Throughout recorded history, warships have been used as tools of martial strength, and as symbols of political power. Roman quinqueremes (large galleys consisting of three banks of oars) were constructed to defeat the Carthaginians, but their size and design, similar to many early modern successors, also served to empower and promote their owners. Warships were, and to some extent continue to be, decorated as well as represented in both elite and popular forms to convey royal, state, mercantile and, in some instances, personal superiority. Through their decoration and representation, warships could serve as a deterrent from opposing threats and competition, even if in reality they had only a limited operational use. The name of a ship, its size, colour scheme, painted imagery, carvings and artillery, as well as its representation in print, artwork, and on other mediums, could all assist in establishing and strengthening the ideological prominence of its owner.

During the early modern period, and particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the emergence of state-owned navies along with the strengthening and revitalization of monarchies, especially in northern Europe, produced an environment whereby monarchs sought to impress through both the military and cultural significance of their warships. Indeed in many regards, monarchs’ martial responsibilities became engrained within a wider national and international cultural theatre: naval warfare was integrated into royal identity. States, especially those governed by monarchies whose egos and beliefs of their supremacy encouraged naval developments, competed not only on the battlefield but also, through warship design, to boast of the largest or most attractive vessel. Warships could be a powerful deterrent with a clear message: the monarch with the greatest warship must be a powerful and sophisticated ruler; by threatening them, the belligerent could face the wrath of such a weapon. With this in mind, a warship did not need to be the most successful in combat. It only needed to suggest that it could be, and an intimidating exterior conveyed this message. Warships’ designs and decoration were products of this competition.
Not only were warships developed because of the competitive nature of the international theatre, they were also products of transnationalism, having been influenced by foreign designs, and in some cases constructed with guidance from non-nationals. The majority of the most celebrated warships of the period were not constructed using only domestic expertise, but instead rulers employed foreign shipwrights and carvers. In England, Henry VIII employed Venetian shipwrights during his construction scheme of the late 1530s and 1540s, which witnessed the development of a number of warships including galley hybrids such as the *Galley Subtle* and *Antelope*. His daughter, Elizabeth I, benefitted from the employment of the Venetian shipwright Augustino Levello to maintain her three galleys during the opening years of her reign. In seventeenth-century Sweden, Dutch shipwrights led the famed *Vasa*’s construction, while Germans coordinated its carvings. It is clear that the escalating importance applied to warship decoration was the product of both international competition and influence.

Researching warship decoration has a number of obstacles. Detailed written accounts of vessels’ appearance are rare, and when available, the creative dramatists and humanists commissioned to design the warship often write them. These works could be state sponsored and were designed to promote only the leading ships of the fleet, which served as flagships and represented the Crown. Examples of such material include Thomas Heywood’s *A True Description of his Majesties Royall and most Stately Ship called the Soeveraign of the Seas* published in 1638 and Juan de Mal Lara’s *Sa Descripción de la Galera Real del Sermo. S[eigneu]r. D[on]. Juan de Austria*, produced between 1568 and 1571. Rarely do first-hand descriptions of warships produced by courtiers, ambassadors, and, in some cases, members of the wider populace provide detailed comments, but instead only make brief reference to size and initial impression, leaving much to the imagination. Diarists such as the London merchant Henry Machyn recorded the launch of warships such as the *Elizabeth Jonas* in July 1559, yet were more likely to comment on the spectacle of ‘shutyng of gunes’, or on the presence of well-known courtiers at the launching ceremony, rather than detailing ship appearance. Perhaps of greater value are those sources that provide visual stimulus, including paintings. Warships were often the focus of works of arts, especially during the Dutch Golden Age, but they were also represented in print, etchings, sketches, and drawings, as well as medals, carvings, coinage, and, of particular value, ship models. However, the verisimilitude of these visual sources is questionable, since many of them were designed to promote royal, state, or regional power, compromising their accuracy. A key example of these processes is *The Embarkation of Henry VIII at Dover* completed in the early 1540s. In this painting, the Tudor fleet is depicted as being uniform in size and design when, in reality, this was not the case because the majority would have been significantly smaller. Artists, especially during the sixteenth century when state-owned warships were in their infancy, both in terms of quantity and operability, prioritized promoting state grandeur, not realism. Consequently, the representation and reality of a warship’s military strength were not necessarily balanced when bearing in mind that these representations, both in words and images, have promotional aims.
This is also apparent in work commissioned to celebrate the English victory against the Armada of 1588, such as *The Armada Portrait* and *English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588* (see Figure 13.1), with both paintings commissioned shortly after the battle. The highly detailed, gilded, and frivolous design of the warships depicted are most likely intended to immortalize the event, which in reality was far less epic, divine, or decisive than the sources portray. Indeed, comparing *English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588* with another painting, *Elizabeth I and the Spanish Armada*, shows significant differences in decoration, including an almost total absence of gilding in the latter, suggesting that art celebrating the event prioritized political power and elitism over historical accuracy. It is therefore extremely difficult to accurately determine the appearance of more than a handful of warships until as late as the mid-seventeenth century, when the artistic family, the Van de Veldes, gained patronage in England and the Netherlands for their maritime art. Besides, when detailed and authenticated evidence of ships’ appearances is available, it needs to be acknowledged that our understanding of decoration is often a snapshot, most often based on a ship’s initial launch. The gilding of warships might have impressed spectators at first, and it was this impression that was most frequently documented and therefore survives in the historical record, but decoration was of course perishable and relatively easily altered. For example, Charles I’s *Sovereign of the Seas* was lauded for its beauty when

![Figure 13.1: English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588, unknown artist. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (BHC0262). Wikimedia Commons.](image-url)
launched, and yet its gilded carvings were described as ‘gingerbread’ both because of their golden appearance and also because they are said to have regularly snapped off when placed in dock.10

This chapter will explore early modern European warship design and decoration and relate it to wider political, cultural, and international trends. It will focus on state flagships and other prominent warships within European fleets, although where relevant, small and medium craft will be considered. The decision to concentrate predominately on larger, state-owned vessels has been made for two reasons. First, they were costly endeavours designed both for military gain and to make political and ideological statements. Second, as the principal warships within navies, more attention was given to them in contemporary records. Smaller vessels were most likely to be selected for sea patrols and other forms of service because they cost less to operate and maintain, but the largest warships in the fleet continued to hold power, even when sitting in dock, by representing the Crown and state.

By employing a loosely chronological structure, first focusing on the period before 1600 and subsequently the period up until 1800, I argue that although the two periods marked complementary developments in visual design, there was also important change. The earlier period was characterized by the emergence of warships as a form of sophisticated elite culture, while the latter refined it further by using more extravagant forms of baroque design from northern Europe. The latter period built on previously developed representational devices and mediums. Thus, the years prior to 1600 can be described as an initial developmental phase of warship decoration, whereas the period 1600–1800 focused on consolidation and enhancement, as warships became an art form. In broad terms, between 1400 and 1800, warships were increasingly designed to reflect historical, religious, and political ideals, before refining and becoming more reserved in their appearance during the long eighteenth century. Their design as tableaux of identity meant that, for some warships, iconography was prioritized over military function. They were symbols of state rather than weapons of state.

Pre-1600 designs

When maritime historians discuss ship decoration in relation to cultural and political values, we usually turn our attention to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the so-called ‘Golden Age of European Sail’ – when warships such as the Sovereign of the Seas, Vasa, and Louis XIV’s la Réale traversed the seas. Yet focusing only on this time overlooks similarities both before and after; the construction and use of warships as statements of political power long predates the Golden Age.

Legendary vessels held historical and mythological significance in Europe and beyond. Biblical accounts of Noah’s voyage, and legendary stories of Jason and the Argonauts, for instance, told of great ships that accomplished impressive maritime feats. These tales inspired wealthy and powerful leaders and states into producing great vessels that could mirror Argo’s renowned career. Of course, it was extremely unlikely that vessels would actually succeed in maritime feats that paralleled those of Jason and the Argonauts, but this did not mean that a vessel could not be constructed to present itself as worthy of such exploits. As well as originating from legendary acts at sea, other
sources of secular and religious authority influenced warships’ symbolic power. In England, Henry V built a strong fleet during his short reign, including four great ships which, according to Ian Friel, were ‘built to impress as well as fight’. In size, name, and design the vessels featured many of the characteristics that continued to shape warships in the nineteenth century. The *Grace Dieu*, *Holy Ghost*, *Jesus*, and *Trinity Royal* were all named to recognize Henry’s religious convictions while expressing his divinely blessed royal authority. They were painted in heraldic colours, and included the king’s arms, religious symbols, patron saints, and other heraldic devices in the form of lions and leopards. Through these devices, the ships combined and promoted the king’s pious and royal qualities.

This tradition continued into the sixteenth century, when the most famous European carracks, caravels, and galleons were often large, imposing, and seemingly impressive, but impractical at sea. For the aspiring European state, it seemed compulsory to possess a large trophy ship: Henry VIII had the *Henri Grace à Dieu* (also known as *Great Harry*), James IV owned the *Great Michael*, Francis I commissioned the construction of *la Grande Française*, the Knights of Malta had the *Santa Anna*, and the Portuguese owned the *São João*. Yet all these vessels had somewhat unsuccessful careers at sea consisting of elongated periods of time being mothballed, or being damaged by storms, and thereby requiring extensive and costly repairs. In the *Great Michael’s* case, the warship was sold to France because of maintenance expenses after James IV’s death at Flodden in 1513. Aside from being a large financial strain on state revenue, their size and bulky fore and aft castles hindered their manoeuvrability, which led to far smaller and more operable vessels generally being employed for service instead. These colossal weapons’ greatest service to their owners was in fostering prestige rather than having actual military function.

Their size was a novelty that impressed. Holy Roman Emperor Charles V commented favourably on Henry’s warships when visiting England in May-June 1522, and was optimistic that with England’s sea power, a combined Anglo-Spanish alliance would easily defeat the forces of Francis I. It was typical of these vessels for their fore or aft castles to comprise of two or, in some cases, three decks, which caused significant complications when sailing, especially in bad weather. Unsurprisingly, warships such as the *Henri Grace à Dieu* were easy targets for storms; in June 1522, heavy wind severely damaged Henry VIII’s flagship in the Channel, which caused it to remain inactive in repair at Northfleet until as late as 1525, while its bowsprit, main topmast, and rigging were changed. Francis I’s great warship *la Grande Française* had a similar, yet more devastating history. Constructed in direct competition with the English ship, *la Grande Française* could reportedly hold up to 2,000 men and featured both a windmill and tennis court, yet when launched in 1520 it failed to leave Le Havre harbour because of the ship’s heavy draught in shallow depths. Despite numerous attempts, the vessel remained at Le Havre without sailing on the open sea until 1533, when it was hit by a storm, likely struck by lightning, and later destroyed. By the early sixteenth century, Renaissance monarchs were prioritizing the size of prestige warships over their functional use as sailing ships, at great financial and material cost.

In this period, France, England, and Scotland were closely connected both geographically and politically because of the Franco-Scottish Auld Alliance. As a result,
competition in warship construction between the three powers was long established and almost naturalized, with other European countries not far behind. The Swedish *Elefant* was completed in Stockholm in 1534 and was nicknamed the Great Carvel because of its size. Its aft castle rose 54 feet above water. Meanwhile, its successor, *Mars* was comparable to the *Henri Grace à Dieu* at 1,500 tons, although in this instance, the limitations of ship design were demonstrated in May 1564 when the ship suffered a damaged rudder during an encounter against an allied Danish/Lubeckian fleet, causing it to be an easy target to cannon fire and its eventual sinking.

It was not only with the round ships of northern Europe that the powerful and wealthy experimented with size. In the Mediterranean, Venetian galleys and galleasses were commissioned to display superiority and power in a theatre that also witnessed elitist rivalry. During the 1520s, the Venetian Republic constructed a quinquereme based upon classical manuscripts, which at 74 metres in length was one of the largest wooden ships ever to be constructed. Yet, similar to its northern counterparts, it was too unwieldy to be useful in combat. This did not deter Venetian ingenuity: such attempts inspired others to create large, manoeuvrable, and combat-engineered ships which led to the design of the galleass around a decade later. The galleass (such as pictured in the foreground of Figure 13.1) was longer than most galleys but was propelled through use of both oar and sail. Its design influenced English ship construction, with the *Antelope* and *Tiger* being two examples of a number of forms of galleasses produced in England during the 1540s. Mediterranean galleasses, like galleys, could serve as a clear representation of wealth, power, and identity. On their poop deck their captains, owners, and patrons could sit surrounded by gilded works, often under a portico, which would appear both theatrical and impressive.

One of the most heavily decorated Mediterranean galleys was the Spanish *la Galera Real* constructed in 1568–9 on the orders of Philip II of Spain. The galley was built for the king’s younger brother Don John of Austria to lead the Holy League against the might of the Ottoman Empire. *La Galera Real* led the Christian war effort at Lepanto and its decoration was intended to complement a vessel with these divine and majestic responsibilities. It was luxuriously ornamented and painted in the red and gold colours of Spain. Its transom and wider poop were elaborately carved with various embellishments designed to evoke the strength of the Catholic Church as well as showing humanist influences. Among a number of decorations celebrating Philip II’s messianic ambitions, scenes of Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece were included, an icon depicted as a tribute to Philip II’s Catholic chivalric order, the Knights of the Golden Fleece, of which his brother was also made a member in July 1559. For Sylvène Édouard, the ship’s design ‘was a prolepsis of the events to come. By seeing the beauty of the vessel it encouraged the Holy League towards victory’. It was a clear piece of both political and religious propaganda.

Such a high level of decoration was the exception rather than the norm. For Spanish and other Mediterranean galleys and galleons, including those of France, portraits on the transom were normally connected with the vessel’s name be it a protecting saint, hero, animal, or some other virtue related to the country of origin. For sixteenth-century Spain, with Charles V and Philip II as defenders of the Catholic faith, this usually related to religion, typically with a saint represented. Surrounding
this portrait were gilded works, although the extent of their use varied and were not as consistent as those portrayed in *English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588* (Figure 13.1). Indeed, evidence suggests that the majority of Spanish galleons had very little decoration or colour. It was not even the case that the upperworks were always painted with national or regional colours. Galleons were designed to sail across long distances throughout the wealthy Spanish Empire, not to sit in dock, which is likely why their decoration was often minimalist.

Nevertheless, one device, the figurehead, often featured on a galley, and it was gradually introduced to galleons in the sixteenth century. Although the origins of the figurehead cannot be accurately dated, they were used in classical antiquity as a ramming device on oared warships. Galleys continued to use them in this way into the sixteenth century, and their carving, typically into some sort of beast, normally a dragon, was merely to make more aesthetically pleasing something that was essentially a weapon. During the late-medieval and early modern period this changed, when ramming techniques slowly ceased and were replaced by heavy ordnance onboard vessels. Yet despite this, figureheads increased in popularity as a decorative device, even on sailing vessels. By the late sixteenth century, both state and private ships commonly sported figureheads relating to the nation and/or the ship’s name. Ornate carvings and gildings featured, designed to embody a ship, making it a piece of high-end material culture. Galleys, as well as large sailing warships became prestigious and elite signifiers, and the figurehead played an important part in establishing this image as the period progressed.

*The Anthony Roll*, an inventory of Henry VIII’s navy produced in 1546, includes illustrations of each of the king’s warships and shows evidence of a slow introduction of figureheads during the sixteenth century. Of the 58 warships depicted, only two include a figurehead (the *Unicorn* and *Salamander*, with their devices being a representation of their names) while the *Mary Rose* also displayed a badge of the Tudor Rose at the bow. Both the *Unicorn* and *Salamander* were prizes captured from Scotland (although constructed in France) in 1544; clearly figureheads, as a decorative device, were not commonplace on sailing vessels, such as cogs and carracks at that time. In part, the absence of figureheads on the majority of warships was because most did not feature an obvious protruding platform at the prow of the vessel (a beakhead), thereby preventing the integration of figureheads because there was no obvious space to attach them. Consequently, as the century progressed, figureheads were increasingly integrated on ships which included beakheads, such as galleons, by being placed underneath the fore end of the beakhead. As a result, by the end of the century, lions and leopards were increasingly employed as figureheads on Elizabethan warships. England was not alone in this preference; throughout Europe, from Sweden to Spain, the lion became a popular heraldic figurehead.

The importance of heavy artillery to early modern design and prestige is apparent in *The Anthony Roll* where, on the exterior of the ships illustrated, large pieces of ordnance protrude from almost every crevice possible (see Figure 13.2). Images such as these are inaccurate, since before the seventeenth century, warships rarely had more than one gun deck below deck; as exemplified by guns being found on the *Mary Rose*’s main, upper, and castle decks. It was rare to have more than eight gun ports
on a single side of a deck during this transitional phase when cannon was becoming a central component of naval warfare. Even when a warship was not mothballed, a large amount of artillery on board a warship during the mid-sixteenth century was unlikely to be an advantage in battle. Artillery could weigh the vessel down, making it even more cumbersome and this could lead to dire consequence, as when the Mary Rose sank in July 1545. Advances in shipbuilding and tactical operation meant sixteenth-century warships struggled to hold and effectively utilize the mass of guns they carried.29 The point here is that early sixteenth-century warships were not tailored to holding heavy guns. They had limited space, and large cannon were heavy, bulky, and difficult to operate and support. Consequently, although a warship could be recorded with a lot of firepower, this did not necessarily equate to greater naval strength; less could be more. When French galleys wreaked havoc on the English fleet during the war of 1512–14, sinking several English ships in the English Channel, it was not because they were overloaded with ordnance, but because they skilfully used it by placing a heavy gun, known as the basilisk, at the prow of the vessel.30

Overpowering warships with artillery during the mid-sixteenth century held more importance as a deterrent than for actual combat. The appearance of military strength could be of greater significance than actual military effectiveness, which more often than not was limited for the northern European sailing warship.31 A large array of cannon could denote military power, even if their effectiveness was limited in reality. Heavy artillery therefore became an essential component of a warship’s appearance, decoration, and representation for much of the sixteenth century. The

Figure 13.2  The Peter (Pomegranate) from the Anthony Roll of Henry VIII’s Navy, 1546. Wikimedia Commons.
illustrations of *The Anthony Roll* should be considered in this context. Heavy ordnance designed to impress and deter did not feature as a pioneering catalyst for naval warfare until the late sixteenth or even seventeenth centuries.

**Post-1600 design**

During the first half of the seventeenth century, the construction of large warships for prestige was increasingly prevalent, while their effectiveness as weapons of war was of secondary importance, as they remained restricted by size and design. When Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden’s *Vasa* foundered in Stockholm harbour during its first maiden voyage in August 1628, the cause was poor structural integrity, since its large and slim hull resulted in it being top heavy. Being heavily armed with bespoke cast-bronze cannon, and lavishly decorated, the vessel was unstable. But the ship was an important status piece. When the Swedish king ordered its speedy launch to Poland, where he was engaged in war, his shipwrights obeyed his order despite seemingly being aware of the design problems. This is an indication of the relationship between monarch and warship. Ships were not only weapons, but also symbols of the Crown that needed to be both preserved and resolute. The hasty launch of *Vasa* was necessary because it was a representation of the Crown at a time when the kingdom’s military forces were being tested.

*Vasa*’s decorative carvings reflect the desire to promote and enhance the image of the Crown at a time when it was being verified by war in Poland. Along with the various motifs of beasts, sea creatures, and gods that referred to stories from antiquity and celebrated the current monarch, *Vasa*’s figurehead also made a clear and direct political statement. Along the beakhead, individual carvings of each Roman emperor were displayed in chronological order of reign, with the exception of Augustus. In

![Figure 13.3 Beakhead and figurehead of Stockholm’s Vasa (Vasamuseet). Author’s collection.](image_url)
place of Augustus, *Vasa* used a rampant lion as its figurehead, a symbol of the Vasa royal family. With this design feature, Gustavus Adolphus was simultaneously replacing and representing Augustus as the next in line to the great empire. He was Augustus reborn, which was particularly appropriate since their names were anagrams of each other.

Gustavus Adolphus’ contemporaries expressed similar ideas, when the image of monarchy was being transformed and strengthened. In 1604, Christian IV of Denmark commissioned *Tre Kroner*, an 80-gun vessel. Similar to *Vasa*, *Tre Kroner* was heavy with a deep draught and was consequently difficult to manoeuvre. Yet this did not prevent spectators from being highly impressed by the beauty of the warship, thus fulfilling its most important strategic function. *Tre Kroner* transported Christian IV to visit his daughter and son-in-law in England in 1606 when a large English audience commented favourably on the gilded carvings that adorned the warship. Indeed, like other contemporary prestigious vessels such as Charles I’s *Sovereign of the Seas* and Louis XIII’s *la Couronne*, *Tre Kroner* remained in dock for most of its career. Such warships were not only hard to operate because of design flaws and heavy ordnance, but were also expensive to equip and crew. Nevertheless, even if these warships were rarely put to sea, when they were employed for service, usually for diplomatic events such as in 1606, the impression that they provided internationally could serve to justify their continuation as symbols of power.

Although large warships continued to be constructed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their design and decorative style changed. Baroque design transformed warship decoration over time as it became less concerned with religion as the basis of identity and power, and instead prioritized national sentiment, history, and culture as a method of justifying rule. The Protestant nations that became major maritime powers in this period discarded religious saints as protectors of their nation and company, replacing them with secular defenders, honouring the monarchy and great nobles of the realm. This was something that did occur in the earlier period, but from 1600 it became far more pronounced, especially in northern Europe where the Protestant Reformation was most established.

Yet this development was neither universal nor synchronized across Europe. Understandably, for Catholic Europe, warships continued to be named and decorated to honour religious saints, while using them as protectors of ships, and this endured into the mid-seventeenth century, with local patron saints taking prominence, such as Saint Denis and Saint Jeanne in France, and San Juan Baptista and San Ambrosio in Spain. Yet even in these countries, warships were increasingly named in connection to nationalist traits that were associated more with the realm than Rome. *La Rèale* was the name given to the lead galley of the French Mediterranean squadrons from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, while *la Couronne* and *le Souverain* served its Atlantic fleet. Meanwhile in England, with the exception of patron saints, no English warship was named after a saint apart from *Saint Michael*, constructed in 1669, although this was likely agreed on with the understanding that Saint Michael was not canonized but an archangel. The naming of warships was therefore highly relevant to domestic and international politics; in no case is this more apparent than with the *Sovereign of the Seas*, which Charles I named as an anti-Grotian statement. The warship’s name was a direct attack on the free seas debate founded by the Dutch Lawyer Hugo
Grotius to justify Dutch maritime policy, which questioned English claims of ownership of its surrounding sea.

Regarding the naming of vessels, it is clear that as the period progressed warships became increasingly representative of secular identity. France is a good case study here, given its Catholic identity and connection to northern, Atlantic, and Mediterranean waters. It is unsurprising that during a period of increased centrality, heightened monarchical power, and strengthened identity, the names of French warships were revised. Martine Acerra records that between Louis XIV’s majority and the end of the ancient regime, just 15 vessels and two frigates bore the names of the virgin mother or of saints, out of a colossal 1,376 ships of the period, indicating an almost total absence of religious names in stark contrast to those adopted in the early seventeenth century. Instead, names were far more likely to reflect on mythology and the sea, the monarchy, war, or geography. Indeed, le Constant was the name of five vessels between 1670 and 1690 alone. This is comparable to the Netherlands. Eendracht (English: unity) was the name of two Maas admiralty flagships, in addition to at least ten further warships across the three Anglo-Dutch Wars.

Other examples that highlight the gradual shift away from religious identity for warships come from lasting cultural devices employed during the late Renaissance movement of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Neptune, Trident, l’Aigle, Lion, Tigre, and l’Hercule are all common names used in France during both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Religion slowly decreased in importance as a major influence on vessel design, even in Catholic Europe after 1648, while names of a more secular nature that were present in the sixteenth century continued to be employed during the later period. This occurred at the same time as new names were introduced, often in order to commemorate military victories in war such as Naseby and Newbury. This was a European-wide phenomenon; indeed, although England and the other Protestant nations were the first to ditch names with religious sentiments, many of the names of vessels introduced during the sixteenth century continued to be used for centuries after. Elizabethan titles such as Victory and Dreadnought are now more commonly associated with Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson and the twentieth century, respectively. In another example, Antelope was an English galleass originally constructed in 1546 and named after a device used on the coat of arms for the Lancasterians. The ship served several successive English monarchs, and the same name was still being used into the twentieth century. HMS Antelope was sunk by Argentine bombs in May 1982, and was the last of 12 different Royal Navy vessels to inherit the name.

The move toward the secularization of warships is particularly evident when considering ship decoration, such as figureheads. Whereas Gustavus Adolphus used a rampant lion for his figurehead on the Vasa to represent his ambitions and hereditary power, for the Sovereign of the Seas Charles I used Edgar, the legendary tenth-century English king of the seas who is said to have led a fleet of 3,600 ships. Edgar was selected in order to signify English claims over sovereignty of their surrounding waters during a period in which this was legally contested. Meanwhile, the figurehead of Louis XIII’s la Couronne comprised Hercules slaying the Hydra. Louis’ father’s defeat of the many-headed Catholic League regularly used this mythological image and
iconography. Likewise, one of Louis’ vessels used Jupiter riding an eagle for a figurehead, another common motif of the time in the king’s iconography. It was standard practice, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, for the leading warships of the fleet to be a direct embodiment of the Crown.

Yet, not all nations appear to have been subject to this change in visual design; for some, such as Spain, the sailing operability of a ship was of paramount importance because of the need to travel great distances to protect the Habsburg Empire. As a result, as the aesthetic design of northern European warships heightened under the influence of the baroque movement, Spain, in contrast, fell behind. Descriptions of six warships constructed by Martin de Arana for Philip IV in 1625–8 suggest that Spanish warships changed little from their late-sixteenth-century ancestors. There was, as Carla Rahn Phillips has suggested, ‘a more austere image than legends of Spanish galleons have led us to believe’. Decoration remained limited with little colour, with only red, as representative of Spain, being prominent on the upper works, which would have stood out against the black appearance of the hull. With this exception, the standard decoration of Spanish warships of the early seventeenth century would have been very different to the lavish designs produced in the north. Indeed, the only other decorative devices mentioned in Spanish inventories were gilded rampant lions placed as beakheads on all six vessels, in addition to each having a painted image on the transom associated with the name of the ship. The names of all six vessels allow us to not only envisage these paintings, but also to clearly understand the differences in warship decorations between Protestant and Catholic Europe. All six were connected to the Catholic faith: Nuestra Señora de Begoña, San Felipe, San Juan Baptista, Los Tres Reyes, San Sebastián, and Santiago. Although some decoration was clearly present, its extent was dissimilar to the frivolous designs present in the English and Swedish examples. This would suggest that Spanish priorities for their warships were focused on operable sailing abilities, which were needed to protect the varsity of the empire – function rather than impression was key.

There were, however, a number of parallels between Spanish and French design during the earlier seventeenth century, principally because Catholicism was a key identifying trait prior to the end of the Thirty Years War. In France and Spain, saints played an important role in warship decoration and embodiment. According to naval chaplain Georges Fournier, writing in 1643, in French design ‘the protecting saint of the ship is always painted on the stern’ along with an inscription that blessed the ship. The Catholicism of the two states was also reflected in the choice of warship names. While France had a warship named Saint Louis, Spanish warship names included San Mateo and San Maria among others; meanwhile the name les Trois Rois/Los Tres Reyes was regularly used in both kingdoms.

Northern Europe continued to lead developments in ship design during the remainder of the period, although the nation spearheading the introduction of these new design features shifted. As previously discussed, for most of the seventeenth century it was Protestant states, particularly the Dutch Republic, which steered developments in vessel construction and decoration. This certainly could be connected to new aspiring Protestant nations trying to establish or reshape their identity; warships became a tableau on which to express ideas of both a personal and collective character.
Dutch shipwrights were valued for their expertise across Europe and were regularly commissioned by foreign adversaries. During the 1620s and 1630s, 26 vessels were constructed in Holland for the French navy. In many respects, Dutch expertise in this field is understandable both before and after 1648, since the war for independence shaped the Netherlands’ identity as a maritime power. After the Peace of Münster, Dutch maritime affairs were divided among five admiralties: Amsterdam, Mass, Friesland, Noordeckwartier, and Zeeland. Each region was responsible for designing and decorating its own vessels, encouraging competition in design and artistry. Sculptors such as Artus Quellin, who designed the decorative baroque works for the Amsterdam City Hall, influenced the decoration of future ship ornamentation, permitting a shared identity and iconography on land and sea. This enabled Dutch warships to be characterized by both national and provincial connections. Broadly speaking, the majority of Dutch warships of this time used a painted lion as their figurehead, which also often featured on the upperworks of the transom. This was a symbol of unity, as the lion, a symbol used to represent a number of European states, was also the emblem of the Dutch Republic. Meanwhile, at a local level, warships were often painted and adorned with flags that reflected regional differences, as well as the admiralty they served. The foregrounding of vessels’ connections to regional identity was not unique to the Dutch Republic, with Spain, Italy, and France all including similar characteristics on their warships, especially during the earlier period. In these cases, national shipyards were scattered across the realm, enabling regional identity to play a bigger role in design alongside general national connections, in contrast to England where royal shipyards were mostly located near to London.

Despite having both national and provincial influences in their decoration, Dutch warships tended to have less decoration than those of the autocratic monarchies that developed in Europe during the seventeenth century. One example of such work is Brederode (launched 1646), flagship of Admiral Maarten Tromp and Admiral Michiel de Ruyter during the first Anglo-Dutch War. Van de Velde’s drawing of Brederode (Figure 13.4) shows a transitional vessel whose pomp was toned down in contrast to England’s Sovereign of the Seas and Sweden’s Vasa. Brederode, like many of its successors, had very little decoration to its upper-side works; instead reserving focus to its stern, which included Neptune, gilded lions, a windowed gallery and the crowned arms of William II, Prince of Orange. Although comparable to the Sovereign of the Seas in that it was easily the largest and most heavily armed vessel in the Dutch fleet, its decoration was more elegant and avoided the theatrics observed on the English ship and Vasa. Other examples of Dutch reductionism, secularization, and relations to both the national and local, include the Zeven Provincien launched 1665, and the Gouda of 1656, named after the town. Although with some richly gilded devices on its stern, Gouda’s centrepiece on its transom was a painting of its namesake town.

As the seventeenth century progressed, however, warship decoration and design gradually transformed in a process that would witness it becoming more standard-ized and reserved in comparison to the flagships produced during the first half of the century. After the Thirty Years’ War, and especially during the final quarter of the century, ship design became more uniform. By the 1640s, both England and France, and shortly after the Dutch, had introduced a ranked system to categorize
warships. Although the Cromwellian navy had accrued a colossal debt by 1660, the navy expanded and it was more efficiently maintained through its systematization. Decoration also reflected these changes. By the Restoration, Stuart warships conformed to the baroque styles introduced in the late sixteenth century, which were adopted as norm during the seventeenth century, which accentuated the importance of gilding while using darker colours in the background. The two mediums complemented each other by drawing attention to the gilded works. Decoration on the upper works of the vessel’s sides was reduced, with the carved motifs embedded on the Sovereign of the Seas and the stripped heraldic paint more accustomed to sixteenth-century decoration being replaced by a simple one-tone colour for the upper decks. Although frivolous display was reduced, both figurehead and transom décor were maintained, and by the end of the seventeenth century, stern decoration too was significantly condensed.

In part, French design was responsible for changes to the transom during the later period. Louis XIV’s desire for spectacular and pompous display was enacted on his warships, and gradually France became the leading nation in maritime design instead of the Netherlands. To some degree, this was a result of Louis’ ambitions and ideological image, but the Dutch were also responsible for the change, through refusing to adapt to new methods of design, instead preferring to emphasize Dutch tradition and identity. The emergence of French leadership in design was gradual, and during the earlier years of Louis’ majority France returned to purchasing Dutch-constructed warships. France commissioned ten Dutch warships in 1665, with their emblematic importance apparent in drawings such as Figure 13.5. Van de Velde’s drawing shows a highly embellished design intended to celebrate the power of the Crown, and its
appearance would have rivalled the European flagships developed during the 1620s and 1630s. Indeed, its taffarel at the centre of its transom bore the Crown’s arms and Royal Orders being supported by two angels, and it would therefore have been very similar to the stern’s centrepiece on Louis XIII’s la Couronne.57

The turning point for French innovation seems to have been in the following decade. It is not coincidental that the change occurred while France was at war with the Netherlands from 1672–8, when the inferiority of French warships compared with Dutch ones was starkly apparent. Indeed, imitating Dutch practice, Louis employed French artist and architect Charles Le Brun to be the chief decorator of his great fleet. As premier peinture for the king, Le Brun was responsible for decoration inside Louis’ palace at Versailles and the Louvre. Intrigued by English and Dutch warships, France’s northern rivals influenced Le Brun’s decision to reduce the number of carvings on French vessels in order to make them more operable.58 This change was most noticeable after the death of Jean de Baptiste Colbert in 1683, when Jean Bérain, Le Brun’s successor, was commissioned to continue Le Brun’s work by standardizing warships, focusing on their operability rather than decoration. Consequently, although some ornament was maintained to reflect the power of the Sun King, decoration of the transom was significantly overhauled. Whereas during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the stern of a warship served as a blank canvas that could be transformed for artistic appeal and propaganda, by the early eighteenth century this emphasis had been reduced. French warships became uniform, symmetrical, and minimalistic, and this quickly spread across Europe. No longer was the transom of

the ship adorned only with cultural motifs that reflected royal (or elite) power, but instead this feature was replaced with large panels and windows that were lighter and more efficient at sea.

It must be stated that as with any study that covers a large geographical area and time, there are exceptions to this analysis. Here, it is worth considering the emergence of Russia on the naval scene under Peter the Great, where ‘westernization’ of the country and navy is a clear indication of the international cultural influences that shaped warship decoration. This is despite the decoration and ideology that underpinned Russian warships not conforming to the wider European trends of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Peter’s famous ‘Grand Embassy’ visited the maritime powers of England, the Netherlands, and France in 1697–8, and during this time, Peter worked in foreign shipyards where he observed the precise and detailed art of ship decoration. Once back in Russia, and following the visit of English shipwrights John Deane and Joseph Nye in the autumn of 1698, Peter ordered the construction of the prestigious *Predestinatsiia*, the keel for which was laid on 19 November. The warship was a clear symbol of a new western outlook; its two Russian shipwrights had previously trained in Venice and similar models seen in Chatham influenced the vessel’s design. Dutch engraver Adrian Schoonebeck was employed to assist with the conceptualizing and engraving of the warship’s emblems. Maria di Salvo has drawn attention to the vessel’s name, which by using Dutch and Latin forms instead of Russian (*predvedenie*) indicated a western approach. Alongside carvings of Cupid and Triton, Hercules was featured defeating the Nemean lion on a side gallery, an allegory of Peter’s ambitions to defeat Sweden. Meanwhile, at the centre of the stern, a scene depicting Saint Peter kneeling on land against a backdrop of the sea was included, on which an angel was represented sailing on a small ship. The warship was extravagant, and adorned with a number of heavy carvings, which would not have looked out of place on northern European ships more than 50 years earlier.

It is also worth stressing that galleys continued to be used in exceptional cases in the Mediterranean during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, while continuing to be used in the Baltic throughout the eighteenth century. Historians agree that the Battle of Lepanto of October 1571 was the turning point after which galleys declined in value for naval conflict. Yet this does not mean that they did not continue to be constructed after 1600. Indeed, their continued presence in the Mediterranean after Lepanto is an indication of oared vessels’ use in the cultural sphere, as an object of elite power. This was facilitated by their appearance. Members of the elite continued to own galleys during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Le Cardinal*, *le Richelieu*, and *l’Olivares* (a Spanish prize captured in 1638) were in operation as part of the French navy during the late 1630s, and named after their owners. Louis XIV’s *la Réale* was decommissioned only in 1720, and the gilded decorations of its stern remain on display at the Musée de la Marine, Paris. The stern used devices of angels, classical figures, and the globe in order to reflect on Louis’ imperial outlook. *La Réale* was a clear indication of the elitist value of warships even when their military worth was limited. This is not to say that galleys did not develop decoration in line with developments to sailing vessels. By the late
seventeenth century, oared vessels were being designed in accordance with the more reserved baroque styles developed in France, and their sterns were similar in design to their northern counterparts in focusing on symmetry and window panels. Galleys were a symbol of elite power in the Mediterranean, and their military value pre-1600 allowed memory to transcend military logic. They continued to be seen as a weapon of war due to their armament and decoration despite no major galley battle being fought after 1571. Mediterranean galleys, instead, became a major tool of prestige under Louis XIV, whose corps des galères was unrivalled in strength before being dissolved in 1748. Its presence, without any significant competition in the Mediterranean reflected and bolstered Louis' imperial ambitions; it was principally maintained to sustain the image of power.

With these exceptions recognized, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, most European states simplified transom decoration, in favour of enhanced manoeuvrability, causing many of the motifs that emblazoned and complimented early seventeenth-century monarchs to be removed. With limited space available on the panels of late seventeenth-century transoms because of the introduction of windows, and with a heightened understanding of restrictions to sailing abilities caused by heavy carvings, the vivid theatrical displays prevalent on European flagships during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries became less common. The transom model adopted by most European warships used the baroque style and divided the stern into three sections. The upper portion, situated at the back of the poop deck was the smallest, and usually consisted of the ship’s lanterns and upper carved and gilded works. The second, the centrepiece of the transom, was a large canvas on which was present the royal coat of arms or a painting associated with state and ship name. Finally, the third section consisted of the ship’s galleries whereby windows provided the stern with a sense of symmetry. This was not something that was necessarily new; indeed Vasa’s stern had many similar qualities, but by the later period this design was almost standard, and windows had a far greater prominence.

This change was not only because of a gradual realization that majestic decorations could compromise a ship’s stability and operability. During a period of increased awareness of monarchical power and its limitations, secularization and enlightened ideas, there is a correlation between political power and warship design. Although this relationship is more apparent for some states (England, the Netherlands, and Spain) than in others (France), the sacred and frivolous image of monarchy, which decorated warships, does appear to have been downplayed in the sailing navies as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressed. This was, after all, a period of political and social revolt and even regicide. The design of warships, and their pompous character, was inherently connected to political circumstance. As one country adapted their warships because of this new atmosphere, others soon were influenced by these new designs. By the end of the seventeenth century, the pomp and fervour of European warships appears to have reduced. Warships now were formidable weapons of war. Even with those flagship vessels that remained highly impressive visually, skill and expertise in design triumphed over majestic flare. By the eighteenth century, a warship’s strength was principally in its value as a weapon of war.
Conclusion

The early modern period was not the first to employ symbolism and decoration on warships in order to reflect and promote ideology, but it was able to tailor and exploit it far better because of the opportunities that came with absolute monarchy, reformed identities that were shaped by faith, and the birth of new states. Within this context, it has been suggested that the fifteenth and, more importantly, sixteenth centuries experienced the establishment of warships as a form of elite culture, while the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the zenith of its exploitation and gradual refinement. Warship design was reconditioned by political and religious transformations between 1400 and 1800, but, at the same time, political and religious change could be influenced and deterred by the imagery and ideology expressed on warships.

This chapter has primarily focused on state-owned warships, but it must be acknowledged that private craft also played an important part in design history. Vessels owned by individuals used for trade and/or privateering could be equally or, in some cases, more lavishly decorated, as shown by the Ark Ralegh sold by Sir Walter Ralegh to Elizabeth I and renamed the Ark Royal in 1587. As depicted in English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588 (Figure 13.1), Ark Royal’s stern, displayed at the bottom right of the painting, was designed to appear majestic through its decoration. A further reflection of state ideology in the private sphere can be observed with coastal surveys of shipping, where available. The name Elizabeth, for example, remained a popular name for English vessels during the late sixteenth century. The point is that although it would have been extremely rare for private ships to have been decorated to the same heightened scale as royal flagships, princely culture was able to transcend class boundaries, with both nobles and merchants understanding and embodying the political power that could be represented on these ships. Arguably, this was even more pronounced in the Mediterranean, where monarchs, nobles, and merchants jointly owned galleys throughout the period.

The early modern flagship did not need to be the most manoeuvrable, powerful, or generally effective warship in battle. It merely needed to suggest these qualities to create an image that would encourage others to trust the message. In 1624, it was written that despite the inferiority of its navy, which was in need of ‘new builde and repayre’, England controlled in its arsenal the ‘Prince-Royal, a Ship’ so powerful that ‘England needed not feare all the Fleeites of the World’.67 For some nations, in particular the new or reformed and militarily restricted states of northern Europe fashioned by the reformation, it was more important to assert power and ideology through the design and decoration of these vessels as a way to combat the perception of deficiencies in economic or land power. In contrast, for the well-established military powers of Catholic Europe, most importantly Spain, the strength of their land forces meant that there was little need to impress and deter its adversaries through decoration. Spanish galleons were thus generally designed for maritime function over long distances. Their cargo carrying and sailing capabilities appear to have been of greater priority than their visual appearance. By contrast, states that had begun this period militarily and economically weaker believed it necessary to decorate vessels in order to provide a false exterior, which would enable the Crown or state to appear
as an equal to the greatest Catholic European powers. Almost in parallel, as Protestant European nations stripped the altars during the iconoclasm movements, religious symbols were transformed and transferred to secular artefacts and possessions as they moved from church to ship. As a result, this process of secularizing warships with political ideology was not experienced by Catholic Europe until far later in the period. It is interesting to note, however, that by the end of the seventeenth century it was a Catholic state with a particularly potent monarchy that strived for cultural supremacy, which led developments in warship design. The importance of Louis XIV’s reign to the redevelopment of warship appearance is hardly surprising given French military and cultural hegemony at this point, showing the importance of politics to cultural developments. Just as the competing monarchies of the early sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries strove for military strength and cultural elitism, by the end of the seventeenth century Louis XIV, the new face of monarchy, adapted and advanced these developments by embracing the ideas developed in northern Europe and moving them in new directions. Warship design and decoration was, as it had long been, transformed due to international competition and influence.

Notes


8 Unknown artist, 1588, *The Armada Portrait*, Queen’s House, Royal Museums Greenwich.


37 M. Acerra, ‘La symbolique des noms de navire de guerre dans la marine française, 1661–1815’, *Histoire, Économie et Société* 16/1, 1997, pp. 45–7. This figure did not include the names le Saint-Michel and le Saint-Esprit, which as royal orders, Acerra does not class as religious.


41 The Antelope title was used by a number of British warships between 1546–1982, the years of their launch/rebuild were: 1546, 1558, 1581, 1618, 1651, 1660, 1703, 1741, 1784, 1802, 1808, 1846, 1893, 1929, and 1972. See R. Winfield, British Warships in the Age of Sail: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates, 4 vols, Barnsley: Seaforth, 2009–14.


44 Fournier, Hydrographie, ‘Description d’un Navire Royal’.


46 This dark appearance was the product of tar and alquitrán produced to make the vessel watertight.

47 Fournier, Hydrographie, p. 45. [Le Sainct protecteur du Navire est tousiours peint dans le Mirouer de la Pouppe, avec cét Escriteau].


49 Winfield and Roberts, French Warships, pp. 49–53.


51 Brederode is another case in which a flagship was named after a state leader. Johan Wolfert van Brederode was the brother-in-law of Frederik Hendrik, Prince of Orange.

52 Bender, Dutch Warships, pp. 200, 205, 223.


54 Glete, Navies and Nations, pp. 44–5.


56 J. D. Davies, ‘Introduction’ in Bender, Dutch Warships, p. 36.


58 Peters, Ship Decoration, pp. 39–44.


61 This scene has been viewed as ‘complex’ and ‘confusing’ for the message that it conveys. For further information see Di Salvo, ‘Peter the Great’s Ship’, pp. 49–52.


64 James, Navy and Government, p. 100.

65 Peters, Ship Decoration, pp. 41–2.


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