

# THE MARIA DEL CARMEN



A hundred-year-old jábega fishing boat

Category: [Dossier](#)

Tag: [#17](#)

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**FOTO:** MMB Collection

Converted into a time capsule, the *María del Carmen* is an exceptional piece in the Museu Marítim de Barcelona. Due to its unique morphological features, this boat is considered a living remnant of the Phoenician heritage in the Mediterranean.



The traditional jábega fishing boat from Malaga, the *María del Carmen*, a symbol of an entire maritime culture, is on display at the Museu Marítim de Barcelona. Photo: MMB Collection.

## Historical context and origin

Registered on 25 February 1926 under folio 1869 of list 3a in the Maritime Captaincy of Malaga, this vessel is a reference model of the classic boat from the first third of the 20th century. Its airy and elegant lines, combined with a morphology featuring curved shapes, faithfully follow the aesthetic canon of the time; a silhouette that rigorously observes all the traditional requirements of the old jábega traditional fishing boat.

During the decline of artisanal fishing, boats like the *María del Carmen* were forced to compete for their space on the open sea at a clear disadvantage with the incipient industrial trawling. In addition to patiently fighting against the tide, they witnessed the emergence of the large steamships, which were part of the then powerful fishing companies. The saturation of the market through overflowing seafood hauls left the jábegas with no room for manoeuvre. Up against the law of supply and demand, the jábegas, limited as they were to the power of the people rowing them, were never on equal footing.

We don't know who built this hundred-year-old boat, but oral tradition suggests that it was originally

launched at the beach of El Palo, a neighbourhood about 5 kilometres east of the capital of Malaga, where it remained almost unrepentantly until the mid-seventies.

The *María del Carmen* has 25 ribs, one fewer than usual, which breaks the unwritten rule of 26 ribs for seven-oar boats. This structural difference suggests that at some point in her fishing life the boat was made a bit longer. Since this modification is not recorded in the Captaincy, this fact can either be attributed to the frequent administrative corruption of those years or to a later refurbishment that was not officially registered, which left a permanent discrepancy between reality and the registry sheet.

The 85-centimetre depth at maximum width makes it a fishing boat that, together with the length of 8.67 metres between perpendiculars and 85 centimetres of depth at the end, can be classified as a seven-oared vessel, at a time when it was already evident that the competition from intensive fishing techniques didn't bode well for the survival of the *jábega*.

This piece from the collection is contemporary with the *Isabel*, another iconic *jábega* from Malaga built in 1925. While the *María del Carmen* landed in Barcelona in the last third of the 20th century, the *Isabel* crossed the Atlantic to join the collection of the Mariner's Museum in Newport News in Virginia in 1934. This connection between the pieces from Barcelona and Virginia highlights how *jábega* boats have earned recognition as a unique example of maritime heritage and a jewel of Mediterranean naval architecture.

For devotees of this tradition, both boats transcend their value as museum pieces to continue being the lighthouse lantern and guide of the *rebalaje* (the swash). They are, in essence, a mirror where the present day of *jábega* boat can be gazed at so as not to forget its most profound roots.

The *jábega*, as a prototype of a way of life in the southern Mediterranean, did not sail alone: it existed alongside other vessels such as sardinals (traditional sailboats from Malaga) and buquetas (traditional sailboats from Galicia). Unfortunately, these types have disappeared from our beaches, an irreparable loss for seafaring heritage; the *jábega* thus has remained as the last witness of that now extinct maritime ecosystem.

## Technical characteristics

At its, the singular clipper bow, crowned by the stemhead and crossed by the ram, sports a defiant sphinx, with the head of a serpeant, that acts as a protective totem against the mythological dangers of the sea. The spar rests on the cutwater, coupled to the stern; this space has historically served as a space for representing religious iconography or traditional scenes, although today it has evolved into the corporate image of regatta clubs.

Above all, the eyes located on the fore-and-aft sides, under the bow spur, stand out. Considered a sacred symbol of life, the most recent research suggests a Mesopotamian origin for this ornament. Through the exchange between civilisations, this element would have evolved to be integrated into the primitive merchant and colonising ships that brought their ancient culture to the Mediterranean, until it became the identifying feature of our boats.

This singular arrangement of the eyes, a source of iconographic inspiration and a favourite target for photographers, constitutes one of the great distinguishing features of the *jábega*. Alongside it, the steering oar located on the *proba* side (starboard according to Xavier Pastor Quijada), together with a striking polychromy, serve as the core elements that keep the essence of this vessel intact.

Designed for artisanal fishing, the *jábega* is a self-propelled beach boat by manual power that always uses



an odd number of oars: seven, nine, eleven or thirteen. Historically it has no mast or sail. The singular rowing nature of this boat defines its sides as the port or *corulla* (following X. Pastor), also known as the *banda de cuatro* (four-person side) and the starboard or *banda de tres* (three-person side). From the stern, the *mandaor* steers right by handling the rudder and directs the course, evoking the Venetian style. An eighth member is also on board.

Over time, the scarce hauls and the increasing difficulty in recruiting *jabegotes* (fishermen) led to a change in construction. Carpenters and caulkers began to shorten the lengths; thus, the evolution from the large thirteen-oar boats to the current seven-oar ones, which were more manageable and adapted to the new reality.

This layout varies when moving from fishing to competition. In regattas, an additional participant is added, the ninth, affectionately known as *metebríos*. Strategically positioned right between the *mandaor* and the rowers, he acts as a boatswain for the sport, who spurs the rowers on and sets the pace of the oars with his shouts.

The longitudinal ridges or double lateral keels are the parts that suffer the most wear and tear from daily work. As they support the entire weight of the boat, they require rigorous maintenance by the carpenters. The contact between the ridges and the spars —thick square wooden beams that were once slatted and are now greased to make sliding easier— is one of the most notable aspects during manoeuvres. This system allows seafarers to push the boat manually, which prevents it from sinking into the sand. This ancestral method has remained unchanged after centuries of use and has not been replaced by any other type of technology.

The forecastle has double handles on each side, which act like cleats. Their primary function is to secure the rope of the grapnel when the order is given to anchor.



A collage of eyes of boats from jábega boats. 2017. Artist: Pablo Portillo Sempel. 2017. Artist: Pablo Portillo Sempel.

## Navigation and manoeuvres

The ultimate *raison d'être* for the jábega boat was fishing and, every day, after the fishing turns were drawn, the vessel went to her fishing spot to set the nets in daytime or nighttime spears, except when there was bad weather, it was off season or due to other reasons.

The fishing grounds were located near the beaching area. Although it was not considered a restricted fishing areas, foreign jábega boats from distant beaches, attracted by the abundance of catches, would travel to seek their fortune in distant waters, which led to friction, tensions and problems with the local boats. The fishing regulations that the skippers of jábega boats had to follow in the province of Malaga, which were compiled by Benigno Rodríguez Santamaría in his *Diccionario de artes de pesca* (1923), are an example of the serious controversies and disputes arising from the manoeuvres and navigation of these boats.

The dimensions of the mesh and, especially, of the yoke of the net, which was sometimes highly selective, was another of the common conflicts in the sector, especially during off seasons, in addition to the

coexistence with other proximity types of boats that were rarely monitored and at the same time prohibited at certain times, such as the sweep net and the *birorta*.

The *mandaor*, in addition to the functions entrusted to him such as keeping order and watching over the boat, launching, fighting the waves in rough weather, setting sail and, ultimately, piloting the boat, guided by the alignment of the marks on the ground to avoid the *agarreros* or underwater rocks, managed the boat in all its aspects. The *jábega* worked in medium waters, around 40 metres deep and less than half a mile from the coast, in what was called the *restinga*, or shallows.

Hauling in the net while directing the operations, ensuring it didn't break or burst, without resorting, to the extent possible, to the *sotorráez* (the boat's second in command who also was in charge of mending the nets) was another of the usual concerns in incidents.

Family members, *porrinos de tierra* (day labourers on the beach) and all kinds of onlookers approached, seeking some reward by trying to take advantage of the leftover scraps.

Finally, the skipper had to personally direct the auction, keeping fraudsters at bay and settling debts to ensure the business was running properly before distributing the haul.

## The Technique of Fishing

The professor and philologist Ramón Crespo Ruano maintains that, for some etymologists, such as Barcelona's Joan Coromines, the term *jábega* as a net arises from the Arabic *šábaka*, from the root *šábak* (to entangle, to intertwine). However, Manuel Alvar maintains that the same word *jábega* / *šábaka* over time diachronically acquired two meanings: first the net and then the ship.

Sáñez Reguart, another Barcelona native, already at the end of the 18th century, recorded that the *jábega* as a fishing technique was "the most common and profitable for those on our coasts of the Ocean and the Mediterranean, from the Gulf of Roses to the mouth of the Guadiana River".

*Jábega* has always been considered a poor man's technique. It operated under the share-based system, where the high number of workers contrasted with the meager yields and scarce profits to share.

Trawling or shooting fishing, using an ancient technique, was done directly from the shore, in shallow waters, flat bottoms and without rocks. The gear is made up of two lateral bands or legs that end in a truncated conical bag where the fishing product, especially sardines and saithe, was housed. Once the gear and the moorings were placed in the boat, the tide was tested to determine the current. Once the tip of the fishing line was left on the ground, the boat rowed in a direction perpendicular to the coastline, moving away from the *rebalaje*, and the gear was lowered. Having formed a semicircle, they returned to the starting line, letting the *cabo arribaero* ashore on the other side. The *jabegotes*, plus those who remained on land by means of the *tralla* (rope held on the shoulder in a sling) and attached to the drag beta, proceeded to pull the craft, leaving in the collective subconscious those incomparable traces of those men bent forward due to the hardness of the effort and always with their backs to the sea, until the yoke of the net touched land, initiating the bidding of the buyers.

Later, the famous figure of the *cenachero*, a sort of public crier, appeared on the scene. This word, not included in the Spanish Royal Academy, represents the person who, proclaiming the excellence of his fresh merchandise, sold fish with individual baskets (*cenachos* in Spanish) hanging from his arms as handles, always roaming from place to place. This figure has been a source of inspiration for painters, sculptors and poets.



The abundance of anchovy and sardine hauls laid the foundations of the culinary identity of the *rebalaje* (swash). For now, this tradition survives in the *espetos* (skewers) and *moragas* (night time festivals) that define the landscape of our xiringuito beach bars.



The Ntra. Sra. Virgen del Carmen on El Palo beach. Photo: Pablo Portillo.

## Order of 11 April 1872 that attributes the drawing of fishing turns to Malaga

Legislative Compilation of the Spanish Navy, volume 7, published in 1915

*Since time immemorial, jábega boats have followed the custom of taking turns fishing in the areas within the reach of this province.*

*Art. 1. At sunset, the boats that have been fishing at the same spot during the day are launched. The skipper who was the last to launch and haul in the net from the water places, next to the boat he is skippering, a morrón. This consists of affixing to the end of an oar or paddle a jacket or piece of cloth, then raises it in the air. Once all the skippers see this morrón, they are required to approach the vessel marked with the distinctive sign. Its skipper takes a deck of well-shuffled cards; each of the other skippers draws a card, as does the one holding the deck. As the cards are drawn, the skipper receives a number corresponding to his card, and that is his turn to fish the next day.*

*Art. 2. The skipper who fails to cast his lot at the time of carrying out this operation will be the last one to take the turn.*



*La Traya* ready to go to work. Photo: Pablo Portillo.

## Evolution over time and historical value

Although jábegas were banned from fishing at the end of the 20th century, the very activity they were designed for, they have evolved into the world of regattas in the summer season. Organised by the clubs of the bay in a league form with points by category and protected by a sport with deep local roots, the boats have received a warm welcome in the different municipalities of the bay.

It has taken several decades to unify the weighing and dimension guidelines so that the latest generation



boats can compete on an equal footing.

Another of the most significant advances has come with women joining the scene. What began as a historical exclusion gave way to a gradual integration, first through what is known as social rowing, before women gained firm acceptance in competitions. A turning point has thus taken place in the world of *rebalaje* by managing to remove obstacles and social and cultural stereotypes.

Surprisingly, this great boat, which we hope will endure in the local collective imagination as a new maritime icon, currently has no legal, cultural or institutional protection aside from the tourist appeal linked to the sun and the beach, in complete disregard of its profound maritime legacy. The hope is that it can eventually be recognised as an asset of cultural interest (BIC) and, ultimately, a greater level of collective awareness.

Official protection of this unique heritage is essential in order to know more about this boat and to showcase its importance. Raising awareness is vital to enrich our Mediterranean cultural heritage. This maritime heritage, intimately linked to a section of the Alboran Sea, is a historical record that has been carefully preserved at the Reials Drassanes de Barcelona.