



ZRINSKIS & FRANKOPANS *AND* THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



Igor Rapać | H. Oğuz Aydemir

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Publisher

H. Oğuz Aydemir

ISBN 978-625-8056-93-8

© June 2024

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A Compelling Story Unfolds in the Realms where the Fates of Great Empires are Decided

Since the time when the Ottoman Empire began expanding across the Balkan Peninsula, a prolonged era of mutual relations between the Croats and the Ottomans unfolds. The territory of Croatian lands becomes a battlefield where many heroes on both sides test their mettle, shaping narratives interwoven into the collective memory of both nations. The most powerful Croatian noble families, namely the Zrinskis and the Frankopans, emerge as guardians of Croatian territories and their estates. Confronted with escalating absolutist aspirations of the Habsburg emperor, members of these two families will forge alliances with discontented Hungarian nobility, eventually pledging allegiance to the Ottomans. However, their conspiracy will be uncovered, leading to their execution as traitors and the extinction of their lineages. The Hungarian nobility, whose territories faced the onslaught of Ottoman forces akin to the Croats, will eventually succumb to the domination of the Habsburgs.

One daughter will defy imperial authority to such an extent that she will earn admiration across Europe. This Croatian-Hungarian noblewoman will eventually find her last refuge among those who had been enemies of her family for centuries. In the name of the martial merits of her illustrious ancestors, the mighty Ottoman

Empire will extend refuge to Jelena Zrinska and her son, providing a peaceful life, secure from the vengeance of the Habsburg ruler, and the glory of her family name will endure for centuries.

The influence of Ottoman rule will deeply permeate Croatian soil, leaving its mark on language, material and immaterial culture, literature, and art. Simultaneously, some Croats will ascend to esteemed positions within the Ottoman Empire, spreading the glory and power of Ottoman sultans worldwide.

The objective of this book is precisely to recount a compelling story unfolding in the realms where the destinies of great empires are forged, while also telling a family tale that mirrors the complexity of turbulent times. However, as we delve into the stories of heroes and events that shaped our past, it is imperative to acknowledge a crucial lesson - wars have invariably engendered profound suffering and trauma in individuals, families, and communities. Therefore, let this book serve as yet another reminder that forging bridges of cooperation through mutual understanding remains the sole genuine response to all challenges.

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The Historical Relations between the Noble Families of Zrinski & Frankopan and the Ottoman Empire

As the initiator and philanthropist behind this publishing project, I wish to share a few words about a work that, for me, embodies the essence of knowledge, inspiration, and the spirit of enlightenment. The book is the result of collaborative effort and unwavering commitment to fostering intellectual development and the exchange of valuable insights with individuals who share a passion for knowledge and a deeper understanding of the messages conveyed by history.

Igor Rapačić, the author behind these pages, has invested his expertise, dedication, and creativity in crafting a book that will undoubtedly resonate with readers from all walks of life. This literary work delves into the complex historical tapestry of the relationships between the noble families Zrinski and Frankopan and the formidable Ottoman Empire. It invites into an exploratory realm, where the boundaries of understanding stretch, and the horizons of thought expand. Through eloquent writing and diverse perspectives, Igor Rapačić takes us on a journey that challenges prejudices, stimulates curiosity, and invokes introspection.

In today's fast-paced world, where information constantly flows, and focus tends to waver, finding a book that not only captures attention but also enriches the mind is a true treasure. This book accomplishes precisely that. It offers refuge -a place for interaction with historical narratives that are significant, delving into the depths of past events and enhancing the understanding of the complexity of historical events and human interactions. Therefore, I express sincere gratitude to Igor Rapačić for his dedication to realizing this invaluable work and to our committed team for their tireless efforts.

I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Mr. Yalçın Balcı, the founder of the Homer Research Institute, for his valuable advice and contributions during the production process of this book. His knowledge and commitment to the culture and heritage of Anatolia played a crucial role in shaping this work. Special thanks are extended to Mrs. Dženet Garibović for her invaluable support in addressing copyright issues, as well as to photographer Domagoj Blažević whose photos brought the pages of this book to life. Furthermore, I would like to extend my gratitude to Pervin Yanıkkaya Aydemir, the proofreader in English, and Perina Kulić, the Croatian text editor, for their invaluable contributions to this project.

Additionally, I express gratitude to my wife, Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir, my partner with whom I share a passion for culture and history. She and her team from the company Muze have contributed to the preservation of the Frankopan heritage through the cultural route "The Routes of the Frankopans." Through them, I have become acquainted with the heritage of the Zrinski and Frankopan families throughout Croatia, becoming increasingly interested in the connections between the most famous Croatian noble families and the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, I express a sincere hope that this book, made possible by the collaboration of dedicated individuals, will leave a lasting impact, and inspire other publishing and related cultural projects that strengthen and empower Croatian-Turkish connections.

H. Oğuz Aydemir

The Captivating Era of Shared Croatian-Ottoman History

In early 2023, I had the privilege of meeting the team members of the heritage interpretation company Muze from Zagreb at Medvedgrad fortress, where I was introduced to Mr. H. Oğuz Aydemir. It was through his passion for history and culture as an entrepreneur and philanthropist that the idea for this book took root and its foundation was laid.

Mr. Aydemir's vision outlook has reshaped this exploration of the past into a narrative of brave individuals who found themselves embroiled on both sides, Croatian and Ottoman, navigating a world largely defined by the spirit of the times, the conflicts between great empires.

The process of bringing this book to fruition was indeed a dynamic task, particularly in the gathering of various sources, given the intertwined histories of Croatia and the Ottoman Empire, brimming with exciting stories and destinies. The book's uniqueness lies not only in its depiction of the tragic end of prominent Croatian families but also in its simultaneous exploration of narratives from both Croatian and Ottoman perspectives, offering insights into the different perspectives of a time when these two cultures intersected.

The narratives presented in this book are complemented by compelling visual material, enhancing the text. The majority of illustrations with accompanying explanations were sourced from freely available internet resources, with the exception of reproductions from the collections of the Croatian History Museum. Gratitude is extended to

Domagoj Blažević for his photographic contributions and to Dušan Dačić providing a geographical map depicting the years of Ottoman rule in Croatian territories.

This captivating era of shared Croatian-Ottoman history brings forth timeless narratives of battles, rulers, power, love, and betrayal, all interwoven into a compelling tapestry that guides us through the annals of time. Hence, I want to express my deepest and sincerest gratitude to H. Oğuz Aydemir for his unwavering faith and patience he invested in this project, and his invaluable insights into Ottoman history and his guidance.

I extend sincere thanks to Mrs. Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir for her versatile assistance, understanding, and invaluable guidance, which played a significant role in shaping and crafting this book. Great effort has been placed in this book by Pervin Yanıkkaya Aydemir, the proofreader in English, and Perina Kulić, the Croatian text editor, as well as Mr. Yalçın Balcı, so I extend my gratitude to all of them for the wonderful work they have done.

I also want to thank my fiancée, Tea, for her patience and support throughout the creation of this book.

It is my sincere hope that this book, rooted in our shared and rich history, will foster to a deeper understanding and collaboration between two peoples who share an extraordinary cultural heritage today.

Igor Rapačić

Great Empires, Small Nations, and Prominent Families

In the broader context of Europe and Asia, two formidable empires, the Habsburg and the Ottoman, were in a state of evolution and expansion, extending their influence across regions. The conflicts spanning several centuries were not merely geopolitical confrontations but also a complex power game in which small nations often paid a high price. The territories inhabited by Croats and Hungarians served as the borderlands between these two expansive empires. To the east, the Ottoman Empire produced a succession of formidable sultans, while within the Habsburg Empire, numerous noble families defended the regions of Hungary and Croatia. Squeezed between

these two juggernauts and facing the looming threat of territorial loss, the nobility did everything in their power to postpone that moment. At the heart of this conflict, two interconnected Croatian noble families, the Zrinski and the Frankopan, held a special place. Their estates and influence commanded respect. Throughout the centuries, they not only maintained their positions but also bolstered their power through political alliances and marital ties. Their decisions reverberated not only at the local level but also resonated across all parties involved. Intrigue, politics, bravery, and romance intertwine in this captivating historical narrative. To provide a



Map depicting the Frankish Empire and Europe in 814 AD after the death of Emperor Charlemagne (The Public Schools Historical Atlas by Charles Colbeck. Longmans Green, New York, London, Bombay 1905)

comprehensive backdrop for better understanding, this chapter provides a broad framework of historical events in Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Hungary, and Croatia, alongside detailing the origins and prominent members of the Zrinski and Frankopan families, central to the narrative of this book.

The European Landscape

After the collapse of the Roman Empire and the great migrations of peoples, the era that followed became known as the “Middle Ages.” Symbolically, this epoch is marked by the 15th century when horizons expanded, and brave individuals embarked on voyages of great geographical discovery. New states emerged in the meantime, and Europe’s history continued to unfold with fresh narratives. The age of kings and knights in Europe was significantly influenced by Christianity, with

the Pope being the most influential figure in Christian Europe. The predominant power in Europe became the Frankish kingdom, which expanded its sphere of influence, and the glorious imperial power in the West was initially restored by Charlemagne, who received his coronation as the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire in Rome from the Pope himself. Despite the consolidation of a significant portion of Europe under one ruler, the growth of the Frankish kingdom was not well received in the east, where the Byzantine Empire considered itself the rightful successor to the Roman emperors.

In the eastern realms, the great power remained the Byzantine Empire, which would decline at the end of the Middle Ages under the pressure of a burgeoning power, the Ottoman Empire, whose conflicts with Europe would mark the coming centuries.

The Church assumed a pivotal role in overseeing the

populace, with Latin serving as the official language, and literacy often restricted to the clergy. The process of Christianization persisted across Europe, whether through violent or peaceful means, resulting in the dissemination of the Word of God ever further. For the illiterate masses, the glory of God was conveyed from cathedrals, exemplars of medieval architectural wonders. However, not all of Europe was unified under a single faith.

Disputes and power struggles within the Church itself surfaced. In the Western domain, Rome served as the supreme seat, with the Pope, as the successor of Saint Peter, at its helm. However, the Patriarch in Constantinople did not view the growing power of his brother in faith with enthusiasm. Both centers contended for supremacy, leading to the significant East-West Schism of 1054, which saw the once-unified Christian Church split into Catholic and Orthodox factions. This rift between the Western and Eastern branches held profound implications for European history, underscoring the fact that both God’s messengers, resolute in their missions, ultimately excommunicated each other.

The cornerstone of medieval feudal society was the landholding structure known as a *feud*. Free peasants often lost their freedom, becoming reliant on the protection of powerful lords, and were called serfs. Their labor constituted the economic bedrock of medieval feudal society.

When examining the interaction between the Christian and Islamic worlds during the Middle Ages, while the initial thought might be that these two distinct religions were marked by conflicts and warfare, it is crucial not to overlook how both influenced each other through trade and cultural exchange. With the preaching of Muhammad in the 7th century, the groundwork was laid for rise of a new world religion, Islam, shaping one of the greatest civilizations in history. Islam extended its reach into European territories, notably in Spain, until the 15th century when the Iberian Peninsula was liberated from Arab rule.

However, as the influence of new religion grew, it became



Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah-inscribed on the door of the Prophet Mosque in Medina

increasingly evident that a clash between the Eastern and Western civilizations was inevitable. Faced with mounting threats, the Byzantine Empire, turned to the West for help, emphasizing the growing menace posed by the expanding Muslim world. In response, the Roman Pope delivered speeches that ignited a series of Crusades, aiming at liberating the Holy Land from non-believers. However, for Muslims, this was also their Holy Land, and the non-believers were the Europeans.

The Crusades, fueled by the religious zeal of the crusaders and the rallying cry of *Deus vult!* (God wills it!), facilitated heightened interactions with the Islamic world, fostering an exchange of cultural achievements. Although they fell short of their intended objectives, these wars catalyzed the growth the development of trade between Europe and the East. European kingdoms became stronger during this period, and the early development of cities began, with merchants becoming a higher social class.

However, no progress could prevent the emergence of a colossal scourge that would play a crucial role in the lives of many people of that time. Characterized by overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and little regard for hygiene, European cities contributed to the development of a terrible disease. Between 1347 and 1352, the European population plummeted by nearly one-third, succumbing to the invisible enemy, the “Black Death”



Byzantine Empire in the mid-13th century

epidemic. It is estimated that approximately 25 million people lost their lives during that time.

The onset of this dreadful disease, seemingly inexplicable, ravaged Europe, prompting the search for scapegoats. In Christian Europe, the culprits were the Jews, and while in a predominantly male-dominated society, blame was also placed on women. Subsequent legal proceedings led to confessions from women accused of making pacts with the Devil, and those labelled as “witches” often met their demise at the stake, in front of enraged crowds.

Following the waning of the plague and burgeoning urbanization from the 14th century onward, a novel paradigm of humanity known as humanism began to flourish, initially in the prosperous cities of Italy.

Leading this transformative shift were the emerging social class, the bourgeoisie. The humanists’ focus shifted away from God, in contrast to the Middle Ages, directing their attention towards the individual. An educated and well-rounded individual became the cornerstone of the new era. Humanists sought knowledge in the world of antiquity, rediscovering ancient writers, philosophers, and artists while challenging the Church’s control over all aspects of life. One particular invention played a crucial role in disseminating these new ideas through



Burning of witches, medieval miniature

more accessible books: In 1445, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press with movable type, enabling the dissemination of fresh ideas across Europe. Royal courts evolved into hubs for scholars and artists, and powerful families, like the Medici in Florence, became their patrons.

During the period from the 14th to the 16th century, European culture underwent flourishing change, characterized by the emergence of a new artistic style known as the Renaissance, or “rebirth,” heavily influenced by antiquity. However, the most significant



The School of Athens, Raffaello Santi, 16th century

transformation occurred in the way of thinking and worldview. Spiritual themes were replaced by secular ones, with scientists, philosophers, and artists assuming prominence, spreading the concept of ideal human throughout Europe. This was an era of versatile individuals who left a profound impact not only in Europe but also globally. Among them were figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti.

In a bid to establish direct trade routes with the East and bypass Arab intermediaries, European explorers embarked on voyages of discovery. The Portuguese and the Spaniards were at the forefront of this quest. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, discovered a new continent for Europeans by crossing the Atlantic Ocean, while Ferdinand Magellan’s

expedition successfully circumnavigated the Earth, confirming its spherical nature. The discovery of the Americas brought wealth to European nations, but the changes were catastrophic for the inhabitants of the newly discovered lands. European conquerors, known as conquistadors, ruthlessly plundered their territories decimating entire civilizations in Central and South America, driven by their avarice for gold.

These colossal events had a profound impact on European society and its economy. Trade hubs transitioned from the Mediterranean, long regarded as a bridge between the East and West, to more western regions, reshaping the geopolitical dynamics. Emerging as new world powers were European states in Western Europe, starting with

Spain and Portugal, followed by England and France. With the onset of the modern era in Europe due to the Age of Exploration, irreversible transformations swept across the globe. The Catholic Church, tarnished by its behavior, witnessed a decline in its credibility, culminating in Martin Luther's rebellion against the church's moral corruption in 1517. Luther's ideas resonated across Europe, deepening the rift within the Church. Over time, even the Popes, as the supreme spiritual leaders, acknowledged the imperative for reform, sparking the Catholic Reformation movement, also known as the Counter-Reformation.

This era of upheaval gained momentum and gave rise to religious wars in Europe. Protestants and Catholics, formerly united in faith, found themselves in bloody conflicts that marked the European landscape throughout the 17th century. These shifts reverberated among rulers, prompting the adoption of absolutism in an attempt to consolidate power firmly within their grasp. While Europe was developing and asserting its dominance, a burgeoning empire emerged in the East, rapidly expanding and soon posing a threat to Europe. The burden of war and defense against the advances of the Ottoman Empire in Europe fell heavily on the lands of Croatia and Hungary.

The Ottoman Empire, Emergence of a New Power in the East

One of the largest and most powerful empires the world has ever seen, the Ottoman Empire, expanded and grew in power from its inception, encompassing vast regions of the Middle East, Southeastern Europe, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula at its zenith. The term "Turks" denoting the founders of this empire signifies a complex group of individuals. They identified themselves as *Türk*, a term in their language signifying strength, a characteristic they would certainly demonstrate by establishing one of the mightiest empires in history.

The foundation of this empire was laid by the great warrior Gazi Osman (1288 - 1326), who achieved victory in the 1301 Battle of Bafeon against the Byzantine Empire's



Osman I, Founder of the Ottoman Empire

army. As his renown grew, Osman attracted a growing number of followers who were named *Osmanlı* after their leader. With the influx of warriors, Osman managed to expand his control over neighboring territories, laying the groundwork for the future Ottoman Empire, which would go on to make its founder's name renowned worldwide.

Following his demise, the empire's expansion persisted into the weakened Byzantine Empire under the stewardship of his son and successor, Orhan (1326 - 1362). His army was exceptionally well-organized. Captured boys, raised in the Islamic spirit, became Janissaries, a pivotal force in the rising empire. Subsequent to Orhan, Murad I (1362 - 1389) spearheaded further campaigns into the Balkans, encircling the once-mighty Byzantine Empire



The Entry of Mehmed II into Constantinople, Fausto Zonaro, 19th century

with Ottoman footholds. The expansion into the Balkans led to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, where both Ottoman and Serbian forces suffered substantial losses, temporarily halting the empire's complete conquest of southeastern Europe. Murad's successor was a man who continued the growth of the new state. Bayezid I (1389 - 1402) earned the epithet "The Thunderbolt" (*Yıldırım*) through swift conquests that expanded the state's borders. The small Ottoman state was evolving into a new state expanding both eastward and westward. The Ottoman state now encompassed territories spanning Anatolia and the Balkans.

The early years brought short-lived setbacks; during the reign of Sultan Mehmed I (1423-1421), in conflict with the maritime power of Venice, the Ottomans had to reconcile with the fact that they were not yet a match for the great powers. This period saw significant damage to the Ottoman navy. However, under Sultan Murad II (1421-1451) campaigns in the Balkans continued, bolstering the Ottoman army into an extraordinarily organized military force.

Meanwhile, the end of another, once-mighty empire, was rapidly approaching. The weakened Byzantine Empire steadily lost control of its cities and provinces, retaining only a narrow space around its capital. The new Ottoman sultan, Mehmed II (1451-1481), elevated his state into a great power. He dedicated himself to conquering the "Golden Apple," the ultimate prize, the city of Constantinople, which was already surrounded by Ottoman territories. Following a siege lasting less than two months, the renowned walls fell, and on May 29, 1453, Sultan Mehmed II captured Constantinople. With this achievement, Mehmed earned the title of "The Conqueror" (*Fatih*), echoing throughout Europe. The Ottoman state was now elevated to the status of an empire. This great warrior, envisioning the establishment of a global empire, struck fear into the hearts of European kingdoms. His army quickly restored the city and attracted new residents with tax incentives.

Under his successor, Bayezid II (1481-1512), the focus shifted to internal consolidation within the Empire,



Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, 16th century

fostering an era of peace and stability. This period witnessed a flourishing of trade, the expansion of urban centers, and Bayezid's court became a vibrant hub for numerous artists. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith of power and influence. Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) conquered Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, the lands of the Mamluk Sultanate. With these acquisitions, the Empire gained control over the sacred Islamic cities of Mecca and Medina, assuming the role of the leader of the entire Islamic world and solidifying of its status as a global power.

Advancements continued during the reign of his successor, the renowned Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). Throughout his extensive reign, the empire expanded its territories both eastward and westward. In the east, it conquered present-day Iraq from Safavid control, culminating in the capture of Baghdad in 1535. Meanwhile, on the western front, there was a struggle against Christians in the Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom. However, Suleiman's aspiration for further expansion westward was halted by the unsuccessful siege of Vienna

in 1529. Suleiman's reign was marked by significant administrative and legal reforms, shaping the empire into a well-organized entity. Additionally, he gifted the world with a beautiful love story with his wife Hurrem. Nevertheless, Suleiman failed to secure a worthy successor, marking the onset of the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire upon his death.

His successor, Selim II (1566-1574), was not as capable as his predecessor, nor was his son, Murad III (1574-1595). This period marked the onset of what historians refer to as the "Reign of Women", characterized by weakening of central authority, and the increasing influence of provincial officials. Failure to embrace advanced modernization led to the decline of Ottoman military technology.

The internal crisis within the empire deepened further, accompanied by increasing taxes. The significance of sultanate diminished as weak rulers were perceived to be under the sway of their mothers and wives, leading to a perception of "shadow rule". Corruption became more prevalent, and the sale of positions replaced the traditional merit-based reward system.

Over time, the military power of the Ottomans began to decline, and after their defeat in the second siege of Vienna in 1683 and another battle at Mohács in 1687, the Ottoman Empire lost territories in Central Europe through the signing of the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699. The empire's expansionist ambitions came to an end, and signs of dissolution emerged across all spheres, from public life to the economy.

The ambitious vision of the Ottoman Empire to extend its reach further westward remained unfulfilled. Their aspirations were shattered upon encountering resistance in Croatian and Hungarian territories. Rather than serving as a gateway for further expansion, these regions became a barrier that could not be breached. These lands became crucial for the defense of Europe, and the efforts of the Hungarian and Croatian nobility succeeded in preventing any further Ottoman incursions to the west.

Hungarians, a European Nation with Asian Roots

Unaware of the impending peril and the pivotal role they were soon to play, this young European nation would establish its powerful kingdom in the conquered territory, tasked with preventing further incursions into Europe from the East. Their new homeland, alongside the Croatian lands, would emerge a bulwark defending Central and Western Europe against the advance of the Ottoman Empire.

The ancestors of the Hungarians were part of the eastern group of Ugric peoples. With their swift raiding campaigns, they instilled fear in the rulers of Western Europe. In the 9th century, under the leadership of the legendary Árpád, a military commander who founded the Árpád dynasty, these remarkable horsemen embarked on the conquest of the Carpathian Basin. Settling in the Pannonian Plain, this nomadic people established their state and integrated into the Christian states of Europe. The population quickly adapted to a sedentary way of life, ushering in a new era in the territories they had conquered. Árpád's successors, Taksony and Geza, continued his policies, forging stronger ties with the West, and embracing Christianity by the late 10th century. With the help of missionaries and German knights, Geza quelled all resistance to the introduction of Christianity. Vajk, the Hungarian ruler who embraced Christianity and assumed the name Stephen I was crowned in the year 1000. He is considered the first Hungarian king, later a saint, and the founder of the Hungarian state. However, after his death, uncertainties loomed over the fate of this fledgling nation chiefly due to issues surrounding his successors. Stephen appointed Peter Orseolo, the son of his sister who had married the Doge of Venice, to govern Hungary on two occasions (1038-1041) and (1044-1046). Hungarian nobles opposed the notion of a foreigner ruler, sparking a rebellion.

The years of turmoil concluded with the ascent of Ladislaus (1077-1095), another king later canonized as a saint. Ladislaus embarked on a campaign to the south with the aim of annexing Croatia and Dalmatia



Arpad I, founder of the Arpad dynasty, his statue in the Hungarian town of Rackeve

to his kingdom. His mission would be completed by his successor and nephew Coloman (1095-1116), uniting the kingdoms of Hungary and Croatia under a single sovereign. The Árpád dynasty now hold sway over the throne of the Croatian kingdom.

In the 13th century, Hungary faced challenges with the Mongol invasion from the east. Following the defeat of the Hungarian army, King Béla IV (1235-1270) fled and sought refuge in Croatia and Dalmatia while the Mongol hordes devastated the land. To enhance defense during that period, kings encouraged the construction of fortified cities and granted privileges to attract the settlers, fostering development.

The Árpád dynasty came to an end with the reign of King Andrew III (1290-1301). With the accession of the new king, Charles I (1301-1342), a new dynasty, the Anjous, ruled over Hungary and Croatia. The new ruler

contended with rebellious magnates before focusing on strengthening the state. His son Louis I (1342-1382) had significant ambitions, seeking to expand Hungarian authority in the Balkans. In addition to the Hungarian-Croatian realm, Louis also acquired the Polish kingdom in 1370. However, while engaged in conflicts against Naples and Venice, he swiftly became aware of the growing threat from the East.

His daughter Maria was married to Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387-1437), who aimed to solidify Hungarian hegemony in the Balkans. However, his aspirations were disrupted by the arrival of a new power. In 1396, Sigismund led a Christian army defeated at Nicopolis, situated in the northern region of present-day Bulgaria, by the Ottoman forces under Sultan Bayezid I. Subsequently, Hungary faced arduous challenges in defending its borders. Despite this setback, Sigismund became a powerful ruler, King of Hungary, Croatia, and Bohemia, in addition to holding the title of Holy Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, he too had to acknowledge the looming threat over Europe. The Ottoman Empire was now penetrating the Balkans and endangering its borders, setting the stage for conflicts that would shape the fate of the Hungarians in the coming centuries.

One of the most significant Hungarian rulers was Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), who, by strengthening royal authority, managed to halt the expansion of the Ottoman Empire westward. His court served as a beacon for humanists, and he is remembered by the people as a just and sagacious ruler. However, following his death, the pressure from Ottoman forces on Hungarian territory intensified.

From the 16th century onward, the Hungarian nation would be ruled by the Habsburg dynasty, offering the nobility assistance against the Ottoman threat. Towards the end of the 17th century, the land gradually, but inevitably, fell under Ottoman rule, prompting the Hungarian and Croatian nobles to seek alternatives. Their discontent with the Habsburg monarchy, which failed to deliver on its pledge of assistance in defending the eastern frontier, eventually erupted into rebellion.



Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, Ottoman miniature, Topkapı Palace



Arrival of the Croats to the Adriatic, Oton Iveković, 1905

Croatia's Territories Amidst Great Powers

The territory of present-day Croatia, named after the people who settled it in the 7th and 8th centuries, has long served as a crossroads where the influences of great powers intertwined. Over the centuries, a diverse array of cultures, peoples, and conquerors have intersected here, from ancient Greeks and Romans to the Frankish Empire, Byzantium, Venice, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, and Germany. While their influences have ebbed and flowed over time, each has left indelible traces in Croatia.

Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, numerous tribes migrated to various regions of Europe. The origins of these peoples are often found in myths and legends that contain hints of actual events. The Croats, a Slavic tribe, arrived in present-day Croatian territory during the 7th and 8th centuries. Byzantine Emperor

Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus recounts their arrival as a response to Emperor Heraclius's call to expel the Avars. Legend has it that five brothers -Kluk, Lobel, Muhlo, Kosenc, and Hrvat- along with two sisters, Tuga and Buga, were the leaders of this migration. After expelling the Avars, the Croats expanded their influence from the Drava River in the north to the Adriatic Sea in the south, blending with the indigenous Romance population. The Croatian principalities found themselves in a region of intersecting interests between the Byzantine Empire, which was expanding its sphere of influence in Dalmatian cities, and the Frankish Empire, which extended its reach in the north. These two great powers of the era had a significant impact on the development of Croatian lands, initiating the Christianization of the populace from both directions. The expansion of Frankish influence provoked resistance from local counts, sparking the rise of the earliest

Croatian freedom fighters. In the northern region of Lower Pannonia, Count Ljudevit Posavski (known as *knez* in Croatian) initiated a rebellion against Frankish dominion in the early 9th century. Despite inflicting several defeats on the Frankish army, the uprising ultimately failed. In the mid-9th century, even while under Frankish suzerainty, Count Trpimir ruled. The Trpimirović dynasty, named after him, would govern -albeit with interruptions- until the early 12th century. He successfully waged wars against both the Byzantines and the Bulgarians, who posed threats to this realm's borders. The process of Christianizing the Croats was in full swing during his reign. His successor, Domagoj, effectively battled against the Venetians and the Arabs.

A period of peace saw the rule of Count Branimir in the second half of the 9th century. He severed ties with the Franks, and Dalmatian cities paid tribute to him. In a significant recognition of the fledgling principality, Pope John VIII blessed Branimir and his people in Rome in 879.

In the early 10th century, Croatian lands continued to strengthen under the leadership of Tomislav, who would later be recognized as the first Croatian king. He expanded his realm to the north, defeating the Hungarians and incorporating Pannonian Croatia into his kingdom. It now bordered Bulgaria, which was engaged in conflict with Byzantium. Taking the side of Byzantium, Tomislav defeated the Bulgarians and, in return, received control over Dalmatian cities and islands from the Byzantine emperor. He ruled over the territory from the Drava to the Adriatic, and Pope John X referred to him as a king. King Stephen Držislav, reigning from around 969 to around 995, was the first recorded Croatian monarch to receive a coronation, obtaining symbols of royal authority from the Byzantine Emperor. While he acknowledged Byzantine authority in Dalmatia, he maintained independent rule. After his death, amid struggles for the throne, Venice took advantage of the situation and seized control of Dalmatian cities and islands.

Under the reign of the formidable King Peter Krešimir IV (1058-1074), Croatia regained control over the coast,



Coronation of King Zvonimir, 19th century

expanding its borders both on land and at sea. After his death, Dmitar Zvonimir (1075-1089), Viceroy of Slavonia (known as *ban* in Croatian), ascended to the throne. He had significant support from the Hungarians and was married to Helena, the sister of Ladislaus Árpád, the King of Hungary. Under King Zvonimir, Croatia maintained its status as a major power. However, problems arose after his death. His successor, Stephen II (1089-1091), lacked the support of the nobility, and upon his death, the Trpimirović dynasty came to an end, plunging the country into turmoil as the nobility could not agree on the selection of a new ruler. Zvonimir's widow, Helena, and a faction of nobles sought Ladislaus Árpád's ascent to the throne. Ladislaus embarked on a military campaign, with Slavonia remaining under his rule. The Hungarian nobility arrived in Slavonia, and in 1094, seeking the support of the Church, Ladislaus established the Zagreb Bishopric.

In 1097, Ladislaus's successor, Koloman of the House of Árpád, continued his campaign to bring Croatia under Hungarian suzerainty. Facing resistance from the last ruler of Croatian descent, Petar Svačić, who lost his life in the Battle of Gvozd, Koloman pursued a peaceful resolution. He acknowledged the traditional rights and privileges of the Croatian nobility, and in return, they accepted him as the Croatian king. In 1102, Koloman was crowned as the King of Croatia, and Croatia entered into a union with Hungary. Through this personal union, the two kingdoms became linked under the rule



Golden Bull of Bela IV, issued in 1242
(Croatian State Archives)

of a single monarch. Croatia thus became integrated into the House of Árpád, the ruling dynasty of Hungary. During this era, the influence of the nobility grew stronger, while the authority of the king weakened. Troubles continued to mount, and amidst these, the Mongols, also known as the Tatars, invaded during the reign of King Béla IV (1235-1270). The king himself was forced to flee south, seeking refuge in Croatia and Dalmatia. The Mongols retreated upon the demise of their leader, and King Béla decided to strengthen the power of the cities to reduce the influence of the nobility. He encouraged settlements and bestowed privileges upon cities, placing them directly under royal authority. In this way, Béla IV, through his Golden Bull in 1242, granted the status of a free royal city to the settlement of Gradec, which would later develop into the city of Zagreb.

Meanwhile, Croatian noble houses, notably the Šubići counts and the counts from the island of Krk were consolidating their influence. These two families would play crucial roles in the history of the Croatian people in the coming centuries. The Šubići centered at the fortress of Bribir near Šibenik rose to prominence during the 13th and early 14th centuries. Pavao I Šubić of Bribir holding the title of *ban* (viceroy) of the Croats, extended his rule over Bosnia. He took advantage of the struggles for the throne between the Árpád and Anjou dynasties to secure greater influence for his family. The Krk counts

expanded their domains and authority during the 13th and 14th centuries and became known as the Frankopans or Frankapans.

Andrija III Mlečanin (1290-1301), the final ruler of the Árpád dynasty, faced opposition from the Anjou dynasty of Naples, challenging his legitimacy to the throne, and resulting in conflicts. Pavao Šubić sided with the Anjous, leading to ascension of Charles I of Anjou (1301-1342) to the throne. With the king's authority already dwindling, Charles decided to curb the magnates, including the Šubić family, who had amassed considerable power. The ongoing conflicts were exploited by a third party, and Venice reclaimed control over the cities in Dalmatia.

Louis I of Anjou (1342-1382) consolidated royal authority and compelled Venice to sign a peace treaty in Zadar in 1358, bringing the majority of Croatian lands under the rule of a single king. However, upon Louis's death without a clear heir, power struggles for the throne ensued. Sigismund of Luxembourg (1368-1437), the son of the Czech king, emerged victorious from this struggle. His rival, Ladislaus of Naples (1377-1414), realizing that he had no more prospects, made a decision that again divided Croatian lands. In 1409, he managed to sell Dalmatia to Venice. Consequently, the Republic of Venice regained control over the eastern Adriatic coastline.

As a result, the Kingdom of Croatia, after losing its independence, found itself ensnared by surrounding powers, notably Hungary and Venice. However, two colossal adversaries soon emerged, turning Croatian lands into a battleground between two empires: the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire; and the fate of the Croatian people and its noble houses became intricately intertwined with the plans of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans.

Over centuries, the Habsburgs expanded their influence across European countries, becoming one of the most powerful ruling families in Europe. In 1527, Croatian nobles chose the Habsburg dynasty as their rulers, lured by assurances of aid against the Ottoman



King Sigismund of Luxembourg, Albrecht Durer,
16th century
(Germanisches National Museum)

threat. However, prolonged wars with the Ottomans began, embroiling both nobility and populace in a struggle against formidable adversaries. Croatian nobles sought strategies to deal with the Ottoman threat while grappling with the growing absolutism of the Habsburgs. As events unfolded, the Habsburgs often left them to deal with the growing threat on their own, despite their promises.

The Rise of the Powerful Zrinski Family

The ancestry of the Zrinski family can be traced back to the Šubić Bribirski lineage, recorded as prefects (*župani* in Croatian) by the late 10th century, establishing their strongholds in the hinterlands of Šibenik and Zadar. The Šubić Bribirski Counts had their power base in the Bribir County, and at the turn of the 13th to the 14th century, at the peak of their power, they commanded a substantial portion of present-day Croatian territory. Their dominion extended along the entire coastline and ruled independently within their realm. From the beginning of the 14th century, they adopted the surname Šubići. From their fortresses, which controlled the routes from the coastal regions to the hinterland, these nobles gradually expanded their authority and influence.

The first known inhabitant of Bribir was Prefect Bogdanac (*župan* in Croatian) in the 12th century, and while by 1180, Prefect Miroslav emerged with notable political clout, evidenced by his independent issuance of documents. As early as 1251, King Bela IV bestowed upon them a charter granting hereditary authority over the Bribir County.

The Zrinski family's rise to power began with the brothers Pavao I, Juraj I, and Mladen I, whose authority expanded across Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Hum. In 1293, the powerful Pavao I declared himself the Viceroy of the Croats, while Juraj assumed the role of Count over the coastal cities, ruling from the Neretva to Zadar. Pavao I, born in 1245, ascended to the position of Viceroy of the coast in 1273, swiftly extending his dominion over Dalmatian urban centers. His endeavors culminated in the establishment of the Šibenik Archdiocese - in 1298. Pavao I held so much power that he bore the title "Viceroy of the Croats and Lord of Bosnia," earning him the unofficial title of the uncoronated ruler of Croatia.

Amidst the tumultuous struggle for the throne, Pavao supported the Angevins, but didn't hesitate to exploit the rivalry between the Angevins and Andrew III the Venetian, the final ruler of the House of Árpád. The Pavao's cunning maneuvers secured him confirmation from both warring sides, solidifying his hereditary banal authority



Original seal of the Šubić of Bribir

and granting him direct control over a significant portion of Croatian lands. In 1301, he brought Charles Robert of Anjou from Naples, who confirmed his hereditary rule over Bosnia. Pavao I was the *de facto* ruler of Bosnia, minting his own money, fostering Franciscan endeavors, and establishing Franciscan monasteries in Bribir and Šibenik. He elevated Croatian cities to commune status to strengthen their progress. Serving as the Viceroy of the Croats and Lord of Bosnia, he passed away in 1312.

He was succeeded by his son, Mladen II, who, by aligning himself more closely with Venice, along with his brothers, obtained Venetian citizenship. Mladen supported King Charles Robert, but when the king solidified his grip on power, he realized the necessity of curbing the influence of the Šubić Bribirski family. When Šibenik rebelled against Mladen II, Charles seized the opportunity, apprehending Mladen and dispatching him to Hungary, where he met his demise in 1341. Consequently, the king freed himself from the most powerful Croatian feudal lord.

The powerful Counts, almost autonomous rulers of Croatia and Bosnia, gradually relinquished their positions of power under the leadership of Juraj II, along with his brothers Grgur II and Pavle II. During this period, a new and illustrious lineage was on the rise. In 1347, acting on behalf of Pavle's underage son Juraj III, Grgur surrendered

Ostrovica to King Louis I of Anjou in exchange for the fortress of Zrin, nestled on the left bank of the Una River. Establishing permanent residence there, Grgur became the founder of the noble Zrinski family, named after their newfound stronghold. Along with the remaining members of the Bribirski family, the new Zrinski lineage actively engaged in inheritance agreements and cultivated alliances. This historical backdrop illustrates the fluidity of political dynamics and underscores the importance of the actions taken by the members of the Zrinski lineage in adapting to changing circumstances.

Pavao I Zrinski (1357-1410), son of Juraj, diligently worked to augment the family's landholdings, a legacy continued by his son Petar I, marking the beginning of the Zrinski family's ascendance. In 1463, King Matthias Corvinus granted Petar II the privilege of ore mining without royal taxation. With the arrival of the Habsburg family in power, the Zrinskis prospered, with Nikola III Zrinski actively supporting Ferdinand's election as king in 1527, considering him a stronger ruler than John Zápolya. While initially backing the Habsburg dynasty's accession, which promised assistance in the fight against the Ottomans, the Zrinskis found themselves in a difficult situation when their mines came under direct threat. To protect their interests, the Zrinskis temporarily paid tribute to the Ottomans, allowing them passage through their estates.

The Zrinski family meticulously cultivated strong relationships with the Frankopan family, their powerful allies. Nikola IV Zrinski, in particular, distinguished himself by marrying Katarina Frankopan and, through a succession agreement, acquiring the estates of Ozalj and Bakar, and markedly bolstering the family's power. When Ottoman attacks began on their estates in Pounje in 1540, the Zrinski bravely rallied to defend their territory. In recognition of their valor, Nikola IV Zrinski was granted stewardship over Međimurje in 1546, with the fortress of Čakovec serving as their stronghold. When the region was ravaged by an epidemic, Nikola resettled Međimurje with settlers from regions by Ottoman encroachment. Nikola IV Zrinski was a valiant warrior and took part in the Battle of Pest in 1542, earning acclaim for his



Territories of the oligarchs in the early 14th century, including the Zrinski and Frankopan families

courage. At the funeral of Ferdinand I, Nikola proudly bore a replica of the Holy Crown, while his son Juraj, who had grown up at the Habsburg court, carried the flag of the Kingdom of Hungary a testament to the esteemed reputation and glory of the Zrinski family at the time. In 1554, Nikola challenged the Bosnian Mehmed Pasha to a duel, but he declined the challenge. True to his nature, Nikola bravely sacrificed his life leaving a burning fortress Siget to attack the enemy. At that time, the Zrinski family was the most powerful family in Croatia, and together with the Frankopans, their estates stretched all the way to the Adriatic Sea.

The Ottoman conquests posed a grave threat to the

free development of trade across Croatian territories, prompting the Zrinski family to staunchly defend and uphold trade routes, recognizing that economic prosperity hinged upon thriving commerce. Nikola's son Juraj IV. continued to expand the family's power, embraced Protestantism, and introduced Protestant clergy to Međimurje, a move that caused dissatisfaction among the Catholic clergy. Additionally, he also gathered writers at his court and encouraged the advancement of knowledge. Near Čakovec, he established a printing press where Rudolph Hoffhalter printed the first book in the Kajkavian dialect in 1574, titled the *Decretum tripartitum*.

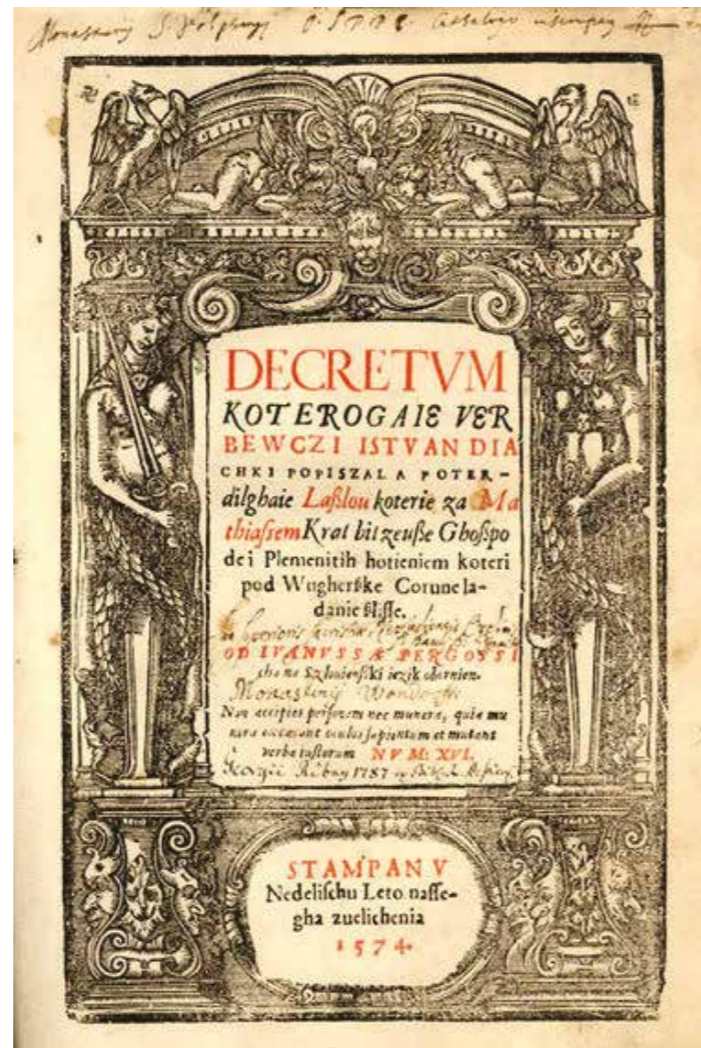


Nikola Šubić Zrinski
(Szilagy Sandor : A Magyar Nemzet Tortenete)

Juraj V. Zrinski (1598-1626) became the Viceroy of Croatia in 1622 and upheld the tradition of his predecessors in the fight against the Ottomans, actively participating in the Thirty Years' War. As a successful military leader, Nikola clashed with the Imperial commander Albrecht von Wallenstein, giving rise to speculations that Wallenstein had Nikola poisoned out of envy for his accomplishments. He left behind two sons, Nikola and Petar, who would emerge pivotal figures in the infamous conspiracy that unfortunately led to the downfall of this esteemed family.

The Frankopan family, a noble lineage from the island of Krk

The Frankopan lineage originates from the island of Krk, where they initially appeared as vassals of the Republic of Venice before expanding their sphere of influence to the

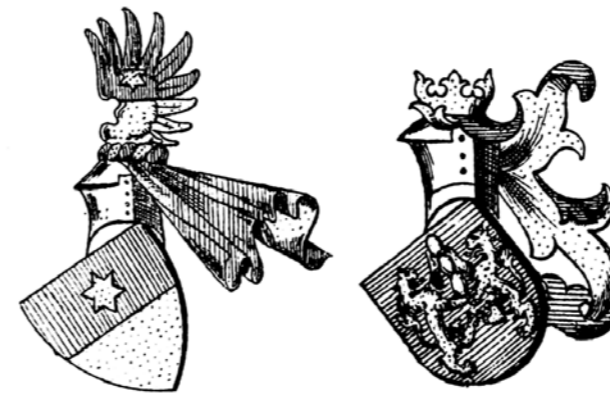


Title page of the Tripartitum, published in 1574

mainland. The earliest recorded member of the family was Dujam, who, in the early 12th century, governed the island of Krk under Venetian suzerainty. During the 12th century, they extended their rule to Vinodol, and during the 13th century, to Senj. Dujam II of Krk, who died in 1317, was one of the most formidable Croatian nobles of his time. As a supporter of the Angevins, he fostered strong ties with the Kingdom of Naples and maintained close relations with Venice.

Over time, the family steadily amassed greater power and influence, particularly as royal authority waned towards the end of the 14th century. In the early 15th century, Count Nikola of Krk (1352-1432) became an extremely influential noble, exercising dominion over territories including Krk, Senj, Vinodol, Cetina, and numerous other estates. To secure his title of Viceroy, Nikola paid King

FRANGEPAN v. VEGLIA u. MODRUS, a.) dñr b.)



Older (left) and newer (right) coats of arms of the Frankopan families

Sigismund a sum of 42,000 ducats in 1430, underscoring the considerable wealth of the Frankopan family.

The influence of the Frankopan family stretched as far as the Cetina River. However, the king sought to limit the power of the nobility and diminish their sway. Nikolin's son, Ivan VI (Anž), is mentioned in Scandinavian sources, indicating his stay in Denmark. King Erik VII dubbed him a knight and entrusted him with managing estates and cities.

Nikola IV. Frankopan became the first member of the family to adopt the Frankopan surname in the 15th century and rose to the position of Viceroy of Croatia. Following medieval customs, he sought to establish lineage connections to ancient Roman families. In 1430, Nikola traveled to Rome, where Pope Martin V affirmed his family's ties to the Roman patrician Frangipani lineage and endorsed alterations to their coat of arms. He added two lions breaking bread to his coat of arms because *Frangere panem* in Latin means "breaking bread." During his rule, the power of the Frankopan family reached its zenith.

However, internal discord in 1449 precipitated the division of the Frankopan family into eight distinct branches. This division temporarily weakened the family's authority. Though their estates enjoyed relative tranquility during this period, the landscape changed with the fall of Bosnia and the loss of Senj. King Matthias Corvinus confiscated Senj in 1469, while Venice took over the island of Krk. The Frankopans turned to the hinterlands

to safeguard their power. In the 15th century, a new threat emerged from the Ottomans, who conquered Bosnia in 1463, dealing a significant blow to the Frankopans. Many family members participated in the Battle of Krbava Field. Nikola VI. Tržaćki was captured, and his freedom was ransomed by his wife.

Unsatisfied with the king and the lack of assistance, some family members began contemplating collaboration with the Ottomans, seeking their protection to secure their estates. Among the most notable figures within the family with strained relations with the king was Bernardin Frankopan (1453-1530). He distinguished himself bravely in the Battle of Krbava Field, but had to flee after a heavy defeat. Leveraging his connections, Bernardin emphasized the need to Croatia to receive assistance in the fight against the Ottomans. His renowned speech *Oratio pro Croatia* ("Speech for Croatia"), delivered in 1522 in Nuremberg, emphasized Croatia's pivotal role as the "bulwark of Christianity" and its significance in defending Europe from Ottoman expansion. Bernardin also championed cultural advancement by renewing and fortifying cities, publishing a collection of norms governing relations between peasants and feudal lords, and contributing to the translation of the Bible into the Croatian language. Before his death, Bernardin designated his grandson Stjepan IV Frankopan of Ozalj as his successor.

Count Krsto I. Frankopan of Ozalj (1482-1527), Bernardin's son, served the Habsburgs and frequently engaged in conflicts with Venice. He also sought assistance from the Pope in Rome to resist the Ottomans. His renown grew further when, in 1525, he successfully broke the Ottoman blockade of Jajce, delivering crucial relief. Feeling aggrieved by the king's failure to appoint him as the Viceroy of Croatia and refusal to return Senj to his control, Krsto advocated for the Habsburgs to ascend to the Croatian throne, which later became a reality. In the end, he joined John Zápolya and lost his life in the battles around Varaždin.

In the early 16th century, the extensive Frankopan family encountered fresh hurdles. Aware of the Ottoman threat, some sought help even from Venice. After the dynastic



Battle of Krbava field, copper engraving by Leonhard Beck, c.1515

struggles in Croatia following the events of 1526 and the Battle of Mohács, the family found itself divided. Some aligned themselves with the Habsburgs, while others supported John Zápolya. Those who sided with the Habsburgs soon grew disenchanted, even going so far to threaten the king with overthrow if he did not fulfill his promises of aid in their struggle against the Ottomans.

Franjo I. Frankopan of Slunj (1536-1572) was the last descendant of the Frankopan family from the Slunj branch. His entire life was dedicated to defending his estates along the turbulent border. In 1567, he was appointed as the Viceroy of Croatia. Through constant involvement in wars, he lost his wealth and became impoverished, ultimately passing away while on route to Moravia for his impending nuptials.

Vuk II. Krsto Frankopan (circa 1578 - circa 1652) entered military service in the Military Frontier (Vojna Krajina in Croatian) at a young age, engaging in battles against Venice. After his brother Nikola IX passed away, he inherited estates, including Novigrad na Dobri, Zvečaj, Bosiljevo, Severin, and others. Vuk Krsto dutifully



Vuk II Krsto Frankopan

protected Croatia and the Coastal Frontier, earning financial rewards from King Ferdinand III.

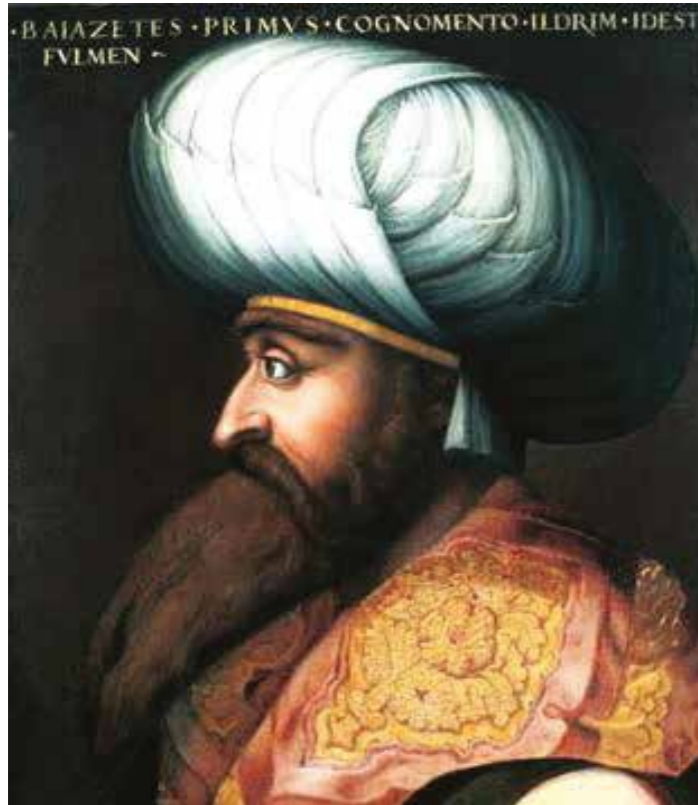
Throughout the 16th century, the Frankopan family prioritized to defend their estates against Ottoman incursions from Bosnia while simultaneously fostering cultural development. They patronized book printing and church construction, leaving behind a significant and rich cultural heritage. The profound impact of this noble family on Croatian history is immense. As various branches of the Frankopan family, such as the Cetinska branch, Slunjska branch, and Ozaljska branch gradually faded away, only the Tržačka branch persisted, albeit declining with the death of the renowned conspirator Fran Krsto Frankopan in the 17th century.

Centuries of Wars and Great Battles

Amidst the tumultuous 15th and 16th centuries, while the noble Croatian families of Zrinski and Frankopan sought to increase their influence and power, the Ottoman Empire, expanding westward, posed a threat from the east. Soon, the Croatian nobility was compelled to direct their efforts towards defense. From the Battle of Krbava Field and the advent of the Habsburg dynasty on the Croatian throne, the centuries that followed were marked by significant conflicts and notable figures on both sides. However, etched in history is a singular event: the Battle of Szigetvár, a clash that would seal the fates of two great heroes, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and Viceroy (*ban* in Croatian) Nikola Šubić Zrinski.

Ottoman Empire's Expansion towards the West

In the 15th century, the mighty Ottoman Empire embarked on its expansion into Europe, sparking the initial direct conflicts between the Croats and the Ottomans. Previously, Croats had participated in battles such as the Kosovo Field and the Battle of Nicopolis as part of Christian armies opposing the Ottoman forces. During the Battle of Nicopolis in northern Bulgaria in 1396, Croatian-Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxembourg (1368-1437) decided to confront the expansion of Sultan Bayezid I, leading a Christian coalition to a catastrophic defeat. One of the final



Sultan Bayezid I, by Christofano dell Altissimo, Uffizzi Gallery, 16th century

crusader military campaigns on European soil turned into a massacre of Christian soldiers, with King Sigismund barely escaping death by fleeing. Subsequently, Ottoman horsemen roamed freely, penetrating, and ravaging eastern Croatia. However, Bayezid's triumph was short-lived, as he soon faced an onslaught from the east led by the Mongol leader Timur. The Battle of Ankara in 1402 sealed Sultan Bayezid's fate, with his army defeated, and himself captured. Bayezid died in captivity, plunging his empire into a period of civil strife.

With the threat from the Ottomans momentarily subdued, the issue of royal succession resurfaced in the Croato-Hungarian Kingdom. A struggle ensued between Sigismund of Luxembourg and Ladislaus of Naples, leading Ladislaus to sell his portions of Dalmatia to Venice in 1409 for 100,000 ducats. With this enormous loss, Croatia found itself without a coastline, while Venice expanded its influence.

Around this time, Sultan Mehmed I (1413-1421) ascended to the throne of the Ottoman Empire, focusing



Sultan Mehmed I with his dignitaries, by Ottoman miniature

his efforts on restoring the state rather than pursuing further conquests. Sultan Mehmed left a cultural legacy through landmarks like the renowned Green Mosque in Bursa, the former capital before the conquest of Constantinople, where he was interred in a mausoleum known as the Green Tomb. With the restoration of the Empire, military campaigns resumed, including the plundering of the estates belonging to Nikola IV Frankopan (circa 1360-1432), a prominent member of the Frankopan family.

Upon the accession of Sultan Murad II (1421-1444), the Ottoman Empire resumed its military campaigns. The bellicose Sultan engaged in conflicts with the Byzantine Empire, Hungary, and Serbia. In 1444, in the Battle of Varna in eastern Bulgaria, a Christian coalition comprising Croatian, Hungarian, and Polish forces attempted to expel the Ottomans from the Balkans, but their efforts proved futile. The young Polish and Croatian-Hungarian King Vladislaus Jagiello I bravely, but recklessly, tried to mount an attack on the location where the Sultan was positioned and perished in the attempt at the tender age of twenty. Murad II subsequently decided to abdicate and handed power to his young son, only to claim the throne shortly after due to a Janissary revolt. Once again, he emerged triumphant against the Christian forces, securing the Balkan Peninsula for his empire before his death in 1451.



Mehmed II the Conqueror, Gentile Bellini, 1480

Under Sultan Mehmed II, also known as Mehmed the Conqueror (1451-1481), the power of the Ottoman Empire surged significantly, culminating in the historic conquest of Constantinople. Mehmed, one of the most celebrated sultans, briefly ruled for two years while his father abdicated the throne, eventually assuming full power after his father's death. Prior to the Battle of Varna, Mehmed requested him to return and lead the army, saying: "If you are the Sultan, come and lead your armies. If I am the Sultan, I hereby order you to come and lead my armies." Heeding his son's call, his father returned and secured victory.

The thousand-year-old Byzantine Empire would finally fall in the year 1453 during the siege of Constantinople lasting less than two months. The city, encompassed by the entirety of the Ottoman Empire, was paying an annual tribute of up to 30,000 ducats. The fortified city prepared for the siege, which began in April. The Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, even had a large chain set up at the entrance to the bay to prevent the arrival of the Ottoman navy. However, Mehmed had his secret weapon, heavy artillery known as the bombard. The last Byzantine Emperor perished in battle at the city's main gates, and his body never recovered. Mehmed the Conqueror proclaimed Constantinople as his new capital, proudly assuming the title of Caesar of Rome. A decade following the fall of Constantinople, in 1463, Bosnia also fell to the Ottomans. While the Ottoman army had previously made incursions into Bosnia, internal conflicts among the nobility provided an opportunity for their conquest, leading to Bosnia's submission to pay tribute. The Bosnian King, Stephen Tomašević (1461-1463) endeavored to ready the state for resistance. He sought help in vain from the Pope and European rulers, and warned Venice that Bosnia's fall would imperil their possessions in Dalmatia. In 1462, he stopped tribute payments. The subsequent year witnessed a fierce Ottoman attack, swiftly capturing Bosnia in a mere ten days under Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror's command. Despite King Stephen's attempt to flee, he surrendered when Mahmud Pasha Angelović,



Map of the Ottoman Empire before 1453

under oath, pledged safety and release. However, he was captured and taken to the Sultan, who invalidated the oath and ordered the execution of final King of Bosnia. With Croatian territories now directly threatened, the Ottoman army ravaged and plundered regions like Lika and Gorski Kotar, prompting mass population displacement.

Hungarian-Croatian King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490) successfully curtailed the influence of the Hungarian and Croatian nobility, firmly establishing his authority. Through conquering parts of northeastern Bosnia, he briefly halted the Ottoman advance. Following his reign, Vladislaus II Jagiellon (1490-1516) ascended the throne, ushering Croatia closer to the Habsburg dynasty. Through the 1515 agreement in Vienna, he secured the Habsburgs' claim to the throne in the event of the Jagiellon dynasty's extinction. The demise of the formidable Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror in 1481 was met with jubilation in Venice which exclaimed, "The Great Eagle is dead." Mehmed's eldest son, Beyazid II (1481-1512), succeeded his father at the helm of the Empire, earning the moniker "The Just."

In the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Beyazid II was succeeded by his son Selim I (1512-1520), renowned for his martial fervor. Engaged in campaigns in Syria and Egypt, Selim delegated smaller raids and incursions into Croatian territories to his commanders. In a land weakened by



Wars of the King Mathias Corvinus that briefly halted Ottoman advancement

defeat, the Ottomans made swift advances, reaching the shores near Trogir, Nin, Zadar, and Split. The defense was skillfully led by the new Croatian viceroy, Petar Berislavić (1475-1520), who even managed to defend Jajce on three occasions and won the Battle of Dubica on the Una River in 1513. Berislavić sent envoys seeking help from the Pope

and Venice, however in 1520, he died in Korenica. Having been hosted by Count Bernardin Frankopan, Berislavić hurried back to Otočac upon learning of the Ottoman incursion. Left with only two companions, the viceroy was dismounted from his horse and beheaded. With his death, the Croats mourned the loss of a valiant defender.

The Bloody Field – the Battle of Krbava Field

However, there emerged one of those pivotal battles that would etch itself into Croatian history as the most significant defeat by the Croatian army in conflicts with the Ottoman Empire. During this period, viceroy Emerik Derenčin was in a dispute with the Frankopans over the city of Senj. Yet faced with a hostile incursion, they reconciled and united their forces to confront the Ottomans together.

In 1493, Ottoman military commander Hadım Yakup Pasha led his army into Styria, and on the way back, they marched towards Udbina. It was there the Croatian army, assembled under the leadership of viceroy Emerik Derenčin, accompanied by Count Bernardin Frankopan (1453-1530), awaited them. Drawing from their experience in combatting the Ottomans, the Frankopans, proposed the viceroy that the optimal strategy would be to engage the enemy in narrow passes and mountainous terrain to incapacitate their cavalry. However, the viceroy refused to heed their advice, leading to a verbal altercation. The decision was made: the enemy would be met honorably on open terrain. Protests from the experienced Count Bernardin against this perilous tactic went unheeded, and the viceroy stuck to his decision.

Viceroy Emerik initially demanded from Hadım Yakup Pasha to surrender prisoners and war spoils, but when the request was refused, he opted to confront the enemy on open terrain. The battle took place on September 9th, with the opposing forces lining up against each other in three battle formations. Count Bernardin Frankopan, in command of the left wing, faced relentless attacks from Ottoman cavalry on both flanks, resulting in heavy casualties. The viceroy's army was destroyed after an hour of battle, with many of his warriors and Counts perishing before the superior enemy forces.

Amidst the devastating aftermath, only Count Bernardin, accompanied by a handful of warriors, manage to evade capture, likely seeking refuge within the safety of Udbina Fortress. Consequently, suspicions arose regarding his supposed intentional flight, particularly given his prior conflicts with Viceroy Derenčin. A representative of the



Armor of an Ottoman cavalryman from the 15th century

Zrinski family, who also participated in the battle, Petar Zrinski did not survive the encounter. The Croatian army suffered a tremendous defeat, losing a significant portion of its noble ranks, which shattered the foundation of defense. After that battle, folklore would come to remember Krbava Field as the “bloody” field.

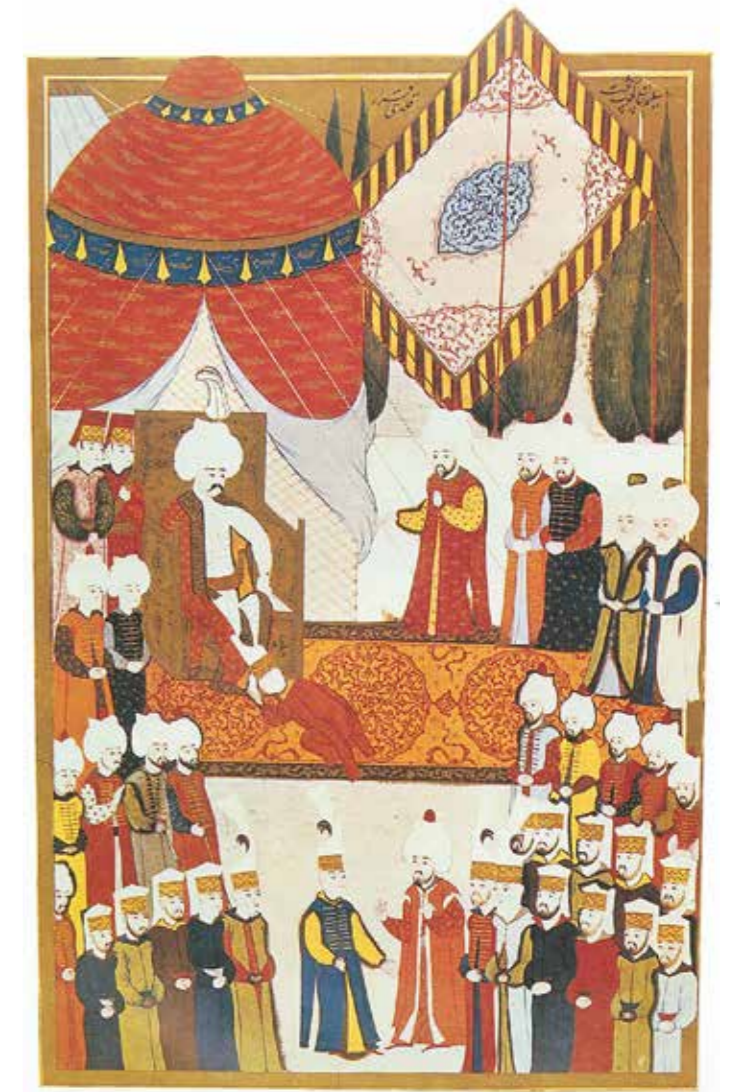
Count Bernardin, though he survived, harbored bitterness and resentment after the defeat. Refusing to yield to Ottoman pressure, he defiantly rejected their calls to submit to the Sultan's authority, who invited him to become a vassal. Esteemed by Ottoman military



Cenotaph of Maximilian I depicting the Battle of Krbava field

leaders as one of their most formidable adversaries, he was deemed even more threatening than viceroy Derenčin himself. The lingering question persists: how might the outcome of this renowned battle have differed had Count Frankopan's wartime strategies been embraced? It's hardly surprising that Count Bernardin nursed his anger for years to come. Having witnessed firsthand the military prowess of the Ottoman Empire, Bernardin Frankopan tirelessly sought aid for Croatia, leveraging his connections with European nobility. As a military leader, diplomat, and orator, he often delivered passionate speeches, none more impactful than his renowned “Speech for Croatia.” Presented in Latin in November 1522 before the German estates in Nuremberg, this address served as a stark warning about the looming Ottoman threat, casting Croatia as the “bulwark of Christianity,” in desperate need of assistance. After the victory at Krbava Field, Hadım Yakup Pasha reported to Sultan Bajazid II that he had killed 9,000 and captured 11,000 soldiers. The victorious commander later celebrated his success in a song, boasting about achieving a victory like only Murat did on the Kosovo Field.

In the aftermath of the devastating battle, the old Croatian nobility suffered immensely, prompting a mass exodus of the population in a bid to evade the conquerors.



Sultan Selim I, miniature, 16th century, Topkapi Palace

Croatians now understood the difficulty of facing the powerful Ottoman cavalry in open combat at a great cost to Viceroy Derenčin, who was ultimately captured and transported to Istanbul, where he soon passed away.

Spanning from the Battle of Krbava Field in 1493 to the Battle of Sisak in 1593, the period is sometimes referred to as the “Hundred Years’ War,” although conflicts between Croats and Ottomans persisted before and after these battles. Following the defeat at Krbava, the Croatian nobility convened at a council in Bihać, weakened, as they sought assistance from various quarters, including the Pope, Venice, and the Habsburgs.

Meanwhile, the reign of the new Ottoman Sultan, Selim I (1512-1520), renowned as “The Great,” witnessed

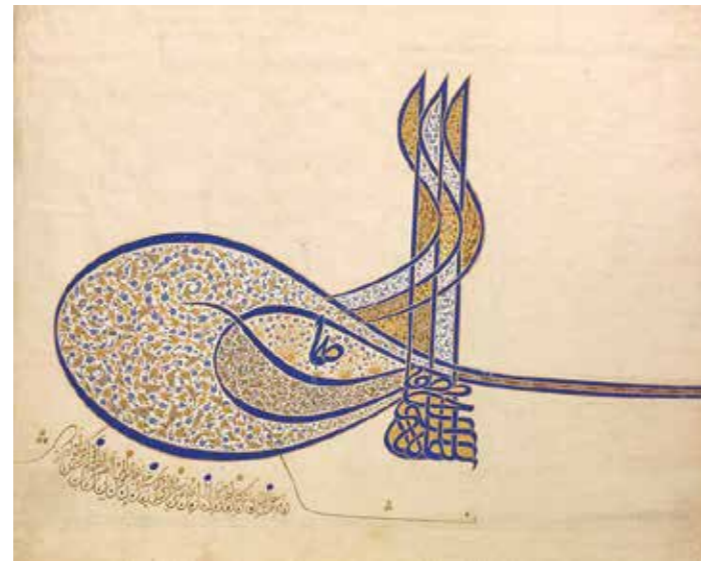
further territorial expansion, notably the conquest of Egypt. By securing vital pilgrimage routes in the east, the Ottoman Empire solidified its position as the preeminent Muslim power. On the other hand, the beginning of the 16th century brought a series of challenges for the Croato-Hungarian Kingdom, which was on the brink of collapse. Incursions by Ottomans into Croatian lands became increasingly frequent as the Ottoman Empire steadily augmented its might, heralding the arrival of a figure destined to become the most illustrious of all Ottoman rulers, with ambitions that stretched westward.

Suleiman the Magnificent Moves Towards Europe

Following the reign of Sultan Selim I, renowned for his conquests in Syria and Egypt, his son Suleiman ascended the throne in September 1520, reigning until 1566. Selim, whose rule had expanded the empire across three continents, bequeathed to his son a vast realm to govern. Suleiman would prove more than equal to the task, enhancing the power and prestige of the state and etching his name in history. His unprecedented 46-year reign stands as the longest in Ottoman annals, securing his status one of the greatest rulers of his era.

However, Suleiman's intentions were often misconstrued at the court of King Louis II Jagiellon (1506-1526), with some anticipating his focus on conquests beyond Europe. In 1521, Suleiman sent his envoy to Buda, demanding tribute on behalf of the Sultan. The undiplomatic court interpreted this as an insult, resulting in the envoy's demise. The enraged Sultan decided to personally lead an army against Hungary and embarked on a campaign that saw the capture of Belgrade that same year. It was evident that his ambitions would extend far beyond those initial conquests.

In Croatia, Count Ivan Karlović took charge of the defense efforts. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, he appreciated the assistance rendered by Archduke Ferdinand, who shared his concerns regarding the formidable threat posed by the new Sultan. However, when the Bosnian fortress of Ostrovica fell in 1523,



Tughra of Suleiman the Magnificent

Count Karlović reached his limit with the ceaseless warfare. In a state of desperation, he offered all of his possessions to Venice, which, in turn, pledged annual support and encouraged him to persevere in the struggle. Yet, even more aid was provided, mostly by Archduke Ferdinand. He knew that the Austrian lands were close to the war zone, so he supported Karlović, the Frankopan family, and the Zrinski family. He lent his backing, particularly to Nikola IV Zrinski, supplying arms and integrating him into his service. With strategic acumen, Archduke Ferdinand dispatched assistance, thereby garnering the loyalty of the Croatian and Hungarian nobility. Vienna grasped a fundamental reality: the fall of Hungary and Croatia would imperil Austria. Hence, efforts were made to confine the conflict within Croatian borders.

The Frankopan family found themselves thrust into the heart of the unfolding events. When an envoy arrived in Buda from the besieged city of Jajce seeking help, Count Krsto Frankopan (1482-1527) boldly stepped up. Offering to lead an army, he won King Louis's approval. Through swift and adept maneuvering, this military leader managed to breach the city's defenses in June 1525, delivering essential supplies of food and weapons. He then skilfully navigated his forces back, inflicting defeats upon Ottoman troops along the way. However, his feat impressed the nobles but not the king. Louis publicly



King Louis II of Hungary, (Nadasdy Mausoleum, 17th century)

humiliated him when he declined to appoint him as viceroy and, on top of that, refused to return Senj to his family. Understandably, this strained the relationship between the Frankopans and King Louis.

Realizing that assistance from the King was unlikely, Krsto Frankopan turned to another quarter for support - the Habsburg family. This Croatian count proposed to his Croatian nobles that they endorsed the Habsburgs as their new rulers, and a Croatian delegation in Buda openly warned the king that without his commitment to protect his subjects, the populace would seek alternative leadership. At a meeting in Križevci, Krsto even declared his intention to declare Archduke Ferdinand as the Bosnian king once it was conquered. Some Croatian

magnates, on the other hand, sought to align Croatia with Venice.

Meanwhile, Archduke Ferdinand continued his support for Nikola Zrinski, aiming to confine Ottoman army's activities within the territory of Croatian lands to prevent their advance into Austria. Croatia, a small nation grappling with significant challenges, found itself a mere pawn in the maneuvers of far more influential players. Simultaneously, the French monarch encouraged Ottoman attacks on Hungary to divert the attention of Habsburgs away from France. Sensing an opportunity in his adversary's vulnerability, Sultan Suleiman decided to launch an attack on Hungary. He ordered his army to begin preparations, devising meticulous war strategies. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, King Louis understood that retreat was no longer an option; the time for decisive action had arrived, so he issued orders for the mobilization of an army to defend the state.

The Death of the Young King - the Battle of Mohács Field

As the Ottomans crossed the Drava River, they encountered the youthful King Louis II Jagiellon at the helm of his forces. His army was bolstered by nobles like Mihajlo Zrinski and Matija Frankopan, totaling approximately 27,000 soldiers and equipped with around 80 cannons. Despite the counsel of some Croatian nobles to await reinforcements from Count Krsto Frankopan and Duke John Zápolya, King Louis resolved to seize the moment, opting to confront the Ottoman menace alone and secure victory for himself.

On the afternoon of August 29, 1526, both armies assembled for the commencement of the Battle of Mohács, a pivotal battle that would determine the destiny of the Croats and their kingdom. The Hungarian-Croatian arranged their infantry in the front ranks, with three lines of cavalry behind them, while the king positioned himself at the rear with heavily armed cavalry and archbishops. Across the battlefield stood the numerically superior Ottoman army, bolstered by powerful cannons.

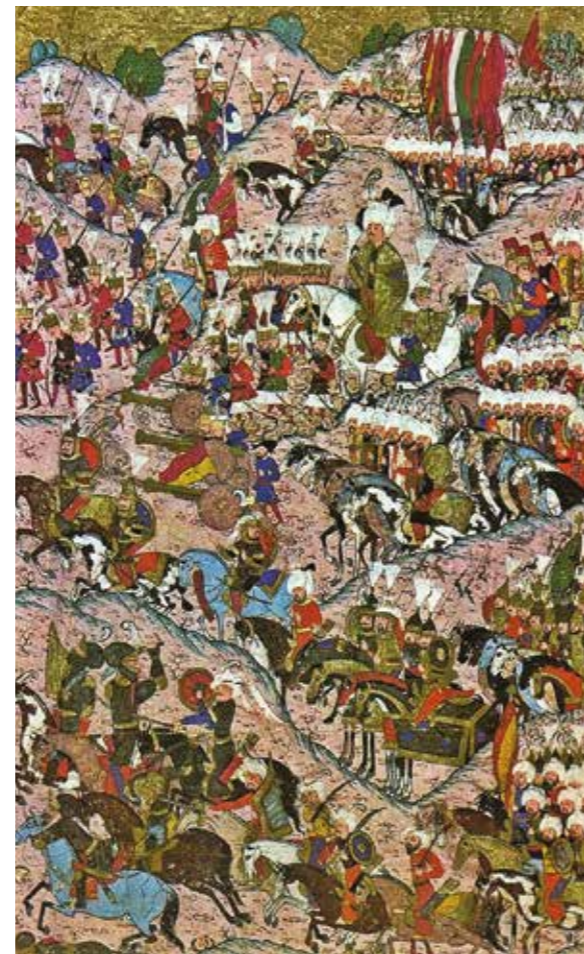
The clash began with an assault on the right flank, yet



Battle of Mohács, by Bertalan Székely, 19th century

the entire engagement lasted less than two hours. The Ottomans, with their overwhelming force, emerged triumphant, resulting in the decimation or capture of the majority of the Hungarian-Croatian army. In the brutal melee, approximately 20,000 soldiers perished, including a large part of the nobility. Faced with the stark reality of defeat, King Louis II Jagiellon opted to flee but tragically lost his life while attempting to cross a swollen stream burdened by heavy armor. The king, aged only 20, left no successors. The following day, most of the captives were executed.

After capturing Buda and Pest, Suleiman led his triumphant army back to Istanbul, leaving a trail of devastation in the surrounding regions. With the defense of Croatian lands now entrusted to Krsto Frankopan, he assumed the role of the Kingdom's defender. He relied on the support of the Habsburg family, striving to preserve the power and strength of his renowned family.



Suleiman I after the Battle of Mohacs, Ottoman miniature



Discovery of the body of King Louis II of Hungary, by Bertalan Székely, 1860

The choice of a new king – the Habsburg dynasty on the throne

Amidst the chaos, Archduke Ferdinand Habsburg (1503-1564), wedded to Anna, the sister of the late King Louis, saw an opportunity to press his claim to the throne. However, the Hungarian nobility found themselves divided, hesitant to accept a foreigner ruler and instead favoring the nobleman John Zápolya (1487-1540). The Croats, on the other hand, were in favor of Ferdinand, who had helped them in their battles against the Ottomans. In a council convened on January 1, 1527 in the town of Cetin near Slunj, attended by a majority of Croatian nobles, it was resolved that Ferdinand I Habsburg would ascend the throne as the new king. This

decision marked the dissolution of Croatia's union with Hungary, a bond that had endured since 1102. To secure the loyalty of the nobility, the new king pledged infantry, cavalry, and provisions for the defensive fortresses protecting the border.

Not everything proceeded without turmoil. A civil strife erupted between the supporters of Ferdinand Habsburg and the nobleman John Zápolya, who opposed the Habsburg dynasty. Even Sultan Suleiman extended his support to Zápolya. However, this was merely a strategical ploy as the Sultan recognized the stronger adversary and offered assistance to the weaker Zápolya without expecting any reciprocation, aiming to bolster his claim to the Hungarian crown.



Election of King Ferdinand at the Assembly in Cetin, by Dragutin Weingartner

The struggle for the throne exacted a toll on the kingdom and the Frankopan family, resulting in loss of many of their holdings. The realm became divided into two factions, north and south, heightening the peril. The conflicts between the two kings provided an opportunity for the Ottomans to capitalize, resulting in the capture of Obrovac, Krbava, and Lika. Ottoman military commander Murad Bey Tardić further weakened the south of Croatia through his conquests, fostering dissatisfaction among the Croatian nobility toward the new king.

Cunning Agreement – the Battle of Güns

Despite the setback caused by inclement weather during the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1528, Suleiman remained steadfast in his overarching ambition. He was resolute in his intent to return. The opportune moment arrived in August 1532, as Suleiman's army halted at Güns, a diminutive fortress in northwestern Hungary under the defense of Nikola Jurišić (1490-1545). Not only a warrior, but he was also a diplomat and he had previously served as an envoy of Ferdinand Habsburg at Suleiman's court in Istanbul and knew well who he was dealing with. With the aid of the local populace, his modest garrison numbered around 700 defenders. Prior to the impending clash, he penned a missive to

Ferdinand saying, *“I have dared to defend this small and vulnerable town against the Turkish force, not in the hope of its salvation, but solely to delay the enemy momentarily, affording Christian leaders the opportunity to muster resistance. It is for this reason alone that I have subjected myself to the gravest peril.”*

Despite the Ottoman army's numerical superiority, they found themselves unable to breach the fortress walls, repelled at every turn in their assaults. After a span of 25 days, the Grand Vizier Ibrahim called for a meeting with Jurišić. The courteous vizier inquired about his injuries, but Jurišić refused to surrender. Recognizing the pressing need to expedite their advance towards Vienna, the vizier understood that a swift resolution was imperative.

An extraordinary accord was brokered. Jurišić agreed to sign a document surrendering the fortress to the Sultan's control, relinquishing the city's keys in the process. While the victory would be attributed to the Sultan, the brave defender would retain governance over the city. Several Ottoman soldiers stationed themselves at the city's entrance, an Ottoman banner was unfurled atop the walls, and, as per the agreement, the Ottomans withdrew from the vicinity two days later.

Suleiman recognized that precious time had been squandered due to Jurišić's resolute defense, causing significant delays. This delay provided the time needed for the Habsburg army to assemble and for winter to set in, dissuading the Sultan from advancing under such unfavorable conditions. In acknowledgement of Jurišić's courageous defense, he was bestowed the title of baron and received financial compensation from the king for his valor.

Meanwhile, Ferdinand Habsburg successfully resolved the civil conflict in his favor, yet the seizure of Croatian territory continued. Slavonia found itself in dire straits, with the entire region between the Sava and Drava rivers enduring relentless raids by Ottoman cavalry, while the frightened population fled to safer havens. The situation remained grim in the south as well, where the Ottomans concentrated their efforts on Klis, a stronghold impeding their further advancement.



Reconstruction of Kiseg Fortress

Two warriors - the Battle of Klis

In March 1537, the esteemed Ottoman commander Murad Bey Tardić resolved to seize Klis, the lone remaining unoccupied fortress in the southern region. The defense was led by Captain Petar Kružić (c. 1490-1537), a celebrated warrior with a history of successfully repelling previous assaults on Klis, however the circumstances were now dire, prompting Kružić to seek aid from every corner. With his brave garrison, he even managed to attack Ottoman fortresses, but the arrival of Murad Bey signaled the need to retreat.

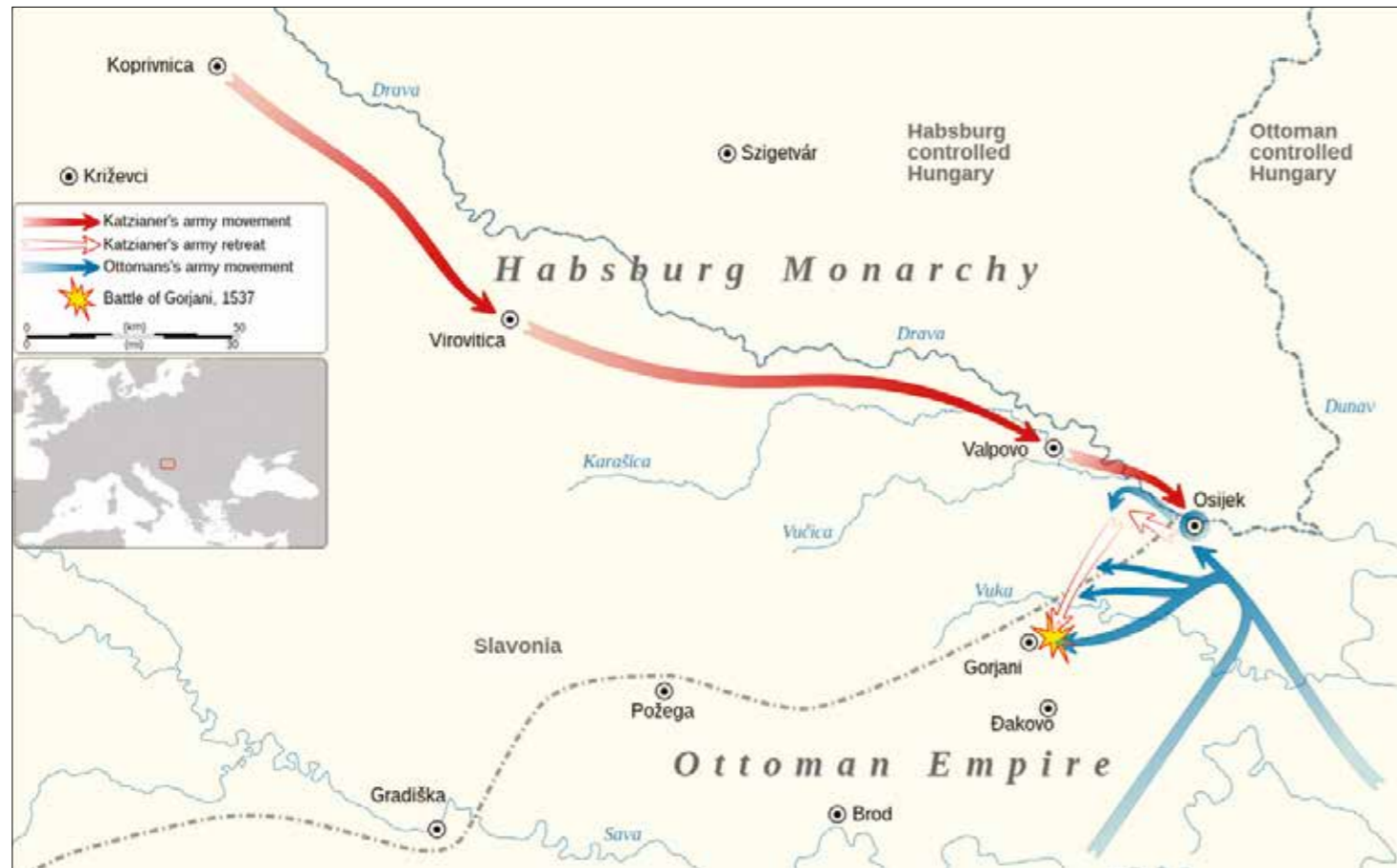
Unable to rally his troops effectively, Kružić's soldiers began a hasty withdrawal towards the coast and awaiting boats. He was among the last to retreat, but he couldn't reach the shore and safety. Ultimately overtaken by enemy forces, the famous captain was overpowered and beheaded, while the fortress surrendered. The remaining garrison then retreated to Senj, continuing their resistance as Uskoks. Petar Kružić's memory endured as

that of a Croatian hero, and with the fall of Klis, the Croats relinquished a vital stronghold in the southern reaches of Croatia.

The Ottoman Deception - the Battle of Đakovo

Even Slavonia found itself embroiled in conflict, as in 1537, when a Christian army of 20,000 men led by Captain Ivan Katzianer was sent by Ferdinand Habsburg to capture Osijek. However, the siege met with failure when epidemic struck the army, compounded by the unexpected arrival of Ottoman cavalry. In addition to this, discord among the Christian camp further weakened their resolve, leading some commanders to abandon the campaign prematurely.

The cunning Ottoman commanders often employed a tactic in earlier battles where they pretended to flee from the enemy and then would launch a surprise attack and encircle the enemy. They used the same tactic in the Battle of Đakovo. Katzianer, misled by the apparent numerical



Representation of the movement of Katzianer's army for the Battles of Đakovo

advantage, sent his army straight into a Ottoman trap, only to find himself outmaneuvered and overwhelmed. His ignominious flight from the battlefield resulted in his imprisonment. However, after a daring escape, Katzianer sought refuge among the Ottomans, collaborating with them until his eventual capture by members of the Zrinski family, and on Vienna's orders, he was killed in 1539.

In 1538, the two kings, Ferdinand Habsburg, and John Zápolya, finally reached an agreement in Veliki Varadin. According to this pact, after Zápolya's death, his portion of the kingdom would revert to Ferdinand. However, upon John Zápolya's death in 1540, his son John Sigismund Zápolya sought to renegotiate terms. By the time of this new agreement, Croatia had ceded central Slavonia and southern Dalmatia, leading to further contraction of Croatian territory under the new dynasty. Many Croats faced enslavement or fled the conflict, leaving the land under the control of three dominant powers: the

Habsburgs, the Ottoman Empire, and Venice. Despite all the conquests, Ferdinand recognized the necessity for a semblance of peace. His envoys succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Sultan in June 1547, which established a five-year peace treaty with an annual gift of 30,000 gold coins.

The era of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent marked a catastrophic period for Croatia. However, amidst the turmoil, there emerged military commanders who valiantly resisted conquest. One such figure would eternally resonate in the collective memory of the Croatian people through his heroic deeds.

Legendary Croatian hero - Nikola IV. Zrinski

Nikola IV Zrinski, also known as Nikola Šubić Zrinski (1508-1566), earned his place in history. Descended from the illustrious Zrinski lineage, Nikola was a warrior from his earliest days. It wouldn't be his first encounter with the renowned Suleiman, but it was one particular



Nikola Zrinski

battle that would forever etch their names in history and herald the end for both.

Possessing a strong temperament and sympathetic to Protestantism, Nikola harbored a staunch belief in the imperative of confronting the Ottoman Empire. Upon his father's death, Nikola decided to break with the tradition of paying tribute to the Ottomans. His valor was first showcased during the siege of Vienna in 1529, where his gallant deeds earned him royal recognition in the form of gold and a steed. Emerging as a pivotal figure in both political and military spheres, Nikola made the decisive call to execute the traitorous Katzianer, held accountable for the defeat at Đakovo. In 1542, this exceptional warrior managed to save Buda with his 400 soldiers. For his valor, the king appointed him to the position of viceroy, a post he dutifully served until 1556. Nikola fearlessly confronting challenges, often provoking

personal duels with Ottoman commanders. From 1553 onwards, he found himself entangled in a dispute with Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (Sokolović), a prominent Ottoman military figure. Despite intense pressure, Nikola adamantly refused to release the captured Ottoman commander Murat, citing his capture during a ceasefire. This personal feud teetered on the brink of sparking a potential war, prompting the king himself to intervene. Despite the king's pleas to release the captive, Nikola remained steadfast, viewing it as a matter of honor, and war loomed ominously on the horizon. Seeking resolution, he sought permission from the king to engage his adversary in a duel.

In July 1554, conditions were set for the duel under royal supervision. Since neither side fully trusted the other, both sides agreed to limit their entourage to 500 horsemen, while keeping their respective armies at bay. This raised concerns among frontier commanders, like Captain Ivan Ungnad, fearing that the duel might escalate into a broader conflict. However, the duel was postponed as the Ottoman commander awaited the Sultan's approval. Meanwhile, the king changed his mind, forbidding the duel for Zrinski and threatening him with the death penalty, loss of honor, and property. Undeterred, Nikola continued to prepare for the duel, even drafting his last will and testament. Despite his readiness, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha failed to appear at the agreed-upon location near Đurđevac in August, and the duel was canceled, much to the relief of all, except for the embittered Nikola, of course.

Due to irregular troop payments and a cavalry shortage, Nikola requested relief from his viceroy duties. However, the king, acknowledging his immense military prowess, persuaded him to continue safeguarding the kingdom's borders. Nikola's military acumen earned him great esteem, evidenced by the honor of carrying the replica of the Crown of St. Stephen at Maximilian I's coronation in 1565. The Zrinski family now became not only a Croatian, but also a Hungarian noble family. With the fall of Kostajnica in 1566, the defense south of the Sava River faced dire threats. Frustrated



Pistol owned by Nikola Zrinski (Croatian History Museum)

and disappointed, Nikola Zrinski resigned from his viceroyalty, unable to accept the Emperor's cessation of border defense funding. He supported the appointment of Peter Erdödy as the new viceroy. Nikola Zrinski's ties to the Frankopan family, through his marriage to Katarina Frankopan, also shaped his life. Following her death in 1561, he inherited new estates.

Throughout his life, Nikola Zrinski waged battles against the Ottoman Empire, proving himself as a brave warrior and hero, a thorn in the side of the greatest sultan. Their fates would converge in a small fortress, uniting their legacies in history.

The Battle of Sziget - A Turning Point in Western History

Sultan Suleiman's ambitions often clashed with formidable defenders like Nikola IV Zrinski, renowned for his unwavering defense of his borders. Suleiman was aware of the reputation of the man who would ultimately become his last rival. Recognizing that Nikola advocated for ending tribute payments and initiating a major war from the Imperial Council, Suleiman saw him as a significant threat to the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, he sought a way to eliminate this persistent foe.

Meanwhile, Mehmed Pasha, now the Grand Vizier, convinced the aging Sultan Suleiman to launch a campaign to seize Vienna, a longstanding desire of the Ottoman Empire. In 1566, a massive army of up to 100,000 Ottoman soldiers set out on this expedition, with the fervent aim to conquer Vienna for their Sultan. The expedition was supported by over 300 cannons,

highlighting the Ottoman determination to achieve their Sultan's ambitions.

Near Osijek, Ottoman engineers achieved a remarkable feat: through immense labor, they constructed a wooden bridge spanning over six kilometers in length and six meters in width. This extraordinary feat was the work of Mimar Sinan, the most renowned Ottoman architect. The bridge facilitated the passage of the Sultan's army across the Drava River to enter Hungary. Accompanied by celebratory cannon salutes, the illustrious Sultan crossed the bridge and embarked on his final attempt to capture the enemy's capital, leaving behind a remarkable architectural marvel. However, this famous structure would be destroyed in 1664 by Nikola VII Zrinski, the Croatian viceroy, in a military action that reverberated throughout Europe.

In early August, Sultan Suleiman approached the fortress of Sziget in southern Hungary. Inside the stronghold was Nikola Šubić Zrinski, a renowned hero with a battle-hardened garrison of 2,500 warriors. Aware of the strength and reputation of his opponent, Zrinski did not waver in his resolve. He was ready. He had procured wheat, stocked the fortress, and secured the loyalty of his men. He sent several letters and prepared a testament, bracing himself for a fierce battle. Before the siege began, Zrinski rallied his defenders with an impassioned speech and took an oath: "*I, Count Nikola Zrinski, first promise to Almighty God, then to His Majesty, our illustrious ruler, and to our humble homeland and to you, my knights, that I will never abandon you, but will live and die with you, enduring good and ill fortune. So, help me God.*"



Siget Fortress before the Siege, Ottoman miniature, 16th century

His warriors pledged their allegiance, while messages seeking aid were dispatched to the Emperor, hoping that reinforcements would arrive in time.

Nikola initiated his confrontation with the vanguard of the Ottoman forces, dealing them a significant blow. Refusing any offers of ransom for captured soldiers he, instead, ordered their execution, further provoking Suleiman's ire. The Sultan perceived this as an insult, fully aware of Nikola's reputation as a courageous warrior and seasoned military commander, whom he respected as a worthy adversary. As tensions escalated, Suleiman faced increasing pressure to devise a strategy to overcome Nikola Zrinski and seize control of the fortress at Sziget. The furious Sultan approached the fortress walls, launching a relentless barrage from the cannons. Under these ceaseless attacks, the defenders were compelled

to retreat from the newer section of the fortress to the older, sustaining significant casualties in the process. Closing off the old gates, the Ottomans erected fresh earthworks, and fortified them with cannons. The siege continued, yet Emperor Maximilian refrained from sending reinforcements. While the attackers suffered substantial losses, with thousands falling, the number of defenders dwindled to around 800. Despite enduring relentless bombardment and repeated assaults, including a personal attempt by Sultan Suleiman himself to breach the fortress alongside his troops, Nikola remained resolute in his defense.

The Ottomans made various attempts to change their strategy. They offered Nikola enticing proposals, suggesting that he could rule over all of Croatia in exchange for surrendering the fortress. However, Nikola promptly rejected such offers. They then tried to slide pamphlets over the walls, urging the defenders to surrender, but their efforts proved fruitless. They even attempted to exploit sentiment by coercing a captured trumpeter to play familiar tunes to encourage the defenders to give up, yet even this tactic failed. It became evident to both sides that this was a battle to the bitter end. The Ottoman army was demoralized, and diseases ravaged their camp. Despite their dwindling numbers, with only about 500 defenders remaining, the stronghold held firm.

In early September, as the siege neared its conclusion, Suleiman's journey through life reached its end. The elderly Sultan passed away at the age of seventy-two, inside his tent during a military campaign, succumbing to the natural course of aging, an ailment that even the mightiest cannot evade. As the flame of his life gradually flickered out, on his path toward the conquest of Vienna, he was thwarted by a Croatian, a member of the renowned Zrinski family.

The Grand Vizier, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, opted to keep the Sultan's demise under wraps to avoid widespread chaos. He needed to emerge victorious from this battle. Thus, the charade began, with food being brought to the deceased Sultan and music playing, all as if he were still alive. A concerted attack was launched on the old



Zrinski's oath by Vizkeleti Bela and Rohn Alajos, 1860.

section of the fortress, compelling Nikola to recognize the necessity of retreating with the remaining defenders into the inner sanctum of the stronghold. Once again, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha invited him to an honorable surrender, with promises of life and freedom. However, Nikola's response remained unchanged. On September 7, 1566, fiery projectiles tore down the ramparts, the fortified city was engulfed in flames. The defenders retreated into the inner citadel and raised the drawbridge. The Ottomans unleashed incendiary balls and arrows, while their forces stormed the fortress walls. Amidst the inferno, Nikola Zrinski made a fateful decision. He called for his ceremonial garb and finest arms, taking up his father's sword and a small shield, then stepping forward before his fellow warriors. Delivering a final address, he commanded them to charge the enemy, prepared to sacrifice their lives for God and homeland.

Euphoric warriors followed their commander into death. His parting words echoed: "God is high, and the king is far away." Nikola mounted his horse, drawing his sword as the fortress gates swung open. The thunderous roar of a cannon signaled the beginning of the final assault. Resigned to death and fate, they charged forth. The defenders of Sziget burst out, transforming from the defensive to the offensive, led by Count Nikola, charging into close combat, man to man. In the fierce clash, three bullets found their mark on Nikola Zrinski, who bravely fell. Around his body, his warriors gathered, ready to meet their end together, guarding the body of their leader. The Ottomans severed Nikola's head, enshrouding it in silk and velvet, placing it upon a cushion, while his body was buried. The Grand Vizier paid homage to this warrior. Subsequently, his family received his



Assault of Nikola Zrinski from the Sziget Fortress, by Bertalan Szekely, 19th century

severed head, interring it in the Zrinski family tomb near Čakovec. The fate of his body remains unknown, likely left buried at the battleground. Sziget succumbed, its defenders perished, while women and children were taken into captivity. The Ottoman Empire suffered significant losses, with over 20,000 soldiers falling, while only seven defenders survived. Franjo Črnko, among the few survivors, penned an account of the battle following his release from captivity, spreading Nikola Zrinski's tale of valor. His heroic demise echoed throughout Europe, earning him the moniker "Slavic Leonidas," drawing parallels to the famed Spartan hero. French Cardinal Richelieu went as far as suggesting that only a miracle could have spared the Habsburg Empire, deeming Sziget that very miracle. Nikola Šubić Zrinski transcended into legend. Subsequently, this battle inspired countless artists, from painters to writers and poets, while the Ottoman rendition found expression in artistic miniatures. The Ottoman Empire, now without a sultan, halted the campaign on Vienna, and the heroic defeat ultimately transformed into a victory.



Funeral of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent

The link between this battle and a historical mystery is captivating. Following the battle, Sultan Suleiman's body was conveyed to the capital for burial, while legend suggests that his heart was interred at the location of his final conflict. The quest to unveil the truth behind this myth continues to captivate numerous archaeologists and historians. Should



Sculptures of Nikola IV Zrinski and Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the Park of Hungarian-Turkish Friendship in Sziget

the Sultan's heart be discovered, it would also hold significance for the local community, which eagerly anticipates the findings of researchers. Near Sziget, there is already a Turkish-Hungarian Friendship Park, featuring sculptures commemorating Sultan Suleiman and Nikola Zrinski, marking the spot where Suleiman the Magnificent's army once stood.

Ongoing Conflicts Leading to the Magnate Conspiracy

The passing of Suleiman the Magnificent didn't halt the Ottoman Empire's ambition for expansion, with subsequent sultans continuing their efforts to enlarge its territories. Selim II (1524-1574), who ascended throne after his father's demise, failed to match the glory of his father. The power of the immense empire slowly began to wane. Selim faced a significant setback in the renowned naval battle of Lepanto in 1571.

The new viceroy, Petar II Erdődy (1504-1567), gathered an army with the Frankopans and defeated Ottoman warriors near Novigrad. However, the triumph was short-lived as news of Nikola Šubić Zrinski's death reached them. Soon after, Viceroy Petar II Erdődy succumbed to illness.

The new King, Maximilian II (1527-1576), appointed two viceroys, Juraj Drašković and Franjo Frankopan Slunjski in June 1567. Chosen for their extensive estates that stretched along the border with the Ottoman Empire, they were expected to defend that border. However, King Maximilian II had already concluded a truce with the Ottoman Empire in 1568, promising an annual tribute of 30,000 gold coins to Sultan Selim II. Despite the truce, occasional Ottoman raids persisted across the border. Ottoman incursions remained a concern, with soldiers frequently plundering and abducting locals. Viceroy Franjo Frankopan, despite the king's disapproval, occasionally launched raids into Ottoman territory.



Territorial expansion of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent

Peace remained elusive in the southern parts of Croatia, with some territories being under Venetian control, while others under the Ottoman Empire's rule. Venice found support among the Senj allies in its war against the Empire. The Uskoks, named after the Croatian term *uskočiti* (to leap in), were fierce warriors who relocated to Senj after the fall of Klis in 1537. Numbering in the thousands and led by military commanders known as *vojvodas*, they sustained themselves through plundering and were notorious for their sudden and agile attacks. At sea, they targeted Ottoman ships with their small boats.

The conflicts between the Uskoks and the Ottomans grew so intense that the Ottomans appealed to Venice to cease support for the Uskoks. Ignoring this, the Uskoks persisted in raiding Venetian ships transporting Ottoman goods. In response, Venice turned against the Uskoks, initiating attacks, coastal blockades, and seeking aid from the Habsburgs. These conflicts escalated into a full-blown war in the early 17th century, prompting the resolution of the Uskok issue and their relocation to the northern region around the Kupa River.

In the meantime, new challenges awaited the Croatian regions. Viceroy Franjo Frankopan Slunjski, hailed as the

“sword and shield of the remnants of Illyria,” for his efforts against the Ottomans, met a tragic fate. At the young age of thirty-six in 1572, he embarked on a journey to Moravia to get married. However, he stopped in Varaždin to undergo treatment for an ulcer, which unfortunately led into infection, and his untimely demise. This sad death marked the abrupt end of his wedding plans, with Ottoman raiders immediately seizing the opportunity to plunder his estates.

In spite of Emperor Rudolf II's (1576-1612) endeavors to find a solution to the border disputes, the situation showed no signs of improvement. Despite signing the Treaty of Zsitvatorok in 1606, which aimed to formalize the status quo, the agreement's provisions held little sway along the border.

The Eerie Silence - The Siege of Gvozdansko

The siege of Gvozdansko, marked by the leadership of Sokullu Ferhad Pasha (Sokolović), a renowned military commander and the founder of the city of Banja Luka, unfolded amidst the prolonged conflicts, commencing in October 1577. Sokullu Ferhad Pasha opted to launch his assault in the midst of winter. Backed by several thousand experienced soldiers, he had no intention of giving up. The defenders of Gvozdansko, numbering around 300, under the command of courageous Captain Damjan Doktorović, faced dire shortages of provisions, ammunition, water, and fuel. Compounding their plight, the besiegers resorted to hurling poisoned meat over the fortress walls.

Despite relentless calls for surrender from Sokollu Ferhad Pasha, the defenders of Gvozdansko remainedolute in their decision to resist to the last. They valiantly repelled the attacks, yet as the icy nights wore on, their hope began to wane. In the predawn hours of January 13, 1578, Sokullu Ferhad Pasha ordered a final assault. However, an eerie silence enveloped the fortress, with no defenders present atop the ramparts. Upon breaching the entrance gates, the Ottomans encountered a horrifying sight: there were no survivors left. A strewn across the grounds were



Gvozdansko Castle, part of the painting, Anton Matthias Weiss, 1729

the lifeless bodies of those who had chosen death over surrender. Sokullu Ferhad Pasha, a seasoned warrior who had witnessed death many times, was deeply moved by this poignant scene. In a gesture of respect, he ordered that they all fallen defenders be accorded Christian burials, arranging for the presence of a Catholic priest, and honoring them with military rites. Additionally, the few remaining inhabitants in the warn-torn region were granted relief from taxes. This act of reverence from the esteemed Ottoman warrior underscored his admiration for the bravery and honorable demise of his adversaries.

Unceasing Fire - Perpetual Military Engagements

Amidst the relentless tide of ongoing attacks, the imperative for a robust defense infrastructure became increasingly evident. In the mid-16th century, the establishment of military garrisons marked the initial steps toward the creation of a formidable defense network. These garrisons, eventually integrated into frontier regions, formed the vanguard of defense, giving rise to what would be known as the Military Frontier (*Vojna Krajina* in Croatian) -a network of fortified strongholds manned by military personnel. The Military Frontier was further subdivided into Croatian, Slavonian, and Banovina frontiers.

Archduke Karl (1540-1590) promoted the construction of strategic fortresses along the border, including the fortress known today as Karlovac. These modern bastions were tasked with thwarting any attempts by the enemy to partition Croatian territories. Archduke Karl instituted a War Council to oversee the governance of the Military Frontier, assuming the role of supreme commander in military affairs. This organizational reform marked a significant step in fortifying Croatian territories against Ottoman attacks.

Concurrent organizational changes were occurring across the border. In 1580, the Bosnian Pashaluk emerged, led by the renowned Sokullu Ferhad Pasha. He was succeeded by Telli Hasan Pasha (Predojević), another hero of the Ottoman Empire, who, following the conquest of Bihać, set his sights on Sisak. Telli Hasan Pasha faced the Habsburg army at Sisak in June 1593, with Toma Erdődy on the opposite side. Despite initial triumphs, the Ottoman forces began to falter and eventually retreated, crossing the river Kupa. This retreat proved fatal As Telli Hasan Pasha lost his life, rendering the battle a pivotal moment. Croatia stood defended, and the tide of Ottoman expansion was stemmed.

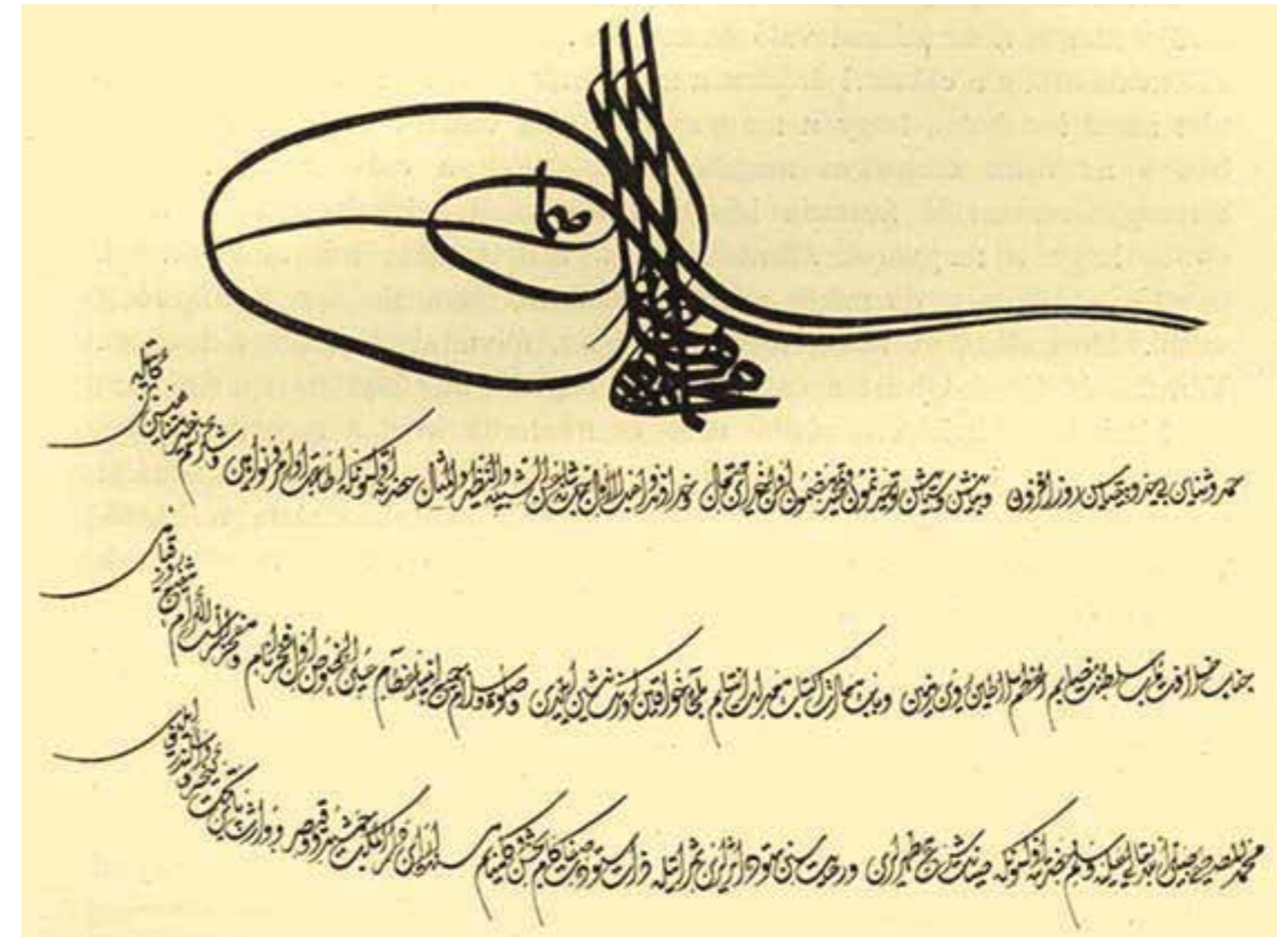
The prolonged exacted a toll on the Ottoman Empire, leading to a weakening of central authority and the rise of provincial officials' power. One of the most notable naval battles, the Battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571, dealt

a severe blow. The Sultan Selim II's (1566-1574) navy suffered a defeat in this encounter, which also involved both Croats and Ottomans. The Republic of Dubrovnik, though technically a vassal of the Ottoman Empire due to paying tribute, cleverly navigated the situation. When the Empire officially requested their ships, Dubrovnik leaders devised a cunning strategy. They claimed to possess 30 galleys in Spain, which they portrayed as merchant vessels, and purportedly agreed to surrender them. In reality, they swiftly communicated with the Spaniards to seize all their ships. Feigning outrage over the supposed confiscation of their vessels, they successfully evaded the Ottomans suspicions. Additionally, Dubrovnik ensured that the ships participating in the battle on the Christian side were flown under the Spanish flag to further avert suspicion. Once again, the resourceful republic emerged triumphant through their cunning.

The new Sultan Ahmed I (1590-1617) faced problems in the east with Persia and sought to stabilize the Empire's western borders through negotiations with the Habsburgs. This culminated in a peace treaty in 1606, delineating borders, and highlighting the Ottoman Empire's growing awareness of its internal vulnerabilities. Despite the signing of a peace treaty, Croatia continued to face enduring problems as raids and attacks persisted. The Zrinski and Frankopans remained engaged in battles against the Ottomans on the border. Leading the defense was Viceroy Nikola VII Zrinski (1620-1664), a seasoned warrior, politician, and poet, known as the 'general of all Croats.' Anticipating new Ottoman military actions in the spring, he opted for a surprise attack in the middle of winter. His objective was to destroy the bridge over the Drava River and impede Ottoman crossings. Successfully executing his tactics, Viceroy Nikola VII Zrinski orchestrated a spectacular event by setting fire to the bridge built by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. This bold move captured the attention of Europe, symbolizing a courageous stand against the formidable Ottoman Empire. Nikola Zrinski's bravery and successful action earned him praise and recognition even from the kings of Spain and France.



Ottoman navy, detail from the painting Battle of Lepanto, Tommaso Dolabella, 1632



Peace of Vašvar, Ottoman version

However, the mood was far from celebratory. Emperor Leopold, who ascended to the throne in 1657, concluded the Peace of Vasvár in 1664. Dubbed the “shameful peace,” it was a twenty-year agreement that included paying war reparations to the Ottomans. This decision stirred discontent in Croatia and Hungary, where expectations of continued warfare aimed at liberating the occupied regions were dashed. Dissatisfied Croatian and

Hungarian nobles recognized the looming threat posed by the absolutist-oriented Leopold and devised a perilous conspiracy. Now in addition to the Ottoman Empire, the nobles found themselves pitted against the mighty Habsburg Empire. This grand conspiracy would have profound and lasting consequences, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the Croatian people.

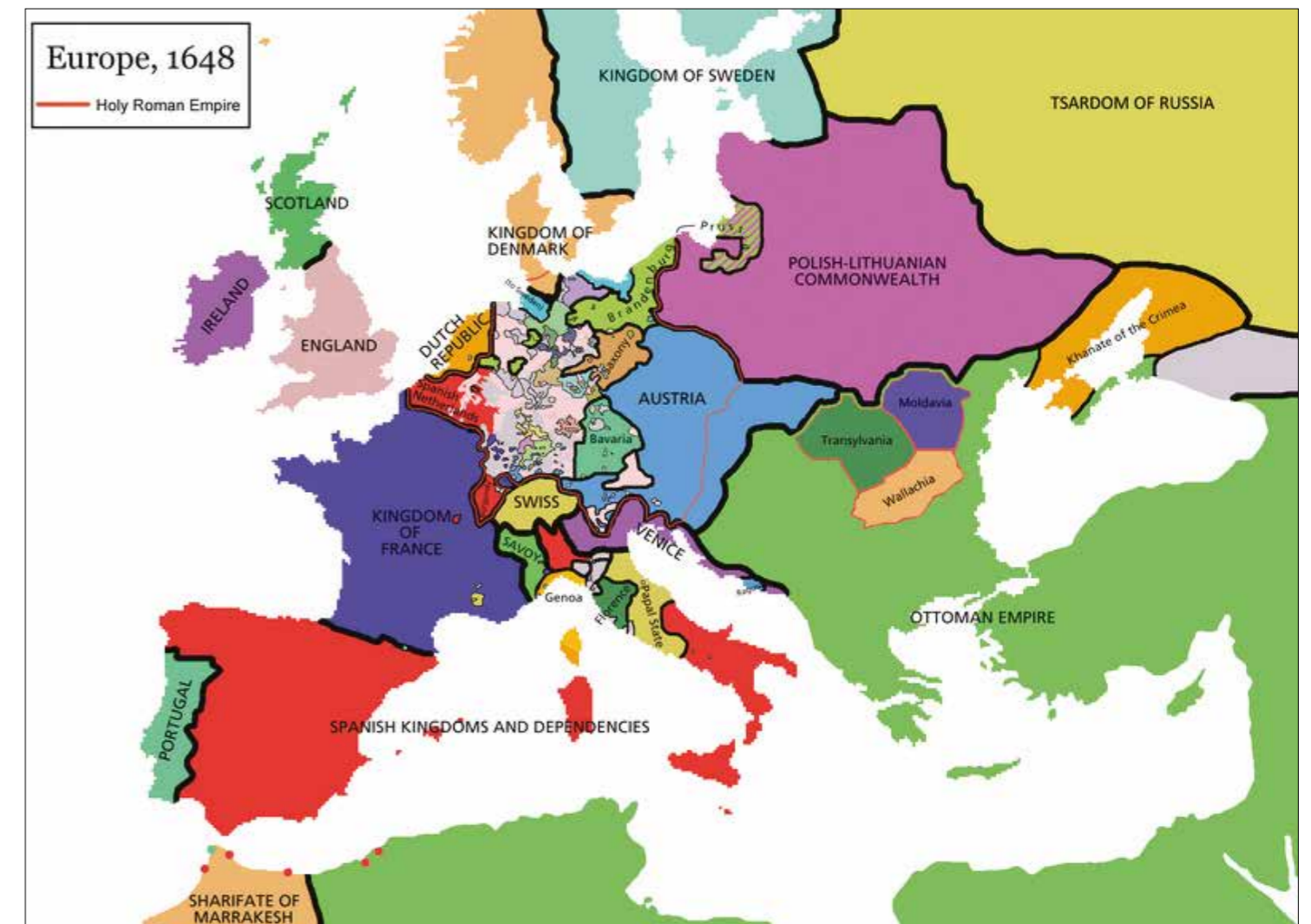
Magnate Conspiracy

In the history of every nation, certain events remain indelibly imprinted in the collective memory. The conspiracy instigated by Croatian and Hungarian nobility against Vienna stands out as one such event. Known as the “Wesselenyi Conspiracy” or the “Magnate conspiracy”, this failed bid to oppose the Habsburg family signaled the end of two of the most powerful noble families, the Zrinski and Frankopans, whose sway over the fate of the Croatian people endured for centuries. Caught between the encroaching absolutist ambitions of the emperor and his family and fatigue from ceaseless conflicts with the mighty Ottoman Empire, Croatian nobles forged alliances with kindred dissidents in

Hungary, unleashing a chain of events that would shape the destinies of Croatian and Hungarian domains. The Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy would emerge as a potent symbol of resistance against foreign rule, embodying the fervent longing and relentless struggle for the freedom of the Croatian people.

Europe and the Ottoman Empire During the Conspiracy

In the 17th century, Europe underwent a period of profound change, signaling a departure from the traditional medieval order. The rift within the Catholic Church and the rise of Protestantism, followed by the



Map of Europe in 1648

ensuing religious conflicts, left enduring imprints on the continent’s history. While winds of change swept across the continent, those in positions of power remained vigilant against these shifts. The rise of absolutism, a novel form of governance, epitomized the aspirations of rulers seeking to reaffirm their diminishing authority. This sentiment was also the driving force behind Leopold I, the King of Hungary and Croatia, and the Holy Roman Emperor.

In the East, the Ottoman Empire, a long-standing adversary, began showing signs of decline during the 17th century. Corruption and nepotism surfaced as prominent issues, eroding the empire’s influence. The sprawling territorial expanse of this formidable state had been stretched thin. Despite maintaining control over regions

like North Africa, the Ottoman Empire’s inferiority in technological and military prowess compared to the West became increasingly evident.

Internally crises unfolded due to the disintegration of the timar system, surging prices, and the sale of governmental positions. In leadership, individuals with lesser capabilities emerged, weakening the Sultan’s authority. Concurrently, the significance of the Grand Vizier’s role waned as conservative elements gained strength, resisting the forward march of the new era. The Janissaries, once the formidable backbone of the Ottoman military, saw a decline in quality as the timar system disintegrated. These factors collectively contributed to the enfeeblement of the once-mighty Ottoman Empire, leading to the gradual unraveling of its vast organizational structure.



Croatian Lands in 1606

The Situation in Croatia

Until the 17th century, Croatia grappled with a series of daunting challenges as a small nation. Venice aggressively sought to expand its coastal territories, while the Ottoman Empire steadily advanced from the east, annexing Croatian land. Meanwhile rulers in Vienna worked to curtail Croatia's autonomy.

Border conflicts of varying intensities were a constant feature, with peace being a rarity. Brave Croatian warriors, often under the leadership of the influential Zrinski and Frankopan families, valiantly defended their homeland against Ottoman incursions. In addition to this, in the 17th century, the Habsburg Monarchy aimed to consolidate its absolutist authority, placing additional pressure to erode Croatia's autonomy. This inevitably led to a confrontation with the powerful nobility.

The frontier region known as the Military Frontier (*Vojna Krajina*), became a focal point where Vienna stationed foreign soldiers and financed defensive measures, which did not sit well with the Croatian nobility. The Croatian Parliament (*Sabor*) frequently protested the presence of foreign soldiers, albeit unsuccessfully. Moreover, within Ottoman-controlled territories, Orthodox Christian settlers, known as Vlachs, were obligated to military service but remained outside the jurisdiction of the Croatian nobles. Facing formidable challenges to preserve

Croatian freedom, the Zrinski and Frankopan families recognized the need for urgent action.

Economic Power of the Zrinski and Frankopan Families

Those who wield power have always been most fearful of losing it. The Zrinski and Frankopan families, among the most influential nobles of their era, had much at stake. By the late 16th century, they had amassed extensive landholdings in Croatia and controlled immense wealth. Their properties spanned the entirety of Croatia, from the south to the north, facing constant threats and incursions from the Ottomans.

Foremost among the Zrinski family's holdings was the Međimurje estate, which underwent development after Ban Nikola Šubić Zrinski assumed control in 1546. In addition, they held considerable properties such as Rakovec, Vrbovec, Ozalj, and Ribnik, along with assets in Gorski Kotar and Brod na Kupi. Their iron mine in Čabar also held particular significance. In the 17th century, properties like Novigrad na Dobri, Bosiljevo, Severin, Novi u Vinodolu, and Zvečaj gained prominence. Furthermore, the Zrinski and Frankopan families exerted firm control over the coastline of Croatia from Rijeka to Senj, granting them direct access to the sea. This geographical position was crucial for trade and economic prosperity.

Their economic interests significantly fueled their rivalry with Vienna. Given that the estates of these families encompassed the entire Croatian territory, trade routes naturally traversed through their domains, providing them substantial income from merchant activities. The port of Rijeka, which was under Vienna's control, suffered significant economic losses as a result. Consequently, the Zrinski and Frankopan families emerged as formidable commercial competitors to their masters in Vienna.

The economic might derived from their vast estates served as a cornerstone for pursuing their ultimate goal - the consolidation of Croatian territories and the reinstatement of independence. They were staunch

advocates of war against the Ottoman Empire because their properties and estates were under direct threat. However, the perpetual danger of conflict led to the departure of peasants who cultivated the land on their estates, necessitating a continuous search for new labor and soldiers to defend their interests. Amidst Vienna's inclination towards maintaining a fractured land under their dominion, the Zrinski and Frankopan families realized the imperative need to safeguard their interests and preserve the territorial integrity of Croatia.

What Ignited the Rebellion?

There were multitude of grievances among the Croatian nobility, prompting collaboration with their Hungarian counterparts in a joint revolt against the Viennese court. Throughout their lives, brothers Nikola and Petar Zrinski not only combatted the Ottomans but also resisted against the Habsburgs. Their opposition to the escalating centralization efforts of the Habsburg Monarchy and the deteriorating condition of Croatian lands due to prolonged warfare ultimately fueled their dissent. Unfortunately, this dissent led to their eventual downfall.

In a bid to bolster their stance, the Zrinski family contemplated a political alliance with the French monarch, Louis XIV (1643-1715), a well-known adversary of the Habsburg dynasty. Such an alliance held significant strategic ramifications. Louis XIV, embroiled in conflicts with the Habsburgs over the Spanish inheritance, undoubtedly viewed any resistance weakening the Habsburgs with favor. For France, aspiring to become the leading European power, internal conflicts within the Habsburg Monarchy presented an opportunity to solidify its position in Europe.

Emperor Leopold I, born in 1640, emerged as a pivotal figure in the intricate political landscape of his era. Ascending as the Habsburg ruler of Croatia and Hungary and securing election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1658, Leopold I became a controversial figure in the eyes of Croatian and Hungarian magnates. To them, this emperor symbolized a despised adversary.



Emperor Leopold I Guido Cagnacci, 17th century

Through his actions, Leopold I opted to disregard the demands and aspirations of the Croatian and Hungarian nobility, directing his attention instead towards his primary adversary - France. This decision provoked deep resentment among the magnates residing on the eastern borders of his empire. The ignominious Peace of Vasvár, signed in 1664, revealed Emperor Leopold I's reluctance to engage in warfare for the liberation of Croatian and Hungarian territories. This act of betrayal stood as a principal cause for the discontent among the magnates. Not only did the Zrinski and Frankopan families vocalize their grievances, but they were also joined in their conspiracy by the foremost magnates of the Kingdom of Hungary - Palatine Ferenc Wesselényi (1605-1667) and the Chief Justice Franz Nadasdy (1622-1671).

Discontented Magnates

The most prominent Croatian noble families, tightly connected among themselves, were the pillars of Croatian statehood throughout the centuries. The Zrinski and Frankopan families were intertwined through various relationships, including friendships and marital alliances, and actively shaped the course of Croatian history.

Nikola VII. Zrinski, born in 1620 in Čakovec, was the son of Prince Juraj Zrinski, the Croatian viceroy and military commander who perished in 1626 in Pressburg, allegedly poisoned at the behest of Imperial General Wallenstein. This episode further fueled the growing mistrust of the Zrinski family towards the ruler in Vienna. Nikola, alongside with his younger brother Petar IV, born in 1621 in Vrbovec, was placed under the care of guardians. From a young age, they were aware that their upbringing was marked by wartime tumult. In 1630, the brothers relocated to Graz with the Jesuits, where they completed their humanistic studies before moving on to Trnava. They were exceptionally well-educated and were fluent in several languages: Croatian, Hungarian, Latin, German, and Italian. Following the culmination of their studies, the brothers traveled to Italy, and in Rome, where they were granted an audience with the Pope himself. While the elder Nikola gravitated towards literary pursuits, his younger sibling Petar displayed a keen interest in military skills. Upon their return to their homeland in 1637, the brothers reached maturity, and in the same year, they confronted the Ottomans in defense of their estates. It became evident that warfare would dominate their endeavors.

The brothers partitioned their estates, with Nikola residing in Čakovec, where he oversaw the northern and eastern regions of Croatia as the Viceroy, while Petar settled in Ozalj, administering the southern and western territories. However, they committed to mutual defense and assistance. Nikola actively engaged in the Thirty Years' War, where his valor distinguished him, earning him the title "General of All Croats" from the king at the youthful age of 25 in recognition of his wartime achievements. In 1642, the younger Petar married



Nikola VII Zrinski, by Elias Widemann, 1646
(Croatian Historical Museum)

Katarina, the daughter of Count Vuk Krsto Frankopan, in Karlovac, further solidifying the bonds between the two esteemed families. Meanwhile, Nikola entered into matrimony with Maria Eusebia, the daughter of Count Drašković, in 1645. Their union endured until her passing in 1651, after which Nikola remarried Baroness Maria Sophia Lobl in Vienna.

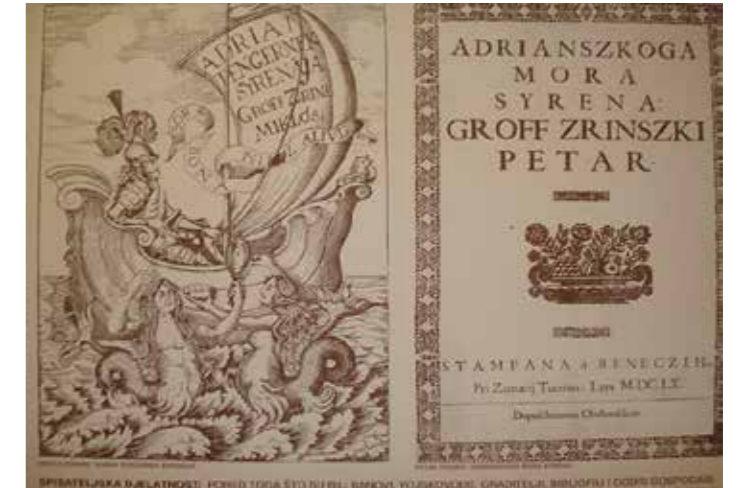
Before long, Petar voiced his discontent with the court's policies, leading to clashes with German officers and even accusations of treason levelled against him by the king. However, these allegations were swiftly withdrawn to allow the Zrinski family to continue supporting the war effort. Petar also made notable contributions to the advancement of maritime affairs. The Zrinski family held ownership of the Adriatic port of Bakar, which they managed independently. They possessed a fleet for trade and fostered friendly relations with Venice.

The Zrinski brothers, cultivated aristocrats and warriors, frequently engaged with numerous intellectuals and



Petar Zrinski

artists, contributing significantly to the development of culture and the arts. Particularly renowned is their *Bibliotheca Zriniana*, located in Čakovec, which served as a repository for the family's valuable collection of books, continually enriched by its members. In 1662, Nikola commissioned a catalog for this library. Proficient in Croatian and Hungarian, Nikola authored works in both languages, and in 1651, he published a poetry collection titled "The Sirens of the Adriatic Sea" in Hungarian while he was in Vienna. In this collection, he included the epic "The Fall of Sziget," recounting the valor and sacrifice of his ancestor Nikola, who stood against Sultan Suleiman in Sziget. Later, his brother Petar translated this epic into Croatian, cementing its status as a symbol of Croatian cultural heritage.

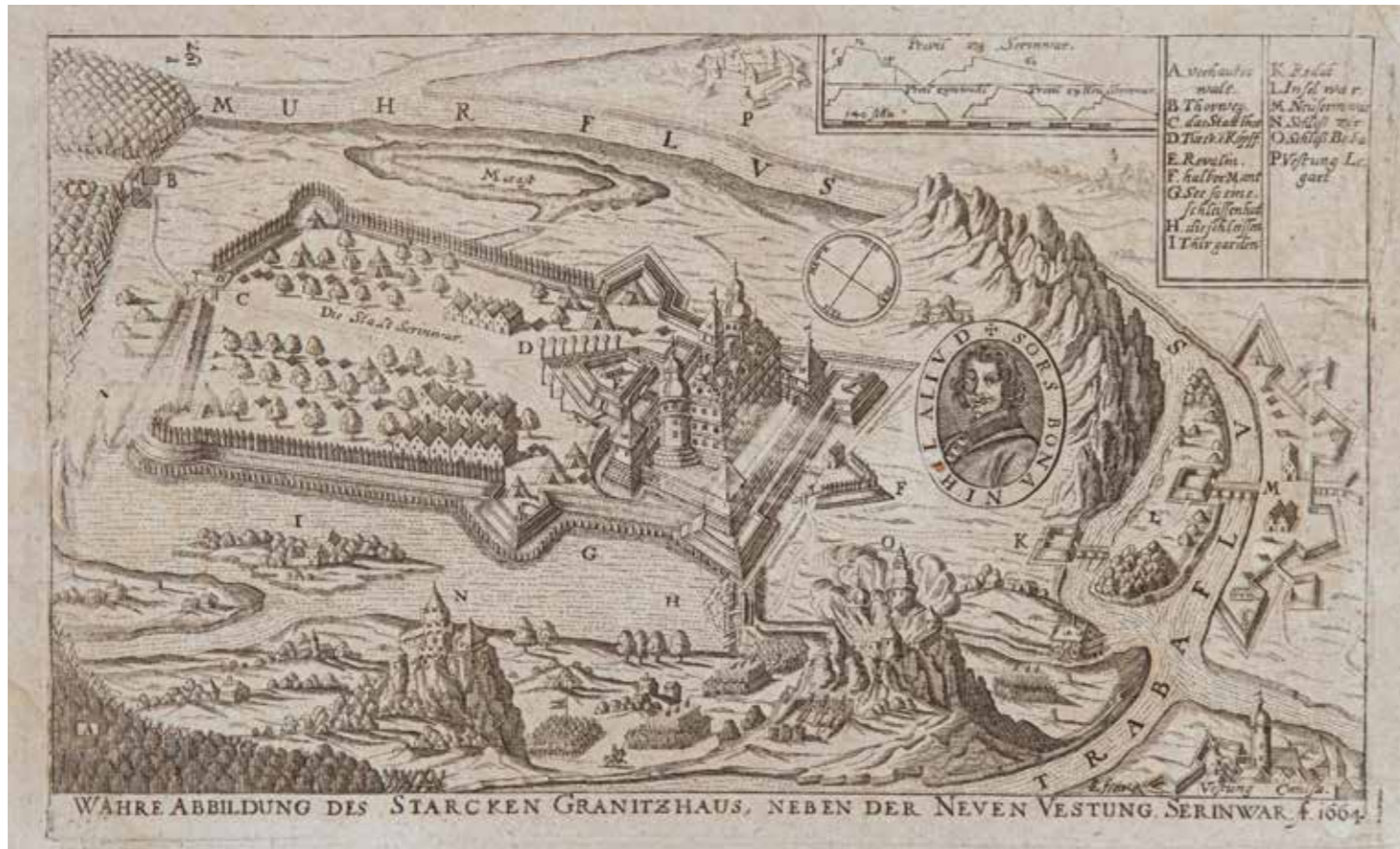


The poetry book "Siren of the Adriatic Sea", published in Venice in 1660

Nikola Zrinski assumed the position of the Croatian viceroy in 1647, distinguishing himself in various military conflicts. In 1651, he secured triumph over the Ottomans in the Battle of Kostajnica, and nine years later, in 1660, he repeated the feat in the Battle of Kanizsa. Emboldened by these victories, he embarked on the construction of Novi Zrin fortress positioned opposite the Ottoman fortress of Kanizsa. This endeavor posed a direct challenge to the Ottomans, precipitating a crisis that risked armed conflict, although neither the Habsburgs nor the Ottomans were eager for warfare at the time.

In 1662, Ali Pasha sent a letter to Count Nikola, urging the demolition of the fortress and cessation of military campaigns. Simultaneously, Emperor Leopold I's envoys in Osijek opposed Count Nikola's military actions due to lack of imperial sanction. Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha sent a protest to Emperor Leopold, who attempted to dissuade the Ottomans from military ventures to no avail. The Ottoman army readied itself to cross the Drava River and advance toward Buda.

Petar Zrinski was also ready, and in 1663, he vanquished Ottoman troops near Otočac. With the arrival of winter, Nikola conceived a daring plan: to strike the enemy from behind during the winter months and obliterate the renowned Suleiman's Bridge. In early 1664, Nikola embarked on a bold incursion into enemy territory and



Novi Zrin, Germany 1664 (Croatian Historical Museum)

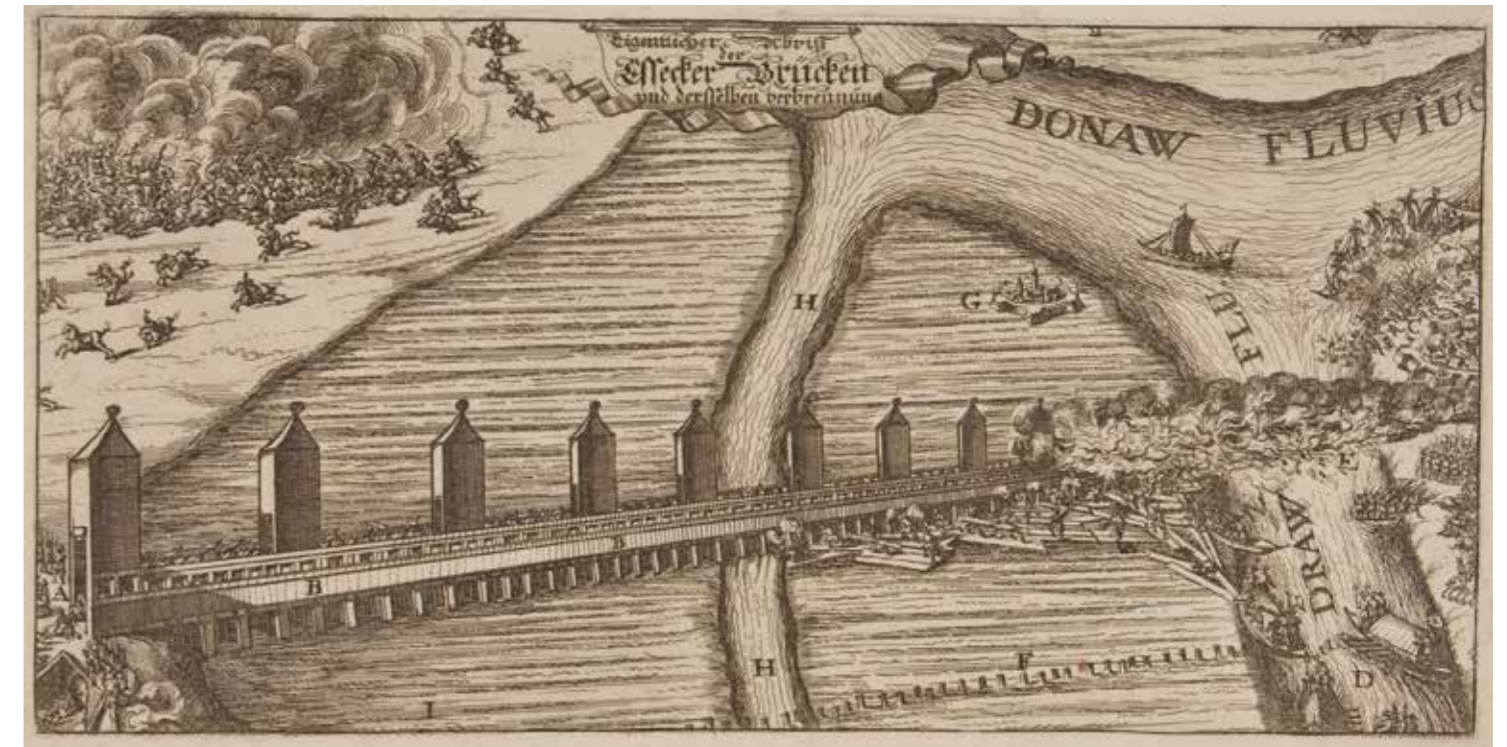
successfully demolished the aforementioned bridge. This winter maneuver proved both triumphant and strategically pivotal, impeding the Ottoman army's advance. Word of this feat reverberated throughout Europe, and many celebrated the courageous Croatian military leader.

Recognizing the importance of disseminating news of their resistance across Europe, the Zrinski brothers dispatched reports from Čakovec to Venice, where they were promptly published in a weekly periodical. Thus, Nikola's audacious winter campaign garnered widespread attention across the continent. However, Nikola also became the target of envy, with many in the imperial ranks coveting his achievements and fame.

The Ottoman forces swiftly rebuilt the razed bridge, facilitating the onward march of the army led by Grand Vizier Köprülü Fazil Ahmed Pasha (1635-1676). In June 1664, the Ottoman forces commenced the siege of Novi Zrin, a fortress that posed a significant barrier to their

advance. Unfortunately, help for the defenders did not arrive, and after enduring a month-long siege, the fortress fell. The decision of the Habsburg army's commander, Raimondo Montecuccoli, to abstain from defending the fortress deeply infuriated Nikola. Venting his grievances, Nicola lodged a complaint with the king in Vienna, yet his protestations went unheeded, with the emperor standing by his general. Montecuccoli would later play a pivotal role in the Battle of Saint Gotthard in western Hungary, where he defeated the Ottomans, although his progress was subsequently halted.

Subsequent events only served to reinforce the disillusionment felt by nobility regarding Vienna's intentions. An imperial envoy arrived in Vašvar to engage in negotiations with Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha, offering terms of peace. This unexpected diplomatic victory for the Ottoman Empire allowed them to maintain control over their conquered territories. The Habsburg rulers were aware of the consequences of this



Burning of the Osijek Bridge, Germany 1665 (Croatian Historical Museum)

peace. They harbored concerns regarding the spread of French influence and were also cognizant of the mounting resistance from the Croatian and Hungarian nobility, who sought the liberation of their lands. This secret peace treaty, concluded in Vašvar in 1664, surprised Europe. Croats and Hungarians now perceived Vienna's absolutist ambitions with clarity, and their discontent became overt. This ignominious peace served as the final straw, directly fueling the conspiracy.

Fran Krsto Frankopan (1643-1671), a Croatian nobleman and poet, was the heir to the illustrious Frankopan family. His education began in Zagreb before taking him to Italy. Familial ties bound him to the Zrinski family through his half-sister Katarina, who was married to Petar Zrinski. During his stay in Italy, Fran Krsto entered matrimony with Julija di Naro, and upon his return to Croatia, he devoted himself to the defense against the Ottomans and to literary pursuits. In 1669, he aligned himself with the conspiracy led by Petar Zrinski. He facilitated the translation of a letter for Petar addressed to the King of Poland and actively sought ways to liberate the land from Vienna's control.

His efforts extended to rallying the support of the Croatian nobility for the conspiracy and advocating for an alliance with the Ottomans.

Course of the Conspiracy

Discontented with the lack of viable solutions from Imperial advisors in Vienna to aid Croatia and Hungary, Nikola Zrinski, Ferenc Wesselenyi, and Franz Nadasdy recognized the necessity of taking matters into their own hands. They grasped that they needed to find a way out of the dire circumstances confronting them. If their own ruler was acting against the interests of their lands, then perhaps it was time to consider seeking a new sovereign. They explored potential alliances with various nations, including Poland, Sweden, Venice, and, of course, France. France, the formidable adversary of the Habsburgs closely monitored the unfolding situation. As early as 1663, Petar de Bonsy, the French envoy in Venice, appraised Louis XIV of the discontent brewing in Croatia and Hungary, suggesting that this unrest could be exploited for French gain. The French monarch saw an opportunity to weaken his opponent, reasoning that if Emperor Leopold did not



Fran Krsto Frankopan

appreciate his subject Zrinski, then let Zrinski should realize that he was valued elsewhere.

Nikola Zrinski received both financial support and a letter from the French king, encouraging him to “continue rendering services to Christianity.” In acknowledgement, Zrinski expressed gratitude, carefully deliberated the situation, and resolved to take action. He entertained the possibility that this monarch might be the one to aid him and his people. In May 1664, Petar Zrinski dispatched a letter to Louis XIV, proposing a clandestine alliance. He welcomed French military officers to Čakovec who praised his courage, therefore fortifying the bond between the Zrinski family and France.

The Zrinski brothers reached a joint decision and opted to send Petar’s wife, Katarina Zrinski, to Venice in September 1664 for a rendezvous with de Bonsy. She conveyed their readiness to seek refuge under the protection of the French king and to incite an uprising in Croatia and Hungary against the Habsburgs. They were also willing to offer their sons as hostages, framing it as their departure for educational pursuits. Katarina elaborated on the mistreatment inflicted by the emperor and his generals upon the Croatian and Hungarian nobility and made a specific proposal to utilize their



Katarina Zrinski in Venice, by Oton Iveković, 1919 (Croatian Historical Museum)

port of Bakar for transporting troops. It was evident that the Zrinski family had meticulously pondered military strategies, including the prospect of open conflict. The French king stipulated that the Ottomans must not be involved in this potential arrangement, tasking his envoy with assessing the actual military strength of the conspirators.

However, Leopold also had his network of informants, thus rumors regarding negotiations between the Zrinski family and the Republic of Venice likely reached his ears. A meeting of discontented magnates was held in Čakovec, but Leopold also decided to invite the magnates to Vienna to elucidate his rationale for seeking peace with the Ottoman Empire. Nikola Zrinski, however, did not attend this crucial meeting in Vienna in November. In Čakovec, amidst all the arrangements, it was customary for the nobles to engage in a hunting expedition, and so they did on the fateful day of November 18, 1664. While pursuing wild boar near Čakovec, Nikola Zrinski met his untimely demise. A wild boar fatally attacked this valiant warrior, yet given the circumstances and events, suspicions arose that Nikola had, in fact, fallen victim to an assassination plot orchestrated by the Vienna Court. The secretary of the Zrinski princes, the Augustinian friar Marko Forstal, left a record of that unfortunate day, recounting that a boar suddenly attacked the ban,



Death of Nikola Zrinski in 1664 in Čakovec

however he also noted that some concluded that a gunshot had caused the wound on his face. Nevertheless, the conspirators lost their most adept leader, prompting a temporary halt to their activities. Nikola VII Zrinski was buried in December in the Zrinski family mausoleum in the Pauline monastery not far from Čakovec.

Following his death, his brother Petar Zrinski assumed the helm of the movement in Croatia, while in Hungary, it was Ferenc Wesseleny and Gyorgy Lippay. In early 1665, Petar met with the French envoy Gremonville in Vienna, who appraised him that the prevailing political climate in Europe did not favor the execution of their plans. At that point, Petar turned his attention to Venice and the members of the Rákóczi’s League. On the other hand, Katarina Zrinski, the widow of his brother, persisted in negotiations with the French, who urged patience. Meanwhile, Emperor Leopold I appointed Petar Zrinski as the Croatian ban and proclaimed him the defender of Christianity, promising that he would be the supreme commander of the Croatian Military Frontier. However, Petar harbored suspicions regarding these assurances and shared his doubts with the Venetian envoy, suggesting that the emperor was merely trying to appease the dissatisfaction of the Croats, knowing they would reject the Vašvar Peace. Leopold was aware of the Croat’s discontent and sought to alleviate the anger felt by Petar Zrinski.

In early 1666, the conspirators faced another setback with the passing of Gyorgy Lippay, further weakening the anti-court faction in Hungary. They now needed to



Petar Zrinski in battle with the Turks, by Krsto Hegedušić, 1940 (Croatian Historical Museum)

seek new allies. In March of the same year, Petar Zrinski forged an alliance with Palatine Ferenc Wesselenyi while returning from his daughter Jelena’s wedding to Franjo Rakoczy. They pledged mutual support until the end and sought the protection of the French King Louis XIV, aiming to secure 100,000 forints in support. They also employed secret aliases in their correspondence, with Wesselenyi adopting the name Oswald, while Petar Zrinski went by Ferdinand.

The negotiations in Vienna proved futile, and the French showed little inclination toward open warfare. By June, State Judge Franjo Nadasdy had joined the conspiracy. Given the failure to find allies in Europe, the Hungarian magnates involved in the conspiracy devised a new strategy: seeking an alliance with the Ottoman Empire. Wesselenyi arranged for an envoy to be dispatched to Sultan Mehmed IV. Despite Petar Zrinski’s insistence on collaboration with the French, he also endeavored to rally support from the Croatian nobility and the Vlachs from the Military Frontier. However, Zrinski did not approve the news of the Hungarian decision to appeal to the Sultan. Nonetheless, in December 1665, the principal conspirators -Zrinski, Nadasdy, and Wesseleny- formed an alliance and pledged loyalty, regardless of the consequences. They decided to face their fate, amid the unpredictable circumstances awaiting them.

Yet, fortune did not favor the conspirators, as they



Ferenc I. Rákóczi

suffered another significant setback in March 1667 with the demise of Palatine Wesseleny. This loss dealt another blow to their plans. Adding to their woes, one of the key conspirators had a secret agenda for his future that involved betraying his fellow conspirators. Nadasdy, driven by personal ambition to ascend to the position of palatine, revealed the plans for the Ottoman alliance to Vienna. Ironically, Vienna had already received intelligence from the Ottoman side. Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha had alerted them to the dissidents in Croatia and Hungary seeking alliances with the French and the Poles to disrupt the peace with the Ottoman Empire. Grand Viziers adeptly maneuvered the power dynamics, remaining one step ahead in the intricate game of politics.

Petar, disregarding the French warnings about Nadasdy collaborated with him to solicit financial backing from the French king for his army. Although the king promised



Köprülü Fazıl Ahmed Pasha

to provide financial support, he instructed his envoy to prolong the agreement, prioritizing negotiations with Leopold over the Spanish inheritance.

In September 1667, Petar gained a new ally who joined the conspiracy - Count Erazm Tattenbach from Styria. Later, he also visited his son-in-law Ferenc Rakoczy to inform him about the strong anti-Habsburg movement and the necessity for joint action.

The secret conspiracy, initially designed to operate discreetly, began to unravel under the pressures of secret diplomacy and espionage. Emperor Leopold I learned through his representatives in the Ottoman Empire of the Croatian and Hungarian magnates' intention to forge an alliance with the Ottomans to free themselves from Habsburg rule. This intelligence was conveyed to his envoy Ivan Casanovi by the Grand Vizier's interpreter, prompting the Emperor to closely monitor the rebellious nobles.

Undeterred, Petar Zrinski embarked on a journey to Vienna in February 1668 to negotiate with the Venetians

and seek their support. However, at the same time, the French were resolving their disputes with Leopold, signaling their withdrawal of support for the conspirators against the Habsburgs. As the situation grew increasingly intricate, with the conspirators themselves uncovering information, Emperor Leopold and his council deemed the situation not urgent enough, opting to continue gathering evidence.

In June 1669, Fran Krsto Frankopan, Katarina Zrinski's brother, became involved in the conspiracy. Despite his efforts to secure support from the Polish king through a translated letter, this opportunity was lost when Leopold decided to arrange the marriage of his sister Eleonora to the Polish ruler. Discontent also brewed among the Hungarian faction and attempts to reach an agreement with the Ottomans failed to yield anticipated outcomes. The Ottomans advised the Hungarians to seek assistance from Petar Zrinski, whom they held in high regard. Even Katarina Zrinski suggested to her husband the prospect of turning to the Ottomans and forsaking the French alliance.

In the spring of 1669, Petar Zrinski resolved to initiate contact with the Ottoman Empire. In November of the same year, he sent his captain, Franjo Bukovački, along with an escort, on a secret diplomatic mission to Thessaloniki. There, they were received by the powerful Sultan Mehmed IV, and on Christmas Eve, Bukovački presented the proposal drafted by Petar Zrinski. According to this proposition, Croatia and Hungary would come under the protection of the Sultan, with an annual tribute of 10,000 ducats. In addition, the Zrinski family would govern Croatia, restoring its former liberties. It's an understatement to say that the Sultan and his advisors were surprised by this offer. Given the history of hostility between Petar Zrinski and the Ottoman Empire, they harbored suspicions regarding its sincerity.

The extensive Habsburg intelligence network swiftly reacted, transmitting news of the Thessaloniki meeting to the monarchy's representatives. Vienna received the reports promptly. Franjo Bukovački, too, sought to the Grand Vizier to relay Petar Zrinski's proposition.



Sultan Mehmed IV
(Ptuj Ormož Regional Museum)

However, the Grand Vizier expressed opposition to this proposal, claiming it was not favorable to initiate a fresh conflict at that juncture. Word of Petar Zrinski's negotiations with the Ottomans circulated within Croatia, fueling rumors of impending Ottoman military actions. Vienna responded by intensifying surveillance on the Zrinski and Frankopan families. Concurrently, Petar Zrinski engaged his subjects, urging readiness for the imminent events and dispatching messages to the serfs. He corresponded with his son-in-law Rakoczy, confirming the alliance with the Ottomans.

While Petar prepared for an armed uprising, he

also sought avenues for peaceful resolution through his deceased brother's widow in Vienna. Vienna, meanwhile, mobilized its forces, but opted to lure the conspirators with promises of clemency. Deception was a better solution for Vienna than a military conflict. Most Croatian nobles remained loyal to the king, while Petar was branded as a traitor. Meanwhile, Fran Krsto Frankopan in Zagreb rallied support for Viceroy Zrinski's resistance efforts, while Imperial General Herberstein prepared a counterattack. Rumors swirled regarding Zrinski's alleged Ottoman alliance. Fran Krsto elucidated the grievances behind the rebellion to the nobility: the emperor's lack of assistance, his officers' tyranny, and the nation's overall decline. While these were valid concerns, few dared openly oppose Leopold. Captain Franjo Bukovački, meanwhile, worked on rallying people and convincing them to support the just cause.

Young Frankopan arrived in Čakovec, joining Petar in their desperate bid for assistance from the Ottoman side. However, lacking orders from the Sultan, their Ottoman allies remained inert. Realizing the futility of their situation, the two conspirators faced the grim reality: help was not forthcoming, and their chances dwindled to near extinction. With no escape route in sight and their plot fully exposed, Petar and Fran had but one course left. They turned to Vienna, seeking clemency. Their envoy managed to persuade the emperor of their sincerity in seeking mercy, prompting the nobles to send letters to Leopold pledging loyalty and imploring forgiveness. Meanwhile, around Međimurje, the imperial army had already gathered, ready for an attack. Petar's son Ivan, distraught, went to Vienna as a hostage, accompanied by the faithful secretary of the Zrinski family, Marko Forstall.

On the fateful night of April 13, 1670, Petar Zrinski bid farewell to his wife, Katarina, and together with Frankopan and their entourage, embarked on the journey to Vienna. Katarina bid her husband and brother farewell, consigning all documents related to the conspiracy to flames. She recognized the utter failure of their endeavors

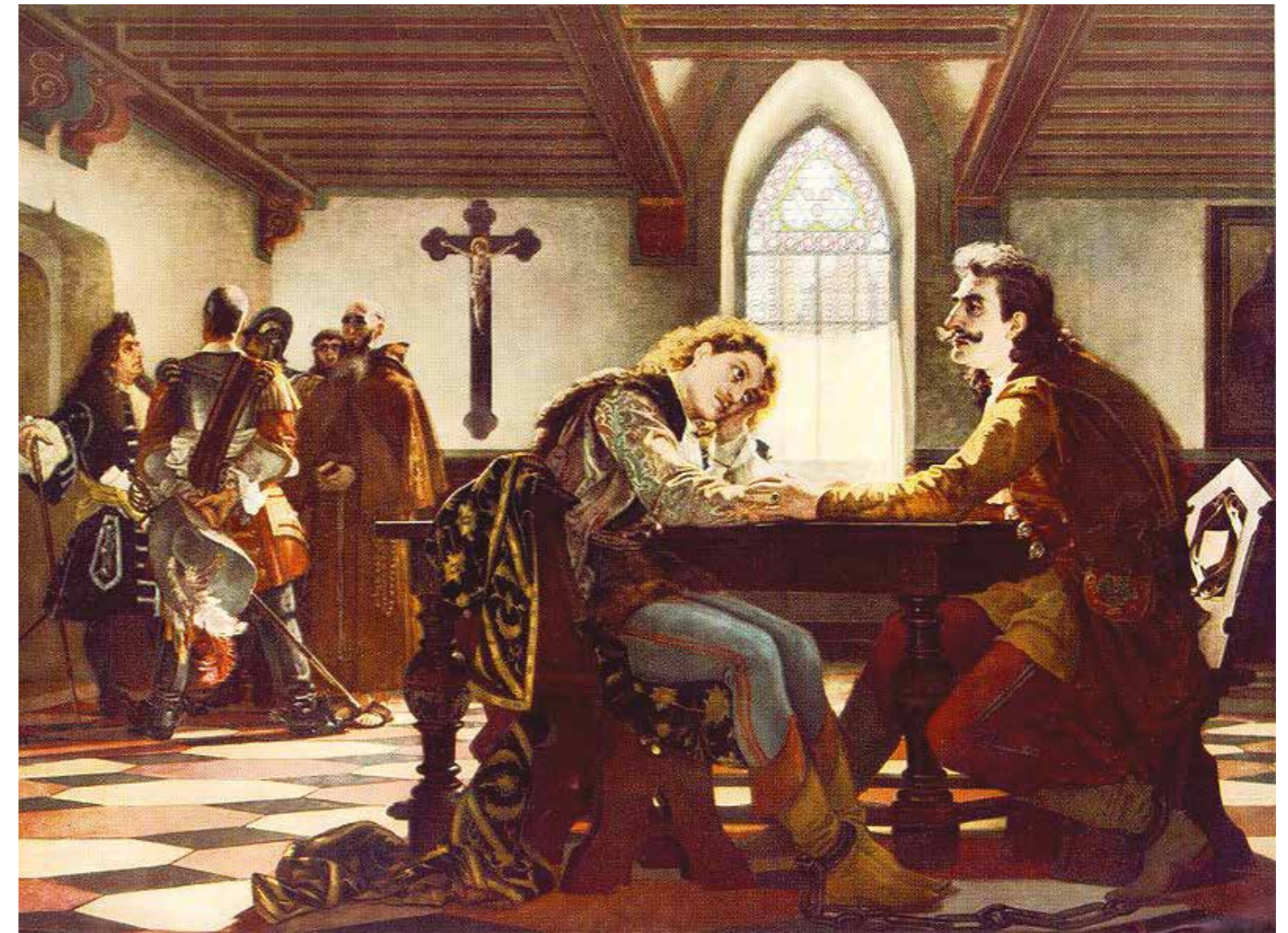
and the absence of hope. In the meantime, the imperial army descended upon the conspirators' estates, pillaging everything in sight. Weapons, statues, paintings, jewelry, livestock, and provisions - all fell prey to their plundering. Similar fates befell the properties of lower-ranking nobles implicated in the conspiracy. As the imperial army traversed Croatia, they left a trail of devastation in their wake. Petar's son-in-law, Rakoczy, instigated an uprising in Hungary, but Zrinski, writing from his prison cell, implored him to desist - a plea Rakoczy heeded. Further bloodshed seemed futile, given the emperor's promise of leniency, a promise Petar trusting in its fulfillment, made at his peril, as events would later reveal.

Captain Franjo Bukovački, held in the highest esteem among the conspirators, harbored no confidence in Leopold's promise of forgiveness. He instead crossed into the Ottoman territory, where he remained until his death.

Unjust Trial and Shocking Verdict

Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan found themselves under house arrest in Vienna. During their hearing in May, Petar stated that he had no intention of forming an alliance with the Ottoman Empire against the emperor, asserting a complete severance of ties with them. He shifted blame onto Prince Frankopan, attributing his actions to his youth. The decision was made for the noblemen to face trial in Vienna's New Place of Justice, where they were subsequently transferred. The primary accusation leveled against them was "insult to His Majesty", with Petar additionally charged with forming alliances with the Ottomans, negotiating with the Poles, and colluding with Hungarian nobility. Fran Krsto Frankopan faced charges of engaging in high treason.

Petar's appeals to the emperor through letters, invoking his past services, proved futile. Meanwhile, young Frankopan's defense emphasized both his personal accomplishments and those of his illustrious ancestors. The eyes of Europe remained fixed on these proceedings, with many voices advocating for clemency toward Zrinski and Frankopan, hailed as heroes who defended



Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan before their execution, Viktor Madarasz, 1864 (Hungarian National Gallery)

Europe against the Ottomans. However, neither Zrinski nor Frankopan could have foreseen the events that would unfold. Despite the emperor's promise of clemency, mercy would remain elusive.

On April 11, 1671, Fran Krsto Frankopan received the death sentence for his failure to report Zrinski's alliance with the Ottoman Empire. Petar Zrinski followed on April 18, 1671, condemned for his aspiration to become the ruler of Croatia. Their punishment was to be executed by beheading, also facing the amputation of their right hand. Yet, the legality of the entire judicial process remained highly questionable as it involved Croatian nobles, who according to the prevailing laws, fell under the jurisdiction of the

Hungarian Diet. However, Emperor Leopold I was indifferent to legal technicalities; the traitors were to face consequences, and those consequences had to be severe to deter others.

Before their impending fate, Fran Krsto Frankopan penned a letter to his wife, Julija, and those noblemen condemned to death were granted a final meeting. Petar and Fran Krsto bid each other farewell, fully aware that their life's journey had reached its conclusion. On April 29, Petar Zrinski wrote a letter to his wife, Katarina, renowned as one of the most poignant farewell letters ever written in the Croatian language. It embodied the sentiments of a man at peace with his destiny, calmly awaiting his end.



Execution of the conspirators (Croatian Historical Museum)

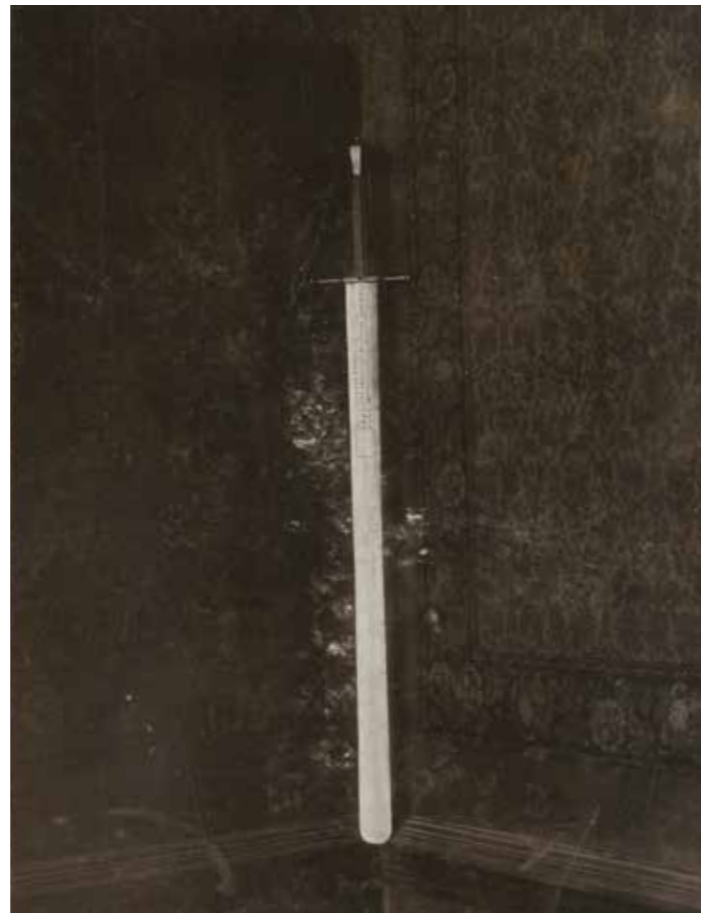
*To Countess Anna Katarina Zrinski
My beloved,*

Do not grieve or be troubled by this letter. According to God's will, tomorrow at the stroke of ten, they will behead me and your brother. Today, we bade farewell with heavy hearts. Thus, I extend my parting words to you through this letter today, and I implore your forgiveness if I have ever caused you any distress or if I have given you any reason for resentment. Thank God, I am prepared for death, and I do not fear it. I have faith in Almighty God, who has humbled me in this world, and I believe that He will have mercy on me. I will pray to Him (I believe, as soon as I come before Him) that the two of us may meet before His holy throne in eternal glory. I have nothing more to write to you. I have left everything to God's will. Please do not sorrow, for it had to be this way.

From Novo Mesto (Austria), on this, the eve of my final day, the 29th of April, in the year 1671, at the hour of seven in the evening.

May the Lord God bless you and our daughter, Aurora Veronika.

Count Petar Zrinski



Sword used for the execution of Zrinski and Frankopan (Croatian Historical Museum)



Tombstone of Zrinski and Frankopan (Croatian Historical Museum)

The following day, on April 30, 1671, the Zrinski and Frankopan families confronted their destiny. Spending the preceding night in prayer, the prisoners received news that the Emperor had opted to spare them from the amputation of their right hands. However, their heads still had to fall, and there was no turning back. Their names were erased from the imperial noble roster, and at around 9 o'clock in the morning, Petar Zrinski proceeded to the execution site. Looking at the frightened crowd, he remarked that people seemed more fearful of his death than he himself was. The executioner, allegedly in an intoxicated state, beheaded him on the second attempt. Fran met the same fate. Two heads fell to the ground. The two most powerful Croatian families were extinguished, and the repercussions reverberated through the annals of the Croatian history. Thousands bore witness



Silver buttons found during the relocation of bones (Croatian Historical Museum)

to the executions, with diplomats dispatching reports to their rulers. The Venetian envoy reported to Venice that this was the unfortunate end of distinguished men. Their remains found sanctuary in a crypt beneath the Church of St. Michael. A stone plaque was installed, bearing a Latin inscription: "In this grave rest Count Petar Zrinski, Croatian ban, and Marquis Franjo Frankopan, the last of their family, who, as a blind man led a blind man, both fell into this pit." Below it was an engraved sword with two skulls and a warning: "Learn from us mortals, and from our fate learn to maintain loyalty to kings and God. In the year of the Lord 1671, on the 30th of April, at the 9th hour." The message was clear: this was how all those who opposed the emperor's will would end up, a cautionary tale of vanity leading to the grave. In 1802, their remains were exhumed for relocation.



Tomb of Zrinski and Frankopan in 1925
(Croatian Historical Museum)

During this process, a silver coin with three initials, P.C.Z. (Petrus Comes Zrini), was discovered, which was supposedly used by Petar Zrinski to blindfold himself. Contemplation regarding repatriating the heroes' bones to Croatia had persisted for some time. In 1919, the Society of the Croatian Dragon Brothers organized the transfer, culminating in a ceremonial burial on April 30, 1919, within Zagreb's Cathedral.

The repercussions of the conspiracy extended far and wide, resulting in the demise of numerous nobles as all associated with the conspirators faced the emperor's ire. On the same day, April 30, Franz Nadasdy met his end, followed by Erazmo Tattenbach. Ferenc Rakoczy narrowly avoided execution by paying a hefty ransom. The emperor's retribution was uncompromising, branding the Zrinski and Frankopan families as traitors, serving as a warning to anyone daring to challenge the Emperor's authority.

After the Conspiracy

The plot against Emperor Leopold I, orchestrated by Croatian and Hungarian magnates, left a profound and enduring mark on the trajectory of both nations, sending shockwaves throughout Europe. Emperor Leopold wielded his authority with unmatched strength, using the conspiracy as a stark example of the consequences awaiting those who dared to challenge his rule. In this dramatic episode of history, any lingering hopes of resistance against the encroaching centralization of power were swiftly extinguished, with magnates forced to acquiesce or face dire consequences.

The fate suffered by Hungarian and Croatian magnates cast a long shadow of caution to all who followed.

Nonetheless, many now sought to benefit from their downfall. The surviving members of the Zrinski and Frankopan families found themselves facing different destinies. Through the lens of time, the enduring legacy of these formidable families, whose decline shaped the destinies of many, will stand as a testament to the complexities of power and influence throughout history.

Collapse and Consequences of Failed Plans

The failed conspiracy brought about profound consequences for the subsequent political, cultural, social, and economic trajectory of the Croatian lands. With the seizure of all conspirators' estates, the emperor

amassed vast wealth, estimated to exceed two million forints when combining the holdings of the Zrinski and Frankopan families. These properties, scattered throughout Croatia, fell under direct imperial control. Before that, the emperor's forces, in a display of strength, thoroughly plundered them. The income generated from these estates ceased to be reinvested in Croatia; instead, it was directed to the emperor, yielding an annual sum of 22,500 forints.

The execution of these eminent magnates by Emperor Leopold I served as a stark warning to all potential traitors, instilling fear among the remaining nobility and paving the way to absolutism. With the loss of their military leaders, the Croatian people found themselves entirely subject to the emperor's whims, extinguishing any hope for the liberation of Croatian territories. The removal of the most influential Croatian families solidified the emperor's dominance, leaving little room for dissent and placing Croatia squarely under imperial authority.

What if – Considering the Ottomans?

The Zrinski and Frankopan families, the most powerful Croatian nobles, had long been viewed as formidable adversaries by the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the Ottomans respected them as skilled warriors, particularly Nikola Šubić Zrinski, who gained fame for his valiant defense of Sziget against Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's army, opting for a heroic demise rather than surrender. Yet, one might ponder: was there ever a possibility for Croatia to actively pursue the shelter of the Ottoman Empire?

The Croatian Parliament often cautioned its rulers about grave perils facing the nation and its people. On occasion, the prospect of embracing Ottoman suzerainty was even broached. Bernardin Frankopan, a prominent nobleman, consistently highlighted the option of Croatia seeking the protection of the Ottoman Empire if appeals for aid from the Christian West continued to go unheeded.

It is noteworthy that amidst the turbulent era of warfare, there were instances of cooperation with the Ottomans, albeit met with skepticism. Nikola III. Zrinski (1489-



Charter from the Assembly in Cetinograd, 1527

1534), father of the renowned defender of Sziget, whose stronghold was at Zrin, played a pivotal role in the political upheavals of that era. At the Parliament in Cetin in 1526, when the Croatian nobility opted to sever ties with Hungary align with the Habsburgs as rulers, Nikola was among the proponents of this decision. His seal on the charter signifying the selection of the new rulers symbolizes his endorsement and aspirations for the support from new allies.

Nikola also possessed valuable mines beneath Zrinska Gora, where he minted his own currency. It was precisely these mines that played a crucial role in an unconventional agreement. The mines yielded about 700 kilograms of silver annually. In 1530, to safeguard his estates, Nikola struck a deal with the Ottomans. According to this agreement, he permitted Ottoman soldiers unhindered passage through his estates in Pounje for conducting plundering raids, provided his estates and subjects remained untouched. Although this accord did not sit well with his sovereign, Nikola remained steadfast in protecting his interests and resources independently.

The Croatian nobility recognized their isolation in resisting the mighty Ottoman Empire. Disappointment in the new Habsburg dynasty was increasingly apparent. The Zrinskis could not anticipate significant support for their military endeavors, and the notion of forming a robust Western coalition seemed more like wishful thinking

than a viable option. There were even rumors that Nikola Zrinski contemplated seizing the Croatian royal throne. Through its diplomatic channels, the Ottoman Empire remained well-informed about the discontent among the Croatian nobility regarding Habsburg policies.

Ultimately, the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy epitomized this discontent. While there were instances where Croatian noble houses may have aligned with the Ottoman Empire to protect their estates akin to a vassal state, the sustainability and outcome of such a scenario were debatable. Nonetheless, Croatia persisted as a border region, marked by perpetual conflict until the decline of Ottoman power began.

Nevertheless, a part of Croatia frequently engaged in various agreements with the Ottoman Empire. Dubrovnik, a small port nestled between great powers, adeptly maneuvered its relations with these empires. The agreements reached brought mutual benefit as trade was crucial for all parties involved. Serving as a neutral port, Dubrovnik provided an ideal hub for Ottoman merchants, and diplomatic channels were efficiently utilized. Once under the protection of Hungarian-Croatian kings, Dubrovnik gradually evolved into a Republic, establishing its own sovereignty and political identity.

Initially, Dubrovnik maintained limited connections with the Ottomans. However, confronted with Ottoman Empire's expansion into neighboring regions, Dubrovnik recognized the necessity of adjusting to the evolving political landscape. In 1442, the Republic of Dubrovnik consented on an annual tribute payment to the Ottoman Sultan. A significant shift occurred during the reign of Sultan Mehmed II, known as the Conqueror, in 1458 when Dubrovnik committed to paying an annual tribute of 1,500 ducats in exchange for protection and trade privileges.

This agreement proved highly advantageous for Dubrovnik, particularly considering that the Sultan initially planned to attack the republic and later demanded a higher tribute. Following negotiations, Dubrovnik citizens managed to reduce the tribute



Coat of arms of the Republic of Dubrovnik

amount. These agreements enabled Dubrovnik to establish trading outposts within the Ottoman Empire's territories, significantly bolstering its prosperity.

On the other hand, through its association with Dubrovnik, the Ottoman Empire, gained a sort of "window" into the Western Christian world. This position facilitated the exchange of valuable intelligence and diplomatic communication between Eastern and Western realms. Dubrovnik merchants operating within the Ottoman Empire benefited from a reduced customs duty of two percent compared to five percent imposed on foreign traders, underscoring Dubrovnik's privileged status.

The question arises: Was the Republic of Dubrovnik ever seriously tempted to align itself with the Ottoman



Territory of the Republic of Dubrovnik

Empire? It was evident that Dubrovnik understood its vulnerability in the event of conflict and sometimes found itself needing to justify its connections to the Empire. Despite acknowledging the payment of tribute to the West, the citizens of Dubrovnik never viewed themselves subjects of the Sultan. Conversely, the Ottoman Empire recognized that the small republic posed no threat but rather offered substantial benefits. Consequently, this unconventional collaboration persisted, benefiting all parties involved: the West, the East, and the intermediary republic.

Caught between two formidable empires, some Croats undoubtedly contemplated switching sides at times to safeguard their sovereignty. Even Petar Zrinski, confronted with the erosion of his position, eventually considered forging an alliance to his adversaries. However, this venture into conspiracy ultimately proved fatal, leading to his demise and the downfall of his family.

The Ottoman Empire and the Conspiracy

In the context of the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy, the position of the Ottoman Empire stands out as particularly

noteworthy. Understanding the delicacy of its situation, the Empire opted not to risk excessive involvement, recognizing that any provocative actions could lead to open conflict with the Christian world and potential loss of power. Hence, the Empire adopted a cautious approach, allowing events to unfold naturally.

During the conspiracy, the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Sultan Mehmed IV, who was born in 1642. He ascended to the throne as a young child in 1648 following the death of his father, Sultan Ibrahim I, who was overthrown in a coup. Mehmed IV ruled until 1687. Born in Istanbul, Mehmed spent much of his time engaged in hunting activities, earning him the nickname “the Hunter.” He was a devout ruler, and his reign of thirty-nine years marked a significant period in Ottoman history.

In the early years of by Mehmed IV’s reign, the administration of the state was largely entrusted to his advisors. Köprülü Mehmed Pasha, who served as Grand Vizier from 1656 to 1661, was a strong and capable statesman who laid the groundwork for further development of the empire. He was succeeded by his son, Fazıl Ahmed Pasha (1661-1676), who held the position of

Grand Vizier during the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy. In 1666, Fazıl Ahmed Pasha alerted Vienna to the growing discontent among Croats and Hungarians, emphasizing their desire to establish connections with other European powers that might offer better governance. Mehmed IV and his advisors were primarily focused on maintaining stability within the Empire and avoided involvement in conflicts that could escalate into larger confrontations.

Regarding the secrecy surrounding the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy, its effectiveness was questionable. Namely, it was no secret that Croats and Hungarians, whose lands had long been embroiled in continuous conflict, harbored dissatisfaction with the rule of the emperor in Vienna. The emperor had been cautioned multiple times about potential unrest among the Croats, including warnings from Ivan Casanova, the Habsburg ambassador in Istanbul, who became aware of the failed negotiations between the nobles and the Ottomans. He viewed this attempted negotiation as the final straw and urged the emperor to take action against the dissidents.

In 1669, Prince Apaffy of Transylvania dispatched an embassy to the Ottoman Empire on behalf of Hungarian nobles. While the grand vizier showed little interest in forming an alliance or offering assistance, he suggested that Petar Zrinski would be a more suitable partner for negotiations. The Ottomans held Zrinski and his family in high esteem. Despite Zrinski’s pursuit of Western assistance, particularly from the French, the Hungarians still proposed that the solution might lie with the Porte, the diplomatic term for the office of the Grand Vizier, implying that the East, rather than the West held the real solution. Petar Zrinski faced a crucial decision, with indication even from his wife Katarina, advising him to engage in negotiations. In 1669, the Bosnian pasha sent envoys to Petar Zrinski, and by the year’s end, Zrinski resolved to send his own delegation. All arrangements were facilitated through the Bosnian pasha, who had been assured of a reward by the sultan for his role in mediating the negotiations.

Petar Zrinski’s delegation presented the offer to the Sultan in Thessaloniki, yet opinions within the



Michael I Apafi, Prince of Transylvania, by Cornelis Meyssens, 17th century

Ottoman Empire were divided. Some urged caution, citing Zrinski’s status as bitter enemy, while others questioned the sincerity of the offer, and a few viewed it as an opportunity. The Sultan, indecisive, sent the delegation to the grand vizier for further negotiations, but the vizier hesitated, casting doubt on Petar Zrinski’s intentions and sincerity.

There was a genuine concern within the Ottoman Empire that this could provoke a new conflict, especially unsettling was the prospect of a large Christian coalition in the West uniting against them. Such a scenario could present considerable challenges to the Empire, given its uncertain defense capabilities in the face of a coordinated attack by Christian forces.

What if Zrinski was lying or had a hidden agenda? The possibility of deception weighed heavily, as trust between adversaries was virtually non-existent. Despite this, the grand vizier chose to proceed with caution, proposing a test of good will: either Zrinski would surrender one of

his cities or send his son as a hostage. Another suggestion was for the Sultan to correspond directly with Zrinski, with the Bosnian Pasha tasked with persuading of the potential assistance. However, despite these deliberations, the Grand Vizier ultimately decided not to receive Petar's envoy, prompting their return to Croatia without a definitive answer. It was decided that no immediate decision would be made.

Meanwhile, news of the failed conspiratorial mission reached Vienna, Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan became the subjects of intense scrutiny at the Viennese court. Simultaneously the Grand Vizier on the Ottoman side closely monitored developments. However, the attempt to negotiate with the Ottomans left Petar Zrinski's envoy bewildered. He believed the issue had been resolved and that the Ottoman Empire would lend its support to Croatia. Armed with a letter from the Bosnian Pasha, which referred to Petar as the commander of the entire Ottoman army, the envoy felt assured that all was proceeding as planned. Consequently, the conspirators proceeded with their actions, only to discover that Ottomans were unable to act without the Sultan's orders.

It soon became evident that while the Ottoman Empire esteemed the martial history of the Zrinski family, their own objections took precedence, and the internal discord among their adversaries could serve their interests. Nevertheless, Jelena Zrinski, the daughter of the esteemed hero Petar Zrinski, ultimately found sanctuary in the Ottoman Empire, where, despite centuries of warfare, the bravery and integrity of her ancestors were recognized and respected.

The fate of women - Ana Katarina and her daughters

The role of Ana Katarina Zrinski, wife of Petar and sister of Fran Krsto Frankopan, in the conspiracy was significant from its inception. While Petar focused on military campaigns against the Ottomans, Ana Katarina, possessing intelligence, education, and resourcefulness, spearheaded diplomatic negotiations with potential

foreign allies on his behalf. As a diplomat, she resided in Venice and maintained contacts with the French and Polish courts. However, upon the revelation of the conspiracy, the countess faced captivity as part of the merciless imperial retribution. Like her husband's brother's son, Nikola Zrinski, Ana Katarina's descendants, including three daughters, and one son, suffered the consequences of their parents' actions.

Ana Katarina and her daughter Zora Veronika were initially taken away together but were soon separated. Katarina was relocated to Graz, where she passed away on November 16, 1673, in the Dominican monastery. Zora, on the other hand, was sent to the Ursuline sisters in Celje, where she reluctantly became a nun and spent her entire life in the convent until her death in 1735. Another daughter, Judita Petronela Zrinski, was sent to the Clarisse monastery in Zagreb as a young girl. With significant contributions from her parents, she eventually rose to become the prioress of the monastery, where she passed away in 1699.

The eldest daughter, Jelena Zrinski, experienced a divergent fate. She involved her husband, the wealthy Prince of Transylvania, Ferenc I. Rákóczi, in the plot against the emperor and actively participated in her parents' rebellious activities. The life of this bold and remarkable woman, whose actions reverberated across Europe, will be detailed in the next chapter.

Ivan Antun Zrinski – the unfortunate captive

Ivan Antun Zrinski, born in 1651 to Petar Zrinski and Katarina Frankopan in Ozalj, endured a tragic fate primarily due to his familial name and the actions of his father. Educated and highly schooled, Ivan was a student of philosophy and military strategy. After the collapse of the conspiracy, he remained free, but his aspirations to serve the Emperor Leopold as a soldier to demonstrate his loyalty fell on deaf ears.

Throughout his life, Ivan found himself closely monitored by the Habsburg family. He engaged in conflicts against the Kuruc rebels in Hungary, who opposed Habsburg rule, spending some time as their captive. Although they

tried to persuade him to switch sides during his eight months of captivity, he remained faithful to the emperor. However, doubts regarding his loyalty persisted.

In a bid to serve as a clandestine intermediary between Kuruc leader Imre Thököly and imperial generals, Ivan found himself imprisoned upon discovery. Suspicions were further fueled by a letter found by the intelligence service, expressing disdain towards Germans, heightening concerns within the imperial court. Despite his military endeavors, Ivan's heritage as the son of a traitor and conspirator led to a lack of trust from the Emperor who refused to return his family's confiscated estates.

The trajectory of his fate took a dramatic turn in 1683 during the siege of Vienna by Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa. Leopold I, in fear, abandoned the city, along with almost a third of its citizens. He sought refuge with his entourage in the Benedictine monastery in Melk. Just when he thought he could find respite within the monastery's walls, alarming news reached him. Ivan Antun Zrinski had recently been spotted in the monastery, making inquiries about the Emperor's entourage and travel plans. It was a chilling reminder that the son of a condemned traitor might now be seeking retribution against the very ruler who had ordered his father's execution.

As Emperor Leopold I departed from Melk, he was met with further unsettling news, affirming his fears. The papal legate issued a stark warning about the Hungarians, particularly singling out Ivan Antun, who sought the emperor's head. Reacting swiftly, the Emperor immediately dispatched a detachment of soldiers to apprehend the alleged traitor. Zrinski was soon captured near Linz and taken into custody, where he vehemently protested his innocence. Everyone knew he had legitimate reasons for seeking revenge, but Ivan Antun had been loyal to the emperor thus far. His previous actions were now scrutinized closely.

Following his capture, Zrinski was granted permission to visit his sister Jelena, who was betrothed to Imre Thököly, the Kuruc leader. However, public perception had already branded Zrinski as a collaborator with the enemy. He was



Ivan Gyulai, the Last of the Zrinskis by Oton Iveković, 1920
(Croatian Historical Museum)

even accused by one of the captives, who testified about the young Zrinski, claiming that he had sent a message to the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, encouraging an attack on Vienna due to its perceived vulnerability.

The true extent of Ivan Antun Zrinski's involvement in the conspiracy against the Emperor remains elusive. While he undoubtedly harbored grievances stemming from his father's actions and other factors, whether he actively participated in the plot or was merely an observer remains uncertain. There are suggestions of a broader conspiracy, including alleged plans to poison the Emperor and his sons. Despite his protests of innocence, the accusations continued to circulate.

He was incarcerated in Tyrol, confined within the walls of the fortress of Rattenberg. Initially, he received treatment befitting his noble status, but as time passed, conditions deteriorated, and he succumbed to despair and anxiety.

In 1703, he was transferred to Graz, where his health continued to decline. He chose silence as his sole mode of communication relying on letters in his final days. Isolated from other inmates, he battled, succumbing to the illness after receiving last rites on November 11, 1703. Vienna, apprehensive of Croatian and Hungarian attendees at his funeral, conducted a secret burial beneath the Dominican monastery. Only in the 20th century were his remains relocated to Zagreb Cathedral. With his demise, the Zrinski lineage came to an end.

Courageous soldier in the Emperor's service – Adam Zrinski

Adam Zrinski, born in Vienna on November 24, 1662, was the son of Croatian ban Nikola VII Zrinski and Baroness Marija Sofija Lobl. Following a brief stay in Čakovec shortly after his birth, Adam and his mother relocated to Vienna in 1664, where he never saw his father again. In November of the same year, Nikola Zrinski tragically passed away while hunting. Adam was at that time under the sole care of his mother, who sought to secure the Venetian patriciate of the Zrinski family for her young son by corresponding with Venice.

However, Marija Sofija's attempts to persuade Petar Zrinski, her late husband's brother and the new head of the family were unsuccessful. Despite her efforts to ensure the transfer of certain estates worth around 50,000 forints for Adam, Petar only granted 5,000 forints. Additionally, their coastal estates came under Petar's administration.

Following the collapse of the conspiracy, challenging times ensued. Emperor Leopold I imposed absolutism and tightened control over the nobility, while friends and followers of the Zrinski family were expelled from the court. However, Marija was a fierce woman, and she and her children did not face ruin despite their familial ties to the conspirators. Young Adam was raised in Vienna, where he completed his education at a Jesuit gymnasium and pursued studies in law. He quickly excelled and mingled among Vienna's elite, soon gaining access to the imperial court. Emperor Leopold I himself showed favor towards Adam on several occasions. In 1679, Adam left Vienna and settled in Medimurje, where he confronted German soldiers who were encroaching on his estates. Faced with this threat, Adam repeatedly appealed to the Court Military Council for assistance.

It appears that despite his family's involvement in the conspiracy, Adam Zrinski managed to earn the favor of Emperor Leopold I. The Emperor himself appointed Adam as the new guardian of his interests and issued a special charter placing him and his estates under personal protection. Declared of age in 1680, Adam went to Čakovec where he engaged in conflicts with the



Count Adam Zrinski

Ottomans. Yet like his ancestors, he also demonstrated a commitment to culture and expanded his father's library. When Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha (1634-1683), the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, led his forces to Vienna, Adam seized the opportunity to distinguish himself in the Christian army that came to liberate Vienna. Following another failed Ottoman siege of Vienna, the Grand Vizier paid for the failure with his life and was murdered in Belgrade the same year by order of Sultan Mehmed IV.

On the other hand, everything seemed to go well for Adam. He earned significant positions and married Maria Katarina Lamberg. His battlefield successes garnered attention, even prompting inquiries from the Grand Vizier himself. Leopold I continued to favor Adam, so at the coronation of Emperor Joseph I in 1687, a descendant of the Zrinski family carried the coronation sword in the procession.



Battle of Slankamen (Theatrum Europaeum, vol.14)

After several years of fighting, in the battle of Slankamen in August 1691, Adam Zrinski found himself facing Imre Thokoly, the husband of his cousin Jelena Zrinski, a woman who would bravely defy the power of the Habsburg family for years. The battle ended with 20,000 dead and the victory of the imperial army, but both the Grand Vizier Köprülüzade Fazıl Mustafa Pasha and the young Count Adam Zrinski perished in the conflict. Adam was wounded by a bullet and bled out on the battlefield, rumored to be in the back, fueling speculation of Vienna's motives in eliminating yet another member of the Zrinski lineage.

Naturally, Vienna compelled his widow to relinquish the control of the estates, offering her compensation in return. Since Adam had no descendants, the family line, which is transmitted through the male line, was considered extinct on that side of the Zrinski family too. Even in death, the renowned warrior, upholding the valor of his forebears, found no respite, as unfounded rumors later surfaced of his survival, purportedly enslaved on galleys. In adherence to his family's legacy, Adam Zrinski met his end gallantly on the battlefield, perpetuating the noble tradition of his Zrinski predecessors.

Following in His Grandfather's Footsteps – Ferenc II. Rakoczy

Tracing the footsteps of his grandfather, Ferenc II. Rakoczy,

son of Transylvanian voivode Ferenc Rakoczy and the courageous Jelena Zrinski, remained true to the warrior and rebellious ethos of his forebears. Born in 1676, in the wake of Emperor Leopold I's execution of his grandfather Petar Zrinski for treason, Ferenc II. Rakoczy led a revolt against the absolutist dominion of the Habsburg dynasty. As one of the wealthiest magnates in Hungary, he spearheaded the movement known as the "Rakoczy's War for Independence," dedicated to ousting Habsburg supremacy. Despite the Hungarian Diet's offer of the crown during the conflict, this nobleman declined, underscoring that his nation's freedom outweighed aspirations for power and prestige associated with kingship.

Orphaned at infancy due to his father's demise, Ferenc was nurtured by his mother, the renowned Jelena Zrinski, who, like other family members, defied the Emperor's might for years, defending the fortress of Mukachevo, where Ferenc grew up. Leading the revolt against the Habsburgs in later years, Ferenc Rakoczy allied himself with their adversaries, the French. Unveiling his correspondence with them led to his arrest in 1700. However, in a gripping narrative akin to a cinematic plot, Ferenc orchestrated a daring escape from confinement with aid from his pregnant wife and the prison commander, seeking refuge in Poland. Rising to prominence as the leader of the Kuruc rebels against the Habsburgs, he was elected ruling prince by the Hungarian nobility in 1705. Not limited to Hungarian ambitions, Ferenc emerged as a contender for the Polish throne. Yet, the French's withdrawal of support in the struggle against the Habsburgs altered the landscape.

During the Battle of Trenčín in 1708, a fall from his horse rendered him unconscious, prompting his alarmed army to retreat, thus granting victory to the Emperor. Ferenc, once more compelled to flee, sought refuge back in Poland. Despite enjoying the hospitality of Polish nobility, Ferenc harbored aspirations of reclaiming his homeland, rejecting offers to ascend to the Polish throne. He embarked on a quest for support, first journeying to England in 1712, then to France.

However, an unexpected offer arrived from the Habsburg



Ferenc II Rákóczi
(Adam Manyoki, Hungarian National Gallery)

family's adversaries, the Ottoman Empire. Embracing this opportunity, Ferenc accepted, and in 1717, was accorded a grand reception on Ottoman territory. Subsequently, the Ottomans entered into a peace agreement, prompting an imperial envoy Vienna to demand the surrender of foreign exiles as a stipulation for peace, targeting, Ferenc, naturally. Yet the Sultan categorically refused, citing matters of honor and dismissing the surrender of exiles as non-negotiable. The ruler of the Ottoman Empire, like in the case of his mother Jelena, remained firm and uncompromising, extending friendship to the valiant descendants of the Zrinski family and ensuring their protection from the Habsburgs' reach.

Ferenc resided in the Turkish city of Tekirdağ, home to a modest Hungarian community, for a span of 18 years. Following his passing in 1735, the rebellious exile left behind letters for the Sultan, the French envoy, and his allies, entreating them not to forsake his fellow exiles upon his death. His mortal remains were transferred to Hungary



Memorial House of Ferenc Rákóczi in Tekirdağ

in 1906, where they found their final resting place alongside those of his mother, Jelena. Ferenc remains honored in Hungary as a hero and advocate of freedom, much akin to the revered status of his grandfather Petar in Croatia.

The Fugitive Widow – Julija Ana Frankopan

Julija Ana di Naro, the spouse of the ill-fated conspirator Fran Krsto Frankopan and a niece of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, found herself in a precarious situation as they had no heirs. She sought refuge alongside her husband's cousin Orfej Frankopan following the exposure of the conspiracy.

They spent some time in Venice, however when Vienna sought the extradition of Orfej in July 1670, he mysteriously vanished without a trace. Julija, left in uncertainty, endeavored to glean any information

regarding her unfortunate husband's fate. Despite enlisting the aid of Roman cardinals in her pursuit to secure their families' estates, her efforts proved futile. Ultimately, she took refuge within the confines of the Roman convent of Saint Teresa, where she awaited her inevitable fate.

Nikola Matija Ilijanović: from captive to greedy

During the 17th century, a time when Croatia grappled with the looming presence of two formidable empires, one Croat, like many of his compatriots, found himself ensnared in Ottoman captivity. He would leave behind a valuable account of his experiences, specifically addressed to the emperor responsible for stripping his homeland of its primary defenders.

Nikola Matija Ilijanović, a Croatian officer in the imperial army, was a man with a turbulent past. Born around 1623, Nikola lost his parents and his freedom at a young age in an Ottoman attack, enduring an astonishing 26 year internment from 1636 to 1662. As he claims, his family held fortresses in Dalmatia, and with their fall, young Nikola fell into captivity. However, it is evident that he managed to adapt to this foreign world, mastering the language and navigating various roles within the Ottoman court. Embracing his circumstances, Nikola transformed his experiences and knowledge into a detailed account titled *“Relatio status Ottomanicae domus”* published in 1679 in Vienna. Within his intriguing narrative, Nikola provides vivid descriptions of the Sultan's court, the administrative apparatus, and the strengths and weaknesses of the Empire.

Nikola initially extols the purported benevolence of the Sultan towards his subjects, highlighting instances where individuals could appeal directly to the Sultan for redress of grievances. He commends the justice of the Ottoman system, noting exemptions from taxation for the financially disadvantaged youth and the hierarchical oversight of tax collectors to ensure adherence to legal norms. Additionally, he elucidates the meticulous supervision of merchants and price regulations governing their products.



Recruitment of Janissaries in the Balkans, by Ali Amir Beg, Ottoman miniature, 16th century

Regarding the court officials, he mentions the term “samci” (singles), likely referring to eunuchs who resided there. To explain Eastern customs and unfamiliar roles of Ottoman administrators to readers, he uses European titles. For example, he describes the Grand Vizier using the Venetian title of duke and refers to the pashas as princes or counts.

Nikola expresses admiration for the renowned military prowess of the Ottomans, detailing their war preparations and the opportunity for the unemployed to join the military. He notes that war booty was distributed based on merit, with a tenth portion going to the Sultan. Regarding the army and the treatment of captives, every fifth captured young man was designated to the Sultan, while those who distinguished themselves ended up at the court. Thus, the system provided everyone with an opportunity for advancement. Many of them would end up as janissaries, *acemi oğlan*, “foreign boys,” forming the elite military force of the Empire. He also lists all the countries and provinces within the Ottoman Empire,

along with the number of soldiers each of them could allocate for military campaigns.

Nikola's document includes a particularly intriguing episode. According to his account, Sultan Suleiman had two sons, Mustafa and Bayezid among others. Bayezid fled to Persia while Mustafa hid in Istanbul, where he was converted to Christianity by a monk who told him that his mother had been of that faith. It was only revealed after his death that he had been a secret Christian, but this was, of course, concealed due to the shame of the Empire. It's difficult to determine where the writer derived this peculiar story, but it appears to be some sort of legend that he may have heard somewhere. At the conclusion of this manuscript, there is a section titled "Oratio contra Turcas" (Speech Against the Turks). After presenting his observations on the Empire, Nikola advocates for Emperor Leopold to confront the enemy. He sees Christians as superior and portrays Islam negatively contrasting it with Christianity. However, he also highlights societal corruption as a cause for lost wars and stresses the importance of Christian rulers uniting against their mutual foe. The publication of this document should have aimed to offer insights that could be valuable in any future conflict with the Ottomans. The years spent in captivity evidently did not deter the author from his intention to wage war against the Empire he had long served against his will. Further insights into the author's life come from the archives of the Court Chamber and the Court War Council. It is evident that following his release from captivity, Nikola pursued a military career and had ties to the Viennese court, as evidenced by his efforts to acquire property. Records from 1671 to 1695 show him either initiating legal actions or being subject to lawsuits, and he even writes to the Pope in Rome seeking help in reclaiming estates allegedly seized by the Ottomans.

And now the tale of this enigmatic figure takes a fascinating turn. Nikola Matić Iljanović presents a demand to Emperor Leopold I based on his perceived merits. Nikola asserts that the emperor owes him for his

loyalty and references his service, urging the restoration of various confiscated estates belonging to the Zrinski and Frankopan families. From the available records, it is revealed that he complained about the young Count Ivan Antun Zrinski, although the exact reasons remain unknown. Similarly, the grounds on which Nikola seeks the assignment of estates, whether from the Frankopan or Zrinski families, are unclear. In 1674, several years after the conspiracy, court documents indicate his plea for some of the confiscated estates of the conspirator Petar Zrinski, citing an unresolved debt owed to him by Petar Zrinski. Regardless of his potential involvement in the conspiracy, Iljanović persists in his endeavors, prompting the imperial court to correspond with the Hungarian Chamber regarding the Zrinski debt. However, the Hungarian Chamber distances itself from such matters, suggesting that Vienna should address the issue.

Iljanović, through his correspondence, reminds Emperor Leopold I himself of his past promises. One letter sheds new light on his claims, as he references his time at the Ottoman court and his acquaintance with adversaries, including Petar Zrinski. Notably, he reminds the emperor of his delivery of certain letters from the conspirators to the imperial court in 1664, hinting at his potential involvement in the conspiracy if indeed those were the exchanged letters between the conspirators and the Ottomans. Despite uncertainties, he persists in his assertions regarding the estates of the Zrinski and Frankopan families. Court documents suggest that this former captive may have indeed played a role in the illustrious conspiracy.

In the intricate web of alliances and conspiracies that defined the political landscape of 17th century Croatia, Nikola Matić Iljanović emerges as a figure whose actions intersected with the destinies of two prominent noble houses: the Zrinski and Frankopan families. As a Croatian officer in the imperial army and a captive of the Ottomans for over two decades, Iljanović's journey intertwines with the tumultuous events surrounding the Zrinski and Frankopan conspiracy against Emperor Leopold I.

Vanished Forever or Survived?

Glorious though their may not have been, the Zrinski and Frankopan families reached a fateful conclusion with the execution of Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan in 1671 in Wiener Neustadt.

Yet could this truly mark their ultimate demise? Might there exist, perchance, a branch of the Zrinski family, tracing back to the illustrious Šubić Bribirski, survived to this day far from their homeland, in Greece? According to the legend of the Greek family Sdrinias, their ancestor was a certain Martin Zrinski, said to be the offspring of Petar II. Zrinski. Martin purportedly served in the Venetian army during the 16th century, eventually seizing control of the island of Kefalonia in 1501 as a military commander. Notably, the coat of arms of the Sdrinias clan with its two majestic wings outstretched bears a striking resemblance to that of the Zrinski family. While concrete evidence remains elusive, the Sdrinias family from Greece has been granted admission into the Croatian Nobility Association. Amidst the swirling mists of history's turbulence, one cannot discount the possibility that the descendants of this storied lineage continue to dwell in Greece to this day.

Family Heritage - Croatian National Treasure

The legacy of the two preeminent Croatian noble families endures through the ages. The last of them are remembered as advocates of the interests of the Croatian people, striving for freedom and independence. In the second half of the 19th century, as Croatian national consciousness blossomed, public fascination with these heroic figures surged.

Their memory was revitalized by Ante Starčević, a prominent politician of the era, who invoked their names in Parliament, igniting a renewed reverence for the two martyrs. Collaborating with Eugen Kvaternik, Starčević advocated commemoration of the 200th anniversary of their deaths in 1871, sparking a wave of mass tributes across Croatian territories. The Society of the Brothers of the Croatian Dragon carried forth this legacy, organizing



Flag of the Brethren of the Croatian Dragon

ceremonies to honor Croatian memorial days facilitating the solemn transfer of their mortal remains to Zagreb Cathedral. Their heritage was meticulously preserved and cherished by the society.

Notably, Ivan pl. Zajc's opera "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" by which premiered in 1876, and its stirring anthem "U boj, u boj!" (Into Battle, Into Battle!) became iconic symptoms of Croatian cultural pride. Meanwhile, Eugen Kumičić immortalized their story in his 1894 novel "Urota Zrinskoga i Frankopana" (The Conspiracy of Zrinski and Frankopan), further cementing their place. Through songs, literature, and dramatic productions, their indelible mark on Croatian history continues to resonate.

With the independence of the Croatian state in the late 20th century, reverence for these two prominent noblemen persisted. Frane Krsto Frankopan's verse "Navik zginе on, ki živi pošteno" (He who lives honestly is accustomed to dying honorably) remains a ubiquitous motto in Croatia, a testament to the enduring memory of these fallen heroes. Since 2011, the day of their execution, April 30th, has been solemnly observed as the Croatian Memorial Day, honoring all those who valiantly fought for the Croatian people and their state.

Today, numerous associations proudly bear the esteemed names of the Zrinski and Frankopan families dedicated



Count Nikola VII Zrinski,
Johann Franz Hoffman, 18th century

to preserving Croatia's rich historical and cultural legacy. Their names adorn countless schools, communities, cultural-tourist routes, and their legacy endures as an

integral part of Croatian national heritage. Throughout Croatia, a plethora of fortified castles and manors, some impeccably preserved while others lie in ruins, serve as tangible reminders of the once-mighty influence of these illustrious families, bridging the north and south of the country. Both families supported the Church with their donations, helping to preserve many cultural treasures, such as the silver reliquary of Barbara Frankopan from 1483, which is kept in the Franciscan monastery in Trsat. Also, for the Franciscan monastery on the islet of Košljun, founded by the Frankopans in 1535, a polyptych, an altarpiece, was commissioned from the legacy of Katarina Frankopan. A valuable legacy is also the gilded baldachin from the Krk Cathedral, a relief with depictions of saints, an inheritance gift from Prince Ivan VII. Frankopan from the 15th century.

Beyond their political activities, these renowned conspirators made indelible contributions to the cultural landscape. Peter Zrinski, Fran Krsto Frankopan, and Katarina Zrinski were central figures in the "Ozalj Literary Circle", a forum where various Croatian dialects were intermingled and flourished. The Zrinski family library, Bibliotheca Zriniana, now housed in the National and University Library in Zagreb, stands as an invaluable cultural treasure trove, a testament to the intellectual legacy of the once-potent dynasty.



Ruins of the Zrin fortress



Castle in Krk (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Stari grad Zrinski, Čakovec



Zrinski Castle, Brod na Kupi (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Franciscan monastery on Košljun (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Ozalj Castle on Kupa river



Stara Sušica Castle (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Trsat Fortress (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Severin Castle on the Kupa river (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)



Nova Kraljevica Castle (Domagoj Blažević, 2016)

Celebrated Women of History

In the illustrious annals of the Ottoman Empire, despite prevailing notions regarding women's roles, their remarkable contributions within the Ottoman court remain impossible to overlook. Numerous women have etched their names in history, particularly during the era known as the Sultanate of Women (*Kadınlar Saltanatı*). During this epoch, courtly women – the wives and mothers of rulers – wielded notable political and social influence, sometimes even surpassing the power of the rulers themselves. Among these, two figures emerge for their profound impact on the fortunes of the mighty empire: Hürrem and Kösem.

In Croatian history, women hailing from the most powerful noble families of Zrinski and Frankopan hold a revered status. Notably, the mother-and daughter duo of Katarina and Jelena Zrinski occupies a significant place. They played pivotal roles in the struggle between two great empires, bravely and decisively defending their family and homeland until fate led them onto unexpected life paths. The saga of Jelena Zrinski, the renowned Croatian-Hungarian noblewoman, is a poignant narrative of valor, love, and unwavering determination despite all the adversities that befell her and her family. Refusing to entertain the notion of surrender, she rallied people with



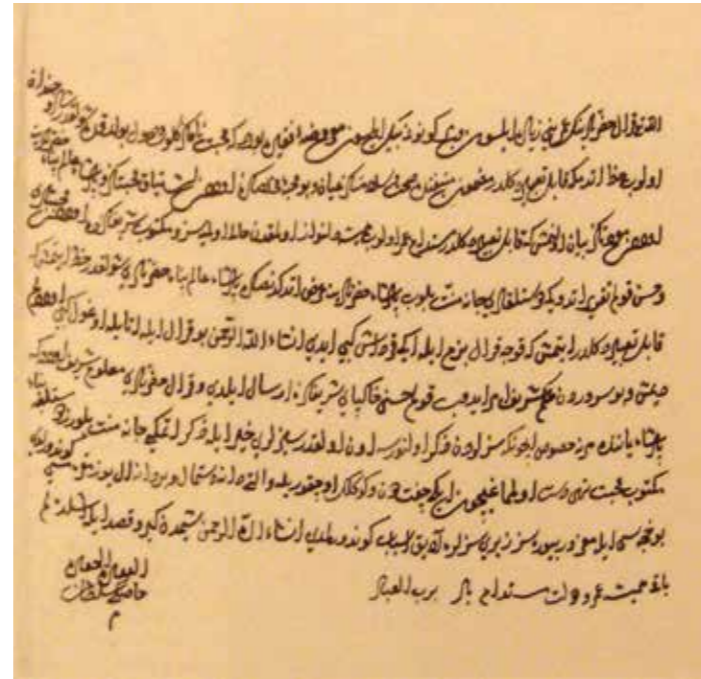
Hürrem Sultan, La Sultana Rossa, by Titian (John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art)

her life's example, leaving an indelible mark on all who crossed her path— even earning the admiration of the Ottomans, who offered refuge to this resolute heroine.

From Slave to First Sultanate – The Rise of Hürrem Sultan

Born around 1504 in present-day Ukraine, Roxelana, later known as Hürrem Sultan, entered the imperial harem as a young captive, where she captivated the heart of Suleiman the Magnificent, the formidable ruler of the Ottoman Empire. Within the harem, Roxelana became Suleiman's favorite and bore him several sons, including the future ruler Selim II. Through a romance that lasted four decades, this former slave rose to the position of the Sultan's legal wife and chief political advisor, becoming the true ruler of his heart.

The enduring enchantment between Roxelana and Suleiman has intrigued historians for centuries. Her



Letter from Hurrem Sultan to King Sigismund of Poland, 1549 (Soliman le Magnifique, p. 48)

beauty and grace, infectious laughter, sharp wit, musical talent, as well as her pronounced aptitude for politics, manipulative abilities, and even alleged use of love potions and magic, are all mentioned. Suleiman's deep affection for her prompted unprecedented actions, including freeing her from slavery and formally marrying her, defying long-standing traditions. As Hürrem Sultan she became the first consort to spend her entire life within the Ottoman court.

Despite facing criticism, Hürrem's position was secure under Suleiman's protection. She actively participated in politics, especially after the relocation of the harem to the new palace. Instead of accompanying her sons during their military training in their provinces, she remained by Suleiman's side. During his military campaigns, she corresponded with him regularly, providing updates on capital affairs. Over time, she became the sultan's chief advisor, playing a key role in shaping the Empire's policies. She also engaged in endeavors, maintaining diplomatic relations with foreign powers; she corresponded with the Polish King Sigismund II and sent him gifts to congratulate him on his ascension to the throne. She also kept in touch with the Safavids, the Persian dynasty,

sending luxurious shirts as gifts to the Safavid prince.

Hürrem Sultan, renowned for her philanthropy, championed the construction of mosques, educational institutions, public baths, and charitable kitchens. Among her notable endeavors was the funding of the Haseki Complex in Istanbul, comprising a mosque, multiple schools, a soup kitchen, and a hospital. As the favored consort of the Sultan, these initiatives underscored her considerable influence in both political and social spheres. Following her death in Istanbul in 1558, she was interred in a mausoleum located within the precincts of the Süleymaniye Mosque near her beloved husband's final resting place.

Kösem Sultan - Ruler from the Shadows

Kosem Sultan, another influential figure within the Ottoman Empire, was born in 1590 on the island of Tinos as Anastasia, the daughter of a Greek priest. Captured by Ottoman soldiers, she spent some time in Bosnia before being brought to the capital, where she caught the eye of Sultan Ahmed I during her education. Swiftly rising to become his chief concubine, she assumed the name Kösem, meaning "leader of the herd." With Ahmed, she bore seven children and eventually became his legal wife. Kosem was renowned for her beauty, intellect with a talent for singing and dancing, and she spoke several foreign languages.

Sultan Ahmed I, who reigned from 1590 to 1617, is remembered for commissioning the iconic Ahmed Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque due to its blue ceramic adornments. Upon his death in 1617, his brother Mustafa I ascended to the throne, who was an incompetent ruler who remained in power for only three months. He was followed by Osman II (1604-1622), Ahmed's young son, but his reign was also short-lived. Following a coup, Osman II was strangled by the Janissaries in 1622. Amid this tumultuous period, Kösem played a pivotal role, facilitating Mustafa I's return to the throne until September 1623, only to be deposed again. Subsequently, the twelve-year-old Murat IV, the offspring of Ahmed I and Kösem, ascended to the throne.



Portrait of Kösem Sultan, 17th century

As a regent, Kösem assumed significant responsibilities in governing the Empire, actively participating in meetings, influencing her son's decisions, and remaining abreast of political developments. She courageously navigated through various challenges, including military insubordination, Janissary uprisings, and territorial losses, all while striving to maintain the Empire's stability. Over time, Murat adopted governance skills, but he began to display cruelty and a desire to diminish his mother's authority.

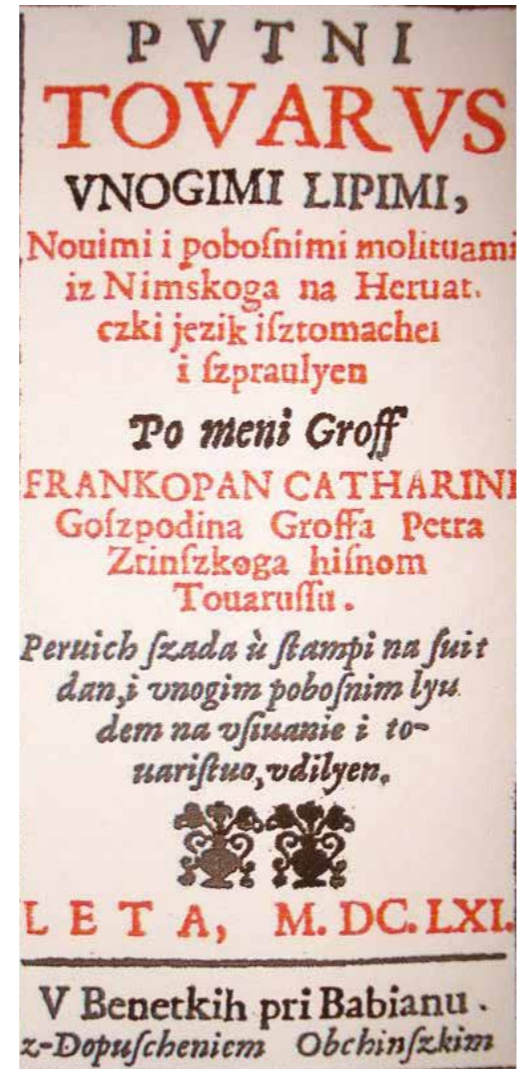
Sultan Murat IV, renowned for his ruthless governance, tightly grasped the reins of power. Towards the end of his reign, in a brutal bid to secure his power, he ordered the execution of all his brothers, sparing only one - Ibrahim. Ironically, it was Ibrahim who would inherit his throne and rule from 1640 to 1648. During his nominal reign, real authority remained vested in Kösem, who engaged in continual struggle for influence. Their relationship was marked by tension, with Ibrahim intermittently banishing Kösem from the court, only to later reinstate



Sultan Murad IV, Ottoman miniature

her as his advisor. İbrahim's eventual downfall was inevitable; he was ousted and subsequently executed, leaving Kösem to redirect her political acumen towards the new sultan - her grandson Mehmed IV, whose reign (1648-1687) heralded a new epoch in the tumultuous history of the Ottoman Empire.

The era dominated by Kösem, the guiding force behind young Mehmed IV witnessed an ambiguous rivalry between her and Mehmed's mother, Hatice Turan. This period epitomized female rule, where astute political maneuvering steered governance and shaped the destinies of rulers. However, after nearly four decades of wielding considerable influence, Kösem met a tragic end in 1651; she was strangled with Hatice's tacit approval. Her demise not only marked the conclusion of an era but also signaled



“Putni tovaruš” (Companion on Journeys), a prayer book prepared and published by Katarina Zrinski

a shift in the hierarchy within the harem and the court. The Empire mourned Kösem's passing for days, whose death interrupted one of the most significant chapters in its history. Kösem would be remembered not only as a potent political figure but also as a philanthropist who fervently aided impoverished girls by providing them with dowries, and as a patron of public construction projects.

Ana Katarina Zrinski - Symbol of Resistance against Injustice

Ana Katarina Zrinski stands as a poignant figure in Croatian history, a woman who played an active role in a conspiracy and faced the loss of everything she held dear



Farewell of Petar and Katarina Zrinski in Čakovec, 1670 by Oton Iveković, 1897

as a consequence. This remarkable woman was both a poet and a diplomat and has remained remembered as a symbol of bravery.

Born around 1625 in Bosiljevo into the powerful Frankopan family, Ana Katarina enjoyed a privileged upbringing, benefiting greatly from her father Vuk Krsto Frankopan's rich library. Raised in nobility, she mastered several languages, including German, Latin, Italian, and Hungarian, engaging in literary pursuits such as writing and translation. Her marriage to Petar Zrinski in 1641 in Karlovac cemented the union of two formidable Croatian families, and together they bore four children: Ivan Antun, Jelena, Judita Petronela, and Aurora (Zora) Veronika.

Residing primarily in Ozalj, Ana Katarina penned her renowned work “Putni tovaruš” (“Traveling Companion”) in 1660. This prayer book, printed in Venice the following year, featured a blend of Chakavian, Shtokavian, and Kajkavian dialects. While many prayers were translated

from German, Ana Katarina also contributed original writing and translations, credited with the authorship of several poems.

Her involvement in the conspiracy centered on diplomatic endeavors, entailing the pursuit of support from powerful allies and dissemination of propaganda against the Habsburg family. She maintained diplomatic channels with various entities she believed could aid the Croatian cause, including Venice and Poland. In September 1664, Ana Katarina embarked on a diplomatic mission to Venice to negotiate on behalf of her husband. During this visit, she engaged with Pierre de Bonzy, emissary of Louis XIV, hoping to forge a political alliance with France.

Accused of complicity in the conspiracy, Ana Katarina found herself powerless when, in July 1670, was forcibly removed from her home in Graz along with her underage daughter under imperial decree. There, she endured her final days in captivity, facing merciless wrath of

the Emperor. A poignant letter reveals Ana Katarina's suffering, wrought by poverty and agonizing uncertainty regarding the fate of her sons, referring to herself as an unhappy widow. Despite her pleas to remain united with her daughter Aurora, the Emperor callously denied her request in late September 1671.

Katarina Zrinski, unwavering in her loyalty and courage, eventually succumbed to the tribulations that weighed heavily on her spirit and body. Impoverished and allegedly burdened by the tragedies that befell her family, she passed away in Graz within the confines of a Dominican convent on November 16, 1673. Centuries later, her legacy emerged as a symbol of defiance against injustice, with her name revered by countless communities and women's associations across Croatia.

Jelena Zrinski: The bravest woman of Europe

Jelena Zrinski, acclaimed as the bravest woman in Europe, stands as one of the final descendants of the noble house of Zrinski, renowned for her defiance against the formidable Habsburg imperial family. Celebrated for her intellect, beauty, and indomitable spirit, she sought sanctuary among the ages-old adversaries of her family, within the domains of the mighty Ottoman Empire.

Born circa 1643 in Ozalj, the seat of her parents, Ana Katarina Frankopan and Petar Zrinski, Jelena was the eldest offspring of a union that united two influential Croatian families. Carrying the traditional name Jelena bestowed upon the firstborn daughter. She grew up amidst the opulence and influence afforded by her family's extensive estates, which spanned the breadth of Croatia. Benefiting from her family's affluence and her mother's esteemed position, Jelena received a privileged education. Exploring the Croatian countryside and visiting family estates during her youth, she reveled in the splendors of nature, unaware of the tumultuous twists would eventually unveil in her life's journey.

In 1666, Jelena, with her dark locks cascading around her, married Ferenc I. Rákóczi, a Hungarian magnate poised to inherit the principality of Transylvania, a historic



Jelena Zrinski, by Karoly Jakobey, c. 1880

domain nestled in Romania. Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of her father's endeavors, young Jelena swiftly persuaded her husband to align with her family in a conspiracy against Emperor Leopold. The Prince of Transylvania could not refuse his lovely wife, who actively participated in discussions with discontented magnates, tirelessly seeking allies.

Despite the fervent efforts of this resolute young woman, the conspiracy ultimately met its demise. Her family faced imprisonment, leaving Jelena to navigate a labyrinth of unverified rumors and tales. The world of the beautiful Jelena began to crumble. Meanwhile, her valiant husband seized the Emperor's officers, demanding the release of Jelena's father, Petar. Soon, the conspirators were executed, her mother and sisters incarcerated, with dire tidings encroaching from every quarter. It is unknown what Jelena felt upon learning of her father's death and the destruction of her family, but one figure loomed large in her thoughts - Emperor Leopold I.

Recognizing the irreversible shifts in the political landscape, the mother of Jelena's husband, Ferenc, grasped the need for decisive action. With unwavering determination, she secured her son's life from the clutches of the Emperor, paying a steep price in the form of a generous ransom. In return, she relinquished all her family's estates to Vienna, except for one crucial fortress - Munkács. Situated in present-day Ukraine, this stronghold held not only strategic significance but also emerged as a symbol of resilience and fortitude, its imposing walls shaping the destiny and trajectory of Jelena Zrinski.

As Jelena and Ferenc pressed on with their lives, their marital happiness proved fleeting, with Ferenc's passing in 1676. Yet, Jelena's mourning was soon interrupted by a startling revelation. She discovered that Ferenc's will, like a bolt from the blue, entrusted the guardianship of their children, young Ferenc II and Julianna Barbara, to Emperor Leopold - a figure whom Jelena regarded with discomfort and disdain. Confronted with this unexpected twist, the young widow embarked on days of relentless struggle to retain not only her estates but also her children. Undeterred, Jelena launched a full scale challenge against the Emperor's custody of the children. Through her defiance and courage, a judge from Vienna delivered the verdict affirming her rights, as well as the inheritance rights of her late husband.

Assuming full responsibility, Jelena took the helm, managing the estates, wielding her own office and seal, her indomitable personality shining through. Revered by her subjects, she championed causes close to the heart, aiding the underprivileged, advocating for religious tolerance, fighting for the rights of serfs, and fostering urban development. It seemed as though she was tailor-made for her newfound role. News from across Europe reverberated within her court, swiftening her into the spotlight. Whispers and rumors spread throughout the aristocratic circles, painting a portrait of a young woman who defied social norms.

Even amidst her trials, Jelena orchestrated a poignant reunion with her brother Ivan Antun stationed at the

fortress of Regec in northern Hungary as an officer in the imperial army. However, the heartfelt encounter took a somber turn for Ivan, who fell into the clutches of Kurucs, rebels led by the young charismatic Imre Thököly, smitten by the allure of the beautiful princess. Ivan refused their offer to join them, remaining loyal to the family that had destroyed his own, and after several months of captivity, he was released.

Jelena, accustomed to navigating tumultuous waters, found herself embroiled in yet another conflict, this time with the Church, which asserted its claim over the estate of her recently deceased mother-in-law. Determined to preserve her family's inheritance, Jelena boldly delved into the family treasury, mollifying the Church's demands with a hefty payment. In a moment of respite, Emperor Leopold sent Jelena a letter full of conciliatory words, assuring her that her estates would remain untouched. However, the emperor's words were not mere courtesy: dark clouds of a major conflict loomed on the horizon. The Pope's warning of the Ottoman Empire's imminent a grand campaign prompted Leopold to mend fences with his Hungarian subjects, including the intrepid princess Jelena.

In this labyrinth of political maneuvers, Emperor Leopold brokered a delicate truce with the Kurucs, permitting them to maintain their positions on the nobles' estates during the winter. In 1680, Jelena crossed paths with Imre Thököly, the purpose of their meeting ostensibly practical - to arrange accommodation for the Kuruc forces. However, what began as a pragmatic encounter soon took on a more personal tone as Thököly's admiration for the courageous princess became palpable. As the emperor brokered peace with the Kurucs, granting them residency on the nobles' estates, Imre Thököly seized an opportunity. Their meeting in 1680 ostensibly aimed to arrange accommodation for his people, yet the charismatic leader of the rebels also revealed his fondness for the princess. Amidst this intricate web of political entanglements, Jelena found herself at the center of a complex situation. Emperor Leopold and Sultan Mehmed IV both pressed their demands upon her, each



Imre Thokoly

seeking her support for the Kuruc forces in their fight against the Habsburgs. Adding to the political turmoil, Emperor Leopold further requested access to the fortress of Munkács, over which Jelena held sway, along with provisions for his troops.

Despite these mounting presses, Imre extended a proposal to Jelena, pledging to align with the Emperor and pacify the Ottomans. In the summer of 1682, Jelena, a ten-year widow and Catholic, wed the young Protestant rebel Imre in Munkács, igniting a storm of speculations. While some viewed the union through a lens of political expediency, others recognized the shared bond between the two: both educated, spirited, and intelligent, and bereft of their fathers at the hands of the Emperor.

That same year, the country faced a daunting challenges as a large Ottoman army marched towards Vienna. A dilemma loomed over everyone: should they have joined the Ottomans even though their campaign could fail,

leaving their allies unprotected from the Habsburgs? In this whirlwind of uncertainty, Jelena fervently prayed for peace while Imre realized that he could not straddle between two powerful forces. Ultimately, he opted to align with the Ottoman Empire, securing the title of Prince of Upper Hungary as a reward from the Sultan. In the ensuing agreement, Imre ensured that Jelena's name held weight, leveraging her influence to secure certain freedoms for the Croats. In his new role, Jelena's young husband proved to be a wise ruler in his new homeland. He abolished taxes and even managed to make peace with Emperor Leopold, who recognized his authority over Upper Hungary.

In 1683, the birth of their son should have been a time of joy, but instead Jelena and Imre found themselves thrust into the preparations for war. Tragedy struck when their newborn passed away after just a few weeks of life. In the midst of their grief, they embarked on a mission to rally the Hungarian nobility to their cause.

Meanwhile, Sultan Mehmed IV, the new leader of the Ottoman Empire, was resolute in fulfilling Suleiman the Magnificent's vision of conquering Vienna. Gathering his massive army, he marched forth to pursue his ambitions.

The siege of Vienna commenced on July 14, 1683, enduring for a grueling two months. On the opposing side stood the Holy Roman Empire, led by the Habsburg dynasty, with the support of the Polish king Jan III Sobieski and his army. While the Grand Vizier focused on the siege, the Polish king launched a sudden attack. The decisive clash unfolded on September 12, resulting in a resounding defeat for the mighty Ottoman army. This pivotal not only thwarted the Ottoman Empire's advance into Europe but also marked a momentous shift in history.

Emerging triumphant from the conflict, Leopold sought to quell opposition by dispatching Archduke Charles to Hungary. However, Imre's actions stoked the ire of the vengeful Habsburgs, including the Grand Vizier whom he refused to aid. In a bid protect their assets, the couple transferred all their valuables to the fortified Munkács. During negotiations with the Grand



The Relief Battle of Vienna, 1683 by Frans Geffels (Wien Museum, Vienna, Austria)

Vizier, Imre reluctantly found himself taken captive. With his army scattered, thousands of soldiers who had once been loyal to Imre defected, joining the advancing imperial forces.

In 1685, the army laid siege to the fortified and well-provisioned town, calling on Jelena to surrender. However, the brave Jelena refused to even consider it – she remained fearless and determined. She made it clear that while the battlefield might traditionally be the domain of men, she would fiercely defend the interests of her children. With wisdom and intelligence, she sought to challenge the pride of her adversaries, reminding them that Vienna would suffer humiliation if it dared to assail a seemingly defenseless woman.

Throughout the siege, Jelena found herself once again pregnant, only to endure the heartbreak of another loss. Meanwhile, Imre regained his freedom, yet the imperial

army persisted in its siege of the city. Assuming her role as chief commander, Jelena shouldered the responsibility for the city's defense, rallying the army's morale, and tending to the wounded. Recognizing the power of communication, she reached out to French and Polish allies, even securing financial support for the defense efforts. Her valor earned her the accolade of being hailed as the "bravest woman of Europe" by none other than the French King Louis XIV.

As public opinion turned against the Emperor for his campaign against a lone woman and her small children, cities across Europe began to rally behind Jelena, the valiant defender of the small fortress. Her indomitable spirit garnered admiration throughout the continent, with one French illustration depicting her armed at the besieged walls, symbolizing her unwavering commitment to defense and freedom.



Jelena Zrinski at Munkács Castle, by Victor Madarasz, 1859 (Hungarian National Museum)

For three arduous years, she bravely resisted the emperor's pressure, yet eventually city's provisions dwindled. Confronted with the stark reality of dwindling food and supplies, Jelena reluctantly conceded to the inevitable, opting to surrender. On January 17, 1688, she permitted the imperial army to enter the city. Employing her intelligence and negotiating skills, she negotiated amnesty for the city's populace during the talks. Securing accommodation for herself and her children in Vienna, she was granted with the title of princess. Demonstrating her dedication to her family, she relinquished all her husband's possessions and their combined wealth to Emperor Leopold. Following her

father's footsteps, she entrusted her fate to Emperor Leopold, though whether history would echo the trials of her family's past or herald a new chapter remained uncertain.

Upon her arrival in Vienna under armed escort, Jelena became the subject of intense public curiosity and scrutiny. Her presence captivated the masses, with newspapers buzzing about her. However, Leopold's patience with the Zrinski family had worn thin, leading to disregard their agreement. Her son was taken away from her, her daughter consigned to a convent, and Jelena herself confined to yet another convent. It seemed as though history was repeating itself once more.

Despite suffering a prior defeat, the Ottoman Empire reemerged onto the stage, their influence undiminished. Imre, too was not idle as the prospect of reclaiming Hungary became a tangible goal once more. Serving the Ottomans anew as the Prince of Transylvania, he successfully reclaimed his estates and orchestrated the capture of important Austrian officers, intending to barter them for his wife's release. Jelena's daughter, Julijana, married an older officer, while her son, Ferenc, pursued studies at the university in Prague, far from the family. Jelena endured the Emperor's cruelty as he obstinately denied her plea to reunite with her children.

Jelena was the sole surviving member of the Zrinski clan, following the tragic demise of her cousin Adam, the sole heir of their family, in 1691, felled by a bullet during the Battle of Slankamen. With Adam's passing, the Zrinski lineage met its end, relinquishing all their lands and assets into the Emperor's hands.

Growing weary of Jelena's presence as a constant reminder of his frustrations, Emperor Leopold dismissed the terms agreed upon at surrender, resulting in Jelena's expulsion from the monarchy in 1691. Simultaneously, her children were declared of age, thus reclaiming control of their estates. Prior to her departure, Jelena penned a letter to her son, urging him to pursue knowledge diligently to attain the crown of glory.

In a tale reminiscent of adventure novels, Jelena Zrinski and her husband Imre finally reunited after seven long years of separation at the border of powerful empires in 1692. They built their home in Požarevac, within the Ottoman Empire domain, present-day Serbia, hopeful of forging a semblance of normalcy. Despite Imre's ailing health, he retained the title of Prince of Transylvania and commanded his army, backed financially by Sultan Ahmed II.

Faced with dwindling financial support from the Sultan, Jelena took the bold step of corresponding with him directly to maintain the Ottoman Empire's backing. Concurrently, she nurtured diplomatic ties with France, eliciting an offer from King Louis XIV to relocate her family to French soil. This proposition rattled the



Sultan Ahmed II

Habsburgs, prompting Jelena and Imre to ponder their future options. Shortly after, the Zrinski family welcomed a new addition, a daughter named Susanna. Though bringing a glimmer of hope, Susanna's life was tragically cut short after just a year.

Recognizing the need for drastic changes, the renowned Zrinski couple decided to leave Požarevac in 1695, setting their sights on the heart of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul. This marked Jelena as the first Zrinski to seek sanctuary with their centuries-old adversaries after her legitimate ruler betrayed both her and her lineage. Their relocation to Istanbul's Christian enclave, Galata, garnered attention even from French newspapers.

Jelena continued to enjoy fame, residing as a princess in the heart of the Ottoman Empire's capital. It appeared that the Ottoman Empire held in higher regard than her



Treaty of Karlowitz (Hungarian National Museum)

own Emperor, ushering her into a new era filled with challenges and changes.

The conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy persisted unabated. While the Sultan remained true to his word, safeguarding Erdelj, Emperor Leopold showed no inclination to acknowledge Imre's authority. Consequently, the Ottoman army suffered significant setbacks, leading to the Emperor gaining control over Erdelj's estates. However, these hostilities momentarily abated as the great powers engaged in peace negotiations.

In October 1698, talks commenced in the small village of Srijemski Karlovci with the aim of resolving the longstanding feud between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy. Yet again, the illustrious Croatian figure, Jelena Zrinski, found herself at the center of tensions. She anticipated Emperor Leopold to honor their initial agreement, including the release of her brother and the return of her estates. However, the Zrinski family had learned firsthand of Leopold's capricious nature – unreliable and prone to betrayal. Instead of returning Erdelj, the Emperor now demanded the extradition of Jelena and Imre, sparking anger and defiance within her. Conversely, the Ottoman Empire, continued to treat Jelena with dignity and integrity, providing her with protection. They persistently urged the emperor to resolve Jelena's predicament through mutual agreement. The



Sultan Mustafa II

negotiations concluded in January 1699, with Leopold conceding certain territories to the Sultan. However, he stubbornly retained control over Erdelj, a move seemingly driven by sheer obstinance rather than necessity.

Upon recognizing that peace was imminent with the Ottomans, Leopold launched a retaliatory campaign and crackdown on the Hungarian nobility. Numerous nobles, including Jelena's son, Ferenc II, were accused of treason. Ferenc found himself imprisoned in Wiener Neustadt, the same place where his grandfather, Petar Zrinski, had been held captive. Fortunately, the grandson's fate did not mirror that of his grandfather.

Following the peace agreement between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, Princess Jelena Zrinski and her



Jelena Zrinski (History.info magazine)

family were compelled to depart from their homeland. Despite the Emperor's demand for her presence, Sultan Mustafa II (1695-1703), whose armies had clashed with her ancestors in many battles, firmly sided with what he deemed right. Rejecting the Emperor's request, he extended to Jelena and her family the sanctuary they desperately sought - a safe refuge and a new home. The Ottoman Empire became the abode of the courageous Croatian-Hungarian princess Jelena Zrinski, who had confronted numerous trials and transitions in her life yet had never faltered in her valor and resolve.

Far removed from the battlefields, in an unfamiliar land, this heroine would spend her remaining days in safety and freedom, under the guardianship of old enemies but ultimately held admiration for both her and their courage - the mighty Ottoman Empire. In a testament of fate's whims, perils, and treacheries, centuries of enmity would dissipate, foes would transform into allies, and Jelena would find lifelong peace.

In 1701, the couple moved to Asia Minor, settling in Izmit. There, they received a plot of land and established their court, where they resumed hosting guests and festivities. In their newfound home, they found joy and contentment although Jelena harbored dreams of returning to her homeland. Her spirits were

lifted when she received news of her son's escape from imperial confinement.

However, in early 1703, Jelena fell gravely ill. She prepared her will and selected attire for her funeral. According to her secretary's accounts, with her last breath, she echoed her father's final words before his execution: "Into your hands, I commend my spirit. Come, Holy Spirit."

A marble slab now rests above her grave, inscribed with words that celebrate this extraordinary woman. She is celebrated as a woman of exceptional character, a pride spanning centuries, renowned worldwide, and as the final pride of the Zrinski and Frankopan dynasties. These words are well-deserved and fitting for this remarkable woman. Jelena, a devout Catholic, passed away on February 18, 1703. Her husband, Imre died two years later, in 1705, also in Izmit.

Jelena Zrinski, a steadfast and proud woman who fought with remarkable courage, elicited admiration on both sides of the conflict. Her life and actions were revered by many, recognized as the bravest woman in Europe, she left a lasting legacy. Across Hungary, numerous monuments were erected in her honor, and her son Ferenc II was hailed as a Hungarian national hero. In 1906, their remains were transferred in 1906 from Istanbul to Košice, Slovakia.

The Legacy of the Ottoman Empire in Croatia

The era of Ottoman rule brought monumental transformations to Croatian lands, leaving enduring marks on its history and culture. Interactions between Croatians and Ottomans fostered closer cultural and historical bonds between two regions. Notably, a prominent Ottoman traveler chronicled his experiences at the court of a renowned conspirator, offering valuable insights into Croatian life. Simultaneously, many Croatians found opportunities within the Ottoman Empire, rising to prominence as military leaders, viziers, and distinguished soldiers. Over the centuries of interaction, a fusion of cultures, traditions and languages

occurred, resulting in a diverse cultural tapestry. The Ottoman legacy in Croatian territories endures, enriching the nation's cultural landscape, underscoring the depth of historical connections.

What was life like under Ottoman rule?

As Ottoman influence expanded in the mid-15th century, Croatia entered into a prolonged period of conflict and Ottoman domination, which persisted until liberation wars in the late 17th century. The Ottomans introduced their administrative system to the conquered territories, organized around a feudal structure. The Sultan, wielding



Map of Croatia in 1593, by Gerard de Jode (Croatian History Museum)

supreme authority, granted land, known as *timar*, as a reward for loyalty and military service. This manorial system allowed *sipahis*, the holders of *timars*, to control land in exchange for military service as cavalymen. The peasantry or *re'ayâ*, cultivated the land and provided produce to the landholders, often a tithe, often alongside taxes paid to the state. Successful warriors could attain land ownership, serving as further incentive for military service.

The main administrative unit under Ottoman rule was known as a "sandjak" (*sancak*), overseen by a military governor called the "sandžak-beg" (*sancak beyi*), appointed directly by the Sultan. This official

held dual responsibilities, managing both the territory's administration and its military affairs as a commander. This territory was further divided into "kadiluks," judicial-administrative districts headed by a "kadi," a judge received gifts rather than a salary, often leading to instances of bribery. In regions with Croatian populations, multiple sandžaks existed, including notable ones like Klis, Požega, Lika, and Srijem, whose borders fluctuated over time. This administrative framework significantly influenced the social and historical dynamic of Croatian lands.

The Christian population was subject to various taxes, including a head tax, a levy on every able-bodied man for



Ottoman captives, by Erhard Schön, 16th century

military service, and a tribute tax, a tax on their property. These taxes placed Christians at a disadvantage compared to their Muslim counterparts, with the burden increasing as conflicts intensified. The 17th century witnessed a deterioration as the Ottoman Empire weakened, resulting in higher taxes and abuse of power by certain officials. Prolonged warfare depleted the Empire's treasury, leading to currency depreciation and additional burdens on the population.

The blood tax, a particularly heavy burden, required Croatian population under Ottoman rule to provide their sons for Ottoman military service. Many of those were trained for elite Janissary units, serving as a means to replenish the Ottoman army. The state took responsibility for these boys, enabling them to advance to the highest state positions. In this way, many Croats found advancement opportunities within the Empire,

rising to prominent positions as military leaders, viziers, and provincial governors. With a notable presence of Croats in influential roles, the Croatian language gained significance in diplomatic circles at the Sultan's court, reflecting the substantial contributions of Croats to the Ottoman Empire's governance and diplomacy.

The Ottomans' invasions and ensuing conflicts brought about significant demographic shifts, prompting widespread migrations as people sought safety in other regions. Many Croatian communities sought refuge under Venetian rule in the southern islands of Croatia and in western parts of Croatia and Hungary. One notable migration was orchestrated by Nikola IV Zrinski, who resettled peasants from Pounje and Slavonia to Međimurje. Following a devastating plague outbreak in Međimurje between 1553 and 1555, which claimed around 12,000 lives, Nikola secured a royal privilege

from King Ferdinand Habsburg exempting the newly settled population from certain obligations for twelve years. This resettlement effort revitalized Medimurje and bolstered the influence of the Zrinski family. Into the vacated border areas, Vlachs, predominantly Orthodox, migrated, gradually increasing the Orthodox population's presence increased, spreading westward and northwestward. Their rights and freedoms were later codified in the Vlach Statutes of 1630, issued by King Ferdinand II.

Forced Islamization was not systematically enforced in conquered Ottoman territories. Many inhabitants, particularly in Bosnia, voluntarily embraced Islam, enticed by privileges such as tax exemptions, enhanced security, and prospects for social and career advancement. Conversely, those who retained their Christian faith were subject to higher taxes but enjoyed religious freedom. This practice contributed to a gradual increase in the Muslim population, particularly among urban dwellers and the ruling classes, reshaping social dynamics in the conquered regions.

According to records from Catholic sources, initially Ottoman rulers initially maintained a degree of fairness, but with the Empire's weakening and influx of new populations, attitudes shifted. The Ottomans had a complex relationship with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, often viewing Catholic Europe, under the Pope's leadership in Rome as antagonistic. Despite this, the Franciscans were permitted to operate after Bosnia's conquest, disseminating religious texts, primarily from Italy, and safeguarding the Croatian population. Friar Andeo Zvizdović played a pivotal role in securing an Ahdnama – a charter guaranteeing rights to the Catholic community – from Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror in 1463. This charter granted the Catholic community freedoms to practice their faith, with the Franciscans offering vital spiritual and cultural support during turbulent times.

The Ottoman Empire exhibited a more tolerant stance towards the Orthodox Church compared to the Catholic Church, as the Orthodox population in the Balkans,



Ahdnama (Ahidname) of Mehmed II, issued in 1463

already under Ottoman rule, did not pose a significant threat to Ottoman authority. Consequently, in the absence of Catholic priests in the conquered territories, many local residents embraced Orthodoxy. During this period, the majority of the populace lived in villages and smaller settlements, with cities being relatively scarce. Existing cities within the conquered territories gradually assimilated Ottoman cultural traits, with the construction of mosques and minarets becoming common features. Urban areas were typically divided into “çarşı,” or commercial districts, and “mahalle,” residential areas, with the Christian population often concentrated in one or two “mahalle.” Urban craftsmanship flourished, as evidenced by examples like Osijek, which housed a foundry for casting cannons for military purposes.

However, fewer new cities were established after the Ottoman conquests, and the number of fortresses (“burgovi”) dwindled due to the expulsion of the nobility. Border regions played a pivotal role, with their fortresses remaining inhabited, and serving as prime targets for ambushes and raiding expeditions.

During the era of Ottoman incursions, two Croatian regions stood out for their historical significance, each experiencing unique developments. The Republic of Dubrovnik, despite its modest size, adeptly navigated between great powers, prioritizing the preservation of its independence and the avoidance of military conflicts. In contrast, the Military Frontier (Vojna Krajina) emerged as a battleground, crucial for defense against Ottoman advances to the west. Effective management of this region, perpetually on edge due to threat of conflict, played a vital role in containing the spread of Ottoman power towards western Europe.

The Republic of Dubrovnik - cunning, espionage, trade, and diplomacy

As a small state, Dubrovnik successfully sustained itself for centuries, skillfully navigating the complexities of power dynamics in the region. Its adept management of diplomatic and trade relations with the Ottoman Empire played a pivotal role in its long-standing survival.

Originally known as Ragusium, this city-state began to forge its own path towards self-governance following the decline of the Byzantine Empire, organizing itself as a commune in the 12th century. Operating autonomously, Dubrovnik established a republican system of governance from the 15th century onwards, with power vested in prominent noble families whose members were elected to the Great Council. Despite its modest size, the Republic of Dubrovnik emerged as a hub of diplomacy and trade, leveraging its extensive network of influence to thrive amidst the dominance of larger empires.

Trade served as the linchpin of Dubrovnik's prosperity, positioning the city as a crucial intermediary between the Balkans and the Italian city-states. Exporting commodities like grain, leather, meat, and salt, Dubrovnik forged

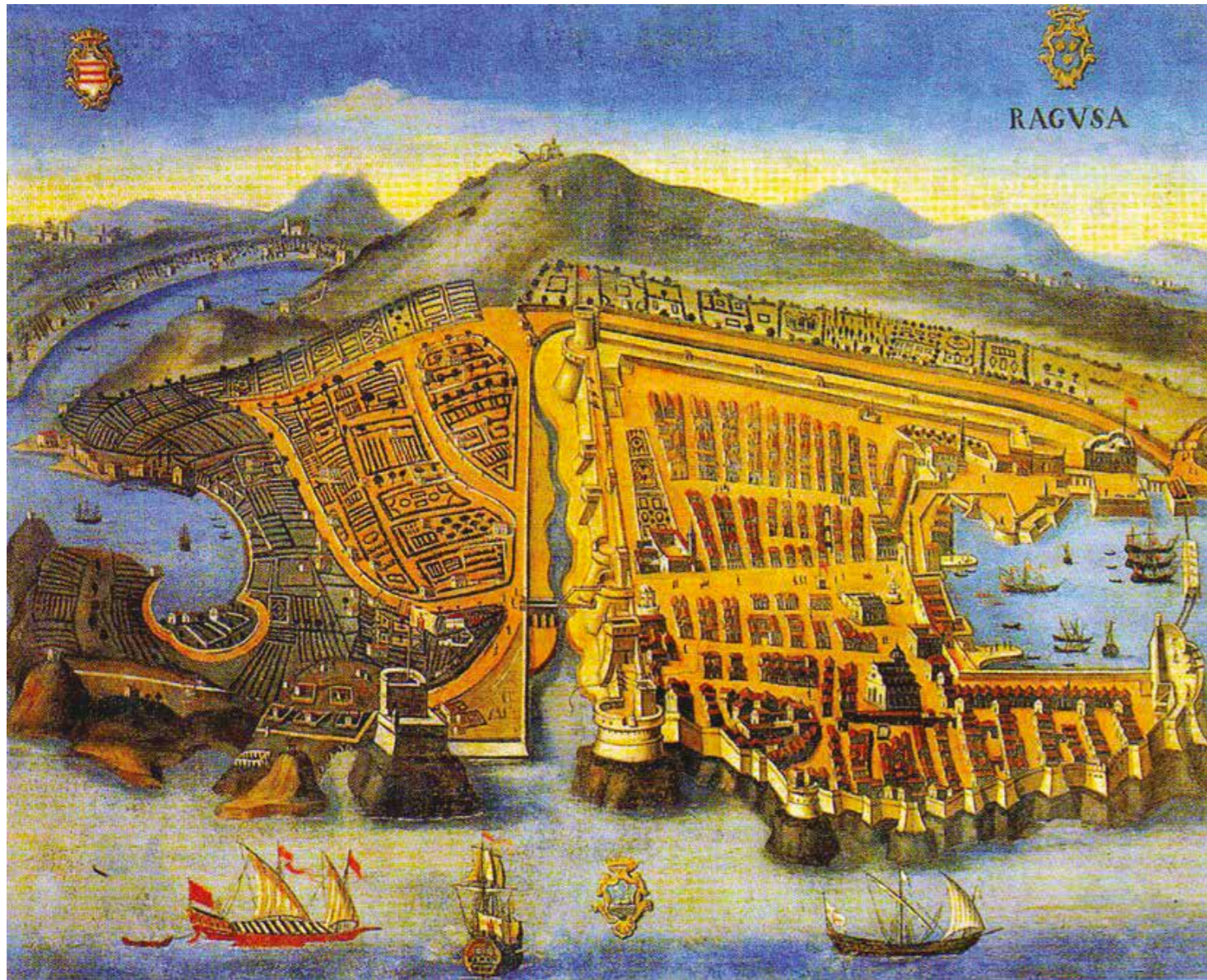


Old map of the Republic of Ragusa, 17th century

alliances with Italian cities as early as the 12th century, guided by a pragmatic diplomatic approach focused on fostering friendships over enmities.

The granting of free trade rights in Bosnia by Viceroy Kulin in 1189 bolstered Dubrovnik's trading prowess, while securing privileges for unhindered commerce within the Byzantine Empire propelled its economic ascendancy in the 12th century. By recognizing the sovereignty of Louis I, the Hungarian-Croatian king, and committing to annual tributes, Dubrovnik gained unrestricted trading rights throughout its realm in the 14th century, further expanding its economic reach. Through a judicious blend of diplomatic finesse, commercial acumen, and political adaptability, the Republic of Dubrovnik solidified its position as a prominent trading and cultural enclave along the Adriatic coast, ensuring its autonomy and prosperity despite the looming shadow of powerful neighboring empires.

The Republic of Dubrovnik's diplomatic prowess stood as its greatest asset, enabling the small state to adeptly navigate complex political landscapes and forge alliances with major powers, thereby showcasing its true strength. Recognizing the burgeoning influence of the Ottoman Empire, Dubrovnik's diplomats swiftly cultivated amicable relations with Ottoman rulers. In 1430, Dubrovnik managed to negotiate permission for free



Dubrovnik in 1667

trade within the borders of the Empire. Although this meant paying the hefty annual tribute of around 12,500 ducats, the open market provided significant economic opportunities for the city.

The primary threat to Dubrovnik often emanated from its rival, Venice, which sought to limit its trading power by imposing levies and halting Dubrovnik's ships. Despite these challenges, Dubrovnik maintained its autonomy and commercial success, even while the rest of the Croatian coast was under Venetian rule. This liberty fueled Dubrovnik's economic and cultural prosperity, facilitating advancements such as the establishment of educational institutions, hospitals, and pharmacies.

Notably, Dubrovnik demonstrated progressive values by abolishing the slave trade as early as 1416, a testament to its forward-thinking approach.

Through adept diplomacy, Dubrovnik deftly balanced its relations with the Ottoman Empire and Spain, two major powers of the time. During the mid-16th century, Dubrovnik's trade reached its peak, with approximately 180 ships traversing the Mediterranean Sea and even venturing into the Atlantic Ocean, solidifying the city's position as a premier trading hub.

To manage and facilitate relations with the Ottoman Empire, Dubrovnik established a dedicated "Turkish office." This office oversaw the reception and translation



Dubrovnik merchant

of correspondence, while dragomans, translators specialized in the Turkish language, played a crucial role in diplomatic exchanges with the Empire. Dubrovnik's envoys received meticulous instructions for audiences with the sultan, including the presentation of gifts, demonstrations of humility, requests for favors, and obligatory bribery of officials. Traditionally, the official gift for a new sultan consisted of a bowl, a pitcher, and twelve silver plates, with a total value of 200 ducats.

The Dubrovnik envoys wielded yet another potent tool in their diplomatic arsenal: cunning. These emissaries, tasked with delivering tribute to the Ottoman Empire, excelled in portraying their city as poor and modest. Adhering to a strict code, they avoided ostentation, refraining from riding expensive horses or dwelling in



Flag of the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik)

luxurious residences in Istanbul; instead, they opted for humble rented accommodations. During the tribute presentations, they artfully lamented the city's financial constraints, depicting a community burdened by the tribute squeezed from its own people. This clever ruse portrayed Dubrovnik as humble and impoverished, while depicting the Ottoman Empire as benevolent and powerful.

In addition to financial cunning, the inhabitants of Dubrovnik displayed remarkable proficiency in intelligence gathering, meticulously inquiring information about Ottoman dignitaries and leveraging it to their advantage. This intelligent network, carefully cultivated and safeguarded, proved invaluable, benefiting all parties involved. The East secured a reliable partner for Western trade, the West gained access to Eastern markets, and Dubrovnik maintained its influence and prosperity. In this intricate ballet of international diplomacy, Dubrovnik adeptly extracted maximum advantage while delicately balancing the interests of both worlds.

Navigating the shifting dynamics between these allies, and sometimes adversaries, Dubrovnik skillfully maneuvered its position between East and West. This delicate performance lasted until the emergence of Napoleon onto the European stage. In 1806, the French army entered Dubrovnik, and in 1808, Marshal Marmont officially dissolved the Dubrovnik Republic with his proclamation on January 31st. Thus concluded the

centuries-long existence of the diminutive, yet influential Republic, leaving an indelible imprint on the history of the Mediterranean world.

Life on the border

Living on the border meant living with the constant threat of Ottoman encroachment, prompting efforts to establish a defensive line safeguarding the kingdom. Thus, the Military Frontier gradually took shape as a bulwark against Ottoman incursions to the west. Following the fall of Bosnia in 1463, King Matthias Corvinus initiated the creation of this defensive network, laying the foundation with the establishment of the Senj Captaincy in 1469. In the 16th century, due to Ottoman conquests, Croatian lands were reduced to “remnants of remnants.” Frontier fortresses in Croatia and Slavonia were organized into captaincies to bolster the defense of the country. Subsequently, in the early 16th century, Ferdinand of Habsburg began the strategic deployment of military garrisons within these fortifications.

The Military Frontier was delineated into three distinct zones: Croatian Krajina, south of the Kupa River, with its headquarters in Karlovac; Slavonian Krajina situated between the Sava and Drava rivers; and Banska Krajina, under the rule of the Viceroy and the Sabor, defending the territory between the Sava and Kupa rivers. This intermediary space, a battleground for shifting powers, was often considered a no-man’s land, fostering population movements. Those who chose to remain gathered around fortified strongholds that offered security. Vlachs, settled along the border and exempted from taxes in exchange for military service, frequently comprised the defense forces on the frontier. It was a society characterized by its martial and agrarian nature, where peasants transitioned into frontier soldiers, fulfilling their military obligations. Agriculture, farming, and animal husbandry were the primary economic pursuits, with agrarian settlements predominating.

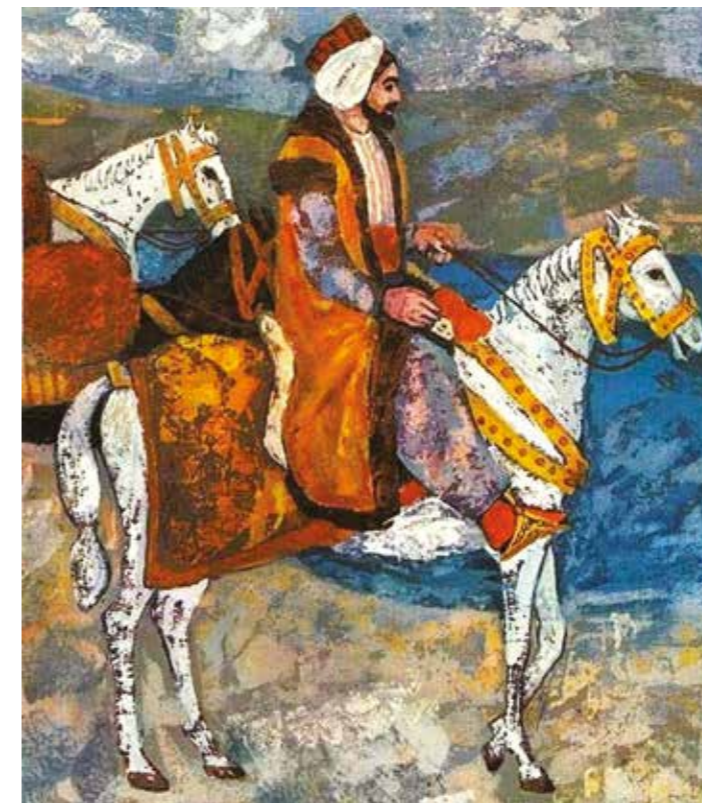
The Military Frontier, a region marked by perpetual warfare and border strife, would only be disbanded in 1873, signifying the conclusion of one of the most protracted and arduous chapters in Croatian history.



Frontiersman from Pomorišje, 1st half of the 18th century, by Martin Engelbrecht

Traveler Evliya Çelebi at the Zrinski’s in Čakovec

Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, renowned for his extensive journeys throughout the Ottoman Empire and neighboring countries, chronicled his experiences in the “Seyahatname” (Travelogue), spanning ten volumes. Born in 1611, his travels from 1660 to 1664, took him through Croatian territories multiple times, making his travelogue an important source of information not only for the Ottoman Empire but also for the history of Croatian lands. His visit to Čakovec and his encounter with Nikola Zrinski, provide a fascinating window into intercultural dynamics, political landscape, and daily



Evliya Çelebi, unknown painter, 17th century

life in Croatia during that era. Evliya Çelebi’s detailed records, particularly about the Zrinski family and their court in Čakovec offer historians invaluable perspectives on this tumultuous period.

Following the Ottoman army’s defeat in 1656, Bihać captain Mustaj-beg Haćumović, taken captive, found himself under the hospitality of Nikola VII. Zrinski. Melek Ahmed Pasha acting on orders from the Grand Vizier, tasked Çelebi with ransoming Haćumović. Setting out on his journey to Čakovec, Çelebi brought along twelve carts, aiming to visit the renowned Croatian ban and warrior. Fully cognizant of Zrinski’s role in Croatia’s defense and his illustrious reputation, Çelebi occasionally embellished his writings, attributing to Nikola Zrinski various cities and properties that were not actually part of the family’s holdings. In his accounts, Çelebi paints a vivid picture of Zrinski’s domain as a land of splendor and prosperity, elevating the stature of this military leader. He even goes as far as to mention Nikola’s possession of the Alexander the Great’s crown bestowing upon him the title of king.

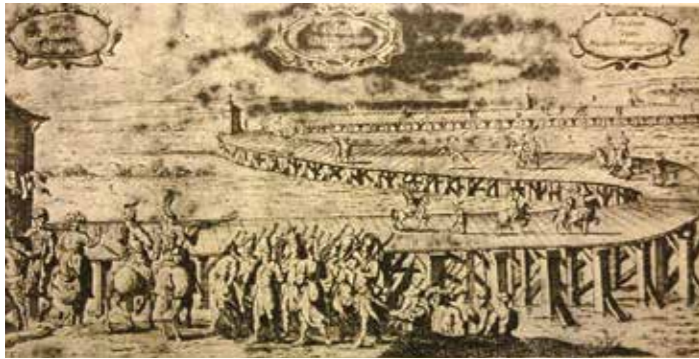
In 1660, Evliya Çelebi arrived in Čakovec. He lodged with his entourage at the “palace near the church of Viceroy Zrinski,” and the soldiers escorted him to the “king” the next day. Nikola received a missive from the Grand Vizier, delivered by Çelebi, along with the ransom for the captive. The Viceroy reverently received the letter, which then passed to the interpreters. Evliya notes Nikola’s hospitality and his gestures of goodwill towards Mustaj-beg, including clothing and a horse, and highlights their amicable conversation during the feast. He further remarks on Croatian Viceroy’s acknowledgement of his former captive’s bravery, signifying respect.

Before departing, Nikola Zrinski entrusted Evliya Çelebi with a letter for Melek Ahmed Pasha. As a respected envoy in the service of the Grand Vizier, Evliya bore the delicate responsibility of negotiating captives’ release. In his accounts, he recounts shared concerns with the Viceroy about border issues and violation of peace agreements.

Travelling with the ban, Evliya Çelebi visited the smaller town of Legrad, where he was captivated by the local maidens, whom he described as unveiled and beautiful like fairies. Engaging in a hunting expedition, Evliya vividly recounts encountering large, tusked boars, a pastime favored by the Zrinski family known for their ardor for hunting. It is a twist of fate that just four years later, his host Nikola Zrinski would succumb to an attack by one of these beasts.

Upon concluding his stay with Nikola Zrinski, Evliya Çelebi received lavish gifts from the Viceroy. Among them were emancipated armed slaves, whom Nikola granted freedom “for the pasha’s happiness.” Additionally, Nikola Zrinski dispatched a carriage with horses to Ahmed Pasha, along with rifles, cannons, carpets, and leather, and he extended his generosity to Evliya’s attendants as well. This gesture underscores the mutual respect and appreciation between the former adversaries.

Evliya’s narrative of the siege of Novi Zrin, a fortress constructed by Nikola despite a standing peace accord, bears considerable historical weight. It recounts the relentless artillery assaults endured by the fortress during the June to July 1664 siege, culminating in a fierce battle.



Bridge of Suleiman the Magnificent in Osijek

Following its capture, the decision was made to demolish the fortress. Evliya duly recognized the significance of Nikola's endeavor when he burned down Suleiman the Magnificent's bridge during the winter campaign, an act that celebrated Nikola as a warrior and strategic genius. Evliya's portrayal of life and traditions along the border of two empires offers a unique insight into the complexity of their mutual relations, diplomacy, and daily existence during that era. His meticulous attention to detail, spanning from local traditions to political affairs, renders his travelogue not just an engaging read but also a valuable historical testament, shedding light on the complexities and cohabitation along the border of two formidable realms.

Though Evliya Çelebi may have exaggerated certain events and individuals in his chronicles, it is evident that the Zrinskis commanded great respect in the Ottoman Empire as exceptional warriors. Their ability to garner admiration from their adversaries in the volatile and precarious borderlands attests to their military skill and strategic acumen.

While the exact year of the intrepid traveler's demise remains unknown, his legacy endures and remains pertinent. His detailed records offer invaluable insight into the societal fabric, cultural tapestry, and geopolitical landscapes of the diverse regions and peoples he traversed. UNESCO recognized the importance of his work by designating 2011 as the Year of Evliya Çelebi, commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of his birth. His "Seyahatname" stands as both a historiographic artifact and a captivating chronicle of one of the foremost explorers of his era.



Statue of Evliya Çelebi, Ottoman traveler,
Location: Eger Castle, Hungary

Croats in the Service of the Ottoman Empire

Croats who served in the Ottoman Empire often carved out remarkable careers despite the challenges posed by war, devastation, and captivity. Some rose to prominent positions within the Empire, imprinting their legacy on its annals.

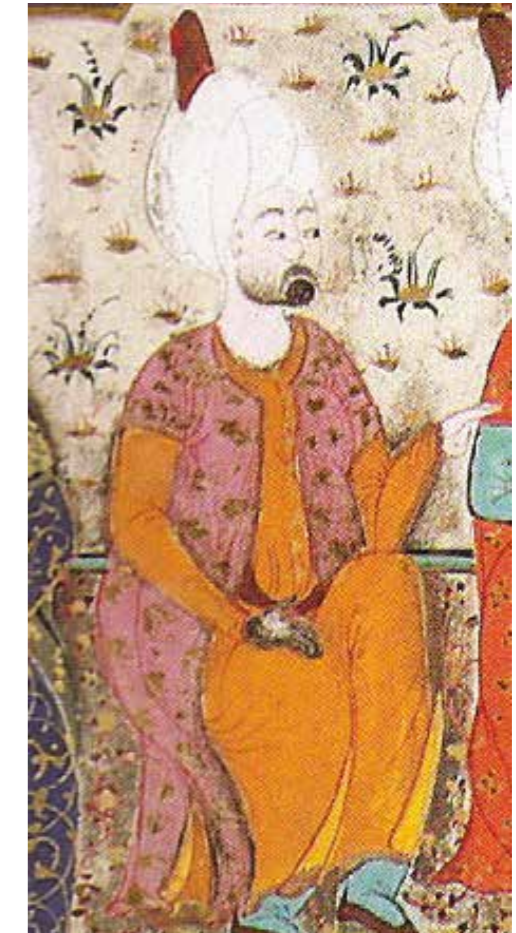
One such figure was Veli Mahmud Pasha (Angelović), whose tenure as grand vizier twice and who died in Istanbul in 1474, underscored his influence at the court of Sultan Mehmed II. He participated in the conquest of Bosnia and was known as a great builder of mosques and madrasas. Additionally, he wrote poetry under the pseudonym "Adni". Regrettably, his life met a tragic end, marked by conspiratorial demise following his deposition. Hersekzade Ahmed Pasha (Hercegović) (1459-1517), son of Croatian nobleman Stjepan Kosača, exemplified another tale of ascent. Relocating to Istanbul and

embracing Islam, he swiftly ascended the ranks owing to his prowess. His marriage to Sultan Bayezid II's daughter, Fatima, further propelled his trajectory, culminating in his appointment as grand vizier and admiral of the navy, serving under three sultans.

Damad Ferhad Pasha, born in Šibenik around 1484, emerged as yet another notable official of the Ottoman Empire. Captured and subsequently converted to Islam, he ascended to eminent positions, including the that of vizier. However, his journey met a grim end with execution in 1524 following a defeat against the Hungarian army. Murad-bey Tardić, born in Šibenik, rose to prominence as one of the renowned military commanders of the Ottoman Empire. As a young man and a war captive, he found himself at the Ottoman court, where he converted to Islam. He distinguished himself as a skilled military commander and in 1528, he conquered Jajce. By order of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, Murad-bey led the Ottoman army to besiege the rugged fortress of Klis in 1536. To ensure its conquest, he erected two fortresses that effectively cut off the defenders' supply lines. Despite the valiant efforts of the Croatian warrior Petar Kružić, Klis fell in 1537 to Ottoman forces, and Murad-bey, for his merits, was granted the title of Klis Sanjak-bey. He died in 1545 and was buried in Sarajevo.

Damat Rüstem Pasha (1500-1561), another Croatian who managed to ascend to prominence within the Ottoman Empire, served as the Grand Vizier of the illustrious Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Taken from Skradin to Istanbul during his youth, he embarked on a trajectory of advancement. His fortunes soared to unprecedented heights when he married the Sultan's daughter Mihrimah in 1539. With ambition and ingenuity, he assumed the role of Grand Vizier in 1544, serving twice in that capacity. His considerable wealth facilitated the construction of mosques and public buildings, reflective of the era's customs. Notably, the Rüstem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul stands as a testament to his architectural patronage. He died in 1561 as one of the most influential figures of the Ottoman Empire.

Piyale (Piali) Pasha (1515-1578), the admiral of the Ottoman Empire during the reigns of Suleiman the



Damat Rüstem Pasha the Croat

Magnificent and Selim II, was appointed to that position by another Croat, Rüstem Pasha. Piyale Pasha brought glory to the Ottoman navy with his successes in the Mediterranean, where he attacked the Spanish coast, destroyed the Spanish fleet, and plundered Italian cities. Notable among his triumphs was the decisive victory at the Battle of Djerba in 1560, where he routed the Christian fleet and returned laden with spoils. His prowess earned him the hand of the daughter of the future Sultan Selim II and elevated him to the rank of vizier. He continued his campaigns in the Mediterranean before retiring. After the Ottoman navy suffered defeat at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, Piyale Pasha returned to active service to rebuild the fleet. He died in 1578 in Istanbul, leaving behind a reputation as the most celebrated admiral of the Ottoman naval history.

Kanijeli Siyavuş Pasha, whose life ended in Istanbul in 1601, ascended to the position of Grand Vizier of



Piyale Pasha the Croat

the Ottoman Empire on three separate occasions. His successful career within the empire attests to his political acumen and capacity to attain the highest echelons of power.

Hadım Sinan Pasha (Borovinić), who died in Cairo in 1517, served as the governor in Herzegovina and as the Grand Vizier during the reign of Sultan Selim I. He was known in Dubrovnik as a just neighbor. His demise in the battle for Cairo prompted the Sultan to declare that no province could match the worth of Sinan Pasha, reflecting the high regard in which he held his advisor and military leader.

Kuyucu Murad Pasha, who died in 1611, likewise ascended to the pinnacle of authority within the Ottoman Empire, assuming the role of Grand Vizier from 1606 to

1611 during the reign of Sultan Ahmed I. He was known for suppressing rebellions that broke out in Anatolia, and his harsh methods in quelling the uprisings earned the nickname “kuyucu,” which means “the one who digs pits,” allegedly due to his practice of excavating pits where the bodies of slain rebels were interred.

Gašpar Graziani, who lived approximately from 1575 to 1620, stands as another Croatian figure who achieved notable success within the Ottoman Empire. While his exact lineage and original surname remain obscure, historical accounts often refer to him as Croatian. Rising through the ranks as a translator and negotiator, Graziani spearheaded peace talks with the Habsburg Monarchy, indicating the high level of trust he enjoyed within the Empire. Renowned for his adept negotiation skills, Graziani successfully maintained good relations with both sides in political negotiations. His contributions earned him the esteemed title of prince in Moldavia, yet his ambitions propelled him to seek greater power by aligning with the Poles against the Ottoman Empire. However, this act of betrayal ultimately led to his downfall and demise.

Dilaver Pasha, who died in 1622, was another Croatian figure who became Grand Vizier within the Ottoman Empire. Educated in Istanbul, he served as the governor of Cyprus and Baghdad, a testament to his capabilities and political skills. Tragically, Dilaver Pasha met his demise during a rebellion against Sultan Osman II's rule, indicating the inherent instability and peril associated with high-ranking positions in the Empire's political arena.

Silahdar Yusuf Pasha, also known as Jusuf Mašković (circa 1604-1646), emerged as one of the prominent Croat figures occupying influential roles within the Ottoman Empire. His journey to prominence began in Istanbul, where he worked as a gardener. Fate intervened when he became close to Ibrahim, the brother of Sultan Murad IV, who was held captive. Upon Ibrahim's accession to the throne, he did not forget his friend, enabling Yusuf to quickly rise through the ranks. As the admiral of the Ottoman fleet, Yusuf Pasha played a pivotal role in



Gáspár Graziani, Prince of Moldavia, 17th century
(National Museum at Warsaw)

compelling the surrender of the Venetian navy in Crete, solidifying his reputation. Additionally, his marriage to Sultan Ibrahim's daughter further cemented his standing. However, he became ensnared in various court intrigues, culminating in his execution by the order of the Sultan. Yusuf Pasha left behind a significant legacy, including the han in Vrana, originally intended as his residence, and now revered as one of Croatia's foremost examples of secular Ottoman architecture.

The end of Ottoman rule in Croatia

Following the collapse of the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy, the imperial court in Vienna consolidated its absolutist rule in Croatia and Hungary, although certain regions remained under Ottoman administration. A significant turning point came in 1683 when the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Pasha launched a campaign against Vienna, marking a historic moment that shifted the balance of power. Despite the Empire's decline, Sultan Mehmed IV remained steadfast in his ancestral ambitions. The siege of Vienna commenced in July 1683, with an

Jan Sobieski at the Battle of Vienna in 1683,
by Julius Kossak, 1882 (National Museum at Warsaw)



imposing Ottoman force of approximately 100,000 soldiers facing off against 10,000 Habsburg troops.

Emperor Leopold I fled from the city, leaving Vienna's defense under the command of the Polish King Jan III Sobieski, who achieved heroic status for his role in the ensuing battle. Kara Mustafa's failure disappointed the Sultan, resulting in his execution by strangulation with a silk rope in Belgrade later that year.

The defeat at Vienna signified the demise of the Ottoman aspiration for westward expansion and altered the perception of the Ottoman Empire as an invincible force in Europe. In response, the Habsburg Monarchy, Poland, and Venice, spurred by the Pope in 1684, formed the Holy League with the aim of expelling the Ottoman Empire from Europe. This marked a pivotal moment in history, precipitating the gradual erosion of Ottoman power in Europe and empowering Christian forces to take the offensive against the Ottoman Empire.

Liberation wars against the Ottoman rule began in Croatian regions, with Venice providing support and funding to insurgents, particularly in the southern regions. Cities in the Dalmatian hinterland, such as Obrovac, Skradin, and Benkovac were liberated from Ottoman administration. In northern Croatia, a campaign to liberate Croatian territories was launched under the leadership of the new ban, Nikola Erdödy, resulting in the liberation of nearly the entire Slavonia by 1688.

Amidst the conflicts of the Holy League, Sultan Mustafa II (1695-1703) personally led his army into battle, following the example of his illustrious ancestors. Opposing him as the supreme commander was Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736), an exceptionally skilled leader. In the Battle of Senta in 1697, Eugene's troops dealt a decisive blow to the Ottoman army, a watershed moment signaling the decline of the Ottoman power.

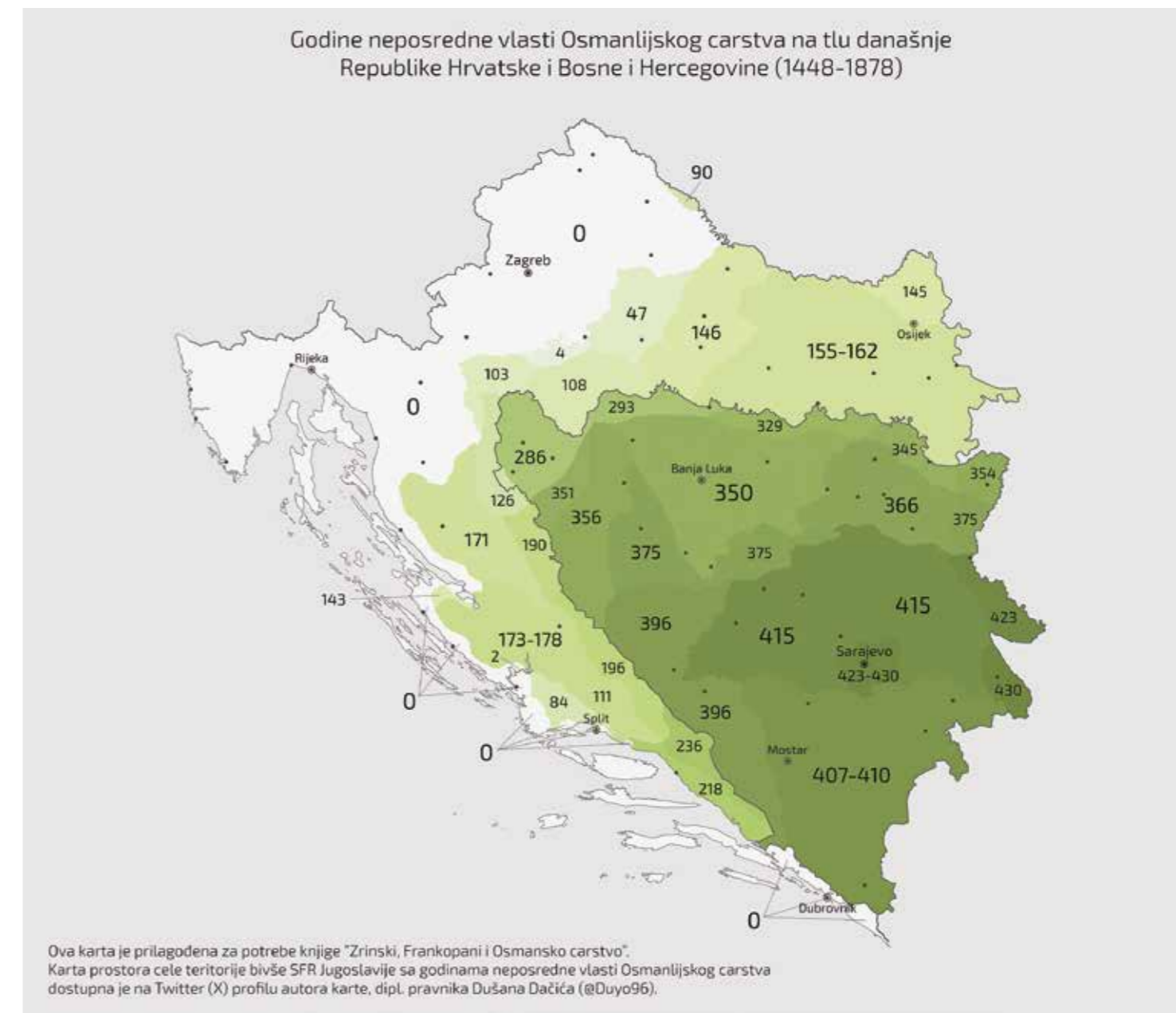
Confronted with this altered landscape, Sultan Mustafa II found himself compelled to engage in peace negotiations. The Peace of Karlowitz was concluded on January 26, 1699 in Sremski Karlovci between the Ottoman Empire and Austria, Poland, Russia, and Venice. Under this



Battle of Senta
(Military history of Hungary, Ed.: Ervin Liptai, 1985)

treaty, the Ottoman Empire ceded significant territories, initiating the process of territorial contraction in Europe. Following the ratification of the Peace of Karlowitz, the Ottoman Empire relinquished control over Hungary and majority of Croatia, including nearly all of Slavonia, Lika, and Krbava. The liberated parts of Dalmatia were absorbed into the domain of Venice.

During the first half of the 18th century, fresh conflicts erupted, and once again Prince Eugene of Savoy emerged as a formidable adversary to the Ottoman Empire. The treaty of peace was inked in Požarevac in 1718, leading to territorial expansion for the Habsburg Monarchy. The cycle of wars persisted until the conclusion of the Treaty of Belgrade in 1739, which delineated new boundaries along the Sava and Danube rivers. These events triggered significant migration from Bosnia and Serbia to Croatia. The series of conflicts that unfolded during the 18th century, culminating in the liberation of Croatian territory from Ottoman rule, concluded with the signing of the peace treaty between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire in Svištov in 1791. This accord heralded the end of centuries-long hostilities between the Croats and the Ottoman Empire, paving the way for a new chapter in the region's history. This prolonged series of conflicts and transformations profoundly influenced the modern identity and territorial delineations of the



Years of direct rule of the Ottoman Empire in Croatian territories (Dušan Dačić)

Croatian people while simultaneously marking the gradual withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from a significant portion of its European holdings, reshaping the political landscape of Europe for centuries to come. Over several centuries of warfare, Croatia found itself fragmented between great powers, yet it successfully contained the expansion of one of history's mightiest empires of its time at its borders. The repercussions of these conflicts were profound, leaving an enduring impact on the Croatian psyche. Croatia continued its journey as part of the Habsburg Monarchy until

the end of World War I in 1918 when it entered into various alliances. Initially part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, it later evolved into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and eventually into the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Croatia ultimately attained independence at the end of the 20th century following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Conversely, the Ottoman Empire grappled with myriad challenges and met its demise with the outbreak of World War I, a cataclysmic event that marked the demise for many empires of that era. In 1923, the Republic of Turkey emerged, marking

the transformation of the former empire into a modern, secular, and democratic nation under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Living heritage from Ottoman times

The Croatian territories, positioned at the westernmost frontier of the Ottoman Empire, served as a cultural crossroads between the East and the West. This dynamic interaction of cultures has profoundly shaped the cultural and social identity of the country. Over time, the perception of the Ottoman Empire within Croatian culture and history has undergone notable changes.

In the medieval literature and oral traditions of Croatia, the Ottomans were often portrayed negatively, a depiction that became deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of the people. However, in modern times, Croatian society has increasingly embraced the cultural legacy of the past, including that of the Ottoman era. Historical events from this period are now being revived and celebrated in local communities across Croatia.

One prominent example of this historical revival is the Sinjska Alka, a traditional knightly tournament held in the town of Sinj in the Cetina region. Dating back to the 18th century, this annual event celebrates the victory over the Ottomans in 1715. The Sinjska Alka pays tribute to Our Lady of Sinj, the town's patron saint, who, according to legend, routed the Ottoman soldiers. Participants, known as "alkars," ride horses and hurl lances at a suspended iron ring. The Sinjska Alka was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, acknowledging its significance as cultural heritage and its status as a symbol of resilience and identity for the Croatian people. In Đurđevac, an annual event commemorates the legend of the Picoki, based on the story of how the town's inhabitants successfully defended their city against the Ottoman army. According to the legend, the event took place in the mid-15th century when the city was under siege. Following the advice of an old woman, the inhabitants fired a rooster (picok) from a cannon to demonstrate to the Ottoman army that they had enough food supplies. Convinced that



Depiction of Picokijada, Stage performance in Đurđevac

that the siege was futile, the Ottoman army withdrew, and the locals earned the nickname "Picoki". This tale, first recorded in the late 19th century, is now enshrined as part of Croatia's intangible cultural heritage.

In the town of Marina, since 2019, a reenactment of the 1657 battle against the Ottomans has been staged. After a week-long struggle, the town was captured, and the Ottomans discovered that among the defenders were women disguised as men. Meanwhile, at Čanjevo fortress on Kalnik Mountain, a manifestation portrays the battle for the fortress, which belonged to the Špirančić family in the 15th century, as a vital defensive outpost against Ottoman incursions into Croatian territories. Klis Fortress, once the stronghold of valiant Uskoks until 1537, boasts a compelling history. During its fall, its famous commander Petar Kružić was killed. Since 2011, a manifestation has been held in Klis portraying the clashes between the Uskoks and the Ottomans, reenacting dramatic moments from Croatian history.

These events reflect the rich history and cultural heritage of Croatia, offering insights into historical conflicts and resistance against Ottoman dominance. Through battle reconstructions and the recounting local legends, communities breathe life into pivotal historical events that have shaped their region. Such endeavors not only preserve the memory of the past but also serve as educational tools and

promote cultural tourism. Through the revival of historical battles and legends, they encourage the conservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage while attracting visitors and enhancing local communities.

Thousands of words that connect us

The Croatian language bears enduring traces of centuries-long interactions with the Ottoman Empire, particularly evident in the incorporation of "Turcisms" or "Orientalisms" - words of Turkish or generally Oriental origin that have become an integral part of the Croatian vocabulary. Many of these words have seamlessly integrated into Croatian, some lacking Croatian equivalents entirely. Examples include "čarapa" (socks), "šećer" (sugar), "bakar" (copper), "top" (cannon), "šator" (tent), "kula" (tower), "tulipan" (tulip), "zanat" (craft), "pamuk" (cotton), and "sapun" (soap). Others, like "džamija" (mosque), "sevdalinka" (a type of traditional Bosnian song), and "baklava" (a type of pastry), clearly retain their Oriental origin.

Furthermore, words such as "miraz" (dowry), "torba" (bag), "para" (money), and "sandale" (sandals), have Croatian equivalents but persists in everyday speech. These linguistic borrowings permeated Croatian society not only through trade and military exchange but also through oral tradition, songs, and written works, enriching Croatian literature and cultural heritage.

Beyond language, echoes of these cultural exchanges reverberate in toponyms across the country. Examples include Turska česma Street in Osijek, the settlement of Turčin near Kneginec, the fortress Turska kula near Perušić, as well as numerous other locations, such as Turčin Creek near Čazma or Turski ključ Hill near Požega. These names serve as testimonies to past times and reflect the deep-rooted connections forged between the Croatian people and the Ottoman Empire over time. The intricate and profound historical connections evidenced in this diverse cultural and linguistic heritage showcase the dynamic evolution of culture and language through interplay and interaction among different peoples and empires.

The Ottoman architectural and artistic heritage

The enduring ties with the Ottoman Empire have left indelible marks on the material heritage of Croatia, especially in the realm of architecture and construction. Initially, the appearance of cities and settlements remained largely unchanged during the early stages of Ottoman conquests. However, the gradual emergence of oriental characteristics became evident with the establishment of *mahalles*, residential quarters typically centered around mosques or smaller religious structures. Petrinja stands out as a notable instance, being the sole newer city founded by the Ottomans in Croatia, albeit succumbing to fire by the end of the 16th century.

Mosques were among the earliest structures built by the Ottomans in conquered territories, yet they became prime targets for destruction upon their retreat, symbolizing the defeat of a long standing adversary. Several places, such as Požega, Osijek, and Đakovo, had multiple mosques. For instance, historical depictions of Đakovo vividly illustrate three city mosques. Following the Ottoman army's departure, some mosques were converted into Christian churches. Among these conversions, the mosque in Đakovo stands out as the largest and best-preserved, serving as a significant exemplar of Ottoman architecture in Croatia.

Dubrovnik enjoying a distinctive status as a trading hub and mediator between East and West during the Ottoman era, occupied a unique position. Despite its Christian majority, the city accommodated a mosque for Ottoman merchants and travelers.

In the 16th century, Osijek had four medreses, Islamic educational institutions, while Pakrac housed three. Likewise, public baths, known as *hamams*, constituted integral components of Islamic architectural heritage with mentions in Osijek, Pakrac, Ilok, and other places in Croatia. Notably, bridges, essential to military and state infrastructure, stand out as significant remnants of Islamic culture in Croatia. The Sultan Suleiman Bridge, spanning the Drava River near Osijek, was one of the most impressive, with a length of almost eight kilometers.



Church of All Saints in Đakovo, former mosque

The Han of Silahdar Yusuf Pasha, an Ottoman dignitary originally from Vrana or Pakoštane, represents the most significant preserved monument of Ottoman architecture in Croatia. Silahdar Yusuf Pasha began the construction of this magnificent han in 1644, but it was not completed due to his death. The han was intended to serve as his residence, which is unusual considering that hans were typically built as caravanserais or resting places. Today, the han now serves as a heritage hotel, located on the shore of Lake Vrana, and managed by the municipality of Pakoštane. Notably, it represents the westernmost example of secular Ottoman architecture in Europe.

The withdrawal of Ottoman forces from Croatia marked the destruction of numerous monuments and artworks. Stone inscriptions, often bearing witness to Ottoman

presence, were often erased, or removed in attempts to expunge memories of Ottoman presence and hostility. Consequently, preserved examples of Ottoman material culture in Croatia remain scarce.

Tombstones, often adorned with symbols such as crescents, swords, or axes, stand as characteristic remnants of Ottoman influence. Additionally, preserved ceramics, mainly in the form of bowls and jugs, offer further testimony to Ottoman influence, while finds of glass and porcelain are rarer as they were expensive materials. Ottoman textiles were often repurposed for making liturgical vestments.

An intriguing discovery among the confiscated items from the Zrinski and Frankopan families after their execution in 1671, included Turkish flags and textiles, likely



Turkish battle axe, 18th century (Croatian History Museum)

acquired as war spoils. As tangible artifacts of prolonged conflicts, weapons remain poignant reminders of this era. Numerous museum collections in Croatia contain examples of Oriental weaponry, including characteristic sabers with curved blades, yataghans with inscriptions on the blades, knives, maces, rifles, and muskets.

A significant array of preserved manuscripts, books, records, and documents represent written remnants and testimony to Ottoman culture in Croatia. Among these, the richest archive resides in Dubrovnik, containing an impressive collection of about 15,000 documents, indicating the rich trading and diplomatic history of Dubrovnik as an important intermediary between the Ottoman Empire and other European powers.

In museums across Croatia, Ottoman cultural heritage occupies a prominent position, with artifacts proudly displaying evidence of a rich history and cultural exchange between the Ottoman Empire and Croatia. Notably, remnants of Iznik pottery stands out as a compelling example. Renowned for its quality and distinctive style, this pottery originated from the city of Iznik in Turkey and enjoyed widespread claim across the Ottoman Empire and beyond, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries. Examples of this pottery, salvaged from a Venetian merchant ship that sank near the island of Mljet at the end of the 16th century, represent an important find that not only attests to the intense trade exchange between the Ottoman Empire and Venice but also to the cultural influence the Ottoman Empire across the Mediterranean.

The multifaceted material heritage of the Ottoman era in

Croatia, spanning from architectural marvels to artistic artifacts and historical records, provides invaluable insights into the complex relationship shared between Croatia and the Ottoman Empire. It serves as a testament to resilience, adaptation, and cultural exchange that defined this lengthy historical epoch. These objects and documents are both cultural treasures of Croatia and important historical sources that deepen understanding of the past within these regions and their significance within the broader European context.

Inspiration in literature and music

Beginning in the mid-15th century, as the Ottoman Empire approached Croatian borders, a heightened awareness of imminent danger began to take root. This era saw the emergence of numerous speeches and addresses condemning the Ottomans, often directed to European rulers, appealing for assistance and alliances in the face of impending conflicts. Many of these addresses lamented the notion that Christian lands had fallen under divine punishment through war, conquest, and destruction.

In Croatian literature, the interactions with the Ottoman Empire occupy a special place. The collective consciousness of the people was deeply influenced by events such as the Battle of Krbava Field in 1493, where the Croatian army suffered a devastating defeat. ‘The Chronicle of Priest Martinac’ represents a valuable testimony to this battle. In this chronicle, Priest Martinac depicts the horrors inflicted by the Ottomans, and marks the emergence of patriotic poetry as a response to the Ottoman threat.



Record of Priest Martinec about the Battle of Krbava

Janus Pannonius (1434-1472) and Juraj Šišgorić (circa 1445-1509) were among the writers who depicted the fear of the Ottoman incursions and the consequences of their conquests in their work. Šišgorić wrote about the devastation of the Šibenik region by the Ottomans, and similar themes were addressed by Frane Andreis (1490-1571), a diplomat and writer, and Toma Nigler. Andreis, who was also in Istanbul on a diplomatic mission, often advocated for war against the Ottomans in his speeches. Marko Marulić (1450-1524) also contributed to this genre with his anti-Turkish missive addressed to the Pope in 1522 and the poem “Prayer Against the Turks,” reflecting on the suffering of Christians as a consequence of Ottoman conquests, perceived as divine retribution for their sins.

Dubrovnik, which had paid annual tribute to the Ottoman Empire since the 15th century, maintained a

unique relationship with its powerful neighbor. Writers such as Mavro Vetranović (1482-1576) and Hanibal Lucić (circa 1485-1553) recognized the necessity of maintaining amicable relations with the Ottoman Empire for the survival of the Dubrovnik Republic. Lucić’s historical drama “The Captive” is one of the most famous Croatian literary works of that period. The drama focuses on the attempt to ransom a beautiful captive, set in free Dubrovnik. The main character is a descendant of the unfortunate Croatian viceroy Derenčin, who met his fate in Ottoman captivity after the Battle of Krbava Field.

Antun Vrančić (1504-1573), a Croatian diplomat and cardinal, spent several years in Istanbul as an envoy of the Habsburg Monarchy, engaging in negotiations for peace with the Ottoman Empire. His efforts and experience contributed to the understanding and intercultural communication between the two powers.

During the 16th century, Croatian writers and historians increasingly delved into the subject of the Ottoman Empire. Ludovik Crijević Tuberon, in his work “Comments on My Time,” writes about the history of the Ottoman Empire, reflecting on the loyalty to the sultan and military power, while also criticizing Christians for their lack of unity against the common enemy. Similarly, Feliks Petančić (1455-1517) describes the Ottoman army, sultans, and customs, while Bartol Đurđević (1506-1566), who experienced Ottoman captivity, provides valuable information, and shares his thoughts about them in his works.

Ivan Gundulić (1589-1638) in his famous epic “Osman” narrates the fall of Sultan Osman II (1604-1622). This masterpiece stands as a pinnacle of Croatian literature of that era.

In the 19th century, amidst a period of national revival and the strengthening of Croatian national consciousness, there emerged a heightened interest in the past and historical events, including the Ottoman rule. Notable among these literary works is “The Death of Smail-aga Čengić” by Ivan Mažuranić (1814-1890), a poet and viceroy, who was the first non-aristocratic viceroy.



Sultan Osman II, Ottoman miniature

Published in 1846 in the almanac “Iskra,” this epic poem addresses the life and deeds of the Ottoman conqueror Smail-aga Čengić, with a focus on his struggle and heroism against a more powerful enemy.

August Šenoa, one of the preeminent Croatian writers of the 19th century, excelled in crafting historical novels. The plot of his work “Beware of the Senj Hand” unfolds in the early 17th century, depicting the challenges faced the Uskoks in their conflicts against Venice and the Ottoman Empire. This novel serves as a testament to how historical events can be turned into thrilling and educational narratives that captivate the attention of Šenoa’s contemporaries.

Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski, a historian, writer, and politician, is the author of the drama “Juran and Sofija or The Turks at Sisak.” Originally penned in German and later translated into Croatian, this drama explores the victory over the Turks in 1539 and follows the story of Juran, the son of Ban Tomo Erdödy. Although the drama was first published and performed in 1839, its popularity and relevance remain strong.

Among the cornerstone works of Croatian culture stands the opera “Nikola Šubić Zrinski” by Ivan pl. Zajc, premiering in 1876. Set amidst the 1566 siege of the Szigetvár fortress, the opera depicts the heroic defense of Nikola Zrinski against the Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent’s forces. The aria “U boj, u boj” (“Into Battle, Into Battle”) from this opera gained immense popularity not only within Croatia but also abroad, notably in Japan.

Following centuries of conflict, collaboration, and cultural exchange, the Ottoman Empire’s legacy in Croatia remains deeply rooted in its fabric. Ranging from architectural masterpieces and linguistic influences on a rich literary and musical heritage, this heritage weaves complex historical tapestry that contributes to the Croatian identity. Serving as tangible relics of bygone eras, these remnants serve as a reminder of the resilience, adaptability, and cultural vitality of a people who managed to preserve their uniqueness through historical upheavals. The Ottoman Empire’s legacy in Croatia not only offers insights into the past but also serves as a wellspring of inspiration for the future, reminding us of the importance of fostering intercultural understanding and collective progress.

Chronological Overview of Croatian History and the Ottoman Empire from the 12th to the 18th Century

1102	The Kingdom of Croatia enters into a personal union with Hungary.	1527	Croats elect the Habsburg family as rulers at the assembly in Cetingrad, with King Ferdinand I.
1118	Dujam I, the Prince of Krk, concludes a treaty with Venice.	1529	Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent unsuccessfully besieges Vienna.
1281-1326	Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Dynasty and the first Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.	c.1530	The "reign of women." Begins with Hürrem Sultan
1302	Battle of Bafeus against the Byzantine Empire, resulting in Osman I's victory.	1541	Ottoman conquest of Buda.
1347	Juraj I. Zrinski receives the fortress of Zrin from King Louis I of Anjou.	1566	Battle of Szigetvár, resulting in the death of Suleiman the Magnificent and Nikola IV. Zrinski.
1362-1389	Murad I reigns, with Edirne as the capital.	1571	Battle of Lepanto sees the defeat of the Ottoman navy.
1365	Bulgaria is forced to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire.	1593	Battle of Sisak, resulting in the defeat of Telli Hasan Pasha (Hasan Predojević).
1389	Battle of Kosovo Polje, marking the death of Sultan Murad I.	1621	Petar IV. Zrinski is born.
1389-1403	Sultan Bayezid I oversees the expansion of the Ottoman Empire.	1625	Ana Katarina Zrinski, countess and writer, is born.
1396	Battle of Nicopolis, a heavy defeat for the Christian coalition.	1640	Leopold I, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire is born.
1453	Mehmed II the Conqueror captures Constantinople.	1643	Fran Krsto Frankopan is born.
1458	Treaty between Dubrovnik and the Ottoman Empire.	1643	Jelena Zrinski is born.
1463	The Ottoman Empire conquers Bosnia.	c.1650	The blood tax is abolished.
1491	Treaty of Pressburg, with Maximilian I securing the rights of the Habsburgs to Croatia and Hungary.	1671	Conspirators Peter Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan are executed in Wiener Neustadt.
1493	Battle of Krbava Field, Croatian Ban Emerik Derenčin captured, and defeat of the Croatian army.	1673	Death of Ana Katarina Zrinski.
1508	Nikola IV. Zrinski is born.	1683	Siege of Vienna concludes with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire.
1517	Sultan Selim I conquers Egypt.	1687	Death of Sultan Mehmed IV.
1520	Suleiman the Magnificent ascends as Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.	1688	Jelena Zrinski surrenders the fortress of Munkács after a three-year siege.
1522	Prince Bernardin Frankopan delivers the speech "Oratio pro Croatia" in Nuremberg.	1695	Death of Sultan Ahmed II.
	1526: Battle of Mohács sees the victory for the Ottoman Empire and the death of King Louis II Jagiellon.	1699	Treaty of Karlowitz.
		1703	Jelena Zrinski dies in Nikomedia.
		1703	Death of Sultan Mustafa II.
		1705	Death of Leopold I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

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Magnate Conspiracy

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Source: Croatian Historical Museum

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Source: Croatian Historical Museum

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Memorial House of Ferenc Rákóczi in Tekirdağ

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Recruitment of Janissaries in the Balkans, by Ali Amir Beg, Ottoman miniature, 16th century

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Flag of the Brethren of the Croatian Dragon

Authors: Željko Heimer, Istvan Molnar, and Jelena Borosak Marijanovic

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Count Nikola VII Zrinski, by Johann Franz Hoffman, 18th century

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Old Town of the Zrinski, Čakovec

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Franciscan Monastery on Košljun

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Castle in Krk

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Zrinski Castle, Brod na Kupi

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Stara Sušica Castle

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Trsat Fortress

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Nova Kraljevica Castle

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Celebrated Women of History

Hurrem Sultan, La Sultana Rossa, by Titian, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

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Letter from Hurrem Sultan to King Sigismund of Poland, 1549.

Source: Soliman le Magnifique, p.48

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Portrait of Kösem Sultan 17th century

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Sultan Murad IV, Ottoman miniature

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“Putni tovaruš” (Companion on Journeys), a prayer

book prepared and published by Katarina Zrinski

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Farewell of Petar and Katarina Zrinski in Čakovec, 1670, Oton Iveković, 1897

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Jelena Zrinski, Karoly Jakobey, c. 1880

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Battle of Vienna, 1683, by Frans Geffels

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Jelena Zrinski at Munkács Castle, Victor Madarasz, 1859

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Sultan Ahmed II

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Treaty of Karlowitz

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Sultan Mustafa II

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Jelena Zrinski

Source: History.info magazine

The Legacy of the Ottoman Empire in Croatia

Map of Croatia in 1593, by Gerard de Jode
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Ahdnama of Mehmed II, issued in 1463

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Flag of the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik)

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Bridge of Suleiman the Magnificent in Osijek

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Statue of Evliya Çelebi, Ottoman traveler

Location: Eger Castle, Hungary

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Piyale Pasha the Croat

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Jan Sobieski at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, by Julius Kossak, 1882, National Museum in Warsaw

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Battle of Senta, Military history of Hungary, Ed.: Ervin Liptai, 1985

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Years of direct rule of the Ottoman Empire in Croatian territories

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Church of All Saints in Đakovo, former mosque

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Turkish battle axe, 18th century, Croatian Historical Museum

Record of Priest Martinec about the Battle of Krbava

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Sultan Osman II, Ottoman miniature

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Igor Rapačić

Igor Rapačić, born in Zagreb in 1979. He works as a professional advisor at the Department for Promotion, Education, and Interpretation of the Nature Park Medvednica. He completed his undergraduate university studies in history at the Croatian Studies of the University of Zagreb, obtaining a master's degree in history education. He worked as a teaching assistant with children with disabilities in several schools in Zagreb and received training for working with students with disabilities through the IDEM Institute, as well as for Braille literacy. He was involved in the activities of the Association of Dr. Ivan Merz Elementary School, where he participated in the organization of the Festival of School Arts (FUŠ). Since November 2021, he has been a regular collaborator of the History.info magazine, where he publishes articles on historical topics. He is a co-founder and vice president of the Art History Platform Association, which promotes culture and creativity from an artistic and historical perspective among members of the local community.

H. Oğuz Aydemir

Hüsnü Oğuz Aydemir, born on December 23, 1950, in Ankara, is an esteemed entrepreneur, philanthropist, and advocate for cultural exchange and heritage preservation. Educated at Ankara College - T.E.D. Ankara Koleji, Talas American Ortaokulu, Tarsus American College, and the University of Istanbul with postgraduate study in European integrations at the University of Amsterdam, Aydemir's foundation is strong.

Since 1976, Aydemir's career has thrived, including membership in the Istanbul Chamber of Industry and in the Turkish Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (TÜSIAD), a prominent umbrella organization. His philanthropic pursuits include directing the Institute of Nautical Archeology of Texas A&M (INA) and presiding over the Turkish Institute for Underwater Archeology (TINA) since 2004, reflecting his passion for heritage preservation.

Notable awards include the Paul Harris Fellow by Rotary International and the Croatian-Turkish Friendship Association's Diploma for fostering cultural cooperation. In 2021, Aydemir was honored as a laureate of the Gusi Peace Prize from the Philippines, a testament to his dedication to peace and understanding.



ISBN 978-625-8056-93-8



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