

The Kotromanić Kingdom of Bosnia in an Ottoman Retrospect

MICHAEL URSINUS

University of Heidelberg

Sveučilište u Heidelbergu

E-mail: michael.ursinus@ori.uni-heidelberg.de

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47960/2712-1844.2025.11.105>

UDK: 7.033

7.033.3 (497.6)

Original scientific article

Received: 27 February 2025

Accepted: 20 May 2025

Summary

Long after the fall of the Kotromanići kingdom of Bosnia, local traditions about its former architectural, topographical and institutional setup were still current among the people in central and western Bosnia (and beyond) who had in the meantime become Ottoman subjects. Ottoman revenue survey registers (*tapu tahrir defterleri*) from as early as 1468/9 started to record not only a vast amount of fiscally relevant data collected on the ground by the surveying commission, but also, yet less regularly and comprehensively, information about the situation 'at the time of the unbelievers', including facts and observations relating to the Bosnian king himself. Equally, but less frequently, Ottoman documents issued by surveying officials or local cadis (now housed in the archives of several Franciscan monasteries in Central Bosnia) also contain references to sites, boundaries and buildings associated in people's memories with the pre-Ottoman past in general, or the Kotromanići kingdom in particular. This paper is to investigate, on the basis of selected examples, the character of such references as a historical source, as well as some of the pitfalls in the course of their interpretation.

Keywords: Historical memory; tahrir; boundaries; offices; Bobovac; Sutjeska; Curia Kotromanića.

Bosansko Kraljevstvo Kotromanića u osmanskoj retrospektivi

Izvorni znanstveni rad
Primljeno: 27. veljače 2025.
Prihvaćeno: 20. svibnja 2025.

Sažetak

Dugo nakon pada Bosanskoga Kraljevstva Kotromanića među narodima središnje i zapadne Bosne (i šire) koji su u međuvremenu postali osmanski podanici, još uvijek su bile aktualne lokalne tradicije o njegovu nekadašnjem arhitektonskom, topografskom i institucionalnom uređenju. Osmanski registri prihoda (*tapu tahrir defterleri*) već od 1468/69. počeli su bilježiti ne samo golemu količinu fiskalno relevantnih podataka, koje je na terenu prikupljalo geodetsko povjerenstvo, već i, ali ipak manje redovito i sveobuhvatno, podatke o stanju „u vrijeme nevjernika“, uključujući činjenice i zapažanja koja se odnose na samoga bosanskog kralja (Bosna kralji). Jednako tako, ali rjeđe, osmanski dokumenti koje su izdali geodetski službenici ili lokalne kadije (koji se sada nalaze u arhivima nekoliko franjevačkih samostana u središnjoj Bosni) također sadrže reference o mjestima, granicama i zgradama koje se u sjećanjima ljudi povezuju s predosmanskom prošlošću općenito, posebno kraljevstvom Kotromanića. Ovim radom želimo na odabranim primjerima istražiti karakter takvih referenci kao povijesnoga izvora kao i neke od zamki u tijeku njihove interpretacije.

Ključne riječi: povijesno pamćenje; tahrir; granice; uredi; Bobovac; Sutjeska; kurija Kotromanića.

One of the immediate consequences of the fall of the Kotromanić dynasty was that its rule was no longer to be 'experienced', but memories, traditions and legends about the king and his court in Bobovac continued to circulate. On a day like this (24 October), what would be more fitting than starting off with the words of Queen Katarina spoken, so the legend goes, in remembrance of, and longing for, the familiar haunts around Bobovac after her flight from Bosnia via Dubrovnik to Rome:

"Najviše mi je žao pšenice s Lješnice, ribe iz Bukovice i vode Radakovice!"

Or, in a similar vein, her plea:

*"Zbogom ostaj, moja Bosno slavna, i u tebi do tri dobra moja: Jedno dobro voda Radakovica, drugo dobro riba Bukovica, treće dobro šenica Lješnica!"*¹

Introduction

The disappearance of the Bosnian Kingdom of the House of Kotromanić was followed by a slow process during which the memory of its reign gradually waned, accompanied by another, more urgent, process among the populace having to come to terms with the new regime, first and foremost the Ottoman sultan and his military and fiscal demands. As the memory of the Kotromanić era was fading, and the symbols of Kotromanić rule, its capitals, palaces and strongholds were crumbling, a new post-conquest generation was faced with the architectural, legal and sometimes fiscal legacy of the former regime which over time became more and more indistinct in its true significance, yet, in some instances, remained to be seen, had to be taken account of, and was being re-appropriated. This is why some of the early Ottoman sources mention locations, objects and regulations as belonging in the pre-Ottoman era, yet are recalled in Ottoman accounts because they still mattered, often in a new way, decades, if not centuries, after the conquest.

Traditions and legends like the above-quoted may still be remembered in people's collective memory locally or even nationally today, and are likely to have been recalled again and again during Ottoman times. Even the new rulers had reason to look back to the time of the 'accursed kral' (*kral-i la'in*), despite their general abhorrence of the pre-Islamic past, the 'time of ignorance' (*cahiliya*) in Islamic terms.

After the 'silent' fall of the Kotromanić kingdom of Bosnia, it was the Ottoman conquerors who not only took over its former capital, Bobovac, as one of their Bosnian strongholds (*kale*), but also the country's internal division into the Kovač and Pavli subdivisions (each considered a '*vilayet*') as well as the king's own *vilayet* with the additional fortresses of Borovac, Kreševo, Crešnica, Prozor, Susid and Vranduk,

¹ Quoted from ŽELJKO IVANKOVIĆ, *Vareš i vareški kraj kroz stoljeća*, Vareš, 2019, p. 150f.

seven of them altogether by 1469,² and by then equipped with timars for the upkeep of their personnel, as well as many of the (former) kings' royal possessions of fields (*tarla*), pastures (*çayır*), zgons (*izgun*) vineyards (*bağ*), water mills (*asyab*) and various possessions (*selişte*) taken from Kristjani, i.e. members of the Bosnian Church. The Ottomans also recorded as the 'Law of the King' passages of *kanun*,³ such as the mining regulations for the Bosnian mines, of which some are first attested in Ottoman *temessüiks* dating back to 1479,⁴ others only in BOA TD24 from 1489 (cf. Djurdjev ed.). These regulations are based on translations, adapted to conform to the Ottoman monetary practice, of pre-Ottoman mining regulations, and passed as Ottoman sultanic law (*kanun*).⁵ While the law code for the silver mine of Kreševo claims to have been „in force since the time of conquest” (*il feth olalıdan berü kanun bu mucibincedir*),⁶ that for the silver and gold mine of Fojnica (spelt Hvoyniça) is explicitly referred to as „the law of the (Bosnian) king”, *kanun-i kral*.⁷ It would take a systematic skimming through all available Ottoman defters up to about 1550 to arrive at a more accurate understanding of just how much the past reality of the Kotromanić kingdom still mattered to the Ottomans (and their subjects) during their first century in Bosnia; but generally speaking we can state that the Ottomans set out to establish what remained of those structures and practices that were still of legal relevance, be this in terms of Customary or Royal Law, rights of possession, fiscal arrangements,

² Belediye Kütüphanesi (Atatürk Kitaplığı), Istanbul, defter no. O.76, fol. I/1. This earliest list of Ottoman fortresses recorded for Bosnia on fol. I/1 is curiously lacking in the copy I have at hand of the translation of this defter published by AHMED S. ALIČIĆ under the title *Sumarni popis sandžaka Bosna iz 1468./69. godine*, Mostar, 2008. The translation begins not with that of fol. 1a, but 1b.

³ See, for instance, the detailed survey register Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Istanbul, defter TD 24 (1489), p. 10.

⁴ Cf. the documents edited by NICOARA BELDICEANU in his *Règlements miniers 1390-1512*, Paris, 1964.

⁵ On the topic of Ottoman sultanic law in its wider context see the recent study by MALISSA TAYLOR, *Land and Legal Texts in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire. Harmonization, Property Rights and Sovereignty*, London –New York – Dublin, 2023, passim.

⁶ BOA TD 24, p. 6; BELDICEANU, *Règlements*, no. 31.

⁷ BOA TD 24, p. 10; BELDICEANU, *Règlements*, no. 32.

boundaries and landmarks, even the possessions and actions of some of the king's officials from the time of the Kings of Bosnia.

Space, and the fact that most of our sources have not yet been published and therefore require some introducing, demands a choice of less than a handful of examples. Those that I have chosen for this contribution all concern the area around Bobovac and Kraljeva Sutjeska, an area of obvious central importance to the House of Kotromanić.

The Sources

Our principal sources consist of (in the main) unpublished Ottoman archival material, including Ottoman survey registers from the Ottoman Section of the Turkish Prime Minister's Archive (BOA) in Istanbul, as well as Ottoman documents held in the archives of the Franciscan monastery of Kraljeva Sutjeska. They all date from the first half of the 16th century.

(1) First let us discuss some landed property in Kraljeva Sutjeska originally in the possession of an official of the Kotromanić court described in an Ottoman defter as the king's envoy (poslanik, or *elçi* in Turkish). The following paragraph, recorded in survey register (*tapu tahrir defteri*) BOA TD 432 (p. 818) of c. 1542, claims to be a verbatim quote from the preceding Old Defter completed in 1530.⁸

The entry reads as follows:

"The tchiftlik of Matijaš, Grgur, Tomaš and Anton, the sons of Milak, together with another Anton, son of Marko, transferred [to them] by 'musketeer' Mustafa, [follower] of the late Yunus Pasha: It consists of the fields situated in the village of Sutjeska belonging to the district of Brod [Zenica] which in the time of the unbelievers the envoy of the damned king (*kral-i la'inin elçisi*) had in his possession (*tasarruf*). The said tchiftlik was [now] found in the possession of the aforementioned

⁸ *Çiftlik-i Matiyaş ve Grgur ve Tomas ve Anton evlad-i Milak ve diğer Anton veled-i Marko an tahvil-i tüfekhurde Mustafa [mardom-i ?] merhum Yunus Paşa Brod kazasında Sutiska nam karyede kafir zamanında Kral-i lainün elçisi tasarruf etdüğü yerlerdir zikr olınan çiftlik mezburlar tasarrufında bulunub ve mezkûra[n] voynuk olub emir mucibince haraca tabi' olub deftere sebt olındı deyü defter-i atikde mukayyed [olub] haliyâ [...]* (BOA TD 432, p. 818).

[individuals], and [even though] the aforementioned are vojnuks, they are subject to the *harac* tax according to [Sultanic] decree and are recorded in the defter [as such]. With this wording they had been recorded in the Old Register (*defter-i atik*) [of c. 1530].

Although it is well known that Franciscan friars repeatedly acted as the king's envoy, it is clear from the defter entry that the envoy in question was in possession of fields (*yerler*) in Kraljeva Sutjeska which later formed a tchiftlik in joint possession of five Catholics which they seem to have taken over from a follower of the late Yunus Pasha, Rumelian beylerbey (1512) and later Grand Vizier (d. 1517),⁹ who can have taken over the possessions of the king's envoy into his personal estate only some decades after the conquest, if that is what he did. It is nevertheless possible that the envoy's possessions in Sutjeska originally formed royal property; what is clear is that the tchiftlik was never part of the monastic estate. But may he (the envoy) perhaps have resided in the *Kraljevski dvor* or *curia bani* in close proximity to the Franciscan monastery? The medievalists among my readers are called upon to identify this envoy of the 'damned king' from the 'time of the unbelievers' about whom I was unable to find any reference.

No matter what was his identity and his exact abode, the Ottoman census officials who were in the process of drawing up the survey register right at the beginning of the 1540s must have received their information locally, most likely from the village headman (*kocabaşı*), who in this case appears to have been aware of traditions specific to the (pre-Ottoman) ownership of the chiftlik fields. It is less likely that the officials drawing up the survey register of c. 1542 might have found such information in one of the previous survey registers of the region held in the State Archives (*defterhane*) in Istanbul.

(2) This brings us to our second example, the single-sheet document which includes a boundary description (perambulation, or *sinurname* in Ottoman, of a type sometimes found abridged in a fiscal survey register of the type mentioned above) of the monastic grounds belonging to the Franciscan monastery of John the Baptist in Kraljeva Sutjeska

⁹ About his career: HEDDA REINDL, *Männer um Bāyezīd*. Eine prosopographische Studie über die Epoche Sultan Bāyezīds II. (1481 – 1512), Klaus Schwarz, Berlin, 1983, p. 210, footnote 23, and *passim*.

dated May 1522.¹⁰ A shortened excerpt from the document runs as follows, quoting from the monks' statement to the Cadi of Brod:

"Apart from the fields and two vineyards belonging to the monastery (*kilisa*) that we have been working since earlier times [...], [other real estate] was recorded in our name in the new imperial survey register (*defter-i cedit-i hakani*) as being of an exempt status (*muaf ve müsellemlik üzre*): [Comprising the area] towards the Old Church (*eski kilisa*) situated above the houses of the zimmi who live on the grounds belonging to the monastery, [then] from there along the path (*yol*) leading up towards the vineyard of Filip Matija [...]. [Additionally], the wood clearings between the path and [the possessions of] the said Filip Matija above the kiln (*furun*) [...], as well as the vineyard we planted ourselves near the path above the aforementioned Old Church [...]. Presently the said sipahis take the tithe from that vineyard and frighten us." [...]. When the aforementioned sipahis were questioned, they contested that the vineyard near the path above the Old Church bordering Filip Matija's vineyard situated near the path above the said wood belonged in the grounds of the monastery'.

Three times in this document the 'Old Church' is referred to as a landmark used by the Sutjeska friars. It clearly is not a reference to their own church dedicated to John the Baptist, but to a church situated high above theirs: No doubt we are dealing here with the Church of St George (Sv. Grgur) in the area still known as Grgurevo today, part of what is known as the '*Kraljevski dvor*' or *curia bani* built in the time of Ban Stjepan II. Kotromanić (1st half C14) where the largest number of royal acts of all royal seats were issued up to the time of King Stjepan Tomaš (1446 – 1457).¹¹ By the time of the 1522 law suit, sixty years after the Ottoman conquest, the Kotromanić church must therefore still have stood above ground to serve as a landmark, but neither the friars nor the *sipahis* refer to its real significance. Perhaps they did not know,

¹⁰ Monastery of John the Baptist in Kraljeva Sutjeska, Acta Turcica, kutija 4, fascicle 12, document no. II, dated 18 – 27 May 1522. A full translation is to be published in MICHAEL URSINUS (ed.), *Osmanske isprave sutješkog samostana. Katalog osmanskijh isprava iz arhiva franjevačkog samostana u Kraljevoj Sutjesci od konca 15. do konca 17. stoljeća*, Kraljeva Sutjeska, 2025, forthcoming.

¹¹ As indicated by the information plaque erected on the ground by the Monuments commission.

were not asked, or had forgotten. But even so, their (non-specific, or even negative) testimony as regards the Church of St George is of interest, because the 'Old Church' is clearly juxtaposed here against the 'New Church', i.e. the Franciscan church of St John the Baptist of Kraljeva Sutjeska monastery as the point of reference in a new world view.

(3) Not so the witnesses in our third example, the detailed perambulation marking the 'military exclusion zone' around Bobovac fortress, originally published by Hamdija Kreševljaković¹² and later, in a revised form, by Pavao Anđelić.¹³ This document, originally issued by the Cadi of Brod (today's Zenica) and entered into the *sicill* in the middle of Muharrem 908 (17 – 26 July 1502), survives only as an undated copy which was kept by the local Jusić family in their private archive before being handed over to the Franciscan monastery of Kraljeva Sutjeska. Initiated by the fortress commander of Ottoman Bobovac and his deputy, the case required the Cadi to establish the exact boundary of the area under the immediate control of the fortress authorities, as it was at the time of the Ottoman conquest nearly forty years earlier. For that the Cadi calls on what he considers 'informed people [from various surrounding villages] who survive from the time of the conquests of Sultan Mehmed' (there follows a list of c. 36 villagers, both Muslim and Christian, including Stari Mihovil from Glumčiči, Stari Juraj from Rotanje, Stari Rodim from Tešava as well as Bayramlu from Ričica and Telal Hüseyin from Sutjeska). The sealed document is finally witnessed by twelve procedural *şühud*, among them Ali Ağa, the lieutenant commander of Vrh Bilica,¹⁴ and Mustafa Ağa, commander (*dizdar*) of Doboj fortress. Thus, by assembling the area's 'collective memory' at the Sharia court, first and foremost those old Christian householders who had witnessed the fall of the King's stronghold to Mehmed the Conqueror, the *status quo ante* was established in a legally binding way

¹² HAMDIJA KREŠEVLJAKOVIĆ, "Stari bosanski gradovi", in: *Naše starine* 1, Sarajevo, 1953, p. 7-44, here: p. 18.

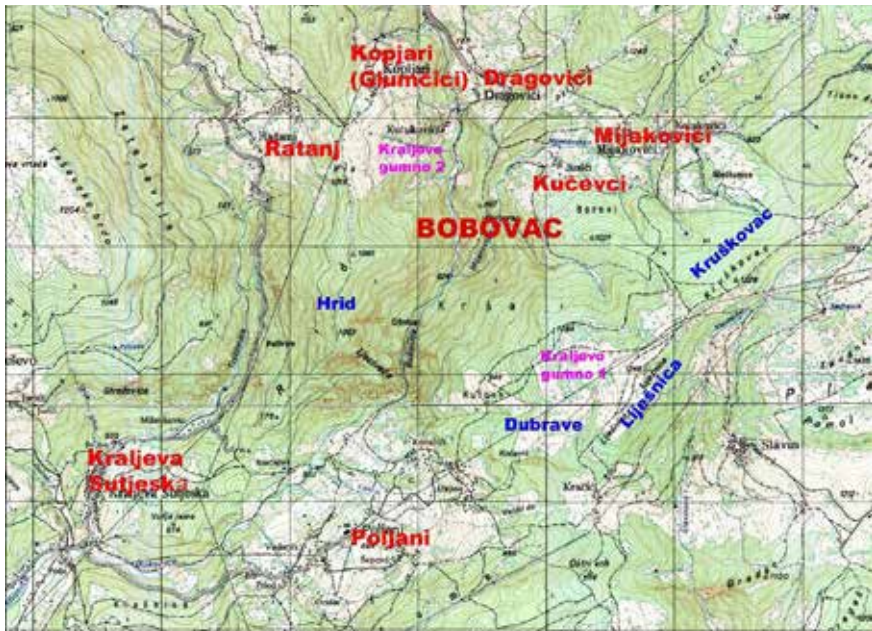
¹³ The circumference of this exclusion zone around Bobovac fortress is mapped in PAVAO ANĐELIĆ, *Bobovac i Kraljeva Sutjeska*, Sarajevo, 1973, p. 33.

¹⁴ For another reference from 1502 to Vrh Bilica as an Ottoman fortress see FERIDUN M. EMECEN – İLHAN ŞAHİN (eds.), *II. Bayezid Dönemi Ahkâm Defterleri*, Türk Tarih Kurumu [TTK], Ankara, 2021, p. 277.

by the Muslim Cadi, and recorded in his record book – the original of which, unfortunately, is long lost.

A final glimpse back in time is offered by our fourth and last example, a brief survey register entry from c. 1528 – 1530. Here, BOA TD 157 (p. 525) records the (former) 'Zgon of the King' or Kraljevo gumno (*kral izgumi*) with several individually named parts (such as Hrid, Dubrave and Kruškovac) in the possession of Ferhad, son of Hüseyin, Grgur, son of Juraj, Ivan, son of Matko, Pavinko, son of Petar and Šimun, son of Matija, and being taxed at the rate of a lump-sum (*mukataa*) of 60 *akçe* annually, situated in the vicinity of Bobovac at a locality known as (wait for it) – Liješnica!

The same information, a decade or so later, is repeated verbatim in another survey register, BOA TD 212, p. 263. On a map, the locations mentioned in the Ottoman survey registers can be identified as follows (marked in blue):



Map: NERMIN AŠČERIJA, Locations marked in blue and pink confirmed by local informants (August, 2021)

So we have documentary proof from the Ottoman *tapu tahrir defteri* or survey registers that the king's (and his queen's) wheat (*pšenica*) supplies are indeed likely to have been harvested (albeit not

exclusively so) in Liješnica – just like the local traditions quoted at the outset would suggest. The location of a 'Kraljevo gumno' next to Lješnica is known to this day, as is a second one situated east of Ratanj (both marked in pink on the map).

Conclusion

This (admittedly small) sample of Ottoman cases of retrospect recording, hinting back to the time of conquest or even the era before the fall of the House of Kotromanić, has shown that early 16th century Ottoman authorities were still using the evidence gathered from local informants (who themselves must have been drawing on some kind of collective local memory) as a basis for establishing a legally binding narrative – of a pre-conquest boundary demarcation, or of pre-conquest ownership rights, for instance. Another instance shows that memories relating to the pre-conquest past had been 'forgotten' in consequence of a change of parameter: The landmark of the 'Old Church' was not (any longer?) associated with the Church of St George, but was (already) seen as the (nameless) 'opposite number' of the 'New Church' of the Franciscan monastery nearby. With our final example we could demonstrate that Ottoman defters are capable, on occasions, to offer documentary 'substance' to local legends and traditions. Beyond that, we hope to have shown how important a close reading of 15th and 16th century Ottoman survey registers can be for the task of retrieving valuable data for the Bosnian student of the country's medieval past. Further steps are undoubtedly necessary to demonstrate the defters' full potential to serve the Bosnian medievalist.¹⁵

¹⁵ See, for instance, my attempt at identifying the Ottoman-installed King of Bosnia, Matthew, as the 'hero warrior' (*yigit begi*) mentioned in BOA TD 24 (1489) who was assisted in the defence of the fortress of Tešanj by the Christian 'man of the sword' from Ričica village near Kraljeva Sutjeska called Dobrešin (Golubić) at some point in time before 1476: MICHAEL URSINUS, "A Defter Entry from 1489 about the Fortress of Tešanj in Bosnia", in: Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions, Summer 2024, vol. 2/2. (available under <https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-24-02-12>).