

The Rise and the Fall of one Croatian noble Family – Castles of the Frankopan Counts of Krk in Historical and Territorial Context

Predrag Marković, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Art History
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Zagreb

Krešimir Karlo
Ph. Student
Graduate doctoral studies in Medieval studies
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Zagreb

Project Croatian medieval heritage in European context: mobility of artists and transfer of forms, functions and ideas (CROMART), funded by Croatian Science Foundation (Hrvatska zaklada za znanost, HRZZ)



Fig. 1 | Map of the Frankopan counts of Krk castles



Fig. 4 | Vrbnik on the island of Krk (view to the Croatian coast and Vinodol)



Fig. 5 | Modruš, drawing of the castle (M. Stier, 1660)



Fig. 7 | Brinje, castle Sokolac with chapel of Holy Trinity (interior with the lord's empora), drawing of the castle (M. Stier, 1660)



Fig. 9 | Ribnik, castle of Bernardin Frankopan (end of 15th century), and ground plan

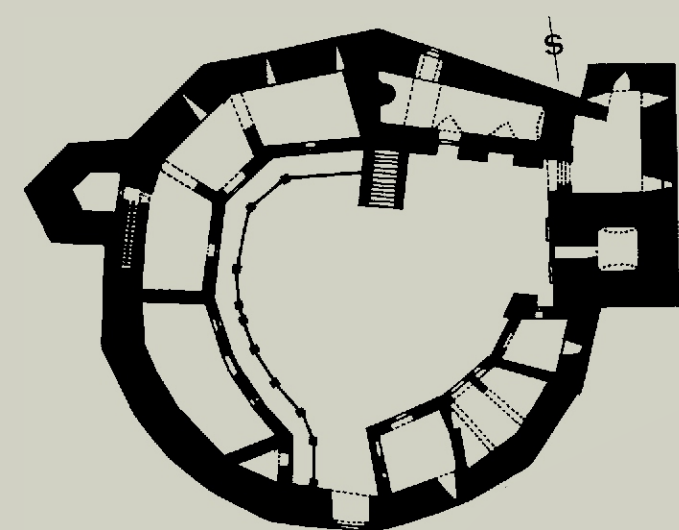


Fig. 11 | Dubovac, castle and ground plan

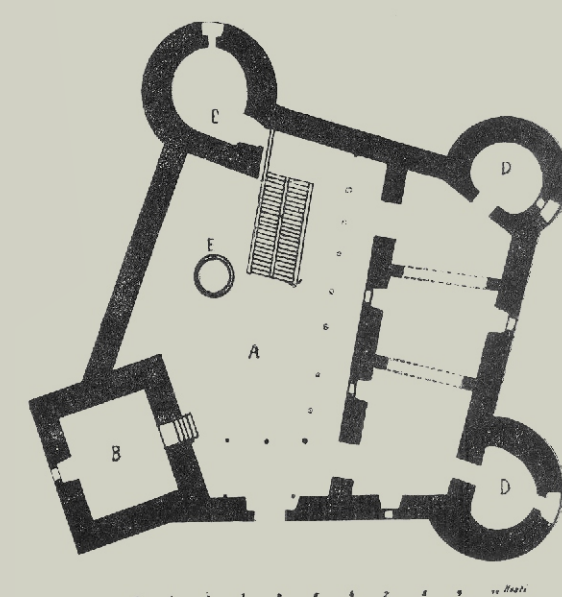


Fig. 14 | Grobnik, castle after the reconstruction (early 16th century phase)



Fig. 15 | Drivenik, castle after the reconstruction (early 16th century phase)



Fig. 13 | Vinodol valley view to the south-east



Fig. 16 | Bribir, Frankopans' tower



Fig. 17 | Novi Vinodolski, Frankopan castle



Fig. 2 | Festungen in Ungarn, Kroatien, Slavonien, ÖNB, Cod. 8609 part of the drawing of Martin Stier

Fig. 3 | Map of the medieval roads in north-western Croatia (13th to 16th century)



Fig. 6 | Senj, castle Nehaj (16th century) view to the island of Krk, and map of Senj (end of 17th century)



Fig. 8 | Cetin, castle today and ground plan (end of 18th century)

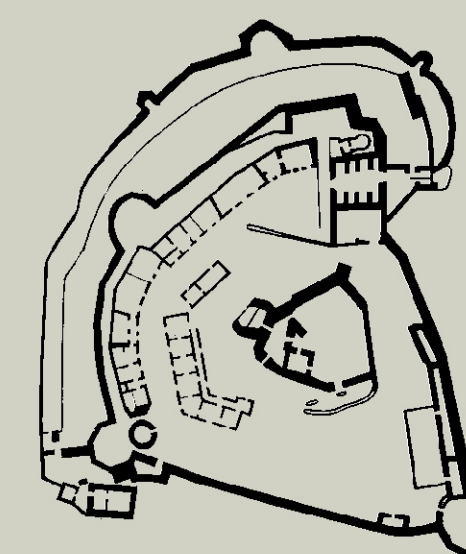


Fig. 10 | Novigrad on the river Dobra, present state after the reconstruction, and ground plan

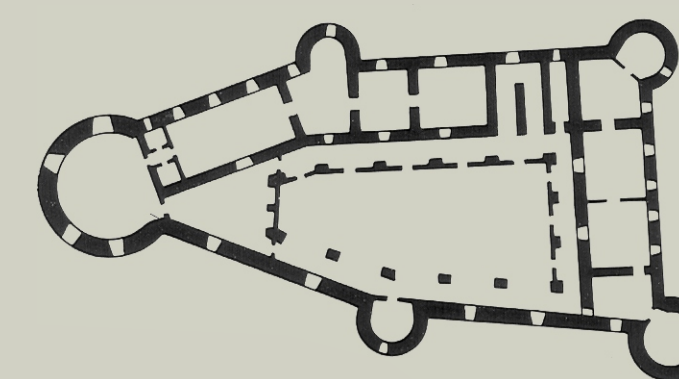
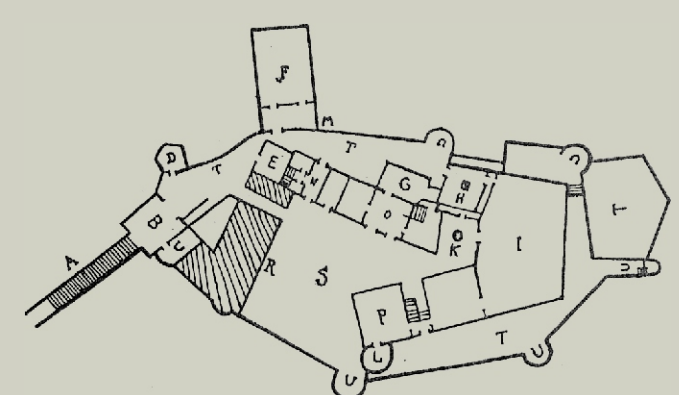


Fig. 12 | Ozalj, castle with aerial view and ground plan



The Frankopan counts of Krk (*comes de Vegliae*) were one of the most eminent noble families of medieval Croatia since their emergence in early 12th century until the extinction of their dynasty in late 17th century. The power of the family grew progressively in the course of five centuries and spread from their native island of Krk to the adjacent mainland, reaching its height in mid-15th century, when they were present in the major part of medieval Croatia between northern Adriatic and the river Sava. (fig.1)

Their lineage has not been decidedly traced but it is presumed that they originate from the area around Vrbnik, on the island of Krk (fig. 4). The name Frankopan (*de Frangepanibus*) was given to the counts of Krk in early 15th century. Since that time the old Frankopan coat of arms with a star in the upper field has been accompanied by a new one, showing two lions facing each other and tearing bread. As vassals of the Hungarian-Croatian king, the Frankopans were granted estates on the neighbouring mainland very early, first at the beginning of 13th century they had obtained Vinodol (*terrae, comitatus*) then, deeper in the inland, Modruš (fig. 5), which by that time become the centre of their entire mainland dominion. At the same century Counts of Krk had succeeded to "close the circle" around their dominion successfully. In mid-13th century they obtained Senj (fig. 6) very important port and trade centre, and the shortest link of the capital of the Kingdom with the sea, then vast region of Gacka County with fortress town Otočac and strategically important Brinje with castle (*castrum*) Sokolac (fig. 7) Situated half way between Senj and Modruš Brinje was inevitable stop and control point on the main traffic road. In accordance with central place theory Brinje fits very well into Christaller's model according to the traffic principle the distances between them range from 15-30 km, which also corresponds to the zone of influence around local trade centres. On the other side the written sources speak of a medieval road through the Gacka valley, leading from Senj over Brinje, Otočac and Kosinj then to Drniš and further to the south of the Adriatic, which was used already in the early Middle Ages by the first Crusaders to transport a part of the army (fig. 3).

But the genuine "golden age" of the family of the counts of Krk arrived when the Angevins ascended the Croatian-Hungarian throne in mid-14th century. Using (again) favourable circumstances Counts of Krk very soon had expanded their feudal dominion to the north and to the north-east, so before the end of 14th century they possessed castles and market places in its suburbium: Drežnik, Slunj and Tržac on the river Korana, Cetin (fig. 8) and, and even more northwards, Ribnik (fig.9), Bosiljevo and Novigrad on the Dobra River (fig.10). This new acquisition very clearly illustrates the intention of controlling almost all northern part of medieval Croatia (area between Dalmatia and Slavonia), by securing all important north-south traffic routes. (fig. 3). This also testify that the territory of present day Croatia was shaped by a network of "non-agrarian" settlements.

The family member who takes most credit for the rise of the family was Nikola IV Frankopan (1393-1432). He managed to get confirmation from Pope Martin V (1430) that his family descended from the Roman patrician Ancius, and gain the right to use new coat of arms with two lions. Through his financial transactions, marriage and clever political moves Nikola IV further extended the family's estates. Taking advantage of King Sigismund's financial troubles, not long before his death in 1432 he acquired numerous old towns and large areas of eastern Croatia and Dalmatia. Some of them were on the border of his territories - as Dubovac (fig.11), Ozalj (fig. 12) and Okić, who is away just 30 km from Zagreb, and Bihać on the river Una (today in Bosnia and Herzegovina). An illustration of his power is the fact that he lent King Sigismund a sum of 48000 gold coins. This immense fortune Counts of Krk had gained almost entirely by of custom taxes, and all kinds of other "administrative revenues", so it is very clear why they never show interest to obtain vast land properties. Trade and transportations brought to the Frankopans important revenues from the very beginning, so they supported the development of castles and marketplaces issuing new privileges or confirming the old ones, similarly as their rivals on the north Counts of Celje. If we take a closer look at the location of these new castles, it becomes clear that he didn't choose them haphazardly they were strategically distributed so not only to protect and secure main medieval traffic route (*via Magna, via regis, via publica*) that led from Senj, via Toplica, Gora to Zagreb, and then off towards Hungary, but all other north-south traffic routes which led towards Hungary and Bosnian Kingdom (through the river Una valley), as well as those who led to the Holy Roman Empire - today Republic of Slovenia - (fig. 3). Little by little, Counts of Krk had obtained not only possessions, and all mayor castles located along one leg of the *Via Magna*, but almost all territory between north Adriatic and river Sava become part of their family estates. In this area, south of Kupa river, 25 marketplaces mentioned in the 15th century, which usually emerged under the castles in Frankopans hands, and no one was granted the status of a free royal town. Beside, on those immense territory only Modruš and Otočac are called *civitates* in the documents, and this is only because in 15th century they become Episcopal centres.

The decline of the Frankopans' influence began as early as Nikola IV's son's conflicts with King Sigismund in the 1430s and continued with the fragmentation of the family's great territory in 1449., when it was divided between his eight sons. Further difficulties come with invasions of Ottoman's Turks, when they lost many estates along the border with Bosnian Kingdom, some of them were conquered and other were confiscated by King Mathius Korvinus, and finally the seizure of Krk in 1480 by the Venetians (fig. 3). The loss of the main part of their territories in Gacka county, around Bihać and royal acquisition of Senj redirected their architectural efforts to their Vinodol estates (fig. 13), or on the margins of what was left. In the time of Bernardin Frankopan (1480-1530) almost all settlements, form Grobnik (fig. 14) on the north to the Novi Vinodolski (fig. 17) on the south, were modernized and fortified: Bakar, Hreljin, Grižane, Ledenice, Drvenik, Bribir (fig. 15, 16). But that was so called "swan song", the last effort to secure at least one part of their land and, beside this, one part of their lost grandeur.