Visualizing Past in a Foreign Country:

Schiavoni/Illyrian Confraternities and Colleges in Early Modern Italy in comparative perspective

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Visualizing Past in a Foreign Country: Schiavoni/Illyrian Confraternities and Colleges in Early Modern Italy in comparative perspective

edited by Giuseppe Capriotti, Francesca Coltrinari, Jasenka Gudelj

The Great Bravery of Croatian Soldier by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli*

Daniel Premerl**

Abstract

The article investigates the iconography of two etchings with Croatian subject matter made by the Bolognese etcher Giuseppe Maria Mitelli in 1684. In the focus is the etching *Great Bravery of Croatian soldier (Gran prodezza di soldato croatto)*. The author concludes, interpreting the explanatory text below the etching, that it depicts an event of the so-called Great Turkish War (1683-1699). The depicted hero belonged to the Croatian Regiment commanded by general James Leslie, and the depicted heroic act occurred, in all probability, during the battle of Virovitica in 1684. Also, the author points out to a model for Mitelli's etching as well as to the literary image of the simultaneous decapitation of both a horseman and a horse in the Croatian literature. In the same year, Mitelli also made the portrait of the Zagreb bishop and the politician Martin Borković. The existence of both etchings is associated with the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna, governed by the Zagreb cathedral Chapter.

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L'articolo indaga l'iconografia di due incisioni con soggetto croato realizzate dall'incisore bolognese Giuseppe Maria Mitelli nel 1684. Il focus del saggio è l'incisione *Gran prodezza di soldato croatto*. Interpretando il testo esplicativo sotto l'acquaforte, l'autore ritiene che essa raffiguri un evento della cosiddetta Grande Guerra Turca (1683-1699). L'eroe raffigurato apparteneva al reggimento croato comandato dal generale James Leslie e l'atto eroico raffigurato avvenne, con ogni probabilità, durante la battaglia di Virovitica nel 1684. L'autore individua inoltre un modello per l'incisione di Mitelli e un riferimento a una fonte nella letteratura croata ove compare la decapitazione simultanea di un cavaliere e di un cavallo. Nello stesso anno Mitelli fece anche il ritratto del vescovo di Zagabria e del politico Martin Borković. L'esistenza di entrambe le acqueforti è associata al Collegio illiricoungarico di Bologna, governato dal Capitolo della cattedrale di Zagabria.

The etching entitled *Great Bravery of Croatian soldier* (*Gran prodezza di soldato croatto*; fig. 1) was signed in 1684 by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (1634-1718), a prolific and well-known Bolognese etcher. It depicts a Croatian cavalry soldier who has just beheaded both an Ottoman horseman and his horse in one stroke. The explanatory text at the bottom of the sheet reads: *La vera, et propria rapresentatione, d'un ben che ordinario, però magnanimo, et risoluto guerriere, sotto / il governo del Regimento Croato, del Generale Lessle, con nome Pietro Barij, nationale Crovato: Come / questo, nell'ultima battaglia, ad un principale Turco, chiamato Mitritz, in un sol colpo, et al suo cavallo, con animo coraggioso, Separò con Sciabla dal collo ambe le teste. Del 1684. / Disegno venuto di Vienna. / Mitelli Intagliò.*

The Great Bravery of Croatian soldier has been catalogued since the nineteenth century among more than six hundred engravings by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli that ended up in the collection of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna¹. The etching has been grouped among Mitelli's popular prints that celebrated Christian victories against the Ottomans and were aimed at the retail market². Mitelli's anti-Ottoman prints are thematically linked to the so-called Great Turkish War that began with the famous Christian victory in 1683 in Vienna and ended in 1699 with the Peace Treaty of Karlowitz, resulting in the liberation of greater parts of Hungary and eastern Croatia from the Ottoman rule. The whole Europe was interested in the outcome of this war, the Papal State city of Bologna being no exception (at that time Bologna's prominent scholar Count Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli was employed by the Habsburgs for twenty years; he was to lead the Habsburg border demarcation commission after the war).

Giuseppe Maria Mitelli's anti-Ottoman etchings have not stirred many comments in the historiography thus far – the Bolognese etcher owes his reputation to the more aesthetically accomplished maps such as *Le arti per*

¹ Varignana 1978, pp. 312-313.

² Cf. Ivi, pp. 309-322; Boschloo 1992.

via, the fantastic *Alfabeto in sogno*, or the curious *Giochi*. However, the *Great Bravery of Croatian soldier* was reproduced in the 1988 book *Annali del Collegio Ungaro-illirico di Bologna*, together with another etching by Mitelli, *Triumph of Bologna* (where the allegory figure of Bologna celebrates the liberation of Vienna)³. In the caption below the reproduction, the editors of the book brought forward the idea that the creation of images such as these should be understood as an effect of the mediation of the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna. In the present article, the *Great Bravery of Croatian soldier*'s iconography will be analyzed, affirming the assumption that its patron was associated with the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna.

The Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna was governed by the Zagreb cathedral Chapter between 1553 and 1781 with the purpose of providing a possibility of doctoral education at the University of Bologna to the students from the Zagreb diocese and Slavonia⁴. Reasons for the foundation of the national College in Bologna laid in the complex political situation in the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom: after the 1526 Ottoman victory at Mohács the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom lost most of its territories and experienced the turmoil of the civil war as well as the successful spread of Protestantism. The College was founded in Bologna in order to provide a safe haven for the training of the future elite. An equal number of students from the Kingdom's two nations, Hungarians and Croats, were enrolled each year; however, since the late 17th and throughout the 18th century, the majority of students were Croats. Rectors of the College, who were also canons of the Zagreb cathedral Chapter, informed regularly not only their political and ecclesiastical protectors in Bologna and Rome on developments of events on the battlefields in the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom but also the Bolognese public. For instance, in 1689 the College organized a public feast to commemorate the victory against the Ottomans in Zrin (Croatia) - it is recorded that on that occasion people of Bologna chanted «Vivano li Croati, vivano li Croati!; Viva il bano di Croatia, vivano li coraggiosissimi Croati!»⁵.

The explanatory text at the bottom of Mitelli's etching, cited at the beginning of this article, mentions the names of the depicted Croatian and Ottoman horsemen: *Pietro Barij* and *Mitritz*, respectively. These names have not been traced in narrative sources thus far. Moreover, the surname *Barij* does not sound Croatian at all and might well have been misspelled. Both protagonists might have been mentioned in an unknown narrative source, possibly written by an eyewitness.

On the other hand, the explanatory text mentions that Croatian soldier Pietro Barij fought in the Regimento Croato commanded by Generale Lessle. Generale

⁵ Ivi, p. 186.

³ Accorsi, Brizzi 1988, pp. 192-193.

⁴ For the history of the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna see studies by G.P. Brizzi, P. Sárközy and D. Barbarić in Accorsi, Brizzi 1988, pp. IX-LXIII.

Lessle is general Count James Leslie (?-1692?), Imperial field marshall⁶. He was the Scottish nobleman who, following his uncle Count Walter Leslie, had a successful court and military career serving the Habsburgs. After receiving praise for his role in the defence of Vienna in 1683, in July 1684 James Leslie's Croatian troops captured strategic town of Virovitica (northeastern Croatia). This important victory opened the way to Osijek (eastern Croatia) where next vear Leslie's troops would burn down Suleyman's bridge, thus weakening the strength of the Ottoman army in Hungary and contributing to the 1686 liberation of Buda (the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary)⁷. In the annual reports written by rectors of the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna general Leslie's campaigns in Slavonia are duly mentioned, and the report for the year 1684 briefly describes the capture of Virovitica by *cumpaniae leslianae*⁸. James Leslie would spend his retirement in the family castle in Ptuj (ger. Pettau: lat. Poetovium) in Styria (present-day northeastern Slovenia), close to the border with Croatia. The castle, now a regional museum, still boasts the Leslies' legacy, including Brussels tapestries cycle with stories of Odysseus.

The explanatory text then describes the image – the violent yet heroic act in which Croatian horseman is beheading the Ottoman horseman and his horse (...*in un sol colpo, et al suo cavallo, con animo coraggioso, Separò con Sciabla dal collo ambe le teste*). The text ends with following information: *Del 1684. / Disegno venuto di Vienna. / Mitelli Intagliò*.

I am not aware of the image of the simultaneous decapitation of both the horseman and his horse, but one: it depicts the heroism of Ferenc Wesselényi (1605-1667), the Palatine of Hungary and the anti-Ottoman hero (fig. 2). This image is the central theme of the theses broadsheet (*Thesenblatt*) of young Hungarian nobleman Gáspár Széchy, made for his degree examination in 1663 at the University of Tyrnau (lat. *Tyrnavia*; hung. *Nagyszombat*; slovak. *Trnava* in present-day Slovakia). Ferenc Wesselényi was depicted on Gáspár Széchy's theses broadsheet because he was Széchy's patron. The engraving was made by German etcher active in Vienna, Matthäus Küsel (1629-1681), after a drawing made by an unidentified painter⁹, but its narrative or visual source remain unknown¹⁰.

It is obvious that both heroic images, that of Hungarian Palatine Wesselényi and that of Croatian soldier *Pietro Barij*, significantly resemble each other. It can safely be concluded that they were made after the same model or its version (*disegno*). However, it is also possible that Küsel's etching itself served as the model – its very owner, young Gáspár Széchy, happened to be the *convictor* of

⁹ Rózsa 1987-1988, p. 261; Galavics 2003, pp. 117-118, 127.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

⁶ Worthington 2002, pp. 84-85; Weigl 2002, pp. 91-93, 50-52; Štefanič 2009, pp. 12-15.

⁷ Mažuran 1998, pp. 249-253, 255.

⁸ Accorsi, Brizzi 1988, pp. 172, 131, 181-182.

the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna in 1669¹¹. Did he bring to Bologna his Tyrnau theses broadsheet and left it there, so it would be handed down to Mitelli fifteen years later as the model for the *Great bravery of Croatian soldier*? Or a patron of the *Great bravery of Croatian soldier* simply acquired the same model (or its version) as the one that had been used for Küsel's etching?

However, the literary image of the simultaneous decapitation of a horseman and his horse appeared in two texts written by Croatian authors, both of them predating Küsel's etching. It appeared in Osmanšćica (Rome, 1631) by Ivan Tomko Mrnavić (1580-1637), a Croatian prelate and author who spent much of his time in Rome working for the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith as well as for the confraternity of St Jerome of the Schiavoni/Illyrians¹². Osmanšćica is a historical drama which narrates the Ottoman defeat by the Polish army at the 1621 battle of Hochim and its aftermath that led to a conspiracy in Constantinople in which sultan Osman II was to be murdered by his Janissaries¹³. The literary image of double-decapitation appears in the preface of the book, directed to Vuk Mrnjavčić of Brezovica near Zagreb (around 1586-1648), Croatian cavalry officer and the son of the deputy viceroy (viceban) of Croatia Krsto Mrnjavčić¹⁴. In the preface the author praises dedicatee's heroism shown thus far in battles against the Ottomans, wishing him to come back to the battlefield soon, so that he can behead Turkish horsemen and their horses in one stroke, for the revenge of his people and his parents («Neka [...] uzbudiš tvoje gospodsko srce, i ukripiš desnicu zavičnu do sada, jednime zamahom, odsikovati glave Turske konijčke i koniske skupa, na osvetu svega naroda našega, a navlastito roditeljne gospode $[...]^{*}$)¹⁵.

The same literary image would recur in the book which was more influential on the readership of the Zagreb ecclesiastical and political elite – *Memoria regum et banorum Regnorum Dalmatiae*, *Croatiae et Sclavoniae* (Vienna, 1652) by Georgius Rattkay (1612-1666), a canon of the Zagreb cathedral Chapter and a historian. The same book happened to be the narrative source for the vault paintings painted by Gioacchino Pizzoli in 1700 in the refectory of the Illyrian-Hungarian College¹⁶. In his book, Rattkay created a heroic story based on the aforementioned Mrnavić's sentence from the preface to Osmanšćica. In Rattkay's story, Vuk Mrnjavčić goes to the fight to revenge his father's death. During the fight, he confronts the Ottoman hero Badanjković, who first gets wounded and then receives the final blow: Mrnjavčić hit him with such force that he beheaded the Turk and his horse in one stroke. «Mernavicius abiecto

¹¹ Accorsi, Brizzi 1988, p. 124; Sárközy 1988, LXI.

¹² For Mrnavić's links with visual arts see Premerl 2018a; Premerl 2018b.

¹³ For Osmanšćica see Fališevac 2011, p. 273 (with previous bibliography).

¹⁴ For Vuk Mrnjavčić see Maček 2015, pp. 55-58. See also Premerl 2018b (with previous bibliography).

¹⁵ Tomko Mrnavić 1631, p. 4.

¹⁶ For the iconography of these vault paintings see Premerl 2014, pp. 25-60.

sclopo, evaginatoque acinace, quem ad latus equi militibus gestare est moris, eum a sinistra parte assecutus, adeo immani ferit impetu, ut uno eodemque ictu, & totum Turcae caput, & equi per collum iugulumque venas praecideret, amboque uno casu in terram ruentes exanimati interirent»¹⁷. Rattkay continues with a description of how this heroic act had an awe-inspiring effect on the Turks. Thus, Rattkay modified Mrnavić: while Mrnavić wished Mrnjavčić to pursue to behead Ottoman horsemen and their horses for revenge of his people and his parents, Rattkay fashioned a story of actual revenge for the death of the father, which has its climax in the duel whose final blow was the doubledecapitation.

The image of the double-decapitation, either literary or visual, is both rare and strange. It is obviously a figure of speech – a hyperbole – for the physical strength of the hero as well as for the humiliation of the enemy. In the *Great bravery of Croatian soldier*, a beholder is even tempted to see the humor, a characteristic of many *stampe popolari* by Mitelli.

The iconography of the *Great bravery of Croatian soldier*, which celebrates the heroism of the Croatian Regiment's soldier performed, in all probability, during the battle of Virovitica, points to a Croatian patron. Other anti-Ottoman etchings by Mitelli celebrated the Habsburgs, the Allied Forces of the Great Turkish War in general, or the Catholic Church, not soldiers or national heroes.

In the same year when Mitelli engraved the *Great bravery of Croatian soldier*, he happened to make another etching with Croatian subject matter – the portrait of Martin Borković, bishop of Zagreb (fig. 3)¹⁸. Martin Borković (1597-1687) was bishop of Zagreb between 1667 and 1687¹⁹. Before that he had been one of the leading monks of the Order of St Paul the First Hermit (Paulines), a notable Central European monastic order (he was the three-times General Superior of the Order). In the year of his death, Borković would become the archbishop of the metropolitan see of Kalocsa and Bács (then still under the Ottoman rule). However, Martin Borković was also the leading Croatian politician of the day. After 1670 he obtained the post of Croatian viceroy's *locum tenens (locum tenens bani*), as Croatian viceroy Petar Zrinski was convicted of treason and decapitated. In the aftermath of the Magnate Conspiracy, Borković would play a pacifying role, advocating for Croatian interests while staying loyal to the king.

The face of Martin Borković on his portrait by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli shows similitude to his face on the portrait by Ioannes Eisenhordt in the Archbishopric palace in Zagreb²⁰. In both portraits the bishop has two papillomas depicted

¹⁸ Varignana 1978, p. 346.

¹⁷ Rattkay 1652, p. 203. There is also a modern reprint of Rattkay's book, published in 2000. Cf. also its Croatian translation: Rattkay 2001, p. 257.

¹⁹ Sekulić 1995.

²⁰ For the portrait of Borković by I. Eisenhordt see Repanić-Braun 1994, pp. 346-347, 362, 78; Cvetnić 2000, pp. 102, 104-107. For the portrait of Borković in the Strossmayer gallery in

on the same place (on the forehead and on the temple). Does that mean that the eighty-seven years old bishop came to Bologna and sat in front of Mitelli? Or a rector of the Illyrian-Hungarian College in Bologna (also a canon of the Zagreb cathedral Chapter) gave to Mitelli an unidentified drawing or etching of the bishop, on the bishop's behalf?

Mitelli's portrait of the Croatian prelate features his coat of arms, which was the coat of arms of the Pauline order. It also features the explanatory text at the bottom of the sheet which reads: *Illustrissimus et Reverendissimus Dominus Dominus Martinus Borkovics, / Primas Croatiae, Dei et Apostolicae Sedis Gratia Episcopus / Zagrabiensis, Beatae Virginis Mariae de Topuzka Abbas, Sacrae / Caesariae Regiaeque Maiestatis Consiliarius / G. M. Mitelli fecit 1684.* What is curious in this text, however, is the phrase *Primas Croatiae*. Bishop of Zagreb has never held that title. The mere use of the phrase *Primas Croatiae* is a sign of Borković's power and his wish for a self-fashioned representation²¹. This confabulated title was coined in contrast to the actual and only title of that kind in the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom, *Primas Hungariae*, which has been held by archbishops of Esztergom (lat. *Strigonium*).

It is reasonable to assume that the bishop of Zagreb and the politician Martin Borković, who considered himself *Primas Croatiae*, commissioned, personally or through the rector of the Zagreb College in Bologna, the etching that glorifies the Croatian soldier as the anti-Ottoman hero. As a matter of fact, both etchings with Croatian subject matter made by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli in 1684 can be associated with a rising national pride of Zagreb bishops and their canons at the outset of the Great Turkish War. After the end of the War in 1699, and the completion of the new building of their Bolognese College in 1700, Zagreb bishops and their canons in Bologna would pursue to commission artworks of self-representational and national iconography; a mirror of their wish for more equality between the two Kingdoms of the Kingdom²².

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Zagreb see Cvitanović 1989, pp. 32, 410, 412. For the no longer preserved portrait of Borković in Lepoglava see Horvat 1910, pp. 75-76; fig. 147. This list of portraits of Borković is not exhaustive. ²¹ It has been mentioned, without citation, that Borković used to sign as *Primas Croatiae*. See

Autonomija katoličke crkve u Hrvatskoj 1870, p. 336; see also Bahlcke 2005, p. 177.

²² For the iconography of the 1700 wall paintings by Gioacchino Pizzoli in the College refectory see Premerl 2014; For the early 18th century coats of arms wall paintings in the College courtyard see Šourek 2016; For the 1765 catafalque for Emperor Francis I by Mauro Tesi see Premerl 2011.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, *Great Bravery of Croatian soldier (Gran prodezza di soldato croatto)*, 1684, etching (*acquaforte*), 399 x 270 mm, Bologna, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna, Accorsi, Brizzi 1988, pp. 192-193



Fig. 2. Matthäus Küsel, *Heroic deed of Ferenc Wesselényi and its allegory*. Theses broadsheet of Gáspár Széchy, 1663, copperplate engraving, 700 x 483 mm, Vienna, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Galavics 2003, p. 117



Fig. 3. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, *Portrait of Martin Borković, bishop of Zagreb*, 1684, etching (*acquaforte*), 168 x 112 mm, Bologna, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna, https://collezioni.genusbononiae.it/products/dettaglio/7247>

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