

Visualizing Past in a Foreign Country:
Schiavoni/Illyrian Confraternities and
Colleges in Early Modern Italy in
comparative perspective



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The Politics of Images, Saints, Relics and Books: Schiavoni/Illyrians in Early Modern Italy

People from the area broadly coinciding with present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and coastal Montenegro, sharing a common Slavic language and the Catholic faith, migrated in a steady flux to Italy throughout the Early Modern period. The reasons behind the move varied, spanning from the often-quoted Ottoman conquests in the Balkans or plague epidemics and famines to the formation of merchant and diplomatic networks, as well as ecclesiastic or other professional career moves. Moreover, a common form of short-term travel to Italy on the part of the so-called Schiavoni or Illyrians was the pilgrimage to Loreto or Rome, while the universities of Padua and Bologna, as well as monastery schools, attracted Schiavoni/Illyrian students of different social extractions.

The first known organized groups described as Schiavoni are mentioned in Italy from the fifteenth century. Through the Early Modern period, Schiavoni/Illyrian confraternities existed in Rome, Venice, throughout the Marche region and in Udine. As was the case with proto-national confraternities throughout Early Modern Europe, these organizations served as a key regulative societal instrument of integration into the tissue of the host society, their charity work designed around helping the sick, the poor, slaves, students, and pilgrims of their nation.

Based on the “national” key, such confraternities inevitably formulated their identity on their “otherness”: the prerogatives for becoming a member, besides good social standing, were a certain area of origin and familiarity with the Slavonic language spoken in this area. This inspired the study of geography and grammar, resulting in maps and books, but also the formulation of certain narratives, both textual and visual, constructing the prominence of the nation through deeds of great men and national saints and their relics. Moreover, the rulers of

the host societies often used Schiavoni/Illyrian institutions as tokens of their politics in South-East Europe: heroic Schiavoni shielding the Europe from the Turks or missionaries in the Slavic lands were the roles often interpreted by members of the Schiavoni communities.

All these aspects mark a multifaceted and ever-changing image of the Early Modern *natio* in question, providing an insight on the circulation of taste and knowledge and enriching the understanding of the role of artistic heritage in the construction of proto-national identity in the European context.

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