pannonian regions. The Mediterranean area is exceptionally interesting for its cultural peculiarities and various deeply rooted traditions, as well as for the sphere of its oral literature. Different levels of culture are present in this area: from the remains of the pre-Christian tradition, the popular traditional Christianity and the written literature that penetrated this region. The oral literature belongs to a special place for the early influence it had on the written literature as well as for its written documents. Besides, the interweaving of the popular and urban culture has remained a feature of the Croatian literature until today.

Keywords: oral and written literature, Croatia, Mediterranean cultural region

Since Fernand Braudel, the great French historian, published his monumental work *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), our knowledge of the area has become incomparably deeper. Almost every discussion of the topic of the sea has to take this book into consideration — as its macrocontext. I shall therefore keep this discussion within the bounds of several remarks.

The word Mediterranean, *Mediterraneum*, contains two notions: the one of the word *medius*, denoting *central*, and that of *terra* — the *Earth, land*. The word itself is indeed not an old part of the European lexis. For example, it appears in French texts in the sixteenth century: in 1569 it can be found denoting the territory in the centre of countries separated from the continents ("Qui est au milieu des terres, séparé des continents") (Robert 1972). This Latin word can be found in Croatian older dictionaries; in *Gazophylacium* (1740) by Ivan Belostenec (1972:769), citing Julius Caesar's meaning "in the middle of the Earth [*srednozemljen*],

away from the sea"; in Andrija Jambrešić's (Andrea Jambressich) dictionary (1992/1742), citing Plinius and Cicero, the word denotes "the middle of the earth between the two ends", or as an adjective, it is interpreted as "the central [*sredazemljeni*], placed in the centre of the Earth" (1992:547). The large historical *Rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika* [Dictionary of Croatian or Serbian language] of the Yugoslav (Croatian) academy (1956:277) has entry Mediterranean as *sredozemni* together with a direction to Mediterranean as *sredozemski*, with a confirmation from the *Dictionary of the Croatian language* by Franjo Iveković. The semantic nest of the word, with the Earth as the middle, and not with the sea that connects, seems to have become stronger during the early period of the usage of the word. The Mediterranean is also rooted in our vision and consciousness as a sea, as the Mediterranean sea with the Adriatic sea as its narrow Northern wing, but also as a territory, wide and spacious, spread around that sea. The Mediterranean is thus an area separated, but also united by a sea, the Mediterranean sea. It is a region of several powerful civilizations: the Egyptian, Syrian, Hebrew, Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, Judeo-Christian and then early Mediaeval, from the early Christendom through the Middle Ages, Humanism, Renaissance and Baroque towards our age.

The Croatia of today is geographically part of an area in which the Mediterranean, Dinaric and Pannonian (actually Danube) cultural influences meet. The spiritual and material culture of the Croats has been created on such a culturally complex and stratified territory. Two components are of a special significance in this culture: the protecting of tradition and the continuing rivalry between all the phenomena of life. The estate and house or home are guarded and those basic goods are also protected by the written and the common-law, by the right to buy the land first [*pravo prvokupa*] (Mažuranić 1908-22:539, 575; Čulinović 1938). The land could be bought only after the sale was announced by the call [*klič*], that is, the public announcement for the people who have the right to buy it first to contact the seller. The family name, as well as the historical and oral facts on a particular family (reflected in the family name, but also in the nickname of each family; the nickname is often inherited with the home, house in which a family is moving in) are most carefully guarded. The customs are also taken care of, for they regulate both private and public lives and they have become some sort of law, ritual. Let us remember the saying: it is better for a village to die out, than the custom. In this case the word *custom* denotes the *law*, the way of legislative and virtuous life of a village. The preservation of the traditional clothes, special food eaten throughout the year as well as on particular holidays, together with the preservation of the oral tradition, handing over the oral texts, lyric and epic essays — it all defined the Mediterranean identity as a unit as well as the identity of a particular social community within this area in its different modifications and all of it supported the

high level of spiritual life, together with the participation in and connection with a large number of people and the life phenomena.

The roots of this cultural tradition are, quite naturally, older than the Croatian ethnic group of this area. The Croats having had settled this area during the seventh century and having had brought their autochthonous traditions with them, had also inherited the ancient old and rich traditions of this region some of which have, in spite of the settlements of peoples, historical disasters, ongoing conflicts and wars, devastation and plagues, and deep structural changes of the economic and political lives, survived up until today. The elements of the Mediterranean features of the Croatian culture within both the spiritual and the material spheres of life are observable in the land-cultivation, in which wheat, vine and olive represent the symbols of life, and bread, wine and oil compose the recognizable symbols of the area that entered the basic Christian rituals. Of course, the fish (also an original Christian symbol and the acronym of Christ) as the food prepared in various ways, as well as the fishing and the maritime economy as a base of the economic life of numerous inhabitants of the coastal areas and the islands have also to be taken into consideration. This poor region has stimulated and established a special feeling of respect for water and land, for the fruit-giving and life-providing herbs and vegetation (Bratulić 1992). An exceptional relationship towards the guest and the foreigner visiting one's home has also developed. Furthermore, here we can find a unique relationship towards the animals that are used as "helping devices" in a human work of cultivating land: donkey, in Croatian called, among other names, *osal* or *osel*, and in the older language *poslenik* [the worker], ox and cow, sheep and goats. Mentioning those animals, we are unavoidably lead to the Biblical roots. In its process of implementation on our territory, the early Christendom indeed contributed with a part of its east Mediterranean atmosphere and tightened it with its symbolic attributes. Interpreting the Bible and its messages with the symbols of fig, wheat, vine and wine — especially in the large encyclopedia *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* [The Key to the Holy Scripture, 1567 and later editions], when interpreting the Biblical names, notions and places — in the distant and cold Germany, Matija Vlačić Ilirik does not fail to mention that Istria, his birth-region was more able to accept and embrace the messages contained in the Biblical text, because it is surrounded by the atmosphere of the Christ's fatherland (Mirković 1960:367-395). The Bible, the Old and the New Testament have early become the basis of the Christianity among the Croats, although it had lived for a long period of time, in some places even until today, in a symbiosis with the remains of the pagan, Slavonic religion (witches, werewolves, various customs related to the field work). Besides, the Christendom has not succeeded in uprooting even older pre-Christian superstitions of the domestic non-Croatian population, that in some regions have found their way into the Croatian popular beliefs. Of the whole old Slavonic paganism, the toponyms have survived and reached our times, and they show clearly the

deep roots of some beliefs. The cult of *Sventovid* that was turned into *Sveti Vid* [St Vitus], the Roman martyr, is apparent in the Istrian town of Gračišće, in Rijeka — Sveti Vid, there is also Sveti Vid on the island of Krk, Vid near Metković, and besides those, there are Perun, Perunkovac in Istria, Traba, Trebišnica, Trebinje and similar toponyms covering the wide area from Istria to Herzegovina.

The urban culture is more vividly present within all levels of life much more in the Mediterranean than in the Dinaric and the Pannonic regions. The cities-communes have a stronger influence on, for instance, the rural milieus of the islands, that are almost by definition closed worlds. However, the coastal cities strongly influence the settlements near cities and rural settlements with their civilization achievements and their rich cultural life. It can be indeed applied on the oral popular literature. The young Jagić had written about the influence of the urban setting on the oral tradition a long time ago, evaluating Bogišić's collection *Narodne pjesme iz starijih, najviše primorskih zapisa* [Folk Songs from Older, Mostly Coastal Recording]:

Bogišić's work has revealed one fact, that is quite important, and it is the tendency of the urban population of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries southern from Dubrovnik and especially in Boka Kotorska towards the epic poems of a long, fifteen-to-sixteen-syllable verse with a repetition of refrain after each two verses (Jagić 1865:55).

The first historical data on the Slavs, including the Croats as a part of a wider Slavonic ethnic group, speak of the Slavonic people as a peaceful population that does not wear war uniforms and carries zithers instead of bow and arrows. This is to be found in the scriptures by Teofilakt Simokata, dating from the seventh century (*Vizantijski izvori* 1955:110-111; Klaić 1971:131). However, those data are a product of a skillful war inventiveness. The today's historians are inclined to see rather war spies than peaceful wanderers in the three Slavs that used to meet the emperor.

However, the data from the fifteenth century might be of even greater importance for the Croats: Juraj Šižgorić writes in his work *O smještaju Ilirije i o gradu Šibeniku* [On the Position of Illyria and the City of Šibenik] the following:

Besides the laws, our citizens have also some independent customs, some of which are of a foreign origin, and some have been adopted from the neighbours. Thus they use sayings that I named *dicteria* in Latin and translated from the domestic language into Latin together with Jakov Naplavčić, a learned man of letters. I would not classify the brighter of the sayings as either the laws of Solon, or the sayings of Numa Pompilius, or the Pithagoras' rules themselves.

Besides, women in mourning lament their wails during the funeral loudly; those wails are touching and invite even the hardhearted people to cry. They are more moving than the lamentations of Thetis and Euryale's mother in which they cried over the death of their son using the barbaric howling. During a wedding, they dance and sing some wedding songs that were not heard sung even by Cato or Claudius. Furthermore, the youth, obsessed with love longings, use the nighttime to sing love songs loudly; those songs could hardly be composed by the sophisticated Tibullus, the tender Propertius or the lascivious Likoridin Gal or Sappho from the island of Lesbos. Even when rolling the stone for olive-pressing they improvise their pastoral poems, as if they compete in reciting Damet and Menalk in front of Palemon. Besides that, when dancing, they follow the rhythm of the song by stamping with their feet (Šižgorić 1981:52-55).

Mentioning the Classical writers and claiming that what he saw and heard in Šibenik and its surroundings was nicer and more pleasant than the old masters of letters, that is, that his people can compete with the classics in the field of those form of creativity, Šižgorić believes that this tradition of competing must be related to very ancient times. Competition is, namely, the continuing form of supporting and maintaining customs, regardless which one: the knight contest such as tilting at the ring [*alka*], race *na prstenac* or a competition in throwing stone from one's shoulder [*kamena s ramena*], in producing better food or drink, in singing while dancing the circle dance [*natpjevavanje u kolu*]. This competition and the supporting that follows it have nowadays been moved to the football stadiums. After all, there was also praying and alternate choir singing in churches, in the monastic communities, fraternities and religious brotherhoods, as well as for the liturgical purposes in general. Was it merely for achieving the rhythmic interchanging of the sung text, or was it a form of a (ritual) competition as well?

Marko Marulić, writing *Judita* in 1501 and dedicating it to his godfather, Don Dujam Balistrilić, the *primicer* of Split, notes that his models were the so-called *začinjavci*. The scholars of today are mostly unanimous in opinion that they were the popular folk singers who started, began with [*začinju*], or created the poetical items but also lead the popular singing in the church and at the fraternity meetings. After all, his godfather, Don Dujam Balistrilić was a *primicer*, meaning, the lead singer in the church. His other model was the Classical poetry, that is, "the poets who write verses" (Marulić 1970). Both epic and lyric examples of such work are noted during the sixteenth century. There are several examples of

folk, that is, oral popular poems noted down in the *Ranjinin zbornik* [Ranjina's Collection] from the early sixteenth century. The fishermen who sailed to the sea with the poem in the Hektorović's *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* [Fishing and Fishing Conversation], dating from the mid-sixteenth century, sing two epic poems, so-called *bugaršćice*, about Kraljević Marko [Prince Mark] and his brother Andrijaš as well as about Radosav Siverinac, the duke of Udina. Nikola and Paskoj seem to use those poems to compete who will perform a more beautiful one in front of the poet, but he is satisfied with both of them, and thanks the singers for their present by offering them a glass of wine. The fishermen also sing a lyric song — *I kliče devojka, pokliče devojka* [And the girl shouts] — as well as a poem honouring their master *Naš gospodin poljem jizdi* [Our Lord on His Mount Floats Across the Field]. The poet noted down the refrain of both epic poems and the honouring one (Hektorović 1874). Petar Zoranić has noted on the margins of his *Planine* [Mountains] that one of his poems can be sung "u zuk", meaning, along the refrain of folk song *A ti divojko šegljiva* [You witty girl], that can luckily enough be found in a later transcript; however, the musical notation has not been preserved (Zoranić 1988). One can justifiably expect that the preservation of tradition in *Planine* is not merely connected with the examples from the Classic and Christian literature with St Jerome as a leading person, as a legendary creator of the Glagolitic script and thus the originator of our standard language, in which Zoranić believed, but also with the popular narratives on the origin of certain places, what harmonically blends with the classical transfiguration from the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. The preservation of tradition is also connected with texts of an author close to Zoranić, namely, of Marko Marulić. During the early seventeenth century, Juraj Baraković writes in his epic poem *Vila Slovinka* [The Slavonic Fairy] a *bugaršćica* about Mother Margarita (Baraković 1889:128-133).

In the nineteenth century, while searching for the regional and national "autochthony", some researches into our written culture have glorified everything that was popular or folk and at the same time neglected the fruits of the individual's, author's work. The products of the oral were therefore very highly evaluated while the written literature was considered to be less worthy. Many of them thought that the oral poems that Hektorović and Baraković embodied in their works are worth incomparably more than the original works of these authors. The structure of the literary works within which those segments were placed were not questioned; not, as we are aware of them today, as the basic poetical structures of the whole but as the equally worth parts. However, it is well known that neither Hektorović nor Baraković have documented texts directly from the mouth of the popular singer. Those texts are — in the form they have been documented — deliberate stylizations, created with the intention to match the author's work in the first place. To observe the problem from a different angle, both of them could have done that — just as Andrija Kačić Miošić did later on — but still had not. They did exactly

what the builders and the folk bricklayers of the time did as well — they built the fragments of the Roman architecture into the new buildings.

It is also interesting to pay attention to the fact that a significant segment of the oral literature aroused a smaller amount of interest by the scribes and the professionals who published those texts: the so-called mythological and religious songs. Those poems, that lean on the old apocryphal Christian literature, are often extraordinary examples of the cultural and religious syncretism. Vatroslav Jagić showed a significant interest for all kinds of those texts. He especially warned that the long-versed poems that were documented within the collections compiled in the Republic of Dubrovnik and the towns of Boka Kotorska have aroused the attention of the local and urban milieu for this kind of art. However, his ancestors (Tomo Maretić) have paid more attention to the decasyllabic epic poetry, considering it to be the expression of the original folk spirit. While they established the folk (that is, the national) as opposed to the artificial (foreign), they emphasized too much that the folk influenced the artificial, but at the same time they seemed not to notice — or to consider as unimportant — the rich mutual relationships, that is, that the very written culture had had a deep, sometimes fatal, influence on the folk or popular culture.

The influence of the texts that used to be read during the service (the Bible), the examples from the Mediaeval and Baroque sermons, the legends about saints and the apocryphal beliefs in angels and devils — topics consumed by the illiterate folk during centuries — and the elements of the so-called high, written literature, within the heroic poems, are seen as the result of the ongoing activities of the tradition. The well known *Pjesan sv. Jurja* [The Song of St George] from the Parisian Codex, dating from the fourteenth century, as the remains of the Mediaeval epic poetry points to the written sources of the knightly oral literature, from the Middle Ages to the Modern History (Fališevac 1997:29-39).

However, let us get back to the two earlier mentioned features of the Mediterranean way of life: the respect for tradition and the competition. In what mutual relationship do these two features stand? The respect for tradition and its treasuring can be clearly seen exactly in the field of the oral expression — the texts are preserved in the folk, popular memory. The texts have existed as unwritten forms, and we can nowadays form an opinion merely on the texts that were luckily enough documented and thus have a written trace. The singing accompanied by the *gusle*,<sup>1</sup> creating riddles and the like are a part of ancient old rituals competing in the skills such as telling a story or reciting a poem, or create and sing an epic or a mock-heroic poem. It is known that Teokrit and Virgil, the two great poets of the Mediterranean, had described exactly such poetic competitions in their pastorales. It is known that Zoranić has described all that in his work *Planine*, in his original milieu. Merely thirty years ago, the fieldwork

---

<sup>1</sup> The south Slavonic one-string folk fiddle.

researchers into the folklore life could find older people in the village of Poljice near Split who would compete in reciting verses "from Kačić", that is, from *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* [Pleasant Conversation of Slavonic People] by the Franciscan Andrija Kačić Miošić,<sup>2</sup> or from the collection of poems with the ten-syllable poems that was composed by Don Miho Pavlinović for the *Matica dalmatinska*, and that was also called "Kačić". They did not compete only in reciting a poem nicely and well, but also in the quantity of poems one knew.

Croatian literature, both written and oral, reflects its strong Mediterranean features even at a glance; there are, above all, the ongoing syncretism, the fruitful mutual interweaving of the high and popular culture, the competing urge for the new as well as for the change, and the jealous preservation of the tradition. It is therefore a perfect ground for studying even deeper structural characteristics of the Mediterranean cultural and civilisational circle.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Baraković, Juraj. 1889. *Djela Jurja Barakovića*. P. Budmani & M. Valjavec, eds. Zagreb: Tisak Dioničke tiskare.
- Belostenec, Joannes. 1972 [1740]. *Gazophylacium seu Latino-Illyricorum onomatum aerariu*. Zagreb: Liber - Mladost.
- Bratulić, Josip. 1992. *Istarski razvod*. Pula: Libar od grozda.
- Braudel, Fernand. 1949. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin Editeur. (Croatian translation: 1997. *Sredozemlje i sredozemni svijet u doba Filipa II*. Zagreb: Antibarbarus).
- Čulinović, Ferdo. 1938. *Narodno pravo. Zbornik pravnih misli iz naših narodnih umotvorina*. Zagreb - Beograd: Štamparija "Svetlost".

---

<sup>2</sup> The most popular were the editions of Kačić's *Razgovor* illustrated by V. Anderle, published by L. Harntan, later Kugli Publishing House, from 1880 to 1914.



- Fališevac, Dunja. 1997. "Pisan svetoga Jurja". In *Kaliopin vrt*. Split: Književni krug.
- Hektorović, Petar. 1874. "Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje". In *Pjesme Petra Hektorovića i Hanibala Lucića*. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.
- Jagić, Vatroslav. 1865. *Grada za slovinsku narodnu poeziju*. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.
- Jambressich, Andrea. 1992. *Lexicon Latinum*. (1742). Zagreb: Zavod za hrvatski jezik.
- Klaić, Nada. 1971. *Povijest Hrvata u ranom srednjem vijeku*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.
- Marulić, Marko. 1970. *Judita, Suzana, Pjesme*. I. Slamnig, ed. Zagreb: Zora - Matica hrvatska.
- Mažuranić, Vladimir. 1908-1922. *Prinosi za hrvatski pravno-povijesni rječnik*. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.
- Mirković, Mijo. 1960. *Matija Vlačić Ilirik*. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.
- Rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika*. 1956. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.
- Robert, Paul. 1972. *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré.
- Šižgorić, Juraj. 1981. *O smještaju Ilirije i o gradu Šibeniku (De situ Illyriae et civitate Sibenici)*. V. Gortan, ed. Šibenik: Muzej grada Šibenika.
- Vizantijski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*. 1955. Beograd: SANU.
- Zoranić, Petar. 1988. *Planine*. F. Švelec & J. Vončina, eds. Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti.

## NEKE MEDITERANSKE SASTAVNICE U HRVATSKOJ PISANOJ I USMENOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI

### SAŽETAK

Hrvatska svojim razvedenim položajem leži na području šire mediteranske, dinarske i panonske (podunavske) regije. Svaka je od tih regija razvila svoje posebnosti u načinu života i privređivanja, svagdana i blagdana. Mediteranski prostor posebice je zanimljiv po svojim kulturnim posebnostima, po dubokim korijenima raznovrsnih tradicija, pa tako i u području usmene književnosti. Kod toga valja imati na umu i raznovrsne kulturne slojeve prisutne na tome prostoru: od ostataka pretkršćanske tradicije, tradicionalnoga pučkog kršćanstva i skromne pisane književnosti koja je u tu sredinu prodirala. Usmenoj književnosti pripada posebno mjesto i zbog njezine rane prisutnosti u pisanoj književnosti (Hektorović, Baraković), zbog pisanoga svjedočanstva o njoj (Marulić, Zoranić), ali posebice zbog njezine vezanosti za gradsku (komunalnu) sredinu iz koje je ruralna (seoska) sredina primala, ali i davala poticaje. Prožimanje pučkog i urbanog ostalo je karakteristikom hrvatske književnosti do danas.

Ključne riječi: usmena i pisana književnost, Hrvatska, mediteranska kulturna zona