Exploring the Commonalities of the Mediterranean Region
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THE BIOGRAPHY OF HERMANN THE DALMATIAN: SEPARATING CONJECTURES FROM VERIFIABLE CLAIMS

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Introduction

This paper presents reassessment of certain claims about Hermann the Dalmatian, an illustrious twelfth-century scholar, philosopher and translator of scientific and religious works from Arabic to Latin. It addresses Hermann’s journey to the Middle East and his purported co-authorship of the first Latin translation of the Quran. Examination of the literature has revealed that these widely accepted claims, which have been uncritically disseminated via Croatian scholarly literature and the popular media, appear to be based on conjectures and misreadings of the sources.

Biographical background

Hermann the Dalmatian (Hermannus Dalmata, c. 1105/1110 – after 26 February 1154) was an astronomer, astrologer, mathematician, philosopher, and one of the pioneers in the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic civilization to the medieval Christian West.¹ He translated Arabic works by great Muslim scientists into Latin, as well as works by Greek and Hellenistic authors that had only survived in Arabic translations.²

Hermann was born in the central part of the Istrian peninsula, most of which now belongs to Croatia, a small part to Slovenia and one per cent to Italy. One of his pen names, Dalmata, refers to the former Roman province of Dalmatia, which encompassed Istria. He is also known as Hermann of Carinthia (because Istria once belonged to the March of Carinthia of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation), Sclavus (the Slav), and Secundus, a designation he chose to distinguish himself from another author, Hermannus Contractus (the Cripple).

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Margaret Casman-Vuko, who revised my English, improved the style and made valuable suggestions.
² The brief biography of Hermann the Dalmatian presented in this paper is mostly based on the works by Franjo Šarčić listed in the bibliography.
Croatian historians tend to attribute Croatian national affiliation to Hermann and refer to him as “our scholar,” as “a pioneer in European and Croatian science,” and “one of the oldest symbols of the Croatian national and cultural identity.” Franjo Šanjek, a distinguished expert on Hermann, opines that he was most probably a descendant of Croats who invaded and colonized the Istrian peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries. On the other hand, some Slovenian authors number him among the great Slovenians, and he has been called “the first known scientist of Slovenian descent and European reputation.” Others refer to him as “a Slovenian or a Croat.”

The Slovenian philologist Kajetan Gantar argues that Hermann’s national affiliation is an open question, but concludes that he was probably a Slovenian because the divide between the Slovenians and the Croats in his time was further south than it is today. However, Gantar concedes that there was no clear-cut differentiation between the two nations in twelfth-century Istria. Šanjek briefly comments that Gantar’s inclusion of the Istrian scholar in the Slovenian ethno-historical context is understandable to a certain extent, as to acknowledge that retrospective determinations of Hermann’s nationality are subjective and tend to be influenced by the nationality of the individual researcher. These controversies have also been reflected outside scholarly circles, in the mass media. In an article published in the Croatian newspaper Vječernji list, headlined Slovenians Appropriate Hermann the Dalmatian, the author reports that the Croatian national television station had included “the Slovenian” Hermann among the great Croats. However, the author reasonably concludes that literate individuals at that time rarely defined their nationalities but, instead, identified themselves according to local and territorial affiliations. In the literature listed in the bibliography, I could find no sources confirming that Hermann had ever expressed his affiliation with either the Croatian or the Slovenian national corpus or with any national corpus whatsoever. When referring to his origins, he mentions only Carinthia and Istria.

Therefore, retrospectively ascribing a specific national identity to him can be viewed as a manifestation of “nationalizing the past.”

The scant biographical data on Hermann are mostly derived from letters and introductions to texts he translated or wrote and a few references to him by his contemporaries, while the lacunae are occasionally filled on the basis of conjecture by analogies. According to Šanjek, Hermann most probably attended a Benedictine monastery school in his homeland and proceeded to study at cathedral schools in Chartres and Paris under the guidance of Thierry of Chartres. There he met an Englishman, Robert of Ketton, who became his inseparable friend and companion in the quest for knowledge.

“These schools had already been influenced by Arabic sciences, especially by the knowledge of positional [place-value] notation and the astrolabe. This was probably what prompted Hermann and Robert to travel toward the roots of Arabic sciences.”

Šanjek writes that in 1135, Hermann and Robert embarked on a journey to the Northern Mediterranean and the Middle East, where they studied the Arabic language. After several years, their route led them to Northern Spain, by the Ebro River, where they participated in the great endeavour of transmitting the knowledge preserved in the libraries of Arabic manuscripts seized during the Reconquista to the West. They translated texts directly from Arabic into Latin, unlike most of their contemporaries, who translated from Arabic to a Romance language and then to Latin, or to Latin and then read the translation aloud to a Latin expert, who would improve the clarity and style. Some authors associate the two friends with the famous Toledo School of Translators. However, as Charles Burnett argues, they formed a distinct group in Northern Spain and Southern France, together with Hugo of Santalla and Hermann’s pupil, Rudolph of Bruges.

The translations attributed to Hermann include Euclid’s Elements, Theodosius’ De sphaeris; al-Khwārizmi’s Zīj (astronomical tables), Ptolemy’s Planisphere, Sahl ibn Bishr’s text on astrology Fatidica and Abū Ma’shar’s Mā’īs introducitorium in astronmiam. These titles indicate that Hermann’s main interests lay in mathematics, astronomy and other natural sciences. It was only at the request of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, that he and his friend Robert undertook the task of translating and compiling religious texts on Islam. Hermann compiled De generatione Mahumet and Doctrina Mahumet. Among his original works and compilations are

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2 Ibid., p. 7.
4 Šanjek, “Herman Dalmatin,” p. 11.
5 For example, Hermann is included in: Sarai SJ, Slovenci izmed svetovnega okrožja, slovenski v teh letih (A Hundred Slovenian Scientists, Doctors and Technicians), Ljubljana 1987 and Jam Doheva, Danes neznanih Slovencev (Twelve Great Slovenians), Ljubljana 1994.
9 Šanjek, “Hermann Dalmatin,” p. 79.
11 This term is borrowed from Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, the editors of the book Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe, New York, 2015.
13 Zarko Dadić, Herman Dalmatin, Zagreb, 1996, p. 60.
14 Šanjek, “Herman Dalmatin,” p. 17.
15 Ibid., pp. 34–35.
16 For example, Arjan van Dijk claims that Robert’s translation of the Quran was prepared in Toledo. “Early Printed Qur’ans: The Dissemination of the Qur’an in the West,” Journal of Qur’anic Studies, 7, 2005, p. 140.
an astrological-cosmological treatise, De essentia, an astrological compilation, De indagatione cordis, and a collection of texts on weather forecasting entitled Liber imbrarium.21

Some authors credit Hermann with co-authorship of the first Latin translation of the Quran, an issue which will be addressed subsequently. The aforementioned itinerary of his sojourn in the Middle East will also be examined, on the basis of the available literature.

**Hermann's Journey to the Middle East**

As an Arabist, I was intrigued by accounts of Hermann's sojourns in Baghdad, particularly those presented by Šanjk.22 In the absence of primary sources, I resorted to speculation, trying to imagine how Hermann may have been received by the local inhabitants and learned Arabic, basing some of my assumptions on the well-documented experience of another Christian, Riccoldo da Montecroce, a Florentine Dominican who lived in Baghdad and travelled across the Holy Land, Anatolia and Mesopotamia for more than a decade in the late thirteenth century.23 Riccoldo wrote an extensive account of his impressions of the Muslims, their religion and rituals, methods of teaching and studying, and attitudes toward foreigners. Incidentally, among the texts he perused while writing his critical work on Islam, *Improbatio Acorani*, was Hermann's compilation *Doctrina Mahumet*.24

The Baghdad of Hermann's time could not have been the same as the Baghdad Riccoldo visited about a century and a half later. Around 1136, the year of Hermann's alleged sojourn there, it was still a capital city of the Abbasid Caliphate. In 1258, Baghdad was conquered and demolished by the Mongols but, according to Riccoldo's testimony, among other sources, even under the new rulers it retained the reputation of a lively centre of learning. Riccoldo thus writes: "Saracens come from all over the Islamic world to study in Baghdad, where great schools, monasteries [dervish lodges, T.-P.-V.], and masters can be found."25 However, an important change occurred between Hermann's time and Riccoldo's sojourn there. Travelers like Riccoldo, who arrived as missionaries, could freely engage in their activities, which had not been the case in the previous period. "The scope of such activity was at first restricted by the laws of Islamic states which, while permitting religious disputations, did not allow the Prophet and his teaching to be publicly criticized, and treated the conversion of Muslims to Christianity as a capital offence. In the case of Iran and Iraq this changed after the Mongol conquest in 1258. Mongol law granted parity of status to all faiths, and after diplomatic relations had been established with

the Roman curia in 1263, Western missionaries were able to work freely in the lands of the Il-Khanate, whose population was overwhelmingly Muslim.26 Riccoldo's journey to and sojourn in the Middle East were further facilitated by the growing number of communities of Christian monks there. As George-Tvrtković writes, "his itinerary gives witness to the presence of numerous Dominican houses throughout the Middle East at the end of the thirteenth century."27 (...) When his party arrived at the outskirts of Baghdad, they were met by 'brothers of our order.' While he never explicitly mentions a Dominican house in Baghdad, the fact that he was welcomed upon arrival by several friars implies its existence.28

This kind of support was not available at the time when Hermann and his friend are said to have travelled to the lands of the Arabs. However, one significant feature noted by Riccoldo can be viewed as a constant: the respect afforded by Muslims to those who travelled in quest of knowledge. Epitomized in a famous saying (hadith) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "Seek knowledge, even as far as China," this attitude was deeply embedded in the Islamic civilization. In a city where teachers and students from all over the Islamic world gathered, Hermann and Robert could have welcomed as "confères in pursuit of knowledge," albeit of a different faith. They may have encountered an environment resembling the one they were used to in Paris, judging from Riccoldo's remarks about the devotion of Muslim students and teachers to learning and their voluntary poverty.29 To him, "the asceticism required of Baghdadi scholars and Dominican friars seems quite similar."30 Baghdad resembled Paris as a centre of international theological learning, its professors were comparable to the Parisian masters.31 It is probable that Hermann could have been admitted to the study circles, just as Riccoldo was given the opportunity to attend lectures at Muslim religious schools, madrasas.32 Intermingling of people of diverse religious affiliations in search of knowledge was not uncommon. In medieval Damascus, another centre of learning that Hermann and Robert are also said to have visited, teaching sessions were occasionally held with participants of different religions. According to Chamberlain, there was a shaykh (professor) who "held a study-circle in which Samaritans, Muslims, Jews, and Christians cultivated the Hellenistic sciences ('ilm al-avâlî) together." (...) Another shaykh was known for holding study-circles in the many fields of knowledge he had mastered, including one for Christians in the New Testament and one for Jews in the Torah.33 However, after these attempts at imagining the circumstances of Hermann's alleged sojourns in Baghdad and Damascus, which are mere guesses by analogy, and after examining the relevant literature, I realized that his journey eastward requires further

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23 Ibid., p. 14.
24 Ibid., p. 50.
25 Ibid., p. 51.
26 Ibid., p. 51.
ther clarification. An exhaustive review of articles on Hermann’s life reveals only one primary source related to his journey, a brief account by an anonymous English chronicler during the Second Crusade, who does not mention the exact place of their stay. Nonetheless, Šanjek writes that Hermann “embarked on a very exciting and perilous journey from the banks of the Seine to Baghdad on the Euphrates [sic].” He repeats this assertion further in the text, adding more details: “The name Dalmatian is also used by an anonymous English chronicler, who conveys news about an exciting and perilous journey from Paris to Baghdad [emphasis T. P.-V.] conducted by his countryman Robert of Ketton and ‘his inseparable companion, Hermann the Dalmatian.’” Several pages later, he quotes the full text of the Englishman’s account, which in fact does not mention Baghdad at all. The text runs as follows:

“This Robert Ketenessis was called an Englishman by surname, as he was by birth: who after some time spent in the foundations of humanitatis, and in the elements of good Artes in the Viuivieries of England, determined to traveail to the partes beyond sea: and so traveailed through France, Italie, Dalmatia, and Greece, and came at last into Asia, where he lived in great danger of his life among the cruell Saracens, but yet learned perfectly the Arabic tongue. Afterwardes he returned by sea into Spaine, and there about the riuers Iberius, gave him selde wholly to the studie of Astrologie, with one Hermannus a Dalmatian, who had accompanied him in his long voyage.”

If this really is the only piece of evidence for Hermann’s journey to the Middle East, what is the basis for claims that he was in Baghdad or/and Damascus? Accounts appear to be contradictory. For example, Šanjek does not mention Hermann’s stay in Baghdad, only Syria, in an article published in 1983 and a book published in 1988. The map he drew in the book does not include Baghdad in Hermann’s itinerary. However, in a map accompanying an article published in 1990, he drew a map with a different itinerary, indicating that Hermann passed through Constantinople on his way to Baghdad in 1135, stayed in Damascus between 1136 and 1138, and visited Aleppo and Antiochia on his way back to Europe. There is a similar map in an article Šanjek published in 2017. Again, since no sources were cited, on what basis were these different itineraries (re)constructed?

Another Croatian author, Franjo Zenko, only mentions Hermann’s stay in Syria but not Baghdad. “With his friend, he shared a great deal of his living and intellectual destiny: they went together to eastern countries by way of Greece, remaining for a longer time in Syria, where they studied languages, specially Arabic, in order to be able to study the ‘secret writings’ from the ‘most hidden Arabic treasury.’”

Again, there is no evidence supporting the claim that Hermann was ever in Syria. The passage ends with a reference to Hermann’s work De essentibus, where reminiscences of “secret writings” from the “most hidden Arabic treasury” are mentioned, but these are not necessarily reminiscences of studies in the Middle East, let alone Syria. For instance, Šanjek understands these words as references to the Arabic libraries on the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, Zenko further elaborates on this undocumented assumption:

“To curious intellectuals coming from the Latin Christian West, directed towards the Islamic-Arabic East from which the light of the ‘new’ science—astrology came, the path to Syria, as one of the first ‘islamized and arabized’ eastern countries with numerous cultural centres rich in writings coming from diverse traditions (early Christian, classical Greek, Hellenistic and Islamic-Arabic), was opened by the First Crusade starting the Christian reconquista [sic]. Its first result was the fact that the Christian-Jerusalem kingdom reached its widest expance under Fulke of Angevins [Fulk of Anjou, T. P.-V.] (1131–1143), therefore at the time when Hermann the Dalmatian was staying in Syria [emphasis T. P.-V.] with his friend.”

The aforementioned claims may be based upon relevant sources that our authors simply failed to cite or upon conjectures uncritically transmitted from one article to another. Whatever the case, such claims have been further disseminated through review articles, essays, and popular articles published on internet portals. A cautious approach seems warranted, as taken by Žarko Dadić, a Croatian historian of science, who mentions only a journey to the Middle East. Likewise, Charles Burnett states that little is known about Hermann’s life except for the years 1138–1143, when he was living in Northern Spain.

There is also the issue of repeated assertions that Hermann’s journey to Asia was perilous. Traveling eastward at that time could have, indeed, been a risky adventure but there are no sources indicating that Hermann and Robert actually encountered any specific dangers. The above-cited English chronicler’s biographical note on Robert of Ketton, “he lived in great danger of his life among the cruel Saracens,” can be taken as a reflection of attitudes toward the Muslim world at the time. “Cruel Saracens” could have been an expression from the usual repertoire of attributions for the enemy of Christian Europe and the Crusaders. This is somewhat contradicted by the remainder of the account, which states that Robert (and Hermann, who is men-
tion as his inseparable companion) learned the Arabic language, which implies that they could have lived in relative safety there, as did Riccoldo da Montecroce.

**Translation of the Quran**

Another issue that merits attention is Hermann’s alleged role in the translation of the Quran into Latin. It is known that Robert and Hermann were persuaded and generously compensated by the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, to translate the Quran and various texts about Islam and the history of the Muslim peoples. The Latin Quran was published in Basel in 1543 and 1550 by Theodore Buchmann, known as Bibliander, with only Robert of Ketton listed as the translator. Some authors may have been prompted to attribute (co)authorship of the Quran translation to Hermann because of a reference by Peter the Venerable to the knowledgeable scholars to whom he had entrusted the task of translating texts on Islam:

“Using pleas and money, I persuaded them to translate the history and the doctrine of that unfortunate man and his law which is called the Koran from Arabic into Latin. And to ensure that the translation would be entirely accurate and no errors would hinder our complete understanding, I included a Saracen among the Christian translators. Here are the names of the Christians: Robert of Ketton, Hermann the Dalmatian, Peter of Toledo; the Saracen was called Mohammd.”

Although the names of four persons are mentioned, it does not follow that all four of them translated the Quran, as there were other texts on the agenda. However, as Vjeran Kursar notes, Croatian authors tend to ascribe greater or lesser co-authorship to Hermann with Robert. At one point, Šanjk changed his views on the issue, as noted by Kursar.

In 1983 and 1988, Šanjk wrote that the letter by Peter the Venerable confirmed that Hermann was one of the translators of the Quran, adding that the work on the translation was led by Robert. However, in a subsequent article published in 1990, Šanjk writes: “The editors of *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 189, insist on the joint work of the two key protagonists, Robert of Ketton and Hermann the Dalmatian. However, it seems that in the translation of the Quran the share of our scholar does not exceed the limit of an expert advisor, a fact to which some other elements point.” In 2017, Šanjk published an article in which Hermann is neither mentioned as a translator of the Quran nor as a collaborator on this translation.

And while Šanjk recanted his previous assertion that Hermann was a co-author of the Latin translation of the Quran in his aforementioned article of 1990, Zenko published the following ambiguous account that same year:

“They were received by Peter the Venerable (Venerabilis) and were prevailed upon to translate, with an abundant financial compensation, some Islamic religious texts, including Kur’an itself. From this Islamic religious group, Hermann translated the texts entitled De generatione Machomet et nutritura eius et Doctrina Machomet, quae apud Saracenos magnae autoritatis est [emphasis T. P.-V.]. As one of the contributions of this people to the process of creation of the universal European spirit out of heterogeneous elements, we should point out the fact that the Ragusan Ivan Stojković (1443), during a diplomatic mission, found in Constantinople a manuscript of Hermann’s translation of Kur’an [emphasis T. P.-V.], had it copied, and it was on the basis of this copy that Bibliander was to publish it in Basel in 1543, together with Hermann’s translations of the mentioned Islamic texts.”

Furthermore, Zenko claims that “the main interest of Hermann and his friend is revealed in Robert’s dedication of his translation of al-Kindi’s *Indicia* to Hermann, as well as in Robert’s letter to Peter the Venerable, which he sent together with the translation of Kur’an in which he says that this work had taken them away from their main task” [emphasis T. P.-V.]. This assertion is supported by a reference to Robert’s words, as quoted by Burnett. However, Burnett actually quoted Robert as follows: “[Your wisdom] has compelled me meanwhile to lay aside my main study of astronomy and astrology.” Burnett is faithful to the Latin original: “que me compulit (...) studium meum” [emphasis T. P.-V.], while in Zenko’s text, the singular pronouns are mistranslated into plural, thereby erroneously implying that Robert could have been referring to the translation of the Quran as a product of his and Hermann’s joint efforts.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have presented no new biographical data about Hermann, but rather called attention to specific widely disseminated assertions that do not appear to be source-based. I have also pointed out mutually contradictory claims in the Croatian edition of *De essentis*, in which Šanjk cautiously approaches the issue of the authorship of the Quran translation in the first volume, while in the second volume Zenko asserts that Hermann translated the Quran together with Robert. Furthermore, in the first volume of the same work, Šanjk claims that Hermann was in Baghdad and provides a map of his itinerary, including Damascus and a longer stay in Damascus, whereas in the second volume Zenko mentions only Syria, but neither

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60 Zenko, “Herman the Dalmatian”, p. 123; the Croatian text: "Herman Dalmatin: potok za tamo porijeklo europske znanosti", p. 49.
61 Zenko, “Herman the Dalmatian”, p. 123, note 10. In the same footnote Zenko also refers to Šanjk’s article “De priscus Hermann Dalmatinicus”, p. 83, note 68, but the note 68 does not exist.
63 Ibid., p. 6, note 27.
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