


THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF CROATIA. TERRITORIAL CHANGE AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES. A REVIEW

Radu MÂRZA

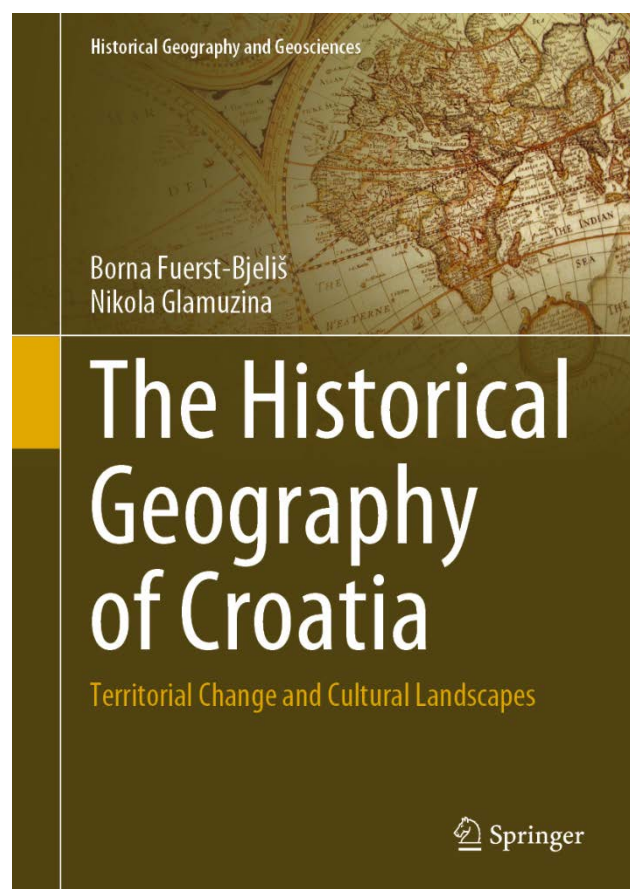
Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Department of Medieval, Early Modern and Art History, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA
radu.marza@ubbcluj.ro,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6378-4584>

The Historical Geography of Croatia. Territorial Change and Cultural Landscapes/ Borna FUERST-BJELIŠ & Nikola GLAMUZINA, Springer, Cham, 2021, 203 p.

ISBN: 978-3-030-68433-4

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-68433-4>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID120226>



Modern man tends to approach the political and territorial realities of our times (e.g. current states) as a given and finds it difficult to understand that they are the result of real historical processes, which took place in the not too distant past: at the end of the First and Second World War, or, in the case of the country referred to in this book, after 1990-1991. Talking about the older history of these political and territorial realities (of the current states) is at least a risky way to understand History. Therefore, it is more likely to talk about the *history of the territory*, possibly about the human interaction with the territory. In fact, our representations of geographical and political spaces are the result of cultural and historical accumulations dating back to the Renaissance, Baroque and especially Romanticism and more recent currents of ideas, which have placed great value on History and Nation.

The most interesting cultural representations of this kind take place in Central

and Eastern Europe, and Croatia is an excellent example from this point of view. Obviously, medieval Croatia is not the same as Croatia as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire or with today's Croatia, but the power of words, of country names, must not be ignored either. Studying the history of the name of this country helps us understand how people from different eras

represented the territory they called “Croatia”. The same can be said about the different historical regions that make up Croatia today (e.g. Slavonia, Dalmatia).

The Historical Geography of Croatia tackles Historical Geography, which is an auxiliary science of History or a branch of Human Geography (according to geographers) that spectacularly combines the working methods of History and Geography. Certainly, Historical Geography explains the history of the territory much better – in this case Croatia – than a classic monograph on the history of this country would. In fact, the authors of the book are not historians, but geographers, professors at the universities of Zagreb and Split, with a rich research and publications in the field of Historical Geography and an excellent understanding of historical processes. This book is a well-developed translation of a Croatian monograph published in Split in 2015, and the authors confess that, originally, the book was a university textbook, which can be seen in the work published in English in 2021. This feature is a gain, because the book is clearly structured, the text being accompanied by various illustrations and cartographic resources, which help understanding it, especially by readers who do not know more about Croatia than generalities.

The book is structured chronologically, which helps the reader to understand the historical nature of the processes that the territory (territories) in question go through, and the authors are constantly paying attention to several factors: human intervention (migrations, conquests, spread of human settlements), administrative organisation, economic development, cultural characteristics, representation of the territory, pointing out the elements on long-term (*La longue durée*), as well as discontinuities.

Along the history of Croatia, since the Middle Ages to the present, there are distinct territorial units which are the result of evolutions and historical factors. Undeniably, these territorial units undergo various transformations throughout the eras, but even starting with the Roman era it may be noticed that, from an administrative and housing point of view (urban network, population, economy) a continental area crystallizes distinctly, respectively one of the Adriatic coast. It is a specific brand that the authors captured very well (p. 39) and showed that this cultural-historical differentiation (of cultural landscape) is found since the Roman era, and it crosses the centuries and today we can admire it in its entire splendour in the cities, towns and villages on the Croatian coast (what we call today Dalmatia). In fact, this is not an unusual situation throughout history; in other countries of today’s Europe, we also find great differences in cultural landscape between the coastal and continental regions.

Then, during the Middle Ages we see the emergence of the kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia, which will have a particular historical evolution, in relation to the Kingdom of Hungary, then the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire (there are really interesting pages about the Ottoman conquest and the period when the Croatian territory was under the Ottoman rule) and again with the Habsburg (Austrian) Empire (after 1867 Austria-Hungary). The presentation of the history of Croatian territory in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929 follows, then in the context of the disintegration of the kingdom during World War II (Independent State of Croatia, puppet state of Nazi Germany) and after 1945, when the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (later the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia) was born. It is a highly interesting and intelligible historical presentation.

Various issues draw the attention throughout the book, especially if the reader is a historian and concerned about the Balkans and Central Europe (as from a territorial, historical, and cultural point of view Croatia is at the crossroad of these two areas). One of the key factors that the authors followed throughout the book is the population, also the great population movements

and the influence they determined on the territory: Roman colonization, Slavic migration, the impact of the Ottoman conquest (p. 100-101, 105-109) etc., but also the internal colonisations from certain historical moments or transhumance being captured. Demographic processes are also presented throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Another topic that may catch the reader's attention is the urban development. Since the Antiquity (Roman times), the territory of today's Croatia has been heavily urbanised, and this trend continued in the following historical periods. In this respect, too, the major difference between mainland and maritime Croatia is obvious. Again, using the travel possibilities of our time, we can see for ourselves how strong the Roman and then Italian-Venetian heritage is within the cities on the Adriatic coast (from Poreč and Pula to Dubrovnik); this historical heritage of urbanity and its specific cultural landscape goes far beyond today's territory of Croatia and includes several cities with a rich and spectacular history on the eastern Adriatic coast (Italy, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania).

In addition to urban development, we must mention the economic aspects that the authors have always taken into account, pointing out, in this case, the continuities and discontinuities in relation to previous eras, but also the differences between different regions. For example, they accurately explained the impact of railway development on the modernisation of the Croatian economy in the late 19th century, within the context of the strategic relationship between the mainland (Austro-Hungarian Empire) and the major Adriatic ports, especially Trieste and Rijeka (pp. 151-156).

I read *The Historical Geography of Croatia* through the historian's lens and I am delighted with this reading. We come across an excellent introduction that addresses the professionals and those interested not only in the historical geography of this country, but also in its own history, in the history of its territory and geographical units. Through the historical processes that people have carried out over the centuries, their presence has shaped this territory, populated it with different populations, framed it in various types of political state organisation, clothed it in infrastructure and in a network of human settlements, changed its natural landscape and resulted in today's Croatia.