

**WOODEN SHIPBUILDING IN CYPRUS  
FROM THE LATE 19TH TO MID-20TH CENTURY**

**Constantinos Nicolaou**

Master's Programme in Field Archaeology on Land and Under the Sea  
University of Cyprus

**Abstract**

As no attention has been given to the maritime ethnographic area of Cyprus thus far, this thesis constitutes the first attempt for a systematic recording of the vernacular wooden shipbuilding. Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to study the local shipbuilding activity during the period between the late 19th and the mid-20th century, its origins and the level on which it operated. The research also included the identification and classification of the typology of the wooden vessels and riggings, constructed or permanently docked and used on the island.

Due to limited literature, this research had to rely on diverse information sources, such as written archival material, photographs, preserved wooden vessels and oral testimonies. Information about the maritime activity in Cyprus during the middle of the 19th century was mainly obtained from consular official documents, as a systematic recording of statistical information began only with the advent of British Colonial Rule in 1878 and continued by the Republic of Cyprus after the country's independence in 1960. Photographic depictions of boats, caiques and ships in Cyprus dated from the second half of the 19th and up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, proved to be a significant source of information, especially for the typology. It was also considered essential to interview 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. An important source of information was also the oral tradition archive of the Cyprus Research Centre. A source of technical and typological information has been the preserved wooden vessels on the island. Specifically, about 400 wooden vessels have been visually inspected and the characteristic features of almost 150 of them were preliminary studied.

The research about the local shipbuilding activity was based on two different areas: first, the people involved and the theoretical part of the craft, and second, the vessels. Regarding the people and specifically the shipwrights, research included information about their origin, their craft knowledge in relation to the design and construction methods, as well as the terminology. Regarding the vessels, research was based on two different topics; first the number of the locally docked vessels and second their construction features. Wooden vessels on the island were mainly engaged in two activities; first on a small scale trade with the nearby coastal areas and second with fishing, which has been the main activity for the

majority of the local vessels. As the information found about shipbuilding on the island during the early period of the research was very poor, the number of the locally docked vessels was considered as very important, as it possibly reflects the level of the local shipbuilding activity. On the other hand, wooden vessels' special features determine their typology, which constitutes a basic element in the study of the wooden vessels. Typology can be approached by different ways, such as the shape, the use, the origin and sometimes in combination of them. The most appropriate approach for this thesis was by the shape of the stem and mainly by the shape of the stern, as photographs were used mostly for the typological analysis.

Information about the shipbuilding activity in Cyprus during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and up until the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is almost non-existent. Some, very limited references in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century's consular documents, present shipbuilding as an almost unknown activity for the local population. However, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant number of wooden vessels were found in the archival material, as permanently docked in the harbours of the island, either for fishing or for small scale trade.

The first documented evidence about shipbuilding activities by local craftsmen during the specific period appear during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig.1). However, the local shipbuilding activity seems to have been systematically developed only after the arrival of Greek refugees' shipwrights due to the Asia Minor campaign and debacle in 1922, as well as to the Second World War. The numbers of the locally docked wooden vessels seems to have been increased during and after the above periods, while the specific shipwrights permanently settled on the island and established their craft traditions. Today, the same traditions can be identified through the preserved wooden vessels and described by the last shipwrights.

Considering the typology of the vessels; in total ten different types were identified as local types, or as known types in Cyprus during the specific period. Based on the shape of their stern, five vessels had a pointed stern, two had an ellipsoid shaped stern and three had a transom at the stern. Also, at least thirteen types of riggings were found during the research. Two types of triangle sails, four types of quadrilateral sails and seven different combinations of them configured the local rigging typology (Fig. 2).

The existence of shipbuilding activity on the island at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was one of the questions to be answered. Such an activity cannot yet be corroborated for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least on an organized level, thus, a local shipbuilding tradition cannot be identified, either. However, based on the large numbers of wooden vessels at the Cypriot ports at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one can argue that there had been some basic shipbuilding knowledge, at least for repair and maintenance purposes. That is definitely confirmed by photos of the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, presenting wooden vessels during maintenance.

The development of the wooden shipbuilding in Cyprus during the relevant period seems to have been mainly a result of certain historical events and not of a specific need for wooden vessels. It therefore appeared that the local development of wooden shipbuilding at the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century depended mainly on the settlement of shipwrights from the Asia Minor and the Aegean, who covered an existing gap of this craft on the island. In total, nine different shipbuilding positions were recorded for systematic or occasional shipbuilding

activities on the island during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 3), although the majority of Cypriots engaged in the shipbuilding craft did it by choice and not due to a family tradition.

The collected evidence indicates that during the first half of the 20th century there was a clear prevalence of the Greek traditional shipbuilding. However, the presence of imported vessels is definitely confirmed and emerges an interesting discussion about the way that these vessels were integrated into the local tradition. The existence of foreign types of vessels, imported or manufactured occasionally on the island, probably affected, but did not determine the local tradition.



Fig.1: Wooden vessels under construction in Kyrenia. Unknown photographer, 1910's. (Katselli, R., 1979, *Kyrenia - a Historical Study*, Nicosia, p.99).



Fig.2: Wooden sailing vessels in the harbour of Kyrenia. Photograph by J.P. Foscolo, 1900. (Malecos, A., 1995, *J.P. Foscolo*, Nicosia, p.18).

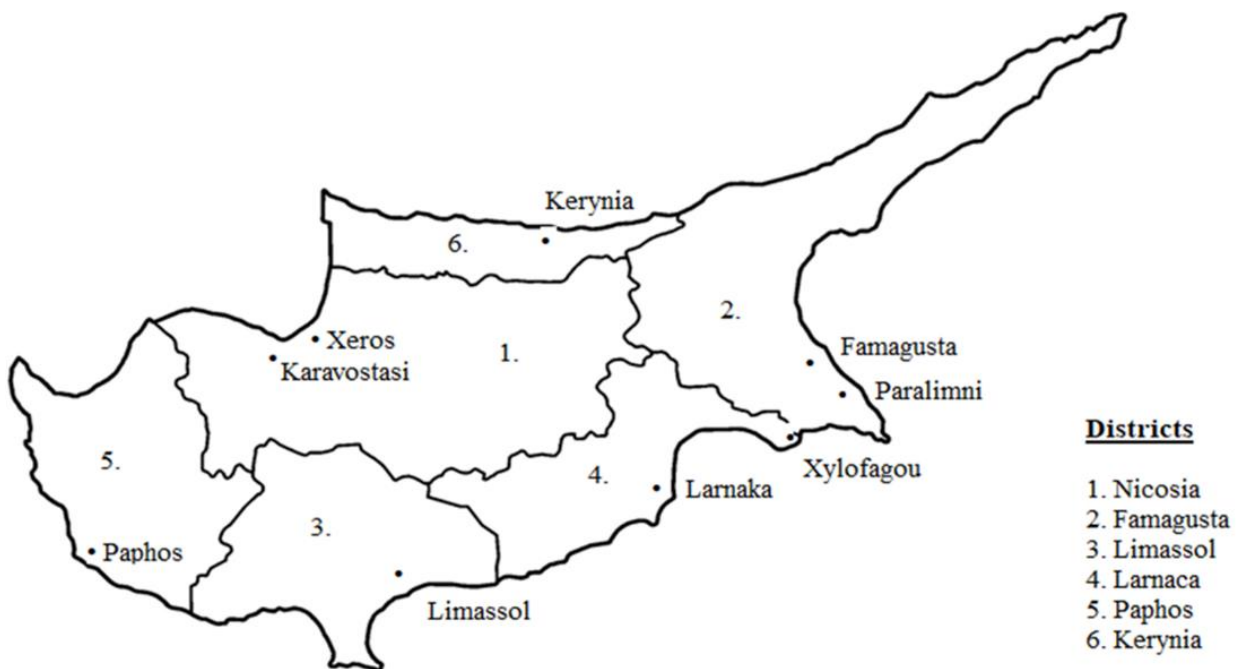


Fig.3: Shipyard's positions during the 20th century (Map by Constantinos Nicolaou, University of Cyprus).