Traditional Boats of Greece

Tenacious survivors of a fading legacy

by Nic Compton

In 1991, Greece was in the middle of a boatbuilding boom, with ever-bigger boats constructed to higher and higher specifications. Most of the boatyards in Spetses, my old hometown, were busy building not just one but several caiques. "So in harmony is it with its environment, it is hard to imagine a caique outside Greece—it is harder still to imagine a Greece without caiques," I wrote in Classic Boat that year.

What a difference 20 years makes. To reduce overfishing, the European Union in 1983 started paying fishermen to either scrap their boats, take them outside the EU, or convert them to other uses. But after one fisherman was caught working with a deregistered boat, the bureaucrats in Brussels decided a sledgehammer was needed to crack this particular nut. Harsher measures instituted in 1993 required that fishing boats not only be deregistered and surrender their fishing licenses, but also that they be scrapped. The result was devastation to the fleet.

An outcry rose in many European countries as dozens and then hundreds of perfectly sound boats were destroyed—usually by being broken up by backhoes and then burned. Historic boats were cut up while those that were newer, more lucrative, and more destructive to the fisheries carried on. Local organizations formed, for example 40+ Fishing Association, which campaigned to save the United Kingdom's fishing boat heritage. In Greece, the Traditional Boat Association of Greece (TBAG) followed suit. Some governments relented, allowing a few historic boats to remain afloat providing they were stripped of fishing gear and were reliably supervised. For a few years, the Greek government did the same, and in this way about 30 caiques

If you take Greece apart,
In the end you will be left with
an olive tree, a vineyard, and a boat...
which means that with these items
you can rebuild Greece...

Odysseas Elytis,
Nobel Prize for Literature,
1979

***Above*— int qui bearci ommodist quis di corae et harchic iiscil est, quas ut qui que nonsequates repellessedi ommolup tatemqui tatemqui blautate lique pa illab id magni acepe sequaspero quas modit aut qui dolorerit aborecabo. Riant**

It qui bearci ommodist quis di corae et harchic iiscil est, quas ut qui que nonsequates repellessedi ommolup tatemqui tatemqui blautate lique pa illab id magni acepe sequaspero quas modit aut qui dolorerit aborecabo. Riant tatemqui blautate lique pa illab id magni acepe sequaspero quas modit aut qui dolorerit aborecabo. Riant

were saved for museums. But even that avenue closed in 2004, after which every vessel had to be destroyed to qualify for the buyback.

TBAG estimates that since 1993, 10,000 decommissioned fishing boats have been destroyed in Greece alone. (This figure, however, is disputed by Mike Smylie of 40+ Fishing Association, who puts the figure in hundreds rather than thousands.) Even those that were saved soon fell on hard times as the economy weakened and museums found no support for maintaining boats. Many rare craft were left to rot.

"In contrast to other European countries which subsidize the preservation and continuation of their maritime tradition, Greece subsidizes its annihilation," said Nikolaos Emmanouil Kavallieros, TBAG's president. "All the ministers of culture for the past 14 years did nothing to stop this. They absolutely cared neither for history nor for tradition. Their crocodile tears for the destruction of so many boats will not move anyone."

And then the economy crashed in 2009. Already struggling to adapt to a much-reduced fishing fleet, the boatyards lost even more business when the tourist trade collapsed. A few survived on repairwork, the occasional tourist boat, or, if they were very lucky, replicas of traditional craft. Many more went bust.

Returning to Spetses after a 20-year absence, I found an eerie lack of caiques. There were still clusters here and there, but nothing like the continuous bustle I had seen before. Where at least half a dozen boats pottered about at any one time, now you were lucky to see one or two. Instead of a dozen boats under construction, I counted just three—all for pleasure use. My old friend and contemporary Vagelis Kombogiorgas, who had worked in his father's boatyard since the age of 10 and took over running it when he was 24, now sat in a kiosk selling ice cream a few yards away from where the family business had been. After nearly 30 years of boatbuilding, the business had been kicked out by a landlord who had decided to turn the waterfront site into yet another café.

Suddenly, and almost unbelievably, the idea of a Greece without caiques—or at least without working caiques—seemed a very real possibility.

Greece has more reason than most nations to be proud of its seafaring heritage. Some of the oldest shipwrecks in the world have been discovered among its 6,000 islands, and there's little doubt that many of its native craft can trace their lineage back to Homer's time. A fourth-century-B.C. wreck raised off Kyrenia, Cyprus, is strikingly similar to the dwindling number of trehandiri caiques that survive to this day.

Boatbuilding really took off in Greece after 1774, when an agreement with Russia allowed ships from Greece, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, to sail unimpeded in the Black Sea. The country's strategic position between east and west, and the ability of its watercraft to outrun the British blockade of Napoleon's

Apellece peruptate dolorio. Ibusci qui am volor minus ut omnimin veruptatem idis et id quam, te quamus eost omnihitiunto cum et quam, voluptassum qui vollestotate ipicia dolessim ea cones dolut dolupta dit,

It qui bearci ommodist quis di corae et harchic iiscil est, quas ut qui que nonsequates repellessedi ommolup tatemqui tatemqui blautate lique pa illab id magni acepe sequaspero quas modit aut qui dolorerit aborecabo. Riant

empire, turned it into a major shipping power—and by extension a great shipbuilding force. The main building centers at that time were the islands of Hydra, Spetses, and Psara, which were to play a central role in the war of independence that followed in 1821–30. Other important shipping centers were Chios, Kassos, Messolonghi, and Galaxidhi.

After independence, a thriving boatbuilding center emerged in Syros, where refugees from Psara and Chios had fled. By 1840, nearly half of Greek merchant ships were built on the island. Between 1843 and 1858, 909 ships were launched there—about 60 a year, or more than one a week. At the same time, Spetses notched up a respectable 643 and neighboring Hydra, 333—although their boats were comparatively small. Hundreds more were built at Pireaus, Koroni, Galaxidhi, Skiathos, Skopelos, and Kalamata.

Many of these were large oceangoing ships—the average Syros vessel was 148 tons—but many were small boats intended for interisland trading or fishing. Maritime historian Dr. Kostas Damianidis notes that while large shipyards absorbed foreign influences, such as hull lofting, small boatyards carried on using traditional methods. Patterns handed down through the generations were used to shape stems, sternposts (or transoms), and principal frames, after which ribbands were installed to refine the final hull shape. This technique—known as the *monochnaro* or *metzarola* method—dates at least from early classical times, according to Damianidis. By the mid-1800s, an astonishing number and variety of Greek-built boats were sailing on Homer's "wine-dark sea."

In Greece, as elsewhere, the arrival of engines and steel construction slowly did away with the fantastic variety of indigenous craft. Ever-larger ships dominated the overseas trade, while steel ferries and small steamers served the islands. Damianidis traces the demise of Greek shipbuilding in the Aegean back to the 1880s, when resources became concentrated at Athens and the nearby shipyards of Piraeus and later the suburb of Perama and the island of Salami. Large-scale shipbuilding was abandoned elsewhere, with the exception of Syros, and boatyards reverted to small-scale construction using traditional methods.

From the 1920s onward, most working boats were fitted with diesel engines. By the 1950s, few still operated under sail. There were, of course, exceptions: British adventurer Sam Barclay reported seeing six large lug-rigged caiques under sail as late as 1950.

Apellece peruptate dolorio. Ibusci qui am volor minus ut omnimin veruptatem idis et id quam, te quamus eost omnihitiunto cum et quam, voluptassum qui vollestotate ipicia dolessim ea cones dolut dolupta dit,

Apellece peruptate dolorio. Ibusci qui am volor minus ut omnimin veruptatem idis et id quam, te quamus eost omnihitiunto cum et quam, voluptassum qui vollestotate ipicia dolessim ea cones dolut dolupta dit,

By the mid-20th century, the great melting pot of indigenous craft had been reduced to a half dozen different types, including the ever-versatile trehandiri for drift-netting and seining, the *hydraiki* or its local variations for longlining and octopus catching, plus a few surviving *perema caiques* soon to be converted to tourist boats. And there was a new breed: the liberty, essentially a small *karavoskaro* with a rounded stern, which could be built using traditional methods without lofting.

Even the boats that did survive were irrevocably altered. A typical 30′ to 40′ (9m to 12m) motor-driven trehandiri was at least 12″ to 16″ (30cm to 40) shallower than its sailing counterpart, its maximum beam was farther aft to provide buoyancy for the engine, and it had less sheer and camber. Without having to support a sailing rig, the structure could be built more lightly. Also, cheaper materials could be used. Oak frames were replaced by pine. Copper and bronze fastenings gave way to steel, usually galvanized but sometimes not.

It was the end of the trehandiri as a fully fledged, oceangoing sailing vessel, but the fact that it was affordable for fishermen ensured the survival of the type for a hundred years longer. Even when fiberglass (or GRP, 'glass-reinforced plastic, as it is known here) took over as the material of choice across most of the western world, boatbuilders in Greece could still build wooden caiques that were cheaper (if not more durable) than the *plastico* versions.

Tourism picked up in the 1960s and '70s and with it the demand for fresh fish, creating new demand for fishing caiques. Also, the liberty style became a popular tourist boat, and some old boats were easily converted for charter. It was a boom time for boatbuilding in Greece, although it might not have felt so at the time.

There were even attempts to market trehandiria (plural of trehandiri) as pleasure boats, both in fiberglass by Olympic Marine and in wood through a French agent, but somehow neither initiative took hold. There was something innately Greek and innately wooden about trehandiri caiques that didn't translate well to other cultures or materials. The sponge boats of Tarpon Springs, Florida, are a rare exception. Imported for the early 20th century sponge fishery by Greek emigrant John Corcoris, the fleet prospered, and the city's Greek

It qui bearci ommodist quis di corae et harchic iiscil est, quas ut qui que nonsequates repellessedi ommolup tatemqui tatemqui blautate lique pa illab id magni acepe sequaspero quas modit aut qui dolorerit aborecabo. Riant

community and several of their distinctive trehandiria are still going strong, mostly for tourist excursions.

In Greece, the material of choice was still the legendary pine from the island of Samos—known as *samiotiki* and consisting mainly of Pinus brutia. Great baulks were usually left for several weeks in the sea before being hauled out and cut into planks and frames. Damianidis speculates that its resin content gave the wood its superior reputation. Most pine trees in Greece were tapped for resin—Greece was the world's fourth-biggest producer of resin before World War II—but this practice was outlawed in Samos in 1899. And indeed Samos timber is significantly denser and heavier than pine from elsewhere in Greece.

As fishermen prospered, materials improved. By the 1980s and '90s, exotic hardwoods such as iroko were commonly being used for backbone timbers and, occasionally, planking and decking, too. At the same time, bronze and stainless steel were adopted as more durable alternatives to steel and galvanized steel for fittings and fastenings.

"My father and I built more than 60 boats in six different styles," said my old friend Vagelis. "My father was the only builder in Spetses to build boats using half models and drawings. All the others built them by eye. He taught me, and I built boats to my design that way too. The biggest boat I built was an 82′ (25m) tourist boat called KELLY CRUISE, which we launched in 1990. It was the biggest boat built in Spetses at that time.

"After a few years, the pine wasn't so good, so we started using iroko, if the buyer could afford it, and stainless-steel screws instead of nails. To start with, only about 20 percent accepted, but by the end 70 percent accepted."

The decline started in the 1990s. At first, declines in the catch because of overfishing meant that many

Using Adjustable Molds in Construction

Thanasis Vlamis was 15 when he started working in his father's boatyard in Syros. His father, Michaelis, and his uncle Tsanis were local characters who founded their own yard in 1970. During the next 35 years, the pair built more than 300 boats, including 200 trehandiri caiques. In 2005, Michaelis died, and Thanasis took over the yard at the age of 19.

Thanasis's workshop is perched high on a hillside overlooking Syros. Hanging on the walls of the plain, breeze-block building were patterns for about 40 caiques of various types up to 50' (16m), the largest that could be safely carried by trailer down the winding road to the sea.

Thanasis took down the patterns for an 18' (5.5m) hydraiki and showed me how the adjustable molds worked. The basic frame template was made in two parts: one representing the floor, the other the turn of the bilge, with a long overlap between the two. A wooden gauge was used to determine the angle between them by measuring the distance between the floor section and the overlap. Seven frame pairs (*nomeas*) were made and set up on the keel. Then, wooden ribbands (*fourmes*) were tacked to the frames and to the stem and transom, the shapes of which had also been derived from templates. The shapes of the remaining intermediate frames were obtained by bending a flexible length of steel rod to fit against the ribbands.

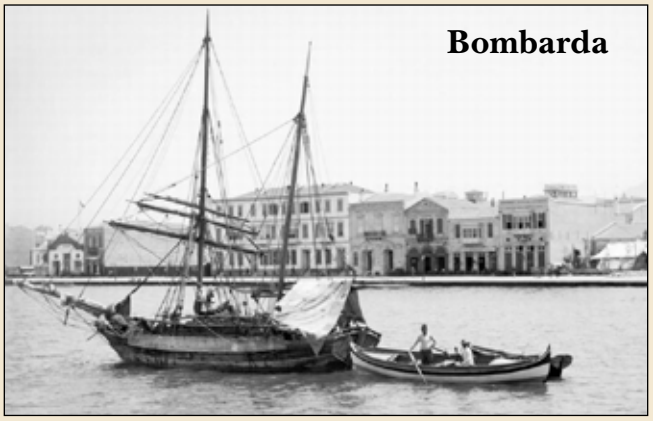
These templates were the fruit of 35 years of work by Thanasis's father and should have guaranteed his son's future. But when I visited in the summer of 2014, Thanasis was building an 18' (5.5m) hydraiki on speculation and hadn't had an order for a new boat in more than two years. Most of his work these days involves restoration and maintenance. "I think plastic boats are just a phase," he told me. "People will realize that wooden boats are better and come back to them. That's how it's always been."

—NC

Apellece peruptate dolorio. Ibusci qui am volor minus ut omnimin veruptatem idis et id quam, te quamus eost omnihitiunto cum et quam, voluptassum qui vollestotate ipicia dolessim ea cones dolut dolupta dit,

Traditional Greek Boat Types

Bombarda: Described by one contemporary as "beautiful toy-like vessels," these jaunty little ships looked as if they had sprung straight out of some pirate adventure book. The *polacca* rig, with a one-piece masts, allows the upper yards to be lowered and furled by the crew while they're standing on the main yard. This simplified brigantine rig, combined with a beamy hull and long yards, meant bombardas could set considerably more sail than similar boats with more conventional rigs. The term bombarda was also used to describe other types of boats with polacca rigs, for example *perama-bombarda* and *trehandiri-bombarda*.


Bombarda

Botis: Essentially a small *trehandiri*, but without the latter's raised stemhead.


Botis

Gaïta: A small, flat-bottomed, doubled-ended fishing boat, usually used on inland waters. In Crete, a gaïta is the same as a *hydraiki* (see below).

Gatzao: A beamy version of the trehandiri, mainly used in the Ionian Sea.


Gatzao

Hydraiki: A small fishing boat with a transom and an upright, or even "knocked back" stem. They are thought to have originated from Hydra, but most places have a local variant, such the *papadia* of Spetses and the gaïta of Crete.

Karavoskaro: With clipper bows and elegant counter sterns, these salty-looking ships are thought to have been inspired by Italian or even American designs. The complex counter required lofting. Up to 165′ long (50m) and carrying cargoes of up to 500 tons, they were mainly built in Syros, Galaxidi, Samos, and, later, in Perama.

Perama: Similar in shape to the trehandiri, the *perama* had a small transom fitted inside the top of the stem, which created its trademark "beak." Primarily used for


Karavoskaro


Hydraiki

carrying cargo, they were typically longer (65′ to 80′, or 20m to 25m) and more heavily built than the trehandiri. Theories about the reason for the beak include support for the bowsprit, more freeboard amidships, a clearer view for the helmsman, and greater protection from spray.

Sakoleva: The term refers primarily to a type of sprit rig but also sometimes describes a *tserniki*-type boat fitted with a sprit rig.

Symiaki skafi: A tserniki type used by the sponge fishermen of the Dodecanese, the *symiaki skafi* was identifiable by its steeply raked stem, broad stern, beamy hull, and large rudder. It was seaworthy enough for the eastern Mediterranean and steady enough to lie at anchor while the crew dived to the seabed. By 1866, Kalymnos and Symi were each home to about 370 symiaki skafia, providing employment for around 2,600 people on each island.

Trata: A narrow, double-ended fishing boat, the *trata* was usually rowed but sometimes carried a one- or two-mast lateen rig. The stem has an unusual projection forward, possibly used for stepping on and off the boat.

Trehandiri: This is the picture-postcard fishing boat that most people associate with the ubiquitous double-ender commonly known as a "caique," which to Greeks describes all small- or medium-sized traditional wooden boats. For most sailors, the *trehandiri* is the essence of Greece, with its sweeping sheer, raised stemhead called a *koraki,* and brightly painted topsides. According to historian Kostas Damianidis, the first trehandiri was built on Hydra in 1658 by two islanders "who were repatriated after capture by pirates." The design was thought to be based on *trabaccolo* fishing boats from the Adriatic. Building centers were Spetses, Hydra, and Koroni, producing 356, 251, and 255 hulls respectively out of 1,061 trehandiri built in 1843–58. The bigger trehandiri were traditionally fitted with a *bratsera* rig, a schooner configuration with a standing lug aft and a balanced or dipping lug forward.

Tserniki: There's disagreement about the origins of the distinctive tserniki, with its dramatically raked stem. Some suggest it was based on a Turkish boat called a *tsikirne*, but Turkish boatbuilders reckon the tsikirne came from Greece. Others suggest Danube origins. Whether they were double ended or transom-sterned is disputed—but everyone agrees that the stems were dramatically raked. They often used a sprit rig called a *sacoleva* that dates back to the 2nd to 3rd century A.D. and is thought to have originated in Turkey.

Varkalas: This term was usually applied to any boat with a transom stern. The original *varkalas* were a graceful workboats of around 65' to 80' (20m to 25m) LOA with a capacity of up to 250 tons. They had either plumb stems or spoon bows, with intricately paneled or carved transoms, often brightly painted topsides, and were either lug, sprit, or even schooner-rigged.

Apellece peruptate dolorio. Ibusci qui am volor minus ut omnimin veruptatem idis et id quam, te quamus eost omnihitiunto cum et quam, voluptassum qui vollestotate ipicia dolessim ea cones dolut dolupta dit,

fishermen could no longer afford new boats. The cure proved as deadly as the illness: old boats were scrapped in unprecedented numbers, courtesy of the EU's decommissioning scheme. Some were replaced by more-efficient modern craft and centralized fish trading, producing greater profit for fewer people. Many other, poorer fishermen, however, couldn't afford to replace their old boats and had to quit fishing altogether. It was the end not only of hundreds of beautiful wooden boats but also a way of life. Fishermen were persuaded to destroy their boats and cobble together a living by running tavernas and letting out rooms to tourists.

"There's no discussion that caiques are disappearing," says Nikos Riginos, who restored his own perama caique in the 1980s and has become something of an expert on traditional Greek fishing boats. "Fishermen are slowly turning away from wooden caiques and turning to GRP boats, because they're cheaper and easier to maintain. It doesn't come from their hearts, but they do it anyway. So fewer and fewer wooden boats are being built, and boatyards have to find a new kind of activity. At Kilada, they have installed a Travelift, and maintenance is now their main activity because they can earn money doing that."

But for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. As the fishing boat carcasses piled up, the Greek boating community was horrified, even though maritime heritage up until then—let's be honest—had been taken completely for granted. TBAG was founded in 1999 to save old boats and the traditional boatyards that cared for them, countering that hated EU directive. By 2013, the organization had grown sufficiently to host 20 boats at Greece's first traditional boat show at Methana, partly sponsored by Johnnie Walker whiskey. In 2011, the first Spetses Classic Yacht Race was launched, and by 2015, 75 boats were participating. That was followed in 2013 by the Cyclades Classic Yacht Race and in 2014 by the Corfu Classic Yacht Race.

The sight of so many traditional boats gathering is certainly a heartening one—even if most of the indigenous craft sailing around the buoys off Spetses were built as motorboats and were never intended to carry sails. But that's not the point. What matters is that the old boats are being celebrated—and there is already evidence that boats are being restored at local yards just to take part in the regatta.

Meanwhile, boatbuilders are adapting. In Halkida, Nikolas Vlavianos is carving a niche for himself building replicas of traditional craft, in addition to restoring old boats and reviving indigenous rigs. He's already built a couple of sacoleva-rigged boats, and currently has a 40′ (12.2m) *tserniki* on the stocks based on plans from 1882. In Aegina, Nikos Daroukakis (see WB No. 243) is developing modern junk-rigged sailing boats based on traditional designs. And in Syros, the legendary Tarsanas boatyard, founded in 1860, is building a new *symiaki skafi*, lofted in the traditional way from their own *sala*, or lofting floor, for use as a tourist boat.

"Twenty years ago, caique was not a respectable word," Nikos Riginos said. "If you said you owned a caique, you were nothing. Now, attitudes are changing. If you had started this regatta 10 or 15 years ago, no one would have participated. They were just thinking old boats were something that belonged to their grandfather. Now they see the regatta, and they see articles in magazines, and they realize they have something of value; something that's worth preserving. It's the start of an idea."

I confess I utterly failed to see the changes coming. Even while I joined the campaign against the destruction of fishing boats in the U.K., I had no idea that the same thing was happening in Greece. And there's no doubt that watching the videos of those exquisite boats being ripped apart by backhoes is deeply distressing—the maritime equivalent of animal cruelty videos.

Yet there is a greater awareness of Greece's unique maritime legacy now than there has ever been before. The Internet, which Greeks have taken to with relish, has helped spread the word—and sites such as naftotopos.gr are packed to the gills with astonishing images of boats that even most Greeks never knew existed. A new museum, costing €8 million ($7.25 million) and due to open at the end of 2016, is being built on the island of Samos specifically for "vernacular" craft, under the watchful eye of Damianidis. But most poignant for me was seeing Dinos Korakis, the boatbuilder I remember toiling endlessly and unrecognized under the Argolic Gulf sun, being honored at the Spetses Classic Yacht Race in 2014. I never saw that coming either.

Perhaps—just perhaps—the Greeks will learn to love what they've got before it's gone.

The author acknowledges the help of Annika Barbarigos, Kostas Damianidis, Thanasis Giannikos, Panos Hassapis, Nikos Riginos, and Nikolas Vlavianos, without whom this article wouldn't have been possible.