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Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral Rijeka

Recognizing and preserving intangible maritime heritage

Abstract

The paper presents the understanding of intangible maritime heritage and raising awareness of its value in the Kvarner region. The author refers to activities that began in 2009 through the cooperation of several associations, individual enthusiasts and professionals from the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka. In the fifteen-year period, not only has the intangible part of maritime traditional heritage been recognized, but activities have also been initiated to protect and maintain it through maritime heritage festivals, lectures and public presentations, demonstration workshops, training of young people and legal protection.

Keywords: intangible heritage, maritime heritage, tradition, knowledge transfer, sustainability

1. Acknowledging intangible heritage

Heritage is closely linked to the identity of a particular community. While its material aspects are immediately noticeable, and we often judge the “height” of a community’s culture based on them, the intangible elements are recognized only over time. We perceive them through language, expressions, creations, and everyday practices. Given this, intangible culture is constantly exposed to influences and change. It is a “living” asset that cannot be fixed or static, as it emerges precisely as the community’s internal response to external stimuli. Through its interactions with others, the community shapes its identity and culture. Intangible heritage is always a space for exchange and development. When it comes to maritime heritage, however, it should, by its very nature, be more open and receptive to external influences, since the sea is a space for new communications and connections with the wider world. The dynamics of change affecting a community also influence its intangible culture. In today’s globalized world, there are no truly isolated communities, i.e., no community

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that exists without global influence. In such circumstances, it becomes essential to preserve the heritage of previous generations, their uniqueness, identity, and their roots. This is where intangible heritage takes on particular importance.

That is why, in 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to this convention, intangible heritage includes practices, performances, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and associated spaces that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, recognize as their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is a community or group response to its environment, nature and historical heritage. It provides a sense of identity and continuity, fostering respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The convention applies only to those intangible heritages that align with existing international human rights standards and emphasizes mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, as well as the sustainable development of human society.¹

The Republic of Croatia ratified this convention in 2005. The Act on the Protection and Preservation of Cultural Property also recognizes intangible heritage, including language, dialect, speech, toponymy, and oral literature of all kinds; folklore related to music, dance, traditions, games, rituals, customs and other traditional folk values; as well as traditional arts and crafts.² In addition to adopting the Convention, UNESCO has established a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and a List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The Republic of Croatia boasts 17 intangible cultural properties listed on UNESCO's register, along with a national list of its own.

Due to its complexity, maritime heritage was not considered as a cohesive whole until about fifteen years ago. Instead, fragments of the tradition and cultural creativity of individual communities were isolated. While maritime heritage is indeed a part of cultural heritage, it possesses its own distinctiveness, primarily shaped by the interaction between humans and the coastal-marine environment, and therefore deserves a separate category.

In September 2009, in Rovinj, organized by the Eco-museum *The House of Batana / Eco-museo Casa della batana*, a forum of the Association of Mediterranean Maritime Museums was held to discuss intangible maritime heritage. At that time, the concept of intangible heritage was still relatively new within museological and conservation circles. Members of the Eco-museum *House of Batana*, under the expert guidance of Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir, were among the first to actively engage in preserving intangible maritime heritage, specifically, their own identity

¹ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000132540> (viewed 10/03/2025)

² Zakon o zaštiti i očuvanju kulturnih dobara Republike Hrvatske <https://www.zakon.hr/z/340/Zakon-o-za%C5%A1titi-i-o%C4%8Duvanju-kulturnih-dobara> (viewed 10/03/2025)

through the conservation of the art of building the Rovinj *batana*. The forum also featured examples of good practice from other parts of the European Mediterranean.

Thanks to the invitation of the forum organizers, I had the opportunity, together with Professor Robert Mohović, to participate and present aspects of maritime heritage that are particularly relevant to my profession as a historian. Specifically, I focused on historical records related to maritime skills used in navigation during the early modern period. Documents are very often regarded as material remnants of the past or as historical sources, however, depending on the content, they can also be the sole transmitters of traditional knowledge, skills, expressions, language, customs, beliefs and overall way of life. When studying the cultural history and the history of everyday life of earlier historical periods, written documents are scarce and insufficient. As a result, research must expand to include oral tradition, stories, songs and visual art.³ Material remains of the past can hold significant cultural value, but even those without material worth can be extremely important as symbols of intangible heritage. Just like the *batana*, a small wooden vessel that embodies the identity of the Italian community of Rovinj, many aspects of intangible heritage are closely associated with its construction and use, effectively “carrying” the community’s cultural identity.

2. Uncovering the maritime heritage of Kvarner

After the AMMM Forum in Rovinj, we began raising awareness about the need to protect and promote intangible maritime heritage in the Kvarner region. While there was, on one hand, good will, and even knowledge and efforts, to preserve the remnants of tangible maritime heritage in Kvarner outside formal museum institutions, a significant contribution to traditional maritime heritage came from associations founded by maritime heritage enthusiasts. Although their primary focus was the restoration and preservation of traditional boats and the organization of regattas as opportunities for gathering and socializing, they were also involved in preserving intangible heritage, even if they were not fully aware of it.

Our task was to collaborate with them to raise awareness about the importance of protecting intangible heritage. In short, to help recognize the value of the craftsmanship, skills and knowledge of old masters – shipbuilders, and then gradually realize that traditional maritime heritage encompasses much more than that. In addition to shipbuilding and the production of equipment for vessels (sails, oars, ropes, fenders, pulleys, etc.), the core of this heritage lies in the art of navigation. This involves understanding conditions at sea, relying on experience passed down through generations. Inseparably linked to this is the richness of maritime language, including the specific terms for parts of vessel, equipment, tools, production methods and navigation techniques. We are increasingly recognizing the importance of other

³ Burke, Peter: Što je kulturna povijest?, Antibarbarus, Zagreb, 2006.

related professions, such as fishing, preparing fish and seafood dishes, managing salt pans, harvesting sea sand and more. Various customs and beliefs are also associated with these practices. All of this represents the fragile knowledge preserved within a community, without being synthetically sealed off, but very much alive and open to exchange with other communities, constantly evolving through the transmission and adaptation of practices that have stood the test of time.

In addition to identifying elements of traditional intangible maritime heritage and collaborating with its bearers, whether individuals, groups or communities, it was also important to begin cataloguing this heritage in the Kvarner region. Thanks to the financial support from European funds, provided through cross-border cooperation projects Slovenia – Croatia and Italy – Croatia, the curators of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral Rijeka conducted a series of field research in the period from 2014 to 2021. The fieldwork was preceded by the definition of key categories of maritime heritage. As a result, we established an online database of maritime heritage, organized into the following categories of tangible and intangible culture:

1. Maritime-related architecture, including shipping companies, port authorities, maritime schools, shipyards, fish markets, fish processing factories, ship equipment factories, fishermen's huts, churches, chapels and shrines dedicated to the patron saints of seafarers, lazarettos and maritime quarantines, port infrastructure, warehouses, sea captains' houses, monuments to seafarers and cemeteries.
2. Maritime signaling facilities, such as lighthouses and beacons.
3. Museum institutions, interpretation centers, collections and visitor centers.
4. Monuments and memorial plaques with maritime themes and motifs.
5. Cultural and historical heritage in the coastal and underwater areas, including ports, docks, slipways, archaeological remains on the coast and in the underwater area, shipwrecks.
6. Cultural landscapes, such as landscaped bays, gulfs, channels, inlets, beaches, bathing areas.
7. Vessels.
8. Equipment related to maritime activities, including anchors, ship propellers, shipbuilding machinery and similar items, especially those displaced from their original context.
9. Exhibitions featuring maritime themes.
10. Audio-visual, literary and archival records.
11. Toponyms related to maritime locations and activities.
12. Maritime linguistic heritage.
13. Traditional activities, crafts and skills related to maritime practices.
14. Public administration, companies, services and institutions associated with maritime affairs.
15. Maritime associations.

16. Events.

17. Sea sports.

The data collected and entered into the online database served as the foundation for the creation of the virtual maritime museum *Mala Barka*, which covers a broad area from the Slovenian Littoral, through Istria to Kvarner⁴. As part of the Italy-Croatia cross-border cooperation project *Arca Adriatica*, this initiative was expanded to include data provided by partners from the Maritime Museum in Cesenatico (*Museo della Marineria di Cesenatico*) and San Benedetto del Tronto.

3. Possibilities for preserving traditional intangible maritime heritage

Through the aforementioned projects, we also renovated around twenty traditional boats from the Kvarner region. This process greatly benefited from the collaboration with experts from the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Rijeka, led by Prof. Roko Dejhalla. Since traditional boats such as the *guc*, *batana* and *pasara* were historically built without standardized technical drawings, it was necessary for experts to take precise measurements and technical drawings for each vessel undergoing restoration. In addition, experts from the Faculty of Maritime Studies of the University of Rijeka – Prof. Robert Mohović, Prof. Đani Mohović and Prof. Renato Ivče – prepared detailed technical descriptions. Each restoration was also documented with a video footage, capturing the process at the shipbuilder's workshop. Thanks to these materials, it will be possible in the future to create faithful replicas of the *guc*, *batana* or *pasara*, just as they were built by traditional craftsmen a century ago. In this way, we have preserved the skills and knowledge of traditional small-scale shipbuilding in Kvarner.

The next step was to ensure at least a partial transfer of this knowledge to younger generations. In cooperation with professors Marija Marač and Ljiljana Domazet from the Technical School in Rijeka, we enabled students of the shipbuilding department to participate in various phases of restoring traditional boats. This hands-on experience took place under the mentorship of master shipbuilders Franko Kraljić in Malinska, Loris and Josip Rubinić in Mošćenice, and Josip Mršić in Selce.

These workshops have since become an integral part of the practical training for students of the shipbuilding department. Furthermore, through the *Arca Adriatica* project, a dedicated workshop was equipped at the Technical School, where students, under the expert guidance of teachers Marija Marač, Ljiljana Domazet, Robin Matulja and Rajko Rubeša, successfully built a traditional *pasara*-type vessel.

In addition to the practical component of the workshops, public lectures covering the theoretical aspects of traditional shipbuilding were also organized. These were held in Rijeka and made available to the wider interested public. Special demonstration workshops were also arranged specifically for primary school children.

⁴ <https://muzejmalabarka.com/> (viewed 10/03/2025)

At the same time, demonstration workshops of maritime crafts and skills have been held during sea festivals and events across the Kvarner region throughout the summer months. These workshops feature demonstrations of fish salting, various fishing techniques, sailing with traditional sails, culinary skills, knot tying, rope making and other nautical practices.

A key role in organizing and implementing these workshops was played by the Coordination of Associations for the Preservation of the Maritime, Fishing and Shipbuilding Heritage of Kvarner and Istria, which was entrusted with their coordination and management.

Thanks to the financial support of the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, we were able to continue offering practical education for students through a program we named the *Academy of Maritime Crafts and Skills*.

4. Legal protection of intangible traditional heritage

As previously mentioned, the Republic of Croatia has been remarkably successful in recognizing the value of its intangible heritage, even in a global context. The National Register of Cultural Heritage currently includes 234 intangible assets. Among them, only six are directly related to traditional maritime heritage: The experience of the *falkuša gajeta* – folk traditions associated with the Komiža *gajeta falkuša* (building skills, navigation, sailing, fishing, language), Traditional fishing skills, customs and beliefs along the Adriatic coast, The art of building the Betina *gajeta*, The art of building and sailing traditional Kvarner boats, The art of building the Rovinj *batana*, The art of sailing with lateen and lugsails along the Croatian coast and Knowledge and skills in making boat cranes (*grue, pai, stupovi*).⁵

All the activities we undertook through the cross-border cooperation projects *Mala Barka*, *Mala Barka 2* and *Arca Adriatica*, in collaboration with the associations united under the Coordination of Associations for the Preservation and Revitalization of the Maritime, Fishing and Shipbuilding Heritage of Kvarner and Istria – *Traditional Sails of Kvarner and Istria*, served as groundwork for submitting a proposal to register *The Art of Building and Navigating Traditional Boats of Kvarner* as an intangible cultural asset of the Republic of Croatia. The accompanying explanation describes this heritage as a synthesis of various traditional maritime crafts, skills and knowledge that together form an inseparable whole. It encompasses wooden boatbuilding techniques, including the making of sails, pulleys, oars and ropes. Sailing itself requires the ability to manoeuvre a boat using the power of the wind, oars or an engine, along with knowledge of local geography of the sea and winds. Thus, within the community, the practices of building and navigating in the Kvarner region are recognized as a unique skill set.⁶

⁵ <https://registar.kulturnadobra.hr/#/details> (viewed 10/03/2025)

⁶ <https://registar.kulturnadobra.hr/#/details/Z-7587> (viewed 10/03/2025)

A key element in the registration of intangible cultural heritage is the existence of active bearers of the tradition. In this case, they include shipbuilders who still practice traditional boatbuilding, associations and individuals engaged in sailing with traditional sails, and institutions such as the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka, which actively promotes these traditional values and fosters connections among the tradition bearers.

The next step was to establish a national network of associations and institutions involved in maritime heritage and strengthen our collaboration in order to exchange experiences, particularly in the preservation and promotion of intangible traditional maritime heritage. In addition to our museum and the Coordination of Traditional Sails of Kvarner and Istria, several key partners actively participated in this effort: the Eco-museum House of Batana Rovinj / *Eco-museo Casa della batana Rovigno*, the Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding in Betina and the Croatian Maritime Museum in Split. The cooperation led to the successful registration of *The Art of Sailing with Lateen and Lugsails Along the Croatian Coast* as an intangible cultural property of the Republic of Croatia.

All these efforts have been further strengthened through international cooperation, initiated by the Association of Maritime Museums of the Mediterranean (AMMM). A team was formed with representatives from Croatia, Spain, France, Switzerland, Italy and Greece to prepare the nomination of *The Art of Navigation with Lateen and Lugsails in the Mediterranean* for inclusion on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. At each stage of this process, as well as in the ongoing preservation of intangible heritage, the presence of active bearers and the transmission of knowledge and skills to younger generations are essential. This is what ultimately ensures the survival of the cultural asset.

This also highlights the inherent fragility of intangible heritage: it is difficult to recognize while still part of everyday life, yet it can be lost in an instant with the passing of the last bearer, someone who was unable to pass on their knowledge and skills to those who come after them.

5. Conclusion

In the field of maritime heritage preservation, we have only just begun to scratch the surface. Our efforts so far have focused on a small segment of traditional heritage, specifically small wooden shipbuilding and sailing with lug and lateen sails. Meanwhile, a significant portion of what can be considered industrial heritage, including the skills, knowledge and expertise related to industrial shipbuilding and maritime affairs, has been largely neglected. Shipyards and maritime companies have long since abandoned the practices of the previous century, and the individuals who once worked within those systems have retired without having had the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience. Why should we even bother recording this previous knowledge, when, in today's rapidly evolving world, innovations become

outdated almost as soon as they appear? The answer lies in the values that endure. These are good practices that not only serve as a foundation for improvement but also act as a starting point for innovation. Moreover, there is also the question of community identity, which is based on culture and tradition, reflected in simple questions: “Who are we? What are we? Where do we come from?” It is also about what positive legacy we are leaving behind and whether we are contributing to a better human society. The concept of sustainability, which is inseparable from traditional values, cannot be ignored. Traditional wooden shipbuilding, for example, embodies sustainability and does not leave a deep carbon footprint on the planet. Vessels were constructed from carefully selected timber, sometimes cultivated over years to get the desired shape. Trees were harvested thoughtfully, making sure that their young shoots remained for future ship parts. With the exception of screws, all materials used in boatbuilding were organic. Sails were sewn from canvas, ropes were made from hemp. Such boats were more susceptible to wear and tear, requiring regular and laborious maintenance. This presents one of the biggest challenges today, because of lack of time, resources, and sometimes even skilled individuals who can maintain a boat using traditional methods. In contrast to a future dominated by rapid, cheap and low-quality solutions that leave behind waste in which we suffocate, the alternative is a path of sustainability, which consists in improving traditional heritage.