

# Nicholas of Modruš and His *De Bellis Gothorum*: Politics and National History in the Fifteenth-Century Adriatic

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*This article analyzes the “De Bellis Gothorum,” a long neglected and misunderstood history of the ancient Goths written in 1472–73 by Nicholas of Modruš, the leading Croatian-Illyrian bishop at the papal curia. By placing the work in its proper context, this article reconstructs a previously unknown episode in the political history of the fifteenth-century Adriatic. It is argued that the “De Bellis Gothorum” was in fact a national history that was meant to provide a trans-Adriatic network of Croatian and Bosnian nobles and churchmen with support from Naples and the papacy for their border wars against the Ottomans and reestablishment of their national kingdom.*

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## INTRODUCTION

IN THE SPRING of 1472, Nicholas, bishop of Modruš (ca. 1425–80), the most prominent among a small group of Croatian churchmen at the papal curia, was sent to Venice to assume command over papal galleys and lead them to the Aegean as part of the first major naval expedition against the Ottomans launched by the papacy in years. The Ottomans had under Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) already conquered almost all of the Christian states in the Balkans, before taking Negroponte, the chief Venetian base in the Aegean, in 1470. Growing fearful of an imminent invasion of Italy, the newly elected pope, Sixtus IV (r. 1471–84), and the Neapolitan king Ferrante (r. 1458–94), decided to send their fleets to help the Venetians stop the Ottoman expansion. During the buildup to this expedition, Nicholas of Modruš started writing his *De Bellis Gothorum* (On the wars of the Goths),

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a partially preserved and little-known work on the three wars that the ancient Goths waged in Italy: the invasion of Alaric's Visigoths; the conquest of Theodoric's Ostrogoths; and Justinian's reconquest. As this article will show, this work, which effectively traced the history of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths from their common origins in Scandza to their respective settlements in Spain and Illyria, was also, in a way, the very first humanist history, or rather prehistory, of Nicholas's Illyrian nation, which in his eyes stood at the frontline of Christendom's defenses against the Ottomans.

For sixteen years, from 1464 until his death in 1480, Nicholas of Modruš was a fairly prominent prelate at the papal curia.<sup>1</sup> At a time when the papacy continuously strove to organize the Christian princes in order to stop the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, Nicholas served as one of the curia's experts for the region. He was well suited for this role: before coming to Rome he was a bishop whose career had long been promoted by Count Stjepan Frankapan of Modruš (ca. 1410–84), the most powerful lord of Croatia, under whose wing he rose to the Modruš see and the position of Pope Pius II's (r. 1458–64) legate. The two major missions entrusted to him by the pope, however, both ended unhappily: his brief sojourn at the Bosnian court was cut short by the Ottoman conquest of the kingdom in 1463, and his equally short stay at the Hungarian court came to an end when King Matthias Corvinus (r. 1458–90) exiled him for involving himself in courtly intrigues on Count Stjepan's behalf. With no possibility of returning to his seat of Modruš—where Stjepan also fell out of King Matthias's grace—Nicholas moved to the papal curia. Owing to his talents and connections with influential cardinals, he rebuilt his career and established himself as the most prominent figure among the local Illyrians, a small national community led by Croatian curialists who claimed to represent what they imagined was the Illyrian nation, i.e., the South Slavs.<sup>2</sup> Together with Catherine, queen of Bosnia (1425–78)—who, like Nicholas, had barely escaped the Ottoman invasion of her kingdom before eventually reaching Rome in 1467<sup>3</sup>—Nicholas became the leading representative of the Illyrian nation at the curia. This was the reason why he started writing the *De Bellis*

<sup>1</sup> Aside from working on the edition and English translation of the *De Bellis Gothorum*, I am currently preparing a biography of Nicholas of Modruš, in which I explore the role played by Croatian churchmen and their ideas of the nation in the politics of the fifteenth-century Adriatic. In the meantime, for a general overview of the bishop's life, see Mercati; Neralić, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The Illyrian community of Rome consisted of Croatian churchmen and lay immigrants from Dalmatia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Slavonia. For the life of this community in the second half of the fifteenth century, see Neralić, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> On Queen Catherine's life, see Thallóczy, 110–20.

*Gothorum* in 1472, and why his contemporaries styled him as the “Glory of Illyria” and the “New Jerome.”<sup>4</sup>

The nation, to be sure, is one of the most debated historiographic subjects, having witnessed a marked surge of interest as result of the major disillusionment with nationalism after World War II. Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Benedict Anderson have done much to deconstruct the long-standing primordialist view of nations as ahistorical entities.<sup>5</sup> Although they disagree on a number of points, all three scholars promote the view that nations are imagined communities that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and thus have no premodern history to speak of. This modernist paradigm drew criticisms early on, but it is only in the last decade or so that historians began to stress the pivotal role that Renaissance humanists and churchmen played in the emergence and development of nationalist discourse.<sup>6</sup> Caspar Hirschi, who provides the most thorough challenge to the modernist paradigm, interprets the birth of the idea of the nation as a pan-European response to the imperial idea.<sup>7</sup> The key episode in its development, according to Hirschi, was the Council of Constance in 1414–18, where the European political and ecclesiastical rivalries led to the reimagining of Christendom as a mosaic of nations, whereby nation was imagined as “political, cultural and linguistic community, inhabiting a territory of its own and sharing an exclusive honour with its members.”<sup>8</sup> While it played a small role in the lives of the vast majority of the population, national discourse came to exert significant influence on learned circles across the continent. Driven by humanist learning and the Ciceronian ideal of *orator doctus*, numerous intellectuals came to present themselves as the moral and intellectual caretakers of their respective nations. They believed they were entrusted with the mission of civilizing their unlearned compatriots, defending national honor in the face of foreign attacks, and bolstering the claims of chosen secular rulers by portraying them as the protectors of their nations. Writing a national history was often seen as a way to achieve these goals.

This article argues that Nicholas of Modruš’s *De Bellis Gothorum*, long discounted as a piece of unoriginal antiquarianism, was one such national history.

<sup>4</sup> This appears most prominently in his epitaph that once stood in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo; see Forcella, 368 (inscription 1421).

<sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm; Gellner; Anderson.

<sup>6</sup> Helmuth, et al.; Münkler, et al.; Hirschi. The volume of Trencsényi and Zászkaliczky brings together a number of case studies on the material from early modern East Central Europe.

<sup>7</sup> Hirschi, 20–49. Hirschi discusses the shortcomings of earlier influential critics of the modernist paradigm, such as Anthony D. Smith with his theory on the ethnic origins of the nations.

<sup>8</sup> Hirschi, 81–88.

By placing the composition of the work in its proper intellectual and political contexts, the article will show that the *De Bellis Gothorum* strove to provide cultural and political legitimacy to the imagined Illyrian nation, as well as the group of people who claimed to represent this nation. Nicholas sought to construct a positive account of his nation's history by turning to the Sallustian historiographic model and Croatian medieval traditions of Gothic origin. His goal was to offer historical advice by highlighting political pitfalls and opportunities and by delineating the roles that Illyrians and other nations in the Adriatic world were meant to play in the course of the renewed war against the Ottomans. By contextualizing the *De Bellis Gothorum*, this article reconstructs a previously unknown episode in the political history of the Renaissance Adriatic, an episode that offers unique insights into how Croatian and Bosnian elites, threatened by the seemingly unstoppable Ottoman advance, imagined their own place in a region contested by Hungary, Venice, and Naples.

#### NATIONAL HISTORIES AND THE GOTHS

When they wrote national histories, humanists followed a similar pattern. They created national myths of origin, praised their respective national characters, cataloged their national heroes and saints, delineated their national territories, and so forth. The goal was, of course, to assert the superiority of their nation over others. The Italian humanists were the ones who started this trend. Biondo Flavio's (1392–1463) *Italia Illustrata* (Italy illuminated), a work that soon became the model of national history writing, sang praises of the geography, famous men, and history of Italy, "the foremost of the provinces of the world."<sup>9</sup> Before long, such claims instigated manifold responses across Europe: the French upheld Paris and its university as the true center of European learning; Germans turned to Tacitus to stress their purity and uncorrupted morals; and Hungarians celebrated Attila the Hun and his military exploits. When Croatian humanists entered this international fray, they boasted

<sup>9</sup> Biondo, 2005–16, 1:10–11: "Italiam describere exorsi, provinciarum orbis primariam." On the idea of Italy in the writings of the humanists, see Fubini, 1988; Prosperi. Although Biondo was the most influential national historian, the works of other Italian humanists were also marked by a national perspective. For instance, Gary Ianziti has shown to what extent Leonardo Bruni's historiographic oeuvre was marked not only by local Florentine bias, but also by wider Italian concerns, while Anthony D'Elia has noted the presence of nationalist discourse in the work of Basinio Basini, a humanist in the service of Sigismondo Malatesta; see Ianziti, 61–88, 237–300; D'Elia, 117–19.

of their ancient Dalmatian or Illyrian roots and their fearlessness and piety, taking particular offense at Biondo's claims that Saint Jerome, whom they saw as their national patron saint—the very emblem of their nation—had been an Italian.<sup>10</sup>

The ancient Goths played a prominent role in various national narratives, both in Italy and across Europe, and, indeed, Nicholas of Modruš's *De Bellis Gothorum* was not the first humanist work that explored their history. More than a half-century earlier Leonardo Bruni had used Orosius and Giovanni Villani's *Chronicle* to reconstruct the Visigothic invasion of Italy in the first book of his *Historiae Florentini Populi* (History of the Florentine people).<sup>11</sup> Even more importantly, Bruni significantly expanded his earlier brief treatment of Justinian's reconquest of Italy when he came across the work of the Byzantine historian Procopius and extensively mined it for his *De Bello Italico Adversus Gothos* (On the Italian war against the Goths) in 1441. Bruni's goal was to provide an account of the then little-known yet crucial chapter of Italian national history, which marked the end of the country's felicitous antiquity.<sup>12</sup> As James Hankins has shown, the work also had a clear political agenda: by showing how Justinian's Greeks had once helped Italians fend off the savage Ostrogoths, Bruni sought to help the dedicatee, Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, raise support for a Crusade that would save the contemporary Greeks from the savage Turks. The anti-Turkish connotation of the work was not lost on contemporaries. It is not a coincidence that the *De Bello Italico* saw its first printed editions in 1470 and 1471, when a renewed Crusading spirit pervaded Italy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as a lot of Italian humanists believed, the Goths were, like the Lombards, Huns, Hungarians, and others, part of the same mutually connected pack of Scythian barbarians that brought destruction to Italy and that now, with the rise of the Turks, threatened it once again.<sup>14</sup>

Biondo Flavio, however, the other Italian humanist who provided a detailed account of the Gothic wars, in the first seven books of his history of medieval Italy, *Historiarum ab Inclinazione Romani Imperii Decades* (Decades of history from the decline of the Roman Empire), presented the Goths in a more

<sup>10</sup> For the Croatian-Dalmatian cult of Saint Jerome, see Ivić. As the anonymous author of the vernacular *Life of Saint Jerome*, composed in Split or Trogir around 1500, put it, "Jerome is our Dalmatian; he is the pride, honor, and glory and the shining crown of the Croatian nation": see Bratulić, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Bruni, 2001–07, 1:54–69. For Bruni and his historiographic oeuvre, see Ianziti.

<sup>12</sup> Bruni, 1470.

<sup>13</sup> Hankins. The first editions of Bruni's *De Bello Italico* are ISTC ib01234000 (Foligno, 1470), and ib01235000 (Venice, 1471).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, this is the historical picture presented in the widely popular *Supplementum Chronicarum* by Jacopo Filippo Foresti of Bergamo; see Meserve, 2008, 81–84.

favorable light.<sup>15</sup> As scholars have long noted, Biondo, unlike Bruni, showed appreciation for the rule and learning of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric and his daughter, Queen Amalasantha, praising in particular Theodoric's efforts to conserve and restore the ancient buildings and monuments of the city of Rome.<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Costa has rightly stressed the importance of Biondo's account of Ostrogothic rule for the development of Gothicism around Europe,<sup>17</sup> and, indeed, it is hardly surprising that a curialist such as Nicholas of Modruš also built many of his points on Biondo's work. Yet Biondo himself did not praise the Goths qua barbarians; he praised them precisely because they imbibed Roman culture and received Roman education.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, he too had no doubts that, when considered within the framework of Italian history, the Goths were the Other. In his *Decades* he explained the Visigothic rebellions by recourse to the nation's barbarian character; he marked their conquest of Rome as the beginning of its decline and though he praised the reign of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, he presented him as, at best, the "mildest of all the barbarian kings under which Italy and Rome have suffered."<sup>19</sup> Another work dedicated to the Goths was the 1453 abridgment of Jordanes's *Getica* by Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II.<sup>20</sup> Though it was not nearly as popular as those of Bruni and Biondo, Piccolomini's history illustrates the widespread fascination with the Goths in Italian humanist circles around the middle of the fifteenth century.

The Goths were seen in an entirely different manner across the Adriatic. Confronted with the lack of narrative sources on the origins of the Croatian-Dalmatian kingdom, local historians had long tied it to the Ostrogoths. The idea of the Gothic origins of the Croats appears as early as the twelfth century,

<sup>15</sup> For these first seven books, see Biondo, 1559, 1–101. In his account of the Gothic wars, Biondo accused Bruni of outright plagiarizing Procopius; on this debate see Ianziti, 278–300. For an overview of Biondo's life and career, see Fubini, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> Costa, 17–31; Pontari. Biondo praises the Ostrogothic rulers in his *Italia Illustrata* and *Roma instaurata* (Rome restored) as well. On Bruni's and Biondo's different takes on the question of decline and rebirth, see Mazzocco.

<sup>17</sup> Costa, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Costa, 29–31, 43–44; Pontari 171–73.

<sup>19</sup> Biondo, 1559, 33: "Is autem rex omnium quos Italia et Roma pertulerint barbarorum mitissimus fuit."

<sup>20</sup> As Piccolomini describes in the presentation letter to Cardinal Juan de Carvajal, he came across the manuscript of Jordanes's *Getica* in the Göttweig monastery; see Wolkan, 115 (letter 56); Weinig, 11. For the edition of the work, see Piccolomini, 1730. The bibliography on Piccolomini is immense, but see Mitchell; Paparelli; Baldi, 2006 and 2012.

and was a common feature of Croatian-Dalmatian historiography.<sup>21</sup> For instance, according to the vernacular *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats*, Ostroilo, the supposed brother of Totila, king of the Ostrogoths, founded the Croatian-Dalmatian kingdom, which, after the death of his last descendant, Zvonimir, at the end of the eleventh century, passed under Hungarian rule.<sup>22</sup> With the pan-European diffusion of humanist nationalism, Croatian humanists relied on such traditions to include the Goths among a host of ancient peoples as their national ancestors.<sup>23</sup> Marko Marulić of Split (1450–1524) even produced a translation of the *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats* so that “not only those who speak our mother tongue can understand it, but also those who use Latin.”<sup>24</sup> As will be seen, Nicholas of Modruš relied on the same tradition. The difference was that when he came to write the history of his nation—which he and other Croatian churchmen at the curia called Illyrian, and which, according to them, included not only contemporary Croats but also Bosnians and Serbs who had to be converted to Catholicism<sup>25</sup>—he decided to focus it solely on the Goths.

<sup>21</sup> The Korčulan *Liber pontificalis* from the 1130s seems to preserve the earliest known references to the Gothic origins of the Croats; see Foretić, 29–30.

<sup>22</sup> The *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats* (alternatively called the *Croatian Chronicle*) is largely based on (and often misleadingly called the redaction of) the *Deeds of the Kings of the Slavs* (also known as the *Chronicle of the Doclean Priest*), a somewhat problematic text that was most likely composed in the twelfth or thirteenth century to legitimize the claims of the church of Bar (in present-day Montenegro) to the status of archbishopric. Recently, however, two alternative, highly speculative theories by Tibor Živković and Solange Bujan have been proposed concerning its composition. For an overview of this debate and problems with Bujan’s and Živković’s theses, see Steindorff. The dating of the *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats* to the fourteenth or the early fifteenth century is more or less widely accepted; see, for instance, Šišić, 10–11; Ančić; Kapetanović. For the editions of the two works, see Mošin.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the catalogue of Illyrian ancestors made by Juraj Šižgorić of Šibenik in his 1487 *De Situ Illyriae et Civitate Sibenici* (On the location of Illyria and the city of Šibenik) in Šižgorić, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Marulić, 172: “quam non solum nostrae vernaculae gnari, sed etiam Latinae intelligant.”

<sup>25</sup> The complex question of early Croatian nationalism far exceeds the scope of this article. I will discuss it in greater detail in my biography of Nicholas of Modruš. In brief, however, it can be said that in the fifteenth century two nationalist matrices were shaped in the Croatian-Dalmatian republic of letters: the narrower Croatian-Dalmatian one, which more or less corresponded with the extent of the network of intellectuals who promoted it; and the wider Slavic-Illyrian one, whereby those who promoted it claimed to represent all the South Slavs or even the entire Slavdom (with whose elites they had little to no contact at this time). As Blažević shows in her pioneering study on Illyrianism, the dramatic political and religious changes in the sixteenth century have complicated this picture.

This understanding of Nicholas of Modruš's *De Bellis Gothorum* as a national history stands in stark contrast to the extant body of scholarship dating back to the late nineteenth century. Indeed, scholars have long misconstrued the work, in part because the *De Bellis Gothorum* has, until now, only been available through a fragmentary autograph manuscript preserved in the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana in Rome. Giovanni Mercati, who leafed through the Corsinian manuscript a century ago and introduced it to the scholarship, was disappointed by what he saw as a piece of unoriginal antiquarianism overly reliant on ancient sources.<sup>26</sup> To be fair, that the text is preserved without a dedicatory letter did not make it easy for him to understand Nicholas's motives. The only feature that Mercati found interesting was Nicholas's penchant for inserting autobiographical digressions into his narrative, and so he published Nicholas's description of the origins of Wallachs (Romanians) and their notorious ruler, Vlad III Dracula "The Impaler" (r. 1448, 1456–62, 1476), whom he had earlier encountered in the prison of the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus. While these passages have provoked much discussion among both scholars and amateur enthusiasts interested in medieval Romania and the most notorious of its lords, the *De Bellis Gothorum* continued to languish in obscurity and is all but unknown in modern scholarship.<sup>27</sup> In order to shed more light on this work, this article relies on another, so far unknown, and significantly longer manuscript copy of an earlier redaction preserved in the Vatican Library. Although the final quires of this manuscript were also removed, making it impossible to know exactly how Nicholas concluded the work, it can now be said with a fair degree of certainty that he did bring at least the first draft to an end.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mercati, 229–30.

<sup>27</sup> For example, there is no mention of the work in Cochrane's voluminous and detailed overview of historiography in Renaissance Italy, and those studies that do mention it usually repeat Mercati's judgments. On Dracula, see Cazacu.

<sup>28</sup> Although more will be said on the dating and the differences between the two redactions in the preface to my edition of the work, a brief note is here in order. BANLC, Corsin. 43.E.3 preserves the text of some twenty thousand words, which ends abruptly with the death of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. BAV, Vat. lat. 6029 preserves a large portion of an earlier redaction, of some sixty thousand words, which cuts off with the rise of Ildibad to the Ostrogothic throne in 540. While the Corsinian manuscript is an autograph, the Vatican one offers a clean copy of the text made by an unidentified humanist scribe and corrected in places by Nicholas himself. Although, as Mercati argued, the work was probably written during Nicholas's year-long sojourn in Rome in 1473, other evidence suggests that he began working on it in the winter of 1472.



## A DIFFERENT HISTORY OF THE GOTHIC WARS

The differences between the Italian and the Croatian historiographic tradition had a profound impact on the way Nicholas of Modruš shaped his *De Bellis Gothorum*. A humanist who wanted to write a pro-Gothic account of the invasions while writing in his own country might have praised them as glorious conquests.<sup>29</sup> Yet Nicholas composed his work in the midst of Italian intellectual circles, during the years that saw the printing of the first editions of Bruni's *De Bello Italico Adversus Gothos*, which highlighted the parallels between the Goths and the Turks. As a result, he chose to present himself as an impartial narrator and resort to subtler measures to vindicate the barbarians. To be sure, Nicholas was able to draw on Biondo's more positive account of the Goths. Yet in many ways he went beyond what Biondo had done, and this was well recognized by contemporaries. Francesco Maturanzio (1443–1518), a young Italian humanist who entered Nicholas's service in Venice in the spring of 1472 and accompanied him to the Aegean, seems to have read parts of the *De Bellis Gothorum* while Nicholas was still working on it.<sup>30</sup> In one of the epigrams he composed during their journey to the East, Maturanzio first praises the learning and literary genius of his new patron, but then laments his decision to pursue this particular topic:

You describe how once upon a time from the Scythian land  
 came the vile Goths and destroyed the Italian cities.  
 And you do not lack in talent: you either describe fierce battles,  
 condemn as is fit, or praise the good deeds.  
 The matter is beneath your learning, and you do not use appropriate words,  
 but, on the contrary, you are careful to restrain them.  
 How truly blessed are those whom the past brought forth,  
 although the savage Goths did not deserve this honor.<sup>31</sup>

Had Maturanzio understood that his patron identified with the Goths, he probably would not have criticized them so openly. Yet he did realize that, unlike the

<sup>29</sup> This is, for instance, the tone that Beatus Rhenanus uses to describe the invasions in his letter to Bonifaz Amerbach; see Hirschi, 119–20.

<sup>30</sup> On Maturanzio, see Falzone.

<sup>31</sup> The epigram is found in a manuscript of Maturanzio's poetry; see BAV, Ottob. lat. 2011, fol. 17<sup>v</sup>, lines 7–14: "Tu canis ausonias ut quondam everterit urbes / a scythico veniens impius orbe Gothus. / Nec desunt artes: seu fortia proelia narras / seu merito accusas seu benefacta probas. / Res est ingenio inferior nec commoda quaeris / verba, sed est illis addere cura modum. / Foelices nimium quos saecula prisca tulerunt, / quamquam hoc crudeles non merueret Gothi." Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

works of Bruni and Biondo, Nicholas's *De Bellis Gothorum* explored a crucial chapter of Italian national history from the perspective of the Goths rather than that of the Romans, and that it presented a "restrained" account of their deeds. And he certainly found this to be unorthodox.

Indeed, as this section will show, Nicholas did not view the Goths as the least bad of the barbarian invaders of Italy, but ultimately sought to challenge the barbarian label altogether and put them on the same plane as the Romans. To this end, he resorted to Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* (The war with Jugurtha, 40 BCE), a history of the Roman war with the Numidian king Jugurtha (111–05 BCE), as his literary model. Nicholas signals his debt to Sallust in the opening lines of his work,<sup>32</sup> and he duly follows his model throughout: he introduces extensive geographic descriptions of Scandza and the Baltic Sea, the Danube, Italy, and Sicily; he presents rapid and intensive portrayals of battles; and he peppers his narrative with numerous orations.<sup>33</sup> This section will show how Nicholas used the Sallustian historiographic model to construct a positive image of the Gothic nation, its character, and its national heroes, and to challenge the anti-barbarian discourse of Italian humanists.

A Sallustian pathos-driven portrayal of battles thus provides the backbone to Nicholas's efforts to revamp the Gothic character. Instead of savage barbarians, the Goths appear as brave Christians who rebel against the empire only after a series of corrupt Roman generals try to destroy them. After accepting Christianity from the Arian bishops sent by Emperor Valens and settling in Moesia to serve as the empire's bulwark (*propugnaculum*) against the Huns, the Visigoths eventually raise their arms in rebellion, raid the province, and finally defeat the Romans at the Battle of Adrianople, killing the emperor himself. Although both Bruni and Biondo recognized the corruption of the Roman generals and the general shortage of supplies as causes of the Visigothic rebellion, they also added that the Gothic princes were savage and bellicose men who hated idleness.<sup>34</sup> For Nicholas it is solely the greed of the Roman generals that provoked the Gothic rebellion, and to emphasize this point he waxes on about the pitiful state of the Gothic people

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas's "Bella Gothorum scripturus quae ter Italia dirissima pertulit" evokes Sallust's "Bellum scripturus sum quod populus Romanus cum Iugurtha rege Numidarum gessit"; see BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>; Sallust, 138–39 (*The War with Jugurtha* 5.1). Interestingly, a quarter-century earlier the Florentine humanist Matteo Palmieri (1406–75) announced his imitation of Sallust in his *De Captivitate Pisarum* (On the capture of Pisa) in the same way, by starting the work with the sentence: "Bellum scripturus sum in quo Pisae sunt a Florentino Populo captae." On Palmieri and Sallust, see Cochrane, 26.

<sup>33</sup> For the style of Sallust and his *Bellum Iugurthinum*, see the classic study by Syme, 138–77, 240–73; also Woodman, 117–59.

<sup>34</sup> Bruni, 2001–07, 1:58–59; Biondo, 1559, 7.

caused by Roman greed. In addition, Nicholas reverts back to Jordanes and incorporates the part of the story that was omitted by both Brunī and Biondo, which spoke about the Roman attempt to ambush and kill Fritigern, the future leader of the rebellion. It is the Goths, not the Romans, who enjoy God's protection: while Fritigern is saved through divine intervention, in the ensuing Battle of Adrianople the emperor meets a horrible death through divine retribution.<sup>35</sup>

After a similar, pro-Gothic account of the Battle of Pollentia,<sup>36</sup> Nicholas proceeds to describe the famous Sack of Rome, perhaps the most powerful example of his reenvisioning of the Gothic ethos. In the first redaction of his work, Nicholas presents the episode briefly, in a mere three sentences.<sup>37</sup> However, upon revising his work, he resorts to Orosius to significantly expand his account:<sup>38</sup>

While the greed for loot drove the barbarians not to spare even the most sacred things, one soldier entered the convent in which the nuns dedicated to Christ used to live. He came upon one of them, venerable in both age and appearance, seized her, and under threat of torture forced her to reveal whether she had any gold stashed with her. Overcome by her womanly fear the nun showed him a great stash of hidden gold and silver but said: "Beware by which audacity and violence you touch the vessels from the sacristy of Peter, prince of the Apostles, that were entrusted to me. I am dedicated to the sacred service and would never dare to hand them over to you." The Goth admired the mass of the vessels and their number . . . and, struck by fear at the sound of the Apostle's name, instantly reported the matter to Alaric and asked him what to do about it. The king at once ordered that nothing should be touched and that the same nun should return everything back to the sacristy with the utmost reverence, adding: "I lead war against the Romans, not against the Apostles."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 7<sup>v</sup>–8<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 16<sup>r</sup>–17<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 18<sup>r</sup>–v.

<sup>38</sup> Orosius, 292–94 (7.39).

<sup>39</sup> BANLC, Corsin. 43.E.3, fols. 30<sup>v</sup>–31<sup>r</sup>: "Nam dum barbaros praedae aviditas nec sacratissimis quibusque parcere compelleret, miles quidam monasterium ingressus in quo virgines Christo dicatae degere consueverant unam forte offendit et aetate et vultu venerabilem apprehensam tamen audacius compellat quicquid auri apud se depositum haberet ante cruciatus depromere. Illa muliebri pavore territa celati auri atque argenti vim ingentem ostendit, 'Haec,' inquit, 'vasa de sacrario principis apostolorum Petri meae fidei credita vide sis qua audacia violentus contingas. Ego divino sacrata cultui numquam tibi ausim tradere.' Admiratus vasorum pondus ac magnitudinem Gothus . . . simul et ad nomen apostoli subito timore correptus rem Halarico indicat et quid fieri velit requirit. Rex extemplo praecipit intacta omnia per eandem virginem summa cum veneratione in sacrarium referri, negans se cum apostolis sed cum Romanis bellum gerere."

Whereas Biondo puts stress on barbarian greed and presents the sack as the beginning of the empire's decline,<sup>40</sup> Nicholas slows down the narrative and describes a lengthy episode that emphasizes Gothic piety. The description of barbarity that opens the episode and initially purports to denounce the Goths ultimately plays the key role in subverting the label *barbarian* used to describe them. The rhetorical *chreia* which Nicholas places into Alaric's mouth, "I lead war against the Romans, not against the Apostles," thus presents the essence of both his and, synecdochically, Gothic character as warlike but pious, and hence, by definition, unbarbarian.

The account of the Sack of Rome illustrates the way Nicholas fashions Gothic kings into national heroes, exemplary figures who provide care for the corporeal and moral well-being of their nation. Nicholas does not deny that, initially, the Goths were barbarians. Yet he regularly mitigates these accusations and often suggests that owing to their leaders they became more temperate and civilized. Vallia and Theodoric play an important role in this process, as these two kings are the ones who convince the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, respectively, to forgo their intemperance, heed imperial orders, and settle down in Spain and Italy to faithfully serve as the empire's bulwarks against the other barbarians.<sup>41</sup> In fact, Theodoric shows incredible valor and courage in liberating Italy from Odoacer's tyranny; he becomes a just and learned ruler and carries out the restoration of Rome with the full support of both his Ostrogothic and Latin subjects as well as that of the eastern Emperor Zeno, at whose court he was educated. No less important a national hero is Theodoric's daughter Amalasantha, whom Nicholas praises lavishly for her incredible learning, her knowledge of Latin and Greek, and above all her moral virtue, by which she "either equaled or surpassed all the ancient matrons."<sup>42</sup> Nicholas goes out of his way to highlight Amalasantha's political skill, strategic acumen, and modesty: once the learned but wicked Theodatus is made her co-ruler, it is she who is responsible for the few good deeds that he does, although she chooses not to take credit for any of them.<sup>43</sup>

When praising Theodoric and Amalasantha, Nicholas was able to draw on Biondo, but it is significant that, unlike Biondo, Nicholas expands the gallery of Gothic national heroes to include a number of rulers who had not been as learned or appreciative of Roman culture, such as Fritigern and Alaric or, as will be seen in the following section, Filimir and Hermanaric. Nicholas's

<sup>40</sup> Biondo, 1559, 10. On Biondo's take on the Visigothic Sack of Rome, see Costa, 20–23.

<sup>41</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 25<sup>v</sup>–26<sup>v</sup> and 28<sup>r</sup>–29<sup>v</sup>, respectively.

<sup>42</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 47<sup>r</sup>: "quae priscas omnes matronas virtutis merito vel aequaverit vel superaverit."

<sup>43</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 44<sup>r</sup>.

emphasis on the authentic, non-Roman virtues of the Goths is most visible in the introductory chapters, which discuss the earliest history of the Goths. Here Nicholas returns to the material found in Jordanes that was passed over by Biondo and, in returning, he introduces the Gothic philosophers Zalmoxis, Zeuta, and Diceneus, who imparted the knowledge of natural philosophy, ethics, and logic to many of their countrymen.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, rather than merely lifting and adapting passages from Jordanes's work, Nicholas also uses Strabo's *Geography* to describe how Gothic kings often relied on the advice of Zalmoxis and his successors.<sup>45</sup> While Biondo highlights the role that Roman education played in civilizing the Ostrogothic rulers, for Nicholas the Gothic kings and philosophers had begun the process of civilizing their people in their own traditions even before they entered the territory of the Roman Empire and accepted Christianity.

Nicholas thus devotes the first two books of his work to the first two wars the Goths waged in Italy: the invasion of Alaric's Visigoths and the liberation of Italy from Odoacer's tyranny by Theodoric's Ostrogoths. He uses the sources at his disposal to prove the fearsome and pious character of the two fraternal nations, portray their rulers as civilized and good, and highlight their military achievements in the service of the empire. Unfortunately, Nicholas's account of the third and longest Gothic war, Justinian's reconquest of Italy, is not preserved in full. The text of the longer, Vatican manuscript cuts off at Ildibad's ascent to the Ostrogothic throne in 540 at what was likely the very end of the fifth book. The quires that presumably contained his account of the remaining years of the war, the long reign of Totila (r. 541–52), and Totila's defeat at the Battle of Busta Gallorum, as well as Narses's subsequent pacification of Italy (552–62)—episodes narrated by Nicholas's chief source, Procopius, as transmitted through the works of Biondo and Brunni<sup>46</sup>—remain lost. Yet even if the end of the *De Bellis Gothorum* is not preserved, Nicholas's account of Ostrogothic rule over Italy implicitly presents Justinian's conquest as an unwarranted war that only brought destruction to the country and rendered it defenseless against the invasion of the savage Lombards. Biondo himself makes the point that this long war left Italy without sufficient troops to withstand the Lombard attack,<sup>47</sup> and it is likely, given his general argument, that Nicholas also explicitly made this point at the end of his work.

<sup>44</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 2<sup>v</sup>–3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Jordanes, 64 and 73–75; Strabo, fols. 81<sup>v</sup>–82<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Considering the harsh attacks Brunni received for not quoting Procopius by name, it is no wonder that Nicholas made sure to explicitly call on his authority at a number of places; see BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 68<sup>v</sup>, 77<sup>v</sup>, 78<sup>r</sup>, 91<sup>r</sup>, 91<sup>v</sup>, 106<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Biondo, 1559, 101.

To be sure, Nicholas does criticize Justinian's invasion, and indeed quite explicitly, in the preserved parts of the work. He does so in the speeches of the Goths, again taking his cue from Sallust, who by presenting the putative viewpoints of Rome's opponents criticized Roman imperialist politics.<sup>48</sup> Similarly to Sallust's model, Nicholas has the Goths attack the legitimacy of Justinian's invasion by rejecting, among other things, Roman and Greek claims of Gothic barbarity. For instance, he has Asclepiodotus, the representative of the pro-Ostrogothic party in Naples, argue against surrendering the city to Justinian's general Belisarius by claiming that it would be better to serve the Goths, "even though they are called 'barbarians', rather than these degraded Greeklings, whose greed and appetite no man was ever able to satisfy and whose arrogance and pride no one was ever able to stomach."<sup>49</sup> Here Asclepiodotus uses the label *barbarian* to designate the Goths under question, and then makes the point that the Goths have imbibed the Roman culture to such an extent that "they had all but coalesced" with their subjects.<sup>50</sup> Nicholas's attack on anti-barbarian discourse is even more direct further in the text, in the oration delivered before Belisarius by the Gothic envoys. The Goths now question the legitimacy of the invasion by mocking Justinian as a lawgiver who fails to produce a legitimate cause for war, and by recalling the blood that their nation shed while liberating Italy from Odoacer's tyranny.<sup>51</sup> Again, the supposed barbarity of the Goths is brought into discussion:

Had we been attacked by beasts or some savage people, our complaints would have been pointless, since it is foolish to ask for reasons from those whom nature formed deprived of reason. But since it is you that have brought war upon us—a man just as much Latin as Greek, both of which peoples have grown accustomed to perceive other nations as inhuman and barbarian and claim both culture [*humanitas*] and a sense of justice as their exclusive privileges—we can, indeed, ask you about the reason that induced you to attack us contrary to law and right.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> On speeches in ancient historiography, see Marincola. On speeches in Sallust's works specifically, see Nicolai.

<sup>49</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 58<sup>v</sup>: "Nemo est enim qui Gothis, quamvis barbaris appellatis, servire non malint quam his obsoletis Graeculis, quorum avaritiam libidinemque nullus umquam explere quivit nec fastum atque superbiam tolerare."

<sup>50</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 58<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 78<sup>v</sup>–79<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 78<sup>v</sup>: "Si nos ferae aut aliquod hominum agreste genus armis lacerarent, vana esset nostra expostulatio, quando quidem stulte ab illis exigitur ratio quos natura exsortes finxit rationis. Sed cum nobis tu bellum intuleris—homo et Latinus et

By having his Goths play here on the double image of Justinian's empire as both Greek and Roman, Nicholas challenges the anti-barbarian discourse not only of ancient Greek and Roman authors, but also of contemporary Greek and Italian humanists. This is not to say that the Roman characters do not make arguments of their own. Just like many Italian humanists, the Romans in the *De Bellis Gothorum* accuse the Goths of barbarity, point to their savage and intemperate nature, and back these accusations with tales of the pillages, plunders, and massacres they had perpetrated against the Romans from time immemorial. However, the Sallustian historiographic model allowed Nicholas to give, for the first time, voice to the Goths, and, in this way, to explicitly state his most controversial thoughts while preserving the appearance of impartiality. In the first two books Nicholas had shown that the Goths were a fierce Christian nation that was no less civilized than the Romans; here he made sure to explicitly state that the label *barbarian* used to designate them was simply a product of Roman-Italian baseless arrogance and that, consequently, Justinian's conquest was an unwarranted attack that paved the way for the invasion of Italy by the savage Lombards.

#### GENEALOGICAL CONNECTIONS

The *De Bellis Gothorum* was thus a pragmatic history of a bygone period that invited its readers to reflect on its analogies with the contemporary world, whether by challenging the anti-barbarian discourse of Italian humanists, or, as will be seen later on, by offering political advice. It was not, however, only a "distant mirror," as, for instance, Gary Ianziti has aptly called Leonardo Bruni's *Commentarium Rerum Greacarum* (Commentary on Greek affairs).<sup>53</sup> Nicholas did, indeed, focus his work on the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Romans, and other ancient peoples, but he also made sure to establish their genealogical connections with contemporary nations. Exploring these connections is important to an understanding of the true purpose of the *De Bellis Gothorum*.

Even though Nicholas starts his narrative by tracing the earliest history of the Goths, at the very beginning of the work he also briefly introduces the Hungarians and Wallachs. Nicholas presents Hungarians as descendants of Huns, whom he defines as the most savage and most vile of all the barbarian

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Græcus cuius utrumque genus ceteras nationes inhumanas ac barbaras habere consuevit propriumque sibi et humanitatis et iusticiæ honorem usurpare—non possumus non abs te eam exigere rationem, qua potissimum adductus tu nos contra ius fasque ferro infestas."

<sup>53</sup> Bruni's commentary on the history of Greece from 406 to 362 BCE was written to highlight the parallels with the contemporary political scene in Italy and warn the Italian elites of the risks of pursuing internecine war; see Ianziti, 237–56.

nations that Europe has ever seen.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the Goths who originated in Scandza, Nicholas argues that the Huns-Hungarians are part of the group of barbarians that came from behind the mythical Riphean (Hyperborean) mountains in Scythia, thus implicitly associating them with the Turks. In order to further demonize them, Nicholas returns to the passages in Jordanes, which Biondo had passed over, that emphasize that Huns-Hungarians were born out of the diabolical union of the demons and witches whom the noble Gothic king Filimir had cast out of the Gothic nation.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, to add further weight to Jordanes's account and leave no doubt as to the demonic origin of the Hungarians, Nicholas claims to have seen with his own eyes in Croatia a baby who was born after a revenant had come back from the grave to rape his own widow: the baby supposedly looked exactly like a Hun-Hungarian.<sup>56</sup> Although the Huns initially exploited the chaos that followed the death of the great Ostrogothic king Hermanaric to "subjugate the Ostrogoths into miserable servitude," the Ostrogoths are in the end victorious, pushing the Huns out of Pannonia back to their Scythian homeland.<sup>57</sup> Through such carefully constructed episodes, Nicholas effectively turns the Huns-Hungarians into a lightning rod to reroute the charges of barbarism laid against the Goths.

Although the passages dedicated to Vlad Dracula and the Wallachs,<sup>58</sup> published more than a century ago by Giovanni Mercati, have been widely cited in scholarship, no one so far has posed the question as to why these passages were introduced into a work on the Gothic invasions in the first place. Here Nicholas presents the Wallachs in an entirely negative fashion, as treacherous people given to banditry, whose allegiance constantly switches between the Hungarian king and the Ottoman sultan. He dedicates even more space to their tyrant, Dracula, giving a long and detailed description of the tortures he inflicted upon his political opponents—which notably surpasses any description of the Gothic bloodshed to which the work was avowedly dedicated. Yet part of the reason why Nicholas introduces these oft-quoted passages into a work on the Gothic wars arguably lies in the emphasis he places on the fact that the Wallachs descend from "former Roman exiles or soldiers."<sup>59</sup> By presenting the Wallachs as untrustworthy savages and, significantly, Romans by origin, Nicholas here makes a subtle jab at the Italian humanists, challenging

<sup>54</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 1<sup>v</sup> and 4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 4<sup>r-v</sup>; Jordanes, 89.

<sup>56</sup> BANLC, Corsin. 43.E.3, fol. 7<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 3<sup>v</sup> and 27<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 1<sup>v</sup>-2<sup>r</sup> and 6<sup>v</sup>-7<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 1<sup>v</sup>.



the idea of *romanitas* as the embodiment of cultural greatness.<sup>60</sup> Rather than the Goths, it is the Huns-Hungarians and the Wallachs(-Romans) who can justly be called barbarians.

It is, of course, the fraternal Gothic nations, the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, that play the lead roles in Nicholas's narrative. In drawing his account of the Visigothic war to a close, Nicholas reflects on their settlement in Spain, when after years of war they finally reached a compromise with the emperor. Nicholas finishes the first book of his work in the following way:

From this time onwards Caesar Constantine relied on the most zealous and trustworthy efforts of the Goths in fighting off other barbarian nations and restored the empire that was nearly destroyed. Vallia effectively became the ruler of Spain and thus founded both the realm and the family line of all the kings of Spain, who after nearly eighty continuous generations persevered even until our time and preserved the realm that they had received, even though it suffered in numerous wars and remained disintegrated for more than twenty years by the kings of the Moors.<sup>61</sup>

By making the connection between the Visigoths and the Spanish, Nicholas draws on Castilian historiographic traditions, according to which the kingdom of León-Castile was founded by the Visigoths in the aftermath of the Arab invasion of the peninsula.<sup>62</sup> This tradition was widely known in Italian humanist circles, and it is no wonder that Italian humanists often dedicated their works on Gothic history to the Spanish elites. Piccolomini thus dedicated his abridgment of Jordanes's *Getica* to Cardinal Juan de Carvajal precisely because "[his] kings are said to draw origin from that people."<sup>63</sup> Biondo, on the other hand, presented the first eight books of his *Decades*, which told the history of the Gothic wars, to Alfonso of Aragon, king of Naples (r. 1416–58),<sup>64</sup> the very

<sup>60</sup> Although Nicholas personally met Dracula, Nicholas arguably draws his account on the Roman origins of the Wallachs from Pius II who himself noted in his *Commentarii* that the descendants of these Roman settlers became "more barbarian than the barbarians" ("barbariores barbaris"); see Piccolomini, 1993, 1:532–33.

<sup>61</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fols. 26<sup>v</sup>–27<sup>r</sup>: "Exinde Constantius Caesar strenuissima fidissimaque Gothorum opera in expugnandis ceteris barbarorum nationibus est usus, eversum propemodum imperium restauravit. Ipse vero Vallia regnator Hispaniae plane effectus sicut dominationis ita et generis auctor fuit omnium regum Hispaniae qui per octoginta ferme generationes succedentes ad nostram quoque aetatem pervenerunt et traditum regnum retinuerunt, quamvis multis saepe Bellis exagitatam et a Maurorum regibus per viginti et amplius annos interpellatum."

<sup>62</sup> On the Castilian myth of Gothic origins, see Svennung, 21–33; O'Callaghan, 3–7.

<sup>63</sup> Wolkan, 115: "Nam populum illum, ex quo vestros reges originem aiunt ducere."

<sup>64</sup> Biondo's presentation letter to Alfonso of Aragon was published by Nogara, 148–53.

person whom he later, in a ceremonial setting, on the occasion of his niece's marriage to Emperor Frederick III (r. 1440–93), explicitly praised as a descendant of the mighty Visigoths who had long defended Christendom against the Moors and Saracens.<sup>65</sup>

As the quoted passage indicates, however, Nicholas had a more profound familiarity with Spanish myths than Piccolomini or Biondo. He draws here on the *Compendiosa Historia Hispanica* (The compendious history of Spain), a work composed and printed in Rome in 1470 by the Spanish curial prelate Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo (1404–70) to bolster the prestige of the Spanish nation and present King Henry IV of Castile (r. 1454–74) as its supreme overlord.<sup>66</sup> Nicholas's reference to the “nearly eighty continuous generations” of the Trastámara royal dynasty, which ruled both Castile and Aragon, is based precisely on Arévalo, who highlights the said number of generations in his work. Moreover, the reference to the twenty-year-long disintegration of the kingdom builds on Arévalo's portrayal of King Pelagius and Alfonso the Catholic—respectively, the first and third kings of Spain after the Visigothic defeat at the Battle of Guadalete in 711—in fighting off the Moors and restoring their homeland.<sup>67</sup>

The fragmentary state of both copies of the *De Bellis Gothorum* makes it impossible to know how exactly Nicholas ended his history of the Ostrogoths. Nonetheless, considering what has been said so far on the general tone of the work, Nicholas's professed national identity, and, as will be seen, the immediate political context, there can be little doubt that the *De Bellis Gothorum* relied on Croatian historiographic traditions to trace the origins of the kingdom(s) of Illyria to the Ostrogothic kingdom of late antiquity. This is not to say that Nicholas integrated, for instance, the entire *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats* into his narrative. After all, he openly asserts in the very first line of the *De Bellis Gothorum* that the work is dedicated to the three wars the Goths waged in Italy.<sup>68</sup> Yet the whole point of the *De Bellis Gothorum* seems to have been to connect the remnants of the Ostrogoths to contemporary Illyrians, probably in the same brief manner as it described the Visigothic origins of the Spanish. Nicholas would have thus likely provided a corrective to Biondo, who claimed that after their defeat, “the Ostrogothic

<sup>65</sup> Biondo, 2015, 155–56 and 160.

<sup>66</sup> Arévalo. On this work, see Tate; Lawrence, 229.

<sup>67</sup> Arévalo, fol. 25<sup>v</sup> (1.16). According to Arévalo, Vallia was the fifth Visigothic king in line after Alaric's predecessor Athanaricus, which explains Nicholas's “nearly eighty continuous generations” as opposed to Arévalo's eighty-two. See Arévalo, fols. 47<sup>v</sup>–49<sup>v</sup> (3.1–3) for his portrayals of Pelagius and Alfonso the Catholic.

<sup>68</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>.

name disappeared, and by the arrival of the Lombards neither outside nor in Italy were known to have survived any descendants of that people.”<sup>69</sup> By drawing attention to the Croatian historical traditions that spoke of the fate of Totila’s brother, Ostroilo, and the kingdom he founded in Illyria, Nicholas would have hoped to shed light on what Biondo and Bruni themselves recognized was a particularly murky historical period. In other words, the *De Bellis Gothorum* may have explored a crucial chapter of Italy’s history, but it served to provide his Illyrians with a positive account of their national past.

Of course, Nicholas was well aware of the linguistic differences between the Goths and contemporary Spanish and Slavs. After all, he was able to read about the Slavic migrations into Illyria in Biondo’s work, only a couple of folios after the ending of the account of Justinian’s conquest.<sup>70</sup> To come to grips with such discontinuities, humanists often spoke of the “coalescence” and “mixture” of nations, i.e., miscegenation, and it was no different with Nicholas.<sup>71</sup> For Nicholas, just as for other Croatian humanists, the contemporary Illyrian nation was a mixture of indigenous Illyrians, Goths, Slavs, and numerous other ancient peoples. Although providing the Illyrian nation with cultural legitimacy ranked high on Nicholas’s agenda, the whole point of centering the Illyrian national history specifically on their Gothic ancestors was to emphasize the nation’s political legitimacy and the fraternal ties that bound them with the Spanish. Nicholas’s focus on the national royal dynasty and the fraternal Spanish-Illyrian ties, as well as a number of other aspects of his work, can be properly understood only by reconstructing the immediate political context in which it was written.

#### THE NAVAL EXPEDITION OF 1472 AND THE ILLYRIAN STRUGGLE

As mentioned in the introduction, Nicholas of Modruš began working on the *De Bellis Gothorum* in the winter of 1472 when, after years spent in the

<sup>69</sup> Biondo, 1559, 95: “Sed priusquam Longobardorum gens in Italiam venerit, quod paucissimis post id praelium annis fuisse ostendemus, evanuit nomen Ostrogothorum, nec extra Italiam neque in ipsa qui fuissent ex ipsa gente superstites in Longobardorum adventu alicubi sciebantur.”

<sup>70</sup> Biondo, 1559, 115–16.

<sup>71</sup> Biondo resorted to pseudo-etymology to present the Catalans as “Gothalani,” a nation that emerged from the miscegenation (*mixtura*) of Goths and Alans; see Biondo, 1559, 100. As was seen above, Nicholas uses similar language in the *De Bellis Gothorum*, when he has Asclepiodotus, the pro-Gothic citizen in Naples, state that the Goths “have all but coalesced” with the Italians into one nation.

provinces of the Papal States, he was recalled to diplomatic service to play an important role in a major naval expedition launched by the papacy and Naples to help the Venetians in their war against the Ottomans. Nicholas served on this expedition as the lieutenant of the Neapolitan cardinal Oliviero Carafa (1430–1511), admiral of the papal fleet, who seems to have personally appointed Nicholas to this post. As Carafa prepared to depart from Rome with a portion of the fleet, he sent Nicholas to Venice to lead the papal galleys in the Adriatic to their meeting point in Brindisi. From Brindisi the two joined the rest of the Christian fleet in the Aegean and then spent the summer and fall of 1472 raiding Ottoman cities in Asia Minor. After a short stop in Naples, they finally returned to Rome in triumph in January 1473.<sup>72</sup>

The expedition of 1472, and the one that followed in 1473—which was far less successful and in which Nicholas, to his disappointment, took no part—were launched as part of the time-honored strategy of attacking the Ottomans from both the east and the west, and cutting communications between their European and Asian territories. The Christian coalition coordinated its efforts with the Aq Qoyunlu Turkmens led by Uzun Hasan (r. 1453–78), who exerted pressure on the Ottomans from the east and who was, until his defeat in August 1473, touted across Italy as a Christian champion.<sup>73</sup> The problem was, however, on the western front, where Matthias Corvinus, king of Hungary, the traditional leader of Crusades, showed no interest in joining the attack, having concluded earlier a secret peace treaty with the Ottomans.<sup>74</sup> For this reason, Benjamin Weber has recently singled out the expeditions of 1472 and 1473 as the first naval expeditions launched by the papacy that were not coordinated with a land offensive in the Balkans.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> The 1472 expedition was launched in response to the shock caused by the fall of Venetian Negroponte to the Ottomans in 1470, on which, see Meserve, 2006. For the 1472 expedition, see Setton, 303–18; Guglielmotti, 342–72. These two studies, however, focus on the activities of Cardinal Carafa, and do not take into account the major part of the fleet that set sail from Venice under the command of Nicholas of Modruš. That Carafa himself suggested Nicholas as his second-in-command can be inferred from the reports of Zaccaria Barbaro, the Venetian ambassador in Naples, who notes that Sixtus IV gave Carafa the liberty of handpicking all the commanders of galleys for the expedition; see Corazzol, 132.

<sup>73</sup> On the image of Uzun Hasan in the Italian humanist imagination, see Meserve, 2008, 223–31.

<sup>74</sup> Engel, 306–07. King Matthias's treaty with Mehmed II spared Hungary proper from the Ottoman raids, but not the Croatian and remaining Bosnian lords; see Grgin, 171–75.

<sup>75</sup> On the papal strategies in dealing with the Ottomans, see Weber, 66–120. Recent decades have seen a growing number of works on the fifteenth-century Crusades. Aside from Weber, see Housley, 2012, as well as the volumes edited by the latter, which include numerous articles covering a wide range of themes and regions: Housley, 2004, 2017a, and

Although it is true that no land expedition took place in the Balkans in 1472 and 1473, this section will show that even without the involvement of Matthias Corvinus the coalition did consider the western front of the war to be against the Turks, and that Nicholas wrote the *De Bellis Gothorum* to influence their views on the matter.

If one pieces together scattered documentary evidence it becomes clear that, to partly compensate for the lack of Hungarian support, Venice, the papacy, and Naples reestablished contacts with those Croatian and Bosnian lords who for years had been waging border wars with the Ottomans without much help from their nominal overlord, Matthias Corvinus. Matthias's lack of engagement on the Ottoman front, as well as his overtly anti-aristocratic politics in Croatia and Bosnia, forced Stjepan Frankapan of Modruš and Vlatko Kosača, Duke of St. Sava, to look for allies across the Adriatic (fig. 1).<sup>76</sup> Catherine, the exiled queen of Bosnia and Vlatko's sister, and Nicholas of Modruš, Stjepan Frankapan's longtime collaborator, were the two most prominent figures in a group of Roman Illyrians who helped mediate the contacts between the coalition and the two disgruntled lords.<sup>77</sup> Before Nicholas sailed to meet with Carafa in Brindisi, he first made a short stop in Novi in the Bay of Kotor, where he met with Duke Vlatko Kosača, Queen Catherine's brother.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, Venice, Naples, and the papacy all sent their envoys to Croatia to reconcile Stjepan Frankapan and the rest of the

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2017b. See also the classic study by Babinger for the expansion of the Ottoman Empire under Mehmed II.

<sup>76</sup> In the autumn of 1469 Matthias's troops conquered Senj from the Frankapani, one of the family's oldest and most prized possessions; see Grgin, 99–106. The family's envoys would, in the following decades, make much of Matthias's unjust treatment of the Frankapani and his conquest of Senj; see Špoljarić, 2016, 140. Further south, from 1466 the Hungarian court began to support Duke Vlatko's rivals and former vassals, the Vlatkovići, against him; see Atanasovski, 23–24.

<sup>77</sup> Other Illyrian prelates at the curia involved in the anti-Ottoman war effort included: Matija de Baronellis, Abbot of St. George of Kopriva, who was sent as a papal envoy to Duke Vlatko in March 1471 (see Atanasovski, 71; Neralić, 2017, 141–42); Marin, a Franciscan from Nicholas's hometown of Kotor, who was sent by the pope to the court of Uzun Hasan in December 1472 (see Neralić, 1999, 103–04); and, perhaps, Fantin de Valle, who had earlier served as papal legate to Bohemia and who, in 1472, as Carafa's *familiaris* may have also joined the cardinal and Nicholas on their mission to the Aegean (see Neralić, 1999, 99–100; Neralić, 2017, 141–42).

<sup>78</sup> The arrival of Nicholas and the papal fleet in the Bay of Kotor in June 1472 was noted in the Kotor treasury records; see the documents published by Brajković, 107–08. Although the documents state that the bishop of Modruš came to visit Kotor, his hometown, his main objective was to meet with Duke Vlatko.



Figure 1. The Adriatic world in 1472. Image created by author.

Croatian lords and encourage them to attack the Ottoman territories in Bosnia.<sup>79</sup> Nicholas of Modruš began writing his *De Bellis Gothorum* just as these contacts were established. His presentation of the Goths as a warlike but pious nation that, when given the proper chance, had always served the Roman Empire as an effective bulwark against the barbarians, was meant to convince the Christian coalition to concentrate their effort on Illyria and to support, both financially and militarily, the Ostrogothic-Illyrian nobility in their border wars with the Turks.<sup>80</sup> Thus, like Bruni, Nicholas wrote about the late antique wars of the Goths to highlight the parallels with contemporary wars against the Turks and provide historical exempla in matters of politics and war. Yet for Nicholas the Goths were not Scythian barbarians who threatened Christendom, but rather brave Christian warriors who defended it, not least by relying on the advice of their philosophers and churchmen.

The *De Bellis Gothorum* also includes brief references to other nations involved in the Christian struggle against the Turks. As was argued, the barbarous Wallachs are introduced into the narrative to subvert the idea of *romanitas* as a cultural ideal. However, Nicholas's emphasis on the Wallach perfidy also

<sup>79</sup> Corrazol, 337; Cornet, 62.

<sup>80</sup> On the idea of the bulwark of Christendom (*antemurale / propugnaculum Christianitatis*) and its role in Renaissance diplomacy, see Housley, 2012, 40–50.

highlights the indolence and insincerity of Italian princes and republics in contributing to the Crusade effort. He would repeat these accusations explicitly a few years later in his *Defensio Ecclesiasticae Libertatis* (Defense of ecclesiastical liberty) when he called the Italians the nation that contributed the least to the common European war against the Turks and Saracens.<sup>81</sup> The other nation Nicholas conspicuously introduces into his account is Hungary. As shown in the previous section, he offers an extremely negative portrait of their Hunnish ancestors, laments their victory over the mighty Ostrogoths, and finally celebrates the Ostrogothic success in banishing them from Pannonia. This portrayal of the Huns not only diverts the accusations of barbarism laid against the Goths, but also rejects Hungarian claims to sovereignty over Croatia-Dalmatia and Bosnia. In other words, it projects Croatian and Bosnian ambitions of independence all the way back to antiquity, presenting a utopian scenario whereby the Illyrian nation would once again throw off its yoke.

But the Hungarians, or more precisely their king, are arguably far more present in the work than these brief references indicate. If Nicholas's work highlights the Ostrogothic origins of the Illyrians and draws parallels between the Ostrogothic wars in Italy and the contemporary period, then hiding behind the image of the oppressive Emperor Justinian is none other than King Matthias Corvinus. Justinian, despite the Ostrogothic service in fending off the barbarians, uses their moment of weakness to establish his control over Italy, ultimately rendering the country defenseless against the savage Lombards. This, Nicholas seems to warn, finds resonance with King Matthias's centralization efforts in Croatia and Bosnia, which weakened these lands and exposed them, and all the rest of Christendom, to the barbarian Turks. It is thus only the fierce and pious Ostrogoths-Illyrians who can effectively defend their country. Just as the Visigoths-Spanish had after twenty years fought off the Moorish attack on Christendom and reclaimed their ancestral lands, now the Illyrians would, with help from the Christian coalition, push back the Turks and restore their homeland to splendor.

Nicholas of Modruš thus did not compose his work because of the negative image the Goths enjoyed in the works of some Italian historians, but in spite of it. He centered his national history on the Ostrogoths because it allowed him to stress the achievements of the Illyrian rulers, the fortitude and piety of their warriors, the service record of the nation as the bulwark of Christendom, and the unwarranted war with dire consequences that was brought against them by a power-hungry emperor. Yet arguably the main reason that convinced Nicholas to focus his history on the Ostrogothic ancestors of the Illyrians

<sup>81</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 8092, fol. 58<sup>v</sup>.

was that he could highlight the common experiences and ties that bound his nation with the Spanish. Indeed, as the final section will show, Nicholas sought to legitimize in particular the contacts between the Illyrians and the Aragonese of Naples, whose own engagement in Croatia and Bosnia during these years ran far deeper than that of Venice and the papacy.

### THE GOTHIC BULWARKS OF CHRISTENDOM

The eastern Adriatic had been in the sights of the Aragonese court from the moment Alfonso of Aragon secured the throne of Naples in 1442.<sup>82</sup> Building a vast network of alliances that further south included the Palaiologoi despots of Morea, the Tocco despot of Arta, and Skanderbeg and the Arianiti clan in Albania, Alfonso in 1444 signed a vassal contract with Duke Vlatko's father, Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, and two years later orchestrated the marriage of Stjepan Frankapan of Modruš to Isotta d'Este, the sister of his son-in-law, Leonello d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara. King Ferrante continued his father's politics as soon as he suppressed the first baronial revolt and secured his throne, sending agents across the Adriatic in 1466 to reestablish contacts and secure fortresses in Bosnia and Croatia, much to the dismay of both Venice and the Hungarian court, which both viewed this area as their sphere of interest.<sup>83</sup> Thus, long before the expedition of 1472 Alfonso and Ferrante had both maintained a network of contacts across the sea, which in turn made Aragonese Naples into an important center of patronage for Croatian-Dalmatian humanists and artists, such as Benedikt Kotrulj of Dubrovnik—one of the agents who was preparing the terrain for the Neapolitan invasion of Croatia and Bosnia in 1466—and Frane of Vrana, better known as Francesco Laurana.<sup>84</sup>

Nicholas of Modruš's *De Bellis Gothorum*, as well as other documentary and literary evidence, reveals that during the early 1470s these plans were once again put into motion. The difference was that this time Ferrante could count on the support of the Venetians, who were desperate enough to back Neapolitan ambitions in Croatia and Bosnia as long as these did not extend to the Dalmatian cities under their control. Concrete negotiations followed not long after Nicholas of Modruš and other diplomats made the initial overtures during the course of the 1472 expedition. According to the reports of Zaccaria Barbaro, the Venetian ambassador in Naples, in February 1473 Nikola Testa, Duke Vlatko's envoy,

<sup>82</sup> The trans-Adriatic horizons of the Neapolitan Aragonese have been the subject of a number of studies, including Marinescu; Schmitt, 2009 and 2017; Petta; Zečević, 111–46; Spremić.

<sup>83</sup> For the activities of Neapolitan agents in Croatia and Bosnia in 1466, see Atanasovski, 20–23; Špoljarić, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> On Kotrulj's life and career, see Luzzati; on Frane of Vrana's, Novak Klemenčić.



appeared before Ferrante to negotiate his lord's marriage to the king's niece, Margherita Marzano d'Aragona. Even Queen Catherine herself was expected to arrive personally in Naples to help mediate between Vlatko and Ferrante, but she was prevented at the last minute by poor health, which forced Testa to seek her council in Rome.<sup>85</sup> Catherine did arrive in Naples, however, on May 21 the following year, after the marriage had already been agreed upon. After the first part of the marriage festivities, she accompanied the young bride across the Adriatic to Duke Vlatko's capital of Novi, where the two were finally married.<sup>86</sup>

Similar moves were made to draw the Croatian lords back into the Neapolitan orbit. When reporting on his discussions with Ferrante regarding the papal-Neapolitan-Venetian joint mission to Croatia in August 1472, Barbaro revealed that the king took special interest in the state of the Croatian lords, requesting that the Venetians furnish him with a map of their lands.<sup>87</sup> Ferrante was able to build here on his father's relationship with Stjepan Frankapan of Modruš. However, it is noteworthy that Stjepan's brother, Ivan Frankapan, lord of Krk, also made an attempt to renounce Venetian sovereignty and submit to Ferrante. While Ivan's realignment eventually proved unsuccessful, foiled by a timely Venetian intervention,<sup>88</sup> Stjepan, who for years had had a troublesome relationship with his overlord, King Matthias Corvinus, at this point seems to have made initial contact regarding the marriage of his son Bernardin to Margherita's sister, Luisa Marzano d'Aragona. This marriage was finally concluded in the summer of 1476 under different political circumstances, yet it too should be placed in the context of the 1472 diplomatic negotiations.<sup>89</sup> Nicholas of Modruš, Count

<sup>85</sup> See Corazzol, 508–09, 527, 564. During his visit to Rome, Testa informed the Venetian ambassador that Duke Vlatko wanted to enter a marriage alliance with Naples rather than accept the proposal of such an alliance made by Nicholas of Ilok, who had been appointed as rival king of Bosnia by Matthias Corvinus in 1471. On Nicholas of Ilok's reign as king of Bosnia, see Kubinyi; Salihović. I will explore this rivalry between the various claimants to the Bosnian crown in the biography of Nicholas of Modruš.

<sup>86</sup> On Queen Catherine's trip to Naples, Dubrovnik, and, presumably, Novi, see Atanasovski, 100–01.

<sup>87</sup> Corazzol, 337.

<sup>88</sup> This episode and other attempts by Ivan Frankapan to ally with Ferrante were described in 1481 by the first Venetian governor of the island of Krk, Antonio Vinciguerra, in his *Relazione*; see Vinciguerra, 43–46. Like Stjepan and Vlatko, Ivan also wanted to marry his son and heir, Nikola, to one of Ferrante's nieces.

<sup>89</sup> Being far more exposed to a potential punitive expedition from King Matthias, Stjepan Frankapan was more cautious in renewing his alliance with Naples than was Vlatko. As will be seen below, the marriage between Bernardin and Luisa Marzano was finally agreed upon only after Ferrante and Matthias themselves entered into an alliance.

Stjepan's longtime collaborator, had the ear of the Neapolitan cardinal Carafa and very likely played an important role in reestablishing this connection.

Queen Catherine, however, was not a mere intermediary in these negotiations. After her kingdom fell to the Ottomans and her children were taken to the Ottoman court, Catherine moved to Rome where, together with Nicholas of Modruš, she established herself as the leader of the Illyrian community.<sup>90</sup> By virtue of the claims of her late husband King Stjepan Tomaš (r. 1443–61), Catherine was not only queen of Bosnia, as she was commonly known, but also of Serbia and Croatia-Dalmatia.<sup>91</sup> Thus Nicholas and other Croatian-Dalmatian churchmen in Rome loyal to her cause saw her not as the queen of a neighboring kingdom, but rather as a representative of their national royal dynasty and the rightful sovereign of the entire Illyrian nation, as opposed to the Hungarian king or the Venetian doge, both of whom exercised effective control over most of their homeland. She was, in other words, the “Queen of the Illyrians,” as Nicholas himself calls her in one of his other works, and, in light of Nicholas's Gothic history, the new Amalasantha, the determined, wise, and modest queen of the Ostrogoths.<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, the question of how exactly Nicholas ended the *De Bellis Gothorum* and connected the lineage of the Bosnian royal dynasty, the Kotromanići, to that of the Ostrogoths, might never be answered. As I have suggested, he may have used the vernacular *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats*, according to which Croatia, Dalmatia, and Bosnia were all parts of the ancient Croatian kingdom founded by Ostroilo, brother of the Ostrogothic king Totila.<sup>93</sup> From here it would have taken little historical imagination to link the Kotromanići to the last Croatian king, Zvonimir

<sup>90</sup> Thallóczy, 110–20.

<sup>91</sup> For Stjepan Tomaš's claim to the Croatian-Dalmatian kingdom and his efforts to expand into Croatia, see Lovrenović, 296–301. The views of Nicholas and fellow Croatian curialists were arguably similar to that of the later Croatian bishops in Rome, such as Ivan Tomko Mrnavić (1579–1637), who believed that Bosnia was a kingdom that emerged from the ruins of the early medieval Dalmatian(-Croatian) kingdom and that added Serbia into its fold, before eventually succumbing to the Ottoman advance; see Horvat, 354.

<sup>92</sup> Nicholas mentions the Illyrians and their queen, Catherine, when listing the feats of Pope Sixtus IV in his *Defensio*; see BAV, Vat. lat. 8092, fol. 65<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>93</sup> The *Deeds of the Kings of the Croats* refers to Bosnia as one of the three parts of the kingdom of the Croats that came under the Hungarian rule after the death of the last Croatian king Zvonimir; see Mošin, 68. Similarly, in the fourteenth-century notes of the *Supetar Cartulary*, the Bosnian viceroy is listed as one of the seven viceroys of the Croatian kingdom; see Novak and Skok, 230. The idea that Bosnia formed part of the early medieval Croatian kingdom reflected the political geography of the early fourteenth century, when the Croatian Šubići lords of Bribir ruled much of Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Hum, rather than the early medieval one.

(r. 1074–89), and through him to the mythical Ostroilo and the Ostrogoths.<sup>94</sup> Then again, given the work's professed focus on late antiquity and its international audience, which had little familiarity with local material, Nicholas may have ended the *De Bellis Gothorum* with a mere reference to the Ostrogothic origins of the Bosnian, that is, Illyrian, royal dynasty, the Kotromanići, one no less casual than the quoted reference to the Visigothic origins of the Trastámaras.

Queen Catherine and Nicholas of Modruš thus saw the marriages they helped negotiate as first steps in building up a power base that would reestablish the kingdom of Bosnia as a national Illyrian kingdom. As is well known, during this period Queen Catherine repeatedly tried to ransom her children, Catherine and Sigismund, from the Ottoman court.<sup>95</sup> Yet what historians have regularly interpreted as testament to the love of a pious and recluse mother was in fact a move of a politically active queen who sought to gain legitimacy for her plans. As Catherine seems to have believed, the only way to reestablish her kingdom was by placing one of her children on the throne and securing the continuation of the Kotromanić dynasty. If one considers that, when negotiating Duke Vlatko's marriage to Margherita Marzano, Nikola Testa also encouraged Ferrante to "send one of his sons to [their] lands, and take possession of them according to his claim,"<sup>96</sup> Catherine seems to have wanted to marry this son to her daughter and thus ensure his legitimacy as the Aragonese king of Illyria (that is, Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia-Dalmatia). Alternatively, she may have hoped that her son Sigismund would marry one of Ferrante's daughters and reclaim his father's throne. Nicholas himself seems to promote Catherine's plans in the *De Bellis Gothorum* when he describes the concerns of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, who, lacking a male heir, chose to marry his daughter Amalasantha to his distant relative, the Visigothic prince Eutharic, and thus save his dynasty, "the noblest dynasty among the Goths," from dying out.<sup>97</sup> This

<sup>94</sup> The first king of Bosnia, Tvrtko Kotromanić (r. 1353–91), the grandfather of Catherine's husband King Stjepan Tomaš, was the son of the Croatian noblewoman Jelena Šubić, whose family promoted the cult of the last Croatian king Zvonimir and presumably claimed lineage from one of his daughters; see Karbić. Nicholas's portrayal of the Bosnian royal dynasty within the Croatian historical narrative can be compared to the situation in the 1370s when the Serbian churchmen came to present the Bosnian ruler Tvrtko as the heir to the Serbian monarchs, on which see Ćirković.

<sup>95</sup> Thallóczy, 114–18.

<sup>96</sup> According to Barbaro, Testa entreated Ferrante to first occupy Dubrovnik and use it as a bridgehead for further expansion; see Corazzol, 527.

<sup>97</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 6029, fol. 36<sup>v</sup>. Biondo also briefly mentioned the arrival of Eutharic at Theodoric's court, but Nicholas turned to Jordanes and listed, immediately after the quoted passage, the names of all the ancestors that bound the two together.

was ultimately the vision that the bishop of Modruš so desperately wanted to effect by describing the common history of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths: a national Illyrian kingdom, the true bulwark of Christendom, ruled by a member of the national royal family under the protection of the fraternal Aragonese rather than under the boot of the demonic Huns—and, of course, with Queen Catherine, as the new Amalasantha, and Nicholas at the king's side.<sup>98</sup>

Given that there are only fragments of his personal copies of the work and no dedication letter, it is impossible to state definitively whether Nicholas presented the *De Bellis Gothorum* to anyone. Since the work played mostly to Gothic ears, as it were, one may hypothesize that Nicholas imagined either King Ferrante himself or, what is even more likely, the Neapolitan cardinal Oliviero Carafa as the dedicatee. A scion of an influential Neapolitan family, Carafa was made cardinal in 1467 by Pope Paul II at Ferrante's insistence, and in the coming years acted as the chief Neapolitan representative at the curia.<sup>99</sup> After Ferrante renewed the Aragonese plans of expanding into Illyria, Carafa began to draw Croatian curial prelates into his circle. As argued above, he seems to have been the one who chose, or at least recommended, Nicholas as his lieutenant in 1472. Dedicating the *De Bellis Gothorum* to Carafa thus would have been a fitting testament to their common political endeavor, ensuring the work's diffusion and support both at the Neapolitan court and papal curia.

Whether or not Nicholas of Modruš presented the *De Bellis Gothorum* to Carafa, it is certain that the work lost some of its currency not long after its completion. After a decade of toying with the idea of pushing the Hungarians out of Croatia and Bosnia, Ferrante's plans came to a halt when in October 1474, after months of negotiations, he and Matthias Corvinus agreed in principle to enter an alliance, with Matthias finally marrying Ferrante's daughter Beatrice in late 1476.<sup>100</sup> While this rapprochement was probably welcomed by both Duke Vlatko and Count Stjepan's son Bernardin across the Adriatic—who by marrying the Aragonese princesses,

<sup>98</sup> Nicholas's work bears parallels to Biondo's 1452 *Oratio Coram Serenissimo Imperatore Frederico et Alphonso Aragonum Rege* (Oration before the most serene Emperor Frederick and Alfonso king of Aragon), which celebrated Emperor Frederick's nuptials with King Alfonso's niece Leonor of Portugal, and in which Biondo praised the joining of the Aragonese-Visigothic and Habsburg-Austrasian dynasties, touting their pedigree as defenders of Christendom against Islamic forces. However, Biondo's oration, which he composed twenty years prior to Nicholas's *De Bellis Gothorum*, seems to have had no circulation whatsoever (see Biondo, 2015, 119), and it seems more likely that Nicholas drew the parallels between Spanish and Illyrian history on his own, especially in light of his close connections with Cardinal Carafa and his familiarity with Arévalo's *Compendiosa Historia Hispanica*.

<sup>99</sup> On Carafa's life and career, see Petrucci.

<sup>100</sup> Réthelyi; Honemann; Farbaký.

cousins of the new Hungarian queen, now enjoyed protection from both Buda and Naples<sup>101</sup>—Ferrante's decision to give up on his designs on Illyria left Queen Catherine and Nicholas of Modruš, the two exiles whose interests directly clashed with that of the Hungarian court, without any power base that would have stood a chance of reinstating an Illyrian kingdom free of the demonic Huns.<sup>102</sup> As a result, Catherine at long last retired from the political scene, never succeeding in her attempts to ransom her children from the Ottoman court, while Nicholas turned to his duties as governor in the provinces of the Papal States, though still keeping close contacts with the Neapolitans at the curia.

Yet even after Catherine and Nicholas had passed away, the Neapolitan-Illyrian connection continued, chiefly in the person of Cardinal Carafa, who continued to act as the main patron of the church of Saint Jerome and the Illyrian national confraternity.<sup>103</sup> As the dynastic politics of the Neapolitan court translated into Rome's national dynamics, Carafa's patronage of Saint Jerome's symbolized not only his personal patronage of the Roman Illyrians, but also Neapolitan patronage of the entire Illyrian nation, thus echoing until the very collapse of the Aragonese regime the idea of the Visigothic-Ostrogothic fraternal ties that Nicholas of Modruš had advocated in his Gothic history.

## CONCLUSION

While he may never have circulated the work beyond his circle of intimates, Nicholas of Modruš certainly intended the *De Bellis Gothorum* to be his magnum opus. It was probably his longest work and the crowning achievement of his career-long commitment to the national cause. Rather than an example of unoriginal antiquarianism, as has long been thought, this national history resorted to some highly creative solutions in an attempt to reconcile the Croatian views of the Goths and their wars in Italy with the established Italian narrative. The work was, however, a product of specific political circumstances, one that offers modern historians a fresh perspective on the politics of the fifteenth-century Adriatic, specifically regarding Croatian and Bosnian

<sup>101</sup> Some of the names that Bernardin and Vlatko chose for their children—in Bernardin's case, Matija (Matthias), Ferenat (Ferrante), and Beatrica (Beatrice), and in Vlatko's, Beatrica—perfectly illustrate the Hungarian-Neapolitan horizons of the two lords after 1474–76.

<sup>102</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, Nicholas of Modruš was exiled from Hungary in 1464. Queen Catherine, on the other hand, saw Matthias Corvinus and, between 1471 and 1477, Nicholas of Ilok as false claimants to her title.

<sup>103</sup> For Cardinal Carafa's involvement in the life of the confraternity, see Neralić, 2017, 145–49.

elites: their ambitions of independence from Hungarian overlordship and deep-rooted contacts with the Aragonese of Naples.

The *De Bellis Gothorum* also stands as a powerful testament to the importance of the nation to the worldview of Croatian churchmen and their role as diplomatic go-betweens. While the Venetians, Ottomans, Hungarians, and Aragonese—the latter two respectively succeeded by the Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs—vied for dominance over their homeland, Croatian churchmen put forth their own political and ecclesiastical traditions, insisting on the idea of the unification and independence, or at least political and ecclesiastical autonomy, of their nation. Nicholas of Modruš's *De Bellis Gothorum* became the first in a long line of historiographic works that were written in the service of this idea. By retelling the past achievements of their nation, Nicholas's successors hoped, as Nicholas himself had, to persuade the regional powers to help local elites defeat the Turks and convert their fellow Slavs to Catholicism, thus restoring their nation to its former glory. In reality, however, they presented a utopian vision of the past that was always minutely tailored to the image of contemporary political circumstances and the possibilities that they so desperately wanted to effect.

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