

The emergence of the 19th century Ålandic peasant yacht

Jan-Erik Engren and Kristin Ilves

In a very generic sense, a typical biography related to ships starts with plans of building a certain vessel and ends after the vessel has served its years at sea. But can an entire shipbuilding tradition have a biography? Shipbuilding traditions are often approached in order to deal with people's social identities, as ships are built and used by people. Yet the art of building ships has been changed and developed, producing traditions and breaking them. The tradition of building ships is central to the biography of its builders and users, but these personal biographies cannot be separated from the sphere of their occurrence and expression – the general material setting. The concept of biography can thereby also be related to the shipbuilding tradition.

In this presentation, we examine the emergence of the 19th century Ålandic peasant yacht within the larger political, economic and social context of the central and northern Baltic Sea region. Through the analysis of the region's fluctuating and changing trading environment following the Finnish War of 1808–1809, it is demonstrated that the increasing uncertainty as well as decreasing profitability of previously stable trading relations provided necessary impetus to change the traditional vessel design. Avenues for both foreign and domestic innovations are discussed in order to clarify the merging of people and ships in the process of building the ships. We discuss why and how decisions about vessel design were made further emphasizing how a shipbuilding tradition is also the material identity of its builders. In addition to exogenous influences, where at the role of the Ålandic peasant sailors' involvement in the Swedish navy is accentuated, the effects of increasing smuggling activities of archipelago inhabitants and competitive sailing emerging during trading journeys are suggested as affecting shipbuilding. The main aim is to create the biography of the Ålandic peasant yacht building tradition and highlight the complex networks and processes through which innovations are generated, transmitted, and adopted.