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THE LATE MEDIEVAL ZAGREB COUNTY AS PART OF *ANTEMURALE CHRISTIANITATIS*. THE CASE STUDY OF ZRIN ESTATE²

Późnośredniowieczne hrabstwo zagrzebskie jako część *Antemurale Christianitatis*. Studium posiadłości Zrin Abstract

Although Ottoman raids on parts of Medieval Slavonia, which is now Central Croatia, began in the early 15th century, it wasn't until the fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Bosnia into Ottoman hands in 1463 that the raids intensified and the Ottoman raiders continuously plundered areas of medieval Croatia and Slavonia. It was during the mid-15th century that Croatian lands started to be recognized as *Antemurale Christianitatis*, meaning they were seen as frontier states of Western Christendom, primarily serving as a defensive barrier against non-Christian peoples in the East. During this time, several important strongholds were established in the late medieval Zagreb County, particularly on the state of Zrin, to defend against the Ottomans. Feudal lords of medieval Croatia and Slavonia began organizing elaborate defensive systems on their estates, consisting of strategically positioned smaller and larger strongholds. The estate of Zrin was one such example. This paper focuses on the defensive systems of the Zrin estate during the late 15th and first half of the 16th century. It examines the number, typology, and fortification features of the strongholds on the estate, as well as their strategic positions and defensive capabilities.

Keywords: Ottoman wars, late medieval Slavonia, late medieval strongholds, *Antemurale Christianitatis*, Zrin estate, 16th century

Abstrakt

Chociaż najazdy osmańskie na obszar średniowiecznej Sławonii, stanowiącej obecnie środkową Chorwację, rozpoczęły się we wczesnym XV wieku, dopiero zdobycie średniowiecznego Królestwa Bośni przez Osman w 1463 roku spowodowało ich nasilenie. Odtąd nieustannie płądrowali obszary średniowiecznej Chorwacji i Sławonii. W połowie XV wieku ziemie chorwackie zaczęto uznawać za *Antemurale Christianitatis*, co oznaczało, że postrzegano je jako kraje graniczne zachodniego

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chrześcijaństwa, pełniące przede wszystkim rolę bariery obronnej przeciwko niechrześcijańskim ludom Wschodu. W tym czasie, w późnośredniowiecznym hrabstwie zagrzebskim, zwłaszcza w posiadłości Zrin, powstało kilka ważnych twierdz dla obrony przed Turkami. Feudalni władcy średniowiecznej Chorwacji i Slawonii tworzyli rozbudowane systemy obronne w swoich majątkach, składające się ze strategicznie położonych mniejszych i większych twierdz. Posiadłość Zrin była jedną z nich. Niniejsza praca skupia się na systemach obronnych majątku Zrin z końca XV w. i pierwszej połowy XVI w. Bada liczbę, typologię i cechy fortyfikacyjne warowni w tym majątku, a także ich położenie strategiczne i możliwości obronne.

Słowa kluczowe: wojny osmańskie, późnośredniowieczna Slawonia, późnośredniowieczne twierdze, *Antemurale Christianitatis*, majątek Zrin, XVI wiek

1. Introduction

In a letter dated mid-March 1540 and addressed to Queen Anne of Habsburg, Count John I of Zrin, one of the key figures in the anti-Ottoman defense efforts in Croatia during the mid-16th century, conveyed alarming news of an impending Ottoman raid on his estate.³ He said that defending his estates against the relentless Ottoman threat was a constant struggle, and indeed his words echoed the urgent need to fortify the lands and protect them from the ever-encroaching Ottoman forces. Finally, Count John expressed his deep concern by saying: *ipsa castra mea tanquam clypeus et propugnacula a parte Thurcarum regno Croatiae*.⁴ With these powerful words, Count John highlighted the pivotal role played by the strongholds on his Zrin estate, emphasizing their significance as vital defensive structures safeguarding the borders of the Kingdom of Croatia against the relentless Ottoman threat.

The Counts of Zrin hold a prominent status among the Croatian noble families during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. Their roots trace back to present-day Dalmatia, specifically the Ravni Kotari region in the hinterland of Zadar and Biograd. Originally, they were a branch of the very important noble kindred of Šubići of Bribir, the members of which were documented in preserved historical sources since the mid-12th century, and who wielded political influence in Kingdom Hungary-Croatia at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries.⁵ In the mid-14th century, one branch of the kindred of Šubići of Bribir relocated to rejoined Slavonia following a donation from King Charles Robert of Hungary-Croatia. In July 1347, the King granted the castle and estate of Zrin to Count George I of Bribir in exchange for his Ostrovica castle in Ravni Kotari.⁶ Over the subsequent centuries, the Zrin estate became a primary asset of this kindred's branch, forming the economic, political, and social foundation for the descendants of George I of Bribir, and therefore they adopted the title of Counts of Zrin.⁷

³ *Monumenta Habsburgica regni Croatiae Dalmatiae Slavoniae. Habsburški spomenici Kraljevine Hrvatske Dalmacije i Slavonije*, ed. E. Laszowski, vol. 2, Zagreb 1916, p. 475.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ About the noble kindred of Šubići of Bribir in the English language see: D. Karbić, *The Šubići of Bribir. A Case Study of a Croatian Medieval Kindred*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Central European University, Budapest 2000.

⁶ *Codex diplomaticus Regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Slavoniae. Diplomatički zbornik Kraljevine Hrvatske, Dalmacije i Slavonije*, ed. T. Smičiklas, vol. 11, Zagreb 1913, pp. 380-383; D. Karbić, *The Šubići of Bribir*, p. 127.

⁷ D. Karbić, S. Miljan, *Knezovi Zrinski u 14. i 15. stoljeću između staroga i novoga teritorijalnog identiteta*, in: *Susreti dviju kultura. Obitelj Zrinski u hrvatskoj i mađarskoj povijesti*, Zagreb 2012, pp. 15-43. On the significance of the Counts of Zrin in Croatian and Hungarian history, for example, see: *Povijest obitelji Zrinski. Zbornik radova*

Between 1540 and 1546, the Ottoman troops systematically devastated the Zrin estate,⁸ significantly impacting the economic base of the Counts of Zrin.⁹ Although the yonder fortresses remained mostly intact and unconquered, the Ottoman assaults undermined the ability of the Counts of Zrin to defend their possessions in the lower Una valley and, consequently, the entirety of Croatian historical lands.¹⁰ In 1546, Nicholas IV of Zrin led the final resettlement of the Counts of Zrin to Međimurje, in today's most northern part of Croatia, after receiving this estate from King Maximilian of Habsburg as settlement for the king's unpaid debt of 20,000 forints. The loss of their estates in lower Una valley as well as significant properties along the coastal Croatia territory not only impacted the Counts of Zrin's economic standing but also influenced their territorial and identity basis. It marked a crucial turning point for this magnate family, shaping their new identity and territorial affiliations.¹¹

Historical records from the 15th and first half of 16th centuries, along with findings from archaeological excavations and terrain reconnaissance, provide evidence to support the existence of several smaller and larger strongholds on the Zrin estate during that era. These strongholds were primarily established for the defense of the region against Ottoman raiders. Referred to as "defensive systems", they were maintained for over half a century, mainly organized, and financed by the Counts of Zrin themselves. During the mid-16th century, however, these defensive systems began to decline and ultimately collapsed by the late 16th century. The reasons for their diminishing effectiveness and eventual crumbling may have been multifaceted, influenced by factors such as changes in warfare tactics, shifting political alliances, and the overall challenging geopolitical landscape of the time.

This paper aims to explore the rise, organization, and subsequent decline of this defensive system on the Zrin estate in late 15th and the first half of 16th century. By analyzing historical sources, examining archaeological evidence, and conducting thorough research, we seek to shed light on the factors that led to the eventual deterioration of the once robust defensive network. Through a comprehensive understanding of the historical context and the fate of these fortifications, we gain insights into the challenges faced by medieval Croatia and Slavonia in their struggle against the Ottoman threat. By examining the rise and fall of the Zrin estate's defensive system, we can appreciate the efforts made by the Counts of Zrin to safeguard their estates and the ultimate challenges they encountered in maintaining their defensive strongholds.

s međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa održanog u Zagrebu, 8.-9. studenog 2004., eds. Z. Ladić, Đ. Vidmarović, Zagreb 2007, as well as: *Susreti dviju kultura. Obitelj Zrinski u hrvatskoj i mađarskoj povijesti*, eds. S. Bene, Z. Ladić, G. Hausner, Zagreb 2012. While, for a concise exploration of the Counts of Zrin's history in English, along with references to sources and literature, refer to: S. Varga, *Europe's Leonidas: Miklós Zrínyi, Defender of Szigetvár (1508-1566)*, Budapest 2016, pp. 22-116.

⁸ Numerous surviving documents, including reports, pleas for military assistance, and narrative sources, vividly depict the Ottoman raids on the Zrin estate during the period from 1540 to 1546. See: R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za povijest Hrvatske XVI i XVII vieka iz štajerskoga zemaljskog arhiva u Gradcu*, "Starine JAZU," 17/1885, pp. 161-164, 167, 190, 197-198, 216; *Monumenta Habsburgica*, vol. 2, pp. 493-494; N. Isthvanfi Pannoni, *Historiarvm de rebus Vngaricis libri XXXIV*, Coloniae Agrippinae 1622, p. 226.

⁹ M. Kruhek, *Krajiške utvrde i obrana Hrvatskog kraljevstva tijekom 16. stoljeća*, Zagreb 1995, p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 126-127.

¹¹ See in more details: N. Štefanec, *Heretik njegova Veličanstva. Povijest o Jurju IV. Zrinskom i njegovu rodu*, Zagreb 2001, pp. 19-35.

Although the Ottoman raids on parts of medieval Slavonia, now known as Central Croatia, began as early as the beginning of the 15th century,¹² it was not until the fall of the medieval Kingdom of Bosnia into Ottoman hands in 1463 that the Ottoman raiders commenced continuous plundering of areas in medieval Croatia and Slavonia.¹³ This important event marked a significant shift in the intensity and frequency of Ottoman incursions into the region. It was precisely in the middle of the 15th century that Croatian lands began to be recognized and perceived as *Antemurale Christianitatis*, meaning they were viewed as frontier states of Western Christendom. This concept primarily denoted a defensive belt established to safeguard the Western Christian world from the non-Christian peoples in the East.¹⁴

Following the accession of young Louis II Jagiello to the throne in 1516, the Kingdom of Hungary-Croatia experienced a gradual decline in royal power, primarily due to continuous rivalries among the prominent magnates and constant Ottoman threat. One of the most damaging consequences of this decline was the breakdown of royal finances, with the first notable symptom being the inability to effectively collect the crucial one-florin tax known as the “subsidy”. There were multiple factors contributing to this predicament. Firstly, the relentless Ottoman raids resulted in the depopulation of the state thus undermining the tax base. Additionally, since 1493, the most influential barons had been granted the authority to retain the tax revenues from their own lands to support their armed forces. This further hampered the filling of the royal treasury, making it increasingly challenging to secure the necessary financial resources. Compounding the financial strain was the ever-growing cost

¹² According to preserved written documents, it was in 1402 when for the first time Ottoman raiders plundered estates of Cistercian abbey of Blessed Virgin Mary in Topusko (*Monumenta historica episcopatus Zagrabienensis. Povijesni spomenici zagrebačke biskupije*, ed. A. Lukinović, vol. 5, Zagreb 1992, pp. 173-174), situated no more than 50 kilometers away from Zrin.

¹³ The fall of the medieval Kingdom of Bosnia by the Ottoman conquest has been in focus by many papers and books ever since the development of modern historiography in 19th century. Here it is worth to pinpoint the newly published monography by Emir O. Filipović, in which the author details the events and the context of the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia with references to the historical sources and the relevant literature, providing new interpretations of the events (E.O. Filipović, *Bosansko Kraljevstvo i Osmansko Carstvo (1386-1463)*, Sarajevo 2019).

¹⁴ Generally, on the concept of *Antemurale Christianitatis*, see: P. Srodecki, *Antemurale Christianitatis*, in: *Religiöse Erinnerungsorte in Ostmitteleuropa. Konstitution und Konkurrenz im nationen- und epochenübergreifenden Zugriff*, Berlin 2013, pp. 804-822; idem, *Antemurale-based frontier identities in East Central Europe and their ideological roots in medieval/early modern alterity and alienity discourses*, in: *Collective Identity in the Context of Medieval Studies*, Ostrava 2016, pp. 97-120; idem, *Murus et antemurale pollens et propugnaculum tocius christianitatis. Der Traktatenstreit zwischen dem Deutschen Orden und dem Königreich Polen auf dem Konstanzer Konzil*, “Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte,” 2015, vol. 109, pp. 47-65; N. Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and The Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750*, Oxford 2019; P. Kolsto, *Antemurale Thinking as Historical Myth and Ethnic Boundary Mechanism*, in: *Rampart Nations: Bulwark Myths of East European Multiconfessional Societies in the Age of Nationalism*, New York-Oxford 2019, pp. 347-373; K. Weiland, *The Origins of Antemurale Christianitatis Myths – Remarks on the Promotion of a Political Concept*, in: *Rampart Nations: Bulwark Myths of East European Multiconfessional Societies in the Age of Nationalism*, New York-Oxford 2019, pp. 31-59; while for the perception of Croatian lands within the concept of *Antemurale Christianitatis* see: K. Pajorin, *Antiturcica negli anni quaranta del '400: Le epistole di Francesco Filelfo, di Poggio Bracciolini e di János Vitéz, “Camoenae Hungaricae,”* 2006, vol. 3, pp. 17-28; eadem, *I primordi della letteratura antiturca in Ungheria e Pio II.*, in: *Pio II Umanista Europeo. Atti del XVII Convegno Internazionale (Chianciano-Pienza 18-21 luglio 2005)*, Firenze 2007, pp. 815-827; L. Kunčević, *Retorika granice kršćanstva u diplomaciji renesansnog Dubrovnika*, “Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti u Dubrovniku,” 2010, vol. 48, pp. 179-211 and T. Matić, *Porijeklo termina Antemurale Christianitatis u kontekstu protuosmanske propagande 15. Stoljeća*, in: *Antemurale Christianitatis. Crkva i društvo na području Središnje Hrvatske krajem 15. i početkom 16. stoljeća*, Sisak 2021, pp. 127-141.

of frontier defense, which consumed significant sums. The royal treasury was ill-equipped to meet these mounting expenses, leaving frontier commanders to find alternative means of financing their troops. Desperate for funds, they resorted to plundering areas already under Ottoman control and ransoming their own prisoners, thus exacerbating tensions, and perpetuating the cycle of conflict. The deteriorating financial situation not only weakened the royal power but also undermined the overall stability and the capacity to effectively counter the Ottoman threat.¹⁵

Facing the increasing necessity of defense, the burden of organizing local defenses against ongoing Ottoman raids primarily fell upon feudal lords, particularly in the regions south of the river Drava encompassing medieval Croatia and Slavonia. As the late 15th century unfolded, these feudal lords began to establish elaborate “defensive systems” on their estates, comprising a network of smaller and larger strongholds strategically spaced throughout their lands. A notable example can be found on the estate of the Cistercian abbey of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Topusko. By the middle of the 16th century, a well-structured “defensive system” was in place, centered around the abbey itself and supported by several smaller strongholds strategically positioned around the Topusko abbey estate. These strongholds were meticulously placed to safeguard major traffic corridors and secure mountain passes, recognizing their strategic importance in protecting key routes from Ottoman incursions.¹⁶ This approach was crucial given that the Ottomans predominantly relied on semi-regular and irregular troops, such as the *Akıncıs* and the *Martoloses*,¹⁷ when conducting raids in medieval Slavonia and Croatia, respectively. The dispersed nature of these strongholds served as a deterrent, making it more challenging for the Ottoman forces to penetrate and conquer the region (see Fig. 1).

In a similar vein, the Zrin estate experienced a comparable situation from the late 15th century to the middle of the 16th century, characterized by an escalating Ottoman threat. Consequently, a comprehensive “defensive system” was implemented during this period. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to present the “defensive systems” of the Zrin estate during the late 15th and first half of the 16th century. This will be achieved by identifying the number, typology, strategic locations, and fortification features of the various strongholds within the estate. Moreover, this paper aims to explore the strategic positioning of these strongholds and assess the defense potential of each fortification. By delving into their design, placement, and defensive capabilities, a comprehensive understanding of their role in safeguarding the Zrin estate can be obtained. Through the analysis of historical records, archaeological findings, and terrain reconnaissance, we seek to shed light on the intricacies of the Zrin estate’s defensive network. By examining the number and distribution of strongholds, their architectural characteristics, and their strategic significance, we can gain insights into the efforts made by the estate’s owners to counter the Ottoman threat and protect their lands. By providing a comprehensive overview of the “defensive systems” on

¹⁵ P. Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen. A History of Medieval Hungary, 895-526*, London–New York 2001, pp. 358-359.

¹⁶ H. Kekez, *An Abbey as a Stronghold: A Strategic Role of Cistercian Abbey of Blessed Virgin Mary in Topusko (Toplica) in Anti-Ottoman Defense Efforts during 16th Century*, “Review of Croatian History,” 2021, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 229-271.

¹⁷ M. Uyar, E.J. Erickson, *A Military History of the Ottomans. From Osman to Atatürk*, Santa Barbara–Denver–Oxford 2009, pp. 58-61.

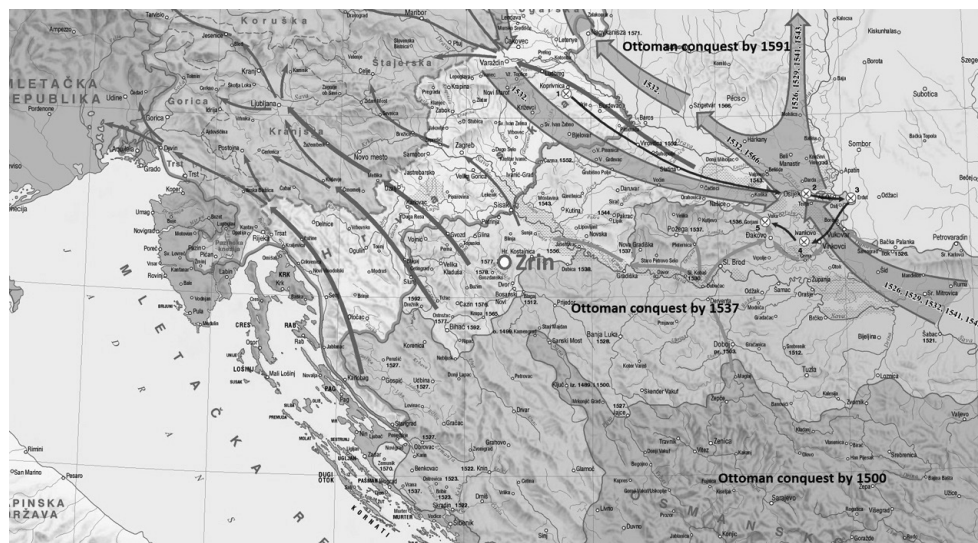


Fig. 1. The Ottoman conquest of Croatian historical areas in the period from the beginning to the end of the 16th century (source *Hrvatski povijesni atlas*, eds. V. Dugački, K. Regan, Zagreb 2018, p. 182–183, modified by Hrvoje Kekez)

the Zrin estate, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the region's defensive strategies in the late 15th and the first half of 16th century, i.e., during a critical period in its history. It also highlights the importance of fortifications in maintaining security and resilience against external threats.

2. The “defensive system” of the state of Zrin from the late 15th to the mid 16th century

As previously mentioned, the Ottoman raids on medieval Slavonia began in the early 15th century, but it was after the fall of the medieval Kingdom of Bosnia into Ottoman hands in 1463 that these raids intensified and expanded to include areas such as the Zrin estate. The strategic significance of the Sava River, serving as a key corridor for Ottoman raiders, as well as the river crossings along the Una River, made these regions particularly vulnerable by the early 1480s. Reports of attacks on travelers and merchants utilizing these routes during this period are plentiful. Furthermore, the Ottomans exploited these roads and river crossings in their raiding campaigns, extending their reach into southern lands of the German Empire, Carniola, and Styria, respectively. In 1474, for instance, a substantial Ottoman force of 8,000 soldiers employed these routes and river crossings to plunder areas as far as Ptuj in southern Styria.¹⁸

¹⁸ “...como questi Turchi, i quali sono stati exercito de circha VIII milla homini, corso de la Sava fina a Petouia a Varasino a Copeveriza a Rachonam a Criveviza loghi parte dello Imepatore et parte della corona de Ungheria...,” *Magyar diplomaciai emlékek. Mátyás király korából*, eds. I. Nagy, A. Nyáry, vol. 2, Budimpest 1877, p. 260; B. Grgin, *Počeci rasapa. Kralj Matijaš Korvin i srednjovjekovna Hrvatska*, Zagreb 2002, p. 175.

Against these threats, Christian military commanders, notably the Counts of Zrin, made efforts to counter them, primarily by launching attacks on Ottoman troops during their return to the bases in Bosnia. For example, Count Peter II of Zrin successfully defeated the Ottomans in 1475 on their return somewhere within his Zrin estate.¹⁹ He repeated this feat in the summer of 1478, once again intercepting and defeating Ottoman troops as they made their way back, this time through his Zrin estate.²⁰

On October 29th and 30th, 1483, a significant victory was achieved by the Christian troops under the leadership of Croatian ban Mattias Geréb (Cro. Matija Gereb, Hun. Mátyás Geréb) in a two-day battle near the crossing of the river Una in the vicinity of the present-day city of Dvor na Uni. This decisive triumph resulted in two major effects. Firstly, a substantial number of Christian prisoners, estimated to be several thousands, were liberated. Secondly, the Counts of Zrin recognized the urgent need to establish a functional defensive system on their estate, comprising a network of strategically positioned strongholds with the aim of preventing the use of yonder traffic routes by Ottoman raiding parties.²¹ In response to this realization, the Counts of Zrin embarked on a series of initiatives to fortify their estate. This involved both the reconstruction and modernization of existing strongholds, as well as the construction of new ones. The objective was to create a robust defensive network that could effectively protect the Zrin estate and its inhabitants from future Ottoman incursions.

Indeed, in the subsequent years, several strongholds were established and operated on the Zrin estate. The charter regarding the division of the Zrin estate between the two brothers, Count Peter II and Count Paul III of Zrin, in 1488 provides information about the presence of two larger strongholds (*castra*) and eleven smaller ones (*castella*) at the time.²² Furthermore, another castle, Novi, constructed at the confluence of the rivers Sana and Una during the second decade of the 16th century, is mentioned in later historical records.²³ Including Novi, the total number of strongholds on the Zrin estate in the first half of the 16th century amounted to 14 (Fig. 2). These strongholds served as the backbone of the Zrin estate's "defensive system" and were primarily maintained and financed by the Counts of Zrin themselves. The military troops stationed within these strongholds played a crucial role in safeguarding the estate and deterring potential Ottoman incursions.

¹⁹ *Österreich's Ehrensiegel*, eds. B. Höfel, A. Reitze, P. Bohr, vol. 2, Wien 1836, p. 826; I. Kukuljević Sakcinski, *Zrin grad i njegovi gospodari*, Zagreb 1883, p. 47; B. Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, p. 175.

²⁰ "Und als die Turckhen an dem Haymzug warn, nomen sy ainen Schand von ainem Grauen, genannt Petter von Serin inn Krabattn, und als sy kamen in Bossen dem Geyte....," *Jacobi Vnresti, Theologi et sacerdotis Carinthiaci Chronicon Avstriacvm, pars posterior; Friderici III. Imperatoris vitam lvcvleniter descriptam imprimis exhibens*, ed. D.S.F. Hahnii, Brvnsvigae 1724, "Collectio Monvmentorvm Vetervm et Reventvm," p. 641; B. Grgin, *Počeci rasapa*, p. 176.

²¹ H. Kekez, *Prilog kontekstualizaciji i rekonstrukciji bitke na 'gazu Zrinskih' 1483. Godine*, in: *Antemurale Christianitatis: Crkva i društvo na području središnje Hrvatske krajem 15. i početkom 16. stoljeća*, Sisak 2021, pp. 69-105.

²² "...castris zrin et pedal ac castellis gvozdanskij stupnitsij pastusij zaverskij zemidras dobranij lesnijsza jamnisa et podmilanskij....," Hrvatski državni arhiv (HR-HDA-), Zagreb, Croatia, fond: 25 – Ugarska dvorska komora, Hrvatske plemićke obitelji i vlastelinstva (25-NRA), fasc. 315, nr. 56.

²³ Castle Novi is for the first time mentioned in preserved written sources in 1524 ("...Newhuas siue Newgrad....," *Spomentici Hrvatske krajine*, ed. R. Lopašić, vol. 1, Zagreb 1884, p. 2). Yet, it was also mentioned in 1509 as the castle of Brodski ("...Brodskij....," HR-HDA-25 NRA, fasc. 1648, nr. 10.) and it seems that it has been constructed at the very end of the 15th century, after the aforementioned Battle of the "Ford Zrinski" (1483) to control the confluence of rivers Sana and Una (H. Kekez, *Prilog kontekstualizaciji*, pp. 96-97).

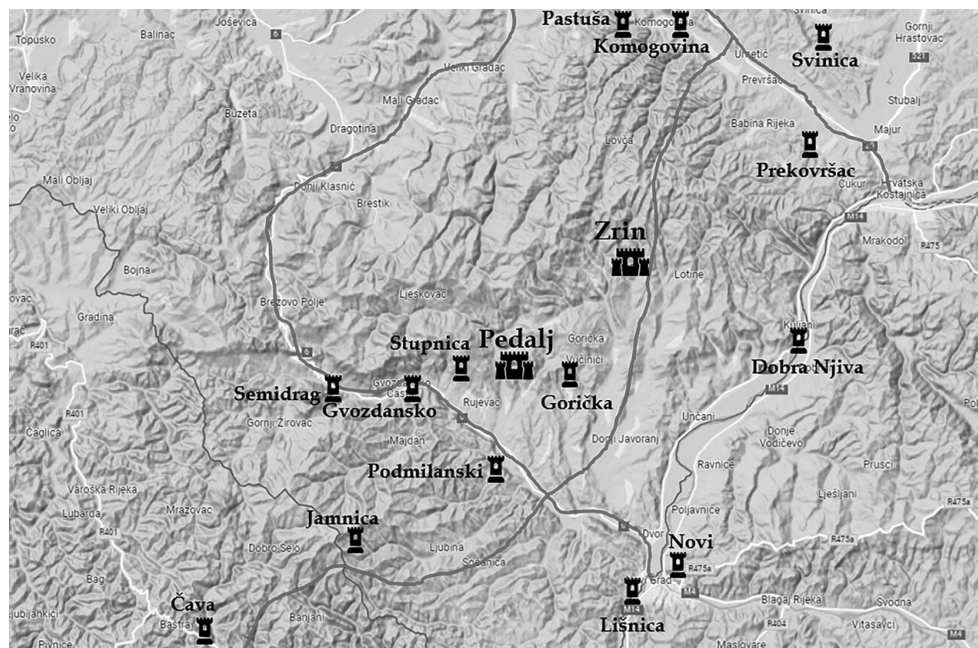


Fig. 2. The “Defensive system” of the Zrin estate in the first half of 16th century (author Hrvoje Kekez)

The castle of Zrin (*castrum Zrin*) served as the focal point and heart of the “defensive system” on the Zrin estate. It held both administrative and economic significance, and in its vicinity, a settlement thrived, complete with several churches, including a Franciscan monastery, and a marketplace. The original construction of the castle of Zrin likely took place during the latter half of the 12th century.²⁴ However, by the beginning of the 16th century, it underwent extensive modifications to enhance its defensive capabilities. In the first half of the 16th century, its fortifications consisted of two main towers, namely the northern and southern towers, along with a gate tower. The outer walls of the castle were also updated, incorporating elements of early Renaissance architecture, including the construction of several bastions.²⁵ These architectural changes aimed to fortify the castle against artillery attacks, reflecting the evolving military tactics of the time (Fig. 3 and 4).

The castle of Pedalj (*castrum Pedal*) held significant importance as the second most crucial stronghold within the Zrin estate. It was a medieval castle primarily constructed towards the end of the 14th century. Initially, Pedalj castle served as the center of a smaller estate that belonged to the Counts of Zrin. Over time, this smaller estate was incorporated into the larger Zrin estate, solidifying Pedalj’s role within the defensive system. Like the castle of Zrin, Pedalj castle underwent modernization during the early 16th century. Its defensive enhancements included the construction of two prominent early

²⁴ Z. Horvat, *Stari grad Zrin*, “Zrinski zbornik za povijest i obranu Hrvatskog Pounja,” 1997, vol. 2, p. 87.

²⁵ K. Regan, *Plemićki gradovi, kašteli i tvrđave obitelji Zrinski*, in: *Povijest obitelji Zrinski. Zbornik radova s međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa održanog u Zagrebu, 8.-9. studenog 2004.*, Zagreb 2007, pp. 146-147.



Fig. 3. The remains of the castle of Zrin today (photo Dalibor Lovrić)

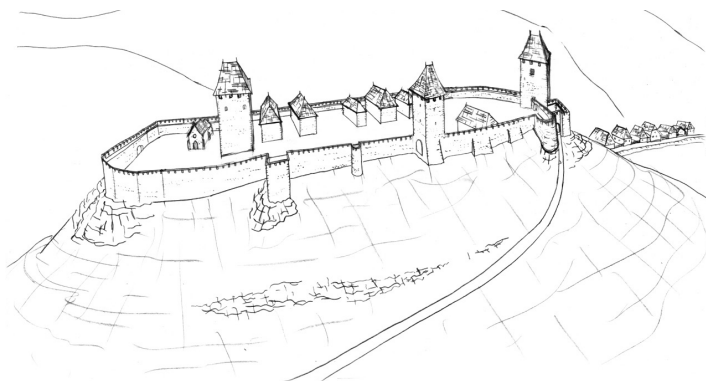


Fig. 4. The possible reconstruction of the castle of Zrin in 16th century (author Krešimir Regan)

Renaissance round towers, which served as vital defensive features. A preserved ground plan from 1765, currently held in the Austrian State Archive (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv*) in Vienna, offers valuable insights into the castle's architectural layout and the presence of these towers (Fig. 5).²⁶

In addition to the castles of Zrin and Pedalj, the Zrin estate was fortified with a total of 12 smaller strongholds during the early 16th century. These smaller strongholds served various purposes, including the protection and control of major roads and river crossings within the estate. Some of these strongholds were pre-existing medieval fortifications that underwent modernization, while others were newly constructed.

²⁶ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Wien, Austria, Kriegsarchiv, Karten- und Plansammlung, Genie- und Planarchiv, Inland, C VII Pedel.

The protection of the main road, known as *via magna*, which started from a significant river crossing near the confluence of the Una and Sana rivers, was entrusted to the smaller strongholds of Gorička, Podmilanski, Stupnica, Semidrag, and Gvozdansko. Among these five strongholds, only the castle of Gvozdansko remains standing today, while the locations of the others are known. Situated on hilltops overlooking the *via magna*, these strongholds played a crucial role in safeguarding the important road.

The castle of Gvozdansko was originally built in the second half of the 15th century to facilitate the extraction of silver and lead from nearby mines.²⁷ The granting of special privileges to the Counts of Zrin by King Matthias Corvinus in 1463 further emphasized the castle's significance. By the beginning of the 16th century, the castle of Gvozdansko underwent modernization, including the construction of Renaissance walls with four rondels on the corners, surrounding the existing late medieval round tower.²⁸ Today, only the late medieval round tower, two rondels, and parts of the outer walls remain preserved (Fig. 6).

In addition to protecting the *via magna*, the Zrin estate was also responsible for safeguarding the road between the fortresses of Kostajnica and Sisak, which traversed its territory. This road was fortified with four smaller strongholds: Prekovršac, Komogovina, Svinica, and Pastuša. These strongholds were originally medieval fortifications that remained in use during the first half of the 16th century. During that time, these strongholds underwent slight modifications. The original smaller round towers and inner courtyards were expanded by the addition of external courtyards protected by wooden palisades. Of these four strongholds, only Prekovršac castle still stands today, while the locations of the other three are known. The process of modernization can be easily observed in the remains and reconstructions

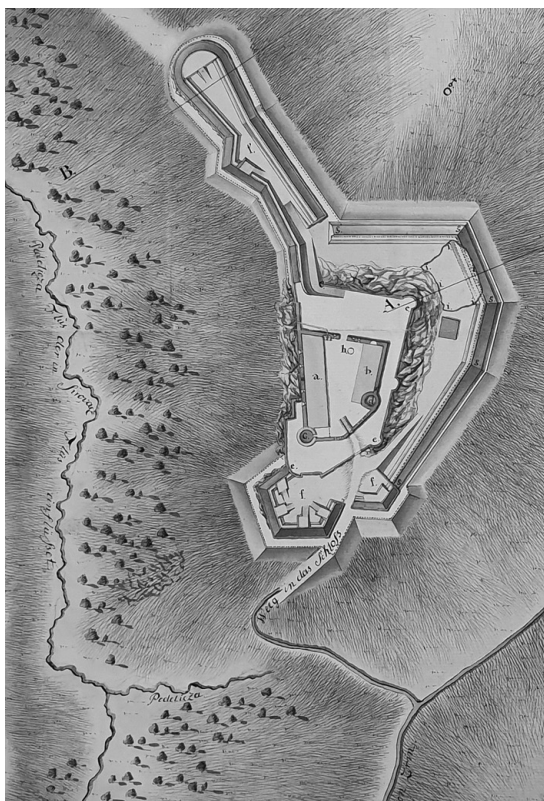


Fig. 5. The plan of Pedalj castle in 1765. – detail (source Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Wien, Austria, Kriegsarchiv, Karten- und Plansammlung, Genie- und Planarchiv, Inland, C VII Pedelj)

²⁷ „...auri et argenti ac plumbi...,” HR-HDA-25-NRA, fasc. 516, no. 35; M. Kruhek, *Gvozdansko: kaštel Zrinskoga srebra*, Split 2007, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ B. Nadilo, *Zrinske utvrde u Hrvatskom Pounju*, „Građevinar,” 2003, vol. 55, no. 5, pp. 304-307.



Fig. 6. The remains of the castle of Gvozdansko today (photo Dalibor Lovrić)

of Prekoveršac castle. The original smaller medieval round tower and inner courtyard are still discernible, alongside the newly added external wooden courtyard (Fig. 7).

The Zrin estate also played a crucial role in safeguarding the important public road (*via publica*) between Sisak and Bihać during the first half of the 16th century. This road passed through the estate and was protected by a smaller stronghold known as Jamnica. The castle of Jamnica was first mentioned in the 1488 charter as a smaller stronghold (*castellum*).²⁹ However, in a preserved written document from 1509, it is referred to as *castrum Jamniskij*.³⁰ The change in the terminology used to describe the Jamnica stronghold, from *castellum* to *castrum*, may suggest that the Counts of Zrin significantly modernized it over a period of twenty years. By 1509, it had most likely become a more significant and strongly defended stronghold, hence the use of the Latin term *castrum* in the document. The Jamnica stronghold was strategically located on a hilltop overlooking the important road, and its precise location is known today. However, only ground-level remains of the castle have been preserved.

In addition to the major strongholds and smaller fortifications on the Zrin estate, there were three smaller strongholds that played a crucial role in protecting the important river crossings of the Una River. Two of these strongholds, Lišnica and Dobra Njiva, were situated on small islands within the Una River, while the third, Novi, was located on a hilltop overlooking the mouth of the Sana River where it meets the Una River. Lišnica castle, known as *castellum Liisnicsa*, was an older medieval fortification that was first mentioned in 1436.³¹ Originally, it served as the center of a smaller land estate owned by the lesser nobility of Brokunova

²⁹ "...castellis ... Jamnisza..." HR-HAD-25-NRA, fasc. 315, nr. 56.

³⁰ HR-HDA-25-NRA, fasc. 316, nr. 22.

³¹ HR-HDA-25 NRA, fasc. 315, nr. 24.

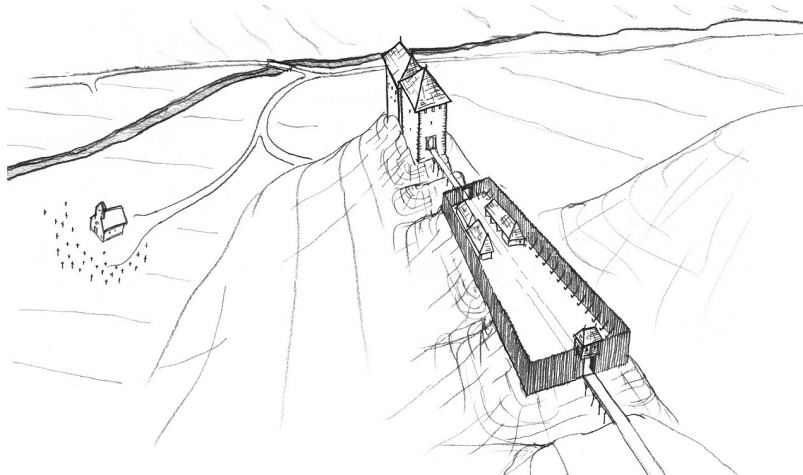


Fig. 7. The possible reconstruction of the castle of Prekovršac in 16th century (author Krešimir Regan)

Mountain. During the mid-15th century, it was incorporated into the Zrin estate.³² The castle was situated on a small river island known today as Vidorijska ada (previously Lješnička ada), located several hundred meters upstream from the mouth of the Sana River into the Una River.

Dobra Njiva castle was another smaller stronghold constructed on a river island along the Una River between the present-day villages of Dobrljin and Kuljani. While it is not preserved today, its location is known through cartographic evidence found in the Count Luigi Fernandino Marsigli collection at the *Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna*.³³

Finally, the castle of Novi, although not extant today, was strategically positioned on a hilltop overlooking the mouth of the Sana River into the Una River. It was likely built by Count Nicholas III of Zrin after the Battle of “ford Zrinski” in 1483 to safeguard the important river crossing.³⁴ The castle was first mentioned in preserved written documents in 1509 as *castellum Brodski*,³⁵ indicating its role in controlling the river crossing. The name itself signifies its main purpose.³⁶

If we reassess the arrangement of fortifications in the Zrin estate, it becomes evident that they were strategically positioned either above crucial traffic routes or in close proximity to significant crossings of the Una River. Considering their spatial locations, it is apparent that their primary purpose was to oversee the traffic routes originating from the Una River, traversing the Zrin estate towards the Kupa River, and extending into the yet unconquered Christian territories. Essentially, these fortifications were designed to obstruct the passage of Ottoman raiding parties during their raids towards the remaining parts of Slavonia and, furthermore, towards the south-east regions of the German Empire. Simultaneously, the great number and widespread distribution of these fortifications within the area of the Zrin estate

³² D. Karbić, S. Miljan, *Knezovi Zrinski*, pp. 19-21.

³³ Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, Bologna, Italy, collection: Luigi Marsili (IT-BUB-1044), fasc. 49.

³⁴ H. Kekez, *Prilog kontekstualizaciji*, pp. 96-97.

³⁵ “...Brodskij...,” HR-HDA-25 NRA, fasc. 1648, nr. 10.

³⁶ “Brod” means “river crossing.”

prove the Counts of Zrin's commitment to safeguarding their subjects – namely, the residents of the Zrin estate. This strategic approach underscores the Counts of Zrin's clear intention to preserve the economic significance of their most valuable land estate.

During the last decades of the 15th century and the first decade of the 16th century, the defensive system of the Zrin estate proved to be highly functional. This is evident from the trend observed in preserved written sources, which indicates that Ottoman raiding parties deliberately avoided using the roads in the Sana River valley and the river crossings on the Una River that were situated on the Zrin estate. Instead, they opted to utilize roads through northern medieval Croatia, specifically the areas of Lika, Krbava, and Modruš, during their raiding campaigns targeting Carniola or southern Styria.³⁷

The fact that the Ottoman raiders chose alternate routes through northern Croatia suggests that the “defensive system” implemented by the Counts of Zrin, including the strategically positioned strongholds and fortifications, effectively deterred or hindered Ottoman incursions along the Sana River valley and the Una River crossings on the Zrin estate. This highlights the significance and effectiveness of the defensive measures undertaken by the Counts of Zrin in protecting their estate and the surrounding areas from Ottoman raids.

The shifting geopolitical situation in the third decade of the 16th century had a significant impact on the defense of the Zrin estate and the broader region. The fall of strategically important cities and/or strongholds such as Belgrade in 1521,³⁸ Knin in 1522,³⁹ and Jajce in 1527,⁴⁰ changed the dynamics at the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier. As a result, the Una River valley once again emerged as a crucial theater of war. In response to the changing circumstances, the city of Bihać, situated in the middle of the Una River valley, became a vital stronghold in northern Croatia. Recognizing its strategic importance, Captain Nicholas Salm requested 400 cavalymen from Archduke Ferdinand in the summer of 1522 to bolster the defense of Bihać and the Una River valley.⁴¹ This highlights the heightened concerns and the need for reinforcements to protect this crucial area. The Counts of Zrin, as prominent nobility in the region, began receiving some financial and military support from the Habsburgs, particularly after the election of Archduke Ferdinand as the Croatian king in 1527.⁴²

Very soon the Counts of Zrin faced challenges in receiving regular and substantial financial and military aid from the Habsburgs, which led them to seek alternative strategies

³⁷ H. Kekez, *Royal power and magnates on the borderlands of the kingdom: The counts of Blagaj and anti-Ottoman defence at the beginning of the 1520s*, in: *Reform and Renewal in Medieval East and Central Europe: Politics, Law and Society*, Cluj-Napoca–Zagreb–London 2019, pp. 348-349.

³⁸ T. Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács. A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389-1526*, Leiden–Boston 2018, pp. 370-395.

³⁹ V. Klaić, *Knin za turskog vladanja (1522-1688)*, “Vjesnik Arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu,” 15/1928, no. 1, pp. 257-262; S. Gunjača, *Tiniensia archaeologica-historica-topographica II*, “Starohrvatska prosvjeta,” serija III, 7/1960, p. 89.

⁴⁰ L. Thallóczy, *Povijest (banovine, grada i varoši) Jajca 1450.-1527*, Zagreb 1916, pp. 221-222.

⁴¹ *Monumetna Habsburgica regni Croatiae Dalmatiae Slavoniae. Habsburški spomenici Kraljevine Hrvatske Dalmacije i Slavonije*, ed. E. Laszowski, vol. 1, Zagreb 1914, p. 188.

⁴² On the assembly of Croatian Estates held in Cetin on January 1st, 1527, see: F. Šišić, *Izbor Ferdinanda I. hrvatskim kraljem*, “Starohrvatska prosvjeta,” 1/1927, no. 1-2, pp. 15-44; L. Margetić, *Cetinski sabori u 1527*, “Senjski zbornik,” 17/1991, pp. 35-44; N. Budak, *The Coming of Ferdinand Habsburg to the Croatian Throne*, “Croatian Studies Review,” 2/2002, no. 1, pp. 135-155; M. Kruhek, *Cetin – grad Hrvatskoga sabora 1527. godine: s posebnim osvrtom na ulogu Frankopana Modruških u izboru novoga hrvatskog kralja*, “Modruški zbornik,” 11-12/2018, pp. 79-108.

of survival. One such strategy was the attempt to acquire land estates in areas of the Kingdom of Hungary-Croatia that were less endangered by Ottoman attacks.⁴³ Count Nicholas III of Zrin even pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence with his nearest Ottoman neighbors, which led to his investigation and litigation for alleged cooperation with the Ottomans. In 1524, Archduke Ferdinand I of Habsburg appointed Weyxlebreg, Katzianer, and Leyser to investigate Count Nicholas III's relations with the Ottomans.⁴⁴

The outcome of this investigation is unknown, but it is worth noting that Count Nicholas III continued his communication with neighboring Ottoman lords, and it appears that he even made peace with them and agreed to pay tribute. This cooperation with the Ottomans led to another investigation in 1530, initiated by Christopher Rauber, the Bishop of Ljubljana and then the main military commander of Christian troops stationed on the border with the Ottomans. Count Nicholas III was eventually cleared of these litigations after explaining that he was forced to make deals with the Ottomans due to the lack of military aid he had received for an extended period.⁴⁵ This demonstrates the challenging circumstances faced by the Counts of Zrin, as they were compelled to seek alternative measures for their survival and the protection of their estate in the face of limited support from the Habsburgs.

3. The fortresses of the Zrin estate in royal hands

After the death of Count Nicholas III in 1534, his sons Nicholas IV and John I did not continue their father's policy of peaceful coexistence with the Ottomans. This shift in policy had consequences, leading to the heaviest Ottoman raids on the Zrin estate in the first half of the 1540s. The series of events began with the fall of the nearby fortress of Dubica into Ottoman hands in 1538.⁴⁶ In an attempt to regain control of this crucial fortress located in the lower Una River valley, the two brothers embarked on a campaign. In early 1540, they successfully recaptured Dubica, but this triggered furious and continuous Ottoman raids on their Zrin estate. These raids persisted until 1546, causing significant damage and hardships for the Counts of Zrin and their estate's inhabitants.⁴⁷

It is important to highlight that, dating back to the era of King Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), Hungarian-Croatian rulers endeavored to establish a defense system of various fortifications along the border with the Ottomans, aiming to curb their incursions and prevent the pillaging of yet unconquered territories. Consequently, in the latter part of the 15th century, the Captaincy of Senj was instituted,⁴⁸ followed shortly by the establishment of the Captaincy

⁴³ This was one of the most common "strategies of survival" adopted by the Croatian nobility of the time, both the high and lesser nobility (I. Jurković, *Klasifikacija hrvatskih raseljenika za trajanja osmanske ugroze (od 1463. do 1593.)*, "Migracijske i etničke teme," 19/2003, pp. 147-174). This strategy was also adopted by the Zrinski family, as already said, it was Count Nicholas IV of Zrin who, in settlement of a debt of 20,000 golden florins, received the Međimurje estate from King Maximilian of Habsburg in 1546 (refer to the information in the text above).

⁴⁴ *Codex diplomaticus partium regno Hungariae adnexarum. A horvát véghegyek oklevéltára*, eds. L. Thallóczy, A. Hodinka, Budapest 1903, pp. 352-353.

⁴⁵ J.V. Valvasor, *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Krain*, vol. 4, Rudolfswerth 1879, pp. 431-436.

⁴⁶ H. Kekez, K. Regan, *Srednjovjekovna Dubica: Orisi grada na obalama rijeke Une*, Zagreb 2022, pp. 93-109.

⁴⁷ Refer to footnote 6.

⁴⁸ About the foundation, organization and functioning of Captaincy of Senj in the period from 1469 to 1563, refer to: V. Klaužer, *Ustrojstvo i djelovanje Senjske kapetanije od njezina osnutka do organizacije vojne krajine po vrhovnom zapovjedniku Ivanu Lenkoviću (1469.-1563.)* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Zagreb), Zagreb 2015.

of Bihać.⁴⁹ These comprised networks of both smaller and larger fortifications, some of them newly built while others were older medieval strongholds of various nobility, now housing royal troops. However, the Croatian and Slavonian nobility displayed reluctance in surrendering control of their border fortresses to the king, i.e., they hesitated to allow royal troops to be stationed in them. Their apprehension stemmed from the fear of permanent loss of ownership of individual castles and adjacent estates, as evidenced by decisions made by the Estates gathered at Croatian and/or Slavonian Assemblies in the middle of the 16th century.⁵⁰

The Counts of Zrin shared a similar approach, as they, until the mid-16th century, were hesitant to cede control of the fortifications on the Zrin estate to the king's military commanders and allow royal troop to be stationed in them. This stance was facilitated by the circumstance that, up until the early 1540s, the Zrin estate had largely escaped significant Ottoman devastation and remained rather well-populated. The continued prosperity was further supported by the presence of profitable silver and lead mines in Govzdansko,⁵¹ guaranteeing the payment of crews stationed in the fortresses of the Zrin estate.⁵² Yet, the aforementioned Ottoman raids on the Zrin estate in the 1540s resulted in the depopulation of the area. Many of the local inhabitants were killed, enslaved, or forced to abandon their homes. As a result, the Counts of Zrin lost the financial means to maintain their defensive system. Eventually, they agreed to accommodate royal troops in their strongholds,⁵³ as did their neighbors, the Counts of Blagaj, approximately at the same time.⁵⁴

Consequently, by the mid-1550s, the Counts of Zrin entrusted the defense of Kostajnica and Novi strongholds to the royal military commanders. Specifically, the 1555 record of crew maintenance costs in Croatia and Slavonia indicated that, at the king's expense, there were crews consisting of a *burggraff* and a *püchsenmeister* in Novi and Kostajnica. Additionally, there were 31 soldiers receiving a monthly salary of 199 forints. At that time, the commander of the royal troops in Novi and Kostajnica was Peter Erdödy, earning a salary of 125 forints.⁵⁵

Furthermore, in his letter directed to the Croatian and Slavonian Estates gathered at the Assembly at the castle of Stjeničnjak on July 17, 1558, King Ferdinand I of Habsburg issued an order for the transfer of the Zrin castle and other fortresses of the Zrin estate from the Count Nicholas IV of Zrin to the hands of royal military commanders, i.e. he directed that a royal garrison should be stationed there.⁵⁶ Yet, there are indications that royal troops

⁴⁹ About the foundation, organization and functioning of Captaincy of Senj during 16th century, refer to: D. Stanić, *Bihać kao sjedište Bihaćke kapetanije i slobodni kraljevski grad* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Zagreb), Zagreb 2020.

⁵⁰ M. Kruhek, *Krajiške utvrde*, pp. 98-108, 176-184.

⁵¹ About the mines in Govzdansko, refer to: I. Mirnik, *Srebra Nikole Zrinskog: gvozdanski rudnici i kovnica novca*, Zagreb 1992.

⁵² In aforementioned Ottoman attacks on the Zrin estate in the early 1540s, the defense was led by the Counts of Zrin, who still maintained their garrisons in those fortresses (M. Kruhek, *Krajiške utvrde*, p. 160).

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 126-127.

⁵⁴ The Counts of Blagaj handed over the defense of their important Otoka castle to the royal commanders in 1558, just like the nearby Ostrožac castle, both situated in middle river Una valley (R. Lopašić, *Bihać i Bihaćka krajina. Mjestopisne i poviestne crtice sa jednom zemljopisnom kratom i sa četrnaest slika*, Zagreb 1890, pp. 238, 244-245).

⁵⁵ *Idem*, *Prilozi za poviest Hrvatske XVI i XVII vieka iz štajerskoga zemaljskog arhiva u Gradcu*, „Starine JAZU,” 17/1885, p. 216.

⁵⁶ „...castrum autem Zryn de manibus domini comitis de Zrinio et alia, que illic habuisset, vnde et potuisset sustentare et subleuare, in sue sacratissime cesaree maiestatis manu set tutelam accepisset...” *Acta comitialia Regni Croatiae Dalmatiae Slavoniae. Hrvatski saborski spisi*, ed. F. Šišić, vol. 3, Zagreb 1916, p. 22.

were stationed in Zrin castle even earlier. A letter from Ban Peter Keglević to the Captain John Lenković, dating from the mid-1557, has been preserved.⁵⁷ In this communication, Ban Keglević informs Captain Lenković that the Zrin's *haramias* had captured three Ottomans. He suggests interrogating them to gather intelligence about the situation on the Ottoman side of the border and assess the feasibility of launching an offensive. The term *haramias*, commonly referred to royal infantrymen, used to describe the Zrin crew thus suggests the presence of royal troops in Zrin at that time.

Nevertheless, starting from the mid-16th century, royal military crews were progressively stationed in numerous fortifications across the lower Una valley, significantly influencing the defense strategies in that area. During this period, endeavors were undertaken to centralize the administration of the kingdom's defense against the Ottomans. In pursuit of this goal, the Court War Council (*Hofkriegsrat*) was established in Graz in 1556. The entire border region, spanning from the Adriatic to Transylvania, was interconnected with fortifications of varying significance and organized into six generalities (*Grenzgeneralaten*). The principal forts were fortified, with crews ranging from 1,000 to 1,500 soldiers. Secondary forts had crews numbering from 300 to 600 soldiers, and the least fortified forts, with 100 to 300 soldiers, were strategically positioned between them. All the forts were linked by various smaller fortifications, such as guardhouses and porches.⁵⁸

The establishment of the Court War Council in Graz coincided with the fall of Kostajnica and Novi fortresses into Ottoman hands. Indeed, Kostajnica succumbed to Ottoman control on July 27, 1556, a consequence of both poorly prepared defenses and possibly by the betrayal of Pankratius Lusthaler, the commander of the royal troops in Kostajnica. The fall of Kostajnica prompted the departure of a small military crew from the nearby Novi as well. Anthony Vramec chronicled these events.⁵⁹ In response to the fall of these fortifications, King Ferdinand I took personal action. In the same year, he summoned military commanders to collaborate on defensive measures with Count Thomas Nádasdy and Captain John Lenković.⁶⁰ In fact, the fortress of Novi, due to its strategic position, swiftly transformed into an Ottoman base for mustering forces before launching new raids. By the spring of 1557, two Ottoman raiding parties had gathered, likely in proximity to Novi, penetrating and devastating the estates of the Counts of Zrin, as well as the castles of Lišnica and Krupa. Count Nicholas IV of Zrin reported these incidents on April 23, stating that those units were subsequently annihilated, by capturing forty Ottoman soldiers while killing eighty of them.⁶¹ Additionally, reports from Bihać in October 1557 indicated the assembly of a formidable Ottoman raiding company near Novi.⁶²

In the context of the aforementioned rationalization and reorganization of the defense in the broader region of the Kingdom Hungary-Croatia, it is noteworthy to consider the information stemming from the Assembly in Stjencičnjak in 1558, where Captain John

⁵⁷ Arhiv Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti (HR-AHAZU-), fond: Diplomata, D-XXXIII-100.

⁵⁸ Refert to: G. Pálffy, *The Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York 2009, pp. 99-101.

⁵⁹ A. Vramec, *Kronika, Zagabriae* 1908, „Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium. Scriptores,” vol. 31, p. 60.

⁶⁰ R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za poviest*, (1885), p. 219.

⁶¹ *Codex epistolaris et diplomaticus comitis Nicolai de Zrinio*, ed. S. Barabás, vol. 1, Budapest 1898, p. 457.

⁶² R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za poviest*, (1885), p. 222.

Lenković, addressing the Croatian and Slavonian Estates, not only sought the surrender of all fortresses belonging to the Counts of Zrin to royal control, but also proposed the demolition of several lower Una River valley fortresses, including Zrin, Komogovina, Prekovršac, Graduša, and Svinica.⁶³ He argued that it made no sense to defend these forts and the border areas due to depopulation.⁶⁴ However, the assembled nobility, firmly adhering to their stance of preserving all fortifications and property rights, rejected these demands. In response, discussions and decisions were made, including considerations for the restoration of certain fortifications, and maintaining border guards against the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁵

In any case, the Ottoman conquest of the castle of Lišnica in the fall of 1558 underscores Lenković's accurate assessment that further defense of fortifications in lower Una valley was impractical. On November 11, John Lenković from city of Varaždin reported to the Styrian authorities that following the capture of the castle of Lišnica, Ottoman forces under Malkochbey advanced up the Una towards the castles of the Counts of Blagaj, Otoka and Bušević respectively.⁶⁶ This suggests that castle of Lišnica likely fell into Ottoman hands towards the end of October in the same year. Three days later, in a subsequent letter from Varaždin, Captain Lenković reported that the castle of Lišnica had been destroyed by Ottoman cannons, and that the castles of Bušević and Otoka had also succumbed to the Ottomans.⁶⁷ In response to the news of the fall of these important strongholds along the Una River, King Maximilian urgently called from Vienna on Styrian Estates on November 19 to mobilize 30 soldiers and dispatch them to the Habsburg-Ottoman border due to the heightened threat resulting from the fall of the castles of Lišnica, Otoka, and Bušević.⁶⁸ However, any aid that may have reached the Una River border was likely inadequate, especially considering the information conveyed by Franz Teuffenbach to the Styrian Estates from Varaždin on December 12 of the same year. According to Teuffenbach, an Ottoman force of 6,000 soldiers had recently assembled near the newly conquered the Lišnica castle.⁶⁹

With the fall of fortresses of Kostajnica and Novi in 1556, and Otoka, Bušević, and Lišnica in 1558, the defense of the middle and lower Una River valley essentially crumbled. This further solidified Lenković's position that continuing to defend those areas was impractical and represented an unnecessary drain on already insufficient military resources. This perspective is clearly articulated in his 1563 report on the state of fortifications along the Habsburg-Ottoman border in Croatia and Slavonia.⁷⁰ Drawing on decades of on-the-ground experience and commanding a royal troop in bordering areas, Lenković proposed demolishing or preserving certain forts based on strategic considerations. In this report, Lenković recommended the demolition of all fortifications in the lower Una River valley. Specifically, he noted that the castle of Zrin was an ancient fortress belonging to Count Nicholas IV of Zrin, guarded by a robust crew of two hundred royal soldiers, but he advised

⁶³ „... finitima castra, nempe: Zryn ... Komogoyna, Prekowerchky, Gradyza et Zwynnycza demoliri et dirui opera colonorum eorumdem demandasset...” *Acta comitialia*, p. 22.

⁶⁴ „... postquam Thurca, hostis nominis christiani, regnum Croacie et confinia depopulare, devastare...,” *ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Compare and see in detail: M. Kruhek, *Krajiške utvrde*, pp. 177-180.

⁶⁶ R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za poviest*, (1885), p. 229.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 229-230.

⁶⁸ *Idem*, *Prilozi za poviest*, (1887), p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁷⁰ *Spomenici Hrvatske krajine*, ed. R. Lopašić, vol. 3, Zagreb 1889, pp. 426-432.

its demolition and abandonment.⁷¹ Similarly, he suggested the destruction and abandonment of the castle of Gvozdansko, which he described as Count of the fortress of Zrin with a crew of a hundred royal soldiers.⁷² On the other hand, he acknowledged that Pedalj castle, once owned by Count Nicholas IV of Zrin, was already abandoned and in ruins.⁷³ For Jamnica fortress, he noted that it was guarded by twenty foot soldiers of the royal army, and that it met the same fate, as it was demolished by royal order in September 1561.⁷⁴ One can say that Captain John Lenković recommended abandoning the ongoing defense of lower Una River valley, as it did not align with his envisioned defense strategy for the region spanning from the Adriatic to the Drava River.⁷⁵

Due to the resistance from the Croatian and Slavonian Estate against suggestions to abandon and dismantle the fortifications along the lower Una River valley, their defense persisted in the subsequent period. Indeed, during the 1560s and 1570s, a royal military garrison continued to be stationed in the castle of Zrin. According to the records of the royal army on the border with the Ottoman Empire for the period from the beginning of 1567 to March 1, 1568, three hundred Croatian *haramias* were stationed in distant fortresses of the Counts of Zrin, likely referring to the castles of Zrin and Gvozdansko.⁷⁶

Even in the subsequent years, the royal crew continued to be stationed in the castles of Zrin and Gvozdansko, albeit with gradual decreasing their numbers. In the records of the royal army on the border with the Ottoman Empire in 1572, it is stated that the castle of Zrin there were 140 infantrymen with a monthly salary of 475 florins, while nearby Gvozdansko castle had only 24 infantrymen with a monthly salary of 78 florins.⁷⁷

In the mid-1570s, just a few years before the castle of Zrin finally fell to the Ottomans, the condition of its fortifications and the military garrison stationed there is best exemplified by a report compiled at the beginning of January 1578, immediately after the castle's fall, by the local military commander Thomas Dornbeg.⁷⁸ According to him, when he assumed command from Thomas Čadež in 1576 or 1577, the Zrin castle was in a severely deteriorated state. The outer walls, as well as those of the castle tower, were collapsing, and the military crew frequently had to manage the procurement of food, weapons, and ammunition independently. While it is possible that Dornbeg's description of the state of the Zrin fortifications and the military garrison, given its post-fall context, could be seen as an attempt to justify the castle's loss, it still seems credible considering his isolation from the rest of the defensive line, especially with the lower Una River valley being devoid of inhabitants at that moment.

⁷¹ „...Schloss Serin den h. graffen von Seryn zuegehörig, wird auch von ih. k. M. mit 200 knechten vnterhalten. (Wär auch niderzureissen)...” *ibidem*, p. 428.

⁷² „...Schloss Guossdannskh, auch den h. graffen von Serin zuegehörig, wird das schloss von ih. M. mit 100 kn. besezt. (Das schloss ware abzubrechen, alda ist das silberreiche perkhwerg)...” *ibidem*.

⁷³ „...Schloss Podl (Pedal) auch d. h. graffen v. Seryn zuegehörig, ist bis auf den nechstverschinen 7bris mit 50 knechten vnterhalten gewest. (Ist aber im monat 7bris durch ih. M. obristen zerschlaift worden)...” *ibidem*.

⁷⁴ „...Schloss Jambnicza, auch d. h. gr. v. Seryn zuegehörig, ist bisher von ih. M. mit 20 kh. besezt worden. (Ist im versch monath 7bris durch h. obristen zersprengt worden)...” *ibidem*.

⁷⁵ M. Kruhek, *Krajiške utvrde*, pp. 185-195.

⁷⁶ R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za poviest*, (1887), p. 32.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁷⁸ I. Bojničić, *Izviješća o kretanjama turske vojske uz hrvatsku granicu u drugoj polovici XVI. vijeka*, „Vjesnik Kr. hrvatsko-slavonsko-dalmatinskoga zemaljskog arkiva,” 16/1914, pp. 91-92.

During those years, the Habsburg military commanders continued to rely on the castles of Zrin and Gvozdansko in defense efforts, considering these two fortresses as outposts along the line of defense towards the river Una. As indicated in the report on the state of the fortresses on Habsburg-Ottoman border in Croatia and Slavonia, sent by Archduke Charles of Habsburg to Archduke Ernest of Habsburg and the imperial advisors gathered at the Vienna Council on August 30, 1577,⁷⁹ the castles of Gvozdansko and Zrin, along with other fortresses, were placed under the newly established Hrastovica Captaincy.⁸⁰

The crucial decisions regarding the future defense against the Ottoman Empire were made during an assembly of inner-Austrian Estates (from Carniola, Styria, and Kärnten) held in Bruck an der Mur from January to March 1578. Considering the Croatian lands, three decisions stood out as particularly significant. Firstly, an agreement was reached stipulating that the primary financial responsibility for anti-Ottoman defense in Croatia and Slavonia would lie with the Estates of the aforementioned inner-Austrian lands. Secondly, the inner-Austrian Estates determined to construct a new Renaissance fortress at the confluence of the rivers Kupa, Korana, Mrežnica, and Dobra, which would eventually become the fortress and city of Karlovac. Additionally, the third decision involved establishing a new defensive line across the river Kupa, stretching from the castle of Sisak to the newly planned fortress of Karlovac. This initiative included the construction of several new strongholds and the modernization of existing ones such as Drenčina, Brest, Sredičko, Letovanić, and Pokupsko. Furthermore, it was decided that the left bank of the river Kupa should be safeguarded by a line of multiple small patrol forts (*čardaks*).⁸¹

In preparation for decision-making in the assembly in Bruck an der Mur, reports from the intelligence service were gathered during the summer of 1577, focusing on the status of Ottoman fortifications and the size of their crews on the Ottoman side of border. These reports unequivocally revealed not only the Ottoman's possession of significantly larger military forces but also a notable superiority in the number of light horsemen – an essential factor in border warfare.⁸² Consequently, in the subsequent period, there was a deliberate effort to bolster the defenses on the Christian side of the border by augmenting the number of paid light horsemen stationed in the forts, as evidenced by the royal military crew listings. This initiative resulted in a noteworthy 10% increase in the number of horsemen between 1564 and 1579.⁸³

⁷⁹ On the Viennese consultation in 1577, see: N. Štefanec, *Država ili ne. Ustroj Vojne krajine 1578. godine i hrvatsko-slavonski staleži u regionalnoj obrani i politici*, Zagreb 2011, pp. 142-159.

⁸⁰ According to this statement, along with the castles of Zrin and Gvozdansko, the fortresses of Blinja, Vinodol, Bojna Gora, Ajtić, Mazin, Greda, Mutnica, Gornji and Donji Gradac also fell under the command of Hrastovica Captaincy („...Das drit haubt vnd grantzhaus ist Hrastobitz, so gar an endt vnd zu endt der Crabatischen grantz bey dem wasserstrom Saw gelegen, hat für sich selbst 2 vnderschidliche schlösser daraus sollen die hernach benannten zwelf orte vnd grancheuser versehen werden, als nemlich Plin (Blinja), Vinodol, Woyna, Gora, Eyditsch, Masin oder Dugischimon Castel, Greda, Mutnicz, Vnter Grädacz, Ober Grädact, Serin, Grossdännsky...“ R. Lopašić, *Spomenici*, vol. 1, p. 42).

⁸¹ On the Bruck an der Mur Diet see in detail: N. Štefanec, *Država ili ne*, pass.

⁸² Eadem, *Osmanski zapovjednici i struktura osmanske i habsburške vojske na hrvatskom dijelu krajišta (prema špijunskim izvješćima iz 1570-ih)*, in: *Ascendere historiam. Zbornik u čast Milana Kruheka*, Zagreb 2014, pp. 209-227. Štefanec included the reports from the intelligence services in the appendix of her work (ibidem, pp. 222-226).

⁸³ Ibidem, pp. 218-219.

Eventually, the decisions reached by the consultation of the Estates of the inner-Austrian lands at Bruck an der Mur gradually solidified the idea of forsaking the defense of the Una River valley. Instead, they opted for establishing a new defensive line along the Kupa River valley. This strategic shift was subsequently implemented, with most of the plans being executed and completed by the beginning of the last decade of the 16th century.⁸⁴

While the decisions taken at the assembly of Bruck an der Mur ultimately proved correct in the long run, they were implemented too late for the remaining fortresses of the Zrin estate. Actually, in the winter of 1577/78, during the winter campaign of Malkoch-bey on what was left of Christian fortresses in lower Una valley, the remaining strongholds of the former Zrin estate, namely the Gvozdansko and Zrin castles, fell into Ottoman hands.⁸⁵ The fall of the castle of Zrin in late autumn 1577 needs to be understood within the context of its isolated location on the southern slopes of Zrinska Mountain.⁸⁶ Its remoteness posed logistical challenges for the supply lines, compounded by the dilapidated state of its fortifications. Additionally, the small and ill-equipped military contingent stationed there was unable to withstand the overwhelmingly numerous enemy forces. The fall of the castle of Zrin can also be attributed to a shift in strategic thinking, marked by the gradual shift of the defense's focus from the Una River valley to the Kupa River valley. Thus, the Malkoch-bey's campaign marked the end of the one and a half century-long efforts to defend the lower valley of the Una River and the Zrin estate.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the historical documents, the archaeological findings, and the remains of the strongholds on the Zrin estate indicate the existence of an elaborate defense system during the late 15th up to the middle of 16th centuries. This system, organized and funded by the Counts of Zrin, consisted of two major strongholds and twelve smaller ones strategically positioned throughout the estate. These strongholds served the purpose of controlling major routes and protecting river crossings along the Una River. More specifically, the fortresses within the Zrin estate, existing from the late 15th up to the mid-16th century, were intended to safeguard the local population from Ottoman raiders. Therefore, these fortifications were strategically well-spread across the entirety of the estate's expanse.

The effectiveness of this defense system is evident from its longevity of over six decades and the fact that none of its strongholds fell into Ottoman hands until the systematic raids in the 1540s. The eventual collapse of the defense system can be attributed to the Ottoman troops' destruction of villages and expulsion of inhabitants, which undermined the economic foundation and the main objective of the Counts of Zrin's military efforts – protecting

⁸⁴ On the construction of the anti-Ottoman line of defense on the Kupa River during the 1580s, refer to: M. Kruhek, *Stvaranje i utvrđivanje obrambene granice na Kupi u toku XVI i XVII stoljeća*, in: *Vojna krajina. Povijesni pregled – historiografija – rasprave*, Zagreb 1984, pp. 215-257.

⁸⁵ Multiple reports exist detailing the capture of the Gvozdansko and Zrin castles by the Ottomans in late 1577 and early 1578. See: I. Bojničić, *Izvjješća o kretanjama*, pp. 91-92 and 94; R. Lopašić, *Spomenici*, vol. 1, pp. 25-26 and 42; idem, *Prilozi za povijest*, (1887), p. 41.

⁸⁶ In October 1577, Toma Dornberg sent an interesting letter from Brkiševina fort, stressing that with the fall of the Sračica fort, the route from Gradac fort to the castle of Zrin had been cut off. He proposed the idea of demolishing and abandoning Zrin castle in response to the altered strategic circumstances (R. Lopašić, *Prilozi za povijest*, (1887), p. 43).

the estate's inhabitants and economic productivity. The Zrin estate's defense system of the late 15th and first half of the 16th century not only demonstrated its functionality, but it also exemplifies the efforts of feudal lords in medieval Croatia and Slavonia to safeguard their estates. By doing so, they aimed to preserve their political, economic, and social status while maintaining their identity in a turbulent historical period.

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