



The traditional fishing boats' regatta from Komiža to Palagruža

J. Božanić

University of Split, Croatia

Abstract

The author writes about a unique traditional fishing boats regatta organised by the Croatian fishermen from the island of Vis (Komiža town) to the small open sea island Palagruža. If the weather is calm, without wind, the five men crew has to row more than 15 hours to reach an islet 42 miles away where they have to catch sardines and salt them in wooden barrels. The author quotes a number of historical documents illustrating the attitude of the authorities towards Komiža fishermen, who are determined to defend their rights at any cost.

This is also a story about the unique Mediterranean type of fishing boat, the *gaeta falkuša*.

1 The tradition of the ancient sailors

The maritime route connecting the Gargano peninsula (west Adriatic coast) with the Hiliias peninsula (Punta Planka – Diomedes' Point) near Šibenik (Županović [1] 316–326) (east Adriatic coast) was named after Diomedes, the Trojan War hero of Homer's Iliad who sought sanctuary on the Adriatic coast after the fall of Troy. This was the busiest trans-Adriatic route in the ancient world and the Middle Ages and Issa was its most important intersection. Ancient writings, in which historic facts are sometimes interwoven with myths and legends, and archaeological discoveries both on the islands and in the seas below them, form a mosaic hinting at the beginnings of a small but powerful insular world, whose historic significance and destiny have always been determined by sea and navigation

So far Komiža bay has remained terra incognita on the archaeological map of Vis. The little knowledge we have does not suggest the existence of an ancient town in this, the largest bay on Diomedes' route. Still, it is difficult to believe

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that it was uninhabited in Illyrian, Greek and Roman times since it has abundant fresh-water wells and faces the sun and the open sea close to the richest fishing in the Adriatic. It is also hard to believe that there was no continuity of culture here before the arrival of the Croats in the Middle Ages, first mentioned in a written document in the 10th century.

The Greek settlers, being seafarers, brought highly-developed shipbuilding, navigational and fishing skills from their homeland of Syracuse as is indicated by archaeological finds such as ceramic weights for fishing nets and forged bronze fish-hooks. It is not certain what the dolphin symbolizes on the reverse side of the Issa coins, and in the mosaic on the floor of the Roman baths in Vis. Neither is it clear what the shapes of fish represent on Issa vases, but they are most likely symbols of the connection of Issa's inhabitants with navigation, fishing and the sea.

Between the 9th and the 12th centuries, followers of St. Benedict from Nursia built monasteries on Tremeiti, Palagruža, Biševo, and Sveti Andrija – Svetac- to spread Christian culture along the most frequented maritime route. However, it is only conjecture that they built the chapel of St. Nicholas, along with their first habitation, on the volcanic hill in Val Comeze during the 9th century (Mardešić [4] 58). Although no written document of this period mentions a name for the habitation, it is clear that the monks did not build their monastery in an empty and deserted bay. According to Marin Oreb, Archbishop Bernard of Split delivered a sermon in St. Nicholas' chapel, perhaps in 1202 on the anniversary of Pope Alexander III's Vis landing in March 1177, evoking the memory of the Pope's visit and of his consecration of the church. The Archbishop praised the monks for establishing their monastery on an inhabited seashore where they could save souls of the sinful, rather than in the empty hills where they could save only their own.

The Middle Ages left few traces of the way of life on the island. There are no written texts about fishing. The archive of the Hvar Commune to which Vis and the rest of the Archipelago belonged was burnt during the Turkish attack in 1571. The fire destroyed records of the fishing, which was probably highly developed by then, as is suggested by the first known documents from the 16th century which described large catches of pelagic fish and the great number of fishermen, craft and tools on Vis.

The Dalmatian islands came under Venetian rule in 1420 and the powerful Adriatic Empire thus became a major market for salt fish, produced mostly on Vis.

2 Sixteen century documents of fishing history

The first written text on pelagic fishing in the eastern Adriatic mentioned the fishermen of Vis "who catch and salt enormous quantities of pilchard in May each year" (Fusco [2] 113). The existence of a rich fishing ground was also confirmed by Giovanni Battista Giustiniano, Venetian Overseer for Dalmatia and Albania, in his Itinerary describing his inspection of Dalmatia in 1553. This report stated "the fishermen of Vis caught three million pilchard in a single day"

(Novak [3] 31). This quantity – nearly 120,000 kilograms – proves that there was a highly developed and organized fishing industry on Vis in the 16th century.

These documents cannot be referring to any primitive fishing skills. In order to catch 120 tonnes of fish in one night using no devices to replace or magnify the strength of human hands, people must have developed knowledge of shipbuilding, navigation, fishing and fish preparation over centuries.

Perhaps the historic data destroyed in the 1517 Hvar fire would have led us through the depths of time to the source of marine and fishing experience which the Slav settlers no doubt inherited from the sparse Greek and Roman populations who arrived from regions deep within the Continent in the early Middle Ages.

It remains an enigma whether the *gaeta falkuša*, equipped for fishing near distant islands and preserved into the 20th century, is a relict of ancient maritime tradition. The origin of the *vojga* (gill-net) is also mere conjecture (Mardešić [4] 160). Ricardo d'Erco says: "I have reason to think that *vojgas* have always existed on Vis (...) It can be assumed that the gill-net was one of the first fishing tools" (d'Erco [5] 188). Although he gives no specific data to support his opinion, he had extensive knowledge of the history of Eastern Adriatic fishing, and his belief is confirmed by etymologist Petar Skok who states that the word *vojga / volega* stems from ancient Greek (Skok [6]).

For three centuries the Venetians persecuted the *vojgari* (*vojga* fishermen), raiding and burning the nets, partly out of superstition about their harmfulness but also for the benefit of the rich owners of *trate* (beach-seine net). Yet the *vojga* predominated on Vis Archipelago until the middle of the 20th century.

The Komižans were the best and most skilful *vojgari* (gill net fishermen) on the Adriatic. History is punctuated by their clashes with authority, but despite drastic measures taken against them, the insubordinate fishermen refused to give up their traditional ways.

Little is known of fishing in ancient times, though we have mentioned the finds of weights for nets and wrought fish-hooks, but perhaps the living tradition of fishing holds more than that, since it has always been the basis of life here. Perhaps the *gaeta falkuša* and the *vojga* are the oldest relics. Written documents take us back to the beginning of the 16th century, and their paucity is complemented by evidence which stems from the depth of time.

Liber Comisae, an unusual historical book preserved on Vis, is a collection of documents in manuscript, for the most part recording Komiža's fishing history. It was compiled by Komiža chronicler Don Nikola Borčić Jerolimov in the second half of the 18th century and covers fishing through the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, including times of tense conflict with the authorities.

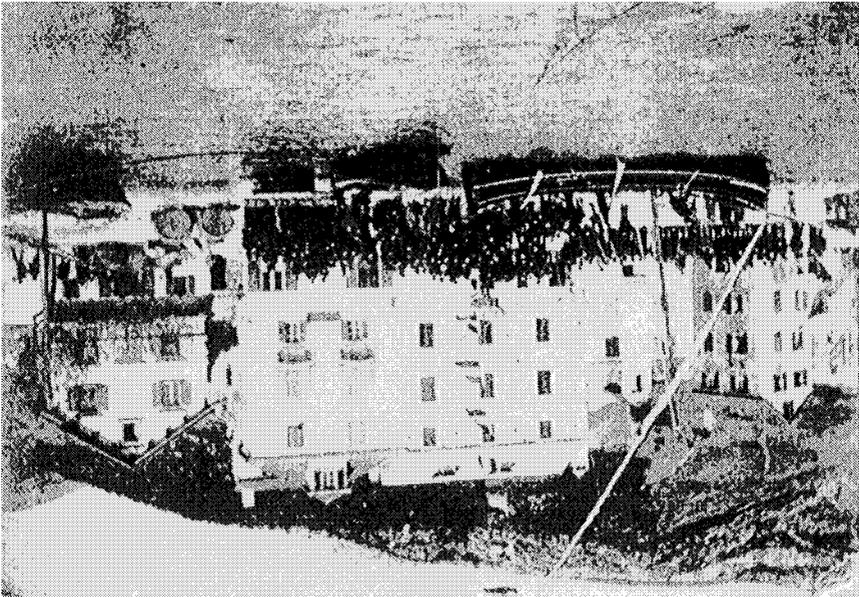
The oldest document in *Liber Comisae* describes a regatta of *gaeta falkušas* from Komiža to Palagruža. On May 9th 1593 a list was made in Hvar, as the centre of the commune to which the Island of Vis belonged, of seventy-four *falkuša* owners who would participate in the regatta at the next new moon (Novak [3] 44). Several associated documents state that all fishermen who wanted to take part had to report to headmen Franjo Borčić and Jakov Bogdan on May 20th. Unregistered departures for Palagruža were forbidden on penalty of

In the early morning of May 20th, guns thundered from the Renaissance tower and an armada of seventy-four *falkusas* preceded by a war galleon set off from Komiza harbour for Palagruža, forty-two nautical miles distant. Each *gaeta* had five oarsmen and if there was no wind three hundred and seventy oars would have frothed up the sea. They were to row continuously for fifteen hours in a marathon to the beaches of Palagruža.

The pilchard-catchers with their small nets made the long voyage to Palagruža not just because of its rich fishing-ground, but because there was no room for them at the fishing posts around Vis and Biševo, which were reserved for the *trata*, bigger nets coming also from as far away as Hvar and Brač. There were four times as many of these larger fishing crews, each comprising fifteen to twenty fishermen on three or four boats, as there were convenient fishing positions around Vis and Biševo.

The *trata* equipment was expensive and the owners, especially those from Hvar, were rich and influential with the authorities. Most of them did not personally take part in the fishing, but they resented the presence of the *vojga* owners. By putting pressure on the authorities they managed to have the

Figure 1. The oldest photograph of a *gaeta* falkusa, Komiza 1875.



eighteen months' rowing on a galley in chains. It is mentioned that a war galleon would accompany the regatta to protect it from pirates. The Hvar *knez* ordered the fishermen to arm themselves with harquebuses and forbade children under eighteen years of age to participate. All fishermen were to obey the orders of the fishing headmen, and if they did not the headmen could dispatch them to Hvar jail in chains (Novak [3] 94).

vojgari's fishing rights restricted and even secured complete prohibition of the use of *vojgas*, and drastic measures were employed against any transgressors. The motive for such prohibitions was the suppression of competition, since pilchard caught by the *vojga* fetched a considerably higher price because of its quality. In addition, the owners of the *tratas* needed a large workforce and tried to fill their crews with *vojga* fishermen, who were especially respected as strong oarsmen and experts on the sea and on fishing. In years when the catch was poor, the authorities allowed the *vojgas* to be used near the big nets, but when the catch was abundant they were forbidden to fish even around Palagruža, where the underwater rocks and rocky shore were totally unsuited to the use of *tratas*.

3 The conflict between Venetian government and Komizan fishermen

Despite the Draconian laws prescribed by Venice and implemented by the state judges of the Hvar commune, the courageous fishermen opposed these unreasonable prohibitions and continued to fish throughout these centuries, risking losing their property and even their lives in order to survive

On May 25th 1655 sentence was passed in absentia on twenty fishermen from Komiža accused of pilchard fishing around Palagruža. Part of the sentence reads: "Aware of their gross transgression they dare not return to face justice. To punish such outrageous insubordination we pronounce that absent subjects Bartul Zamberlin, Petar Petričević, Andrija Harvat, Petar Covo, Mihovil Pavšić, Pavao Bracan Jr., Franjo Fruzin, Jakov Galiot and Ivan Perina are exiled from this town and region, and from the Province of Dalmatia, for a period of ten consecutive years, and that they should approach no nearer than the tower of Klis. If during that time they are found in defiance of this exile and brought to justice, let them serve for five consecutive years as oarsmen, chained by their feet, on a Galley of the Most Serene Republic. Should any of them be incapable of such service, he will be kept in jail for three years and then returned to exile (...). Anyone who catches or kills these offenders shall be rewarded one hundred liras for each, which shall be taken from the offender's property if he has any, and otherwise one half of that amount from the funds of this Municipality (...)." (d'Erco [5] 192–193).

The Venetian authorities treated the *vojga* fishermen like bandits. Drastic measures were constantly invoked: fishermen were exiled from their homeland, sentenced to years of rowing on galleys bound in chains; their property was confiscated and their nets were burnt. The notice of General Overseer Alvis Mocenigo in 1697 regarding the ban on *vojga* pilchards fishing pronounced unpardonable punishment of "burning their boats and nets, fines of fifty ducats per net, exile, prison, hard labour (...)" (d'Erco [5] 194)

In 1698 Komiža *vojgari* (gill-net fishermen) petitioned the Doge of Venice for permission to fish for pilchard on the grounds that "the Komiža region is part of the Island of Vis but is the most barren and infertile in the whole of Dalmatia, being on rocky ground and surrounded by bare hills. Nothing can be grown there because it lies in the jaws of the sea and its fertility is no better than that of

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Arabia. Komiža could be called Arabia were it not for the sea, which feeds about 1800 hapless souls (...) who survive through pilchard fishing using small nets called *sardelaras*, because their poverty precludes use of expensive *tratas*." The fishermen talk of their value to Venice in its wars with the Turks, and complain of the hard penalties associated with the unjust prohibition of pilchard fishing using *vojgas*. They say that in order to survive they need to fish around the far-off islands of Sušac and Palagruža, where they are in great danger from pirates who have "in several incidents taken captive 176 men" (d'Erco [5] 196).

The letter for the Doge was sent to the Council of the Wise in Venice in July 1696. By way of transfer, they were visited from Venetian warships and in 1700 their nets were burnt.

In 1756 the Venice senate abolished its ruling of 1708 which gave Komižans the right to use *sardelaras* around Svetac, Sušac and Palagruža and the Komižans responded with a memorandum demanding reinstatement of the right. They were refused and subsequently a mission of thirty-six boats travelled to Venice to protest to the authorities, whose orders endangered their very survival. Their arguments were rejected and they were returned to Komiža by an escort of war galleons.

In 1764 both boats and nets were ordered to be burnt, but the threat was not executed after the fishermen promised to refrain from using the *vojgas*. This was the time when the Venetian Republic, in its decline, wished to destroy this oldest form of fishing once and for all.

Francesco Grimani, then General Overseer for Dalmatia and Albania, proclaimed on August 14th 1756 the final eradication of the *vojgas*. The ultimatum to the Komižans was resolute: "Anyone who keeps *vojgas* must bring them to us and put them at our disposal within fifteen days from the day of this notice. Moved by pity, we shall dispose of them according to regulations which have the mildest effect on net owners, but in so doing we shall not deviate by a hair's breadth from executing the aforesaid regulations. After the stated time has elapsed, we shall use a firm hand using war galleons to destroy and eradicate these nets wherever they may be" (d'Erco [5] 203).

After this proclamation, nets were confiscated and burnt, and war galleons visited Komiža harbour several times to assist the authorities' punitive action. "War galleons and punitive expeditions cruise in fishing waters", says Mijo Mirković. "They confiscate nets and boats and capture men. The immediate motive is always the Komižans' inflexibility, independence, love of freedom, 'scandaloso libertinagio' and 'iniquo talento'." (Mirković [8] 15).

Despite these measures, the Komiža fishermen continued to use the forbidden nets because of their lack of fertile land and their long tradition of *vojga* fishing. "The miserable condition of the great mass of people", says R. d'Erco, "was the reason why they neither wished nor were able to abandon the *vojga* either far from or near to their island; as a result, they remained fearless in their long struggle with the Venetian authorities" (d'Erco [5] 207).

Ricardo d'Erco in his manuscript "History of Legislation on Sea Fishing in the Waters of the Austrian Littoral" (mid 19th century) wrote about the *vojgari*: "The Winged Lion raged against them with all the force of its wounded authority

at all times, excepting a few moments of truce. It persecuted them incessantly with confiscation, burning and threats of jail sentences, exile, hard labour and even death. Children lost their fathers, wives their husbands, and families were deprived of their sole breadwinner. But such cruelty led nowhere. As a hydra grows another, when its head has been cut off, the confiscated and burnt *vojgas* were replaced. The *vojgari* withstood Venice's rage and remained untamed and undefeated in a ferocious struggle with the Venetian Republic over a period of two hundred years." (d'Erco [5] 183).

In his *Itinerary* (Venice 1774), Alberto Fortis says that according to geographer A. Friedrich Buching the whole of Italy and a good part of the Levant were supplied with pilchard from Hvar and its dependent, Vis (Fortis [7] 254).

The voice of captain Ivan Vitaljić Gusla from the tape recorder:

"T' is hard for me ter see all the fishin' and sailin' experience be forgot. I've given all me life to it. T'is easy bein' a fisherman today. Today they've got engines, echo sounders, radio stations, automatic pilots, weather forecasts. In my time there was no harder school than t' one which a fisherman had ter go to. He had ter know more than a professor. He had ter know t' winds, stars, currents, all underwater rocks, t' fish under him in complete darkenss, t' whims of t' fish and t' whims of t' weather. Sometimes t' wasn't easy even stayin' alive, let alone to live from t' sea all yer life.

Most people me own age see in all that jist hard work which is best forgot. But I remember and want ter keep t' memory for t' young. They ought ter know about t' toils of the'r elders.

Komiža sprang from t' pilchard. Old people used ter say: "When there's pilchard, even t' ants are well fed". And when ther' was no pilchard, yer had ter run away into t' wide world.

When I were young, Komiža was a place which, how s'll I put it, seethed from end to end. Trawlers came, and sailboats, they were unloadin' hoops for barrels, and salt, and they were loadin' up with barrels of salted pilchard, caulkers were bangin', the barrels were bein' hoped, pine-bark was bein' beaten into pulp with mallets, carts wer' pulled, ther' was a smell of fresh fish, of brine and resing and tar. T'was an industry like nowhere in Dalmatia.

People used ter say then, if a man had four boys, they used to say his wife'd given him a fishin' crew, 'cos five men went in a crew – t' svičar and four others. My wife's given me a fishin' crew, only me crew went ter all sides of t' world. One son's in South America, Chile, t' other in Australia, a third in Italy and t' fourth in Split – each one ter a' four sides o' t' wind.

I didn't want me children to become fishermen, 'cos I couldn't forget me youth. That wasn't youth. We wer' galley-slaves, chained ter t' keel. We wer' galley-slaves, we young uns fishin' on Jabuka, on Brusnik, on Palagruža..."

Thus speaks the voice from the tape recorder, the last witness of Komiža's fishing saga.



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