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## THE MEDIEVAL CASTLE OF BRIBIR

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### GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION OF BRIBIR CASTLE

Bribir castle, the seat of the Šubić kindred, one of the most important noble kindreds in medieval Croatia, is situated on the eastern side of the Ravni Kotari, a small plain extending from the coast to the northern hill region of Bukovica. The Krka river and a ravine are found to the east. Bribir can be found on the edge of a small fertile valley which to the west borders Ostrovica, another castle of the same kindred.

Bribir castle was built on a plateau on average 150 metres high (which reaches its peak at 300 metres), and approximately 70,000 square metres in area. This hill is a natural continuation of the Ostrovica massif. A gorge, Planičnik, separates the hills of Bribir and Ostrovica. This gorge, controlled on one side by Bribir castle, and on the other side by Ostrovica castle, serves as the main entrance to Ravni Kotari. A medieval road traversed this gorge, leading from Knin (Tininium), the capital of medieval Croatia to Zadar (Iadra), the most important city of medieval Dalmatia. The southern side of the valley on which Bribir is situated borders Žažvička Kosa, a low highland with a natural passage leading to Šibenik (Sebenicum). In the same valley, there is a rivulet, Bribirčica, which was very important throughout the Middle Ages for agricultural and military purposes in the region.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tonči Burić et al., *Bribir u srednjem vijeku* [Bribir in the Middle Ages] (Split: Muzej hrvatskih arheoloških spomenika - Split, 1987), 9; Stjepan Gunjača, "Strateško i histori-



## PREHISTORY AND ANTIQUITY OF BRIBIR

Settlement on Bribir hill can be traced back to the Bronze Age. Archaeological finds of *impresso* ceramics dating to an older Smilčić culture indicate that the region was inhabited earlier. The larger settlement emerged only at the beginning of the Iron Age. Archaeological finds and architectural remains also indicate that the settlement was continually inhabited from the Bronze Age until approximately the end of the seventeenth century.

The first written record on the settlement of Bribir gives it the name *Varvaria*, one of the Liburnian *civitates* collected in the Liburnian confederation. The settlement on Bribir hill was the central area (*oppidum*) of the *civitas* with different rural settlements under its jurisdiction (*pagi, vici*). Archaeological finds, such as graves, pottery and parts of the foundation, remain from this period as well.

After the Roman occupation of Liburnia, Julius Caesar granted the *ius Italicum* to Varvaria, and it was organized as a *municipium* with all the characteristics of a municipal constitution (*ordo decurionum, quattuorviri* and later *duoviri*). The Roman period was very important for the settlement of Bribir. Megalithic walls were constructed under Hellenistic influence, which remained later as fortifications. There are many other archaeological remains from the Roman period, such as private and public buildings, *piscinae* and hypocausti, and remains of early Christian sculptures and *memoria* with *sarcophagi*.<sup>2</sup>

The defence system of ancient Varvaria was founded in the first century B.C., when more primitive walls were replaced by megalithic walls. There were few changes in the fortification until the end of the Venetian-Turkish wars in Dalmatia in the second half of the seventeenth century. These fortifications were built on all sides of the hill, except on the southern and south-western side with narrow cliffs that served as natural defense structures, and therefore did not require fortification. A very low auxiliary wall existed on these cliffs. The town in that period had two main gates, one on the eastern side and another on the western side (Vratnice), and two auxiliary gates on the northern and eastern sides. Access to the gates was ensured by ramparts which were traditional in the region, especially in Liburnia. In

jsko-arheološko značenje Bribira" [Strategical and historico-archaeological importance of Bribir], *Starohrvatska prosvjeta*, III. ser. 10 (1968), 205-212.

<sup>2</sup> Burić et al., *Bribir*, 9-10; for more information, see Mate Suić, "Bribir (Varvaria) u antici" [Bribir (Varvaria) in antiquity], *Starohrvatska prosvjeta*, III. ser. 10 (1968), 217-234.

antiquity, the walls were restored twice: first in the second century, and later in the third century during the Gothic wars. The walls were restored provisionally in as efficient a way as possible in order to protect Varvaria, radically changing their structure and appearance. The urban area was surrounded by walls and organized in rectangular *insulae*. The urban centre was on the southern periphery of the hill, where remnants of a pagan temple<sup>3</sup> have been found.

“MEDIEVAL PREHISTORY” OF BRIBIR  
(FROM THE SEVENTH TO THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY)

The first written record of medieval Bribir dates from the tenth century in Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos's, *De administrando imperio*. There he refers to Bribir as η Βρεβερρα, which at the time was the seat of one of the counties (*županija*) of the Croatian state.<sup>4</sup> The counts of Bribir (*iupani*) were often mentioned by Croatian rulers in eleventh-century charters<sup>5</sup>.

Unfortunately, few written sources of this period remain, so little can be said about early medieval Bribir. Valuable archaeological remains from this period indicate that the ancient walls were restored in late antiquity and remained in use during the Migration period and throughout the Middle Ages. Ceramic material and re-used objects from late antiquity testify to this continuity. In addition, the fact that ancient *civitas Varvarina* had the same borders as early medieval Bribir county<sup>6</sup> also testifies to this continuity. All that is known from the written sources is that the site was continually settled.

The architecture of medieval Bribir has not been well researched. Only some parts of the plateau have been excavated. The most impor-

<sup>3</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Constantini Porphyrogeniti de administrando imperio*, c. 30 (quoted from Franjo Rački, *Documenta historiae chroaticae periodum antiquam illustrantia*, Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum Meridionalium VII (1877), 400).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 10; Bribir, at that time, was the royal county. One of the most important counts (*iupanus*) was Streza, uncle of King Zvonimir. For more information, see Nada Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata u ranom srednjem vijeku* [History of Croatia in the early Middle Ages] (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1976). It is worth mentioning that the memory of King Zvonimir was preserved as well in the other castle of the Šubić clan, Ostrovica, where a fourteenth-century inscription with his name was found during an excavation.

<sup>6</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 10-11; for a history of Bribir and surrounding counties in the Middle Ages, see also Branimir Gušić, “Starohrvatsko naseljenje Ravnih Kotara” [The Old Croatian Settlement of Ravni Kotari], *Radovi Instituta JAZU u Zadru* 18 (1971), 137-192.

tant early medieval dwelling complexes are to be found at Tjeme and Dol. It seems that these were again inhabited buildings from late antiquity. The use of pottery from both late antiquity and the early Slavic era in the same period points to the fact that new settlers mixed with old settlers. Pottery from late antiquity is predominant in the area.<sup>7</sup>

Vratnice was continually used as a burial place. Five graves from late antiquity have been excavated, although the majority of graves in the cemetery date from a much later period. Approximately 130 graves date from the tenth and eleventh centuries. In addition, there were two cemeteries in the early Middle Ages: Novi Put with thirteen graves from the ninth to the eleventh century, and Groblje, which existed from the tenth to the fourteenth century around a pre-Romanesque church. It is important to note that this cemetery is only partly excavated on the periphery (59 graves have been excavated), as it is occupied by the village's local parish cemetery with the parish church upon the ruins of the pre-Romanesque church.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the restored churches date from the early Middle Ages. The first is the previously mentioned pre-Romanesque church at Groblje. It is a small polyconchoidal building (presumably with six apses), with pre-Romanesque stone furnishings. Other remains of stone church furniture point to the possible existence of another pre-Romanesque church or to the possible restoration of an earlier church with pre-Romanesque furnishings. The other early medieval church is not well known, but it is possibly an early Romanesque church from the eleventh century.<sup>9</sup>

Little is known of building activity in the written sources at the time of the Hungarian royal house of the Árpáds. When the kings of the Árpád dynasty became rulers of Croatia (in the early twelfth century), the counts of Bribir became hereditary counts, due to the development of royal administration in Croatia. The title of the count was passed from father to son, but other members of the Šubić kindred also held positions of authority in the county. Although this process of change is well documented, building activity remained the same as in the previous period. Knowledge of the castle's develop-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 69-71.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed description and further literature, see Burić, *Bribir*, 45-48, 50-59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 29, 32-33.

ment at the time of the Árpádians is supported mainly by archaeological data.

The main features of the castle structure did not change during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Only the use of enamel ceramics indicates a higher standard of living and an increase in the power of the counts of Bribir. During this period, the medieval walls appear on the south-western side of the hill,<sup>10</sup> as does a small Romanesque church with round apses on Vratnice, on the western edge of the castle.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the church has not been well preserved and remains of the sculptures have not been found. Therefore, it is difficult to give a precise date as to the construction of the church and the medieval wall. Another indication of the high standard of living in Bribir castle under the Árpáodian kings is the fact that King Béla IV visited Bribir in 1245 and stayed in the castle for several weeks.<sup>12</sup>

Although knowledge concerning the castle's urban development in this period is based mostly on archaeological finds, more data on the larger area of the county can be found in charters and chronicles. The borders were extended by the growing power of the Šubić counts who gained estates to the west of the castle. These estates were offered by means of treaties or donations given by the king. It should be stressed that this growth and power eventually dissolved in Ostrovia (Luka) once the main branch of the kindred moved to medieval Slavonia. Later, they became the counts of Zrinj/Zrinyi. With the settlement of Slavonia, the king's power in the region was restored in the first half of the fourteenth century (1322–1347).

Two main contributions are connected with the enlargement of the Šubić counts' personal possessions. In 1223, King Andrew donated the possessions of Count Domaldus to Count Gregory of Bribir. This donation included the region between the Krka river to the east and the district of Zadar to the west.<sup>13</sup> A second contribution was a document confirming the rights of the Šubić clan as the counts of Bribir. In 1251, King Béla IV granted these rights to different members of the kindred. The king confirmed a donation apparently previously made by King Andrew (which may have never existed) to Count Stjepko, his brother James, and other relatives according to their

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Gunjača, "Strateško", 209.

<sup>13</sup> Nada Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata u srednjem vijeku* [History of Croats in Middle Ages] (Zagreb: Sveučilišna naklada liber, 1983), 284; Tadija Smičiklas, *Codex diplomaticus regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Sclavoniae*, vol. III (Zagreb: JAZU, 1905), 230-231.

statements (the previous charter had apparently been lost). King Béla confired on the Šubić clan *comitatum Breberiensem cum omnibus utilitatibus*, so that they could possess it *in perpetuum ... pleno iure*. This donation probably was the result of King Béla's general policy concerning the defence of the territory, and confirmed the division of power between the king and the noble kindred in Croatia.<sup>14</sup>

#### BRIBIR CASTLE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES (FROM THE LATE THIRTEENTH TO THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY)

The last quarter of the thirteenth and the first quarter of the fourteenth century is the culminating period of the oligarchic power of the Šubić kindred, at which time they dominated almost the entire Croatian kingdom. Therefore, this is the peak period of Bribir castle, from which time many buildings have been identified. Even the subsequent Šubić decline in power did not in any way influence the standard of living in Bribir. Bribir remained the seat of the Šubić kindred, and indeed the standard of living grew further, even during the civil war between King Sigismund and his opponents. The castle deteriorated only during the Ottoman occupation and later, with large-scale devastation during the Venetian-Turkish wars. Bribir castle was abandoned after the wars, and a new village emerged with the same name in the valley at the bottom of Bribir hill.

One of the first buildings identified is the small Gothic church of St. John at Tjeme. Although it was first mentioned in 1338, it was built at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The patronage of the church is confirmed by an eighteenth century Venetian map, which depicts the ruins of a church with the same name. The church had quadrangular apses and from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century was surrounded by a cemetery with graves in two or three layers.<sup>15</sup> The church was rebuilt in the fifteenth century. This is documented in a contract from 1447 between the counts of Bribir and a master builder, Vidul Ivanov, from Zadar. Vidul worked on the restoration of the church of St. John and its sacristy. However, excavation has not

<sup>14</sup> Smičiklas, *Codex*, vol. IV, 466-468; Klaić, *Povijest*, 285, 304-305. For a more detailed explanation of the changing policy of King Béla concerning lords after the Mongol invasion, see Erik Fügedi, "Castle and Society in Medieval Hungary (1000-1437)", *Studia historica Academiae scientiarum Hungaricae* 187 (1986), 50-64.

<sup>15</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 29-31, 48-49, 63-65.

made it possible to distinguish between his building activity and previous building activity on the site.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the best excavations conducted in the castle include the Franciscan monastery at Dol, and the church of St. Mary, which dates from the fourteenth century. The monastery was founded by Ban Paul. Unfortunately, the foundation charter for this monastery has not been preserved.<sup>17</sup> The *Breviarium Breberienne*, one of the most valuable sources of research regarding the cultural role of the kindred from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century, comes from this monastery. It is preserved in the Franciscan monastery in Šibenik, where it was transported from Bribir castle after the Ottoman occupation. The *Breviarium Breberienne* also contains the necrology of distinguished members of the family. One of the first inscriptions is that of Paul's wife, Ursa,<sup>18</sup> which indicates that the monastery was founded as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century.

The monastery is mentioned for the first time in 1327. Around 1340, it is mentioned again as part of the *custodia* of Split and Zadar in the Franciscan province of *Sclavonia* in the list of Franciscan provinces and monasteries by Paulinus of Venice. In 1393, it is mentioned as part of the *provincia Dalmatie sancti Hieronymi*. The monastery was the burial place of the family of Ban Paul and his kindred. This is documented in the testament of his son, Paul II of Ostrovica, in 1346, where he writes "I wish my body to be buried in Bribir, in the church of St. Mary, where my father and my sons rest."<sup>19</sup>

The Franciscan monastery at Dol is built upon foundations of the building complex of late antiquity. The church built with regular stone *briquettes* is longitudinal with one nave and quadrangular apses. The proportion between *naos* and *presbyterium* is typical of churches of mendicant orders of that period. The cloister is surrounded by different

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 30. For the activities of Master Vidul and his sons in Bribir, see Cvito Fisković, *Zadarski sredovječni majstori* [The Medieval Artisans of Zadar] (Split, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Ban Paul also founded the Franciscan monastery in *Skradin*, under the title of St. John. It is worth noting that this is the same name as the above-mentioned church at Tjeme. The foundational charter of the monastery in *Skradin*, issued on the April 7, 1299, is fortunately preserved (Gušić, "Starohrvatsko", 155).

<sup>18</sup> Under 'October 3, 1303', we read: *Obiit domina Ursa inclita Croatorum banissa* (Stjepan Zlatović, "Bribirski nekrolog XIV. i XV. vjeka" [Necrology of Bribir from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries], *Starine JAZU XXI* (1889), 83-85).

<sup>19</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 31; Gunjača, "Strateško", 209. The testament of Paul II is also a valuable source concerning cultural history. He donated manuscripts and sacral objects to the monasteries of St. Mary in Bribir and St. Nicholas in Zadar, where his daughter was a nun.

rooms such as a refectory and a chapter, and both it and the garden are situated north of the church. South of the church, there are some other buildings, which are considered to be the economic complex of the monastery or of the castle. Many tools and other remains of various workplaces were found, such as tools typically used by a smith.<sup>20</sup>

The church and the monastery were rebuilt several times in the fifteenth century. In 1415, Master Petar Radmilov from Šibenik constructed a new vault in the church. The main restoration in the church was done by the master builder Vidul from Zadar and his sons, hired by Count James, one of the most important figures of the Šubić kindred in the fifteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The first preserved contract concerning this activity dates from 1440, and deals with the enlargement of the church. A more detailed contract from 1447 specifies different activities of Master Vidul and his sons, such as the building of a new chapel for the Šubić kindred. The last contract concerns a new roof to be built by Vidul's sons.<sup>22</sup>

The church was decorated with high-quality Gothic sculpture and architectural ornamentation. There is also some architecture that is Romanesque. A part of a *transena* and a chaplet ornamented with heraldry emblems of the Šubić clan (a coat of arms with an eagle's wing) are especially interesting. It is worth mentioning that this chaplet is the only object attributed to the activity of Master Vidul and his sons.<sup>23</sup>

The monastery was the burial place of the Šubić kindred. Archaeological excavations and objects found in the graves in the church and in the cemetery around the monastery prove this. These objects testify to the different social positions in Bribir at that time. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century 172 graves were found in the area. Some graves contain clothing and ornaments. One grave was covered by a monolithic stone decorated with the Šubić coat of arms.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 31-32, 103-104.

<sup>21</sup> Count James seems to have been a true follower of King Sigismund, who granted him and some other members of the clan possessions and titles (Georgius Fejér, *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis*, t. X/V (Budae, 1842), 333-337). He was several times *vicebanus* (*banovac*) of Dalmatia and Croatia. For further information about the Šubić clan in the second half of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Stjepan Antoljak, "Izumiranje i nestanak hrvatskog plemstva u okolici Zadra" [Extinction of the Croatian Nobility in the Surroundings of Zadar], *Radovi Instituta JAZU u Zadru*, 9 (1962), 55-115.

<sup>22</sup> Burić, *Bribir*, 32. See also footnote 16.

<sup>23</sup> *idem*, 33-35.

<sup>24</sup> *idem*, 49, 59-63.

Near the monastery, remainders of fifteenth-century military architecture were found. The ruins of a quadrangular tower which was built from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century were also preserved. It can be found on the inner side of the eastern wall near the monastic complex at Dol. Unfortunately, only the foundations stand today.<sup>25</sup>

The high quality of life in the settlement is testified to by the large amount of luxury objects imported from Italy and from southern Spain,<sup>26</sup> such as pottery and glass. This flourishing period was followed by the decline of the oligarchic power of the Šubić kindred, when Bribir lost its importance as a central place in the region. Ostrovica became the new center of the county when it was taken over by the king's officials. The members of the kindred maintained the title of counts. However, sources do not indicate whether Bribir remained a separate county or whether it became a district within Ostrovica (Luka). Those members of the kindred who lived in Bribir and possessed estates in Luka became the wealthiest owners of the region, but did not have any exceptional rights of jurisdiction.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Bribir castle was the seat of one of the strongest and most influential noble kindred in medieval Croatia. It demonstrates the importance and role of the medieval castle as a center of medieval regional organization. For this reason, Bribir is one of the best excavated castles in medieval Croatia. However, it is crucial that further archaeological investigations be made as well as further research and documentation. Other parts of the plateau ought to be excavated in order to obtain more material concerning the development of settlement in the castle and its surroundings. Nevertheless, the importance of Bribir in the Middle Ages offers a good insight into Croatian medieval history.

<sup>25</sup> idem, 25.

<sup>26</sup> idem, 72-75, 82-89, 93-94. See Vedrana Delonga, "Nalazi hispano-maurske majolike na arheološkom lokalitetu Bribir" [Finds of Hispano-Maurian Ceramics on the Archaeological Site of Bribir], *Starohrvatska Prosvjeta*, ser. III 16 (1987).

<sup>27</sup> For a description of the economic situation of the region at the end of the fourteenth and at the beginning of the fifteenth century, see Damir Karbić, "Agrarni odnosi na području Lučke županije krajem XIV. stoljeća" [Agrarian Relations in Luka at the End of the Fourteenth Century], *Historijski zbornik* XLIII/1 (1990), 17-24, and the work of Stjepan Antoljak.