

***Intangible Heritage of Aci Trezza:  
Historical Reconstruction of the Rodolico Shipyard and Its Living Human Treasure***

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**Abstract**

In the seaside village of Aci Trezza, in Sicily, the Rodolico family's shipyard has been building boats since at least 1808. They use the "mezzo garbo" construction technique passed down orally. In 1960 the golden age for the shipyard began, Salvatore Martino, assisted by his sons and over thirty workers. He began building large wooden boats by applying a modification of his own invention to insert a third engine on the hull, applying a modification in the hull of his invention to insert a third engine on board. The Salvatore Martino represents the old tradition, with his own naivety he manages to relaunch the economy of the village. In 2018 he was recognized as a Living Human Treasure. Among the construction techniques of the shipyard, the use of the "Jupiter's dart" (an ancient Phoenician carpentry technique) also stands out. The importance of his work, and of his ancestors, was recognized by the inclusion in 2014 of their "trezzote wooden boats" in the REIS. The decorations present in the wooden boats, characteristic of the traditional Sicilian naval carpentry. The motivations that push to decorate the hulls are to be found in superstitions, which lead to elevate the boat to the status of a living being. The study examines literary works, paintings, engravings, videos, interviews, archive documents: to trace a continuity over time in support of the oral transmission of the wooden boat building technique typical of Trezza. We are dealing with an intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Intangible Culture Heritage, Living Human Treasure, Shipyard

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## Introduction

The location of my research is a seaside village called Aci Trezza. In particular, I assess the shipbuilding practice developed in the Rodolico shipyard from the early 19th to the 21st century. During the Roman period, it became a place of transit and landing: evidence of this can be seen in the various anchors and amphorae found on the seabed of the Riviera dei Ciclopi and the wreck of a Roman ship offshore.<sup>1</sup> Later, the town was officially founded at the end of the 17th century by Prince Stefano Riggio (Castorina, 2018, p. 53). Initially born as a maritime landing place of the Principality, it was the feud's only village from which the sea could have been reached and if properly arranged would have become an excellent port of call. Soon, it became the centre of local commercial life: a shelter for boats, a church, an emporium and an oven where pasta was also made were built. It became one of the most active commercial ports in Sicily (Castorina, 2018, p. 58). Over time, the coastal landscape has been the setting for the myth of Ulysses and Polyphemus, Aci and Galatea. The town inspired the pen of the young Giovanni Verga, who wrote the novel *I Malavoglia*, which Luchino Visconti later filmed in his documentary *La Terra Trema*, in 1948. During the 17th century, the activity of the shipwrights is presumed to have begun. In order to understand the craft of the shipwright, it is necessary to know the anthropological and ethnological point of view. The sea contains strong contrasts: it is wealth, work, contact, life and death. The boat represents the indispensable working tool for accessing the sea. For the fisherman, the boat becomes a member of his family, to whom he entrusts his life and the sustenance of his family. The boat is the hub of social, working, family activities. Who is the shipwright? The shipwright builds boats and sums up several specialisations in his figure: from carpenter to caulker to painter (Li Vigni & Tusa, 2002). Building a boat at the Rodolico shipyard involves several stages, that are strictly followed still today:

- Ordering and choosing the shape of a vessel's hull according to its function.
- Choice of the proper timber, a very hard wood for the skeleton, a more impermeable wood for the planking.
- Use of the empirical construction technique of the 'half-rib'. This technique reproduces the master half-section of the boat to be built and is used to create the curvatures of the central body of the hull.
- After completing the deadwork, the hull is covered with hull planking, individually prepared, plank by plank, formed and bent following the ancient custom of using fire and water.
- In order to make the hull watertight, the technique of caulking is used, tarry tow is inserted between the gaps in the boards (i.e. the joints) with the help of a handmade mallet.
- Finally, the painting and decorations (Seafaring images, apotropaic symbols) are usually done by a *Pingisanti* (the hull painter), who uses both sacred and profane symbols.

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<sup>1</sup> Castorina, A. (2018). Aci Trezza tra natura, storia, fede e tradizioni (Eds.), *Paesaggi del Sacro tra memoria, storia e tradizione* (pp.53-64), Regione Siciliana, Palermo.



Figure 1: The Decorations on the Hull of the Boat by a Pincisanti (Photogram from ‘La barca siciliana’ by Ugo Saitta [1958]) (Source: Sicilian Regional Film Archive, CRicd.)

The methodology research was carried out initially following an open scheme, in order to know the main subjects of the matter. Furthermore, interviews were organized, following the topics that were considered relevant. After collecting and analysing the testimonies, I verified the truthfulness of the information through combination of documentary sources already recorded at the shipyard in possession of national archives. By cross-referencing the data, it is possible to draw a timeline, in which the bibliographic research allowed me to fill in some gaps and broaden the horizons in the multidisciplinary approach, helping me with the fields of anthropology, ethnology, history and art.

The presence of the Rodolico shipyard is as early as 1808. This is testified by an invoice recorded in the archives of the Sicilian Region, though this document does not specify the purpose of the work required to the shipwrights. The place where the wooden fishing boats were built was along the coast, today this street bears the name Rodolico. In 1908, the University of Catania commissioned the shipwright Salvatore Rodolico Sr. (homonymous grandfather of Salvatore Martino) to build a 22-palm-long wooden boat to accompany scholars to the Lachea island. The family tree of the Rodolico family shipwrights begins with Salvatore Rodolico, born in 1887 and ends with the last heir Giovanni Rodolico, born in 1963. The *savoir faire* was handed down from father to son, the activity of shipwright being the central focus in the family, everyone from childhood onwards attending the shipyard and learning its secrets. The shipyard, in the past until the 1950s, only built the typical Trezzote wooden boats for fishing anchovies and sardines in the Gulf of Catania. These boats have an average length of 6-7 meters, the shape of the hull varies depending on the type of fishing, and are rowed or fitted with a lateen sail if necessary. Today, this construction technique is included in—and protected by—a regional legislation. Sicily, in response to the call for the protection of the Intangible Heritage by UNESCO,<sup>2</sup> in 2003, organised itself in the activation of a strategy on the territory by issuing, on July 26, 2005, Decree no. 77, the Register of Intangible Heritage (REI) and the Regional Programme of Intangible Heritage. By means of the REI, the Sicilian Region has initiated the surveying and recording of its cultural heritage, also making a significant contribution to its protection, with particular attention to heritage at risk. Recently, on the basis of accumulated experience and with the aim of further enhancing

<sup>2</sup> The Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003

the regulatory tool, in order to adapt it to the latest UNESCO's guidelines, the regulatory framework was revised. This took place through D. A. no. 571 of March 5, 2014, which established the new Register of the Intangible Heritage of the Sicilian Region (R.E.I.S.)<sup>3</sup>. This register consists of a series of specific books, recording spaces that have hosted significant events, capable of generating dynamics of collective memories, symbolic production, or representing historically recognised socio-cultural scenarios. In 2014, typical Trezzote wooden boats were inscribed in the Book of Trades, Knowledge and Techniques. The sixties marked the beginning of the golden age for the shipyard, which passed to the young Salvatore Martino Jr who, assisted by his sons Sebastiano and Giovanni and over thirty workers, began the construction of wooden fishing boats. These large vessels measured 40 meters, and over time and according to requests, Salvatore Martino, thanks to his ingenuity, applied a modification to the hull to insert a third engine underboard (Li Vigni, Tusa, 2010, pp. 124–125). Orders arrived from Tuscany, Liguria, the Aeolian Islands and the island of Elba. The flourishing activity of the shipyard marked the development of the village, helping it in its expansion and modernisation. Where the shipyard is today, it is presumed to be the ancient Malavoglia dockyard, mentioned in Verga's works. In 2018, the shipwright Salvatore Martino Rodolico Jr was declared a Living Human Treasure, listed in the REIS.



Figure 2: Salvatore Martino Rodolico, Shipwright and Living Human Treasure Included in the REIS of the Sicilian Region (2022) (Photo by G. Nicotra)

Today, the shipyard takes care of the typical Trezzote boats included in the REIS, depending on the fishing technique used, in: Sardare, Cozzolare, Fiocinare and Nassarole. The typical Trezzote wooden boats are no longer than 6–8 metres in length and use oar propulsion or sail rigging with the use of lateen sail. The construction technique used for small boats, but also for large wooden vessels, is the ‘half-rib’. The difference in construction is the addition of inboard engines in large wooden fishing boats up to a maximum of three, and the hull design also varies up to the addition of cabins below deck. When the wooden base is finished, the decoration of the hull served as a means of procuring divine protection by dedicating it to a saint of the Catholic religion. The *pingisanto* was the painter who decorated the hulls

<sup>3</sup> Fonte web: <https://reis.cricd.it/>

(Finocchiaro, 2012). The following were usually painted on the bow: the mermaid, the dolphin, the fist, the eye (Coppola, 2011, p. 5). The eye symbolizes being on the alert to escape from danger. An example is the Providence of G. Verga's *I Malavoglia* in which *Sardara*, besides being conceived as a member of the family, also becomes a paradigm of their destinies. The decorations, like the types of boats, also depend on its function, and each ornamental motif occupies a precise portion of the hull, as an identifying feature of a precise area. Aci Trezza seafaring will have Saint John the Baptist imprinted in their hulls in the 'Palummedda'. The recurring colours of the area are red, yellow, blue, orange and green. The edge of the planking often hosts a festoon with geometric motifs. On the prow a mermaid is represented blowing a trumpet, symbolizing a warning against danger, both the mermaid and the eye are defined as apotropaic symbols.

## Conclusion

The case study offers a perspective on the maritime and coastal culture of eastern Sicily, with a focus on the ethnography that characterizes the place. The aim is to highlight how tradition in shipbuilding has generated innovation in technology in order to pass on its maritime heritage to future generations (Li Vigni & Tusa, 2002). The purpose of the study on the family of Aci Trezza's shipwrights showed how an ancient craft evolved in the construction of the living human treasure, Salvatore Martino Jr. He expanded the shipyard, acquired new machinery to be able to build ever larger boats. In addition to the typical wooden Trezzote fishing boats, which he built together with his father and grandfather, he started to design new hulls that were closer to the demands of his clients. Eventually becoming the driving force behind the town's economy, almost all the townspeople worked in the shipyard. Since around 1980, the port filled up with six new large boats every year, plus the old boats pulled out for annual refitting. During his time there, he built around one hundred larger boats with commissions around Italy. His ingenuity allowed him to evolve in step with the rules of modernity.



Figure 3: Cantieri Navale Rodolico During the Construction of Large Wooden Boats During the 1980s c.e. (Source: Sicilian Regional, CRicd)

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