

ZETA/ MONTENEGRO IN THE TIME OF
THE BALŠIĆ DYNASTY (1360–1421)

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The Balšić dynasty is the second medieval ruling dynasty of Montenegro (also Doclea or Zeta) after Voislavljevići who ruled between the end of the tenth and the end of the twelfth century. They were already a very powerful family of aristocratic landowners in the time when Zeta was occupied by Nemanjići, and they took over the throne of Zeta after the retreat of the dynasty from Raška. They ruled Zeta from 1360 to 1421. According to some sources (which occur most frequently) they descend from French aristocrats.

The first ruler from the Balšić family, Balša I (Đurađ I Balšić) was the most successful representative of the Dynasty. His deeds proved him a very energetic, venturesome but also wise person. He was a dangerous opponent to his enemies: „an angry man who can not be reasoned“... In his time Balšići were the most powerful lords in the region. Dominus Balša I ruled (from Ulcinj, the centre of Balšići) over a very wide „land of Zeta and Littoral, half of the Serbian land, and part of the Greek land“ – from river Maća in the middle Albania to Dubrovnik, and from Lovćen to Prizren (Zeta, Albania, Kosovo, Herzegovina). He was a catholic, just like his

successors – Balša II and Đurađ II Stracimirović Balšić, whereas the fourth member of the dynasty Balša III died relatively young. He lived and ruled under a strong influence of his mother Jelena, a daughter of the Serbian prince Lazar Hrebeljanović – and under her influence he accepted rites of the Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Just like their strongest rivals in the region, Balšići were very clever and cruel in politics, and relentless feudalists. They were tireless in war competing with the surrounding rivals for territories and possessions for the purpose of greater economic and military power. Frequent were their war campaigns as well as sudden truces, and if necessary, very smart political vacillations – towards Kotor, and especially towards Albanian powerful families and landowners (whose territories Venice treated as the Venetian Albania with fictive borders, even towards Budva). Their great historical enemies, and sometimes allies (often by turns) were also the Republic of Venice, the Hungarian Kingdom, Serbian tsar Uroš, Nikola Altomanović, baron of Zahumlje and Raška, Bosnian king Tvrtko and Serbian despot Vuk Branković. What drew special attention was their origin, their military engagement and control of possessions, as well as their family and inter-dynastic relations – with the goal of achieving greater political authority and dynastic independence. After the dissolution of the Nemanjić empire of tsar Dušan, the founder of the Balšić dynasty was wisely building great influence through

powerful friendship and marital connections: his sons Stracimir and Đurađ were married to daughters of Vukašin Mrnjačević, whereas the youngest Balša II was the husband of Komnina, a daughter of Jovan Asen and cousin of Dušan's widow Jelena. Soon, he released himself from the domination of Serbian prince Lazar...

Beginning with the establisher Balša I, the power of the dynasty also reflected in their special Charter to the People of Dubrovnik (1373) – which guaranteed „all rights which they had had during the rule of tsar Dušan“, but in return the people of Dubrovnik had to pay a tax (the famous St Dmitar Tax), which was an income on the claim that the Balšići had upon the peninsula Ston (later Pelješac). Furthermore, already in 1372, the mints in Prizren started with the emission of their money, (Balšić dinar) with their heraldic symbol: head of a wolf with a helmet. (According to some sources, Đurađ Balšić had minted seven different types of coins). Numismatics as a material proof and the money of Balšići are specially important because two series of coins had the impressed title of the ruler – with the inscription „king“. That was the time of Đurađ and Konstantin Balšić, which maybe is not so important because of the form of ruling – as much as because of the level of the achieved independence. That meant not only that Balšići won Montenegrin (Doclean) independence but also that they had restored the kingdom of Doclea! On the other side, the people of Montenegro have repaid

them in their own „style“: for example, in the respectable journal of the Montenegrin historiography Documents/Historical Documents (starting from 1927) there were only four published texts on Balšići, three of which were written by foreign authors!

Although sometimes tactlessly „venturous, unruly and crude“ but also „wise, sharp-witted and skilled soldiers“, Balšići have certainly remained Montenegrin cultural-historical and ethno-genetic valuable heritage. The Matica Crnogorska (the Central Montenegrin Cultural and Publishing Society) as the central society of culture and moral civil coexistence in Montenegro – organises this symposium on Balšići and Zeta, or Montenegro in the time of the Balšić dynasty, with the primary purpose to remind the public that we should act responsibly in the critical valorisation of that part of the Montenegrin history and its overall factual and evaluation systematisation.

However, the organizer of this symposium had no financial means or people to do a thorough research on this topic which would involve a dissected and long-term projecting of the research work in Montenegro, as well as in foreign data bases. Therefore, we relied on recognised Montenegrin experts, and we also managed to provide the participation of foreign respectable experts (Paskal Milo and Pelumb Džufi from Albania, Jakov Sabljčić from Croatia) which gives this assembly international and scientific character.

It was very important to me as the operative organiser, representative and coordinator of this assembly that the content of the Symposium or its anthology of works is turned into a book on the lasting cultural-historical, cultural and art values of the Balšić époque as the essential, and therefore, unquestionable contents and witnesses of time.

The Anthology will contain the following works: „Art in the time of Balšići“ (Aleksandar Čilikov, PhD), „The Balšić Architecture“ (Čedomir Marković, PhD), „On the Literary – Language Heritage of the Balšić Epoque“ (Adnan Čirgić PhD and Aleksandar Radoman), and „On the Complexity of the Novel *Kostadin Balšić* by Milan Šuflaj“ (Jakov Sabljčić, PhD).

There are also few works with more general approach to the topic of Balšići: Balšići – From Regional Landlords to Powerful Dynastic Rulers (Božidar Šekularac, PhD), Dynastic Symbols of Balšići (Aleksandar-Saša Samardžić), Economic Circumstances in the Balšić State Through Literature (Marijan-Mašo Miljić), and Balšići in the Educational System of Montenegro (Šerbo Rastoder, PhD).

The works which are dealing with certain details and location characteristics are The Essay on Some Historiography Interpretations on the Balšić Dynasty (Živko Andrijašević, PhD) and Balšići and Bar Border (Ivan Jovović).

The complex Montenegrin – Albanian relations from the time of Balšići are the topic of papers: Albanian –

Montenegrin Correspondences in the Middle Ages (Pelumb Đufi, PhD); Balšići in the Montenegrin and Albanian Historiography (Đorđe Borozan, PhD) and Balšići and the Albanian Aristocracy (Vasilj Jovović). The essence of Montenegrin – Serbian relations of that time is the topic of authorial papers: Jelena Balšić and Serbian Despots Towards Zeta (Radoslav Rotković, PhD) and Đurađ II Balšić and the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 (Novak Adžić, PhD).

The Anthology will also include texts of heads of the Matica Crnogorska, the president Branko Banjević who wrote the Introduction and the general secretary Marko Špadijer: Lake Skadar – Cultural Park. These texts reflect the general stand of the Matica Crnogorska and their knowledge on this matter.

In the end, on behalf of the organiser (Matica Crnogorska) and my own, I would like to thank all authors who have accepted to be our associates in this project. Of course, we owe special thanks to the company Lovćen-Bečići and their director Mr Sreten Mrvaljević who kindly offered themselves, the second year in a row, to be generous and responsible co-organisers of our programmes.

(Translated by **Jelena Samardžić Kotri**)