

THE NATIONAL NOTATION OF
MATTHIAS FLACIUS ILLYRICUS

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The reputation of Matija Vlačić of Labin, known in the West as Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575), has been largely forgotten. Not a single major study of his life and work has been attempted outside his native land for more than a century — this despite the fact that in his time Flacius enjoyed widespread renown.¹ As the standard-bearer of the Gnesiolutheran party, which defended the integrity of Luther's teachings in the uncertain period after the reformer's death, Flacius was the leading contender in every great controversy of the early Reformation, including the disputes against the Synergists, Majorists, Adiaphorists, and Osiandrists.

For all that, where Flacius is at all cited nowadays, it is usually on account of his prickly defense of the substantialist heresy, the somber doctrine that equated original sin with the very substance, not an accident, of human nature. That position made him an abomination to the other Protestants. Derided and condemned in his lifetime, the teachings of this "exile of God" were almost totally forgotten after his death. But even though the vigorous theological salt of Flacianism truly lost its savor in the permutations that brought mainline Protestantism to the status of a moral science, it is still remarkable that Flacius's enormous intellectual labors, which were among the most erudite of the reformers, have been relegated to the lesser ranks of Protestant scholarship.

Flacius combined two somewhat diverse strains in the intellectual frame of the Reformation. He was at the same time a scripturalist and a humanist, the bond being his pronounced historicism. His biblical studies, notably the hermeneutical essay from the *Clavis scripturae sacrae* (1567), the first work in comparative linguistics by a Croatian author, have gained him the title of the "father of hermeneutics" among modern practitioners. But his far greater historical output, especially the *Catalogus testium veritatis* (1556-1562) and the *Centuriae Magdeburgenses* (1559-1574), though recognized as the first fruits of modern ecclesiastical historiography (and the basis of comparative religious history), generally have been considered second rate in comparison with the work of the Italian humanist historians.

This view, shared by liberals and Marxists, is marginal to the real technical faults of Flacius's researches. Moreover, the critics of Flacius

tend to affirm the methodological merits of his work. The *Centuries*, especially, subjected the historical proofs of Roman Catholic legitimacy to rigorous documentary criticism, thereby contributing to the growth of historical consciousness on both sides of the great religious divide. In carrying out his plan for the *Centuries*, Flacius had the help of several assistants, who rummaged the obscure vaults of Germany in search of sources, making this thirteen-volume work the first extensive collaborative history. (Cardinal Baronius's *Annales ecclesiastici* [1588-1607], also multi-volumed and collaborative in organization, in turn applied historical proofs in defense of Catholicism.) But though the sectarian excesses of the "Centuriators of Magdeburg" are duly noted, their modern critics have found greater fault in Flacius's unwillingness to accept the modern distinction, typical of Italian humanist historiography, between sacred and secular history. Flacius's refusal to separate the history of salvation from the very heart of human history has been indeed, his chief offense against modern sensitivity.²

Though nineteenth-century Lutheran historians stressed the contribution of the *Centuries* in the development of critical historiography, Flacius did not become the model for Protestant historians. Orthodox Lutherans, who were increasingly held in thrall to unilateral biblicism, shunned Flacius after the controversy over original sin, his ideas on this doctrine being condemned posthumously in the Formula of Concord (1577). In rejecting Flacius, they settled on Martin Chemnitz's *Examen concilii tridentini* (1599) for all the historical refutations of Rome that they considered necessary. As for the Calvinists, though they reprinted the *Catalogus* on two occasions and generally were more receptive to Flacius's historiography than the Lutherans, their historical polemicists nevertheless preferred to draw their arguments from primary sources rather than from modern works.³ All the more remarkable, then, that the first historians of Croatian historiography, such as Ferdo Šišić (1869-1940), failed to claim Flacius as their own. Šišić recognized that the "conflict and polemicizing between the Catholics and Protestants were of significance not only for the origin of paleography and diplomatics but for the beginning of modern historiography in general,"⁴ but he neglected to include Flacius in the company of Marko Marulić and Dinko Zavorović, the initiators, in the sixteenth century, of modern Croatian historiography.

In part, the neglect of Flacius must be attributed to the stigma of Protestantism. Mijo Mirković pointed out in 1938 that "Croat Protestantism [was] insufficiently explored. A consistently positive stand toward Protestantism was assumed only by the Croats and Slovenes who lived abroad ([Ivan] Kostrenčić, [Matija] Murko). Positive appraisals of Croat Protestantism continue to provoke the reaction of the Counter-Reformation at home."⁵ But Flacius did not seem alien to the Croat

milieu only on account of his long exile and Protestant engagement. Juraj Križanić, too, spent most of his life outside Croatia, but his national notation, once his work was rediscovered by Ivan Kukuljević and Vatroslav Jagić, was never in doubt. Leaving aside Flacius's commitment to the well-known evangelizing projects among the South Slavs (for example the building of a South Slavic Protestant university in Regensburg or Klagenfurt), was there evidence of Croatian national concepts, of a protonational ideology, in Flacius, or more precisely in his historical works? Or was Flacius a German Protestant of "Illyrian" origin?

The *Magdeburg Centuries* was clearly not a national history, though its reference to Croat and South Slavic affairs points to Flacius's personal interests: in the sixteenth century, no more than now, Western historical surveys by Western authors did not include any references to the South Slavic *terrae incognitae* except when some disadvantage or peril to the West was involved. With the exception of the portrayal of Saint Jerome, who received very extensive treatment in the *Centuries*, the more popular, but less studied, *Catalogus testium veritatis* is a surer guide to the national themes in Flacius.

Croatia held a unique position in medieval and early modern Europe. Though Catholic (and therefore separated from Orthodox Slavdom), Croatia alone was exempt from the general use of Latin as the liturgical language of the Roman church, and it was therefore hardly a typical representative of the trends in Catholic Slavic centuries. Medieval Croats, especially in the northwest, including Flacius's native Istria, used glagolitic as their chief scriptory medium. Their literary activity was based on the Croat recension of Church Slavonic, which approached the Croat čakavian dialect by the high Middle Ages.

For all the great vigor of Croat Glagolism and its rich and varied culture, the slavic liturgy was never fully legitimated in the Roman patriarchate, despite the tradition of papal sanction. But since Saints Cyril and Methodius, the originators of glagolitic script and the Slavic liturgy, were Greeks, their handiwork became highly suspect in the West after the Cerularian schism. The Croats, determined to prove the canonical status of Glagolism, started attributing Glagolism to their own native Dalmatian, Saint Jerome, whose orthodoxy and accomplishments on behalf of the common — and Latin — version of the scriptures were beyond dispute (this despite the fact that the father of the Vulgate lived before the Croat migrations to the Adriatic basin). Just as the Croats increasingly looked upon themselves as a people autochthonous to the areas they inhabited, having lost track of historical sequences, the tradition of the Cyrillo-Methodian derivation of the glagolitic script, too, slowly atrophied, although it did not entirely disappear. Deacon Blaž, the author of the glagolitic breviary of Priest Mavar (1460), writing only sixty years before Flacius was born, demonstrated great reverence for

the Salonican brothers, but located their birthplace in Salona (Solin), moreover tracing their lineage from Diocletian and Saint Caius the Pope.⁶ The Croats, in short, sustained two cultural-historical traditions. The Cyrillo-Methodian tradition of Glagolism was part of the tendency toward maintaining some links with the Slavic East. The Hieronymian tradition represented the centuries-old — though very slowly developing — link with Latin classicism and Western Christianity.

Flacius was clearly aware that the liturgical status of Croatia was unique. Writing about the testimony of the “Illyrian churches,” he noted: “Ad haec publica Ecclesiarum testimonia additur & illud, quod Illyricae Ecclesiae ad huc hodierna die in publicis sacris uulgariuntur lingua.”⁷ The reference to the use of the vulgar or common tongue in the liturgy is evidence of the extent to which the Croat vernacular of Flacius’s time appropriated the glagolitic letters and quietly started dominating not just the nonliturgical texts but also the sacred writings. The vulnerability of Church Slavonic in Croatia prevented its clerical users from evolving into a conservative establishment, which regularly felt duty bound to safeguard the integrity of dead — but sacred — languages, as happened in the Orthodox Slavic countries (Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia). Instead, the Croatian recension of Church Slavonic was permeated by the spoken — largely čakavian — Croatian, leading to a proliferation of hybrid texts, which were increasingly written entirely in vernacular Croatian. Yet despite the observation on Croatian linguistic practices, Flacius had a surprisingly imperfect knowledge of the Croatian language question.

Flacius knew nothing of the origins of Croatia’s liturgical-linguistic singularity. He evidently believed that the “Illyrians” maintained their own, apostolic, local church, which was independent of the papacy during much of its history. (Flacius explicitly says that the Illyrians were not under the Roman pontiff during the reign of Emperor Theodosius the Great [379-395].⁸) But he did not know that Glagolism was linked to the Christian East. Flacius, in fact, knew very little about the Orthodox churches and their doctrine, and discounted their influence in Croatian affairs. In the Balkans, besides the Greek church, he knew of the Macedonian, Moesian, and Wallachian Orthodox churches, which probably correspond to the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Serbian patriarchate (revived in Flacius’s time), and, least recondite, the Metropolitanate of Moldo-Wallachia.⁹ But though he praised their opposition to papal primacy, the doctrine of purgatory, private masses, and priestly celibacy, he also wrongly believed that the Orthodox were against the penance imposed by confessors and that they did away with the prayers to the saints and Mary, abolishing fasts, monastic vows, veneration of the cross, and belief in the miracles of saints. Flacius also readily admitted that he did not know the deeds and words of Photius, giving his account of the Photian schism from Platina.¹⁰

Still, in the light of the Croatian Cyrillo-Methodian tradition, it is more surprising that Flacius evidently knew nothing about the mission of Cyril and Methodius, including its Greek provenance. At the same time, it can be inferred that he also rejected the Hieronymian tradition of Glagolism. Flacius's portrayal of Saint Jerome is based on the evidence of Sulpicius Severus, according to whom Jerome "non solum Latinis atque Graecis, sed & Hebraeis etiam ita literis institutus est."¹¹ Flacius did not attempt to enhance Jerome's reputation for erudition by assigning the glagolitic script to the Dalmatian doctor, though it is inconceivable that he was ignorant of this bogus tradition.

Flacius's knowledge of the Cyrillo-Methodian ministry was, of course, secondhand and acquired in Germany. He noted among his witnesses a "certain [*quidam*] Methodius Illyricus, a learned man, who flourished around the year of the Lord 860," but attributed his own cognizance of Methodius to the *Bavarian Annals* of Aventinus, who, in turn, wrote that Methodius "Slavis literarum characteres inuenerit, Sacrasque literas in uulgarem sermonem uerterit. Ait quoque eum impulisse Dalmatas, aliosque Illyricos, ut abolita lingua Latina, uulgari in sacris mysterijs peragendis uterentur."¹² Flacius was himself noncommittal on the accuracy of Aventinus's claim. He repeated his earlier acknowledgment that church services in Illyria were conducted in the vulgar tongue, though he was not certain whether Methodius introduced this practice or whether the situation obtained "from the beginning."¹³ His sorrow at the want of Methodius's writings was deep and genuine: "Vtinam aliqua eius scripta extarent, historiamque certaminum ipsius notioem haberemus. Nam non parua, nec uulgaria fuisse oportet."¹⁴

Flacius took Methodius for a native of Illyria, but he also set down that the Slavic missionary had operated in Bavaria. After the priests and bishops of the land had incited the princes and people against him, Methodius fled to Moravia, where he died, Olomouc being his burial site.¹⁵ Like Aventinus, Flacius was not certain whether his Methodius was the same as another Methodius, a Moravian bishop, who, according to this anachronistic reconstruction, received a written message from Pope Eugene II (824-827). Small wonder that Flacius failed to notice any connection between the refuge of Methodius Illyricus and the consecration and mission to moravia by Archbishop John, and the Bishops Benedict and Daniel, by, according to Flacius, Pope John VIII around 880 AD. Moreover, Flacius printed the letter of protest to the pope against this mission by the Bavarian episcopate, led by Thotmar, archbishop of Salzburg, and four of his suffragans. Flacius read the letter as another historical witness of Christian resistance to papal tyranny, though it was, in fact, an unevangelical and anti-Slavic document, claiming Bavarian ecclesiastical and secular jurisdiction over the Slavs by right of conquest.¹⁶ But though Flacius, as did all Lutherans, certainly gloried in examples of regal and princely supremacy over the papacy, himself hav-

ing praised Pope Leo IV for the pontiff's obedience to the emperor,¹⁷ it should not be surmised that he approved of every secular intervention in ecclesiastical affairs. For all his dependence on the Germans, Flacius condemned their role in the wars against the Hussites, noting that Germany, too, helped the Antichrist in persecuting the Bohemian church.¹⁸

An additional — and rather mysterious — Croatian witness appears at the very end of the *Catalogus*. Flacius listed him as Theodoricus, *Episcopus Croatiae* (*Episcopus Croatus* in the Frankfurt edition of 1672) and claimed that this prelate was first a Franciscan and that he lived around 1410. A printed version of his rhymed prophecies, predicting the demise of the Roman see, was apparently available to Flacius.¹⁹ It is difficult to make out just who this Croatian bishop was. Nobody by that name appears in the Croatian episcopal chronologies in the cited period. The title *Episcopus Croatus*, however, was associated with Nin, the first diocese on the territory of Croatian rulers. Theodosius, the first bishop of Nin (879-886) under Prince Branimir, was the same *Episcopus Croatus* who disappointed Popes John VIII and Stephen VI by his loyalty to the metropolitan see of Aquileia. And indeed, there was a Franciscan bishop of Nin in 1410, a Trevisan by the name of Nicholas. Was Flacius's Theodoricus the result of an elaborate miscall, incorporating elements of Theodosius and Trevisanus Nicolaus?

By the end of his life Flacius claimed, in the *Clavis*, that the unredeemed man (*homo vetus*), "who is not born again, is the work of the Devil, and made for the works which the Devil prepared for him, in order to be tied to them and serve the devil against God, and every piety and honesty."²⁰ This was an essentially orthodox doctrine, which cannot be linked with the Neomanichean heresies and their Bosnian and other South Slavic manifestations. In fact, though there was no mention of the Bosnian dualists or their Eastern or Western equivalents (Manicheans, Bogomils, Paulicians, Catharists, Patarins, Albigensians) in the *Catalogus*, Flacius explicitly rejected Manichean *deliria* in the *Clavis*.²¹ Flacius Illyricus tried very hard to adhere to the theological orthodoxy of Martin Luther. Though profoundly originative, he never wanted to be original.

The gaps in Flacius's knowledge of South Slavic affairs are as obvious as his eagerness to bring the "Illyrians" into the mainstream of ecclesiastical history and Protestant resistance to Rome. Though conscious of his *patria*, in the Renaissance meaning of the term, he was first of all a Protestant militant. Except for his championing of the vernacular in liturgy, no aspect of his historical system can be traced to specifically Croat national traditions. Though nationally minded, Flacius did not advance any sort of Croat protonational ideology, however rudimentary. His case — and one suspects not his alone — demonstrates that the Reformation, at least among the Croats, did not offer any advantage to

the ideologists of nationhood, Baroque Croato-Slavism being a product of the Counter-Reformation. Moreover, the ideological realm of Glagolism, especially during its golden age that predated the Reformation, was less universal, hence more national, than the best products of the Croatian reformers, Flacius included.

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REFERENCES

1. The only major twentieth-century biography of Flacius is Mijo Mirković's *Matija Vlačić Ilirik* (Zagreb: 1960). Mirković, an Istrian and a Catholic apostate, was a Flacius enthusiast, though as an economist he was not quite prepared to tackle the intricacies of Flacius's thought.
2. In the opinion of one historian, Flacius's work "was a denial of the Italian humanists' thesis that world movements proceed from human sources. The doctrine of the *Centuries* is purely theological, conceiving secular world history as a struggle between God and the Devil. Not man, but God, is the prime mover in history; world events are the result of divine and not human action. History, therefore, is the record of God's will." James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, Vol. 1 (New York: 1942), 530.
3. Pontien Polman, "Flacius Illyricus, historien de l'Église," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* (Louvain), 27 1 (1931), 66-73. The second Calvinist edition of the *Catalogus* (Geneva, 1608) was in the original collection of the Yale Library in 1742, making it one of the first works of Croatian authorship in North America.
4. Ferdo Šišić, "Hrvatska historiografija od XVI do XX stoljeća," *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* (Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade), 1 1-4 (1935), 24.
5. Mijo Mirković, *Flacius* (Zagreb: 1938), xvi.
6. Marija Pantelić, "Glagoljski brevijar popa Mavra iz godine 1460.," *Slovo* (Zagreb), 15-16 (1965), 133.
7. He continued, "Vnde colligitur, non rectè Antichristum, eiusque mancipia facere, qui omnes ad Latinum sermone cogere uolunt." Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Catalogus testium veritatis* (Strasbourg: 1562), 16.
8. *Ibid.*, 134.
9. "Ecclesia Graeca, eique coniunctae, . . . Macedonica, Moesica, Valachica . . ." *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 145.

11. Cited by Flacius from Platina, *ibid.*, 137.
12. *Ibid.*, 78.
13. "Est uero ad huc in Ecclesiasticis actionibus, seu sacris usitata uulgaris lingua in Illyria, siue ea res ab hoc Methodio initium in stauarationemque sumpserit, siue sic semper inde ab initio in usu fuerit." *Ibid.*, 78.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "Eo opere perfecto, dicit illum etiam in Bauariam peruenisse, idem & ibitentaturum: sed sacerdotes ac Episcopos concitasse in eum Principes ac populos, ita ut in Morauiam bonus ille humo aufugerit, ubi mortuus, as Olmutiae sepultus sit." *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 156-158. The actual letter was addressed to Pope John IX in 900 AD. For comment on this remarkable document see Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1970), 196-197. The Bavarian letter does not mention Methodius, but it cites Wiching, bishop of Nitra, Methodius's German adversary. No mention is made of Slavic liturgy or literary activity.
17. Flacius, *Catalogus*, 82.
18. "Sequuta sunt ob istam iniustam caedem, & quia Papa uolebat ui retrahere Bohemos ad suas impietatas, ingentia, ac Germaniae, quae se Antichristi ministram in persecutione Bohemicae Ecclesiae praebuit, funesta bella." *Ibid.*, 495.
19. "Theodoricus primum Minorita, postea Episcopus Croatiae, uixit anno 1410. In fine suae prophetiae, unà cum alijs Rhythmicis prophetijs impressae, praedixit fore, ut Romana sedes, quae simonia & libidinibus esset contaminatissima, corruat." *Ibid.*, 541.
20. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis scripturae seu de sermone sacrum literarum altera pars* (Basel: 1607), col. 659.
21. *Ibid.*, col. 660.