

## Ship graffiti on the East Adriatic coast

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**Abstract:** On the insular and coastal area of Dalmatia about thirty sites with ship graffiti from Antiquity to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been found. Three quarters of the graffiti are found on sacral edifices, with a lesser number found on profane buildings or on rocks above the sea. Particularly valuable are ship drawings from earlier centuries, that, due to the lack of other information from that period, present valuable visual data about historic vessels, providing insight into the daily life and the rational world of the earlier inhabitants of this part of the Mediterranean.

**Keywords:** ship graffiti, Dalmatian coast, historic ships, drawing, ex-voto

The inhabitants of the coastal and insular area of the indented Eastern Adriatic coast, have since time immemorial based their living on activities related to the sea – fishing and trade, salt production and trade, and shipbuilding of specific vessels adapted to local maritime conditions. The ancient ships that sailed the Adriatic are testified by material remains discovered on the sea bottom. These ships are mentioned and sometimes described in detail in written sources, but valuable visual information is also preserved in a number of visual and artistic representations, of which the so-called graffiti presented here are particularly interesting. The term graffiti, already accepted in archaeology and art history, denotes an informal quick and simple text or drawing, executed by carving or drawing by charcoal stick on a hard surface – wall of a building, on a rock, on wood or on ceramics – used by an individual or group to communicate a message in a spontaneous and honest way (Baird, Taylor 2011). Graffiti are considered to be direct historical sources, revealing thoughts and emotions of their creators ‘behind’ the representation, giving us an insight into daily life of coastal residents and seafarers (Basch 1978; Delouca 1996; Artzy 1999; Muscat 1999; Westerdahl 2013; Damiandis 2014; Champion 2015; Demesticha *et al.* 2017; Gonzales Gozalo 2017; Van de Moortel, Langdon 2017; Nakas 2021). Perceived as type of visual documentations, these drawings become more precious with their age, particularly when they date from an era that otherwise provides only scarce or even no information at all (Ray Martin 2001: 18, 134–137, Figs 122–125).

The following paragraphs provide a short overview of ship graffiti discovered until the present on the Dalmatian coast, their characteristics, time and context of appearance and possible interpretations of their meaning.

The interest for this phenomenon in Croatian science has developed rather recently – the first few texts mentioning them were published in the 1960s (Gušić-Fisković 1958; Fučić 1962; Kečkemet 1962; Petricioli 1968). In the last twenty years several papers about this topic have been published (Praničević Borovac 2001; 2002; 2005; 2016; 2021), and the number of newly discovered graffiti has increased as well. Research is still going on and new finds can be expected.

Along the coast and islands from Kvarner to Dubrovnik, from Antiquity until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a total of 32 sites, and as many of the sites contain several representations of vessels, the overall number of ships displayed exceeds 100 (Fig. 1).

Most of the drawings are found on sacral edifices: 25 sacral sites have been discovered to date. They are mostly town churches – among them are four cathedrals (Zadar, Trogir, Split, Dubrovnik), but also smaller churches on the edges or outside of settlements and even at distant, isolated sites such as open-sea islands. Two drawings were found on parts of monastery complexes (Badija – cloister, Živogošće – belfry). Seven drawings belong to non-sacral edifices and are situated on the walls of public buildings (Šibenik – jail, Dubrovnik – granary) or private houses (Drvenik, Korčula), and on a natural cliff above the sea (Senj, Viganj). In the towns of Zadar, Trogir, Split and Dubrovnik, several sites with graffiti have been found on various edifices dating from different periods.



Fig. 1 Map of the Dalmatian coast with marked location of the sites where ship graffiti have been found (author: I. Praničević Borovac)

As spontaneous creation and quick execution are crucial features of this visual expression, it is not surprising that most of the registered drawings were made by inscribing the stone or plastered surface of an exterior or interior wall surface of a building with a sharp object. On two examples, the discovery of pigments indicates that after being inscribed, the graffiti were coloured (Krk, Split). About one third of the ships were drawn by charcoal (burnt stick), while a few of them were made by red lead – *minium* (Pb<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>), used for colouring (painting) consecration crosses, which may facilitate the future dating of these drawings.

Dating graffiti is a particularly challenging task. There is no information about them in archival documents, and they are not mentioned in descriptions of the buildings where they were inscribed. The *terminus post quem* is certainly determined by the time of construction of the building, and in some situations, *terminus ante quem* can be ascertained based on detected reconstructions or alterations that modified the original space of the building and covered the drawings (thus preserving them until the present). The determination whether the drawing is simultaneous with the construction, or made at a later, or much later moment, is sometimes possible according to technical data about the material and type of construction – if the drawing was inscribed in fresh, first mortar it may be presumed that it was simultaneous with the building's construction. If, on the other hand, it was inscribed in a dry surface, then the estimated dating is based on other arguments.<sup>1</sup> A crucial element in determining the time when the graffiti could have been made lies in the appearance of the ship itself, i.e. it is based on recognizing the type of vessel according to its shape and details – shape of hull, prow and stern, ship's equipment such as: number of oars, presence or absence of stern rudder, the number and inclination of the masts, shape of sail, etc. (Kozličić 1993).

The earliest representation of a graffiti is on a cliff,<sup>2</sup> on the southern side of the Pelješac Peninsula, which together with the opposite, northern coast of Korčula Island creates the Pelješac Channel, since ancient times an area of dense sea traffic (Rapanić 1972). Drawings of two smaller ships can, with necessary caution, be dated to Antiquity, that is to the period of Roman administration, based on the appearance and proportions of the drawn boats and, their close

<sup>1</sup> For example, on the medieval church of St. Barbara on Šipan Island, built inland from the coast, several ship graffiti are engraved in mortar on the exterior side of the southern and northern wall, which are dated to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as the year 1861 was also engraved into the mortar.

<sup>2</sup> As the drawing hardened during nearly two millennia, it can be considered a petroglyph.

similarity with the amber figurine of a ship with an oarsman from Nin dated to the 1st century (Suić 1969). Archaeological context – the discovery of a shipwreck of the Roman *navis oneraria*, at the sea bottom under the rock where the drawing stands, although not necessarily connected, confirms that this strait was frequently used in antiquity, but also dangerous for navigation which may indicate a possible motivation for the creation of this graffiti.

About 10 medieval sites yield very valuable representations dated from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that have survived until the present date. In these centuries, when there are extremely few works of art with maritime motifs, and those vessels that are represented are most often a small part of a biblical scene, it is the graffiti that bring extremely important facts about the appearance of medieval ships. We find several types of so-called long ships designed for combat missions, as well as larger so-called round, merchant ships with three masts, and smaller merchants, with one mast holding a square sail.



**Fig. 2** Graffiti of ships (about 20 x 30 cm) from the Dubrovnik cathedral, late 11<sup>th</sup> century photo: archive of the Maritime Museum Dubrovnik)



**Fig. 3** Interior of the Early Medieval church of St. Luke on the island of Brač with a drawing (about 100 x 80 cm) of a ship on the west wall (photo: I. Praničević Borovac)

The earliest precisely dated medieval ship graffiti in Dalmatia date from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. These are six drawings of long ships with a multitude of oars, each with one or two masts (Praničević Borovac 2001: 77–85) (Fig. 2). The drawings are small, inscribed into the plastered skin of a pylon by the apse of the pre-Romanesque Dubrovnik cathedral (Stošić 1988).<sup>3</sup> Approximately at that time or at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, graffiti of at least three ships, (very likely even more), were made in the small pre-Romanesque Church of St. Luke on Brač Island. Precisely inscribed in fresh mortar, of beautiful proportions and portraying clear details such as a stern rudder, two tilted masts with a triangular sail and fifteen oars, stands the portrait of a historic vessel known as the 'sagena' (Domančić 1960; Kozličić 1993) (Fig. 3). Of similar features, but drawn in charcoal and unfortunately not preserved in their entirety, graffiti of historic ships were discovered on Vis Island some twenty years ago, in the chapel of St. George, an early church of long existence, built on the seaside at the entrance to Vis harbour (Praničević Borovac 2001: 51–54), and in the only church of St. Sylvester, on the open-sea island Biševo (Praničević Borovac 2002).

The economic rise of harbour towns on the studied area of the Croatian coast, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is reflected in graffiti of merchant sailboats discovered in the Romanesque chapel of St. George on Krk Island (Fučić 1962) (Fig. 4) and on the exterior stone surface of the old Split Cathedral (Praničević Borovac 2005). Additionally, maritime conflicts, including pirate incursions never lacking in this part of the Mediterranean, were documented by drawings in the interiors of sacral edifices – Stomorica Church in Zadar (Petricioli 1968), St. Vitus near Šibenik (Praničević Borovac 2001: 35–39), and SS. Cosmas and Damian in the interior of Korčula Island (Praničević Borovac 2001: 64–76).

<sup>3</sup>The dating is reliable and is based on archaeological research undertaken after the earthquake in 1979, which determined the sequence of construction and reconstructions of the Dubrovnik cathedral over more than a thousand years (Stošić 1988; Peković 1998; Vežić 2014).



Fig. 4 Engraved and painted drawing (about 120 cm) of a merchant sailing ship in the church of St. George, is land of Krk, 13<sup>th</sup> century (photo: I. Praničević Borovac)

The time of rapid changes that marked the new age from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards brought an extreme leap in artistic expression. That said, the increase in both the quantity and the versatility of art works produced, including the appearance of engraving techniques and the possibility of multiplying art templates (which, along with other types of graphic works, made *isolarii*, portolan charts and nautical charts widely accessible), seems not to have had influence on the appearance of ship graffiti. Sketchy and clumsy, yet skilful and detailed, drawings of sailboats, oared vessels and fishing boats were still incised or drawn on church walls, as well as on the walls of houses and palaces, jails, town granaries, and on the rocks rising above the sea.

Some 15 sites with ship graffiti from the 16<sup>th</sup> until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been discovered along the Dalmatian coast, with many of them displaying more than one vessel. Examples of such graffiti include (approximately in chronological order): a precise drawing in *minium* of a galley with a crew on a stone block of the wall of the cloister of the Franciscan monastery on Badija islet; a graffito at the entrance to the Pelješac Channel (Belamarić 1983); and an elaborate drawing of a galleon and another small sailboat in the interior of the parish church of St. Mary in Sali on Dugi Otok, a village of strong fishing and maritime tradition (Kečkemet 1962: 573). In the Trogir Cathedral of St. Lawrence graffiti can be seen in two locations, the result of two mutually unrelated acts of inscribing – a representation of a boat on the southern facade made in *minium* (Kečkemet 1962: 562), and a later graffito, recently discovered group of sailboats and horsemen drawn in charcoal in the apse. Not far from Trogir, in Kaštel Lukšić, on the interior side of the southern wall of the parish church dedicated to the Ascension of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a hardly noticeable small drawing of a small, oared vessel, shallowly scratched in dry mortar (Praničević Borovac 2021). Also, worth mentioning are two sites on the islands of Hvar and Mljet with several similar circumstances – graffiti of ships are incised on the outer side of the walls of the parish churches built in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (on the sites of earlier churches), in old settlements on the slopes of the hilly interior of the islands, far from the sea. On Hvar, façade on the Church of St. James in the village of Pitve displays graffiti of several larger and many smaller sailboats, and on Mljet the Church of St.



Fig. 5 Drawings of ships (about 20 cm), on the exterior of the church of St. Anthony the Abbot, island of Mljet, late 19<sup>th</sup> century (photo: J. Amadeo)

Anthony the Abbot in Maranovići clearly displays engraved boats (Fig. 5). Interestingly, not far from Maranovići, the chapel of St. Mary of the Hill had a drawing of a smaller sailboat made in *minium* on the facade of a small church, done in the same medium, and logically at the same time as the gothic consecration crosses dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Gušić, Fisković 1958: 90). Unfortunately, the church has no roof and is in very poor condition, and the remains of the drawing are nearly completely faded.

Among the ship graffiti on non-sacral edifices – family houses or public buildings, some are still legible and in good condition, such as several drawings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century found in the cellars of the former Rector's Palace in Šibenik, an area that once served as prison (Bilić 2013: 178, Fig. 1). These drawings can be seen today in the basement of the Šibenik City Museum. Graffiti have also been found in the building of the former Dubrovnik granary that presently houses the Rupe Ethnographic Museum. The many graffiti there, textual and pictorial, are mostly from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries including about a dozen sailboats drawn in charcoal (Fig. 6a) and the very skilful representation of a Dubrovnik carrack (Fig. 6b). The rocks along the Senj Podgorje, rising above a centuries-old dense maritime traffic route used by small boats on local trade routes as well as large merchant ships, yielded a considerable number of simple paintings of various motifs and different ages, among which are about a dozen representations of different types of ships – smaller, coastal sailboats, *grips*, large *naves* etc. (Glavičić 1975: 209–210, Figs 54, 56, 57).<sup>4</sup>

Some concluding thoughts at the end of this short overview:

- Ship graffiti are a valuable archaeological and historic source of information about the appearance and features of historic vessels. Each single drawing, at each site is unique, even when a certain drawing is part of a larger group – the final result is an authentic and original 'portrait' of a ship.
- Although there are some representations of larger galleys/dromons or larger merchant sailboats, representations of smaller boats are more prevalent, including fishing boats, warships, and merchant ships. The sizes of the drawings vary from the smallest of about ten centimetres to the largest ones whose longitudinal axis is one meter. However, smaller graffiti are more common.
- The authors of graffiti are unknown individuals, seamen, fishermen ... but certainly art amateurs whose 'art' reveals directness, naïveté, and fresh expression.
- The purpose of the graffiti is revealed by the site and way of execution. Those on the church walls are religiously motivated and are most often interpreted as an expression of lay piety, as a form of vow, gratitude for salvation from distress at sea, or as a 'drawn prayer'. However, other locations demonstrate that there are other motivations driving the artist to make the drawings. A sailboat drawn on the facade of a palace, could be an advertisement of availability; a graffiti placed on the wall of a jail cell may be the reminiscence of happier days of free living, and still others may have been made of necessity while describing an event at sea or in harbour by means of an image, or even rendered just out of boredom etc.
- This phenomenon of drawing ships seems to be, from time immemorial, very widespread in all coastal areas, and the Eastern Adriatic is no exception. There must have been many more of these graffiti produced along the coastlines and islands of Dalmatia over the centuries comparison to the small number of graffiti preserved by coincidence and discovered to date.

<sup>4</sup> According to scholars it may be concluded that these drawings were warnings of sites of accidents that should be avoided.

Studying this style of preserved history provides an opportunity to draw attention to the fragility of precious testimony from the past, reflected in their dilapidation (especially those executed in charcoal), and the need for their preservation.



**Fig. 6** Ship graffiti in the City Granary Rupe in Dubrovnik, 17<sup>th</sup> century: a) graffiti of sailing ships, 15-30 cm (photo: A. Vukoja); b) graffito of argosy, about 40 x 50 cm

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