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Nicholas of Modruš (1427–1480): Bishop, Man of Letters and Victim of Circumstances

The purpose of this paper is to explore two rather curious episodes in the career of a highly successful diplomat and man of letters who served the Roman Curia under three fifteenth-century popes, Nicholas Machinensis de Catharo, bishop of the Croatian dioceses of Senj and Modruš. The first of these episodes concerns his imprisonment or 'protected custody' between May and August 1462, and the second his diplomatic mission to the court of the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus, which ended in mysterious circumstances in June 1464. As the following biographical notes indicate, these two incidents were part of a very active career.

'Nicholas de Catharo' or 'Nicholas Modrusiensis'¹ was born before 1427² at Majine, in the diocese of Kotor, and belonged to the noble family of *de Pasqualibus*.³ Kotor and the surrounding region had become Venetian territory in 1420. Between 1434 and 1455 Nicholas lived in Venice and was for some of that time a student of Paolo della Pergola.⁴ His doctorate in arts and theology was obtained by the time he was made commendatory abbot of

1 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [hereafter BAV], *Vat. Lat. 8092*, f. 1r: dedication formula: 'Ad reverendissimum dominum R. cardinalem Sancti Georgii N. episcopi Modrussien. Defensio ecclesiasticæ libertatis. G.'. The cardinal is Raffaele Riario, nephew of Sixtus IV.

2 This is presumed from the fact that he did not have to apply for a papal dispensation *de defectu ætatis* when elected bishop of Senj in 1457, the canonical age for the bishops being settled at thirty.

3 My recent research on registers of supplications and papal letters kept in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano brought to light two new pieces of evidence, which help us identify his family background. From the letter of provision dated 20 January 1469, addressed to 'Marco de Pasqualibus', priest of Kotor, we are informed that Marco is 'Nicolai, episcopi Modrusiensis pro nobis et Sede apostolice in civitate Asculana gubernatoris deputati nepos' (ASV, Reg. Lat. 699, ff. 271v–272v). The same family relationship is stressed in the petition dated 19 May 1477, submitted to Sixtus IV by the same Nicholas, who sought to be provided with the benefices vacant after the nephew's death outside the Curia: ASV, *Reg. Suppl. 751*, f. 205r–v: Rome, 19 May 1477.

the Benedictine abbey of S. Lucija in Baška, diocese of Krk, in 1456. On 14 November 1457 Calixtus III elected him bishop of Senj⁵ and the abbacy passed to Cardinal Giambattista Savelli.⁶ In September 1460 Pius II sent Nicholas on his first diplomatic mission, to crown the Bosnian king Stjepan Tomašević, who had recently placed himself under papal protection by accepting a crown offered to him by the pope. News of the coronation greatly disturbed the Hungarian monarch, the yet uncrowned Matthias Corvinus, feudal overlord of the Bosnian king. The mission ended in August 1461. In the course of it Nicholas was translated from Senj to Modruš, following the sudden death of Franjo of Modruš, the first bishop of that recently created diocese. The appointment dated from 11 March 1461.⁷ By the end of that year Nicholas was resident in his new see. Payment of his common and minute services to the Apostolic Camera was, however, not recorded until 15 October 1466.⁸

On 11 December 1462 Nicholas was sent on his second papal mission to Stjepan Tomašević.⁹ Within six months Bosnian defence against the armies of Mehmet II collapsed, towns and villages were destroyed, the king was

⁴ Nicolaus Modruvensis, prologue to the dialogue *De mortalium felicitate*: 'apud Paulum Pergulensem, virtum utique tam divini quam humani iuris peritissimum atque, ut nosti, cum omni antiquitate conferendum: huius enim auditores multis annis extitimus'. For Paolo della Pergola see Arnaldo Scgarizzi, *Cenni sulle scuole pubbliche a Venezia nel secolo XV e sul primo maestro d'esse. Atti del Reale Istituto Veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti. LXXV* (1915-1916): 637-667. esp. 646, 652-667.

⁵ ASV, Reg. Lat. 521, ff. 257r-258r: 'sacre pagine professorem, in sacerdotio constitutum'.

⁶ ASV, Reg. Vat. 450, ff. 138r-139r (A. Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium* I, 430-431. n. 611). ASV, *Cam. Ap., Oblig. et sol.* 72, f. 106r and 75, f. 106r, dated 14 November 1457, confirms Nicholas being 'artium et sacrae theologiae doctor'.

⁷ ASV, Reg. Lat. 562, ff. 66v-68v: 'Sane ecclesia Segniensis ex eo pastoris solacio destituta quod nos hodie venerabilem fratrem nostrum Nicolaum Modruviensem episcopum licet absentem a vinculo quo eidem Segniensis ecclesie cui tunc preerat tenebatur, de fratrum nostrorum consilio et apostolice potestatis plenitudine absolventes ipsum ad ecclesiam Modruviensem tunc pastore carentem duximus auctoritate apostolica transferendum, proficiendum ipsum eidem Modruviensis ecclesie in episcopum et pastorem.... Datum Rome apud Sanctum Petrum anno incarnationis Domine millesimo quadringentesimo sexagesimo, quinto Idus Martii anno tercio.' Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica* II, p. 237.

⁸ ASV, *Cam. Ap., Oblig. et sol.* 79, f. 132v: 'Nicolaus, episcopus Modruviensis, pro totali solutione suorum comunis et minuti serviciorum, in quibus etc. racione translacionis sue de ecclesia Signensi ad ecclesiam Modruviensem florenos auri de Camera septuaginta, solidos quadraginta unum, denarios otto nobis etc. per manus honorabilis viri Petri Cosme de Medicis et sociorum, Romanam Curiam sequencium, die date presencium solvi fecit realiter et cum effectu.... Datum Rome, XV Octobris 1466. Fl. I. Gr. II.'; J. Barbaric, *Camera Apostolica 1, 1299-1560*. (Zagreb-Rim 1996). n. 891.

captured and executed in the fortress at Ključ at the beginning of June 1463, and his mother went into exile in Rome. The papal envoy left an account of these events in his *Defensio ecclesiasticae libertatis*, a book of memoirs written shortly before his death. Nicholas tells us that nineteen of his twenty-strong household were lost in this crisis, and that his own life was saved by nothing short of divine intervention.⁹ Without active support for Bosnia from either the Venetians, preoccupied with the defence of their economic interests along the Adriatic coast, or from Matthias, who concentrated his forces on the defence of Belgrade and was more concerned about blocking Turkish moves into Slavonia and further northwards, Nicholas's Bosnian mission was bound to end in failure.

In 1463 Nicholas was sent to persuade Matthias to lead a military expedition in Bosnia. On 13 October of that year the envoy was in Venice, appealing to the Senate for financial and military support for the king's Bosnian campaign. By the end of the month he reached Matthias in Belgrade and continued to accompany him during his three-month winter campaign in Bosnia, in the course of which some seventy fortresses, towns and villages, including the royal town of Jajce, were liberated. This Christian resurgence encouraged Pius in his efforts to galvanize the princes of Christendom into crusading action, but such enthusiasm was frustrated when the harsh winter conditions brought the Hungarian campaign to a halt.¹¹

⁹ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 508, f. 4v, dated 10 December 1462, safeconduct for 'Nicolaus episcopus Modrusiensis, legatus vel orator noster pro nonnullis nostris arduis agendis negotiis ad plures variasque partes mundi habeat se personaliter transferri littera passus ... cum viginti personis...'. ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 508, f. 102r-v, 11 December 1462, a letter of nomination as apostolic legate: '...opus sit quod quibusdam arduis negotiis fidem catholicam concernentibus nos aliquem prudentem et fidum atque expertum virum ad Regnum Bosne qui ibidem negotia ipsa diligenter et accurate tractare et ad debitum finem reducere sciat et valeat destinare. Tuque de cuius singulari prudentia et eximia probitate rerumque experientia apud nos fidedigna testimonia facta sunt, ut ad huiusmodi negotia tractanda et peragenda aptissimus nobis fueris propositus.... te ad Regnum ipsum et dicte sedis legatum duximus destinandum ut ea que in certis aliis nostris litteris expressa sunt, et que tibi verbo commisimus tam apud carissimum in Christo filium nostrum Stephanum Regem Bosne quam dilectos filios nobiles viros sui Regni et alios circumstantes principes et proceres cum exacta fide et diligentia prosequaris... tuque post ipsorum negotiorum expeditione in nostro conspectu exinde non in merito valeas commendari.'

¹⁰ BAV, *Var. Lat.* 8092, ff. 1-68r: 'rege ipso Stephano capto et trucidato, regno autem eius maximis ruinis cladibusque affecto, quarum ego missus a pontifice non parva pars extiti, nam undeviginti meorum amissis ipse post maxima pericula incredibilesque labores divina potius quam humana opo servatus evasi.'

Pius's successor, the Venetian Paul II, employed Nicholas in the Papal States rather than on extra-Italian missions. Between 18 September 1464 and 17 January 1468 he was castellan of Viterbo;¹² on 5 February 1468 he was named governor of Ascoli;¹³ on 31 October 1470 governor of Fano, Sinigaglia, and Montefiore;¹⁴ and on 11 January 1471 governor of Sassoferrato. During the month between Paul's death in July 1471 and the coronation of Sixtus IV the following month, Nicholas was governor of Cesena.

On 7 October 1471 he petitioned for the Benedictine monastery of S. Juraj, diocese of Kotor, *in commendam*, with its annual income estimated at 150 gold florins.¹⁵ By April 1472 he was in Venice as papal 'commissarius', an agent of Sixtus's first foreign policy initiative, allying with Venice and Naples to create a naval force to send against the Turkish fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. According to his *Defensio ecclesiasticae libertatis*, he went on to assist the legate to the combined fleet, Cardinal Oliviero Carafa. With Carafa he returned to Rome on 23 January 1473 after indifferent military success. Thereafter Sixtus employed him in the Papal States, as governor of Spoleto and Sangemini from 25 February 1475, and governor of Todi the following year.¹⁶ On 13 April 1475 he petitioned for the Benedictine priory of S. Bartolomeo in Venice, which had been vacant since the death of its last prior, another cleric from Kotor, and which was designed to provide him with an annual income of 150 gold florins.¹⁷ On 3 November 1475 he was appointed administrator of the diocese of Skradin, previously held by Fantino de Valle, auditor of the Rota and a papal chaplain. This diocese Nicholas retained *in commendam* until 28 April 1479, when he resigned it in favour of Pietro Marzio, but nevertheless retained an annual pension from it of 120 gold florins.¹⁸ The last benefice Nicholas is known to have received

¹¹ BAV, *Vat. Lat.* 8092, ff. 60–61: '... regem haud longe a Belgradum cum victore exercitu incredibilique preda Misia redeuntem paucis mandata expono; neque enim cupidissimus parendi animus multis se monere passus est. Ducit impigre, quamvis apertente iam hieme, militem in Illiricum, et intra tres menses, me semper castra sequente, septuaginta ferme oppida Turcis erripuit ac ex clarissima totius regni urbe Iaize, in qua reges residere sunt soliti, hostes pellit, toto procul dubio regno pulsurus si promissae ab oratoribus pecuniae date fuissent.'

¹² ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 544, f. 186r.

¹³ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 542, ff. 203v–206v.

¹⁴ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 543, ff. 67v–; 544, f. 73v; on 24 November he swore fidelity: *Reg. Vat.* 545, f. 22v.

¹⁵ ASV, *Reg. Suppl.* 672, f. 161r: Rome, 7 October 1471.

¹⁶ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 656, ff. 144v–146v.

¹⁷ ASV, *Reg. Suppl.* 718, f. 5v: Rome, 13 April 1475.

was the Benedictine monastery of S. Marija on the island of Mljet (diocese of Dubrovnik), to which he was named on 22 December 1479.¹⁹ His proctor, Johannes Sepia of Zadar, paid his common services to the Apostolic Camera on 19 January 1480.²⁰

Nicholas died before 29 May 1480, evidently in Rome and as a member of the papal household.²¹ Sixtus thereupon appointed Christopher of Ragusa to succeed him at Modruš, though Matthias favoured an alternative candidate, his wife's confessor, a Dominican called Dominicus de Jadra. Nicholas was buried in the Roman church of S. Maria del Popolo and his cousin, Francesca Ragusea, a Franciscan tertiary, commissioned a memorial inscription. According to Vincenzo Forcella, writing at the end of the nine-

¹⁸ ASV, *Reg. Lat.* 758, f. 46r-v; *Reg. Lat.* 794, ff. 45v-46r; *Reg. Lat.* 800, f. 79r-v.

¹⁹ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 597, ff. 172v-174r.

²⁰ ASV, *Cam. Ap., Oblig. et sol.* 84A, f. 70r, 19 January 1480: 'Die XVIII eiusdem mensis [Ianuarii] venerabilis vir dominus Iohannes Sepia, clericus Iadrensis diocesis, ut principalis et privata persona ac vice et nomine reverendi patris domini Nicolai, episcopi Modrusiensis, commendarii monasterii Sancti Benedicti insule de Melede Ordinis eiusdem sancti Ragusinensis diocesis, obtulit Camere Apostolice et Collegio reverendissimorum dominorum cardinalium pro communi servitio dicti monasterii ratione commende et eodem sibi auctoritate apostolica facte per bullas domini Sixti pape IIII. sub datum XI^o Kalendas Ianuarii anno nono florenos auri de Camera octuaginta ad quos dictum monasterium taxatum reperitur, et quinque minuta servicia consueta.'

²¹ The election of his immediate successor, Christopher of Ragusa, took place in the secret consistory of 29 May 1480. In his relation Cardinal Giovanni Battista Cibo, the future pope Innocent VIII, affirmed that the diocese of Modruš was vacant after the death in the Roman Curia of its late bishop Nicholas, member of the household of Sixtus IV:

1) BAV, *Vat. Lat.* 3478, ff. 12v-13r.; [m.s. *Ecclesia Madrusien.*] Hodie Sanctissimus dominus noster dominus Sixtus divina providentia papa IV. in suo consistorio secreto ut moris est ad relationem reverendissimi in Christo patris et domini domini Iohannis Baptiste, tituli sancte Cicerie transtiberim presbiteri cardinalis Melfiten. de consilio reverendissimorum patrum dominorum cardinalium ecclesie Mudrusien. (!) per obitum bone memorie Nicolai illius ultimi episcopi prefati Sanctissimi Domini nostri familiaris apud Sedem apostolicam defuncti pastore carenti de persona venerabilis viri domini Christophori decretorum doctoris presbiteri Ragusini providit ipsumque eidem ecclesie Madrusiensis prefecit in episcopum et pastorem curam, regimen et administrationem cuius in spiritualibus ac temporalibus sibi plenarie committendo in quorum fidem presentem cedulam fieri et mani (!) propria subscribere. soliti nostri parvi sigilli missimus impressione communiri. Datum Rome apud Sanctum Petrum die Lune XXVIII Maii MCCCCLXXX, pontificatus sanctissimi domini nostri anno nono. R. ep(iscopu)s Portuen. car(dina)lis Valentin. S.R.E. vicecan(cellarius).'

2) ASV, *Cam. Ap., Oblig. et sol.* 82, f. 124v and 83, f. 94v (J. Barbaric, *Camera Apostolica* 1, n. 959) gives a slightly different account, the cardinal being Giuliano della Rovere: 'Die Lune XXVIII mensis Maii, idem sanctissimus dominus noster, ad relationem reverendissimi domini Sancti Petri ad vincula, providit ecclesie Modrusiensis de persona reverendi patris domini Cristofori de Ragusa, in Romana curia defuncti.'

teenth century, the inscription was still *in situ* at the time on the left-hand wall of the room leading to the sacristy.²²

Nicholas's library was added to that of the pope and twenty codices bearing his arms are still to be found in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.²³ A further nine passed to the Biblioteca Angelica in 1849, having previously been the property of the Augustinian monastery attached to the church of S. Maria del Popolo.

We come now to the two curious episodes. Pius II was persuaded by Sigismundus Frankopan, count of Senj, Krk and Modruš, to divide the diocese of Senj and duly created the new bishopric of Otočac on 5 March 1460. It was destined to last only sixty years.²⁴ On 4 June the throne of the bishop of Krbava was transferred to Modruš, and the see of Krbava was suppressed because 'ecclesia in suis structuris et edificis ruinosa et in loco silvestri et nemoroso ab hominum quoque habitatione remota necnon ad sedem episcopalem penitus inepta existat, domo etiam episcopali et capitulo actu careat', whereas 'opidum Modrusie numerositate populi in illis paribus insigne plurimum, incolis quoque et habitatoribus prefate diocesis valde accomodum existit, in quo etiam episcopus prefatus domos proprias et ad mensam episcopalem Corbaviensem spectantes ut plurimum habitare consuevit'. Count Stjepan Frankopan was ready to 'mensam capitularem inibi statuendam pro numero canonicorum deputandorum sufficienti de bonis sibi a Deo collatis competenter dotare'.²⁵

The feudal lords of the Krbava region violently opposed the pope's decision. Karlo Kurjaković junior (son of another Karlo Kurjaković), his

22 Vincenzo Forcella, *Iscrizione delle chiese di Roma*, vol. I, p. 368, n. 1421: 'nel convento, nella parete sinistra del corridoio che mette alla sagrestia': DEO. OPT. MAX. / QVEM NVLLVM LATVIT STVDIVM / VIS NVLLA LOQVENDI / VRNA TEGIT CELEBREM / QVAMTVLA NICOLEVM HIC MERVIT POST TE CERTAS / HIERONYME LAVDES / ALTER HONOS ET SPES ILLYRIS / ORA TIBI / OCCIDIT AN VIVIT PRESVL PAR/CA IMPROBA VIXIT / NON TIMET VT RAPIAS / PARVA MODRVSA DECVS / FRANCISSA CONSOBRINO B. M. / TERTII ORD. S.F.

23 Nicholas himself bought lots of books. See, for example, an autograph receipt for a book bought from the Domenico de' Domenichi, bishop of Brescia, in 1467 which says: 'Ego N. episcopus Modrussiensis emi hunc librum a prefato reverendissimo domino Torcellano olim, nunc Brixiensi, cum comento Gali super quadruperticum Tholomei anno Domini 1467, testis est ipse dominus, reverendissimus dominus D(ominicus) Brixiensis.' Also see G. Mercati, 'Note varie sopra Niccolò Modrussiese' in *Opere minori* vol. IV, Studi e testi 79, Città del Vaticano, 1937, tav. VI, from the codex *Vat. Lat. 2059*, f. 1v.

24 ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 477, f. 241; Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica*, II, p. 209.

25 ASV, *Reg. Lat.* 560, f. 1.

cousin Ivan Kurjaković (son of Toma Kurjaković), and some of their associates captured Nicholas, who was then presumably in residence in his palace at Modruš, and kept him imprisoned, probably in their castle at Krbava. Unusually for Croatian history of this period, the details of the episode can be reconstructed in remarkable detail. The first piece of evidence is a donation document issued by Nicholas himself on 14 May 1462 from his residence in Modruš, which can be taken as a *post quem* for the kidnapping. Next in date came two letters written by the archbishop of Zadar, Maffeo Vallaresso (1450–1495), dated 10 July 1462, one addressed to Bishop Nicholas himself, the other to Count Ivan Kurjaković.²⁶ The letters were obviously written after Vallaresso had been informed about the imprisonment by Nicholas himself.²⁷ They witness to the role of the archbishop as a negotiator, as a personal friend, and as a senior ecclesiastic in this unusual case. On 12 August the Venetian Senate received a report on Nicholas's plight. Finally, Pius II's bull of absolution, dated at Pienza on 13 August, testified to the bishop's liberation.²⁸

It can be seen from Vallaresso's letters that the counts Kurjaković had three priorities: firstly, for the bishop to intercede with the pope in order to restore the episcopal title to Krbava; secondly, that the counts be granted absolution from the ecclesiastical censures for which they knew they were liable as a result of their treatment of Nicholas; and thirdly, that Vallaresso personally guarantee that their demands would be fulfilled before the bishop's actual liberation.

The archbishop urged the counts to liberate Nicholas immediately, his imprisonment being *sine culpa*, and advised the bishop to comply with his kidnapers in order to hasten his freedom. He promised to do everything in his power to bring the case to a happy conclusion and to intercede with the Holy See, but he categorically refused to provide any guarantees. The Senate report of 12 August informs us that their secretary Domenico Stella had already been sent to the counts in July to discuss the bishop's liberation.²⁹ The counts promised to free him, providing that the bishop would not undertake any legal action against them regarding the Krbava diocese or try to seek revenge.

²⁶ The letters were copied in the archbishop's epistolary codex kept in the Vatican Library, *Barb. Lat. 1809*.

²⁷ BAV, *Barb. Lat. 1809*, ff. 197–198 and 199–201.

²⁸ ASV, *Reg. Vat. 507*, ff. 301r–v.

²⁹ M. E. Lukšić, 'Zatočeništvo Nikole Modruškoga kod Krbavskih knezova g. 1462', in *Radovi Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Zadru* 42 (2000), 105–171, esp. pp. 136–137.

The Holy See was informed of events by the Venetian government and by means of the supplication for absolution from ecclesiastical censures submitted to Pius by Nicholas himself. This intercession on behalf of his kidnappers prompted the pope to authorize Matthias de Baronellis, abbot of S. Juraj, Kopriva,³⁰ to grant absolution from excommunication and other censures to Karlo and Ivan Kurjakovic of Krbava and their accomplices³¹, as issued at Pienza on 13 August 1462. The bishop appears to have been liberated at the end of July or beginning of August, but the counts failed to realise their principal aim, that of having the bishopric based in their territory. Only a few months after his liberation, Pius II sent Nicholas on his second mission to the last Bosnian king, Stjepan Tomašević, an action presumably undertaken to protect him from further trouble with the counts. He had never returned to his diocese.

The second curious episode can be dealt with more briefly. In early 1464, following the Bosnian campaign, Nicholas was in Buda at the court of Matthias Corvinus. Preparations for a fresh campaign were in progress when he suddenly left the court and, indeed, Hungary, without obvious explanation. No reason for this can be gleaned from his own memoirs, in which there is no suggestion of any rift between himself and the king. It might be supposed that he returned to Italy to help coordinate the papal fleet, this being shortly before Pius's death at Ancona, but there is no evidence to support such an interpretation.

The thirteenth chapter of *De egregie, sapienter, iocose dictis ac factis regis Mathiae ad ducem Iohannem eius filium liber* by Marzio Galleotto of Narni, written some twenty years after the event, solves the mystery.³² According to this account, Matthias assembled his councillors, noblemen and Hungary's senior churchmen and denounced Nicholas as an enemy spy, in the presence of the envoy himself. Matthias went on to expose an alleged noble plot against the Crown, a plot nevertheless revealed to him by Nicholas. The plotters were threatened with death and Nicholas was openly invited to leave Buda, which is precisely what he did. Galleotto's account certainly confirms Matthias's known promotion of men of lesser rank at the expense of the higher nobility. Nicholas, the Croatian bishop, escaped with his life in 1464. Eight years later, Ivan Vitez, archbishop of Esztergom, was not so

³⁰ Matthias de Baronellis O. Camal., became abbot of St George, Kopriva on 5 May 1456, after the supplication of the Counts Pavao and Ivan of Krbava, the patrons of the monastery: ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 442, ff. 237v-238r.

³¹ ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 507, f. 301r-v: Pienza, 13 August 1462.

³² Published in *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Medii recentisque aevorum. Saeculum XV*, ed. Ladislaus Juhász, (Lipsiae, B.G. Teubner, 1934) (int. 7; 1-47; caput: 1-32); caput 13., 12-14.

fortunate. After having been informed about his participation in another plot against the Crown in 1471, Matthias deprived him of all of his ecclesiastical privileges and possessions. Humiliated and seriously ill, Ivan Vitez died in 1472.

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