

# BETWEEN LAND AND SEA: RESIDENTIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY AMONG 18th-CENTURY FRENCH SAILORS



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GEMER



## 1. Objectives

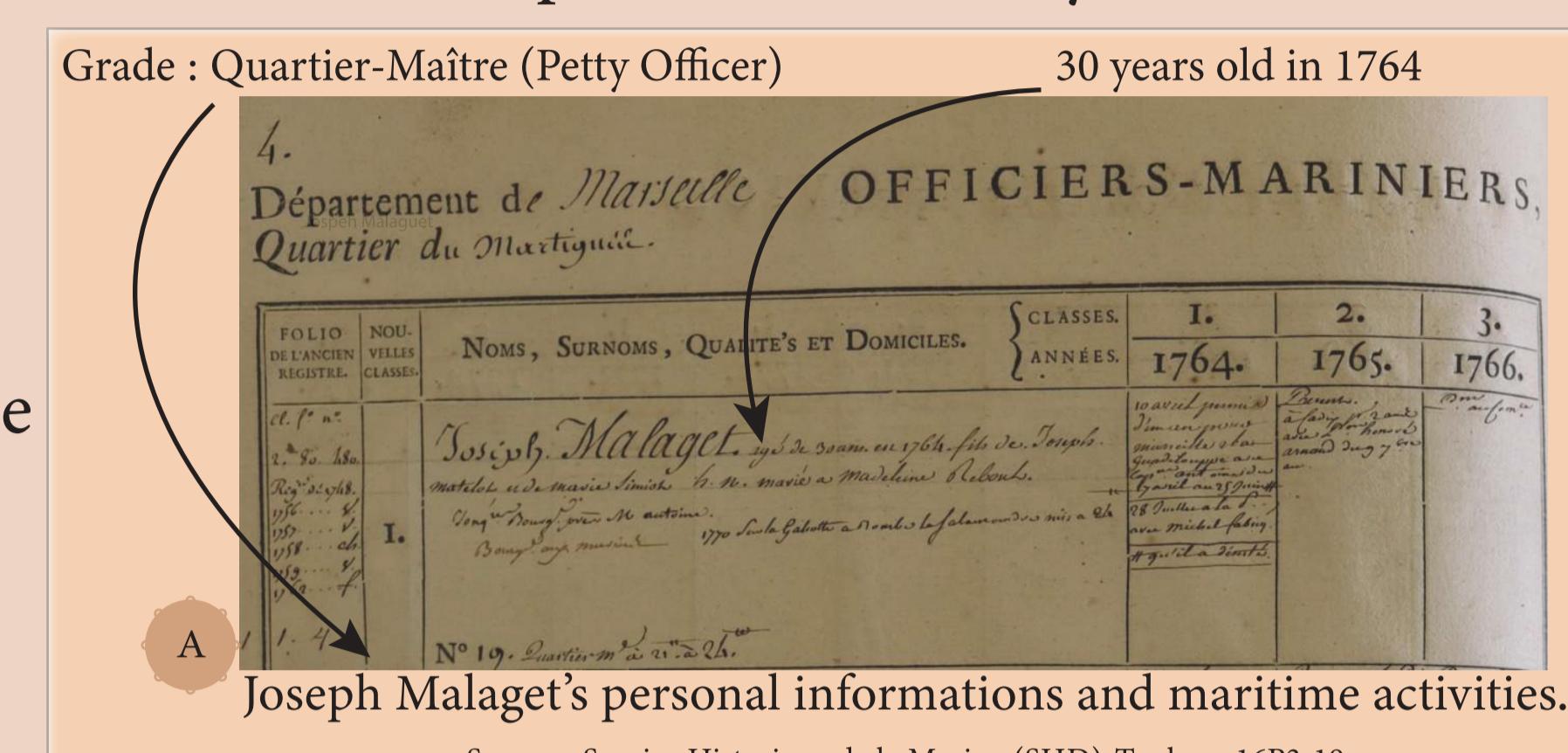
While sailors' occupational mobility has been well documented, their residential patterns ashore remain understudied.

We examine whether seafarers from the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts displayed distinct residential behaviors and mobility practices.

By mapping their settlements and movements using eighteenth-century sources, can we uncover a form of rootedness, despite the inherently mobile nature of their profession? And if so, what factors might explain this apparent paradox?

## 2. Matricule Registers a Rich Historical Source

Matricule registers, introduced in late 17th-century France with the establishment of a professional Royal Navy, recorded men liable for naval service to the King (A). These standardized documents provide detailed data on identity, residence, and family, and track yearly maritime activities, including service type, wages, and promotions. They offer a rare, systematic view of sailors' lives both ashore and at sea.

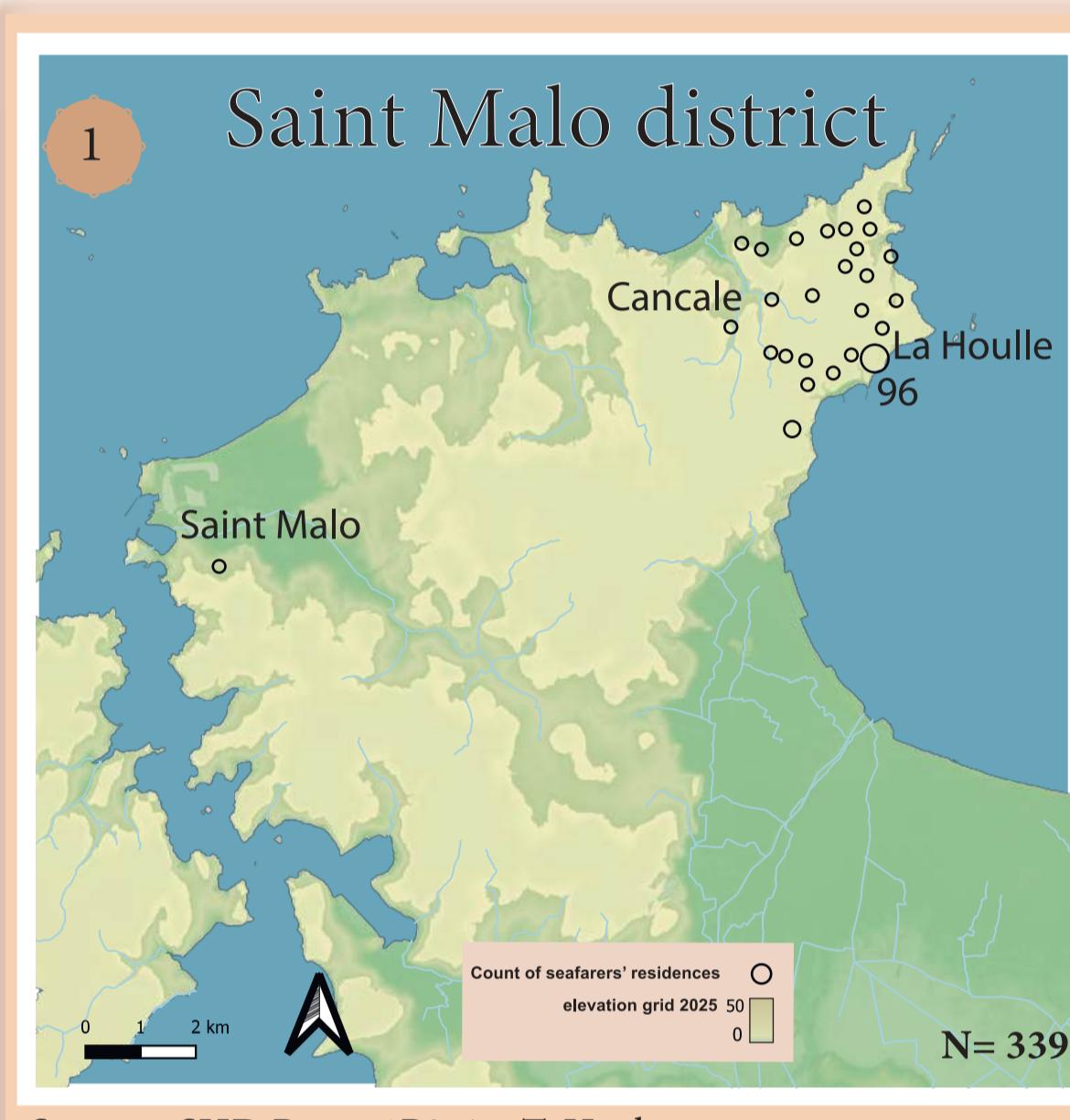


Source : Service Historique de la Marine (SHD)-Toulon -16P3-19

## 3. Historical and Geographical Frameworks

The GEMER project investigates the daily lives of sailors and their families in three coastal regions near major French ports (B):

- Atlantic coast: Cancale and Plessis-Bertrand (near Saint-Malo) (1),
- Seudre and Marennes (linked to La Rochelle and Bordeaux) (2),
- Mediterranean coast: Martigues and the Berre Lagoon (adjacent to Marseille) (3).



Source : SHD Brest-1P3-47-T. Huck

## 4. Methodology

Drawing on the standardized structure of the matricule registers (A), we are able to trace and compare the residential patterns of seafarers along both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts using consistent research protocols.

It also builds upon a set of previously developed methodological tools, including historical gazetteers of place names and GIS-based reconstructions of urban spread and the built environment in the town of Saint-Chamas during the 18th-century.

## 5. Residential Behaviors of Seafarers: Historical and Cartographic Evidence

**Some key topographical characteristics:** Sailors' settlements are often located near the shoreline, at the interface of land and sea.

This enables a mix of activities—coastal and deep-sea navigation, fishing—as well as agricultural and proto-industrial work.

On the Atlantic coast, settlement patterns appear dispersed across the landscape, while in Martigues district, they are more compact, with marked concentrations of sailors in specific urban neighborhoods. **Such areas were not necessarily in the healthiest or most desirable parts of town.**

**Origins and First Mobility:** the gap between birthplace and declared residence at the time of registration is an indication.

Between 5% and 10% of sailors originated from beyond the city or maritime district in question. However, the majority came from neighboring regions and often with established ties to the locality. This indicates an effort to bring in new sailors to a region left sparsely populated after the 1720 plague (3).

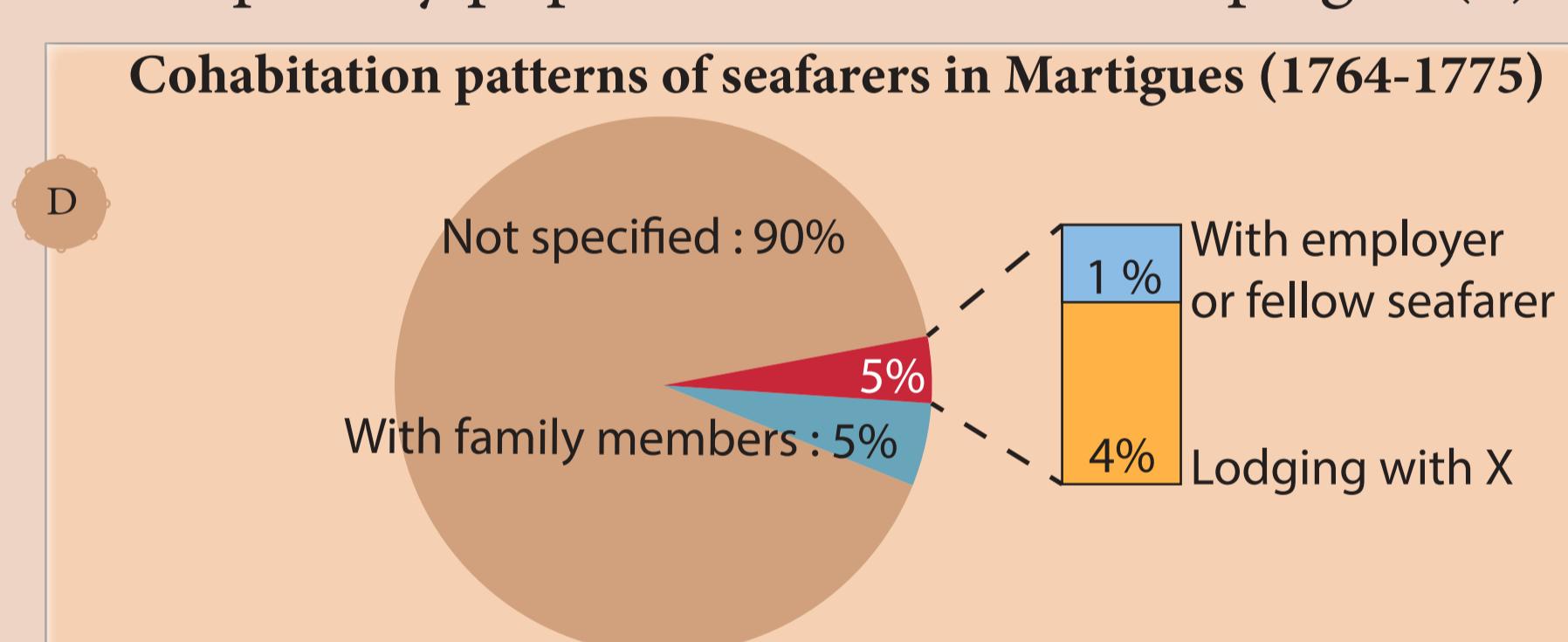
**Cohabitation and Kinship:** The matricules of Martigues district are the most informative showing that approximately 10% of sailors resided in someone else's household (D).

**Together at sea and together ashore,** their living arrangements reflect a form of occupational solidarity and extended familial cohesion that characterized this young and specialized population.

## 6. Seafarers' Local Residential Mobility

Some registers record changes of residence over time, allowing us to assess internal mobility.

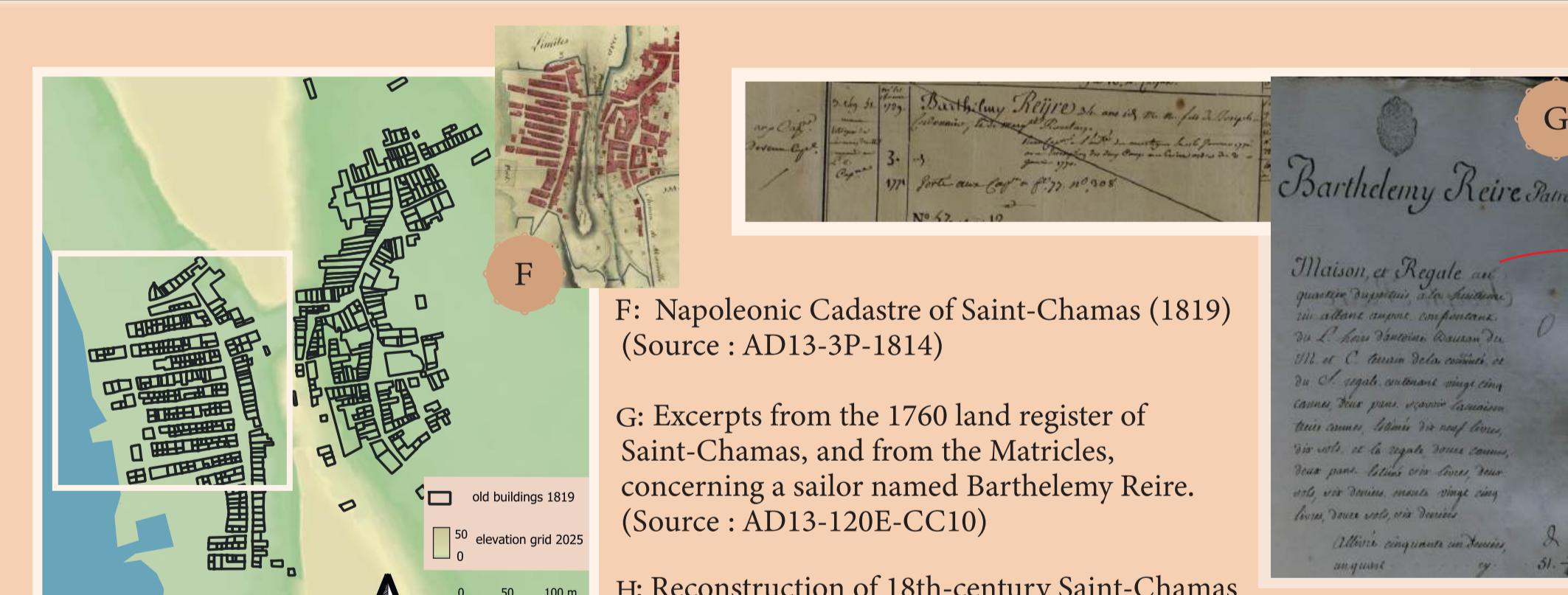
In the Seudre basin, residential movement beyond the initial address was extremely limited; in contrast, in Martigues city, residential mobility was notably higher (E).



Location	None	At least once	Moved once	Moved twice
Seudre Basin	379	11	2.5%	0.5%
Berre Lagoon	746	114	12%	1%

### Address and Housing: Mapping Sailors' Residences

Using the geographic data extracted from fiscal sources such as Napoleonic Cadastre (F) or land registers (G), we have been able to reconstruct the urban layouts of Saint-Chamas (H) in the mid-eighteenth century with a high degree of spatial accuracy. Complementing this, the matricule registers for the Berre Lagoon district offer a remarkably fine-grained level of address detail, specifying the street and, frequently, the exact dwelling. By cross-referencing address data with these Historical-GIS, we can locate the residences of some seafarers, particularly the minority who owned property (H).



## 7. Anchored in Place, Drawn to the Horizon

Overall, residential mobility among seafarers appears limited and predominantly short-distance.

- On the Atlantic coast, very few seafarers were outsiders to the district of Cancale or the nearby port of Saint-Malo.
- In contrast, intra-urban mobility was more frequent in Martigues, shaped by a combination of family solidarity, a flexible rental market, and limited access to property for young sailors.
- This dynamic may also apply to Cancale and Marennes districts though sources there are less detailed. In these rural areas, stronger rootedness may reflect the intergenerational transmission of land or housing—an aspect requiring further study.

**Matricule registers do not capture daily mobility between home and harbor**—which is possible by consulting additional archival sources—but they do offer valuable data on maritime careers, from coastal fishing to long-distance expeditions (notably to Newfoundland), and royal naval service.

## 8. A Constrained Mobility by State Control

This relative residential immobility\* was less a matter of personal choice than the result of tight state control. The monarchy maintained close control over its seafaring population—both on land and at sea—to ensure rapid mobilization. Address changes required formal authorization, and movements were tracked with precision, even when sailors were ill, imprisoned, or disabled. In return for these constraints, sailors benefited from economic privileges and fiscal exemptions. Notwithstanding, desertion remained a last resort—around 10% of sailors deserted temporarily or permanently, reflecting the tensions inherent in this controlled mobility.

\*Fully reconstructing the entire cycle of land-based mobility would require access to the complete set of matricule registers for the 1764-1775 period, in order to identify sailors who changed maritime districts—a task currently beyond our reach.

