

THE ROLE OF THE FRANCISCANS IN THE KINGDOM OF BOSNIA DURING THE REIGN OF KING STJEPAN TOMAŠ (1443–1461)

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This article is a condensed version of my MA thesis of the same title,¹ which treated the problem of the role of the Franciscans during the reign of the penultimate king of Bosnia, Stjepan Tomaš, whose reign was a period of major progress for Catholicism. My work problematized the activities of the Franciscans of the Bosnian vicary through looking at their entire mission, the Observant reform, their role at the royal court and the organization of an anti-Ottoman crusade. The reign of Tomaš was essentially a time of the Franciscans' triumph over the heretical Bosnian Church, the traditional spiritual pillar of political power in Bosnia. The spheres of life that these two rival organizations were competing to dominate were fully taken over by the friars during the reign of Tomaš. At the same time, the expansion of the Observant movement contributed to the partition of the large Bosnian vicary into smaller Observant units. The conflict between the Franciscans of Bosnia and their Observant superiors went on during the entire reign of Tomaš and brought the monarchy and the vicary closely together.

The main sources that I used in my research were documents issued by the Papal chancellery and the Ragusan chancellery, as well as general documents of the Franciscan order. To a lesser degree, I also used Franciscan chronicles. The Franciscans of Bosnia in general have received ample scholarly attention from the scholars of different disciplines and backgrounds. However, their status in the last years of the Bosnian kingdom remains a topic discussed only within wider narratives. In most cases the description of their situation in the last years of the kingdom is very brief, which strongly suggests that the topic, focusing on the friars in the given timeframe, has not been adequately problematized thus far. Juxtaposing the interests and needs of the king, the papacy and the friars with the rapid contemporary changes in Southeastern Europe, in the Kingdom of Bosnia and in the Franciscan order, my thesis reveals their symbiosis as well as tensions between them.

¹ Paweł Cholewicki, "The role of the Franciscans in the Kingdom of Bosnia during the reign of King Stjepan Tomaš (1443–1461)," MA thesis (Central European University, 2018).

Bosnia and the Franciscan Mission before the Reign of Tomaš

Geographically, Bosnia was positioned on the historic boundary between the Eastern and Western Roman empires, Greek and Latin, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity; thus, it was an area of interwoven external influences.² Politically, Bosnia emerges in the context of the Byzantine withdrawal from Southeastern Europe after the death of the Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1118–1180). During the Middle Ages, Bosnia remained by varying degrees in subordination to Hungary, and Hungary had various pretensions toward Bosnia, sometimes even invading it militarily.³ With its elevation from banate to kingdom in 1377 under Tvrtko I (c. 1338–1391), Bosnia became an important political player in the region. It managed to expand territorially into Dalmatia and partly into Serbia which, after death of Tsar Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1308–1355), entered a phase of decentralisation. During the reign of Tvrtko I, Bosnia flourished, its rich deposits of silver attracted Saxon miners, Ragusan merchants and other various foreigners.⁴ These changes, combined with the establishment of the Franciscan vicary in 1340, contributed to the Bosnian (re)integration into Latin Christendom.

However, after the death of Tvrtko I in 1391 the Bosnian kingdom entered a phase of decentralisation. Royal power weakened in favour of local aristocrats, the “Lords of Rusag” (bos. Rusaške Gsopode), who initiated rebellions and foreign interventions into Bosnia in the name of pretenders. Moreover, from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, the Ottomans emerged from the East and their expansionism endangered Bosnian integrity and existence. From 1415 onward, the Bosnian kingdom was forced to yield as a tributary to the Ottomans. Given its strategic position, it was used as a passage for further raids into Dalmatia and Hungary, some of which devastated Bosnia itself.⁵ Thus, when Tomaš occupied the

² Dubravko Lovrenović, “Krist i Donator: Kotromanići između vjere rimske i vjere bosanske – I” [Christ and the donor: Kotromanići between the Roman and the Bosnian faith Pt.1], in *Fenomen “Krstijani” u Srednjovjekovnoj Bosni i Humu* [The “Krstijani” phenomenon in medieval Bosnia and Hum], ed. Franjo Šanjek (Zagreb – Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu/Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2005), 194.

³ The relationship between medieval Bosnia and Hungary has its own historiography, main contributors being Lajos Thallóczy, Nada Klaić, Pál Engel, Dubravko Lovrenović and others.

⁴ Đurđev Branislav, “Rudarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini u srednjem vijeku” [Mining in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Middle Ages] in *Radovi sa simpozijuma Rudarstvo i Metalurgija Bosne i Hercegovine od prahistorije do početka XX vijeka*, ed. Hamdija Kulović (Zenica: Izdanja muzeja grada zenice, 1999), 185–210.

⁵ Emir Filipović, “The Key to the Gate of Christendom? The Strategic Importance of Bosnia in the Struggle against the Ottomans,” in *The Crusade in the Fifteenth Century: Converging and Competing Cultures*, ed. Norman Housley (London–New York: Routledge, 2016), 157.

throne of Bosnia, he inherited a largely decentralised kingdom with an imperialistic, expansionist neighbour at its doorstep. When looking for potential allies against this menace, Tomaš had to face yet another factor playing to his disfavour; that is, Bosnian heretical dissidence.

Although Bosnian confessional problems began as early as the thirteenth century, the controversy that caused major consequences for the Bosnian Middle Ages arose in 1230s after the papal legate James of Pecoraria replaced an unknown bishop, who was a follower of the Slavic liturgy, with the famous Dominican, John of Wildeshausen (?–1252). The avalanche of events that this triggered resulted in the Bosnian bishopric's transference from the jurisdiction of the archbishopric of Dubrovnik to the jurisdiction of the archdiocese of Kalocsa, and in the early 1250s its seat was permanently translocated to Đakovo in the Kingdom of Hungary.⁶

By this turn of events, Slavic Christianity in Bosnia, until that moment organised by the Catholic *Ecclesia Bosnensis*, was snatched from the community of the universal Church and entered a process of developing its own independent ecclesiastic structures that appeared as a fully-fledged “Bosnian Church” (*Bos. Crkva bosanska*) in one of the few surviving documents of local origin dated to 1326–1329. The Bosnian Church was present in Bosnia until its expulsion by Tomaš.⁷ It was accused of holding heretical, dualistic views by both the Catholic and the Orthodox Church. From the nineteenth century until this day, regional scholarship has been engaged in extraordinarily prolific discussions of whether it was indeed heretical/dualist in its beliefs.⁸ The relative longevity of the Bosnian Church was a result of its vital function in the Bosnian banate/kingdom.⁹

⁶ Franjo Šanjek, ed., *Bosansko-humski krstjani u povjesnim vrelima (13.–15. st.)* [Bosnian-Hum Christians in the historical sources (13–15 c.)] (Zagreb: Barbat, 2003), 134–135.

⁷ Lovrenović, “Krist i donator [I],” 203, 207.

⁸ The discrepancies in sources of local and foreign origin, as well as significance of the Bosnian Church in national narratives fueled the scholarly debate. In his recent publication, Dautović divides the works dealing with the Bosnian Church into three frameworks: First, the Orthodox framework of Božidar Petranović, which presumes that the Bosnian Church was Orthodox since its foundation, similar to that of Serbia. Second, the Dualist framework of Franjo Rački, which presumes that the Bosnian Church was moderately dualistic, as described in Catholic anti-heretic treatises. Third, the Orthodox framework, which includes works containing a variety of different approaches but agreeing that the Bosnian Church was orthodox in its Christology. Dženan Dautović, “Crkva Bosanska: Moderni historiografski tokovi, rasprave i kontroverze (2005–2015)” [The Bosnian Church: Modern historiographic flows, debates and controversies], in *Historijska traganja* [Tracing history], ed. Vera Katz, vol. 15 (Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju, 2015), 129–131.

⁹ Unlike the dualist movements in the Latin West, the Bosnian Church should be considered more a public church rather than a sectarian organization. Jaroslav Šidak, *Studije o “crkvi bosanskoj” i bogumilstvu* [Studies on the “Bosnian Church” and Bogomilism] (Zagreb: Liber, 1975), 96.

The major challenge to the Bosnian Church's position was the establishment of the Bosnian Franciscan vicary in 1340 at the general chapter in Assisi. Its emergence elevated the international diplomatic position of Bosnia. The Franciscans of the Bosnian vicary were detached from Hungarian expansionism, and, thus, they found a great ally in the Bosnian monarchy, which at the same time remained tolerant of the Bosnian Church. The confessional life of the Bosnian rulers, as well as many Bosnian noblemen, started to rest on the principle of confessional balance and compromise.¹⁰ Their ability to oscillate between the vicary and the Bosnian Church was indispensable for a successful government.¹¹

In Bosnia, the friars worked outside of the Catholic structures. In their task of returning Bosnia to Catholicism they struggled to overcome legal and economic challenges as well as an insufficient supply of missionaries. These challenges were first pronounced in a letter that Ban Stjepan II Kotromanić (r. 1322–1353) sent in 1347 to the pope.¹² Eventually, especially during the term of Bartholomew of Alverna as the vicar of Bosnia, the Franciscans made gradual progress in securing their position and their sustenance mainly by expanding their vicary, which at its greatest extent had houses in medieval southeastern Hungary, Croatia, Dalmatia, Bulgaria and Serbia, i.e. a large part of Southeastern Europe, and it also controlled a few convents in Apulia.¹³

With the creation of the vicary, the friars and the Bosnian Church entered a phase of competition to dominate the royal court and ultimately to win Bosnia. Traditionally, the Bosnian Church, by mediating the content of the charters and by guaranteeing their fulfilment, positioned itself as a spiritual pillar of the political stability in Bosnia. Even Catholic Dubrovnik tolerated the Bosnian Church's confessional dissent for the sake of its mediatory potential. The ongoing competition was manifested in the appearance of the friars in political roles as well. A good illustration of this competition of the two organizations on the eve of Tomaš's reign is a document from 1442 in which the duke of Dubrovnik (Lat.

¹⁰ John Fine, *The Bosnian Church, its Place in State and Society from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries: A New Interpretation* (London: SAQI, The Bosnian Institute, 2007), 225–227.

¹¹ Lovrenović, "Krist i Donator [I]," 197.

¹² Eusebius Fermendžin, ed., *Acta Bosnae potissimum ecclesiastica cum insertis editorum documentorum regestus ab anno 925 usque ad annum 1752* (Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1892) (henceforth: *Acta Bosnae*), 28; Bazilije Pandžić, "Djelovanje franjevaca od 13. do 15. st. u Bosanskoj državi" [Activities of the Franciscans from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century in Bosnia], in *Kršćanstvo srednjovjekovne Bosne* [Christianity in medieval Bosnia], ed. Marko Karamatić (Sarajevo: Vrhbosanska visoka teološka škola, 1991), 247.

¹³ Dominik Mandić, *Franjevačka Bosna* [Franciscan Bosnia] (Rome: Hrvatski Povijesni Institut, 1968), 73–81.

Rector) promised King Tvrtko II that his deposit of silver in the city would be available to him whenever he would send an envoy with a sealed letter written “in the presence of monks either of the Roman or the Bosnian faith.”¹⁴

A Difficult Beginning

This relative confessional balance was disturbed during the reign of King Stjepan Tomaš, who took the throne in late 1443. At the beginning of his reign, Tomaš faced several major problems regarding his legitimacy as king. As an illegitimate son of King Stjepan Ostoja (?–1418, king in 1398–1404, 1409–1418), he was raised in the Bosnian faith and before he was entrusted with the government of the kingdom, he had already been married to Vojača (1417–1463), a woman from the lower nobility. Moreover, Stjepan Vukčić Kosača (?–1466), one of the most powerful Bosnian magnates, refused to recognize the new king and took a stand in favor of the king’s brother, Radivoj (?–1463), who had already been promoted as pretender by Sandalj and the Turks a decade earlier. This drove Bosnia into a civil war at the beginning of Tomaš’s reign.¹⁵ As if internal problems were not enough, the Ottomans were already at the doorstep of Bosnia.

The papacy under Eugen IV (1383–1447, pope from 1431), in the process of restoring its universal power and observing the “unstoppable” expansion of the Ottomans, turned its attention to Bosnia. For Tomaš, who confessed the “Pataren errors” while ascending the throne, Catholicism might have seemed like a potential solution to all the challenges of his reign and from its very beginning he established his ties with the papacy mainly thanks to the mediation of legate Thomas Tomassini (?–1469).¹⁶ It is not clear when exactly Tomaš officially declared himself to be converted to Catholicism, but he was baptized only in 1457 by Cardinal Carvajal.¹⁷

The offer of official conversion to Catholicism was possibly supplemented by an offer of papal justification concerning the most troublesome obstacles for his government. Already on 29 May 1445 Pope Eugene IV issued bulls where he removed the “*defectum natalium*” from the king and dissolved his marriage to

¹⁴ Ljubomir Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma* [Old Serbian charters and documents], vol. 1, (Belgrade–Sremski Karlovci: Srpska manastirska štamparnja, 1929), 516.

¹⁵ Sima Ćirković, *Hercceg Stefan Vukčić Kosača i njegovo doba* [Prince Stefan Vukčić Kosača and his age] (Belgrade: Posebno izdanje SANU 176, 1964).

¹⁶ Augustin Theiner, ed., *Vetera monumenta historica Hungariam sacram illustrantia maximam partem nondum edita ex tabulariis Vaticanis deprompta collecta ac serie chronologica disposita* (Rome: Typis Vaticanis, 1859), vol. 2 (henceforth: *Vetera monumenta historica*), 264.

¹⁷ *Acta Bosnae*, 202.



Fig. 1. Two coins issued by King Stjepan Tomaš. The one on the left displays St. Gregory of Nazianzus and the one on the right St. Gregory the Great. The coins are part of a permanent medieval exhibition in Zemaljski Muzej Bosne i Hercegovine in Sarajevo. Photos by Paweł Cholewicki.

in his *Illiricum Sacrum*, and in my MA thesis I questioned its authenticity, at least in the form preserved in his work. Whether we are to accept the source's authenticity or not, the problems that the vicary and the monarchy faced compelled them to find common ground soon after.

The Disintegration of the Bosnian Vicary

All reconfigurations that followed Tomaš's turn towards Catholicism at first sight indicate the most favourable period for the Bosnian Franciscans. However, while Catholicism prospered in Bosnia, the Bosnian vicary was facing separatist tendencies that challenged its integrity and effectively ripped it apart in the years 1445–1447. The crisis of the vicary was related to the ongoing Conventual/Observant conflict within the Franciscan order.²⁵

The Observant Franciscans became interested in Bosnia as early as the fifteenth century because of the good reputation of its missionaries. The first Observant convents in Hungary and in Dalmatia were under the jurisdiction of the Bosnian vicary and were initially supervised by the *Custos domus Bosnensis*, and later by the vicars themselves. In 1432 the famous observant friar, James of the Marches (1391–1476), started to reform the Bosnian community as *commisarius* of Minister General and in 1435 he became the vicar of Bosnia. His actions exposed the differences between the lifestyle and the pastoral ministry in Bosnia and those

very long period of toleration of the Bosnian king's contacts with the Bosnian Church. Jaroslav Šidak, "Heretička Crkva bosanska" [The heretic church of Bosnia], *Slovo* 27 (1977): 181.

²⁵ The Conventuals accused the Observants of destroying the order's integrity while the Observants accused Conventuals of dissent from the original Rule. They both become effectively two separate Franciscan communities. John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 451.

demanded by the Italian reformers. While James was resisted by the Bosnian friars, who defended their missionary privileges and concession, the Dalmatian and the Hungarian parts of the vicary developed strong Observant tendencies and started to demand separation. The Franciscans of Bosnia wanted to maintain the vicary's integrity and tensions grew.

Despite the resistance of the Franciscans of Bosnia backed by King Tvrtko II, James of the Marches found a powerful patron in Sigismund of Luxemburg (1368–1437, King of Hungary from 1387, Holy Roman Emperor from 1433), who forced the Bosnian king to allow James to conduct his reform without interference. On Sigismund's insistence, the document *Universalis Ecclesiae* was issued by the Council of Basel in April 1434, guaranteeing that the Bosnian vicar would come from the Observant family. A subsequent bull of Eugene IV from January 1445 subjugated the Bosnian vicar under its Cismontane branch.²⁶

James of the Marches and the vicars who followed him conducted a Hungary-oriented policy until 1447. They fought against the Hussites in the Kingdom of Hungary and Moldavia rather than against the Bosnian Church.²⁷ Concessions for new convents were given for Hungarian territories rather than Bosnian ones. There was a tendency for replacing Slavic friars with Hungarians.²⁸ Such reconfigurations were unacceptable for the Bosnian friars, and a major conflict broke out in the vicary between the Bosnian and the "Sclavi" friars on one side and the Hungarian on the other. Each side elected their own vicar.²⁹ The bull of January 1445 annulled the self-proclaimed Hungarian Observant vicary, but it confirmed Fabian Kenyeres of Bačka, favored by the Hungarian side, as the vicar of Bosnia.³⁰

In 1446, James Primadizzi became the Cismontane vicar of the Observants and he took steps in favour of the separatists within the Bosnian vicary. During his term, the Apulian, Dalmatian and Hungarian parts of the vicary were removed from it. Primadizzi gave an autonomous standing to local Observant communities; this was his contribution for the promotion of the Observant movement. The first part to be taken away was Apulia, where the vicary had the custody of St. Catharine. James Primadizzi decided to transfer this custody to the newly organized Apulian

²⁶ *Acta Bosnae*, 189; Stanko Škunca, *Franjevačka renesansa u Dalmaciji i Istri: opservantska obnova i samostani Provincije sv. Jeronima u 15. St* [The Franciscan renaissance in Dalmatia and Istria: Observance renewal and convents of St. Jerome Province in fifteenth century] (Zadar–Split: Franjevačka provincija sv. Jeronima u Dalmaciji i Istri, 1999), 36–37.

²⁷ *Vetera monumenta historica* II, 223; Mandić, *Franjevačka Bosna*, 113.

²⁸ Škunca, *Franjevačka renesansa*, 56.

²⁹ *Vetera monumenta historica* II, 225; Mandić, *Franjevačka Bosna*, 111.

³⁰ Mandić, *Franjevačka Bosna*, 112.

Observant vicary of St. Nicholas.³¹ At the end of 1446 or at the beginning of 1447, the pope also confirmed the Hungarian Observant vicary, giving a legal framework to what was most likely already reality by then.³² In time this vicary became the Observant *provincia SS. Salvatoris*.

The convents that the vicary had on the Adriatic coast arguably played the most important part in sustaining the vicary. Initially, in 1437, the papacy strictly forbade taking the Dalmatian convents away from the vicary. However, in September 1447, James Primadizzi convinced Pope Nicholas V to put five key Dalmatian houses of the vicary under his immediate jurisdiction, as well as those that would be built there in the future.³³ In this way, at the beginning of 1448, the Bosnian vicary – with many of its possessions in the Catholic lands taken away and many of its Balkan convents lost to the Turks – was effectively reduced to the Kingdom of Bosnia and a few possessions in Dalmatia.

After this disintegration, the Franciscans of the Bosnian vicary even temporarily detached themselves from the Observant authority. In spring 1448, they sent a list of complaints against Primadizzi to Nicholas V.³⁴ The pope allowed them to elect their own vicar who would be directly under the jurisdiction of Minister General Antonio Rusconi, a Conventual himself. However, most likely already in 1449, the new Bosnian vicar, Michael of Zadar, accepted Capistran as his superior. The latter was re-elected that year in the Observant chapter in Florence for the office of Cismontane vicar. Nevertheless, the document *Status locorum vicariae Bosnae* issued in 1450s and the election of Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce, the controversial preacher (at least in Observant circles), as the vicar of Bosnia in 1454 indicated that the Franciscans of Bosnia kept their own pastoral lifestyle and their own channels of sustenance, as well as skepticism towards Observant establishment.

With the integrity of the vicary broken, the sustainability of its houses inside Bosnia were at issue. King Tomaš created a special tax for his subjects to be paid for the vicary *vel voluntarie vel invite*, but the Cismontane vicar Marko of Bologna wrote to the king that according to their rule, the Franciscans could accept only

³¹ Giovanni Giacinto Sbaraglia, ed., *Bullarium franciscanum Romanorum pontificum, constitutiones, epistolae, ac diplomata continens* I (Rome, 1759) (henceforth: *Bullarium franciscanum*), 446.

³² *Bullarium franciscanum* I, 591; Marie-Madeleine de Cevins, *Les Franciscains observants hongrois de l'expansion à la débâcle (vers 1450–vers 1540)*, Bibliotheca seraphico-capuccina 83 (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 2008), 33.

³³ *Acta Bosnae*, 160; Mandić, *Franjevačka Bosna*, 113. The bull indicates that Nicholas V was aware of the role which the Dalmatian convents, especially Dubrovnik, played in the Bosnian vicary's system of provisions and sustenance and in it he assured the right of the vicary to collect alms in Dalmatia. Škunca, *Franjevačka renesansa*, 126–129.

³⁴ *Vetera monumenta historica* II, 250.

Bosnia.⁵⁴ In this light, it seems that the king's decision to expel the Bosnian Church in 1459/60 was a desperate attempt to save his reputation in the Catholic world.

The Franciscan vicary and the Serbian Orthodox church both took advantage of Bosnian Church's decline and disappearance. The letter sent by John Capistran to Pope Calixtus III in 1455 illustrates that already in the mid-1450s, they clashed for the converts.⁵⁵ This conflict, in a variety of forms and manifestations, carried on long after the Ottoman conquest.

King Tomaš died in the second half of 1461 and was buried in Bobovac. Late in 1461, Stjepan Tomašević ascended the Bosnian throne and was crowned in Jajce with the papal crown by the legate Nicholas of Modruš. The Bosnian monarchy as a political entity was finally included into the sphere of Latin Christendom. However, in less than two years the Ottomans conquered Bosnia, opening yet another chapter in its complex religious history.

Concluding Remarks

The reign of Stjepan Tomaš was the period of the most spectacular Catholic progress in Bosnia. The king's initial weakness compelled him to maintain close ties with Rome. The Franciscan vicary, the only successful Catholic structure in Bosnia, was a natural beacon for increasing Catholic influence. This period was the final act of the struggle between the vicary and the Bosnian Church in the vacuum left by the "exiled" canonical bishopric. The spheres of life that these two organizations were competing to dominate were fully taken over by the friars during this time. Several high-ranking Franciscans, especially Marino of Korčula, were personally involved in the most important political initiatives taken by Tomaš.

The Franciscan action in Bosnia was prompted and bolstered by the papacy and the Bosnian monarchy. The papacy included the Franciscans of the Bosnian vicary in two of its major fifteenth-century projects: the reunification policy and the organization of the anti-Ottoman Crusade. The sources regarding the potential crusade illustrate the pragmatic motivation behind Tomaš's cooperation with the vicary. The king's self-representation as a defender of Christendom was necessary if external help for his kingdom was to ever materialize.

⁵⁴ From the *Commentaries*: "King of Bosnia to atone for having surrendered Senderovia to the Turks and to give proof to his religious faith (or, as many thought, to cloak his avarice), forced the Manichaeans [...] to be baptized or to emigrate leaving their property behind them." William Gray and Harold Faulkner, eds., *The Commentaries of Pius II*, trans. Florence Gragg (Northampton: Smith College Studies in History) 1937, 366.

⁵⁵ Šanjek, *Bosansko-humski krstjani*, 110–113.

Even though the Franciscan actions in Bosnia were diversified at the time, a common denominator is conspicuous in everything they did. Whether it was the pastoral lifestyle described by Vicar Bernardino of Aquila, the maintenance of the vicary's integrity, or their resistance to the radical reformists, their persistent attempts to dominate the royal court and to organize a crusade, all these actions originated from their particular understanding of the Franciscan vocation, which was immersed in the missionary foundation of the vicary.