

## **THE FATE OF TRADITIONAL MALTESE BOATS**

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### **SUMMARY**

Traditional Maltese vessels have long been part of Malta's cultural identity. These vessels were used for a variety of roles including transportation, work, fishing, defence and pleasure. Changes in society and the local economy resulted in these vessels no longer forming part of the county's working fabric and were replaced with more modern vessels. In light of this, the population of traditional Maltese vessels has been dwindling with critical aspects such as how these vessels were sailed being lost for good. A recent incident with the planned disposal of a vessel called the Maryanne led to public uproar and raised further awareness for the current situation.

This paper investigates whether traditional Maltese vessels are still considered an integral part of the fabric of society. Different stakeholders were questioned to understand what challenges were experienced when operating such vessels. The results were then synthesised into key points to provide a unified message for what has led to the current state of affairs and what could be done to rectify the situation. A proposal for actions to be taken to safeguard these vessels for future generations was also suggested.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Malta is a small island located in the centre of the Mediterranean sea, synonymous for its touristic appeal and dense historic fabric. Malta's sea and iconic harbours are a central pillar of the country's economy, noting the island's otherwise limited natural resources. In particular, the fishing industry has sustained locals over the centuries and the vessel's used to facilitate this became part of the nation's cultural identity. These wooden, multicoloured boats were customised to the fisher's needs and became a canvas to express themselves. Each vessel proudly showed their family's skilled workmanship through the joinery, intricate carvings and special adaptations to improve their fishing procedures.

As the economy grew and the demand for fish increased, these traditional boats didn't remain the nation's preferred choice of vessel due to their inability to explore more distant waters and adapt to larger scale fishing practices [1,2]. Locals preferred vessels requiring less maintenance, resulting in most of the traditional stock of vessels being decommissioned. The skilled workforce needed to repair these vessels has dwindled and the knowledge of how these vessels were sailed is already lost. The few larger vessels that were converted to commercial pleasure craft have now also started being decommissioned, making many wonder what the fate of the remaining traditional boats will be. This once strong strand in Maltese identity is fading away at an accelerated pace.

### **2. TRADITIONAL MALTESE BOATS**

Being an island nation, Malta had strong maritime and boat building industry. Vessels were made to fulfil different roles including transportation, work, fishing, defence and pleasure. These were made by locals using traditional techniques that had been passed on over generations as well as being influenced by practices of neighbouring countries. Over the years many of these vessels have been replaced by more modern alternatives resulting in the older, traditional vessels without a role to fulfil.

#### **2.1 VESSEL TYPES**

The most common types of traditional boats include the Luzzu, Kajjik, Fregatina and Dghajsa tal-Pass with various examples still found in local waters today, despite their dwindling population. Figure 1 shows an example of each of these types of vessels. Unfortunately only few examples of vessels such as the Firilla and Dghajsa tal-Latini are still in circulation with no known examples of vessels such as the Xprunara about [3,4].



(a) Luzzu [5]



(b) Kajjik [1]



(c) Frejgatina [1]



(d) Dghajsa Tal-Pass [6]

Figure 1: Examples of Traditional Maltese boats still in service

## 2.2 ADAPTATION

Similar to other cultures, each of these vessel types had their own technical features that were adapted over time to reflect the needs of their most recent role as well as the innovation of the time. Vessels were originally propelled by various types of sailing rig, depending on the particular type and use of the vessel. In time, mechanical propulsion, mainly in the form of inboard diesel engines, was adopted alongside the sails as a more reliable propulsion system which was easier to handle by a smaller crew. Over the years, mechanical propulsion became more and more popular which meant that sailing rigs were phased out completely. Unfortunately, no examples of traditional boats with their rigging are known to still exist on the island.

Interestingly, although the majority of these vessels were small craft operating in local waters, they were equipped with two or more propulsors to improve reliability and increase manoeuvrability for fishing operations. Various examples of these vessels have had engines from war time land vehicles installed that needed further modification to operate with an open water-cooled system.

Each of the vessel types highlighted were designed, built, and maintained for an extended lifespan to serve generations of fishers. Most remaining wooden traditional vessels were built more than 70 years ago. Figure 2 (a) shows Neptune 89, a wooden traditional luzzu, returning to port in 1951 while Figure 1(b) shows the same vessel on the hard 68 years later. The robustness of the design as well as the care shown to it over the years has permitted this vessel to still be in regular use till this day.



Figure 2: Neptune 89 in 1951 and in 2019

Figure 2 also shows some traditional features found on luzzus including the eyes of Osiris, the distinct colour scheme as well as carvings and mermen. Each of these features have distinctive names and cultural significance. In particular, the eyes of Osiris were originally installed to ward off evil spirits and ensure safe passage. The popular use of these vessels meant that technical vocabulary was created to facilitate more accurate communication when discussing distinct parts of the vessel.

### 2.3 IDENTITY

The distinctive colourful look of these vessels soon became part of the national identity. With the island's fishing villages being full of luzzus and kajjiks over the last 100 years, numerous paintings, songs, postcards, postage stamps, coins, photos and artwork have been made, immortalising their presence in local history.

The identity of these vessels goes beyond that of a national fleet but also to local level where vessels hailing from particular fishing villages would sport a different coloured "moustache". This can be identified as the ochre yellow triangular section in Neptune 89's bow as shown in Figure 1(b) implying that Neptune 89 berths in Marsaxlokk. Other localities would be represented with other colours such as white for Saint Paul's Bay and red for Gozo [7].

Further distinction in identifying luzzus would be made by assigning names, typically related to Christian saints that the family adored or by carving decorative elements. When questioning senior fishers who served on such vessels in their younger years, an emphasis was always made on the pride they had for their vessel as it was considered to be a representation of themselves and their family. In fact, when a fishers family was in mourning, the boat's moustache was painted black as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: A vessel whose family is in mourning [source unknown]



### **3. ROLE IN SOCIETY**

The large number of these vessels clearly demonstrated that they were relevant to society.

#### **3.1 INDUSTRY**

As highlighted earlier, the original purpose behind designing and building these vessels was to provide a service to society.

The Dghajsa tal-Latini was used as part of a service to ferry people to Malta's sister island, Gozo while the Dghajsa tal- Pass was originally a smaller passenger ferry to operate within the Grand Harbour which is why they could have shallower freeboards. No traditional boats are used for local commuting any longer but some services by independent parties are done with the dghajsa tal-pass in the grand harbour for touristic purposes.

The current industrial use of traditional vessels has been dominated by fishing and day charters for the tourism sector. Figure 4 shows a small Kajjik being used by an independent fisher while Figure 5 shows Neptune 89 on a day charter with tourists. Other infrequent uses of these include props in films such as the luzzu in Figure 1 (a) claiming the title role or skuba diving platforms.



Figure 4: A fisher trawling on a traditional Kajjik [8]



Figure 5: Neptune 89 on a day charter

#### **3.2 PRIVATE USE**

Since neither of these vessel types were designed for leisure, the uptake of recommissioning these vessels to leisure boats has been poor. The vessels are typically up to 25ft overall length with little space for lounging. Larger vessels have been converted into day boats but these often lack modern commodities that would render them attractive for a wider audience. With the advent of fibreglass, pastiche kajjiks and luzzus have been made that require less maintenance and offered more space for daytime cruising. Despite this new option, these vessels were still less popular than other day cruisers on the market and hence had limited uptake.

#### **3.3 THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS**

In order to investigate the fate of traditional Maltese boats, different stakeholders were interviewed to determine what their take on the current state of affairs is. People having a history with these vessels as well as fishers, day charters, enthusiasts and even some people from the general public were asked what they believe are the biggest challenges, threats and frustrations are. The same people were also asked whether they see a future for these vessels or whether their time has passed. The following information is a compilation of the various thoughts that were expressed, synthesised into discrete elements to provide a unified voice.

### **4. CHALLENGES**

The continuous decline in population of traditional Maltese boats is a symptom of the changes experienced by the country. Maltese people still consider these traditional boats to be part of their national identity but the current social fabric has left little room for these vessels to thrive. The fishing and day charters sectors have been put under great strain by various aspects that may initially seem unrelated.

#### 4.1 SPACE

The vast majority of traditional boats used to be berthed or stored on the hard in the fishing village harbour. Over the past 30 years, these locations have increased in popularity, primarily because of the picturesque look that these boats gave the village. This popularity has led to increased tourism which in turn commanded that the space originally attributed to these vessels for maintenance and safe keeping over the winter months be instead allocated to eateries, promenades and other business ventures [9]. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the same locations in two different fishing villages that originally used to be a hub for traditional Maltese boats that now have minimal space allocated to them.



(a) Xatt is-Sajjieda Postcard [Source Unknown]



(b) Xatt is-Sajjieda [10]

Figure 6: Several traditional vessels on the hard in Marsaxlokk



(a) Church Street Postcard [Source Unknown]



(b) Church Street [11]

Figure 7: Traditional vessels in St Pauls Bay harbour in approx. 1965 vs the same location in 2016

The reduction in publicly allocated space to these vessels without providing a substitute made it difficult for many owners to store and maintain their boats. This introduced new hardships and served as a means to break an established community that shared resources and knowhow.

In the case of those fishers operating in Marsaxlokk, a hard standing facility was opened in 2007 to aid those operating under a fishing licence [12]. While this was a welcome step forward, the hard standing was on the periphery of the community and was therefore no longer part of the social mechanism of the village.

To this day, the country still does not have a dedicated facility to restore and maintain traditional boats. This is a space that has been desired by enthusiasts since at least 2003. The Malta Traditional Boat Association has long been striving to secure a sheltered space where an appropriate workshop could be set up to restore the vessels they have saved from destruction [13]. The National agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage, also known as Heritage Malta, recently added one of the last remaining examples of a Dghajsa tal-Latini in its portfolio which it aims to restore. This vessel was craned down into a ditch instead of secured in an appropriate climate controlled facility [14,15].



Figure 8: A Dghajsa tal-Latini rescued by Heritage Malta being stored and restored in a ditch [14,15]

#### 4.2 COMPETITION

The introduction of larger, more efficient vessels in the local market meant that those people operating traditional vessels were at a disadvantage to their competitors. With larger fishing companies dominating the market by securing a larger catch and day charter vessels experiencing great financial difficulties to maintain a competitive price per person; it's no surprise that various people upgraded their vessels to keep up with the times, resulting in more traditional vessels lacking a role to fulfil.

#### 4.3 FUNDING

While competition is in itself good for a healthy economy, those people operating part of the country's national heritage and identity should receive aid. This would ensure that the fleet of privately owned vessels would be preserved and be compensated for the burden of not upgrading like their competitors.

The Government of Malta has regularly taken such a stand in fixed assets where privately owned buildings would be granted funds to restore or replace their traditional Maltese balcony [16]. This was not done with the traditional Maltese buses which ultimately led to them all being decommissioned from public service and the vast majority scrapped. As of September 2023, a new scheme has been launched to aid those who privately own a traditional Maltese boat after years of lobbying. A maximum of 5000Euro can be granted towards repairs for each project with a total budget of 80,000Euro for the nation [17]. While this is a welcome start, it is merely a token aid to try and safeguard this heritage.

In the case of vessels operating under a fishing registration, some funding applications were made available over time but the application process did not work to the strengths of the fishers. This meant that many often didn't make use of the scheme. An alternative, controversial funding option became available prior to 2007 through the EU which offered fishers a handsome sum in exchange for their fishing licence [18]. The policy resulted in the destruction of fishing vessels, traditional or not, as part of the settlement to ensure that the vessel would no longer be used for fishing [19].

#### 4.4 RESOURCES

In light of the points described above, the number of traditional boats in circulation reduced. The reduced community element, less cashflow and tight competition meant that skilled labourers who were trained by their elders on how to go about making and repairing these traditional vessels focused their efforts elsewhere. This led to a shortage of skilled labour, making it even harder for those who still had a traditional fleet to keep up with their maintenance requirements [20,21]. A traditional boat building course was set up at MCAST but the uptake has been very poor. This links to the lack of incentives associated with the Maltese traditional boat industry. Maintaining a wooden traditional vessel is very labour intensive which makes it a less attractive option. Unfortunately, no boat yard in Malta is constructing new wooden traditional Maltese boats.

### 5. AN ONSLAUGHT ON CULTURE AND TRADITION

The challenges experienced by many people owning traditional boats led to them decaying or accumulating fines in different areas around the country. Instead of providing support to maintain these vessels or



confiscating them to auction them off to the public which is a common practice done with impounded vehicles [22], various local authorities went as far as doing a public demonstration of breaking these traditional boats. Figure 9 shows an example of a traditional boat being broken in public, despite members of the Malta Traditional Boat Association willing to save the vessel at their own expense. Footage of this vessel was recorded as part of a promotional video celebrating its destruction by the Cleansing and Maintenance Division. At least 70 traditional vessels were recorded to have been broken in this manner [23].



Figure 9: Traditional vessel being broken in public [23]

Similar scenes were also seen by the authors as part of the scheme described in Section 4.2 which saw several vessels broken as part of a policy.

## **6. THE CASE OF THE MARYANNE**

The Maryanne is a vessel that had a longstanding history in Malta's recent history by being a charter boat for one of the larger tourist excursion providers. Although the vessel was built in Sicily, its characteristics are a close match to a traditional Dghajsa tal-Latini, of which there are only 5 vessels known to be available, most of which are unusable [14,15]. Traditional Maltese boats have long been influenced by the surrounding cultures.

For reasons not published, the Maryanne was dismantled of her outfit and was in line for breaking until this news was leaked and local enthusiasts including the Malta Traditional Boat Association tried to rescue it. Figure 10 shows the Maryanne on the hard awaiting to be broken.



Figure 10: The Maryanne on the hard awaiting breaking [Source Unknown]

Following public uproar, government entities stepped in to salvage the vessel. Once again, no appropriate facility exists to restore her and she was craned onto an exposed hard stand. Despite being a well utilised day charter boat for a substantial number of years, the condition of the vessel suggests that a significant amount of funds would be needed to render her sea worthy again.

This recent event demonstrates that although issues have been flagged over several years, the situation for traditional Maltese boats has not gotten any better and should things remain the same, it is likely that the last examples of these vessels will be purely limited to a museum and not out on the water where they belong. As highlighted earlier, this is already the case with traditional rigging as very few records of how these vessels were rigged and sailed are available.

## **7. TRADITIONAL MALTESE BOATS IN A MODERN SOCIETY**

Traditional Maltese boats, especially luzzus and kajjiks are still widely recognised as part of the national identity. The tourism industry regularly uses images of them as part of their promotional material were some companies go as far as using luzzu in their name. In addition to this, their colour scheme and design motifs are often interpreted as other forms of artwork including jewellery, pottery, paintings, etc.

Acknowledging this, action must be taken to safeguard the remainder of these vessels by:

- Reintegrating these vessels into society, especially in the fishing villages where they original came from [24]
- Celebrating these traditional vessels by means of public events to showcase the skill, craftsmanship and dedication
- Introducing at least 2 facilities that are appropriately equipped to manage, maintain, train and build traditional Maltese boats
- Increasing the funding for these vessels
- Introduce incentives to make use of traditional vessels as part of commercial ventures

## **8. A FUTURE FOR MALTESE BOATS**

While conserving the remaining stock of traditional vessels is essential to safeguard national identity, innovation is an alternative approach to instil new life in these vessels. These may involve retrofitting already existing vessels with new technology or developing a new iteration to the traditional vessels that would maintain the fundamental elements of the design but apply new purpose.

A local architectural studio, Mizzi studio, has applied this approach to the traditional Maltese bus where the essence of the original design was extrapolated to a modern context [25]. These vehicles would be able to cater for the needs of a modern society while staying true to their heritage.



Figure 11: A contemporary take on the traditional Maltese bus [25]

In light of this, a think tank to design and develop the new luzzu should commence. Further work in this research will explore the primary tasks that would be appropriate for a new design to undertake by first understanding the maritime needs of the modern, local society.



## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the work carried out by all those who strive to preserve Malta's maritime heritage.

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**Mr Philip Grech** is a business owner currently involved in household heating. His interests include our natural environment and sustainability. Philip's previous business involved chartering the traditional Maltese 'Luzzu', Neptune 89, for day trips. This vessel was built for his family in 1951 for fishing purposes and refitted as passenger vessel by Philip with assistance from Dr Andrea Grech La Rosa. Although Neptune 89 is still used as a commercial passenger vessel, the ultimate sale of the vessel has highlighted the challenges of owning and maintaining such vessels first hand to Philip and prompted him to cowrite this paper in the hope of raising awareness.