

SELF-REPRESENTATION OF THE SERBIAN »CIVIL-CLASSEN« IN THE 19th CENTURY

Communicating through Dositej Obradović¹

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1 This text is the written form of my presentation at the 4th Emergenzen meeting on January 12-13, 2007 in Vienna on the topic of Self-Representation and is at the same time a condensed version of my dissertation »Dositej Obradović im Kontext des 18. Jahrhunderts und seine Rezeption bei den serbischen Eliten im frühen 19. Jahrhundert.« Univ.-Diss. Universität Wien. 2002, which will be published in an updated version as Fischer, Wladimir: Dositej Obradović als bürgerlicher Kulturheld. Zur Formierung eines serbischen bürgerlichen Selbstbildes durch literarische Kommunikation 1783-1845. Studien zur Geschichte Südosteuropas 16. Eds. Katsiardi-Hering, Olga/ Peyfuss, Max Demeter /Stassinopoulou, Maria. Frankfurt/ M. e.a.: Peter Lang 2007.

2 Cf. this collection of defining articles about the concept: Pennock, James Roland/Chapman, John William (Eds.): Representation. Piscataway: Aldine Transaction Publishers 2006.

3 For overviews of several aspects of this wide field, cf. for instance Bödeker, H. E.: Aufklärung als Kommunikationsprozeß. Aufklärung 2 (1987). Corner, J. Textuality, communication and media power. Language, image, media. Eds. H Davis and P. Walton. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983, 266-281, Deutsch. Karl W.: Nationalism and social communication. An inquiry into the foundations of nationality. New York 1953. North, Michael /Ed.): Kommunikationsrevolutionen. Die neuen Medien des 16. und 19. Jahrhunderts. Köln/Wien/Weimar: Böhlau 1995.

4 For an introduction to the connection between representation, meaning and hegemony refer to Hall, Stuart (Ed.): Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London:
Thousand Oaks 1997.

This paper sketches a specific historical manifestation of the overarching topic of Emergenzen: self-representation. I understand "representation" as a communication process in a certain hegemony. I will exemplify it by the Serbian Civil-Classen and how they used the representation of a certain figure, Obradović, for their self-representation in discourse and in urban space. Let me briefly review these technical terms and then come to the central question. This paper is on representation, communication, hegemony, the Civil-Classen, Dositej Obradović, who he was and what exactly was communicated via him, and finally, what this had to do with urban space.

What is representation?

Representation is something that stands for something else. I am using the term mainly in the sense of the German *darstellen*: i.e. in the sense of a sign, in semiotics, or, a symbol. The advantage of the English usage is that representation also has a political and social meaning, i.e. to represent voters, a population, a social group etc. while in German *darstellen* and *vertreten* are separate terms for these different concepts. ²

This comes in handy for my argument about the public culture of the Serbian *Civil-Classen* around 1800 because it is about representational strategies that made use of all sorts of symbols, which were at the same time highly political and meant to represent certain social strata, the *Civil-Classen*.

What makes it a process of communication?

Symbols and signs become relevant for societies when they mean something to many people. In modern societies, communication on a mass basis has become the basis of any societal and political process. The program of democracy (and nationalism) of the 19th century meant that ever more people were included in communication processes. All citizens were supposed to read the papers, all citizens were supposed to serve their country in wartime etc.³

What does it have to do with hegemony?

Hegemony is the sum of discursive phenomena that provide a regime with reality, i.e. it makes people believe that the current power distribution and mode of production is *normal*. In the late 18th century, discourses were not yet on a mass basis, and hence the hegemony was confined to those participating in communication: the counter reformation had already tried to establish an early form of all-encompassing hegemony by intruding and redefining folk culture. 4

However, only with the explosion of communication after 1848, an all-encompassing hegemony could be established in the Central European regions. In this establishing phase of modern hegemonic discourses, Serbian discourses were still lacking much reality or normality, because they were still forced to take over large quantities of text production from other language discourses (and monolingualism was one of the major aims and techniques in the new national hegemonies).

The period we are talking about is thus a transitional era when the ruling elites were trying to negotiate hegemonic discourses, or rather it was a process when competing and cooperating elites (nobilities, clerics, middle classes) were reacting to the challenges of technology. In this phase the Serbian *Civil-Classen* and other Serbian elites were also in a rather weak position when they constructed their hegemonic discourses. Dositej Obradović was the most prominent producer of hegemonic discourse of his time. His texts assumed a central position in this discourse. Therefore it was crucial for actors interested in power and prestige to colonize these texts and this symbol. To do that, they had to enter hegemony producing communication processes in order to access the representation via Dositej Obradović.



5 I am borrowing the term from a contemporary report on the linguistic situation among Habsburg Serbs by school reformer Teodor Janković-Mirijevski (1741-1814) cited in Unbegaun, Boris: Les débuts de la langue littéraire chez les Serbes. Paris: H. Champion 1935, p. 54.

6 Vucinich, Wayne S.: The Serbs in Austria-Hungary. In: Austrian History Yearbook 3.2 (1967), pp. 3-47. Vucinich gives a good survey of the history of the Austrian Serbs and of the military frontier. Cf. also Kann, R. A. /Zdeněk, V. D.: The Serbs of Vojvodina. In: A history of East Central Europe. The peoples of the eastern Habsburg lands. 1526-1918. Ed. by V. D. Zdeněk. Vol. 6. Seattle/London: Univ. of Washington Press1984, pp. 279-287. An instructive Serbo-Croat overview is Radenić, Andrija: Srbi. Srbi u Vojvodini od 1790 do 1918. In: Enciklopedija Jugoslavije. Ed. by Miroslav Krleža. Vol. 7. Zagreb: Lewksikografski Zavod 1968. pp.534-539 and Krestić, Vasilije: Srbi. Srbi u Vojvodini od 1790 do 1918. Razdoblje od 1790 do 1847. Popović is the standard reference, but there is also a french monography: Radonić, J[oseph]: Histoire des Serbes de Hongrie and a German one: Schwicker, Johann Heinrich: Politische Geschichte der Serben in Ungarn. Budapest: Univers. Buchdr. 1880. More specific are Radonić, Jovan: Srpske privilegije 1690 do 1792. Beograd: Naučna knjiga 1954 on the privileges of the Serbs and Pavlović, D. M.: Srbija i srpski pokret u Južnoj Ugarskoj. Beograd: Drzavna Stampa 1904.

7 Stoianovich, Traian: The social foundations of Balkan politics. 1750-1941. The Balkans in transition. Ed by Barbara Jelavich and Charles Jelavich. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1963, pp. 305-312, citing Nenadović, Matija. Memoari. Beograd: Prosveta, 1947.

Who were the Serbian Civil-Classen?

This is the trickiest of the questions I am tackling in this paper. First of all, I am using the antiquated German term Civil-Classen because all contemporary terms, and terms borrowed from other regions of the world, would lead to false equations. The Serbian elites were not the same as the English middle classes. And what were the English middle classes? Were they equivalent to what is known in German as the Mittelstand? Certainly not. Rather we could speak about something like Bürgertum. But in this case we would again venture into the semantic realm of bourgeoisie, which we can safely rule out as a term for the Serbian elites around 1800, as they were part of an ethnic minority and did not have enough control over the state they were maneuvering in. Therefore, I am using the contemporary term Civil-Classen5 - and I will not explain it further, hoping that these short considerations have created an idea of what it is about: merchants, officials, clerics in an ethnic minority position in the Habsburg Empire. There was traditionally no Serbian nobility. Only some individuals and their families managed to access this estate, most often via a military career.

A number of Serbs had lived on imperial lands from the time they colonized the Balkans, but most of them settled after the Ottoman invasion of the Balkan Peninsula in the fourteenth century. Some Serbian communities in Austria-Hungary were more oppressed than others and had less opportunity for social advancement. Certain of them were blessed with rich lands that yielded abundant crops, while others were settled on starved lands from which they could barely earn a living. A few made their home astride important trade routes and near major centres of civilization and others in relatively isolated communities. A small minority became successful merchants and artisans and some of them amassed fair-sized fortunes. There were among the Serbs well-to-do landowners (including the Serbian church) and a handful of Serbs who had titles. Eventually a number of Serbs became distinguished as high ranking officers in the emperor's army and as scholars and professional men. But most Serbs in Austria-Hungary were peasants and remained so.6

Of course the term Civil-Classen was coined for the situation in this empire. However, only half of the Serbs lived at that time in Austria while the other half was in the Ottoman Empire, the region soon to become Serbia. In the Ottoman provinces, of course, the majority was also peasants, but the Serbian elites there were different - although the above mentioned merchants held up a certain communication between the two realms, and some clerics who did the same, the leading groups of the Ottoman Serbs were far from being called Civil-Classen: they were the traditional local segmental elites that had developed under the Ottomans, accustomed to the Ottoman system and part of it. Local elites were known as kneževi, a political term and čorbadžije, a social description. When the Serbs in this region, which then comprised Belgrade and its surroundings, when they rebelled against the Janissary rule in 1805, a process of nation building started that brought many of the Habsburg Serb Civil-Classen to the developing Serbian state, while their majority remained in Austria-Hungary (a point I will come back to below).

The new political class (after the 1804 revolution in Ottoman Serbia) which carried out the revolution in Serbia was made up of many hajduks (i.e. guerillas), of some intellectuals, and of "the better people, who were able to feed and arm two, ten, or twenty serving companions (momaks)«.7

So, what we are talking about is an historical class situation that was quite special in many ways: the ruling classes as well as the majority population were in a highly complex situation in/between to empires (which, as should become clear much later, did not last for more than another 100 years). However, during the 19th century, the Habsburg Empire was progressing in the Balkans while the Ottomans were retreating. In this complex situation the Civil-Classen were trying to negotiate their version of reality not only to the lower strata who were in their reach in Austria-Hungary, but increasingly *also* in the former Ottoman lands, in Serbia – in a cultural locale that was in the end alien to them. This is what makes my example so special. 8 Barac, Antun: A History of Yugoslav Literature. Beograd: Geokarta 1955, p. 62f.

Who was Dositej Obradović?

Obradović was a Habsburg-Serb Enlightenment writer. He was born around 1740 and died in 1811. He was from the Banat that was during the time of his life a part of the Habsburg monarchy. He was member of the merchant class and his family was from a mixed Romanian-Serbian village. He was bilingual and visited the Greek school. His biography is emblematic for the development of the Habsburg Serb elites. This fact is to a great deal due to himself: his most famous book is auto-biographical. So here is the CV of Dositej that became so famous: as a young man he was very stubborn and wanted to become a saint; he went to the monastery in Syrmia, only to find out how corrupt the monasteries were. He left the monastery to look for knowledge in the traditional places of Orthodox education, starting from the Holy Mountain Athos, and ending at the progressive Greek school in Smyrna (Izmir). He then turned to modern places of education and enlightenment, that is Vienna, Halle, Leipzig and London. In Leipzig he published his first texts, including the autobiography. In his later years he went to Belgrade to support the Serbian uprising there by establishing a high school in his function as minister for education. Here is how this curriculum has been transferred by generations of scholars in a petrified stereotypical short form:

Dositej Obradović (1742-1811), christened Dimitrije, was the son of a craftsman from Čakovo in Banat. His father died while Dositej was a child. Under the guardianship of his uncle, he also was expected to take up a craft. Having mastered the art of reading at an early age, he read books avidly. He was deeply impressed by the hagiographies. Influenced by them, he fled to Hopovo Monastery in Srem in order to become a saint, like his heroes. But in his new environments he soon realized that the life of the monks was not what he had anticipated. So he fled abroad to accumulate as much knowledge as possible. He passed almost his whole life in traveling, earning his way mostly as a tutor. He got to know Croatia, Dalmatia, Albania, Greece, Asia Minor. He lived in Constantinople, in Rumania, at Odessa. He spent a number of years in Vienna. He went as far as Germany, Italy, France and England. [...] His chief task was to educate the Serbs, and to eradicate superstition from among them. He especially combated the fatal influence of the monasteries, whose ignorant monks deliberately perpetuated the ignorance of the peasant masses in order to continue their own leisurely way of life.⁸

After this quote it does not come as a surprise that Dositej was a follower of the reforms of Josef II and Maria Theresa. He put great hopes on the joint Austrian-Russian campaign against the Ottoman Empire in 1789, during which Belgrade was once more iliberated by Habsburg troops. However, the political fortunes changed with the French revolutions and the Emperor concentrated efforts on stemming the revolutionary tides and his successor completely cancelled the anti-Turkish policy and Austria-Hungary hence supported the declining Ottoman Empire. Therefore, after Josef's death Obradović turned to Russia, as he no longer saw the Austrian empire as favorable to the cause of the Serbian Civil-Classen. His main issues were to educate the Serbian masses; to reform the Serbian church with pietistic ideas and by battling the collaboration of the Orthodox clergy with the Ottomans; to expel the Ottomans from the Balkans. Here is an excerpt from a fictitious dialogue from Dositej's most widely read book, the autobiographical Erziehungsroman Life and Adventures that is meant to summarize the author's intentions:

Zelotes. Tell me what is the purpose of your writing [...]. 1. [...] As for your inquiry about my purpose, you might have learned it from my preface; but, if it is so please you, listen to me once more for a short time. These are my two principal purposes: first, by my example I suggest to the learned men of my nation that they write and publish in the dialect of our common people; second, I would have my fellow countrymen venture to think freely on all matters, reflecting an passing judgement on all they hear. You know well, my dear friend, that all nations which merely cling to old opinions and customs must needs lie in eternal and hopeless darkness and stupidity, like all the nations of Asia and Africa. Not thinking, not reflecting, and making no use of the reason and intellect that God has given them, not taking example from the learned and enlightened nations, they remain forever in an endless and lamentable torpor. Ah, how thankful should we be to Heavenly Providence that we live amid learned and enlightened nations, and above all under the government of a most wise and just ruler, enlightened by God, who breathes naught else but love and fatherly kindness to his subjects, who desires and seeks naught else but the general prosperity of his nation. Under the



9 Obradović, Dositej. The Life and Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović. Ed. by George Rapall-Noyes. University of California Publications in Modern Philology 39. Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press 1953, pp. 208-215. shadow of his wings learning flowers, justice and universal love triumph and sing a song of victory, reason and wisdom reign. Now no man fears that anyone will meddle with his religion. To no one are the schools and academies closed. The beams of enlightenment of mind and intellect are poured out richly and copiously on all our nations. Why then do w not recognize the grace of heaven and so much beneficence? Why do we not begin to think intelligently and freely like rational men? Why do we not take courage and venture to prefer what is more useful to what is less useful? How long will our kinsmen lie in their ancient simplicity and owing to their simplicity and stupidity resist and rebel against governmental acts of their superiors that are to their own great advantage? [...]

Before and after this quote, the pair of fictitious interlocutors make some judgements about the relation between the elites and the average people:

Zelotes. If you were writing for a nation that measured, considered, and judged everything in accord with the rules of common sense, I should not at all object to what you have written, since I too am of the opinion that only those nations can hope to become more prosperous who by drawing enlightenment from learning reform themselves from day to day and attain a higher state of culture, distinguishing what is more useful from what is less useful and choosing rightly between them. [...]

Shortly after, the author asks his fictitious friend about the ordinary orthodox flock:

Why will they not recognize that not a single hair of orthodoxy depends on celebrating the feasts of so many saints? [...]

Zelotes. The archpriest should take the initiative and tell that to the people. But so long as they are silent things must remain as they are.

I. Believe me, brother, neither does the matter depend on the archpriests. Today we have various learned and intelligent archpriests, free from all superstition and fanaticism. But, to confess the truth, the ignorance and simplicity of the common people are the cause of the whole trouble. [...] (9)

This sheds a light on the political and ideological stance of Obradović as an adherent of enlightened absolutism and a member of the *Civil Classen*. Nevertheless, his main achievement that makes him interesting to the topic of this paper is that he understood how to address several different groups among Serbian elites: he managed by means of narrative composition and argumentation to accommodate both traditional orthodox identities and at the same time catering to the urge for ideological change among the *Civil-Classen*. One classic textual strategy he used for that purpose was exactly to ascribe such contestable standpoints to a fictitious character.

In other areas of appealing to target groups, he especially addressed women and the young, and simultaneously showed respect to the old generation and purported male dominance. As a good disciple of German enlightenment he communicated all this through easily consumable textual strategies to be included in the daily lives and identities of a relatively broad section of Serbian society in the Habsburg lands. The most difficult questions arose when all this came into contact with Serbian lives in the Ottoman Empire. So the reason why the Serbian *Civil-Classen* developed discourses to further their self-representation via Obradović is obvious: a) because he was a powerful symbol in the developing Serbian discourses – the second reason was that b) his texts were among the most widespread in Serbian elite circles. That means that communication via him was practical because there already existed »channels« – the books he and his followers had been publishing. The printing of his books had begun in Germany and it slowly moved towards Serbia in the last decade of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century.

What did they communicate via him?

This is one of my central questions because what the Serbian elites communicated via the Dositej symbol, was not exactly what he had championed. The aims and issues I outlined before were not exactly what the self-representing discourse was about. Obradović had, as mentioned before, provided for self-representation of the Serbian middle classes in his books (by trying to create a book where they could mirror themselves) – these were the connecting parts of the reception in the 19th century. As the quotes above underline however, the



10 Stoianovich, The social foundations, p. 314.

11 Sandić, Aleksandar: Dve zvezde sjajne, dva groba svetla. Dositej i Vuk. In: Brankovo kolo 3 (1897) pp. 39-40.

12 Stoianovich 1963, p. 317.

ideological-political program was outdated in several respects: Austria was not any more the sole reference among the great powers, and instead of educational advancement according to the examples of the Northwest the ideology with which Dositej's texts were now decoded was a new self-confidence, inspired by German Romanticism, leading to Serbian nationalist authenticism. This also meant that the people had become the central reference point of political discourse, and therefore the elitist standpoint hat had been typical for Obradović was no longer adequate.

These differences aggravated in the following decades: this was because the Serbian elites changed their face massively in Serbia proper. The days when the Habsburg Serbs dominated discourse were over, although they were still influential in state institutions, the Ottoman Serbs, or now, Serbian Serbs, gained self-confidence and momentum, while the Serbian state was expanding to the Southeast on the expense of the Ottoman Empire, as roughly sketched by Traian Stoianovich:

By founding intermediate and higher schools at home and sending qualified students to the universities and higher schools of Europe and Russia, Balkan conservatives unintentionally helped transform the Balkan intelligentsia from a tiny ineffectual group in each country into an influential educated class. Still more important in facilitating and hastening the growth of a liberal intelligentsia were the loosening of family, clan, and patriarchal ties, the expansion of a money and exchange economy, the rise of a class of national urban merchants and shopkeepers, and the evolution of the new quasi state(s) into political organisms with most of the characteristics of the modern political state. Allying themselves with the cause of the growing class of merchants and market-oriented peasants, the educated class propagated their social theory, after 1848, under somewhat more propitious circumstances.

Therefore, large parts of the new elites could not recognize themselves in the texts of Obradović. It had been their like whom Obradović had described as close to, as he put it, the people in Africa and Asia who are in the darkness of ignorance. In these texts they were the ones to be educated. Therefore they partly reinterpreted Dositej's life story of a story of one of them who went out into the world to achieve knowledge and who returned to Serbia – although he actually had not born there (but in the Banat). Eventually a new integrating symbolic figure squeezed Dositej out of discourses – Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864). At the end of the 19th century the latter had become so important that his earthly remains were transferred from Vienna to Belgrade and buried opposite Dositej's grave at the entrance of the cathedral and an enthusiastic intellectual composed an article titled *Two shining stars*, *two bright graves* – *Dositej and Vuk*. ¹¹

So, first the Civil-Classen modified the ideological impact and the function of Dositej, and later on, the kneževi, čorbadžije, the new state officials etc. changed the meaning of his narratives. This again changed when the new ruling classes transformed and further developed the new kind of in-bred intellectuals and several political parties developed:

In the politically and socially more advanced provinces of the Balkans, an <code>?educated class</code> (liberals) grew up, between 1830 and 1870, at the side of the <code>?governing class</code> (conservatives). After 1860, part of the new educated class acquired some or all of the attributes of the governing class. Another part, however, failed to obtain this right, simply because the number of competitors far exceeded the number of available functions. (...) In the year of the Paris Commune, the new intelligentsia – urban youth in their teens and twenties, numerically small but ideologically influential – rebelled against the authority of their <code>?fathers</code> [...] A decade later, the radicals of Serbia organized their own political party, giving it a popular base by taking it to the people [...]

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How did they communicate via him?

The first and major place to represent oneself via Dositej were his writings, of course there were individual reading practices, in which everyone could and can imagine oneself in the stories of Obradović, but apart from that and most relevantly to this paper, there were public practices: wealthy men competed in publishing his books, unearthing, if they were lucky, previously unpublished manuscripts. Another important practice was, typically for the time around 1800, that they subscribed to his books and their names were then published at the end of each volume, ordered by their hometowns. These names were adorned with titles and



obviously self-granted adulations like »patriot and booklover« or »avid reader«. Women also represented themselves as patriots, but also as wives and mothers, publicly displaying their educational and patriotic enthusiasm by medializing their giving Dositej's books to their children.

They most incisive practice in this early phase of the reception of Dositej was the publication of a collection of quotes of his, volume called in Serbian what is in German *Lesekörner*, i.e. a collection of best readings: such *Lesekörner* were a fine way of reorganizing the text production of the late 18th century author in an early 19th century manner. The most crucial characteristic of this reproduction of Dositej's texts was however that they were designed to be integrated into the contemporary *everyday* of the Serbian elites and broader strata of society: all kinds of areas of life were covered; one was able to refer to the booklet for all sorts situations in life. In other words it was meant to be a universal companion. This is not to say that this strategy was successful throughout and all and every movements of people oozed the spirit that was purported in this collection of Dositej quotes. Yet it was at the beginning of what we know today as our medialized reality, and it worked in the same way, basically.

Let's quickly return to the early 1800s: other practices of Dositej reception included the trading of copper engravings with his image, and of course articles and review articles in the newly developing learned magazines and incipient newspapers. Let me now come to my last point:

What did they do with urban space?

Urban space was of course the main site of the public culture of the *Civil-Classen*, also the Serbian ones. In the Habsburg Empire they were a minority population, so their impact in public culture was limited. The point is that in Belgrade, where they belonged to the majority ethnicity, the situation was very special because this was an Ottoman city with some important remainders of the short Austrian period in the early 1700s. So the urban space the new ruling classes were confronted with was mainly an Ottoman street lay-out with Turkish and Balkan houses, and *konaks* (palaces), mosques, hamams (Turkish baths) and interspersed with Baroque churches and the Kalemegdan fortifications from the Austrians. Initially there was not much change to this picture – Dositej himself opened his high school in a Turkish house, and the *konak* of the ruling family, who were of course not from the *Civil-Classen*, but from the Ottoman tradition, had a Turkish bath in their palace. But slowly, parallel to the ousting of the Turkish inhabitants of Belgrade, mosques were closed and demolished (only one is left in the center of town), as well as hamams and old Balkan style houses were replaced with Western style buildings.¹³

Of course, this development was closely connected to the special hybrid outlook of the ruling classes. Ironically, as the influence of the Habsburg Serbs decreased, the poriental outlook of the city vanished as well. Not so much the Vojvodinians, but to a large degree the pindigenous ruling classes were in charge when the pwesternization of Belgrade took place.

The public culture in the urban space is one major part of hegemony. Especially the built environment represents a notion of permanence and normalcy – and the 19th century western influenced building practices in the city centers of course emphasized this aspect massively with strong long-lasting materials. It is then no wonder that Dositej's last will to be buried in the old green park area of Topčider was dismissed by the authorities and he was instead interred in the entrance of the representative Sabor church in the city center, the same church where the earthly remains of the ruling family were buried. The burial was accompanied by public processions and was one of the first major inscriptions of the new hegemony in the city space. Of course, to the everyday user of this space, such inscriptions are not in the foreground. Yet they make up the mesh that elastically holds together what is perceived as normalcy.

The discourse about Dositej was at the beginning of the advent of a hegemony with a Serbian outlook, in Serbian language. What was crucial was the integration of the Dositej-discourse as part of a hegemonic discourse into everyday surroundings and practices in order to achieve an all-encompassing reality. Societal struggles and changes brought about around the turn of the century, a dominance of other integrating figures in mass communication, which were also woven into the fabric of Serbian urban agglomerations.

13 Djurić-Zamolo, Divna: Beograd kao orijentalna varoš pod Turcima 1521-1867. Arhitektonsko-urbanistička studija. MGB-Monografije 5. Beograd: Muzej grada Beograda 1977.



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