

*The Revival of Sea Trade – the Port of Marseille and its
Cross-Cultural Mercantile Collaborations in the Early
Modern Period*

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In the year 1599, the city of Marseille established its Chamber of Commerce in order to effectively regulate and administrate trade and more precisely to address its declining seaborne commerce in the Mediterranean. From its foundation in 600BC as a Greek colony, Marseille was a key Mediterranean port and remained so when the city eventually became a French territory in 1484. In 1536, France signed its first capitulations with the Ottomans, which provided Marseille with an unprecedented trade advantage in the Ottoman trading posts. However, by the mid 16th century, several factors resulted in a steady decline of French trade in the Mediterranean. An increasing number of Northern Europeans, such as the British, and the Dutch, negotiated their own Ottoman peace treaties with commercial advantages. Second, Mediterranean cities, in general, were facing competition from the Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade routes. And finally, the Italian port cities, in particular Livorno, made their ports free of duty and invited foreign merchants to help stimulate their economy.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the French Crown and Marseille’s merchant aristocracy followed the Italian example and compromise upon making Marseille’s port “free of duty”. This paper focuses on how Marseille utilized its “free port” and mercantile networks to rejuvenate its Mediterranean trade. The “*affranchissement*” of the port through the *Edict of 1669* and the *urbanization* of Marseille, were both products of collaboration and cooperation of not only municipal leaders and the Crown, but also of individual merchants. The city’s existing mercantile networks in the Levant and Barbary were revived through the restructuring of commercial institutions, by improving the city’s infrastructure and by offering favorable trade privileges and liberties to foreign and local merchants.

The “free port” was not a concept unique to Marseille. In the latter part of the 16th century, Italian cities such as Livorno competed with Marseille through their “free ports” while foreign merchants paid a 20% custom on shipments that arrived at the port of Marseille. Colbert, minister of Finance to Louis XIV, insisted that France needed a central government and a Mediterranean city to concentrate on commerce. He believed that, “Commerce [was] the most appropriate way to reconcile with different nations and to maintain [...] good and mutual correspondence...” and that the port of Marseille because of its history in seaborne-trade was to be an essential part of this mercantilist policy.[1] If Marseille was to accommodate the anticipated increase in trade and to attract capable foreign merchants, there was a need to physically restructure the city and to encourage commerce through incentives.[2] In 1666, an urbanization project was in motion to create a new neighborhood for “the naval and other royal personnel” in order to protect ships that left for the Mediterranean. The goal was to also facilitate the circulation of people and goods through larger boulevards and improved port facilities and to attract prominent and experienced merchants to conduct business.[3] To ensure safe commercial conduct, the merchants could store and distribute goods in the newly built or improved shipyards and warehouses after the *Bureau of Health* inspected the shipments.[4] In exchange for trade privileges, such as monetary support to merchants who acquired large ships suitable for sea trade, and removing certain custom fees, merchants had to abide by a revised Merchant Code of Conduct, regulated by the Chamber of Commerce and the consuls.[5]

For merchants who took long journeys to the Mediterranean, the *Edict of 1669* was extremely useful, enabling them to further expand their networks in the Mediterranean in the next few decades. This was because the *Edict* focused on encouraging local merchants to invest in seaborne trade and inviting foreign merchants to take part in France’s commerce through trade privileges and custom fee exemptions,[6] stating that,

“... we are pleased that the foreigners and other persons of all nations and qualities can enter [the city...] with their vessels and cargoes [...and...] load and unload, to stay there, to shop, to store, and to leave by sea freely whenever they wish[ed], without being required to pay no entry fees there by sea.”[7]

This Duty-free entry was an exemption toward goods brought from the regions of the Levant, Barbary, and Persian territories, with a promise of protection, even in periods of war. The *Edict* also extended the possibility of naturalized citizenship to foreign merchants, a status which would ensure that they would not be harassed or abused by French trade policies and could conduct trade freely.[8] The settlement rights were based on marriage to a Marseillais or property purchase or conducting commerce.[9]

In order for the “free port” to function effectively, the participation of both Marseillais

and foreign merchants was necessary. The most active and major trading posts were Aleppo, Salonica, Smyrna, Istanbul, Cairo and Alexandria. In the Barbary coast, Tripoli, Algiers and Tunis. Merchants traded in silk, cotton, indigo, sugar, coffee, firewood, coral and a number of other colonial and oriental goods such as goats hair, mohair, program yarn carpets, valonia, raisins and dried fig. Merchants' participation was stimulated in two ways: by inviting foreign merchants to settle in Marseille and take part in sea-borne commerce and by encouraging Marseillais merchants to trade in the Ottoman *trading posts*, through reduced trade fees and collaboration with foreign merchants.

Alexandria for instance was one of the main ports in the Levant in the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, between 6.3 to 17 percent of all goods that came to Marseille from the Ottoman Empire were passed on through the port of Alexandria.^[10] A number of elite merchant families of Marseille were active in Alexandria and their main associates were usually Jewish merchants. Louis Remuzat of Marseille collaborated with several Jewish families who traded between Livorno and Alexandria, namely, the Nas, Ergas, Silvera, Pignero and Albuquerque families. The Livornais Jews had a privileged position in Alexandria because they enjoyed protection from both the French consuls through the capitulation agreements and by the Duke of Tuscany through the Charter of Livornina. In addition, foreign merchants, such as Sephardi Jews often took advantage of the lower custom fee of 5% offered to French merchants. As a policy, this reduced custom fee was not extended to Sephardi merchants.^[11] On August 4, 1688, a "royal order" informed Marseille that the privileges which the Crown granted to his subjects who traded in Egypt failed to work properly. The order further stated that some of the established Frenchmen allowed foreign merchants to enjoy the same liberties when they let them trade under their names.^[12] On one occasion, Jewish merchants, Abraam et Izaak Nav, Moize and Jacob Franco Albuquerque, Emanuel Ergas, and Jacob and Joseph Pignero, petitioned to release their confiscated goods from Marseille's infirmaries, because they were accused of using Remuzat's name, who was a resident of Marseille. Two other merchants, Benevento and Raphaely from Alexandria it appears, sent the goods to the address of Remuzat in Marseille under his name, but in fact, they belonged to the above Jewish merchants.^[13] The intendent of commerce ordered the confiscation of the goods and stated that the shipment was sent under false pretenses so that Remuzat could sell the goods for the Jewish merchants.^[14] By August it becomes clear that Remuzat in fact had several connections with Livornais merchants and was a liaison between Marseille and the Levant to sell Livornais and Levantine merchandise on behalf of his contacts. Remuzat had corresponded earlier with both Benevento and Raphaely in Alexandria when the latter wanted assurance that the shipment would be handled accordingly for Remuzat's contacts in Livorno.^[15]

The consul reports, notarial records and also shipping disputes filed at Marseille's *Cham-*

bre of Commerce, as part of the “free port” trade administration, speak to the complexity of relationships and the manner within which merchants took advantage of trade privileges to expand their mercantile networks. Recently, scholars have attempted to demonstrate that Crown policies in conjunction with municipal cooperation enabled Marseille to dominate Levant trade; thus, contributing to the economic wellbeing of the absolutist state of Louis XIV. While this assessment is valid to a degree, this argument ignores that the “free-port” and its success was a product of collaboration and cooperation of not only municipal leaders and the Crown, but also of individual merchants in Marseille and across the Mediterranean.

References

- [1] ACCM D23, « Franchise de la ville et du port de Marseille ».
- [2] William H Sewell, *Structure and Mobility: the Men and Women of Marseille, 1820-1870* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985), 102.
- [3] AM, DD152, « Articles et Conditions » article VIII. Sharon Kettering. *French Society, 1589-1715* (Edinburgh: Person Education Limited, 2001), 51.
- [4] Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce*, 122.
- [5] AM HH 452, « De par le roi, Henry De Maynier , de Forbin, Comte, 11 Mai 1669 » ; ACCM C88 « droit de cottimo » Oppede 1670 ; Rambert, *Histoire du Commerce de Marseille* Tome V, 20.
- [6] HH 452, « Edit pour la franchissement du port a Marseille, 1669 ».
- [7] ACCM G6, “Edit Franchissement”, AM HH 452, “Edit”
- [8] ACCM G6, “Edit Franchissement”, AM HH 452, “Edit”
- [9] ACCM G5, « Juif à Marseille »
- [10] Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce*, 119; ACCIM I33 (For instance, from a total value of 19,348,040 livres in 1749, 3,224,377 came through Alexandria, just second to Smyrna)
- [11] Bashan, *Contacts between Jews in Smyrna and the Levant Company*, 57
- [12] ACCIM - J1584 (« de Par le Roi » 4/Aug/88).
- [13] ACCM J1584 (case of Remuzat and merchants)
- [14] ACCM J1584 (shipment case memo of July 30, 1699)
- [15] ACCM J1584 (Aug and sept memo)