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## WHAT IS 'WHORE BARLEY' IN CROATIAN?

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### Abstract

'Whore barley' is an English translation of a Croatian syntagm adduced in Evliya Çelebi's itinerary. This author, intrigued by the apparently senseless expression, tries to explain its meaning.

Evliya Çelebi, a 17th-century Ottoman traveller of worldwide renown, and an author of a famous itinerary *Seyāhatnāme* 'Book of travels', recorded samples of languages he could hear on his journeys. Robert Dankoff took the trouble to cull and publish them all in a separate book (Dankoff 1991). As Dankoff informs us, a Polish-American Slavic linguist, Zbigniew Gołąb, assisted him with the Slavic section (*ibid.* 118, fn. 1).

Among Evliya Çelebi's Slavic glosses, most of which are only of moderate importance to Slavic language studies, one can sometimes find an interesting or surprising phrase. This is the case with a phrase group consisting of a Croatian phrase, *idi donesi qurba zop*, and its Turkish equivalent, *var getir qahbe arpa*, which was translated by Dankoff (and Gołąb?) in English as 'come bring whore barley' (Dankoff 1991: 118, section 'Croatian'). The structure of the sentence is very simple – but what is 'whore barley'? No additional explanation or comment is given, so that a reader who is not a native speaker of English may wonder whether or not such a phraseological syntagm really exists in English. That was the case with me and one of my Slavistic postgraduate students while working on Evliya's Slavic material.

The phrase very much looks like an incorrect translation. Since the Slavic equivalent of the English meaning 'whore' is <qurba> in the *Seyāhatnāme* one can easily imagine that Gołąb associated the notation <qurba> with *kurva*, a common Slavic

designation for 'whore'. But he would certainly have noticed that such an interpretation makes no sense. Why did he and Dankoff not reject it?

We cannot actually say that Gołąb's misinterpretation was the source of the strange translation, because it is supported by the Turkish rendering of the Croatian phrase: *var getir qahbe arpa* means exactly what Dankoff wrote in English, since Turkish *qahbe* really means 'whore'. But the syntagm *qahbe arpa* is as senseless in Turkish as is 'whore barley' in English.

I think it is not enough to compare the English translation with the Turkish phrase. An interpretation of the Slavic sentence will substantively clear the situation.

The notation of the Croatian phrase, *idi donesi qurba zop*, is relatively good but not quite faultless. Its most important part is <Qurba zop>, which should be corrected to *korpu* (acc.) *zobi* <*korpa* (nom.) *zobi* 'a basket of oats'.

The person who is most to blame appears to be an anonymous interpreter whose command of Croatian (and/or Turkish?) was very limited indeed. Three out of four words are incorrectly translated in this phrase: *idi* is 'go' rather than 'come'; *korpa* is 'basket' rather than 'whore'; *zobi* is the genitive (used after words naming quantity or measure, cf. English (*basket*) of *oats*) of *zob* 'oats' (= Turkish *yulaf*) whereas 'barley' is *ječam* in Croatian (= Turkish *arpa*). The fourth Croatian word (*donesi*) would be better rendered 'fetch' in this context.

All in all, the Croatian phrase is to be read: *idi donesi korpu zobi*, and its English meaning is 'go [and] fetch a basket of oats'. A 'whore barley' does not exist (at least in Croatian).

## References

- Dankoff R. 1991. *An Evliya Çelebi glossary. Unusual, dialectal and foreign words in the Seyahat-name*. Cambridge (MA): Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University.