

The saint, the storm, and the ship: diving into the Corsican maritime ex voto

Hélène Botcazou

Abstract: This article presents a survey carried out in 2018 within the research framework of the author's defended PhD Dissertation, on the sailing trade coasters of the Corsican shores between the 16th and the 20th c. Few treaties and albums from the 18th and the 19th c. represent Corsican ships. A review of Corsican ex voto representations allows a look on the day-to-day coastal trade from the south of France or the northern part of Italy. The goal was to search for corresponding pictures from Corsica in the maritime ex voto curated in the churches and chapels of the island. This research led to the identification of a two-masted gondola ship that seems associated to the island.

Keywords: maritime history, maritime ex voto, nautical ethnography, Corsica

1. Introduction

A maritime ex voto (from the Latin Ex Voto Suscepto) can be a painting, or an object in relation to a maritime event, given to a sanctuary as a reward to God or a Saint. The donor generally survived a misfortune or an accident. He depicts it and sometimes describes the event in a dedication (Boulet, Boulet 1996: 9).

The gift can be offered by an individual or a group (the crew, some passengers) that make a pilgrimage and attend a religious service. The maritime ex voto can be made by the rescued themselves, or by a paid professional painter. One example is the case of some paintings from the corpus that have been made by members of the Roux dynasty from Marseille (Lepage, Rieth 1978; MacNairn 1987; Chadwick Forster Smith 1978; Brès 1883), a family from which several members have received the official title of *Peintre de Marine* that rewards the most careful and realistic depictions of maritime subjects (Fig. 1). Another famous professional painter of which some artwork was found in the Corsican chapels is Louis Gamain (1803–1871), who also offered a ship model of a little frigate, *La Louise*, to the son of Napoleon the third in 1858 (Patrimoni Nustrale 2018: 46).

But not everybody who is willing to offer an ex voto has such painting skills. Some paintings or models can present distortions, depending on the painter or drawer, or depending on what he wants to emphasize from the scene. It nonetheless constitutes a corpus of very high quality to improve our knowledge on the Mediterranean coasters, especially from the 19th century.

As Eric Rieth notes: “A comparative study allows us to isolate the elements that are technically illogical and to gather a kind of inventory of the distortions and the alterations, of which the most common are problems of perspective, strange ratios between the hull, the rigging and the characters, a simplification of the depiction” (Lepage, Rieth 1978: 31). On the other hand, the repetition of architectural traits on several stylistically different drawings allows assumptions on the presence or the morphology of architectural features.

The paintings can therefore inform us on numerous interesting points:

- on the architectural details of the ship,
- on the rigging of the ship,
- on the type of the ship, her name and the date of the event,
- on the maritime routes followed before the event, and the changing of the itinerary in adaptation to the event,
- on the emergency procedures followed during extreme weather conditions (caused by the waves, the winds or a broken element of the ship), and if it is the case, the location of the wrecking,
- on the cargo, the captain and the crew, the painter, and the donor.



Fig. 1 Maritime ex voto from the church of Lavasina, Brando, Corsica. In the dedication it is written: “Wish made by the crew of the brig-schooner *The Two Friends*, cap(tai)n Cesar Alfonsi, at 10 lieues from the Cape Corse, by a gale from N-N-W the 25th of January 1841, arrived at Calvi (Corsica) the same day”. On the other side we can read: “François Roux Hydrograph and painter of Marine, on the harbour, 23, Marseille. Make, sell and repair any kind of instruments, flags, maps and navigation instructions” (photo: H. Botcazou).

2. The 2018 survey¹

The 2018 survey’s methodology relied on previous research elaborated by Sylvie Bénac in summer 1974 on the maritime ex voto of Corsica and in particular in the Cape Corse. Sylvie Bénac made an extensive inventory of all the maritime ex voto of the churches and chapels in this part of the island, which has the reputation to hold the most prominent maritime cultural heritage (Bénac 1975) (Fig. 2). A systematic study of the presence of maritime ex voto in the rest of the island is still to complete. A project of the General Inventory of Cultural Heritage of the French ministry of Culture, with the collaboration of the Petre Scritte Association, is currently being undertaken in this perspective².

The inventory made by Sylvie Bénac had two limits: the ships drawn or painted were sometimes only described as a ‘one’ or ‘two-masted ship’, and there were very few photographs taken of them. There was no idea of what was left of these churches and their ex voto 44 years later.

During our survey, some pictures and data on every maritime ex voto were taken, along with its precise description and state, and this information was later offered to the National Marine Museum in Paris, in order to complete their collection. But to enlighten the subject of research, there was the need to select specific maritime ex voto that were describing maritime events with sailing coasters depicted. In order to study the local coasters, the ships coming from the Atlantic coast (Giansily 2019: 53–62) were eliminated. The remaining corpus consisted mostly of paintings, watercolors, drawings, dioramas, and ship models. The majority of them were dated from the 19th century, and at least three others were from the 18th century. In total, 20 churches and chapels were visited; 76 ex voto were recorded; nine previously documented ex voto were not found.

¹ This study has been carried out with the collaboration of the LA3M laboratory (UMR7298, CNRS, Aix-Marseille University, France) and the IPSO FACTO Company. This work was co-directed by Nicolas Faucherre (LA3M, CNRS, AMU) and Eric Rieth (LAMOP, UMR 8589, CNRS, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Musée National de la Marine).

² Some ex voto are already recorded in a state database: <https://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/>

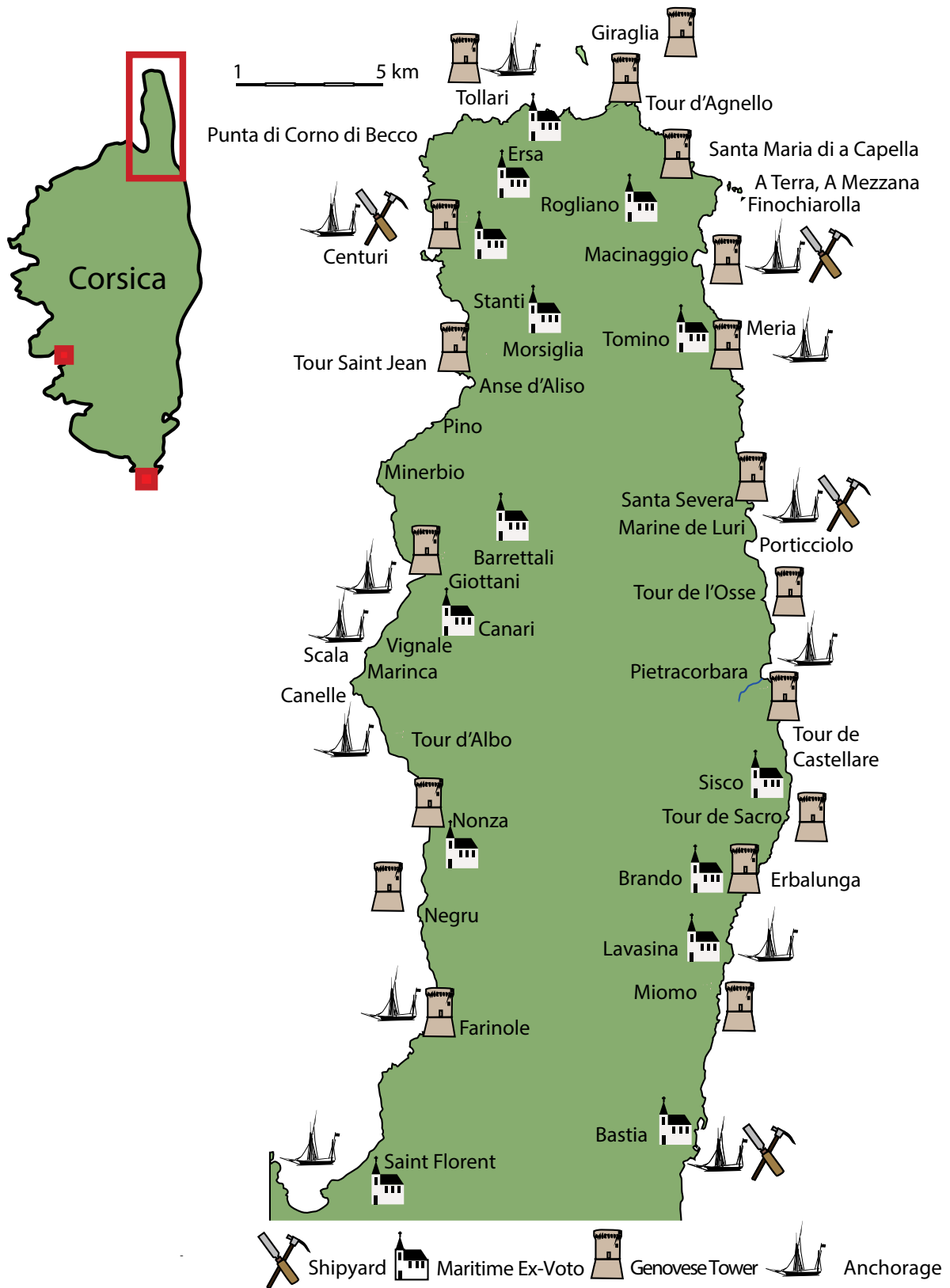


Fig. 2 Map of the visited churches (author: H. Botcazou)

In the 19th century, that is the period of the extreme majority of the corpus, 16 of the 79 ex voto are schooner-brigs (also called brigantines), ten are brigs and ten are schooners. Only two tartanes are depicted, although this was a ship type commonly described as the generally used coaster, at least in the south of France (notably in Languedoc and

Provence). However, six bovi and one leuto were found, two ship types from the same family that seem to have a more important local use. Three fishing dinghies are depicted as rowing boats, sometimes with a very short mast in the front of the hull (Fig. 3).

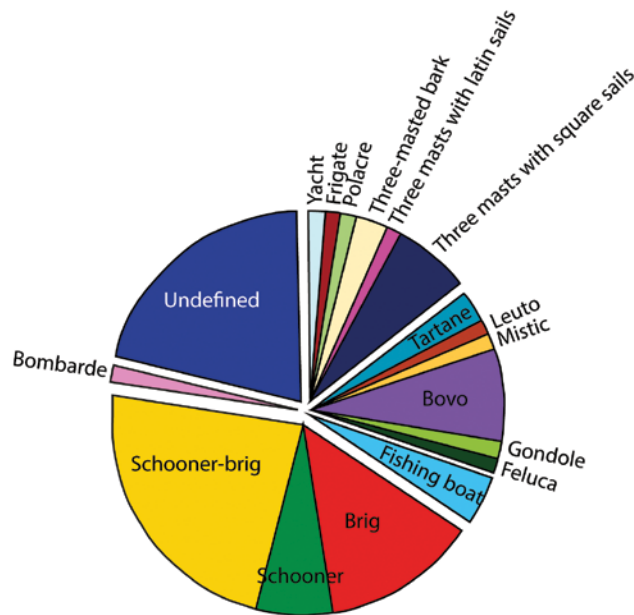


Fig. 3 Ship types found in 2018 (author: H. Botcazou)

3. Case study: An inquiry about a strange gondola

The gondola ship depicted in the Saint Erasmus Church in Ajaccio had a particular rigging compared to other common images of gondola ships (Fig. 4). This church shelters an important amount of maritime ex voto as it is known as the ‘church of the sailors’. Built in 1617, it is located at the heart of the historic center. It is an old Jesuit convent, closed during the French Revolution of 1789 and reopened in 1815, at the end of the reign of Napoleon I. It is then given as an oratory to the sailors’ religious brotherhood. A lateral chapel was already consecrated to the sailors in 1645 by Captain Giovanni Pietro Orto.



Fig. 4 Ex voto of the Gondola San Francesco, Ajaccio, Saint Erasm Chapel, Corsica (photo: H. Botcazou)

The ship has round shaped extremities, although the stern is slightly more slender. Two lateen sails seem to be set up for bad weather conditions. The foremast is placed very forward, and the main mast is in the middle of the hull. Another ship in the background is already pulled out of the sea and protected by a cover set up on the yard that has the same length as the ship. The ships could be pulled on the beach thanks to a hoist that is set up along the flanks of the hull with a bridle. The sails are not set up but rolled around the masts. The rudder of the gondola is lifted up and laid on the deck. One of the characters is holding the yard.

The dedication indicates: “The gondola called *San Francesco* from Ajaccio, led by Giuseppe Selli, traveling from Senetosa to Ajaccio, found in the Gulf of Campomoro a terrible storm from the East. By pure miracle we had the good fortune to land in the Cala of Giglio the 9th of July 1833.”³

The first mention of the gondola is dated from 1246 (Jal 1848, (new ed.) 1986: 6)⁴. Augustin Jal declares “The Genovese *nef* from the 14th and 15th centuries had three dinghies, as well as those from the 13th century: the *barque* or *chaloupe* (dinghy), the *laud* that replaced the *barque pariscalmé* and the *gondole* [...]” (Jal 1840: 393–408).

It is certain that this type of boat had been in use in Corsica anciently. Damien Broc found mentions of gondolas at Saint-Florent (Corsica) in the archives in 1518 (Broc Damien 2014: 297). Antoine-Marie Graziani also indicates that a gondola was used as a post and transport in his study on the 15th century building of the Genovese tower of Campomoro (Graziani 1997: 30).

In Corsica, this boat was traditionally used by fishermen to recover the famous red coral and also as a coaster for local trade. They were appreciated for their speed, as Tobias Smollett taught us in the story of his journey in France and Italy in 1765: “For my own part, I hired a gondola from hence to Genoa. This is a boat smaller than a feluca, rowed by four men, and steered by the patron; but the price was nine zequines, rather more than I should have paid for a feluca of ten oars. I was assured that being very light, it would make great way; and the master was particularly recommended to me, as an honest man and an able mariner” (Smollett 1806: 438).

In the beginning of the 19th c., gondolas constituted 5 to 10% of the Corsican registered ships according to Pierre-Jean Campocasso (Campocasso 2011: 343–359). Roberto Moresco wrote that it is a ship of 3 to 15 t, 7 to 10 m long and equipped with both oars and sails (Moresco 2015: 9–18). Jean-Christophe Liccia gives for this ship type a length comprised between 8 and 32 palmi (around 8 m) (Liccia 1998: 11–15).

In 1820, in order to harvest the red coral, the Corsicans are using gondolas of “6 to 12 tons, of which the shapes of the front and the back are identically elongated and they obey easily to the maneuvers with sails or oars [...] they are generally equipped with a crew of 8 to 12 men, including the apprentice”⁵.

Roberto Moresco described this boat as the most typical ship from Capraïa Island in the 18th c. (Moresco 2015: 9–18). He indicates 60 to 70 boats of this type used from 1734 to 1737 and from 1742 to 1744. They are generally used for local trade, except for the smallest that are used for fishing. They could be bought in Corsica. They also could have been built from Corsican wooden timbers and assembled in Capraïa. They had a sprit sail when rigged for fishing in Liguria. The mast was in this case placed at the very front of the boat.

In the 19th century, Carlo de Negri indicates 212 registered gondolas in 1867 in Elba Island which is more than the gondolas registered in bigger harbors like Genoa or Livorno (De Negri 1974: 200–202).

A dive in the iconographic collection of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF) made possible to have a glimpse of these gondolas in Corsica. A picture from the Roland Bonaparte collection shows them in the bay of Ajaccio in the late 19th c. They nonetheless seem to have a little lateen sail and not a sprit sail (Fig. 5).

On the other side of the Island, in the Cape Corse, some archive researches have been made (Luchetti 2010: 22–28). It gives us a good idea of the journeys these ships of very little tonnage were doing to trade goods from city to city in the Ligurian sea. *Le Rusé*, registered in Luri and of 14 t, had a charged waterline of 3 ft and 2 when unloaded. It was a ship that had a deck, and a crew of six men. Between the 28th of February 1789 and the 30th of January 1790, she went from Livorno to Macinaggio, from Rogliano to Genoa, From Genoa to Meria, from Rogliano to Marseille, from Livorno to Macinaggio.

³ *Gondola nominata San Francesco d' Ajaccio comandata da Giuseppe Selli partita dalle Senitose per venir in Ajaccio trovandosi nel golfo du Campomoro essendo un tempo fulminante da Lievante per pure miracolo ebbimo la fortuna d abbordare in Cala di Giglio li nove Luglio 1833.*

⁴ [Gondole], *et doit avoir la devant ditte nave une bargue de cantier, Il bargues de pescalines, et une gondole* (Belgrano, documenti, San Ludovico, p

⁵ *Ils [les Corses] arment à cet effet des gondoles de 6 à 12 tonneaux dont les formes de l'avant et de l'arrière sont pareillement élongées, lesquels doivent facilement obéir aux manœuvres soit à la voile, soit aux avirons [...]. Elles sont ordinairement équipées de 8 à 12 hommes, un mousse compris [...]*, in Bénac 1975. She quotes the Archives from the Port of Toulon, 19P231, 1828.

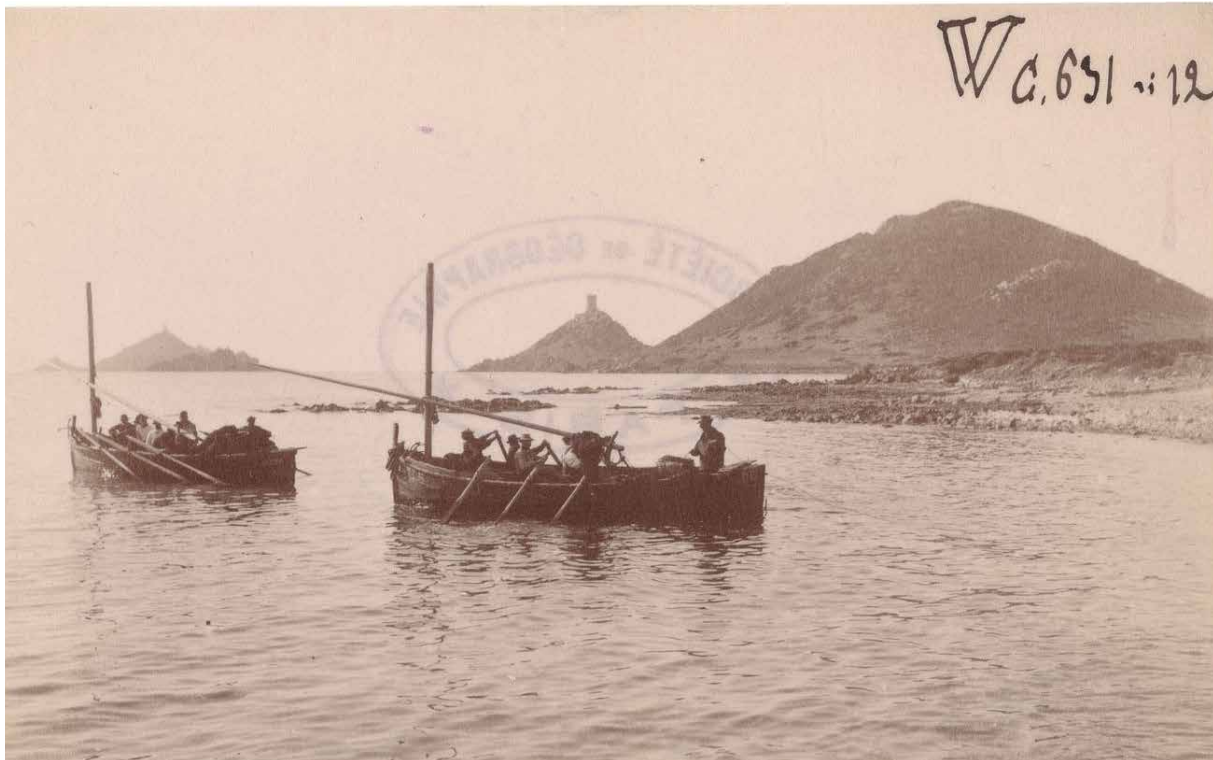


Fig. 5 Fishermen in front of the Sanguinaires islands (Ajaccio, Corsica) (Roland Bonaparte collection, 19th c., Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

Some gondolas from Bonifacio draw another picture of the local trade that had importance in the south of the Island: smuggling. This narrow canal is dotted with ‘intermediary islands’, the Maddalena archipelago and the Lavezzi one. The Sardinian coast of Gallura was scarcely populated between Castel Sardo and Posada in the 18th c., excepting Terranova di Olbia that welcomed trading ships from Bastia and Capraia. This coast has numerous bays that are proper for a discreet unloading of illegal goods. The researches of Henri Marmonier on the archives of the Maddalena Islands give a testimony of the use of gondolas in this strategic military area that was at the same time an important shelter for people of both islands. *Doléances* letters⁶ indicate on the 27th of August 1783 that a Sardinian half-galea guarding the coast shot the *Sant-Antoine*, a gondola, and took her. The 5th of November 1841, Captain Oliveri, leading another gondola called *Sant Antonio*, filed a report to the maritime jurisdiction of Bonifacio because he just escaped a bombing from the Sardinians practically under the walls of the Corsican city. He was carrying cheese from Porto Torres (Marmonier 1896:1–41).

Sergio Spina has drawn a gondola on a beach from the end of the 19th c. that shows a vertical stem and stern. It is associated by Giovanni Panella and Carlo de Negri to fishing boats from the area of Liguria (Bellabarba, Guerreri 2002: 108–113). The mast is situated in the first quarter of the total length. Two masts are interchangeable and two lateen yards can be set up depending on the weather. There is no deck in the central part of the hull. The sailors can sit on the beams to row. But none of the various declinations of these gondolas has two masts like in the ex voto of the Saint Erasmus Church of Ajaccio, Corsica. This drove the search for a locally designed boat.

On two old postcards of the same docks of Ajaccio respectively from the first quarter of the 20th century, ships can be seen with a shape similar to the *San Francesco* curated in the near church of Saint Erasmus. They have two masts with the front one settled near the stem. The ships are pulled out on the quay located under the citadel of the city.

The two ships seem to have a slightly different rigging. One has a main mast higher than the front mast (Fig. 6), while in the other picture (Fig. 7), both masts seem to have the same height. Those pictures prove the use of these two-masted gondolas until the 1920’s in the city of Ajaccio. The first half of the 20th century corresponds to the disappearing of the sailing ships used for work (fishing and trade), and the very beginning of the presence of engines on board.

⁶ Letters of *doléances* are generally written in order to complain about something. The disadvantages resulting from a bad situation are described and explained in this kind of letter.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 6 Ajaccio, its harbour and its ships, press photography (photo: Agence Rol, between 1914 and 1921, Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France)



7 AJACCIO. — Vue générale des Quais. — LL.

Fig. 7 Ajaccio – general view of the quays, L.L., first quarter of the 20th c. (personal archive)

4. Conclusion

It can be a difficult thing to establish a precise typology of small ships, especially in places that have several different culturally interlinked regions, like in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where the names of the ships fluctuate depending on the language used (French, Provençal, Corsican, Genovese, etc.). Each coastal population, separated by seas and mountains, but at the same time very close to each other, sometimes gives the same name to different types of ships, or different names to the same type of ship. The features associated to a specific type of ship also evolve over time. Moreover, it can be difficult to link written sources from the archives to pictures. This was however the goal of the author's PhD, to establish a nuanced catalog of the local adaptations of common types of coastal sailing ships found in the Tyrrhenian region, from the 16th c. to the beginning of the 20th century (Botcazou 2020). In total, 23 types of sailing coastal ships were studied in their multiple local declinations. Among other iconographical sources used to gather the needed information, the maritime ex voto are important testimonies as they give a picture and an associated description, and the dedications are written or dictated by the very person using the ship, in his own language. It is a good way to have a glimpse on the very locally used ships.

The example of the Corsican two-masted gondola illustrates perfectly the quality of the data that can be gathered thanks to the maritime ex voto. The gondola ship type had indeed already been studied on the island of Elba and on the Italian coast (Bellabarba, Guerreri 2002), but those two-masted types were not described. Searching for other examples of this type of boat, the author found two old postcards taken in the same city of Ajaccio, showing a similar ship. It can therefore be stated that the specific features found in the ex voto did not result from a bad interpretation. These two-masted ships may be a specific adaptation of the gondola ship-type in Corsica.

References

- Association Patrimoni Nustrale 2018. *Les ex-voto du sanctuaire de Notre-Dame-des-Grâces-de-Lavasina*. Brando, Association Patrimoni Nustrale.
- Bellabarba, S., Guerrerri, E. 2002. *Vele italiane della costa occidentale*. Milano, Hoepli.
- Bénac, S. 1975. *Ex-voto marins de Corse*, master thesis. Paris, Université Paris V.
- Botcazou H. 2020. *Voiliers de cabotage sur le littoral de la Corse entre le xvie siècle et le xxe siècle : essai de généalogie comparative des traditions d'architecture navale*, PhD Dissertation, Aix-en-Provence, Aix-Marseille Université.
- Boullet F., Boullet C. 1996, *Ex-voto marins*. Rennes, Editions Ouest-France.
- Brès, L. 1883. *Une dynastie de peintres de Marine, Antoine Roux et ses fils*. Marseille, Librairie marseillaise. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6573473j.texteimage>
- Broc, D. 2014. Dynamiques politiques, économiques et sociales dans la Corse Médiévale: le Diocèse de Nebbio (xie siècle-c. 1540), PhD Dissertation. Corte, Université Pascal Paoli.
- Chadwick Forster Smith, P. 1978. *The artful Roux, marine painters of Marseille*. Salem, Peabody Museum of Salem.
- Cazemajou-Pizzini, C. 2007. Un ex-voto en mémoire du naufrage du brick-goëlette Sainte Marie. *A cronica, le journal de l'histoire du cap Corse, le cap Corse et la mer*, special issue 2: 36–39.
- Cousin, B. 1981. *Ex-Voto de Provence, images de la religion populaire et de la vie d'autrefois*. Paris, Desclée de Brouwer.
- De Negri, C. 1974. *Vele italiane del xix secolo*. Mursia, Milan,
- Giansily, P-C. 2019. À propos de quelques ex-voto marins peints conservés dans les églises de Bonifacio. In *Commerce de Cabotage dans les Bouches de Bonifacio aux xviiie et xviiiie siècles*. Bonifacio, Bonifacio city and Albianna: 53–62.
- Graziani, A-M. 1997. *Les bâtisseurs de la tour de Campomoro, Corse-du-Sud*. Éliisa, Office de l'Environnement de la Corse, Conservatoire du Littoral et des Rivages Lacustres.
- Jal, A. 1840. *Archéologie navale*. Paris, A. Bertrand. vol. 2. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k62342f.texteImage>
- Jal, A. 1986. *Nouveau glossaire nautique d'Augustin Jal: dictionnaire des termes de la Marine. Révision de l'édition publiée en 1848*, M. Mollat du Jourdin (ed.), Vol. II (F-L). Paris, CNRS.
- Lepage, J., Rieth, É. 1978. *Ex-Voto marins de Méditerranée*. Paris, Les Musées de la Marine.
- Luchetti, P. 2010. Isle de Corse, Département de la Marine, Quartier maritime de Bastia, Rôles d'armement pour les années 1787 et 1788, Rôles d'équipages pour l'année 1789 (4th and last part). *A cronica, le journal de l'histoire du cap Corse, le cap Corse et la mer* 31: 22–28.
- MacNairn, E. 1987. *Reflections of an era: portraits of 19th century New Brunswick ships – Reflets d'une époque, portraits de navires du New-Brunswick au XIXe siècle*. New Brunswick, New Brunswick Museum.
- Marmonier, H. 1896. La question de la Maddalena. *Revue Historique* 62.1: 1–41.
- Moresco, R. 2015. Les gondoles de Capraïa dans les transports entre les ports de Corse au temps de la rivolta. *A cronica, le journal de l'histoire du cap Corse, le cap Corse et la mer* 37: 9–18.
- Smollett, T. -G. 1806 (1766). *Adventures of Sir Lancelot Greaves, Travels Through France and Italy*, Vol. V. Edinburgh, Mundel Doig & Stevenson.