

Research Article

Warfare in the Serbian State from the Late 14th to the Mid-15th Century

Miloš Ivanović*

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the changes in warfare within the Serbian state during the late Middle Ages. Beginning in the 1380s, Ottoman pressure on Serbian territories prompted significant transformations in the military organisation of Serbian rulers. To enhance their defences against the advancing threat, they introduced various forms of military service. Despot Stefan Lazarević undertook a reform of the local government system, establishing new administrative units. Additionally, the period under review witnessed notable advancements and changes in armaments.

Keywords: Serbia, warfare, army, Ottomans, *krajište*, *Vlachs*, *pronoia*, armament.

Introduction

After the Battle of Maritza in September 1371, Serbian territories were gradually more strongly pressured by the Ottomans. This led to significant changes in the military organisation of the Serbian lands over time. The aim of these changes was to strengthen the defensive capability of the state

* Institute of History Belgrade
ORCID: 0000-0003-1917-2331; E-mail: misaveritatem@gmail.com

against the Ottomans. Some new institutions were adopted by the Ottomans after the conquest of the Serbian state.

To begin, it is important to provide a brief overview of the military organisation in Serbia prior to the Ottoman advance. Most of the available information comes from the charters issued by Serbian rulers and the provisions of *Dušan's Code* from 1349 and 1353/1354. Article 42 of the Code stipulated that patrimonies (*baštine*), the fundamental type of noble estates, were exempt from all obligations except military service and the payment of a tax known as *soće*.¹ Accordingly, it can be concluded that warfare was the basic duty of the nobility.² Based on several provisions, it can be seen that nobles were supposed to fight as horsemen. The only known provision of the *Military Law*, dating back probably to the late-12th century,³ determined that soldiers' horses were not to be used for carrying loads, and that they themselves could not participate in the transport service.⁴ Further, the horse and arms appear in Article 48 of the *Code* as symbols of the noble status.⁵ It can be inferred that the number of soldiers a noble was required to provide corresponded to the size of his estate.⁶ *Dušan's Code* specified that, alongside the Emperor, voivodes held the authority to command the army. Additionally, voivodes were empowered to resolve disputes arising during military campaigns.⁷ Marcher nobles (*vlastela krajišnici*) bore significant responsibilities under *Dušan's Code*. Article 49 mandated that they compensate for any damage inflicted by an enemy army passing through their region onto the ruler's territory.⁸ If bandits caused similar harm, the marcher noble was obligated to pay seven

¹ Đorđe Bubalo, ed. *Dušanov zakonik* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike–Službeni glasnik, 2010), 83, 164.

² Miloš Ivanović, "Konj dobri i oružje". in *Vlastela države srpskih despota (1402–1459)* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2024), 27, 33.

³ Rade Mihaljčić, "Vojnički zakon," in *Izborna vrednost stare srpske građe* (Beograd: Srpska školska knjiga–Knowledge, 2001), 51–52.

⁴ Vladimir Mošin, Sima Ćirković and Dušan Sindik, (eds.), *Zbornik srednjovekovnih ćiriličkih povelja i pisama Srbije, Bosne i Dubrovnika*, knjiga I, 1186–1321 (Beograd: Istorijski institut Beograd, 2011), 324, 328, 465; Rade Mihaljčić, "Vojnički zakon," 54, 56; Miloš Blagojević, "Zakon svetoga Simeona i svetoga Save," in *Sava Nemanjić– Sveti Sava. Istorija i tradicija*, ed. Vojislav J. Đurić (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1979), 159–161, 164.

⁵ Bubalo (ed.), *Dušanov zakonik*, 85, 166; Ivan Božić, "Konj dobri i oružje (uz 48. član Dušanovog zakonika)," *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke* 13–14 (1956): 85–87.

⁶ Stojan Novaković, *Stara srpska vojska. Istorijske skice iz dela "Narod i zemlja u staroj srpskoj državi"* (Beograd: Kraljevsko-srpska državna štamparija, 1897), 27.

⁷ Bubalo, (ed.), *Dušanov zakonik*, 101, 197; Teodor Taranovski, *Istorija srpskog prava u Nemanjičkoj državi* (Beograd: Lirika, 2002), 154–155, 215, 378, 545, 586.

⁸ *Dušanov zakonik*, ed. Bubalo, 85, 166–167; Miloš Blagojević, "Krajišta srednjovekovne Srbije od 1371. do 1459. godine," *Istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1987): 31.

times the value of the damage.⁹ This demonstrates the immense pressure placed upon these nobles, as the Ottomans penetrated the region.

Serbian Local Rulers under the Ottoman Pressure

Following the death of Emperor Uroš (1355–1371) in early December 1371, the Serbian state ceased to exist even as a formal entity.¹⁰ The Ottomans were confronted by a fragmented resistance led by local rulers, each primarily focused on expanding their own territories. During the 1380s, the most determined opposition to the Turks came from Prince Lazar, the lord of the region in the basin of the three Morava rivers. He was allied with his son-in-law Vuk Branković, the lord of the region encompassing present-day Kosovo and Metohija.¹¹ Prince Lazar placed significant emphasis on the construction of fortifications. He established Kruševac as his capital in the 1370s¹² and oversaw the building of key fortresses such as Koprijan, south of Niš, and Stalać, northeast of Kruševac.¹³ The responsibility for building and maintaining these fortifications fell largely on the dependent population.¹⁴ However, in 1387, Prince Lazar and Vuk Branković imposed an obligation on the Ragusans, who owned property in their towns, to contribute to the construction and defence of fortifications.¹⁵ This measure was clearly a response to the escalating threat from the Ottomans.¹⁶ In response to this growing danger, Prince Lazar initiated the modernisation of his army's weaponry. In

⁹ Dušanov zakonik, ed. Bubalo, 105, 204; Blagojević, "Krajišta srednjovekovne Srbije," 31.

¹⁰ Marko Šuica, "Narastanje novih moćnika," in *Vlast i moć – vlastela Moravske Srbije od 1365. do 1402. godine*, ed. Siniša Mišić (Kruševac: Narodna biblioteka-Centar za istorijsku geografiju i istorijsku demografiju Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2014), 21.

¹¹ For more details see: Rade Mihaljčić, *Lazar Hrebeljanović. Istorija, kult, predanje* (Beograd: Beogradski izdavački-grafički zavod, 1989), 97–100, 108–115; Marko Šuica, *Vuk Branković: slavni i velomožni gospodin* (Beograd: Evoluta, 2014), 80–111.

¹² Momčilo Spremić, "Kruševac u XIV i XV veku," in *Prekinut uspon. Srpske zemlje u poznom srednjem veku* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2005), 108–109; Nebojša Đokić, "Kruševac" in *Leksikon gradova i trgova srednjovekovnih srpskih zemalja: prema pisanim izvorima*, ed. Siniša Mišić (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2010), 152.

¹³ Marija Korpivica, "Koprijan," in *Leksikon gradova i trgova srednjovekovnih srpskih zemalja: prema pisanim izvorima*, ed. Siniša Mišić (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2010), 140; Dušica Minić and Obrenija Vukadin, *Srednjovekovni Stalać* (Beograd: Arheološki institut-Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture Kraljevo, 2007), 7–11, 163.

¹⁴ Marko Šuica, "Gradozidanije" in *Leksikon srpskog srednjeg veka*, ed. Sima Ćirković and Rade Mihaljčić (Beograd: Knowledge, 1999), 125–126.

¹⁵ Aleksandar Mladenović, *Povelje kneza Lazara: tekst, komentari, snimci* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2003), 193; Marko Šuica and Tatjana Subotin Golubović, "Povelja Vuka Brankovića Dubrovniku," *Stari srpski arhiv* 9 (2010): 101.

¹⁶ Marko Šuica, "Pripremi o srpsko-turskim okršajima i "strah od Turaka" 1386. godine," *Istorijski časopis* 53 (2006): 119.

September 1386, he entered into a contract with a Ragusan craftsman, Milaš Radoslavić, to produce ballistae and cannons in Serbia for one year.¹⁷

Different Forms of Military Service

The Battle of Kosovo in June 1389, which resulted in the deaths of both Prince Lazar and Sultan Murad I,¹⁸ had profound consequences for the Serbian lands.¹⁹ Before the middle of 1390, Prince Lazar's successors were compelled to acknowledge the supremacy of the Ottomans. Vuk Branković resisted the Ottomans until the summer or autumn of 1392, when he was forced to submit to Sultan Bayezid I (1389–1402).²⁰ As Ottoman vassals, Serbian rulers were subject to two primary obligations. The first was to provide auxiliary troops for the Sultan's campaigns, and the second was to pay an annual tribute (*haraç*).²¹ The requirement to supply auxiliary troops is explicitly mentioned in a charter issued by Despot Stefan Lazarević (1389–1427), the son of Prince Lazar, in 1417 for the Vatopedi Monastery.²² The exact number of soldiers Serbian rulers were expected to contribute is unclear. According to the Byzantine historian Doukas, Prince Stefan Lazarević sent a detachment of 5,000 lancers to the Battle of Ankara.²³ Another Byzantine historian, Chalkokondyles, claimed that at

¹⁷ Mihailo Dinić, "Prilozi za istoriju vatrene oružja u Dubrovniku i susednim zemljama," *Spomenik Srpske kraljevske akademije* 161 (1934): 83–84; Šuica, "Pripovesti o srpsko-turskim okršajima," 114.

¹⁸ For more details about the battle see: Rade Mihaljčić, *The Battle of Kosovo in History and in Popular Tradition* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1989), 43–51; Sima Ćirković, "The Field of Kosovo, 15 June 1389," in *Bitka na Kosovu 1389. godine*, ed. Sima Ćirković, Dragoslav Srećević and Oliver Miljković (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti – Istorijski muzej Srbije, 1989), 81–90.

¹⁹ Veljan Trpković, "Tursko-ugarski sukobi do 1402," *Istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1959): 102; Sima Ćirković, "Godine krize i previranja," in *Istorija srpskog naroda, druga knjiga. Doba borbi za očuvanje i obnovu države (1371–1459)*, ed. Jovanka Kalić (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1982), 48.

²⁰ Stanoje Bojanin, "Povelja Vuka Brankovića kojom oslobađa manastir Hilandar plaćanja turskog danka," *Stari srpski arhiv* 9 (2010): 149–151, 153–154, 158; Šuica, *Vuk Branković*, 139–148.

²¹ Cengiz Ohnonlu, "Kharādj," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 4, eds. Emeri van Donzel, Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Bernard Lewis and Charles Pellat (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1053, 1055; Momčilo Spremić, "Haraç" in *Leksikon srpskog srednjeg veka*, ed. Sima Ćirković and Rade Mihaljčić (Beograd: Knowledge, 1999), 773; Halil Inaldžik, *Osmansko carstvo: klasično doba 1300–1600* (Beograd: Utopija, 2003), 17, 164; Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13, 913, 180.

²² Michel Lascaris, "Actes serbes de Vatopedi," *Byzantinoslavica* 6 (1935–1936): 179–180; Cyril Pavlikianov, *Medieval Slavic Acts from Mount Athos 1230–1734. Critical Edition and Commentary of the Texts* (Sofia: "St. Kliment Ohridski" University Press, 2018), 277.

²³ Doukas, *Decline and Fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks: An Annotated Translation of "Historia Turco-Byzantina"*, trans. Harry Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 93.

least 10,000 Serbian soldiers participated in the same battle,²⁴ although this figure seems exaggerated. The Serbian detachment, which participated in the siege of Constantinople in 1453, consisted of 1,500 horsemen according to the testimony of Konstantin Mihailović, a member of it.²⁵ This suggests that the size of the auxiliary force may not have been fixed but varied depending on circumstances. The obligation to send troops was burdensome, affecting not only noble estates but also those of monasteries.²⁶

After the Battle of Ankara, Stefan Lazarević emerged as a key figure in the Ottoman succession struggle between the sons of Sultan Bayezid I, which lasted from 1402 to 1413.²⁷ During this period, Despot Stefan frequently clashed with his brother Vuk and the sons of Vuk Branković.²⁸ Vuk was killed in July 1410,²⁹ but Stefan reconciled with Đurađ Branković in 1411 or 1412, who later became his successor.³⁰ Although both Despot Stefan and Đurađ Branković aligned themselves with the victorious faction in the Ottoman civil war, they became vassals of the new Sultan Mehmed I in 1413.³¹ The mentioned charter issued by Despot Stefan to the Vatopedi Monastery in July 1417 provides insight into the various types of military service in his realm. The monastery's new possession, the village of Koprivnica (near the mining town of Novo Brdo) was exempted from military duties except in two cases: contributing troops for Ottoman campaigns and defending the border area (*krajište*) of Novo Brdo.³² Military service in these border regions, already significant under *Dušan's Code*, gained greater importance due to the increasing Ottoman threat,

²⁴ Laonikos Chalkokondyles, *The Histories*. Vol. 1, trans. Anthony Kaldellis (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 242–243; Maja Nikolić, *Vizantijski pisci o Srbiji (1402–1439)* (Beograd: Vizantološki institut SANU, 2010), 39.

²⁵ Konstantin Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, trans. Benjamin Stolz (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1975), 90–91.

²⁶ Miloš Ivanović, "Militarization of the Serbian State under Ottoman Pressure," *Hungarian Historical Review* 8, no. 2 (2019): 395.

²⁷ For more details see: Nikolić, *Vizantijski pisci o Srbiji*, 46–75.

²⁸ Momčilo Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković i njegovo doba* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1994) 52–61.

²⁹ Nikolić, *Vizantijski pisci o Srbiji*, 60–61; Dimitris Kastritsis, *The Sons of Bayezid. Empire Building and Representation in the Ottoman Civil War of 1402–1413* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 152.

³⁰ Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković*, 61; Miloš Blagojević, "Vrhovna vlast i državna uprava," in *Istorija srpskog naroda, druga knjiga. Doba borbi za očuvanje i obnovu države (1371–1459)*, ed. Jovanka Kalić (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1982), 116–117.

³¹ Nikolić, *Vizantijski pisci o Srbiji*, 76–77; Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković*, 62–63.

³² Lascaris, "Actes serbes de Vatopedi," 179–180; Pavlikianov, *Medieval Slavic Acts*, 277.

particularly the raids of the *akıncıs*.³³ In a 1427 charter, Despot Stefan further clarified the military obligations tied to estates granted to the Monastery of Great Lavra on Mount Athos. These obligations included participation in campaigns personally led by the ruler, suppressing banditry, and waging wars in border regions under the command of a voivode.³⁴ Campaigns led by the ruler were likely considered the most critical, as exemptions from participation were not permitted. This prioritisation is corroborated by a similar provision in a charter of Bosnian King Stefan Tomaš and his son Stefan, issued to the Serbian nobleman and grand logothete Stefan Ratković.³⁵ At that time, King Stefan Tomaš was vying for the Serbian throne for his son, with Hungarian support and negotiations with the Serbian court.³⁶ The Ottomans adopted aspects of this military organisation after the conquest of the Serbian state in 1459. For instance, a legal provision from 1536 in the *Kanun* for the *Sancak* of *Smederevo* indicates that *Vlachs* previously had to send one man with a pack horse for every five households (*petnik*) for the Sultan's campaigns or border service. Under this regulation³⁷, *Vlachs* were primarily a pastoral population with certain military obligations in medieval Serbia and later in the Ottoman Empire.³⁸ A similar recruitment system existed in Hungary. At the Diet of Timișoara in October 1397, Hungarian nobles were required to equip one mounted archer for every 20 peasants.³⁹ This ratio

³³ Adrian Gheorghe, *The Metamorphosis of Power. Violence, Warlords, Akıncıs and the Early Ottomans (1300–1450)* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2023), 62–92; Imber, *The Structure of Power*, 190, 252, 254, 256, 260–265, 35.

³⁴ Aleksandar Mladenović, ed. *Povelje i pisma despota Stefana: tekst, komentari, snimci* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2007), 260.

³⁵ Franjo Rački, "Prilozi za sbirku srbskih i bosanskih listina," *RAD Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti* 1 (1867): 158.

³⁶ Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković*, 536–538; Andrija Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 2nd ed (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2006), 92.

³⁷ Dušanka Bojanić, ed. *Turski zakoni i zakonski propisi iz XV i XVI veka za Smederevsku, Kruševačku i Vidinsku oblast* (Beograd: Istorijski institut, 1974), 47; Dušanka Bojanić-Lukač, "Ko je učestvovao u zamaničnoj vojsci?," *Vesnik Vojnog muzeja* 6–7 (1962): 241–242; Veselinović, Neven Isailović, "Legislation Concerning the Vlachs of the Balkans Before and After Ottoman Conquest: An Overview," in *State and Society Before and After Establishment of Ottoman Rule*, eds. Srđan Rudić, and Selim Aslantaş (Belgrade: Institute of History Belgrade-Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2017), 38; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 168.

³⁸ Isailović, "Legislation Concerning the Vlachs," 30–31, 36–40.

³⁹ *Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, vol. 2, eds. János Bak, Pál Engel and James Ross Sweeney (Salt Lake City: Charles Schlaks JR., Publisher, 1992), 22; András Borosy, "The Militia Portalis in Hungary before 1526," in *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, eds. János Bak, and Béla Király (New York: Brooklyn College, 1982), 63; Joseph Held, "Military Reform in Early Fifteenth Century Hungary," *East European Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1977): 131–132.

varied during the 15th century depending on the wealth of each nobleman. These kinds of troops are known in historiography as the *militia portalis*.⁴⁰

The mentioned charter of King Stefan Tomaš from 1458 emphasises that the estates of Grand Logothete Stefan Ratković were required to contribute to the *zamanička* army, much like all other villages in the state.⁴¹ Similarly, the Ottoman *Kanun* from 1536 provides further details about this military obligation. In cases of urgent tasks along the borders or in the marches, one man from each Vlach household would serve as a *zamanica*, either as an infantryman or horseman.⁴² The fact that the Ottomans retained the Serbian term suggests that a comparable system existed in the Serbian state.⁴³ Notably, *Despot's Law* for the *Vlachs* persisted as a legal framework in the *Sancaj of Smederevo* until 1516.⁴⁴ It is also believed that this form of recruitment was employed in the border regions (*krajišta*) of the Serbian Despotate⁴⁵ and likely extended to efforts aimed at suppressing banditry.⁴⁶ It can be assumed that the regulations on *petnik* and *zamnica* were part of *Despot's Law*.⁴⁷ However, questions remain about the effectiveness of such troops, as many peasants likely lacked proper military equipment. Historians have concluded that detachments composed of peasants played only a secondary role in military conflicts, particularly in Hungary, where heavy cavalry formed the backbone of the army. This is why Hungarian kings in the 15th century invested substantial resources in hiring mercenaries.⁴⁸ The Serbian situation differed slightly due to the involvement of the Vlach population, who typically owned horses. While the *Vlachs* may have been effective against brigands or in defending against smaller *aķuncu* raids, their contribution in

⁴⁰ *Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, vol. 2, 78; Borosy, "The Militia Portalis", 64; Held, "Military Reform," 133; Tamás Pálosfalvi, *From Nicopolis to Mohács: A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389–1526* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 22–23.

⁴¹ Rački, "Prilozi za sbirku srbskih i bosanskih listina," 158; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 190.

⁴² Bojanić, ed. *Turski zakoni i zakonski propisi*, 47; Bojanić-Lukač, "Ko je učestvovao u zamaničnoj vojsci?," 242, 244; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 190–191; Isailović, "Legislation Concerning the Vlachs," 38.

⁴³ Bojanić-Lukač, "Ko je učestvovao u zamaničnoj vojsci?," 244; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 191.

⁴⁴ Bojanić, ed. *Turski zakoni i zakonski propisi*, 32, 140; Gordana Tomović, "Despotov kanun," in *Srednjovekovno pravo Srba u ogledalu istorijskih izvora*, eds. Sima Ćirković and Kosta Čavoški (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2009), 291–292, 298–299.

⁴⁵ Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 190–192.

⁴⁶ Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 165, 193.

⁴⁷ Tomović, "Despotov kanun", 292–295.

⁴⁸ Martyn Rady, *Nobility, Land and Service in Medieval Hungary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 151–156; Held, "Military Reform," 135–136.

larger conflicts against the organised Ottoman army was likely limited.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Serbian despots are known to have hired mercenaries.⁵⁰ Despot Stefan, for instance, paid his mercenaries higher wages than those offered by King Sigismund in 1432/1433.⁵¹

Reform of Local Government and the Expansion of the *Pronoia* System

To strengthen the country's defences, Despot Stefan introduced a reform of the local government system. New administrative units called *vlasti*, led by voivodes, were organised following the model of the earlier marches (*krajišta*). These administrative centres were typically located in fortified towns.⁵² The critical distinction between *krajišta* and *vlasti* lay in the status of their leaders: while *krajišta* were governed by the most powerful noblemen of their regions, voivodes were directly appointed by the ruler and could be replaced at his discretion.⁵³ The primary responsibility of voivodes was military leadership. They led the army in their region, as evidenced by Despot Stefan's 1427 charter for the Monastery of Great Lavra.⁵⁴

The growing pressure from the Ottomans appears to have contributed to the expansion of the *pronoia* system.⁵⁵ *Pronoia* was a type of estate granted by Serbian rulers from the Nemanjić dynasty, similar to its Byzantine counterpart, in exchange for military service. Unlike *baština* (patrimony), *pronoia* estates could not be alienated, even when inheritance was permitted.⁵⁶ This system maintained its specific character until the fall

⁴⁹ Ivanović, "Militaryization of the Serbian State," 396–397.

⁵⁰ Sima Ćirković, "Cena najamnika u jugoistočnoj Evropi krajem srednjeg veka," in *Vojne krajinu u jugoslovenskim zemljama u novom veku do Karlovačkog mira 1699*, ed. Vasa Čubrilović (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1989), 16–18; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 184–185.

⁵¹ *Decreta regni Hungariae: Gesetze und Verordnungen Ungarns 1301–1457*, eds. Franciscus Döry, Georgius Bónis and Vera Bácskai (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 411; Ćirković, "Cena najamnika", 18.

⁵² Mihailo Dinić, "Vlasti za vreme Despotovine," *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 10, no. 1 (1968): 237–239, 242; Miloš Blagojević, "Krajišta srednjovekovne Srbije od 1371. do 1459. godine," *Istorijski glasnik*, no 1–2 (1987): 39–40, 42; Miloš Blagojević, *Državna uprava u srpskim srednjovekovnim zemljama* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 1997), 294; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 255.

⁵³ Blagojević, "Krajišta srednjovekovne Srbije," 40–42.

⁵⁴ Mladenović, ed. *Povelje i pisma despota Stefana*, 260; Veselinović, *Država srpskih despota*, 165, 193.

⁵⁵ Georgije Ostrogorski, *Pronija. Prilog istoriji feudalizma u Vizantiji i južnoslovenskim zemljama* (Beograd: Naučna knjiga, 1951), 149.

⁵⁶ Ostrogorski, *Pronija*, 135, 149–150; Mark C. Bartusis, "Serbian *pronoia* and *pronoia* in Serbia: The diffusion of an institution," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 48 (2011): 191, 207, 210.

of the Serbian medieval state.⁵⁷ One example of this shift is found in a charter indicating that, after the Battle of Kosovo, Prince Stefan Lazarević confiscated the patrimony of a nobleman named Obrad for treason and converted it into *pronoia*.⁵⁸ This suggests that granting land as *pronoia* was a particularly effective way for rulers to secure additional soldiers.⁵⁹ It comes as no surprise that the prominent nobleman and logothete (chancellor) Stefan Ratković held over 20 villages as *pronoia* by October 1458, while he did not possess any patrimonial land.⁶⁰ On the other hand, approximately 30 years earlier, the powerful nobleman and *čelnik* (comes palatinus) Radič owned as many as 60 villages as patrimony.⁶¹ The *pronoia* system also expanded in Byzantium, particularly at the expense of monastic estates, after 1371.⁶²

Construction of Fortresses and Changes in Weaponry

Serbian rulers placed significant emphasis on fortress construction during the first half of the 15th century. Despot Stefan Lazarević dedicated substantial efforts to developing Belgrade, which he received from the Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxembourg in 1403 or 1404.⁶³ However, his successor, Đurađ Branković, was compelled to return Belgrade to King Sigismund in September or October 1427, as stipulated by a prior agreement.⁶⁴ In response, Đurađ chose to establish a new capital at Smederevo. The *Small Town* of Smederevo, which housed Đurađ's court, was completed by 1429 or 1430,⁶⁵ while most of the fortifications, including 19 towers, were constructed by 1439.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ Ostrogorski, *Pronija*, 149–150; Bartusis, "Serbian pronoia," 207, 210; Miloš Ivanović, "Pronija u državi srpskih despota," *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 53 (2016): 326–332.

⁵⁸ Marko Šuica, "Povelja kneza Stefana Lazarevića kojom se Hilandaru prilaže crkva Vavedenja Bogorodičinog u Ibru," *Stari srpski arhiv* 3 (2004): 112.

⁵⁹ Ivanović, "Konj dobri i oružje," 122.

⁶⁰ Rački, "Prilozi za sbirku srbskih i bosanskih listina," 156–158.

⁶¹ Pavlikianov, *Medieval Slavic Acts*, 98–100, 103–104; Miloš Ivanović, "Pronija u državi srpskih despota," 337.

⁶² Mark Bartusis, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: The Institution of Pronoia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 551–558; Ostrogorski, *Pronija*, 108–110.

⁶³ Marko Popović, *The Fortress of Belgrade* (Beograd: Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Belgrade–Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, 1991), 29–37; Marko Popović, "Dvor vladara i vlastele," in *Privatni život u srpskim zemljama srednjeg veka*, ed. Smilja Marjanović Dušanić and Danica Popović (Beograd: Clio, 2004), 44–45.

⁶⁴ Aleksandar Krstić, "Kralj Žigmund u Borči, ili kada je i kako Beograd predat Ugrima 1427. godine?," *Istorijski časopis*, no. 61 (2012): 115, 118–126.

⁶⁵ Marko Popović, *Smederevo Fortress* (Belgrade: Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia, 2013), 6, 8, 22–32, 45, 50, 53, 55–56, 60, 62–64; Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković*, 126, 130.

⁶⁶ Popović, *Smederevo Fortress*, 57, 64; Spremić, *Despot Đurađ Branković*, 126, 130.

The first half of the 15th century also saw notable changes in the armament of the Serbian nobility. Under Ottoman influence, it appears that sabres became more commonly used among Serbian nobles. A note in a Ragusan document indicates that sabres were perceived as Turkish weapons.⁶⁷ Depictions of sabres appear in frescoes of holy warriors in monasteries such as Manasija and Kalenić,⁶⁸ although these representations cannot definitively prove their widespread use in Serbia.⁶⁹

By the late 1420s or early 1430s, the production of crossbows likely began in Serbia.⁷⁰ Additionally, Serbian nobles appear to have started using imported plate armour during this period.⁷¹ According to Doukas, Serbian warriors at the Battle of Ankara wore armour made of black iron, which offered substantial protection against Mongol attacks, forcing their adversaries to target the backsides of their horses.⁷² Helmets were also imported in large quantities; for instance, the *defter* for the Branković region from 1455 recorded that the Ottomans found 80 Hungarian and 30 Turkish helmets in the fortress of Novo Brdo following its capture.⁷³

Firearms were produced within the Serbian Despotate; by the 1430s, a gunsmith was documented as living in Novo Brdo.⁷⁴ The importation of saltpeter and sulphur further suggests that Serbia had begun manufacturing gunpowder during this period.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Ljubomir Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, I-1 (Beograd-Sremski Karlovci: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1929), 223.

⁶⁸ Gavro Škrivanić, *Oružje u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji, Bosni i Dubrovniku* (Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka, 1957), 63–64.

⁶⁹ Miodrag Marković, "Sveti ratnici iz Resave. Ikonografska analiza," in *Manastir Resava. Istorija i umetnost. Dani srpskoga duhovnog preobraženja II*, eds. Vojislav J. Đurić, Miroslav Pantić (Despotovac: Narodna biblioteka "Resavska škola", 1995), 213–214.

⁷⁰ Đurđica Petrović, "Oružje," in *Istorija primenjene umetnosti kod Srba I, Srednjovekovna Srbija*, ed. Nada Andrejević Kun (Beograd: Muzej primenjene umetnosti, 1977), 128.

⁷¹ Petrović, "Oružje", 128–129.

⁷² Doukas, *Decline and Fall of Byzantium*, 93; Nikolić, *Vizantijski pisci o Srbiji*, 43.

⁷³ Hamid Hadžibegić, Adem Handžić and Ešref Kovačević, eds., *Oblast Brankovića. Opširni katastarski popis iz 1455. godine* (Sarajevo: Orijentalni institut u Sarajevu, 1972), 208.

⁷⁴ Mihailo Dinić, ed., *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*, knjiga I (Beograd: Naučno delo, 1957), 71; Petrović, "Oružje", 128.

⁷⁵ Petrović, "Oružje", 128.

Conclusion

Warfare in medieval Serbia underwent significant transformations between the late 14th and mid-15th centuries. A key factor behind these changes was the relentless pressure from the Ottomans, which compelled Serbian rulers to conscript as many inhabitants as possible. A similar trend could be observed in Hungary during the same period. The organisation of local administration was also restructured to better support the defence against Ottoman incursions. Additionally, firearms began to play an increasingly prominent role in military operations. Despite these reforms, they ultimately failed to prevent the fall of the Serbian state to Ottoman rule. However, the fact that the Ottomans adopted many elements of the Serbian military organisation suggests that they recognised its potential effectiveness.

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