

## **Saint-Malo and the Newfoundland Fisheries in the 18th Century**

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# RESEARCH NOTE

## Saint-Malo and the Newfoundland Fisheries in the 18th Century

MARITIME HISTORIANS SHARE WITH OTHER HISTORIANS a temptation to which they have often succumbed: they seem to be more interested in studying growth and success than stagnation or decline. Indeed, the maritime historiography of French ports in the 18th century has concentrated mainly on success stories of a few major places such as Le Havre, Nantes, Bordeaux, Marseilles and a few major activities like privateering, the slave and sugar trades or the East Indies and "Levant" trades. Relatively little attention has been devoted to ports and trades in less flamboyant situations.<sup>1</sup> The Breton port of Saint-Malo, with its reputation as "privateer city" and reaper of South American trade profits in the early 1700s has not been immune from this prejudice. From 1713 to 1792, the North American fisheries were the destination of 67 per cent of all ships outfitted in Saint-Malo while only 3.4 per cent of these vessels went privateering.<sup>2</sup> The socio-economic importance of codfishing has rarely been fully acknowledged in Saint-Malo historiography. Yet sources suggest that codfishing played a major role in helping the Breton port to withstand the many and sometimes swift changes affecting the political, social and economic environment of maritime France throughout the 18th century.

The Malouins had become interested in fishing in Newfoundland waters probably as early as the 1520s, before Cartier's expeditions. Later in the century, they specialized in the processing and selling of dried cod to the southern European markets of Spain, Mediterranean France and Italy. Their codfishing industry reached a dominant position in France only much later, during the second half of the 17th century, as many other ports involved in the trade withdrew from it. Saint-Malo reached the peak of its prosperity between 1690 and 1719, a period of wars and international tensions that gave the Malouins the

- 1 Until very recently, activities such as coastal trade or the fishing industry and social groups such as seamen had not received the attention they deserve from historians. The only major work published on the history of the French codfishing industry is *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale* (3 vols., Paris, 1962) by Charles de la Morandière, who was not a professional historian. Recent books such as Alain Cabantous' *La mer et les hommes. Pêcheurs et matelots dunkerquois de Louis XIV à la Révolution* (Dunkerque, 1980), or the *Histoire des pêches maritimes en France* (Toulouse, 1987) under the direction of Michel Mollat demonstrate a growing interest towards aspects of the maritime world which previously have been relatively ignored by scholars.
- 2 Crew rolls and shipping registers Saint-Malo, 1706-1722, Archives de la Marine Brest, PC6 (crew rolls), C4 178 (shipping registers 1706-1739), PC8 2g (shipping registers 1726-1734), PC8 2i (shipping registers 1749-1755); Archives Départementales Ille-et-Vilaine, 15 Rd 20-21-22-23 (shipping registers 1756-1810).

opportunity to enrich themselves enormously in privateering and in trading with the Spanish colonies and the East Indies. After 1707, the Compagnie des Indes Orientales subcontracted its trade monopoly to Saint-Malo companies which reaped huge profits from it. These 30 years of commercial splendour ended with Law's financial rout. The 1720s and 30s were relatively difficult times for Saint-Malo. The Breton port had to readjust to a new, less hotly speculative trading environment. Much of the capital accumulated in maritime speculation during the previous three decades was reinvested in real estate or venal offices by wealthy merchant families eager to join the ranks of the nobility. The portion of capital which remained invested in maritime ventures went back into traditional trades in which the Malouins were highly experienced, the trade between France and Spain and the codfishing industry.<sup>3</sup> As international maritime trade increased in volume and became more and more sophisticated in its operations, a process of concentration and redistribution took place in the commercial activities of French ports. Many ports declined (Dieppe, Les Sables, Bayonne). A few managed to concentrate trade with the French West Indies and experienced a tremendous expansion (Le Havre, Nantes, Bordeaux). Others, while remaining active, followed a middle ground of relative stability (or stagnation) throughout the century. Saint-Malo clearly belongs to this third category. Although the Malouins took advantage of the right that had been granted them to outfit for the slave trade and the West Indian colonies, the North American codfisheries remained by far the most frequent destination of their ships. Yet Saint-Malo's well-established supremacy in this sector of maritime trade was increasingly challenged by the rapid expansion of a major competitor, the port of Granville in lower Normandy.

Thanks to the reforms enacted by Colbert and his followers in the organization of the French navy after 1660, more abundant and reliable administrative sources give historians a vision of the French codfishing industry that is much clearer for the 18th century than for previous centuries. These sources have been generally well preserved for Saint-Malo, allowing a quantitative study of shipping that sheds new light on the port's extensive fishing activities.<sup>4</sup>

From 1713 to 1792, Saint-Malo's outfitters sent 4,654 ships (out of a total of 7,037 outfitted for all destinations excluding coastal navigation) to the North American fisheries or approximately one third of all French ships bound for that

3 André Lespagnol, "Cargaisons et profits du commerce indien au début du XVIIIe siècle. Les opérations commerciales des compagnies malouines, 1707-1720", *Annales de Bretagne*, 89, 3 (1982), pp. 313-50 and "A propos des élites urbaines dans l'Ancien Régime: l'exemple de Saint-Malo au XVIIIe siècle", *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne*, a. 73, sér. 15, no 9 (1974), pp. 2-9. See also by same author: *Histoire de Saint-Malo et du pays malouin* (Toulouse, 1984), pp. 89-139.

4 Unless specified otherwise, sources for all figures relating to Saint-Malo are in crew rolls and shipping registers Saint-Malo (see note 1).

destination (12,000 ships as a rough estimate). The percentage of codfishing ships in total yearly outfittings experienced wide variations: from 0 per cent during wars to a record 87 per cent in 1785 (118 ships out of a total of 135). On a long term basis, this percentage increased from an average of 55 per cent in the period 1713-1720 to 69 per cent in the 1730s (1730-1739) and 81 per cent in the mid-century interwar period (1749-1755), dropping back slightly to 77 per cent in the 1780s (1783-1789). The number of Malouin ships bound for the North American fisheries doubled during the 18th century, from an average of 47 ships per year in the years 1714-1718 to an average of 109 ships per year in 1784-1788. For a port which used to send more than 80 ships annually to the fisheries in the 1680s, such an increase was actually a slow recovery rather than real long-term growth. Two periods of relative depression, the 1730s and the 1770s, were each followed by periods of sharp increases in the 1740s/1750s and the 1780s. Tonnages did not quite increase at the same pace, pointing to a well documented decrease in the average tonnage per vessel that was a result of a new orientation towards the bank fishery (green cod) and also of the growing use, after 1763, of smaller and faster ships.

From 1713 to 1792, Saint-Malo sent to the North American fisheries a total of 218,000 men or approximately half of the total French crews for that destination (400,000 men as a rough estimate). Although the number of ships sent by the Malouins was only 4.7 per cent higher than that of their competitors from Granville, the number of men they sent was 46 per cent higher because of the greater importance of the dried cod shore fishery in their industry. Total yearly crew figures for the fisheries varied from 0 in wartime to a maximum of 5,387 men in 1754 (91 per cent of all crews departing from Saint-Malo), an astonishingly high figure when one considers that the total population of Saint-Malo in the mid-18th century was only around 15,000. A large proportion of crews actually came from the surrounding countryside. Surprisingly, the number of men reached its peak in the 1740s and 1750s, not later. This apparent anomaly was probably the consequence of important changes in commercial strategy clearly visible when one looks at crew densities (men/ton ratio) on board vessels, crew remuneration and ships' destinations.

Crew densities increased during the first half of the century from around 0.30 man/ton before 1720 to over 0.40 man/ton in the 1740s and decreased afterwards back to around 0.30 man/ton again in the 1780s. There was a significant increase in advances paid to crews after 1774, probably as a consequence of the Seven Years' War which, by stopping the training of new recruits for eight years, seriously reduced the number of highly experienced sailors/fishermen a decade later. This dearth of experienced sailors created an upward pressure on remunerations to which outfitters responded by reducing the number of men on board their ships. The development of Saint-Malo's bank fishery had a similar effect: crew densities on board small vessels in green cod fishing were always much lower than in the dried cod shore fishery where large

ships were merely a means of transportation for a manpower partly used on land. This explains the paradox of codfishing fleets, where there was always more space per crewman on smaller ships than on larger ones. It is also the reason for the huge gap (much larger than the tonnage gap) between crew sizes on board ships bound for the bank fishery and those going to the shore fishery in Newfoundland or Canada. From 1713 to 1792, the average crew per ship in the Saint-Malo bank fishery was 12 men; it was 64 men in the shore fishery. The smallest crew on record to leave Saint-Malo for the North American fisheries numbered 8 men, the largest 192. Thus, the increasing share taken by the bank fishery at Saint-Malo inevitably contributed to lower overall crew densities.

Until 1749, the Saint-Malo codfishing industry was overwhelmingly a summer shore fishery producing dried cod on the coasts of Canada and Newfoundland. The Malouins' Bank fishery remained almost nonexistent. Records show strange variations in the destinations of ships during this period. Although fishermen from Saint-Malo retained the right to fish at Newfoundland after 1713, they stopped coming to the island between 1718 and 1724 (1717: 18 ships; 1718: 0) and instead went fishing exclusively on the continent, on the coasts of Ile Royale, Gaspé and Labrador. Although it is quite possible that catch failures contributed to such a change, its timing suggests that it may have been unwillingly provoked by the royal "lettres patentes" of 1717 which exempted ships' supplies from being taxed on vessels bound for the French colonies, thus excluding Newfoundland.<sup>5</sup> Difficulties in adjusting to new fishing locations and bad fishing seasons forced the Malouins to start coming back to the northern coast of Newfoundland (Petit Nord) in 1724 (1723: 0 ships; 1724: 11). They requested and finally obtained that the tax exemption be extended to Newfoundland in 1733.<sup>6</sup> This measure, as well as increasing competition from resident fishermen in Ile Royale and Gaspé, accelerated their return to the island during the following decade (1734: 16 ships; 1743: 57). A second major shift in orientation took place in 1748. For the first time ever, Saint-Malo started to outfit for the bank fishery on a large scale (before 1748: 0 to 5 ships; 1748: 10; 1754: 25; 1767: 53; 1786: 61). Here again, changes in tax laws allowed a geographical reorientation of the fishing industry. Before 1739, the Malouins could not compete with the fishing ports of Normandy in delivering green cod to the Paris market through Dieppe and Le Havre because they did not enjoy, as the Normans did, a large exemption of duties on green fish imported into Normandy. In 1736, under the combined pressure of difficulties suffered in their shore fishery and of increasing competition from the British in the Spanish and Italian dried cod markets, they asked the Crown to be granted the same privilege in order to expand their bank fishery. They obtained it in 1739, just when the outbreak of the Anglo-Spanish war opened unexpected opportunities for

5 "Lettres Patentes" of April 1717, Archives Départementales Loire-Atlantique, C744, 9.

6 Decree in Council, 31 October 1733, Archives Départementales Loire-Atlantique, C744, 16.

French dried cod exports to Spain. They took advantage of the situation as best as they could (even selling English cod to the Spaniards) and their bank fishery started to develop only after the return of peace in 1748.

Because of the expansion of the bank fishery and the massive return of the shore fishery to the coast of Newfoundland, Saint-Malo's codfishing industry turned away from New France between 1725 and 1750, in a complete reversal of previous orientations. In 1718 and 1719, 51 and 53 ships were sent from Saint-Malo to coastal New France and only 4 and 5 to the Newfoundland/Banks region; in 1749 and 1750, only 4 and 11 were sent to coastal New France while 58 and 67 went to the Newfoundland/Banks region. Even on the few ships still sent to the Canadian coast, especially those going to Louisbourg/Ile Royale, the share system of remuneration was increasingly replaced by a time-based salary system, clearly indicating that these vessels were simply loading fish bought from resident fishermen. It seems as though the Malouins made a serious attempt at establishing their migratory shore fishery on the coasts of New France after 1713, then came to realize that the future of their industry was not really there and left. A similar geographical shift appears to have been repeated elsewhere: Granville's shore fishery set foot on Newfoundland in the early 1740s and expanded there while stagnating on the coasts of New France.<sup>7</sup> When the Seven Years' War broke out, Canada was no longer the major playing field it had been earlier in the century for the French codfishing industry. Had it still been so, one cannot but wonder if the peace arrangements made in 1763 would have been the same. Stronger pressure might have been exerted by the maritime business community to demand that France keep fishing rights on the coasts of Labrador, Gaspé and Ile Royale instead of Newfoundland.

After 1763, Saint-Malo's bank fishery grew very quickly (1755: 24 ships; 1763: 22; 1767: 53) but a general crisis struck the whole fishing industry between 1768 and 1774. An abnormally high shipwreck rate in 1768 (8.6 percent), the skyrocketing cost of supplies (including salt) and increased tension with the British at Newfoundland (although most incidents involved the Granvillais, not the Malouins) probably caused, at least in part, this temporary decline. As a result, the Malouins developed their trade with Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon residents (1766: 6 ships; 1769: 14; 1771: 18; 1774: 25). After the War of American Independence, the bank fishery continued to expand (1784: 53 ships; 1786: 61) while the shore fishery at the Petit Nord (Newfoundland) stagnated slightly below its mid-century level. After 1787, a new crisis occurred in the codfishing industry of Saint-Malo and other ports, closely linked to the serious economic problems France was facing at the time. In the years following the war, intense speculation encouraged by government subsidies led to an excessive growth of the codfishing fleet (1783: 78 ships; 1786: 122). This expansion pushed outfitting costs upwards and increased production at the very time when the market

7 Shipping registers Granville 1722-1759, Archives Municipales Granville, C6 141 to 178.

started to shrink. Unlike dried cod, green cod was a fairly expensive luxury food item. Demand was likely to drop whenever a serious food crisis occurred, which probably explains why the bank fishery suffered the most during this period (1786: 61 ships; 1792: 11). An increase in trade with Saint-Pierre again resulted from difficulties in the fisheries. The larger share taken by the bank fishery in the Saint-Malo fishing industry may also have contributed to a lowering of the shipwreck rate, which went down from 2.5 per cent between 1725 and 1755 to 1.9 percent during the period 1763-1792. Fewer accidents occurred in the bank fishery because ships remained far away from the coast at all times.

Unlike major ports such as Le Havre, Nantes, Bordeaux or Marseille, Saint-Malo was not well connected to inland markets. Land communications in Brittany were notoriously difficult and no major river provided a link with the interior. Consequently, Saint-Malo never became a place of major importance for unloading goods, whether these were sugar, coffee or codfish. Ships from Saint-Malo coming back from the bank fishery usually delivered their cargo either in Dieppe, Honfleur and Le Havre for the Paris market (2/3 of green cod received in these three ports in the 1780s) and to a much lesser extent in Nantes, La Rochelle, Bordeaux or Dunkerque. Vessels coming from the shore fishery unloaded their cod in Marseilles (60 per cent of dried cod delivered in France in the 1780s) and to a lesser extent in La Rochelle, Bordeaux, Bayonne, Sète and in Spanish ports such as Alicante, Malaga or Cadix. Few ships from Saint-Malo delivered dried cod to the French West Indies. This major market was too far afield for vessels engaged in fishing activities. It was difficult to complete the circle Saint-Malo/North American fisheries/West Indies/port of delivery in France/Saint-Malo in less than a year, a requirement that had to be met in order to make the following fishing season. Consequently, the French West Indies had to be supplied either by ships based in Louisbourg, Quebec and Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon or by vessels sent from Bordeaux or Nantes. Despite pressures and subsidies from the government, few French outfitters were interested in such trade and the French West Indian market came to rely more and more heavily upon Anglo-American lower-priced deliveries.

Taking only eight to ten months to complete, the triangular voyage via Newfoundland and Marseilles was better suited to the rigid time framework of the codfishing industry, as long as unusual delays were avoided. The Malouins were not the only ones on this route. Until 1750, they clearly dominated it in quantitative terms, delivering between 2/3 and 3/4 of codfish unloaded in Marseilles. After 1750, because their bank fishery expanded while Granville's shore fishery grew, their share in deliveries fell to between 1/3 and 1/2 of codfish unloaded. But they managed to dominate the route in qualitative terms by often reaching Marseilles before their competitors in September (the prime season or "primeur"), when prices were higher, which allowed them to quickly load for Bordeaux, Nantes or Le Havre freight that their agents had found for them. Among the first ten codfishing ships arriving each year in Marseilles from 1749

to 1792, 229 vessels came from Saint-Malo, 64 from Granville and 27 from Saint-Brieuc.<sup>8</sup> The ability of the Malouins to reach Marseilles earlier than others was clearly linked to the greater concentration of capital at the outfitters' level (not to be confused with the investors' level) in Saint-Malo than in other codfishing ports. This concentration increased during the century. In 1724, 50 outfitters sent 64 ships to the fisheries; Poitevin des Ormes sent five ships, Jallobert four and the others one or two. In 1786, 46 outfitters sent 122 ships to the fisheries; Fromy du Puy alone sent 15 ships with crews totalling 1,155 men, Dubois 14 ships, Chenu seven, Guillemault six and many others three, four or five vessels. Because they could pool the production of many ships and send it quickly to Marseilles, traders in control of such large scale enterprises enjoyed an unmatched advantage in the "primeur" race.

A specific inducement for the Malouins to win this race might be found in the system of remuneration of crews. The bank fishery used the "au cinquième" share system, which gave men small advances (called "pot de vin") before departure (on the base of qualification and experience) and large shares proportional to the commercial value of the catch. The shore fishery (at Saint-Malo and Saint-Brieuc only) used the "à la mode du Nord" system with large advances and smaller shares, but these shares (this is the key point) were proportional to the total weight of fish caught, not to their commercial value. Therefore, commercial profits and losses were not shared by the crew; the outfitter and his co-investors were the only ones to benefit or suffer from the sale price level. This was a powerful inducement for Malouin outfitters and captains (often co-investors) to systematically follow a strategy designed to reap the benefits of high prices rather than one designed to maximize production. The use of smaller, faster ships after 1763 was a concrete outcome of such a strategy. It also gave the Malouins greater flexibility in switching their fishing business from the shore fishery to the bank fishery and vice-versa.

The system of remuneration of crews also appears to provide a clue to the unexplained presence of large numbers of clandestine sailors on board many Malouin ships bound for the shore fishery (between 0 and 19 per ship). By definition, clandestine sailors (often poor adolescents) were not entitled to receive advances, but without the assurance of some reward or incentive, they were not likely to be very productive in the fishery; as a result, they always received one share, just like regular sailors. Potential recruits for illegal boarding knew that and this is why they came on board. Because advances were so large and shares so small, the "à la mode du Nord" system of remuneration was better able than any other system to integrate illegal boarding without causing

8 Charles Carrière, "La pêche de Terre-Neuve. Brèves réflexions à propos d'un ouvrage récent", *Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*, 42, 2 (1964), pp. 255-65; Jean-François Brière, "Le commerce triangulaire entre les ports terre-neuviens français, les pêcheries d'Amérique du Nord et Marseille au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle: nouvelles perspectives", *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française*, 40, 2 (automne 1986), pp. 193-214.



disruption into a codfishing venture. It was easy and profitable to accept clandestine boarding and the practice was so widespread (5 per cent of regular crews in 1742) that it must have enjoyed the passive support of outfitters and captains alike.

The history of Saint-Malo provides an interesting case study of how well a French port adapted to the rapidly changing environment of 18th century trade. Saint-Malo managed to maintain a middle line between the kind of commerce Granville engaged in, which remained almost exclusively specialized in the codfishing business, and that of places like Le Havre, Nantes, La Rochelle or Bordeaux, where the expansion of colonial trade eliminated the codfishing industry. Throughout the century, the maritime business community in Saint-Malo maintained an interest in both the slave/colonial trade and, increasingly, the fisheries. But it seems as though the Malouins did so reluctantly, as if they had no choice. Lack of capital for maritime investment appears to have created problems during the first half of the century, leaving the Breton port with unused shipping capacity. A leading indicator of this can be seen in the great number of ships from Saint-Malo that were chartered by traders from Nantes and Le Havre or in the unusually high number of vessels outfitted for coastal trade. The Malouins realized that codfishing, with its moderate investment requirements and quick capital rotation, remained one of their stronger assets. As their fishery experienced difficulties on the coast of New France, they turned away from the continent towards British Newfoundland and the Banks. They remained most active here as well as in Spain and Marseilles. Finally, Saint-Malo's strong maritime traditions and long-established commercial network were more oriented towards foreign trade than towards colonial trade. This factor, among others, seems to have somewhat inhibited the ability of the Malouins fully to develop trade with New France or the French West Indies and induced them to concentrate their efforts on the fishing industry. Saint-Malo found itself more or less on the losers' side in the process of increasing concentration of colonial trading activity, but clearly managed to reap the benefits of a similar process of concentration in the codfishing industry.

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