The Early History of Croatia

Stories From The Middle Ages
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Sara Škrobo
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The cover page picture: Oton Iveković (1869 – 1939): The Coronation of King Tomislav (enciklopedija.hr)

Motif below: the traditional Croatian interlace
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The modern Republic of Croatia lies in Central and Southeastern Europe, in the northern part of the Balkan peninsula and on the Adriatic coast. It’s the meeting point between the Italian influenced regions to the West and the Continental regions to the East. The latter had mainly been influenced by Hungarian kings, the Habsburg Emperors and the Ottomans. This book, however, will take you later into the Early Middle Ages, back to the period of the first Croatian Duchy that soon became a Kingdom.

The territory of today's Republic of Croatia was occupied by Slavic tribes, later known as Croats, in the Early Middle Ages. Migrating towards the Adriatic, they entered the Ancient Roman world. They inhabited the older Roman province of Illyria, stretching from the Drin river (in modern northern Albania) to Istria (Croatia) in the west and to the Sava river (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the north. Illyria was now divided into two smaller provinces: Dalmatia and Pannonia. Dalmatia is the Croatian coastal region, bearing the same name today. Pannonia was divided into four different Pannonias, as shown on the map. The city of Sisak (Roman Siscia) in modern day Croatia, was the capital of Pannonia Savia, while the city of Solin (Roman Salona) on the Adriatic coast was the centre of the Roman province of Dalmatia.
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The first Slavic tribes migrated to this area in the 7th century.

It was the Huns who crossed the border between Asia and Europe, riding through the Gate of Ural in the late 4th century and thus initiated the so called Great Migration. Since then, many other tribes started migrating as well; among them were the Slavs and Avars, Euroasian nomads whose state was once very mighty and used to occupy vast parts of Central and Eastern Europe during the 6th to 9th century. It is thought that some Croats, among other Slavic tribes, were serving in the Avarian military before the desintegration of Avarian state. One of the theories concerning the origin the Croatian name says that “the Croat” was actually a name for a rank in the Avarian military. Once those people migrated to their new homeland, they took over the name that once stood for a social and military cathegory and turned it into a name of an ethic group – Croats/Croatians (Budak 1994, pp.11-12).

The remnants of the distant Roman past can still be seen throughout Croatia in cities such as Split, once known as Spalatum and Zadar, the Roman lader. The Western Roman Empire had seen its final fall in the 5th century, but its tradition continued to live through the Byzantine Empire, in the east.
Chapter 2
The Beginnings: Myth vs. Reality

The story of the origin of first Croatians and how they came to their homeland in the Middle Ages was saved in the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the Byzantine Emperor. According to him, the first Croatians came to their new homeland guided by five brothers: Hrvat, Klukas, Lobelos, Kosences and Muhlo and two sisters: Tuga and Buga. It is regarded by many historians that these names referred to different tribes that came to this area and mingled with the local (Roman) inhabitants. This is, however, only a legend, and has many common features with other similar stories concerning the origin and first settlers adopted by other nations.

The legend also says that the first Croatians came from the area known as White Croatia. As the colour white used to indicate that something was situated above or beyond, it is today regarded that White Croatia in the legend, could have been situated somewhere around today's Poland and northern parts of the Czech Republic (Budak 1994, p. 12).

Oton Iveković (1869.-1939.): The Arrival of Croats to the Adriatic Sea (enciklopedija.hr)
Chapter 3

“A Dwarf Among Giants”: Life On The Crossroads of Empires

At the end of 8th and beginning of the 9th century, a new political and military power had arrived into the struggle for supremacy in Central and Southeastern Europe. The Frankish ruler, Charlemagne, who proclaimed himself emperor in 800, had defeated the Avarian state. By doing so, Charlemagne had gained new lands, including those very close to medieval Croatia (Budak 1994, p. 15). Thus the Croatians found themselves surrounded by two competing superpowers of the time: the Frankish in the West and the Byzantine Empire in the East. It became "a dwarf among giants" (Raukar 1997, p. 20).

The Franks started to attack Croatian territory at the end of 8th century.

A few years later they took over parts of it, though Dalmatian cities still remained under Byzantine rule, successfully repelling the Franks helped by the Byzantine fleet (Budak 1994, p. 15). Still, life between two belligerent powers was very insecure. Croatians felt they needed some a guarantee for their safety during these turbulent times. In attempt to reconcile the Franks and Byzantians, the bishop Donatus from the city of Zadar embarked on a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine metropole – Tsarigrad, today known as Istanbul. He thought that it would be better to succumb to the Franks rather than continue on living in atmosphere of constant struggle. Donatus' mission did somewhat succeed: from this period on, Dalmatia had opened itself to Frankish cultural as well as religious influence (Budak 1994, p. 15). It was the Frankish empire that underwent massive christianisation among the Croatian dukes and kings.
The greatest evidence of these cultural and religious links between the Croatian coast and Frankish Empire is the pre-Romanesque church of St. Donatus, named after the aforementioned bishop from Zadar. This remarkable work of Early Medieval architecture, well known for its circular shape and a flower-like layout, is still well preserved and one of the most popular tourist attractions on the Croatian coast.

**St. Donatus' Church in Zadar (late 9th century),**
built in early Byzantine and pre-Romanesque style (zadar.travel.).

Finally, the dispute between Frankish and Byzantine Empire over the Croatian territories had been resolved by signing the Treaty of Aachen in 812. It had been decided that each side should keep what it already possessed: thus the Franks continued ruling continental parts of Croatia and Istria, the peninsula in Western Croatia, while the Byzantine Empire kept its Dalmatian cities and the city of Venice. This division did indeed bring peace to Southeastern Europe. On the other hand, it caused the far fetching differences in historical development between the different Croatian territories: the coast and the continent (Budak 1994, p. 16).
The two parts of what is today known as Croatia – Byzantine Dalmatian cities and Croatia under the Frankish rule - continued on developing separately.

The first Croatian duke who gained some autonomy for Croatian lands was Trpimir (see the map no. 2 below). His capital was based in Klis near the Adriatic coast. The whole dynasty of Croatian dukes and kings were named after him. Today a well known charter from 852 is regarded to have the first mention of Croatia (written in Latin, which was the language of clerks and rulers of that time). Trpimir established the first Benedictine convent in Croatia; it was situated in Rižinice. (Budak 1994, p. 21)

**Map No. 2: Trpimir's Croatia** (medievalwall.com). **Purple:** Pannonian Croatia, **pink:** White Croatia (includes parts of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina), **green/blue** (islands): Byzantine Dalmatia, **brown:** Red Croatia (includes parts of today's Bosnia and Montenegro)
By the end of the 9th century, both Frankish and Byzantine rule over the Croatian lands de facto disappeared; Croatian rulers were able to work towards unification of the scattered lands and the develop of the young principality. Yet Venice was a new emerging city state, causing troubles for the young Croatian Duchy.

Domagoj, another member of the noble Croatian dinasty of Trpimirovići, sat on the throne after Trpimir's death. He would become remembered in history as both "the glorious duke", as nicknamed by Pope John VIII, as well as "the worst duke of all the Slavs", as dubbed by the Venetians. Why so harsh? In 871, Domagoj helped the Frankish Empire to repel the Venetian threat in the city of Bari in Italy. After all, it was his duty as he was still a Frankish vassal, but seems like he gave the Venetians so much trouble that they gave him this infamous nickname (Šišić 1916, p. 42). Yet, Croatian rulers wanted more independence for their Duchy.

It was the duke Branimir who arrived at a solution. In order to prevent further Frankish and Byzantine political influence, he reached towards the bulwark of the Roman Church. In 879, Branimir wrote to the Pope John VIII and expressed his will to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Holy See. John VIII wrote back, welcoming Branimir's proposal and recognizing the independence of Croatia and Branimir as its ruler. This is without a doubt one of the most important documents in Croatian history, as this is the first time Croatia had been recognized as independent by an international authority (Raukar 1997, p. 26).

This is how Branimir wisely bypassed both the Franks and Byzantines and gained the recognition of his rule from a third party, steering the development of his territories towards the West and the influence of Catholic Church.
In 1925, Croatians lived in the First Yugoslavia as one of its federal states, and this event served as an important demonstration of Croatian independence and unity. Croatians had a good reason for celebration indeed. King Tomislav is regarded the first Croatian king, though historical sources about his coronation are rather scarce. Yet, many public monuments and street names throughout Croatia celebrate and keep the memory of this country’s first king alive, although Croatia is no longer kingdom but a republic.

Tomislav is regarded by many as the first Croatian duke, later crowned a king, who managed to unite all Croatian lands, including the Byzantine Dalmatia, under his rule (see map no. 3 on the next page).

Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the Byzantine Emperor, wrote about Croatian military power under Tomislav's rule. According to Constantine, his cavalry consisted of 60,000 men, and 100,000 infantry. Though these numbers are probably exaggerated, they still show that Tomislav's army must have been impressive. He fought wars against Hungarians and Bulgarians, and thus expanded Croatian territory. Both Hungarians and Bulgarians were trying to invade Croatian territory but Tomislav repelled their attempts (Raukar 1997, p. 38). Thanks to his many victories, Tomislav's power stretched over a vast territory; he ruled today's Bosnia and Herzegovina, and had parts of Montenegro under his political influence as his vassal states (Map No. 3).
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Map No. 3: Croatian Kingdom under Tomislav (cca. 925.). Both Hunagrian Kingdom and Bulgarian Empire were on Croatian borders.

The story of his coronation has become legendary; allegedly, Tomislav was crowned in 925 near today's Tomislavgrad, named after him, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Pope John X. called Tomislav a king (“rex” in Latin) in one of his letters to this Croatian ruler (Raukar 1997, p. 38). This indicates that, after Branimir set diplomatic relations with Rome in the late 9th century, Croatian lands had stayed a part of Pope's religious and political influence. Historians don't agree, however, on whether Tomislav was actually crowned, or if it's just a title the Pope used in order to glorify the ruler.
Tomislav is today regarded the first ruler who was recognized and named a king by an international papal authority. Yet another ruler, in the end of the 10th century, received a crown from another source – the Byzantine Emperor. His name was Držislav; upon his coronation he took another name – Stjepan (Stephen) and became known as Stjepan Držislav. He's regarded the first Croatian crowned king as there is evidence of his coronation. Basilius II, Byzantine Emperor, was attempting to repel a Bulgarian invasion. Thus he needed a Croatian ruler to be his ally against Bulgaria and made him a king, sending him a crown, cloak, scepter and a golden apple, which were all symbols of kingship at that time (Budak 1994, p. 36). Thus Croatia continued on balancing between East and West in order to gain more independence in these insecure medieval times.

A third party soon became an important factor in the power struggle in Mediterranean and thus entered the Croatian political space. Venice had started its development as a mighty city state in the 10th century and jeopardised Croatian territorial integrity. Venetians were constantly trying to conquer Dalmatia and its islands. They finally succeeded to put most of the Croatian coast under their rule by the end of the 10th century; but it didn't last long. Soon after Petar (Peter) II Orseolo's death, Venice lost almost all its possessions on the eastern Adriatic coast (Raukar 1997, p. 42). But this is not the end, rather the beginning, of long lasting hostilities between the young Croatian state and Venice.

According to legend, Stjepan Držislav was once held captive in a Venetian dungeon, after losing a war against the Venetian ruler Peter II. Orseolo. Peter offered the Croatian ruler a deal – a game of chess and if Stjepan Držislav could beat him three times in a row, he'd be released and free to return to Croatia. The king accepted the challenge and won three times! He then created a the Croatian coat of arms using the red and white chessboard in order to remember the event.
While historical and archaeological sources on Tomislav and Stjepan Držislav's rule are rather scarce, there's plenty of evidence about Petar Krešimir IV and Dmitar Zvonimir (simply called Zvonimir), who were among the last Croatian kings, ruling in the 11th century. Both of them had the title "king of Croatia and Dalmatia" ("rex Croatie Dalmatieque in Latin"). Many historical and archaeological sources serve as evidence of their power today. One of them is the pluteus with the relief of Peter IV. Krešimir from Dalmatia, probably found in the city of Solin (Raukar 1997, p. 45).

Pluteus showing the relief of Peter Krešimir IV, Croatian king from the 11th century.

Probably found in today's city of Solin (ancient Roman name: Salona), this relief bears witness to Petar Krešimir's kingship.

The king is sitting on his throne, holding the cross (as a symbol of Christianity) in his right hand and a ruler's globe (as a symbol of his power) in left hand. You can also see the crown on his head. Next to him is his "hand", the most important person right after the king. In the left bottom of the relief, under the king's feet, is a person presumably begging or thanking him for something.
Petar Krešimir continued founding and building Catholic monasteries and churches, as well as maintaining Croatian religious and diplomatic ties to the Pope in Rome. By the end of 11th century, and after the 1054 the schism of Christianity on Eastern and Western part, Croatian lands stayed part of the Western, Catholic Church.

**Following his footsteps and continuing his legacy, king Zvonimir was given a papal recognition of his rule.**

In 1075, Zvonimir was crowned by the papal envoy, Gebizon, in St. Peter and Moses' Basilica in Solin in Dalmatia. He was recognized as "the king of Croatia and Dalmatia" by the Pope himself. Many archaeological sources confirm his kingship as well; the Baška Tablet is one of them (Raukar 1997, pp. 49-52). This is probably the most important archaeological source dating from medieval Croatia.
Dating from year 1100, the Baška Tablet was found in the St. Lucy's Church in Baška, on the island of Krk. It is written in old Croatian and in Glagolitic script (krk.hr). The Glagolitic script, also known as Glagolitsa, is the oldest known Slavic alphabet. The inscribed stone slab records King Zvonimir's donation of a piece of land to a Benedictine abbey, and is used as evidence in support of Zvonimir's rule.

The Baška Tablet is made of white limestone. It is 199 cm wide, almost 100 cm high, and about 9 cm thick. It weighs approximately 800 kilograms (info.hazu.hr).
Zvonimir took Jelena, sister of a Hungarian nobleman Ladislav, as his wife. The Hungarian Arpadović dynasty (named after Arpad, the first Hungarian ruler), entered the Central European political space and became Croatia's first neighbor in the Northeast. Jelena was later given the nickname “Jelena the Beautiful” by which she is still known. Her Hungarian bloodline will soon bring the first Hungarian rulers to the mutual Hungarian – Croatian throne after the Croatian dynasty of Trpimirovići (named after Trpimir, the duke from 9th century) ceases to exist (Budak 1994. p. 50).

**King Zvonimir's Curse**

According to legend, king Zvonimir didn’t die a natural death, but was killed by his noblemen after asking them to join the Crusades. They weren’t willing to leave their homes, wives and children and fight in the Holy Land; thus they killed the King. Gasping for his last breath, Zvonimir cursed the Croatian people, saying that they will never have kings of their own blood again, as punishment for what they’d done.

"The Pearl of Adriatic", as the city of Dubrovnik is today referred to, began its development in the first half of the 7th century AD. Its historical path was, in a way, separated and different from the rest of Croatian lands. It was Dubrovnik's specific position on the Mediterranean sea that made it valuable as the center of trade between the East and West and helped it emerge as a mighty Republic in later centuries.

The first settlement close to today's Dubrovnik was founded in the late 7th century by refugees from Epidaurum, today's Cavtat, that used to be an Ancient Roman colony in the southern part of Croatian coast. These people escaped the decaying Epidaurum and inhabited the island on the opposite side of today's Dubrovnik. The Latin name of the island was Ragusa, and was in use until the 15th century. It is today regarded that this name originated from Lausa, which came from the Latin term for the rock (lat. Lausa=rock). Over time, it was changed and finally became Ragusa. The incoming Slavs established their own settlement on the opposite side and named it Dubrovnik. The name of the city, presumably, was derived from the Croatian word for oak woods – dubrava. Finally, over time, the two settlements – Ragusa and Dubrovnik – were connected when the channel between them was filled (whc.unesco.org).

In this early period, Dubrovnik was part of the Byzantine Empire. Yet more glorious days were still ahead – it will become a free republican state in the 14th century and will experience even more glory during the Renaissance. Dubrovnik was, so to say, an island of stability in turbulent Medieval and Early Modern Times. It was a home to various scientists, writers and artists whose legacy is still very much alive in modern Croatian society.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: Towards The 12th Century

After the demise of the Croatian dynasty of Trpimirovići, the Hungarians invaded Croatian territory and became rulers of Croatia. As the queen Jelena, king Zvonimir's wife, was sister of the Hungarian king Ladislav, he thus had a claim to the Croatian throne.

It is today regarded that the Hungarian-Croatian Union was established in 1102, by the signing of the treaty known as the Pacta Conventa, by Koloman, a Hungarian king, and Croatian noblemen.

Historians today know that this document is actually a forgery written in 14th century, but its content still shows what was the nature of the Hungarian-Croatian political relationship. Croatians lost their political independence, but the nobility still kept their privileges and Koloman promised to respect Croatia's special status inside the union. Croatia had its parliament and a person who represented its official autonomy – the ban. The Ban ruled Croatia in the name of the king. Croatians also forged their own currency and were free to take care of their internal matters; this all meant they still kept some elements of autonomy, but were no longer independent.
Croatians would stay in a political union with Hungary until the 16th century. In 1527, during Ottoman invasions, and in need of protection from a powerful ally, both Hungarians and Croatians entered the Habsburg Empire. The Habsburgs helped Croatians in their development alongside other Catholic Western countries, but also caused a constant struggle for national, political and cultural recognition of the smaller nations under their rule.

Timeline – The Croatian History up to the end of the First World War and the Establishment of First Yugoslavia
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