# Between Empires, Among Believers: A Microhistorical and Borderland Analysis of Benedikt Kuripešić's 1530 Travel Diary

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**Abstract:** This article offers a microhistorical and borderland-centered analysis of Benedikt Kuripešić's 1530-1531 travel diary, composed during a Habsburg diplomatic mission to Ottoman Constantinople. Often cited yet rarely studied in depth, Kuripešić's text is reinterpreted here as more than a record of geographic movement; it is a rich epistemic artifact that captures early modern inter-imperial friction in the Balkan borderlands. Drawing on the methodologies of Carlo Ginzburg and Anssi Paasi, the article argues that Kuripešić's diary reveals how borders were experienced not only through political boundaries but through affective registers: faith, fear, memory, and resistance.Through close readings of selected diary entries, such as encounters with chained Christian children or whispered appeals from peasants, the article illuminates the lived experience of Ottoman-Christian coexistence. It also traces Kuripešić's rhetorical positioning as interpreter, diplomat, and narrator of martyrdom, highlighting how sacred geography and narrative mapping became acts of Christian counter-sovereignty. The legend of Miloš Obilić, retold with reverence, is analyzed as a key site of myth-making and identity projection. Furthermore, the article explores the Ottoman strategies of governance; taxation, devşirme, and regulated religious tolerance, as an early form of "soft conquest", prefiguring modern theories of biopolitics.

By combining microhistory and border theory, the study demonstrates that Kuripešić's "small text" bears large historical implications for understanding Balkan identity, imperial subjectivity, and religious resilience across fluid frontiers.

**Keywords:** Kuripešić, Microhistory, Balkan borderlands, Devşirme, Christian martyrdom, Miloš Obilić, Sacred geography, Habsburg-Ottoman relations

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## Introduction

In the late summer of 1530, a Habsburg diplomatic convoy departed from Ljubljana, winding its way through the rugged and politically fractured landscape of the Balkans. The aim was Constantinople, famed seat of Sultan Süleyman I, where royal envoys would negotiate with one of the most formidable rulers of the age. Among those in the imperial retinue was a relatively obscure figure: Benedikt Kuripešić, a man from Obernburg, serving as Latin interpreter. Yet it was he, not the noble emissaries, who would leave behind the most enduring trace of this mission: a travel diary written in German, blending observation, lamentation, cartographic record, and confessional polemic.

Kuripešić's *Reisebericht*, or *Embassy Travel Diary*, offers more than a diplomatic log. It emerges as a richly textured document of early modern Balkan realities, bearing witness to the religious dislocation, forced conversions, and administrative routines of Ottoman power. The diary, written in the vernacular and only partially translated in modern editions, remains a relatively underexplored historical source, despite its frequent citation in works on Ottoman-Christian relations, Balkan ethnography, and early modern mobility. What distinguishes it is its emotional register, political urgency, and attention to quotidian detail. His narrative is marked by a fervent Christian voice, writing as he journeys through what he regards as lands suffering under "Turkish tyranny" (Kuripešić, 1950: 8).

The uniqueness of Kuripešić's account lies in its position at the crossroads of empires and epistemologies. The Balkans of the early sixteenth century were not simply a frontier between Christianity and Islam; they were a zone of negotiation, adaptation, and silent resistance. Kuripešić's text captures that ambiguity. He is at once observer and participant, intermediary and chronicler, filtered through Habsburg imperial ideology but also affected by the direct human encounters of his journey. His sympathetic portraits of Christian peasants, clandestine expressions of faith, and recurring invocations of divine justice reveal a layered and unstable perception of empire, one in which power was contested not only through arms but also through ritual, rumor, and belief.

To approach such a source with appropriate methodological sensitivity, this article adopts the perspective of microhistory, as developed by Carlo Ginzburg and

Giovanni Levi. Microhistory privileges the small scale: not to obscure the broader structural forces of history, but to render them intelligible through the specificity of individual experience. Ginzburg's classic studies, such as *The Cheese and the Worms,* showed how marginal figures could embody the fractures and transmissions of larger cultural systems (Ginzburg, 2012). Kuripešić, though not a peasant or heretic, similarly stands at a marginal threshold: a minor court interpreter thrust into the geopolitics of a continental conflict. His narrative, shot through with sensory immediacy and confessional passion, allows the historian to read empire not from its capitals, but from its contested peripheries.

At the same time, the article draws upon the conceptual lexicon of borderland studies, especially as articulated by scholars such as Anssi Paasi, Sebastian Conrad, and James Scott. Borderlands are not merely geographic zones; they are social processes: spaces where identities are renegotiated, loyalties tested, and sovereignties blurred; to quote Laine and Cassaglia (2017, 3), "borders do not simply exist, but are ceaselessly both contested and maintained by diverse processes and practices". Paasi emphasizes that borders are never static, but are continually reproduced through institutional, discursive, and spatial practices, stating that "one distorted ideological expression of the territorial trap is to perceive national cultures and identities as homogeneous, coherent and static phenomena" (Paasi, 2000: 5). In Kuripešić's diary, the border is everywhere: in the checkpoints of customs officials, in the fearful whispers of Christian villagers, in the uncertain gestures of hospitality from Muslim hosts. These are not liminal spaces in a romanticized sense; they are zones of real danger and moral calculation.

What emerges, therefore, is not a travelogue in the traditional sense, but an epistemic artifact of inter-imperial friction. Kuripešić records a world in motion: children taken for the devşirme; monks praying for deliverance; ruined monasteries; cities half-abandoned. The empire he encounters is not monolithic. The Ottoman officials are courteous; the Turkish military displays order and magnificence. Yet beneath the civility lies coercion, economic extraction, and the subtle erosion of Christian lifeways. By reading the diary as both a historical and literary source, this article seeks to recover the subjective and affective

dimensions of empire: how domination was felt, interpreted, and resisted in the minds of those who lived on its edges. It explores how Kuripešić's account navigates not just physical terrain, but also moral and theological boundaries. Through a close textual and contextual analysis, we shall follow his itinerary not merely through space, but through meaning: from Ljubljana to Constantinople, from surface observation to cultural translation.

In doing so, we gain more than a sharper image of the sixteenth-century Balkans. We also enter into a conversation about the nature of borders, the construction of imperial knowledge, and the fragile persistence of belief under conditions of occupation. The Kuripešić diary is not a neutral report. It is a plea, a warning, a record of cultural memory inscribed by a witness who believed he was traveling through the ruins of Christendom. And yet, in its sorrow and testimony, it also preserves the dignity and agency of those it depicts: those who, under duress, still crossed themselves, buried their dead, and waited for deliverance.

This article, then, will examine the diary not as a footnote to diplomacy, but as a central document of Balkan early modernity, one that allows us to think critically about empire, identity, and the lived experience of borderland existence.

## Historiographical Silence and Opportunity

Benedikt Kuripešić's *Travel Diary*, despite its length, detail, and narrative richness, has largely remained a marginal text within Balkan historiography. It is frequently cited, often for its vivid descriptions of Ottoman-occupied Christian lands, yet rarely is it the central object of focused scholarly inquiry. Where it does appear, it is typically in footnotes, invoked as a supporting voice on topics ranging from the demographic history of Bosnia to the Ottoman devşirme system or the material condition of border monasteries. This pattern of citation without sustained engagement constitutes a striking silence, a historiographical gap that reveals much about the priorities and limitations of early modern Balkan studies.

Several academic works have drawn from Kuripešić's observations to corroborate local or regional historical trends, particularly in relation to Christian-Muslim dynamics in Ottoman borderlands. In his work on Ottomanization in Bosnia,

Noel Malcolm mentions Kuripešić briefly when noting the presence of forced conversions and economic pressures on Christian populations, using the travel diary to illustrate the psychological toll of Ottoman taxation policies (Malcolm, 1994: 46). Similarly, Dubravko Lovrenović references Kuripešić's lament over the chained Christian children as evidence of the devşirme's moral and social implications, but stops short of analyzing the narrative structure or ideological underpinnings of the diary itself (Lovrenović, 2009).

In the field of historical geography, Kuripešić is often mined for toponyms and descriptions of routes and settlements. Vladimir Ćorović and others in the Yugoslav scholarly tradition treated the diary as a sourcebook for historical geography and administrative borders, extracting names, place descriptions, and route data with little attention to the narrative form or subject position of the author (Ćorović, 1933). These uses have preserved the diary as a referential object but have left its literary, ideological, and emotional dimensions largely untouched.

Yet Kuripešić was not a mere bureaucratic observer. He was a narrator, an interpreter, and a cultural mediator. His diary is not a transparent window onto early modern realities but a carefully constructed narrative, shaped by Habsburg political priorities, Christian cosmology, and the moral dilemmas of inter-imperial diplomacy. As the designated interpreter for the Habsburg embassy, Kuripešić translated not only languages but also social behaviors, local customs, and religious atmospheres into a textual form palatable to his imperial patrons. The diary thus becomes a space where cultural translation takes place; not always faithfully, but always revealingly.

To read Kuripešić merely as a passive chronicler is to miss the diarist's agency as a representational figure. The emotional charge of his prose, his strategic selection of vignettes, and his repeated emphasis on Christian suffering point to a deeper ideological mission. His account is performative: it seeks to convince, to stir conscience, and to frame the Ottoman realm as a territory not only of political domination but of theological aberration. In this sense, the diary aligns with the tradition of confessional polemics that proliferated in the wake of the Reformation and the Ottoman advance into Central Europe. Texts from Martin Luther to Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq's *Turkish Letters* (1881) projected the East as a foil

to the moral, ecclesiastical, and political order of the Christian West. Kuripešić, though far less well known, operates in the same register: offering a vision of the Balkans as a fallen Christian space awaiting liberation.

The diary also fits within the larger corpus of early modern travel writing, a genre shaped by the tensions of curiosity, fear, and projection. As Mary B. Campbell and Joan-Pau Rubiés have argued, early modern travel texts often served as modes of knowledge-making that reflected as much about the traveler's epistemological frameworks as about the lands visited (Campbell, 1999: 215; Rubiés, 2002: 356). Kuripešić's diary exhibits these qualities with clarity: the reader encounters not only landscapes and peoples but a moral economy, an implicit map of civilization and barbarity, encoded in the distinctions between bell towers and minarets, chained children and well-fed Ottoman officials.

Given this layered textuality, it is striking that no sustained literary or cultural analysis of Kuripešić's narrative has yet been undertaken. While scholars such as Maria Todorova have addressed Balkan representation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the lens of Orientalism and internal othering, early modern Balkan texts remain on the fringes of such theoretical attention (Todorova, 1997). Kuripešić's diary offers precisely the kind of liminal material that invites such reevaluation. It is a text from the margins that speaks in the idiom of empire, a vernacular document that discloses imperial anxieties through its affective register.

The opportunity, then, is twofold: to re-center Kuripešić not merely as a witness but as a cultural agent, and to reframe his diary as a site of narrative production shaped by the volatile pressures of inter-imperial contact. To do so requires a methodology sensitive to both the microhistorical context of the journey and the borderland logic of the world it describes. Kuripešić was not simply traveling; he was recording a vision of what Europe was, what it feared to become, and what it had perhaps already lost.

## Balkan Borderlands as Liminal Space

In the sixteenth century, the Balkans occupied a liminal and contested zone between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires; a fluid space shaped by overlapping

sovereignties, hybrid identities, and imperial anxieties. Benedikt Kuripešić's 1530 travel diary functions as an imperial "sensorium", surveying a region that was politically Ottoman but religiously and culturally heterogeneous. His observations capture a disjointed geography where sovereignty did not align with faith, customs, or cultural allegiances. This disjuncture is not incidental but emblematic of borderland life, where surveillance, hybridity, and suspicion defined both governance and daily life.

## Imperial Borderlands as Zones of Hybridity and Anxiety

The early modern Balkans were structured not by rigid frontiers but by porous and negotiated spaces, zones where allegiances were often pragmatic, affiliations fluid, and categories like "Christian" or "Ottoman" insufficient to encapsulate social reality. Scholars have described such regions as "ambivalent spaces", where multiple loyalties could coexist (Stanić, 2017: 121). The Habsburg-Ottoman military frontier, for instance, was less a fixed border and more a shifting corridor of accommodation, resistance, and mixed identities (Ballinger, 2004: 31).

Kuripešić's diary is particularly telling in this respect. While traveling through Ottoman-controlled lands, he repeatedly notes the presence of Christian rituals, ecclesiastical architecture, and monastic hospitality. In Sarajevo, for instance, he reports: "There are more than 100 Christian houses, and also a fine church". Despite the region's political incorporation into the Ottoman world, Christian lifeways persisted, visibly and materially. Churches stood intact, processions were held, and clerical figures played prominent roles in community life. This coexistence of Islamic sovereignty and Christian visibility illustrates the hybrid nature of frontier governance, where empire ruled through incorporation rather than eradication.

Kuripešić's travelogue thus presents the Ottoman Balkans not as a monolithically Islamic space but as a palimpsest of imperial and religious overlays; what Zrinka Stahuljak calls "textual métissage", or the layering of conflicting codes of power and meaning in border zones (Stahuljak, 2010). These were "minor

empires", according to her, not in size but in their embeddedness in translation, mediation, and negotiated authority.

## The Diary as a Tool of Imperial Surveillance

More than a mere narrative of travel, Kuripešić's diary served an explicitly political function: to assess not only geography and military infrastructure but also the religious and social dispositions of the population. In this sense, the text embodies what Norton (2007: 79) terms "reflected and contested identity". The Habsburg interest in mapping Ottoman subjects' confessional loyalties, tax obligations, and potential for rebellion turned the diary into an early modern intelligence report. This resonates with the idea of the "imperial sensorium", proposed by Thomas (2022), in this context explored by Virginia Aksan (1999), who analyzes Ottoman and Habsburg comparisons of internal dissent and political loyalty, showing how tax policies and records were used to monitor instability and rebellion, whereby empires mobilized not just armies but epistemologies to understand and manage contested regions.

Indeed, Kuripešić frequently remarks on taxation systems, noting whether Christian populations are taxed more heavily than Muslims; a reflection of Ottoman policy under the millet system. He also comments on the extent of Islamization, observing in some areas that the population remains "largely Christian", while in others, conversions have occurred. These details suggest a concern with religious stability, loyalty, and potential leverage: classic indicators of imperial anxiety.

This surveillance also manifests in the detailed mapping of rituals and public behavior. Monasteries and churches are not just spiritual centers; they are read as signs of latent Christian loyalty. Kuripešić's detailed attention to these markers underscores a strategic vision; religious infrastructures become indicators of imperial influence or resistance.

## Liminality and Disjointed Sovereignty

Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "liminality" is especially applicable to the Balkans in this period. As Turner argued, liminal spaces are those "betwixt

and between", where norms are suspended, and transformation is possible. The Balkan borderlands exemplify this condition. They were not merely peripheral but *liminal*: inhabiting a third space between submission and autonomy (borrowing from Bhabha, 2012), orthodoxy and heresy, Islamic law and Christian canon (Dobreva, 2011: 34; Grmuša & Oklopčić, 2022).

Kuripešić's diary records this liminality in everyday practices. In the village of Goražde, he observes that although ruled by Ottoman authorities, the local population "still celebrates Christian holidays", and the monastery welcomes him with "the rite of blessing". Such rituals defy the prescriptive boundaries of sovereignty, suggesting an enduring religious geography that maps imperfectly onto political borders.

This disjunction reveals the dialectic of imperial anxiety and accommodation. The Ottomans tolerated many Christian institutions; not out of benevolence, but as a pragmatic strategy to ensure order and tax compliance. Simultaneously, such tolerance bred suspicion in the Habsburg mind: these Christians might one day become insurgents or collaborators in a future war.

As scholars like Ljuckanov (2015: 80) and Laven & Baycroft (2008) argue, early modern Balkan borderlands created a "borderline identity", where neither empire could fully assert control nor fully relinquish claims (Laven and Baycroft, to go into more details, discuss numerous, interlocking identities). They were constantly surveilled, negotiated, and reinscribed by cartographers, ethnographers, and emissaries like Kuripešić.

## The Politics of Hospitality and the Moral Economy of Loyalty

One of the most vivid features of the diary is its emphasis on hospitality, especially by Christian monastic communities. Kuripešić often frames these encounters as affirmations of shared faith and subtle resistance to Islamization. In one passage, he describes how a monk at Mileševa welcomed them with "bread and wine, according to the custom of our people", thus drawing a line of communal identity across political divides.

This form of hospitality performs dual work. It asserts Christian solidarity in a landscape of Islamic authority and functions as a coded expression of political allegiance. Hayden explored how shared traditions of hospitality became tools of inclusion or exclusion depending on broader power structures (Hayden 2007: 105). It allowed Christian communities to maintain a moral economy that positioned them closer to Habsburg Christendom despite Ottoman rule.

Thus, hospitality becomes a technology of border navigation. It signals loyalty while maintaining plausible deniability. It affirms identity through ritual without inviting retaliation. Kuripešić's reception by Christian hosts reveals this performative balancing act that was crucial for survival in the borderlands.

Kuripešić's diary renders the Balkan borderlands not as inert peripheries but as dynamic zones of hybridity, liminality, and surveillance. His descriptions capture the profound dissonance between political and religious borders: Ottoman military control coexisting with Christian rituals, monasteries, and iconography. The diary thus becomes a proto-ethnographic instrument of imperial sensing, tasked with assessing not just the terrain but the terrain's moral and confessional contours.

In these liminal spaces, empires ruled not by obliteration but by negotiation. Christian symbols persisted under Islamic rule, and imperial emissaries like Kuripešić became the eyes through which Vienna monitored these delicate balances. The frontier was not just a place of potential warfare; it was a site of epistemological labor, where loyalty, identity, and faith were continually produced, recorded, and interpreted.

## Everyday Tyranny and Resilient Faith: Microhistorical Vignettes

In the corpus of early modern travel writing, few texts expose the quotidian operations of imperial rule as vividly and affectively as Benedikt Kuripešić's *Diary* (1530-1531). Beneath its formal framing as a diplomatic travel report lies a layered narrative structure that interweaves personal observation, affective appeal, ethnographic detail, and Christian polemic. This section offers a microhistorical approach to selected episodes in Kuripešić's diary, demonstrating

how the text performs the role of a "witness" to injustice and a chronicler of Christian resilience. The microhistory lens allows us to reconstruct the experiences of non-elite actors (peasants, monks, women, children) within the overlapping systems of Ottoman administration and religious stratification. Their fragmentary voices surface through gestures, rumors, iconography, and expressions of faith, filtered and reconstituted through Kuripešić's narratorial agency.

The diary's structure lends itself to close reading. Dates and places are meticulously recorded, creating the skeleton of a diplomatic itinerary. Yet within this framework, Kuripešić often halts the chronology to describe what might otherwise be peripheral events: a villager's gaze, a lament overheard, or the markings on a tombstone. These interruptions (deliberate and weighted) become the loci of his political theology. They are the places where the moral geography of empire is redrawn not through cartographic lines, but through symbolic resistance and human testimony.

One of the most harrowing microhistorical moments occurs on *7 January 1531*, in the village of Slatmwerde (Saparjevo). Kuripešić recounts: "where we encountered many Christians, bound in iron chains. May God have mercy on them!" (Kuripešić, 1950: 49). The brief sentence sears itself into the narrative not through rhetorical excess, but through its stark economy. No elaboration is needed. The chained bodies speak for themselves. The visual image conveys more than a list of injustices ever could. This is no generic scene of conquest; it is a glimpse into the technologies of control deployed at the edges of empire. The use of chains literalizes the metaphor of captivity: these are not merely subjects of an alien power, but its hostages, its collateral.

The imagery here parallels Ginzburg's insight that microhistory rests on the interpretative potential of minute details, "clues" that open toward larger structures of meaning (Ginzburg, 1993). Kuripešić's chain-bound Christians are not just victims of a localized abuse. They are emblems in a broader Christian discourse of martyrdom, functioning as moral referents in a Christian-Ottoman dialectic. Moreover, the passive suffering they embody is not inert. It is articulated, even weaponized, through the narrator's call to solidarity: "May God have mercy on them!"; a prayer, but also a prompt for action.

This call is echoed throughout the diary in scenes where villagers approach the envoys in secrecy, offering words or gestures of desperation. Kuripešić repeatedly narrates moments in which peasants, constrained by fear, communicate their discontent through indirect channels. In one striking episode near Sarajevo, he observes:

"Oh, how many times have we seen them standing before us with their arms crossed, sighing and looking at the sky, not daring to talk to us. But when one of them was left alone with us, he would say: 'Oh, with what desire we have waited, but you will free us with Christ's help!" (Kuripešić, 1950: 24).

This is a choreography of repression and hope. The villagers' crossed arms and upward gaze enact a silent liturgy of supplication. Their bodies speak what their mouths cannot. Once alone, the whispered desire for liberation (phrased in eschatological language) positions the Habsburg emissaries as messianic figures. Kuripešić may well be reporting these moments to flatter his sovereign's cause, yet the pattern and consistency of these accounts suggest more than narrative flourish. They are instances of what Michel de Certeau would call "tactics"; small, everyday ways of asserting meaning under conditions of domination (de Certeau, 1984: xix).

Equally evocative are the numerous references to Christian iconography that survive amid the Ottoman-ruled landscape. Kuripešić takes pains to note ruined churches, neglected graveyards, and above all, the persistence of crosses. At the tomb of the Serbian duke Radoslav Pavlović near Rogatica, the diary shifts registers, moving from ethnography to elegy. Kuripešić transcribes the tombstone's inscription:

"I, voivode Radoslav Pavlovich... While I lived, the Turkish king could neither oppress nor defeat me; even less did I think about renouncing my faith."(Kuripešić, 1950: 25).

The text is self-consciously monumental. Radoslav's epitaph is not only a record of death, but a profession of militant faith. The stone becomes a chronotope of resistance, a place where history, geography, and ideology converge. Even in ruin, the inscription resists erasure. It reminds the reader that the territory Kuripešić crosses is not a void, but a palimpsest of struggles, sanctified by loss.

This devotional resilience is not confined to elite figures:

"May God deliver these unfortunates from Babylonian and eternal slavery! May the merciful God quickly free them with his mercy! The Turks are afraid of them, and they secretly kill many" (Kuripešić, 1950: 32).

The plea is simultaneously political and theological. It invokes ancestry, continuity, and mutual obligation. The speaker does not beg for military assistance alone; he demands fidelity to a shared covenant. The Christian "borderlander", stripped of worldly power, becomes the guardian of a transhistorical moral order. And it is he - not the imperial envoy - who instructs the Habsburgs in faithfulness.

The paradox that emerges from these episodes is fundamental to the structure of Kuripešić's narrative: political boundaries may be fixed by conquest, but spiritual boundaries remain porous. Christian communities on both sides of the frontier recognize each other as kin. This is not the ecumenism of official theology but the solidarity born of shared suffering. As borderland studies scholars like Scott (2009) and Paasi (1996) argue, borders are not only sites of regulation but of interaction. They are "performed" in everyday life. Kuripešić's diary reveals a borderland not only mapped by the Ottomans, but spiritually surveilled and morally contested by its inhabitants.

The diary also contains meta-commentary on the Ottoman state's economic and social pressures. Kuripešić describes the devşirme (child levy), forced taxation, and restrictions on church restoration. But these are often framed not simply as policies, but as sins—violations of divine as well as human law. The language is stark:

"The Turk no longer allows churches to be renovated or new ones to be built. This is how he thinks he can force them to convert to his faith"(Kuripešić, 1950: 23).

Here again, the policy becomes a symbol. A ban on construction is read as an assault on permanence, a denial of spiritual futurity. In the microhistorical frame, this restriction is not abstract. It is embodied in the weeping of monks, the silence of destroyed bells, the bent heads of children in chains.

In sum, Kuripešić's diary stages a series of micro-encounters where structural tyranny and individual resistance meet. Through his selective narration - what he chooses to see and record - the borderland becomes a space of contested sovereignty. Yet it is also a sanctuary of enduring belief. The true frontier in this narrative is not territorial, but moral: between tyranny and fidelity, silence and witness, despair and hope.

## Interpreting the Interpreter: Kuripešić's Positionality

Benedikt Kuripešić's *Putopis* is more than a documentary log of diplomatic passage; it is an authored narrative, one that bears the marks of its writer's positionality as an interpreter, Christian, imperial subject, and, most subtly, as a cultural broker. Throughout the diary, Kuripešić's presence is not limited to translation between spoken languages. His mediating role encompasses the interpretive, rhetorical, and symbolic domains of early modern frontier politics. He listens, observes, records - and crucially, re-narrates. What emerges is not a neutral relay of events but a highly charged moral and political narrative, one in which Kuripešić oscillates between the roles of chronicler and polemicist, observer and confessor.

As a Latin interpreter serving an imperial mission, Kuripešić's primary role was linguistic. But his diary reveals that he also functioned as an epistemic intermediary. He frequently translates not only words but entire worldviews. What he records from Christian villagers, Orthodox monks, Turkish officials, or Greek subjects is filtered through a Catholic-Habsburg conceptual lens. Often, the "local" is transmuted into an allegory for imperial concerns. His repeated invocations of divine justice such as the mentioned "May God have mercy on them!" act as punctuation marks across the diary, turning descriptive passages into theological appeals (Kuripešić, 1950: 49).

These interjections are never neutral. They construct a moral binary between the "right" faith and "tyrannical" Islam. Kuripešić's interpretive gaze flattens the complex religio-ethnic diversity of the Balkans into a Manichaean battle between persecuted Christianity and encroaching Islam. His rhetorical strategy draws heavily on soteriological imagery: the Habsburgs are framed as potential

deliverers, while the Ottomans are described as "bloodthirsty" and "unmerciful" foes of Christendom. In his opening lines, Kuripešić laments that "the blood-drinker and sworn enemy of the Christian faith… continues striving to conquer all of Christendom" (Kuripešić, 1950: 8). The language is not diplomatic. It is apocalyptic.

While these polemics might be dismissed as typical of Habsburg propaganda, Kuripešić's role complicates such an interpretation. He is not a court scribe composing official dispatches; he is an interpreter embedded in the convoy, moving across villages, interacting with peasants, and attending monastic liturgies. His proximity to the local, combined with his loyalty to the imperial mission, generates a tension that permeates his writing. The diary oscillates between empathy and distance, detail and generalization. One moment he transcribes a villager's plea; the next, he universalizes the condition of "Christian slavery". In this sense, his positionality bears resemblance to what Natalie Zemon Davis called the "double vision" of cultural intermediaries; those who see both sides but must write for one (Zemon Davis, 2011: xii).

Kuripešić's rhetorical treatment of Muslims is uniformly negative, yet his depiction of Greeks and Jews is more complex. The Greeks, particularly those encountered near Constantinople, are portrayed with a mixture of pity and reverence. He notes their suffering, their liturgical discipline, and their adherence to Christian faith, despite Ottoman domination (Kuripešić, 1950: 42-43). The Greeks, while not Catholics, are still rendered as part of a broader Christian "we". Their identity is subordinated but not demonized. This stands in contrast to his mention of Jews, which is rare but telling. When Jews appear, it is often in the context of commerce or servitude, never as spiritual interlocutors. Their role is peripheral, instrumental.

The selective empathy in Kuripešić's narrative reveals an ideological project: the stabilization of a Catholic-Habsburg identity amid cultural and confessional ambiguity. The interpreter becomes a builder of boundaries. He records how Christians under Ottoman rule continue to mark graves with crosses, sustain monastic life, and whisper prayers to emissaries from the West. These fragments are gathered to construct an imagined trans-border Christian continuity, threatened by Muslim rule but awaiting salvation from the Habsburg center.

But Kuripešić is also deeply aware of the fragility of this vision. He is not writing from a position of triumph, but of negotiation. In Constantinople, the delegation must perform submission. The Habsburgs, far from being liberators, are supplicants. The interpreter watches as his patrons kiss the Sultan's hand. The contradiction is not lost on him. In one of the most anguished passages, villagers lament: "Now we see that even you must bow to the Turkish Sultan" (Kuripešić, 1950: 24). This is not just a political humiliation. It is a spiritual wound. Kuripešić, too, must submit: to service, to empire, to narrative constraints.

This raises a final interpretive question: is Kuripešić offering a proto-nationalist narrative, or is he merely echoing imperial rhetoric? The answer is complex. His moral geography is clearly shaped by imperial categories: Christendom, Habsburg sovereignty, Ottoman tyranny. But within these coordinates, he collects and preserves local voices: peasants, monks, elders. His diary becomes a vernacular archive. While the notion of nationalism is anachronistic in this context, there is a nascent sense of cultural identification that transcends politics. He constructs a Christian "people", defined not by ethnicity or language, but by faith and suffering.

Yet this identity is hierarchical. The Catholics of the West are imagined as the elect, while Eastern Christians are depicted as faithful but needing rescue. The interpreter, positioned between these worlds, resolves the tension by making himself a conduit. He is not a hero of liberation, but a narrator of affliction—a voice that renders distant suffering legible to imperial ears. In doing so, he prepares the moral ground for future interventions, future claims, future borders.

Kuripešić's diary is thus not a simple report, nor a fully formed nationalist vision. It is a liminal text, born of a liminal position. It speaks from the edge of empire and the edge of identity. And in doing so, it reminds us that the interpreter is never just a translator. He is a builder of meaning, a shaper of perception, and (however unwittingly) a maker of history.

## Memory and Myth-Making: The Case of Miloš Obilić

Among the many vignettes recorded by Benedikt Kuripešić during his diplomatic mission to Constantinople, none resonates with such emotional and

ideological intensity as the account of Miloš Obilić, the Serbian knight who, according to legend, assassinated Sultan Murad I at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 (Bataković 2015: 578). This retelling, inserted in the diary during the delegation's passage through Kosovo Polje in late September 1530, occupies a narrative space markedly different from other observations. Here, Kuripešić shifts from observer to orator, recounting the event with theatrical vividness and unmistakable reverence. The tale becomes a hinge between memory and prophecy, past and future, suffering and hope.

The episode begins plainly enough. Upon visiting the memorial site on 24 September, Kuripešić describes a tower-like tomb with a rounded roof, believed to be the burial place of Sultan Murad, and introduces the story of "Serbian knight named Miloš Kobilović" who stabbed the sultan in his tent (Kuripešić, 1950: 34). From this point forward, the narrative pivots into moral theater. Miloš, once slandered and humiliated by his own prince, proves his loyalty not by complaint or defection, but through an act of supreme sacrifice: "I will end the war, even if I must lose my life" (Kuripešić, 1950: 35).

Kuripešić frames the assassination not as a political stratagem, but as a Christian martyrdom. Obilić's stabbing of Murad is not merely vengeance for insult or a patriotic duty: it is redemptive justice, an act of faith and fidelity that restores moral order. "Oh, Kobilović... you avenged in a Christian manner and repaid evil with good" (Kuripešić, 1950: 36). Here the language no longer belongs to the genre of travelogue or diplomacy, but to hagiography. Obilić is portrayed not simply as a brave knight, but as a Christ-like figure; wronged, misunderstood, but ultimately vindicated through self-sacrifice.

This shift from empirical narration to moral allegory is significant. Kuripešić's retelling of the Obilić legend marks a moment in which memory becomes myth, and myth becomes ideology. It is one of the few places in the diary where fiction (or rather, what modern historiography would label unverified legend) is granted full narrative dignity. The insertion of this mythic episode within a diplomatic travel diary invites several layers of interpretation. On one level, it serves to deepen the diary's spiritual narrative: Obilić becomes a surrogate for all Christian resistance against Ottoman power. At a time when the Habsburg delegation

was traveling in submission to the Porte, and when Kuripešić observed Christian villagers beaten, taxed, and chained (Kuripešić, 1950: 49), the invocation of Obilić offered a symbolic reversal. Here was a moment in which the West triumphed, however briefly and mythically, over the East; not through imperial force, but through individual virtue. Moreover, the Obilić narrative blurs the boundary between historical memory and affective propaganda. By the 1530s, the Battle of Kosovo had already entered the realm of nationalist martyrology among South Slavs, though not yet in its modern form. Scholars such as Maria Todorova have shown how the Kosovo myth became a central element of Balkan national imaginaries in the nineteenth century (Todorova, 1997: 186). Yet Kuripešić's diary suggests that the seeds of this mythic structure (self-sacrifice, betrayal, redemption, divine justice) were already culturally legible in the early modern period. What distinguishes Kuripešić's version is not its nationalism, which would be anachronistic, but its supranational Christian universalism.

Indeed, Kuripešić's admiration for Obilić operates within a theological frame. The knight is valorized not as a proto-Serbian or ethnic hero, but as a Christian martyr whose virtue transcends borders. This allows Kuripešić to deploy the tale in service of Habsburg ideology. The narrative becomes a moral exhortation: a reminder to Western Christian princes of the sacrifices endured by their brethren under Ottoman rule, and a call to spiritual solidarity. Obilić is thus conscripted into a moral economy that legitimizes imperial diplomacy and frames submission as temporary, contingent on a higher divine plan.

What is remarkable about this narrative gesture is that it upends the formal logic of the mission itself. In the same diary that records emissaries kissing the Sultan's hand and receiving Turkish gifts (Kuripešić, 1950: 45-46), we find a counter-myth of resistance and vindication. This contradiction is not resolved but dramatized. Kuripešić, positioned as intermediary and interpreter, uses the legend to insert a moment of Christian agency into a narrative otherwise defined by political passivity.

This episode also reveals much about the politics of memory in the early modern Balkans. It illustrates how oral tradition, sacred landscape, and political grievance coalesce in moments of narrative crystallization. The tomb at Kosovo Polje

is not just a monument to a dead sultan; it is a site of competing meaning. For the Ottomans, it is a sign of imperial reach. For Kuripešić, it is a stage for moral resurrection. That both perspectives coexist within the same topography underscores the ambiguity of the borderland: a zone where history becomes myth, and myth becomes a weapon of interpretation.

The case of Miloš Obilić in Kuripešić's diary is not an incidental folkloric detour. It is a moment of narrative transformation, a literary and ideological pivot that anchors the diary's moral vision. Obilić serves as a vessel for expressing Christian longing, political frustration, and theological hope. His story blurs fact and fiction not to deceive but to mobilize. In the process, it anticipates the emergence of modern heroic narratives and signals the enduring power of martyrdom as a political theology.

## Border Bureaucracy and Ottoman Soft Power

Kuripešić's travel diary, while primarily a record of diplomatic movement, becomes a revealing lens through which the Ottoman state's subtle yet extensive apparatus of control may be seen. His descriptions of the child levy (devşirme), taxation structures, and military obligations constitute more than ethnographic notations. They chart the contours of a quiet conquest; an imperial rationality that sought not merely to subjugate, but to reshape.

Kuripešić reports that, in many of the Christian villages traversed, "from each place or region, the third, fourth or fifth boy "is taken, with the best-looking and most intelligent selected, even "if the father and mother have only one child "(Kuripešić, 1531: 23). These children were destined to become janissaries, soldiers of the Sultan, ideologically remolded. This "child tax", enforced annually, becomes emblematic of the Ottoman Empire's conversional biopolitics. As Güneş Yılmaz argues, the devşirme was not merely a military draft; it was "a system of epistemic and bodily transformation" that enacted "a performative biopolitics well before the modern state" (Yılmaz, 2021: 239-245).

Kuripešić also notes a taxation regime increasingly detached from land and anchored in persons. In addition to one florin per household, new levies emerged: "several aspri for each head of cattle, for each field, garden, vegetable garden...

for the doors in the house" (Kuripešić, 1531: 23). These fragmentary taxes mimic the strategies of the pre-modern fiscal-military state, but here they perform an additional function: disaggregating communities, as obligations are tallied by individual units rather than collective estates or parishes. The economic burdens, combined with the symbolic toll of witnessing one's children taken, amount to what Agamben terms "thanatopolitics": a sovereignty exercised through decisions on life, lineage, and future (Agamben, 1998).

In this light, Kuripešić's comments on local responses become especially poignant. He notes Christian villagers in Bosnia who secretly accept gifts and whisper their grief: "Often, before our eyes, the Turks mercilessly beat not only the old, but also the young and women", and adds, "they often did not dare to accept anything from us…they took only what we gave them secretly" (Kuripešić, 1531: 24). Their cautious interactions reflect a deep awareness of Ottoman surveillance mechanisms and the constant balancing of loyalty and resistance.

What the interpreter records here is not mere cruelty. Rather, it is the embedding of coercion within the very rhythms of daily life. Taxation becomes ritualized, child-culling institutionalized, and movement conditional upon compliance. As Čedomir Nestorović outlines, the devşirme functioned both "as military recruitment and as psychological deterrent", designed to enforce hegemonic compliance not through visible terror alone, but through "a system of learned helplessness" (Nestorović, 2023).

Kuripešić does not use the language of modern critical theory, but the outlines of Michel Foucault's "governmentality" are visible in his narrative. The Ottomans did not need to garrison every village, for they had installed networks of informants, pashas, and revenue-collectors who operated in tandem with the architecture of fear and fiscal rationality. Control was exerted through the promise of protection as much as the threat of punishment. As Başak Bayraktaroğlu writes, "the Ottoman Empire did not so much rule by eliminating Christianity, but by entrenching its presence under conditions of permanent dependency" (Bayraktaroğlu, 2021); Bozluolcay (2023: 12), in a dissertation on Ottoman Damascus, similarly describes how revenue collection, regional governors, and networks of power worked in the absence of permanent military garrisons. This confirms the role of *administrative* rather than *martial* governance.

Kuripešić's diary reveals these techniques of dominion not as abstract policies but as tangible encounters. His record of children chained in Saparjevo, the lamentations of enslaved monks in Toplica, and the visible impoverishment of the Christian countryside, where, he notes, peasants "flee with all their property to the mountains…they cultivate their land far from the roads" (Kuripešić, 1531: 32), tells of a form of conquest designed to make rebellion seem irrational.

And truly, the effectiveness of this "soft conquest" lay in its ability to fracture communities from within. Religious tolerance was conditional, churches allowed but not repaired, clergy retained but unempowered. The boundaries of Ottoman tolerance were fluid, allowing cultural continuities so long as they posed no challenge to central authority. This mimics what Foucault described as "biopolitics": a state logic that governs populations by managing their life potential, rather than through visible spectacles of death (Foucault, 2004).

Yet for all its efficiencies, Kuripešić also records moments of rupture. The whispered hopes of peasants, the persistent presence of Christian rituals, and the melancholic hospitality of monks suggest a society under strain but not spiritually vanquished. It is here that Kuripešić's record transforms into an interpretive document. His depiction of these social mechanisms (precise, observational, yet also moralizing) makes the diary a proto-ethnographic account of imperial rule and its discontents.

## Sacred Geography and Christian Cartographies

Benedikt Kuripešić's diary does not merely chart the itinerary of a diplomatic mission; it redraws a mental and spiritual map of the Christian Balkans under Ottoman dominion. His pages are thick with place-names, but more importantly, with meanings. Monasteries, graves, relics, and sites of martyrdom are given weight far beyond their strategic significance. They emerge as fixed points in a sacred geography, anchoring a cultural identity amid the disorienting fluidity of imperial borders.

Throughout the journey, Kuripešić does not hesitate to describe physical spaces through the lens of spiritual symbolism. When the delegation reaches the monastery near the river Rzav, the scene departs from political observation and

enters reverence. “The monks received us very well…and prayed for our successful journey and return”. (Kuripešić, 1531: 27). This moment of hospitality from the monastic community offers more than comfort; it becomes an interlude of moral continuity, a reminder that the land retains its Christian rhythm despite its Islamic governors.

The landscape is inscribed with stories. In his moving description of the grave of Voivode Radoslav Pavlović near Rogatica, Kuripešić cites the gravestone’s inscription: “While I lived, the Turkish king could not defeat me with any heroism, any gifts…; even less did I think about renouncing my faith”. (Kuripešić, 1531: 25-26). This is not just a lament for a fallen noble but a declaration of territory; faithful land, held through defiance, even in death. Kuripešić includes these words not as quaint folklore, but as testament. The tomb becomes a monument to resistance, and its inclusion in his narrative a form of sanctification.

In this sense, Kuripešić participates in what Denis Cosgrove has termed “cartographic performance”; the act of mapping not only terrain, but worldviews and value systems (Cosgrove, 2008: 135). Every monastery visited, every cross observed, becomes part of a Christian counter-cartography. The monk who blesses them, the ruin where relics once were, the sacred spring identified with a saint: all these coalesce into what Iver Neumann calls “memoryscapes”, which reterritorialize imperial space along lines of faith rather than flag (Neumann, 1999).

This act of narrative mapping is most visible in Kosovo. As the delegation moves through the region, the landscape becomes saturated with religious and heroic memory. The field of Kosovo is marked not merely as terrain, but as stage of martyrdom. The tomb of Miloš Obilić is described in vivid physical detail: “grave…like a rectangular tower, with a rounded tin roof”, but more crucially, its meaning is explained: here lies the man who died for Christendom. The site is not a grave; it is a reliquary. Kuripešić’s inclusion of Obilić’s story cements this site as a shrine of collective memory.

Christianity, in this diary, is more than a faith; it is a cartographic principle. The spaces that matter (where prayer is said, saints remembered, relics venerated) form a map that overlays the Ottoman administrative geography like

a palimpsest. Michel de Certeau famously distinguished between "maps" and "tours", between abstract representations and lived itineraries (de Certeau, 1984: 121). Kuripešić's travelogue, though linear, is no neutral route. It is a pilgrimage route disguised as diplomatic passage.

And through this sacred geography, Kuripešić resists the erasure that conquest attempts. He shows that territory does not belong solely to the sovereign who taxes it, but to the faith that remembers it. The names of churches, graves, monastic orders, and inscriptions become instruments of remembrance. This geography is thus mnemonic: it records presence not by asserting ownership, but by preserving prayer.

In doing so, Kuripešić maps an alternative vision of the region, not as Ottoman Rumelia, but as a Christian landscape-in-waiting, layered with signs of faith, sorrow, and fidelity.

## Conclusion

Benedikt Kuripešić's diary is more than the record of a diplomatic passage; it is a palimpsest. Written during a volatile epoch of territorial negotiation between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, it overlays cartography with faith, geography with emotion, and itinerary with ideology. Beneath the surface of logistical precision (such as the listing of rivers, towns, nights spent, and the like) lies a Christian cosmology attempting to make sense of an increasingly unfamiliar political landscape. The diary emerges not as neutral description, but as a prism through which the anxieties, hopes, and dogmas of early sixteenth-century Christian Europe refract.

This article has argued that Kuripešić's diary, when read through the twin lenses of microhistory and borderland theory, offers a rare window into the mechanics of empire and the resilience of faith. Its microhistorical texture: scenes of chained children, whispered supplications from peasants, or the gesture of monks offering blessings, captures the granular realities of those who lived at the blurred seams of imperial orders. These vignettes resist abstraction; they force the historian to reckon with empire not as ideology alone but as daily intrusion.

Borderland studies, particularly as articulated by scholars like Anssi Paasi (1999) and Konrad and Scott (2011), remind us that frontiers are not merely lines drawn on maps but zones of ambiguity, adaptation, and contestation. Kuripešić's journey through the Balkans illustrates this vividly. The Ottoman-controlled Christian villages, the continued operation of monasteries, the presence of Orthodox clergy, and the cross-cultural socialities he describes all reveal a landscape in which sovereignty is both present and porous. Taxation and devşirme, as Kuripešić documents, were mechanisms of imperial control, but also produced hybrid identities; Christians in turbans, peasants fluent in both prayer and fear (Kuripešić, 1531: 23, 45).

Kuripešić's narrative must also be seen as a performance of identity. As interpreter, he mediates between empires. But as narrator, he positions himself as a loyal subject of Habsburg Christendom. His invocation of God, his condemnation of the "Turkish curr", and his sanctification of figures like Miloš Obilić are rhetorical maneuvers; strategies to stabilize Catholic identity in a world that threatened its coherence. Whether Kuripešić offers an early proto-nationalist myth, or merely echoes the political theology of his time, remains a question. But that he writes in a voice both devotional and political is indisputable.

This diary, viewed from a contemporary standpoint, speaks not only to its time but to ours. The Balkans remain a region where history weighs heavily on identity, where the traces of old empires persist in cultural memory, and where religion continues to shape political imaginaries. Kuripešić's effort to draw sacred maps and narrate faith through motion anticipates later Balkan struggles to define belonging not only by state but by story.

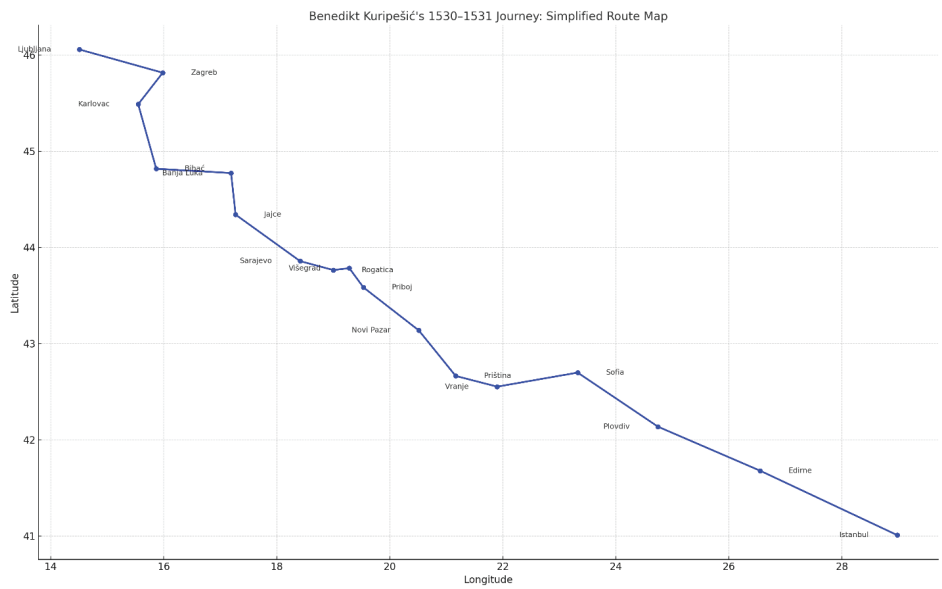
Further research could build on this foundation. Comparative analysis with other early Habsburg or Venetian travel texts (such as those by Luigi Bassano or Bertrandon de la Broquière) could clarify whether Kuripešić's rhetorical mode was unique or representative of a broader discursive formation. Another promising path lies in gender: the near-total absence of women in Kuripešić's text prompts questions about visibility, power, and the masculine coding of space and diplomacy. How did female presences, often relegated to silence or captivity, inhabit these same contested spaces?

Digital humanities tools could also illuminate new dimensions of the diary. A geospatial mapping of Kuripešić's route, overlaid with present-day borders and religious sites, would help visualize the diachronic transformations of the region. This could in turn contribute to larger debates about memory, territory, and the legacies of imperial cartography.

Kuripešić's diary, in the final measure, is a small text with wide resonance. Its power lies not in its scale but in its sensitivity to suffering, its ability to record nuance within empire, and its conviction that faith could survive even the most unstable borders.

## Additional material

Figure 1: Kuripešić's travel, mapped



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