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Sugar and Spice. Disaster on the Seine in the 16th century

Malcolm Walsby

► **To cite this version:**

| Malcolm Walsby. Sugar and Spice. Disaster on the Seine in the 16th century. 2023. hal-04188952

HAL Id: hal-04188952

<https://hal.science/hal-04188952>

Submitted on 27 Aug 2023

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Sugar and Spice.

Disaster on the Seine in the 16th century

26 July 2023

The movement of goods during the Renaissance depended heavily on boats. Waterways were essential to trade both within countries and internationally, but this was not without risk, especially for items that needed to be kept dry.

For northern France, Rouen was a vital port. It was not only an important city in its own right, it also served as a gateway for Paris. It was here that goods were transferred from seafaring ships onto smaller crafts that made their way further inland. But Rouen was already some way from the open seas and boats had to snake their way up the Seine to the city, navigating twists and turns and treacherous sandbanks.



Rouen in 1525 with sea ships and river boats either side of the main bridge, digitised by [Rotomagus](#)

Two documents centring on the same event in the late sixteenth century show us the difficulties faced by merchants – especially those with expensive cargos who faced multiple different threats...

In 1595, a ship known as the *Gold Falcon* left Rotterdam for Rouen with some luxury goods aboard. The captain was ‘Girard Juisse Clost’, or perhaps more accurately Geeraerd Joos Clost (the French notaries having undoubtedly gallicised his name), an inhabitant of the Dutch city. He had accepted to ferry a consignment that had been given to him by a local merchant named ‘Peters Leonart Suais’ for David de Smith in Rouen. Exchanges with Rotterdam were common by the end of the sixteenth century. The city was expanding rapidly thanks to its role as one of the major sea ports of Holland. Its population almost quadrupled between 1514 and 1622 when it reached nearly 20,000 inhabitants.¹

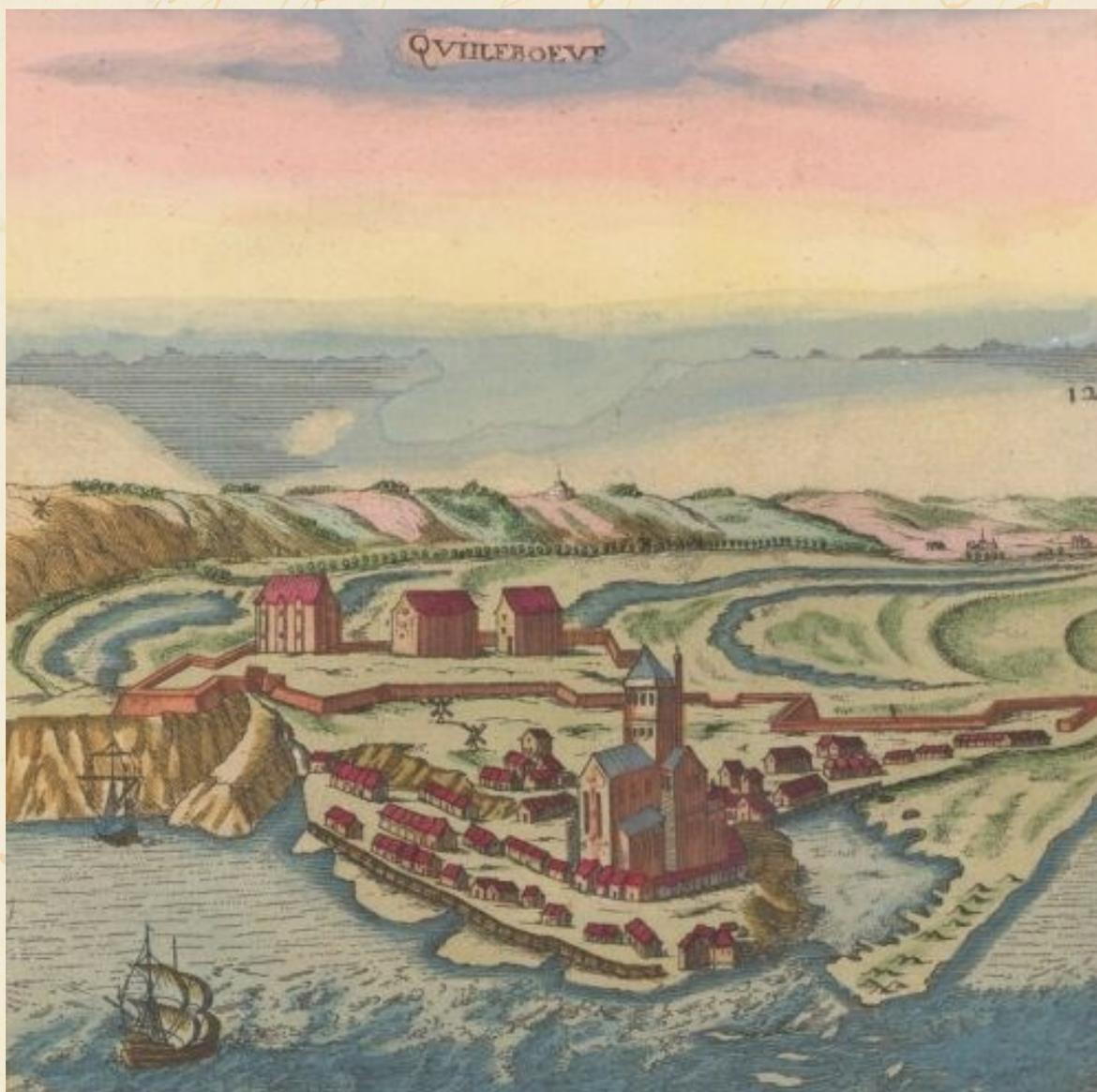


Rotterdam in 1612, engraving by Willem Janszoon Blaeu and Johannes Janssonius, digitised by the [Rijksmuseum](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/)

¹ Marjolein ‘T Hart, ‘Cities and Statemaking in the Dutch Republic, 1580-1680’, *Theory and Society*, XVIII (1989), pp. 663-687 at page 665.

The first part of the voyage seemingly went well, but as the ship began to make its way up the Seine disaster struck. As the boat passed [Quillebeuf](#), near the mouth of the river, it hit a sand bank that had been moved by the flow of water, leaving the *Gold Falcon* stranded. Worse still, the impact had caused a hole to form and the ship was in danger of sinking. Water gushed in and damaged the cargo, in some cases beyond repair.

The notaries of Rouen took down the statement of two Flemish merchants living in the city: Francoys Henry and David de Smith – the very man to whom the consignment was sent. They were clearly on the look out for the ship and its precious holdings as they testified that they were in Quillebeuf on the day the ship hit the sand. They confirmed what had happened and indicated that many goods were soaked. But their deposition concerned one thing in particular: a barrel of sugar.



Quillebeuf in 1638 from a drawing by Christophe Tassin engraved by Michel van Lochom and digitised by the [Rijksmuseum](#).

Sugar was a precious commodity during the Renaissance. It was not new to Europe, where it had been used for centuries, but it was imported from warmer climes, such as India or the Middle-East, before being later planted in the Americas. The cost of such travel ensured that it remained expensive – sugar was taxed twice as much as olive oil, for instance, when it was imported into Paris.²

Before being shipped, it was transformed into sugar loaves that were then put into bales or barrels for the sea journey. The *Gold Falcon* had one such barrel, described as a ‘boucault’, a very light white wooden barrel. With hindsight, using a relatively flimsy contraption may have been a mistake. The sugar was described as having “completely melted away, with nothing left but pieces of woods, cords, straw and paper” that had been used to wrap it.



The making of sugar loaves, circa 1580— a drawing by Jan van der Straet engraved by Philips Galle – digitised by the [British Museum](#).

² *Tableau contenant la moderation des prix que le Roy entend estre levez sur les bleds, grains, vins, bestails, et marchandises passans et entrans dans laville et fauxbourgs de Paris* (Paris: Frédéric Morel, 1594), [USTC 35226](#), p. 6 – the brochure has been digitised by [Gallica](#).

The complete disappearance of the sugar was particularly problematic: it was impossible to prove that the consignment had genuinely been damaged rather than stolen. Thankfully, Smith and Henry had been on hand to witness the breaking open of the barrel and the complete absence of sugar – and later declare the loss formally to the notaries.

Sugar was not the only item to be declared missing after the ship had run into the sand bank. A second document mentions the loss of another expensive commodity: pepper.

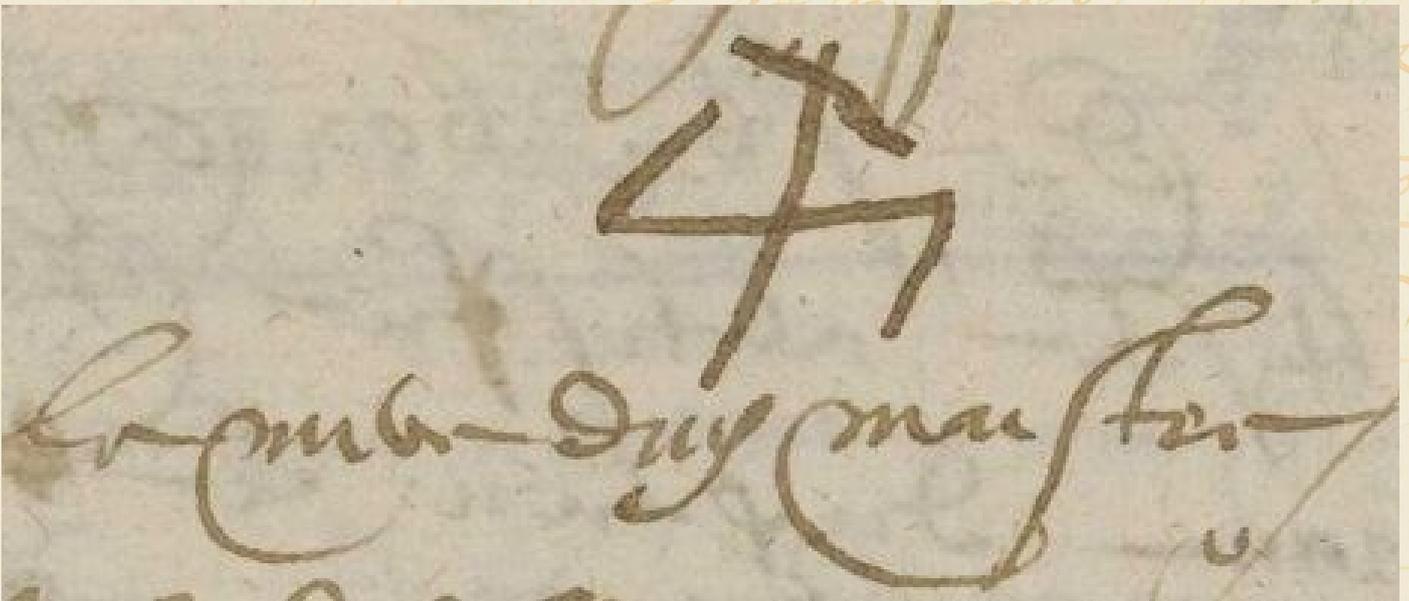
Pepper was far more water resistant and unlikely to simply dissolve as had the sugar. The presence in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam of around 700g of peppercorns retrieved from the wreck of the ‘Witte Leeuw’ or White Lion, that sunk before 1613, stands testament to its ability to survive water damage.



Pepper from the wreck of another the Dutch ship, before 1613, preserved in the [Rijksmuseum](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en).

With the cargo safely taken ashore, they checked on the spices that had been uploaded in Rotterdam, namely two bales of round pepper and two barrels of cloves. Once more, some of the original consignment was missing, though this time the water was not to blame. They noted that there was a hole in one of the bales of pepper and another in one of the barrels of cloves... The contents had mysteriously disappeared.

Speaking through an interpreter – the courtier of the Flemish merchants in Rouen – the captain of the ship had no doubt who was to blame. The locals who had helped ‘save’ the goods had clearly taken it upon themselves to ensure that their pains were rewarded... in pepper and cloves!



The mark of the captain of the ship in the archives of Rouen



The documents on the missing sugar and spices are preserved one after the other in the [Archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime](#) in Rouen and bear the same date: 24 April 1595. They are kept at pressmark 2E1/614 f. 161v to 162v. Here are transcriptions of the main part of the originals:

On the loss of sugar:

« Furent presens Francoys Henry et David de Smith, marchands flamens demeurans en la parroisse St Eloy de ceste ville de Rouen, lesquelz de leur bon gré ont dict, attesté, certiffié et tesmoigné pour verité par les foy et sermens de leurs corps que environ le cinq ou sixiesme jour de ce present mois d'avril eulx estans à Quillebeuf pour les affers de leurs marchandises ilz verrent comme le navire nommé le Faulcon d'or dont est maistre Girard Jousse Clost de la ville de Rosterdam pais de Hollande estant eschoué devant ledit lieu de Quillebeuf à l'occasion de l'eau qui avoit miné le sable lequel navire faisée son retour dudit lieu de Rosterdam pour venir descharger en ceste ville de Rouen et que de quoy les marchandises qui estoient dedant furent en la pluspart mouillées et gastées et entre aultres ung boucault de sucre lequel a esté tout fondu n'y restant rien que la fustaille, cordons, paille et pappiers qui y estoient et le disoient savoir lesdits attestans pour avoir esté presens à veoir deffoncée ledit boucault de laquelle presente attestation ledit maistre dessus nommé a requis ».

On the pepper and the cloves:

« Fut presens Girard Jousse Clost, demeurant en la ville de Rosterdam pais de Hollande, maistre du navire nommé le Faulcon d'or, lequel n'entendant pas le langage francoys à me parlant par Jehan Pasquier, son interprete courtier pour les Flamens en ceste ville de Rouen, present, disant bien parler et entendre les langaiges francois et flamen, de son bon gré et volonté a dict, attesté, notifié, recongnu et déclaré que venant dudit lieu de Rosterdam avec sondit navire chargé entre aultres choses ung pacquer dans lequel estoient enveloppées deux balles de poivre rond et deux barilz dans lequel y avoit du clos de giroffle avec des rompes, le tout adressant au sieur David de Smith par Peters Lenart Suais marchand dudit lieu de Rosterdam qui l'avoit chargé et dans ledit navire audit lieu de Rosterdam que ledit navire estans eschoué à Quillebeuf à l'occasion de l'eau qui avoit miné le sable, iceluy navire creva et les marchandises qui y estoient chargées mouillées et gastées en pluspart mesmes celles appartenantes audit Smith et le disoit savoir ledit maistre par la quand estant lesdites marchandises deschargées en terre, il a veu qu'il y avoit un trou au fonds de l'un desdits boucaulx et ung trou dans l'une desdites balles de poivre à raison de quoy ledit maistre a oppinion qu'il y a eu de ladite marchandise prinse et desrobée par aucuns dudit lieu de Quillebeuf qui ont aidé à saulver icelle marchandise ».

Cite this article as: Malcolm Walsby, "Sugar and Spice. Disaster on the Seine in the 16th century," in *Renaissances: archives and discoveries*, 26 July 2023, <https://renarchives.hypotheses.org/1776>.