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THE ARMS OF KING RENÉ

*A. Oswald*

## THE ARMS OF KING RENÉ

THREE Queens' men, of whom the writer was one, spent a holiday last summer on a lovely but little known island off the Dalmatian coast, a few miles north-west of Ragusa. Its Roman name was Tauris; but it is known today as Shipan, or, in Italian Giuppana. In the great days of the Republic it was the summer resort of the Ragusan aristocratic families, whose villas, ruined now, are strewn among the pine woods and olive groves. We were not looking for antiquities: on this lotus-island you want to "cease from wanderings" and only bathe and eat and read and sleep in a leisurely rhythm of dreamful ease so difficult for most of us to compass nowadays. But, one morning, guided by our inn-keeper, the local cicerone, we set out to see "the sights," rising at six so as to be back before the heat of the afternoon.

Our objective was the village at the opposite end of the island, named after the patron saint of another island better known to all three of us—St George. Our walk through the vineyards and under the silvery olive trees took us past the ruins of a bishop's summer palace and the remains of a deserted monastery before it brought us eventually to the village, the second largest on an island that only boasts of two. The principal distinction of the place is the possession of a pair of Renaissance villas—castles rather, for each had linked to the main building a four storied keep into which their owners might retire when pirates were about. But enchanting as these houses were with their walled gardens and terraces, their vine arbours and trellised walks, they must not seduce me from the subject of this article

which I have already been overlong in approaching. Above the doorway of a small house a short distance away from the finer of the two castles we saw embedded in the wall a carved shield, which to our astonishment, bore the arms of our own College with all the six familiar quarterings.

The arms that make our Queens' blazers so resplendent are, with the addition of the "bordure vert," those that were borne not only by our foundress, Queen Margaret, but by her father, King René of Anjou; and the six quarterings—Hungary, Jerusalem, Naples, Anjou, Bar, Lorraine—represented his widely scattered inheritances, the first and second of which were never more than purely nominal. Our stone shield, still almost as fresh as on the day it left the carver's hands, was surmounted by a crown, and beneath it was the inscription: RENATUS REX IUSTUS. Undoubtedly it was the shield of King René; but how did it come to be where it was? The local story, as retailed by our innkeeper, a highly intelligent man, was to the following effect:

King René, towards the end of his long life, retired from the cares of government, and went into voluntary exile. He made the refuge of his last years this enchanting island in the Adriatic, where he built himself a house, which though now in ruins, is still known as the house of King René. Some fifty years ago, Sir Arthur Evans, when visiting the island, discovered this stone with the shield lying face downwards amongst the ruined walls. There was also found another stone bearing an inscription. This, according to our innkeeper, Sir Arthur Evans had taken away and presented to the British Museum. The shield was subsequently set up over the door of the house where we saw it.

Curiosity has sent me researching in a somewhat desultory fashion, but I cannot claim that my investigations have been very successful. The British Museum had no knowledge of the missing inscription, and Sir Arthur Evans, to whom I wrote, politely but firmly denied that he had ever carried it off, and, moreover, at this distance of time could not remember what the inscription may have been. So one line of enquiry failed. The other, into the life of René himself, leaves it practically certain that he never set foot in Dalmatia. From documents that have been preserved an itinerary has been drawn up that makes it possible to trace his movements from month to month and often from day to day throughout the greater part of his life.

The nearest he got to Dalmatia was during the years 1438—1442 when he was fighting Alphonso of Aragon for the throne of Naples, which had been bequeathed him by Queen Joanna II shortly before her death. After his failure he made his escape back to France by way of Leghorn and Florence. His second expedition to Italy in 1453 took him no farther than Cremona and Piacenza, and he was out of France for less than six months. When his son Jean, Duke of Anjou, made another bid for the throne of Naples between 1458 and 1463, René did not accompany him. He continued to style himself King of Naples, however, until his death, and his court at Aix-en-Provence remained a rallying ground of Neapolitans and Sicilians of his party. He died at Aix on July 10th, 1480.

The mystery remains unsolved. Yet one or two facts emerge which might help to throw some light on it—evidence of links between Dalmatia and far-distant Anjou. In the fourteenth century, when the House of Anjou reigned at Naples, the throne of Hungary was

occupied by the elder branch of the same family, both lines descending from Charles II, King of the two Sicilies. Ragusa thus found herself placed between the two Angevin courts, and in 1358 she signed a treaty with Louis, King of Hungary, placing herself under his protection, and thus freeing herself from the tutelage of Venice. In 1384 she revealed her power on the seas when she captured two galleys belonging to Louis D'Anjou, René's grandfather, who was making an attempt, unsuccessful like that of René himself, to gain possession of the throne of Naples. The subsequent negotiations for the release of the Angevin prisoners necessitated a special embassy being sent from France to Ragusa. During the struggle between René and Alphonso of Aragon for the illusive Kingdom of the Sicilies I have not been able to discover with which side Ragusan sympathies lay: the little republic was always a dark horse, maintaining her independence by astute diplomacy. But the shield on the island of Shipan shows that at least someone recognised René's claim to be the legitimate King—"Renatus rex *iustus*," if the emphasis should be laid on the final word. Had he an ambassador in Ragusa, who owned a villa on the island? Or did he really possess property there himself—property that had been granted him by the Republic in some obscure diplomatic negotiation, but which he never saw.

The last suggestion is not so far-fetched as it may sound, for René's court was a cosmopolitan affair. His love of poetry and his patronage of the arts made Aix-en-Provence a brilliant centre of culture, and attracted, among other artists, the great sculptor and medallist, Francesco Laurana, who first introduced Renaissance art into France. Laurana was a Dalma-

tian, a native of Zara, who had worked in Naples (for René's rival, Alphonso), in Urbino and in Sicily before migrating finally to Provence to remain there for the rest of his life. With him, too, went Pietro de Martino of Milan, who in earlier days had worked on the Rectors' Palace at Ragusa, a building that like so many others in that city drew artists from Italy as well as natives of Dalmatia. These are but faint clues, if clues at all; but they rub a few corners off the sharpness of the surprise that was ours when we stood and stared at the familiar escutcheon, found in so unlikely a place.

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