Erasmus and the Croats in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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"Cernere non licuit facundum pectus Erasmi" (Erasmus’ eloquent heart I might not see): this line by Tranquillus Andronicus Parthenius, stemming from the disappointment of an unfulfilled wish, might almost be placed as a paradoxical kind of motto for a disquisition about the connections between Erasmus and the Croats in the time of Renaissance humanism. Few indeed of the Croats managed to get to know Erasmus personally (only Jakov Baničević has been reliably determined to have done so), and it would seem that he too knew but little of Croatia. Nevertheless, in the vast compass of the intellectual insights and personal contacts of this leader of all the humanists, there are records concerning connections with humanist writers and diplomats from Croatia. If details about the reception of Erasmus’ works in Croatian sixteenth-century literature are added to these, we shall obtain a list of some fifteen names that will repay our attention.

However fragmentary the documentation about the acquaintanceship and the contacts might be, very valuable items of information can be found, particularly about the lasting interest of the Croatian humanists in the great Erasmus, and about those few of them who, thanks to their knowledge and capacities, were able to enter the privileged circle of his correspondents and friends. Our objective here is to bring these facts together into a single place, because they do show that Erasmus was present in the Croatian intellectual milieu as well, and that this was a milieu that gave rise to respected writers and statesmen who merited the recognition of the “prince of humanists.”

In his writings Erasmus mentions the lands of the Croats in passing (besides Croatia proper, these included Dalmatia and Slavonia, provinces that were then parts of various different states, as well as the Dubrovnik Republic, which was an independent city state). Thus in the treatise De bello Turcis inferendo (1530), listing the military successes of Bayazet I at the end of the fourteenth century, he says, "hoc successu rerum inflammatior, Bossinam, Croatiam, et ulteriores Illyrici partes vastat" (still more inflamed with these successes, he lays waste to Bosnia, Croatia and the more distant areas of Illyria). And speaking of the immediate and current Turkish threat to Europe:

Quis enim nescit quam facilis genti Turcarum terra pateat ad nos aditus? Quum enim vtramque teneant Mysiam, superiorem et inferiorem, ad flumen Danubium, regiones Thraciae vicinas, non difficilis per hoc flumen ad nos patet aditus. Dalmatas et Illyrios eadem vicinitate habet obnoxios, ne quid dicam de Pannonia quam toties impetit.

(And so who does not know how easy is the approach to us, open by land to the Turkish race? Since they hold, that is, both the Mysias, the lower and the higher, to the Danube River, the regions close to Thrace, there is little difficulty in the approach to us that is open along that river. The same propinquity is a threat to the Dalmatians and the Illyrians, not to mention Pannonia, which the Turk has invaded so many times.)

In this same account Erasmus alludes to the Battle of Mohács, in which the Croats had an important role. Besides, Erasmus certainly knew that Tran-

3 ASD V-3:44, lines 266–67; the English translation is mine.
5 ASD V-3:50, line 339 and 64, lines 691–93.
6 The most significant description of the battle (an eyewitness account) is Stjepan Brodaric’s De conflictu Hungarorum cum Turcis ad Mohacz verissima historia (for the bibliographical data cf. note 20 below). Other notable Croats on the field were Bartul Jurjevic, or Đurđević (Bartholomaeus Georgevits), who spent nine years in Turkish slavery and later published several important works in Latin on the political and military affairs of the Turkish empire; Krsto Frankapan (Christophorus de Frangepanibus), who was one of the most important figures of the anti-Turkish military and diplomatic campaigns of the time; he recommended (unsuccessfully) to Louis II, king of Hungary-Croatia, not to offer battle before he arrived at Mohács with his troops.