Wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus from the late 19th to the mid-20th century

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Abstract
Wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus was a craft based on traditional, pre-industrial design and construction methods. The transition of the island administration at the end of the 19th century from the Ottoman to the British Empire with resultant economic and social changes, and then the turmoil of two World Wars with their population movements, impacted on the craft in the first half of the 20th century. The evolution of traditional wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus during the 20th century constitutes an excellent example of how geographic and socio-economic changes can affect shipbuilding.

Keywords
British Empire, Cyprus, Ottoman Empire, traditional wooden shipbuilding

The period from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, the last phase of the widespread use of wooden vessels in the Mediterranean, was a period that shaped modern Cypriot wooden shipbuilding activity. It coincides with British rule on the island, during which the administrative and political system changed after 300 years of Ottoman rule, along with historical events of global impact, like the two World Wars, which also affected the socio-economic conditions of the island. This article discusses the results of a broader research into vernacular wooden shipbuilding on Cyprus during this period within its historical and cultural context.

As this is the first attempt at a systematic recording of the island’s nautical heritage, published literature on the subject is very limited. The main sources used were of four types. Information on the historical and economic context of the period was retrieved from 19th century consular reports, the British administration’s annual reports, known as ‘Blue Books’, and the statistical publications of the Republic of Cyprus after the country’s independence in 1960.

In order to create a coherent typology of the small wooden vessels of Cyprus, 19th century published photographs were the main source of information for the early period of the research (Bonato et al. 2007, p. 14, 2011, p. 57-62). In addition, a total of about 35,000 photographs from private archives and published albums were examined, of which only 700 were related to shipping and shipbuilding activity in Cyprus.

Ethnography was extensively used, with interviews of elderly mariners and especially the last Cypriot shipwrights, now in their 70s or older, who were able to give, even indirect, information about the craft during the mid-20th century.

About 400 boats docked in fishing shelters or small harbours around the island have been visually inspected and used both as a direct and indirect source of information on shipbuilding and typology. The characteristic features of almost 150 of them were recorded.

1. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1571 Cyprus had become part of the Ottoman Empire (Papageorgiou 1996, p. 67). From the end of the 17th century the island experienced economic decline with a negative impact on the local population, which suffered from high tax, poverty and mortality rates. The negative socio-economic status seems to have continued up until the 19th century (Dionyssiou 2009, p. 166). According to British consular reports for the years 1854-1858, the local population was engaged mainly in agricultural work on a very basic level, leaving large fertile areas uncultivated, while it seems to have had a very limited involvement in maritime activities (Papadopoullou 1980, p. 57-58, 60). According to Ottoman archives, a state shipyard operated on the island during the 17th and 18th century (Mpekiaroglou-Exadaktilou 1994, p. 53, 56), however, no information about an organised shipyard is reported in the official consular reports of the 19th century. In 1878, after a secret agreement between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain, Cyprus came under British rule (Hadjivasiliou 1998, p. 43-44). One of the British administration objectives, however, was the general development of the economy including trade and shipping (Hadjivasiliou 1998, p. 44), and thus particular attention was paid to the recording of related activities by the authorities. Thus far no strong local shipbuilding activity could be identified in the late 19th century.
In the early 20th century, even though Cyprus was not really involved territorially in the First World War, it was affected by the war’s migration problems. From 1914 more than 300,000 refugees, mainly from Asia Minor, moved to different regions of the eastern Mediterranean and some of them seem to have ended up in Cyprus (Michaelides 2018, p. 50-51). In 1922, the Greek Asia Minor Campaign and subsequent debacle led to the destruction of Smyrna and the violent and permanent removal of the Greek population (Llewellyn Smith 1973, p. 284-311). Between November 1921 and November 1923, a total of 5,249 Greek refugees ended up on Cyprus (Mathopoulou 2015, p. 81-106). Among others, craftsmen of different expertise, shipbuilders included, significantly enriched the local vernacular industries (Egoumenidou-Rizopoulou 1998, p. 125-147).

During the Second World War, Cyprus was used by Britain as a transit point for over 23,000 Greeks on their way to Egypt and the Middle East: more than 5,500 of them settled permanently on the island (Michaelides 2018, p. 177-179). The majority of them came from the Aegean islands and in particular from Samos and Symi, which had strong shipbuilding traditions (Michaelides 2018, p. 52-53, 108-112; Damianidis 1998, p. 30-32).

2. SHIPBUILDING IN CYPRUS

According to British consular reports, five to ten brigs or goletes and a total of 30 to 80 small fishing boats were permanently docked in the ports of the island during the years 1854-1858 (Papadopoullou 1980, p. 60). Another report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United States in 1856 gives the following information:

“There being no good port in Cyprus, the number of vessels belonging to the island is quite insignificant, and these are small craft not built in Cyprus, but on the coast of Caramaria [Karamania] from Castel Rasso to Adalia. Vessels are also sometimes bought at public sales in and out of the island; but these instances are extremely rare. Small boats are built in Cyprus now and then” (Merchant’s Magazine and Commercial Review 33, January-June, 1856, p. 387).

Even though shipbuilding activity is not reported in the consular or administration reports, the presence of a number of wooden vessels on the island during the late 19th century is possibly a result of the existence of some basic shipbuilding infrastructure, or at least the existence of some basic knowledge in relation to the repair and maintenance of wooden vessels. This is definitely confirmed by photographs of the late 19th or early 20th century depicting wooden ships careening, i.e. during maintenance (Chatterton 1914, p. 335).

The existence of Cypriot registered sailing vessels is documented by the ‘Blue Books’ from 1888 to 1946, although their number cannot be accurately determined, nor can it be confirmed that these vessels were permanently docked in the island. However, probably no more than two or three dozen permanently docked caiques, in Kyrenia and Limassol if not elsewhere, sailed beyond the island and belonged to wealthy locals engaged in commerce, at least since the early 20th century (Yiordamli 2008, p. 106-109).

According to the ‘Blue Books’ for the years 1887-1888, a total of 77 fishing boats were docked in the harbours of Limassol, Larnaca, Famagusta and Kyrenia. Until 1916, the number of fishing boats gradually increased, when Paphos was added as a mooring as well. From 1917 up until 1946 the numbers fluctuate, with some interesting indications. After a decline between the years 1920-1923, an impressive, sharp increase is recorded in 1932, a drop in 1938, and an increase again in 1946.

One of the issues that emerges here is the possibility that some of these boats came from abroad and were only temporarily involved in fishing in Cypriot waters. This could explain the annual variations that are presented in the numbers of vessels over the years, especially after 1920 (Table 1).

The first documented testimony of wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus found so far dates back to 1917 in Kyrenia, when the Cypriot shipwright Kostas Fitos and one of his brothers (Michalis or Alexandros) were called from Limassol to Kyrenia and built two or three wooden caiques for the local businessman Demosthenis Severis. The information is reported by the newspaper Φωνή της Κύπρου (The Voice of Cyprus, 30/04/1919), and is confirmed by Katselli (1979, p. 140) as well as by interviews with Karkanias (CRC/OTA 1), Ekonomou (CRC/OTA 3) and Toumanis (CRC/OTA 2) (fig. 1).

The first official report of a shipyard in Cyprus is found slightly later in the ‘Blue Books’, in 1922, and concerns a small “boat-building yard” in Famagusta. The existence of a boatbuilding yard in Famagusta is reported every year up until 1936, while during the years 1925, 1930, 1934, 1935 and 1936 another unit with very limited staff and very small production, not exceeding five boats per year, is also reported. This must be related to the arrival of Table 1: Number of boats engaged in fishing according to the ‘Blue Books’ for the years 1887-1946.
Greek refugees from Asia Minor. According to Andoniadis (2018, p. 88), as well as to two different shipwrights who were interviewed, Kyriakou and Nicolaou (NC 1-2), two shipwrights named Pantelis Stavrou and Kyriakos Konstantinou (Kimilis) came as refugees and engaged in shipbuilding in the towns of Famagusta and Limassol. Marios Parbour (probably of Lebanese origin) seems to have been another shipwright who, according to his grandparents (NC 7), might have already been working in Limassol in the 1920s and then moved to Lebanon probably in the 1930s. Giakoumis “Varkaris” (no information about his origins were found) and “Mastre” Giorgis (son-in-law of the shipwright Pantelis Stavrou of Asia Minor origin) were reported as shipwrights in Famagusta during the 1920s by Kantounas (CRC/OTA 5) as well as by Eleftheriou (NC 3). The oldest known shipwright that worked in Larnaka is Dimitris (Dimitros) Skeparnidis. According to Andoniadis (2018, p. 90) and Nicolaou (NC 2), he was a Cypriot engaged in shipbuilding at least since the 1920s.

During the period between the Second World War and 1960, at least 27 shipwrights were engaged in building boats and small caiques around the island (fig. 2). Three of them (Pantelis Stavrou, Kyriakos Konstantinou Kimilis and Dimitris Skeparnidis) had already been working since the 1920s and continued their activity during the next decades. However, Kantounas (CRC/OTA 5), as well as four different shipwrights who were interviewed (NC 1, 3-4, 6, 8), agreed that at the beginning of the Second World War in 1940, five shipwrights and their relatives from the island of Symi (Loucas, Giannis, Nikos and Vassilis Moraris, together with Eleftherios Billis) came as refugees to Cyprus and worked in different cities.

2.1. SHIPBUILDING ACTIVITY IN DIFFERENT CITIES

In Famagusta there seems to have been no large organised shipyard before 1953, when, according to Tziortzi (CRC/OTA 7), Kantounas (CRC/OTA 6) and Zouvanis (CRC/OTA 4), the first one was established within the city’s port: it seems that only vessels of up to 200 tons could be hoisted out of the water there. In the same oral testimonies, as well as in the testimonies of Toumanis (CRC/OTA 2), Spaou (CRC/OTA 8) and five other shipwrights that were interviewed (NC 1, 3-6), at least eight shipwrights where reported as working in the city. These were: Nicolaos Eleftheriou Billis (son of Eleftherios Billis from Symi), Chrysostomos Antoniou, Panagiotis Dimitriadis, Gregoris Panayi, Christos Fartas, Mattheos Philis, “Mastre” Panaos and Riskalas Parpour. The shipwrights were working either in the port’s shipyard, or in small private shipyards. Although no information about the origins of any of them was found, most of them were locals or from Greece, except one, Riskalas Parpour, who according to his sons (NC 7) learnt the craft from his father, Marios Parpour, in Lebanon and immigrated to Cyprus in 1956 or 1957. He first settled in Paphos and then in Famagusta where he established a small shipyard.

In Larnaca, according to Andoniadis (2018, p. 90) as well as the five shipwrights who were interviewed (NC 1-3, 6, 8), two other Cypriots worked alongside Dimitris Skeparidis and learned the craft from him: Antonis Kyriakidis (Outsokkas) and Patroklos Nicolaou (Patroklis).

In Limassol, in addition to Pantelis Stavrou and Kyriakos Konstantinou Kimilis, Lambros Rigos and Dimitris Agisilaou, both Cypriots, were reported as shipwrights by Yiordamli (2008, p. 114) and Andoniadis (2018, p. 88), as well as by six shipwrights that were interviewed (NC 1-4, 6, 8). During the 1950s a new generation of shipwrights learned the craft and engaged in shipbuilding in Limassol. These were Herakles Kyriakou (son of Kyriakos Konstantinou Kimilis) and the Cypriot brothers Grigoris Avgousti and Charalambos (Hampis) Avgousti, whose families were the most active shipwright families on the island during the second half of the 20th century. Ali Jafer Rati is the only Turkish Cypriot shipwright reported during the research: he learnt the shipbuilding craft from
Dimitris Agisilaou and worked also in Limassol (Yiordamli 2008, p. 114).

In Kyrenia the only reported shipwright was the Cypriot Sotiris Georgiou (Karagiaouris) who was the owner of a small shipyard and one of the shipwrights that were interviewed (NC 4).

The Cypriot Vasilis Shiakallis was reported by Kofteros (2010), as well as by Kyriakou (NC 1), Georgiou (NC 4) and Spyrou (NC 6), as a shipwright in Karavostasi, (Morfou district). He was also the owner of a small shipyard.

In Paphos, the only shipwright reported during this period was Pantelis Kyriakou (son of Kyriakos Konstantinou Kimilis) who, according his brother Kyriakou (NC 1), engaged in shipbuilding in the early 1950s, but he died in an accident in 1957.

2.2. SHIPBUILDING TECHNIQUES

In order to study and characterise shipbuilding activity and origins on the island, an understanding of the shipbuilding design methods is required. Information about the methods used during the period under consideration was primarily available from the local modern shipwrights whose knowledge was obtained from the shipwrights who worked on the island in the first half of the 20th century. Research has shown that the basic shipbuilding design methods used locally were: the monochnaro, a ‘master frame’ method used by seven shipwrights that were interviewed (NC 1-3, 5-8); and the sala, a ‘lofting process’ used by six shipwrights that were interviewed (NC 1-2, 4-5, 7-8).

The same methods are found and similarly named in the Aegean tradition, and are used in different variants (Damianidis 1989, p. 180-227, 1993, p. 97-101; Priti, Loukakis 1993, p. 141-149). Similar methods are also found in several Mediterranean traditions (Bloesh 1983, p. 148-149; Lane 1992, p. 93-97; Marzari 1998, p. 192-211; Rieth 1998, p. 91-100, 2011, p. 409-418; McGrail 2001, p. 164-165). However, during research it emerged that shipbuilding design knowledge was poor among most of the modern local shipwrights, which led to the use of local variants in order to create a new vessel. A typical method, probably used in order to ensure a positive result, was the creation of moulds after the construction of a successful vessel, which were then re-used for the construction of new vessels. This method was used by at least five shipwrights who were interviewed (NC 1-2, 5, 7-8) and is a distinct practice not common to the Aegean.

The local shipbuilding process was based on the frame-first or skeleton-first method, where the frames (skeleton) of the vessel precede the construction of the shell, a method which most probably became gradually predominant somewhere between the 6th and the 10th century AD and has prevailed to date in most of the Mediterranean and on traditions further afield (Steffy 1994, p. 83-100; McGrail 2001, p. 160-164; Rieth 2011, p. 409; Pomey et al. 2012, p. 235-314).

The construction of the shell was based on the carvel method, where the planks are placed edge to edge in order to create a smooth outer surface (Adams 2013, p. 53-55). The shipbuilding process included seven different basic stages described the same way by the eight shipwrights who were interviewed, and they include:
- the laying down of the keel and the posts;
- the construction and adjustment of the frames, called skarmoloima;
- the adjustment of the longitudinal reinforcing elements;
- the deck fastening;
- the planking, called maderoma;
- the ceiling;
- the caulking, called kalafatisma (NC 1-8).

The local shipbuilding process presents obvious similarities with the Aegean tradition in the construction procedures, the use of particular construction parts, and the terminology. (Damanidis 1989, p. 255-304).

2.3. TYPES OF VESSELS AND SAILS

For the period between the late 19th and the middle of the 20th century, 11 different types of vessel, according to their hull construction features, were found to be built or used on the island. These include six vessels with a pointed stern: botis, trespantiri, trespantira, tserniki, maouma or fortigida, and santali; three with a transom stern: varkalas, bombarda and pasara; and two with an elliptical stern: karavoskaro and liberty (NC 1-8; CRC/OTA 1-8; Chiotellis 1987, p. 137; Pilavakis 1997, p. 226; Yiordamli 2008, p. 106-116; Kofteros 2010, p. 174-177; Antoniadis 2018, p. 90). The above 11 types are also found in the Greek traditional typology (Segditsas 1940, p. 237-258; Konstantinidis 1954, p. 137, 156, 565; Throckmorton 1964, p. 205-216; Denham 1986, p. 277-293; Damianidis 1998, p. 41-76). The presence of imported vessels on the island during the specific period was also confirmed, however it seems that vessels from a non-Greek speaking region were called by the corresponding Greek names according to their hull construction features. Two cases were found to be the exception to this pattern, however information about their construction features is very limited. The first case is a vessel called a douba, probably of Middle Eastern origin (Yiordamli 2008, p. 107-108), and the second is a vessel called a potouni, probably of English origin (CRC/OTA 7).

In addition to the vessels’ hull typology, 16 different types of sail and combinations of sails were also found. All of them have been identified in photographic records. These include: two triangular sails, latini (lateen) and pena (Bermuda or gunter); four quadrilateral sails, sakoleva or sakolefi (spirt), psatha (lug), randa or mpouma (gaff) and stavrosi or pina (square); seven combinations of sails: brik or vriki (brig), brigantini or polaka (brigantine or polacre), goleta (gullet), bombarda, brazzeria, radopsathi, schoona or lover (schooner); and three secondary
sails: *flokos*, *straliere* and *trikettina* (variant of *tourkettina*) (CRC/OTA 2-3, 8-10; Chiotellis 1987, p. 137). The same types are also found in the Aegean typology (Kotsovilis 1919; Damianidis 1998, p. 77-96), and most of them correspond to types used widely in the Mediterranean and beyond (Casson 1964, p. 57-198; Moore 1970).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Significant local shipbuilding activity on the island cannot yet be corroborated during the middle and end of the 19th century, at least on an organised level. Thus, a local shipbuilding tradition cannot be identified either, even though the existence of Cypriot flagged vessels and Cypriot ship owners can be confirmed. The reason behind this is probably related to the limited needs for wooden vessels by wealthy local merchants, or local fishermen. These needs could more easily be addressed by the experienced and productive shipyards of neighbouring areas, especially those in Asia Minor and the Aegean, or by occasional shipbuilding taking place on the island, or even through the importing of used vessels from nearby places. The first documented evidence of wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus for the period under consideration is dated to the end of the 1910s, however, there is no official reference to shipbuilding activity on the island before 1922 according to statistical records kept from the beginning of the British administration. The establishment of the first small shipbuilding units seems to have triggered the shipbuilding craft on the island. This tradition, in the sense of apprenticeship, was based in most of the cases on the simple relationship of an employer and an employee. The involvement of the majority of Cypriot shipwrights in shipbuilding during the first half of the 20th century has been through choice and was less associated with a family tradition, which has never in fact exceeded two generations.

The collected evidence also indicates that during the first half of the 20th century there was a clear impact of Greek traditional shipbuilding on the island. The settlement and activity of Greek shipwrights, the terminology preserved through the modern shipwrights, as well as the types of vessels built locally, all point towards this conclusion. The common cultural background between Greek Cypriots and Greeks has certainly enhanced this process, which was initiated by the political and economic events of the period. It therefore appears that the local development of wooden shipbuilding between the late 19th and the mid-20th century has been the result not of a specific need for wooden vessels, but mainly of certain historical events. It depended mainly on the settlement of shipwrights from Asia Minor and the Aegean, who filled an existing gap in this craft on the island.

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