The traditional ship construction in the gulf of Lion and the Ligurian sea: the tartane case study
Hélène Botcazou

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Local and Inter-Regional Traditions in Shipbuilding

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Marseilles 2018

Edited by Giulia Boetto, Patrice Pomey and Pierre Poveda
OPEN SEA | CLOSED SEA
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MER FERMÉE | MER OUVERTE
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TRADITIONAL SHIP CONSTRUCTION IN THE GULF OF LION AND THE LIGURIAN SEA: THE TARTANE CASE STUDY

Hélène Botcazou

Abstract
This article deals with a type of coaster from the northwest Mediterranean called tartane. This emblematic coaster is generally presented as the most commonly utilised boat for cargo transport from the 16th century until the end of sailing ship coastal trade in this area at the very beginning of the 20th century. Although it is often described as a wide-bottom one-masted lateen ship, we can count at least four different rigging systems in various iconographic resources portraying tartanes, dating from 1679 to the very first decades of the 20th century. These diverse rigging systems reveal some developments to and influences on the tartane-type vessel, and they add complexity to our vision of a maritime cultural landscape in a coherent sailing space that includes the Gulf of Lion and Liguria.

Keywords
Corsica, lateen rigging, naval architecture, 17th-20th century, tartane, western Mediterranean.

This paper presents an overview of the evolution of the tartane-type vessel, which was the most emblematic and widespread coaster along the southern coasts of France, from Provence to Languedoc. This case study is part of the author’s PhD research focused on the architectural and functional systems of coasters sailing along Corsica’s coast between the 16th and the 20th century. Indeed, this island is strategically situated within a specific maritime transport zone sailed by a large number of coasters coming from different regions of the northwest Mediterranean basin. Thus, alongside the coasters of Corsican origin, this research also takes into consideration the coasters of Catalonia, the south coast of France, Liguria and Sardinia.

At the core of our research is the collection of a complete ‘catalogue’ composed of ship representations in paintings, stamps, photographs, and archival and bibliographical descriptions, along with other information from current underwater archaeological excavations conducted on the coast of Corsica. The aim is to describe the characteristics of the different coasters and identify adaptations to their environment and to the local societies that built them. We also try to present the differences and similarities in the coasters’ building traditions in the different regions covered by our research.

Résumé
Cet article traite d’un type de caboteur à voile de la Méditerranée nord-occidentale appelé tartane. Ce caboteur emblématique est généralement présenté comme le bateau le plus utilisé pour le transport de marchandises du XVe siècle jusqu’à la fin du commerce côtier par voiliers dans cette zone, au tout début du XXe siècle. Bien qu’il soit souvent décrit comme un navire à voile latine à large fond, on peut compter au moins quatre systèmes de gréement différents dans diverses sources iconographiques représentant des tartanes, de 1679 aux toutes premières décennies du XXe siècle. Ces divers systèmes de gréement mettent en évidence un certain nombre de développements et d’influences sur le navire de type tartane et ils ajoutent de la complexité à notre vision d’un paysage culturel maritime inscrit dans un espace de navigation cohérent qui comprend le golfe du Lion et la Ligurie.

Mots-clés
Corse, gréement latin, architecture navale, XVe - XXe siècle, tartane, Méditerranée nord-occidentale.

1. THE TARTANE-TYPE VESSEL

A comparison of the various drawings of tartane-type vessels allows us to follow the evolution of this type of ship and possibly the diversity of its regional adaptations (fig. 1).

The tartane generally corresponds to a one or two mast ship that has an average tonnage around 70 tonnes, though it can displace from 25 to 100 tonnes for the largest. Its wide bottom is easily recognisable, as well as its lateen rigging. As an example, the Tartane Provençale from 1789, drawn by Admiral Pâris (Pâris 1882), the first French maritime ethnographer and curator of the National Maritime Museum between 1871 and 1893, measured 12.90 m long, 3.20 m wide, with a draught of 2.30 m (fig. 1.3).

It seems that the first tartanes appeared in the 16th century (De Nicolò 2012) in Provence, southern France. The last of them was used in L’Estaque, Marseille, to transport tiles (Damonte 1990).

During the 17th and 18th century, tartanes for hauling cargo had a greater rigging, composed of a main mast (mestre), which was a lateen mast situated a little beyond the master frame, and a fore mast (trinquet) with a 25° inclination (fig. 1.1). This fore mast gradually disappeared during the 18th century. Ships like the Tartane Provençale of 1789 drawn by Admiral Pâris tend to adopt some of the features of the one-masted tartane used for fishing or transporting ballast as drawn by Jouve in 1679.
(Jouve 1679). Here, a large jib called polacre replaces the fore mast (fig. 1.2).

Another type of tartane is represented by the Albanaise, a model from the 18th century held in the French National Maritime Museum in Paris (fig. 1.4). It is a lateen-rigged boat with a main mast and a mizzen (mijane) situated at the stern of the boat. The mizzen is balanced at the bow by a polacre (Pâris 1882). This type of rig can be related to both the Italian bovo and paregge vessels that were in use in the 19th century, especially between Corsica and Liguria, and to the Spanish balancelles from Catalonia.

During the transition from the 19th to 20th century, the surviving tartanes are of the one-masted type. The yard of the lateen sail (antenne) becomes more rigid and is topped up so that the triangle of sail situated in front of the mast is reduced. We often see a triangular topsail rigged to a topmast attached above the lateen one. The front part of the yard will slowly disappear to look like a fore and aft rig, and a large jib is used beyond the main mast (fig. 1.5). This system demands less effort and people for handling. It allows the division of the sails, which are as a result lighter to use. This organisation is cleverly complemented by a curtain sail (voile à rideau), which allows easy furling of the main sail without lowering the gaff (Burlet 1988).

The one-masted tartane with a lateen rig was related to fishing activities from at least the 17th century (fig. 1.2). The term tartane is also the name of a specific net. These boats were involved in pair-trawling (pêche aux boeufs). The last versions of these vessels were still in use in the first half of the 20th century in the harbour of Sète in Languedoc. André Aversa, a local traditional boat builder, witnessed the changes in technology during his life, and testified that he adapted the original shape of the bateaux boeufs, a tartane-like fishing boat, to the engine and to the new nets that are now hauled in from the rear of the boat. Little by little the sail disappeared and, with the engine, a transom appeared (Vigne 2003).

2. CONCLUSION

This ongoing research has led us to understand that the tartane-type vessel, which seemed at first sight to correspond to a very distinctive type of coaster, effectively reflects a varied range of successive adaptations over time. The rigging of the tartane has been successively modified to answer the needs of the local populations: it has influenced other types of coasters (e.g. the bateaux boeufs of Sète); and it has itself been influenced by external practices. The fore-and-aft coaster from the first decades of the 20th century, for example, sheds light on this last case. The successive adaptation of the rigging of the tartane corresponds to the global evolution of the lateen rig. The big two-masted tartane from the 17th century abandons the fore mast in the subsequent century, and then follows two different paths. The first is inherited from the one-masted fishing or ballast ship, and will later be influenced by the Atlantic fore-and-aft rigging. The second corresponds to a widespread rigging from Catalonia to Liguria, composed of two masts (a main and a mizzen) and a jib. This efficient balanced rigging was also used to fit the bovi and paregge.
both types abandoned at the end of the 19th century in Liguria, Corsica and Provence.

Although iconographic and archival research provides information on the rigs and superstructures of ships that have now disappeared, it does not offer much data on architectural building details. However, this research opens new perspectives for the study of the structural and technical systems of the often forgotten small to medium size Mediterranean merchant vessels, and brings fresh insight to the archaeological data gathered from past and ongoing archaeological research.2

2. In particular to the current project led by Franca Cibecchini (Drassm) at Paragan (southern Corsica) where a coaster has been under excavation since 2016 (see Rieth, Cibecchini in this volume). This fieldwork is part of a larger research programme led by Eric Rieth (CNRS) on the architectural signatures of traditional Mediterranean shipbuilding.

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