CHAPTER 9

Cloth and Geography: Town Planning and Architectural Aspects of the First Industry in Dubrovnik in the 15th Century*

Joško Belamarić,**

On June 17, 1513, Marin Sanudo, a Venetian senator, mentioned in his diary a secret report on a mission that had lingered a day or two in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) en route from Venice to Istanbul.1 Some of the members of the mission looked around the harbor in Dubrovnik, and saw a 400-ton ship that had arrived from England, laden with 9000 pieces of worsted worth 85,000 ducats and fine fabrics worth 13,000 ducats, all of it the property of the Dubrovnik people. At the same time, sailing out of the port, bound for Ancona, was a 500-ton ship carrying silks and zambelotti (camlet, a fabric of camel’s hair or angora wool) worth 100,000 ducats, as well as 12,000 ducats in coins—the property of Ragusans and Florentines. The report concludes, wrote Sanudo, that the riches of the city were incredibly large.2 Dubrovnik’s revenues in the Golden Age of the Ragusan Republic must indeed have been very great, although the Ragusans incessantly spoke of their poverty (“we are neither Turks nor Jews, but poor people from Ragusa,”3 a Levantine saying). During the first half of the 15th century, 25 tons of silver worth more than 500,000 ducats was shipped via Dubrovnik from the mines of the Balkans to the west. The value of the exports of Ragusan fabrics to the interior reached a value of 250,000 ducats a year.

Nothing speaks more eloquently of the real beginnings of modern Dubrovnik (Fig. 1) than the efforts of organizing the textile industry at the dawn of the

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* Translated by Graham McMaster.


3 The original Italian: “Non siamo ne Turchi ne Ebrei, ma poveri Ragusei.”
15th century. Considering that when the Ragusans founded their first and only great industry, they had neither serviceable raw materials (quality wool and dyes) nor the most important factor in the manufacture of textiles (access to large quantities of water), their enterprise seems indeed remarkable.

There exist a number of documents showing that from the end of 1415 or the beginning of 1416 Dubrovnik had begun manufacturing textiles, understanding that profits would be much greater if, rather than trading other people’s cloth, they sold cloth that was produced in the town itself. They also began to adopt modern laws and institutions. That same year (1416), with a touching declaration, the Senate abolished the slave trade.\footnote{A myth that has long been propagated in history writing. For another view, see Bariša Krekić, “L’abolition de l’esclavage à Dubrovnik (Raguse) au XVe siècle: mythe ou réalité?” Byzantinische Forschungen 12 (1987): 309–317. Repr. in Bariša Krekić, Dubrovnik: a Mediterranean Urban Society, 1300–1600. London: Variorum Reprints, 1997; Zdenka Janeković-Römer, “Nasilje zakona: Gradskva vlast i privatni život u kasno srednjovjekovnom i ranosrednjovjekovnom Dubrovniku.” Analı Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku 41 (2003): 9–44.} In 1432 a home for