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The Making of a Nation: Identities of the Croatian Nobility during the Second Half of the Fourteenth Century*

During the 14th century, the state and governmental development brought forward the need to simplify a complex social reality. The management of this complexity eventually led to the formation of more tightly connected social groups, some of which can be considered as corporate groups. At the same time, different identities became clearly visible. Both processes can be observed in the Kingdom of Croatia during the Angevin reorganization of their dominions. The paper argues that these processes, among other things, nurtured the emergence of a pre-modern Croatian nation.

Keywords: 14th and 15th centuries, Kingdom of Croatia, nobility, nation, identity, corporate groups



In the past thirty years, research on identity and nation has been increasingly in the focus of attention. This is hardly surprising if one takes into account the socio-political circumstances: the fall of the communist regimes, the end of the Cold War with its division of the world, the accelerated globalization, and also the overall transformation of the elites. This trend in identity research has not bypassed the medieval studies, which have adopted innovative approaches to achieve outstanding results, especially in the field of early medieval history.¹ Thereby the question of nation building has often been approached in accordance with the established primordialist, instrumentalist, social-constructivist, and more

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¹ Critical literature on the subjects of early medieval identity is vast. With regard to Southeastern Europe, the most notable studies include: GILLET 2002; CURTA 2005; POHL – REIMITZ 1998; GEARY 2003; HEN – INNES 2000; STEPANOV 2010; CURTA 2008; also see BEREND 2001. On the early medieval Croatian identities, see BUDAK 1995; MILOŠEVIĆ 2000; BUDAK 2008; DZINO 2010; ANČIĆ – SHEPARD – VEDRIŠ 2018; DZINO – MILOŠEVIĆ – VEDRIŠ 2018.

recently ethno-symbolist models.² It is precisely by relying on the premises of the latter model, more precisely that of Anthony Smith,³ that some researchers have recently started to give preference to deep historical research and to interpreting the historical insignia and the spirit of the time, which has led them to abandon the aforementioned traditional models. Even though I cannot treat this issue in detail here, I will mention two facts: (1) that the models preceding Smith's – such as those proposed by Clifford Geertz, Frederik Barth, Pierre van der Berghe, Ernest Gellner, Elie Kedourie, or Benedict Anderson, John A. Armstrong, Rogers Brubaker and even Steven Grosby⁴ and Smith himself – did not explore the past professionally and thoroughly; and (2) that the new trends in identity or nation research have come from the historical and intellectual contexts other than the Anglo-Saxon one, moreover from a generation not directly connected to World War II. In any case, it is only recently that the gap between theoretical premises and the knowledge of the actual past has been bridged, occasionally leading to the rejection of the proposed theoretical models, as evident, for example, in studies by John Breuilly, Miroslav Hroch,⁵ and primarily those (on pre-modern nations) by Caspar Hirschi or Azer Gat.⁶

Identity research, regardless of its objectivity, cannot be completely separated from the way each individual researcher understands it subjectively. However, I also believe that the key elements, inseparable from any identity, are its given social and situational construction as well as its encounter with the "Other". Accordingly, identity can be also seen as a continued opposition between the longevity of mental patterns in the general context and their continual change in the context of the individual, depending on the given circumstances.

Keeping all this in mind, I will focus in this paper on the issue of late medieval identity among the Croatian nobility. Firstly, I will explore the context in which some aspects of identity were formed among the nobility, as well as the universality of that identity and the circumstances of its continuity and/or transformation. I will thereby elaborate the hypothesis that it is indeed possible to discern the elements of a Croatian nation in the identity of late medieval Croatian nobility.

However, before dedicating myself to the question of identity in late medieval Croatian nobility, I will offer a brief historical context of the Kingdom of Croatia and Dalmatia⁷ in the 14th century.

² Critical literature on the theories of nationalism is also vast. For an overview of different approaches, see ÖZKIRIMLI 2010. For further insight, also see the studies listed in notes 3–6.

³ Cf. SMITH 1999; SMITH 2000; SMITH 2009.

⁴ Cf. GEERTZ 1963; BARTH 1969. p. 9–38; BERGHE 1981; HALL 1998; GELLNER 1983; KEDOURIE 1994; ANDERSON 2006; ARMSTRONG 1982; GROSBY 2005.

⁵ BREUILLY 1993; HROCH 2007; HROCH 2015.

⁶ Cf. HIRSCHI 2012; GAT 2013.

⁷ In the following I will mostly use the term Kingdom of Croatia in accordance with the late medieval political theory (I will discuss this in more detail below) and modern composite state theory (see BACKERRA 2019; ELLIOTT 1992). Putting it more simply, the Angevin ruler

Around the mid-14th century, most of the nobility in the Kingdom of Croatia found themselves in a new social setting compared to the previous period.⁸ This happened primarily with the ascent of the House of Anjou: Charles and his son Louis, who restored the royal power and efficiency, including its omnipresence in every corner of the lands under St Stephen's Crown, which had been seriously weakened during the last Árpáadian kings. In order to consolidate his power, the ruler now used direct interventions (military and legal) in order to define the position of the nobility, with the aim of reducing the actual differences among them to an acceptable measure. This included the levelling of their legal status in 1351 or 1352⁹ – although the effect of these decrees both on the interrelations among the nobility of the Kingdom of Croatia and on the relations of that nobility with the central government is very questionable – and their formal organization, primarily into counties, which he literally resuscitated. To be sure, these royal actions were not peacefully tolerated. In the Kingdom of Croatia, after the Croatian noble families of Bribirski, Cetinski, and Krbavski had succumbed by the mid-14th century to the king's direct military attack or at least his demonstration of military power, the rest of the nobility sought to resist the royal reforms by means of a more concisely designed political program. It is this program that allows us to consider the identity of the noble families that interest us most here.¹⁰

A very lively statement of the political program of the nobility in view of the aforementioned royal action is given in a narrative source commonly known as *Pacta conventa*,¹¹ one of the foundations of Croatian national

governed over several separate territories of which only some remained kingdoms during the later periods or were to be perceived as such. Unlike in the other parts of medieval Europe, the Angevin ruler was crowned only with the Crown of St Stephen, which nonetheless symbolized the plenitude of the ruler's authority. Thus, the lands encompassed by the Crown changed over time and it was not until the second half of the 14th century – in accordance with the new political theory and practice – that the Crown became finally and inextricably linked with the development of abstract concepts of the state primarily confined to Hungary (proper). This problem, simplified for this occasion, goes beyond the scope of this paper, for this see further PÉTER 2003. Following this line of argument, I believe that the term Kingdom of Hungary-Croatia, most often used in historiography, does not correspond to the late medieval past and is, as such, a conceptual anachronism. In order to emphasize the social and administrative difference between the area of the Eastern Adriatic towns (Kingdom of Dalmatia) and the hinterland (Kingdom of Croatia), I will use the latter term. Besides, my research relates to the latter and not the former.

⁸ For a historical overview of the Kingdom of Croatia and Dalmatia during the 14th century, see ENGEL 2001. p. 140–277; KARBIĆ 1999; KARBIĆ 2000a. p. 58–138; ANČIĆ 1997b; ANČIĆ 2009; KLAJČ – PETRICIOLI 1976. p. 291–374; RAUKAR 1997. p. 77–88.

⁹ For the decrees, see SOMOGYI – SOMOGYI 1986.

¹⁰ Besides the works cited in the note 8, on the Angevine rule also see RADY 2002; CSUKOVITS 2013; KORDÉ – PETROVICS 2010; KLANICZAY 2002; LASZLOVSKY – NAGY – SZABÓ – VADAS 2018; SZENDE 2016; VARDY – GROSSCHMID – DOMONKOS 1986.

¹¹ Cf. CDCDS II. nr. 5, p. 8–9. For an overview of the discussion in Croatian historiography about the *Pacta conventa* cf. KLAJČ 1958–1959; ANTOLJAK 1980. p. 11–43; BEUC 1985, p. 73–85; RAUKAR

identity to the present day. Briefly, this document places in the year 1102, that is, after the extinction of the Croatian royal house, a purported agreement between the Hungarian king, Coloman the Learned and the representatives of twelve Croatian kindreds, in which the noblemen recognized Coloman as the king of Croatia in exchange for his confirmation of their various privileges. However, considering the fact that the *Pacta* have been positively dated to the 14th century,¹² it is reasonable to ask whether this document may be considered at all as a discursive framework for building the identity foundations in a broader sense. With regard to that, I consider it necessary to take a closer look at the wider context of identity that led to the articulation of a discursive political programme among the Croatian nobility in the second half of the 14th century as manifested in the *Pacta*.

As for the fourteenth-century Croatian nobility, two closely connected identities can be determined: that in connection with the memory of the last indisputably legitimate king of Croatia, Dmitar Zvonimir,¹³ and the identity of the community of *nobiles duodecim generationum regni Croatiae*. I will start with the latter and come back to the former.

Among the few mentions of the *nobiles duodecim generationum regni* in the sources,¹⁴ the *Pacta* is the only one that offers detailed insight into the community. However, an analysis of the *Pacta* reveals its two main messages, one of the community of nobles and the other on the right of this community to the kingdom of Croatia. Furthermore, the nobles of this community are presented in it as the only relevant political subject in the Kingdom.¹⁵ It is exactly among these nobles that the memory of King Zvonimir was nurtured.

2002. p. 28–33. Also see MARGETIĆ 2003. p. 112–131; ANČIĆ 1998; JAKŠIĆ 1998. p. 269–286; MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 107–111.

¹² For a most recent argumentation on dating the *Pacta* in the 14th century, see MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 110–118. See also the previous discussion in the studies cited in note 11. It is also important to emphasize that in the political theory of the 11th and early 12th centuries, the concept of political representation – at least in the way it was presented in the *Pacta* – did not exist. In this context, the possibility of some kind of agreement between the ruler and his noble subjects as partners at the same level of social and political power – a precondition for entering such an agreement – cannot be presumed. But the concept did exist in the 14th century and was gaining in importance. I will return to the matter of political theory, especially regarding corporate groups, in more detail below.

¹³ On the revival of the figure of King Zvonimir during the 14th century, see KARBIĆ 2000b. p. 271–280; ANČIĆ 1997b; GOLDSTEIN 1984.

¹⁴ For these sources, see further KLAJIĆ 1956. p. 92–94.

¹⁵ A similar message is also communicated in a document known as *Pripis Supetarskom kartularu* (for the problem of the name see ANČIĆ 2013. p. 165). The *Pripis* lists 12 kindreds who ruled the Kingdom of Croatia. Among the six of *generibus* (named identical to those mentioned in the *Pacta*) a viceroy (*ban*) in Croatia was elected. Thus, the viceroy had to be *de genere Croatorum*. Other six kindreds gave the counts *in comitatibus Croacie*. This shows a clear correlation between the central messages of the *Pacta* and the *Pripis*.

During the 14th century, probably initiated by the circles close to the viceroys (*ban*) from the Subić of Bribir – the uncontested rulers of the Kingdom of Croatia in the last decades of the 13th and the first two decades of the 14th century¹⁶ – the figure of King Zvonimir experienced a genuine revival. Today, one can identify only some traces of this restoration, the fundamental one being the story of King Zvonimir's death. In its various versions, it has been noted down in several narrative sources,¹⁷ the oldest one dated to the 14th century.¹⁸ At the same time, the story is anachronous with regard to the age in which Zvonimir ruled (1076–1089), since it has no confirmation in the sources from his time. Basically, it evolves as follows: responding to the call to the First Crusade, King Dmitar Zvonimir summoned his subjects to an assembly near Knin, where they refused to go to war and, as the king insisted, wounded him lethally. According to the oldest version preserved in writing, the church of St Mary in Bribir, the home and seat of the Bribirski, became the site of the royal tomb. In some versions of the story, the king cursed the Croats with his last breath, saying that they would never again have a king of their own, but henceforth be subjected to foreigners. Except for the direct link to the Bribirski, manifest in the mention of Bribir,¹⁹ the immediate historical model for its final version – as plausibly shown by Damir Karbić – was the sudden death of Count Mladen Bribirski, the most powerful opponent of King Louis in Croatia in the mid-14th century. It is no coincidence that the tomb inscription from the cathedral of Trogir describes Mladen as *Croatorum clipeus fortis*,²⁰ the strong shield of the Croats. The title and the whole inscription conveyed the same symbolic and ideological message as the one nurtured by the community of *nobiles duodecim generationum*.

From this brief outline, it is evident that the Bribirski established an ideological link with Zvonimir as a good and just ruler, which – also based on the analogy between their own and Zvonimir's relations with the papacy – allowed them to assert the divine sanction of their power. That, again, made it possible to present the period of their rule as a natural and legitimate continuation of Zvonimir's reign as the last ruler of the native dynasty.²¹ After the decline of the Bribirski, this vision was further nurtured by their Croatian noble social circle formed at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century around the counts of Bribir. By the second half of the 14th century, as attested in the documents, the idea of

¹⁶ See further in KARBIĆ 2000a. p. 58–97.

¹⁷ For an overview of the sources and the different versions of the story, see KARBIĆ 2000b. p. 271–280; KURELAC 1970–71; ŠIŠIĆ 1905.

¹⁸ Besides the studies cited in n. 12, see ANČIĆ 1997b; NEMETH 2006.

¹⁹ In the same context, it should be noted that Viceroy Paul put up a plaque commemorating King Zvonimir in St Mary's church at Bribir (see KARBIĆ 2000b. p. 275–276; MARUN 1897) and also that the Subići allegedly wrote a letter to Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) in which they claimed that Croatia had been a fief of the Holy See ever since the time of King Zvonimir (see HC p. 97).

²⁰ MIC. p. 242; cf. ANČIĆ 2013. p. 167.

²¹ For the possible implications of the divine sanction on the Bribirski, see ANČIĆ 2020.

linking the Croatian noblemen with the “good king” Zvonimir had become part of their traditional understanding of their own past. Thus, the nobility presented itself as the bearer of continuity and the main political subject of the kingdom on the basis of its historical right, as the principal and direct partaker in the legacy of Zvonimir’s “sacred” rule. For these nobles, the figure of King Zvonimir was the focal point of their common memory and familial affiliation, and because of this common origin, they saw themselves as an elite entitled to be the only relevant political subject in the Kingdom.

The case of the noble kindred of Karinjani shows this quite manifestly. In 1360, some noblemen of Lapac approached the royal commission in Zadar, headed by Queen Elisabeth and the *iurati* of the Kingdom of Croatia, to defend their claim to the land of Karin.²² Among other things, they stated that a man called Vniha Lapčanin had married Klauda, a daughter of King Zvonimir, and obtained Karin from his father-in-law. Since Vniha died without heirs, Karin was inherited by his relatives, and their descendants still owned the land in 1360. Their claims were not corroborated by any written evidence – a common practice at the time – only by the argument of a sort of historical right. The *iurati* of the Kingdom of Croatia supported it, and thus the royal court accepted the claim about Vniha and Zvonimir as a valid argument. Apparently, the decisive factor, besides the fact that they were king’s men, was the legal formula – that the noblemen owned the land of Karin “by permanent claim” (*iusta et legitima prescriptione precedente*), which resulted from their statement that the Lapčani were the true heirs of Vniha, who had died without descendants – rather than the figure of King Zvonimir.

At the same time, the identification of the elite with the figure of King Zvonimir gradually also influenced the perception of the Bribirski. This provided them with a central position in the social memory of the local community, because that of King Zvonimir evoked the “glorious past” of the time of the Bribirski viceroys and celebrated the past of the elite as such. This kind of social memory had a real effect on the everyday rights of the nobility. During the second half of the 14th and the 15th century, there were several confirmations of various land privileges that the Bribirski had granted as viceroys.²³ It does not matter if these privileges were authentic, or if the interested parties needed to substantiate some kind of written evidence in the legal proceedings: they testify to the importance of sharing a common vision.

It is precisely these common myths and memories that the *Pacta* also relied upon. However, they also emphasized in their own way that only a part of the Croatian nobility constituted the “elected people” and the incontestable political subject. That refers, of course, to the community of

²² CDCDS XIII. nr. 54, p. 69–71. For the context of the case, see MAJNARIĆ 2018, p. 103–107. Also, on its importance in the context of the regulation of royal rights, see useful remarks in MATIJEVIĆ ŠOKOL 2008, p. 254.

²³ For some of the cases, see MAJNARIĆ 2022.

nobiles duodecim generationum, in which one may recognize, without the need of getting more deeply into the argumentation, the traditional, historical Croatian nobility as opposed to those noble families which acquired the status by elevation, often linked to the royal intervention during the second half of the 13th and in the 14th century.²⁴ Putting it more simply, the organization bearing the exceptionally symbolic name²⁵ of *nobiles duodecim generationum* may be considered the elite of the Kingdom of Croatia, which particularly flourished under the rule of the Bribirski.

Inextricably linked, the mentioned identities of the Croatian noble elite may be seen as the basis for creating the political-ideological message directed against the forceful assertion of royal supremacy around the mid-14th century, of which the *Pacta conventa* are only a discursive framework.

Briefly, the message presented the “elected people” as an unquestionable political subject, appearing before the king as the guardian of historical noble customs and rights in the territory of the medieval Kingdom of Croatia. At the same time, this message was also cultivated among the nobility as such, with some of its elements, such as the historical rights, successfully applied in everyday life, especially in cases when they did not directly contradict the royal orders.

Moreover, beyond that and especially at the discursive level, this message contained all those elements that are indispensable for generating the idea of the nation. This is most conspicuously shown in the content of the *Pacta*, regardless of the context of its production and the interpolation of our present knowledge. It should also be mentioned that the content of the *Pacta* is strikingly reminiscent of Smith’s five features of national identity, at least if viewed in the context of the Late Middle Ages and as a discursive phenomenon.²⁶

Applying to this content the premises of Smith’s model with its features of national identity, adapted to the limitations of the medieval reality, one may reach significant conclusions: the historical territory is identifiable with the area delimited by the Drava River;²⁷ the common myths and

²⁴ Besides the studies cited in note 11, for further argumentation see MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 118–120.

²⁵ For the symbolism of the name and the medieval symbolism of the number twelve, see MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 113–114.

²⁶ Cf. SMITH 1999. p. 104.

²⁷ For the most recent discussion on the northern border of medieval Croatia, the toponyms Drava and especially Gvozd, and the significance of the latter as a divider of geographical areas, but not the political ones, see SZEBERÉNYI 2017; ANČIĆ 2019. p. 119–122. What Gvozd really was and where it can be located is clearly discernible from the late medieval map *Tabula Hungariae*. The *Tabula* shows, in accordance with the methods of late medieval cartography, a relief-like massif that stretches from the Grobnik Alps over Kapela and Plješivica to River Una. It should also be noted that one of the most important ways of marking a geographical area was the impression that it had on the observer. In that context, it is important to emphasize the Old Slavic word *gvozd* with its meaning of a (dense) forest or mountain.

historical memories with the “good king” Zvonimir; the common culture with the so-called political-ideological message, among other things; the common rights and duties with the right to use the land and the duty of defending the Kingdom; and the common economy with the exemption of tax payment.²⁸ Moreover, if one adds to the *Pacta* the revival of King Zvonimir as a symbolic figure, its use can be seen as an extension of Smith’s model to include an elaborate vision of the national hero, as well as a national saint. Even though simplified, the implications of applying the model are more than evident.

But does that mean that among the subjects of the time who enjoyed full legal rights, one may speak of a Croatian nation in the 14th century?

In order not to view Smith’s model as another theoretical and anachronic shaping of the past reality, it is necessary to connect it with the late medieval political theory and its important consequences for society. During the 14th century, the development of political theory and its application in practice gradually led to the shaping of various corporations throughout Europe.²⁹ These were at the same time a reflection of an impetus coming from above (the centrifugal force of the government) and of one coming from below (the differentiation of the society itself). Putting it more simply, the constant growth of government required a clearer classification of society in order to facilitate its management. The side effect of this classification was the growth of the political community and, over time, its participation in the prerogatives of government previously reserved exclusively for the ruler. The community consisted of different groups, each with its own special position and rights, but they all focused on the common wellbeing.³⁰ Occasionally, the emergence of (corporate) groups, based on spatial, social and/or economic conditions, and in a given situational construction, brought to the fore the efforts of the elite. Such was the case of the nobility of the Kingdom of Croatia, but due to the disappearance of active royal opponents (first of all, the Bribirski) and the comprehensive regulation of royal authority in the Kingdom, these efforts did not survive as exclusively elitist. Nonetheless, the elite of the Kingdom became the core of a (corporate) group that, during the second half of the 14th century, came to be known as the *Hrvati*. Initially through the discourse and eventually through the mediation of the symbolic idea of belonging to a community with a certain (normative) relationship with the ruler, the elite gave the impetus to a clearer shaping of the distinctive community and at the same time provided a conceptual connective tissue that differentiated that community from any other. By constantly insisting on

²⁸ Cf. the content of the *Pacta* in CDCDS II. nr. 5, p. 8–9.

²⁹ On medieval corporations and the corporation theory, see BURNS 2008. p. 341–606; WATTS 2009. p. 43–157; TIERNEY 1982. p. 29–53; CANNING 1996. p. 84–134; LATHAM 2012. p. 60–91.

³⁰ An exemplary representation of the late medieval world’s moral and spiritual order are the Ebstorf Map and the Hereford Map. They show the world as superimposed over the body of Christ, with Christ’s head, hands, and feet clearly visible and indicating the cardinal directions. See further EDSON 2007. p. 11–32; WOODWARD 1987; ENGLISCH 2002; 437–499.

the values of the elite – whether they were originally an invention of this elite or were appropriated and transformed by it – they gradually became the rights of the community. Moreover, these rights were at some point also defined by settlements with the ruler or at least by the fact that they were to some point acceptable to him.³¹ As shown previously, the *Pacta* is the best discursive example of these values, but they can also be discerned in the customs of the Croats (*consuetudines Croatorum*),³² a part of which were written down in the Law Code of Novigrad.³³ Without going into detail,³⁴ it is necessary to point out that the customs were not an indisputable norm, but rather guidelines to serve the sensitivity of the community to its own members. In this way, the customs were used according to the situation in order to preserve and perpetuate the community's self-identity and clearly separate it from outside factors. This self-identification was followed by practical actions on the local level, which affirmed the community's organization and ensured the preservation of its own local centre of power.³⁵ Thus, the customs played one of the crucial roles in building up the community and keeping it together.

The practical role of the customs for the community can be seen in several cases.³⁶ In 1361, a long-lasting lawsuit was delegated to the banal court by an order of King Louis I. In doing so, the king also instructed Nicholas Szécsi, the viceroy (ban) of the Kingdom of Dalmatia and Croatia, to litigate according to the Hungarian customs and not the customs of the Croats and Dalmatians ([...] *non more aut secundum consuetudinem Croatorum an Dalmaticorum, sed iuxta legem et consuetudinem Hungaricalem iudicare deberemus*).³⁷ In 1376, Charles of Durazzo, the duke (*dux*) of Dalmatia and Croatia, filed a lawsuit from the Zadar court to the court seat of Knin. He did so because the Zadar court did not prosecute according to the *consuetudines Croacie*, and unlike in Knin (*ubi iura Crohatorum convenienter redduntur et clarius elucidantur*), the customs of the Croats were not valid in Eastern Adriatic towns. Furthermore, the duke pointed out that the court seat of Knin was equipped with experts for the customs of the Croats (*per homines antiquos Crohacie in talibus expertos [...] antiquioribus hominibus dictarum parcium Crohacie, qui scirent consuetudines ipsarum parcium [...] magis expertos in sciendo consuetudines*

³¹ The best way to follow these settlements in the Kingdom of Croatia are the activities of different special commissions under the king's authority, see MATIJEVIĆ SOKOL 2008; MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 66–71; ANČIĆ 1998. p. 250–251.

³² For the customs of the Croats, see KARBIĆ 1998; ANČIĆ 2003; KOLANOVIĆ 1993.

³³ For the Law Code of Novigrad, see ANČIĆ 2003; JAKŠIĆ 2000. p. 170–180; MAJNARIĆ 2018. p. 82–90; KARBIĆ – KARBIĆ 2013. p. 61–63.

³⁴ For detailed analyses, besides the works cited in the two previous footnotes, see also MAJNARIĆ 2022.

³⁵ Cf. QUILLET 2008. p. 525.

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the cases, see MAJNARIĆ 2022.

³⁷ Cf. CDCDS XIII. nr. 127, p. 185–190.

Crohatinas...).³⁸ Finally, in 1383, Queen Elisabeth instructed the viceroy to judge the men of Poljica according to the customs of the Croats (*iuxta ditor(um) fidelium meorum Croatorum antiquas consuetudinis, seu ordines, et iudicia supradicta... fideles nostri hominess de Politia [...] legibus, et consuetudinibus Chroatorum [...] et antique consuetudine*).³⁹

The mentioned cases suffice to show what the *customs of the Croats* meant for the cohesion of the community and at the same time how the central government promoted such cohesion. In these circumstances, most of the nobles wanted to be a part of the community that shared the same values (the *customs of the Croats*), and at the same time determined what was acceptable at the local level, not solely by their own will, but as a reflection of their relations with the ruler. Exactly these were the features of a corporate group that can be recognized as the *Hrvati*.⁴⁰

The sense of belonging to the corporate group of *Hrvati*, as the only relevant political group, and its association with the largely defined territory led to the universality of that group. Coming back to the arguments from the beginning of my paper, the aforementioned identities and the corresponding ideological program were a product of fusion between the situational and social contexts. This program was indeed popular among the Croatian noble elite and also acceptable to the dominant political and administrative practice, at least insofar as it did not oppose that practice. This program also became the core of the universality of the *Hrvati* and belonging to the group basically became an imperative for all noblemen who wanted to successfully maintain their position.

The fact that by the 15th century, however, the organization of the *nobiles duodecim generationum*, as the most outspoken and present expression of that programme, would have gradually become a transpersonal reminiscence – which is clearly evident in its record of 1459⁴¹ – shows the monopolization of social life of the corporate group *Hrvati* in the Kingdom of Croatia. The protective role of the corporate group *Hrvati* with regard to the external factors that infringed upon the rights and position of the nobility is also mirrored in the so-called Fraternity of Croats of 1430.⁴² It was a union of Croatian nobility presided by the most prominent noblemen (Ivaniš Nelipčić and the five counts of Krbava), but

³⁸ Cf. MNL OL, DL 38492 (May 6, 1376); for a transcription, see KOLANOVIĆ 1993. p. 95–97; for some useful remarks regarding the transcriptions, see ANČIĆ 2013. p. 195.

³⁹ For the dating and transcription of Queen Elisabeth's letter, see NAZOR 2005. p. 247. Cf. NAZOR 2015. p. 52–53.

⁴⁰ This does not mean that the Croats, as a socio-elitist and politically-administratively defined and clearly perceived group, had not existed since the early Middle Ages. On this occasion, the aim has been to emphasize the (final) transformation of the (social and political) understanding of the Croats during the 14th century, especially during its second half, when the general political theory and its practice gradually led to the conception of society through various corporate groups.

⁴¹ Cf. LISTINE X. nr. 150, p. 146.

⁴² Cf. MNL OL, DL 38517 (26 July 1430); cf. also ANČIĆ 1996. p. 71–72; KARBIĆ 1998. p. 109–110; ANČIĆ 2013. p. 193; MAJNARIĆ 2022.

also included all other Croatian noblemen, dignitaries, and landlords linked to the court seats of the Croatian counties (Knin, Luka, Lika, Bužani, Krbava, Lapac, Pset, Humljani, Sokolsko, Srb, Poljica, Unac). Even though there are no direct records of this union, apart from a mere mention, its name is exceptionally intriguing when it comes to the issues of identity and community. According to a source from 1401, the Croatian noblemen considered each other as brothers.⁴³ Thereby this title seems not to have implied only noblemen as persons, but also reflected special closeness between their positions, rights, and affiliation with the *Hrvati*. Among others, it is important to point out that the Fraternity also nurtured the memory of King Zvonimir, which is evident from their annual gathering place in the church of St Bartholomew, where King Zvonimir was allegedly buried.⁴⁴ Another fact shows how the corporate notion of the society had taken rooted by then.

At the centre of the Fraternity, as a kind of its patron, was none other than King Sigismund.⁴⁵ The king was the only instance, as the members of the Fraternity saw it, which could and ought to provide them protection. It was the corporative reality that directed the Fraternity, as the guardians of the customs of the kingdom, towards the ruler. Furthermore, this is fully in line with the late medieval concepts of the mystical body of politics, which is also manifest in the distribution of fines in case of offences against the Fraternity. The most prominent nobles had to pay the highest fines, and a half of the amount of all fines went to the royal treasury. Thus, the transgression against the Fraternity's values was at the same time an offence against the ruler.

The case of the Fraternity, again, offers a clear insight into the actual level of cohesion among the Croatian nobility and into the process of emergence of the corporate group *Hrvati*, indicating a direction in which it is worth to search for an answer to the aforementioned question of the Croatian nation in the 14th century. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in order to offer a more comprehensive answer, it is far more important to consider the discursive value of the political-ideological message, most clearly articulated in the *Pacta* (than the everyday political or social practice). The fact that this message was at the core of the corporate group *Hrvati*, and that this group did in fact exist from the second half of the 14th century, made the process of making the pre-modern Croatian nation – whether using the premises of Smith's model or not – possible in a certain social and situational context. Therefore, it is not crucial whether this Croatian nation was initially perceived discursively, but rather the fact that this distinctive

⁴³ Cf. ANČIĆ 2005. nr. 9, p. 76–77.

⁴⁴ On the significance of the church of St Bartholomew, see BUDAK 1999. p. 241–249; JAKŠIĆ 2000. p. 245–256.

⁴⁵ “[...] *concordiam et vnionem atque fraternitatem perfectam inter se ipsos primo ad laudem omnipotentis Dei a quo rite totum bonum fundatur exordium et ad fidelissima seruicia serenissimi regis nostri Sigismundi et per consequens sacre sancte chorone Hungarie [...]*” – MNL OL, DL 38517 (26 July 1430)

discourse, so central to the community, became refined and distorted over time into a historical fact, and could as such serve its purpose as a highly favourable proof in building a social position.

At the very end, we must ask ourselves once again: can we speak of a Croatian nation in the 14th century when referring to the subjects who enjoyed full legal rights at the time? Even though the elements of a Croatian nation in the 14th century can at first only be seen as one among many identities of the Croatian nobility, their unifying effect – perpetuated by the subsequent state formation and its need to simplify a complex social reality, among other things, by channelling this complexity into manageable corporate groups – can be positively followed during the 14th and partly the 15th centuries. So, it seems that the concept of the Croatian nation, at least for historical research, functioned equally in the late Middle Ages as it did in the 19th century, only with some different connotations and meanings, depending on the time and the overall context of its use. Therefore, I would like to argue – perhaps somewhat close to the recurrent perennialists – that the emergence of the Croatian nation should be sought in the late Middle Ages, but its elements sporadically appeared and evolved in history as it was needed. I am also of the opinion that one cannot presume that this “nation” was completely continuous; instead, its (discursive) elements were gradually conceptually elaborated. This “nation” also disappeared over longer periods and did not remain constant for a long time. Nevertheless, this vague nation with its clearly formulated elements awaited a suitable political (situational) and social moment, or the pressure of external/other factors, in order to become a reality.

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Abbreviations

MNL OL, DL Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára,
Diplomatikai Levéltár

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CDCDS Codex diplomaticus regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et
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