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Reflections on the arbitrariness of regional boat-forms

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ABSTRACT

When describing specific forms of boats, it is quite often that their particular form is argued for as a response to specific local conditions, to particular wind, water or rocky shores etc.

Looking at research on several examples of boats from Scandinavia, these narratives of need for regional adaptation do not hold fully. Local forms have existed alongside imported designs, which were not made to fit the particular local needs but served the purpose well, partly showing distinct advantage, even. And both forms were kept continually.

The successful co-existence of traditional local forms and of imported different forms shows that the emergence of extremely specialized boat-designs in specific places must have other reasons than just their adaption to these environments. The demise of local forms to today's mass-produced non-localized forms shows that their advantage cannot have been that strong, as they would have survived stronger otherwise. Regional need for very specific boat-forms seems to be a narrative convention linked to folklore and aesthetic style preferences, i.e. it is expressing local identities and style preferences rather than local restrictions of usability.

KEY WORDS

regional boat forms
application to local conditions
boat functionality
identity
INTRODUCTION

Robert W. Stephens starts his description of a specific Chesapeake skiff by summarizing exactly the established idea of regional cause to each specific traditional form of boat that comes on top of local style-choices:

"One of the enduring pleasures of traditional wooden boats is how each boat conveys a sense of place. Every region has its distinct type, evolved to best suit that locale’s topography, weather, water conditions, and the use to which the boat is put..." (Stephens 2014, 78)

The position sounds so familiar and it appears rather convincing to explain specific forms of boats by looking at their regional or even local surroundings. Everybody who ever tried to row or sail through a particular surf onto e.g. a cobbled beach easily understands that each place on whatever shore can be described by its particular conditions in regards to wind, water or geological setup of its shores etc. But in comparison, descriptions become quite similar and in some places it is difficult to explain the dominating forms of boats as necessary responses to their environment, not at least as other forms meet similar conditions as well. Local conditions for boating are not that unique, after all. It becomes obvious from comparing the boat-forms existing in regions with similar conditions that very different answers to identical local needs did and do exist. In general, it has to be understood that a strong sense of individuality was needed to counter peer-pressure in closer-knit communities: Those who dared to challenge consensus invited ridicule for every mishap or even exclusion when in need. Because of more frequent exposure to different designs of boats, areas of intense exchange adapted influences more easily than areas in which different boat-forms
appeared hardly at all. It has to be emphasized that regions of high transit and secluded regions obviously had different exposure to foreign forms of boats, but still there are examples for both cases that show successes of non-local forms over established traditions.

Looking at research on specific examples of boats from Scandinavia, the narratives of exclusive need for regional adaptation cannot be sustained, really. Chance and personal style preferences of local boat-builders and their customers have to be taken into consideration when looking into the establishment of local or regional preferences.

Christer Westerdahl approached the issue of local boat-forms by focusing on the question of what makes a boat good. He answered summarily that a good boat is the result of its reflected adaptation, which is combining functional issues and psychological aspects like the need for identity and difference (Westerdahl 1999, 244 f.). Functionality in this regard is defined as the compromise between different uses that all have to be well possible using the same boat, like e.g. rowing and sailing: the first asks for a narrow body to make it run well while the second needs a certain width of the boat’s beam to be stable under sail. Accordingly, all forms hint at specific functional properties, no matter where the form is found (ibid., 247).

"What a boat was good for was summarized by the boat builder as its local environment for which it was made. On the other hand, it suited not that well where oneself had developed different and better features. In case this was not only a sales-trick for the
local customers. Decisive was the rational adaptation. Sometimes that could be just pretense, but it was not seen as such." (Westerdahl 1999, 247; my translation, JD)

Individual boat-builders did initiate specific forms because they combined established forms with new ideas they brought back from journeys or they even established new forms because of experiences with different boats in other parts of the world. Others collaborated with builders from other areas, combining their ideas and knowledge (Nilsson 1998, 25). Also, individual people experienced the functionality of specific foreign boats, understood their potential for local use and ordered local builders to build these foreign designs, thus introducing these alongside the already established forms (ref. Wollentz 1998). Westerdahl argues that boats as commodities are subject to conservative reasoning: people order boats in the forms that are known to meet their requirements and tended to stick with the locally established forms. As a consequence, builders had most freedom when building for their own usage and introduced most changes in these examples. Innovation spread from these designs as people did observe their functionality and wanted likewise for their own boats (Westerdahl 1999, 246 f.).

Regional types of boats and imported, on first sight even exotic forms existed and exist alongside each other, chosen according to personal preferences and needs.

More recent developments in boatbuilding and usage prove that there is no physical need for localized designs in boats: The spread of mass produced non-local forms of recreational and professional boats after World War II shows that these have taken over and are used successfully. The traditional local forms and the imported forms of
yesteryear alike have been pushed aside and are both matter of nostalgia and wooden boat renaissances (slightly paradoxically expressed even in plastic and glass-fiber hulls).

EXAMPLES

The adaptation of forms to local conditions and preferences is considered as given. But there are important examples of forms that were not changed to cater for differences in local conditions over considerable periods of time. Other examples show the use of imported forms instead of the locally established designs. In these cases, the functionality of the non-local forms must have been understood to be sufficient or even superior by their users.

The use of Norwegian boats in the Orkneys, Shetlands, and Faroes serves as a quite striking example for making use of a foreign form over a long period of time in somewhat secluded areas. The introduction of English-style pilot boats to Kalmarsund in the late 19th century showcases preference for an existent foreign form because of its established qualities, despite of its non-adjustedness to the local conditions.

The lack of a distinct local type of boat around Skåne points to other needs than mere functionality of forms: The need to express different identities in the use of different designs can be highlighted well in this example. Finally, the spread of the Norwegian ekan over South-Western Scandinavia and far into the Benelux countries and up the Rhine river illustrates the use of a very distinct type of boat in very different environments that do not call for the properties of the boat in question. It exemplifies
that its appeal was not based on its performance in distinct local settings alone, but also on its formal distinctness.

Boats in the Shetland and Faroe Islands

In the Middle Ages and after, close political and economic relations were maintained between Orkney, Shetlands, Faroe and Norway. Among the goods traded from Norway to Orkney and Shetland were boats (ref. Thowsen 1969; Mortensen 1998, 93). In how far boats also were exported to the Faroe Islands is not clear, but it can be assumed given the complete lack of boatbuilding material there.

The myths around the boats of the Faroe Islands state these to be directly derived from Viking boat-building. In reality, the types of traditional boats still known and used were established around the middle of the 17th century – if they should be older, no traces supporting this have been found so far. Before that time, boats had been of the Norwegian type, but according to folk sagas these were prohibited after an uprising that involved approx. 1/3 of the boats in the Faroe Islands (Mortensen 1998, 89).

Andras Mortensen points out the existing differences between Norwegian and Faroese processes and systematics in the construction of boats (Mortensen 1998, 91-94). It has to be pointed out that it was not possible to establish at what point these differences came into being. The example of the higher bow in the Faroese forms points to the adaptation of the form to local preferences (Mortensen 1998, 91). It has to be noted that this must have come into use only after the Norwegian forms were used: all the time
before, Norwegian boats were used, which presumably had not been built differently for export to the Faroe Islands.

The traditional boats of the Shetlands were imported from Norway for several centuries, as there was and is no local supply of building materials in the Shetlands:

"As late as the 1860’s the Shetlanders were getting all of their boats from Norway. Boats of all sizes were being imported in to Shetland in kit form, with local people finally nailing them together." (Watt 1998, 26)

So, even if they were built in Norway with the distinct needs of Shetlanders in mind, they were not developed locally but possibly adapted from a Norwegian design to be used in the waters around these islands. In the 1880s, the situation had finally changed and boats were now built locally from imported material, and the established Norwegian forms of boats were adjusted for local use in different parts of the islands. The results were specific variations of yoals specialized for fishing for different kinds of fish – with the North and the South of the Shetlands each setting its own demands to the design and functionality of boats (Watt 1999, 21).

**Kalmarsund pilot boats**

The example of the Kalmarsund pilot boats serves as prime example for the establishment of a non-regional design of boat in a region with rather distinct conditions for sailing. Pilot boats of the English type were used by pilots of Kalmarsund in the rather brief period from ca. 1890 to 1920, afterwards they remained in use for cup-
sailing until replaced by the *folkeboat* and non-localized plastic boats. It is estimated that about 40 of these boats were built during the period.

The pilot boats in question are distinctly different from all local boats that were in use at the time. Claes Wollentz has traced the introduction of the pilot boats to the Kalmarsund to one particular Smålandic boat builder, who has experienced these boats as a seaman visiting West Hartlepool (Wollentz 1998, 117 f.). After returning to the Kalmarsund region, he set up as boatbuilder and executed the first pilot boat for a lighthouse-keeper in 1886. The pilots of Kalmar encountered the boat on a daily basis and understood its capacity for speedy sailing, thus offering the possibility to take on more pilotages. Several boats were duly built for various pilots, spreading from Kalmar to other pilotages along the Sund. A second boat-builder took over to build the form and changed some aspects, making it look more like English sailing trawlers (ibid., 119).

While the sailing properties catered ideally for the pilots’ needs, the form was not adopted by the few existing local fishermen, as they reportedly considered it too wet as a workplace (Wollentz 1998, 120). In this case the establishment of the boat has been proven to be the consequence of one person’s encounter with a distinct form of boat abroad and his stylistic preference favoring that particular design (s. ibid.). The application of this foreign form was caused by its performative qualities and the stylistic preference of its builder alike. Because of these, it remained not adjusted to the local forms and traditions.

*Boats around Skåne*
The lack of dominating distinct local forms in Skåne, the very South of Sweden, together with the spread of boat forms from neighboring regions adds another interesting aspect. Already in the 18th century it was argued that Skåne did not have a distinct type of boat (Nilsson 1998, 25). Instead, different local and imported forms were used alongside each other: The Bohuslän's ekan, a kind of wherry with stern-transom and a small bow-transom differs in many ways from other forms of boats and can therefore be traced well: Along the Western coast it was used down from the Bohuslän along the Sund towards Malmö as a slightly and southwards as an increasingly exotic form alongside other designs. Along the Eastern and Southern coast down to and including Ystad, the Blekingsekan (without bow-transom) from further up the Eastern coast was used, even though these Southern stretches of coast feature no kind of archipelago but quite different conditions for boating (ref. Cullberg 1998).

Along the non-localised ekan, different forms did exist in various places: flat bottomed boats were used for fishing from Malmö up to Landskrona. From Malmö around Skanör-Falsterbo and over to Ystad similar boats were used to get to the bigger fishing boats that were moored further out at sea. Along the Österlen boats of the Blekingsekan-type were used. But the interesting thing is that all these different types of boat from the Western, Southern, and Eastern coast were used for fishing in the same waters around Bornholm and for landing their catch in the same harbors (Nilsson 1998, 24).

Expression of identity in the artefacts used, in this case boats, has to be understood as an important aspect in the choice of specific forms of boats. To illustrate the point with an example: Skåne is a culturally dense area where "the North" meets "the Continent" and
Scandinavian East meets Scandinavian West. It is a cultural meeting place, in which cultural areas are differentiating, all kinds of traditions are used to express distinct identities; forms of boats are one of these traditions to express the difference between these cultural areas (Nilsson 1998, 25).

*Spread of the Norwegian Ekan*

A very interesting counter-narrative to local-specific designs of boats is offered by Carl Cullberg in his stupendous work on the spreading of the *ekan* from Southern Norway not only along the coast of Sweden and Danmark, but also into the Netherlands, Belgium, and Northern France (Cullberg 1998). It seems to have stood in concurrence and even superseded local forms that provided for the different local conditions as well. The example showcases the use of a non-local form in quite diverse environments (Cullberg 1998, 10-14). It cannot have been functionality alone that supported the spread of the form but also its distinctness that differed from local forms, its aesthetic appeal or style. Nils Nilsson argues in particular for one of the regions in which this boat was used: There is no factual need for the use of the Norwegian design in Northwestern Skåne (Nilsson 1998, 24). And exactly this point can be continued from: The fact that this kind of boat was not only used in rocky coastal waters but also along the Rhine delta with its rather soft banks and up the river as far as the Middle Rhine (ref. Keweloh 1994), exemplifies that its appeal was not based on its performance in distinct local settings alone, but also on its stylistic distinctness. It might be considered something like the SUV of its time.

**CONCLUSION**
Regional types and imported "exotic" forms exist alongside each other, were and partly still are used and preferred according to individual needs, potential, and stylistic choice. Both groups are established in the same waters and become considered to be local over time. Some distinct forms are employed to express specific identities. Some show the use of imported forms instead of the locally established designs. Both groups certainly are functional and fulfill the needs of their users but their extra quality lies in their marking of specific identities. Just as Westerdahl (s.a.) suggested, some boats are recognized as expressions of their performative functional qualities, but these have to be understood as a sum of their performance in distinct local settings on the one hand, and as communications of stylistic distinctness, of identity, on the other. Regional need for specific boat-forms also seems to be a narrative convention that is linking to folklore and aesthetic style preferences: It answers the need to express identities rather than just local restrictions of usability.

Historically, traditional forms and rare specialized forms got replaced by mass produced non-local forms of recreational and professional boats almost everywhere. These were considered functional enough for the local environments in question to compete with established older forms. Also, their lower prices were seen to outweigh their lack of application to locality and expression of local identity. As a consequence of the dominance of these mass-produced boats, identity of their user-groups is expressed in other ways than the choice of a regionally established form. That process repeats the earlier adoption of foreign boat forms to other localities, very much as described in the case of the Kalmarsund Pilot. Also, it is obvious that the market has become quite
differentiated because of the co-existence of many modern forms and makes in all kinds of localities.

Nostalgia for traditional boats and interest in local history of boatbuilding and usage have led to the documentation (ref. Eskeröd 1970; Zacke & Hägg 1973) and partly renaissance of both the older standards and the imported local forms. In due process, some of the local forms even have become subject to mass production and are issued as glass fiber or plastic boats. It remains to be seen, in how far these will be able to establish themselves in particular localities for which they might cater best functionally and in how far they might become established as expressions of local identity or even as stylistic exclusiveness that is supposed to communicate individuality.

SOURCES


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