

Breton Linen, Indian Textiles, American Sugar:

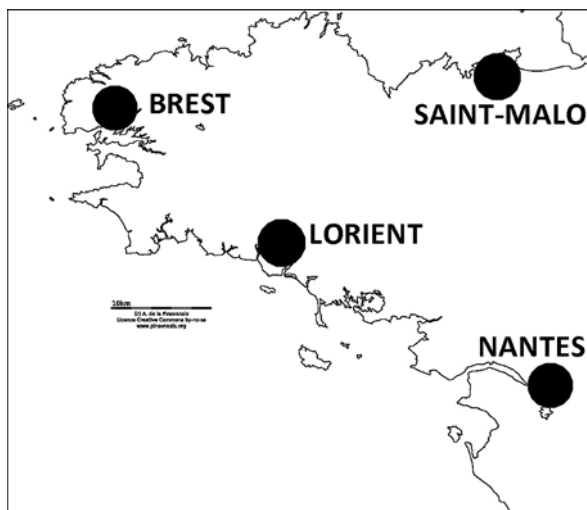
Brittany and the Globalization of Trade in the 18th Century

Pierrick POURCHASSE

ブリュターニュのリネン、インドの繊維製品、アメリカの砂糖 —ブリュターニュと18世紀の貿易のグローバル化—

ピエリック・プルシャス

Brittany was a province of great economic importance to the kingdom of France in the eighteenth century. It was an area with a population of 2 million inhabitants in the late seventeenth century that is 10% of the total French population. If its economy, like the rest of France, was based on agriculture, it had certain peculiarities. First, the importance of its manufacturing sector with a huge production of linen and hemp textiles. Then, its maritime activities with the presence of several ports of national importance: Saint-Malo, a port specialized in cod fishing, privateering and relations with Spain; Brest, the great French military port on the Atlantic; Lorient, a port created in the late seventeenth century for the needs of the French East India Company; Nantes, capital of the province and the second French commercial port specialized in transatlantic trade.



The main Brittany's ports

According to Fernand Braudel, European economy changed between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century through the development of the market economy. He noted two essential evolutions. First that the markets across the world were interconnected; It was the birth of what he calls a world economy but it only concerned a few special goods and precious metals. Secondly that a more advanced capitalism appeared in the transoceanic trade. These new activities generated large profits which contributed to the accumulation of significant capital¹⁾.

Brittany was an example of a region that integrated world economy and gave rise to a group of capitalist entrepreneurs as described by Braudel.

Breton textiles and American silver

Exports of Breton textiles to Spain were made from the early sixteenth century onwards. However, until the reign of Louis XIV, the main buyer was England. Things changed with the mercantile measures taken by Colbert to limit imports of English cloth. A real trade war was declared between the two countries. In 1678, an embargo caused the immediate cessation of exchanges between the two countries. In 1714, after the War of Spanish Succession, the British market was definitely lost to Breton textiles²⁾. As a result, the Breton merchants were turning to Spain which became the only outlet market for their products in the eighteenth century.

If Spain succeeded in taking control of maritime relations with America, the content of the exchanges would come mainly from its European neighbors. Spain was, in fact, unable to supply the demand of its empire which was both considerable and diversified.

Nearly 95% of the cargo shipped to America had first to be imported from various European suppliers and 90% of these goods were manufactured goods mainly textiles. According to an inquiry of 1686³⁾, France alone provided 40% of the cargoes shipped to Spanish America. In 1714, after the War of Spanish Succession, the consul of Cadiz estimated that two thirds of the goods forwarded to America were of French origin. So, almost all the production of Breton textiles was exported to Spain.

The port of Saint Malo made its fortune through this Spanish demand. The merchants of the city provided

Percentage of the different European countries in the imports of Cadiz

Country or port	Sum (£-tournois)	%
France	17 millions	39%
Genoa	7,3 millions	16,5%
England	6,2 millions	14,3%
Dutch Republic	5,1 millions	11,8%
Austrian Netherlands	2,8 millions	6,5%
Hamburg	2,2 millions	5,1%
Spain	2,4 millions	5,55%

Breton textiles to Spain but also manufactured goods from all over France. Following delivery, the transport from Cadiz to America and the sale were taken over by the Spanish Commissioners. However, gradually they became nominees and finally Saint-Malo, just as their European competitors, shipped their goods directly to America. In 1746, the French consul said that most of the cargoes leaving Cadiz belonged to foreign merchants⁴⁾.

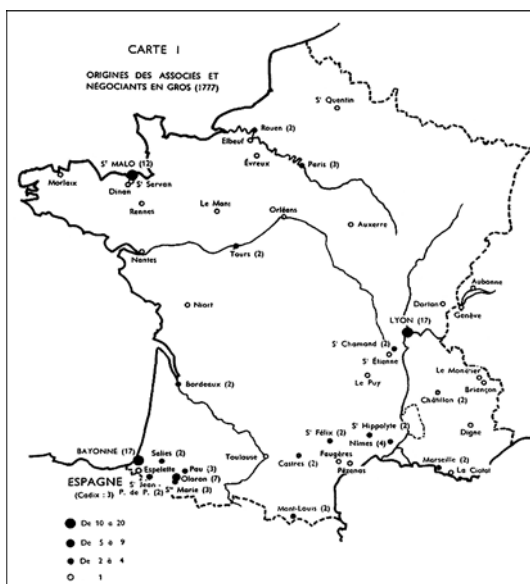
As indicated by the consul, direct participation in American trade required a permanent presence in the Andalusian port. As a result a large merchant community settled there playing the role of commissioner between

Net trading profits (utilidades)⁵⁾

Nations	1753–1754 (pesos)	1762 (pesos)	Number of commercial houses (1762)
Spain	270.724	203.104	218
France	710.450	472.200	60
Italy	149.800	120.050	35
Germany	31.000	28.500	3
Sweden, Prussia, Damas	75.500	65.000	11
England, Irland	231.100	173.750	30
Flanders	74.700	49.750	14
TOTAL	1.543.274	1.112.354	371

Didier Ozanam, op.cit., p. 276.

Provinces	1717	1777
Provence	24	3
Brittany	20	17
Lyon	12	20
Languedoc	2	11
Basque Country	2	36
Others	20	32
	80	119



The French merchants in Cadiz

France and Spain. The French commercial houses were the most numerous and most important in Cadiz. The number changed according to the political situation in Europe. Merchants from Brittany were among the most present in the 18th century in Cadiz.

Another major activity for the Port of Saint Malo was the cod fishery in Newfoundland. By the first decade of the sixteenth century, Breton fishermen were crossing the Atlantic to supply Europe with fish. In the seventeenth century, each year between 40 and 80 ships left the Breton port to go to Newfoundland. These fishing vessels settled along the coasts of the island and the fish was brought to the coast to be prepared and dried. This dried fish was mainly intended for the Catholic countries of southern Europe, particularly Spain and Italy. Because of religious prohibitions, dried cod had become imposed on the eating habits of these regions. More than half the ships of Saint Malo, especially the largest, fishing for cod went to Southern Europe⁶.

In return the ships were carrying Mediterranean products such as wine, dried fruits and oils but the most important part of the cargoes consisted of bars, ingots and spanish piastres of silver. For two centuries, Saint Malo was one of the main gateways for American silver to France⁷) but also to the Dutch Republic and to the Levant via Marseille. The shipowners of the Breton port emerge as precious metal transporters with their ships heavily armed as a protection against acts of piracy.

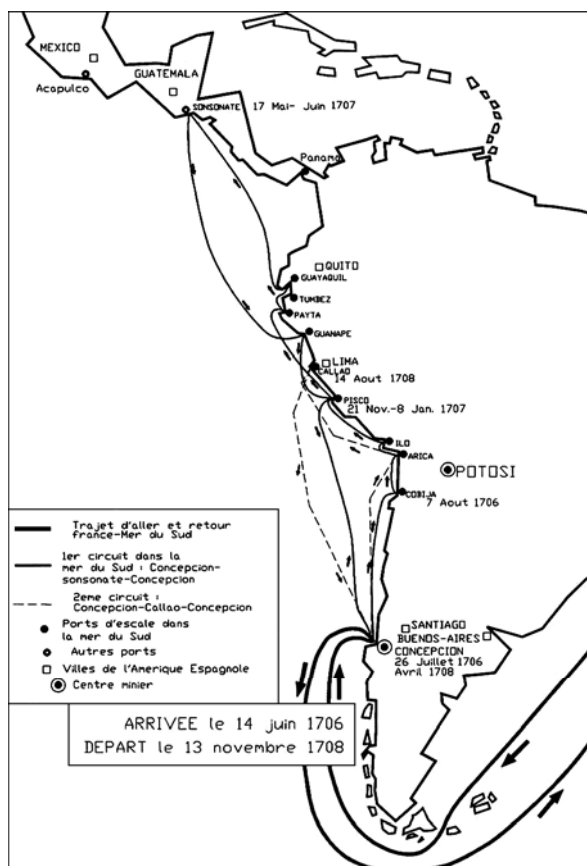
During the War of Spanish Succession, the maritime routes for Spanish silver were cut off by the English and the Dutch. Then the shipowners of Saint Malo organized a direct link between France and the Pacific coast of Spanish America⁸). Thus, they took the silver of the Potosi, from the ports of Chile and Peru without passing through Spanish intermediaries. The benefits were considerable: in 1703, two ships returning from Peru made a profit of 211%. Of the 133 French ships that participated in this smuggling operation, 86 were equipped in Saint-Malo. The money brought by this route saved France financially, exhausted after the long war of Spanish Succession. After the war, throughout the eighteenth century, to a lesser extent, a traffic of contraband silver was organized between Spanish America and Saint Malo.

The arrival of American money in Brittany also allowed the province to do business on Asian routes.

Lorient, the gateway to Asia

The first French East India Company was founded in 1664 by Colbert. However, because of repeated conflicts with its neighbors, France did not allow the company to operate and the enterprise had to cease operations during the War of Spanish Succession. Saint Malo which had “the sinews of war” that is to say silver from America because of its businesses in Cadiz, took over the company’s business in Asia. During the conflict, the city sent 15 ships to Asia with success. At the same time, the shipowners opened regular traffic with Saudi Moka and embarked on the great international coffee trade. In 1710–1715, Saint Malo was a world port connecting America, Europe and Asia. In 1713, the ship *Le Grand Dauphin* finished the first French lap of the world: after delivering textiles to Peru via Cape Horn, she bought Chinese goods with American silver before returning to France.

In 1719, the monopoly of trade with Asia was transferred to a new East India Company. However, the networks of the Saint Malo merchants in Cadiz and smuggling continued to bring in silver for the company’s purchases

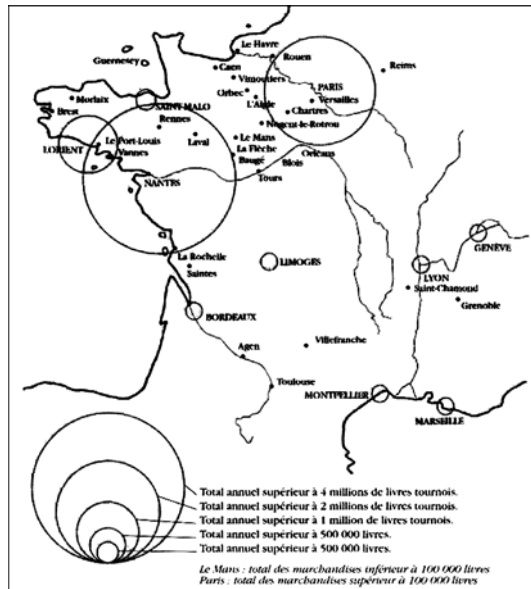


The trip of "La Confiance" (1706–1708)

André Lespagnol, *op. cit.*, p. 619.

in Asia. The port of Lorient, on the south coast of Brittany, became the harbour of the French East India Company. A totally new town was built for the needs of this enterprise⁹. The port had three main activities¹⁰. It was a shipyard where ships were built for the Company: 130 ships representing about 100 000 tons would be built in Lorient and, among them, 3 huge ships of 1 600 tons would be launched to go to China. The supplies for the shipyard came from all over Europe particularly from Sweden for tar and iron and Russia for timber. The Dutch and the Scandinavian fleets took charge of the transport between Northern Europe and Brittany¹¹. Lorient was also the place to prepare the ships for the long trip to Asia. The company needed about 1000 to 2000 sailors each year for its ships. The majority of the crews came from the ports nearby. For the trips to Asia, large quantities of food were bought for the crews, including salt beef from Ireland and Denmark. Finally Lorient was the sale center for Asian products brought in by the ships. Each year, in October, merchants from all over France and also from abroad, particularly Geneva, came to Lorient for the sales. For this a special building was constructed in 1732.

In India, France had several factories. The largest one was Pondicherry in the Bay of Bengal which was



The sales of the French East India Company¹²⁾

the administrative center of the Company's activities in India. The European city had 4000 inhabitants, while India's population was of 100 000 inhabitants. Its activity was mainly related to cotton textile. Chandernagore, near Calcutta, was the richest and most active factory of the Company. The French had three secondary factories: Yanaon, Karikal and Mahe. Moreover, the Company set up bases on the island of Bourbon (Réunion) and on the island of France (Mauritius) in the Indian Ocean. They created Port Louis, on the Isle of France for victualling and ship repair. On the island of Bourbon, they developed colonial cultures, particularly coffee.

Like other major European Companies, a section of the French ships went to Canton to trade with the Chinese.

The French East India Company was the third largest European company after the Dutch and the British. In 1769, after the end of its activity, its business was taken over by private traders. The high figures regarding the number of ships in the last decades of the eighteenth century shows the great dynamism of these owners. However it is important to know that they used smaller vessels than those of their competitors.

As we have seen, American silver was the principal value to buy products in Asian markets. However, this share tended to decrease: 90% at the end of the seventeenth century, 80% between 1725 and 1750 and 50% in the late eighteenth century. French products were increasingly present in cargoes, mostly textiles and metals as well as some luxury goods¹⁴⁾.

Return products from Asia are identical to those of other European companies. The main commodities were:

- 1) Coffee and Tea. The quantities of tea grew from 100,000 pounds in the late seventeenth century to nearly 2 million in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Numbers of ships sent to Asia (1600–1795)

	VOC	EIC	CDI
1600–1610	76	17	2
1610–1620	117	77	10
1620–1630	141	58	0
1630–1640	157	59	6
1640–1650	164	75	6
1650–1660	206	81	6
1660–1670	238	91	24
1670–1680	232	131	30
1680–1690	204	142	35
1690–1700	235	80	36
1700–1710	280	120	38
1710–1720	311	127	41
1720–1730	382	149	55
1730–1740	375	154	109
1740–1750	314	184	124
1750–1760	291	191	135
1760–1770	292	242	105
1770–1780	290	229	194
1780–1790	297	292	303
1790–1795	118	177	196
	4750	2676	1455

Bruijn & Gaastra¹³⁾

- 2) Spices. Pepper, very highly sought after in France, dominated. The other spices were traded in small quantities.
- 3) Cotton. Quantities were also increasing. We notice that there were very few silks from China, France being one of the largest European manufacturers with the silk industry in Lyon.

In France, following their sale, some Asian products were sold again to other countries in Europe and also overseas.

Smuggling and colonial trade

This is particularly the case of tea that was the subject of a huge smuggling operation. According to the historian Louis Dermigny¹⁵⁾, the only real market for tea was England: “So that all trade with China, carried out by Britain itself or by the nations bordering the English Channel and North Sea is based in fact, on the massive conversion of

the English population to tea.” Historians estimated incoming smuggled tea in England between 4 and 7.5 million pounds (between 2000 and 3,500 tons) in the 1780s, a figure higher than the total legal imports¹⁶. It is said that in some regions of Great Britain such as Scotland or the South West of England, almost all tea consumed came through smuggling. Always according to Dermigny, the specialist in trade with China, “at least two-thirds and probably three-quarters of tea traded in France was for export”. This is not a peculiarity of France: we have similar figures with Danish and Swedish companies.

The main centers of smuggling between France and England were Brittany and Northern France. At the end of the eighteenth century, after the Isle of Man lost its privileges¹⁷, the great centers of illicit trafficking became the Channel Islands and Brittany, and first of all the small port of Roscoff. British traders from the Isle of Man and Guernsey set up in the Breton port which became a base for smuggling. Contemporary accounts estimated around 500 annual trips between Roscoff and the English coast made by small British boats. Payment was made in golden Guineas so the tea coming from China in exchange for silver, served finally to connect the Kingdom of France to the current that drained the Brazilian metal from Lisbon to London¹⁸.

Asian products were also used by the Breton shipowners to connect to other international routes, including the slave trade in Africa and the plantation economy in America. Brittany, with the port of Nantes, was the main French center for the slave trade. The Breton ports accounted for almost 55% of total French expeditions to Africa.

To purchase slaves, textiles were the most important goods in the cargoes destined for Africa. Thus, one of the reasons which explains the preponderance of Breton ports in the slave trade, came from the proximity of Lorient where Asian textiles were sold. Cotton was a commodity used to purchase captives in Africa; 35% of white canvas and 52% of painted canvas arriving in Lorient was bought by traders in Nantes, many of whom took part in the slave trade. It should be noted that the entry of foreign cottons onto French territory was prohibited until 1759 so all the arrivals from India had to be sold abroad. Thus, all vessels departing for Africa carried Asian products. Of

French slave trade¹⁹

PORTS	SHIPMENTS
Nantes	1427
Saint-Malo	216
Lorient	156
Vannes	12
Brest	7
Morlaix	2
Saint-Brieuc	1
TOTAL BRITTANY	1819
TOTAL FRANCE	3321
% BRITTANY	54,8%

these, the blue cotton called “parts of Guinea” was essential for African trade. However, it is difficult to estimate precisely the amount of Asian canvas sent to Africa, due to counterfeits produced in France.

After having sold their slaves in the French Caribbean islands, the ships returned with colonial products, including sugar and coffee. After Bordeaux, Nantes was the second port of arrival for colonial goods from the West Indies during most of the eighteenth century. France consumed few of these products and re-exported in large quantities. These re-exports were variable depending on the product and the statistics are especially high for coffee and sugar.

Re-exports of Colonial Products (livres tournois)²⁰⁾

	Valeur imports	Valeur exports	% reexports
1775a	87.554.832	87.730.332	100,2
1776a	123.602.556	85.509.978	69,2
1777a	159.599.129	113.736.072	71,3
1778a	168.830.930	72.980.979	43,2
1779a	29.258.179	33.756.307	115,4
1780a	31.362.272	23.712.786	75,6
1782b	149.580.483	66.506.035	44,5
1783b	107.918.789	98.195.641	91,0
1784c	137.717.477	111.639.966	81,1
1785c	177.595.814	125.478.171	70,7
1786d	174.832.000	132.808.000	76,0
1787d	192.107.000	140.475.879	73,1
1788d	212.738.363	157.733.873	74,1
1789d	218.418.505	160.501.428	73,5
1790d	233.791.851	173.968.134	74,4
Average	146.993.879	105.648.905	71,9

a: Cacao + coffee + indigo + sugar
 b: Id. + rocou and ginger
 c: Id. + coton
 d: All
 J. Tarrade, p. 752.

Re-exports went mainly to Northern Europe. Holland accounted for about 40% of sugar from Nantes, Germany about 35%, the other countries sharing the rest. Trade between Brittany and the Nordic countries did not consist only of colonial products. The province produced salt, which since the Middle Ages was exported in large quantities to the North Sea and the Baltic. In modern times, salt from the French Atlantic coast was an essential element in the organization of Dutch navigation in Europe. The Nantes region also produced wine and brandy. A part of the Breton vineyards had been planted by the Dutch to supply their demand for brandy.

Conclusion

Brittany was thus an example of a maritime province connected with all continents and whose trade circuits show the globalization of trade in the eighteenth century.

The canvas and fishing products used to buy American silver enabled the province to participate in Asian and American trade. Then, the French authorities chose Lorient as the center for the French East India Company because of all the advantages of the province and the activity of its merchants and shipowners. As a consequence, in Europe, Brittany had connections with all the great exchanges with the Levant, the Baltic and even England, France's main enemy.

Some merchants of Saint-Malo, Lorient and Nantes benefited from these multiple activities to build vast fortunes. They gave birth to a capitalist group investing in all fields. Most of them incorporated the nobility and became gentry-merchants.

Thus, Brittany is a model of economic transformation in early modern times according to the ideas of Braudel with the opening of the province to all continents and the globalization of its trade and the birth of capitalism world-wide and the accumulation of considerable capital.

Notes

- 1) Fernand Braudel, *La dynamique du capitalisme*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. Champs, 1988.
- 2) Jean Tanguy, *Quand la toile va. L'industrie toilière bretonne du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle*, Rennes, Apogée, 1994.
- 3) Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris, manuscrit 4068, mémoire de Patoulet. See Michel Morineau, *Incroiables gazettes et fabuleux métaux*, Paris-Cambridge, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, 1985, pp. 326–343.
- 4) André Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo: une élite négociante au temps de Louis XIV*, Saint-Malo, L'Ancre de Marine, 1991 (réédition PUR, Rennes, 2012).
- 5) Didier Ozanam, « La colonie française de Cadix au XVIII^e siècle d'après un document inédit (1777) », *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 1968-4, 4, pp. 259–348.
- 6) Charles de La Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale*, Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris, 1962, 3 vol: André Lespagnol, op.cit.
- 7) Jean Delumeau, *Histoire de la Bretagne*, Toulouse, Privat, 1969 (chapter written by Jean Meyer, p. 265).
- 8) Erik Wilhem Dahlgren, *Les relations commerciales et maritimes entre la France et les côtes de l'océan Pacifique: Le commerce de la mer du Sud jusqu'à la paix d'Utrecht*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1909.
- 9) Claude Nières, *Histoire de Lorient*, Toulouse, Privat, 1988.
- 10) Philippe Haudrère, *La compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vol., Second edition, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2005.
- 11) Pierrick Pourchasse, *Le commerce du Nord. Les échanges commerciaux entre la France et l'Europe septentrionale au XVIIIe siècle*, Rennes, PUR, 2006.
- 12) Philippe Haudrère, Gérard Le Bouédec, *La Compagnie des Indes*, Histoire, Editions Ouest-France, 2010.
- 13) Jaap R. Bruijn and Femme S. Gaastra, *Ships, Sailors and Spices. East India Companies and Their Shipping the 16th, 17th and 18th Century*, Amsterdam, NEHA, 1993.
- 14) Philippe Haudrère, op.cit., p. 279.
- 15) Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident : le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle: 1719–1833*, 2 vol, Paris, SEVPEN, 1964.
- 16) Hoh-Cheung et Lorna H. Mui, « Smuggling and the British Tea Trade before 1784 », *The American Historical Review*, vol. 74, 1-1968, p. 44.

- 17) Rupert Charles Jarvis, "Illicit trade with the Isle of Man, 1671–1765", *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, vol. 58, 1945–6, pp. 245–267.
- 18) Louis Dermigny, *op.cit.*, p. 666.
- 19) Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises au XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vol. (1. Nantes—2. Ports autres que Nantes), Paris, L'Harmattan, 1984.
- 20) Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: l'évolution du régime de l'Exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972.