

## *Introduction*

### *The Obscurity and Celebrity of Venetian Dalmatia*

In the eighteenth century, when Edward Gibbon surveyed the lands that had once belonged to the ancient Roman empire, he observed that Dalmatia, “which still retains its ancient appellation, is a province of the Venetian state.” As Gibbon wrote and published *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the 1770s and 1780s, Dalmatia did retain its ancient name as well as some classical ruins, such as the tremendous palace of Diocletian at Split, to testify to the former Roman affiliation. The province’s eighteenth-century political importance, however, lay in a different historical drama, the decline and fall of the Venetian empire, then in the final decades of its sovereign survival. Though Venice still clung to its eastern Adriatic empire over “the best part of the sea-coast,” the Roman province of Dalmatia, to Gibbon’s regret, had not been preserved in its ancient integrity: “The inland parts have assumed the Slavonian names of Croatia and Bosnia; the former obeys an Austrian governor, the latter a Turkish pasha; but the whole country is still infested by tribes of barbarians.”<sup>1</sup> For Gibbon the balance of civilization could be construed from the displacement of ancient appellations by Slavic names, and his reflections on Dalmatia were not objectively neutral when he pronounced the province to be “infested” by barbaric tribes.

On the one hand, he tended to conflate the eighteenth-century circumstances with the ancient drama of the decline and fall, the overrunning of Roman provinces by barbarian invasions. On the other hand, he perfectly reflected the philosophical values of his own century, of Augustan England, of the age of Enlightenment, when he interpreted the map of Europe according to an implicit opposition between civilization and barbarism. Gibbon’s eighteenth-century summation appeared curiously relevant again at the end of the twentieth century, when the political

situation of Dalmatia was again associated with the names and fates of Croatia and Bosnia, and foreign observers grimaced again, barely concealing the Augustan distaste that the supposedly civilized still feel for the presumably barbarous.

Gibbon's remarks on Dalmatia were followed by a footnote, that emblematic numeral of neutral scholarship, naming the historian's source: "A Venetian traveller, the Abbate Fortis, has lately given us some account of those very obscure countries."<sup>2</sup> The abbé Alberto Fortis, Paduan by birth, when Padua was part of the Venetian republic, published his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* in Venice in 1774, not long before Gibbon published his passing remarks on Dalmatia, in 1776, in the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*. Fortis's work was promptly translated into English and published in London in 1778 as *Travels into Dalmatia*. Fortis, though a priest, was emphatically a man of the Enlightenment, much more interested in natural history, geology, and paleontology than in any religious matters. With his voyage to Dalmatia, and his investigations into the natural resources and economic potential of the province, he set forth the issues of empire before the public of Venice. The great success of his book made the subject of Dalmatia fundamental for the Venetian Enlightenment and much more than a footnote to the Enlightenment all over Europe.

Fortis found in Dalmatia the classical ruins of ancient Rome, studied the "Sclavonian names" that designated contemporary Slavic society, and described the customs of the most notable "barbarians" in the province. These were the Morlacchi: "a race of ferocious men, unreasonable, without humanity, capable of any misdeed." Fortis, however, quoted this conventional Venetian opinion of the Morlacchi for the purpose of rebutting its excessive excoriation, and he went on to attribute to these Dalmatian barbarians a sort of noble savagery, according to the revisionist values of the Enlightenment. Gibbon might have found the presence of barbarians distasteful, but Fortis offered a sympathetic anthropological treatment of "barbarous" customs in Dalmatia and an ambivalent verdict upon "the society that we call civilized." Gibbon was absolutely right, however, to recognize that Fortis's account had illuminated the hitherto "obscure" province of Dalmatia, publicizing its topography and anthropology all over Europe, as the *Viaggio in Dalmazia* rapidly appeared in German, French, and English translations. Obscurity, of course, was a matter of perspective, and, no doubt, Dalmatia always appeared dimmer

from the distance of England than from the Adriatic maritime proximity of Venice. Yet the inland mountains of Dalmatia, the Dinaric Alps, where the Morlacchi resided, had been obstacles to Venetian observation, preserving provincial opacity and obscurity; from the perspective of San Marco it was easier to contemplate and comprehend the accessible cities of coastal Dalmatia. There, on the Adriatic, such towns as Zadar and Split, known under their Italian names as Zara and Spalato, were sufficiently influenced by Italian culture for Fortis to pronounce that “the society of Zara is as civilized as one could desire in any notable city of Italy.” Fernand Braudel described Dalmatia as “a narrow strip of Mediterranean life,” a hilly landscape of “terraced gardens, orchards, vineyards, and fields where the hillside was not too steep,” and small towns on the Adriatic—all in the menacing shadow of the “wild mountains,” extending almost to the coast.<sup>3</sup> What enlightened Europe came to find most fascinating about Dalmatia in the late eighteenth century was the wildness that lay beyond the Adriatic coast, in the obscure mountainous interior of the province.

Venice was inevitably interested in Dalmatia in the eighteenth century, as the metropolitan capital on the lagoon sought to refashion the rule of centuries across the Adriatic into the form of a modern empire. If London also took an interest in Fortis’s travels in Dalmatia, it was because England, even more than Venice, was deeply invested in the importance of empire and the issues of imperial rule. Indeed, Gibbon’s epic engagement with the decline and fall of the ancient Roman empire belonged to a contemporary context of excitement and anxiety about the modern British empire. The first volume of the *Decline and Fall* appeared in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence. Edward Said has emphasized the correlations of “culture and imperialism,” observing that empire is “supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations,” that “the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire.” Anthony Pagden has argued for the importance of “ideologies of empire” in early modern England, France, and Spain, with reference to their respective possessions in North and South America. In the eighteenth century those ideologies of empire were culturally reconceived and reformulated according to the values of the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The eighteenth-century Venetian empire was miniature by comparison to the British, French, and Spanish dominions. The late medieval

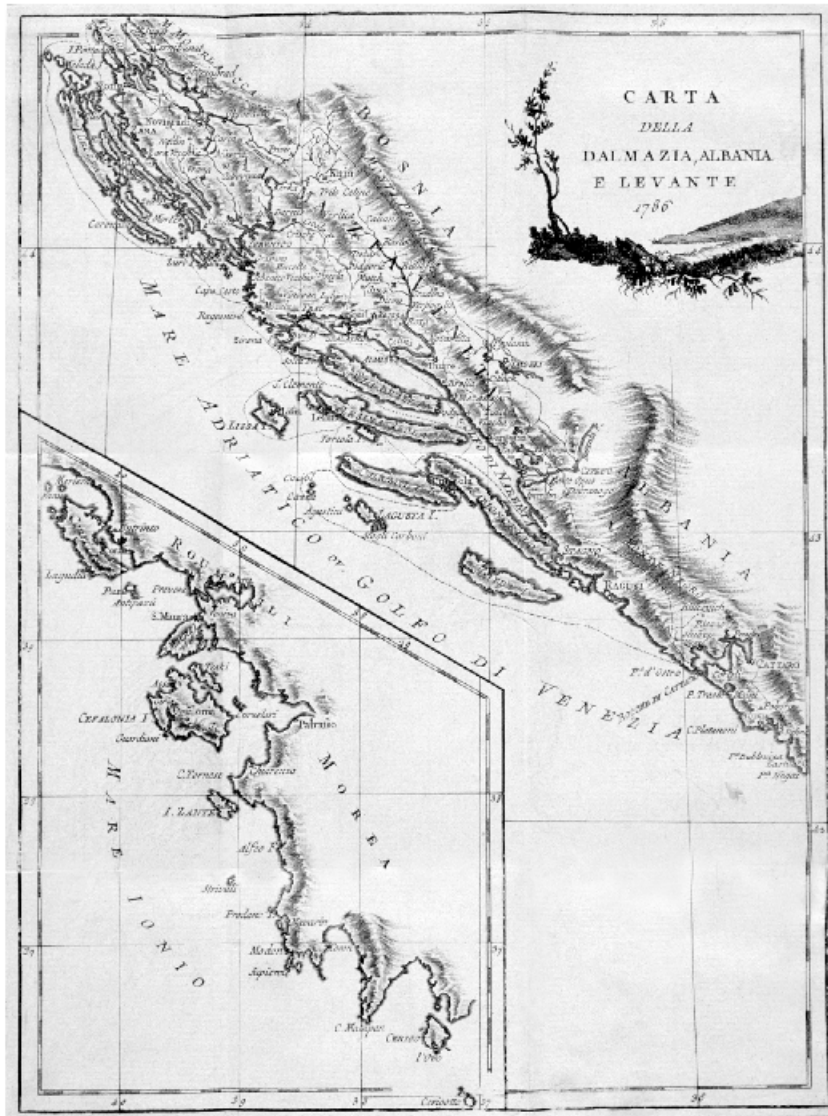


FIGURE 1. “Carta della Dalmazia, Albania, e Levante,” from Giulio Bajamonti, *Storia della peste che regnò in Dalmazia*, his history of the plague in Dalmatia, published in Venice in 1786. The map represented the meager remnants of Venice’s once farflung imperial domain beyond the sea, the *Oltremare*, which formerly extended all around the eastern Mediterranean. Dalmatia itself was most of what remained in the eighteenth century, with the appendage of Venetian Albania to the south, at the Gulf of Kotor, and, still further south, the several Ionian Greek islands, such as Corfu, Cephalonia, and Zante, inset on the map. (By permission of Widener Library, Harvard University.)

empire of Venice, dominating the arrival of Asian trade in Europe, had consisted of many Mediterranean islands, from Negroponte and Naxos to Crete and Cyprus, as well as powerful commercial communities in important ports around the sea, like Acre, Alexandria, and Constantinople. Control of the Adriatic, including the Dalmatian coast, was essential to more remote seafaring enterprises. The decline of Venice's eastern Mediterranean domain followed from the Ottoman conquests of the fifteenth century, but, at the same time, the Republic extended its mainland state—the Terraferma—across northern Italy as far as the River Adda, almost to Lake Como. In the eighteenth century, Venice still ruled over a mainland territory that included several restive Italian cities—Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia, Bergamo—as well as the Friuli region and the Istrian peninsula along the Gulf of Venice. There were also a few Greek Ionian islands like Corfu, Cephalonia, and Zante, just beyond the Adriatic, though the great Greek prizes, the imperial Mediterranean bases, had already been traumatically lost, Cyprus in the sixteenth century and Crete in the seventeenth century. Yet, Venetian Dalmatia, along with its appendage of Venetian Albania, was not only preserved but actually extended by conquest in the early eighteenth century. The province became the focus for Venice's final fantasies of imperial resurgence, as the gondola of state glided toward political annihilation at the century's end. Dalmatia was Venice's America, though small in size and close at hand, just across the Adriatic, replete with savage tribes and civilizing missions; the Venetian Enlightenment fashioned a richly elaborated ideology of empire upon the province's slender territorial base. Gibbon, with his eye on the ancient Roman empire, and perhaps a glance over his shoulder at the modern British empire, failed to observe that Fortis, in redeeming Dalmatia from obscurity, stood forth as the enlightened public spokesman for a renovated Venetian vision of Adriatic empire.

After the decline and fall of the Roman empire, Dalmatia was ruled by the Byzantine emperors from Constantinople, and in the seventh century the migration of the Slavs into southeastern Europe decisively altered the province's ethnographic character. Venice established outposts on the Dalmatian coast as early as the year 1000, though the medieval kingdom of Croatia also extended to the Adriatic during the eleventh century. When the kings of Hungary assumed the Croatian crown in the twelfth century, there commenced a protracted contest between

Hungary and Venice for the eastern Adriatic coast, finally resolved in Venice's favor in the early fifteenth century. Venice ruled Dalmatia thereafter, consolidating naval domination over the Adriatic Sea and establishing a unified administration at the end of the sixteenth century under the governorship of the *Provveditori Generali*. The eighteenth century, however, brought an important difference in the territorial dimensions of the province, for after the peace of Carlowitz in 1699, when the Ottoman empire ceded Hungary to the Habsburgs, the Venetians managed to obtain an inland extension of Dalmatia at the expense of Ottoman Bosnia. Dalmatia was given further inland depth after the peace of Passarowitz in 1718. These two enlargements of the province, the new and newest acquisitions, *nuovo acquisto* and *nuovissimo acquisto*, meant that Dalmatia no longer consisted only of the old coastal strip, *vecchio acquisto*, whose maritime stations had once marked the route to mercantile destinations in the eastern Mediterranean. With Adriatic control and Mediterranean trade more tenuous and less profitable, and with serious competition from Habsburg Trieste as a free port after 1719, Venice had to reconsider the imperial potential of Dalmatia in terms of both terrestrial and maritime advantages.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the *Provveditori Generali* reevaluated Dalmatia's importance to take into account its new lands and especially its new inland inhabitants, the ferocious Morlacchi in the mountains. During the second half of the eighteenth century, these same issues, concerning the new territorial, economic, and anthropological significance of the province, burst forth from the official confines of administrative reports and emerged into the public sphere of the Venetian Enlightenment. Alberto Fortis publicized "those very obscure countries" to the point that even Edward Gibbon in England noted the new level of Venetian interest in Dalmatia. Though Venice's political stake in Dalmatia dated back seven centuries before the time of Fortis's voyage, the Venetian Enlightenment discovered and explored a province that Venice had never really known. There were new and newest acquisitions, of course, but there were also new issues and aspects of empire in the eighteenth century, posing new questions and defining new perspectives. Venice's "discovery" of Dalmatia revealed hitherto obscure aspects of the inland Dalmatians, but also the innermost cultural preoccupations of the Venetians themselves during the final decades of their sovereign independence.

The intellectual history of this discovery of Dalmatia must consider not only how Venice ruled there—the administrative means, economic uses, and political purposes of Adriatic empire—but also how Venice viewed the province, the articulation and elaboration of Dalmatian themes according to the cultural perspectives of the Venetian Enlightenment. The development of an imperial discourse of Dalmatia during the eighteenth century focused on several distinctive concerns. The most fundamental was the construction of an ideology of empire, Adriatic rather than Atlantic in its dimensions and references, mapping the geography of backwardness to justify the imperatives of economic development. Closely related was the formulation of a civilizing mission to redress the supposed barbarism of the Dalmatian Morlacchi, or rather, as it may appear, the formulation of the barbarism of the Morlacchi to establish the importance of Venice's civilizing mission. The ideological importance of the Morlacchi pointed toward an anthropological classification of the Slavic peoples, based on new Venetian knowledge of Dalmatia, in the context of the Enlightenment's contemporary articulation of the idea of Eastern Europe; the philosophical reconception of Europe, as divided between more and less civilized western and eastern domains, perfectly fit the evolution of Venice's imperial perspective on its eastern Adriatic province. The discussion of such concerns conditioned the emergence of an enlightened, imperial public sphere within the Republic, for the reception and consumption of the published discourse on Dalmatia in its ever diversifying forms and aspects; this public sphere eventually came to constitute an Adriatic rather than a narrowly Venetian forum, with bases in Zadar and Split as well as Venice and Padua. Finally, that sphere became the site for the ascriptive formulation of national identity, as the Adriatic Enlightenment contemplated an anthropological constellation of overlapping labels: Dalmatians, Morlacchi, and Illyrians, as well as Albanians and Bosnians, even Serbs and Croats, and especially Slavs, whose name became the taxonomic key to sorting out the ethnographic alternatives. Imperial ideology influenced the negotiation of national identity in Dalmatia, through the meeting of imaginations, in the ruling metropolis and from within the province itself. Thus, the intellectual history of Venice's discovery of Dalmatia in the eighteenth century must focus on the articulation of an imperial imbalance, emphasizing the challenge of backwardness and development, the value of civilization over barbarism, the anthropological classification of the Slavs, the dynamics of discursive

domination within the public sphere, and the ascription of national identity in an imperial context.

In addressing these Dalmatian issues the Venetian Enlightenment contributed culturally to an agenda of imperial concerns: the political coherence of the Adriatic empire, the economic development and even exploitation of provincial resources, the cultivation of the patriotic loyalty of the Slavs to the Venetian Republic of San Marco, and the disciplinary administration of the Morlacchi in the name of civilization. The historian Marino Berengo, writing in 1954 about Venetian Dalmatia, offered the designation “semi-colonial” as a suitable label for the government of the province in the eighteenth century: “Here was firmly established a semi-colonial regime that was rendered legitimate and almost inevitable by the fearful backwardness of the region and the continuing Ottoman threat that transformed entire territories into military districts, such that the administrative organization was inspired by criteria still more centralist than those prevailing for the continental state.” In the multivolume *Storia di Venezia* of the 1990s, Benjamin Arbel has discussed the *colonie d’oltremare*, the overseas colonies, including Dalmatia, and described the Renaissance imperial pursuit of profit and honor, “ad proficuum et honorem Venetiarum.” The relations between ruling Venice, the *Dominante*, and the dominion beyond the sea, the *Oltremare*, according to Arbel, “always preserved their fundamental colonial nature.” At the same time, the administrative distinction between the mainland Italian *Terraferma* and the trans-Adriatic *Oltremare*—both ruled by the *Dominante* from metropolitan Venice—remained significant for matters of maritime trade and Ottoman relations.<sup>5</sup> In the age of Enlightenment that distinction was publicly affirmed and culturally elaborated with special reference to Dalmatia.

The perceived asymmetry between the Republic’s continental Italian and trans-Adriatic territories was rendered “legitimate” in the eighteenth century by the ideological articulation of difference in Dalmatia, whether as economic backwardness, anthropological barbarism, or alien nationality. Since Dalmatia, however, was made up of mixed Italian and Slavic elements, with different social and economic levels from the coastal cities to the inland mountains, there was a balance of difference and similarity with respect to Venetian Italy. “The Atlantic and the Pacific are seas of distance,” Predrag Matvejević has written, “the Adriatic a sea of inti-



macy.”<sup>6</sup> Dalmatia was not America, did not lie beyond the Atlantic, but was located just across the Adriatic and was undeniably in Europe. With its Diocletian remains Split had a more evidently venerable classical pedigree than Venice itself. The Dalmatian mountains, rising immediately to the east of the Adriatic coast—a range of the Alps, after all—could hardly be endowed with the absolute “otherness” of the Orient. Rather, the exoticism of semi-colonial Dalmatia was formulated according to the demi-Orientalism by which the Enlightenment discovered Eastern Europe. The Adriatic divided the dominions of Venice along just the same geographical axis that was becoming increasingly significant for marking the distinction between Eastern and Western Europe. For that reason, the imperial ideology of the Venetian Empire reinforced the broader continental reconception, and, reciprocally, the western and eastern vectors of civilization, as marked upon the map of the European Enlightenment, conditioned the Venetian perspective on Dalmatia.

The Venetian Enlightenment thus cultivated the articulation of Adriatic difference, which vindicated the asymmetrical aspects of imperial rule in Dalmatia. Yet, even if the Enlightenment’s formulas of discursive mastery were sometimes inseparable from the political and economic priorities of power, it was also true that imperatives of empire were often accompanied by beneficently enlightened intentions. The Dalmatian historian Giuseppe Praga, after departing from Zadar for Venice, published his *Storia di Dalmazia* in Padua in 1954, writing in counterpoint to Berengo about the eighteenth-century Venetian discovery of Dalmatia: “Little by little it became clear what a chest of hidden treasures Dalmatia could be if properly cared for and administered. It was no longer economic interest alone that stood behind all the activity, but the forces of science and culture also began to take an interest in the problems of renewal.”<sup>7</sup> It would be difficult to disentangle the strands of economic and cultural interest that constituted the Venetian perspective in the age of Enlightenment, but the exploration and excavation of the province’s “hidden treasures” ultimately turned out to be less fiscally profitable than philosophically rewarding. The intellectual historian may remark that the scant success of the semi-colonial economic and agronomic program, within an empire doomed to imminent extinction, was overshadowed by the abundant wealth of flourishing cultural reflections and representations, inventive Venetian variations on Dalmatian themes.