

Palagruža, Komiza's Fishermen, and Fishermen's Regatta

The name Palagruža is associated not only with the main island of the small group of islands and rocks in the open sea of middle Adriatic but also with a millennium history of navigation across the Adriatic. This is the history of the struggle for survival of the fishermen from Komiza (small town on the Island of Vis, Fig. 1) who used to fish sardines in their very special boats built for fishing at Palagruža (1).

The Palagruža group of islands and rocks consists of two islands, Vela (big) and Mala (small) Palagruža, and 13 rocks (Fig. 2). Although the Palagruža is nearer the Italian coast and islands (29 nautical miles [NM] to Monte Gargano and 21.5 NM to the Island of Pianosa) than to the Croatian coast and islands (60 NM to Pelješac and 25 NM to the Island of Šušac, Fig. 1) it belongs to Croatia because it was traditionally Komiza's fishery.

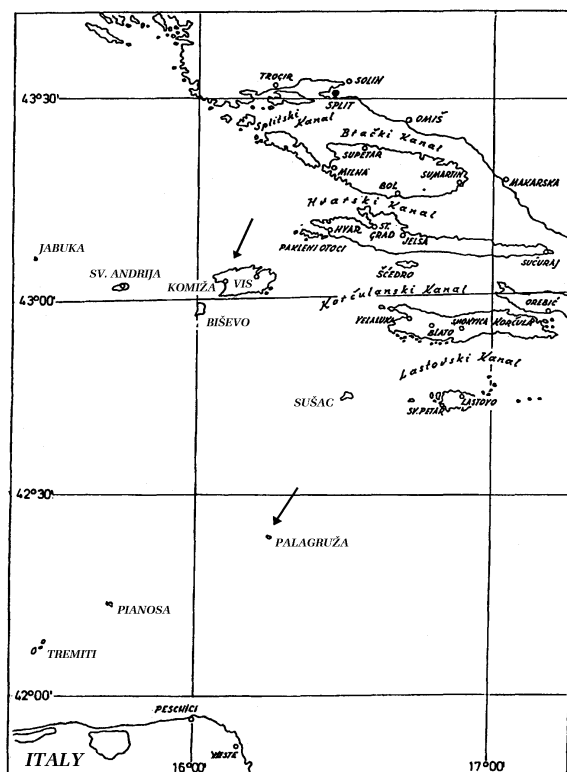


Figure 1. The map of middle Adriatic. Note the relations of Palagruža island with Komiza at the island of Vis (arrows).

This large area of the open sea in the middle Adriatic is Croatian territorial sea (Fig. 1).

From the north, Vela Palagruža looks like a lizard (Fig. 3). It is about 1 km long, narrow (max. width is 270 m), and steep island. On the highest peak (83 m) there is a big and very important lighthouse. The island of Mala Palagruža is the eastern extension of Vela Palagruža and is surrounded by a number of rocks (Fig. 2). There are only three coves on both islands, but neither is safe from all winds. Gale force winds, particularly sirocco (south wind) and storms on Palagruža are very dangerous. The area of Galiola rock with a number of small hardly visible rocks and shallows is 3 NM east of Palagruža.

Palagruža was a very important landmark during the early years of navigation, when compass was unknown, and when with primitive sails anything but sailing downwind was well-nigh impossible. On a clear day Palagruža is visible from the Italian islands of Tremiti and Pianosa, as well as from Croatian islands (Sušac, Vis, and Lastovo). The south side of Palagruža is sheltered from bora, a strong north wind (2).

A rich deposit of flint stone tools found on Vela Palagruža is a proof that stone age men lived there. The finds of numerous fragments of fine Greek painted pottery indicate the importance of Palagruža to ancient Greeks. The name Diomedes is written on one of them, and there is a hypothesis that Palagruža was Diomedes' island of ancient time, the place which, by legend, was the last refuge of this Trojan hero and where a temple was dedicated to them. From the remains of Roman period we can assume that there was a villa there with hot baths, mosaic floors, columns, walls with marble decorations and a big cistern (3). In the middle ages, most vessels sailing across Adriatic followed the line Monte Gargano – the island of Tremiti – Palagruža – Sušac – the island of Sveti Andrija (St. Andrew) to the middle Dalmatian ports (Fig. 1). This was also the route used by Benedictine monks, whom the popes sent to spread Christianity among Croats. They built their monasteries in all these places, and this route is known as the Benedictine route. Some of the stone fragment finds indicate that there was a Benedictine monastery on Palagruža, probably built at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century, and abandoned in the 12th century (4).

A very interesting voyage is described in biography of Pope Alexander III. In 1177 he undertook a voyage

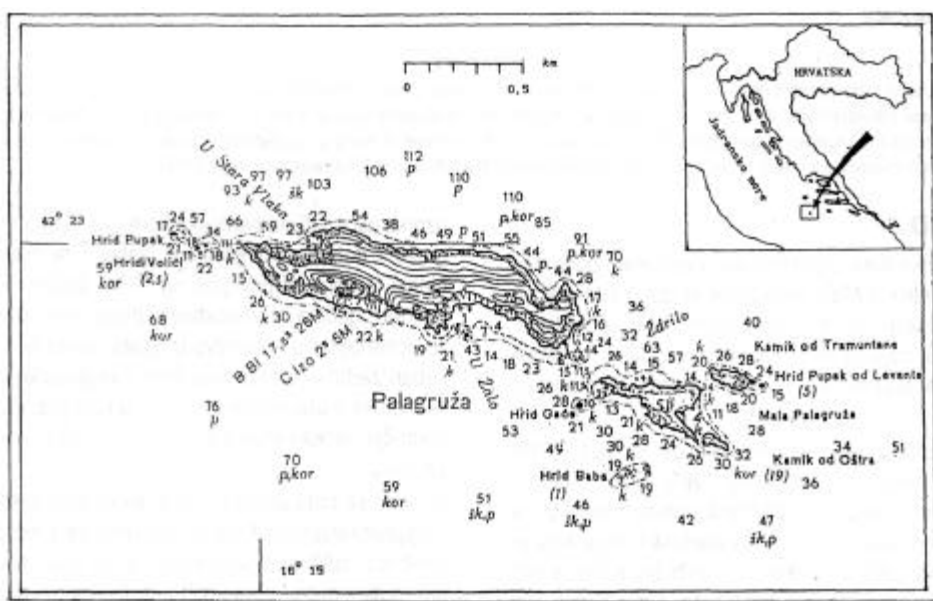


Figure 2. The map of Palagruža islands.

with 13 galleons from Viesta at Monte Gargano via Palagruža, Vis, and Zadar to Venice where he had negotiations with the German emperor Friedrich II Barbarossa. He waited for a whole month in Vištra for a favorable a wind and, when they set off, a strong bora forced them to stop at Palagruža on 9th March. It was probably on the south side of Mala Palagruža which is the best shelter from bora. The small valley at Mala Palagruža is known as the Pope's valley, reminiscent of that event. The fishermen offered the Pope a dinner, and the next day he arrived in Komiža and consecrated St. Nicolas church there (5), which is still a fishermen sanctuary.

Austro-Hungarian marine authorities built the Palagruža lighthouse and it began operating on the 25th September 1875 (6). The original lens and the clockwork which turns the lens are still in use today. In the next year, Sir R.F. Burton, a famous British explorer, linguist and adventurer (7), and at that time acting British counsel in Trieste, visited Vis and Palagruža with marine authorities supervisors. He is known to posterity as the discoverer of the lake Tanganyika, and his adventurous visit to Mecca, disguised as an Arab (at that time, no one but Muslims was allowed there under death penalty). He also translated *Arabian Nights* into English. Describing the visit to Vis and Palagruža, he gave a poetical description of the island and the wholesome air saying that sick people get better when they come there, and those who work there do not know what illness is (8).

Komiža is famous for long standing fishing tradition. Although Palagruža is 42 NM southeast in the open sea (Fig. 1), it was the main fishery of Komiža's fishermen.

The geographic relationship between Komiža and Palagruža is optimal because the steady blowing mistral is favorable for sailing out and permits the escape from Palagruža in a dangerous sirocco.

Komiža's fishermen used a very special boat "falkuša" (Fig. 4), which was suitable both for open sea sailing and costal net fishing. Falkuša was a slender,

8-9.5 m long, open vessel with a sharp fore and aft. She was fitted with "falks", removable planks running from stem to stern, which increased the height of sides by half a meter, making it possible the cross the open sea from Komiža to Palagruža and back. On arrival to Palagruža, the fishermen would take the "falks" away, making her a low fishing boat. Falkuša had a five member crew and was equipped with 4 oars, removable mast, bowsprit, and 120 m² of sails (Latin sail and gib) (9).

Between 50 and 100 "falkuša" vessels used to fish near Palagruža, spending there three weeks of dark. In case of sirocco the fishermen had to run their boats ashore at one of the two Palagruža's beaches, where there was not enough space for all of them. They also had to build provisional barracks or use caves to store barrels of salted sardines and equipment.

Who gets the best place at Palagruža was decided by fishermen's regatta (10), which required strength, extreme endurance and sailing craftsmanship. It was probably the longest rowing regatta in the world, taking between 10 and 15 hours of rowing. When there was a favorable mistral, a falkuša could arrive at Palagruža in 5 hours, with sailing a speed of more than 8 knots. The regatta winner was entitled to the best place on the Palagruža beaches, and the other places were taken in the order of arrival. Because it was not possible to keep the boat riding on anchor during strong sirocco, the

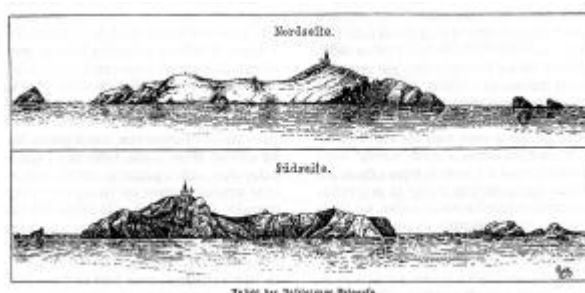


Figure 3. The view of Palagruža, top: north side; bottom: south side (Max Grollier, 1896).



Figure 4. The vessel falkuša.

crews last arriving had to keep rowing their boats for as long as a few days in the shelter of the island.

The fishermen had to take 3 weeks' supplies. Each boat took 25 barrels of salt, 80-100 empty barrels for salting sardines, 5 nets, 4 beams and lifting tackle for pulling out the boat, kit for mending the boat, 2 barrels of water, biscuits, oil, wine, and other provisions. Even fire wood had to be brought to Palagruža. The only medical supply was 2 kg of rice and some chamomile, the remedy in case of diarrhoea.

The last regatta was held in 1936. Engines and modern nets have now completely changed sardine fishing, and Komiža's fishermen have adapted themselves successfully to new fishing methods.

The last falkuša sank during a storm in 1986. Her remains with complete equipment can be seen in Komiža's fishermen museum.

Palagruža is now an important well preserved clean and quiet natural area, visited only by Komiža's fishermen in modern motor boats and with fishing lines. Unfortunately the Mediterranean Monk Seal which used to inhabit Palagruža sea caves has now disappeared (11).

A replica of falkuša was built and exhibited as an example of Croatian nautical tradition at EXPO '98 in Lisbon. Now Komiža's younger generation use the boat to learn sailing with old rigging, keeping alive the millennium's nautical tradition.

Stjepan Gamulin

References

- 1 Gamulin T. Komiška ribarska epopeja. *Morsko ribarstvo* 1984;36:155-8.
- 2 Kozlić M. Otok Palagruža na antičkim pomorskim putevima. In: Hodžić M, editor. *Zbornik Palagruža jadranski dragulj*. Split: Matica hrvatska; 1996:39-43.
- 3 Kirigin B. Arheološka baština Palagruže. In: Hodžić M, editor. *Zbornik Palagruža jadranski dragulj*. Split: Matica hrvatska; 1996:19-25.
- 4 Mardešić AV. Monaške zajednice na Palagruži. In: Hodžić M, editor. *Zbornik Palagruža jadranski dragulj*. Split: Matica hrvatska; 1996:45-9.
- 5 Oreb M. Papa Alaksandar III na Visu. *Adriatics* 1993;4-5:81-120.
- 6 Piplovic S. Svjetionik na Palagruži. In: Hodžić M, editor. *Zbornik Palagruža jadranski dragulj*. Split: Matica hrvatska; 1996:141-7.
- 7 Anonymous. Burton, Sir Richard Francis. *The world book encyclopedia*. London: World Book International; 1994;2:663.
- 8 Burton RF. A visit to Lissa and Pelagosa. *J Royal Geographic Society* 1879;49:151-90.
- 9 Kozlić M. *Croatian shipping*. Split: Književni krug; 1993:211.
- 10 Božanić J. Tradicionalna regata gajeta falkuša. In: Hodžić M, editor. *Zbornik Palagruža jadranski dragulj*. Split: Matica hrvatska; 1996:57-77.
- 11 Gamulin-Brida H, Kamenarović M, Mikulić Z. Sur la distribution du phoque moine dans L'Adriatique. *Rapports et Procès-verbaux des reunion de la C.I.E.S.M.M.* 1965;18:257-60.