

**Digging Illyrians cum
Interpretatione Gallica.
Transforming Western
Balkan Identities
through the Ideas of
the French Revolution**

**Fouiller les Illyriens
cum Interpretatione
Gallica. L'influence
idéologique de la
Révolution française sur la transformation
identitaire des Balkans occidentaux**

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Abstract

The French Revolution and Napoleonic era catalysed a profound reimagining of European identities, supplanting medieval legacies with revived ancient Mediterranean narratives like those of the Gauls and Illyrians to empower bourgeois elites against imperial aristocracies. This unique ideological matrix, labelled in this paper as “Interpretatione Gallica” – exported via conquests, administrative reorganisations, and cultural diffusion – hybridized, replicated and glocalised the French antiquity-spiced universalism in different corners of Europe. This paper examines the early transformative processes of identities in South-Eastern Europe using the case study of the French Illyrian Provinces (1809–1814). It hypothesises that in this early phase of influence from Western Europe, the “Interpretatione Gallica” cultural model fostered the evolution of “Illyrism” from Habsburg imperial propaganda into an emancipatory cultural and political movement, promoting liberalism and separatism. The paper utilizes an innovative interdisciplinary methodology that fuses symbolic analyses, cultural studies, disciplinary histories, the study of court culture and rituals, and transnational diffusion and networking models, offering a reconceptualization of these and related nineteenth-century and later processes. This paper suggests that the presented developments should not be viewed through the artificial lenses of present national boundaries and “Kultur”-dominated or anticolonial paradigms. Instead, what would traditionally be interpreted as cultural imposition could also be understood as a catalyst for glocalised reprogramming. In addition, the longue durée interdisciplinary framework of this paper illuminates why certain contemporary

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identities in South-Eastern Europe and beyond prioritize classically inspired ancient motifs over medieval archetypes, offering clarity to contemporary European identity dilemmas, heritage politics, and research challenges in sociology, history, ethnology, archaeology, and related disciplines.

Keywords:

French Revolution, Illyrism, Early Europeanisation, identities in SEE, Interpretatione Gallica.

Résumé

*La Révolution française et l'ère napoléonienne ont catalysé une profonde ré-
imagination des identités européennes, supplantant les héritages médiévaux par
des récits antiques méditerranéens ravivés, tels que ceux des Gaulois et des
Illyriens, censée permettre une autonomisation des élites bourgeoises face aux
aristocraties impériales. Cette matrice idéologique singulière, désignée dans cet
article comme « Interpretatione Gallica » – diffusée par les conquêtes, les
réorganisations administratives et la circulation culturelle – a hybridé, répliqué
et glocalisé l'universalisme français imprégné par l'imaginaire de l'Antiquité
dans différentes régions d'Europe. Cet article examine les premiers processus de
transformation identitaire en Europe du Sud-Est à travers l'étude de cas des
Provinces illyriennes françaises (1809–1814). Il émet l'hypothèse que, dans cette
phase précoce d'influence ouest-européenne, le modèle culturel «
Interpretatione Gallica » a favorisé l'évolution de l'Illyrisme, passant d'une
propagande impériale habsbourgeoise à un mouvement culturel et politique
émancipateur promouvant le libéralisme et le séparatisme. L'article mobilise une
méthodologie interdisciplinaire innovante combinant analyses symboliques,
études culturelles, histoires disciplinaires, étude de la culture de cour et des
rituels, ainsi que des modèles de diffusion et de réseautage transnationaux,
offrant une reconceptualisation de ces processus et d'autres dynamiques du XIX^e
siècle et ultérieures. Il suggère que les développements présentés ne doivent pas
être interprétés à travers les prismes artificiels des frontières nationales
contemporaines ni des paradigmes culturalistes ou anticoloniaux. Au contraire,
ce qui est traditionnellement perçu comme une imposition culturelle peut
également être compris comme le catalyseur d'un remodelage identitaire
glocalisé. En outre, le cadre interdisciplinaire de longue durée adopté dans cet
article est à même de révéler pourquoi certaines identités contemporaines en
Europe du Sud-Est et au-delà privilégient des motifs antiques imprégnés de
classicisme plutôt que des archétypes médiévaux, apportant ainsi un éclairage
tant sur les dilemmes identitaires européens contemporains et les politiques
patrimoniales, que sur les défis de la recherche en sociologie, histoire,
ethnologie, archéologie et les disciplines connexes.*

Mots-clés : *Révolution française, Illyrisme, européanisation précoce, identités
en Europe du Sud-Est, Interpretatione Gallica.*

Introduction

The complex processes of identity transformations are inherently dynamic and inextricably intertwined with diverse evolving societal structures and economic forces. Scholars in diverse disciplines have found evidence for certain continuities and patterns in these processes across historical, geographical and societal contexts. And yet, there are certain historical episodes that remain prominent as inevitable cornerstones for research into particular identities and wider cultural transformations. Among them, in the realm of nationalism studies, undoubtedly the French Revolution stands out, with the related shifts, if not ruptures, in societal processes and structures, as well as its impact upon pre-national identity matrices in Europe and beyond.

This unique societal transformation involved, or rather required, supplanting certain medieval feudal and confessional hierarchies with secular narratives from the Mediterranean antiquity that propelled the continent toward modern nationalism. By elevating ancient mythologies, ethnonyms and narratives – such as the “Gauls” – over medieval legacies, revolutionary ideologies instrumentalized ancient Mediterranean heritage as a mechanism for popular sovereignty and imperial legitimation. This process was exported in subsequent decades through conquests, administrative centralization, and cultural diffusion that permeated all corners of Europe and beyond.

Taking the responsibility for analysing such complex and relentlessly consequential phenomena requires both innovation and methodological rigour. Therefore, this paper introduces an innovative interdisciplinary methodology that fuses a wide spectrum of disciplinary approaches ranging from cultural studies, the study of nationalism and the theory and history of archaeology, to symbolic analyses, court ideologies and rituals, and networking models. At the same time, it balances this wide theoretical scope with precision in the time-space localisation of the research through the concrete case study of the 19th century north-western Balkan fringes. It observes Napoleonic cultural imperialism through novel lenses, not as unilateral imposition and invention of

identities *ex nihilo*, but as a catalytic process that via “*Interpretatione Gallica*” reprogrammed, reinvented and strengthened local identities. Thus, departing from traditional nation-state, regionally or disciplinarily bounded ontologies or teleologies, this paper traces how French antiquity-spiced universalism hybridized with Habsburg antiquarianism and glocalised in the Illyrian Provinces (1809-1814), yielding novel emancipatory discourses with persistent geopolitical ramifications.

Leveraging an integrated bibliography spanning from modern history and the history of archaeology to international relations, identity and nationalism, the analysis presents fresh insights into the processes of identity formation, illuminating enduring tensions and shortcomings in European and South-Eastern Europe’s heritage and identity theory and policies.

State of research

Scholarly literature has addressed aspects of this study’s themes for over a century, primarily from historical and historiographical perspectives. Therefore, before delving into the paper’s arguments, it is essential to highlight elements that have been more extensively elaborated. Specifically, the literature relevant to this analysis can be categorized into three main areas.

The first area of scholarly interest concerns the impact of Napoleon and his policies on the transformation of Europe and its identities. Of immediate relevance to our analysis are contemporary works that shift from historiographical and factographic foci toward sociological analyses of identity and social transformations (Dietler, 1994; Grab, 2003; Tevdovski & Ilievski, 2015). In this domain, multidisciplinary approaches, including fields like sociology, cultural studies or international relations, offer novel frameworks for understanding complex hybrid processes (Reeves, 2004).

The second area contributing to this study’s analyses is research on the phenomenon of Illyrism. It encompasses two primary scholarly foci: the history of the Illyrian Provinces and related Napoleonic policies and administration on one hand, and the Illyrian

Movement as an early form of national awakening in the Western Balkans on the other. Early works such as that of Bradshaw (1932), Despalatović (1975), and Thomas (1988), as well as newer ones such as the analyses of Stauber (2012), provide a detailed picture of the policies, administrative solutions, and objectives of French rule in these regions. In contrast, Balkan and Yugoslav historiography has produced numerous studies on the Illyrian Movement as part of the national awakening among Croatian, Slovene, Serbian, Macedonian, and other Balkan peoples. Nevertheless, particularly significant for our analysis are contemporary works from the last two decades that adopt a deconstructive approach, transcending national boundaries and dogmas while addressing regional dynamics within international frameworks. Inevitable among them are the numerous and important analyses of Zrinka Blažević (2003, 2007, 2011) and Wojciech Sajkowski (2013, 2020). Their analyses share approaches and both involve modern historiographic discourses, ideological concepts, theory of history, cultural history and historical anthropology. In addition, they are complementary and very informative together to all interested in the particular issue, as Blažević (2010) is focusing on the ideological constructs within the local (Croatian/ wider Slavic) contexts, while Sajkowski (2018) provides the external Western-European perspectives. The two authors are not isolated within the new trends and application of new paradigms in the research related to these processes. A number of researchers, and especially those from the region of Southeast Europe, have provided their perspectives and contributions to the transformations of Illyrism under the influence of the French. While many share the general focus, and some of them like Palavestra (2010), Stergar (2016) and Novaković (2021) provided a wider regional overview, from researchers like Seitz (2025), Dzino (2008, 2014), Šešel-Kos (2007), Blažević (2008) and Bataković (2006) we learn of the particular developments in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, as well as among the 19th century elites that lived in these regions.

Finally, an equally vital focus of this study is the influence of ancient identities, as well as cultural – and above all, archaeological

– heritage on the transformation of Western Balkan narratives during the nineteenth century. In this specific area, significant scholarly advances have been made in recent decades. The global advances in the history and theory of archaeology – epitomised by the seminal works of Kohl and Fawcett (1995), Trigger (1996), Díaz-Andreu (2007) or Dyson (2006), have illuminated the extensive intersections between the evolution of archaeology as a scientific discipline and the formation of modern national identities and nationalist ideologies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the same pattern, archaeologists from South-Eastern Europe, like Babić (2010), Gori (2012), Kuzmanović and Vranić (2013), Mihajlović (2014), Tevdovski (2016), Novaković (2021), and others, have pursued these global paradigms, examining or focusing on local/regional contexts of identity construction and ideological contestation related to archaeology.

Some of these contributions have extensive focus on the reciprocal influences between archaeological praxis and the intellectual, ideological, and political imperatives of the Illyrian Movement. In this context, the contributions of Novaković (2011), Gori (2012), Lomonosov (2012), and Kuzmanović and Vranić (2013), hold particular salience, elucidating the instrumentalization of Illyrian heritage in advancing ethno-nationalist narratives.

Yet, what remains as a gap in the literature that this study begins to fill – leaving room for many future analyses as well – is the specific focus of the translation of the ideological and identity transformations from the French Revolution into the “New Illyrism” and early-modern identity shifts in the Western Balkans and the wider region of Southeast Europe. An approach that uses the knowledge of history, politics and history of archaeology, neither for the sake of historicism nor for extensive analyses on diverse factors of local developments. Instead, a historical knowledge utilised in a generalised parallel of ideological and identity transformations capable to reveal the roots of the identity issues of the past and present and confront the ideological and identity dilemmas and challenges of the future.

The kingdom of the Gauls

The French Revolution was a profound political and social upheaval that not only transformed France but had lasting impacts on Europe as a whole. Prior to the Revolution, French society was divided into estates, with the clergy and nobility enjoying significant privileges and exemptions from taxes, while the vast majority – comprising the bourgeoisie, workers, and peasants – lacked political power and faced heavy fiscal burdens.

The strong scientific and social development of France in the era of the Enlightenment, combined with the stagnation in the military and political successes of the empire, led to major internal upheavals that triggered the Revolution. In the French Revolution, under the idea of uniting the “nation” on a broader basis, the last non-Mediterranean layer of French identity fell apart. The bourgeoisie fought against the imperial elite and aristocracy, which also meant a conflict with some of the ideological postulates of the then French Empire. These postulates and mythologized social stratification implied a society structured by the emperor, who was associated with Roman and Eastern Mediterranean traditions; the nobility, which invoked the local traditions of the Franks as rulers of regions; and, of course, the people, or the “indigenous dwellers on the land” (Tevdovski & Ilievski, 2015, p. 10), who were represented as Gauls (Dietler, 1994, p. 587), influenced by Mediterranean and Italian terminology for France as “ancient Gaul” (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 35). The pre-revolutionary myth implied that the Gauls, i.e., the people, accepted the bondage (subordinate status) under the Roman emperors – identified with the contemporary French emperors – and that imposed by the Frankish conquerors, whose tradition was invoked by the “old aristocracy” (Dietler, 1994, p. 584-587; Geary, 2003, p. 20-21).

During the French Revolution, the myth of “the Gauls”, or “the people”, was elevated to the central pedestal for the needs of the new elites without noble origin. The importance of this “identity engineering” was so great that some of the “humane and patriotic” leaders of the revolution went as far as to call on the people, “the

Gauls”, to expel the nobility, i.e., the Germanic conquerors – the Franks – from the state.¹

At the same time, the republican traditions of the classical antiquity and its heritage of ancient philosophers and rhetoricians had a great influence on the French Revolution and remain an important element of French culture and society to this day, creating a contrast to the medieval Frankish nobility as the last remnant of authoritarian medievalism. Nevertheless, the results of the revolution, at least in the 19th century, show that the fall of the noble “Franks” and “noble kings” was less a blow to authoritarianism, than it was directed against the last remnants of the non-Mediterranean heritage and identity of Europe (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 65).

After the revolution, most of the needs of this great European and world power did not change, and the imperialist tendencies were not permanently interrupted (Hutchinson, 2005, p.38). Instead, the new ideology meant renewed and revitalized imperial credentials. Thus, the French dynasty created by Napoleon Bonaparte owed much more to its Mediterranean origin and the Mediterranean symbols of power than to the traditions of the Franks and their noble lines (Grab, 2003, p. 41-43). In that context, the universal new empire of France further strengthened cultural and political ties with Rome and the Mediterranean, as opposed to certain remnants of the “German” (continental) Pre-Renaissance culture of its neighbours.

In the nineteenth century, the tendencies of the global empire and its ancient roots in France became balanced by the new identity of the broader elites, ruling in the name of their people – the Gauls. In terms of the development of the interest for the past

¹ Dietler points towards the words of Emmanuel Joseph de Sieyès (1789) who “urged that those claiming to be a race of conquerors (the Franks) should be ‘sent back to the forests of Franconia’ by the Third Estate in order to purge the nation, which would then be ‘constituted solely of the descendants of the Gauls and Romans’” (Dietler, 1994, p. 587). The new idea supported later by the research and hypotheses of many antiquarians and archaeologists was that “despite the adoption of Roman and later Germanic institutions, the pre-Roman Gaulish race had basically remained untouched” (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 376-377).

and heritage, this meant that on the domestic front in the nineteenth century, local antiquarians, enthusiasts, and early scholars increasingly engaged with the culture of the reborn “ancient Gauls”. In this period, besides the aesthetically most striking artifacts, most often imported from Rome and the Mediterranean, local artifacts, usually from the Roman period, were collected, studied, and commemorated more and more frequently. Their potential aesthetic inferiority compared to those from the Mediterranean now mattered even less to the French antiquarians, proto-archaeologists and enthusiasts, as they represented the specific forms of a supposed authentic “Gallo-Roman culture” (Dyson, 2006, p. 56). In the decades after the revolution a new important society organisation was formed called “*Académie celtique*”, a prominent research group that would transform later into a major antiquarian organisation – Société des Antiquaires de France. This Academy had a mission to combine the new research in French ethnography, with its main aim “to describe, explain, and have engravings made of the ancient monuments of the Gauls” (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 320).

Finally, in the period of the empire's restoration by Napoleon Bonaparte, the new “universal empire”, freed from the legacy of the “Dark Middle Ages”, with its new social, political, and cultural knowledge and ideas, set out to unite Europe and the world under the ideals of “peace and prosperity”². These arguments had great impact on ideology and identity of different European elites, and yet they were not original in the wider historical context. Common arguments and propaganda were employed for millennia by ancient dynasts (like the Romans, Macedonians, Persians and Neo-Assyrians), as well as all later (medieval) empires and monarchies that invoked their traditions.³

² On the continuities of these imperial conceptions with the Bourbons (*Ancien Régime*), see more: Dyson (2006, p. xiv, 21), Tevdovski & Ilievski (2015), and on the importance of these imperial conceptions, symbols and rituals for the *Ancien Régime* see: Rubin (1992, p. 28-32) and Melton (2001, p. 252).

³ Professor Rolf Strootman from the University of Utrecht explains extensively the pathway through which the court traditions, rituals, diplomacy, protocols, and festivals of the dynasts from the period of Macedonian imperialism were

This renewed French Empire, that was combining ancient symbols and ideas with radically modern societal conceptions, despite its great assumptions, would not succeed in permanently subduing, or “unite”, Europe or the world militarily. Yet, its novel, or rather “reinvented” ideas⁴, especially those regarding the “ancient identity of the nations”, would transform Europe and the world and contribute significantly to the formation of nations and nationalism on a global level (Grab, 2003, p. 206-211).

Rebranding Europe through Antiquity

The early nineteenth century marked a pivotal era of upheaval across Europe, propelled by the expansive reach of Napoleonic France following the French Revolution. Napoleon’s conquests disseminated revolutionary principles while imposing French administrative models, sparking both emulation and resistance that reshaped identities and eventually created nations continent-wide.⁵

reflected in the royal and state protocols of early modern Europe. Strootman exposes the model through which the Macedonian court traditions, that adopted the Persian and Neo-Assyrian worldviews for the global empire, were first adopted by “Rome and Byzantium”, and through Byzantium “were eventually transmitted to Medieval and Renaissance Europe, and the Ottoman Empire”. This illustrates the long-lasting influence of these imperial cultural practices on the formation of European court and state ceremonial traditions (Strootman, 2007, p. 3). See also Strootman, 2014, and Tevdovski, 2025.

⁴ For the importance of the “reinvention of ideas” in the period of reorganization of the French society after the Revolution, one should be reminded of the words of the prominent French political philosopher, diplomat and author of the book “The Old Regime and the Revolution”, Alexis de Tocqueville. Actively involved in the rapidly changing political context and processes of 19th century France, de Tocqueville analyses that: “It is unbelievable how many systems of morals and politics have been successively found, forgotten, rediscovered, forgotten again, to reappear a little later, always charming and surprising the world as if they were new, and bearing witness, not to the fecundity of the human spirit, but to the ignorance of men” (Jackson, 2005, p.1).

⁵ In this paper we are focusing on a case-study that might, in most general terms, be classified as emulation through the “*Interpretatione Gallica*”, and represents an early stage, and more importantly many times neglected in contemporary analyses on the creation of the modern conception of nation. However, it was the resistance to the “*Interpretatione Gallica*”, a model where the local dwellers, or

Under the intensified Gallo-Roman universal imperialism led by Napoleon Bonaparte, new European nationalisms emerged on all fronts, mirroring France's model by erasing pre-Renaissance traditions and identities (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 79). Medieval continental legacies were swiftly supplanted by symbols, cultures, and identities echoing the "glorious culture" of the ancient Mediterranean – later habitually termed as classical.

This cultural and ideological metamorphosis encompassed not only symbolic change but also vast institutional, professional, and social transformations. Within this dynamic context, new scientific interests and disciplines flourished, particularly archaeology and its prominent subfield, classical archaeology. These disciplines played a pivotal role in legitimizing and constructing the emerging national narratives, providing a scholarly foundation for nation-building projects (Trigger, 1996, p. 61–67).

Reflecting on the transformative phases European identities underwent from the French Revolution onward, renowned "nation branding" expert Wally Olins remarked that during Napoleon's era, "France was no longer large enough, and Europe itself was to be rebranded" (Olins, 2002, p. 242–243).

A cursory review of the nomenclature for Napoleon's new provinces and satellite states reveals a deliberate and systematic revival of ancient identities, such as Helvetians, Belgians, Illyrians, Parthenopeans, and Romans – signalling a profound reinterpretation of Europe's classical past.

Moving East and South-east, this emergent universal monarchy, rooted in the pre-Christian Mediterranean traditions and universal knowledge, collided not just politically and militarily, but also ideologically, with the Vatican and the Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon dismantled papal authority in Italy, delivering a fatal strike to pre-Renaissance legacies on the Apennine Peninsula by curtailing the Papal States and Vienna's imperial influence.

the natio, is emancipated through imperial culture and gains strength and right to rule and emancipate, that in the period after Napoleon created the idea of modern nations as we know it today. On the creation of the *kultur* nations and the German Romanticism as reaction to French imperialistic efforts and propaganda, see Reeves (2004, p. 17-21) and Black (2010, p. 87-90).

Rome's amassed treasures were redirected to Paris, the "city of light and universal knowledge (rule)" (Dyson 2006, pp. 23–26), while the Eternal City itself saw ambitious archaeological excavations. Led by artists, scholars, and planners, these initiatives "purified" Rome by stripping later accretions to unveil authentic ancient monuments (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 70, 72).

The consistency of Napoleonic cultural imperialism and political restructuring not only reshaped Europe's geopolitical landscape but also planted the seeds for modern nationalism and the emergence of new "professional" disciplines evaluating and reimagining the past. While certain policies stemmed from Napoleon's personal ambitions and military exigencies, others reflected broader ideological and intellectual shifts across Europe.

This transformative *zeitgeist*, crystallizing within mere decades, permeated 19th century Europe and beyond. Moving east they reached the fringes of the Balkan Peninsula, where during the ephemeral advances of Napoleon's armies and cultural initiatives they found and reinvented the identity of the "ancient Illyrians". These incursions introduced Enlightenment legal and administrative reforms, and classical revivalism, but also inadvertently fueled local identity changes. They managed to transform the ancient and medieval nomenclature into an active societal protagonist that changed Europe and its imperial remnants.

The new Gallic invasion of the Balkans

The rapid ideological and societal transformations propagated eastward from France, traversing the culturally dominant Apennine Peninsula toward the Balkans. From Napoleon Bonaparte's reign through Napoleon III's era, "reformed" France profoundly shaped modern Italian national identity and statehood – both through Enlightenment ideals and the "archaeological excavation" of "pure" ancient Rome (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 70, 72).

This embedded classical antiquity deeper in 19th century Italian elites' consciousness, sharply contrasting it against medieval church traditions and Habsburg dominance (Díaz-Andreu, 2007, pp. 71–72). Constituting novel French "software", it educated future Italian

revolutionaries and independence fighters, who later received direct French military support.

Simultaneously, the Habsburg monarchy – burdened by its “Holy Roman Empire” religious heritage – lagged in transforming into a culturally and economically integrated empire modeled on classical (Macedonian and Roman) and ancient Middle Eastern models. It transitioned sluggishly from medieval tribal and particularistic identities towards the Mediterranean-aculturated modernity.

This delay enabled Napoleonic France to wage a “cultural war” aimed at dismantling Habsburg unity, whose legitimacy still anchored in 10th-century Carolingian roots (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 77–78). Napoleon’s assaults emphasized and promoted ancient regional identities across the Empire, implementing widespread cultural particularization policies.

Beyond fostering the “Italian national spirit”, these initiatives incited Hungarian independence from Austria and stoked “anti-Russian sentiments” in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, eroding strategically the cohesion of both Habsburg and Russian empires (Black, 2010, p. 144).

Reimagining Illyrians *alla Franga*⁶

The new “enlightened” identities, modeled upon the “Gauls”⁷, had early implications across South-Eastern Europe,

⁶ The impact of the French (political and cultural) advances in the Balkans, was engraved deeply in the conscience of the Balkan elites. In that context, the wider trend of Europeanisation in the 19th century Balkans (especially Ottoman Balkans), meaning Western influence on society, culture and life of Balkan elites, ranging from architecture to fashion and music, was frequently labeled as “*alla Franga*”. Illustratively, even in the middle of the twentieth century, when German nazi troops occupied different areas of the Balkan peninsula, the rural mountain population, according to the Canadian historian Rossos, would refer to their technologically advanced military motorbikes as to “*Frech donkeys*” (unpublished interview of the author with Andrew Rossos). This, almost aphoristic, example shows the longevity and entrenched nature of the understanding of French as synonym of novel and modern in the understanding of different Balkan populations.

⁷ According to the new paradigm supported by archaeologists and other French researchers of the past the Gauls were “wise enough” to embrace civilization.

finding local protagonists from the Ionian Islands on the west to Romanian lands in the east.⁸ Yet, these policies targeting, and tailored for, the once-mighty Habsburgs impacted the Balkans most directly from its north-western fringe. During this era, Napoleon established autonomy for the so-called “Illyrian Provinces”, providing significant impetus to the Illyrian movement and separatism among South Slavic-speaking elites within the Habsburg monarchy (Blažević, 2010).

While the French “Illyrian provinces” were an important geostrategic project, aimed at isolating Habsburgs, and preventing them from approaching the Adriatic, their impact on the identity of the local population and the transformation of their society were long-lasting and multifaceted.

While the Illyrian identity of the Balkan Slavic speakers, their language, culture and heritage, was promoted both by the Vatican and the Habsburgs over the centuries, this new impetus changed its nature and political aims. In the post-Renaissance context of the Vatican and the Habsburgs policies these ideas were aiming mainly towards historical identification of the “Illyrians” and “their lands”, the traditional Roman province (and later prefecture) of Illyricum, as traditional, and, thus, legitimate possession of the “Western Empire” and the “Western church”, in contrast to the rivaling claims of the “Oriental” Byzantine “Greeks” and later Ottomans (White, 2000, p. 143-144; Blažević, 2010, p. 203-224; Marinov, 2015, p.78).

In contrast to this preexisting imperial tradition, the new “Illyrism” established the dimension of a “symbolic political capital” and was emancipatory from both churches and the

The “had intermarried with the Romans and also learned from them the benefits of civilization” (Diaz-Andreu 2007, p. 268-269). So now the “enlightened” Gauls had the same mission as Romans once had. In the words of the French archaeologist Rene Cagnat: “As they (the Romans) did, we have gloriously conquered the country. As they did, we have assured the occupation. As they did, we have tried to transform it to our image and impose civilization” (Mattingly, 1996, p. 54).

⁸ More on the case of Romanian Roman and Dacian identity, see: (Cărăbuș, 2004, p. 185-193; White, 2000, p. 48-56; Popa & Ó Riagáin, 2012). For the Ionian and wider impact on Greece, see Koulouri, 2012 and Solimano, 2011.

empires (Blažević, 2010, p. 203-224). As in the case of the Gauls in France, the new “reborn” Illyrians, the Balkan Slavic speakers of the “Illyrian provinces” from Slovenia to Montenegro, and many more aspiring “Illyrians” towards the east of the peninsula, were taught in this short period that they could govern their lands autonomously and decide for their destiny themselves, with the symbolic support of the enlightened French. The idea of the “antiquity of nations”, legitimizing this new political context, was not falling behind. Thus, following the pattern of policies and in a close similarity to those in France and Italy, in 1802 the “French Marshal Auguste de Marmont established the first collection of ancient monuments in the Temple of Augustus in Pula”, as a reminder of the great Illyrian and ancient imperial past of these lands (Novaković, 2021, p. 102).⁹

While French possessions and reorganization in the Balkans’ western fringes were almost a short-lived maneuver of the great powers, their legacy has shown great resilience. Thus, the Habsburgs had to play with the ideas of autonomy of these regions and elites until the middle of the 19th century, when they managed to fade away from the documents the titular Kingdom of Illyria. At the same time, they needed to invest heavily in institutions and entities capable of maintaining that ambivalent legacy and tailoring it to the needs of the already volatile empire.

Thus, while the antiquarian culture, interest in Mediterranean antiquities and related research was well developed on the Habsburg court and the museum in Vienna had a large collection, all these centralized developments have largely an “imperial perspective” (Novaković, 2021, p. 39). In contrast to

⁹ The new nomenclature extended beyond mere revivalism into economic restructuring. The Illyrian Provinces, encompassing modern Croatia, Slovenia, and parts of Bosnia, were administered from Ljubljana as “Illyria”, with prefectures also named after classical cities, like Salona (Split) and Naron. According to Vulić, the taxation drew on Roman models, while coinage featured Bonaparte as “Illyrian Emperor” (1920). The new French administration also imposed meritocratic bureaucracies, sidelining feudal nobilities and Habsburg clerics, thus directly accelerating the shift from estate-based to citizen-based identities.

such traditions, in the beginning of the 19th century, the empire already had to make efforts in developing more localized, and even “ethnicised” museums and cultural operators, like the new big museums in Budapest and Prague. In this context, a number of museums were opened in the “Illyrian lands” from the Provincial Museum of Styria in Graz (1811) and the Provincial Museum of Carniola (Kranjska) in Ljubljana (1821), the museums in Split (1818) and Zagreb (1846), the Provincial Archaeological Museum in Diocletian’s Palace in Split (1830) and the National Museum of Dalmatia in Zadar (1832) (Novaković, 2021, p. 102).

While the Habsburgs continued to invest heavily in tailored University programs and research, cultural and literature societies and institutions, the “Illyrism”, transformed on the French model, had its own path. Thus, the prominent researcher, professor of antiquities at the University of Budapest and curator of the university library (1795-1800), Matija Petar Katančić (Mathius Petrus Katancsich, 1750-1825), was not just active epigraphist, ancient historian and early archaeologist, but also an early protagonist of the national project that offered historical explanations to the “autochthonous origin of Croats as descended from the ancient Illyrians” (Novaković, 2021, p. 102). The Count Janko Drašković, with illustrious origin related to crusaders and highest Austro-Hungarian nobility, although educated in Vienna and loyal to the Habsburgs during the conflict with Napoleon, transformed into one of the founding figures of the political “Illyrian movement” in the empire. Furthermore, he did not feel obliged to limit his “Illyrism” in the Habsburg borders and ideological dimensions, but rather envisioned a “Great Illyria”, uniting many of the “Illyrian speakers” in the wider region (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p. 340-345). Finally, the “Illyrian-based” intellectual of German-Slovak origin Ljudevit Gaj, who “obtained royal privilege for publishing *Novine Horvatske*”, was even less content with the nomenclature of the empire. Instead, he began publishing its literary supplement *Danica Horvatska, Slavonska i Dalmatinska* (*The Croatian, Slavonian and Dalmatian Morning Star*), where the “morning star” represented an ancient “iconographic *topos* in Illyrian ideology”, and later on changed the

titles of the journals into *Ilirske narodne novine* (*The Illyrian National Newspaper*) and *Danica Ilirska* (*The Illyrian Morning Star*), signaling, thus, their transformation into official organs of the Illyrian political movement (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p. 230-232).

Gaj and other promoters of the Illyrian movement in the first half of the 19th century were not only cultural operators that pursued support from the Habsburgs but also transformed into political actors who cooperated internationally and entered into relations with other big or emerging centers of power such as the Russian Tsar or the Serbian Prince. Therefore, in 1843 the Habsburg authorities officially banned the Illyrian movement and obtained different strategies for reinvention of this important cultural tradition of the 19th century Balkans rooted in its ancient roots and obsessions (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p. 182).

However, the “Illyrian ideas” and the antiquity of “Illyrians” continued with its reformatory and emancipatory effects even after the change of heart of the Austrian authorities. One of the prominent followers of Ljudevit Gaj and his Illyrian ideas was the Croatian theologian and monk Stefan Verkovich. After the ban of the Illyrian movement by the Habsburgs, he went east entering into relations with different political powers, like the newly established Serbia and later Russia.

His ideological mentor Ljudevit Gaj had already created in 1835 a symbolic map of the “modern Illyrians”, depicting Europe allegorically as a maiden and Illyria as her lyre, whose three vertices were formed by Lake Scutari (bordering Montenegro and Albania), Varna (on the Black Sea in Bulgaria), and Villach (in Austrian Carinthia). Thus, he initiated a political program that proposed certain unity, under the Illyrian cultural and historical banner of the Slavic-speakers from Slovenia and Vojvodina to Montenegro and the Black Sea (Greenberg, 2010, p. 366-367).

Yet, Verkovich went a step further, both geographically and ideologically. Settling in Macedonia, that he saw as “the glorious ancient country”, and “homeland of classical culture”, he set himself on a path to prove that the “modern Illyrians” or the

“Slavic speakers of the Balkans”, did not just have ancient identity, but were also “educators of the world, (and) the most ancient and developed Indo-European culture” (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p.182). Verkovich’s mission in “his” “ancient Macedonia, full of precious souvenirs”, was not just to “research and save the monuments of the past... the collecting of antiques, studying and comparing with particular attention and curiosity also the types, affinities, qualities and customs...”, but also to politically emancipate its elites (Verkovich, in Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p.185). He connected with the most prominent representatives of the Slavic-speaking elites in Macedonia, and together with them, created one of the most intriguing poetic mystifications in 19th century Europe, entitled *Veda Slovena*, aimed at supporting his claims for the ancient identity and culture of the Balkan Slavic speakers.

At the beginning of the transformative process, supported by the ideological matrix “*Interpretatione Gallica*”, the identity transformations around the Balkans continued to spread through both emulations and reactions. While, different Illyrian protagonists and enthusiasts, like Stefan Verkovich, brought diverse elements of this heritage and ideology as far east as Macedonia and Bulgaria, the innovative court policies and strategies of the Habsburgs opened another door and chapter of the transformative history of the “Illyrism” (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007, p. 182).

In 1856, Austrian scholarship and diplomacy – embodied by diplomat-scholar Johann Georg von Hahn – first contested the South Slavs’ exclusive claim to “Illyrian heritage”, artifacts, and narratives. Hahn’s seminal “*Albanesische Studien*” convincingly positioned Albanians as another distinct European people in the Balkans (Wilkes, 1996, p. 5)

Previously dominantly depicted in less favorable, non-European contexts by Western authors, Albanians were now elevated by Austrian intellectual and diplomatic efforts as serious contenders for the modern articulations of the “Illyrian myth” and heritage (Wilkes, 1996, p. 5-9). This new episode of “reinvention” of the ancient identities, required time for local appropriation, but

certainly marked a pivotal reorientation of Balkan ancient and modern identity narratives and geopolitics.

During the 19th century prominent Western antiquarians, archaeologists and travelers strengthened the link of the “Illyrian myth” with modern Balkan populations and their reinvented identities. The prominent western researchers, like William Martin Leake, through his interests and travels in Albania, or Sir Arthur Evans, as prominent supporter of the freedom and emancipation of the Slavic-speaking Illyrians in the Balkans, were pushing political causes in the region and involved actively in the creation of its early nationalistic tendencies (Dzino, 2014). Thus, the early 19th century Europeanisation of South-Eastern Europe, as in the case of its present stage, brought changes, hopes and new visions for the Balkan elites. At the same time, it also facilitated the creation of the complex mosaic of Balkan overlapping nationalisms, that create compound challenges to the processes of reintegration of the region in the wider European family today.

Conclusion

The French Revolution initiated a process that reshaped fundamentally French and, later on, European and global identities. Its accomplishment was not related only to supplanting certain medieval continental legacies with revived ancient Mediterranean narratives, but also to creating a unique matrix that provided collective ancient credentials for wider populations and, thus, legitimizing the new intensified social mobility. These processes did not involve inventing ancient geographic or cultural symbols, but they certainly recontextualized and revived them. Thus, this plethora of ancient symbols and narratives was revived and from traditional imperial tools they transformed into novel instruments of emancipation, as seen in France’s elevation of Gauls against “Frankish conquerors” and the Balkans’ shift toward autonomous Illyrian self-rule.

Such nineteenth-century ideological and cultural transformations, including Illyrism’s evolution from Habsburg-Vatican claims to political separatism, demand *longue durée* and

comparative research frameworks to connect revolutionary upheavals with global processes, ensuring objectivity despite subjective modern identities and preconceptions of both researchers and audiences. These new methodological lenses reveal on the case study of the western fringes of the Balkans the universality of certain processes and tendencies in the past epochs and the artificiality of contemporary political or ideological boundaries in their research and understanding. More importantly, it also reveals a unique French-born pattern in proto-nationalism and early nationalism, whose remnants still play a role in identities of different parts of Europe.

Understanding these patterns of intellectual thought and identity formation submerged under the later thick and dominant layer of the *Kultur* concept, born in reaction to the French imperialism in “romantic” Germany, might help us understand diverse complexities of the contemporary tendencies in society and scientific research of human past. It provides unique arguments that explain why certain national, local and regional identities and narratives tend to rely dominantly on “ancient past/s” and archaeologically inspired motifs, while others evoke mostly medieval-based and ethnologically documented archetypes.

In that context, this unique experimental review of reinvented Illyrism through the “*Interpretatione Gallica*” cultural matrix, provides additional clarity to the challenges and future pathways for research and analyses of contemporary European and global identity dilemmas and reflective processes in archaeology, ethnology and the wider spectrum of the social sciences and humanities.

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