

The Croatian Nobility and King Matthias Corvinus

Between Cooperation and Confrontation

BORISLAV GRGIN

The anti-Ottoman defense efforts, coupled with the constant care to block any Venetian or German territorial conquests or increasing influence in Croatia, directed the king's policy towards Croatia.

Borislav Grgin

Associate professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Department of History. Author of several books and studies focusing on Croatian, regional and European late medieval and early modern history. Among his most recent works: **Počeci rasapa: Kralj Matijaš Korvin i srednjovjekovna Hrvatska** (The beginnings of disintegration: King Matthias Corvinus and Croatia) (2002).

THE RULE of Hungarian and Croatian King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) had a profound impact upon his kingdom, upon the region, and upon the whole of Europe. Croatia was no exception. This paper will attempt to evaluate the Croatian component of Matthias' legacy, enabling comparisons with the other regions of his kingdom at the time. The position and relevance of medieval Croatia in Matthias' realm, in the second half of the 1400s, could mainly be reconstructed through the king's relations with various strata of the nobility. This is first of all true because of the structure of preserved sources, particularly the written ones, which are in the vast majority connected, one way or another, with the nobility. The king's relations with the Croatian magnates are by far the best documented. The main families of Croatian magnates of the time were the Frankapani (Frangepani), the Kurjaković (Corbaviai), the Blagajski (Blagay) and the Zrinski (Zrinyi) counts.

The sources show that the king was mainly at odds with the Kurjaković

family (counts of Krbava, Corbavai). In that period the Kurjakovići held six counties in central Croatia, on both sides of Velebit Mountain, as well as the town of Obrovac and the strategically important fortress of Kličevac in the hinterland of Zadar (Zara).¹ The territory controlled by the Kurjakovići in the 1460s suffered several devastating Ottoman raids, after the Ottoman conquest of medieval Bosnia in 1463.² As the territories of the Kurjakovići bordered on the districts of the Venetian-held Dalmatian towns, the Ottomans devastated the latter as well. Those events prompted Venice to try to help and better organize the defense of Croatia, in order to keep the Ottomans as far as possible from their own borders. However, despite the common anti-Ottoman interests, the Kurjakovići continued and even intensified the border disputes with the Venetian subjects, particularly because of the transhumant Vlach shepherds who, with their flocks of sheep, repeatedly violated the possessions and rights of the Venetian subjects.³ On the other hand, the Venetians stepped up their efforts to conquer Kličevac and other strategically important Croatian border fortresses in the Dalmatian hinterland, fearing that they might fall in the hands of the Ottomans.⁴ It is no wonder that, consequently, the border disputes between the Kurjakovići and the Venetians multiplied. To conflicting interests one has to add the problem of the increasingly meager resources available to the medieval Croatian social elite, because of the Ottomans. On the other hand, Matthias was a close ally of Venice in the 1460s. Therefore, his negative, sometimes even hostile attitude towards the Kurjakovići in that period was no surprise.

Sources on the counts from the late 1460s onwards mention several brothers, namely, Ivan (John), Pavao (Paul) and Karlo (Charles). Paul is the least documented of them all. Ivan had the greatest problems with the king throughout Matthias' reign, and the greatest border disputes with the Venetians, as well.⁵ In return, Karlo, at least after 1476, following Matthias' marriage to Beatrice of Aragon, seems to have enjoyed a much better status at the court. His daughter Helena (Ilona) appeared as one of the ladies in waiting in the queen's entourage. He was also of the signatories of the 1492 treaty, by which Władysław (Władysław, Ulászló) II secured the throne.⁶ The reasons why Karlo enjoyed such a distinguished status call for further research.

Further south in medieval Croatia, in today's Dalmatian hinterland, Matthias intervened actively from the very beginning of his reign. After the decline of the Talovci (Thallóczy) family there, it seemed that there were no magnates who could halt the king's actions. The Hospitaller prior of Vrana (Aurania), Tamás Székely, and the Croatian *ban* Jan (John) Vitovec lead the action to gain control over the strategically important towns and fortresses of Knin (Tinín), Ostroviča, Klis (Clissa) and Sinj. In the early 1460s, the new Croatian *ban* Pavao (Paul) Špirančić continued their actions.⁷ Why did the king start his interven-

tion in Croatia exactly there, in the southernmost part of the kingdom? Several moments could be taken into account. One could suppose that the king realized the strategic importance of the area and also its volatility. Aside from the Ottoman pressure there, Bosnian kings Stjepan (Steven) Tomaš and later Stjepan Tomašević, then Duke Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, the ruler of medieval Hum (Humska zemlja), and of course the Venetians were strong external factors. In the absence of a strong royal presence there or at least of strong Croatian magnates loyal to the king, combined pressure from all sides could be potentially detrimental to the territorial integrity of the kingdom. That the king judged the situation correctly is clearly shown by the fact that all the above-mentioned neighbors joined, in 1461, in protesting at the Buda court because of the ban's actions. Alongside the Kurjakovići, they also formed an ad hoc league against *ban* Špirančić.⁸

On the other hand, the king did not really want to completely alienate the most important Croatian magnates as he needed them on his side during the first part of his reign, while struggling for confirmation on the royal throne. Therefore, any kind of action on a larger scale in their territories was out of the question. Matthias mainly wanted to strengthen the royal power, starting from the periphery of his kingdom, in order to prevent the attempts of various neighbors to help his potential or real enemies in medieval Croatia, such as the Kurjakovići. However, typical of his policy towards Croatia, the actions of the royal agents (*bans*) in southern Croatia lacked permanent and substantial support from the central authorities. *Ban* Špirančić soon had to struggle alone against everybody else. In doing so, he was ultimately captured by the Ottomans.⁹ His wife Margareta (Margaret) continued his fight for some time on her own, until the king directly intervened once again through a newly appointed Croatian *ban*, Ivan Tuz. The aforementioned ban managed to strengthen royal control over the abovementioned fortresses in 1466.¹⁰ However, after accomplishing this, *Ban* Ivan almost immediately withdrew to Slavonia, leaving as his *locumtenens* Viceban Ladislaus (László) Markus, who was not able to prevent the neighboring powers and magnates from gradually depriving him of his new strongholds.¹¹ In the end, the sole beneficiaries of this confusion were the Ottomans, who managed, by the end of the 15th century, to conquer all Croatian territory between the rivers Cetina and Neretva.

King Matthias took an individualized stance towards the most powerful Croatian magnates of that time: the Frankapan counts. The Frankapans held under their control the greatest part of medieval Croatia. Count Martin Frankapan was among the king's enemies in the beginning, siding with Emperor Frederick (Friedrich) III. It is interesting to note that Count Martin's red wax seal hangs on the charter of Frederick III's election as king of Hun-

gary even in front of several seals of much higher dignitaries, perhaps indicating the magnitude of the count's political standing.¹² The reason for Martin's initially negative attitude towards Corvinus can also be explained by the fact that the core of his domains bordered on the empire. However, after 1464 and Matthias' coronation, the king reconciled with Martin. It seems that the turning point in the king's relations with the count was the latter's apparently significant contribution to the anti-Ottoman fight, during the Bosnian campaign of 1463.¹³ After the king's conquest of the town of Senj (Zengg, Senia) and the creation of the military captaincy in Senj (1469), the relations between Matthias and Count Martin deteriorated once again. Old sentiments resurfaced, with Martin declaring that he would rather bow to the Ottomans than to the king's will.¹⁴ Still, when the Senj controversy lost its initial emotional impetus for the Frankapans, Martin left all his possessions to the king before his death (1479), as he had no heir.¹⁵ However, from the preserved sources it is not clear whether this move was forced upon him, or if Martin made the decision of his own free will.

On the other hand, Martin's brother, Count Stjepan (Stephen), was from the very beginning one of the king's most distinguished and closest allies. One of the main reasons for this attitude was perhaps the count's ambition to grab a part of the inheritance of the Celjski (Cillei) counts. He probably hoped for Matthias's support for his ambitions. Moreover, contrary to his brother Martin, it seems that Stjepan better assessed the overall situation and the power relations inside the kingdom and in the whole region. Stjepan was repeatedly engaged, during the first years of Matthias' rule, in various diplomatic missions, particularly to Italy, meant to promote the king's international interests or to obtain assistance for the anti-Ottoman defense. Stjepan, through his marriage to Isota d'Este, had many relatives at the courts of Modena, Ferrara, Milan and Naples. He was among the Hungarian and Croatian participants to the Mantua Congress of 1459, summoned by Pope Pius II in an attempt to organize the anti-Ottoman crusade.¹⁶

However, the various degrees of the king's affinity towards the individual counts did not prevent the monarch from firmly pushing aside all the Frankapans from their most valuable possessions on the Adriatic coast, the town of Senj and a portion of Vinodol County.¹⁷ They were of crucial importance in the king's struggle against the Venetians and the Empire for domination in the northern Adriatic basin. After 1464 even the relations between Matthias and Count Stjepan gradually deteriorated, due to the king's increasing interest in the town and region of Modruš, the center of Stjepan's possessions and the key stronghold on the important medieval road linking Zagreb and Senj. The king's increasing interest in Modruš is particularly clear from his well-known dispute

with the papacy about the candidates for the position of bishop during the final period of Matthias's reign, after he married Beatrice of Aragon.¹⁸

The complex and ambiguous relations between Matthias and the Frankapans are clearly shown by the case of the island of Krk (Veglia). Until 1480 the island and the town of Krk, the cradle of the Frankapans, were in the hands of Count Ivan Frankapan. In the 1460s, Ivan had a pro-Venetian stance, which did not run counter to his presumed loyalty towards the king, due to the Hungarian-Venetian political alliance of that time. However, from the mid 1460s onwards, he started his own independent initiatives. First of all, he sent his first son to the court in Buda and tried to find a bride in Naples for his second son.¹⁹ Both moves aroused suspicions in Venice. The situation further deteriorated in 1468, when he, probably trying to grab his portion of the inheritance of the Cillei and Duino counts, attacked several settlements in Istra (Istria) and Kvarner (Quarnaro), subject to Frederick III. This move not only annoyed the emperor, but also forced the Venetians to excuse themselves in front of Frederick, emphasizing that count's actions had inflicted damage upon the Venetian subjects in those areas too.²⁰ King Matthias most probably did not play any part in the count's actions, for his relations with the emperor at that time did not significantly deteriorate. It is more probable that Count Ivan tried to profit from the unclear situation in the area, thinking that later, in case he were successful, he could justify himself in front of the king with eventual territorial gains.

One way or another, Count Ivan managed to maintain the situation calm for some time until 1479, when his new actions triggered the chain of events that led to his ultimate downfall. As mentioned above, his brother Martin died that year and left all his possessions, including a significant part of the prosperous and strategically important County of Vinodol, to Matthias. Judging that his rights had been thereby severely violated, Count Ivan tried to occupy Vinodol, but the royal troops immediately expelled him.²¹ The king did not stop there, but continued his action on the very island. After finding himself with no exit, Count Ivan desperately called for Venetian aid. The Venetians helped him, but in such a way that they expelled the royal troops and conquered the whole island. After that, they sent Count Ivan into exile.²² Both on the Hungarian-Croatian and the Venetian side, these events triggered strong statements, serious threats, intense political propaganda, etc. We cannot examine all this in detail here. One should only emphasize that these developments clearly illustrated the importance of the control over Krk for all the participants in the conflict.

In the regions around the Una and the Sana rivers, in the border zone between medieval Slavonia and medieval Croatia, the Blagajski (Blagay) counts

were the most important magnates, with estates in both kingdoms, bordering in many places on Kurjaković and Frankapani estates. Their center, Blagaj, was located in the medieval county of Sana, belonging to medieval Slavonia, today in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The sources from Matthias's period show that the Blagajskis felt very strongly the presence of the Ottomans and that they had many difficulties with the neighboring Zrinski (Zrinyi) counts in Slavonia, as well.²³ Numerous conflicts in which the Blagajskis were involved, against their various neighbors, from among the magnates and the middle nobility,²⁴ clearly show the aforementioned fight for the remaining resources and for survival. The essentially predatory character of the noble class could only be further emphasized in such dire circumstances. The sources contain, particularly in the case of the Blagajskis, but in those of the Frankapans and Kurjakovičs as well, several mutual accusations of a secret conspiracy with the *Turk*, either in the form of willingness to accept his rule, or simply to let him pass through somebody else's territory, in order to attack the next ones in line.²⁵ Some of the accusations could be regarded as political propaganda, meant to mock the adversaries. However, in the daily fights for survival against the Ottomans, such practices were not unusual. Therefore, one cannot *a limine* disregard the accusations, like some traditional and nationalist historians in Croatia used to.

King Matthias held a royal court (*iudicium generale*) in Zagreb in 1481 for the Slavonian nobility, where numerous lesser and middle nobles accused the majority of the abovementioned Croatian magnates, having possessions on Slavonian soil as well, of various abuses.²⁶ Though the sentences were mainly harsh, going as far as the confiscation of property and death penalties, the king's intentions were not serious. What Matthias really wanted was to get the magnates' consent to introduce a new tax of half a florin in Slavonia, and he succeeded in that.²⁷ This is obvious from the fact that the king, after his requests were fulfilled, liberated the magnates from all accusations and confirmed their privileges and possessions.²⁸

The anti-Ottoman defense efforts, coupled with the constant care to block any Venetian or German territorial conquests or increasing influence in Croatia, directed the king's policy towards Croatia. Only in this context can one better understand the king's stance towards various individuals and social groups in Croatia. One could suppose that the king would have sought to promote some other strata of society, like the lesser or the middle nobility, in order to broaden the basis of his reign and to better protect his interests against the rivaling Croatian magnates. However, this was not the case. The lesser and the middle nobility, although some of them were rather well off, were increasingly preoccupied with the struggle for survival against the Ottomans. The help in that

direction that they, and Croatia in general, received from the king was the integration of Senj and the neighboring towns and fortresses into the captaincy of Senj in 1469, and of other key fortresses in Croatia into the anti-Ottoman defense system.²⁹ Still, the defense system was rather expensive to maintain and Croatian resources could not cover the costs without substantial help from the central authorities.

The consequences of the abovementioned events and processes were important for medieval Croatia. The Croatian nobility gradually started to develop a specific border mentality, coupled with fear, anxiety and insecurity for the future of their homeland. The reactions to that varied from organized migrations or simple fleeing, to bitter resistance against the Ottoman enemies. Such conditions significantly diminished social cohesion in Croatia, particularly in the border areas, which in some cases resulted in true anarchy. That, in turn, further facilitated the Ottoman conquest. It seems that Croatian society became confronted with multiple challenges that surpassed its ability to cope. Matthias' part of the blame was that, as in the rest of the realm, he left the state financially exhausted and the magnates dissatisfied with his rule. The fact that Croatia and its nobility were in serious trouble started to be clearly visible soon after 1490, especially after the severe defeat of the Croatian forces in the battle on Krbava field (1493).

□

Notes

1. V. Klaić, "Rodoslovje knezova Krbavskih od plemena Gusić," *Rad Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti* (Belgrade) 134 (1898): 190–214 (193); N. Klaić, "Srednjovjekovna Krbava od Avara do Turaka," in *Krbavska biskupija u srednjem vijeku-zbornik* (Rijeka–Zagreb, 1988): 1–9 (8); B. Grgin, *Počeci rasapa: Kralj Matijaš Korvin i srednjovjekovna Hrvatska* (Zagreb, 2002), 87.
2. I. Nagy and A. Nyáry, *Magyar diplomáciai emlékek: Mátyás király korából* (= *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, IV, 1–4), vol. 1 (Budapest, 1875), 218–219 (hereafter cited as *MDE*); Š. Ljubić, *Listine o odnošajih Južnoga Slavenstva i Mletačke Republike*, vol. 10 (= *Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium*, XXII) (Zagreb, 1891), 250.
3. The State Archives of Zadar, *Spisi mletačke vladavine, Dukali i terminacije* (hereafter cited as *DAZ, SMV-DT*), contain many individual examples of such border conflicts. For instance: reg. II, 1408–1487, pp. 110 (no. 869), 119 (no. 908), 135 (no. 972).
4. *MDE*, I: 8, 88–89.
5. Ljubić, *Listine*, 10: 147; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 87–88.
6. P. Farbaký, E. Spekner, K. Szende, and A. Végh, eds., *Matthias Corvinus, the King: Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court 1458–1490: Exhibition catalogue*.

- Budapest History Museum, 19 March 2008 – 30 June 2008* (Budapest, 2008), 263; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, vol. 4 (Zagreb, 1980³), 220–221.
7. M. Perojević, “Talovci-cetinski i kliški knezovi,” *Kalendar “Napredak”* 27 (1937): 171–187; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 4: 41–43.
 8. Ljubić, *Listine*, 10: 186; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 89.
 9. The activity of Ban Špirančić can be followed in more detail in *MDE*, 1: 82–84, 86–89, 89–90, 94–95, 118, 123–124, 159, 208–210, 214–216; Ljubić, *Listine*, 10: 169, 171, 177–178, 186, 245–246, 247–249; Perojević, “Talovci-cetinski,” 184; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 4: 41–43; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 89–90.
 10. *MDE*, 1: 288–289, 290–291, 293–294, 296–299, 387; 2: 30, 34; Ljubić, *Listine*, 10: 346–347, 376–378; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 4: 75, 86; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 97–98.
 11. Perojević, “Talovci-cetinski,” 185; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 4: 96–97; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 98.
 12. V. Klaić, *Krčki knezovi Frankapani: Od najstarijih vremena do gubitka otoka Krka*, vol. 1 (Zagreb, 1901), 246; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 85; Farbaky et al., 199–200.
 13. L. Thallóczy and S. Barabás, *Codex diplomaticus comitum de Frangepanibus* (= *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, I, 38), vol. 2 (Budapest, 1913), 57–60 (hereafter cited as *CDCF*); Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 85–86.
 14. *MDE*, 2 (Budapest, 1876), 157–159; *CDCF*, 2: 117–118.
 15. *CDCF*, 2: 139–140, 149–150.
 16. *Mathiae Corvini Hungariae Regis epistolae ad Romanos Pontifices datae et ab eis acceptae* (= *Monumenta Vaticana historiam Regni Hungariae illustrantia*, I, 6), ed. V. Fraknoi (Budapest, 1891), 8–12 (hereafter cited as *MCH*); *CDCF*, 2: 32; V. Klaić, *Krčki knezovi Frankapani*, 245, 354; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 83–84.
 17. In this respect: B. Grgin, “Senj i Vinodol između kralja Matijaša, Frankapana i Venecije (1465–1471),” *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest* (Zagreb) 28 (1995): 61–70.
 18. On this conflict see in detail; V. Fraknoi, *Mátyás király levelei: Külügyi Osztály*, vol. 2 (Budapest, 1895), 40–42; *MCH*, 163–164, 165–169; Đ. Šurmin, *Hrvatski spomenici: Acta Croatica*, vol. 1 (= *Monumenta historico-iuridica Slavorum meridionalium*, VI) (Zagreb, 1898), 304–305; S. Krsić, “Regesti pisama generala dominikanskog reda poslatih u Hrvatsku (1392–1600),” *Arhivski vjesnik* 17–18 (1974–1975): 198; V. Fraknoi, *Matthias Corvinus, König von Ungarn 1458–1490* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1891), 133, 283–284; K. Nehring, *Matthias Corvinus, Kaiser Friedrich III. und das Reich: Zum ungarisch-habsburgischen Gegensatz in Donauraum* (Munich, 1975¹), 218–222; M. Bogović, “Pomicanje sjedišta krbavske biskupije od Mateja Marute do Šimuna Kožičića Benje”; M. Kurelac, “Nikola Modruški (1427–1480): Životni put i djelo,” *Krbavska biskupija* 72, 74, 134; M. Kurelac, “Ivan Vitez od Sredne i Jan Panonije (Ivan Česmički) između anarhije i tiranije”; S. Krsić, “Uloga hrvatskih domini-kanaca u kulturnim planovima kralja Matije Korvina,” in *Dani hrvatskog kazališta, Hrvatski humanizam—Janus Pannonius*, vol. 16 (Split, 1990), 235, 243 (n. 27), 258, 259, 260; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 168–170.
 19. *DAZ*, *SMV-DT*, reg. II, p. 29 (doc. no. 602); Š. Ljubić, *Commissiones et relationes Venetae*, vol. 1 (= *Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium*, VI) (Zagreb, 1876), 42–43; Šurmin, 1: 246; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 93.

20. Ljubić, *Commissiones et relationes*, 1: 42–43; *MDE*, 2: 92–94, 208; F. Cusin, *Il confine orientale d'Italia nella politica europea del XIV e XV secolo* (Trieste, 1977²), 407; V. Klaić, *Krčki knezovi Frankapani*, 274–275; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 93.
21. Ljubić, *Commissiones et relationes*, 1: 47–48; V. Klaić, *Krčki knezovi Frankapani*, 276; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 144.
22. On this see in detail: Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 143–151, and the sources and the literature quoted there.
23. L. Thallóczy and S. Barabás, *Codex diplomaticus comitum de Blagay* (= *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, I, 28) (Budapest 1897), 384–386, 397–398, 399–403 (hereafter cited as *CDCB*); Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 110.
24. For example, the conflicts with Ladislav *de Zenche*, in 1471 and Juraj (George) Mikuličić, in 1486 (*CDCB*, 382–384, respectively 403–404, 416–423).
25. See note 23.
26. *CDCB*, 388–392; V. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 4: 152–157; Kurelac, “Ivan Vitez od Sredne,” 239, 243–246 (n. 28); Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 112.
27. I. K. Tkalčić, *Povjestni spomenici slobodnog kraljevskog grada Zagreba: Monumenta historica liberae regiae civitatis Zagrabiae*, vol. 2 (Zagreb, 1894), 157; N. Klaić, *Zagreb u srednjem vijeku*, vol. 1 (Zagreb, 1982), 167.
28. *CDCB*, 393–394; *CDCF*, 2: 158–160: I. Kukuljević Sakcinski, *Zrin grad i njegovi gospodari* (Zagreb, 1883), 48; L. Margetić and M. Moguš, *Zakon trsatski* (Rijeka, 1991), 19; V. Klaić, *Krčki knezovi Frankapani*, 295; N. Klaić, *Zagreb u srednjem vijeku*, 167; Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, 112–113.
29. See note 17.

Abstract

The Croatian Nobility and King Matthias Corvinus:
Between Cooperation and Confrontation

The rule of Hungarian and Croatian King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) had a profound impact upon his kingdom, upon the region, and upon the whole of Europe. Croatia was no exception to this. The paper analyzes the relations between Matthias, the Croatian magnate families, and the lesser and middle nobility. One might conclude that the Croatian nobility gradually started to develop a specific border mentality, coupled with fear, anxiety and insecurity for the future of their homeland. It seems that Croatian society became confronted with multiple challenges that surpassed its ability to cope. Matthias' part of the blame was that, as in the rest of the kingdom, he left the country financially exhausted and the magnates dissatisfied with his rule. The fact that Croatia and its nobility were in serious trouble started to be clearly visible immediately after 1490.

Keywords

Croatia, magnates, nobles, King Matthias Corvinus, Ottomans