



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies

of

Lovro Kunčević

on

**The Myth of Ragusa: Discourses on Civic Identity in an Adriatic City-State
(1350-1600)**

will be held on

Thursday, 19 April 2012, at 11:00 am

in the

Gellner Room – Monument Building

Central European University (CEU)

Nádor u. 9, Budapest

Examination Committee

- Chair: László Kontler (Department of History, CEU)
- Members: Gerhard Jaritz (Department of Medieval Studies, CEU)
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Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

The dissertation seeks to investigate the self-representation of Ragusa between the mid-fourteenth and the early seventeenth century, during the period of city's greatest political, cultural, and economic importance. In other words, it seeks to analyse the changing ways in which Ragusans spoke about themselves as a community, how they developed a set of recognizable discourses of identity to describe their republic. Since Ragusan self-narration was performed through different social practices, ranging from historiography to civic ritual and visual arts, this study has to take into account diverse source material (e.g., diplomatic correspondence, poetry, historiography, descriptions of ritual, and representative art). The statements regarding collective identity found in these sources are analysed through a set of contextualizing questions which address their authors, the specific circumstances of their creation, and the purposes they served.

Various themes, motifs, and commonplaces which usually appeared when Ragusans spoke about their city-state can be subsumed under three major discourses on identity, each of which is addressed in a separate chapter of this work. They were the discourses of origin, on liberty, and on the frontier. The discourse of origin encompassed various references to the foundation of Ragusa, on the one hand connecting it with prestigious peoples of Antiquity through its legendary founders, and on the other creating a tendentious image of the newly founded city which clearly served the contemporary interests of the Renaissance Republic. The discourse on liberty consisted of historical myths and theoretical propositions concerning the political independence and aristocratic constitution of the Ragusan Republic, in fact amounting to a specific Ragusan version of Renaissance republican ideology. Finally, reflecting the fact that the city was situated at the borderland of cultures and religions, the discourse on the frontier portrayed Ragusa as the defender of Catholicism and Christianity or even civilization against the infidel and barbaric Ottomans in its hinterland, a heroic *antemurale* in the "jaws of the infidel."

The first chapter discusses the various utterances concerning the origin of Ragusa, the ways in which the image of the city's foundation changed through time. Since pre-modern historical consciousness saw an origin as an epistemologically privileged moment which revealed *in nuce* all the essential traits of a community, the young Republic took great care to re-fashion its beginnings in order to suit its contemporary concerns. More precisely, Ragusan authors used the narrative of the city's foundation in order to tackle four major ideological issues. The first was creating a suitable Classical predecessor for the flourishing city-state. Ragusa was endowed with a prestigious Classical past through re-writing the traditional story about its foundation by refugees from the neighboring ancient city of Epidaurus, which began to be represented as a Roman colony, a fully-fledged republic, and even the birthplace of a pagan god, Aesculapius. The second ideological issue was increasing the prestige and legitimizing the rule of the patrician elite which had recently monopolized political power. This was achieved by changing the traditional protagonists of the founding – a somewhat amorphous group of refugees – into ancestors of the nobility, thus inscribing the patriciate into the very foundations of Ragusan history. The third issue was reconciling the traditional claim of the Roman origins of Ragusa and its elite with their undeniable contemporary Slavic culture. These were harmonized through an insistence on the alleged Slavic culture of the founders, that is, by projecting the contemporary ethnic and cultural situation of the city into a distant and normative past. Finally, the last issue was finding firm and deep historical roots for two crucial features of Renaissance Ragusa: its political independence and its uncompromising Catholicism. Similarly to the Slavic culture, both were represented as essential and timeless attributes of the city-state by being projected into the prescriptive moment of foundation.

The second chapter is dedicated to the discourse on statehood, various historical myths and theoretical propositions about the independence and political system of the Ragusan city-state. The first part follows the gradual redefinition of the city's relationship with its distant sovereign, the Hungarian king, during the late fourteenth and fifteenth century. Although this relationship was originally an

unambiguous acknowledgement of Hungarian sovereignty, Ragusan diplomats and historians represented it as a contract made freely between two essentially equal partners, thus laying the foundations for the later independence of the city. The second part of the chapter deals with probably the most problematic political relationship in Ragusan history in general – the city's status as a tributary state to the Ottoman Empire. It follows the ways in which Ragusans tried to obfuscate, justify, and redefine this immensely compromising political relationship after its establishment in the mid-fifteenth century. The third part of the chapter deals with a specific crisis of legitimacy which characterized Ragusa after the mid-sixteenth century. The city had seceded unilaterally from the Hungarian Kingdom after it collapsed in 1526 and therefore its self-proclaimed independence rested on dubious legal foundations. In an attempt to ground that independence on both historical precedent and divine sanction, the Republic's apologists redefined the entire history of Ragusa, suggesting not only that the city had always been free but that its liberty was defended by providence. The fourth part of the chapter deals with the various conceptualizations of the other basic aspect of Ragusan statehood – its republican form of government. It analyses various references to the political system of Ragusa, the virtue of its patrician rulers, and the social harmony which such a system allegedly produced. Finally, the fifth part of the chapter considers the Ragusan discourse on statehood in a broader context of other similar ideologies. On the one hand, it compares Ragusan discourse with the emblematic Florentine republicanism, while on the other it demonstrates the profound indebtedness of Ragusan ideology to the city's great teacher but also enemy, Venice.

The third chapter is dedicated to the discourse on the frontier, investigating how Renaissance authors commented on the fact that their city was situated at the borderlands of religions, empires, even civilisations. It is largely dedicated to analyzing the various strategies of diplomatic self-representation which thematized Ragusa's position between Christianity and Islam. In this regard the most important was the rhetoric towards Western courts, which sought to justify the tributary position in quite a surprising way -- by representing Ragusa as an altruistic frontier guard of

Christianity that defended the true religion by appeasing the “infidel.” Besides the diplomatic rhetoric, this chapter also analyses the various references in the literature and historiography to the religious identity of Ragusa and its position on the fringes of Christianity. While some such references were written in the usual panegyric tone, lauding the piety of the city and its unwavering loyalty to Rome, others were echoes of a hushed but fervent debate among the city’s elite regarding the relationship with the “infidel.” Namely, despite the diplomacy which trumpeted about the great merit of Ragusan tributary status, numerous historians and literati felt distinct unease about it, raising the question of whether it was morally permissible and politically prudent for a Catholic city to cherish such good relations with a Muslim empire.

The conclusion considers these three civic discourses and the resulting image of the city-state in their broader ideological context. The first main question it addresses is how the three civic discourses interacted among themselves, what their relationships were in creating the totality of the city’s image. They seem to have coexisted without contradictions, frequently even complementing and strengthening each other, which is only natural once one recalls that they were all the products of a homogeneous and small patrician elite. The second, even more important, question posed in the conclusion concerns the relationship of the civic discourses with other discourses on collectivity – focused on religious, social, familial or ethnic communities – which appear in Ragusan documents. Two main two main patterns of interaction seem to have existed, one of which could be labelled “parasitic” and the other “supportive.” The “parasitic” pattern designated the instances in which the references to other communities were combined with those to the civic community in order to “borrow” some of the other’s prestige or legitimacy. The “supportive” pattern was the exact opposite: it designated the instances in which references to the non-civic communities were invoked in order to elevate the prestige and legitimacy of the civic one.

The epilogue of the dissertation addresses the remarkable fact that many of the *topoi* of Ragusan self-representation have survived since the Renaissance and still exert a profound influence upon modern thinking about the old Republic. In other

words, modified by modern ideologies and interests, many of the ancient *topoi* still enjoy a vibrant existence, emerging in different cultural genres from academic historiography and politics all the way to tourist marketing and schoolbooks. The aim of the epilogue is to provide a cursory overview of the more salient cases of such survivals, thus revealing the remarkable posthumous influence of Ragusan Renaissance ideology.

Curriculum vitae

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Degrees:

1997-2003: History and Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb, Croatia

2002-2003: Medieval Studies, MA Programme, Department of Medieval Studies, CEU, Budapest

Employment:

Research assistant, Institute of Historical Sciences of HAZU, Dubrovnik (2007-)

Research interests:

History of institutions and culture of the late Medieval and Renaissance Ragusa

Conferences organized:

“Tributary states of the Ottoman Empire (16th-18th centuries). Comparative perspectives” organized by GWZO (Leipzig) and Institute for Historical sciences of HAZU (Dubrovnik); held on 21st -24th May 2009 in Dubrovnik

“The Cultures of Voting in Pre-modern Europe: State of the Art and Further Prospects” organized by King’s College (London); held on 23rd March 2012 in London

Related publications:

Edited with Gábor Kármán. *Tributary states of the Ottoman Empire (16th-18th centuries). Comparative perspectives*. Brill: Leiden, 2012 (forthcoming).

“Discourses on liberty in the Early Modern Ragusa (16th-18th centuries).” In *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*. Edited by Quentin Skinner and Martin Van Gelderen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (forthcoming).

“Retorika granice kršćanstva u diplomaciji renesansnog Dubrovnika.” (Rhetoric of the Frontier of Christendom in the Diplomacy of the Renaissance Ragusa). *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku* (Annals of the Institute for

Historical Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Dubrovnik) 48 (2010): 1-34.

“Civic and ethnic discourses of identity in a city-state context: The case of Renaissance Ragusa.” In *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe*. Edited by Balázs Trencsényi and Márton Zászkaliczky, 149-177. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

“O dubrovačkoj *libertas* u kasnom srednjem vijeku (On Ragusan *libertas* in the Late Middle Ages).” *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku* (Annals of the Institute for Historical Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Dubrovnik) 46 (2008): 9-54.

““Ipak nije na odmet sve čuti:” medičeski pogled na urotničke namjere Marina Držića (“No Harm in Hearing it All: Mediceian Attitude to the Conspiracy of Marin Držić”) *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku* 45 (2007): 9-46.

“The Oldest Foundation Myth of Ragusa: the Epidaurian Tradition.” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 9 (2004): 21-31.