

Traditional ships: Lithuania context

Lithuanian traditional ship: concept

In our country (not even talking about others) it isn't easy task to define strictly what a traditional ship is. I mean, people just do not know how real traditional Lithuanian ship should look like. The problem is that we (Lithuanian nation), during our history, had very few touch points, more accidental, with seafaring and shipping overall until 1923, when almost 100 km. long shore line of the Baltic sea became part of the independent Lithuania state. From then we started to realize the maritime culture and to meet the opportunities the sea can give us on a much higher level. First of all, Lithuanians had to accept wider view of Klaipeda (Memel) region, which was part of distinct ethnical Lithuania Minor/Lithuania Prussia borderland in German state since the XVI th. century, history as their own and to understand that progerman culture during the centuries strongly influenced people lives in that area. The biggest part of those people were living in villages or small towns. They developed a special subculture and identity (common for whole Lithuania Minor) and they didn't feel being neither Lithuanians, neither Germans. In modern times (XVIII ó XIX th.c.) they talked Lithuanian language, but were loyal citizens for German government.

Our (maritime historians) attention is concentrated especially for those, who established homes near the water and used ships for fishing, transportation and communication. In origin they were Baltic tribes folk. The shallow lagoon stretching besides the Baltic sea and the spit separating these waters in historical lands of Prussia and Courland was named after Curonians. The traditional boats in operation we now have rebuilt in Lithuania are typical examples of inland water ships used in Lithuania Minor some hundred years ago. Only when Lithuania became independent country in the beginning of XX th. century and incorporated Klaipeda region (Memelland) with Curonian lagoon in its territory, traditional (historically used) ships of lagoon were started to be presented as traditional or historical ships of Lithuania. When you look in the past of Lithuania state tradition and its evolution, you see Lithuanians usually depended on agriculture activities. Claiming that maritime and shipping traditions in Lithuania reach less than one hundred years can sound logical, but, talking about traditional shipping, we have to point up that Curonian lagoon for a long time was "the sea of Lithuania Minor", which was sailed by "different Lithuanians", living in neighbor country. Today our task is to understand it and to keep it "continuity". We have to respect and stimulate own traditions we discover. So, when we discuss Lithuanian traditional ships concept, as a context we should have in mind not the shifting territory of one country, but rather the historical specific region, it now covers.

Exactly the Curonian lagoon is the place where we can still find the earliest evidences of Lithuanian maritime heritage. Ships (boats) types only differed in size, sail plan and rigging, but all were similarly built, concerning natural conditions. Shallow waters dictated flat-bottomed (with the draft only 30 ó 40 cm.) construction of sailing boats. Moving leeboards from the both sides of the boats had to be attached to reduce the drift. The primary usage of these sailing boats was for fishing and they were called after the specific type of nets. The most usual fishing sailing boats: *kurrenkahn* (kur nas), *keitelkahn* (kiudelvalt), commonly known as "the Curonian boats" (*kurenkahn*). These or similar ships were used for several hundred years or even from as early as XV th. century. For economical needs and connection purposes between the Curonian spit and eastern shore of the Curonian lagoon *kurenkahn* sailed till the late 1950's.

Traditional sailing boats reflect the way the people, who had lived in this area for centuries, had adapted themselves to the natural environment of the Curonian Lagoon.

Lithuanian traditional ship: in operation

During the last years we can notice the rise of traditional shipping movement in Lithuania. It spreads in different parts of the country. From the beginning of XXI century traditional shipbuilding finds its way and new projects are continuously being prepared. The last year it was a good chance, during the stopover of The Tall Ships` Races 2009 in Klaipeda, to check the state of our maritime heritage by gathering the most representative and visible part of it "traditional ships in operation". We succeeded in joining the fleet of 8 traditional sailing ships (for Lithuania it is quite an achievement). Two of them were built in 1990s, but before the end of the first decade of the XXI century we can say that during this period

traditional shipbuilding flourished (in only 8 years six boats were built). So, today in Lithuania we have rebuilt as replicas eight traditional sailing ships (all in operation): five of *kurenkahn* type and three smaller fishing boats. This building initiative is held by Lithuanian Sea Museum, shipbuilders in Rusn island on River Nemunas (Nieman) entry to the Curonian lagoon and by businessmen. The ships are used for education, ethno cultural expeditions and for cultural tourism. Most are supplied with auxiliary engines.

We are looking forward for the juridical status of traditional (historical) ships to be determined in Lithuania and hope one day to have a register of these ships. There is a vision to establish a port for traditional ships in the centre of Klaipėda, taking as an example already existing heritage harbors in other European countries. By becoming advisory members of European Maritime Heritage we expect to share experience and have a support in our working fields with traditional shipping. In the year 2010 you will have a chance to see Lithuanian traditional sailing ship of the Curonian lagoon (*Süüd 1*) in the ships gathering *ó Hanse Sail Rostock* on August 5-8.

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