

## The Lost Archive: Traces of communication that has not been preserved between Bosnian and Serbian Courts in the 15th century

*By Dr. Enes Dedic*

The project *The Lost Archive: Traces of Communication That Has Not Been Preserved between Bosnian and Serbian Courts in the 15th Century* aims to explore the possibilities and scope of researching communication between medieval courts for which no documents have been preserved. An illustrative example is the relationship between the Bosnian and Serbian courts in the 15th century, for which only one document on mutual communication has been preserved. By studying the correspondence of rulers and nobles in this part of Southeastern Europe, it is possible to shed light on the communication between Bosnian and Serbian rulers and nobles. Based on indirect information that reached Ragusa through Bosnian, Serbian, and Ragusan envoys, data indicating direct diplomatic communication can be identified. The goal of this research, funded by the Archives Portal Europe, is to establish traces of this communication using data from the Dubrovnik State Archives and to contextualize this knowledge within the political circumstances of the time.

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<https://iis.unsa.ba/osoblje/enes-dedic/>

### The Lost Archive

After the application deadline for projects under the Archives Portal Europe Research Grant for 2024, I was informed in mid-July that my project, *The Lost Archive: Traces of Communication That Has Not Been Preserved between Bosnian and Serbian Courts in the 15th Century*, had been accepted for funding. This topic caught my interest as a potential research avenue due to the fact that only one document has been preserved that directly evidences communication between the Bosnian and Serbian courts of the 15th century.

Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina holds only three surviving medieval documents. In Serbia, the number of preserved documents is somewhat higher, though most are from before the 15th century and primarily consist of church donations. The afore-



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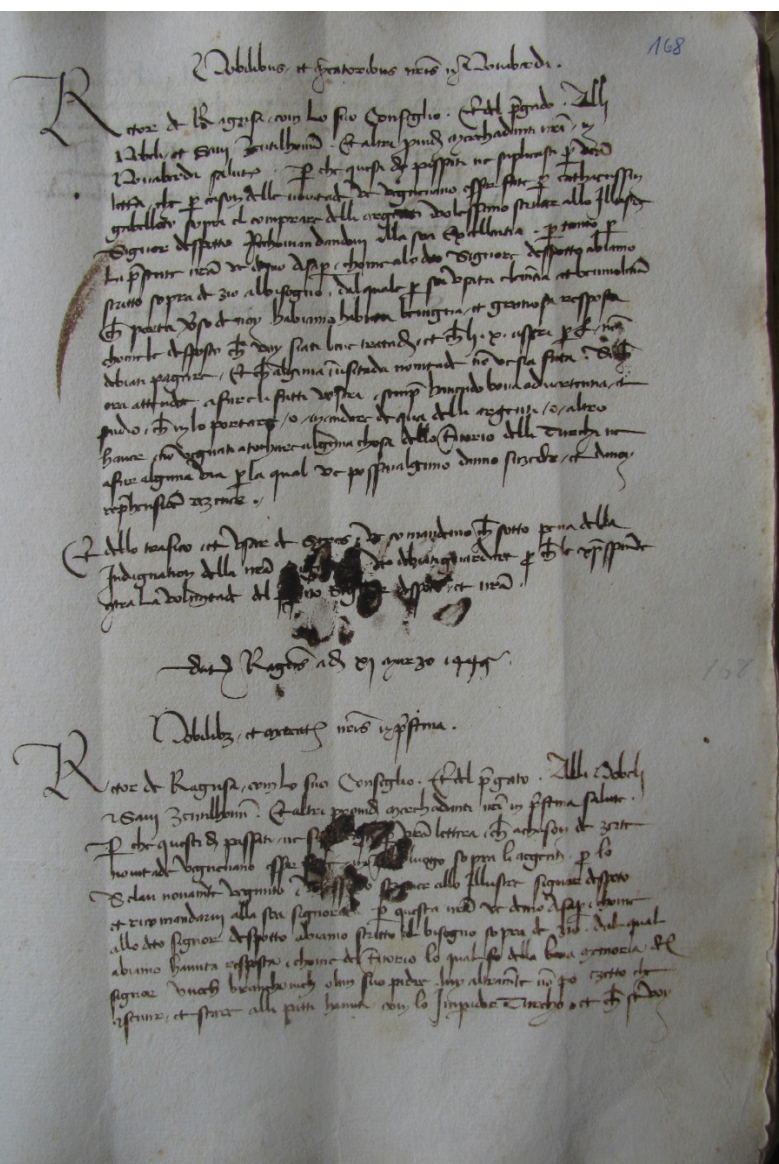
mentioned preserved document is a transcript of a diplomatic record from October 1458. It is a charter issued by King Tomaš of Bosnia to the Serbian logothete Stefan Ratković during negotiations for the marriage of Bosnian prince Stjepan Tomašević and Jelena (Mara), the daughter of Despot Lazar Branković. However, this document has only survived in transcription, and its current location remains uncertain. According to the latest information, it was housed in the State Archives in Budapest, though my efforts to verify this have yielded no new findings.

It seems implausible that two states sharing an extensive common border, roughly along the rivers Drina, Lim, and Tara, would have had no communication between them. While researching documents in the State Archives in Dubrovnik, I found references that clearly indicated interactions between Bosnian rulers and noblemen and their Serbian counterparts. During this period, Bosnian and Serbian rulers and nobility were involved in wars, reconciliations, alliances, and opposing coalitions of broader significance, negotiating and engaging in various agreements and interactions, as was typical in the medieval era. However, all records of these events have been preserved through documents created in Dubrovnik, Buda, Venice, Naples, and other locations. Through indirect information that reached Dubrovnik via Bosnian, Serbian, and Ragusan envoys, it is possible to extract data pointing to direct diplomatic contacts and communication.

The aim of this research was to use preserved archival sources to identify traces of such communication and to contextualize these findings within the broader political circumstances of the time. I realized that these references to diplomatic documents belong to a “lost archive,” as they were irretrievably lost over the course of history. Therefore, I sought to, in a sense, revive them and attempt to reconstruct their content.

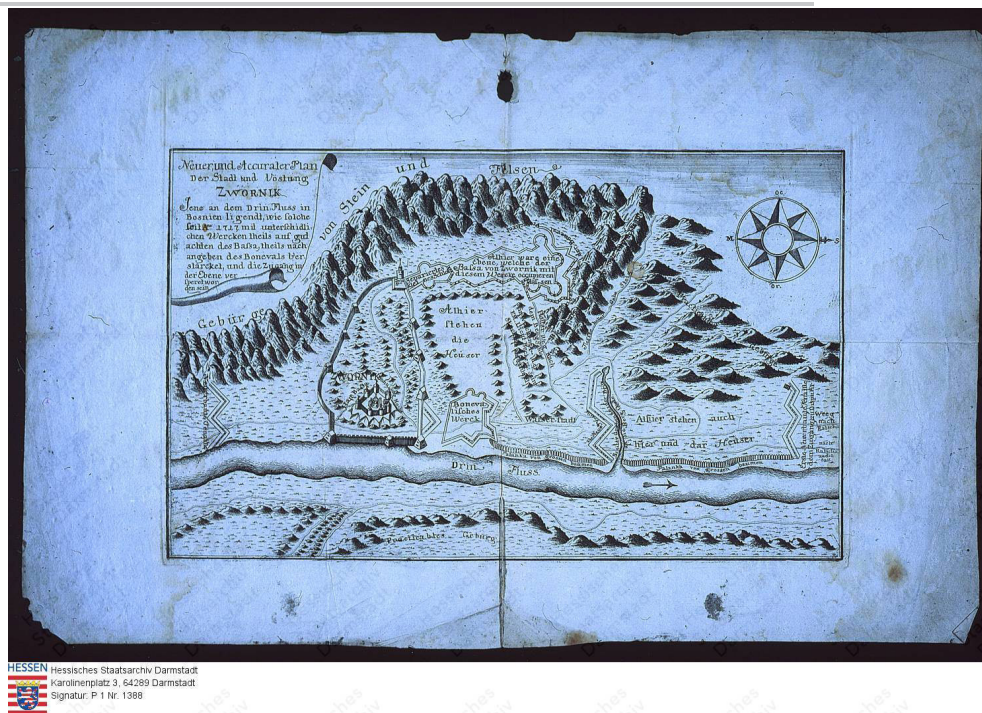
I conducted my research at the Dubrovnik State Archive, the most significant archive for studying the medieval history of Southeastern Europe. The informational content provided by Archives Portal Europe, serving as a guide for more in-depth exploration of archival materials, was invaluable during the preparation phase. The research in Dubrovnik lasted one work-week, from October 21 to 26, 2024.

1445: registre de correspondance marchande avec empreintes de pattes de chat.  
[Dubrovnik State Archives](#), Lettere di Levante, vol. XIII, f. 168r.  
Transcription by Emir O. Filipović [Version 1 dated 2013-02-25]





The research focused on archival series that include letters and instructions to Ragusan envoys sent to other countries, titled *Lettere di Levante*, as well as the decisions of the three Ragusan councils contained in the series *Reformationes*, *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, *Acta Consilii Minoris*, and *Acta Consilii Maioris*. The chronological framework of the research targeted the period from 1402 to 1459, coinciding with the existence of the state known in historiography as the Serbian Despotate. This was a polity formed after the disintegration of the Serbian Empire, governed by rulers from the Lazarević and Branković families who held the title of despot, granted by Byzantine emperors. The research revealed that traces of mutual communication between the Bosnian and Serbian courts could be definitively established based on 19 identified examples. These examples derive from information held by the Ragusan government, preserved through council decisions made during discussions on specific issues and through letters and instructions sent to Ragusan envoys on diplomatic missions to neighboring countries. Envoys already stationed at foreign courts would also receive updated instructions from the Ragusan authorities via couriers to keep them informed.



Map of the city and fortress of Zvornik on the Drina in Croatia.  
Source: Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt, APEF Archives

The earliest reference to communication between the courts is found in a letter from the Ragusan government to its nobleman stationed at the court of Bosnian nobleman Duke Sandalj Hranić Kosača. The letter mentions that a messenger from Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević had visited Sandalj, and the Ragusans instructed their envoy to ascertain the purpose of this visit. Unfortunately, subsequent letters from the envoy Nikola Gučetić do not mention the reasons for the visit. March 1405 was a period marked by ongoing conflicts between Bosnian rulers and nobility and Hungarian King Sigismund, who was also the overlord of the Serbian despot. However, the despot's envoy's visit to Sandalj seems more aligned with the conflict in Zeta, where Despot Stefan and Sandalj had become involved in the protracted war between Balša III Balšić and Venice. This conflict lasted until January 1413, when peace was concluded with Sandalj's assistance.

From the examples found, it is evident that communication between the Serbian and Bosnian courts primarily involved correspondence between the Kosača and Lazarević families, and later the Branković family. In addition to the Kosača, the Bosnian rulers from the Kotromanić dynasty, and occasionally the Pavlović nobility, also established communication with the Serbian royal court. It is particularly important to emphasize that the political actions of the Bosnian nobility, specifically the Dinjičić and Zlatonosović fami-

lies, whose estates were located in the border territories near Serbia, indicate that they too maintained communication with the Lazarević and Branković courts.

The identified examples suggest that communication between the Bosnian and Serbian courts was almost exclusively related to current political issues in Bosnian-Serbian relations, particularly regarding ongoing military and political events of broader regional significance. Given the nature of the preserved mentions of communication between the two courts, it is difficult to ascertain much about their negotiations concerning economic, social, or cultural matters. As is often the case, the daily life of ordinary people in border regions cannot be reconstructed based on the available sources.

The analyzed data represent fragmentary but credible traces of unpreserved communication, offering a glimpse into the diplomatic correspondence between the neighboring courts of Bosnia and Serbia. A scholarly article on this topic is currently in preparation, which will analyze and contextualize all 19 identified instances that provide clear evidence of diplomatic communication between the Bosnian and Serbian courts. I hope this article will encourage further research of this kind, aiming to reconstruct the unpreserved diplomatic communication of political actors in Southeastern Europe, which was undoubtedly frequent, thereby contributing to the restoration of the “lost archive.”

The realization of this project would not have been possible without the support of Archives Portal Europe, to whom I extend my heartfelt gratitude. As part of this project, a workshop was held on October 30, 2024, at the University of Sarajevo, where Archives Portal Europe was introduced along with the various potentials it offers to contemporary researchers. In this way, all interested researchers from the South Slavic region were able to learn more about how the Archives Portal Europe platform operates, as the workshop was conducted in a hybrid format in the Bosnian language.



*Sarajevo City Hall, Vijecnica. Source: Wikimedia Commons*