The Batana of Rovinj - Rovigno

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Abstract

The multidisciplinary project “Batana of Rovinj - Rovigno” is a result of the potential of alive maritime tradition nourished by the community of Rovinj. The objectives of the project are research, protection, transmitting, and presenting oral tradition, material and non-material heritage of the batana, and enriching the offer of heritage tourism of Rovinj, Istria, and Croatia. The eco museum “The Batana House” is the basis of the project, which, among other things, stimulates a more systematic research of the traditional construction of the batana and a more systematic nomenclature of the constituent parts of the vessel in the native Italian dialect of Rovinj that this article will present to the scientific community for the first time.

Keywords: oral maritime tradition, non-material maritime heritage, stakeholder and grassroots community, heritage tourism, eco museum, flat bottom vessel, traditional process of construction, constituent parts, nomenclature of the vessel in the native Italian dialect of Rovinj.

1 Introduction

This article will address the following issues:

1. What is the batana of Rovinj and what is its significance for the Town of Rovinj and its inhabitants?
2. What are the purpose and the objectives of the project “The Batana of Rovinj – Rovigno”? 
3. How “The Batana House” museum was made, what is its mission and its concept?
4. What are the results of the research about structural characteristics and the process of building the batana of Rovinj?
5. Conclusion - plans for the future?

2 Batana – the traditional vessel of Rovinj

Batana is a wooden fishing boat with flat bottom and the most widely spread traditional vessel in Rovinj, a little town situated on the west coast of Istria with around 12,900 inhabitants. Batana, like the picturesque peninsular town nucleus, witnesses the continuity of local tradition. Despite numerous changes characterizing the history of Rovinj, it has remained a permanent heir of local heritage. For decades, local boat-builders and caulkers have built it, it is daily used by local fishermen and owned by numerous families in Rovinj. In the age of plastic vessels, the batana has become the symbol of a harmonious coexistence of local inhabitants, this ancient little town, and the coastal Adriatic landscape.

As the smallest and the most affordable fishing vessel, it has preserved the closest connection with the everyday life of numerous generations of the inhabitants of Rovinj. The batana reflects customs, traditions, habits, mentality, and the spiritual atmosphere of this little town and its inhabitants, regardless of whether they belong to the autochthonous Italian, Croatian, or some other ethnic minority living in this area.

3 Project “The Batana of Rovinj - Rovigno”

3.1 About the project and its objectives

This batana phenomenon is the primary focus of attention of the multidisciplinary project unifying museology, protection of oral maritime history, and maritime material and non-material tradition, cultural tourism, as well as many other scientific and artistic disciplines, arts and crafts.

The most important objective of the project is to use the story of the batana as an instrument of opening little and big windows with views of little and big histories and traditions of Rovinj and its inhabitants. The second objective is for the traditions and customs to be systematically researched, registered, and presented to local visitors and numerous tourists in a modern and interesting way. The establishment of collaboration with similar European and world projects, institutions, associations, and individuals working in the field of protection of maritime heritage is the third basic objective of the project.

3.2 Project activities

The realization of the project objectives includes numerous activities, manifestations, and programmes such as research, multimedia, exhibitions, publishing, film, gastronomy, festivals, educational, tourist…
The construction of the batana “Oun Rigno” (“A Kingdom”) is undoubtedly the most significant of the so far realized programmes. Under the auspices of the project, the oldest living batana-maker in Rovinj built the batana together with his sons and grandsons. The whole process of construction was documented by a digital camera connected to a computer (more than 12,000 photograms were made), while a film camera recorded the interview with the batana builder. Speaking in the native Italian dialect of Rovinj, which developed directly from the Latin language, the old batana builder transmits the secrets of his craft.

The reconstruction of the oldest preserved batana “Risorta” (“The Resurrected”), built at the beginning of the 20th century was performed by the youngest batana builder in Rovinj, and the whole process was also recorded on photographs and on the film.

The project has launched many other researches about traditional ways of fishing and various ways of traditional rowing. A systematic documentation of traditional ways of fishing with the batana by day and by night, as well as of the ways of using traditional fishing tools have been systematically built. A traditional culinary night was organized in a typical inn in Rovinj (dialect. spacio) with meals of fish and sea fruit caught on the batana, accompanied by an exchange of fishermen’s stories and local fishermen’s songs bitinadas - this is a
special way of performing musical accompaniment with singer’s voices. All these events and valuable photographic materials were recorded both on photographs and on film with the objective of making an ethno documentary film about the batana.

Nevertheless, the opening of eco museum “The Batana House” is the highest point of the project. In the museum, numerous results of the project are professionally presented in a modern, communicative, and interesting way. The museum also hosts numerous educational workshops about old boat-building and fishing crafts. In such a way, the project became the stronghold for the enhancement of cultural tourist offer in Rovinj.

4 Museum “The Batana House”

4.1 About the Museum

Eco museum “The Batana House” was opened in September 2004. The museum was not designed as a static cultural and tourist product. Its mission is acting as a dynamic cultural and social process providing a new impulse to enlivening the spirit and the cultural landscape of Rovinj [1].

The choice of the location of the museum alludes to the integration of the batana into the very heart of town’s everyday life. The museum occupies two floors of a typical Rovinj two-story house built at the end of the 17th century on the coast of the peninsular town nucleus. Sailor’s families, craftsmen’s, and workers’ families have for centuries lived in this house, a family still today lives above the museum. A small square in front of the house, thanks to its space and stage potentials is suitable for organizing various museum manifestations and open-air programmes including the daily exhibition of the batanas moored in the port.

4.2 Concept and realization of the Museum

The concept of a permanent museum layout entirely depends on the potentials of live transmitters of local traditions, crafts, and spiritual values. Grassroots community, collaborating with a team of experts and professional management, has created an ideal “critical mass” for its realization.

The process of realization, which lasted less than two years, included the participation of more than eighty members of the local stakeholder community: boat-builders and caulkers with families, fishermen, researchers of local history, musicians and performers of local fishermen’s bitinada songs, cooks of traditional fishermen’s cuisine, model builders specialized in making batana models, the batana owners, donators of exhibits, volunteers and enthusiasts…

The Museum is designed for a wide range of users: starting with pre-school and school children to adult local visitors, including senior citizens, as well as numerous Croatian and foreign tourists visiting this well developed tourist center year round (during the summer season, the number of inhabitants in Rovinj increases about threefold!).
4.3 Museum layout

In the minimalist designed interior of the museum spreading on about one hundred square meters, there are three galleries. The first one presents themes about the origin, typology, constituent parts, historic shipyards, shipbuilders, and the process of shipbuilding. The second exhibition hall is dedicated to the theme of real life of the batana and its original users - fishermen. The third museum hall is multifunctional. This is the site of Rovinj’s media library, “the wall” for occasional exhibitions and a small studio with the library, a board for press clippings, and a work computer with a database.

Figure 2: “The Batana House” interior.

The museum layout is designed as multimedia. The exhibits are permanently correlated with their owners and donators. The batana models assess model making, and most vividly illustrate differences between various types of the batana. Visual materials always supplement short and summarized accompanying texts: drawings, archive and contemporary photographs. Touch screen desk enables a layered research of museum’s themes, and the batana making process shows a 12-minute slide show. Through these interactive
exhibits, visitors can actively participate in the choice of levels of information they want to obtain, which also includes the recorded speech of protagonists of the exhibition in the native Italian dialect of Rovinj. The screen wall shows the ambient film with excerpts from the everyday use of the batana on the sea, the media library contains film clips, while the work computer offers a database about all preserved batanas in the port of Rovinj.

The visit to the museum exhibition is accompanied by constant music background of the Rovinj fishing songs *bitinada*.

The languages of the exhibition are Croatian, Italian, but also the native Italian dialect of Rovinj used for naming all parts of the batana, as well as boat-building and fishing tools. Fliers with explanations have so far been translated in English and German languages.

5 Origins, structural characteristics, and the construction process of the batana of Rovinj

5.1 Origins of the batana of Rovinj and its names

Geographic configuration and characteristics of the Northern and Mid-Adriatic favored the existence and the development of a special type of smaller flat bottom vessels. The batana of Rovinj, along with the *batel* of Rovinj, the *gondola* of Venice, the *trupa* of Neretva, the *sandula* of Komiža, and many other vessels, belongs to this numerous family.

According to Salamon [2], the main advantage of flat bottom vessels was the possibility of sailing in shallow waters, lakes, river mouths, lagoons and shallow seashores, and their simple construction. Due to a wide use and relatively simple construction, the existence of such vessels was not limited only to the Adriatic, but it was also characteristic of the whole Mediterranean and even further. The frequency of such vessel types and cultural exchange throughout centuries have produced a universal project solution and the construction process of flat bottom vessels, with some specific solutions characterizing various autochthonous vessels.

This was the story about the origin and the development of the batana of Rovinj. Despite the fact that a written testimony about the first batanas of Rovinj does not go further back than the beginning of the 19th century, the history of the batana itself began much earlier. Together with the premise that the batana developed out of vessels sailing in the Venetian lagoon in the Middle Ages, described in Cherini’s text [3], Benussi [4] reports the theory of completely autochthonous origins of the batana. According to him, the batana developed due to the need of fishing close by the shore in shallow waters of Rovinj’s coastline, similar to the lagoon area.

There are various explanations of the origins of the term batana. The first two explanations are Benussi’s [5]. According to the first one, the name descends from the Italian verb *battere*, which means *to beat*, because the batana “was beating” the waves with its flat bottom. The second theory claims that the name batana belongs to the autochthonous dialect of Rovinj: due to their good
maritime characteristics, the batanas were vessels good enough to win the sea, or bone da bati mar. The third theory defended by Pelizzer [6] claims that the name descends from the ancient sailing term batto, the root of the word batello, descending from the Anglo-Saxon expression bat, the origin of the English word for boat.

5.2 Structural characteristics

Throughout the centuries, the batana of Rovinj has preserved structural characteristics that make it unique. It is completely made of wood, with moderately rounded bottom towards the transom and the stem. Oakwood was used for making ribs and other parts of ribbing, while spruce-wood or fir-wood was used for the boarding. Only galvanized nails were used for joining planks.

The dimensions of the batana are relatively small and they have varied in the past from 4 to 8.5 meters, while today there are not many batanas longer than 5 meters. Its dimensions usually depended on the size of workspace of its builder, so that this is one of their distinctive features. The feature that makes the batana significantly different from similar flat bottom vessels in this area is larger width, which significantly improves navigation, enabling fishing in the open seas on more distant and longer routes.

Another special and interesting feature of the batana of Rovinj, presented by V. Salamon from the University of Zagreb in his research of the oldest batana of Rovinj still in use “Risorta”, published by Marzari [7], are the dimensions of the hulk performed in the so-called “Pythagoras’ harmony”.

Despite the fact that the batana was suitable for various types of fishing, in time several types of vessels were developed specialized for a specific kind of fishing, which was systematically researched by Benussi [8]. The classic batana is the most frequent in the port of Rovinj. It is covered only in its bow and stern part, so that the largest part of the deck is open. Diagonally in the middle of the classic batana, there is a thwart (dialect. banchito) also used as the support for the mast. It was used for day fishing, mostly in the coastal area. Another type is covered batana (dialect. batana cuviért) with the completely covered deck with two openings: the larger one (dialect. quadráio) situated along the middle of the boat, and the smaller one on the stern (dialect. purtiel). Such batana was also equipped with a sail, and it was used for fishing in the open sea, especially with long lines (dialect. parangaliti) and bigger nets that would be cast by night and hauled at dawn. The large covered deck was used as a shelter by night and during bad weather. The semi-covered batana (dialect. batana mie∫acuviért) is the third variety that developed in time. The covered deck stretched all the way to the outrigger (dialect. trasto), while next to the large stern opening (dialect. quadráio) it had a side passage on the right side (dialect. mie∫ocuradúr). The side passage was useful for night fishing with spears and the lamplight fishing boat (dialect. luminà). Not a single example of such batana can be seen in Rovinj today. The last variety that appeared in the last decades is the glass bottom batana. It was probably imported from the northern part of the Istrian coast. The bow-area of the boat bottom was made of glass, which served for easier spotting of the fish during night fishing with spears.
Along with its specific shape, the batana of Rovinj differs from other flat bottom vessels by its specific system of rowing. On shorter routes and during the fishing, two long oars were used placed in the diagonal outrigger (dialect. *trasto*).

There was also rowing in the Venetian fashion - standing up facing the bow. The use of outrigger made rowing simpler because it avoided the crossing of oars and increased the working arm of the oar. Additional oars were used on larger batanas, placed in side davits. On the outrigger and on the boat, there were oar grooves used for rowing with one oar during the fishing, mostly for casting nets.

On longer routes and in particular situations, the batana sailed with a large square lug sail (dialect. *vila al tiérso*).

Sails were made of tough cotton fabric, which was then painted. The painting of the sail was initially used for impregnation and longer duration. However, in time, it has become a sign of recognition, denoting personality and identity of the batana owner. Each family had its sign painted on the sail by which its members and other people recognized the vessel and its owners out on the sea. According to Pellizzer [9], sails of more than 95 families in Rovinj have been identified and registered so far. The painted motifs were geometric, and there were also less frequent figurative images, writings, numbers, and symbols. The most frequent colors were yellow, red, and green. As a precondition for sailing, the batana was equipped with a helm. Such helm had a larger leaf leaning towards the bow, because along with the function of steering, it also performed the function of...
balancing the boat and partly prevented the dropping during the navigation with the wind.

5.3 Building process

Despite the fact that the batanas of Rovinj had standard dimensions and construction characteristics, simple principles of building and its frequency among local boat-builders and caulkers affected the variety of the final building of the batana. In fact, although the batanas all looked the same, at the end of the building process each batana had its special features often reflecting the identity of its builder. One of such significant factors was the building space, which frequently limited its dimensions. Batanas were frequently built in small fishermen’s basements, and the fishermen had to pay attention to the size of the vessel so that they could actually take them out of the basement.

Considering small dimensions and the simplicity of construction, the building process itself was relatively simple. Before the beginning of building, the builder had to prepare boards for side boarding (dialect. maiéri delle fiancâde), the bottom (dialect. maiéri del fóndo), the stem (dialect. ásta da prua) and the transom (dialect. ásta da po^upa), which then had to be precisely cut and polished. Special rabbets (dialect. linbiéi) used during the juncture with side planking were cut into such elaborated planks of the stem and the transom.

Once all preparation activities were completed, the building started by nailing lower wale planks (dialect. preîme tuóle or maiéri da ñúta) to the stem and the transom in the previously cut rabbets with semicircular diameter with the length from 7 to 10 centimeters.

The next construction phase was the installation of the ribbing, a demanding work that asked for special attention and rich experience of the boat-builder. Side planking was gradually widened and two middle ribs were installed. Due to sharp form of the batana, the ribs were made of two parts, the floor (dialect. piána) and the futtock (dialect. brâso). The floor was slightly curved and installed so that the longitudinal bottom curve was about 10–12 centimeters, and its waterline would pass right above the bow and the stern. The futtocks (dialect. brâsi) were then joined to the floor at the specific angle (dialect. cartabón). From the middle of the mid-part of the vessel towards the ends, other floors and futtocks were then installed. Once the skeleton was put together, two upper sheer strakes (dialect. áliti maiéri da ſúra or fása da ſúra) were inserted. After that, the keelson (dialect. parama[l]ál) was placed along the mid-part of the bottom and joined to the floor. A pair of bow and stern bitts was then added, together with two small supports (dialect. suchíiti) carrying the keelson (dialect. parama[l]ál) on the bow and one on the stern.

To strengthen the side of the hulk, two more deck-beam shelves (dialect. cuntrafuórti) were installed, so that the ends were inserted into rabbets of the bitts and joined to the futtocks (dialect. brâsi). Between the upper planking and the two deck-beam shelves, additional bulwark stanchions (dialect. manculeiti) were installed with the function of structurally strengthening the batana, together with posts (dialect. sancheini) serving as supports for the outrigger (dialect. trasto) and for the thwart (dialect. banchito).
The form of the hulk of the batana was finally defined by inserting deck beams (dialect. *cadène*) and a part of their boarding. The final activity in this phase was the installation of the bulwark (dialect. *fei î*). Once all the elements were put into place, bitts were additionally modeled and polished, along with the bulwark stanchions, posts and the stem, and the whole construction was painted with the inter-coat.

![Figure 4: Construction of batana “Oun Rigno” in 2004.](image)

Turning the batana and finishing the bottom boarding continued the process. Bottom planks were added one by one from the middle towards the ends, while sheer strakes (dialect. *li pine*) were installed at the end. The completed boarding was then polished and painted with the inter-coat. The caulking was performed on the junctures of the stem and sheer strakes, as well as of the lower sheer strakes and the bottom, which means that the gaps in junctures were filled with hemp fiber (dialect. *stúpa*).

The batana was then put back in its initial position, the boarding of the stern and the bow was completed, and the topside plank (dialect. *braghîta*) was installed. Finally, rub rails (dialect. *curdôni*) were attached on the bullwark, the outrigger was prepared and the flooring (dialect. *paiôî*) and the oars (dialect. *reîmi*) were made.

Once the construction of the batana was completed, the whole vessel was painted. Originally, the painting was done with coats on the basis of linseed oil, and the choice of the color was mainly red for the bottom, white for the side, and green for the deck.
6 Conclusion

The project has so far had excellent results. The response and the reactions to “The Batana House” from both local and foreign guests in Rovinj are very positive and encouraging.

The objective of involving the population of Rovinj in the permanent work of the museum has been realized in several ways: through the organization of creative workshops for children with the topic of building the batana and traditional ways of weaving fishing nets, with occasional engagement of local fishermen and guardians of the batana tradition working as museum guides.

The task of connecting the project with similar projects in Europe and in the world is yet to be realized, and the participation at the Maritime Heritage 2005 Conference in Barcelona is the first and very important step in this direction.

In conclusion: in the previous decade, not a single batana has been constructed in Rovinj. Immediately after the opening of “The Batana House”, the batana makers have even received a couple of orders. This is one of the most illustrative indicators of the fact that the project has excellent results in such an early phase. The batana never really was out of fashion in Rovinj!

References

[5] Benussi, L., ibid, pp. 2