
Danijel Dzino, Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat. Identity Transformations in Post-Roman and Early Medieval Dalmatia, East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages 450-1450, volume 12, General Editor Florin Curta, Leiden/Boston 2010

The book has 271 pages, consisting of an introduction with summaries of its eight chapters, a conclusion, a list of a primary sources, a bibliography of books and articles consulted (particularly the major recent editions, almost never cited in Croatia’s medieval studies field), and an index, and it is also enhanced by eight photographs and five maps. In the book, the author builds upon the ideas examined in the article “Becoming Slav, ‘Becoming Croat’: New Approaches in the Research of Identities in Post-Roman Illyricum”, published in the journal Hortus Artium Medievalium, vol. 14, Zagreb-Motovun 2008, pp. 195-206.

This book constitutes a new approach to the problems surrounding the changes which occurred in the “dark age” in the territory of Dalmatia from the seventh to ninth centuries. No longer is there any acceptance of the meta-narrative of historical discourse whereby the deserted space of Dalmatia was flooded by Slavs/Croats in the seventh century, tearing down everything before them, while the remains of the Romanized indigenous population were either assimilated or sought refuge in the remaining coastal cities. No longer is there any acceptance of the evolutionist view of ethnicity as a primordial, immutable social phenomenon which changes superficially while remaining the same at its core, nor of the linkage of archaeological artefacts to a specific ethnicity. The modern post structuralist approach to ethnicities places more emphasis on processes than on static identities, and through the history of culture, mentalities and group identities, it views them as fluid and fluctuating phenomena. Historical sources are also re-examined, as they speak more of their actual authors and their views and stereotypes on individual ethnicities, largely foreign to them, because they always constitute a view from the outside, a sort of “Orientalism”, while actual identities remain hidden because the view from inside is absent. I shall endeavour to convey Dzino’s ideas in their basic outline as presented in the individual chapters, without exhaustively covering the numerous arguments and examples used to back them.

1. Croat Origins in the Croatian Imagination

The first chapter contains a discussion of the various theories concerning the ethnogenesis of the Croats in Croatian historiography. One such theory is migrational, according to which the Croats came to post-Roman Illyricum either as Slavs, Goths, Iranians or Turks, while another is the autochthony theory, which views the Croats as indigenes.

The discourse according to which the Croats and South Slavs are the indigenous population of Illyricum, present in continuity since Antiquity, has its origins in the Renaissance (Vinko Pribojević, Matija Petar Katančić, Mauro Orbini, Pavao Ritter Vitezović). This theory was also advocated by the Illyrian national movement of Ljudevit Gaj in the early nineteenth century. Ivan Lucić, in his work De Regno Dalmatiae et Crotiae, was the most prominent proponent of the migration theory, according to which the Croats, as an integral component of the Slavic ethnie which spread throughout the Balkan Peninsula, came from the territory of Poland to Illyricum in the seventh century during the reign of Emperor Heraclius. These ideas were later elaborated by the historian Franjo Rački and the linguist Vatroslav Jagić.
The idea of the common arrival of the Croats and Serbs in post-Roman Illyricum suited advocates of the Yugoslav idea and Pan-Slavism in the intellectual and political circles gathered around Josip Juraj Strossmayer. The historical framework outlined by Rački ideally suited the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes established in 1918, and called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1927 onward. Ferdo Šišić incorporated Rački’s ideas into his book on the history of the Croats in the era of its own ruling dynasties (Povijest Hrvata u vrijeme narodnih vladara), the cornerstone of Croatian historiography. The Croats were a distinct Slavic group which came in the second wave of migrations into Illyricum.

The Gothic theory of the origin of the Croats had its roots in the medieval stereotype which identified all migrating groups as Goths, an idea maintained in the Libellus Gotorum and also in the works of Thomas the Archdeacon. The basic political context is the separation of the Croat identity from the Slavic, and most pointedly from anything Serbian, in the struggle to secure political rights in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia dominated by the Serbs, especially after the institution of the dictatorship in 1929. In more recent times, Ivan Mužić has advocated a combination of the autochthony and Gothic theories in his works.

The Iranian theory became particularly popular after the discovery of two inscriptions from Tanais bearing the engraved names Horoathos and Horouathos. Linguists have also interpreted the name Croat, which is not Slavic, as being Persian in origin. The non-Slavic theories generally emerged as a form of opposition to the Serbs and Yugoslavia.

A new view of the origin of the Croats, early medieval in nature, appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, when Lujo Margetić and then Nada Klaić linked the appearance of the Croats with the Avar Khaganate and Frankish expansion in the late eighth and early ninth centuries rather than to the Slavic migrations in the sixth and seventh centuries. The linguist Otto Kronsteiner speculated as to the Turco-Avar etymology of the ethonym Croat, while Walter Pohl posited that the Croatian identity was first and foremost a social, elite identity of a warrior group in the Avar Khaganate which, after the latter fell, became the leaders of Slavic groups in Dalmatia.

The various views on the origin and arrival of the Croats cited above were at one time also exploited to underscore Pan-Slavism or South Slav brotherhood in opposition to “others” (Germans, Italians, or Hungarians), or to distinguish the Croat identity from that of other Slavs, especially Serbs.

2. Theoretical Framework and Scholarship

The new interpretations known as post-modern, post-structuralist in the narrower sense, attempted to deconstruct the layers of structure imposed by existing views (political, cultural, ideological) which influenced earlier historical interpretations. All sources must be re-examined with particular focus on the context in which they emerged.

Examination of the political/cultural background of their authors and their cultural stereotypes must take precedence over historical “truth” or fragments thereof. Orientalism and post-colonialism play an important role in the new concept. Orientalism is the manner in which Westerners viewed the culturally different peoples of their colonies; this is the “us” and “them” dichotomy in which one is dominant and the other subjugated. The colonial and imperial view also held sway in the Graeco-Roman world with reference to indigenous populations (“barbarians”). As far as Illyricum is concerned, it is still uncertain as to what happened to the population in Late Antiquity.

According to linguistics and toponymy, Slavification, i.e., the spread of the Slavic languages, occurred from roughly 650 to 750, wherein there was no rapid nor comprehensive change in the population, rather the Slavic language was accepted in the process of acculturation. The biggest problem is the absence of
both written sources and archaeological finds that would shed light on the Slavic migrations during the sixth and seventh centuries. The “early Croatian” cemeteries are often divided into cemeteries with pagan and Christian horizons. The cemeteries of the pagan horizon are difficult to date, and normally they are dated from the eighth century to roughly 850, when goods appeared in the graves that would indicate Christian-style burials. The absence of finds from the seventh century is explained by the ritual of cremation. One group of authors (Petrinec, Jarak, Belošević) advocates the view of continuity between the pagan and Christian horizons, maintaining that the Croats arrived in the seventh century, and that there were no separate Croatian migrations in the ninth century.

Another group (Rapanić, Milošević) casts doubt on the oldest early Croatian burials in the eighth century, noting the ties with materials from Late Antiquity and seeking evidence of the survival of the indigenous population, while only ascribing the appearance of items of Carolingian provenance to the arrival of the Croats. The most recent work in the fields of genetics and anthropology cannot provide an answer to group identities (ethnicities), for these are social rather than biological categories.

3. Identities Before Slavs

In this chapter, Dzino analyzes ethnicities in Illyricum, beginning with the Late Iron Age. Our knowledge here is drawn from the archaeologies of Iron Age regional cultures, onomastics and interpretation of Greek and Roman sources on the Illyrians. The Illyrians were groups with differing identities, combined in ancient sources under a common name; the Romans borrowed the term Illiris from the Greeks for their non-Greek, western neighbours (Illyrioi). After the last Illyrian war (bellum Batonianum), the Romanization of Illyricum proceeded. After the Roman conquest, the indigenous population was divided into peregrine civitates, organized along regional and ethnic lines, and acculturation (Romanization) took effect. The matrix of Roman identity was accepted in various ways in different parts of the Roman Empire, and different indigenous interpretations of the unified Roman culture emerged.

In Late Antiquity, the most important phenomena were the rise of the military elite, the appearance of Christianity, and the formation of regional identities. The recruitment of indigenous populations into the legions on the Pannonian limes led to the appearance of a military elite, Illyricani, an identity formed in the detachments of the Roman military which largely originated in the eastern part of Illyricum. In Late Antiquity, the province was divided into so-called patriae. The patriae and their civitates became the basis for understanding the Late Antique conception of the world. In the Cosmography by Anonymous of Ravenna, Roman Illyricum was divided into these patriae: Liburnia Tarstaciensis, Dalmatia, and Pannoniae (Superior, Inferior and Valeria).

Christianity was not a unified, monolithic religious bloc, so there were differences between the two centres of Salona and Iader in terms of architecture, liturgy, cults of saints and interior décor. Iader had closer ties to Aquileia and northern Italy, while Salona had similar ties with the Eastern Mediterranean sphere. The interior was Christianized as of the mid-sixth century, and the indigenous population exercised greater influence on artistic forms and syncretic beliefs. The Late Antique population had the following identity markers: municipal, provincial, regional, cosmopolitan, Christian, barbarian, Roman and military.

4. Illyricum and Dalmatia 378-600: A Very Brief Overview

This chapter contains a brief look at the historical events following the Battle of Adrianople in 378 and the death of Emperor Valens, which left Pannonia wide open to the incursions of the Goths and other trans-Danubian groups. A division of the Empire followed the death of Emperor Theodosius in
395, as well as a new territorial organization for Illyricum. Written sources tell of political and social changes, referring to the specific circumstances in Dalmatia in Late Antiquity. Not long after the Western Roman Empire collapsed, Dalmatia and Savia came under Ostrogothic rule, followed in turn by Justinian’s reconquest, when the Dalmatian coast became an important stronghold for the wars in Italy. Considerable changes also proceeded in Pannonia, as Justinian permitted the immigration of the Lombards, while the Byzantine general Narses allowed them to settle in Italy, which opened the way for the arrival of the Avars. In 582, the latter occupied Sirmium and they dominated Pannonia for a considerable period.

There is also a consideration of physical remains with emphasis on changes in settlement as well as the appearance of the first cemeteries in rows in the fifth and sixth centuries. On the coast, a process of de-urbanization of cities and a move back to fortified hilltop sites began, meaning the transition from an urban to a rural culture. The sea became the principal means of communication between over one hundred small fortifications on navigation routes. In the hinterland, the population often chose to form settlements around abandoned Iron Age fortifications on hillocks (hillsforts), at easily defended positions.

Archaeological evidence on migrations of groups such as the Slavs and Avars, who arrived in large masses and engaged in destruction in the late sixth and seventh centuries, almost does not exist. By the same token, there are no written sources from that time, and the only mention of it is found with Theophylact Simocatta, who wrote about the Avar raid on Dalmatia on 597, and in the letter of Pope Gregory the Great to the Salona Archbishop Maximus at around 600, on the fears of Slavic incursions in Istria. Written sources which speak of the incoming migrations date to later periods, in the writings of Constantine Porphyrogenitus in the tenth century and Thomas the Archdeacon in the thirteenth century.

5. Written Sources on the Slav Migration in the 6th and 7th centuries in Western Illyricum and Dalmatia

In this chapter, Dzino discusses written historical sources written by "others", the members of the Byzantine elite who depended on the literary and ethnographic stereotypes of their time when they wrote about the Slavs. The group referred to as Slavs (Sclavenoi, Sclabenoi, Antes) in Byzantine written sources appeared at the time of Justinian (Procopius of Caesarea), while the Latin sources (the Getica of Jordanes) used three group names: Venethi, Sclavenes and Antes. Paul the Deacon mentioned the Slavs in the context of the devastation of Istria and their conflict with the Lombards in 642. The episode in Liber pontificalis contains mention of Pope John IV of Dalmatia and the mission of Abbot Martin, who in 641 collected the relics of the Istrian and Dalmatian martyrs and gathered captives. The sources do not mention the migration of the Croats, who are only mentioned later, first by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and then in the sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, written by Presbyter Diocleas and Thomas the Archdeacon. Thomas wrote from the anti-Slav and anti-Croat standpoint with the objective of proving that the church in Split was not successor of the Salona church.

Dzino dedicates particular attention to an analysis of De administrando imperio (chapters 29, 30 and 31) by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the most important source on the ethnogenesis (Origo gentis) and arrival of the Croats. The DAI was originally a book about the peoples outside of the empire, an ethnographic and didactic work written for the emperor’s son Romanus II, which means that it is imbued with the spirit of Byzantine imperial concerns and cultural dominance. The story on the Croatian migration and their conversion in the DAI should be viewed as a literary construction, a combination of Byzantine "Orientalism" and a practical ideological-political manual, with vestiges of historical memory from the region. It is an entirely unreliable source for seventh-century events.
6. The “Dark Ages”: 7th and 8th Century in Post-Roman Dalmatia I (Cemeteries)

This extensive chapter contains a discussion of the different views of the material remains from “Early Croatian” cemeteries and their chronology. The goods in the graves are used to prove a clean break with Antiquity and confirm the existence of a new ethnicity and religion.

The dating of early Croatian cemeteries is a significant problem. In the rough division and chronological scheme, cemeteries with cremations are dated to roughly 650-750, and those cemeteries with inhumation and grave goods such as ceramic pots, miniscule tools, knives, razors and flints are generally classified to the pagan horizon and dated to the end of the seventh and eighth centuries, while in the ninth century the placement of goods stopped (which is interpreted as due to the Christianization of the Slavs/Croats) and the Christian horizon and burials around churches began. Dzino counts examples of cremation and burials in ceramic urns in the entire territory of Dalmatia, Pannonia and Bosnia. The question of cremating the deceased is controversial, and it has been registered at only four sites in Dalmatia, while it does not chronologically correspond to the arrival of the Slavs in the early seventh century. (An example is the burials in urns at the Duga Česta site in Vinkovci, where an age between 667-780 and 672-776 was determined with the help of C14 analysis.) Debate also proceeds around the possibility that the cemeteries were bi-ritual, i.e., that both rites, cremation and inhumation, were practiced there simultaneously. With reference to interment rites, the appearance of cremation was an exception and numerically minor. The appearance of cremation is not evidence in Dalmatia of the earliest traces of Slav/Croat migrations, rather it is just a sign that a minority of people chose this manner of burial or it demonstrated their status, roots, or membership in a given clan.

Interments reflect a cultural uniformity, and cemeteries can be divided into two phases: an earlier, pre-Carolingian style and a later, Carolingian, with riding gear, spurs, and swords in the Carolingian style. The graves dated prior to 775 contained no riding gear nor weapons, with the exception of axes and arrowheads, and there was notable social equality without visible differentiation of elites, which was apparent in the graves of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Also considered is the location of the cemeteries in the landscape, with views of the sea, next to running water, Roman roads, alongside Iron Age mounds, around Late Antique churches or next to Late Antique cemeteries. Dzino does not necessarily consider earlier graves with goods “pagan” or non-Christian, for as was the case in Merovingian Gallia or early medieval England, the depositing of goods in graves was not contrary to Christianity, i.e., the church had no interest in controlling burial rituals prior to the Carolingian era.

This same case can be found in the Church of St. Mary in Biskupija, the mausoleum of Croatian elites, where interments with grave goods have been confirmed inside the church. It is not possible to ascertain either Christianity or paganism through grave goods; proof of evident paganism is absent and may only be discerned in toponymy. “This was a world of barbarized Christians and Christianized barbarians”.

The change emerged in the late eighth century, with the appearance of Carolingian materials and differentiation of elite, largely male graves, which corresponded to the formation of principalities and the appearance of a hereditary warrior elite, these changes, according to Dzino, occurred prior to Frankish activity in the 880s and 890s. A complex social, regional-political and ethnic fragmentariness in this period is notable.

Dzino concludes that there is no physical evidence testifying to the appearance of the Slavs in the seventh century and there is no pottery of the Prague type that would indicate Slavs in the sixth and seventh centuries, while the pottery designated as Slav should be dated to the eighth and ninth centuries because it is comparable to the pottery of Pannonia. From the seventh to ninth centuries there was a unified cultural habitus in Dalmatia. The Early Croatian cemeteries of the earliest phase, the “pagan” horizon, indicate a society in transition,
which was once more building its social structure from the ground up. The cemeteries are not evidence of the Slavic or Croatian arrival in Dalmatia, nor of the indigenous population’s disappearance, nor do they prove the disappearance of Christianity and the arrival of paganism.

7. The “Dark Ages”: 7th and 8th Century in Post-Roman Dalmatia II (Becoming Slavs)

After the Byzantine army and navy departed from the Dalmatian cities when the reign of Heraclius ended, the coastal population in the cities created a new Roman identity, Romanic (Romaioi), while in the hinterland a Slavic identity was created and the Slavic language proliferated. This spread of Slavic language and toponymy is still an insufficiently explained process. According to some scholars, Old Slavonic was the lingua franca in the Avar Khaganate, a part of the cultural habitus of the trans-Danubian population. Linguistic breakthroughs can occur even without major population shifts, led by numerically small elite groups. When Dalmatia became a periphery of the Avar cultural continuum, Slavic became a better communication tool than provincial Latin, and perhaps it was also accepted as a counterpoint to the Romanic spoken in the cities. The institutions of the Župan (roughly equivalent to a duke) and the ban (governor) are examples of Avar cultural and political influence, while the system of županiya (county/canton/province) in many ways corresponded to the Late Antique administrative-territorial and church structure.

The material from the graves do not show that any dramatic demographic changes had occurred, rather they are more an indication of the cultural and social transformation of Late Antique society. The possibility of the appearance of immigrant groups from the north is certainly accepted, but there is nothing to suggest that post-Roman Dalmatia was overrun by Slavs in the seventh and eighth centuries who then physically replaced the earlier population. The Slavic “migrations” were a chaotic population movement of smaller groups, and not a “Slavic flood” nor an organized colonization of the area abandoned by its natives. What had transpired was a change in identity and a linguistic shift among the indigenous population. (A similar process occurred during the Anglo-Saxonization of England, when the native peoples accepted the identity of the new arrivals, even though the ratio of the population was of 4:1 in favour of the natives.)

The period the “dark centuries” in Dalmatia, between the withdrawal of the Eastern Roman Empire in the seventh century and the arrival of the Carolingians and the restoration of Byzantine rule in the late eighth and early ninth centuries was generally a time of transition, when, in the wake of extreme political fragmentation, a new society began to be built, beginning with small tribal communities which grew into regional units and then political institutions.

8. The Ninth Century: Chroati Ex Machina

The first evidence of the Croats as a separate ethnie appeared in the mid-ninth century, in the charter of Trpimir (dux Chroatorum), which was preserved as a forgery in the sixteenth century. The first reliably dated monument is the beam and pediment of an altar screen bearing an inscription testifying to the ruler Branimir (Branimiro commes dux Cruatorum) from Šapot (eighth decade of the ninth century). The appearance of the Croatian identity was largely interpreted as a result of migration, which was now moved from the seventh to the end of the eighth and early ninth centuries. The main political changes in this territory are the Carolingian expansion and the destruction of the Avar Khaganate and the return of Byzantium to Dalmatia. In this newly-emergent constellation, the Dalmatian cities belonged to Byzantium, while Dalmatia and Liburnia went to the Carolingians.

The finds of Carolingian military gear is ascribed to the arrival of a new
ethnicity, the Croats, as one of the small ethnic groups which settled here under Carolingian patronage (other small groups were the Avar, Dalmatians, Guduscani, Timochani). The main problem is the absence of written sources, for not a single Carolingian source mentions migrations, so these arguments are based on the similarity of toponyms and ethnonyms in north-east and central Europe. The first regional power centre was in Lika (Guduscani), while in the mid-ninth century the territorial core of the first Croatian rulers appeared to be in the triangle bounded by Nin, Knin and Skradin, where the highest concentration of churches and cemeteries dates to the ninth century.

There is a considerable number of written sources for this period: from Frankish royal annals, biographic works by itinerant Benedictine monks (Gottschalk of Orbais, Amalarius of Metz), letters from Pope John VIII to the rulers Domagoj, Zdeslav and Branimir, Venetian chronicles (John the Deacon) and Greek sources - Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Frankish sources make use of ethnonyms such as Dalmatians, Romanics, and Slavs, and do not explicitly mention the Croats. For Amalarius of Metz, the denizens of the Dalmatian hinterland were Illyrians, even though in another place he mentioned “savage Slavs”. The first evidence of the Croatian identity in church sources dates to 925 in the conclusions of the first synod in Split when the episcopus Croatorum and rex Croatorum were mentioned. In that same year, Pope John X addressed Tomislav as rex Croatorum. As opposed to Carolingian sources, Byzantine sources reflect a different approach and distinguish between several different group identities in the region.

The other vital group of sources consists of the body of inscriptions from the early ninth to eleventh centuries, mostly dedicatory and sacral in character, with several sepulchral inscriptions, all commissioned by members of the elite: princes, kings and dukes who refer themselves exclusively as Croats. The Croatian elite demonstrated its “Croatism” only as a definition and this is underlined in the inscriptions. The names of missionaries, clerical personages, are Germanic and Lombard in origin. The Croatian identity was only a designation of the ruling group, while the Slavic identity was the perception of outside observers.

Post-Roman Dalmatia’s entry into the Frankish political sphere is associated with the question of the conversion of the Croats. Besides the confusing reports from Porphyrogenitus, there are no written records of their formal conversion to Christianity. From the ninth century onward, a considerable body of sacral architecture appeared, while as of the mid-ninth century, cemeteries began to surround churches, and goods were no longer deposited in graves and attention was turned to liturgical rituals for the salvation of the soul. According to Dzino, an elite Christianity brought by the organized Frankish church and missionaries co-existed with a popular Christianity (mixed with folk beliefs) which were engaged in some form of dialogue, so that there was no formal conversion. Christianity in some form was present throughout the “dark period” in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the expansion of the Carolingian spiritual model of Christianity in the ninth century was not a reason for the indigenous population to mount any resistance.

The Croatian identity appeared with the disappearance of the Avar continuum and the establishment of new models of power in Dalmatia based on the new social and spiritual system of the West and the indigenous regional communities (the županije). The book certainly merits attention, for by small advances in standpoints, it alters the accepted cultural and historical picture of events in Dalmatia in the Early Middle Ages.