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**IS SLOVENE IDENTITY ALONG THE GULF
OF TRIESTE POSSIBLY DISTURBING?:
SOME THOUGHTS ON PAMELA
BALLINGER'S ARTICLE "LINES
IN THE WATER, PEOPLES ON THE MAP:
MARITIME MUSEUMS
AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL
BOUNDARIES IN THE UPPER ADRIATIC"
(*NARODNA UMJETNOST. CROATIAN
JOURNAL OF ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE
RESEARCH* 43/1, 2006, PP. 15-39)**

This article was written as a response to Pamela Ballinger's study of maritime museums in the Upper Adriatic and was based on the knowledge of this author on the museums in question, of places and circumstances of their origin, and of their broader historical context. It is this author's belief that Pamela Ballinger is insufficiently familiar with the area in question as well as with relevant publications from the field of social sciences. It seems that Ballinger's study had been written on the basis of preconceived, yet unsubstantiated conceptions that the museums, which help preserve and present cultural heritage of the people living along the Gulf of Trieste and which do not hide their Slovene identity, build walls between cultures. With her biased hints about their ties with nationalistic claims on the sea and on mainland territory Ballinger strayed far from scientific correctness.

Key words: Adriatic, Gulf of Trieste, Istria, Slovene minority in Italy, borders, museums, representations, stereotypes

I have read Pamela Ballinger's article with great interest. One of the reasons for this was that I am familiar with the museums mentioned by the author,

well-acquainted with the places and the circumstances of their development, and know the people who took part in their creation. Indeed, I myself have participated in the formation of one of them. Ballinger discusses the following museums: *Civico Museo del Mare* (Civic Maritime Museum) in Trieste/Trst, *Ribiški muzej tržaškega primorja/Museo della pesca del litorale triestino* (Museum of Fishing of the Triestine Coastline) in Santa Croce/Križ, *Muzej Kraška hiša/Museo della Casa Carsica* (Karst House Museum) in Repen, *Pomorski muzej "Sergej Mašera" Piran/Museo del mare "Sergej Mašera" Pirano* (Sergej Mašera Maritime Museum in Piran), *Tonina hiša* (Tona's House) in Sv. Peter/S. Pietro, *Muzej solinarstva v Sečoveljskih solinah/Museo delle saline nelle saline di Sicciole* (Museum of Salt-Making in Sečovlje/Sicciole Salt Pans), *Etnografski muzej Istre* (Ethnographic Museum of Istria) in Pazin/Pisino, *Povijesni muzej Istre/Museo storico dell' Istria* (Historical Museum of Istria) in Pula/Pola, and *Kuća o batani /Casa della batana* (Batana Museum) in Rovinj/Rovigno. There is also a brief mention of museums in Dalmatia. The topic of her interest has been placed within a broader context of the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, and the Balkans. This extensive frame of reference, with extensive quotes from wide range of sources and literature, is, in my opinion, decidedly too broad, especially in view of the fact that there is a lack of even basic geographic, historic, and demographic data on the Gulf of Trieste, which is the primary focus of her article. Since the text deals with such an extensive territory that is historically, geographically, ethnically, and linguistically extremely diversified, and as such represents a very delicate subject, the article literally begs for additional information and discussion. My comments refer to the part of Ballinger's paper that deals with museums in Italy and in Istria and which contains the major part of author's argumentation on the topic announced in the title.

The starting point of Ballinger's paper represents views and opinions of the author herself and of some other authors on a number of widely different subjects. In her introductory paragraph, Ballinger states the following:

In this paper I explore the symbolic construction of cultural boundaries demarcating peoples of the coast from those of the hinterland around the Gulf of Trieste – an 'inner' sea of an inner sea – and inquire into the contemporary representation of maritime cultures and heritages in local museums (Ballinger 2006:16).

Next she quotes Macdonald who maintains that "museums are products of modernity and their development is deeply implicated in the formation of the modern nation-state" (Ballinger 2006:16) and Köstlin who states that "the process of musealization of the local shows to what degree we have learned to declare and to decipher our existence by means of stories concerning the region or the localities in which we live" (Ballinger 2006:16). Finally, she summarizes the objective of her text with the following words:

In this article, then, I ask what stories maritime museums in Trieste and Istra/Istria tell about cultural and ethnic differences, particularly in light of the history of competing nationalist claims to the sea (based in part on the notion of peoples "belonging", or not, to coastal environments) and the massive demographic shifts in the Gulf of Trieste region during the interwar and post War II periods (Ballinger 2006:16).

The article thus focuses on a number of subjects: the Gulf of Trieste; cultural divides between people living on the coast and those in the interior; museum presentations of marine cultures and heritages; connection between museums and the state; museum stories of places and regions that tell about our existence; competitive nationalistic claims on the sea; and large demographic changes in the interwar period and after World War II. Since several of these subjects are rather unclear it would be better if the author defined them more precisely. Some of these are the construction of cultural borders in connection with museums; nationalistic claims (whose, when, and where); nationalism; demographic changes (since in the 20th century alone there had been many demographic changes in the Triestine territory it might have been better if Ballinger had further clarified which of them she was referring to). These issues remain unexplained to the very end of the article. A mixture of inadequately substantiated claims that museums draw divisions and map territories, interspersed with suggestions about a connection between museums and nationalism, territorial, and maritime claims offers ample space for possible interpretations and manipulations, among them also political. In view of this, a part of Ballinger's text may be understood as an attempt to prove the thesis that Slovene museums along the Gulf of Trieste, which preserve and present cultural heritage, are in essence nationalistic, build walls between cultures, separate them, and, on top of everything else, also have territorial claims that extend to the sea. In view of the complexity of themes dealt with in this article, its author was perhaps unaware of the possibility that the text might contain a politically incorrect message.

The emphasis in this article is on two large professional museums, the Civic Maritime Museum in Trieste and the Sergej Mašera Maritime Museum in Piran, yet with a distinctly different approach. Having visited these museums, the author had some critical remarks about both. In the Civic Maritime Museum she noted, among other things, that the artifacts on display had been chosen haphazardly, that the labels explaining them were only in Italian, and felt that it did not address maritime culture(s) in any significant manner; the reason for this, she presumed, was to avoid discussion about the agents of culture and history and thus also avoid potentially delicate subjects on ethnic and linguistic groups. Nevertheless, Ballinger did discuss the museum and its operation with Marino Vocci who in his professional capacity of Trieste's Civic and Scientific Museums Director of External Relations, and thus its public relations officer, also outlined the proposed Museum of the

Gulf that is still in its initial phase. According to Vocci, this future museum will include a Marine Park and they both "would seek a more inclusive experience for visitors that, taking the unity of the Gulf of Trieste as a starting point, would reforge connections across national, ethnic, and linguistic divides" (Ballinger 2006:26). Although very much impressed by the idea, the author did not mention when and how this proposal will be translated into practice nor if present deficiencies will be dispensed with.

Among the museums visited by Pamela Ballinger was also the Sergej Mašera Maritime Museum in Piran. In contrast to the Civic Maritime Museum in Trieste, which lacks historical background, the author feels that the Maritime Museum in Piran offers relevant historic details, depicts changes of authorities and borders, and the impact of these factors upon Slovenes working on the sea. Yet "again and again", says the author, "the contribution of Slovenes receives emphasis" (Ballinger 2006:29). However, she did not choose to discuss these issues with a representative of the Museum as she did in Trieste, nor did she find it necessary to ask about the nature of the museum's operations and future plans. Incidentally, had she inquired about the term *Slovene Istra*, which in connection with the Roman period she deemed anachronistic, she would have learned that it denoted simply the territory of present-day Slovene Istria. But she had not.

The author also paid a visit to the Museum of Fishing of the Triestine Coastline. Still in its formative phase, the Museum was founded by Bruno Volpi Lisjak, a former naval captain and an amateur researcher, and a group of locals from Santa Croce, a village near Trieste. Under a strong influence of the Triestine MuseoGo, Ballinger introduces the future museum with the following statement:

In contrast to this regional vision of a common maritime space, the promoters of a Ribiški Muzej Tržaškega Primorja/Museo della pesca del litorale triestino or Fishing of the Triestine Coastline explicitly address and challenge the ways in which the Slavic experience of the sea has been obscured by the strong identification of Italians with the coastline. This museum would thus pursue a very different strategy from that of the MuseoGo in overturning stereotypical thinking about the relationship between ethnic groups and environments (Ballinger 2006:26).

The small collection still in its nascent stage is thus compared to an as yet unrealized vision of a large museum which the author has already deemed ideal. The Museum of Fishing is portrayed in a singularly narrow manner and through an a priori negative view of Slovene identity. The museum is credited with the delineation of cultural boundaries, yet with no argumentation. The author does not mention the location of these boundaries nor who they demarcate, as if the very existence of Slovene identity, and its expression, imply a territorial division. Bruno Volpi and his co-workers use the term Slovene fishermen because the people living in these villages are Slovenes. Their

museum is an invaluable acquisition that will help further the preservation and presentation of cultural heritage in the entire Triestine territory.

The author was very much impressed by notions expressed by people living along the Adriatic on differences between those living on the coast and in the interior, ranging from chance conversations, jokes, and taunts on who is an expert on fishing and who is not, who possesses a fine understanding of the sea and seafood and who does not, to political discourse. Ballinger cites extensive paragraphs on these stereotypes, also those in connection with migrations, from literature on Austria-Hungary and Venice, from Jovan Cvijić to Predrag Matvejević. Yet she is easily satisfied with only brief fragments and simplifications on the subject of the Gulf of Trieste, which is the focus of her attention. When discussing the Museum of Fishing of the Triestine Coastline with Ballinger, Volpi Lisjak criticized Slovene Ethnographic Museum of Ljubljana, "claiming to have found little knowledge or awareness there of 'the dialect of the fishermen, the maritime terminology, the terminology for fish, the instruments and names of nets' and so on". He also said: "To understand this maritime mentality, requires being a 'man of the sea'" (Ballinger 2006:26), but Ballinger's comment that "Volpi Lisjak implicitly affirms anthropogeographic notions about maritime and interior cultures" (Ballinger 2006:27) is, in my opinion, far overdimensioned. She also seemed surprised at hearing that there were differences within a single nationality as well rather than only between Italians and Slovenes (Slavs). While it is perfectly understandable that she did not know about the finer nuances of this topic, additional knowledge of history, historical demography, and ethnology would prove beneficial. It needs to be emphasized that the relationship between the sea and the interior, the coast and the hinterlands, between inner regions of Slovenia and its littoral Primorje, has been widely researched in Slovene social sciences and in the humanities, not only as contrasting entities, but also as areas that complement and inspire one another. At the beginning of the 20th century, Trieste was the largest Slovene town.

According to the 1910 Austrian census, among the 229.510 residents of Trieste 56.916 were Slovenes, which amounts to approximately 25% of the total population. At the same time, Ljubljana as the capital of Slovenia numbered 41.727 inhabitants, 33.846 of whom were Slovenes (Bratina 1988:63).

Moreover, Slovenes have been living in this same territory through two imperiums as well as all subsequent states forms. These facts alone should suffice to realize that relations between inhabitants living in the Gulf of Trieste and those of the Triestine interior are much more complex than is indicated in Ballinger's article.

The author further discusses Muzej Kraška hiša/Museo della Casa Carsica (Karst House Museum) in the village of Repen in Triestine Karst. Its founders, like in Santa Croce, were local enthusiasts with a strong wish to

preserve their cultural heritage from oblivion. In 1968, they founded *Naš Karst* (Our Karst) cooperative that enabled them to purchase and restore, with their own funds, a very impressive homestead that had been uninhabited and completely empty. It was later furnished with items supplied by local people and by inhabitants of nearby villages, Trieste, and even people from further away, all of whom had brought them from their own homes. Even in the preliminary phase of this undertaking, its initiators contacted the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana whose curators helped with the restoration plan and documentation. A guide through the Carstic House Museum was published in 2003 (Serec et al. 2003). Ballinger mentions that members of the Albert Sirk Society, who are supporters and employees of the museum in Santa Croce, initially pondered the idea to annex their museum to the Civic Maritime Museum in Trieste, but later decided to remain autonomous.¹ Later on, says Ballinger, the museums in Repen and in Santa Croce decided to join forces and offer their visitors the possibility to visit both museums together; she adds that "such a project would link the 'coastal' and 'interior' aspects of the Slovene experience" (Ballinger 2006:27). The author has clearly overlooked the fact that the Slovene experience is an integral element of the Triestine culture and that both museums simultaneously preserve and present the Triestine cultural heritage as well; without them, the latter would have been significantly diminished. Let me state that museums that have arisen from purely local efforts, reflecting local, regional, ethnic, or national identities, are especially highly valued in Europe. Yet it also needs to be said that the two museums, one on the coast and the other in the hinterlands, do not by far depict the entire body of Slovene cultural heritage in the Triestine region. Among other things, the Slovene culture in the city of Trieste, which presence is by no means negligible and certainly merits scholarly attention, has not yet been presented anywhere.

The author included in her research also the Museum of Salt-Making in Sečovelje salt pans and Tona's House in Sv. Peter village. It is her belief that both, as well as the Piran Maritime Museum, "map and stake a claim for a specifically Slovene space and historic cultural tradition, much as the proposed Museum of Fishing of the Triestine Coastline aims to link up with the Karst House Museum and thereby map out a Slovene territory ranging from sea to karst". She writes:

The museums in Slovene Istria instead implicitly naturalize changes in "ethnic" borders brought about by the 1954 Memorandum of Under-

¹ This decision has not been explained although I have to say that I understand it perfectly. It is probably due to the fact that Italian museums that also exhibit artifacts from areas inhabited by Slovenes do not list their Slovene names or provenience. I do hope and believe that the situation in the proposed exhibit at the Civic Maritime Museum in Trieste will be different, and am certain that in this case both will be able to reach a mutual agreement, respect one another, and successfully cooperate with each other.

standing, at least on the Istrian coastline. The representation of culture in these museums located in Slovenia proper also stakes claims in the ongoing contests over the political borders (maritime and terrestrial) between independent Slovenia and Croatia (Ballinger 2006:29).

I have to confess that I fail to understand how she automatically recognized the museums as some kind of border fortifications of Slovene territory and I wonder if this was her actual purpose or if she was perhaps not even aware that at this point her writing descended to the level of nationalistic tabloids.

I have been privileged to witness the growth of the Tonina Hiša Museum and participated in the preparations for the groundwork for the Museum of Salt-Making and the proclamation of the Sečovelje Salina Nature Park. The site for the museum was chosen after a thorough examination of immovable salt pan heritage and also because the Fontanigge salt pans are the best-preserved saline complex from the period prior to modernization of salt pans. Ballinger is not likely acquainted with the book *Stare piranske soline* (The Old Salt Pans of Piran) (Pahor and Poberaj 1963) that was written by Miroslav Pahor, director of the Maritime Museum in Piran at the time. The book was based on his study of the salt pans in the period when the very last salt makers were leaving them. Initiator of the salt pan museum, Pahor originally intended to establish the museum in Strunjan. However, since the salt pans of Strunjan are still in operation it would not have been opportune to discontinue their operation solely on account of a future museum. Moreover, the salt pans of Strunjan are not as historically important as those of Sečovelje.

Since, according to Ballinger, the museum allows neither for historical context nor for demographic changes, she is very critically disposed toward it:

The silence of the exhibits on these topics is more than compensated, however, by the commentary of the docents who take visitors through the open-air portions of the museum and demonstrate moments in the salt production process (Ballinger 2006:31).

While it is perfectly understandable that as a researcher of the refugees Ballinger is most interested in the emigration of the Istrian population after the end of the World War II, and while it is also true that many aspects of this subject have not yet received adequate scholarly attention her evaluation of the Museum of Salt-Making is nevertheless hardly objective. Had she contacted the museum's curator or its director Ballinger would have learned that the museum had been dealing with this topic, that it possessed invaluable material, for instance field notes, photographs, and a number of videotapes on the salt pans, and that the salt pan workers still working in the salt pans at the time had indeed cooperated on the creation of this museum.

The primary mission of this museum is to present the traditional saltmaking process and the daily life of the saltmaker and his family; Ballinger, however, views this merely as a compensation for the missing

historic context. Yet the museum is truly unique in this aspect, and has been awarded the 2003 European Union Award for its "model and sensitive revitalization of cultural landscape, restoration of the traditional salt-making process, restoration of architectural heritage, and educational activities, all in harmonious symbiosis with the delicate natural environment" (as stated in the award clarification letter).

As previously stated, Ballinger had not visited an employee of the museum, or its representative, who could supply more information on the research conducted in the salt pans and on future plans of this museum; instead, it seems that she had talked to – according to her description – one of the young men working at the salt pans and doubling as museum guides for visitors. Chatting about a number of issues connected to the border between Slovenia and Croatia, as people generally do when talk turns to this subject, he mentioned that people were tired of conflicts, that in comparison with the situation in ex-Yugoslavia, when people could freely go from one republic to another, this border strongly interfered with their daily life, or that the former Municipality of Piran included the peninsula of Savudrija etc. Although the author is aware of the fact, that "one should not move from one guide's comments to make sweeping generalizations about the representation of culture at the Museum of Salt-Making", she nevertheless admits that "the guide nonetheless spoke in his official capacity as an employee of the museum" (Ballinger 2006:32). In my opinion, her interpretation of the guide's discussion with her is a manipulation, due, perhaps, to the lack of time necessary for getting any objective impressions.

At the end of her article, the author becomes enthusiastic about the Batana Museum in Rovinj that presents the *batana* boat as a typical vessel used by the residents of Rovinj. According to Ballinger, the *batana* is presented without any implication of national affiliations and definitions, but rather with a touch of nostalgia for the golden years of socialist Yugoslavia, and also "for the imperial era before the differentiation between the littoral and the continental culminated in an exclusively ethnic and national differentiation mapped onto separate territories" (Ballinger 2006:35). In 2005, a restored *batana* sailed from Rovinj to participate in the Historic Regatta of Venice, "which recalls and recreates a lost world connected (rather than divided) by water" (Ballinger 2006:35). It was joined by the "*gajeta falkuša*, a rebuilt traditional fishing boat from Vis" sailing up the Adriatic, and together they set on their voyage to Venice (Ballinger 2006:35). Referring to Paul Gilroy's statement that ships represent both "actual and symbolic 'living means by which the points within that Atlantic world was joined'" (Ballinger 2006:36), the author concludes that "boats like the *batana* and *gajeta falkuša* may likewise constitute literal and symbolic means by which to (re)join the upper Adriatic and re-imagine it as a space of connections, rather than borders" (Ballinger 2006:35-36).

The sailing of the *batana* and the *falkuša* serves as an illustration of an idyllic past. Yet this past was not shared by the entire coast of the Adriatic nor was the coast of Trieste its part. Each ethnic entity along the Gulf of Trieste has its unique story to tell.² In the 20th century, Slovenes were the most violently persecuted people during the period of fascism between the World Wars I and II; after World War II, they became an ethnic minority whose fundamental minority rights have been denied to the present. They cannot be compared with old, indisputable identities like the *Rovignesi* regardless of whether they are Italians, Croats, Albanians, or Bosnian Muslims.

In conclusion, let me add to the story of two boats navigating to Venice yet another story. Likewise filled with symbolism, it is about a boat from the Gulf of Trieste. In 1948, Milko Matičetov, curator of the Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana, sailed a *čupa* from Aurisina/Nabrežina, then situated in Zone A of the Free Territory of Trieste, to Zone B. Since it was clear even then that the boat would not have survived the ravages of time otherwise he proceeded to take the fishing boat to the Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana. The boat, which has been restored and put on exhibit at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, is the only original *čupa* that has been preserved to the present.

² Let me quote just few facts: "In Paris in 1946 international high diplomacy chose as the base for normalisation of relationships between Yugoslavia and Italy the so-called 'ethnic equilibrium', in accordance with which approximately as many persons of Yugoslav descent had to stay on in Italian territory (excluding the Free Trieste Territory) as there were Italians (by the 1910 census) in Yugoslav territory. If one takes into account the general Yugoslav situation, this requirement was almost met. However, if only Slovenians and Italians are counted, the results are surprising and prove above all a big Slovenian sacrifice on behalf of Yugoslavia. After the partitioning of the FTT in 1954, the final relationship was 1 to 4 in the disadvantage of Slovenians.

It is true that Slovenia acquired a strip of land with an Italian majority – the area variously referred to as the coast, Littoral, or riviera of Koper, or Slovenian Istra, of which much earlier S. Rutar (1899) had said that there 'one speaks Italian'. But it must not be forgotten that this represented compensation for the loss of the true Slovenian Littoral, the coastal strip between Barcola/Barkovlje, Villa Opicina/Opčine and S. Giovanni/Štivan where Slovenians had settled in remote times and where they made up 90% of population. This area, however, was part of Zone A" (Darovec 1998:101).

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KOME SMETA SLOVENSKI IDENTITET U TRŠČANSKOME ZALJEVU? NEKE MISLI O ČLANKU PAMELE BALLINGER "CRTE U VODI, LJUDI NA KARTI: PREDOČAVANJE 'GRANICA' KULTURNIH SKUPINA NA SJEVERNOM JADRANU" (NARODNA UMJETNOST. HRVATSKI ČASOPIS ZA ETNOLOGIJU I FOLKLORISTIKU 43/1, 2006, STR. 15-39)

SAŽETAK

Članak je napisan kao odgovor na tekst Pamele Ballinger o maritimnim muzejima na sjeveru Jadranskoga mora. Temelji se na autoričinu poznavanju muzeja i mjesta koja su razmatrana u navedenom tekstu, na poznavanju okolnosti u kojima su ti muzeji nastali i širega povijesnoga konteksta u kojemu se zbivao cijeli proces. Autorica smatra da je Pamela Ballinger nedovoljno upoznata s tom regijom, kao i s relevantnim publikacijama o njoj iz područja društvenih znanosti. Pretpostavlja se da je Ballinger napisala svoj tekst na temelju nedovoljno argumentirane teze da muzeji koji pomažu očuvati i predstaviti kulturno naslijeđe ljudi u Tršćanskome zaljevu, a koji ne skrivaju svoj slovenski identitet, izgrađuju zidove među kulturama. Svojim pristranim tvrdnjama o njihovim vezama s nacionalističkim presizanjima nad morem i nad kopnom Ballinger se udaljila od znanstvene korektnosti.

Ključne riječi: Jadran, Tršćanski zaljev, Istra, slovenska manjina u Italiji, granice, muzeji, predstavljanja, stereotipi