

NICHOLAS DE NALE, RAGUSAN MERCHANT, AND HIS BRASS

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SUMMARY

London's churches contained many different types of monument as Stow's editor, Anthony Munday (d 1633) records in his revised edition of the Survey of London. One church on the periphery that survived with its monuments virtually intact was St Andrew Undershaft. Of the monuments and brasses recorded in the church, that commemorating Nicholas de Nale, a Ragusan merchant, was unique, and may well have been of continental design. It was seen by Thomas Fisher in about 1810 but disappeared shortly afterwards.

Trade played an important part in Tudor times. In London, merchants were based around the area now known as the Port of London, where many nationalities had their own quays, wharfs and warehouses. One of these communities was the Ragusans, who originated from the maritime republic of that name centred on the city of Ragusa (now Dubrovnik); in extent it comprised a coastal strip running from Neum to the Prevlaka peninsula in what is now southern Croatia.

The Ragusans had a long history of trade with London dating back to the 1300s. Initially they crewed ships for the Venetians; by the 15th century these ships were reaching the ports and towns of southern England bringing spices from the East, Venetian cloth and Cretan wine, and returning with manufactured goods from Flanders and English wool (Ramsey 1973, 22–49; Kostić 1977, 261–73). By 1509 the Anglo-Venetian trade was at an end; their ships were outdated, and this, coupled with new sea routes to the East via Africa, sounded its death knell.

Into this void stepped the Ragusans who,

being ideally situated, coupled with trading privileges from the Turks, were able to look towards Europe for new opportunities. By 1500 they were travelling beyond the Straits of Gibraltar bringing with them cheap wine, spices and cloth.

The first evidence for a Ragusan merchant in England is in 1509 and shortly after this, with trade increasing, an office was opened in London. Exports started three years later, when Henry VIII granted two merchants a licence to export ten thousand lengths of kersey cloth (Kostić 1975a, 494–5).

The years 1515–35 were the most important for Anglo-Ragusan trade. They imported wines for the aristocracy, black and white soap for use in the manufacture of woollens (instead of the scarcer fuller's earth), olive oil, currants, carpets, cotton and fine Italian fabrics. In return they bought tin, lead and pewter vessels, hides, and broadcloths and kerseys from Hampshire and Surrey.

Their ships, owing to their size, mainly used the ports of Southampton and Margate, the former because of its 'double tide', which allowed them to manoeuvre with greater ease. Margate was the nearest port to London that they could berth at.

A number of early Ragusan merchants are known from the first half of the 16th century, such as Nikola Sorkočević (Nicolo de Sorgo) who traded in England between 1512 and 1529 buying mainly kerseys. Luka Lukarević traded in London for more than twenty years, before returning to Ragusa in 1533, leaving his son, Petar, to continue the business. The latter proved not to be such an able trader as his father, and the firm closed in 1540.

The ten years between 1540 and 1550 was to be a period of change in Anglo-Ragusan trade. Sea-borne transport was virtually discontinued owing to the rivalry between the English and the French. Barbary attacks in the western Mediterranean, coupled with a Turko-Spanish conflict, meant that Ragusan merchants were not willing to take the risk and send their goods by sea. Instead they chose a route via Antwerp or Hamburg, overland to Cologne, Frankfurt or Nuremberg and then over the Brenner Pass to Italy, where the goods would be loaded aboard ships for the onward journey to Ragusa.

This was the trading environment into which Nicholas de Nale was born. He was a member of the Nalješković family, his father being Marin Nalješković. They were of the wealthy citizen class called Antunini. His father had been engaged in trade with England for a number of years, although sporadically, and was co-owner of a vessel, importing mostly English cloth from the beginning of the 16th century.

Marin Nalješković had three sons, Ivan, Augustine and Nikola (Nicholas). The name of their mother does not appear in English records or in any published account relating to the family. Similarly little is known about his brothers. Augustine had been trained by his father to look after the Ragusan part of the operation, while Ivan was sent to Venice, then an international centre of finance, to deal with the banking side of the family's trading ventures (Kostić 1975b, 586).

Nicholas, born in 1516, arrived in London as a young man, and by 1537 was running the London business successfully. In 1541 he was assessed on goods to the value of £200 in the Subsidy Roll, being described as a 'stranger', living in the parish of St Nicholas Acon, and making him liable to pay the sum of £10, while his servant, John Cador, paid 5s. In this assessment over 2,700 English and over 670 'strangers' were liable to be taxed (Subsidy Assessment Roll 1993, 89). Analysis of the assessment shows that he was one of the ten most wealthy aliens in London at this date. In March 1554 he received Letters of Denization 'provided that he does not live in the towns of Berwick and Calais' without permission (*Cal Pat Rolls Philip and Mary I*, 333). Now an English subject this freed him from the restrictions imposed on foreign

merchants, and so he could own houses and land. He bought property in the parishes of St Olave Hart Street, St Katherine Colman and St Dunstan in the East. He also owned property in Aldersbrook, Essex, and along the Thames bank at Erith, Kent. He traded locally in timber, wheat and rye. De Nale never married and lived with his workers and servants in Lombard Street, in the heart of the City, known then, as now, for its financial institutions (PROB 11/48, f 267-8, The National Archives; Sharpe 1908, 32-3, 94-5). He must have known all his fellow Ragusan merchants, as well as city bankers, including Sir Thomas Gresham (c.1518-79), founder of the Royal Exchange, who described de Nale as 'a man of honesty and great service'. It is not clear in what context Gresham was referring to him (PRO SP 69/11/704 TNA).

After 25 years trading in London, de Nale died at his London home on 1 January 1566, and was buried in the church of St Andrew Undershaft. A monument to his memory, commissioned by his brother, Augustine, who was also his executor, was placed in the church. It is not known why St Andrew Undershaft was chosen for de Nale's burial, or why his monument was a brass, as they were not a common form of commemoration in Ragusa. He did not live in the parish nor was it a chosen place of interment for 'aliens'.

The brass was of unusual design (Fig 1). At the top was a plate engraved with a frieze of trailing foliage, below which were two shields bearing a chevron between four fleur de lys, 3 and 1. The arms are unknown, presumably of the de Nale family, but no record of them appears in English heraldic records. As the fleur de lys and the chevron stand proud of the background, they were probably meant to represent gold.

Beneath this, on a further plate was an inscription, in raised capitals that read:

NICOLI DE NALE RAGV:
SINI CARO HOC IN TVMV=
LO REPVLVERESCIT, SPIRIT'
AD CoELVM REVERSVS, RE=
ASSVMPTIONEM CAR=
NIS EXPECTAT.

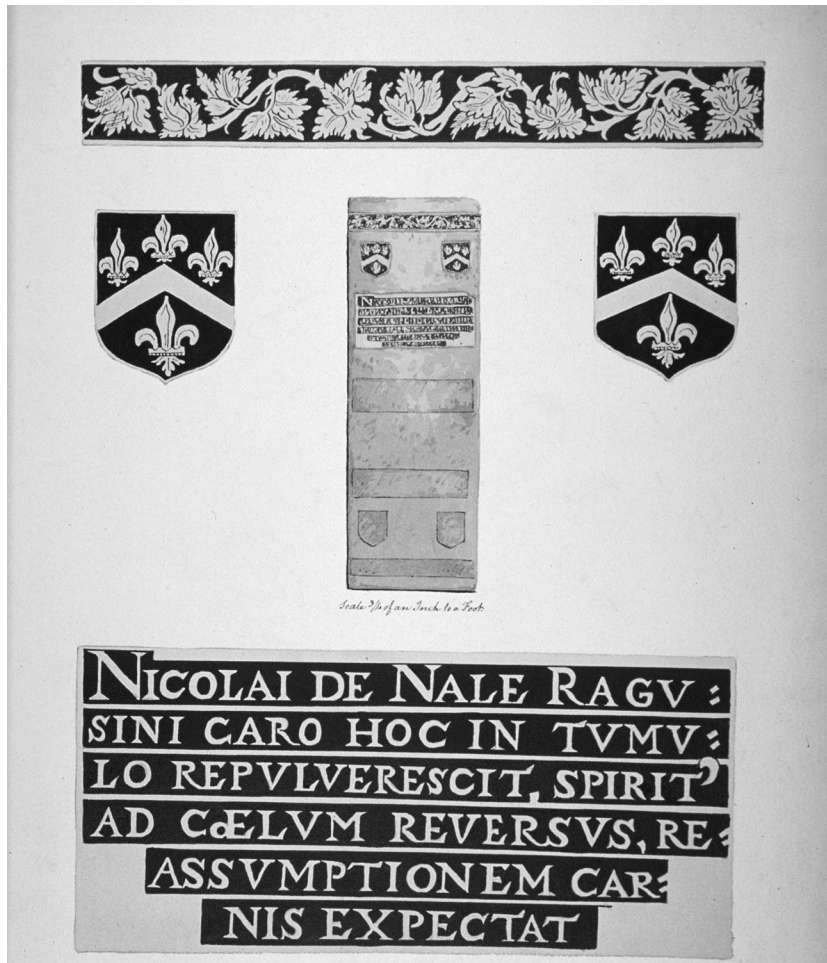


Fig 1. Drawing by Thomas Fisher of the brass to Nicholas de Nale (d 1566) formerly in St Andrew Undershaft. Frieze 50 x 500mm, dexter shield 125 x 100mm, sinister shield 125 x 100mm, inscription 225 x 450mm, inscription indent 125 x 475mm, inscription indent 100 x 450mm, dexter shield indent 150 x 112mm, sinister shield indent 150 x 100mm, frieze indent 75 x 475mm, slab 1524 x 500mm. All measurements are approximate. (London Metropolitan Archives)

Munday records the inscription that was most likely on the centre plate, but lost by the time Thomas Fisher recorded it: 'Obiit die 1 Januar. 1566. A nativitate vixit, An. 50, Mens. 7. dies 29. Augustinus amantissimo fratri mœrens ponere curavit', but did not describe the monument (Munday 1633, 152). Translated, the inscription reads:

Nicholas de Nale, born in Ragusa, is mouldering to dust in this grave. His soul, having gone back to heaven, awaits the resurrection of the flesh. He died 1 January 1566. From his birth he lived 50

years 7 months and 29 days. Augustine, mourning, had this set up to his most loving brother.

Below the inscription would have been a further plate, perhaps with additional biographical details, that may well have alluded to his skill as a trader. As the monument had been commissioned by Nicholas's brother it may have contained another inscription of a more personal nature.

Below were the indents for two shields, and lower still a single, long indent, most likely for a plate similar to that at the top. Fisher's

drawing of the brass shows that the design was in relief, with the rest of the metal cut away leaving the letters standing proud. It was not similar to any contemporary English brass, and it is not known where it was engraved. It may well be of continental origin, although the slab was of black marble, a stone favoured by the Southwark engravers at this time. The precise phrasing giving de Nale's exact age is unusual, although a few other examples do exist.

The monument was noted by Stow, but he does not give the inscription. The only illustration of it is by the antiquary Thomas Fisher, who visited St Andrew Undershaft in about 1810. At that date it was on the chancel floor, with a number of plates already missing, as the illustration shows.

Exactly when the brass was lost is not known. Various restorations within the church were carried out, but it appears that nothing major was done to the fabric of the building until 1850 when the chancel was enlarged (Anon 1964, 4). The brass does not feature in any of the early lists suggesting that it was already lost (Manning 1846, 53; Simpson 1857, 52; Haines 1861, 2, 128).

Another explanation is that the slab was removed so that another interment could take place in the chancel. This would result in both slab and brass being thrown out and sold as scrap. This was common practice in the first half of the 19th century (Bertram 1976, 33–8).

One further grave to a Ragusan trader is known in England: Nikola Srbin (Nicholas de Seruia) who died in 1528, and requested burial in the church of the Austin Friars. Nothing is known about his monument or whether it was even erected (PROB 11/12, f 230v TNA). The fact that de Seruia chose to be buried in the friary church is telling, for the Austin Friars had been a popular place of burial for 'aliens'. This included members of the Italian community living and working in London. There was also a large number of memorials to members of the English nobility and gentry class since the 14th century as the friary was seen as a prestigious place to be buried (Bradley 1992, 17). This ended with the Dissolution and in 1550 Edward VI gave the nave of Austin Friars to Dutch refugees for worship.

Lying in the chancel of the church of

North Stoneham, Hants, is a large slab measuring 2356 by 1232mm. On it is an incised fillet around the edge of the stone, and an inscription that reads: SEPVLTVRA DE LA SCHOLA DE SCLAVONI ANO DNI. M.CCCC.LXXXXI. (The burial place of the Gild of the Sclavonians). At the corners are symbols of the evangelists with a shield in the centre bearing a double-headed eagle. What appear to have been fixing points for two rings are visible along one side of the stone, indicating that it was the coverstone of a vault that was placed over deceased members of the gild (Kitchin 1895, 130–8).

Following the death of Nicholas, Augustine took over the running of the business in London. Initially he lacked experience, but by the early 1570s the company was one of the leading firms in London. He had become an English citizen in 1566 (*Cal Pat Rolls Elizabeth I III*, 357) and in the assessment of 1567 Augustine, who was living in the parish of St Catherine Christchurch, was enumerated as a 'Venetian' and liable to make payment of £120 (Kirk & Kirk 1900, 1, 325, 163).

Shortly after this he was involved in a lawsuit, when Innocent Comey, one of Elizabeth I's servants, sued him for a debt. Augustine, who did not lack the means to pay, refused, alleging that he had been falsely accused. He was arrested and confined to jail where he furnished his room in a luxurious style and entertained his friends on a lavish scale. Comey complained, and the case came before the Privy Council, who ordered that Augustine's jailers were to give him a harder time while in prison. This proved ineffective, and a short time later he was released without charge (Dasent 1895, 391; Kostić 1975, 587).

As Anglo-Ragusan trade was by this time almost at an end, Augustine closed the business and returned home to Ragusa, dying there in 1603. From the 1590s few Ragusan merchants were to be found in London and by 1620 there were none. The trade between the two countries that had lasted for over 120 years was finally at an end.

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