CHAPTER SEVEN

BOAT AND BOAT HOUSE. THE CONCEPTIONAL ORIGINS OF CLINKER BOATS AND BOAT-SHAPED HALLS OF THE FOURTH TO ELEVENTH CENTURIES IN SCANDINAVIA

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1. The boat. The product of an artisan or an architect?

During the greater part of the history of mankind, ships and boats were created by ‘simple craftsmen’ who were artists in their field, capable of constructing complex three-dimensional hulls of a high visual and functional quality. These early boat and ship builders and master shipwrights were the true creators of most of the basic boat shapes known to us today. The naval architects would work from moulds or drawings to define or modify the final three-dimensional hull form and plan the building process accordingly. Their ability to do so was used as a criterion to distinguish them from the craftsmen building ships in their ‘primitive’ ways, without using drawings.

Modern man is inclined to interpret the original construction process for large buildings and other complex structures of the past in terms of present-day architects and engineers, considering calculations, drawings and moulds a prerequisite for the original builders. However, for several complex structures of the past this was evidently not the case. A good example is the construction of ships during the Renaissance, built on the basis of the Dutch shell-first method using clamps as vital elements in creating the desired result, such as the Swedish man-of-war *Vasa* and several large Dutch East Indiamen. They were built without any drawings at all. Such a process was indeed ‘the art of shipbuilding’ since it involved the trained eye of the ship builder and a sculptural talent for shapes, symmetry and individual curves that resulted in a complex and fully-functional hull form. At a later stage, this ‘art’ term has been disregarded in favour of the more academic naval architectural approach to the construction of ships.

Therefore, I suggest going further back in the history of boat and ship building in an attempt to identify the initial shape-creating processes forming the conceptional origin of some traditional boat types.
The Nordic boat and its ‘standardised’ shape

The layout and shape of boats vary strongly in different parts of the world as a result of several individual factors. There is rich variation in the way boats are built, in their basic concepts as well as in their shapes, proportions and structural details.

Among the large number of finds of boats and ships from Northern Europe, dating to the 3rd to 13th centuries, one group stands out as a class of its own: the double-ended, clinker-built vessels with overlapped plank strakes fastened to a gently curved keel, stem and stern. These vessels primarily come from Scandinavia and the coastal areas of the Baltic and North Seas and they are members of what is commonly called the ‘clinker-built Nordic boat type’.

These boats, including Viking ships, comprise a group of complex three-dimensional structures that have been built on a well-defined basic concept, applied with creativity to form a multiplicity of shapes and sizes of vessels, guided by the boat builder’s ability to combine functional requirements with aesthetic qualities—the artisan working without any involvement of an external architect.

Boats of this basic design built over a millennium ago, such as those found with the Gokstad ship of c. A.D. 900 from eastern Norway, are strikingly identical to a 12th-century boat found in Denmark and to the oselver boats being built today on the basis of living traditions in western Norway (Fig. 7.1). They share identical basic features, having a double-pointed, elegant shape with rising lines towards the curved stems, as well as slender frames and beams which are symmetrical to the centre plane and placed with a regular, wide spacing along the length of the hull [3].

To Scandinavians this set of features defines what is considered a ‘proper boat shape’ for a traditional boat. This is not strange, since the general pattern of the Nordic clinker-built boat during the centuries has been used in the construction of a wide range of shapes and sizes of vessels. For more than a millennium, clinker-built ships and boats could meet all the requirements for relatively safe transportation of warriors, merchants or emigrants on their voyages in the stormy North Sea and North Atlantic as well as for communication in home waters and on the large European rivers.