

The Center and the Periphery - Medieval Croatia in the Realm of King Matthias Corvinus

In this paper, based on my research on King Matthias and his rule, I will try to evaluate the role of medieval Croatia in king Matthias's state and in his political plans. The main task would be to evaluate the impact of the king on local political development and on political and military issues connected with the Ottoman threat, as well as the role of medieval Croatia in the kingdom's anti-Ottoman defense system. The rivalry with Venice and the Empire over eastern Adriatic will be also taken into account.

When one speaks today about King Matthias Corvinus, probably the most famous of all the medieval Hungarian-Croatian kings, one could claim that many aspects of his reign and the impact it had on local, regional and European history of the Late Middle Ages have already been thoroughly studied. However, equally valid is the fact that his rule in the southern border parts of the kingdom – on the territories presently belonging to Croatia and Serbia – did not attract many scholars from those countries, particularly after 1918, mainly due to political reasons. The distance from the common past that the new states outside of Austria and Hungary wanted to create reflected significantly on their historiographies, the approach of the authors, selection of topics etc. In this context, the medieval period of common history started to be perceived ever more often with the ethnocentric bias on all sides. Such an attitude characterized national historiographies in the region even during the decades preceding the collapse of the Empire. However, this attitude was not brought to the extent of the interwar period.

When one analyzes the earlier Croatian historiography on the Middle Ages and its attitude towards the common historical legacy with Hungary and Hungarians, it is fair to say that the ethnocentric bias was constantly present even during the last decades of the Empire. The common state and political framework, as well as many heated political issues inside the Hungarian half of the Empire, pushed even medievalists, both on Hungarian and Croatian side, to deal with many topics that could be used or abused for modern political purposes. With the establishment of the first Yugoslav state the above-mentioned immediate political issues were taken out of the agenda. Therefore, this kind of motivation for research on the medieval period mainly disappeared on both sides. Besides that, even the general interest

in Croatia for issues of common medieval history declined as well, particularly after the World War II when the communist regimes in the region, for ideological reasons, in general neglected the history of the nobility and of the ruling classes. For example, the rule of King Matthias Corvinus, although mainly positively viewed in the earlier historiography and popular tradition, almost completely disappeared from the focus of interest until recently. Regarding the rule of King Matthias Corvinus in Croatia one could state that the older generation of Croatian historians has already reconstructed the main political and military events already about a century ago.¹ However, until the end of the 20th century there was no significant progress made in the research on Matthias.

The most abundant sources for Matthias's rule in Croatia are the ones covering his relations with the Croatian magnates and other nobles.² These sources show that while the king was in odds, for example, with the Kurjakovići family (Counts of Krbava), he took a very flexible stand towards the most powerful Croatian magnates of that time, the Frankapani counts. Although Count Martin Frankapan was among his enemies at the beginning, on the side of Emperor Frederick III, after 1464 and Matthias's coronation the king reconciled with Martin without hesitation. It seems that the turning point in king's relations with Count Martin was the latter's apparently significant contribution in the anti-Ottoman struggle. According to the sources, after the Ottoman conquest of medieval Bosnia in 1463, Count Martin suffered huge damage to his possessions, helped the royal army with all possible means and by doing so defended medieval Croatia as well. During the king's counteroffensive on Jajce (Jajcza), Count Martin personally led a host of Croatian magnates and other nobles, on his own significant expense. Taking all this into account, Matthias confirmed to Count Martin and his family all their rights and possessions throughout the kingdom.³

On the other side, Martin's brother Count Stjepan (Steven) figured, from the very beginning, among king's most distinguished and close allies. One of the main reasons for such an attitude was perhaps count's ambition to grab a significant part of inheritance of the Celjski (Cillei) counts. He probably hoped for Matthias's support for his ambitions. Moreover, contrary to his brother Martin, it seems that

¹ It is fair to say that till the end of the 20th century the basic references for the Corvinus' era in Croatia were the works of Vjekoslav Klaić, namely V. KLAJČ 1901, 1905, 1980a, 1980b. Klaić's approach followed the methodological patterns of Ranke's school, dominant in the European historiography of that period. His books and articles were mainly based on the extensive narrative of political and military events, coupled with the descriptive overview of the social and legal institutions and culture of that period. For the events connected with the wider context of Matthias's reign Klaić heavily relied on FRAKNÓI 1891.

² The main source collections are: LJUBIĆ 1876, 1890, 1891, THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1897, 1903, 1913, ŠURMIN 1898, V. KLAJČ 1917.

³ THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 57-60.

Stjepan better judged the overall situation and power relations inside the kingdom and in the whole region. Stjepan was repeatedly engaged, during the first years of Matthias's reign, in various diplomatic missions, particularly to Italy, that were due to promote king's international interests or to obtain assistance for the anti-Ottoman defense.⁴ Count Stjepan, through his marriage to Isota d'Este, had many relatives in the courts of Modena, Ferrara, Milan and Naples.⁵ He was among the Hungarian and Croatian participants of the Mantua congress in 1459 that Pope Pius II convoked, trying to organize the anti-Ottoman crusade.⁶ After the return of his delegates from Mantua, who brought with themselves money collected by the pope for the war against the Ottomans, King Matthias donated to Count Stjepan several villages and possessions in the Zagreb County, in medieval Slavonia. In this document the king addressed the count with chosen words, particularly emphasizing Stjepan's fidelity and loyalty and success of his diplomatic efforts in Italy that were coupled with Stjepan's significant personal efforts and expenses. On this occasion, as well, Matthias offered to Stjepan and his son, young Count Bernardin, his special protection due to the fact that they had, as king explicitly mentioned, many enemies at that time. King's words clearly indicated that Stjepan's political choices at that period were not at all easy to make and without serious consequences.⁷

However, various degrees of king's affinity towards the individual counts did not prevent the king to firmly push aside all the Frankapani from their most valuable possessions on the Adriatic coast, the town of Senj (Zengg, Senia) and the largest part of the County of Vinodol. They were of crucial importance for king's struggle with the Venetians and the Empire to dominate the northern Adriatic basin.⁸ After 1464 even the relations between Matthias and Count Stjepan gradually deteriorated, due to king's increasing interest to control the town and region of Modruš, the center of Stjepan's possessions and the key stronghold on the important medieval road linking Zagreb and Senj. King's increasing interest for Modruš is particularly clear from his well-known dispute with the pope about the candidates for the local bishop, during the final period of Matthias's reign, after he married Beatrice of Aragon.⁹

⁴ GRGIN 2002: 83.

⁵ V. KLAJČ 1901: 354.

⁶ FRAKNÓI, 1891a: 8-12, THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 32, V. KLAJČ 1901: 245.

⁷ THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 36-39, 39-41, V. KLAJČ 1901: 246.

⁸ See in detail: GRGIN 1995: 61-70.

⁹ For the details of the dispute see: FRAKNÓI, 1891: 133, 283-284, 1891a: 163-164, 165-169, 1895: 40-42, 46-48, ŠURMIN, 1898: 304-305, KRASIĆ 1974-1975: 198, 1990: 258, 259-260, NEHRING 1975: 218-222, KURELAC 1988: 134, note 21, 1990: 235, 243, note 27, BOGOVIĆ 1988: 72, 74.

The anti-Ottoman defense efforts, coupled with the constant care to block any Venetian or German territorial conquests or increasing influence, were directing the king's policy towards Croatia. Only in that context one can better understand king's individual stands towards various individuals and social groups in medieval Croatia. One could suppose that the king would try to socially promote some other strata, like the lesser and the middle nobility, or the citizens of a handful of Croatian towns, in order to broaden the basis of his reign and to protect better his interests against the rivaling Croatian magnates. However, this was not the case. The lesser and the middle nobles, although some of them were materially rather well-off, were ever more increasingly preoccupied with the struggle for survival against the Ottomans. The help in that direction that they, and medieval Croatia in general, received from the king was the integration of the town of Senj and the neighboring towns and fortresses in the captaincy of Senj in 1469, and of other key fortresses in Croatia in the anti-Ottoman defense system, as well.¹⁰ However, the defense system was rather expensive to maintain and Croatian resources, particularly from the small, undeveloped and less numerous urban settlements, could not maintain it on their own without substantial help from the central authorities. On the other hand, help was coming insufficiently and rarely. As a consequence, the defense-system was mainly ill equipped, fortresses were kept in a poor state and food and weapons supplies were scarce. A good example of the poor state of the Croatian defense system, at the end of Matthias's reign, is the description of the fortress of Brinje (near Senj) in November 1489.¹¹ Not to mention, moreover, that the captaincy of Senj was created directly on the expenses of the Frankapani family. Taking all this into account, one could suppose that the social and the economic costs of the defense system even surpassed the benefits Croatia received from it. It must be stressed that the main parts of the overall kingdom's anti-Ottoman defense (the banats of Jajce and Srebrenik) prevented much more the Ottoman incursions into Hungary proper and medieval Slavonia, then into medieval Croatia.¹² Contrary to that, the Ottomans did not have such difficulties, neither natural obstacles nor such important military strongholds in front of them, to repeatedly ravage the heart of medieval Croatia practically on their own will, starting right after the collapse of medieval Bosnian kingdom, in 1463. This is valid despite the role and achievements of the military captaincy of Senj, from 1469 onwards. From the military and strategic points of view, the very first look into these two features explains an extremely unfavorable position of the Croatian

¹⁰ See footnote n. 8.

¹¹ The description is published in ŠIŠIĆ 1934: 272-273, and referred to in KUBINYI 1999: 188-201, 194.

¹² SZAKÁLY 1982, RAUKAR 1997: 94-95, BUDAK 2004: 26.

part of border defense fortifications. One more military-tactical inferiority of the Croatian defense forces lied in their inadequate mobility when compared to highly mobile paramilitary units of the Ottoman *martolosi* and the *akinji*.¹³

The little numerous and undeveloped Croatian towns could serve neither as a financial basis for the defense, nor as king's allies in medieval Croatia. The only Croatian town with relatively developed administrative and political structures, and with some economic significance, was the coastal town of Senj. However, even Senj's social and economic development was always restricted, until 1469 because of the Frankapani counts, and from that year onwards because of its military status and function. Besides Senj, the towns of Knin and Bihać, and to a certain extent Skradin and Obrovac, were the only urban settlements of any significance. However, their legal, social and economic status was even weaker than that of Senj. The rest of urban-type settlements in medieval Croatia were *oppida*, under the rule of various Croatian magnates. They were mainly small in size, with dominantly agrarian population, and did not play any significant social or economic role.¹⁴ The only preserved conscription of the so-called *dika* tax in Croatia from Matthias's period, in 1470,¹⁵ shows that the largest part of territory and population in medieval Croatia were exempted from it, such as the estates of the Frankapani, Kurjakovići and Nelipčiči counts, as well as the largest part of the noble counties. The towns of Obrovac and Skradin, the royal Vlachs, the lesser nobles and noble servants from the areas of today's Dalmatian hinterland, south of the mountains Velebit and Dinara, were paying the greatest portion of that tax. As their financial capacities were limited, it is clear that in Matthias's overall financial policy the income from Croatia could have only a marginal significance. As has been stated before, the expenses for the defense of the southern borders of the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom were significantly higher than the income from the same region.

King Matthias's reign was a period when certain monastic institutions, with the active support of the king and the Croatian magnates, particularly Frankapani on their estates, significantly increased their privileges, social and economic roles. This is particularly valid in the case of the Order of hermits of St. Paul, especially on the territories of the Frankapani counts.¹⁶

After his marriage with Beatrice of Aragon, King Matthias started to pay more attention to the eastern Adriatic coastal regions of medieval Croatia, in the wider

¹³ JURKOVIĆ 1999: *passim*, RAUKAR 2000: 26-28, GRGIN 2002: 171-176, BUDAK 2004: 26.

¹⁴ About the towns and *oppida* in Corvinian Croatia see more in: GRGIN 2002: 189-201, and the sources and literature quoted there.

¹⁵ Published in ADAMČEK-KAMPUŠ 1976: 1-3. See also: GRGIN 2002: 207-210.

¹⁶ GRGIN 2002: 204-206, and sources and literature quoted there.

framework of his ever more ambitious Italian politics. After the conquest of Senj and Vinodol and the creation of the captaincy in Senj, at the end of 1470's, the king tried to take over from the Frankapani counts their last coastal possession, the last eastern Adriatic island still in the hands of the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom, the island and the town of Krk (Veglia). However, the whole enterprise ended in failure both for the king and for the Frankapani, and the ones who emerged victorious from that clash in 1480 were the Venetians.¹⁷ By conquering Krk, they confirmed and completely insured their rule on the eastern Adriatic. The fury with which King Matthias reacted to the news, and the threats he sent in his letters to the pope, who was at the time on Venetian side, show both the extent of loss he felt and his frustration with the fact that he was powerless, lacking any fleet with which he could be a factor of any significance in the eastern Adriatic.¹⁸ Even later, during his episode with Ancona, Matthias tried to interfere in the affairs of some Venetian Dalmatian towns like Zadar (Zara), using as mediators the neighboring Kurjakovići, Counts of Krbava. However, Venice took all the necessary measures of precaution on time and blocked king's attempts still in their initial phase.¹⁹

The western borders of medieval Croatia were at the same time the borders between the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom and the German Empire. All the ups and downs in the relations between the two sides had their impact even in this region. Emperor Frederick had Count Martin Frankapan on his side at the beginning. On the other hand, at the end of the 1470's, when the hostilities between the two rulers reappeared, Count Stjepan Frankapan, former close ally of the king, now in odds with him over Senj, Vinodol, Krk and Modruš, formally recognized the emperor's supreme rights over his possessions.²⁰ In that moment such a move had mainly a symbolic value, due to the fact that neither the emperor nor the count had real chances to implement their agreement. However, it gave the opportunity, from that time onwards, to Frederick and his successors to claim their supreme rights over Senj and other Frankapani possessions. In 1487, the imperial army even managed to conquer Trsat (Tarsatica, today the eastern part of the town of Rijeka-Fiume), the border fortress until then in the hands of Stjepan's son, Count

¹⁷ For the Krk episode see: LJUBIĆ, 1876: 47-51, 55-57, 59, 63, 75, 76-90, 90-91, 97-98, 107, NAGY & NYÁRY 1877a: 407-410, 412-417, 420-422, 423-427, 428-433, 435-436, 444, 445-448, 1877b: 21, 26, 27, 38, FRAKNÓI 1891a: 141-144, THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 139, 140, ČRNČIĆ 1867: 134, note 2, 166-167, V. KLAJČ 1901: 275-281, 284, 289, 290, N. KLAJČ 1970: 147-149, 1980b: 55, GRGIN 2002: 143-151.

¹⁸ FRAKNÓI 1891a: 141-144, GRGIN 2002: 150.

¹⁹ NAGY & NYÁRY 1877b: 426-427, FRAKNÓI 1891a: 234-237, 238-240, THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 182-183, 184-186, LASZOWSKI, 1923: 130-131, CUSIN 1977: 488, 493, V. KLAJČ 1980a: 174, 175, GRGIN 2002: 136, 165-166.

²⁰ GRGIN 2002: 155-156.

Bernardin Frankapan.²¹ The creation of the Habsburg *Militärgrenze* really came on the agenda only in the 16th century. However, it is obvious that, particularly from 1467 onwards, when the Ottoman raids intensified both on Hungary and Croatia and on Habsburg-held Upper Austria, the Habsburgs wanted to keep the Ottomans as far away as possible from their borders, creating a sort of a buffer-zone on the Croatian territory. Therefore, the contract between Count Stjepan and Frederick III and the episode with Trsat should be viewed primarily in that context.

The court circles in Buda had a very limited impact on the development of arts and culture in Croatia in this period. The only significant example of influence of the court's Renaissance culture in Croatia is connected with Count Bernardin Frankapan, son of Count Stjepan. The whole area of the Frankapani counts, particularly its maritime parts, kept vivid contacts, including artistic and intellectual ones as well, with Dalmatia and Dubrovnik.²² As Count Bernardin married Aloisia de Marzano, queen Beatrice's first cousin, it is highly probable that those family ties played their part as well in establishing closer links with artistic trends at the court in Buda. Count Bernardin ordered, by the end of Matthias's reign, a tabernacle for St. George's church in one of his residences, town of Hreljin in the County of Vinodol, from the Florentine Renaissance sculptor Gregorio di Lorenzo. He is known for his works elsewhere in Hungary and Europe as "Master of the Marble Madonnas". Gregorio finished his tabernacle in 1491. He decorated it with the Frankapani coat of arms and figure of St. George killing the dragon. Such high quality work of art clearly indicates count's close relations with Italy and with the Buda court.²³ Gregorio's work is one of his few Renaissance sculptures preserved in Croatia, which also include the sculpture of Madonna in St. Peter and Paul's church in Bribir (Vinodol County) and the one of Holy Trinity in the cathedral church of Senj, all dating from the same period.²⁴ Taking into account the possibility that the destruction caused during the centuries of the anti-Ottoman struggles left till today only those few representative examples to survive, one can, however, suppose that such objects of Renaissance art were even initially rare. The Croatian culture and arts in the

²¹ THALLÓCZY & BARABÁS 1913: 184-186, GRGIN 2002: 114.

²² DABINOVIĆ 1942: 56, 60, GRGIN 2002: 72.

²³ For more on Hreljin tabernacle see: BALOGH 1967, 1972, 1980, GRGIN 2002: 72. This author, following Balogh's interpretations, in his earlier work attributed the sculptures in Hreljin, Bribir and Senj to Giovanni Ricci. In recent years, several Italian historians of art convincingly argued that the real "Master of the Marble Madonnas", and author of Hreljin, Bribir and Senj sculptures as well, was actually Gregorio di Lorenzo of Florence. See: CAGLIOTI 2008, and literature quoted there.

²⁴ CAGLIOTI 2008, 133, 135. In his text Caglioti consequently and erroneously locates Senj, Hreljin and Bribir in Dalmatia while, throughout the Middle Ages and later, they always belonged to medieval Croatia.

second half of the fifteenth century still predominantly followed their typical medieval patterns.

All said till now is just a brief summary of key issues regarding the relations between King Matthias and medieval Croatia of his time. However, despite that, it is safe to say that medieval Croatia was a true periphery of Matthias's kingdom, not only in the geographical sense. King's interests generally shifted after 1464 to Central Europe, putting all the southern border regions of the kingdom on the second place of ruler's interests. From that time onwards Matthias was primarily preoccupied with keeping the *status quo* there.²⁵ Because of the increasing Ottoman menace, medieval Croatia and other southern border regions became increasingly difficult and expensive to maintain. The state and the ruler had to invest much more in the south than they could expect to receive in return from various sources of income there. The king involved himself personally only in the situations when his own interests were tackled (Senj, Vinodol, Krk and Modruš for example), while besides that he mainly left Croatia to its own faith. Long gone were the decades when the Šubići counts and other Croatian magnates could significantly shape the course of history of the overall kingdom. King Matthias's rule was the true beginning of disintegration for medieval Croatia. Although one might claim that previous Venetian conquest of Dalmatia and consequent spreading of districts of several Dalmatian towns (particularly of Zadar) on medieval Croatian soil, or even temporary Bosnian gains on the expense of Croatia before Matthias's reign marked the true beginning of this process, there is one significant difference which should be taken into account. Bosnian and Venetian permanent or temporary conquests partly altered the established social order there (particularly Venetians did that in the hinterland of Zadar).²⁶ However, all these changes did not have serious demographic consequences. On the other hand, the Ottoman raids and territorial conquests starting from this period (after 1471 the region between the Cetina and the Neretva rivers) led to the gradual depopulation of border zones in medieval Croatia that was coupled with gradual process of complete disintegration of medieval social structures.²⁷ Particularly hard hit during this first period (1463-1490) were the peasants, who were the backbone of every medieval

²⁵ KURELAC 2000: 44-45.

²⁶ ANTOLJAK 1962, MAJNARIĆ 2012. The impact of Bosnia on medieval Croatia during Matthias's era was still felt during the first five years (1458-1463), till the Ottoman conquest of the first kingdom. The last medieval Bosnian king Stjepan Tomašević (1461-1463) and Herzog Stjepan Vukčić Kosača tried for example, among others, to grab the inheritance of the Talovac kindred on medieval Croatian soil, comprising the strategic fortress of Klis (Clissa), in the hinterland of Split (Spalato). However, Croatian *ban* Pavao Špirančić prevented them to do that. GRGIN 2002: 88-89. After 1463, the Ottoman menace became the primary concern both for Herzog Stjepan, Croatian *bans* and magnates, as well as for the Dalmatian towns under the Venetian rule.

²⁷ See more in: JURKOVIĆ 1999, 2006.

society.²⁸ Therefore, one could speak with justification about the true beginning of both social and territorial disintegration of medieval Croatia in Matthias's time.

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²⁸ RAUKAR 1984, 1997: 95, 175-176.

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Središte i periferija - Hrvatska u sastavu države kralja Matijaša Korvina

U radu, zasnovanom na autorovom istraživanju ugarsko-hrvatskog kralja Matijaša Korvina (1458-1490) i njegove vladavine u onovremenoj Hrvatskoj, pokušalo se ocijeniti ulogu srednjovjekovne Hrvatske u sklopu Matijaševa kraljevstva te u njegovim vlastitim političkim zamislama i planovima. Glavni je cilj rada bio pokušaj davanja ocjene stupnja i opsega kraljeva utjecaja na lokalni politički razvoj te na politička i vojna zbivanja povezana s osmanskim prijetnjom. Također se analizirala i uloga Hrvatske u protuosmanskome obrambenom sustavu na južnim granicama kraljevstva u to doba. U obzir se uzeo i kraljev rivalitet s Venecijom i Njemačkim Carstvom oko istočnojadranskih posjeda i teritorija. Provedena analiza pokazala je da, unatoč nekim elementima društvenog razvoja koji hrvatski prostor stavljaju uz bok kretanja u državnom središtu, onovremena Hrvatska je ipak bila prava periferija Matijaševa kraljevstva, i to ne samo u geografskom smislu.

Ključne riječi: Hrvatska, Matijaš Korvin, Osmanlije, Venecija, središte, periferija

Key words: Croatia, Matthias Corvinus, Ottomans, Venice, center, periphery

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