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An entangled dragon in a Renaissance inscription from Dalmatia

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Abstract

The Greater Papalić Palace, built during the Quattrocento, is one of the best-preserved examples of private Renaissance architecture in Split. It was probably built by Juraj Dalmatinac (d. between 1473 and 1475). The palace portal has three later additions: a coat of arms, a dragon, and an inscription, a Latin epigram; we know that the epigram was composed sometime after 1493 by Marko Marulić (1450-1524). The short poem reveals a network of actors, interactions and meanings, including an Illyrian episode from the *Vita Hilarionis* by Jerome, a saint especially honoured in Dalmatia.

1 The Papalić palace in Split and its portal

If you find yourself in Split, Croatia, in front of the Greater Papalić palace (today it houses the City Museum of Split); if you look up while standing before the portal of the palace, you will notice a lunette, and on it a coat of arms – an eight-pointed star and a wing, heraldic sign of the Papalić family – and, above the coat of arms, a helmet. Atop the helmet a dragon is perched.¹

The lunette is considered to be a product of the workshop of Juraj Dalmatinac or of that of Andrija Aleši, and to have been added to the portal around 1494, when the ownership of the palace had passed from the local patrician family de Albertis to the family Papalić. The lunette has an inscription in Latin. It is a two-verse poem which reads:

In magnum latrare, canes, nolite draconem:
Hic etiam tauros ore uorare potest.

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The inscription was first published by Cvito Fisković in 1950.² From 1997, thanks to a manuscript in Glasgow, we know who the author of the inscription was, and we know that he was a local celebrity.³ It was Marko Marulić, an important Croatian Renaissance writer.

Here I will present briefly what is already known about the author of the inscription, about its most probable patron and about their humanist interests. Then I will show what inspired Marulić's epigram – *beside* the figural motif on the lunette. Finally I will consider possible purposes of the inscription, taking into account the fact that it has a competitor just around the corner.

2 The author

Marko Marulić from Split wrote prose and poetry, in Croatian, Latin, and Italian. In 1501 he composed the first epic in Croatian language, the *Judita*, today part of the Croatian literary canon. Marulić was also author of several religious prose works which were widely published in Europe during the Renaissance. The first of these was a collection of Christian moral examples under the title *De institutione bene uiuendi per exempla sanctorum*. Appearing in Venice in 1507, the book was reprinted in at least 15 editions before the year 1700, and also translated into Italian, German, Portuguese, French, and Czech.⁴

3 In epigrammata and Dmine Papalić

As I have mentioned already, in 1997 Darko Novaković found in the manuscript in Glasgow, among other known and unknown Marulić's Latin poems, the epigraph on the dragon. In the same manuscript there is also a copy of another work by Marulić, the *In epigrammata priscorum commentarius*.⁵ It is a commentary on some 140 ancient Roman inscriptions, from Italy, but also from Dalmatia and especially Salona, the ancient Roman city some five kilometers far from Split. Marulić dedicated the commentary to Dmine Papalić (Dominicus Papalis), a member of the same family which possessed the palace with the portal, the lunette and the dragon. From the *In epigrammata* we know that Dmine Papalić, about the same age as Marulić, had put together a lapidarium of epigraphs; remains of the lapidarium can still be seen in the Archeological Museum of Split. This fact, and certain features of the Glasgow manuscript – its decorations, binding, even textual variants

²Fisković 1950: 158, note 40

³Novaković 1997.

⁴For an introduction to Marulić and a selection of his writings, see Lučin 2007.

⁵Lučin 2011.

– led Darko Novaković to interpret the codex as “something similar to an in-house guide to the lapidarium of Dmine Papalić”.

This is important for our story because Papalić’s humanist interests make him an excellent candidate for a commissioner of the coat of arms and the inscription about the dragon.

Remarks scattered across the *In epigrammata* show us how Marulić saw his friend. Papalić, *antiquitatis mirum in modum studiosus*, was asking many questions about the inscriptions carved in stones; Papalić and Marulić often visited the ruins of Salona, where Marulić cited to Papalić Vergil’s *Aeneid*: *Fuimus Troes, fuit Ilium et ingens gloria Teucrorum*; both Vergil’s first person plural and the word *gloria* are important here. In the ruins Marulić discovered Roman military diplomas in bronze and presented them as a gift to Papalić, because he was *quasi heres eorum quibus olim in testimonium uirtutis ab imperatore traditę fuere*. Through the inscriptions, the ancient ruins spoke to the two patricians about the past of their homeland; the ancient words revealed to the two patricians who they themselves were, and what they... should be.

While Marulić was a writer and a scholar, Papalić was a man of action; in his youth, we learn from Marulić, Papalić had practised the art of war, clashing with the Ottoman enemy, and finally commanding the Split galley in the Venetian fleet during the Second Ottoman-Venetian War, from 1499 to 1503.⁶

As a lover of the past, Dmine Papalić did not limit himself to the Roman times. The question of who he was was answered by the Middle Ages as well. Here, again, Marulić helped to formulate the answer. In the year 1500 Papalić himself found and copied, from an ancient manuscript preserved in Makarska (some fifty kilometers southeast from Split),⁷ a short medieval genealogy of rulers of the medieval Croatian kingdom. This genealogy, the *Hrvatska kronika* covers events from 6th to 12th century. In the year 1510 Marko Marulić translated the *Hrvatska kronika* into Latin, stating in the short preface that he has done so at the request of Dmine Papalić, *tuo rogatu*.⁸

But how can we be sure that Dmine Papalić was connected with the Papalić palace, the one with the dragon? A last will from 1492, by another Split patrician, Ivan Alberti (who was also an uncle of Marko Marulić), makes Dmine Papalić’s son Petar heir to Ivan’s new house.⁹ In a typical network of an Adriatic city, the patrician families Papalić and Alberti were related both through shared possession of real estate, and through marriages, in this case with noble Venetian Marcello sisters.

⁶Jovanović 2011.

⁷In the house of Juraj Marković Kačić.

⁸Jovanović 2014.

⁹“Item lasso a Piero fiol de Domenego de Papali e de Marcella la mia casa nuoua la qual ho fato fabricarmi”, Hilje 2005: 44; 54, note 73

The fact of inheritance from Alberti to Papalić suggests to art historians that the lunette in the portal of Papalić palace, or at least the Papalić coat of arms and Marulić's inscription, must have been added after the house had passed into the possession of the Papalićs. It is easy to imagine Dmine Papalić, a brave soldier, a distinguished member of the family, a lover of all aspects of antiquity, playing the *spiritus movens* of this architectural statement.

4 Why bulls?

So far I have reported what is known and what has been discussed about the Papalić palace and its portal. Now let us return to the words of the Latin inscription about the dragon and add something new.

The epigram invites us to imagine three kinds of animals at odds; two are in plural, one is solitary: the dogs, the dragon, the bulls. The dogs, symbols of enmity, worthlessness and offensiveness, are discouraged from making noise against the virtuous dragon, which is powerful enough to devour not one bull, but bulls in general. The image is clear and effective. A question might, however, arise: *why bulls*? A logical answer would be that in the hierarchy of the poem it would be dishonourable for the dragon to engage *directly* with a pack of worthless, and also harmless, dogs; they deserve only contempt.¹⁰ The dragon demonstrates its strength by overcoming a worthier enemy. But here, again, we meet the same question: why are the appropriate enemies of the dragon precisely *bulls* – and not, for example, wolves or bears or elephants?

In the world of Marulić and Papalić, the key to the words of the image is provided by more words; this time, words from a book.

Around the year 390 Saint Jerome wrote a Life of Saint Hilarion. Hilarion the Great, Jerome's contemporary born in Thabatha, south of Gaza, became famous after he had lived as a hermit for 22 years, and later Hilarion visited Egypt, Sicily, Dalmatia, and Cyprus (where he died). In Dalmatia, near Epidaurus (modern Cavtat, 20 kilometers southeast from Dubrovnik), Hilarion had met a dragon. The dragon, of huge proportions, belonged to the species locally called *boa*; the species was large enough to devour oxen. Hilarion burned the dragon.¹¹

¹⁰Berković 2014.

¹¹Vita S. Hilarionis, PL 33, c. 49: "Duxit itaque illum ad Epidaurum Dalmatiae oppidum, ubi paucis diebus in uicino agello mansitans non potuit abscondi. Siquidem draco mirae magnitudinis, quos gentili sermone boas vocant, ab eo quod tam grandes sint, ut boves glutire soleant, omnem late uastabat provinciam, et non solum armenta et pecudes, sed agricolas quoque et pastores tractos ad se ui spiritus absorbebat. Cui cum pyram iussisset praeparari, et oratione ad Christum missa euocato praecepisset struem lignorum scandere, ignem supposuit. Tum itaque cuncta expectante plebe immanem bestiam concremauit;" Praga 1938; Degórski 2017.

“Large enough to devour oxen” – the characteristic establishes a connection. It serves as a hint that the dragon in the lunette of the Papalić palace was seen by Marulić as a *local* dragon, a Dalmatian dragon. Moreover, the source for this claim is Saint Jerome himself, especially authoritative because he was born in Dalmatia.¹²

The encounter of Hilarion with the Dalmatian dragon near Epidaurus was known in medieval and Renaissance Dalmatia. The episode is mentioned in the 13th century by Thomas the Archdeacon in *Historia Salonitana* and in the 14th century in the *Annales Ragusini Anonymi*; in Dubrovnik, a contemporary of Marulić cited in 1505 Jerome’s description as important for Dalmatian Epidaurus.¹³ In Mlini near Cavtat there was a church of Saint Hilarion, and we know of seventeen Croatian Glagolitic manuscript breviaries between 14th century and 1561 which contain life of Saint Hilarion (although they omit the episode with the dragon).¹⁴

Marulić himself knew and studied Jerome’s account of Hilarion’s life. Marulić mentions a dozen episodes from the life both in his *De institutione* and in the *Repertorium*, his private commonplace book.¹⁵ Neither in *De institutione* nor in the *Repertorium*, however, does Marulić mention the miracle of the Dalmatian dragon. But we still have Marulić’s own copy of the volume of Jerome’s letters (printed in Parma 1480) where the *Vita Sancti Hilarionis* is included. In that book, the episode is briefly annotated by a marginal title in Marulić’s own hand: *Draconem concremauit*.

5 Why an inscription?

Now, if we move from the world of the poem back to the context in which the inscription stands, in a narrow street in Split, we cannot help but wonder: *why* the inscription, what is its message? For the scholar who first published the inscription, the art historian Cvito Fisković, the answer was clear: the verses, which Fisković read in the context of similar epigraphs from other Dalmatian cities, express “spitefulness... provocativeness... Renaissance haughtiness in self-assertion... intolerance in the irritated, confined space of medieval towns...”¹⁶ The *dišpet*, *dispetto*, is a persistent feature of Mediterranean life and mentality in general and of Split in particular. But in Marulić’s and Papalić’s Split this *dišpet* was going on on a level both more concrete and more refined.

¹² An example of the local cult is a stone relief from Split which Andrea Aleši made probably for Ivan Alberti, the former owner of the Papalić palace (Belamarić 2021). Note that there is a dragon on the right side of Jerome.

¹³ Hieronymo Hilarionis Thabathensis boa dracone celebrem; Daniele Clario, at the time a chancellor of the Republic of Ragusa. (Jovanović 2023)

¹⁴ Badurina-Stipčević 2004.

¹⁵ Compiled over at least forty years (1480-1520); Novaković 1998.

¹⁶ Fisković 1962

A competitor of the patrician Papalić lived just around the corner. Fifty meters from Papalić you will see another portal of another palace. It is the Augubio palace. It also has a lunette. That one bears an ostrich which swallows a tip of a spear. Above the ostrich there is another inscription, this time in somewhat enigmatic Italian: “De più duri orosi”.¹⁷ The ostrich and the motto have been connected, by Radoslav Bužančić, to Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482), the famous mercenary humanist.¹⁸ The ostrich which can digest the hardest materials, including a steel spearpoint, is one of the heraldic symbols of the Montefeltro family. The Augubio palace in Split belonged (as the inscription below the coat of arms proclaims) to Battista d’Agubio or Augubio or Ugubio, a merchant who around 1430 moved from Gubbio in Umbria (ruled by the Montefeltro) to Split in Dalmatia, to become a citizen of the Dalmatian city (in 1439). Battista d’Agubio died around 1485, ten years before Papalić acquired his palace, but the D’Agubios prospered further.¹⁹ They were, however, rich citizens, and not patricians; their roots were not local. I see the portal of the D’Agubio’s palace in dialogue with the Papalić portal through its art, its symbolism, its motto (with the shared motifs of monstrous animal and of devouring), its enigma and its very attempt to create a context which requires deep knowledge.

I say *deep* knowledge because the more knowledge we bring to the inscriptions, the more levels of meaning are revealed. In 2011, Radoslav Bužančić presented the Marulić inscription not in the context of noble spite, but of noble *virtue*, as an embodiment of the Renaissance patrician ideal. Bužančić reads the inscription as the noble virtue devouring the bulls of desire while rejecting the help of dogs of watchfulness.²⁰ To me, Bužančić’s interpretation is confused and, in the final analysis, unconvincing. Still, it reminds us we can also choose not to stop at the level of everyday *dispetto*.

Marulić’s epigram warns about the dragon’s strength. At the same time, relying on the knowledge of antiquity, it anchors the dragon in the local soil. This anchoring happens through Jerome’s story of Hilarion. If we are aware of the story, we are aware that the actual local Dalmatian dragon Jerome wrote about in the story was an emanation of *evil*. Then a gesture aimed at envious neighbours develops another direction as well. It sounds a note of delicate warning also for the people who are making the gesture. Yes, the local dragon is strong and fierce, but you must bear in mind at all times that there is somebody stronger – Saint Hilarion and, through him, God.

Thank you.

¹⁷Probably “De più duri ho rosi”, “I have gnawed down even the hardest ones.”

¹⁸Bužančić and Brakus 2011

¹⁹Raukar 1979a, 1979b; Kornprobst 2019.

²⁰Bužančić 2011; at the same time, Bužančić tried to connect the topic with Leon Battista Alberti’s writings and with Petrarch.

6 Appendix

To anybody standing on the Papalić street of Split, it is painfully clear that epigram, on its lunette high above our heads, is demanding. It poses before its potential readers an array of obstacles, each level more challenging than the previous one. At the very beginning, in the narrow street it is hard to notice the lunette at all, and then to spot the inscription. It is hard to make out the tiny letters. Then you have to know Latin to understand what you have read; you have to recognize the Latin as poetry; you have to know what was known in the past about Dalmatian dragons; and you have to know what Saint Jerome had written about Saint Hilarion and his very specific dragon near Epidaurus. Knowing all that will make you different from an average passer-by. This difference is, to put it bluntly, entitlement. This coalescence of strength and knowledge, where strength is shaped, refined and controlled by knowledge embodied in words and architecture. *This* is what we talk about when we mention the patrician *virtus*.

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