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The Galleys of Salou
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THE GALLEYS OF SALOU

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While today Salou is a sleepy resort town on the Catalan coast south of Tarragona, the present setting is a thin veneer over a turbulent past. During the 16th and 17th centuries, life in the region was particularly hard due to constant raiding by marauding galleys. In fact, the present town of Salou sits on the remains of the village of Barenys which was wiped out during that time by Turkish raiders. A reflection of those violent times can be seen in the ship graffiti on the walls of the Torre Vella.

The primary reason the area was constantly raided during the 16th century had to do with geography. While the harbor of Salou is not large and was never commercially important, it had two invaluable assets: it was strategically located and had a large flat beach. Because of its location on the coast, Salou is one of the closest harbors to the Balearic Islands and thus was commonly used for expeditions leaving for the Balearics or other western Mediterranean islands. In 1229 Jaume I used the harbor as a staging point for his invasion of the Balearics. Later, Salou was used by Roger de Llúria during the War of the Sicilian Vespers. In 1323 Jaume II assembled his fleet at Salou before setting sail for Sardinia to fight the Pisans.¹ These are but a few examples which highlight the strategic importance of the harbor.

The harbor was popular with fleets not only because of its location, but also because of its broad flat beach. Beaching and hauling out galleys for maintenance and repair was a constant necessity if nothing else than to keep the sleek hulls clean of marine growth. Also, it was common practice from Classical

¹ J. Piñol Agulló, *Salou*, Barcelona, no date, 43.

times onwards to beach war galleys at night. The galleys were usually beached stern-first as a defensive measure and to permit easy access to the ships. These two practices required a large protected beach, which is exactly what the harbor of Salou offered. It is little wonder that the harbor remained in use by squadrons of galleys up through the 17th century.

Yet the very factors which made Salou an excellent staging area for galleys also made it an excellent landing for pirates and enemy fleets. The area was relatively isolated and thus provided an excellent site for marauding galleys since they would have had little fear of being molested. The incessant raiding made life in the Barenys, as the town was called, almost impossible. In 1339 only six houses were lived, and by 1424 the town was nearly deserted.² As early 1150 the need for some type of fortification to protect the harbor was recognized, but it was not until the start of the 15th century that any work was undertaken. Since the harbor served Reus, the town planned construction of a tower in 1450, but negotiations for its construction with the baroness of Mas Calbó broke down. The town tried again in 1500. However, the project was opposed by the Archbishop of Tarragona who stated in a letter dated July 19, 1517 that the project was unnecessary as he planned to build one himself. The underlying issue was one of control and the archbishop wanted to construct the tower himself so that it would be his exclusive property.³ This issue further delayed construction. The tower was finally completed in 1530 by Archbishop Pere de Cardona as part of a system of 25 towers built along the coast at the order of Carlos V.⁴ Along with the tower a large unattached house was built. A document, dated 1542, shows that the house sold bread and wine, and served as a stable and inn for the harbor.

² J. Gebellí, *Torre Vella*, Vila-Seca-Salou, 1985, 3.

³ E. Liaño Martínez, «Vila-Seca El Seu Passat Monumental», *Monografies de Vila-Seca-Salou*, #9, Vila-Seca-Salou, 1984, 51, 54.

⁴ J. Piñol Agulló, *op. cit.*, 25.

The Torre Vella itself is square with heavy sandstone block walls and a floor area of 10 square meters. The ground floor walls are heavily reinforced and have loopholes for cannons and firearms. Above the main floor are two intermediate wooden floors each with a set of windows. It is in these windows that the ship graffiti is located. The graffiti is cut into the relatively soft sandstone of the sills of the west window on the first floor and the south window on the second floor.

The west window on the first floor is heavily marked to the point where later graffiti has obliterated early inscriptions. Because the window does not directly face the harbor most of the graffiti is not of ships. However, one depiction of a light galley with a single lateen sail is discernible (fig. 1). On the stern, the *carroza* is clearly visible, as is the curved rudder. There is also a large standard, the *estandarte*, placed in the area of the *espalda*. On the bow, the *espólón* is also visible, but the galley lacks a forecastle for the guns, called the *arrumbada*. This is the only recognizable ship depiction in this window.

The south window on the second floor faces the harbor and as a result has numerous ship graffiti. The graffiti is a mixture of depictions of galleys and merchant ships (figs. 2-8). Figure 2 shows the tracings of two merchant ships. The lower depiction is of a large hull without any masts. The upper graffito is of a small sailing vessel with a single lateen sail. This type of ship was common along the coast of Catalunya from the early 15th century onward and was commonly depicted on ceramic tiles.³ The only other merchant ship graffiti are very stylized. The graffito (fig. 3) shows a two masted sailing ship while the lower one (fig. 4) is of an apparently smaller single masted vessel.

The window sill contains four etchings of galleys (figs. 5-8). Figures 5 through 7 are of galleys with single lateen sails and

³ Examples of this can be seen in the Museo de Cerámica Nacional at Valencia (inventory # 2233). Another example can be seen in the *Llibre de les ordinacions de l'administrador de les places* (fol. 60r).

which lack any type of forecastle. The scalloped pattern along the yardarms indicates that the sails were furled and that the depictions were made when the galleys were beached or at anchor. All three have triangular-shaped pennants with horizontal lines. These lines may represent the stripes of the Catalan or Aragonese flag. The galley in figure 6 also carries the flag of Sant Jordi indicating that the galley depicted was probably part of the Catalan squadron. Figures 5 and 7 may have been done by the same artist as they are very similar stylistically. In contrast to these galley depictions, the galley hull in figure 8 is the only depiction which has an *arrumbada* on the bow. It also has a large *carroza*, whereas the *carrozas* on the other galley graffiti are barely visible.

The graffiti of galleys indicates that there was an active naval presence at Salou, probably in an attempt to stop the constant raiding. Unfortunately for the inhabitants, this effort was largely in vain. In 1547, the towns of Barenys, Empruis de Salou and Pineda were destroyed. Three years later, in 1550, the infamous pirate Dragut landed and sacked the tower as well as completely destroying the one at Mas Cabó.⁶ While the Torre Vella was not destroyed, it remained deserted and virtually unused until 1689 when a guard was again placed in it. However, a graffiti with the date 1660, which is etched on top of the ship graffiti indicates the tower was occupied before 1689. The inscription provides an upper limit for the latest possible date for the galley graffiti on the second floor. While this date gives a definite upper limit for the age of the graffiti, it is quite possible the graffiti was made before 1550 when the tower was actively manned. A hint of this comes from the graffiti itself. As mentioned earlier, except for one depiction, all of the other galley representations lack an *arrumbada*. While it was common for Spanish galleys built during the first half of the 16th century to lack any type of forecastle, by the cen-

⁶ E. Liaño Martínez, *op. cit.*, 55.

tury virtually every type of war galley had an *arrumbada* of some type to protect the guns and soldiers.⁷ The fact that the galleys in figures 1, 5, 6 and 8 have no forecastle of any kind is an indication the graffiti was made before the tower was sacked in 1550 and left deserted. It is very likely that the galley graffiti was made between 1530 and 1550 by the tower guards as they sat in the window overlooking the harbor and the galleys on the beach.

Today, Salou is tranquil and the Torre Vella serves as a cultural center and art school. Yet the tower's earliest artwork is mute testament to a more violent past when the area was witness to a vicious naval campaign.

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⁷ J. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys*, Cambridge, 1974, 298-299.

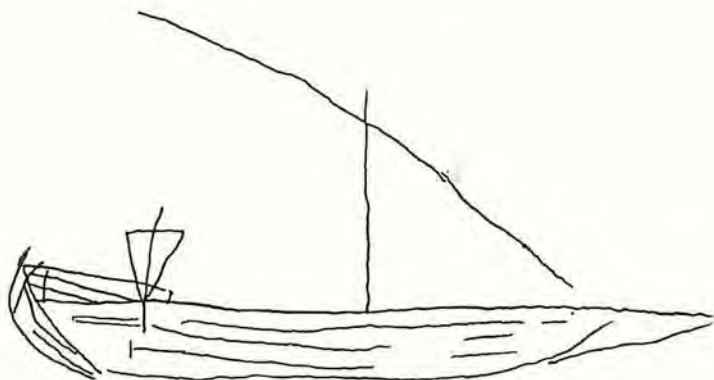


Figure 1. Graffito of a galley in the west window on the first floor.

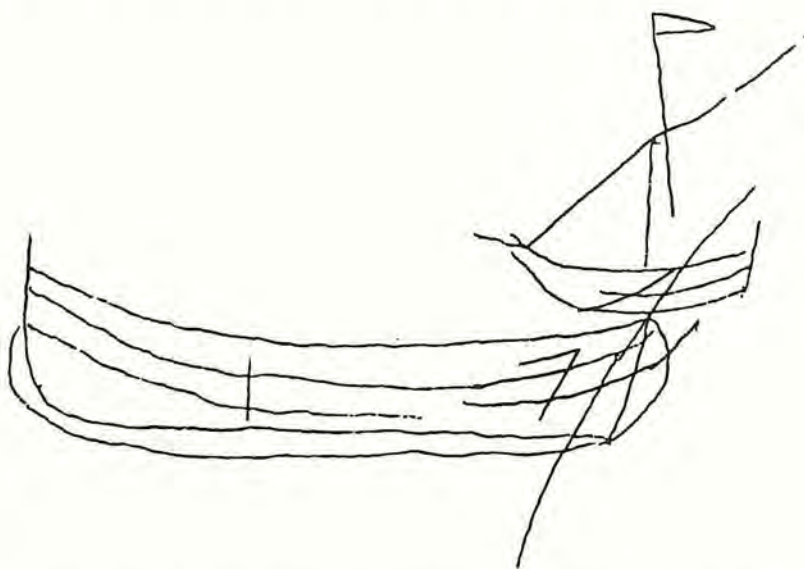


Figure 2. Graffiti of two merchantmen in the south window of the second floor. The upper depiction is of a small lateen-rigged coaster common to the area and frequently depicted on ceramic tiles of the 15th and early 16th centuries.



Figure 3. A tracing of a stylized depiction of a merchantman with three masts from the south window on the second floor.

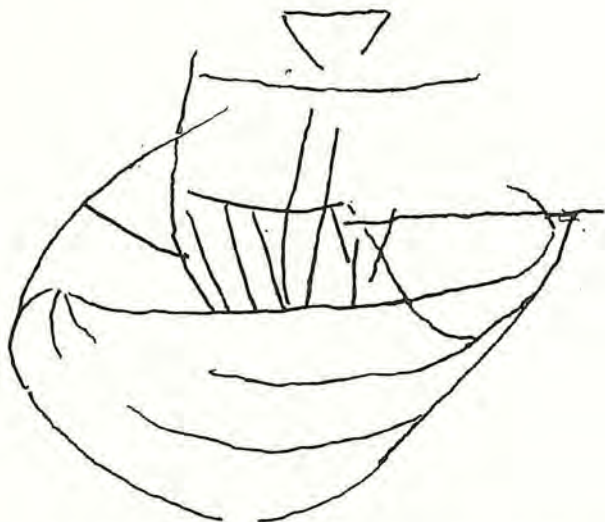


Figure 4. A highly stylized depiction of a ship with a single mast in the south window of the second floor.

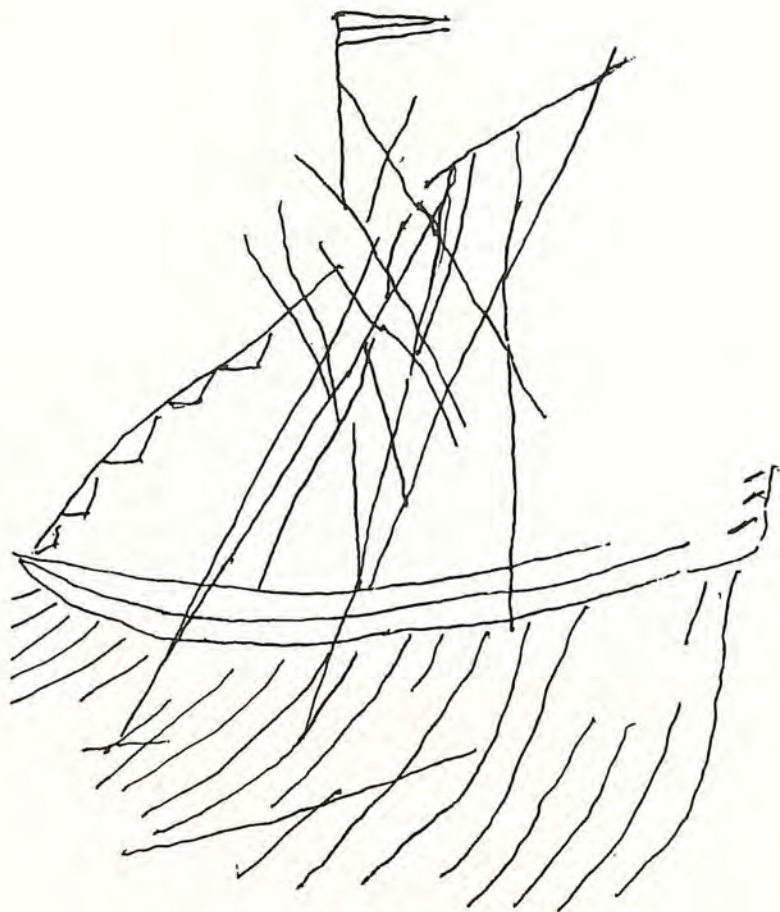


Figure 5. Graffito of a galley in the south window of the second floor.

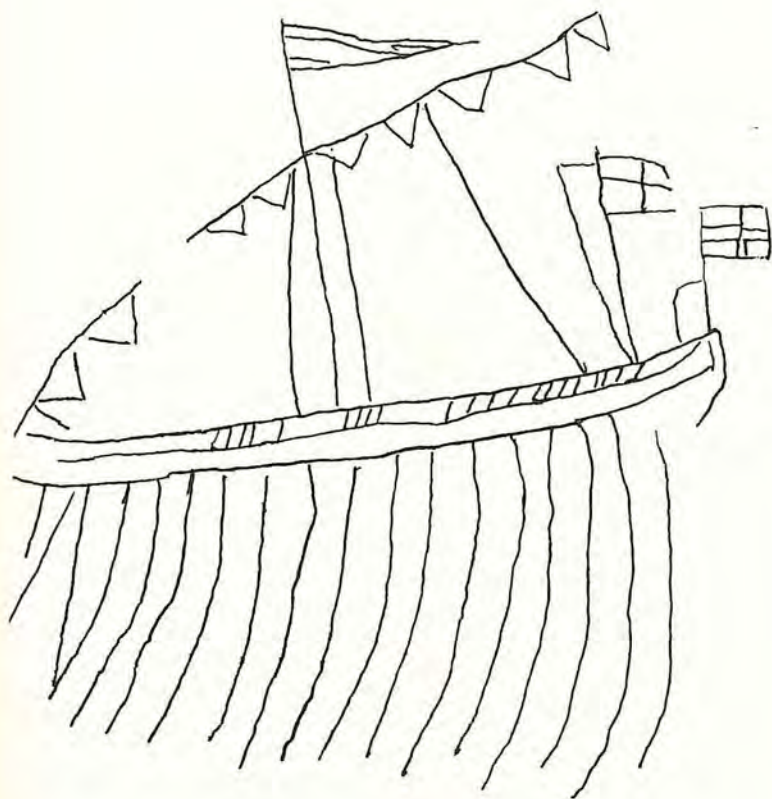


Figure 6. Graffito of a galley in the south window of the second floor. The galley carries the flag of Sant Jordi which indicates it was probably part of the Catalan squadron.

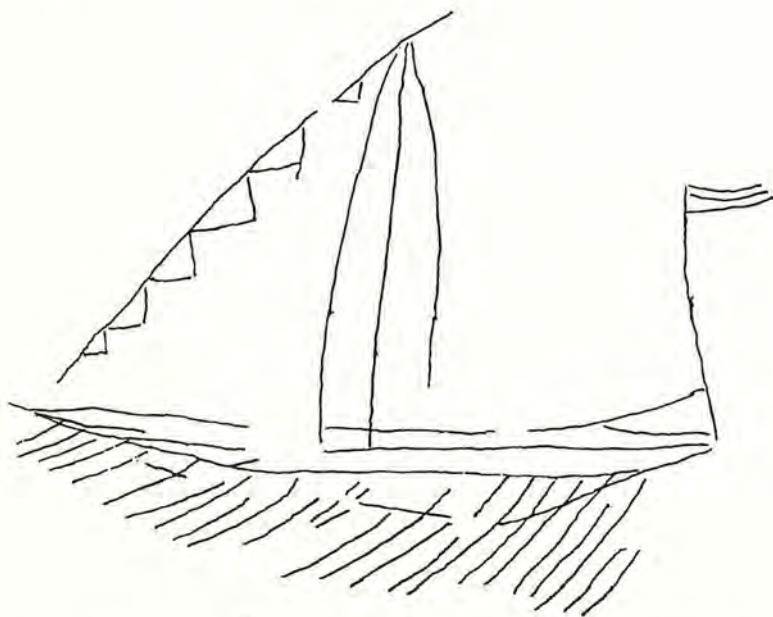


Figure 7. Graffito of a galley in the south window of the second floor.



Figure 8. Graffito of a galley hull in the south window of the second floor. Of all the galley graffiti in the Torre Vella, this is the only one where the galley is depicted with a forecastle, called the *arrumbada*, to protect the guns and soldiers.