

The Role of the Basque, Breton and Norman Cod Fishermen in the Discovery of North America from the XVIth to the End of the XVIIIth Century

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North Europeans have known of the existence of Newfoundland, Labrador, and perhaps the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon since the beginning of the eleventh century. In 1001, the Icelander, Bjorn, was driven off course on his way to Greenland by a violent tempest from the northeast and made landfall in a "country" he named Markland. Most recent students of this question think the country was Labrador. During a second expedition in which he was accompanied by Leif, the son of Eric Rauda, who colonized Greenland, Bjorn found a more southerly island, certainly Newfoundland, which he circled. It is likely that he also saw the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon (Figs. 1, 2), as it is almost impossible to sail around Newfoundland without seeing this group of islands.

In 1497, almost five centuries later, John and Sebastian

Cabot, two Venetian mariners in the service of England, became the official discoverers of the Island of Newfoundland (Fig. 3). They also sighted Cape Breton Island during this voyage but did not give it a name. It has been established that the French were not far behind in the discovery of Newfoundland and Labrador. The historian Charles de la Morandière writes in the first volume of his work, *Histoire de la Pêche Française dans l'Amérique Septentrionale*: "In 1509 Thomas Aubert went to Newfoundland in his ship *La Pensée*, belonging to the well-known Dieppe shipowner Jean Ango, and brought back seven local inhabitants who were described in Latin by the printer Estienne." Further evidence lies in a document kept at Beauport Abbey which gives details of a contract made in 1514 between the Breton shipowners and the monks of the Abbey. This agreement, signed on 14 November 1514, states that the monks had the right to tithe all the cod fished in Brittany, Iceland, and Newfoundland. Yet further evidence can be found from 1511, when Queen Joanna of Aragon sent Juan d'Agramonte on an expedition to explore Newfoundland, on condition that he employ two Breton pilots. This was because the seafarers from that province had the reputation throughout Europe of being most knowledgeable about the coasts of Newfoundland, which would not have been the case had they not had many years' experience sailing along them. There are other accounts which confirm this knowledge on the part of the Bretons. For example, in 1510 *La Jacquette*, commanded by Bertrand Meynier from Dahouet, was fitted out for the Newfoundland Banks. This is documented in the Loire-Maritime archives, where we are told that after fishing over the banks off Newfoundland, *La Jacquette* delivered her cargo first to Rouen, then to Quilleboeuf. During the return, there was a mutiny on board, after which the King sent his pardon to the guilty fishermen. If Dahouet fitted out a boat in 1510 and Bréhat in 1514, one can be sure that other Breton ports such as Paimpol and Binic did the same.

Many scholars have taxed themselves over the discovery of Cape Breton Island. Though the enigma is still not clear and perhaps never will be, it is certain that the Vikings were the first visitors to these waters. Several sources state that Leif Ericson landed on this island covered with wild grapes, and called it Vinland. These same sources agree with others that the island was given its present name much later, at the beginning of the sixteenth century by the Basque fisherman Gabarus and his companions Lajut, Libet, and Gorostarzu. The name Cape Breton bears no relation to the province of Brittany. It is more likely that it derives directly from a small watering place 20 km north of Bayonne. In the sixteenth century this port was called the "town of a hundred captains", as it was an impor-



FIG. 1. Aerial view of Saint-Pierre. Ile aux Marins is in the foreground, Langlade is in the background.



FIG. 2. Aerial view of Miquelon.

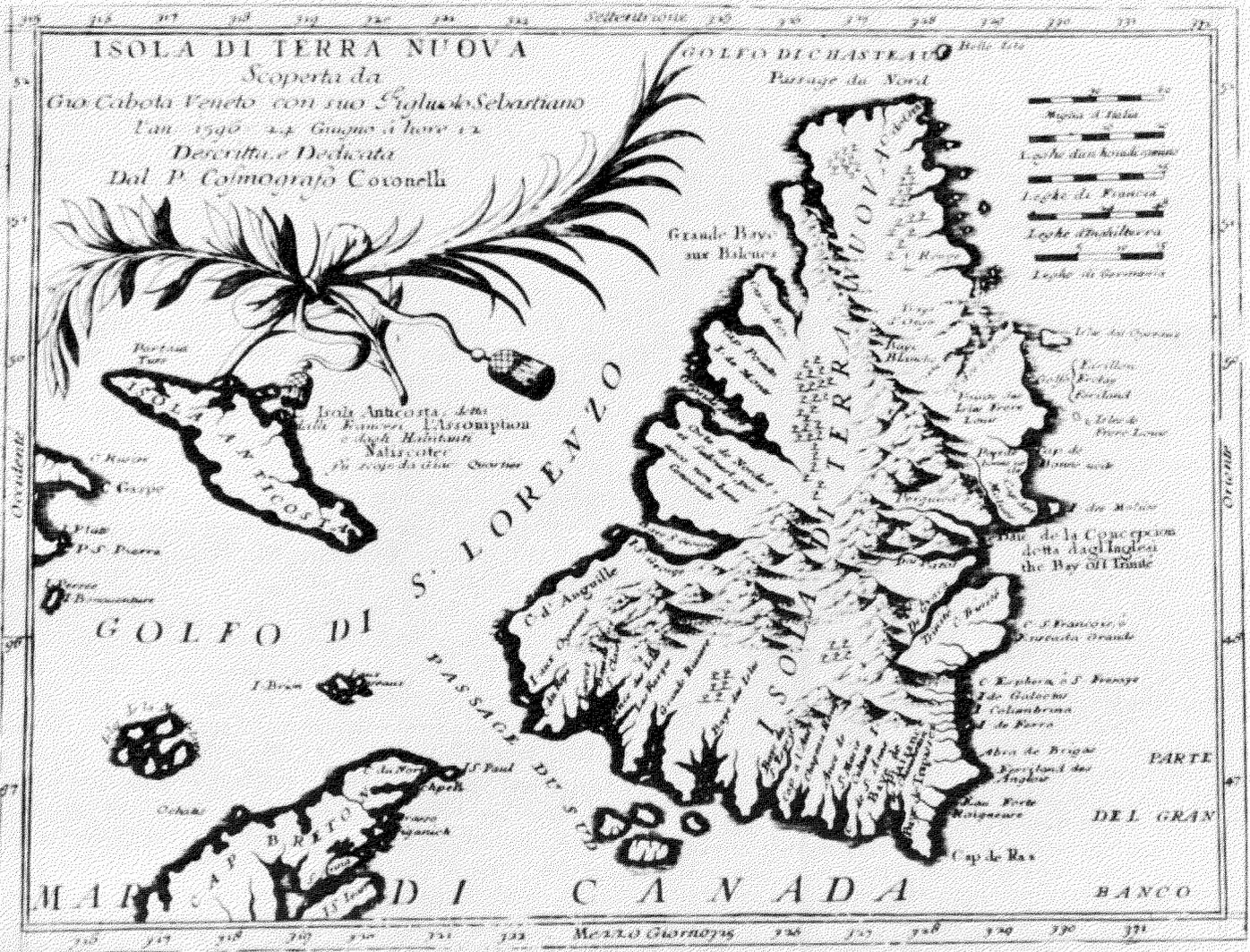


FIG. 3. Map of Newfoundland based on John and Sebastian Cabot's discovery in 1497; the date of the map is 1596, by which time Cape Breton had been named.

tant whaling and cod-fishing centre until it was ruined as a port by the diversion of the River Adour in 1578. The Basques were great whalers and cod fishermen, first in the Gulf of Gascoyne region, then further out in the Atlantic, and then following the shoals of fish far to the west over the ocean. Gabarus reached this unnamed land early in the sixteenth century and named it Cape Breton after the small port from which he had set out. The name could have come from Caput Bruti (the head of Brutus), Cato's nephew who was sent to Aquitaine by Julius Caesar after the battle of Parasala in 48 B.C., or it may derive from Caput Bretonnum, the name of the last bridgehead of the Breton immigrants in the south after their expulsion from England by the Angles in the seventh century.

An important point is that the name of the island is not the only one which recalls the influence of the Basques in that region. Fort Louisbourg is surrounded by Cape Gabarus and the waters of the Bay of Gabarus. This name, which was also given to a street in the aforementioned port town, is Latin for the French "gave", which means Pyrenean mountain stream. Most of the streams are tributaries of the River Adour, which runs into the estuary near Cape Breton where the family

Gabarus (or Cabarus) lived several centuries ago. A descendant of this family, Theresa, the famous Madame Tallien, was designated by the historians of the French Revolution as Our Lady of Thermidor. The island of Cape Breton is a sort of historical and geographical bridge spanning the Atlantic.

Another Frenchman, Jacques Cartier, was destined to become one of the first and most famous explorers of North America. He came from St. Malo, the port which long disputed with Nantes the right to be considered the birthplace of the best Breton sailors. He began, as did many of his compatriots, as a cod fisherman, and in 1519, when he was 28, he reached the Banks of Newfoundland while pursuing his trade. Francis I, King of France, had sufficient faith in this stalwart sailor from St. Malo to allow him to organize an expedition to what is now Canada. Thus on 20 April 1534, at the age of 43, Cartier left on a voyage which was to claim Canada for France. This first voyage is best described in the words of the great naval historian, Charles de la Roncière:

On October 31st, 1533 Jacques Cartier was received by Admiral de Chabot and during this interview was given orders to prepare ships for the exploratory voyage and conquest of New

France and also to find a northern passage to Cathay. He was thus to resurrect the old dream and mission which had been entrusted to Verrazzano a few years earlier, but which had failed when the latter was killed and eaten by savage Indians on the coasts of North America. Having sworn his oath of allegiance between the hands of the Vice-Admiral, Charles de Morey de la Meillerayé, "to bring good and loyal service to the King", Jacques Cartier left Saint Malo on April 20th, 1534 for the new territories which Verrazzano had baptized La Franciscane. The Atlantic crossing to Newfoundland only took twenty days, but ice made the approaches to the Portuguese-named "Cape Bonna-Vista" difficult. Five leagues from there Cartier found shelter in Saint Catherine's harbour to repair his ships. On May 21st he sailed northwards from here and on May 27th the expedition arrived at the entry to the Baie des Châteaux, in reality a strait between Newfoundland and Labrador. Soon after entering the Strait of Belle Isle he had to seek shelter again in the Havre du Carpont where the breakup of the ice kept him blocked until June 9th, a period which he used to extend his knowledge of the area from this base. He took advantage of his enforced stay to make a hydrographic survey of the coasts of Labrador, strewn with islands separated by narrow channels, such as Belle Isle, the island of Saint Catherine and the Havre de la Baleine and Havres des Buttes. He found an unsheltered creek which he called the Anse de Blanc-Sablon, no doubt to commemorate the naval battle of August 24th, 1513, between the galleys of Prigent de Bidoux and the English vessels of Admiral Howard, in the Baie des Blanc-Sablons north of Brest.

On June 10th a harbour for the expedition's ships was revealed amidst a cluster of islands. In this harbour, named Brest by Cartier, the first Mass was celebrated and with this communion service Christianity took hold in these desolate regions of Labrador. Cartier startled native inhabitants one day who were fishing in their birchbark canoes. They wore their hair tied in plaits adorned with feathers and dressed in animal skins which were closer-fitting for the women than for the men. They had painted their rather corpulent bodies in tawny colours. They were not natives of the region but came solely for the hunting and for the fishing of the seals in these desolate waters, plentiful then as now in the St. Lawrence River in winter and the Arctic Ocean in summer.

Jacques Cartier sailed south from the Havre de Brest on 15 June 1534, and on 24 July he took possession of the land he called New France. His first act was to plant in the soil a huge cross adorned with fleurs-de-lis. The precise spot where he raised this cross, similar to those placed by the Portuguese to mark their discoveries, is the present site of a hospital opposite Gaspé and can be found in the Indian village of Stadaconé across the pass of Barachois. The planting of the cross had an extraordinary effect which suggests that the Christian religion was not unknown to the natives of this area. A few hours after the positioning of the cross, Cartier saw the Iroquois Chief Donnacona, clad in an old bearskin, coming towards him, accompanied by his three sons. The Indian Chief approached the monument and made a long speech and then, pointing to it, made the sign of the cross with two fingers, his sons following his example. The sight of Indians doing this was an enormous surprise. This sign must have been a vestige of an evangelical past which reached back to the time when there was a bishopric at Gardar in Greenland, or to the time when the colonists of Eric the Red spread the wake of their dragon-headed drakkars far and wide as they roamed the sea from bay to bay. Greenland colonists were certainly in contact with the American

continent: the Icelandic sagas speak of it variously as Helluland, Markland, or Vinland.

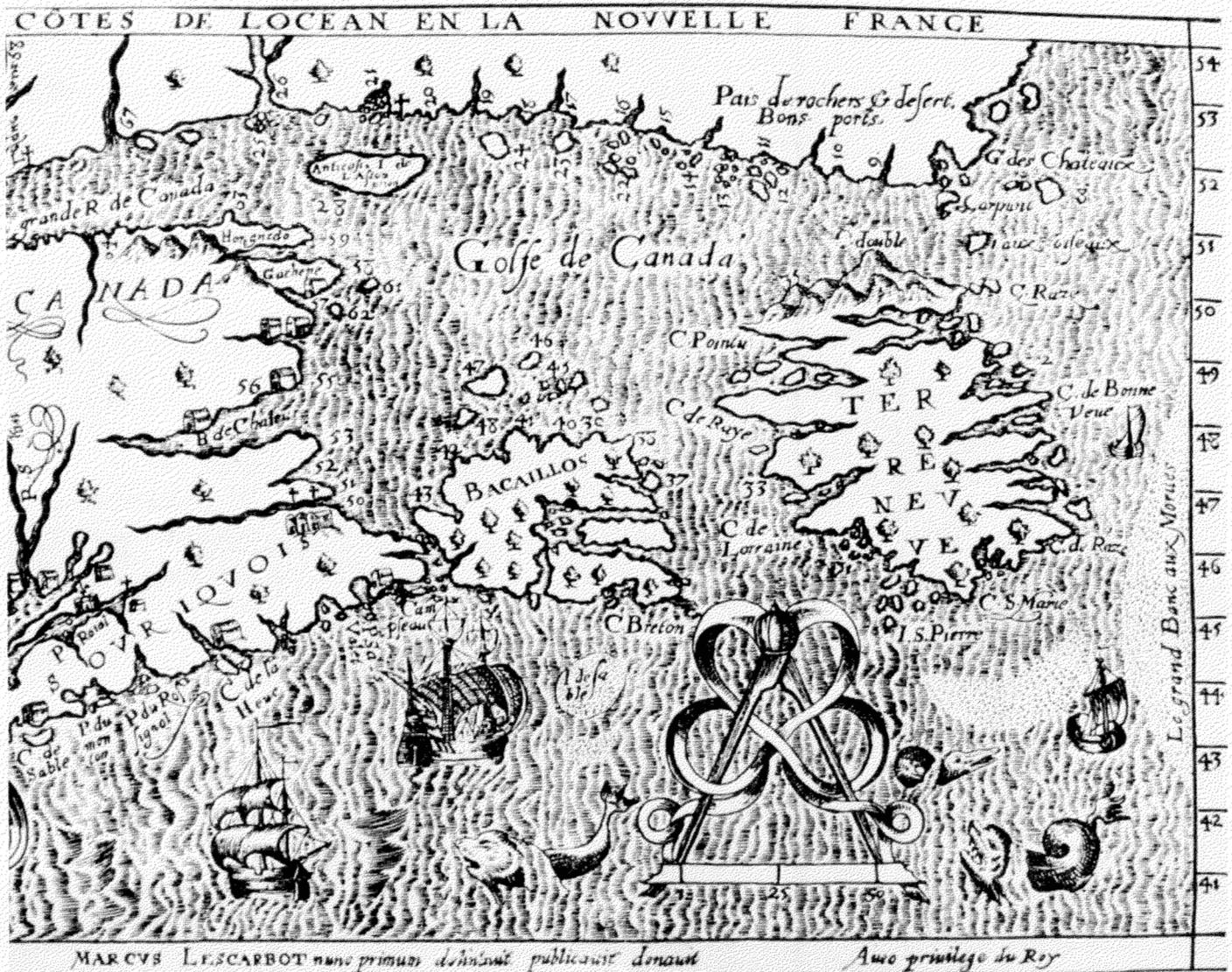
The Indian Chief agreed to leave two of his sons, Domagoya and Taignoagny, with Cartier on condition that he bring them back in 12 months. On 25 July 1534, Jacques Cartier left Gaspé to return to France. From 8-15 August the expedition stayed in the harbour of Blanc-Sablon, and after celebrating the Mass of the Assumption on land, Cartier got under way. On 5 September, his mission accomplished, he cast anchor in the port of St. Malo.

It is thus clear that France and Portugal were the first nations after the Vikings to arrive and install themselves in Newfoundland and Labrador. This fact can no longer be doubted, and was formally recognized in the seventeenth century by the English Admiral Sir William Mansons in his *Naval Tract*: "Only the French and no one but the French have made stable establishments. We have tried to do the same on several occasions but have always failed." Such words written by a man of his stature ring true. Charles de la Roncière also cites another example of a Breton fisherman, Nicolas Dion, who made a voyage to Newfoundland in 1526.

The official discovery of the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon dates to the beginning of the sixteenth century. On 19 October 1520, the Portuguese explorer and fisherman Joao Alvarès Faguendès, who was exploring the west coast of Canada towards Newfoundland, sailed east from Cape Breton Island. Two days later, just after dawn, the look-out signalled land to port, and a group of islands slowly became visible on the horizon. Other sailors must have seen these islands before but no one had given them a name. Captain Faguendès called them the Eleven Thousand Virgins Archipelago. Why this rather oracular title, and what was his motive? In casting an eye over his Gregorian calendar, he saw that 21 October was the feast of Saint Ursula, the virgin of Cologne who was massacred by the Huns, and the patron saint of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, also massacred by Attila and his hordes. On 15 March 1521, King Manoel of Portugal gave him, in letters patent, ownership of the lands he had discovered in Newfoundland as well as the archipelago of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. The Portuguese held the islands only for a short time and they quickly lost their name; from 1530 onwards marine charts identify them as the Islands of Saint-Pierre (Fig. 4).

On 11 June 1536, Jacques Cartier called in there enroute home from his second expedition to Canada with his two ships the *Grande Ermine* and the *Emerillon* (he had left the *Petite Ermine* in Canada because an outbreak of scurvy had ravaged his crew). During his six-day stay, he noticed many vessels in the harbour of Saint-Pierre, "as many from France as from Bretagne [sic]" as he wrote in his logbook. He used this occasion to proclaim French possession officially in the name of King Francis I.

It is somewhat surprising that even today so many French names occur on English maps of Canada: Cape Breton, Gabarus, Louisbourg, Main à Dieu, Catalogne, l'Île Saint-Paul, Cap Enfumé, Bras-d'Or; and particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador: Plaisance, Baie des Trépassés, Baie de Conception, Baie de la Trinité, Baie des Baleines, Baie Notre-Dame,



Côtes de la Nouvelle-France, par Marc LESCARBOT, 1612

FIG. 4. Lescarbot's 1612 map of the coasts of "New France", showing the Islands of Saint-Pierre.

Baie Blanche, Baie du Pistolet, Cap Degrat, Cap Fréhel, Petit-Nord, Fortune, Férolle, Ile de Frère Louis, Baie Verte, Blanc-Sablon, Havre du Loup, and Havre de Brest are only a few examples.

What the Basque, Breton, and Norman sailors were looking for in these waters at that time was certainly not petroleum as in the present time, but was equally precious in their eyes. For the Basques it was whale oil. To the Bretons and Normans cod was equally important. The seas of the North Atlantic have the justified reputation of being among the most richly-stocked fishing grounds in the world. Well before the discovery of Newfoundland, Labrador, and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, cod was fished in certain areas of this ocean by Irish, Scottish, English, Portuguese, Spanish, and French fishermen. Several writers affirm that the Basque whalers of the sixteenth century observed enormous quantities of all kinds of fish, particularly cod, on the Newfoundland banks. It has been proven that the first settlers of Newfoundland, Labrador, Saint-Pierre and

Miquelon, and other nearby areas were there because they wanted to fish.

The Newfoundland banks are a series of high plateaus and shallow troughs situated approximately south and southeast of the island of Newfoundland between 41° and 55°N. Whereas the depth of the Atlantic Ocean is between 3000 and 4000 m, the depth in the banks ranges between 30 and 100 m. Certain soundings to the east give a depth of only 5-7 m, for example at the Rocs de la Vierge. It has been suggested, although specialists have not reached a consensus, that the high shelves were built up by sediment brought by the warm Gulf Stream in the south and the cold Labrador Current in the north. The banks themselves can be divided into two distinct groups: the Grand Banks of Newfoundland proper, and other banks nearer the American continent, often known as the Banks of Nova Scotia. These banks are separated by a long trench, the bed of the St. Lawrence River, sometimes called the Laurentian Channel. The names of these banks, moving westwards, are:

le Bonnet Flamand, the Grand Bank including different sections such as Woolfall, Virgin Rocks, le Platier, and la Queue du Grand Banc. Here and there are trenches such as the Trou à la Baleine and the Chenal du Flétan. These are all official names printed on maps, but the local fishermen use other names handed down from generation to generation, such as the Grand Nord, the Petit Nord, the Fer à Cheval, the Langue de l'Ouest, and the Langue des Poissons Rouges. There are other descriptive forms in common use today. For example, my friend the trawler captain and occasional writer, Jean Récher, may say when he puts into Saint-Pierre that he has been fishing "in the R, under the branch of the T, below the hyphen and between the branches of the U". These places correspond on the map to the letters of the words Terre-Neuve, which are always in exactly the same place on French marine charts. There are two other banks which form part of this ensemble, the Banc à Vert and the Banc de Saint-Pierre. The shelves of Nova Scotia carry the names Banc de Misaine, Banc d'Ar-timon, and Banquereau.

It is difficult to determine exactly what kinds of boats were used for cod-fishing in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. One could safely say that there were as many types of boats (Fig. 5-9) as there were fishing ports. On going through old documents one finds many names — carvels (cara-

vels), doggerboats, cargo boats, and pinnaces — which only adds to the confusion. However, the question of the ships' rigging is much clearer. There were schooners, three-masted schooners and brig schooners, all of which were built in France or Holland and used for cod-fishing in the first part of the sixteenth century when the strong movement towards Newfoundland and Labrador began. The tonnage of the ships fishing on the banks of Newfoundland was low, many being only 30-40 tons. Later this increased to 100-150 tons. In contrast, the fishing ships based along the coasts of Canada, Newfoundland, Labrador and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon were much bigger, weighing 200, 300, or even 400 tons.

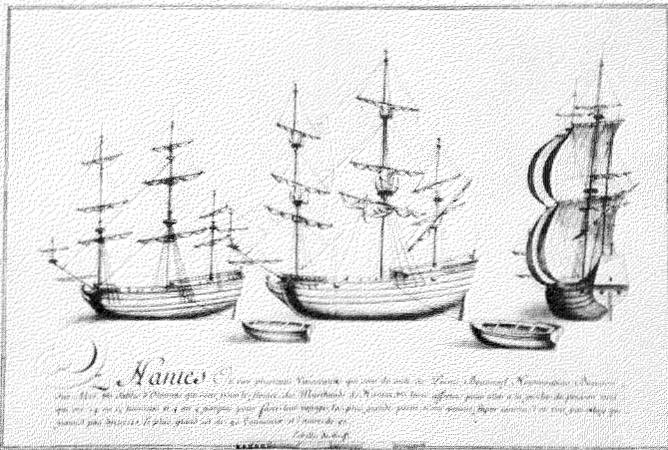


FIG. 5. Fishing boats from Nantes.

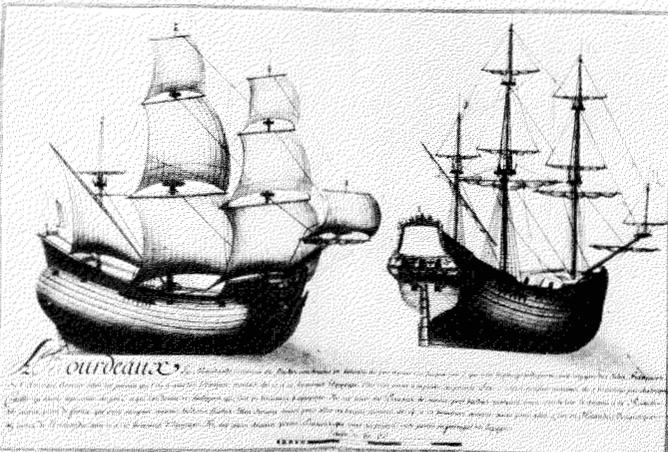


FIG. 6. Fishing boats from Bordeaux.

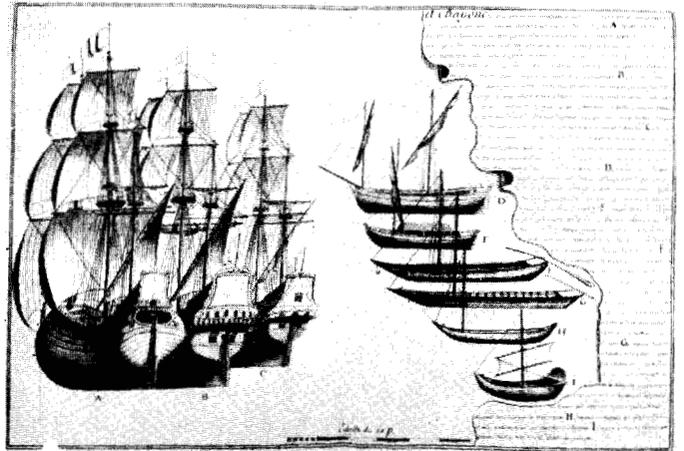


FIG. 7. Fishing boats from Bayonne.

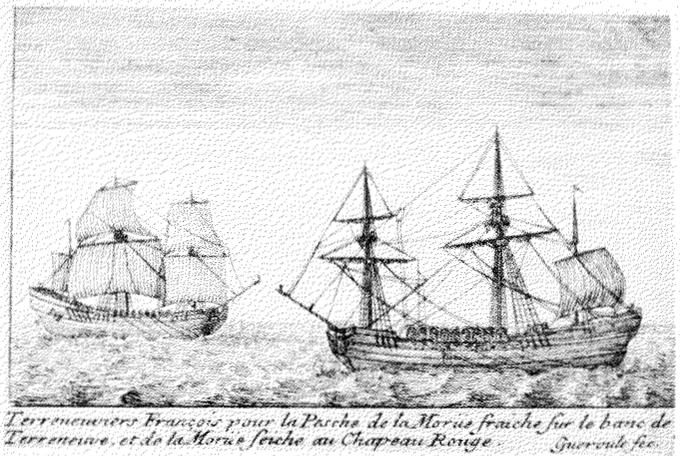


FIG. 8. Newfoundland fishing boats constructed in France.

The history of fishing in Labrador, Newfoundland, and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon cannot be understood without some explanation of *how* fishing operated from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. A distinction must be made between two different methods of fishing, that for salt-cured cod and that for dried cod. The former was practised offshore over the banks, and after each fishing trip, the boats came straight back to their base port with their catches of salted fish. (The salt used, particularly by the French, was of excellent quality and came

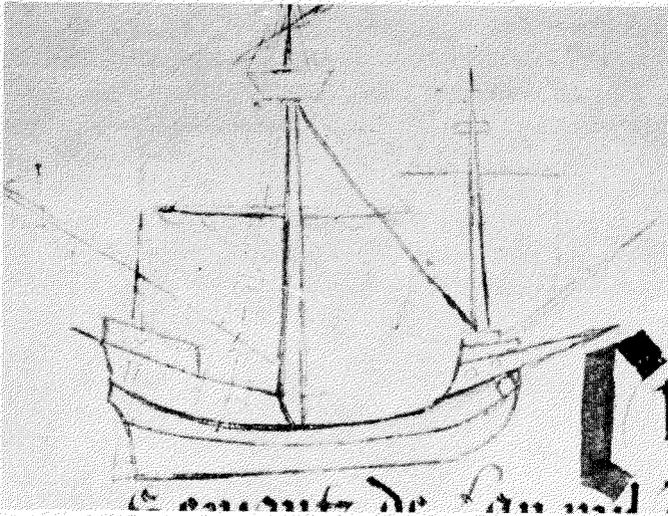


FIG. 9. Sketch of a fishing boat, 1539.

from the salt marshes of Aunis, Saintonge, and Brittany. Another top-quality salt came from Cadiz in Spain.) This type of fishing was called seine fishing because the boat drifted its seining nets over the banks looking for the largest shoals of fish.

This method of deep-sea fishing, where the boat brought its catch back to base or to another port, was extremely difficult and exhausting work. The actual fishing was carried out on only one side of the boat, the exposed windward side. The fishermen would line up in niches made from casks, along a platform behind railings (Fig. 10). It was only much later that the banks fishermen adopted another method introduced by Captain Sabot of Dieppe in about 1770: the fishing vessel dropped anchor and used two or three ship's boats to set the nets or trawl lines. This system resulted in bigger catches and was easier work for the fishermen, but it was far more dangerous, especially in rough seas; for the boats inevitably had to leave the anchored mother ship far behind. Many lives were

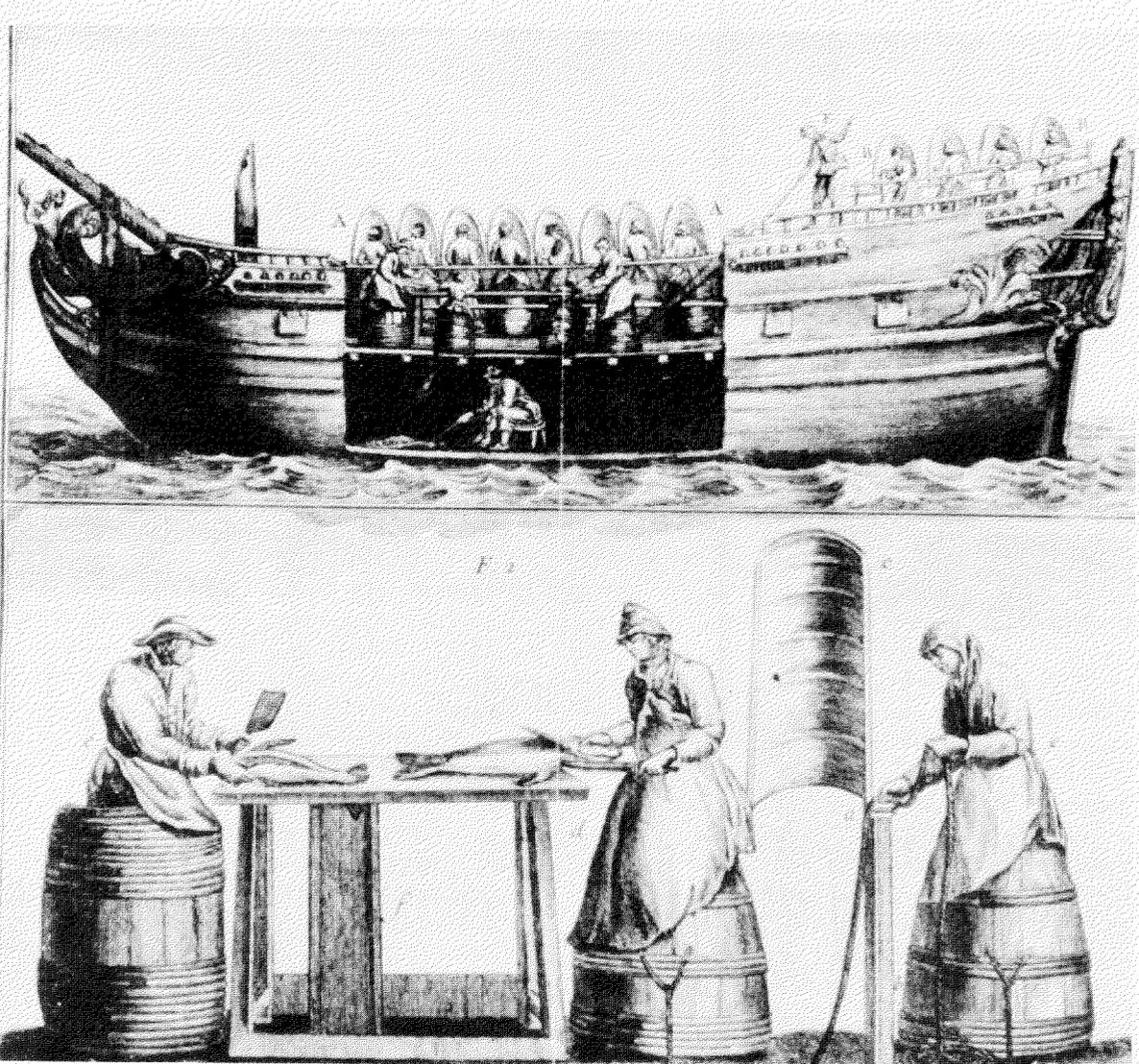


FIG. 10. Top: Along the side of the boat, protected by casks, are the fishermen. Behind them are the "dressers" of the fish, and in the hold is the salter. Bottom: At left, the dressers preparing the fish for salting; at right, a fisherman, protected in his cask.

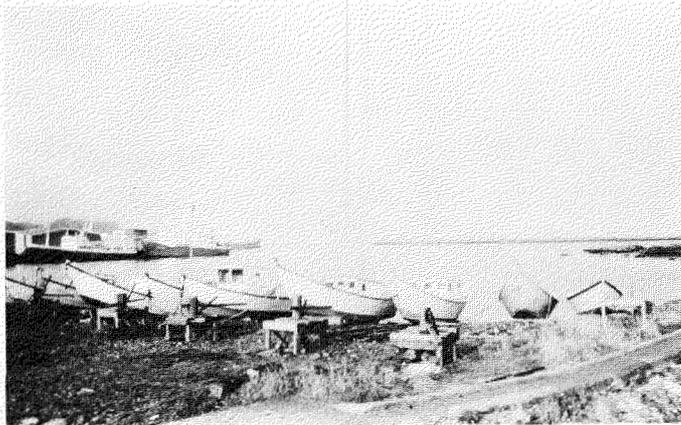


FIG. 11. Dories in port.

lost before the appearance, in about 1872, of the small, flat-bottomed dory invented by the Americans. These boats are still used by the coastal fishermen of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon (Fig. 11).

The dried cod method of fishing was totally different, as it was carried out from the shores of Newfoundland Island, Labrador, and the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon. In this system, the shipowner selected a deep, well-protected bay, rich in fish, where the ship anchored as close to shore as possible and then was completely unrigged. The fishermen installed themselves on shore in cabins put up by the ship's carpenters. They then built a fairly long jetty on piles which they called "chauffaud" (local slang for "échafaud" (platform), a word still employed by Saint-Pierre and Miquelon fishermen). The fishing was carried out in small boats with a crew of four or five men. The fish were brought back to shore, gutted, split (to remove the backbone, thus making the fish flat), salted, washed, and then put to dry on the shingle (a littoral bank of round pebbles rolled up by the sea), on the gravel bank, or on wooden stages. The fish were laid out to dry each sunny day until they were completely cured, after which they were put on board ship.

Where there was insufficient or no shingle, the fishermen made a bed of stones on a large flat area, and the cod was laid there, flesh side to the sun, to dry. Young French boys called "graviers" were employed to do this work under the authority of the specialist "maîtres de graves". They were not seamen or fishermen, having no aptitude for sailing, but were employed only to do this job. Women and young girls later joined them on Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, and proved expert at this kind of work, often being more efficient than the "graviers". The gravel beds have disappeared today, except in my native island or l'Ile aux Marins (Fig. 12) (a small island 1 km long and 400 m wide), which protects the entry to Saint-Pierre from the swells and winds blowing in from the Atlantic (Fig. 13).

When, as sometimes happened, there was no shingle beach or suitable place to build a gravel bed, the carpenters made wooden racks. They hammered in metre-high wooden stakes on which they built a framework of slats or branches, or sometimes just ropes lashed together. This was the best of all drying methods, in fact, as the fish were completely exposed to the sun and not affected by humidity from the soil. Once the fish-



FIG. 12. Gravel beds on Ile aux Marins.



FIG. 13. Saint-Pierre in foreground, Ile aux Marins in background.

ing season was over, generally in September (except for Saint-Pierre and Miquelon where it went on longer), the cod was put on board the ships, which were re-rigged and sailed to their home ports or other destinations according to the owner's instructions, to deliver their cargoes. As a general rule, the fishermen of Cape Breton Island, Labrador, and Newfoundland delivered their cod to France and Italy. Some ships from the fisheries of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon went to France, but the biggest export of dried cod was to the French islands of the West Indies (Martinique and Guadeloupe). The ships brought back rum, molasses, spices, and other tropical products on their return trip from the Indies.

For two and a half centuries the North American fisheries alternately flourished and declined because of the wars between France and England; Saint-Pierre and Miquelon changed hands nine times before the final settlement of 1816. Wars raged between the French and English even before the beginning of the sixteenth century and only came to an end in 1713 with the Treaty of Utrecht, under the terms of which France lost the Island of Newfoundland, the fisheries of Labrador, and the Saint-Pierre and Miquelon archipelago. France retained Cape Breton Island which was used as a revictualling base for her naval flotilla and fishing fleet. During 50

years of peace, French fisheries reached a peak of prosperity. Then came the upheaval of the Seven Years War during which Fort Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island, and Nova Scotia ("Acadie") fell to the English in 1758. A year later, in the autumn of 1759, English troops under General Wolfe and French forces under General Montcalm fought the battle of the Plains of Abraham. Though both generals perished in the fight, fate smiled once more on the English. The defeat of the French sounded the death knell for her sovereignty in Canada. By the treaty of Paris of 10 February 1763, France lost all her territories in North America. On the other hand, she regained the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, lost at the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

For 15 years there was another period of great prosperity during which the French were operating 360 cod-fishing boats with 12 000 men. But in 1778 the American War of Independence broke out. France sided with the insurgents led by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington and so was at war with England once more. Montague, the English admiral, seized Saint-Pierre and Miquelon and their populations were deported under appalling conditions. The Peace of Versailles, five years later, did not last long — the French Revolution broke out in 1789 and the islands were again attacked by the English in April 1793. Admiral King arrived in the waters of Saint-Pierre with a large fleet and a strong fighting force. The population of 1200 inhabitants was deported in the infamous convict-ships to Halifax, the Channel Islands, and England. This war ended nine years later, in March 1802, with the Peace of Amiens. It turned out to be a very short truce for, as the French were preparing to return to the islands, war began again in May 1803; the English occupation continued throughout the Napoleonic era until Waterloo. Fortunately, the French envoys, led by the Bishop of Autan, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord at the Congress of Vienna, were well aware of the vital importance of the French fisheries. They succeeded in having a clause inserted in the second Treaty of Paris of 20 November 1815, in which Saint-Pierre and Miquelon were returned definitively to France. Thus, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the flotsam from the wreckage of the great ship of French Canada came finally to rest on the shores of these two small rocks lost in the mists off Newfoundland, where 6000 Frenchmen have clung tenaciously for four centuries, and where today the Tricolour still flies.

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