APPROPRIATING THE PAST, NEGOTIATING HISTORY: KOTZEBUE'S *BELA'S FLUCHT* (1813) IN IVAN KUKULJEVIĆ SAKSCINSKI'S ADAPTATION (1841)

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Abstract: This paper investigates the negotiation of history in Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski's translation of August von Kotzebue's play Bela's Flucht (1813). The original play, written for the opening of the new German theatre in Pest, deals with the exile of the medieval Hungarian King Béla IV (b.1206, r.1235–1270) one year after the Mongol invasion. In 1841 Kukuljević adjusted the historical context of the play and introduced a different perspective on this historical episode, creating a new set of references pointing to the national past. Kukuljević pursued this subject further in his dramatic and historiographical works, related increasingly to his own historical research. By negotiating history within a "dramatic frame" Kukuljević is also framing the collective memory.

The cultural presence of theatre productions in vernacular languages of the Habsburg monarchy increased during the first half of the nineteenth century, reflecting the changing socio-political circumstances of this multicultural entity. The reception of German-speaking popular theatre induced the production of dramatic works in vernacular languages and encouraged the process of cultural appropriation. In the course of the period of the national revival, the re-creation of the (national) past became an important issue and it too was negotiated on the stage.

In 1811 the popular German playwright August von Kotzebue (1761–1819) was commissioned to write a dramatic trilogy with a Hungarian subject for the opening of the new German theatre in Pest.¹ It included the play *Bela's Flucht* ('Bela's flight') as well as two smaller pieces as a prelude and a postlude: *Ungerns erster Wohlthäter* ('Hungary's first benefactor') and *Die Ruinen von Athen* ('The ruins of Athens'), both with music by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827). The second part of the festival trilogy, *Bela's Flucht* was not staged in the course of the opening ceremony.² *Die*

¹ Axel Schröter: August von Kotzebue: Erfolgsautor zwischen Aufklärung, Klassik und Frühromantik. Weimar: Weimarer Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011, p. 92.

One of the cited reasons for the withdrawal is that the audience could have associated the exile of the King Bela IV with the fate of the Habsburg Emperor Francis II (1768–1835, r. 1792–1806) who was forced to flee the country in the course of the Napoleonic wars. Ibidem, p. 92.

Erhebung von Pest zur königlichen Freistadt ('The raising of Pest to a royal free city'), a play by an anonymous author, was staged instead, and the new, capacious German theatre at Gizella-Platz opened in a grand manner on 9 February 1812.³

Bela's Flucht deals with an important episode in the life of the Hungarian King Béla IV (b. 1206, r. 1235–1270) by employing one of the significant moments in the national history: the Mongol invasion. Béla, a member of the Árpád dynasty, was forced into exile after his army was defeated by the Mongols at the battle of Mohi (1241). He allegedly fled to Dalmatia and was able to retrieve the throne only after the Mongol troops withdrew.

Within this frame Kotzebue constructs a plot of patriotic ground, with the protagonist Colomann conflicted between his sense of duty and his personal need for revenge. Unlike Bela, Colomann is an invented character. A member of the Hungarian nobility, he has nevertheless distanced himself from the court, blaming the King for the death of his son. However, when the Mongol troops seize the land and the danger to his homeland becomes acute, Colomann acts like a patriot and saves the King and his family, whom he had first held captive.

Colomann's self-imposed exile is illustrated by geographical distance as well as the wilderness of his surroundings: He dwells in Dalmatia, spending his time hunting in the forest. In contrast to the nobleman Colomann, the Slavic population of Dalmatia is represented by the "bandits of Almissa", Budimir and Branislav. Referencing the town Almissa/Omiš and its rather negative reputation in the Middle Ages for maritime piracy, and alluding to Count Malduco (Kačić) suggest a more detailed knowledge of the local conditions. This points to the representation of Dalmatia by historiographical works of the period.

RE-INSCRIBING THE UNKNOWN LAND: REPRESENTATIONS OF DALMATIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Bela's Flucht is set in Dalmatia in the year 1242, during the period of Béla's exile. By then Dalmatia was part of the medieval Kingdom of Croatia which had been in personal union with the Kingdom of Hungary since 1102. By the end of the eighteenth century, the region was about to reshape its territorial and cultural identity due to changing geopolitical circumstances.

After almost five centuries under Venetian rule, Dalmatia was incorporated into the Habsburg monarchy in 1797. The following year the German publicist

³ Hedvig Belitzka-Scholz (ed.): Deutsches Theater in Pest und Ofen 1770-1850. Normativer Titelkatalog und Dokumentation, vol. 1. Budapest: Argumentum, 1995, pp. 15-16.

and archaeologist Karl August Böttiger (1760–1835) announced in the journal *Der neue Teutsche Merkur* a call for "Entdeckungsreisen" ('expeditions') to this newly acquired territory, as it still appeared to be a "terra incognita".⁴ Once Dalmatia became part of the Habsburg monarchy, interest in its inhabitants increased – not least for utilitarian reasons.⁵ The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the publication of several works dealing with Dalmatian history, demography and geography. The episode of Béla's exile, an essential reference in the historical narrative, can also be found in the travel literature. The nobleman Vince Batthyány refers to it in his travelogue *Ueber das ungarische Küstenland* ('On Hungarian Littoral') as "bedenkliche Periode unseres Vaterlandes" ('the ominous period for our homeland').⁶ Many historiographical works of the period give a detailed account of Béla's exile and its geographical context.⁷ In referring to such toponyms as Zagrab/Zagreb, Stuhlweißenburg/Székesfehérvár or the river Sajó, Kotzebue re-created the context of the "ominous" episode in Hungarian history with geographical precision.

Bela's Flucht eventually became very popular with Hungarian audiences as the libretto for the first Hungarian-language Singspiel, composed by József Ruzitska (1775–1823).8

RESURRECTING THE 'HEROIC PAST': ADJUSTING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BELA'S FLUCHT

The Croatian translation of *Bela's Flucht* by Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski (1816–1889) was published in 1841. Kukuljević, who became a well known writer, historian

⁴ Mirna Zeman: "Reisende und Nachahmer: Ostadria-Repräsentationen in deutschsprachigen Texten des späten 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts; Eine imagologische Studie", in: *Dalmatien als europäischer Kulturraum*, ed. Wilfried Potthof. Split: Philosophische Fakultät in Split, Abteilung für Geschichte, 2010, p. 621.

⁵ Ihidem

⁶ Vince Batthyány: Ueber das ungarische Küstenland: In Briefen vom Herrn Grafen Vinzenz Batthiány. Pesth: K. A. Hartleben, 1805, p. 19.

⁷ Cf. for instance: Ludwig Albrecht Gebhardi: Geschichte der Königreiche Dalmatien, Kroatien, Szlavonien, Servien, Raszien, Bosnien, Rama, und des Freystaats Ragusa. Pest: Joseph Leyrer, 1805 – Johann Christian von Engel: Staatskunde und Geschichte von Dalmatien, Croatien und Slawonien nebst einigen ungedruckten Denkmälern Ungrischer Geschichte. Halle: Johann Jakob Gebauer, 1798.

⁸ Ferenc Kerényi: "Angaben und Gesichtspunkte zur August Kotzebue-Rezeption auf den ungarischen Bühnen", in: *Rezeption der deutschen Literatur in Ungarn 1800–1850*, vol. 1, ed. László Tarnói. Budapest 1987, (= Budapester Beiträge zur Germanistik 17), p. 145.

^{9 [}Kotzebue, August von]: *Izbor igrokazah ilirskoga kazališta*. Vol. 3: *Stěpko Šubić ili Bela IV. u Horvatskoj*. Drama u 2 čina, polag němačkoga s proměnami od Ivana Kukuljevića Sakcinskoga. – *Ljubomorna žena*. Vesela igra u 2 čina polag němačkoga od Kocebua. Zagreb: Ljudevit Gaj, pp. 1–20.

and politician, was then twenty-four years old and already an author with his 'heroic play' *Juran i Sofija ili Turci kod Siska* ('Juran and Sofija or the Turks by Sisak'). This first work of his is significant, being one of the few plays of the time in the Croatian language, and one of the even fewer dramatic works in a vernacular language to be staged. That performance was in 1839, and the following year his retitled adaptation of *Bela's Flucht: Stjepko Šubić ili Bela IV. u Horvatskoj* ('Stjepko Šubić or Bela IV in Croatia') was staged as well.

Considering that Kotzebue's plays dominated the repertoire, and the number of translations of his works into Croatian and Serbian, Kukuljević's choice of the work appears almost self-evident. However, the subject introduced by Kotzebue in *Bela's Flucht* seems to have been of genuine interest to Kukuljević, and he continued to pursue it in his dramatic and historiographical works.

Kukuljević adapted the play using strategies of 'domestification', as the title already illustrates. The fictitious Hungarian nobleman Colomann is replaced by an historical personality who was a contemporary of Béla IV – Stjepko Šubić. The clan of Šubić belongs to the oldest nobility of medieval Croatia and one branch of it later became the Zrinski family. Thus Kukuljević modified the plot towards even more 'historical credibility', appropriating the representation of the past and creating a symbolic frame of reference for the ongoing nationalisation of culture. Stjepko's ethnic identity is clearly defined, with both 'Illyrian' and 'Croatian' as terms of (self-)denomination and address. By using them instead of the term 'Hungarian', Kukuljević introduced a set of references for the local context.

Compared to the majority of Kotzebue-adaptations of the period, *Stjepko Šubić* does not represent a localisation in a strict sense, as the overall geographical context remains almost unchanged. However, Kukuljević defines the setting far more precisely than the original did: his version of the play takes place in the town of Grobnik at the Croatian seaside in year 1242. The exact spatial contextualisation of the plot is a significant reference to the 'heroic past': Grobnik marks the site of a battle between Croats and Mongols, which allegedly took place in 1242.

The historical character of the battle of Grobnik is disputed, yet the agents of the Illyrian movement frequently exploited the symbolic potential of this event, "prikazjući zamišljeni identitet kao vlastiti" ('presenting the imagined identity as their own').¹¹ Dimitrija Demeter (1811–1872), Petar Preradović (1818–1872)

¹⁰ Stjepko Šubić probably died in the early 1260's, cf.: Damir Karbić: "Šubići Bribirski do gubitka nasljedne banske časti (1322)", in: Zbornik Odsjeka za povijesne znanosti Zavoda za povijesne i društvene znanosti Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti 22 (2004), pp. 1–26.

¹¹ Ivana Žužul: Pamćenje, sjećanje i zaborav: figure oblikovanja nacinalne kulture", in: Pamćenje, sjećanje, zaborav u hrvatskoj književnosti i kazalištu, ed. Boris Senker et al. Zagreb, Spilt: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 2011 (= Dani hvarskoga kazališta), p. 54.

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and other prominent writers of the Illyrian movement reinforced the idea of a 'memorable' victory by making recurring references to it in their works. It is during the Illyrian period that the battle of Grobnik was established as *lieu de mémoire*. It was a great concern of the Illyrian movement to establish a link to the 'glorious' past and produce a sense of continuity. Hence, by referring to the Middle Ages as a long-lost period of 'national' unity, Kukuljević applies the strategy of appropriating the past for the present.

PLACING "HISTORICAL TRUTH" INTO A "DRAMATIC FRAME"

In his speech at the Croatian Diet in 1843 Kukuljević pleaded for the implementation of Croatian as the official language (instead of Latin and in opposition to Hungarian). The speech was given in the Croatian language, which provided an important impetus for the agents of Illyrian and other revival movements in the region.

He published another play with a Mongol subject in 1844: Poraz Mongolah ('The defeat of the Mongols'). Here Kukuljević composed a more elaborated version of the plot introduced in Bela's Flucht/Stjepko Šubić with evident contemporary relevance. He addressed the problem of national discord and the resulting lack of (political) power, 12 along with other issues such as the dispute over language. What is more significant about this work is the author's claim of historical authenticity. In his preface Kukuljević stated that his aim was to place the "historical truth" into a "dramatic frame". 13 Furthermore, he attached transcriptions of historical documents "za one, koji bi u naše vrěme rado dokazali, da Tatari nikada preko Drave bili nisu, i da u Hèrvtaskoj, osobito okolo Grobnika, Rěke i ostrva Kèrka (Velje) od strane Hèrvatah s tatarskimi mnogobrojnimi četami nikada boj bijen nije". 14

After the revolutionary events of 1848/1849 Kukuljević focused mainly on historical research. In 1863, four years before the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, he published the "historical-critical dispute" *Borba Hrvatah s Monogoli i Tatari* ('The battle of Croats against Mongols and Tatars') – again with commented

¹² Robert Basalja and Katarina Ivon: "Imagološki aspekti Kukuljevićevih drama", in: *Zbornik o Ivanu Kukuljeviću Sakcinskom*, ed. Tihomil Maštrović. Zagreb: Hrvatski studiji sveučilišta, 2011, p. 309.

¹³ Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: *Poraz Mongolah*. Junačko-istorička igra u IV čina, in: *Različita děla Ivana Kukuljevića Sakcinskoga*. Knjiga treća: Igrokazi. Zagreb: Ljudevit Gaj, 1844, s.p.

^{14 &#}x27;those, who in our time would be glad to prove, that Tatars never crossed [the river] Drava and that they never were in Croatia, [and] especially [that] around Grobnik, Rijeka and the isle of Krk (Velja) no battle between the Croats and numerous Tatar troops ever took place'. Ibidem, appendix.

documentation. However, by then Kukuljević had shifted the venue of the main battle away from Grobnik towards the sea, basing his assumptions, "due to the lack of records", on the "oral tradition".¹⁵

Kukuljević's "historical-critical dispute" is greatly concerned with the asymmetry of power and the "misfortune" of the subordinate role of the Slavic peoples. To him the Slavs are being unjustly ignored by their "more fortunate neighbours". This repeated stressing of the sense of injustice, apart from national sentiments, seems to have motivated Kukuljević to 're-examine' and appropriate history. Moreover, by placing it in a "dramatic frame", Kukuljević was also framing a collective memory along with others proponents of the Illyrian movement.

As a historian – and an aristocrat – Kukuljević took deep interest in the feudal history and genealogies of Croatian nobility, ¹⁸ and in the play *Stjepko Šubić* he referred to several noble families of the Medieval Croatia. But Kukuljević was also looking beyond the frame of feudal history, to a collective, 'national' history as a point of identification. ¹⁹ Moreover, the constitution of the national identity implies the existence of the Other, in this case the Mongols. The contrast between Croats and Mongols is intensified by the confessional difference.

For Kukuljević theatre appears to have been a suitable medium for disseminating issues related to his historical research. The notion of theatre as an educational establishment and an authority – especially in the context of language – was absorbed by Croatian and Serbian intellectuals of the time. In accordance to this view, as well as to the previously stated intention of the author, Kukuljević's 'heroic plays' could be regarded as "history lessons" to a certain extent, which were even more effective for having been given from the stage.

STAGING OF STJEPKO ŠUBIĆ

In 1840 Kukuljević's play *Juran i Sofija* ('Juran and Sofija') opened the premier season of the theatre company Domorodno teatralno društvo ('The Native Theatre Society') at the theatre in Zagreb. It was the first Croatian/Serbian vernacular

¹⁵ Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: Borba Hrvatah s Mongoli i Tatari: Povjestno kritična razprava od Ivana Kukuljevića Sakcinskoga (sa dodatkom izvornih listina). Zagreb: A. Jakić, 1863, p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibidem, s.p.

¹⁷ Kukuljević Sakcinski: Poraz Mongolah, s.p.

¹⁸ Ivan Pederin: "Kukuljević kao povijesnik", in: *Zbornik o Ivanu Kukuljeviću Sakcinskom*, ed. Tihomil Maštrović. Zagreb: Hrvatski studiji sveučilišta, 2011, pp. 25–53.

¹⁹ Aleida Assmann: Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses. München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1999, p. 77.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 79.

company to be engaged by a professional theatre, and so the event had considerable resonance for the 'Illyrian' public. German-speaking theatre had already become well established by then, while performances in the Croatian/Serbian language were sporadic and irregular.

Following the invitation of the Ilirska čitaonica ('Illyrian reading room') in 1840, the Novi Sad-based company Leteće diletantsko pozorište ('The Flying Amateur Theatre') came to Zagreb to perform in the 'Illyrian language'. The company entered a contract with the Illyrian reading room as well as the German theatre. Consequently it was renamed Domorodno teatralno društvo. In the course of their engagement (1840–1841) the ensemble employed several new Croatian members.

Heinrich Börnstein (1805–1892), the intendant of the city theatre, recollected in his memoirs that the repertoire of the company consisted mostly of "national-patriotische[n] Dramen aus der kroatischen Geschichte" ('national-patriotic dramas from the Croatian history'). Indeed, among the works of Kukuljević, Demeter and Jovan Sterija Popović there were several plays referring to Croatian as well as to Serbian history. However the repertoire was by no means dominated by vernacular 'heroic plays'; it included many comedies and melodramas by foreign and domestic authors (especially by the Serbian Jovan Sterija Popović). Among translated plays there were adaptations of Shakespeare, Calederón, Körner, Schikaneder and – mostly – Kotzebue.²²

There are seven documented performances of *Stjepko Šubić* in 1840 and 1841 by Domorodno teatralno društvo.²³ Demeter was a prominent poet and dramatist, and in one of his reviews in the Illyrian magazine *Danica ilirska* he noted that both Kukuljević plays (and some others) had achieved "great success".²⁴ This statement is followed by a detailed account of a particular actor's performances. Further stagings include productions by amateur travelling companies, for instance in 1841,²⁵ 1847²⁶ and 1861.²⁷ After the establishment of the Croatian national theatre in 1860, the play was included in the official repertoire.

²¹ Heinrich Börnstein: Fünfundsiebzig Jahre in der Alten und Neuen Welt: Memoiren eines Unbedeutenden, vol. 1. Leipzig: Verlag von Otto Wigand, 1881, p. 273.

²² Branko Hećimović (ed.): Repertoar hrvatskih kazališta 1840-1860-1980. Zagreb: Globus, 1990.

²³ Ibidem, p. 21.

²⁴ Danica ilirska, 10 October, 1840, p. 164.

²⁵ Danica ilirska, 8 May, 1841, p. 74.

²⁶ Hećimović: Repertoar hrvatskih kazališta 1840–1860–1980, p. 25

²⁷ Srpski dnevnik, 16 February 1861, s.p.

CONCLUSION

Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski's translation of Kotzebue's *Bela's Flucht* constitutes an adaptation on different levels. By partially domesticating the original, Kukuljević established a new semantic context that resulted in a shift of meaning. Furthermore, he appropriated the historical frame of the play in the context of his own historical research and in regard to the ongoing construction of Illyrian/Croatian identity. Regarding his historiographical perspective and the strategy of the dramatisation of history, Kukuljević's 'heroic plays' could be seen as a framing of the collective memory as well as 'history lessons' in the process of shaping the national identity.

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