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Early development of the St. John’s Fortress in Šibenik
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Abstract
In early autumn of 1646, after only two months of hastily organized public works and just days before the arrival of the Ottoman army, the people of Šibenik had finished the construction of fortress on the hill which overlooks the Old town. The new defensive position, built without the official approval or financial help from Venetian government, successfully withheld two sieges in 1646/47. St. John’s Fortress thus became the main defence point of Šibenik, and during more than three centuries it was used as such by successive ‘users’ which came after the Venetians – Austrian, Italian and Yugoslav army.

After the revitalization of two other fortresses of Šibenik in the last few years with the help of EU funds, the €6.55 million Revitalization of St. John’s Fortress area project was initiated, and the first archaeological excavations of the Fortress took place in 2015 and 2016/17. These new circumstances were an opportunity for an enhanced approach and interdisciplinary conversation about the Early Modern fortification heritage of Šibenik and the region. Based both on familiar as well as new, recently found historical sources and material, a theory suggests that the fortress’ early development (1646-1660) was significantly more complex than deemed earlier.

Keywords: Šibenik, Venetian Republic, fortress, seicento.

1. Introduction
The War of Crete (1645-69), fought between the Venetian Republic and Ottoman Empire, was one of the key formative points in the history of modern Dalmatia. Although this region was a battlefield of secondary importance, the long lasting conflict left similar consequences on the political, social and economic life on the Eastern Adriatic.

The Republic of Venice has had conquered or subjected to her governance most of Dalmatian cities (with the notable exception of Dubrovnik) during the first and second decade of the 15th century. That was also the period when the first looting campaigns of akinçi forces were recorded in Dalmatia [Kolanović, 1995]. In the next two centuries, these irregular Ottoman troops ravaged the Dalmatian hinterland and reduced the communal territories to a narrow strip of coastline and the islands. Occasional armed conflicts, such as those during the War of Cyprus (1570-73) were accompanied with the destruction of the region's resources. The constant exposure to wars and the development of new military techniques have pressured the cities to invest in their fortifications, which were often still better suited for medieval warfare [Čuzela, 2005].

By population, Šibenik was the largest city of Venetian Dalmatia in the 17th century [Novak, 1976]. The salt evaporation ponds, a main source of city's wealth in the last two centuries, although destroyed in the War of Cyprus, were partially reconstructed, and the City's economy again experienced a slight rise. After the
construction of St. Nicolas' Fortress in the mid-16th century, Šibenik was well-defended from the sea side, but its land defense was very deficient. Medieval city walls, which extended from the Old fortress (castel vecchio) towards the sea, were too thin and unable to withstand artillery attacks. The fortress itself, the parts of which dated probably more than half of millennia ago, was also in a pretty rough state. Several minor defensive positions within the district were used more as refuges for the local population, than as reliable fortification elements of the City's defense. But the greatest problem was located 300 metres from the city gates – a short ridge which overlooks the highest point of the Old fortress. It was an ideal place for the enemy artillery which could easily target the City. Šibenik has never faced a prolonged attack of heavy artillery, and was fundamentally unprepared for this challenge.

Fig. 1 – Il fidelissimo Sibenicho, Martin Rota Kolunić, 1571. The original image is the property of Šibenik City Museum.

A small votive church of St. John the Baptist was located on the highest part of the ridge, constructed or rebuilt in 1444 [Gundrum, 1902], and since the 1520's, the city rectors, military engineers and even the citizens themselves, with no avail, have periodically sought funds for the construction of new Fortress, which could oversee every access road to the City [Žmegač, 2009]. Venetian defensive policy in Dalmatia had changed a little since the War of Cyprus – in the case of the new conflict, only Zadar and Kotor, two cities with the latest and most modern fortifications, will be defended at all costs.

The situation had changed at the start of the War of Crete – in July 1646, when a large and well equipped Ottoman force had easily conquered a strong fortress of Novigrad, causing panic in other Dalmatian cities. Despite the disapproval of the war council and the Senate, the people of Šibenik had started building St. John's Fortress with their own funds and their own hands, and finished the construction in only two months, right before the arrival of the Ottoman army, which initiated a short and unsuccessful siege in October 1646. Next year, the largest invading army since the ancient times descended into Dalmatia – more than 25,000 soldiers with over 20 cannons. Their leader, Bosnian pasha Techieli, had marked Šibenik as their primary goal, but the enemy could not penetrate the newly formed defensive positions of the City – after a one-month long siege in the summer of 1647, during which the Ottomans even succeeded in occupying the exterior fortifications of St. John's Fortress, the Ottomans retreated with great victims [Difnik, 1986].

Fig. 2 – Location plan of Šibenik, with the St. Michael’s Fortress (left), St. John’s Fortress (middle) and Barone Fortress (right) marked in black.

The story of the construction of St. John's Fortress was always told linearly, from the historical point of view, with events regarding the siege and the city's heroic defense being rightfully emphasized. The details and chronology regarding the military architecture of the Fortress were not deemed as important by local and even national researchers. New developments in Šibenik have challenged that approach – several heritage revitalization projects have been developed and implemented in the last decade, and two fortresses of Šibenik were reopened recently (St. Michael's Fortress,
Barone Fortress). The commencement of the third project, Revitalization of St. John's Fortress area, in September 2016, was an opportunity to revisit the old and perhaps, find new source materials. The first archaeological excavations on the Fortress, also conducted in 2015/16, combined with the new findings, suggest that the final form of the Fortress, shaped c.a. 1660, doesn't fully reflect the complexity of its construction and the constant alterations throughout this early period.

2.1. The sieges of 1646 and 1647.

The Ottoman army was already in full swing during the early summer of 1646, when fr. Antonio Leni, a military engineer the Venetian service, designed the Fortress on the St. John's hill above Šibenik. It was a plain and symmetrical fortification, with its front hornwerk elongated towards the enemy and two lateral bastions verso la Citta. Leni's design also predicted additional defensive elements, but the hurried construction dictated the final, basic form [Žmegač, 2009]. Up until now, researchers have assumed that this 'first phase' had not occurred, and that the Fortress was, due to the mountainous terrain, built in more or less the same shape as it looks today. Recent discovery of new graphic sources, mainly the late 1646 drawing of Giovanni di Namur, another Venetian engineer, suggested that this phase could indeed have existed. It was finally confirmed during the archaeological works in 2016, when a well-preserved corner of the northwestern demi-bastion was uncovered in the oldest layer on the Fortress.

One of the commanders of Venetian army, count Scotto, proposed the additional fortification of an exterior defensive position, which was finished just a few days before the arrival of the Ottoman army in 1646: "Noticing one narrow and rocky branch of the same ridge (…) he gave orders to build a dry-stone tenaille, which overlooked the whole valley (…)" [Difnik, 1986]. Numerous graphic sources confirm the location of this tenaille. Geotechnical research defined the supposed altitude and location, and additional archaeological research could give new answer regarding its precise position.

St. John's Fortress, a new main defensive point of Šibenik, had successfully withheld the first, short siege of the town (7-13th October of 1646). Fortress was slightly adjusted to the terrain during the next winter, when the same count Scotto proposed that "a new hornwerk should be broadened towards the west and the north, and its front should be rotated toward his tenaille" [Difnik, 1986]. This description perfectly fits the new form of the Fortress, as is evidenced by Namur's and other drawings. This adjusted St. John's Fortress faced the Ottoman army again from 21 August to 16 September of 1647. After few days, the enemy had conquered the Scotto's tenaille, and despite fierce counter-attacks, "they could not be forced out". The enemy's final charge onto the fortress' curtain was eventually unsuccessful, and not long after that the Ottoman forces withdrew.

Fig. 2 – St. John’s Fortress in 1647, etched by Joan Blaeu and published by Pierre Mortier in 1704. The original image is the property of Šibenik City Museum.
2.2. The immediate repairments

Extensive repairments on the badly damaged fortress were conducted in late 1648 and early 1649. One drawing presents another extension of the fortress' main shape towards the west, and strengthening of hornwerk's demi-bastions [Žmegač, 2009]. Also, a revelin/mezzaluna was built at the front of the hornwerk, and the "rocky position encompassed several terrapieni outside of lower walls, so expertly built that, as they overlooked the slope, they were also being overlooked by the fortress" [Difnik, 1986]. These works are also confirmed by the inscription on the fortress, which was erected by the rector Barbo Pesauro in 1649, as well as several contracts from 1648, mentioning the delivery of construction material (travertine rock) for the walls repairment [Ćuzela, 2005].

2.3. The final formation of external fortifications

The next interventions were made on the exterior fortifications from c.a. 1651 to 1656, mainly under the leadership of Dalmatian provveditore Antonio Bernardo, and his chief engineer Onofrio del Campo. These works were referred to in several different sources – the inscription on the Fortress erected by Bernardo in 1656, his written report to the Senate, and the extensive report with layouts and cross-sections made by del Campo [Bertoša, 2003]. According to him, he finished the fortificazioni esterio – tenaille, meza luna (revelin), contrascarpa and l'Ornaveccha (a ditch between the fortress and the tenaille). Also, a two entrenched redoubts (ridotti interrati) were built for the protection of dead angles. The new shape of these elements is confirmed by several other graphic and written sources.

Fig. 3 – St. John’s Fortress (upper left), drawn by an unknown author c.a. 1657-62. The legend reads – Forte di San Giouani (M); Fortificazioni Esteriori regolate da Onofrio del Campo (N); Tenagla regolata dal detto (O). The original image is the property of Šibenik City Museum.

The final adjustments of these northern fortifications were made just after 1660, when that area was brought to its current shape. Tenaille, counter-scarp, ravelin, and entrenched redoubts were removed, as well as parts of the lower hornwerk, and an elongated plateau was formed instead, partially filled with soil and ending with another hornwerk. A new ravelin/spur was built to improve the defense of plateau's western wall. In his report, del Campo is extremely critical towards this solution, and points out that "before, the enemy was supposed to conquer four fortifications before arriving to the fortress' walls, and now he is supposed to conquer just one" [Bertoša, 2003]. Although del Campo mentions neither date nor names, we can still define the author and the time of this latest intervention – in his report to the Senate, Dalmatian provveditore Girolamo Contarini (1662-64) says that he constructed un oppera a corna, che anco a stata disegnata dal signor don Innocentio Conti, but he had not finished it.
and in his opinion, it would be very useful to hurry the completion of these works [Novak, 1972]. As the extent of this intervention was very demanding, additional research on archive materials and sources should take place to further determine the precise datation, course and the scope of works.

3. Conclusion

The breathtaking events of 1646/47 made the St. John's Fortress a symbol of local unity and communal spirit of (not only) Early Modern era. In the story of Šibenik defense, these narrative elements were the ones already highlighted. The construction of the fortress, as well as the detailed adaptations which were made to provide the best possible strategic position to the defenders, have been considered marginal and self-explanatory.

Thanks to the revitalization projects, the fortresses of Šibenik were again under the spotlight – metaphorically and literally speaking. The re-interpretation of old and the discovery of the new sources, both written and graphic ones, along with their analysis, have led to new conclusions. Throughout its first decade and a half, St. John's Fortress experienced several interventions which transformed the ad hoc realized dry-stoned fort into a very complex and well-defended fortress. The main part of the fortress ("star") was reshaped twice in a very short span (1646-49), and the adaptations of exterior fortifications were continued well into the 1660's.

After that era, the basic form and structures of St. John's Fortress remained intact until today, as is witnessed by numerous graphic displays throughout the last three centuries. Venetian, Austrian and Yugoslav military forces have occupied the fortress, and left their mark in small-scale interventions on various facilities, depending on their needs.

Fig. 4 – St. John’s Fortress, made by V.M. Coronelli in 1688-91. The original image is the property of Šibenik City Museum.

As the fortress was losing its primary function, the parts of the defense structures were more and more neglected, obsolete, and devastated by human factor. During the last few decades, the citizens of Šibenik used this area, already completely covered with Aleppo pine forest, as a pathway and viewpoint. The revitalization projects have also revitalized scientific research and the interdisciplinary collaboration of researchers. One hopes that the planned features of the revitalized St. John's Fortress, the fully equipped archaeological campus being perhaps the most interesting one, will draw even more attention to the rich Modern fortification heritage of Croatia.
References


