

Mate Zekan

Stjepan Gunjača (1909–1981)**– on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of his Birthday**

STJEPAN GUNJAČA, historian and archaeologist, was born in Sinj on October 30, 1909 and died in Split on December 6, 1981. He attended the elementary school (1915–1920) and a private secondary school (1928) in Sinj and continued his education by enrolling into the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, where he received a degree in anthropogeography (geography and history).

Already as a graduate, he was appointed a contracted official on July 24, 1933 and acted as a temporary curator of the Antiquity Museum of the Croatian Sava and Littoral banat in Knin (which later on became the National Museum of Croatian Antiquity and today's Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments). From June 17, 1936 to July 30, 1939 he was the acting curator of the aforementioned Museum, followed by his official appointment as the curator on July 31, 1939. During this entire period, he was also carrying out the tasks of the head of this institution.

After voluntarily leaving the Museum's board in Knin, as well as after differences with the government at that time, he was dismissed from government employment on October 1, 1943.

From May 1, 1945 till July 31, 1947, he was the head of the Archaeological Museum in Zadar. By the formal decision from May 14, 1947, he was appointed director of the Museum of Croatian Antiquity (from 1955 the Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments), whose tasks he carried out until July 9, 1958, when he became the director of the newly-established Institute for National Archaeology HAZU, which comprised also the work of the Museum. He retained this function until his retirement on July 1, 1977.

On December 4, 1937, Stjepan Gunjača received a doctor's degree at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb with his dissertation *Topographic questions regarding the ancient Cetina county*. He was elected a correspondence-member of the Croatian Academy of Science and Art on June 29, 1951 and became its permanent member in 1962.

* * *

By taking over the Museum's management from Pavao Pausch in 1933, Gunjača devoted himself to organize the buildings in the Knin fortress in order to create suitable conditions for the Museum's material and continued to transfer the stone and metal monuments from the decrepit and dilapidated museum building in the old town even before.

As a staff member of the Museum, he envisioned a more contemporary presentation of the moveable monumental heritage for which purpose he acquired new showcases for the exhibition of metal artefacts, while the stone monuments were being placed on wand bracket racks. In order to protect the material in the archive and the inventory of the library, he procured new cabinets–showcases for the library.

As a young Museum member, who wished to get familiar with its inventory as soon as possible, he went about the demanding task of systemizing the Museum's collections during which he successfully separated the medieval artefacts from the filigree objects that belong to the prehistoric or Illyric–Roman affiliation.

He particularly carefully analysed and connected individual stone fragments into common units that allowed the reconstruction of representative architectural complexes of church furnishings (whereby the Preromanic ciborium from Biskupia–Crkvina stands out), but also the gaining of valuable results for the reinterpretation or negation of until then ingrained perceptions (about the name of Duke Zdeslav) in archaeology and historical science.

With his arrival in Knin, Stjepan Gunjača came in close contact with Brother Lujo Marun, who was in disgrace and expelled from the Franciscan Order by the church authorities and dismissed from the board and sent away from the Museum and the Croatian Antiquity Society by the secular government.

Brother Lujo was going maybe through the most difficult moments in his life. He did not find any sympathy even among his former colleagues, who were employed in the Museum due to his personal intervening and to whom he – by thanking them for the

acclamation election as the Society's president – benevolently handed over the management after his resignation.

The young and recently appointed manager approached Marun in a tactful manner, with respect and appreciation, gaining slowly his trust to such an extent that Marun appointed him the executor of his will. Alongside this experienced senior, who had a natural and well refined sense for detecting and discovering archaeological monuments as well as an extensive knowledge on topographic data, Gunjača found exactly that, what he himself was keen of. With the help of Marun, Gunjača built the bases for his later greatest scientific virtue, which has elevated him to an archaeologist–topographer with no equal. Where Marun stopped, Gunjača built up, studiously and perseveringly. Perseverance was actually a common characteristic of both. How much Marun respected Gunjača can be seen in the fact that he engaged him immediately after his arrival in the research of the archaeological sites that Marun financed with his own money (among which are the most significant ones like Tepljuh–Biočić, Kapitul, Koljani Gornji, Nin). As a pledge to this trust, Stjepan Gunjača, after Marun's death, sought the confirmation and advancement of Marun's assumptions and doubts by conducting revision interventions (Biskupija – five churches, Zvonimirovo zborovanje, Koljane – Crkvina) or systematic archaeological excavations (Pridraga – Sv. Martin and Mijovilovac, Cetina – Sv. Spas, Bribir) which lead to envious scientific results.

When the Knin fortress was classified as a military–strategic building in the second half of 1941, the Museum was ordered to completely move out of it until July 9, 1942. The insecurity reached its peak after the Zagreb treaty was signed and Knin became part of the Italian military operation zone. At that time, the Italians and the militant Serbian Chetnik units had informer's relations, and latter ones raged in Knin and Krajina. The endangerment and threat to destroy the most precious Croatian national treasure was therefore very certain. Due to this situation, Gunjača decided to transport and shelter the mediaeval collection, the library and archive into his hometown Sinj, where he placed them in private homes, while he bricked up the box with the most precious artefacts into the wall of his father's house.

The prehistoric and Roman collection (stone monuments, ware, glass), copper and silver coins of Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Hungarian provenience, as well as part of the library inventory and archive material was placed into the cellar of the high

school in Knin. Due to the war events at the end of 1943, the Museum's material, which was abandoned and left unsupervised by experts or any external influence, ended mostly up by being thrown into the courtyard of the high school.

Under such circumstances, Gunjača did not return to Knin, but decided to stand up against the occupying and criminal powers and to direct his knowledge and capabilities against those who threatened to destroy the Croatian heritage by joining the antifascist movement.

After the end of World War II, as the director of the Archaeological Museum in an almost cataclysmic Zadar, which has been destroyed by aircraft bombs, Gunjača quickly scrutinized and organized the discovered material of the Museum, selected artefacts for exhibition, conceived a suitable museum exhibition and arranged the archaeological collection of this Museum, which has been placed in the church Sv. Donat at that time. What followed was the opening of the Museum to the public after six months. Besides taking care of archaeological objects, he literally collected various cultural goods from ruins out of which the rich book inventory must be emphasized. Gunjača used this remarkable inventory as a base to establish the National Library.

After ensuring the required work conditions for the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, Gunjača returned to his first love, the early Croatian monuments. Already during his time in Zadar, he encouraged and organized support from expert institutions regarding the establishment of a central Museum of Croatian Antiquity. However, Gunjača believed no longer that Knin should be its centre. Also in this case, he was in agreement with Marun's seeking to construct an independent museum of Croatian monuments in a larger coastal city, by which means this for the Croatian people extremely important heritage would gain in meaning.

The Klis fortress was chosen as the first location of the new museum, and the monuments, which were sheltered in Sinj, were being transported there. However, numerous problems regarding the operation and work conditions in this location influenced on the decision to withdraw this idea and Gunjača, fighting to ensure a respectable exhibition space for the Croatian archaeological monuments, got into conflicts with many opponents. In order to overcome such resistance, he was forced to invest great effort, wisdom and time.

Under those circumstances, while numerous pro-

posals for the future location of the museum were considered and rejected, the museum's inventory was being moved from Klis into the Kaštelet and Meštrović Gallery and after that into the barracks of the former factory of concrete slabs on the western coast of Split.

During this period Gunjača, who was firm in his believe that this material had inestimable value for the Croatian people and its history, decided to place the museum into the care of the Croatian Academy, which had received the property of the Croatian Antiquity Society as a legacy. As the property of the Bihač Society from Split ended up in the same manner under the auspices of the Academy, Gunjača firstly initiated an initiative and thereupon united both monumental inventories by which means the basic collection of the Museum of Croatian Antiquity was enriched and turned into a new museum – the Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments.

Being driven by the belief of the specialty and exceptional appreciation of the Croatian archaeological treasure and by holding an uncompromising point of view, as Marun taught him, when sometimes being challenged, Gunjača sought an organizational form which would allow elevating the Croatian heritage to a higher scientific and expert level. This idea became a reality in 1958 when the Academy established the Institute for National Archaeology in Split in which the Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments was an integral unit.

This very important scientific institution was established in order to systematically monitor, coordinate, organize and record the scientific–research related activities in the field of mediaeval archaeology in Croatia, in particular in the original area of the early mediaeval Croatian state. Its aim was to study and synthesise the knowledge about the life and work of our ancestors in this area in order to proof the historical–political identity and the scope of civilisation of the Croatian people from its arrival throughout the early mediaeval Croatian state as well as during the Late Middle Ages.

By establishing this Institute, Gunjača has secured it an envious status, which was necessary to him in order to engage into the crucial battle for the permanent and dignified location of the Croatian archaeological monuments. However, even with such an inventory, which value and manifoldness was unquestionable as well as the tutor's reputation, two more decades had to pass for the realisation of his visions– the construction and opening of the magnificent museum building where the early Croatian monuments, he was

taking care of for over forty years, were with dignity exposed to the public.

And just in those moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm, Gunjača asked for his retirement. His life's opus was obviously completed for him. He set up and ensured an optimum future for the museum and his successors.

There are many archaeological sites that S. Gunjača has personally explored. He approached archaeological research after seriously preparing and studying the diplomatic and archive material. To an amazing amount of topographic data in his mind, he was seeking confirmation on site, ignoring unfavourable weather conditions and inaccessibility of the locations. Therefore it is not surprising, that he was known in the most remote little villages in the central Dalmatian back–county. The academic Gunjača could not even picture the influence he would have by his field–research approach, creating a “school” which his colleagues and co–workers, among which I belong to as well, still nurture.

His spirit of an explorer could especially be felt in early spring when the “earth started to smell” as he tended to say, irresistibly calling him to tenderly reveal and discover the monumental heritage during his entire forty–five years of work. Hundreds of monuments from these explorations enriched the inventory of the Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments. From the initial cooperation during explorations with Mihovil Abramić and Lujo Marun, Gunjača developed into an independent researcher, who explored over 50 sites during his lifetime. As he was not an archaeologist by vocation, he did not hesitate to hire and hand over the explorations to qualified experts whenever possible. Due to this fact, his camps were particularly popular and even today they are mentioned with wistfulness. This especially refers to the site on Bribir, the archaeological find spot with which Gunjača wanted to show the world an urban centre populated by Croatians from their time of arrival, where they have built a representative town over the centuries in which they sought shelter under the noble family Šubić and many powerful European rulers abode.

Gunjača published the results of his numerous explorations in almost 150 bibliographic units. From his first published work in 1933 until his last days of life, his presence in the archaeological and scientific field was very alive. With deep respect for his predecessors, Gunjača opposed from the beginning of his career against the until then ingrained perceptions,

polemicalising with arguments on numerous theories and thesis on authority. Vehement and keen, following his principles in the battle for historic truth until the end and with a caustic pen on incorrectness, untruth and inconsistency, Gunjača was not always at pleasure to his colleagues. Hot tempered, he reached for the pen only in cases when something required correction, supplementation, verification or discussion. Hence, almost all of his works are saturated with an analytical-critical introduction that is a firm base to make a case for his own thesis. In particular, his major piece of work in four volumes "Corrections and supplementations to the earlier Croatian history" needs to be emphasized, because it is a compelling contribution to our historical science, but also a source for the development of theses of the new generation of historians. Besides the aforementioned, Gunjača also renewed and edited the first 10 issues of the III. series *Starohrvatska prosvjeta* in which he, alongside with many other experts and scientists, published also the results of his own research work.

Stjepan Gunjača, archaeologist and historian, left us almost 28 years ago, bequeathing an indelible trace in the mentioned scientific disciplines, creating a new, critical approach to the valorisation of monumental heritage, whether it has an archaeological or diplomatic character. Today, almost three decades after his death, the absence of such an authoritative person can be felt, a person who would strongly protect and take care of the national Croatian archaeological treasure, which distinctiveness regarding the European mediaeval civilisation has been recognized by many scientists in the world a long time ago.

It must be pointed out that this heritage is not treated as a Croatian specification in Croatia, it has not been extracted from the conglomerate of former civilisations (from the Palaeolithic to the Ottomans and later), and as such, has not been protected by a special law (*lex specialis*) or a sub-Act, although everybody is aware that it has an original Croatian uniqueness. The Croatian early mediaeval monumental heritage should therefore be highlighted as a Croatian cultural brand, primarily giving it such a status in its home

country, and ensuring it a proper treatment in the future European Union.

Archaeological findings, as first-class historical sources, and their scientific valorisation, were the ones that initially saved Dalmatia from the political pretensions of its neighbours, and latter on significantly contributed to the international recognition of the sovereign Croatian state.

After Gunjača's parting from the Museum and the archaeological-historical scientific field, the Institute for National Archaeology was closed, which has been one of the rare scientific institutes, if not the only one, that has been dissolved at the end of the 1970s. It is therefore quiet surprising how relevant factors in Croatian culture and science, even during the inflation of various scientific-research centres, which often were established "ad personam", have not yet recognized that the foundation of an institution such as the Institute for National Archaeology is highly important for the state. The reason, purpose and aim and hence the justification of its existence are not questionable as visible from the aforementioned facts. Optimum conditions could be achieved in this scientific institution that is specialized in this kind of work with the reopening, i.e. insaturation, of the Institute for National Archaeology in order to deal with the already collected archaeological inventory and to conduct systematic scientific research of the monumental heritage that is still archived in ruins and under the ground in the original territory of mediaeval Croatia as well as in the wider area.

May this anniversary be also the incentive for the reconstruction of the scientific unit as it has been conceived by its founder. Among other supporting historical branches, the *Croatian national archaeology* would in this way be enabled to further develop and to keep its honourable place that it has acquired. For its affirmation, along with credits for saving this national treasure by exposing his life to risk and dangers, outstanding contributions were brought into also in this case by the elaborated leading spirit of the Croatian culture and science of the 20th century-Stjepan Gunjača.