

The influence of social elites on cultural processes. The example of Istrian feudal fortresses

Josip VIŠNJIĆ

Summary

Istria, the northernmost of the Adriatic peninsulas – beyond its evidently strong cultural ties to the broader Mediterranean, deeply ingrained in its identity and traditions – was also firmly connected to the inland Central European hinterland. These connections were particularly pronounced during the medieval period and are evident through various material manifestations. One of the most distinctive phenomena is the development of feudal residential fortifications, which, in terms of design and function, closely resemble those built in Central Europe.

While an older type of fortification – smaller fortified settlements with rudimentary traces of feudal residences—was well represented in Istria in earlier centuries, a new type of feudal castle emerged when the Patriarchs of

Aquileia secured the position of Istrian margraves, and the Counts of Görz (Gorizia) became their advocates, as well as the advocates of the Bishops of Poreč. The architectural model for feudal fortifications was transferred from Central Europe to Istria, introduced through the presence of these secular and ecclesiastical dignitaries as well as their numerous ministeriales, who settled in the province and became the first inhabitants of the newly built fortresses. These new social elites and their castles played a crucial role not only in shaping several centuries of the region's history but also in forming the distinct identity of the population in central and northern Istria.

Keywords: medieval fortresses, Istria, feudal elites, identities, local population

1. Introduction

The creation of cultural identities among different social groups in a given area in the past can only be cautiously inferred through the analysis of material remains still visible in the landscape or collected through archaeological research. This issue is particularly pronounced in regions where various influences intersect and intertwine, often originating from culturally distinct areas. An outstanding example of such a region is Istria – the northernmost and largest Adriatic peninsula – where clearly defined Mediterranean influences merged with those coming from its Central European hinterland.

Adding to this dynamic was the Slavic ethnic base, the majority of the population, who were continuously reinforced by migrations from the east during the medieval and early modern periods. These factors created ideal conditions for the formation of numerous and diverse identities within a relatively small territory and among a relatively limited population. Writing about Istrian identities in the early modern period, the renowned Istrian historian Miroslav BERTOŠA highlighted the complexity of these identity-formation processes in his article titled „U znaku plurala. Višebrojni i višeslojni identiteti istarski. Kroki

ranoga novovjekovlja: XVI.–XVIII. stoljeća“ (eng. “Under the Sign of the Plural: Multiple and Multilayered Istrian Identities. An Outline of Early Modernity: 16th–18th Century”).¹ This phenomenon became particularly evident during the early modern period, especially after devastating wars significantly reduced the population of the peninsula, creating a need for new settlements and leading to the redefinition, restructuring, erasure or supplementation of existing identities.

While some of these processes are at least partially recorded in written archival sources, attempts to identify similar developments in earlier periods often have to rely almost exclusively on material evidence. In the following section, I will explore the influence of medieval noble families on the identity formation of the local population, specifically through the lens of the construction of their fortifications.

¹ BERTOŠA 1999, 17–31.

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Der Einfluss sozialer Eliten auf kulturelle Prozesse – das Beispiel feudaler Burgen in Istrien

Istrien, die nördlichste der adriatischen Halbinseln, war – neben ihrer offensichtlich starken kulturellen Verbindung zum Mittelmeerraum, die tief in ihrer Identität und Tradition verwurzelt ist – auch stets eng mit dem zentral-europäischen Hinterland verbunden. Diese Verbindungen waren insbesondere im Mittelalter ausgeprägt und zeigen sich in verschiedenen materiellen Manifestationen. Eines der markantesten Phänomene ist die Entwicklung feudaler Wohnburgen, die in ihrer Gestaltung und Funktion den in Mitteleuropa errichteten Burgen stark ähneln.

Während ein älterer Typ von Befestigungen – kleinere befestigte Siedlungen mit rudimentären Spuren feudaler Residenzen – in Istrien bereits in früheren Jahrhunderten weit verbreitet war, entstand eine neue Art von Feudalburgen, als die Patriarchen von Aquileia die Position der Markgrafen von Istrien sicherten und die Grafen von Görz

(Gorica/Gorizia) sowohl ihre als auch die Anwälte der Bischöfe von Poreč wurden. Das architektonische Modell der feudalen Befestigungen wurde aus Mitteleuropa nach Istrien übertragen, eingeführt durch die Präsenz dieser weltlichen und kirchlichen Würdenträger sowie ihrer zahlreichen Ministerialen, die sich in der Provinz niederließen und die ersten Bewohner der neu errichteten Burgen wurden. Diese neuen sozialen Eliten und ihre Burgen spielten eine entscheidende Rolle, nicht nur bei der Gestaltung der Regionalgeschichte mehrere Jahrhunderte hindurch, sondern auch bei der Herausbildung einer eigenständigen Identität der Bevölkerung Zentral- und Nordistriens.

Schlagworte: mittelalterliche Burgen, Istrien, feudale Eliten, Identitäten, lokale Bevölkerung

Dr. Josip VIŠNJIĆ
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula
Centre for Interdisciplinary Research
in Landscape Archaeology
Zagrebačka 30
52100 Pula
Croatia
jovisnjic@nipu.hr