

# Ship ahoy! Prayers on the walls: votive offerings and engravings on the island of Oléron in France

## ¡Barco a la vista! Oraciones en las paredes: ofrendas votivas y grabados en la isla de Oléron, Francia

**KEY WORDS:** Ex-votos, historical graffiti, seafaring customs, Modern Age, Age of Sail.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Exvotos, graffiti históricos, costumbres marineras, Edad Moderna, Era de la Vela.

**GAKO-HITZAK:** Esker-opariak, graffiti historikoak, marinelen ohiturak, Aro Modernoa, Bela Aroa.

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### ABSTRACT

We present 23 tracings of historical graffiti depicting boats and seafaring motifs, obtained from the walls of four churches on the island of Oléron in France. Through our analysis of all the engravings, we have established a chronology spanning from the Late Middle Ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our typological study has enabled us to identify the types of ships that sailed the oceans during the Age of Sail. Engravings of galleons, ships of the line, brigantines, and other vessels associated with the study area – such as *couraux* and *coralines* – have been recovered. Furthermore, we have concluded that some of these engravings appear to be votive offerings from people who could not afford to build a model ship or paint a commemorative picture of a shipwreck. Others may simply depict ships that people saw in port or at sea.

### RESUMEN

Presentamos 23 calcos de grafitis históricos que representan barcos y motivos marineros, obtenidos de las paredes de cuatro iglesias de la isla de Oléron, en Francia. A través del análisis de todos los grabados, hemos establecido una cronología que abarca desde la Baja Edad Media hasta el siglo XIX. Nuestro estudio tipológico nos ha permitido identificar los tipos de barcos que surcaban los océanos durante la Era de la Vela. Se han recuperado grabados de galeones, navíos de línea, bergantines y otras embarcaciones asociadas al área de estudio, como *couraux* y *coralines*. Además, hemos llegado a la conclusión de que algunos de estos grabados parecen ser ofrendas votivas de personas que no podían permitirse construir una maqueta de barco o pintar un cuadro conmemorativo de un naufragio. Otros pueden simplemente representar barcos que la gente veía en el puerto o en el mar.

### LABURPENA

Itsasontziak eta marinelen motiboak irudikatzen dituzten graffiti historikoak 23 kalko aurkezten ditugu. Frantziako Oléron uharteko lau elizatako hormetan topatu dira. Grabatu guztien azterketa egin ondoren, Behe Erdi Arotik XIX. mendera arteko kronología ezarri dugu. Gure azterketa tipologikoari esker, Bela Aroan ozeanoak zeharkatzen zituzten itsasontzi motak identifikatu ahal izan ditugu. Galeoien, lineako ontzien, bergantinen eta azterketaren esparruari lotutako beste ontzi batzuen grabatuak berreskuratu dira, hala nola *couraux* eta *coraline* izenekoak. Gainera, grabatu horietako batzuk hondoratze baten oritzapenezko koadroa margotzea edo itsasontzi-maketa bat eraikitzea behar adina baliabide ez zuten pertsonak egindako zinopariak izan zitezkeela ondorioztatu dugu. Beste batzuek, besterik gabe, jendeak portuan edo itsasoan ikusten zituen itsasontziak irudikatzen ditzakete.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historical graffiti provides us with invaluable insights into past life and customs. By definition, they are technically simple and usually spontaneous, but they can reveal precious information when their intrinsic features, such as subject, meaning and purpose, are analysed, as well as their context in terms of visibility and social acceptance (Milnor, 2014). Historical graffiti can generally be formally classified as textual, figurative, or tally mark, and many different purposes arise

when identifying the subject of the first two categories, such as indicating presence or transmitting messages with religious, political, lyrical, humorous, and other themes (Amórtegui, 2021; Milnor, 2014; Lohmann, 2020).

This research project examines a series of ship and maritime engravings found on the walls of four churches on the island of Oléron. Based on technical features such as the number of masts and sails, most of these depictions can be dated to the Age of Sail, spanning from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Analysing this type of

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representation in such a specific and well-defined geographical context as the island of Oléron provides an excellent opportunity to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon.

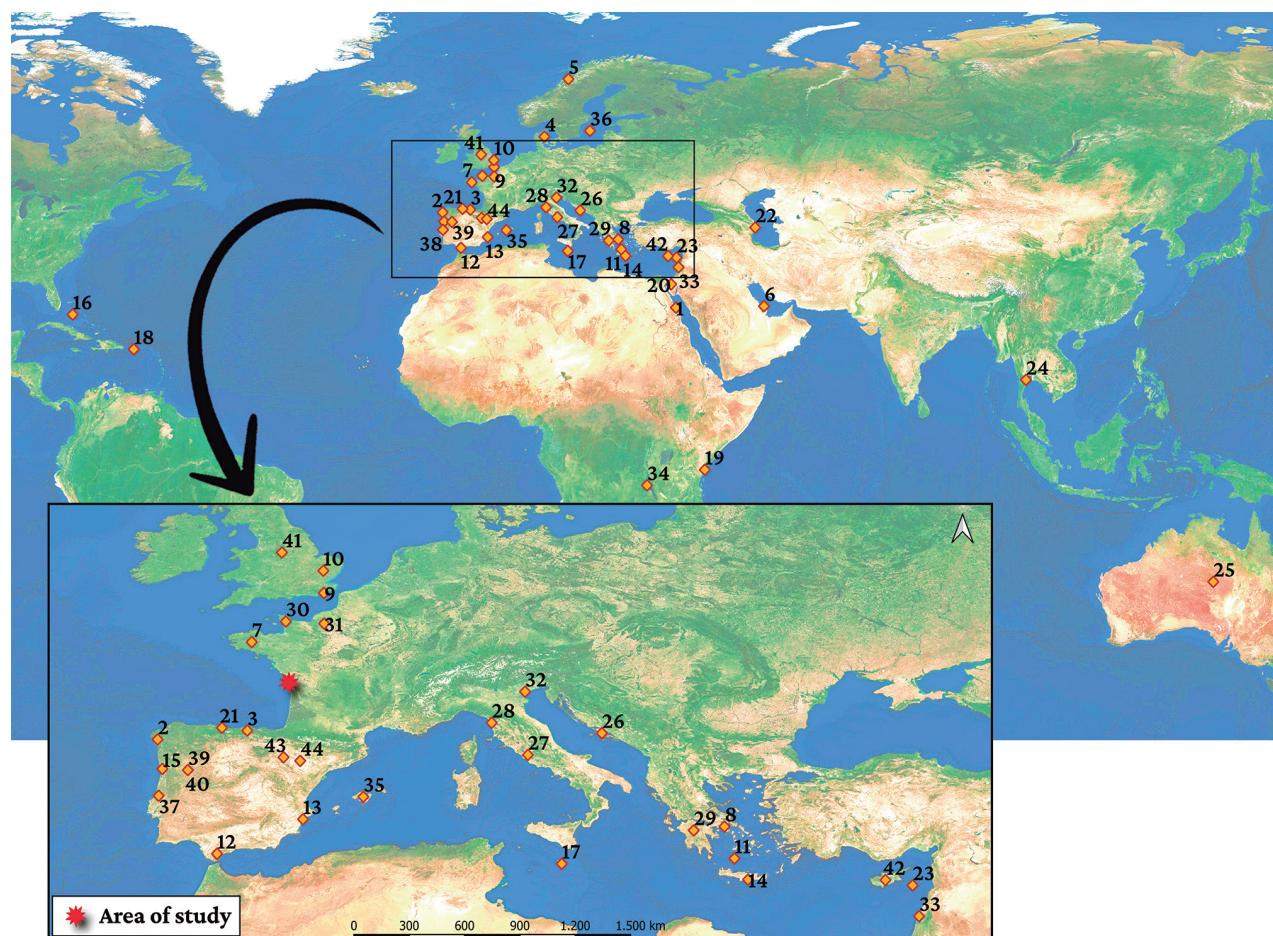
The island of Oléron lies in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region of France, in the department of Charente-Maritime, on the west coast. It lies north of the mouth of the Garonne River within the Seudre Estuary. As an island, its population has always relied on the sea for its livelihood.

Maritime representations emerged very early on, many of which were linked to religion or sacred symbolism. Examining this phenomenon in Western Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, it is evident that it is almost invariably associated with churches or temples connected to maritime traditions (Alonso, 1985; Bochaca, 2012; Emden, 1922; Gomar, 2021; Lixa, 1982; Ruiz de la Peña, 2003 and 2014; Villain-Gandossi, 1990; Champion, 2015), suggesting a religious purpose. However, the motivation behind these engravings, graffiti and paintings is open to wide debate. Some of them may have been created for entertainment or out of boredom (Cooper *et al.*, 2015; Kahanov, 2011).

Regular bibliographic research on the subject shows that these representations constitute a cultural phenomenon that has existed throughout human prehistory and history in many regions and cultures (Ballard *et al.*, 2004; Brody, 2021; Evans, 1894; Gambin, 2014; Gertwagen, 2006; Muscat, 1999; Pollard & Bita, 2017; Streiffert, 2016; Tingle, 2010). Similarly, compendia of general works have attempted to document seafaring traditions, the human response to the sea and its challenges, types of ships and motivations for their depiction (Agius *et al.*, 2014; Atkins, 2010; Brody, 2018; Streuding, 2014; Westerdahl, 1994). As can be seen from the spread and scope of the ship graffiti phenomenon (Fig. 1 and Table 1), it transcends a single religious belief or geographic region.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This survey of historical graffiti is restricted to the walls of churches on Oléron Island. Six of the island's churches and temples were visited. Only four of them had graffiti: The Church of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption in Le Château; the Church of Saint-André in Dolus; the



**Fig.1.** Map showing the locations of the sailors' graffiti that have been studied by other researchers, alongside a table listing these references. / Mapa que muestra la ubicación de los grafitis de los marineros que han sido estudiados por otros investigadores, junto con la tabla que recoge estas referencias.

Number and bibliographical reference					
1	Agius <i>et al.</i> , 2014	16	Meyers, 2022	31	Cinquabre, 1984
2	Alonso, 1985	17	Gambin & Kassulke, 2023	32	Helms, 1975
3	Arteaga <i>et al.</i> , 2023	18	Lace <i>et al.</i> , 2019	33	Kahanov, 2011
4	Ballard <i>et al.</i> , 2004	19	Pollard & Bita, 2017	34	Garlake & Garlake, 1964
5	Bayliss-Smith & Mulk, 1999	20	Pomey, 2018	35	González, 2017
6	Cooper <i>et al.</i> , 2015	21	Ruiz de la Peña, 2014	36	Westerdahl, 2013
7	Coughlin, 2020	22	Sigari, 2017	37	Martins & de Magalhães, 2016
8	De Moortel & Langdon, 2017	23	Streiffert, 2016	38	Estrela, 2019
9	Dhoop <i>et al.</i> , 2016	24	Sukkham <i>et al.</i> , 2017	39	Baptista, & Gomes, 1997
10	Emden, 1922	25	Taçon & May, 2013	40	Baptista, 1999
11	Evans, 1894	26	Tiboni, 2017	41	Champion, 2015
12	Gomar, 2021	27	Villain-Gandossi, 1990	42	Stella, 2015
13	Hernández & Ferrer i Marset, 2009	28	Arduini & Grassi, 2002	43	Fondevila, 2009
14	Hood, 1974	29	Basch, 1978	44	Royo & Gómez, 2002
15	Lixa, 1982	30	Carpentier <i>et al.</i> , 2001		

**Tabla 1:** Map showing the locations of the sailors' graffiti that have been studied by other researchers, alongside a table listing these references. / Mapa que muestra la ubicación de los grafitis de los marineros que han sido estudiados por otros investigadores, junto con la tabla que recoge estas referencias.

Church of Saint Pierre in Oléron; and the Church of Saint Georges in Oléron (Fig. 2).

This survey involved visually inspecting the walls and taking photographs of all the ashlar bearing graffiti. The majority of these were scratched onto the limestone ashlar, probably with a knife or other hard metal object. In one case, the graffiti was drawn with charcoal. All photographs were taken from a distance of 20 cm. Some photographs had to be retaken to achieve the optimal lighting for capturing the lines. The photographs were processed using Inkscape and the engravings were drawn in the same software to facilitate analysis. In some cases, the weathering process on the limestone made accurate tracing difficult, and it is also possible that some of the church walls were previously painted, as suggested in other contexts (Champion, 2015). If tracing the engraving proved too difficult due to its deterioration or that of the stone on which it was made, the photograph was processed until the lines became visible. Any lines that were not visible were not drawn. No interpretative tracings were made; the existing engraving was simply followed.

We then carried out a study of the depicted boats to establish chronologies and gain a better understanding of the seafaring customs of these people. To identify the type of ship depicted in each engraving, the following reference bibliography was consulted: Culver and Grant (1992); de Lorenzo *et al.* (1864); Ford *et al.* (2018); and Gibbons (2002). However, despite this, it became apparent that some of these vessels were difficult to recognise. It is well known that warships and merchant ships were mixed in the Atlantic during the Modern Age. We found that galleons, ships of the line, corvettes, frigates, hulks and fly-boats are virtually indistinguishable in engravings. They all have three masts and a similar number of sails, which are difficult to dis-

cern in engravings such as those presented here. The only distinguishing feature is whether they carry cannons and on how many decks.



**Fig.2.** Location and situation of the churches on the island of Oléron. / Ubicación y situación de las iglesias en la isla de Oléron.

If they depict battery decks, it is sometimes easier to tell whether a ship is a ship of the line or a corvette. The former usually have two or three, whereas corvettes and frigates typically have only one. The problem is that gun lines are not always depicted. This may be because the artist did not want to depict them or because the ships are merchant vessels. If the latter is the case, it is difficult to tell whether we are looking at a galleon, a fly-boat, a frigate or an hulk. Furthermore, even merchant ships may carry cannons. Therefore, unless the type of ship can be recognised from the representation and there is no doubt as to its identity, it should be referred to as a 'large tonnage ship' without further specification.

The total number of identified figurative graffiti had been recorded, classified and organised into sheets, which are presented as 'Supplementary Information 1' (SI1) in this work. The location of each piece of graffiti is also recorded on these sheets; the majority are drawn on the inner walls of the narthex. The SI1 images have been given a number and an abbreviation to help locate the engraving. SGO will be used for the church of Saint Georges d'Oléron; SPO for the church of Saint Pierre d'Oléron; SAD for Saint André de Dolus; and NDA for

Notre-Dame de l'Assomption de Le Château. Sometimes an engraving of a single ship constitutes a single panel, while at other times, several engravings of ships constitute a panel. Therefore, if reference is made to a complete panel, a single number will follow the abbreviation. If reference is made to different engravings within the same panel, multiple numbers will be used. We recommend consulting SI1 while reading the article to understand this work.

We also present a document entitled 'Supplementary Information 2' (SI2), which features many votive offerings such as commemorative plaques, crosses, ship models and other statues. Whenever we refer to a figure, we will always be referring to the numbering system given in the SI1.

### 3. RESULTS: VOTIVE OFFERINGS AND MARITIME GRAFFITI FOUND IN THE CHURCHES ON THE ISLAND OF OLÉRON

Twenty-three engravings were obtained from the aforementioned churches. All of the engravings were found in the vicinity of the bell towers, at a height between 140 and 160 cm above the church's current floor.

Number of masts	Type	Chronology of most frequent use	Figure
Single-masted ship	Coca or nao	XV	SGO1
	Filanderie	XVII-XX	SPO7-1
	-	?	SAD1
	Courau	XIV-XX	SAD9-1
	Coraline	XIV-XX	SAD9-1
	Cutter	XVIII-XX	NDA4-2
Two-masted ship	Schooner	XVIII-XX	SPO3
	Xebec	XVII-XIX	SPO5-3
	Ketch	XVIII-XX	NDA4-1
Large-tonnage vessel (three masts)	Fly-boat, carrack, galleon	XVII-XVIII	SPO1
	Line-of-battle ship	XVIII-XIX	SPO2-1
	Line-of-battle ship or frigate	XVII-XIX	SPO4
	Line-of-battle ship or frigate	XVII-XIX	SPO5-1
	Corvette	XVII-XIX	SPO5-2
	Corvette or frigate	XVII-XIX	SAD2
	-	XVI-XIX	SAD7
	Brick-barque	XVII-XVIII	SAD4
	Galleon	XVI	NDA5
	Galleon or Line-of-battle ship	XVI-XIX	SAD10
	Fly-boat	XVII-XVIII	SAD3-1
	-	XVI-XIX	SAD6
	Brick-barque	XVII-XVIII	NDA2
	Corvette or frigate	XVII-XIX	NDA3
Four-masted ship	Brigantine-schooner or barquentine	XIX	SPO6

**Tabla 2:** Ships are categorised by type and date of use, according to the literature, as well as by reference to their representation. / Barcos clasificados por tipo y fecha de uso, según la bibliografía consultada, así como por su representación.

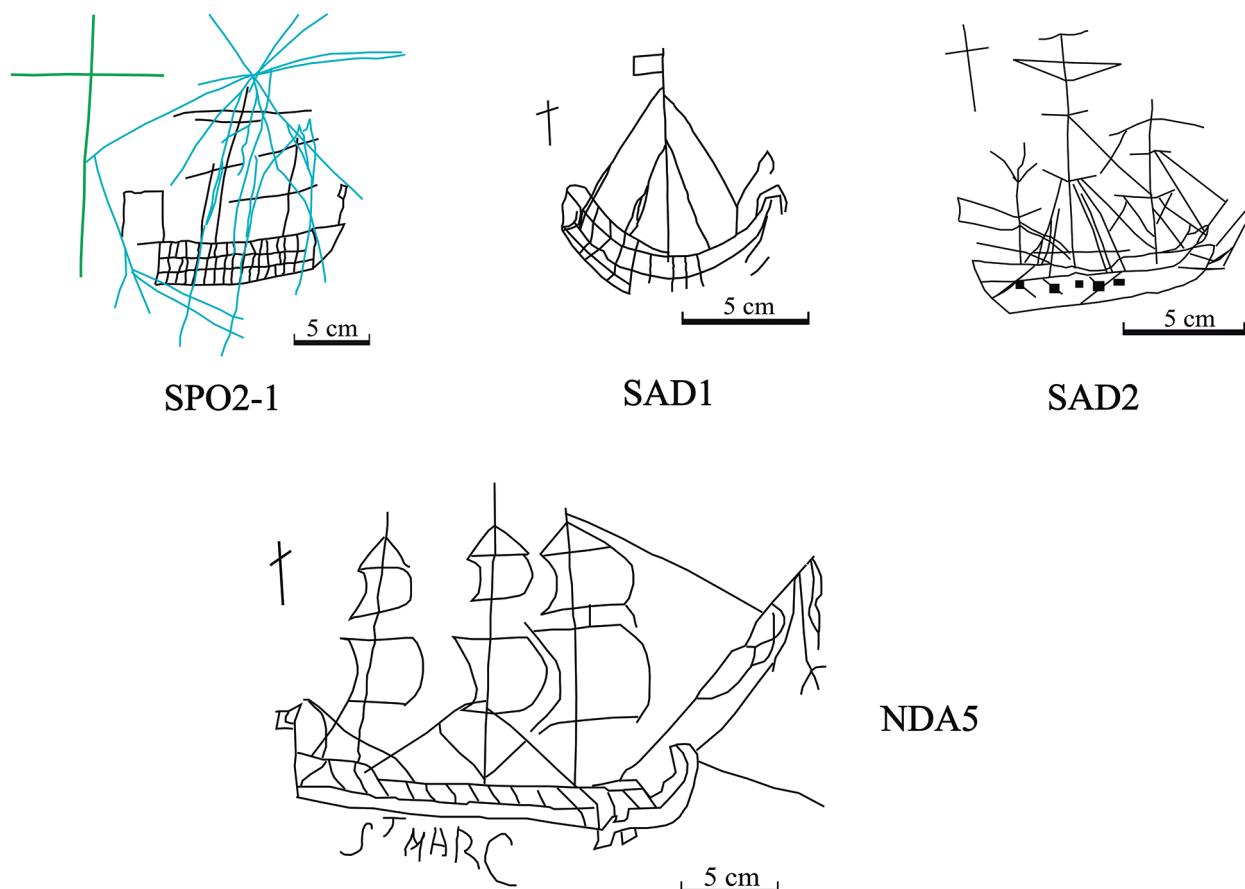
Based on the typology by number of masts, there are six single-masted vessels, three double-masted vessels and fourteen three-masted sailing ships, as well as one four-masted vessel. Table 2 shows data for all of these vessels, classified according to the type we have deduced they could be. They were all created within a specific chronological period, and we have tried to refine the possible centuries of representation as much as possible.

Some of the engravings form panels composed of multiple graffiti images of ships, which are sometimes superimposed (SPO2, SPO5, SPO7 and SAD3). Additionally, two of these panels have been identified as potential harbour scenes, depicting large ships (SPO8 and SAD9). SPO5 shows how the ships represented in black and red on the tracing respect each other's space and do not overlap. However, the green ship has been drawn over the black ship.

We believe that the engravings were made by sailors or their relatives, although it is possible that some were created by a professional draughtsman (Lohmann, 2020). What does seem certain is that they were drawn with a number of common characteristics in mind that make the ship in question easily recognisable (Fondevila, 2009). Conversely, due perhaps to a lack

of experience in engraving stone, we found a series of engravings that we have termed 'sketches' due to their disjointed, irregular and incomplete lines (SPO2-2, SPO5-2, SPO7-2, SAD3-2; SAD5, SAD6 and SAD8).

It is unclear whether this is a coincidence, but the graffiti featuring the most skilful strokes are believed to be votive offerings. Likewise, it is likely that some of those without a cross drawn on the stern are also votive offerings, but we cannot be sure (SPO2-1, SAD1, SAD2, NDA3 and NDA5). These offerings are identified by a cross on the stern or flag. They probably represent a sunken ship. The Latin cross symbolises death and conveys a message of salvation; it can even stand in for a corpse when one is not present after a shipwreck (Baudouin, 1916; García de Castro, 2009; Montoux, 2022). An example of this can be seen in the church of Notre-Dame-et-Saint-Nicolas in La Cotinière, also in Oléron (SI2). Other non-engraved maritime votive offerings, such as model ships, statues and plaques, are also preserved in other places in Oléron (SI2). These are the most common votive offerings (Baader, 2016; Coughlan, 2020). We believe that the engravings presented here serve the same purpose; they were simply created by people with fewer financial resources (Fig. 3).



**Fig.3.** Tracings of some engravings found in churches in Oléron, France (image created by the authors). / *Calclos de algunos grabados encontrados en iglesias de Oléron, Francia (imagen creada por los autores).*

Regarding these engravings, it is important to consider the history associated with three of them.

SPO2 shows two ships. We consider the main scene to be the one outlined in black, SPO2-1. This is a three-masted ship bearing a large flag at the stern and a much smaller one at the bow. When ships fly their flags in this way, it is for decoration (Espinosa de los Monteros, 1775). The ships are probably representations of ships of the line, which explains why there are up to three rows of cannons. There is no forecastle or stern, nor any elevation on the deck.

Based on the stratigraphy of the engraving itself, the ship of the line was the first thing to be engraved, probably using a knife or other sharp object. Subsequently, another engraving was made which practically destroyed the graffiti. It is unclear whether this was done by someone else or using different materials for engraving. We believe that the cross may have been added at this point. At the top of the main mast, there is a depiction of a lightning strike colored in blue in our sketch. We interpret this line as St. Telmo's fire, an electrical phenomenon that occurs at sea when the atmospheric electric field is very high. Initially, it resembles a cloud or green lights that shine and move with the mast. Sometimes, it simply remains like this. At other times, however, the electrical charge builds up to the point where the mast explodes (Errasti and Ezcurra, 2003; Iturriaga, 1961). This must have been the reason for the sinking.

Another ship depicted as a votive offering can be seen in SAD1. It depicts a single-masted ship with a curved keel. This type of representation was probably chosen because these ships could be seen in shipyards, out of the sea and undergoing repairs. Alternatively, it may be due to idealisation (Ruiz de la Peña, 2014). The ship depicted is small, unlike those seen from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. There is a line on the bow which may indicate a slightly elevated deck. This could represent a fishing boat or small vessel, descended from the medieval naos and coca. Alternatively, it could be similar to the representation in SPO7-1, except that some of those ships have been idealised. Taking into account the ships in the area at that time, it could depict a *filandière* (Cocula, 1995; Joineau, 2017; Lerat, 1959; Minovez, 1999).

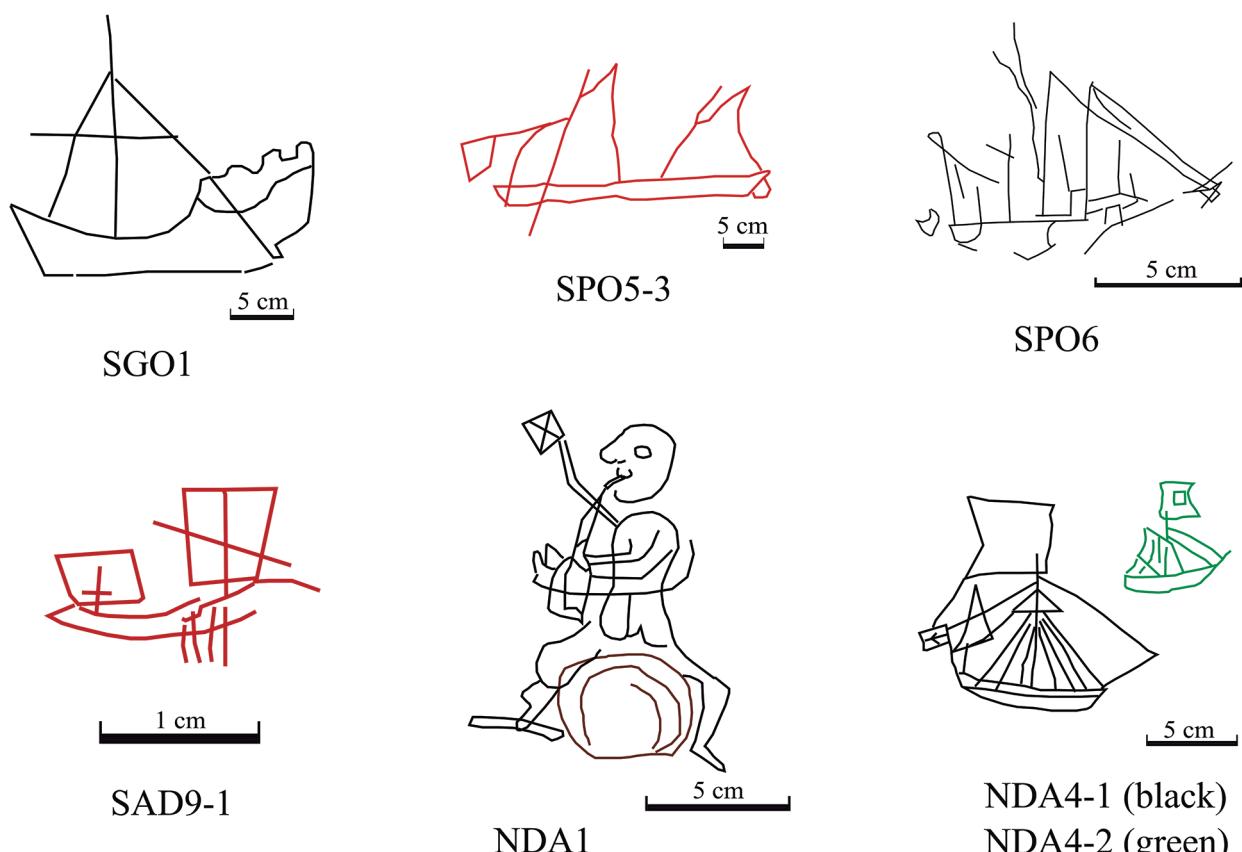
Finally, we will recount the story behind NDA5. On 20 September 1588, the galleon San Marcos sank off the coast of Ireland. There were 140 sailors on board, but only four of them managed to reach the Irish coast. Once there, they were hanged by the English. The San Marcos belonged to the Portuguese contingent of the Spanish Armada and, like all the other ships involved, suffered from the inclement weather (Bonilla, 2018; Sorianio, 2016). Built in 1585, this galleon appears to have been seen moored in port, as evidenced by the pulley emerging from the bow. With a blade bow, figurehead and square sail, it had the typical 16th century galleon feature of a sloping bowsprit with a higher elevation.

The quarterdeck has also been outlined, though it does not resemble a castle. Interestingly, like other figures already depicted, a Latin cross has been drawn behind the stern, indicating that this is a votive offering. This suggests that either the entire representation or just the cross was engraved after the ship sank. It has square sails on all its masts, although it must also have had a square topsail and, below that, a mizzen sail. Although they are not depicted, it had cannons on the side decks and at the stern and on the quarterdeck.

We start with the standard classification by number of masts. Fourteen engravings of three-masted ships were found. Several of these graffiti feature more detailed representations. SPO1, for example, appears to have been engraved using perspective. In this engraving, the sails of the ship have been drawn with less depth. We have previously discussed SPO2-1, which allowed us to recognise a phenomenon known as St. Telmo's fire, as well as the level of detail in SAD2. The detail in these images is sometimes so striking that we can recognise types such as the fly-boat in SAD3-1. The attempt at realism in the depiction of the rigging in SAD7 and NDA2 is notable. NDA5, the galleon San Marcos, has already been mentioned as one of the highest quality representations.

The level of detail and the quality of the engraving are the two characteristics that allow us to identify the ships depicted in SPO3, SPO5-3 and NDA4-1 as having two masts. SPO3 depicts a ship without cannons. Due to the arrangement of its rigging for triangular sails and its two masts of the same size, it has been identified as a schooner. SPO5-3 depicts a red ship that has been identified as a xebec, a vessel with triangular sails that was widely used by Maghreb corsairs. These ships were used to raid as far as the British Isles and remained in use until the 19th century (Ekin, 2012; Rodríguez, 2002). Finally, we believe that the black ship in NDA4-1 is a ketch. It is related to the cutter shown in green in the same figure (NDA4-2), and the two vessels help to date the engraving. Ketch-type vessels are sailing ships with two masts: a main mast slightly forward of the bow and a small mizzen mast aft. Cutter-type vessels began to be used around the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were associated with a single-mast rig. Gaff sails, such as the one shown, and scandalous sails were commonly used. Designed for speed, they were the boats of choice for smuggling. They were so fast because of the type of hull they were built with: clinker-built hulls, like those used by the Vikings, are made by overlapping pieces of wood. Due to their speed and ability to navigate shallow waters respectively, cutters and ketches became indispensable in modern marinas (Fernández de Navarrete, 1831; Winfield and Stephen, 2015; Winfield, 2007) (Fig. 4).

In addition to the cutter in NDA4-2, we have SAD1, which was also mentioned above as an ex-voto, for representations of single-masted boats. The boats in SAD9-1 are particularly illustrative. Two small boats, one on top of the other, are visible using perspective.



**Fig.4.** Depiction of some 'unusual' graffiti found in churches in Oléron, France (image created by the authors). / Representación de algunos grafitis «inusuales» encontrados en iglesias de Oléron, Francia (imagen creada por los autores).

The oars are clearly visible on one of them and both have square sails. Merchants travelled by boat on the Garonne River. Some boats were used only for certain sections of the river; others were suitable for the estuary; and others were suitable for coastal voyages. The most common vessels found in our study area in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that could sail both the Garonne estuary and the Seudre were the *couraux* and the *coralines*. Although they were usually strictly river boats, they are known to have crossed to the island of Oléron. They usually had a pointed bow and stern with a flat hull bottom to prevent them from running aground, as well as a folding and tilting mast to pass under bridges. They also had a cargo mast and oars, as well as another oar in the form of a *forcola*, like those on Venetian *gondolas*, to propel themselves from the bottom. *Couraux* were often accompanied by *coralines* to facilitate loading and unloading, or to warn of tidal movements (Cocula, 1995; Joineau, 2017; Lerat, 1959; Minovez, 1999).

Another example of a single-masted vessel can be found in the Church of Saint Georges d'Oléron (SGO1). A boat has been engraved in stone, one metre above the floor, in the central nave of the church, on the side facing the Gospel. This engraving is unique compared to the others. Located in the oldest part of the church,

it must have survived the Wars of Religion (Le Roux, 2010; Lestringant, 2004), which left most churches in ruins (Flohic, 2002). It must have been created while the artist was seated, as it is located one metre above the current floor of the church. The design is simple and very similar to that found on a tomb in the portico of the church of *Santa María de Noia* (La Coruña). It may depict a ship at sea, as the keel is straight as if in the water. It has a distinct stern and a slightly raised bow with a straight cutwater. A single mast supports a yard; it is unclear what type of sail it was, though in Noia it is suggested that it may have been square (Ruiz de la Peña, 2014). The ship depicted also bears a strong resemblance to the vessels that regularly sailed the seas between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Casado refers to these as *cocas* or *naos*, which were designed to be propelled by the wind (Casado, 2013; Guerrero, 1949).

Only one depiction of a four-masted ship has been found. SPO6 most likely depicts a brigantine-schooner or *barquentine*. The engraving reveals a wide, rounded hull. The typical hull of a *barquentine* is shown, with a steel hull and a slightly flying stern that narrows to the rudder. The ship has four masts: a foremast, a mizzen-mast, a mainmast and a fore-and-aft mast. Judging by the arrangement of the rigging, the two forward masts

appear to have a combination of square and triangular sails. Judging by the arrangement of the yards, the rear sails must be gaff and square sails.

Finally, among the curious graffiti, NDA1 stands out. This shows an anthropomorphic figure sitting with his legs spread apart on a log or barrel. One of his legs appears to be wooden. The artist has attempted to draw a side view, so the arms are depicted in an awkward pose. The musician appears to be forcing a mouthpiece into his mouth. His arms are reaching towards the instrument, and his fingers are surrounding it. We believe he is playing the bagpipes, and what is protruding behind him is the drone. The bell is represented by a square shape with a cross through it. It is unclear whether this is simply the bell or an image of a flag. If the latter were the case, he might be a Scottish sailor who decorated his bagpipe with an image of his country's flag instead of tassels. This flag was already in use in the modern period (Bechhofer and McCrone, 2013; Fargo and Scott, 2021; MacLean, 2021).

#### 4. DISCUSSION: THE INTENTION, LOCATIONS AND TIMING OF MARINE GRAFFITI

Due to the wide range of thoughts and life choices that can lead someone to create graffiti, it is difficult to provide a single answer to all the questions that will be raised in the following sections.

When investigating maritime graffiti, a number of questions need to be asked. To better understand its meaning, we must try to answer the questions: how, who, where, when, why, and what is its purpose?

With regard to how they were made, it has already been mentioned that all but two were created using a cutting tool, such as a knife. SPO5-1, in particular, must have been made with a tool with a thicker tip for engraving, as was the case with the *barquentine* in SPO6, which was made with charcoal.

Although the representations are idealised (Ruiz de la Peña, 2014), it is striking that they always ensure the engraving has a characteristic that recalls the original (Cooper *et al.*, 2015). Some elements are consistently present in the graffiti we have observed. For instance, the number of masts and yards is always shown, and if not the total number of yards, then at least their shape is depicted. If a boat has oars, these are depicted, as in SAD9-1. If it is a galleon, the quarterdeck is always depicted, and often the figurehead too, as in NDA5. They do not depict them in detail, but they do highlight their existence, even if only with a line, as in SAD4. The way in which they depict the flatness of the decks of ships of the line is highly representative, as this was a notable difference from other vessels.

All of this leads us to believe that, although they are idealised engravings, they take certain details into account that make it possible to recognise the type of vessel, or even the name of the ship, in many cases. An

example of this is the galleon San Marcos in NDA5. The intention to identify the ship in question may suggest that a specific message is being conveyed. This would be linked to the motivation behind the graffiti.

We believe that the people who carved the graffiti featured in this article deliberately sought out sacred places. In these churches, they sought out the narthex, which is always located beneath the bell tower. This location has great symbolic significance due to the sound of the bells and the stairways of the towers rising towards the sky. These bell towers would have served the same purpose as the *lanternes des morts*, acting as a beacon for souls lost at sea, whose bodies rest in the ocean (Treffort, 2001).

Although the churches were open to the public, not everyone could afford the expense of commissioning a painting, a crown for the Virgin Mary or a model ship to hang from the ceiling (Gertwagen, 2006; Coughlin, 2020). Nevertheless, the motivations and fears that drove people to send these messages were the same for all (Baader, 2016; Tingle, 2010). Therefore, having analysed all the evidence, we believe that the engravings studied here were made by people with links to the sea. In other words, sailors and their families, who were accustomed to the fears associated with life at sea (Cooper *et al.*, 2015; Davis, 2008).

Clearly, whenever a representation is created, it conveys a message that can be understood by those who view it within the same context and period. They would have recognised the ships being depicted and understood the reasons behind it. For example, they would have recognised the ship that was struck by lightning and sank as a result, as shown in SPO2-1 (Baader, 2016). Given their location in places of worship, we believe that the vast majority of cases are representations of exvotos. At the Museum of the Island of Oléron in Saint-Pierre d'Oléron, next to a model of a ship that has lost its original location, there is an explanation of what a sailor's votive offering is on the island: *Ex-voto: objet que l'on place dans un lieu sacré (église, chapelle...) en accomplissement d'un voeu ou d'une grâce obtenue*. There are therefore several motivations for making offerings, and these are the ones we believe to be the most likely.

- Offer it as a token of gratitude for having arrived safely from a journey.
- Before setting off on a journey, to request protection and assistance.
- After a shipwreck, as a tribute to and prayer for the souls of those who perished at sea.
- During the journey, by family members, so that their god will protect the ship at sea.

We believe these are the reasons that prompted the population to make votive offerings in the form of graffiti inside churches. There must also have been another reason for the more informal engravings, such as

idleness or a desire to prove that someone had been there. NDA1 is a good example of this, as it was found in the tower leading up to the church of La Château. We believe that this type of representation has no religious or symbolic value, unless the gentleman in NDA1 also ended up sinking into the sea, which is difficult to ascertain. Likewise, at the top of the aforementioned church's bell tower, there are signatures of people who have either passed by or, perhaps, were on board a ship (this is not easy to ascertain). Two of the signatures are those of Joseph Gauché in 1760, and of five men from Reims who belonged to the 106e Régiment d'Infanterie (106e RI), also known as the Iron Regiment (Régiment de Fer) (Andolenko, 1969). These men landed on the island of Oléron on 1 May 1945.

The engravings on the bell tower of Le Château church make us wonder when these engravings were made. The documentation has always been clear that the churches were almost completely destroyed after the Wars of Religion (Flohic, 2002; Le Roux, 2010; Lestringant, 2004). They all had to be rebuilt and repaired in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the tower that rose up to the bell tower of the church of Le Château did survive. The walls of the church of Saint Georges, in its oldest nave, remained standing in part, which is why some medieval graffiti is still visible. We believe that what has been said about the tower of the church of Le Château has been misinterpreted until now. Although it was inaugurated following various works and repairs in 1883, there is no mention of it collapsing or being demolished; rather, it is stated that there had always been a 'blind elevation with a bell tower' (Flohic, 2002). In other words, it was a spiral staircase that ended in a bell tower, bearing witness to the island's history since the time of the San Marcos galleon, which sank in 1588.

Based on Table 2, the following statements can be made, and these should be considered in conjunction with each other. Firstly, most of the engravings depict large ships. There are 6 representations of single-masted, 3 of two-masts and 14 of ships with more than two masts. Ships with one or two masts are more difficult to date precisely, as types derived from them are still in use today (Cocula, 1995; Joineau, 2017; Lerat, 1959; Minovez, 1999). However, ships with more than three masts can be dated more accurately, as many of them fell out of use at a specific time. It is clear that they were all built during the Modern Age, with the predominant types dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which coincides with the Age of Sail (Bolster, 2012; Rediker, 2015; Volo & Volo, 2001; Winfield, 2007).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Ship graffiti have never been linked to a single religious belief and have occurred globally. The European and Mediterranean worlds are the most extensively studied. Nevertheless, we have no doubt that many more engravings are yet to be discovered.

This collection showcases 24 pieces of graffiti created by individuals who depicted what they saw, their surroundings, and the things that aroused their curiosity and fears. These representations remind us of the finite nature of human existence and the importance of seeking solace from our fears in the sacred. Many traditions are linked to the sea in an attempt to overcome the fear it inspires due to the countless deaths it has caused (Tingle, 2010). Shipwrecks and loss of life at sea were so common throughout history that they gave rise to a multitude of similar rituals around the world (Gambin, 2014). However, the rituals discussed here were probably practised by people who could not afford to spend money on honouring their loved ones, who, on the other hand, needed protection. The pieces served as symbols for those who remained behind and as messages to deities they hoped would safeguard them. However, the message was often not intended for people on land. It was a prayer for help, comfort, relief and eternal gratitude, and ultimately a search for divine protection.

The ships depicted were present on the usual trade routes in this part of the Atlantic (Ferreira, 1981). Galleons, ships of the line and brigantines dominate these images and must have dominated the ocean in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries until cutters and ketches appeared at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These were mixed with other ships more commonly associated with trade and transport, such as *couraux*, *coralines* and *filandières*, which were also integral to the daily lives of the Oleronese people.

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