

Minimal, Intermediate, and Maximum Reconstructions of the Dover Boat

Three articles in *IJNA* 35.1 (Crumlin-Pedersen, 2006; Crumlin-Pedersen and McGrail, 2006; Roberts, 2006) discuss possible reconstructions for ancient boat structures, of which one of the most contentious is the Bronze-Age boat found at Dover a decade and a half ago. This fragmentary find illustrates an ongoing problem for archaeologists who find a unique but incomplete boat or ship: to what degree should she be reconstructed?

Legitimate caution, and sometimes fear of criticism, encourage a minimalist approach. It is easy simply to show what was found and what can be comfortably extrapolated from what was found, then let other professionals and members of the public interpret it as they will. Yet this is rarely done. Reconstruction is sometimes called minimal when enough is added to the find to make it look like a complete boat or ship. In that way, the public is given the impression that the boat's overall appearance is known and that she originally did not consist of much more than what was found, neither of which is demonstrably true in the Dover Boat reconstruction. It would be better to call this an intermediate reconstruction rather than a minimal reconstruction. It is open to criticism that it is both too much reconstruction in relation to what is known, and too little reconstruction in relation to what might have existed originally.

The display and publication of the Dover Boat (Clark, 2004a; Clark, 2004b) shows her 'as found' and in three different possible lengths and two different stern treatments, one of which is the preferred option. However, the significant questions of number of side strakes, height of side, possible flare of side, possible sheer, possible rocker, and shape of bow (or possibly stern) are dealt with very narrowly. The internal structure is given a starkly minimal interpretation, not even providing thwarts for the paddlers or rowers. It is as if a slab-sided box had been built up on the remains, despite the shipwrights' demonstrated abilities to create complex timber shapes. The result is a low-lying scow reconstruction, seeming best suited for

riverine trades—although apparently there would have been little need for such a craft in the vicinity of Dover, with its tiny river and estuary. That scow configuration is a possible solution, but not the only one, and other options could be developed.

Instead of a local scow with some very peculiar features, the Dover Boat could be seen as a logical development of the Ferriby Boats (Wright, 1990). The method of aligning and fastening the lowest side strakes to the bottom strakes can be interpreted as an evolutionary improvement of Ferriby. The shape of the lowest side strakes—a form of chine log with the approximate section of a quarter circle—provides more internal space and probably more strength at a crucial point than the equivalent strake in Ferriby, and may have helped limit the flare of the sides to an angle which permitted crewmen to sit comfortably to wield their paddles—if they sat, and if they used paddles. Is it possible that the chine strakes were made from a somewhat curved tree-trunk, providing the bottom with rocker, as in the reconstructed Ferriby Boat?

The absence of frames may look like regression from Ferriby (assuming that Ferriby had them), but perhaps the combination of chine logs, a few vertical posts mounted in large cleats which serve as futtocks, a reinforced gunwale, and through-strake locking thwarts created a structure strong enough to dispense with frames, which would have been difficult to secure effectively to sides and bottom without metal fastenings or treenails.

The most peculiar feature of the Dover Boat, to modern eyes, is the system of cleat rails near the midline and around the missing stem or stern plank that stand proud of the two bottom strakes and are cut to admit the thwartship wedges and floor timbers. The assumption is that such a system, without stitches, would have worked badly in any sea. Yet, is that an established fact? The wear pattern on the underside of the bottom planks suggests that they may have toed up slightly amidships when afloat, squeezing the planks together. The central caulking lath, held

firmly under the cross timbers, seems well suited to its task of pressing the caulking into the steep 'v' seam. If the missing ends were strongly fastened, the result may have been a strong hull, although how it would have behaved when both ends were suspended by waves needs to be studied. Rocker may have helped limit sagging.

Reconstructing the sides with two strakes seems conservative, when Ferriby apparently had three, and a height of three strakes would increase freeboard and still accommodate paddlers. Even slight flare of sides would have increased stability. Spoon-shaped ends probably would have been more effective at sea than a broad, flat, scow bow, and could have been brought up to accommodate the hood-ends of strakes with some sheer.

A maximalist reconstruction with slight rocker, slight flare of the side strakes above the chine strake, three side strakes (including the chine strake), longitudinal stiffening such as a reinforced gunwale, locking thwarts at the level of the joint between second and third side strakes, and a spoon-shaped bow and stern built of hollowed timbers with considerable upward sweep beyond the ends of the existing bottom planks and first side strakes, could configure the Dover Boat as a strongly-built double-ended seagoing successor to the

Ferriby-type craft. She would still be low enough to be paddled, and could ride waves well with modest sheer at the ends of the upper side strakes. She could have been an example of the dominant seagoing wooden boat-type of her region and era.

Experiments with a model of such a configuration—clearly marked to show what is known and what is hypothetical—could test this hypothesis, and such a model would show visitors a far wider range of possible reconstructions than exists at present. Or perhaps this is a craft that would be better exhibited and interpreted 'as found', admitting that we do not have enough information to reconstruct her in any configuration with any confidence. The decision not to excavate the parts of the boat that lay beyond the cofferdams of 1992 probably means that we will never have more direct evidence.

At the present state of knowledge of the Dover Boat, I incline toward interpretation 'as found' and suggest relegating the reconstruction models to the storeroom, unsatisfying as that would be to the museum staff and the public.

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