

**Representing the Accused:
Nicholas of Modruš's (ca. 1427–1480) *On the Wars of the Goths***

Luka Špoljarić (Central European University, Budapest)

I

The year 1897 saw the publication of one of the most famous pieces of the fin-de-siècle literature, *Dracula*, a novel that made the name of Bram Stoker. Yet, the very same year the eponymous hero of the novel made an appearance in a first scholarly article describing the life and works of a fifteenth-century Dalmatian humanist, Nicholas bishop of Modruš. The author of this article, a Hungarian scholar Vilmos Fraknói, had in the course of his research consulted nearly all of Nicholas' preserved works, yet from all he deemed a single passage worth transcribing – Nicholas' description of Vlachs and their *tyrannus* Vlad Țepeș Dracul. When 20 years after Fraknói, Giovanni Mercati conducted his own research on Nicholas and his works, he chose to publish the same passage. What is even more interesting here is that this passage describing the contemporary events which took place in the Wallachian principality comes from Nicholas' *De bellis Gothorum (On the Wars of the Goths)*, an account of the Gothic invasions of Italy in 4 books. Even if they were interested in the information about Țepeș and his Vlachs, Fraknói and Mercati had little appreciation for the work in general and had little to say about it concluding that it “contributed little to the knowledge of the Gothic invasions.” Consequently, for nearly a century no one has turned to it from a fresh vantage point, and it is one of the aims of my PhD dissertation to do just that. Today I will first strive to shed some light on the author of the work, Nicholas of Modruš, since it is his cultural background that provides the key for the understanding of the work. Next I will proceed to discuss the rhetorical strategy employed in the course of the narrative and then to interpret it within its historical context, before finally concluding by returning to *Dracula*, Vlachs and their place in the story.

II

Nicholas was born sometime before the year 1427 in Kotor/Cattaro, then part of Venetian territories in Dalmatia. Following the completion of his studies in Venice at the school of Paul of Pergola, Nicholas was ordained a priest and his rise in the ecclesiastical hierarchy followed soon. He was first in 1457 appointed as the bishop of Senj, in Croatia only to be transferred in 1461 to the neighbouring bishopric of Modruš. Yet, here Nicholas played an important role in realizing the crusading plans of pope Pius II in the Balkans. On pope's command, he spent the next 3 years on diplomatic missions to Bosnian and Hungarian courts, Venice and Ragusa. In 1464, due to unclear circumstances he was forced by King Matthias Corvinus to leave the Kingdom of Hungary, after which he permanently settled in the Papal States, never again returning to his bishopric. Until his death in 1480 Nicholas was an active participant in the Roman intellectual circles, acted as a governor of numerous towns in the Papal States and was occasionally drafted as a diplomat for important missions. He was also a prolific author, and today eight of his works have been preserved, out of which *De bellis Gothorum* represents Nicholas' only historiographical work.

The Gothic invasions of Italy indeed represented one of the focal points of interest for the Italian humanists. Leonardo Bruni, the foremost historian of the Quattrocento, dedicated an entire work to the subject – his *De bello Italico aduersus Gothos*, a translation of Procopius'

De bello Gothico – and discussed it at length in his *Historiae Florentini populi*. The influence of Bruni's works in particular is reflected in the fact that *De bello Italico aduersus Gothos* was printed already in 1470 in Foligno and in 1471 in Venice, receiving wide dissemination. Given that Nicholas was writing his work during 1472 and 1473, one could imagine that the two printed editions were one of the reasons behind his project. In addition, Gothic invasions represent the starting point and one of the key episodes of Flavio Biondo's *Ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades*. The Italian humanists, Bruni and Biondo, viewed the Roman history as their own and constructed in the course of their narrative of the Gothic invasion a binary opposition of Romans vs. Goths, civility vs. barbarity, us vs. them. In their narratives, the Gothic invasions represented an event that had ushered in the Middle Ages thus ending the felicitous times of Antiquity; it represented a cataclysm of their nation's fortunes and thus a moment of immense historical significance. Although as a humanist Nicholas of Modruš held same veneration for the classical literature, his own cultural background was different than that of the Italians. While the Italian humanists appropriated the Roman literature as their own, Dalmatians like Nicholas maintained a historiographical tradition that identified the Goths with Slavs, making them thus their ancestors. Already in the thirteenth century the Archdeacon Thomas of Split had traced the Croatian lineage to the Goths or Slavs, while from the Quattrocento onwards the Goth-Slav identification became a commonplace of Dalmatian historiography; most notably Vinko Pribojević and Juraj Šižgorić both counted the Goths as the ancestors of the Slavic or Illyrian people, praising their might and courage. It should be noted that the appellation was used outside the historiographical discourse as well – in the Ragusan chancellery for example; in 1432 in the set of instructions of the Ragusan envoys to the Bosnian court the progenitor of the Kotroman dynasty was called a Goth. Given these circumstances it is no wonder that even if Nicholas belonged to the Italian intellectual milieu, his account of the Gothic wars reflects a perspective different from that of Bruni and Biondo. Divided into 4 books, his work is in fact the first comprehensive treatment of the three wars that the Goths had waged in Italy; each war being accorded a separate book, books two to four (the three wars are: invasion of Alarich's Visigoths, invasion of Theodoric's Ostrogoths, and finally Justinian's reconquista). The first book is dedicated to the origins of the Goths and their history before entering Italy. The work is preserved in a single autograph manuscript, Cod. Corsin. 127 43.E3, although not in its entirety; from the last book only the first folio survives.

III

Given the limited amount of time available I will discuss the aspects of Nicholas' rhetoric only briefly. To be sure, Nicholas did not compose a *laudatio* of Goths and their deeds. In *De bellis Gothorum*, they were still labelled as barbarians. But as he himself stated in the opening lines of the work, his aim was rather to present the causes of their invasions, and here he sought to put stress on concrete causes rather than, like Bruni and Biondo, to project the stereotypical image of the Goths and explain their motivations through their inherent ferocious nature. Although not fully justifying their actions, Nicholas regularly kept presenting the Goths as the ones being provoked and always attributed a lot of space to the descriptions. To illustrate this point one can adduce the episode of how the Visigoths, after having being accepted to settle in the Moesia province as *foederati*, soon rebelled and started pillaging the Balkan provinces. Bruni and Biondo, following Orosius and Jordanes, had indeed written that the Gothic princes were incensed because of the avaricious Roman generals who kept for themselves the salaries owed to the Goths. Yet, they both saw the main cause of their rebellion in the fierce nature of the Gothic princes (*feroces ingenio*), characterizing them as bellicose men who hated idleness (*uiri bellaces otioque infensi*). Nicholas rather chose to dedicate a larger space to this episode, and in his account it was

solely the Roman avarice that prompted the Goths to choose between perishing from starvation or in battle. Moreover, in his account, Roman generals even conspired to kill from ambush the Gothic princes, but as Nicholas himself concluded: “it was through some divine will, I believe, that such a crime was averted.” The deaths and wounds that the Goths had suffered here provoked them to rebel and start pillaging Moesia and Thrace. This type of causation becomes a frequent motif of Nicholas’ narrative. He indeed regularly condemned the pillages of the “barbarians”, but he regularly devoted much more space to their causes. This is particularly evident in the second book of the work, when a new villain emerges – Stillico. The Gothic actions now become represented as a series of responses to Stillico’s machinations in his attempt to crown his son the emperor of the West. The battle of Pollentia becomes the central episode, where, unsatisfied with the alliance of the Goths with the emperor Honorius, Stillico decides to attack them by surprise and destroy them with one single stroke. Again, it is the attack of the Roman troops led by general Saul, “Hebrew by nation and perfidy” as Nicholas made sure to emphasize, that ultimately led to the Gothic sack of Rome. Whereas in Bruni’s narrative it was “Honorius’ generals” that had attacked the Goths, Nicholas subverted his account by turning the coin around and presenting the battle of the Christian Goths against the vicious Stillico’s troops led by a Jew, on an Easter Sunday. Strongly employing *pathos* in his exposition, at length he condemned the surreptitious character of the attack and lamented the fate of the God-fearing Gothic Christians. The battle description was constructed not by opposing terms ethnical terms as *Romani* and *Gothi*, but religious *Ebreus* and *Christiani*, emphasizing that aspect of the Gothic *ethos* with which the audience could identify and sympathize. Like Nicholas, Biondo relied on Orosius and Jordanes, and he mentioned as well that the troops were led by Hebrew Saul and that the surprise attack came on the Easter Sunday, but, in his account, the Goths were caught by surprise since, as the barbarians they are, they were “passing out from all the wine and feasting.” Nicholas’ emphasis on the Goths as Christians comes to the fore particularly during the account of the sack of Rome. Nicholas’ effort to invalidate the image of the Goths as barbarians became here explicit. His comment that “the greed for loot drives barbarians not to spare even the most sacred things,” is succeeded by a lengthy episode of how Alaric, the leader of the Goths, did not want to take golden and silver vases from the St. Peter’s basilica, but returned them there with the utmost reverence, saying that he does not lead war with the Apostles but with Romans. Whereas Biondo lamented on the pitiful state in Rome during the siege and elaborated on how the sack represented the beginning of the fall of the empire, Nicholas chose to emphasize Alaric’s piety and the Christian processions.

As I have indicated already, Nicholas consistently sought to justify the Gothic pillages, but he did not deny their bellicose and intemperate nature. Later Dalmatian and German humanists confronted with the same problem of self-identification continuously praised the uncorrupted morals of the barbarians, thus upholding stereotypical image of “the barbarian” even if reassessing its quality. In *De bellis Gothorum* however, Nicholas strove to subvert the stereotypical, petrified image as such. Indeed, as he himself put it, “the Goths are born with such nature that they do not know how to set limits to their desires.” But as he kept asserting throughout his work, despite their barbarian background individuals among Goths were able to achieve moral virtue and intellectual greatness. It was precisely Alaric’s restraining from pillaging the sanctuaries that earned Nicholas’ praises. And he was not the only one. Throughout the third book Theodoric was presented as a just and learned ruler, favourite of the emperor Zeno, at whose court he was educated. What is left of the fourth book is dedicated to praise of Amalasuenta’s moral virtue and her learning. And there were not only great rulers that could be found amongst the Goths. In the very beginning of his work, Nicholas at length described the three Gothic philosophers Diceneus, Zeuxis and Zamolxis, and as he exclaimed,

“who could believe that such ferocious hearts could be kept warm by the study of philosophy.” This idea that Nicholas presented as the narrator throughout the work, was also stated through the use of discursive speech. For the first time in the Renaissance the Goths were made to speak their mind. In one of the most interesting passages of the work, responding to the emperor’s accusations that rejected the Goths as savage barbarians, their legates were made to proclaim that “in different nations and so in our own the good people are mixed with bad, and so our people were obeying in the same way a good king, just as they did not oppose a bad one.” This subversion of the petrified image of barbarians represents the most important message communicated by the *De bellis Gothorum*, and a most original aspect of it.

IV

Now, I would argue, the rhetoric behind the work was tailored to serve a specific purpose. As it has been said already, the work was composed during 1472 and 1473, an important years for Nicholas’ career. For when in 1472 pope Sixtus IV agreed to join the Venetians in an open conflict against the Ottomans, he made Nicholas in charge of equipping the papal galleys in Venice, and then leading them personally to Rhodes, the base of Christian naval operations. Thus, after nearly a decade of appointments in minor provincial towns of the Papal States, Nicholas was, presumably due to his experience in anti-Ottoman diplomacy, put in charge of a major military enterprise. On this expedition he took with himself a young Perugian humanist, Francesco Maturanzio, whose two autograph manuscripts (Cod. Vat. lat. 5890 and Cod. Vat. Ottob. lat. 2011) containing letters and poems addressed to Nicholas, composed during and immediately after this expedition provide material for understanding the context of *De bellis Gothorum*. The recurrent motif of these poems, composed during expedition, is the praise of Nicholas as the pride of Illyria (*decus Illyriae*) and the second St. Jerome. In addition, two references can be found that reveal Nicholas’ career ambitions following this enterprise: 1) a poem addressed to Nicholas: “If your head is crowned by purple mitre / if due honour is given to Nicholas / I will not need you Maecenas, neither you Proculeus / you will be my Maecenas, my Proculeus;” 2) a poem addressed to Virgin Mary: “I myself pray that the renowned father lives up to Nestor’s years; / he, Nicholas, the first glory of his people. / Let not the highest priest deprive him of his due honour. / Let his head be crowned with a red tiara.” These reveal a conscious project by Nicholas of establishing himself among the Roman social and intellectual elites by fashioning an image of himself as a learned and eloquent bishop and a representative of his Illyrian nation – one worthy of a cardinal hat. But it was already the act of playing the social role of a patron that had reflected a clear ambition on Nicholas’ part for the accumulation of symbolic capital in an effort to move up the ecclesiastical hierarchy. And *De bellis Gothorum*, I would argue, constituted an important part of this project. By emphasizing the ability of the “barbarians” to achieve moral virtue and intellectual greatness, Nicholas was defending the merit of his own position as a Slavic intellectual among the Italian elites – and this precisely at the time of Ottoman wars when the word “barbarian” was one everyone’s lips.

To conclude, keeping in mind the rhetorical construction of *De bellis Gothorum* (and considering particularly the process of *inventio* whereby arguments are recollected in order to persuade the audience in a particular message), I would like to come back to the puzzling description of the Vlachs and Draculus. In this passage Nicholas presented the Vlachs in an entirely negative fashion, as people given to thievery, perfidious in nature and whose allegiance switched between the Hungarian king and the Turkish sultan. Nicholas used even more space for the description of their ruler Draculus engaging in a long and detailed description of the tortures he inflicted to his political opponents, fashioning thus an image of a

sadist of utmost cruelty. Now, seen in the context of the whole work, this passage represents more than a mere curiosum, since Nicholas made sure to stress that these perfidious Vlachs were actually “former Roman either exiles or soldiers, named from their leader Flaccus now called Vlachs by a change of a letter; by this word ... all the neighbouring nations call Italians as well.” The stress on the Vlach-Roman connection in the context of the whole work reveals that the story had, I would argue, a rhetorical function. For it is not only that Nicholas strove to challenge the monolithic image of an ignorant and cruel “barbarian” in the whole work. Here, by referring to Vlachs, he took one step further and undermined the very idea of *Romanitas* as the embodiment of cultural greatness.