

The supercargo, a major figure in Marseille transoceanic trade with Asia (1771-1793)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the figure of the supercargo through the group of those who took on this role during travels to Asia in the last third of the 18th century on behalf of Marseille merchants and ship-owners. Until now, this embarked on ship agent and commissioner has never been the subject of specific studies, even though he was the soul of these commercial maritime expeditions and the profits they generated. After defining the function and presenting the texts that governed it, this research analyses the difficulties of supercargo work, whose activity was marked by a permanent tension between the particular instructions he received before the ship departure and the general objective of acting, during the voyage, to the best advantage of those who entrusted him with their interests. As the matter of fact the on-the-ground reality business often forced them to make choices contrary to the orders they received previously from the merchants and ship-owners. This text also seeks to draw up a group portrait of these men and to evaluate the extent of their remuneration. Finally, this work attempts to explain how these supercargos managed to take advantage of their function to become true businessmen, nevertheless without joining the upper echelon of the local community of merchants.

Keywords

Supercargo; captain; trade; law; Marseille; India; China.

Introduction

During the last third of the 18th century, the Marseille merchant shipowners were heavily engaged in transoceanic trade with Asia¹. The trend was primarily led by Protestants from the Alps and the southern Massif Central (Castrais, Rouergue and Languedoc Cévenol), whose activities have been analysed by Gaston Rambert, Louis Dermigny, Charles Carrière and Gilbert Buti, to name a few of the principal historians who have studied these men². Although they were expedition promoters, Audibert family, Baux brothers, Hugues family, Fesquet father and son, Jacques Rabaud, Rafinesque brothers, Jacques Seymandi and Solier family were not the only protagonists in this maritime trade with the East. The major Marseille merchants shipowner did not board their vessels to accompany their cargo and therefore needed contacts to manage their affairs from a distance. Like the practices in the Ports of the Levant, some used partners, managers or commissioners established in the nerve centres of Asian trade, such as Port-Louis in the Indian Ocean, Pondicherry on the Coromandel coast, Calcutta and Chandernagor in Bengal³. These contacts were however inadequate for maritime expeditions subjected to all kinds of hazards, frequenting ports that sometimes had no local support, involving continuous monitoring of commercial operations and constant strategic readjustments. To manage their interests in Asia, the merchant shipowners needed to rely on trusted representatives on board the ships.

These men were the supercargos. Until now, they have not been the subject of specific study, even though the success of maritime expeditions whose initial capital approached or exceeded one million *livres tournois* (Tours pounds) rested on their shoulders, and they were major figures in the Marseille transoceanic trade

¹ 192 expeditions between 1769 and 1792 according to Charles Carrière (C. Carrière, *Richesse du passé marseillais. Le port mondial au XVIII^e siècle*, Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Marseille-Provence, Marseille, 1979, p. 37). The author acknowledges warmly Gilbert Buti and Xavier Daumalin for their comments on the first draft of this text and Laurent Burrus for having provided documents kindly photographed from several archives in Switzerland.

² G. Rambert, *Histoire du commerce de Marseille. t. VI : Les colonies, 1660-1789*, Plon, Paris, 1959; L. Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes. Solier et Compagnie, 1781-1793*, S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1960, 2 volumes; C. Carrière, *Négociants marseillais au XVIII^e siècle. Contribution à l'étude des économies maritimes*, Institut historique de Provence, Marseille, 1973, 2 volumes; G. Buti, *Entre Levant et Ponant : d'une compagnie l'autre. Les frères Joseph et Georges Audibert, négociants de Marseille au XVIII^e siècle*, in G. Buti, A. Montenach, O. Raveux (eds.), *Chaînes et maillons du commerce, XVI^e-XIX^e siècle*, Presses universitaires de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 2023, pp. 23-40.

³ This, for example, was the case with Jacques Rabaud in the 1780s, represented by *Almaric, Coulon & Co* in Pondicherry and partner in *Eustache Vialars & Co* in Bengal (J. Neumuller, *Acteurs et réseaux ultramarins. Provençaux et Languedociens dans l'espace indien (seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle)*, Master II, Aix-Marseille University, dir. Gilbert Buti, 2013, t. I, pp. 87-88; Archives of the State of Geneva (hereafter AEG), Moulto archives, I.3, limited partnership *Eustache Vialars & Co*, 12 February 1785).

networks with Asia⁴. These trading organisations had two major differences from so-called “traditional” networks, which were defined around a centre with elements spread over several specific points. Firstly, the centre lost its ability to influence strategic decisions, the further away the ship sailed. Next, the supercargo was not a fixed point, but a moving representative with an uncertain itinerary, a situation requiring genuine delegation of decision-making powers.

The aim of this essay is therefore to examine these supercargos, through the Marseille group that worked on the Indian Ocean, India and China routes from 1771, the year of Jacques Rabaud's *Conquérant* expedition, the first ship to leave Marseille for Asia by transoceanic travel, up to 1793, when the maritime routes were closed during the revolutionary period following the war against the British. The topic will be developed in three stages. Firstly, we will focus on the definition of the role, the documents that govern it and the presentation of the men who took on this responsibility. We will then follow the supercargo at work, explaining the difficulties he encountered in fulfilling his mission and assessing his remuneration. Finally, we will examine the supercargo as a trader. All those who took on this role were traders and some, who enjoyed the most success, were even described as *négociants*, a word that was used at the time to define the upper echelon of the merchant community. We will therefore see whether the fact of having been a supercargo on the Asian routes was a stepping stone in changing scale and rising to the top of the Marseille merchant pyramid.

A role, the papers and the men

To explain the role of the supercargo precisely, let's start by describing what he did. The supercargo worked for the merchant shipowners or charterers, often referred to in 18th and 19th century texts as the mandators (*commettants* or *mandants* in French). He boarded the ship as a commercial agent for the voyage. His activity mainly consisted in receiving the freight price during the expedition, selling the shipping goods, purchasing the return goods, keeping accounts and submitting these to the people who commissioned him with these operations.

Power of attorney and commissioner

The role of a supercargo was undoubtedly a job in its own right, as performing the role required specific technical skill, often based - as we will see later - on a formative background and practical experience. To a certain extent, this role can

⁴ In 1786, it took a little over 23 *livres tournois* to obtain a sterling pound (G. C. Faipoult de Maisoncelle, *Situation actuelle des finances de la France et de l'Angleterre*, Briand, Paris, 1789, pp. 22 and 91).

also be compared to a profession, as the supercargo's status and agency are governed in several points by usages and obligations taken from some legal texts, in particular the articles concerning Captains in the Marine Order of 1681 and the Declaration of the King on navigation of French vessels of 21 October 1727⁵. The supercargo of a French vessel could not therefore be foreign, he gave orders to the Captain regarding the ship's itinerary and the length of the stopovers, he had to keep an up to date account book, day by day, initialled at the start by the ship owner or charterer, he was not authorised, unless specifically permitted, to trade on his own account during the voyage, and was notified of the courts settling any disputes that might concern him, i.e. the Admiralty if he was in dispute with the Captain, or the Consular court if the case was against his mandators⁶.

What was the status of the supercargo? In what way specifically was he an agent of the ship and cargo owners? The supercargo was above all an agent, an authorised representative. For a commercial expedition, his capacities for action were detailed in an official deed, a power of attorney signed before a notary, the effects of which ended once the ship completed its voyage. The mandate issued by *Laflèche, Rafinesque & Co* to Pierre Blancard for the expedition of the *Argonaute* to China in 1791 is an example of this type of document:

"In the year 1791 on 20th August [...] were present Messrs. Lafleche, Rafinesque & Co, merchants in the city of Marseille, owners of the vessel named the *Argonaute*, commanded by Captain Victor Chabert, having as its voyage destination the Isle de France [Mauritius] and China, & being about to depart; in which capacity they have established for their general and & special power of attorney Mr Pierre Blancard, supercargo of the said vessel, here present & accepting the office, to whom they give full powers to represent them and act in their name during the voyage, for everything related to the management of the vessel, the sale of the cargo, the purchase of the return goods & generally for everything that might be of interest to the ship, to present himself wherever required, and also to sell by treaty & at the best price possible the said vessel the *Argonaute*, if during its time in the Isle de France there occurs any war or hostility between France and any maritime power that prevents it, for fear of events, from continuing to its destination, release the sale price and give discharge for it [...]"⁷.

⁵ *Ordonnance de la marine du mois d'aoust 1681*, G. Cavelier, Paris, 1714 ; *Déclaration du Roy concernant la navigation des vaisseaux françois aux côtes d'Italie, d'Espagne, de Barbarie & aux Échelles du Levant donnée à Fontainebleau le 21 octobre 1727, enregistrée en Parlement à Aix et à Toulouse les 9 et 12 décembre 1727*, Imprimerie royale, Paris, 1727.

⁶ On these points, we can refer to: the "Supercargo" articles in the *Dictionnaire universel de commerce, banque, manufactures, douanes, pêche, navigation marchande, des lois et administration du commerce*, F. Buisson, Paris, t. 2 (M-Z), 1805, pp. 647-648; in J. Chérade de Montbrion, *Dictionnaire universel du commerce, de la banque et des manufactures*, Delahays, Paris,, t. IV, 1851, p. 862 and in C. Goujet, C.-B. Merger, J.-R. de Couder, *Dictionnaire de droit commercial, industriel et maritime*, Garnier, Paris, 1879, t. IV, p. 536.

⁷ Bouches-du-Rhône Departmental Archives (hereafter AD B.-d.-R.), 380 E 295, Notary Jean-Joseph Bonsignour, Power of attorney of *Laflèche, Rafinesque & Co* to Pierre Blancard, 20 August 1791.

The supercargo was also the holder of specific instructions given by his mandators before departure of the ship, directives and recommendations that he agreed to follow as closely as possible, by signing an specific agreement (*raccord* or *record* in French), a document generally drawn up as a private deed, in duplicate. Like the power of attorney, it was a synallagmatic contract, as it recorded the mutual obligations of both parties. The agreement specified the itinerary of the ship, the stopovers to be made or avoided, the places for buying and selling the various goods, with the conditions and prices desired for the transactions, the freight price if it was necessary to take external loads on the expedition during the route, the monetary exchange rates, the names and locations of relations of the interested parties, commissioners and brokers, with whom he can or must work during the stopovers... These documents, of which there are many examples in the annexes of Louis Dermigny's *Cargaisons indiennes*, particularly those signed by the Soliers and their supercargos Pierre-Antoine Icard and Nicolas Guient⁸, reflect both the departure strategy set out by the merchant shipowners and the margin of manoeuvre that the latter wished to give to their agent during the voyage. The agreement also set out the supercargo's remuneration for his mandate, which was in fact the percentage of the value of certain commercial operations. We will come back to this point later. The supercargo therefore received a commission for his work and as a consequence was a commissioner in the full sense of the term.

Group portrait

Who were these Marseille supercargos? What were their backgrounds? What were their careers before working on the Asian routes? These men must not be confused with the supercargos of the East India companies, which have been the subject of several studies, such as Charles de Constant and Pierre-Louis-Achille de Robien, who both worked for the *Compagnie française des Indes orientales* in Canton⁹. These men were employees, most frequently residing in the place of operations, in the trading posts, and were usually from the world of commerce. The supercargos on board the vessels came from the maritime world and had been trained and worked on ships. They were all Captains and shared an identical career path, with initial transoceanic experience on routes to the West Indies and Guiana, before going to Asia, as shown by the table below presenting the careers of the main Marseille supercargos who led expeditions to the Indian Ocean, continental India and China.

⁸ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, pp. 282-290, 313-319, 335-340 and 345-347.

⁹ L. Dermigny, *Les mémoires de Charles de Constant sur le commerce à la Chine*, S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1964; M.-S. De Vienne, *La Chine au déclin des Lumières : l'expérience de Charles de Constant*, éditions Champion, Paris, 2004 ; P. Huard, M. Wong, *Pierre-Louis-Achille, chevalier de Robien dit 'Le Chinois' (1736-1792)*, « Annales de Bretagne », 70 (1963), pp. 269-289 and H. Cordier, *Américains et Français à Canton au XVIII^e siècle*, « Journal de la société des américanistes » (1898-2), pp. 1-13.

Table 1: some of the careers of the supercargos for the Marseille maritime enterprise to Asia (1771-1793)¹⁰

Name	Place and date of birth	Father's occupation	Date admitted as Captain	Destinations before Asia	Principal expeditions to the Mascarenes, India and China with date of departure and shipowners
Pierre Blancard	Marseille (Provence), 1741	Captain	1770	West Indies	<i>Thétis</i> , 1771; <i>Gracieux</i> , 1773; <i>Duc-de-Duras</i> , 1776; <i>Saint-Charles</i> , 1783 and 1786 (Audibert); <i>Argonaute</i> , 1791 (Laflèche, Rafinesque & Co)
François Boulouvard	Arles (Provence), 1749	Captain	1774	West Indies	<i>Chêne</i> , 1784; <i>Grande Duchesse Maria Luisa</i> , 1788; <i>Florine</i> , 1791 (Baux frères)
Louis Brémond	La Ciotat (Provence), 1733	Woolen draper ?	1764	West Indies	<i>Conquérant</i> , 1771 and <i>Philippine</i> , 1776 (Rabaud & Co); <i>Consolateur</i> , 1784 (Solier, Martin, Salavy & Co)
Jean Dallest	La Ciotat (Provence), ?	Captain	?	?	<i>Sartine</i> , 1777 (Rabaud, Solier & Co)
Nicolas Guient	Marseille (Provence), 1740	Marine officer	1768	West Indies	<i>Consolateur</i> , 1786 and <i>Roi de Sardaigne</i> , 1788 (Solier, Martin, Salavy & Co); <i>Consolateur</i> , 1791 (Martin & Salavy)
Pierre-Antoine Icard	Martigues (Provence), 1742	Captain	?	West Indies	<i>Prince de Piémont</i> , 1787 (Solier, Martin, Salavy & Co); <i>Olympe</i> , 1791 (Solier & Co)
André Gabriel Jauffret	La Ciotat (Provence), 1716	Captain	c. 1740	Levant and West Indies	<i>Génois</i> , 1776 (Estoupan de Saint-Jean); <i>Agilité</i> , 1781 (Solier, Martin, Salavy & Co)
Étienne Marchand	Grenada (Caribbean Sea), 1755	Merchant	c. 1785	Levant and West Indies	<i>Clairvoyante</i> , 1780 (?) ; <i>Grand Archiduc-de Toscane</i> , 1787 and <i>Solide</i> , 1790 (Baux frères); <i>Suzette</i> , 1792 (Payan & Jouve)
Claude Pastouret	Santo Domingo (Caribbean Sea), 1739	Captain	1772	Levant and West Indies	<i>Éclair</i> , 1791 (Solier & Co)
François Pinatel	Tripoli (Barbary Coast), 1737	Merchant	1764	West Indies	<i>Iris</i> , 1776 (Treytorrens & Co) ; <i>Comte-de-Perron</i> , 1782, <i>Malabar</i> , 1785,

¹⁰ Toulon Navy historical department (hereafter SHMT), Marseille, captains, 13P5-5, 1785-1796 and 13P6-3, shipping registers, 1785-1796 and National Archives (Paris) (hereafter AN), C4/223, status of the Captains of the various districts in 1778 (documents generously provided by Gilbert Buti); Historical Defence Department, Lorient, 2P 47-I.9, crew list of the *Génois* to the Isles de France and Bourbon, February 1776; P. Blancard, *Manuel du commerce des Indes orientales et de la Chine*, Sube et Laporte, Paris-Marseille, 1806; O. Gannier, C. Picquoin, *Journal de bord d'Étienne Marchand. Le voyage du Solide autour du monde (1790-1792)*, éditions du CTHS, Paris, 2005, 2 volumes ; Geneanet (French genealogy database).

They were all able to build up a reputation among the ship owners and merchants in Marseille before joining the voyages to Asia. This is an important factor, as the main link between the mandators and their agents was trust, which was above all based on information from past experiences. In this way, for the expedition to China in 1791 with the *Argonaute*, *Laflèche*, *Rafinesque & Co* chose to entrust their affairs “with the greatest confidence in the prudence and recognised abilities of Mr Blancard”¹¹. We also find this idea in the words of Jean-Baptiste Guide, signatory of the agreement binding the interested parties in 1787 in the expedition of the *Prince de Piémont* to their supercargo: “based on the good reports given to me of you, Mr Icard, I did not hesitate to place my trust in you to manage the expedition to India that I am planning”¹². This trust was not delivered without a safety net. It was even stronger as it was governed by legal elements, with signed deeds that were binding on the supercargos. In the event of failure to comply with the clauses or instructions contained in the power of attorney and the *raccord*, the ship owners and merchants had the possibility of taking retaliatory measures, bringing the case before the judges of the Marseille commercial court.

Work and remuneration

Supercargos had a varied activity, coming under some very different areas. Before examining the commercial management of the expedition, we need to clarify a specific point: did these experienced captains take command of the ships on which they acted as agents for the ship owners and merchants?

Supercargo and Captain?

The archives tell us that command of the ship was regularly entrusted to them. Jean Dallest was both Captain and supercargo of the *Sartine* in 1777, as was Pierre-Antoine Icard on the voyage of the *Olympe* in 1791 or Claude Pastouret for the expedition on the *Éclair* in the same year¹³. However, combining the roles of supercargo and captain was not a dominant practice, as we can see that the two roles were just as often separate. In 1784, on the *Consolateur*, Louis Brémont was supercargo and his brother Paul was Captain. For the voyage of the *Liberté* to India

¹¹ AD B.-d.-R., 380 E 295, notary Jean-Joseph Bonsignour, Power of attorney of *Laflèche*, *Rafinesque & Co* to Pierre Blancard, 20 August 1791.

¹² Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, p. 282.

¹³ Ivi, pp. 154, 335-340, 349-354 and 403-408.

and China in 1790, the supercargo François Pinatel departed with the Captain Louis Blaise Guérin¹⁴. Did the separation of the two roles depend on the individuals? Not really, as shown by the example of Louis Brémont: in 1771, he was Captain and supercargo of the *Conquérant*; by contrast, in 1776, although he was supercargo of the *Philippine*, he was accompanied by Captain Guey who commanded the ship and the crew¹⁵. It seems that the decision depended more on the importance of the capital placed in the expedition and the volume of business to be carried out during the voyage. As Pierre Blancard explains, at the time of departure of the *Argonaute* from Marseille on 28 August 1791:

“As the commercial operations of this expedition are very important, & desiring to be relieved of the duties of daily supervision of the conduct of the crew, Captain Victor Chabert was appointed to command the vessel”¹⁶.

Sometimes, the choice of a captain other than the supercargo was even imposed by the strategy developed by the ship owners for their expeditions. This was the case when the Marseille merchants used cover flags to circumvent the privilege of the Compagnie des Indes between 1785 and 1790, or to avoid being captured by the English, particularly during the American War of Independence. In 1782, the supercargo François Pinatel embarked with the Savoy Captain Nicolas Barboro on the *Comte de Perron*¹⁷. The difference in nationality did not at all change the hierarchy between the two men, as shown by the instructions issued by Jean-Baptiste Guide to his supercargo Nicolas Guient about his relationship with Captain Louis Barret, also from Savoy, during the *Roi de Sardaigne* expedition in 1788:

“[...] want Mr Barret to be completely subordinate to you, following you in every point in which you instruct him, both as regards operations on board and navigation, stopovers, etc., in a word that he considers you as if I myself was on board, given that, in this *raccord*, you have the same powers as a power of attorney before the notary, so that where necessary you act with full authority [...]”¹⁸.

Commercial management under pressure

Although managing the ship was not therefore an obligation for the supercargo, he had many other demanding tasks, as shown by the table below. These were

¹⁴ SHMT, Marseille, captains, 13P5-5, 1785-1796 (cf. Louis Blaise Guérin and François Pinatel) and AD B.-d.-R., 13 B 666, declaration of the *Liberté* ship, 4 September 1790.

¹⁵ AEG, Moulou archives, 1-5, letter from Louis Brémont to Jacques Rabaud, 26 July 1772 and Laremborgue private archives, letter from Jacques Rabaud to Jean Cabanes, 30 April 1777.

¹⁶ AN, MAR 4JJ/144/O, “Journal des voyages dans l’Inde et à la Chine par Pierre Blancard, 1771 à 1793” (non-foliated manuscript).

¹⁷ AN, AE, B 1/291, correspondence from the Consuls of France in Cadix, 1789, ff. 77-79.

¹⁸ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, p. 155.

generally divided between trading relations, usually face to face, and working, quill in hand, in the quarter-deck. The tasks given to the supercargo brought him into contact with a large number of people, from the representatives or agents of his mandators in Asia, to indigenous traders and brokers, plus the people in charge of customs or maritime matters in the trading posts or ports frequented.

Table 2: the supercargo's main activities during expeditions

<i>Commercial activities</i>
Selling goods from the shipment and finding goods to return with Finding freight for travel within India (country trade) Finding passengers for the country trade or returning to Europe Receiving payment for bills of exchange, converting them in Asia or sending them to Europe Collecting the funds promised by partners in Asia Contracting bottomry loans or mortgages locally Taking out insurance for return goods
<i>Administration</i>
Writing letters, particularly to the merchant shipowners Drawing up accounts of purchase and sale, current accounts, bills of lading Fulfilling administrative formalities, from customs to the judicial authorities Compiling information on the places, currencies, goods and their prices

Everything the supercargo did was marked by a tension between two elements that are logically linked at the time of the ship's departure: the commercial strategy of the expedition on one hand, with the instructions he was required to follow, and the agreement he signed before the notary, on the other, which required him to act during the voyage "to the greatest advantage of the interests entrusted to him". During the voyage, risks and unforeseen events multiplied, undermining the best-laid plans of the interested parties and forcing their agents to contravene them on many occasions. We will cite just a few examples here. In 1783, coming from Europe, François Pinatel moored the *Comte de Perron* at Port-Louis in the Isle de France [Mauritius]. He was forced to do so, as some of his sailors had scurvy, his ship had to be refitted after being damaged at sea and some of his load was rotting¹⁹. In doing so, he contravened the "precise orders" he had received on departure: go straight to India to pick up his cargo. In 1786, the same François Pinatel received instructions to pick up some pepper from the Malabar coast for his return cargo, but learned on route that Tipû Sâhib, the local sultan, forbade the exit²⁰. He

¹⁹ AEG, Moulto archive, I-8, letter from François Pinatel to Jacques Rabaud, 27 March 1783.

²⁰ AEG, Moulto archive, I-3, letter from Jacques Rabaud & Co to Paul Moulto, 4 December 1786.

therefore chose a new destination and new goods. Faced with the realities on the ground, the connection between the instructions and the interests of the merchants and shipowners becomes distorted, even at times contradictory. Reducing or managing the uncertainty and unforeseen events causes the supercargo to deviate from the departure instructions to meet his objectives, to ensure that the expedition benefits the mandators as much as possible.

Did this situation generate conflict between merchants and shipowners and their agents? We have not identified any disputes between these parties in the consular archives consulted, which would seem to show that the supercargos performed their missions and made the decisions considered most advantageous for their return voyage. However, it must be said that these men knew how to cover themselves by producing documents justifying their decisions and acts contrary to the departure instructions. This is the case with Louis Brémond in the Isle de France during the summer of 1772, the initially planned destination for selling his cargo for piastres (“pieces of eight” or “reales de a ocho” in Spanish) or bartering it for coffee. However, the silver coins and these goods were unavailable in the Mascarene islands and he had to exchange his cargo for the King’s papers, which are not convertible in cash locally²¹. He therefore had official deeds drawn up by local merchants, attesting to the local situation, which could be used in the event of any proceedings before the commercial courts.

A high remuneration

The role of a supercargo was challenging and full of responsibilities, and deserved a salary commensurate with his talents and efforts. But at what level? As we have seen, the supercargo was a shipping agent and was therefore paid at a percentage of the value of the commercial operations. Most often, the sales made in Asia determined the amount of his commission. In 1787, for the expedition of the *Prince de Piémont*, Pierre Antoine Icard was paid 5% on sales on the Malabar coast and 4% on the Coromandel coast²². In 1788, Nicolas Guient was awarded a commission of 5% on sales made during the expedition of the *Roi de Sardaigne*. In 1791, Claude Pastouret was granted 5% commission on the sale of goods in India during the voyage of the *Éclair*, as was Pierre Antoine Icard for the expedition of the *Olympe* the same year. This rule on sales commission was not in any way an obligation. For maritime expeditions with specific characteristics, a different basis could be used for the calculation. For example, in the case of the remuneration paid to Pierre Blancard during the voyage of the *Argonaute* to China in 1791, the outgoing

²¹ AEG, Moulou archive, I-5, letters from Louis Brémond to Jacques Rabaud, 26 July and 11 August 1772.

²² For the data concerning Pierre-Antoine Icard, Nicolas Guient and Claude Pastouret, cf. Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, pp. 232, 288, 339 and 353.

cargo contained very few goods, essentially consisting of piastres. For this reason, it was decided to calculate a commission of 6% on the return purchases in Canton²³. So in general, a fee of 4 to 6% was applied to the value of commercial operations in Asia. What was the final amount? Pierre Antoine Icard's commission for the expedition of the *Prince de Piémont*, which departed in 1787, was 14,078 *livres* 1 *sol* and 7 *deniers*²⁴. Louis Brémont's commission for the voyage of the *Consolateur* in 1784-1785 amounted to 19,994 *livres* 13 *sols*²⁵. In 1791, Pierre Blancard's planned commission for his expedition to China on the *Argonaute* resulted in an amount of nearly 50,000 *livres*, sixty times the annual salary of a clerk in a Marseille trading house²⁶. The sums could therefore be high, reflecting both the importance of the ship owners and merchants' investments and the work performed.

The supercargo therefore earned a good salary for managing the voyages, and that's not all. In most cases, his combined roles meant he could increase his remuneration by obtaining salaries and bonuses paid to members of the ship's staff. As mentioned previously, the supercargo sometimes took the helm of the ships on which he embarked. As Captain on the *Solide* in 1791, Etienne Marchand was paid 200 *livres* per month, and the same amount was foreseen to Nicolas Guient to take the *Charles-Louis* to the East Indies in 1786²⁷. It is therefore quite a considerable sum for voyages of between 16 and 30 months, depending on the destination and itinerary of the vessel. Although the supercargos were not the Captain of the ship, they were at least the second-in-command or pilot. They all therefore received extra remuneration for a purely maritime role. In addition, the supercargos increased their income through personal trading activity.

Going beyond the role: the supercargo as merchant

The analysis of this final point requires examination of a legal question. During the expedition, was the supercargo required to restrict his activity to the sole profit of his mandators? In other words, was there a form of exclusivity clause preventing him from conducting business on his own account? After all, his mandate implies that he is bound by obligations of loyalty and non-competition. However,

²³ Archives of the city of Lausanne (hereafter AVL), P 116, papers of the Rivier family, 24/2, prospectus for the *Argonaute*, 14 May 1790.

²⁴ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, p. 291.

²⁵ Archives of the Vaud canton, PP 984/1182, register 6, Accounts for the expedition of the *Consolateur* to India in 1784-1785.

²⁶ AVL, P 116, papers of the Rivier family, 24/2, prospectus for the *Argonaute*, 14 May 1790. Antoine-Jean Solier, clerk for the company Solier, Martin, Salavy & Co, was paid 800 *livres* per year from 1784 (Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. I, p. 54).

²⁷ Fine-Salles-Strafforello private archives, "Contrat d'achat et d'affrètement par Charles et Louis Salles du navire le Charles-Louis pour un voyage aux Indes"; <http://famillefine.free.fr/Docs-SallesDuPasse/Bateaux/CharlesLouis01.JPG> (consulted in July 2020); Gannier, Picquoin, *Journal de bord*, cit., t. II, p. 104.

conducting his personal affairs could lead to a conflict of interest in managing the goods and could take up time and energy, to the detriment of the mission.

From pacotille to involvement in the expedition capital

For these reasons, he could only claim a limited right to trading in his own name, within a specific framework. As a sailor on board, whether he was Captain, second in command or pilot, it was customary to grant him a port permit, “which is the permission to load on board the ship a certain quantity of goods - known as *pacotille* - on his own account”²⁸. This is where his freedom to engage in personal commercial activities ended, unless he was explicitly authorised to do so by his principals. Was this a written or verbal agreement? The business and commercial law dictionaries from the 19th century indicate the need to state this authorisation on paper²⁹. The situation is much less clear in the 18th century. Although all the Marseille supercargos working on the Asia routes carried out strictly personal business during their expeditions, no mention authorising them to do this or specifying the terms thereof was stated in the powers of attorney and instructions consulted for this research.

The supercargo's individual affairs could be combined with the collective interests of the expedition. They might therefore be among the interested sponsors of the trip. Pierre-Antoine Icard invested 50,000 *livres* in the expedition of the *Prince de Piémont* in 1787³⁰. Nicolas Guient contributed 25,000 *livres* to that of the *Roi de Sardaigne* in 1788³¹. Pierre Blancard invested 16,000 *livres* in the voyage of the *Argonaute* in 1791³². Although these sums only represent 1.6 to 5% of the total investment, they were still significant for the supercargos, who were therefore more invested in the success of the expeditions. It should be noted that the initial investments might also be increased during the voyage and the agreements entered into between the ship owners-merchants and their representatives regularly stated that the commission received by the supercargos may be paid “as an increase in interest on the expedition”³³.

These men were also very closely involved in thinking and developing the commercial strategy and financial package for the expeditions. Therefore, when *Laflèche, Rafinesque & Co* wanted to undertake a voyage to the East Indies in 1790, they charged Pierre Blancard with drawing up the prospectus, meaning the overall

²⁸ Montbrion, *Dictionnaire universel du commerce*, cit., t. IV, 1851, p. 862.

²⁹ P. Boucher, *Institution au droit maritime*, Schoell et compagnie, Paris, 1803, p. 73.

³⁰ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, p. 279.

³¹ Ivi, p. 324.

³² Carrière, *Négociants marseillais*, cit., t. II, p. 936.

³³ Dermigny, *Cargaisons indiennes*, cit., t. II, p. 353.

plan, with a forecast of the investments required by the undertaking³⁴. So this Captain chose China and requested his networks, particularly the Swiss, to make up the *mise-hors*, meaning the initial investment. In other cases, the supercargo may even be the initiator of the expedition. For the voyage of the *Solide* in 1790, Pierre Marchand approached the Baux brothers' trading house, after having planned the first French commercial circumnavigation and the destination of Canton, to sell the furs acquired through bartering on the North-western coast of America, in the Bay of Nootka³⁵.

Agent and merchant on his own account

Alongside the direct financial investment in the expedition that uses his services, the supercargo also develops his own personal affairs. Firstly, he may therefore be a power of attorney and agent for people unconnected with the expedition. This was the case with François Pinatel during a voyage to China, when he was made power of attorney in May 1790 for the Marseille coral factory *Miraillet, Rémuzat & Co* to recover the revenue from a sale - or sell himself - the goods sent to Canton³⁶. The supercargo could also represent *pacotille* traders in their business in Asian trading posts or ports. This was the case with Pierre Blancard, who was required to replace the Swiss agent Charles Constant in Canton, if he defaulted, to be the consignee and manage the sale, still in Canton, of a batch of goods of a value of 10,000 piastres, loaded by a group of sixteen Geneva shareholders onto the *Argonaute* in 1791³⁷. The supercargo also exercised this role of representative-agent for Asian merchants and brokers that he met during expeditions, seeking to make the most profits from European markets. This was the case with Pierre Blancard, who in 1787 was entrusted with a cargo of Indian cotton goods and cinnamon by the Hindu Brahman company Camotin in Goa, for a sale to be made in Europe, in Lorient or Marseille³⁸.

Given their different roles, multiple activities and the revenue they earned from these, some supercargos were real businessmen. The volume of goods they accumulated during their voyages on their own account attests to the importance of their business. When the *Solide* returned to Marseille in 1792, two barrels and a crate of indigo, 64 bales of coffee, a crate of Chinese porcelain and seven bales of

³⁴ AVL, P 116, papers of the Rivier family, Jean-Théodore's files, 24/2, letter from Pierre Blancard, 14 May 1790.

³⁵ Gannier, Picquoin, *Journal de bord*, cit.

³⁶ AD B.-d.-R., 380 E 292, notary Jean-Joseph Bonsignour, power of attorney from *Miraillet, Rémuzat & Co* to François Pinatel, 30 May 1790.

³⁷ L. Dermigny, *Les mémoires de Charles de Constant sur le commerce à la Chine*, S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1964, p. 83.

³⁸ E. Carreira, *Les Kamat et le commerce français en Inde*, « Moyen Orient & Océan Indien », 7 (1990), pp. 164-165 and *Marselha e o Oriente Português, o capitão Pierre Blancard*, « Revista de cultura. Instituto Cultura de Macau », 14 (1991), pp. 181-191.

diverse goods were consigned to the supercargo Étienne Marchand³⁹. In April 1790, around 2,600 Indian cotton fabrics purchased by Pierre Blancard in Bengal, Surat and on the Coromandel coast during his second expedition with the *Saint-Charles*, were placed on sale at public auction at his Marseille home in Montée des Accoules⁴⁰. Blancard was involved for over twenty years in shipping and chartering, not only on the Asian routes that he regularly sailed, but also to the West Indies⁴¹. The terms used to describe him in the notarial deeds show his prominence in the world of business over the years 1780-1790. Whereas he presented himself as a simple “Captain of a merchant ship” in the early 1780s, from 1789 he was identified as a “*négociant*”⁴². Should we conclude that the role of supercargo, for those who were most successful in business, was a springboard towards entering the restricted world of merchants and ship owners in Marseille? Words are one thing, reality is another. Pierre Blancard chose to be presented as a “*négociant*” before his notary. As emphasised by Gilbert Buti, these men who were captains, managers and traders, even with their expanded activities, “were still far from being *négociants*” at the time. They are not from a “specific merchant tradition” and do not show evidence of a “confirmed versatility in activities”, particularly as they were not involved in the banking and insurance sector⁴³. For these men, use of the term “*négociant*” was more a personal desire to signify their economic and social success, rather than the result of genuine integration within the upper echelons of the local community of merchants.

Conclusion

A hybrid figure in maritime trade, with experience in ocean seafaring and trading practices in far-off lands, praised for his ability to adapt and make decisions on uncertain expeditions, the supercargo was very much a leading player in the Asian fever that gripped the port of Marseille during the last third of the 18th century. The itinerant alter ego of the ship owners and merchants, he was the soul of the voyages and the profits they generated. The importance of his role and his success placed

³⁹ Archives of the Marseille-Provence Chamber of Industry and Commerce, *Manifestes des marchandises d'entrée dans le port de Marseille* (Brébion, Marseille) ZBR 001744, 1792, entry manifest for the *Solide*.

⁴⁰ Retronews (Bibliothèque nationale de France), “État des marchandises des Indes, qui seront exposées aux enchères publiques à Marseille par le sieur Pierre Blancard” (Journal de Provence, 17 April 1790).

⁴¹ AD B.-d.-R., notary Jean-Joseph Bonsignour, 380 E 294, power of attorney from Pierre Blancard to Jean-Antoine Merlet, 25 January 1791.

⁴² AD B.-d.-R., notary Jean-Joseph Bonsignour, 380 E 280, ff. 34 and 460; 380 E 281, ff. 1, 35 v° and 68; 380 E 291, f. 1.476; 380 E 292: ff. 418 v° and 474; 380 E 294, f. 143 v°.

⁴³ G. Buti, *Capitaines et patrons provençaux de navires marchands au XVIII^e siècle. Exécutants ou entrepreneurs des mers ?*, in G. Buti, L. Lo Basso, O. Raveux (eds.), *Entrepreneurs des mers. Capitaines et marins du XVI^e au XIX^e siècle*, Riveneuve éditions, Paris, 2017, p. 57.

him at the top of the maritime enterprise on-board personnel, and his income made him a real businessman, in default of not being a *négociant*. The golden age only lasted a few decades however, as he was a victim, during the 19th century, of the consequences of Western imperialism across the world, technical innovations in communication systems and changes in the way international trade operated, in particular with the early development of logistics chains. The lawyer Louis Thiébaut summed up the situation in a treatise on the rights of ship owners and charterers in 1894: “the role of the supercargo no longer has any relevance [...] the ship owners have agents or trading posts in every country where they have interests, the agents know everything that might interest the ship owner, with whom they correspond very regularly via telegraph”⁴⁴. On the Asian routes, management of the ships and the trade - much lesser in importance - were now combined into a single directional unit, in the hands of a Captain. The fading of the supercargo’s role was a notable marker of the transformation of the process of globalisation during the 19th century.

⁴⁴ L. Thiébaut, *De la responsabilité des propriétaires de navires et des armateurs*, Rousseau, Paris, 1894, p. 47.