

Ship Iconography from Prehistory to Modern Times

Organizers

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Session Description

For thousands of years people used boats and ships to navigate the seas, rivers and lakes. People sailed to discover new areas for settlements or to engage in trade, conquest or piracy. The ship was the main and fastest means of communication, exchange of ideas, and cultural spread. Shipwrecks studied in underwater excavations mostly provide information on the lower half of the ship together with its cargo. The upper part, the rigging and steering gear are generally missing. The imagery of ship representations on the other hand mostly provides a full picture of the ship. So both approaches can be very complementary. Ship iconography only received limited scholarly attention. Therefore, this conference provides an opportunity to shed light on ship iconography as a tool for nautical archaeology and especially for the study of ship technology, ship types, ways of propulsion, and their social integration throughout time. The session will also take into account the mythological, religious, votive, and decorative contexts.

The study of ship iconography raises several questions related to nautical archaeology such as:

1. Why did people decide to draw, paint or build ship models? And do we know these people? Can they be qualified as mariners in the broad sense well-informed on ships and their technicalities or on the contrary as artists or other persons inspired by pattern books or by other non-first-hand observations?
2. What is the meaning of ship representations? And can they be dated sufficiently precise to become valuable interpretational assets? Is the meaning related to the art form? And what is the impact on the iconography of people without first-hand knowledge on ships and their context? Where do we find in general ship representations? Is there a relation with the environment?
3. Can ship representations in the end help to understand the technology and evolution of ships and the relation with their contexts?

Many more questions can be raised but these above are a starting point for the discussions.