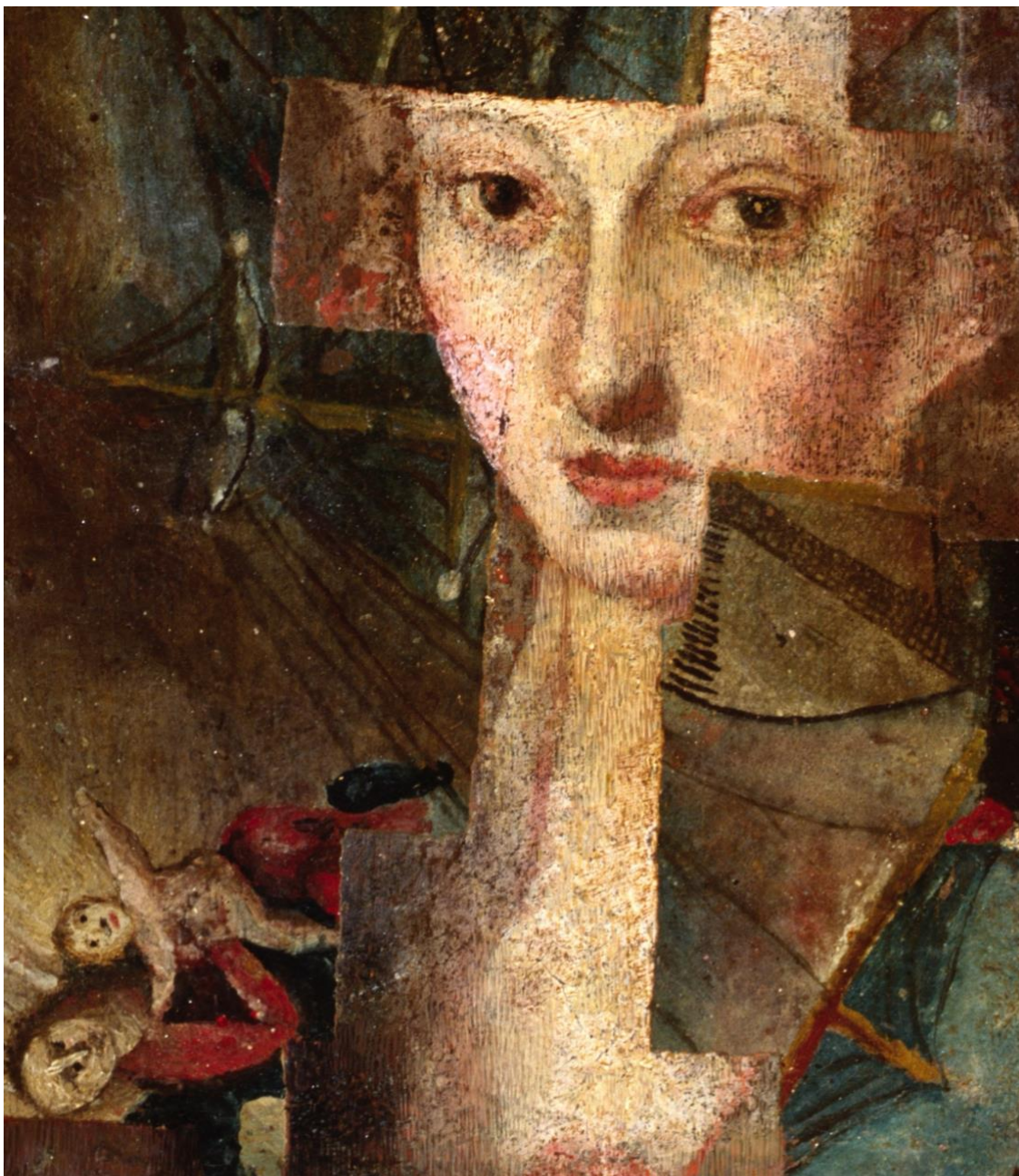


GLIMPSES OF DALMATIAN MARITIME CULTURE



FROM THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
TO THE COAST OF AUSTRALIA

Ivan Lupis-Vukić

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FROM THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE TO THE COAST OF AUSTRALIA

Being an extract
of

SHIPWRECKED ON A CORAL REEF
DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS CONCERNING OUR MARINERS IN AUSTRALIA IN 1875

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Translated
by
Josko Petkovic
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Front page illustration: photo by J. Petkovic © 2021, votive painting (fragment) from Her Lady of Mercy Church Museum, Dubrovnik. Inscription mentions Pelješac vessel *Meotide*, and Christmas Day 1854.

Prelude

Translated by Josko Petkovic © 2021

Lupis-Vukić cultural dialogues in *Shipwrecked on a Coral Reef* begin with a storm. On reaching the Cape of Good Hope, the *Stefano* encountered fierce winds. The sailors could hardly move about, so violent was the swaying of the vessel. At times the *Stefano* disappeared in the abyss created by the immense waves. At other times a wall of water seemed to advance towards the ship, ready to engulf it with its relentless power. [6]

In the text below Lupis-Vukić freely translates Angelina's text – which the writer has translated freely back into English again:

“The ship rose, driven high by the waves, and then it descended, as if from the top of a hill, downwards towards the depths, only to rise again trembling, squeaking, and moaning. The waves washed and covered the deck like raging demons seizing everything in their path and dragging it to depths. People tied themselves with ropes to stay in the places where they were needed. Crossing the deck was impossible. One had to wait for the right moment when the ship was in the correct position and then use the rope tied tautly from the stern to the ship's bow to cross to the other side.”

“The sharp and experienced eye of captain Vlaho judged the height, direction, and wave power. He gave orders with a strong, reassuring voice to the helmsman who, tied to his wheel, managed with abrupt and quick movements to avoid the blows of the powerful waves. The ship's fate and its entire crew depended on these two men's quick-thinking skills, speed, and experience. One clumsy and reckless movement could send them all to the abyss. In this unequal struggle between a small walnut shell of the ship and the raging ocean, the *Stefano* skilfully avoided the blows of its enemy.”

“When the ship rushed into the trough of the wave and the bow plunged into the water all the way to the first mast, the young and inexperienced sailors thought this was their last hour. The waves roared, threatened, foamed, and toyed with the small vessel, never allowing the men to catch their breath, to pause, or to rest. In their thoughts, the young men recalled their homeland, the sunny Dalmatian towns, and villages, and silently they bid farewell to their family and friends.”

“The land-bound people can't imagine this struggle with the sea. Battlefield, assault, man-to-man combat, these are all minuscule compared to Man's struggle with the ocean. To survive and be able to describe this experience is wondrous and magnificent.”

“The storm lasted eight days. Its rage slowly dissipated, and by 9 September, it had completely died down. After the superhuman exertion, sleepless nights, and hunger, the exhausted mariners gave a sigh of relief. The fear of the younger men melted away. This difficult initiation brought them even closer to their older and more experienced companions, who had been through many such ordeals and storms before. These companions found the sea to be the sole purpose for their existence, and for them, the sea had become both the dearest friend and the fiercest enemy.”

“With all its sails unfurled, the *Stefano* sailed gracefully towards the Island of St. Paul.”

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After they had rested, the crew began to repair the damage inflicted by the storm on the ship. Even the slightest little thing did not escape Grga's experienced eye. Everything had to be restored to its designated place. Each rope, and there were hundreds of them of various thicknesses and length, had their place and Grga knew it. He knew its purpose as well as the purpose of each piece of ship's equipment. He knew the ship like the palm of his hand. Men like Grga, who could not read or write, oversaw the outfitting of new ships, not forgetting the slightest rope, frog*, or a wedge. Under Grga's supervision, the *Stefano* was soon in perfect working order again.

Cutting the water at 10 knots, the *Stefano* was getting nearer to its destination. The persistent clear sky heralded the arrival of spring. The guards changed every four hours. The busiest men on the vessel were the helmsman and the officer on guard. The off-duty sailors would gather on deck to wash laundry, mend clothes, and converse with one another.

“What are you discussing in such a lively fashion?” - asked the officer Karlo Costa. The crew greatly appreciated him for his considerate and fraternal demeanour.

“These young ones,” replied the older sailor Thomas Dediol, “talk about their homes, homeland, families, and their fiancées. Some curious people ask how the Chinese look. Imagine, Jurić asking if Chinese are cannibals!”

Patting Jurić on the shoulder and laughing cheerfully, the officer said to him: - “We are still a long way from home. We're only just on our way to China. I've been there once before, and I am still alive, Jurić! You don't have to fear Chinese. They are wonderful people, more enlightened than we Europeans. I became acquainted with one of their educated countrymen, who spoke good English. He told me he had been to Europe once and could not but marvel at our customs. After descending from the ship to the shore, he was greeted, he told me, by some grim, unkind men, with girded sabres. They shuffled all his luggage to determine if he was carrying a weapon!”

The conversation continued in this fashion. Each sailor added some thoughts or experiences and, in this way, complemented the figure of a Chinese man.

Time in the conversation had passed quickly, and the change of crew was about to take place. Captain Costa got up from his seat to leave, punctuating his departure with a jocular dare:

“So, who among you young men <momci> is afraid of storms?”

“I am,” cadet Bačić readily replied.

“I can see we have a real hero here!” teased the oldest helmsman Sretko Bučić. “You have no idea how lucky you are to be sailing on a new barque. Our sails are new, as are our masts. They can survive the most severe of storms. And what would you have done, young man, on an older vessel if you saw the wind rip and tear away the sails, snap the masts, and the ship is full of water? The crew had to pump water day and night without a break until they fell with exhaustion. You are yet to learn what a seaman has to live through and endure on a sea voyage!”

“I believe you, even if it is unbelievable,” Bačić replied.

“But Captain,” he continued by addressing Captain Karlo <Costa> “why is it that in school we were never told about our mariners? Our newspapers do not write about them”.

“You ask for a reason? The land-bound writers and journalists are not interested in the lives and misfortunes of our mariners. They listen to our stories with disbelief. We sailors do not know how to write what we feel, when we sit on the porch in the cool of the house, when we converse among ourselves, old and exhausted. We believe one another and understand one another. Our children believe us. They retell our memories that recall the courage of their fathers, grandfathers, and compatriots. Perhaps a worthy pen will arise that will tell the world of the unspoken and unseen events and the heroism of our mariners.”

Bačić could no longer hide his secret: “Captain, I have recorded everything that has happened on our ship from the day of our departure. I will continue to do so if you allow it. I would never want to forget my first voyage and my first storm.”

The bell rang for the new crew to take their place, and Captain Karlo Costa hurried off to take his place on the watch. The conversation among the seamen continued. Every one of them wanted their young mate to record their own story.

“My father drowned somewhere near the coast of England. I was eight years old” said Božidar Vulović. “Of the entire crew, only two died: my father and another person from the Island of Lošinj.”

“How could that have happened? Tell me about it, Božidar!”

“Men, it's all the fault of poverty and misery. The storm threw the ship onto a protruding rock near the shore. The sailors cut the mast and propped one end across to the shore. This is how they saved themselves, taking only what they had on them. You must know that the shipowners do not worry much about sailors when the ship is lost. Their only concern is to dispatch the men home again: ** What do they care that the shipwrecked men need to return to seafaring! As if it is easy for poor men to outfit themselves with clothes and other attire again? My father felt uneasy. He was tormented by the thought that all his miserable possessions would be lost with the ship: waterproof boots and a coat from Marseilles. How would he get these again? He and a mate of his decided to return to the ship on the mast again to save from the ship's hold all that could be saved. Their companions on the shore watched with apprehension as the two waited for the right moment to return to the ship. No one tried to stop them. They nearly succeeded had it not been for the ferocious waves that drew the ship to the water's depth. Men, is it humane, that no one compensates the sailor for his loss, that no one thinks of his poor widow and orphans? “



Artwork(fragment) P. Zrinjski
Source: Brodolom na Koraljnom Grebenu
Ivan Lupis Vukić (1953 JRM series)



Karlo Costa, 24
Deputy Captain
(Photo: Courtesy of Rathe family)



Miho Bačić, 16
Cadet
(Photo: Courtesy of Rathe family)

“In our village, there is not one family that the sea has not wrapped in black”, as added Thomas Dediol, “either the father or the son ... And people still try to persuade you to get married! Well, brothers, why would you get married only to leave your wife and children at the mercy, or malice, of strangers? I have passed thirty and do not intend to marry. Before my eyes, I always see my poor mother. She married at the age of twenty. My father lived with her for less than a month and then went to sea. He left her with an elderly and odd mother-in-law and father-in-law. She had to raise chickens, pigs, and sheep because the household was untenable without these. Seamen need woollen socks, under-shirts, and covering. With us, sheep do not go to pastures. It was necessary to go to the field and cut grass and collect hay for the winter. It was necessary to go to the forest, that was distant some hours of walking, and then bring a heavy load of hay for sheep and for the fireplace. The newlywed bride had to do all of this, and instead of being greeted with “Good Morning” she is greeted by her father-in-law with the question, “Have you fed the animals?”

“The father-in-law demands that even the smallest plot of land be cultivated, and the bride and the mother-in-law, if they are able, had to dig the fields, plant, and grow. Not an hour of rest and peace. Even in the evening, there was wool to spin, knit, mend, while their eyes were heavy with fatigue, and the bruised hard hands could barely hold the needle.”

“Every second year the man returns home. Each of his visits means another child ... There were six of us, six heavy burdens on the back of one mother. I always remember those terrible nights when the <cold northerly wind> *bura* raged outside, or the south wind roared. Mother would go upstairs, and instead of going to sleep, she would stare long into the black night and cry while praying.”

“The poor thing thought that the storm was raging across all seas and that my father at that moment was in mortal danger. How could she be calm? Every day black news came to the village and enveloped the little houses of sailors with sorrow.”

“Despite all of this, our men continue to marry, and our girls continue to be married. There is no more pitiable creature than an unmarried woman in a poor seaside house. Even so, widows do not starve to death. With the help of the locals, they somehow bring up their orphans. And when the boys turn twelve or thirteen, they leave for the “call of the wind” as we did ...”

“Stop it! Enough of misery and trouble,” Jurić interjected. “It’s not like that everywhere. As soon as I save a little, I’ll go home and get married. Not everyone goes to the sea here in Oskorušno. People there cultivate the land and don’t leave it to women. Enough of your grief! It’s time to break up.

The *Stefano*, in the meantime, flew like a proud swan across the vast Indian Ocean. In 25 days, it had crossed the distance from Cape of Good Hope to the Island of St. Paul,³ but due to the thick fog at this locality, it was not possible to make observations with a sextant nor regulate the chronometer.

* ship’s pulley

** These were the prevailing conditions for seafaring at that time

From here on Lupis-Vukic’s *Shipwrecked on a Coral Reef* text resumes the free translation of Angelina Baccich’s text which is included Appendix II in this volume.

