1 When the Portuguese attacked Hormuz in the Persian Gulf in 1507 they fought people in merchant ships and small boats that had planks laced together with coconut fibre …

2 … but before the British agreed truces with the maritime tribes of the Gulf three hundred years later, they had to fight off ‘pirates’ in specially built fighting craft.

3 The traditional ships and boats from the Persian Gulf and the Arabian seas are now known as dhows, but there are many types, most now extinct.

4 While there are few archaeological remains of watercraft from this period, there are hundreds of contemporary images that tell the story of transition from simple craft to complex fighting vessels. Evidence from archaeology and ethnography can be compared to historical images of dhows to see how technology changed over time.

5 The best-known example of a fighting dhow is a model in the Science Museum in London that was built as a display for the Great Exhibition of 1851.

6 The fighting dhow is reconstructed in this thesis by using a catalogue of 391 historical images — paintings, drawings, rock art, graffiti, models and Islamic miniatures — of Persian Gulf watercraft from 1200 to 1900 as primary evidence. Together these visual sources depict over 900 individual watercraft.

7 People in Persian Gulf maritime societies changed the way they built and acquired watercraft to cope with the stress of organised violence in the wake of European intrusions in the western Indian Ocean.

8 While the monumental warships of the European traditions absorb much archaeological attention, the vernacular fighting craft of peripheral societies offer alternative insight to the ways people modify their everyday things in response to violence.