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# The Shipwreck of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth*, 1755

Marine Jaouen  
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*In November 1755, the Swedish merchant vessel, the Jeanne-Élisabeth was driven ashore by a storm on the coast of Palavas-les-flots, in Southern France. The ship left Cadiz for Marseilles carrying wheat and 24,000 piastres. Despite many attempts, the ship and the cargo could not be saved. In 2007, the French authorities and archeologists learned about the pillage of the site. Five excavation campaigns and an excellent state of preservation of the remains provided an important contribution to our understanding of maritime communities in the context of global trade that took place in the 18th century between the American colonies, Northern Europe and the Western Mediterranean.*

## Context of the Discovery and Archival Documents

In November 1755, the Swedish merchant vessel, the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* was driven ashore by a storm on the coast of Palavas-les-flots, in Southern France. Leaving Cadiz, the ship was bound for Marseille with a cargo of wheat and 24,000 Spanish coins (*piastres*). It was the pillage of this site in 2006 and 2007 that led the *Département des recherches archéologiques subaquatiques et sous-marines* (DRASSM) to carry out a preliminary survey of the wreck in 2008. Resting at a depth of 5 m, it lies three hundred meters off the beach of *Maguelonne*, on the coast of *Languedoc*, near Montpellier, France. Following this survey, the DRASSM decided to conduct an exhaustive excavation of the wreck. DRASSM archaeologist Patrick Grandjean directed the first four campaigns from 2008 to 2011. Marine Jaouen and Andrea Poletto ran this Research Project since 2012 (Grandjean 2010, 2011, 2012; Sadania and Chouzenoux 2010; Jaouen et Poletto 2012, 2013).

In 2007 the investigation conducted by the DRASSM and French customs authorities led to the seizure of several hundreds of objects illegally taken from the site by looters. The nature and the chronology of the artefacts recovered at that time permitted instantaneous confirmation of the identification hypothesis put forth during the investigation. The plundered wreck is that of the Swedish merchantman *Jeanne-Élisabeth*, lost in a storm the night of 14 – 15 November 1755.

The search for and subsequent pillage of this wreck stemmed from the discovery by unscrupulous divers of archives precisely recounting the circumstances of the sinking of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth*. These documents also provide information on the vessel's cargo, a shipload of wheat intended for the Roux family, *Marseillais* bankers, associated with Swiss buyers. The archives also specify that the ship transported 24,360 silver *piastres*, hidden

in the wheat (Archives de la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Marseille-Provence [ACCIMP], folder L IX 410).

Sailing from Cádiz (Spain) on 10 October 1755, the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* was transporting its cargo and a few passengers to Marseilles when, disabled, she was thrown by a storm onto sandbars located 150 m from shore. The deck was very rapidly submerged, but the crew were able to escape by taking refuge aloft until being rescued. Immediately notified of the sinking, the Roux family commissioned a salvage team to try to recover the cargo of silver coins. But witnesses recount that a succession of storms over the entire winter of 1755 prevented the carpenters from intervening effectively on the wreck. Furthermore, the ship proved to be extremely sturdy; axes and saws were inadequate for cutting-up the boat. However, after each storm, the salvors gathered on the beach wooden crates containing cochineal, turpentine, tobacco, and even the passengers' effects. Despite the port side being partially torn from the wreck on 30 November, the masts remained in place until March 1756, the date on which the salvors undertook their recuperation along with the anchors and the cannons. Salvage attempts continued until 5 July 1756. The thickness of the sediment that covered the vessel was then estimated at one toise (ca. 2 m), which justified abandoning the work, as the expenses incurred for the salvage of the cargo would be exorbitant, "*en pure perte*" because "*n'y a nul espoir de desengraver cette carcasse*" (in pure loss... there was no hope of extricating this skeleton), (Archives du Département de l'Hérault [ADH], 4 B 302, and 5 M 96. Montpellier, France).

## Historic Context

The sinking of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* took place within the broader context of the smouldering conflict between France and Great Britain dating from the War of the

Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle of 18 October 1748. The Seven Years' War (1755–1763), which broke out in France officially in 1756 just after the sinking of the vessel, had as a backdrop the expansionist, ideological and commercial ambitions animating these two powers at the time. From 1756 to 1763, more than sixteen kingdoms, duchies and electorates were engaged in this war that is often considered a sort of First World War because most European countries and their colonies appear on the list of warring parties.

In 1755, the finances of the Kingdom of France were strained by several years of war and the fleet of the French king, Louis XV could no longer rival that of the king of England, Georges II, who had mastery of the seas. English ships relentlessly harassed French merchant vessels whose cargos they sought to intercept. The island of Menorca was then a British possession and provides a basis of primary importance in this context (Dull 2009). To circumvent this literal but unstated English blockade, the French, who needed silver from Spanish America to monetize their trade, appealed to Northern European ships, particularly Swedish, to transport Spanish *piastres* into France. The archives from the port of Marseilles (ACCIMP, L IX 1139 *Connaissance des marchandises entrées à Marseille en provenance d'Espagne – Cadix (1749–1790)*) attest to the importance of this commerce,

which between 1749 and 1790 united this major port of southern France with Cádiz, the obligatory outlet in Europe for commerce with Spanish America. In the archives of Marseilles only one shipload of silver, with 32,000 *piastres*, was superior to that of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* (ACCIMP, folder L IX 1139).

## Archaeological Data

One particular difficulty in the excavation of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* is also the factor that ensured the exceptional preservation of the wreck, namely the heavy silting of the site.

### The Hull

Excavations have revealed that the starboard half-hull of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* is preserved from the keel to the second deck along a north-south axis (Figure 1). The preserved length is 25 m from the apron to the stern deadwood, and the width from the keel to the upper deck is 5 m. At the centre of the hull, the height between the keel and the first deck is 3.40 m and the height between the lower and upper decks ranges between 1.35 m and 2.10 m. Only the tops of the floor timbers are visible, the planking concealing the rest of the frames (Jaouen and Poletto 2012, 2013; Rieth 2014). A "window" was nevertheless created with a hydraulic saw in

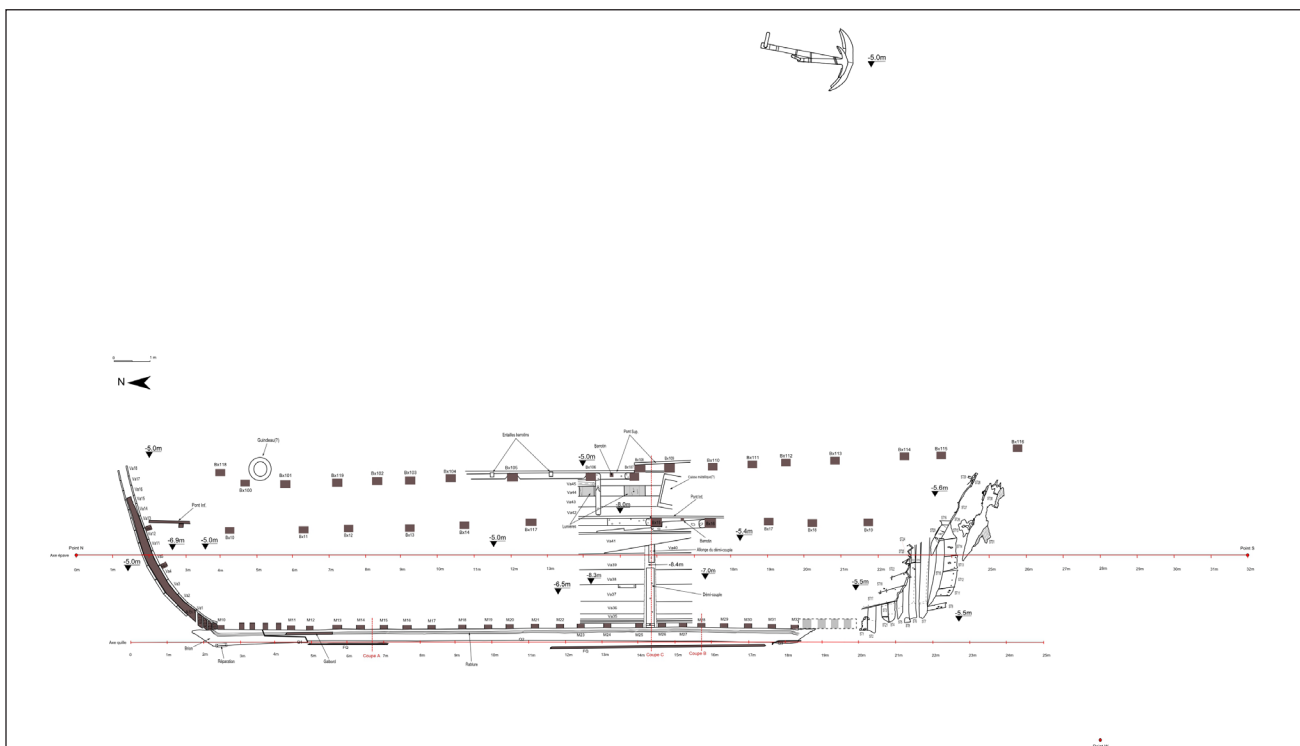


FIGURE 1. OVERALL SITE PLAN (DRAWING BY ANDREA POLETTA, 2013).

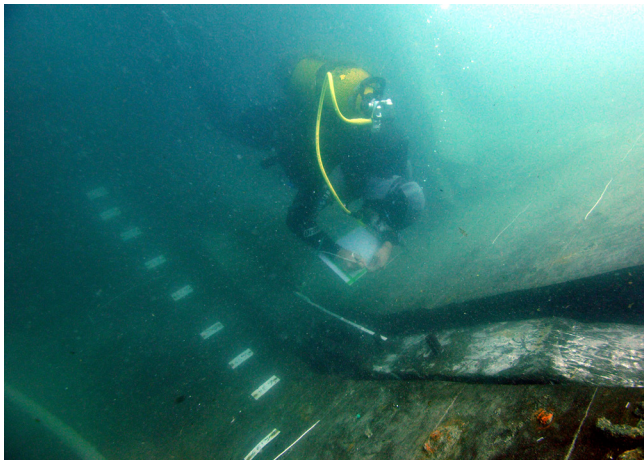


FIGURE 2. SUBMARINE VIEW OF THE EXCAVATION  
(PHOTO BY LAURENT BOREL/CCJ, 2011)

order to permit observation of the frame assemblies (Figure 2). Eric Rieth (director of research at CNRS) sees some similarities between the construction of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* and Dutch shipbuilding methods from the second half of the 17th century (Eric Rieth 2014). However, this remains to be verified. Two marks are also observed on the ceiling planking. The first, engraved in a piece of wood partially preserved, is a series of Roman numerals. These may be trademarks of carpenters or signs of timber re-use (Figure 3). The second mark is made with chalk or white paint, and evokes the shape of an arrow. Future planned fieldwork excavation and architectural analysis should result in a better understanding of the vessel's construction and design.

### *The Cargo*

Archives (ADH, 4 B 302, and 5 M 96) document the nature of the cargo loaded in Cádiz: 200 barrels



FIGURE 3. ROMAN NUMERALS ON A PIECE OF LOWER CEILING PLANK, WHITE MARK ON THE INNER SIDE OF A CEILING PLANK (PHOTO BY TEDDY SEGUIN, 2008).

of wheat, 8 barrels of cochineal, 3 of indigo, 14 cases of turpentine, 3 of Spanish tobacco and 24,360 silver coins (Figure 4). To date, only the *piastres* and the wheat have been confirmed archaeologically (Grandjean 2011; Jaouen and Poletto 2012, 2013).

### *Furnishings and Galley Gear*

The *Jeanne-Élisabeth* delivered rich furnishings: a silver cabinet contained plates and soup plates, platters, forks and spoons. This dishware, usually stamped, bears the tax markings established by ordinance of the king of Spain by the Mexican assayers, such as Diego Gonzales de la Cueva, responsible for the quality of gold, silver and certain alloys for liturgical and culinary objects (Munoz de Amador 1755). The presence of glass wine bottles attest to the superior quality of the wine on board. Some of these bottles came from Sweden. Two small Chinese export porcelain bowls of a type called "*à ventre de biche*" (light orange in colour) were discovered in the wreck. Together they create a luxurious image of the Captain's table. This impression of a certain degree of refinement is also supported by the presence of a coffee grinder. At the time of the sinking, the distribution and consumption of coffee in Northern Europe was still limited to the best tables, even though signs of its democratisation were emerging (Braudel 1979:213-223).

More conventionally Spanish jars, Rhenish stoneware, ceramics from Languedoc, and a copper alloy cauldron were discovered on the site. They epitomise the cuisine intended for the officers' table or for feeding the sailors (Grandjean 2011; Jaouen and Poletto 2012, 2013).

Personal items were also found. They indicate the presence not only of sailors but also passengers including one woman: leather shoes, combs and belt buckles, a hatpin, smoking pipes from Gouda (Holland), and a book. Among these objects, 2 gold coins deserve mention, because they were not part of the cargo but rather belonged to one of the passengers or crew member. One of them was minted in 1740, during the reign of Philip V of Spain and its value is 4 escudos. The other is 1 ducat minted in 1742 and intended for commercial trade within the Holy Roman Empire (Krause, Mishler 2002:1001).

### *Armaments, Rigging and Objects Related to Navigation*

At the present time, the armaments intended for defence of the vessel include the following: 2 canons, 5 pistols, 7 rifles with their respective projectiles and 3 swords.





FIGURE 4. SELECTION OF ARCHEOLOGICAL ITEMS (PHOTO BY PHILIPPE GROSCAUX, CCJ, 2009; STÉPHANE CAVILLON, DRASSM, 2012).

Two anchors were found about 10 m east of the hull. Marine Sadania et Christelle Chouzenoux (2010) conducted their studies. They are characterized by wood stock (now gone) and the presence of rings. Their theoretical weight was estimated using total length depending known for warships tables. Thus the weight of the smallest (1.52 m) would be about 110 French Livres and the largest (3 m) of 884 French Livres (Sadania et Christelle 2010). Once again, the archives complete the excavation data gathered until now, and provide information on a third anchor. The latter, abow anchor, logically position the poop of the ship, weighed about 1,400 French Livres to 3.30 m-long. It is part of pieces recovered by salvors during the winter of 1756 (ADH 4 B 302, and 5 M 96). The removal of the two anchors found on site in 2010 revealed unusual cables linking them to the ship. The cordage composition and their extension under the sand in the direction of the centre of the hull leads Damien Sanders (2012) to attribute their presence to salvage operations of the masts in 1756. Once cut, the rigging was carried by the current until the anchors arrested it. It is believed that the rest of the standing rigging should still be found on the bottom (Sanders 2012).

## Continuation of the Excavation and Conclusion

After 5 years of fieldwork, only a third of the hull has been excavated. It appears that the looting only affected the stern section of the wreck. Indeed, the stratigraphy is very chaotic in this area, artefacts are absent unlike intrusive and contemporary objects. For the moment, even though the looters claim to have not recovered all the cargo detailed by the archives, no the Spanish *piastres* was found during the excavation.

Regarding the study of the material culture and principles of assembling the hull, the research continues, especially for manufacture of sails and rigging, still promising great discoveries. The furnishings and gear and the personal effects of the sailors and passengers reflect the geopolitical context of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth*. The production sites of the material culture indicate commerce on an international scale. The objects brought to light permit the identification of the port areas where the ship set sail.

The state of preservation of the hull is exceptional, to the extent that it greatly slowed down the advancement of the excavation. During future campaigns, the hull should be dismantled in order to observe the assembly of the floor timbers to the keel. The aim is to highlight a technical signatures that will perhaps establish the architectural type to which the *Jeanne-Élisabeth* belongs, and also possibly indicate the location of its construction.

A systematic photographic coverage is provided for generating a 3D reconstruction of the hull. In France, this process has often been implemented but never on a hull in elevation like that of the *Jeanne-Élisabeth*. Finally, a virtual reconstruction of the sinking will assist in understanding the mechanisms relevant to the taphonomy of the sinking. This data should be illuminated by the account of the sinking provided by the archives.

To date, this wreck constitutes the sole evidence of the monetary commerce in the Mediterranean for the mid-18th century. Archival sources bring much to the comprehension of seamanship and also clarify the nationality of the ship and thus the neutrality of its flag at the time of sinking. Undoubtedly, this wreck will be listed in the future among reference sites on the navigation, the materiel culture and the commerce of small tonnage vessels in the Mediterranean during the 18th century.

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