

Persian Gulf Sailing

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In 1998 a shipwreck was found near the Indonesian island of Belitung. The cargo was almost 60,000 pieces of Imperial quality Chinese ceramics, some fine porcelain pieces and silver and gold artifacts. Some of the pieces had dates on them which established the date of the cargo to be 826 AD, almost 1,200 years ago.



The ship was a hand-made wooden craft, better known these days as a dhow. This magnificent find shows there was maritime trade between China and the Middle East at least 1,200 years ago, and also it shows that Persian Gulf sailors sailed very long expanses of the oceans much earlier than previously thought.



Even today you can see these hand-made wooden vessels used in the waters of the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, albeit without sails and using diesel engines.



What is a dhow?

Dhow is the English name for many kinds of traditional Middle Eastern, African and Indian wooden ships and boats. The term is not used in those areas by the native people. In the Persian Gulf the term *Jahazat* (which is Arabic for ‘vessels’) is used instead of dhows.

There are unique names for many kinds of dhows, depending on the hull shape and also on the locality. Some of these names are: *Baghlah*,

Mashwah, Shouii, Badan, Kouti, Battil, Boum, Sanbouk, Parakeh, Fellukeh, Ghoncheh.

Many of these names are specific to locations and some are no longer in use, as the hull itself is no longer built. Of these, the *boum* has been considered by local sailors to be the best ocean-going vessel through the centuries.

Rigging

All dhows, regardless of their shape and size use what is known in the west as the lateen sail. The term originates from the Mediterranean region and is known to come from Italian *vela a la trina*, meaning a triangular sail. In fact most dhow sails are not triangular but trapezoidal, or a truncated triangle.

Encyclopedia Britannica says:

The lateen is believed to have been used in the eastern Mediterranean as early as the 2nd century AD, possibly imported from Egypt or the Persian Gulf. Its effective use by the Arabs caused its rapid spread throughout the Mediterranean, contributing significantly to the resurgence of medieval commerce.

Traditionally the sails are made from cotton cloth that almost invariably comes from India. The long strips of this cloth, called *shaqqeh* (strip) in Arabic and Persian, are sewn together based on a design put forward by the master sail-maker of the town. The sail size depends on the size of the ship and is sewn on a flat lot near the shore.

The sail hangs on a long spar or yardarm called a *parvand* in Persian. The *parvand* is raised and lowered on the mast by main halyards called *bornadeh*.

There is a smaller triangular sail in front of the main sail called a *jib*. It is almost exactly like the jib on a modern European vessel. I am not sure if this sail has come from the western sailing tradition into the Persian Gulf and India or vice versa. Again, Encyclopedia Britannica says:

[jib's] use began to spread about 1600 and extended to larger war vessels about 1700. Jibs proved handy in helping to steer and were much valued—*e.g.*, on the square-rigger, as a means of better close-hauled sailing and of setting extra sail with comparatively little labor demand.

So, as the traditional sailing techniques date back centuries before 1600 in the Indian Ocean, it is probable that the jib has come from that region to the west.

Dhows can be single-, double- or triple-masted. There is the main mast, the *ghalami* mast, and a small *topser* mast. Each of these hold the sail named after it. Only the *topser* is gaff-rigged. There is another type of sail, raised on the top of the main mast above the main sail using a short additional pole. It is named *gabiyeh* and is used in fair weather.

Masts are secured in place with ropes called *emrani* and *bivard*, one of each on each side. They act as shrouds, but unlike shrouds they are not fixed and are tied to different points on the boat depending on the tack the boat is on. The mast is mounted to a rather large piece of wood block, or *fels*, fastened to the *bis*, or the keel.

Many wooden blocks are used to reduce the force needed to pull the ropes. These are called *goffieh*. The largest of these blocks is called *jame'* and is used on the main halyards.

All the ropes are made of coconut fibers and come from India.

Boum

Boums used to be the main ocean-going vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In fact most old pictures taken by westerners in the

1800s and the first half of the 1900s in the African and Arab ports show nothing but boums.

All the skippers that I met in Bandar Kong credit the boum to Kuwait. They say the first boums were made in that region, which used to be a small port town at the westernmost part of the Persian Gulf. They also say that later boum-making was practiced in other towns along the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.



An illustration in an old manuscript of *Maqamat Hariri* which is kept in the National Library of Paris shows a ship and its personnel as well as its passengers. The shape is distinctively a boum.



Boums are ships with a capacity of 200 to 800 tons. Although they are still used as launches, i.e. motorized dhows, they are no longer built. All the existing boums are old and one can assume that they will disappear soon, unless some action to revive these beautiful and majestic hand-made ships is taken.

Bandar Kong

Bandar Kong is a small port town in the Persian Gulf in south of Iran. It is located some 70 miles to the east of the more famous Bandar Abbas. The population is Persian speaking and mostly Sunni Muslim. Bandar

Kong has interesting urban architecture. Clay houses with wind-towers are common. The coastal strip traditionally was occupied by the dhow captains. No skipper would settle for a house anywhere but the coastal strip. Mosques abound, as the Sunni inhabitants are very strict in their Muslim practices. Women wear the traditional south Iran outfits with hand-made embroidered trousers and a veil over their head and shoulder. Some old women still wear *borka*, or face mask, but the younger generation do not wear such masks anymore. Men wear the long robes, common in the Persian Gulf region, with a scarf over their head.



Bandar Kong used to be the hub of Persian Gulf sailing and the hometown for many famous sailors up till the end of 1970s. The sailing culture is still alive there. Many young skippers do sail for trade with their diesel powered dhows to Dubai and Bahrain, as their fathers and

grand fathers sailed their dhows to the coastal towns of India and Africa. Fortunately there are still some old timers who used to sail to the western coasts of India, or Malabar as they call it, and eastern cost of Africa, mainly Mombasa.

Long Journeys

The long trips, or *Safar-e Gapp* (meaning ‘the great journey’ in local dialect) were commercial in nature and usually started in late August or early September each year. Either a local tradesman, or the captain himself, financed and initiated the journey. The vessel used was always a Boum. The crew on a Boum consisted of some 20 people that included the captain and a *moalem* (a navigator adept at using charts and *komal*, the sextant). Sometimes the captain was at the same time a moalem. Four or five sailors, called *sokkanis* were assigned to operate the steering wheel in shifts. A *sarhang* (colonel) was in charge of some 10 deck hands. There was a cook and his young helpers, called *walids*. For coordinating the collective efforts of the sailors while hoisting the sails, or while taking up the anchor, there was a group of musicians which played lute and drums and sang work songs. They also performed for the entertainment of the crew at times.

They started by going to the western-most part of the Persian Gulf, to Basra, to buy large quantities of locally produced dates. Then they would sail back to the strait of Hormuz and from there to India, along the coast of present day Pakistan. They sailed all the way to Calicut and Cochin in south India. They sold the dates and bought teak timber for future dhow building. They also bought locally produced terra cotta tiles. From there they crossed the Indian Ocean to the western coast of Africa, usually to Mombasa, in Kenya, or Dar es Salaam. The terra cotta tiles were sold. Hiring local workers, they went into the tropical jungles of Kenya and cut timber, mainly sandalwood to be brought back to

Bandar Kong for boat construction and also used in buildings. Finally around April they started their return trip to Bandar Kong and arrived around May. The returning ships were greeted by a line dance and song ceremony named *Rezif*. Interestingly, even today when this ceremony is performed it includes songs in Swahili, a reminder of their times in the African ports.

A Vanishing Tradition

With the introduction of the diesel powered dhows in the 1950s and the change in the economy of the Persian Gulf due to the oil revenues, the sailing tradition of Bandar Kong went into decline and fewer and fewer captains did the long journeys of the old times. Dhows with sails are no longer seen on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf.



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