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ARTISTIC AND SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF THE MALTESE *LUZZU*

Efthymia AKRIVOPOULOU and Irene MUÑOZ

Abstract

Almost in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese islands provide harbours for various types of traditional fishing boat. One of these types, and the focus of this research, is the *luzzu*. Decorated with different colours and symbols, the once prominent *luzzu* is today found in only a few harbours. Using *in situ* research, these boats were studied to understand how the symbolism of their decorations might have changed throughout the years.

Keywords

Colour symbolism, *luzzu*, Malta, nautical ethnography, *oculi*

Résumé

Situé au centre de la mer Méditerranée, l'archipel maltais offre une multitude de ports pour divers types de bateaux de pêche traditionnels. L'une de ces embarcations, objet de cette recherche, est le *luzzu*. Décoré de nombreuses couleurs et de symboles variés, le *luzzu* autrefois très courant ne se trouve plus aujourd'hui que dans quelques ports. Par le biais de recherches effectuées sur le terrain, ces bateaux ont été étudiés pour percevoir comment le symbolisme de leurs décorations a pu évoluer au fil des ans.

Mots-clés

Symbolisme des couleurs, *luzzu*, Malte, ethnographie navale, *oculi*

This short contribution aims to present and understand the meaning of colours and symbols of the *luzzijet* (singular *luzzu*), a type of traditional fishing boat found in the archipelago of Malta (fig. 1). It probably evolved from the *gozzo*, an Italian boat that was regularly seen off the Maltese coast around the 19th century. The *luzzu*, usually between 9 ft and 25 ft (2.7 m and 7.6 m) in length, superseded other traditional Maltese boats due to its strong construction. It is a double-ended, carvel-built open boat with a stern rudder, a false keel and extra planking at the bilge for extra framework support and protection while beaching. Originally, it was propelled by oars, later developments added sails (spritsail and jib) and nowadays engines power the boats (Muscat 1999, p. 94-98).

Our initial approach was to use first-hand knowledge derived from personal communication with Maltese fishermen, owners and shipwrights, but that proved impossible since few were willing to talk to us. Therefore, our approach changed, this time focusing more on personal observations and the available bibliography.

A total of 62 *luzzijet* were observed. Sometimes their identification was quite problematic since they were anchored far from shore or covered with cloth, so they were not easily distinguishable from other similar boats. They were not distributed evenly around the islands: of the recorded boats, 14 of them were in Mgarr, Gozo's main port, five in the area of Msida and St Julian's, seven in St Paul's Bay and Qawra, and more than

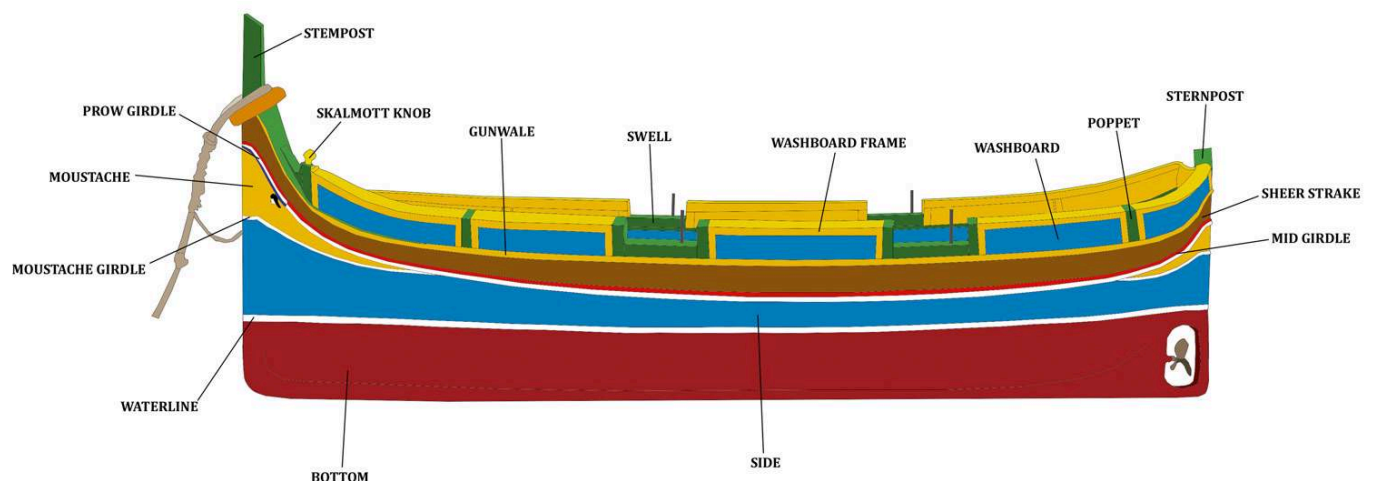


Fig. 1: Drawing showing the shape of a *luzzu* along with the terminology for each part (drawing Irene Muñoz).

half of them, 36, were anchored in Marsaskala and Marsaxlokk, especially Marsaxlokk (30 of the 36).

1. INTERPRETATION OF COLOURS

When choosing a colour, many factors come into play, including the practical, aesthetic, symbolic and cultural. Earlier authors emphasised the importance of the moustache (*mustacċ*) to distinguish the location of origin of a *luzzu*. S. Said (2014, p. 36) notes, “a red *mustacċ* would mean that the boat came from St Paul’s Bay. A lemon yellow *mustacċ* indicates it came from Msida or St Julian’s, whilst an ochre yellow would identify the boat as pertaining to the south (Marsaxlokk and Marsascale area)”. A fisherman interviewed by J. Hornell (1923, p. 314) mentioned the change to a black or dark blue moustache as a sign of grief when a relative dies.

However, unlike previous research, no local differentiation regarding the colour of the moustache was observed today. In Valletta and St Julian’s, we interviewed two fishermen, asking why they used specific colours for their boats. They gave vague answers, such as “because these colours are used here” or “there is no particular reason, just because I like it”. Even if today the traditional selection of colours is mostly respected, the meaning behind those colours seems to have been lost. In table 1 we have gathered past and present possible meanings of the dominant colours of each part of a *luzzu*.

2. INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS

2.1 BIRD WITH SCROLL

The bird, represented on the sides of the boat flying under the *oculi* usually carrying a scroll in its beak, can be identified as a debased form of the Christian dove carrying an olive branch. In Christianity, the dove symbolises the soul and is the image of the Holy Spirit. It can also be understood as a symbol of hope, since it helped Noah find land after the flood. Thus, it could act as a protective image, helping boats return home safely. In addition, D. Morris (2016, p. 71) recorded an interesting tradition: during the launch and baptism of a *luzzu*, references to Noah’s

tale can be found in the priest’s sermon, and also in the olive branch and cross that are attached to the stempost.

2.2 OCULI

Oculi are depicted on the moustache. This symbol is present on many boats around the world, possibly indicating several inception points. It is not until the Egyptian civilization that this symbol becomes common. The eye appears as an independent entity or associated with a deity such as Ra, Atum or Horus. The eye of Horus was a popular amulet in ancient Egypt for protection against disease and the ‘evil eye’ (Castañeda Navarro 2014, p. 9). It can be seen on Ra’s sacred barque, on the bow of funerary ships and other objects ensuring a safe trip to the ‘other shore’ (Hornell 1923, p. 300). It is likely that the Phoenicians helped spread this symbol across the Mediterranean, with the Greeks and later the Romans continuing the tradition. Painted eyes also appear on pre-Islamic Arabic ships as protection against the ‘evil eye’ and the temptations of demons, a custom that probably spread to the East through trading routes (Castañeda Navarro 2014, p. 14-15).

When Hornell visited Malta and Gozo in the early 1920s, he found that locals thought the eye of Horus acted as a protection against the ‘evil eye’, while Gozo residents believed that the symbol gave a spiritual identity to the boats, as if they were ‘animated’. They were also associated with the success of the *luzzu*. Hornell also noticed that most *oculi* had a yellow eyebrow (Hornell 1923, p. 314). Similar symbolism is common today, but most eyebrows are painted black, or yellow as the second most common colour. Red and blue are rarer, while there was also one example of an orange eyebrow. All these variations seem to be associated with personal preferences.

2.3 BIRD/DRAGON

When the sheer strake of the *luzzu* is decorated, the motif has been observed to be a garland of plants and flowers. In some *luzzijet*, this decoration is carved and painted yellow or white, although this only occurs on those boats where the sheer strake is varnished wood. Sometimes a dragon appears on the bow, or else a bird or a creature that is a mix of both. The bird, like the one on the side of the boat, can be interpreted as a dove holding

Table 1: The table shows the dominant colour for each part of a *luzzu*.

Colour	Meaning / Functionality	Location
Brownish-red	Copper-based paint as an antifouling aid	Bottom
Blue	Related to water and the spiritual world in many cultures	Side Washboards
White	Aesthetics and tradition: visually separates different sections of the boat	Waterline Moustache girdle
Yellow	Colour of the Vatican flag and the Archbishop of Malta. Almost universally, yellow symbolises the sun, eternity and the divine	Moustache Sheerstrake Washboard frames
Red / white	Maltese flag. A variation of this, red/white/blue, represents the colours of the Maltese flag under British rule	Prow girdle Mid girdle
Brown	Imitates wood, since varnished wood needs more maintenance	Sheerstrake
Green	In ancient Egypt symbolised goodness, life and resurrection, while in ancient Rome green was identified with growth, health and life	Poppets Swells

a floral garland instead of the usual olive branch (Morris 2016, p. 77). When the bow figure has a more dragon-like shape, the rest of the pattern on the sheer strake can be interpreted as fire coming out of its mouth. In many Western societies, the dragon has a negative connotation related to evil (Carmona Muela 2008, p. 227). Thus, this symbol can be considered a memory of an older religion or culture.

3. CONCLUSION

Compared to previous studies, such as those carried out by Hornell in 1923 and Morris in the 1970s, the number of *luzzijiet*

has decreased significantly and any local differentiation regarding the colour of the moustache that was recorded previously is absent today. Although each *luzzu* is different depending on the owner's colour preference, the final choice is still subject to local cultural pressure. Symbols once prominent, but now stripped of their original meaning, still survive in art and cultural traditions despite contradicting modern beliefs. The chromatic homogeneity seen today may also be related to the numerous photographs of romanticised fishing villages and colourful boats that are used to promote Malta as a tourist destination.

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