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## Transhumant Vlach Shepherding in Dalmatia and its Influence on Natural Environment in the Early 19th Century as Perceived by French

*Transhumancyjne pasterstwo wołoskie w Dalmacji  
i jego wpływ na środowisko naturalne na początku XIX w. w oczach Francuzów*

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to show how the traditional pastoral economy practiced by a large part of Dalmatian society was perceived by the French administration in Dalmatia, which became part of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy in 1806 and of the Illyrian Provinces in 1809. The analysis is based on the documents of the French National Archives and the French Ministry of Defense, which were created for the use of Napoleon's civil and military authorities. Within this context, the study focuses on the specific issue of how traditional pastoralism affected the Dalmatian environment.

The findings indicate that, although the Morlachs might appear to be the least likely group associated with environmentally harmful practices, French administrative documents clearly suggest otherwise. These sources portray the Morlachs as suffering from

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famine due to the barrenness of the land—an outcome attributed to their own actions, such as burning grasslands, uprooting vegetation, and excessive deforestation. The Morlachs failed to recognize their own role in causing the degradation that led to their misery.

**Key words:** Vlachs, Morlachs, Dalmatia, transhumant pastoralism, France, Napoleonic era, historical ecology

### STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu pokazanie, w jaki sposób tradycyjna gospodarka paster- ska praktykowana przez znaczną część społeczeństwa Dalmacji była postrzegana przez francuską administrację w Dalmacji, która stała się częścią napoleońskiego Królestwa Włoch w 1806 r. i Prowincji Iliryjskich w 1809 r. Analiza opiera się na dokumentach francuskich Archiwów Narodowych i francuskiego Ministerstwa Obrony, które powstały na użytek napoleońskich władz cywilnych i wojskowych. Artykuł skupia się przede wszystkim na kwestii postrzegania wpływu tradycyjnego pasterstwa wołoskiego na środowisko naturalne. Badanie pokazuje, że nawet jeśli Morlacy wydawali się być ostatnimi, którzy mogli być kojarzeni z praktykami szkodliwymi dla środowiska, to właśnie taki problem sygnalizowali francuscy administratorzy Dalmacji. Morlacy mieli głodować z powodu jałowości gleby, która opustoszała z powodu ich własnych działań (wypalanie trawy, wyrywanie korzeni, nadmierne wycinanie lasów) i nie byli w stanie zrozumieć, że są odpowiedzialni za własną niedzę.

**Slowa kluczowe:** Wołosi, Morlacy, Dalmacja, pasterstwo transhumancyjne, Francja, epoka napoleońska, ekohistoria

### INTRODUCTION

This article aims to show how the traditional pastoral economy practised by a large part of Dalmatian society was perceived by the French administration in Dalmatia, which became part of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy in 1806 and of the Illyrian Provinces in 1809<sup>1</sup>. This issue can be situated within the broader context of the formation of a Western European image of the Balkans, as well as an Enlightenment image of communities considered less civilised, in the light of the new perspective

<sup>1</sup> In 1797, French troops entered Venice and incorporated it into the newly formed Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy. The Venetian possessions in Dalmatia and Istria were first handed over to the Habsburg Monarchy under the Peace of Campo Formio, but a few years later first Dalmatia and Istria, and later also partly Croatia, were in French hands again. The reasons for the French expansion in the region were primarily of strategic nature and made it possible to tighten the Continental Blockade and keep the Habsburg Monarchy in check from the southwest – M. Kerautret, *Napoléon et les Balkans*, in: *Les Provinces illyriennes dans l'Europe napoléonienne*, ed. J.-O. Boudon, Paris 2015, p. 17.

created by the emerging scientific field of anthropology<sup>2</sup>. The analysis outlined in this study is based on the documents of the French National Archives and the French Ministry of Defense, which were created for the use of Napoleon's civil and military authorities of Dalmatia during Napoleonic rule in the years 1806–1813.

Within the previously outlined context, the impact of traditional pastoralism on the environment of Dalmatia is the specific issue the article intends to explore. This thematic focus is due to the fact several of the author's earlier works have already examined the issues of assessing the economic potential of Vlach pastoralism in Dalmatia and also its perception within an anthropological framework of progress and backwardness<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, this paper aims to complement these studies by focusing on the particular aspect of the Morlach image that relates to the natural environment.

## RESEARCH AND RESULTS

The perception of Vlach (Morlach) communities in Dalmatia during the Enlightenment has already been the subject of numerous analyses by various researchers. The Morlachs<sup>4</sup>, as the shepherds of the Dalmatian hinterland were called, were portrayed as lacking civilisation and being highly dependent on the natural environment, as Croatian, Italian and American researchers have pointed out<sup>5</sup>. This stereotypical image

<sup>2</sup> M. Todorova, *Imaging Balkans*, Oxford 2007, p. 76; L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994, pp. 5–16.

<sup>3</sup> W. Sajkowski, *French image of the peoples inhabiting Illyrian Provinces*, Warszawa–Bellrive-sur Allier 2018; idem, *Vlach Transhumant Economy at the Beginning of the 19th Century in Dalmatia and Bosnia in the French Perspective*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio F" 2021, 76, pp. 93–107.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Morlaques* (Morlachs), a term used by French observers to describe the various populations living in Croatia and Dalmatia, which were part of the Illyrian Provinces (1709–1713). The ethnonym 'Morlachs' comes from Greek (Mavro Vlasi – the Black Vlachs), but since the 16th century it has been used to describe not only the Vlachs, but also the Slavs and other groups who led a semi-nomadic pastoral life – Z. Mirdita, *Vlasi u historiografiji*, Zagreb 2004, p. 343.

<sup>5</sup> M. Knezović, *Morlak kao prirodni čovjek u djelima Alberta Fortisa, Ivana Lovrića i Balthasara Hacqueta*, in: *Triplex Confinium (1500.–1800.). Ekohistorija – Zbornik radova, Književni krug Split, Zavod za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, eds. E. Ivetić, D. Roksandić, Split–Zagreb 2003, pp. 130–121; E. Novello, *Crime on the Border: Venice and the Morlacchi in the Eighteenth century*, in: *Constructing border societies on the Triplex Conflinium: International Project conference papers 2 "Plan and practice: how to construct a border*

also had a positive dimension, as it affirmed the purity of the Morlachs' customs, uncorrupted by the negative influence of civilisation<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the image of Morlachs could be successfully placed among other utopian representations of exotic arcadias, and become a forerunner of the later fascination with Slavic folklore<sup>7</sup>.

The physiocratic but also mercantilist perspective, which assumed that a given society should make the most of the resources provided by the land it occupied, should also be mentioned when discussing the perception of communities living in Dalmatia (or the Balkans in general) and their relation to the natural environment<sup>8</sup>. These potential sources of nations' richness consisted of different kinds of natural resources, including minerals, metals, and ores, and also the land itself, as the new agricultural technologies would provide the means of subsistence or even prosperity. According to the French administrators, the local Dalmatian population was unable to exploit either the potential of natural resources, the value of which, like any uncivilized population, they were unable to assess, or the potential of agricultural land (because of backward agricultural practices)<sup>9</sup>. When Dalmatia became part of Napoleon's empire in 1806, officials and officers arriving in the region also criticised the alleged inefficiency of traditional Vlach herding. In their view, it was bereft of any economic value. According to Lasseret, an engineer and author of a report on Dalmatia in 1806, the purpose of the local herding was not to produce wool, but food for the shepherds' own use. Like Alberto Fortis decades earlier, Lasseret underestimated the quality of the products created by Morlachs. The French engineer clearly indicated that the population of the Dalmatian interior was primarily engaged in traditional herding<sup>10</sup>.

society? *The Triplex Confinium c. 1700–1750*" (Graz, December 9–12, 1998), eds. D. Roksandić, N. Štefanec, Budapest 2000, pp. 57–73; L. Wolff, *Venice and the Slavs: The Discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment*, Stanford 2002, pp. 156–161.

<sup>6</sup> This second positive image was derived from the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau and other authors who reflected on the corrupting nature of civilisation – P. Saint-Armand, *The Pursuit of Laziness: An Idle Interpretation of the Enlightenment*, transl. J. Gage, Princeton 2011, pp. 58–59.

<sup>7</sup> W. Sajkowski, *Les Morlaques de Justine Wynne Rosenberg–Orsini. Le prélude à la fascination romantique par le monde des Slaves du Sud et l'influence de Jean–Jacques Rousseau*, in: *Rousseau et Diderot: traduire, interpréter, connaître: actes du colloque organisé à Varsovie, 2–4 décembre 2013*, ed. I. Zatorska, Warszawa: 2013, pp. 198–199.

<sup>8</sup> D. Božić–Bužančić, *Europski fiziokratski pokret u južnoj Hrvatskoj u drugoj polovici XVIII. Stoljeća*, "Historijski zbornik" 1992, 45, pp. 111–124; W. Sajkowski, *French*, pp. 150–160.

<sup>9</sup> W. Sajkowski, *Vlach*.

<sup>10</sup> Service historique de la Défense [hereinafter: SHD], Département de l'armée de terre [hereinafter: DAT], ref. no. 1M 1590–1591, p. 20 (Lasseret, *Mémoire à joindre à la reconnaissance*

Transhumant pastoralism could be perceived as an activity that was very much in symbiosis with the environment and with the rhythm of nature. This was due to the fact that, in summer, the flocks were moved to the higher altitudes and mountain peaks, while in winter, they were brought down to the lower altitudes. Moreover, the sheep kept by the shepherds were primitive breeds originating from the Balkans<sup>11</sup>. During the Enlightenment, because pastoral societies depended on their herds and were forced to move with them (unlike modern, sedentary farming), this lifestyle was seen as a sign of these social groups' dependence on nature<sup>12</sup>.

But although the Dalmatian shepherds could be presented as a community living according to the laws of nature, numerous passages in the documents produced by the French administration point to the harmful impact of the Morlachs' activities on the environment. One of the most discussed issues was the presumed negative impact of the shepherding on soil quality. In his report of 10 June 1806, General Charles-Nicolas D'Anthouard stated that 'the Morlachs, seeing the growth of bushes, cut them off without mercy', and that the resulting damage to soil fertility was caused by the herdsmen's activities<sup>13</sup>. In other documents of the French administration in Dalmatia, especially in the anonymous project for the agrarian reform of Dalmatia written in Šibenik and dated 16 March 1806, the problem was addressed even more extensively. The project claimed that the poor state of the agriculture in this province was due to the lack of agricultural, industrial, technical, goodwill, direction, order, compliance with the law, and finally, to the negligence of the former rulers of Dalmatia, the Venetians<sup>14</sup>. Despite the subtleties of the causes of poverty in Dalmatian agriculture presented in the report, a considerable part of this document was devoted to the nature of the Morlach, which was perceived as an obstacle to the proper use of natural resources. The document attributed the over-exploitation of timber to the local population, which had led to the 'drought of exterminating proportions'. According to the anonymous author of the report, the Morlachs not only

*militaire de la Dalmatie*, 1806); A. Fortis, *Voyage en Dalmatie*, vol. 2, transl. M. Chapuis, Berne 1778, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> M. Stojiljkovic et al., *Morphometrical characterisation of Karakachan sheep from Stara Planina, Serbia*, "Bulgarian Journal of Agricultural Science" 2015, 21, 6, pp. 1278–1284.

<sup>12</sup> M. Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières*, Paris 1971, pp. 87–102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> [...] l'état de la Province causé par faute d'agriculture, d'industrie, d'un génie au bien, de la bonne volonté, de la direction, du bon ordre, et de la non observation des loix, et en dernier lieu de négligence de ceux qui dominent jusqu'à présent en Dalmatie' – SHD, DAT, ref. no. 1M 1590–1591, p. 5 (*Projet d'agriculture, en Dalmatie*, Sebenico, 26 mars 1806).

cut down the smallest shrubs in a haphazard way, but also they pulled out their roots and left the ground barren roots and leaves the ground deserted<sup>15</sup>. The *Projet d'agriculture* claimed that this practice was the cause of the drought in the Dalmatian countryside, not to mention the excessive and irrational exploitation of the forests by the Morlachs. In fact, their economic activity, like the traditional shepherding, had a negative impact on the condition of the woods, but the Venetians carried out much of the timber felling from the 15th to the 18th century in order to obtain material for the construction of their navy<sup>16</sup>.

The report on the state of agriculture in Dalmatia and ways of improving it gave other examples of the Morlachs' inability to use natural resources wisely. Over-cutting was likely a consequence of their poverty, but some of the damage caused by them was also due to poor habituation. The report identifies specific harmful practices in Morlach apiculture. According to the anonymous author of *Projet d'agriculture* after collecting after collecting honey from the hives, the local population killed the bees<sup>17</sup>. This practice aimed to reduce the cost of honey production, as the swarm should have been moved to another hive after the honey was harvested. Furthermore, the anonymous author of the agricultural reform project in Dalmatia stated that there was no need to enumerate other environmentally harmful practices of the Morlachs for the natural environment, as this list is too long: 'If I were to mention all the disruptions and their effects, the description would be tedious because of the ingrained ignorance of the Morlach people'<sup>18</sup>.

Until the end of the French presence in Dalmatia (1813), similar views continued to be expressed. In his annual report for 1812, sent to General Intendant Chabrol, Dalmatia's Intendant ordered his 'foresters' to look

<sup>15</sup> 'Que pourrait-on pas dire sur les bois ? Une affaire d'autant d'importance partout les rapports, autant négligé de toute manière, objet par lequel cette malheureuse Province va sujette à des sécheresses exterminatoires. Il suffira de dire que le Morlaque indigent, n'a pour ressource dans ces besoins que les bois qu'il coupe non seulement sans ordre et âge les plus petits arbrisseaux, mais il enlève les racines, et rend les bois déserts'. *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> N. Štefanec, *Trgovina drvetom na Tripleks Confiniumu ili kako izvući novac iz senjskih šuma*, in: *Tripleks*, pp. 338–340; D. Jedlowski, *Venecija i šumarstvo Dalmacije od 15. do 18. vijeka. Doktorska disertacija*, Split 1975, pp. 84–88.

<sup>17</sup> 'Aux abeilles bienfaisantes et industrieuses, que les barbaries ne leur ruse t'on pas ? Après qu'elles (malgré que peu les cultivent) ont fourni le fruit précieux, pour épargner la peine de les faire passer d'une caisse à l'autre, ils les tuent dans leur ruche ce qui les obligent de vendre ce fruit a meilleur marché [...] – SHD, DAT, ref. no. 1M 1590–1591, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> 'Si je voulais citer tous les désordres et leurs conséquences, par l'ignorance invétérée dans le Morlaque la description en deviendrait trop ennuyante et pour cela on les omet étant suffisant pour le connaisseur' – *ibidem*.

after those 'wretched woods' and to take specific measures to help them recover<sup>19</sup>. The intendant of Dalmatia boasted that he was able to prevent the unrestrained uprooting of plants by farmers – 'a practice particularly detrimental to the expansion of the forest and gradually destroying the topsoil', as he specified – by imposing strict legal measures. The governor of Dalmatia reported that the burning of plants and grass had been banned under the most severe penalties<sup>20</sup>.

The harmful practices of the local population were perceived as a serious threat to afforestation and soil quality, as evidenced by the number and intensity of actions taken by the authorities in the Illyrian provinces. However, were it not for the fact that the French reports state that poverty led the Morlachs to feed on plants and herbs, the dangerous practice of uprooting would be less understandable<sup>21</sup>. Despite the fact that Marmont's report referred to the army's Croatia, it is certain that the reference was to the inhabitants of the Dalmatian interior, whose poor condition was used as an argument maintaining the military regime in Croatia, whose inhabitants could live as wretchedly as the Dalmatian Morlachs if they were not subjected to the system of the military hierarchy. In the course of the discussion about the status of the Croatian army, the first governor of the Illyrian provinces, Marmont, compared the inhabitants of the Illyrians, forced to subsist upon roots and small wild plants, to 'beasts living upon herbs'<sup>22</sup>.

That the communities living in the Illyrian provinces could be judged very differently is illustrated by the opinion of General Marmont, who pointed out that in military Croatia the local population (which he he considered similar to that of Dalmatia) had a higher standard of living. This is confirmed by a thorough analysis of the sources, which shows that

<sup>19</sup> 'Le sol de la Dalmatie est dépouillé de verdure, quelques broussailles seulement, parsemées, ça et là prennent le nom des forêts. Ces tristes bois sont plus respectés aujourd'hui, les agents forestiers y ont mis de l'ordre, et leur vigilance fait espérer pour l'avenir la renaissance des bois dans ce pays, qui en fut couvert jadis' – SHD, DAT, ref. no. 1M 1590–1591, AN F1e62 (*Description topographique et militaire de la Dalmatie, par le général de brigade d'Anthouard, aide de camp du prince Eugène, Milan, 10 juin 1806, 1806*).

<sup>20</sup> 'On a défendu l'extirpation des racines à laquelle les gens de campagne se livraient sans réserve: quelques punitions ont fait l'effet. Enfin j'ai pris dernièrement un arrête qui défend sous les peines les plus graves que fixe la loi le brûlement des plantes et herbages, qui détruisait peu à peu la terre végétale et nuisait singulièrement à la propagation des forêts' – *ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> ' [...] la famille [Morlaque] [...] mange la pâte cuite sur les charbons, ou les racines quand la terre lui en donne encore' – *ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> SHD, DAT, ref. no. AN 138 AP 149, dossier 1 (A. Viesse de Marmont, *Croatie militaire: mémoire sur les régiments frontières*, 1810).

accusing the inhabitants of the Dalmatian interior of environmentally harmful practices was a kind of singularity linked to the fact that this area was the poorest part of the Illyrian provinces.

On the other hand, the issue of the harmfulness of pastoralism appears to be largely ignored in the reports on the Dalmatian coast and the numerous islands. This is due to the fact that this part of the province was more economically diversified, so traditional pastoralism did not attract as much attention from the authorities, who were able to tax other economic activities of the local population that they considered more profitable, such as fishing<sup>23</sup>. This is the case in the description of Dalmatia by the engineer Lasseret in 1806, who mentions the importance of the garfish fishery<sup>24</sup>, or in an anonymous report about Dalmatia: 'Large quantities of fish are caught near the Dalmatian coast'. For example, in the description of Dalmatia by the engineer Lasseret in 1806, which mentions considerable catches of garfish or in an anonymous report *Notice sur la Dalmatie*<sup>25</sup>. Similar information is found in reports on the population of coastal areas in other provinces along the sea, such as Istria and civil Croatia, where fishing is mentioned as one of the most common and highly profitable activities<sup>26</sup>. In addition, exploitation of natural resources by inhabitants of Carniola was also portrayed in a manner that differs from descriptions of inhabitants of inland Dalmatia<sup>27</sup>.

Here, as with many other elements that shaped the French image of the inhabitants of the interior of Dalmatia, known as the Morlachs, it is important to consider the context of earlier Venetian perspective, especially Alberto Fortis's description of Dalmatia. Several examples of the inability of the Morlachs to make a correct economic assessment

<sup>23</sup> According to Melita Pivec-Stèle the fishing was one of the most important sources of the richness of Dalmatia – *La vie économique des provinces illyriennes (1809–1813) suivi d'une bibliographie critique*, ed. M. Pivec-Stèle, Paris 1930, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Engineer Lasseret mentioned especially about the garfishes, which were caught in the lakes of Wrana, the mouth of Krka river near Skradin, as well as in the swamps of Nertva's estuary, and about the oysters, which were fished in the seawaters near Zadar, Novigard, or Ston – SHD, DAT, ref. no. 1M 1590–1591, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> 'On pêche sur les côtes de Dalmatie une grande quantité des poissons' – SHD, DAT, ref. no. 1M 1611, p. 6 (*Notice sur la Dalmatie, sa division politique (ancienne division Vénitienne) et physique; note historique, étendue, population, commerce et produits, fleuves, chevaux, forts de mer, mœurs et caractère des habitants et des Morlaques, état militaire, administration, description abrégé du 23 gouverneur de la Dalmatie Vénitienne et de leur chef lieux*).

<sup>26</sup> 'Sur les côtes de la Croatie vulgairement appelées littoral on pêche du thon en assez grande quantité et en qualité excellente' – *Note sur l'industrie, manufacturière et commerciale, dans les provinces Illyriennes*.

<sup>27</sup> W. Sajkowski, French, pp. 160–163.

of the various natural resources were given by this Italian naturalist and traveller. Fortis also claimed that the population of the Dalmatian province was incapable of planning the use of natural resources in the long term, as they continued to exploit them only in a day-to-day perspective<sup>28</sup>. As a result, they were unable to improve their living conditions and remained constantly on the verge of poverty. Thus, some scholars have observed that Fortis's description of the population of the interior of Dalmatia comparable to that of the indigenous peoples of the most remote parts of the world colonized by European powers. For example, Fortis compared the Morlach people to the Hottentots<sup>29</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it should be noted that the French view of the attitude of the Dalmatian interior inhabitants towards the environment was marked by certain inconsistencies/ exhibited certain contradictions. Since Alberto Fortis wrote about them, the Morlachs have been portrayed as a society living very close to nature, as every population considered primitive and uncivilized<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, however, these qualities were thought to contribute to their poverty, which, in turn, supposedly led them to harm the environment, for instance, through predatory forestry. This is clearly reflected in the French documents describing Dalmatia during its incorporation into the Napoleonic Empire. Unable to understand that they were responsible for their own misery, the Morlachs were starving because of the barrenness of the land, which had been made desolate by their own actions (burning grass, pulling up roots, overcutting forests).

As Voltaire noted in his treatise on universal history, Dalmatia flourished from the time of Diocletian until the seventeenth century, when the region became a desert 'infested with barbarians'<sup>31</sup> – the Morlachs, Uskoks, and other groups associated with the eastern coast of the Adriatic. Voltaire's comparison of the Morlachs to the barbarians was both a symptom and a cause of Dalmatian degeneration. The alleged responsibility of the Morlachs, who exploited Dalmatia's natural resources and caused deforestation, was also an argument that appeared earlier in the Venetian perspective, for example in Alberto Fortis's description of Dalmatia,

<sup>28</sup> A. Fortis, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 85–86.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> M. Duchet, *op. cit.*, pp. 271–280; M. Knezović, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–131.

<sup>31</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit de nations et les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'au Louis XIII*, in: *idem, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 16–19, Berne 1784, p. 254.

who denounced 'the stupid ignorance of the inhabitants, who cut down all the trees indiscriminately', such useful plants as mastic, which grew near Pirovac (Slosella)<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> 'I y a beaucoup de Lentisques dans le district de Slosella: mais la stupide ignorance des habitans, qui coupent tous les arbres sans distinction, ne les laisse pas parvenir à l'âge où leur produit pourrait être considerable' – A. Fortis, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 222.

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#### NOTA O AUTORZE

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