



Vinko Paletin's Discovery of the New World

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Conclusions

Of the ten narratives Forth considers only one has its provenance in Timor. It features a bird known locally, i. e., by Tetum-speakers, as the *berliku* (Vroklage 1953/II: 141). The call given by this bird, i. e., *kiu kau, kiu kau*, reproduced by Vroklage seems to me to differ significantly enough from that of the friarbird to suggest that the *berliku* is a different species, and as Forth remarks, whereas the *berliku* is reported to be a small bird, the friarbird, being about the size of a pigeon, is not especially small. For the record, my Timorese informants told me that the *berliku* is a very small bird with a forked tail – decidedly different from the friarbird (Pinto personal communication 1996). In Raphael das Dores's dictionary (1907: 93) it is identified as a nightingale, and Morris (1984: 13) identifies it as a willy wagtail. On the other hand, despite it not having a tail that is particularly forked, Gregory Forth (personal communication 1996) suggests this bird is very probably a kind of whistler (*Pachycephala* sp.), which would make it correspond to the Manggarai *kiong* or forest whistler (*P. nudigula*), though possibly not the *nudigula* species. In the Vroklage narrative the *berliku*'s antagonist is the crow, a species known in Tetum as *ka'o*, and during the course of my fieldwork in Timor I collected a text in which crow and friarbird contest the lengths of day and night. In due course I hope to publish it; but I anticipate the narrative's existence here in order to draw attention to the singularity of the *berliku*'s presence in these avian narratives of confrontation that Forth has collated meticulously and explained cogently.

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Aleksandar Bošković

Introduction

Ignacio Bernal's (1962) impressive annotated bibliography of the research in Mesoamerica between 1514 and 1960, completely omits works published in the territory of the former Yugoslavia – in particular, articles and books in Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian. This should be attributed mostly to the relative inaccessibility of these languages to the scholars engaged in Middle American research, especially regarding the pre-Columbian cultures. People who have working knowledge of these languages are mostly engaged in the linguistics, history, or Old World (especially Neolithic and late Roman) archaeology. They appear to have been much less interested in anthropology and ethnology, the disciplines that produced most of the research in this area in this century.

Naturally, a short paper could not remedy this great disproportion. What I intend to do is to present a rather brief overview of the works dealing with the pre-Columbian in Middle America in Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian, and then concentrate on one of the participants of the conquest of Yucatán, Vinko Paletin.

An Overview of Research

The first series of articles dealing with the Middle American Indians in Croatian appeared in four consecutive issues of the *Catholic Journal*¹ (*Katolički list*) in Zagreb in 1885 under the same title, "Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Indians' Struggle for Freedom" (Jambrušić 1885). These articles introduced the great discussions of the Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda in the mid-1500s to the general public in Croatia. It is interesting to note that this appears while Croatia is still part of the Austro-Hungarian kingdom, and while the Croatian nationalism is on the rise. In that context, introducing the discussions that were dealing with the human rights of the conquered populations of other continents and ethnic backgrounds does seem

1 I will translate the names of the journals and other publications, as well as the titles of the contributions, throughout the paper, giving the original title right after the translated one in the parentheses.

curious, and might have served the purposes of Croatian nationalists in their struggle for self-determination.

In any case, the interest for Middle America did spread to other parts of the Austro-Hungarian kingdom, and in 1890 in Novi Sad, R. Žeravica published in the journal *Banner (Zastava)* the article "The Ruins in Mexico." This article seems to be an eclectic combination of the author's own trip to Mexico and the descriptions published by 1880s (especially the ones from the Maya area, since he did not travel there) by other scholars.

The increasing immigration from the Balkan peninsula by the end of the 19th century also increased presence of the South Slavs throughout the Latin America. Most people came in search of the better life for them and their families. Some were also adventurers and explorers. Among the latter ones, especially interesting are the Seljan brothers (Lazarević 1977), and for the subject of this paper it should be noted that Stevo Seljan left a short manuscript under the title "Curiosities of Central America," written probably around 1908.

After the unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians in a single state, Yugoslavia (in 1918),² the interest in this subject was expressed first in the article on the "Decline of the Maya Kingdom" (Tomičić 1935) in the Zagreb journal *Family (Obitelj)* – an eclectic article drawing heavily on the research done up to that date. A few years later (1937), Debeljak writes on "The Aztec Culture" in Slovenian.³

After the WW II, Melita Viličić (1953) wrote a treatise on the pre-Columbian architecture. These were several chapters originally prepared for the general history of architecture, but they were eventually published as a separate volume.

Due to ideological reasons (affiliation with the Communist ideology, which was the dominant component of the cultural life in Yugoslavia from 1945 until its dissolution in 1991), Knorozov's work on the Maya hieroglyphs was easily introduced in the several volumes dealing with the origins of writing. This influence survived much later in the works of the Momčilović brothers in Belgrade. Actually, the older brother, Vladimir Momčilović, focused his work (he was a freelance researcher in the Belgrade's City Committee of the Communist Party) on the role and influence

of the Catholic Church in Latin America, but this did not prevent him from discussing other issues, including strongly criticizing others for not paying more attention to the work of the Russian scholars (Momčilović 1988; the reply is in Bošković 1989c).

Probably the most important event of the 1980s is the introduction of the splendour of the Mesoamerican civilizations through the series of translations; actually beginning with the B. Prelević's translation of the León-Portilla's "Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares" (1979). This trend continues with the translations (in all cases, from Spanish – *not* from the original manuscripts!) of Lj. Ristanović of the Recinos version of "Popol Vuh" (1983a), Barrera Vásquez and Rendón edition of "El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam" (1983b), and the new (Carmack's) version of "Título de Totonicapan" (1984).⁴ All three titles were published by the Bagdala Publishing House from Kruševac (Serbia), a publisher who specializes in the Third World literatures. The translator acknowledged the help of René Acuña and Robert Carmack, but still, his commentaries remained rather confused, fragmentary, and perplexing for a person without background in ancient Mesoamerican cultures.

Finally, the work of Bošković was primarily oriented towards the understanding of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations through their religion (1986a, 1986b, 1988a, 1988b, 1989b, 1990). This includes a paper in the highly prestigious *Bulletin of the Ethnographical Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* (Bošković 1988b). He edited (1989) as well a selection of articles (in translation) by Beatriz de la Fuente (1989), David C. Grove (1989), and Ulrich Köhler on the Olmec (1989). The same author also wrote a brief introduction to the oral literature of the Maya Indians (1989a).

Las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas

As already noted above, first articles in Croatian and Serbian on the pre-Columbian Middle America were dealing in great detail with the life and

2 Other South Slav ethnic groups, like Macedonians, were not officially recognized at the time.

3 My data on the research in Slovenian are too fragmentary, so I only mention this as the first article in Slovenian on this subject – as far as I know.

4 The editor and translator notes that it is the first edition of this text anywhere in the world, and he also acknowledges the help of Dr. Robert M. Carmack – who found this text in the Guatemala highlands. This is a rather extraordinary event, since most of his commentaries to the other translations are usually just translations of other people's comments (for the "Popol Vuh," for example, the ones by Adrian Recinos) – without any reference.

times of Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), traditionally regarded as a symbol (or at least, a figure of immense importance) of the struggle for dignity of the American Indians.⁵ Actually, Las Casas can be seen (in a historical context) as a continuation of the efforts of his fellow Dominicans, Antonio de Montesinos and Pedro de Córdoba, who were already refusing to hear the confessions of the Spanish settlers at Santo Domingo (Haiti), based on what they have considered to be inhuman treatment of the native population. Las Casas went a little further in asking the abolition of *encomiendas* and *repartimientos*,⁶ as something in itself evil and immoral. In the letter to the king Carlos V in 1516, he wrote that it is better to lose all the lands overseas, than to allow that such a horrible injustices be done in the name of the king. With the support of the Dominican theologians from the University of Salamanca,⁷ Las Casas eventually succeeded (with great help of the Spanish royalty!) in arguing for the laws that abolish *encomiendas* and grant (at least formally, if not in practice) freedom to the native population, in 1542.

5 An impressive summary of these debates and the issues involved is given in Šanjek 1978 and (in a somewhat abbreviated form) Šanjek 1991.

6 Without getting into the detailed explanation of these important institutions, I will only say that they refer to a series of regulations that basically connected (tied) native inhabitants to the lands that were purchased by settlers or given away as gifts, thus keeping the native population practically as slaves.

7 Among the most notable ones were Bartolomé de Carranza, Melchior Cano, and Domingo de Soto. They were trying to prove that Pope Alexander's VI bull "Inter cetera" (1493) is valid only in the spiritual sense – giving to the Spanish and the Portuguese the right to Christianize native population in the territories that they discover, but not to treat these territories and their inhabitants as their own property. The Dominican General, Thomas de Caeta, wrote in his commentary to the edition of the "Summa theologica" of Thomas Aquinas that there are actually three kinds of infidels: 1) the ones that are legally and factually subjects of the Christians and live in the Christian kingdoms (Moors, Jews); 2) the ones that are legally but not factually Christian subjects because they seize Christian territories (Turks); and 3) the ones that are neither legally nor factually Christian subjects (Indians). He concluded that the second kind (Turks) should be treated like enemies, but the third kind (Indians) are legal owners of their own lands, and cannot be subjected to force. These and similar statements were recognized in the bull of Pope Paul III, "Sublimus Deus" of June 2, 1537: "Indians and all the peoples that are yet to be met by Christians, even if they live with no faith in Christ, should not be deprived of their freedom or their worldly possessions . . . They cannot be forced into slavery, and to the faith of Christ they should be introduced by the preaching of the Divine Word and the example of the decent life."

However, the theoretical question of the use of force in converting the native population to the "true faith" and "true God" had already been raised by the lawyer from Córdoba, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, in his treatise "Democrates alter sive de iustis belli causis" (Rome 1535). Sepúlveda stressed the fact that the Indians are, in his opinion, "infidels, barbarians, and slaves by their very nature" (cf. Coe, Snow, and Benson 1986: 22), and all this led to the famous discussion between him and Las Casas in 1548 at Valladolid in Spain. In this discussion, Las Casas claimed that the differentiation of the civilized peoples and the barbarians could not be based on ethnic, cultural, and religious differences, but on the fact that there are people that respect freedom and natural rights of the others and people that do not respect these rights. Although the royal auditors never officially declared the outcome of this debate, the fact that shortly after the debate (in 1552) Las Casas published his "Brevísima relación . . ." (1989 [1552]) while Ginés de Sepúlveda never received permission to publish any of his subsequent polemical works, speaks for itself.⁸

Vinko Paletin: Looking for the Compromise

However, views expressed by Las Casas and other Dominicans were not enthusiastically embraced in the New World. In this context, we encounter Vinko Paletin (1508–1573), a native of the island of Korčula (Croatia), in Adriatic Sea off central Dalmatian coast.⁹ At the age of 20 he left his native island and went to Spain. Eventually, he became a sailor and left for the New World in 1535, where he participated in the conquest of Yucatán, under the command of the younger Francisco de Montejo (1535–1541). During his stay in Mexico (1542–1543), he became a Dominican. After his return to Europe, he studied theology (Bologna, 1546–1552), compiled a map of Spain (1550), translated Pedro de Medina's "L'arte del navegar," into Italian, wrote a treatise (now lost) "De la institución del buen gobierno" (1560), wrote a short description of the Yucatán, taught mathematics and cosmography at the Academy at Vicenza (from

8 Of course, one should not forget that Las Casas on the theoretically similar grounds justified the slavery (and slave trade, which was becoming a profitable business venture) in Africa!

9 The data on Paletin's life are based on Šanjek 1978 and 1991.

1560), etc. (a much more detailed account is in Šanjek 1978).

However, his most famous work is a treatise in Spanish and Latin "On the Right and Necessity of War That Is Being Waged by the Spanish Kings against the Peoples of the West Indies," written in 1557/1558.¹⁰ In this treatise, Paletin summarized the main arguments of both the conquerors and their opponents, taking as his starting point the rebuttal of the writings of Las Casas, which he describes as "insulting and harmful" (Šanjek 1978: 102). Trying to choose the middle way between what he saw as the two extremes, Paletin noted that the Indians are much more likely to be traitors, liars, to commit sins against the nature, to sacrifice other human beings, than to live a life of virtue. However, unlike his more famous Dominican contemporaries, he did believe that the Indians could be brought by force to the civilized life. In his final arguments, it seems that the Paletin the *conquistador* defeated Paletin the Dominican.

The Maya Civilization of the Yucatán Peninsula as Seen by Paletin

The content of this treatise is mostly known to us from the secondary sources – only some fragments still remain today, and they are kept in the Dominican monastery in Korčula. Two versions of this text exist outside Korčula, both incomplete and dating from the 18th century: 1. the Manuscript Phillipps Ind. 11798 (in Latin) in the library of the Indiana University in Bloomington, and 2. the Spanish version, discovered by J. B. Muñoz on January 21, 1784 in the Archivo General de las Indias in Sevilla. The latter one was published in Hanke and Millares Carlo (1943: 12–37), and it is the basis of the Croatian edition. However, the Croatian edition is more accurate and takes into account other (primarily Latin) contemporary sources, so that is the one that I am following here.

One of the most fascinating (and most complete) fragments contains Paletin's brief description of Yucatán, with remarks that the marvellous cities were, according to the natives, built by the race of bearded people, resembling Spaniards, but who were eventually defeated by the Mayas and had to leave their cities, leaving them empty as they were on the eve of the conquest. Paletin was

convinced that the pyramids and temples that he saw were actually built by the Carthaginians, since the notion of an autochthonous, Indian civilization was something completely unacceptable at the time. Here is what he wrote:

The Yucatan peninsula has several provinces. One is Zacatlan, a little bit more than a day's walk from the sea, with the old structure of the finely worked stone and the high tower. In the middle is the temple where they made sacrifices to their idols, and the Indians call this temple *cu*¹¹ ...

Another province is called Ciciniza [Chichén Itzá], where, I believe, New Salamanca had been founded ... The Indians annoyed us and we had to leave that place where remnants of the old structures are still visible. There are also seven towers, but the Indians do not live there. On all these structures and towers there are images of infantry and soldiers, bearded and with armor, helmets, and other objects; they have sharp swords, darts, and axes, as well as the Amazons, and everything is depicted like the army that is on the move. Two rows of letters were on these towers, but none of us could understand them. They were not Latin, or Greek, or Hebrew. As far as I can tell, these letters are from Africa, from Carthage. The letters are still there today, and your Majesty [the treatise is addressed to the king Philip II] can determine what language they represent. Right next to that tower there is a wonderful stream, and all around there are many old fruit trees.

Some among us, the ones that were more curious, while admiring the structures, repeatedly asked the Indians what were these structures for, these old and ruined cities that existed long ago. They all replied that they have heard from their forefathers that many years ago bearded people came with ships from afar, just as you [the Spaniards] come ... and they have founded these cities and lived in them. As time went by, the ships and the people stopped coming. When our [Yucatec Mayan] forefathers saw that, they started attacking them. They weared them down with hunger and war, killed and destroyed them. The cities were left empty and in ruins and they still remain that way.

It is quite obvious that everything fits: history, the position of this land, distance of this land from the Europe and Africa, remnants of buildings.

It seems that first these territories were Carthaginian and Roman. After that, the Catholic kings [of Spain], eager to spread the Divine Word more than other Christian kings, with all the expenses did everything to discover these territories under the command of the Captain Cristóbal Colón [Christopher Columbus]. As a supreme arbiter of all the kings, the Pope has legally announced that these formerly Roman lands now belong to the Spanish kings, which conquered them according to the justice and law, and kept them under their command (Šanjek 1978: 120 f.; 1991, footnote added).

¹⁰ The Croatian translation (by I. Mihojević) is published in Šanjek 1978: 102–127. Although some fragments have been published, only Šanjek 1978 has the full version of the ones that are preserved.

¹¹ Actually, this is the Yucatec Maya word for god.

Conclusions

I believe that the preserved fragments of Paletin's text could help us to further understand the ongoing theoretical battles over the lives and property of the American Indians, as well as some of the very earthly concerns that were involved. Obviously, a view of the participants in the conquest was sharply different from the view of the clergy that tried to – within their powers – protect the native population.

Furthermore, Paletin is one of the first authors that tries to rationally explain the origin of the magnificent structures that the conquerors saw in the abandoned cities. Certainly, Carthage is a very wild guess, but we must understand that to admit that the “inferior” and “barbaric” native population could have built something like Chichén Itzá was completely impossible for the conquerors. Any notion that the natives had high civilization of their own seemed quite impossible. Therefore, authors were examining the arguments and looking for the most rational solutions. Therefore, here is Carthage.

This is also one of the earliest accounts on the Maya hieroglyphic writing (written before Diego de Landa's “Relación de las Casas de Yucatan”), although not the earliest (cf. Coe 1989). I do believe that some similar surprises await us in the course of examining early Colonial records of the New World. Maybe there are many more Paletins, with works less fragmented and more precise, that need to enter the field of the scholarly research?

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