

PRECEEDING THE *TRIPLEX CONFINIUM* – THE BATTLE OF KRBAVA FIELD, SEPTEMBER 9TH, 1493

In this paper the attempt has been made to present a rounded view and offer some new interpretations regarding one of the most recognizable and dramatic moments during the late medieval Croatian history. The Battle of Krbava Field, September 9th, 1493, dramatically shook the very foundations of medieval Croatia's political and social structures. It stimulated creation of various texts written by its contemporaries and later commentators, who were discussing political, military and symbolical elements of the battle. The battle left a significant imprint even in the collective memory of the Croatian people, thanks to the older historians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the interpretations of the battle in school manuals and teaching. The Krbava Battle, due to its real and symbolic significance in Croatian "history, still remains an interesting and challenging topic for the historians and for the wider public. Therefore, it is not surprising that, due to incomplete and sometimes conflicting and contradictory information in the sources, the interest for the battle and various interpretations reemerged during the last two decades and a half, after Croatia gained its independence.

Key words: Krbava, Croatia, Ottomans, Late Middle Ages, Battle

There are few events or moments in Croatian medieval history that are today present in national collective memory. The Battle of Krbava Field, fought on September 9th, 1493, is definitely one of them. Its contemporary image, transmitted through media, schoolbooks and popular literature, is that it was a great national disaster that destroyed the medieval Croatian kingdom.¹ It never reached proportions or mythical potential that for instance the Battle of Kosovo, in 1389, reached in Serbian history and collective memory.² However, both events remained in public perception of the South Slavic peoples as a kind of watershed between the imagined period of national "medieval glory" and later gloomy period of "Turkish yoke".³

One has to emphasize that in Croatian modern historiography, from the beginning of its constitution at the end of the nineteenth century, this over-simplified view of great national disaster that destroyed the medieval Croatian kingdom did not hold ground.

¹ See the overview in: Srećko Lipovčan, "Razlozi i posljedice katastrofe 1493. godine: prikaz Krbavskoga boja u srednjoškolskim udžbenicima u Hrvatskoj nakon 1918." ["The Causes and Consequences of the Catastrophe in 1493: The Interpretation of the Krbava Battle in School Manuals in Croatia After 1918"], in: Željko Holjevac (ed.), *Identitet Like: korijeni i razvitak [The Identity of Lika: Roots and Development]*, 1, Zagreb – Gospić 2009, 295-322.

² On this see an excellent analysis in: Ivan Čolović, *Smrt na Kosovu polju. Istorija kosovskog mita [The Death on the Kosovo Field. A History of the Kosovo Myth]*, Beograd 2016.

³ For more details see: Ivo Goldstein, "Značaj krbavske bitke 1493. godine u hrvatskoj povijesti" ["The Importance of the Battle of Krbava in 1493 in Croatian History"], in: Dragutin Pavličević (ed.), *Krbavska bitka i njezine posljedice [The Battle of Krbava and Its Consequences]*, Zagreb 1997; Suzana Miljan – Hrvoje Kekez, "The Memory of the Battle of Krbava (1493) and the Collective Identity of the Croats", *Hungarian Historical Review*, 4/2, 2015, 283-313, particularly 289-292.

From Matija Mesić to Vjekoslav Klaić, Ferdo Šišić and others, the heavy defeat and losses were not disputed. However, all authors have already noted that the Ottoman territorial conquest did not happen immediately following the battle, but rather a few decades later. Until 1512, when Selim I succeeded his father Bayazid II as sultan (that is for almost two decades),⁴ the Ottoman territorial conquest of medieval Croatian territory did not happen. This was, of course, primarily due to different priorities of Ottoman expansionist policy at that time.⁵ However, one can safely claim, on the other hand, that medieval Croatia was seriously weakened by the battle and that the king in Buda and central authorities could not significantly help in the given circumstances. On the other hand, the migration of inhabitants of Krbava and neighboring regions into safer areas was however accelerated after the battle.⁶

The sequence of events leading to the battle, its course and final outcome, had already been reconstructed in detail, both in older Croatian and Hungarian historiography. Older authors were mainly heavily influenced by their sources. The interpretations and evaluations of contemporary witnesses and chroniclers were many times taken for granted, *ad litteram*. This is particularly true for Bonfini's claim about Count Bernardin Frankapan's alleged dishonorable conduct in the battle. Common place was also the critique of tactics and strategy that the commander of royal troops, Dalmatian, Croatian and Slavonian *ban* Emerik Derenčin (*Derencsényi Imre*) chose in the battle. The other common elements in older historiography are the consensus on heavy losses, particularly among the highest strata of Croatian nobility,⁷ then on dire consequences for Croatia and on the beginning of gradual shifting of Croatian social elites' political preferences towards the Emperor, Venice and partly towards Papacy.

The summer of 1493 witnessed changed dynamics in the whole region. The Ottoman incursions that year served as well, it seems, as a catalyst of new political trends that were for some time fermenting under the surface. According to Venetian letter to the pope in Rome, already in June 1493 the Frankapani and the Kurjakovići subjected themselves *ad obedientiam domini Turci*.⁸ How should one interpret such accusations? Kekez suggests that those claims were not founded, and that the Venetians were accusing the counts because

⁴ For the sake of comparison, this is the same amount of time like the whole interwar period in Europe in the first half of the 20th century (!).

⁵ Goldstein, "Značaj krbavske bitke", 22-24; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka: je li spasio sebe i malobrojne ili je pobjegao iz boja?" ["Bernardin Frankapan and The Krbava Battle: Did He Rescue Himself and Few Others or He Escaped from the Battle?"], *Modruški zbornik*, 3, 2009, 65-101, 66; Krešimir Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata – bitka na Krbavskom polju 1493. godine – strategija, taktika, psihologija* [*The Battle of the Croats – The Battle of Krbava Field in 1493 – Strategy, Tactics, Psychology*], *Historijski zbornik*, 67/1, 2014, 11-63, 47.

⁶ Miljan – Kekez, "The Memory of the Battle of Krbava", 286.

⁷ Mijatović enumerates the tragic deaths of Count Ivan (John) Frankapan of Cetina, young Juraj (George) Vlatković, Petar (Peter) III Zrinski, followed by ban of Jajce as well as the son and the brother of ban Derenčin, while Derenčin himself and Count Nikola (Nicholas) Frankapan of Tržac were captured. Anđelko Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju 1493. godine* [*The Battle on the Krbava Field 1493*], Zagreb 2005, 71-73.

⁸ Ferdo Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika o hercegu Ivanišu Korvinu i o borbama Hrvata s Turcima" ["Collection of Documents about Herzog Ivaniš Korvin and Croatian Fights with the Turks"], *Starine JAZU*, 38, 1937, 157-336, doc. 112, 165.

at that time they preferred the royal rule over Senj and Obrovac.⁹ Kekez does not say it explicitly, but implies a kind of negative Venetian propaganda on the expenses of Croatian magnates, as a consequence of Venetian own political preferences. One should emphasize that the author of the above-mentioned claims, reported through Venice to Rome, was indeed the Venetian local *rector* in Krk (Veglia). Providing the fact that the Frankapani were originating from the island of Krk, and surely still did not come to terms with the Venetian takeover of the island in 1480, one would be tempted to think on the same path. Moreover, the accusations of willing or passive collaboration of various magnates and other nobles on the Christian side with the Ottomans were on the agenda in the wider region for some time. Older historians mainly dismissed them as a result of mutual envy or as a mean to avoid individual responsibility for the possible negative course of events. Other explanations usually concentrated on negative foreign, particularly Venetian propaganda against the brave defenders, because of foreigners' own political interests. One cannot negate that all these elements in many occasions really played a significant part in such accusations.

However, was there any hint of true in these allegations against the Kurjakovići and the Frankapani just prior to the Krbava Battle? It is hard to answer this question precisely, due to the paucity of relevant sources that could corroborate such views. However, judging from the overall context, one could suppose that it is not at all excluded that certain contacts existed or even some promises were given to the Ottomans.¹⁰ For instance, Moačanin mentioned that an anonymous negotiator from Croatia appeared in Edirne at the end of 1491 or at the beginning of 1492, when Sultan Bayazid was there as well, with an unknown purpose.¹¹ On the other hand, one should not overestimate the importance of those contacts. All this was probably much more of tactical rather than of strategic nature. One could even speculate that the very Croatian counts sometimes deliberately facilitated spreading of such rumors, in order to alarm the Buda court, Venice and papacy not to stay idle, but to help the Croats as soon as possible in their fight for mutual cause. The reality of survival on the Ottoman borders at the end of the Middle Ages was far from national romantic and heroic narratives of modern and contemporary periods. Quite the opposite, it mainly consisted of "multifaceted layers of gray". It was a harsh and gloomy everyday reality that necessitated all possible strategies of survival. It is also indicative that after devastations during the Krbava Battle and the following decades, Count Bernardin Frankapan, who was one of the key protagonists in Croatia, in his famous letter addressed to his son-in law George of Brandenburg in 1511, said that "I have to think of **all possible means** not to be expelled and not to lose all that is mine".¹² Bearing this in mind, one

⁹ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 70.

¹⁰ Kužić even speculated, based on one document in Šišić's collection and a passage in the text of Spanish chronicler Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas, that the units of recently deceased Count Karlo Kurjaković participated in the Krbava Battle wearing two black flags, in order to be recognized and spared by the Ottomans. This is not completely excluded. However, was it maybe only a sign of mourning for their recently departed senior? Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 137; Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 18, note 32.

¹¹ Nenad Moačanin, "Život Jakub-paše, pobjednika na Krbavi 1493." ["The Life of Jakub-Pasha, the Winner in the Battle of Krbava 1493"], in: Pavličević (ed.), *Krbavska bitka*, 176-177.

¹² *Ich muss gedenken in all weg, dass ich nit der erst werd vertrieben und das mein verlier.* Lajos Thallóczy – Antal Hodinka, *Monumenta Hungariae Historica – Diplomata*, 31, 1903, 26; Milan Kruhek, "Bernardin Frankopan krčki, senjski i modruški knez – posljednji modruški Europejac hrvatskoga srednjovjekovlja, 1453.-1529." ["Bernardin Frankopan Count of Krk, Senj and Modruš – the Last European in Modruš during the Croatian Middle Ages, 1453-1529"], *Modruški zbornik*, 3, 2009, 187-235, 211.

cannot but agree with Jurković when he concluded that the Croatian magnates, and the author particularly emphasized Bernardin and his words quoted above, had exactly this as their primary goal throughout the whole period in question.¹³

Throughout June 1493 the Venetians intensified their alarming of the Borgia papal court in Rome, insinuating the alleged treason of leading Croatian magnates.¹⁴ The same documents soon started to reveal in alarming tone the appending danger of Frankapani conquering the town of Senj and the fact that the counts were in open conflict with Duke Ivaniš (János) Korvin (Corvinus).¹⁵ Even the inhabitants of Senj wrote to the pope, emphasizing the imminent danger of Ottoman conquest.¹⁶ All this demonstrates the attempts of interested parties opposed to the Frankapani (the royal authority through *ban* Derenčin, Duke Ivaniš, the inhabitants of Senj and the Venetians) to camouflage their fear for the fate of Senj and their vested interests there with the alleged Frankapani's secret liaison with the enemies of true faith. Kekez is most probably right when he pointed to the switch of Venetian preferences from the Frankapani (during the reign of Matthias Corvinus) to the weakened royal power of Władysław II as regards to who should have had the effective control in Senj.¹⁷ He also agreed with my views, as opposed to the older Croatian historiography, that the Venetians did not have any serious intentions throughout this whole period to conquer any stronghold in the Croatian part of the eastern Adriatic coastline. On the contrary, they always preferred the weakest party at the given moment. The most important was to prevent the Ottomans or anybody who could facilitate their descent to the eastern Adriatic.¹⁸

How did the Ottomans perceive the attitude of the Frankapani and the Kurjakovići prior to the Krbava Battle? The Ottoman chronicler Sa'd-ud-din differentiated between Anž Frankapan and Karlo Kurjaković. According to him, the former was oscillating in his loyalty between the sultan and the king, while the latter was firmly on the Ottoman side.¹⁹ The Ottoman author could be regarded as less partial, due to the fact that as an outsider he described the events that led to their great victory. He personally had no vested interests in the region, in order to hide or misinterpret the events related to the battle. His words coincided well with the previously mentioned Venetian accusations against the Croatian counts. However, even Sa'd-ud-din emphasized that among potential allies of the Ottomans the Frankapani were the less reliable ones. On the other hand, one must not neglect the fact that the Ottoman chroniclers usually tended to create an image of the sultan and the Ottoman Empire as undisputed and superior to everybody. To such a great

¹³ Jurković even claims that such attitude of Croatian magnates at the turn of the epochs, in fact, enabled the birth of early modern Croatia that eventually survived in front of the Ottoman menace. Ivan Jurković, "Turska opasnost i hrvatski velikaši – knez Bernardin Frankapan i njegovo doba" ["Turkish Threat and the Croatian Magnates – Count Bernardin Frankapan and his Age"], *Zbornik Odsjeka za povijesne znanosti Zavoda za povijesne i društvene znanosti HAZU*, 17, 2000, 61-83, 82.

¹⁴ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", doc. 113, 165; doc. 114, 166; doc. 116, 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 115, 168; doc. 122, 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 123, 174.

¹⁷ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 70-71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Borislav Grgin, *Počeci rasapa. Kralj Matijaš Korvin i srednjovjekovna Hrvatska* [The Beginnings of Dismemberment. King Matthias Corvinus and Medieval Croatia], Zagreb 2002, 106.

¹⁹ Aleksije A. Olesnicki, "Krbavski razboj po Sa'd-ud-dinu" ["The Battle of Krbava According to Sa'd-ud-din"], *Nastavni vjesnik*, XLIII, 1935, 185-208, 198-199; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 123-124.

leader and empire the potentates on the Christian side of the border would be eager to express their loyalty, obedience and subjugation. Of course, this idealized image was not always corresponding with reality. Taking all that is said into account, I would remain with the assumption that regarding their Ottoman policy the Croatian counts were only making tactical moves. They did not change their strategic allegiances from Christian to Muslim side neither in this case, nor before or after that. An indirect but important argument for this is the political development in Croatia during the decades that followed.²⁰

It seems, however, that Count Anž Frankapan of Brinje was the initial force behind the liaisons with the Ottomans, despite the fact that his allegiance to them remained fragile. Kužić speculated that his plan and of his sister's husband Count Karlo was to redirect the Ottoman plundering forces to medieval Slavonia and to keep the *ban* and his troops busy there, in order to be able to fulfill their plans of recapturing the family domains, particularly Senj.²¹ This is possible but remains in the realm of hypotheses. Even the author recognized that Yakub-pasha at the end did not send any troops to help the counts, but does not conclude from that that the importance of those alleged liaisons was, in fact, rather limited.

In July 1493 the Frankapani action to recapture Senj gained momentum. The Venetians offered 600 ducats of financial help to the citizens of Senj for their defense. On the other hand the same inhabitants, despite the fact that they were aware of Count Anž's and other Frankapanis' intentions, put their main hopes on the help of their captain and *ban* of Croatia Emerik Derenčin, who proceeded to help the town with his troops allegedly consisting of 4.000 horsemen and 2.000 infantry soldiers.²² As this move of banal troops coincided with the sudden death of Count Karlo Kurjaković, Count Anž Frankapan judged with full justification that in the given circumstances it is better for him to withdraw behind the safe walls of his fortress Sokolac in Brinje, in the hinterland of Senj, avoiding the full-scale open conflict with banal troops. He obviously realized all possible negative consequences for him and his relatives if they oppose Derenčin militarily and eventually come out defeated.²³ However, according to Sa'd-ud-din, it seems that in such dire circumstances Count Anž indeed sent his envoy to the Ottoman military leader Hadum Yakub-pasha, who was just returning to Bosnia from his raiding campaign in Carniola and had somehow to pass through medieval Croatia.²⁴ The retreat of Ottoman troops through Croatia certainly collided with *ban* Derenčin's plans, creating him a much more difficult situation on the ground. Therefore, he came out with an offer of reconciliation to the Frankapani.²⁵

The attitude of individual Frankapani counts to *ban* Derenčin's offer varied. The one who showed significant interest for reconciliation with state authorities was, not surprisingly, Count Bernardin Frankapan. This was so despite the fact that he profited on royal expenses during the tensions around Senj, taking the opportunity to regain the Frankapanis' ancestral lands in the region of Vinodol that were taken away from them by King Matthias Corvinus,

²⁰ See footnotes 17 and 18.

²¹ Jurković, "Turska opasnost", 78-79; Kruhek, "Bernardin Frankopan", 201, 203, 206; Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 43.

²² Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", doc. 127, 179; doc. 132, 183.

²³ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 72-73.

²⁴ Olesnicki, "Krbavski razboj", 199; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 124.

²⁵ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 282, 308.

a few decades before.²⁶ The fact that the Ottoman returning troops, at the beginning of August 1493, plundered the center of Bernardin's estates – Modruš and its surroundings – could only strengthen the count's will for reconciliation with royal representatives.²⁷ On the other hand, the conflict between Derenčin and Count Anž Frankapan was much more difficult to overcome in such a short period. Kekez is most probably right when he claimed that Count Anž Frankapan and his sister Dorotea, the widow of Count Karlo Kurjaković, did not participate in the Krbava Battle because the victory of banal and royal troops against the Ottomans was not something they would desire.²⁸ Besides that, Kužić emphasized the volatile and violent nature of Count Anž in various occasions prior and after the battle.²⁹ However, in my view all this just provides an additional argument to Jurković's main idea that the Croatian magnates were using all possible means and tactics to achieve their common primary goal – not to lose everything what is theirs.

After the Ottomans had plundered the region of Modruš, they continued their retreat to Bosnia. The sources speak about their march through mountains and forests and coming to Krbava Field, but without details of their actual itinerary.³⁰ Kekez suggested the toughest itinerary through Plitvice and Korenica, speculating that the other more convenient ways back were packed with royal troops and fortresses. On the other hand, Kužić viewed the itinerary of Ottoman troops in an entirely different light.³¹ His thesis is that the Ottomans deliberately took the hardest route, in order to plunder exactly the possessions of their most feared adversary, Count Bernardin Frankapan. Moreover, according to him the Ottomans also wanted to engage in an open battle to settle once and for all their accounts with *ban* Derenčin. By choosing the longest route of retreat they also obtained a few more days for resting, regrouping and preparing for the incoming battle. That is why they did not want, according to Kužić, to retreat towards Bihać, despite the fact that this could be much easier and faster way for them that would not offer any chance to Croatian or banal troops to stop them. As in many similar cases, the lack of information from the sources prevents us from formulating firm or definite conclusions. Therefore, everything we are left with are assumptions. Despite Kužić's tempting and interesting interpretation, in my view it is less likely that the Ottomans would ask for conflict at any cost. Their primary goals in this campaign were booty and slaves, what they successfully accumulated earlier on, and most probably not the open battle with the bulk of Christian forces. One must not forget that the slaves were a valuable commodity for the Ottomans. The fact that they slaughtered

²⁶ Grgin, "Senj i Vinodol između kralja Matijaša Korvina, Frankapana i Venecije (1465-1471)" ["Senj and Vinodol between King Matthias Corvinus, Frankapani Counts and Venice"], *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest*, 28, 1995, 61-70; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 73.

²⁷ Đuro Šurmin, *Acta Croatica*, 1, Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium, 6, Zagrabiae 1898, 376-378; Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama na Krbavskom polju 9. rujna 1493." ["The Clash of Christianity and Islam at the Krbava Field on September 9th, 1493"], *Riječki teološki časopis*, 1/2, 1993, 241-269, 251; Grgin, "Modruš između kneževa Frankapana, Osmanlija i kraljevskih vlasti" ["Modruš Among the Frankapani Counts, the Ottomans and the Royal Authorities"], *Modruški zbornik*, 3, 2009, 41-51, 46.

²⁸ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 73-74.

²⁹ Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 43-44.

³⁰ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 251, 279, 283; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 54; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 75.

³¹ Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 21-22.

their prisoners only just before the battle indicates that they did it when they were left with no choice but to accept the challenge posed by the Christian troops. Of course, this challenge they had to meet seriously and vigorously and to do everything possible to inflict defeat on the enemies of the Prophet. And they certainly did it, efficiently and mercilessly.

Kekez also presumed that *ban* Derenčin, besides the knightly ideal that led him into an open-field battle, wanted to intimidate Countess Dorotea Kurjaković whose main possessions lied exactly in the region of the battle and to discourage her from a possible alliance with the Venetians.³² It is not excluded that *ban* thought of that, too. As an argument for his claims, Kekez quoted Dorotea's pleas for ammunition and protection from the Venetians, in August 1493, positively met by the *Serenissima*.³³ However, I would argue that in such dire circumstances the military reasons and goals had an absolute priority for the royal commanders and everything else was of secondary importance. Even better so if one could achieve additional goals fighting in Krbava. However, I would not go so far as to say that the *ban* "deliberately chose" the location of the battle "to show to Dorotea the strength of royal army and discourage her from making an alliance with the Venetians".³⁴ One should also define what one means by "alliance with the Venetians" in that context. Is it a military alliance, political subjugation or something else? All this is questionable, particularly if one takes into account the previous accusations against Count Karlo of his alleged collaboration with the Ottomans. In my view, the notions of Venetian "protection" or "alliance" were vague and volatile in this period, analogue to the similar claims or accusations of siding with the Ottomans. All those "foreign contacts or plans" of Croatian magnates should be primarily interpreted as various tactics of surviving and of keeping positions, possessions and property, using all possible means in the given circumstances. All this according to Count Bernardin's *credo* from 1511 quoted above that Jurković justly considered as essence of Croatian magnates' political, even existential stance at the end of the Middle Ages.

The two armies finally met at the Krbava Field on September 9th, 1493. *Ban* Derenčin's request to Yakub-pasha to release the Christian prisoners, whom the Ottoman retreating army was dragging back to Bosnia, fell on deaf ears. Several authors suggested that this was most probably due to Ottoman spies who unveiled on time that there was no ambush set in the hills and mountains around Krbava and that the *ban* indeed intended to enter in an open-field battle.³⁵ The estimated number of troops varied in the contemporary sources and among the relevant pre-modern authors, although majority of them agreed about the superiority of Christian forces in number and, on the other hand, the Ottoman superiority in cavalry and quality of soldiers involved.³⁶ It seems that the infantry composed the bulk of Croatian troops and that they were not accustomed with such kind of open-field battle

³² Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 74-75.

³³ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", doc. 132, 183-184; doc. 139, 188.

³⁴ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 75.

³⁵ Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 255; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 56-57; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 75, note 58.

³⁶ Olesnicki, "Bošnjak Hadum Jakub, pobjednik na Krbavskom polju" ["Bosnyak Hadum Jakub, The Winner on Krbava Field"], *Rad JAZU*, 264, 1938, 123-160, 149; Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 254; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 56-57; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 75, note 59; Miljan – Kekez, "The Memory of the Battle of Krbava", 285.

and necessary strict order during its course.³⁷ Regarding the social strata that provided the bulk of infantry troops they were usually identified with free Croatian peasants.³⁸ The important role of peasants in late medieval Hungarian military organization is well established in historiography.³⁹ On the other hand, the military involvement of peasants in late medieval Croatia is very poorly researched up till today, mainly due to the paucity of relevant sources. Jurković supposed that the Croatian infantry in the Krbava Battle were mainly members of local and regional noble kindreds and communities.⁴⁰ He quoted priest Martinac's comparison of their death with that of St. Maurice and his entourage, for the glory of faith,⁴¹ as well as Ján Hasišteinsky's conversation in Zadar (Zara) soon after the battle with a certain Croat who lost several male members of his kindred in the battle. From the overall context Jurković concluded that Jan's informer in question was most probably a petty noble from Krbava.⁴² Although Jurković's argumentation is indirect and does not have an explicit confirmation in the sources, I would argue that his hypothesis is closer to truth, based on the local situation in the Krbava region and its surroundings. It was relatively well populated in the Late Middle Ages, particularly with numerous members of petty and middling nobility. In any case, besides the magnates and contrary to the peasants, they were the ones who were primarily supposed to serve militarily in the case of need.

On the very day of the battle the Christian troops concentrated on the southern – south-eastern part of the Krbava field, while the Ottomans came there from the north – north-west, retreating to Bosnia with booty and slaves. The tradition holds that immediately before the battle there was a dispute among the leaders of Christian army as to when and where to attack the Ottomans. The Croatian magnates, particularly Count Ivan (John) Frankapan of Cetin, allegedly favored an ambush in the hilly region at the northern entrance of the Krbava Field, between the modern-day small Croatian towns of Korenica and Udbina, the choice that would have offered Christian troops greater

³⁷ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 296-298; Ludovik Crijević Tuberon, *Commentarii de temporibus suis / Ludovici Tuberonis Dalmatae Abbatis*; praefationem conscripsit, textum Latinum digessit et apparatu critico notisque instruxit Vlado Rezar; indicem composuerunt Tamara Tvrtković, Vlado Rezar; textum manuscripti Marciani cum textu huius editionis contulerunt Vlasta Rezar, Tamara Tvrtković, Vlado Rezar; legit et correxit Darko Novaković, Zagreb 2001, 100; Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 20-21.

³⁸ Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 254; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 56-57.

³⁹ The literature on this subject is vast. Here I quote only few important authors: András Borosy, "The militia portals in Hungary before 1526", in: János M. Bak – Béla K. Király (eds.), *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi. War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, New York 1982, 63-80; Ferenc Szakály, "Phases of Turco-Hungarian Warfare before the Battle of Mohács (1365-1526)", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 33, 1979, 65-111; Isti, "The Hungarian-Croatian Border Defense System and Its Collapse", in: *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi*, 141-158; András Kubinyi, "Historische Skizze Ungarns in der Jagiellonenzeit", in: *König und Volk im spätmittelalterlichen Ungarn*, Herne 1998, 323-366. See also sources and literature quoted there.

⁴⁰ Jurković, "Turska opasnost", 71, note 47.

⁴¹ Ibid.; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 120.

⁴² Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 280; Jurković, "Turska opasnost", 71, note 47; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 106.

⁴³ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 304; Crijević, *Commentarii*, 98; Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 255-256; Isti, "Topografija Krbavske spomeničke baštine" ["The Topography of Krbava's Monumental Heritage"], in: *Krbavska bitka i njezine posljedice*, 99-129, 113-114; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 61. Besides that Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 76-77, extensively analyzed the relevant details of topography, particularly in note 64.

chances of victory.⁴³ Such a stance of Croatian military leaders is understandable in the given circumstances, taking into account their previous experiences with the Ottomans. The alleged famous “verbal duel” between Count Ivan and *ban* Derenčin on the choice of tactics, their vivid dialogue loaded with emotions and even collective stereotypes, understandably became one of the favorite commonplaces among both the older and the newer Croatian authors.⁴⁴ However, this is only a literary tradition and construct written down by Ivan Tomašić in his *Chronicon breve regni Croatiae* from the 16th century. Therefore, one should not take it for granted without any reserves, as the Croatian authors usually did up till now.⁴⁵ It is equally not safe to build on these lines explanatory conclusions about *ban* Derenčin and his lack of war experience or about the power of political prediction of Count Ivan.⁴⁶ Don't we also hear the echo of later 16th century disputes between the Croats and the Hungarians in those lines, too? Besides that, when one looks closer in the text it really reads like a self-fulfilling prophecy, or better to say like a text written with the *post festum* acquired wisdom that offers to its readers a plausible and easily understandable explanatory narrative. In other words, what the Christian leaders really discussed and how they exactly commented tactics on the eve of the battle remains an open question. The reason why the Croats seemingly took a more cautious approach could more probably be traced in their numerical inferiority, mentioned by Tomašić only several lines before in the same text.⁴⁷

Count Bernardin was commanding one flank of Christian troops, most probably the left one, together with Count Nikola Frankapan of Tržac. The right flank was led by Slavonian commanders and composed of their troops, while the center was under Count Ivan Frankapan of Tržac and *ban* Derenčin, who was also the supreme commander of the defenders.⁴⁸ The problems of Christian army were numerous. The lack of coordination, subordination and planning were only some among them. It is highly likely that the already outdated and inefficient banderial system of Croatian and other Christian troops was one of the important reasons for the final outcome of the battle. It has been reintroduced after the death of King Matthias Corvinus, in 1490, whose military and other reforms, or at least attempts of reform, were mainly annihilated by the magnates. Paradoxically, Croatian and other magnates on the southeastern borders were the ones who could benefit the most

⁴⁴ According to Tomašić, the discussion in the Christian headquarters between the *ban* and Count Ivan allegedly went as follows: “...Banus inquit: ‘Ha Hrvate! Vazda ste bili strašljivice!’ [‘Ha, Croats! You were always cowards!']. Respondit Ioannes comes Cetini: ‘Danas hoćemo vidjeti tko je bigavica. Ti budeš danas začetak raspa hrvatske zemlje. Bane! Ni ti to [kao] po Ugrih od grada do grada, jahati ter se hartati. Hoćeš danas vidjeti, kako Turci boj biju.’ [‘Today we shall see who is a coward. You, oh *ban*, will become today the beginning of destruction of Croatian lands. It is not like in Hungary that you ride your horse from castle to castle and participate in the knightly tournaments. You will see yourself today how the Turks do the fighting’]. Banus vero inquit: ‘Probabo’...”, Šišić, “Rukovet spomenika”, 304.

⁴⁵ The most recent example is Kekez, “Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka”, 80.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ ...*Verum banus Derencin, plus audacie in consulendis quam virium in peragendis rebus bellicis habens, aperto Marte dimicare suadebat. Idem banus Derencin inimicos contemnes iudicabat; Croati vero obstabant, quia pauci erant...*, Šišić, “Rukovet spomenika”, 304.

⁴⁸ Ibid.; Kruhek, “Sraz kršćanstva i islama”, 258; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 122. Kekez is most probably right that the faith of retreating Bernardin's troops, namely their drowning in the Krbava River, indicates that his troops were covering the left Christian flank on the battlefield. Kekez, “Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka”, 82-83.

from the efficient and well organized defense. By weakening the royal authority in this aspect they *de facto* worked against their own vested interests.⁴⁹

On the other hand, the Ottomans facilitated their own entry in battle by slaughtering the Christian captives. This in turn enabled them greater mobility, as well as additional advantage in horsemen. Yakub-pasha even sent some of his troops, probably a part of light cavalry, to secretly circumvent the adversaries and in the case of need come from their rear in the battle.⁵⁰ The main Ottoman troops were also divided in three flanks. Ismail-bey led the one with troops from Serbia, Muhammad-bey of Carilia the other with Rumeli troops and Yakub-pasha personally led the center of the army.⁵¹ The battle was fought most probably from early morning till some 4 p.m.⁵²

The role that the most powerful Croatian magnate of that time, Count Bernardin Frankapan, played in the battle remained an interesting and intriguing question. Kekez devoted his extensive and detailed analysis to that. The sources do not provide clear information about the count's intentions and views on the eve of the battle.⁵³ The author, in my view, convincingly showed that the accusations of some contemporary (Bonfini, Tuberon) and later writers (Donado da Lezze, Paolo Giovio, Istvánffy Miklós) that the defeat was caused due to flight of Bernardin's troops and his treason were not founded.⁵⁴ Kekez quoted contemporary sources (Priest Martinac, Anonymous, Antonio Fabregues, and of the later authors Tomašić) who do not mention any treason or flight, except the fact that Bernardin's troops were overpowered by a much stronger enemy and count escaped alive with only a handful of his men across the Krbava River.⁵⁵ Besides that, he argued that Bernardin's overall activity before and after the battle is a key argument against such accusations, as well as the fact that the Ottomans perceived him as one of their key adversaries in the region, explicitly stated for example by Sa'd-ud-din.⁵⁶

Taking into account all what Kekez has already said, one should also try to explain why various authors had such diverging views on Count Bernardin and his role in the battle. Among the ones who accused him of dishonest conduct Antonio Bonfini is certainly the most important for our topic, being an official court chronicler of the Buda kings Matthias and Władysław. As such, in describing events like this he was always trying to protect the

⁴⁹ Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 22.

⁵⁰ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 279; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 67; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 82, note 86.

⁵¹ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 304; Olesnicki, "Bošnjak Hadum Jakub", 143, note 7; Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 258; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 83.

⁵² Olesnicki, "Bošnjak Hadum Jakub", 139; Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 265. Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 26-27, contested this view after a detailed analysis and claimed that the real battle lasted significantly shorter. His view is that even a significant part of captured Christian soldiers were killed till sunset and their noses and ears were cut off.

⁵³ Kekez is aware of that fact, and on p. 77 of his analysis he **supposed** that Bernardin agreed with the alleged views of his relative, Count Ivan Frankapan. However, on p. 79, without quoting any additional source or providing any new argument, Kekez takes such a stance of Count Bernardin for granted and even elaborates it further. It is not at all improbable that Bernardin indeed thought in such terms, but this cannot be corroborated with primary sources, even less so using such a method.

⁵⁴ Bernardin allegedly wanted revenge against *ban* Derenčin, on the account of the latter's previous role against the Frankapani.

⁵⁵ Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 83-86, notes 94-113 and sources quoted there.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

image of the king, central authorities and state officials in front of possible objections or accusations. The defeat in Krbava was indeed a severe blow not only to Croatian elite and people, but as well to the banal power and prestige of royal offices, armies, authority and kingdom as a whole. It is understandable that in such circumstances the royal chronicler had to try to find a scapegoat, to show that the defeat was not due to poor tactics and strategy of the royal commanders or non-sufficient involvement and help from the king.⁵⁷ Who was a better choice for that role than Bernardin, whose troops were decimated in the battle and with whom the overall *cladis Croatica* started? Even better so if at the same time he was the most important of the Frankapani and of all the Croatian magnates. As such, Bernardin even symbolized Croatian political individuality inside the kingdom, particular interests, political and social priorities of Croatian elites in contrast to the court circles and Hungarian elites. Therefore, he was an ideal and easy target. It was easier to put the burden of responsibility on his shoulders, at the same time exculpating the main culprits for the defeat. Moreover, the court surely did not forget Bernardin's recent takeover of Vinodol from the royal hands and his liaisons with the Empire, Venetians and others that could potentially endanger the royal governance over medieval Croatia.

Istvánffy's interpretation, in the 16th century, not surprisingly followed Bonfini's path, in the tradition of Hungarian court circles. The Italian authors, da Lezze and Giovio, were probably also under Bonfini's predominant influence. Moreover, their descriptions of these events suffer from factual mistakes and misinterpretations. On the other hand, it is highly indicative that the bulk of contemporary sources written outside the court circles, be they Croatian or foreign, only mentioned Bernardin's heavy losses but put no blame for alleged misconduct on Croatian count's shoulders. One might conclude, taking all said into account, that the alleged Bernardin's treason in the crucial moment of the battle was no more than Bonfini's construction designed for political purposes of King Władysław and his court. Despite that, it resonated loudly in the centuries to come. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries it could even, if necessary, conveniently serve as one among many pseudo-historical arguments used on both sides for political purposes, in the context of internal political struggles between Hungarians and Croats in the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This even more so due to much greater confidence that the historians of that time were ready to offer to their narrative sources than they do today.

Kužić recently analyzed in detail the proceedings of the battle and all its military aspects.⁵⁸ His estimate is that the three *banderia* of Croatian magnates consisted of some 1.500 men altogether. He blamed bad formation, lack of discipline, inexperience and insufficient weapons for the poor performance of Christian troops.⁵⁹ The overall estimate of Croatian troops Kužić put at some 5.000, out of which some 2.000 from the Hungarian

⁵⁷ Despite the fact mentioned above that the king objectively could not significantly help even if he would want to.

⁵⁸ Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 22-27. Compare also: Kruhek, "Sraz kršćanstva i islama", 262-263; Kekez, "Bernardin Frankapan i Krbavska bitka", 83-84. Kužić's interpretation of ritual character of prisoners' executions after the battle, corroborated to a certain degree with the archeological material and skeletons unearthed in the region during the past two decades are interesting and thought-provoking. However, this has still to be further researched. Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 26, particularly note 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

Kingdom, and 2.400 from neighboring Slavonia. According to him, the Ottoman army consisted of approximately 8.000 soldiers, Hungarian-Croatian troops of 11.600, out of which 9.200 were infantry (almost 80%) and some 2.400 cavalry. His estimate of Christian casualties during and after the battle is at some 9.600, prisoners taken by the Ottomans at some 1.700 and escaped from the battle at 300. The Ottoman overall casualties Kužić estimated at some 1.000.⁶⁰ One has to emphasize that, although this reconstruction is meticulous, even the author was aware that all the above-mentioned figures remained only approximations, in all liking the most probable ones so far. As regards to the weapons the both armies used in the conflict, the Christian and the Ottoman sources agree on the predominance of cold weapons, particularly swords and lances (according to Nin bishop Juraj Divnić, Sa'd-ud-din and other Ottoman authors).⁶¹ Ottoman sources speak about the captured fire-arms that were, most probably, partly present only in the ranks of Christian army. This could be connected with the banal troops prior to the Krbava battle and their attempted siege of Count Anž's fortress of Sokolac near Brinje.⁶² Kužić asked the question why the Christian troops did not use them, but left it unanswered. Maybe the collapse of Christian troops was too swift and sudden and they did not have the time to use their fire arms, but this is also only a speculation.

When speaking about the causes of Christian defeat at Krbava one has to emphasize that the superiority of Ottoman troops in their strategy and tactics, even in cases like here when the Christian side was superior in numbers, is today a matter of consensus among historians. Besides the already mentioned outdated banderial system of gathering and organizing the troops for the battle, the Christian side was also inferior in logistics, causing in many occasions shortages of food, particularly among the defenders of distant and peripheral fortresses or among the infantry troops. Kužić justly emphasized those shortages, coupled with poor roads and communication system and much better Ottoman spying and information networks, among important causes of problems for the defenders.⁶³ The weaknesses on the side of the defenders were, in fact, streaming from the structural problems of late medieval Hungarian-Croatian Kingdom and its society. They were consequences of medieval social organization that was simply not efficient enough to respond to the challenges posed by the Ottomans. Therefore, it is partly an anachronism to lament on the narrow-mindedness or lack of insight of the Croatian social elites (nobles and particularly magnates) when they stubbornly insisted on their privileges and wanted by all means to curb the authority and power of the central government.⁶⁴ The same is valid for their tendency to negotiate with the centers of political power in their surroundings. All the above-mentioned elements were typical for medieval politics in the wider region, be it at the end of the Middle Ages or many times before. Moreover it is an anachronism to speak, as is occasionally still done as well, of an "absolutist state" during King Matthias's

⁶⁰ Ibid., 31. See also his overview of numbers in various Christian and Ottoman sources and early modern literature on pp. 32 and 33 of the same paper.

⁶¹ Šišić, "Rukovet spomenika", 171; Vedran Gligo (ed.), *Govori protiv Turaka [Speeches Against the Turks]*, Split 1983, 317; Mijatović, *Bitka na Krbavskom polju*, 113, 128; Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 36-37.

⁶² Olesnicki, "Bošnjak Hadum Jakub", 149, 153; Kužić, *Bitka Hrvata*, 37.

⁶³ Ibid., 46-47.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 44.

rule, or even about the “totalitarian” nature of Ottoman and Venetian governments in the context of late medieval Croatian history.⁶⁵

The Krbava Battle, due to its real and symbolic significance in Croatian history, still remains an interesting and challenging topic for the historians and for the wider public. Therefore, it is not surprising that, due to incomplete and sometimes conflicting and contradictory information in the sources, the interest for the battle and various interpretations reemerged during the last two decades and a half, after Croatia gained its independence. This article is an attempt to cast some new light on it. However, in my view these attempts would remain futile if they would not take into consideration wider context of the events described. How much this article succeeded in doing that is for the readers to evaluate.

⁶⁵ As, for example *Ibid.*, 44-45, recently did in his otherwise valid and interesting analysis from the point of view of military history.