

## **The City of Paper: Saint-Malo and its concentric spatiality in the saga *Ces Messieurs de Saint-Malo* by Bernard Simiot**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate, using a geo-literary approach, the way in which territorial descriptions are created in popular literature. Furthermore, it studies the role of popular literature in defining the geographical imaginary of its readers. Moreover, this work can be collocated in the area of study regarding regional literature and the *roman de terroir*: a unique feature of French literature.

### **Keywords**

Geo-literary approach, geographical imaginary, regional French literature.

### **Some initial considerations concerning the geo-literary approach and French regional literature**

The geo-literary approach has its roots in humanistic geography (Copeta, 1986; Ley, Samuels, 1978; Pocock, 1981) and, before this, in the “experimental” geography of imaginary (Wright, 1947). In 1954 the geographer André Ferré stressed that: “[...] ‘literary geography’ is an unusual and ambiguous term. Unusual, mainly owing to its novelty; although we are used to recognising

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the relationship between historical concepts and geography, [...], we are not in the habit of associating the adjective *literary* to the noun *geography* [or even] considering literary phenomena in the spatial context” (André Ferré, 1954, p. 145). Despite these initial doubts, the geo-literary approach established itself in the last two decades of the 1900s, supported by new concepts and methods of investigation that allow scholars to demonstrate that “[...] imaginary reality can transcend or contain many verities of physical or daily reality” (Pocock, 1989, p. 255).

In French literature, this particular geographical current has aroused the interest of researchers mainly with regards to nineteenth and twentieth century literature, which can be defined as “classic” (Brosseau 1994 e 1996; Chevalier et al, 1993). This has occurred in spite of the widespread circulation of regional literature and literary sagas, particularly the *roman de terroir*, in France and other French-speaking areas. Therefore, vast areas of study regarding the scientific importance of this “literary back country” of twentieth century regional literature have remained unexplored (Chevalier, 2001; Claval, 1987). My study of French regional literature reaches into this “geographer’s no-man’s land” and endeavours to: (a) understand how spatial descriptions full of local territorial references are defined and spread; (b) identify the processes aimed at spreading this particularly rich and articulated regional geographic imaginary<sup>1</sup>.

### **“Concentric” spatiality in Bernard Simiot’s novels**

The corpus of this work consists of literary texts from the saga *Ces Messieurs de Saint-Malo*, by Bernard Simiot. The author proposes a literary version of the spatial and temporal processes that gave rise to the city of Saint-Malo. Particular emphasis is given to the dynamics that contributed to making a small coastal island, without a real hinterland, one of the most important French ports, and at any rate, the city of legendary French corsairs (Marengo 2013a). Simiot creates a scene in which an imaginary spatiality forms a model of Breton coastal territoriality and more specifically *malouin*<sup>2</sup>. These spatial dimensions can be

summarized with concentric and progressive seriality, from the inside to the outside, or rather from the micro-space, the *terroir*, to the Oceans (Marengo, 2013b). In order to capture the essence of these spatial dimensions, I have chosen to use a combination of geographical reference concepts to delve into the complexity of the geographical imaginary of a literary work<sup>3</sup>. These concepts are:

- the local-global, a paradoxical and indissoluble pair for everything concerning the opening/ and closing to/from Saint-Malo – in this specific case – towards the whole, explored, colonized planet and vice versa. From the *terroir* to the Earth according to the epoch, and family, local, national and international strategies;
- territorial identity together with more precise references to identity *in progress*, such as the three levels of identity singled out by Christine Chivallon in the writings of Patrick Chamoiseau (Chivallon, 1996);
- insularity, *îléité* and archipelago (Bonnemaison, 1991 e 1997; Marengo, 2013b).

Four types of progressive, concentric imaginary spatiality can be identified in the scene set by the author. They highlight Saint-Malo's progressive role on a local, national and international level (fig. 1).

### **The local dimension: Insularity and *îléité***

This dimension refers to the daily spatiality of the characters, determined by the detailed creation of their socio-territorial identities. The concept of *îléité* predominates, understood as a concept of closure especially towards the nearby coast and *malouin* back country. This peculiarity can be defined as a 'founding' feature. As a matter of fact, the city rose on an island called *Saint-Malo-des-Flots*. Even though work to permanently connect the *Sillon* sand bank to the mainland started as far back as the sixteenth century, the memory of insularity or better still of *îléité* perpetuated (Laurent, 1986). The difference between the two concepts is fundamental in order to understand the

strategies of ‘resistance’ to the weakening of *élite* on the part of

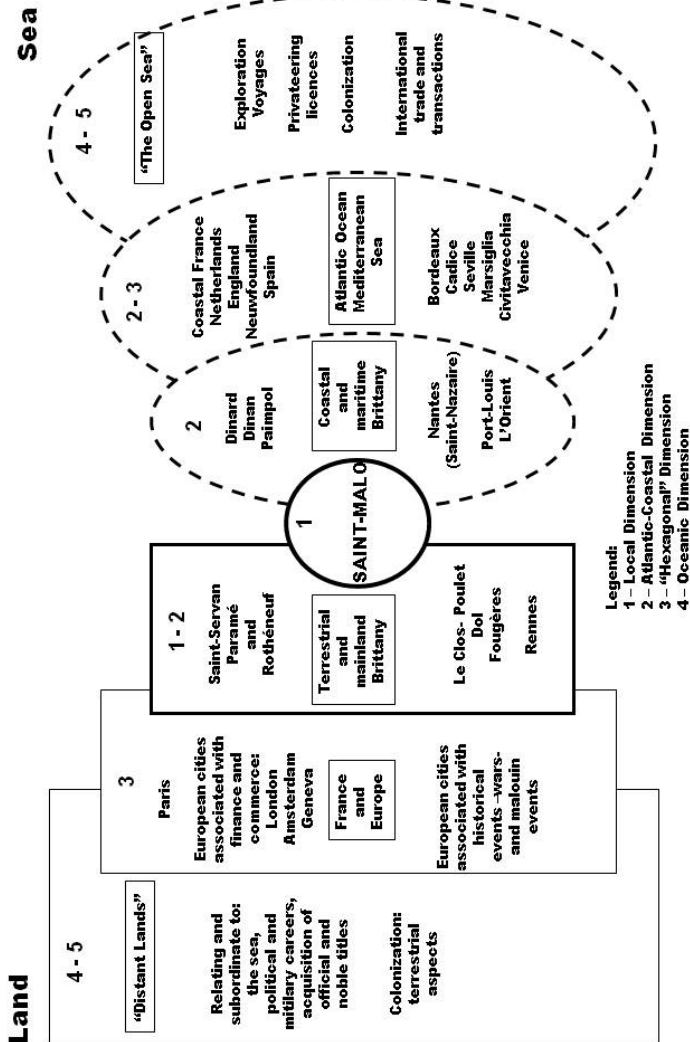


Figure 1: The founding position: Saint-Malo’s archipelagic routes between land and sea

the *malouins*. Joël Bonnemaïson has described it in these terms: “Insularity is isolation. *Îléité*, is a fracture; a broken connection with the rest of the world and therefore a space outside the realm of space, and a land/place outside the realm of time” (1991, p. 119). Bonnemaïson then goes on to emphasize that the key feature of *iléité*: “[...] consists of the awareness of insularity, or rather of the myths and symbols that surround the feeling of insularity” (1997, p. 122).

This feature is often present in the descriptions of Bernard Simiot. First the island and then the peninsular acquire an incomprehensible aura for the non-*malouins*: “A gust of wind made the door rattle [...] he sensed that the time of high tide was near [...] he left without looking back, taking long strides to reach Sillon before it was covered by water and Saint-Malo, separated from the mainland, would set sail for the open sea of the night” (Simiot, p. 18). The city-ship loses its fantastic dimension when the ‘bowels’ of the city are described: “[...] heaped together, more than ten thousand inhabitants were crammed into tall wood and glass houses, which lined stinking alley-ways” (Simiot, p. 22). Economic and financial development did not change the essence of Saint-Malo, since: “Encased in its corset of stone and attached to terra firma only by the narrow sandy strip of the Sillon, Saint-Malo, unlike Nantes, Rouen or La Rochelle, did not possess a hinterland with which to trade and exchange the necessary products for daily life” (Simiot, p. 292). Yet Saint-Malo managed to keep its reputation for centuries in spite of its initial territorial ‘drawbacks’ because: “Despite being attached to the terra firma by the Sillon dam, the city remained an island which owed its prestige to the adventurous courage of its inhabitants” (Simiot, p. 456). Perhaps this is the reason why even now their descendants continue to perpetuate the feeling of *iléité* at the core of *malouin* identity.

## The Coastal and Atlantic dimension: Building archipelagic relationships

This dimension is considered to be still in progress, along with the city's identity and the centuries-old process of building and consolidating the economic relationships of the ship-owners. In this case, the concept of *îléité* is enhanced by new, stimulating elements. Over the centuries, Saint-Malo has become a major node in an archipelagic socio-economic network: the nodes of this archipelago are both terrestrial and maritime. However, the union between the liquid and solid dimensions is not clear-cut, in fact: "Just five leagues, that is all. And yet there was an abyss between the squire's house and the walls of Saint-Malo. Two universes. On one side, the sea opened to the world, [...] on the other, the mean land with its enclosed spaces [...] the Squire of Couesnon preferred his terrestrial universe. When he crossed San-Malo's gate, he felt as if he were entering a dangerous world, where everything was for sale and a man's only worth was the weight of gold ingots he owned" (Simiot, pp. 108-109).

Nevertheless, it is also true that when the inhabitants of this walled city managed to make a fortune, they opened up to the outside: "Some of the rich malouins, tired of living in dark wooden houses in narrow roads which were no longer suitable to their new station, had large homes built on the city walls, so that they could dominate the sea at a glance" (Simiot, vol. 1, p. 472). Alternatively, they tried to overcome the deep-rooted sentiment of *îléité*, anchoring them to the mainland: "This will never be anything else but a country abode, in other words a malouinière. I hope it pleases you, because one day it will be yours, may it be fitting to your station, sir" (Simiot, p. 486). The first "solid moorings" were able to reconcile the rich ship-owners and the *malouin corsairs* with a somewhat unwilling and hostile territory. Thanks to centuries of reclamation and polder building, the territory was transformed into a back country, at least from a residential point of view. The most important nodes of this liquid-terrestrial network relationships were mainly along the French coast. These seaports, helped by the management problems of the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*'s senior officials and

despite rivalry, were all connected by economic relations and shared interests: “The ship-owners do not complain at Saint-Malo, Dieppe, Dunkerque, Honfleur, Rouen, Nantes, and La Rochelle. If most of the royal fleet and the last ships of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales are immobilized or being disarmed, their trading is favoured because they can hire the necessary personnel more quickly for their business” (Simiot, p. 322). Business relationships have often gone hand in hand with family and financial strategies, that began in the modern era and still survive today: “[...] the people of Nantes carried on identifying the inhabitants of Saint-Malo, as skilful and lucky fishermen, racers and traders and there were good relations between the two cities [...] it was not unusual for two ship-owning or merchant families to strengthen their business ties by arranging a marriage between their children” (Simiot, p. 124). On the other hand, relationships with Port-Louis and Lorient had a different origin and were strictly maritime: “[...] “There were some ship-building sites in the place where the Compagnie des Indes Orientales had built on the uncultivated land at the mouth of the Scorff, which everyone called L’Orient since the launching of the most beautiful merchant ship in the world [...] the ‘Sun of the East’” (Simiot, p. 84).

### **The hexagonal dimension: Necessary openings and strategic closings**

This dimension is based on the socio-economic rise and fall of various generations of *malouin* ship-owners. It describes in detail the turbulent relationships between Saint-Malo and the French kings or better still: “[...] with the tax collectors and the troops which the Duke of Chaulnes called back from Alsace to put down the Bretons rioting against the tax duties” (Simiot, p. 109). According to Abraham Moles, this “fiscal resistance” was justified owing to the fact that “[...] the island and its inhabitants followed the laws of proxemics: the ‘central’ seat of power was far away and for this reason it lost its importance and opposing strength; its prestige became abstract and for this reason its

coercive power disappeared” (Moles, 1982, p. 285). The crux of the matter is that Saint-Malo’s ship-owners and corsairs: “[...] have never refused their shields to the king, but they will certainly not get more from us by treating us badly. On the return of the Marie-Léone, I lent him almost five hundred thousand piasters which will never be repaid” (Simiot, p. 563). Avoiding the tax collectors was common practice and the shrewd *malouins* knew all too well that: “[...] if you want to convert your piasters and ducats, all you have to do is contact a discreet business agent [...] They come from Lyons, Bordeaux and Paris. The most important ones are from Geneva [...] they have obtained free circulation for themselves and money throughout the kingdom in exchange for loans to the king” (Simiot, p. 257).

Their unquestionable skill in avoiding the inspections of the *Hôtel des Monnaies*’ emissaries, contributed to the accumulation of vast family fortunes. Moreover, the prestigious, but by now bankrupt *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* was added to their list of illustrious prey.” Captain Le Coz explained that the malouin ship-owners were becoming aware of the financial situation in Paris. They had already stated that they were not willing to pay the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*’s debts, and instead they were ready to set up a new Saint-Malo Company, with directors who would run the business as merchants and not as State officials” (Simiot, p. 535).

The contrasting relationship between Saint-Malo and the Central State did not, however, hamper the unique maritime reputation of its inhabitants, in fact: “[...] Colbert had a maritime school opened in Saint-Malo. Young malouins set sail at fourteen to learn the art of navigation but, between voyages, the most ambitious ones attended lessons held by Maître Denis Beauvoisin, a hydrography teacher, for free” (Simiot, p. 145).



### **The oceanic dimension: From courageous captains to fearless privateers**

The founding of the East India Company provided the necessary push for the courageous ship-owners and captains of Saint-Malo to extend their range of influence (fig. 2): they started as experts of Newfoundland and insinuated themselves in the “exotic” routes, which led to their involvement in the process of colonization. As the spice routes weakened, they entered triangular and fraudulent trading, using royal exploration licenses. Many ship-owners made their fortune above all in the “Southern Sea”, the Pacific, which was as yet relatively unknown and unvisited. Exploration licenses helped the boldest to build up their fortunes thanks to these new routes: “At the end of a long voyage that had started ten months before in Port-Loius, the Maire-Léone reached Callao at the end of March 1699. It had taken three months to sail up the Chilean coast [...] Concepción, Valparaiso, Coquimbo, tiny cities that had sprung up recently from the land” (Simiot, p. 420). If it is true that “gold and silver are not in the Antilles, but on the other side of the Indies, on America’s western coast” (Simiot, pp. 397), it cannot be disputed that these courageous captains worked hard for it: “Jean-Marie Carbec recounted that he had arrived in Peru crossing the Strait of Magellan and returned doubling round Cape Horn” (Simiot, p. 450).

Interest in triangular trading was less common until the decline of trade with the East. The fortunes of Nantes and rival ship-owners convinced the *malouins* to invest in the slave trade. Simiot gives voice to a powerful ship-owner from Nantes who effectively summarizes this triangular trade: “With shells from the Maldives and cotton fabric from Pondicherry, you can buy negroes in Africa and feed them on Newfoundland cod. In the Antilles you trade negroes for raw sugar which you then refine in your factories in France and sell to the wholesale merchants who will in turn buy shells and Indian fabric” (Simiot, pp. 334).

History recounts the actions and defines the financial and trading spatiality of the *malouin* ship-owners, but it is memory that

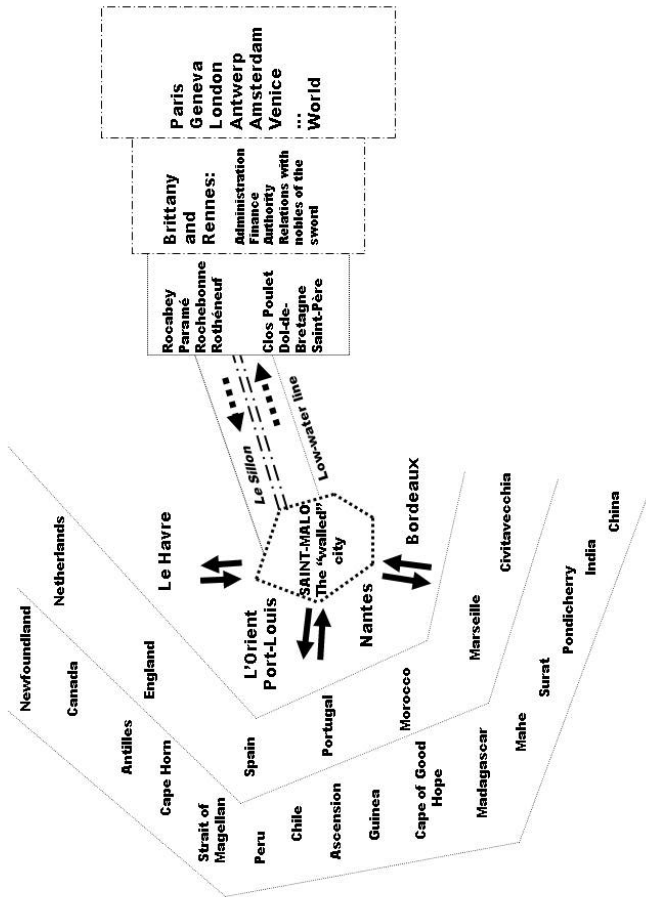


Figure 2: Saint-Malo's development: between *élite* and the search for a back country

transmits the fame of the local corsairs down through the centuries. Saint-Malo was in fact a focal point in the *Course d'Etat*: the kings of France issued privateering licenses to numerous captains of the city. It was an activity requiring a sharp-wit and courage, but also allowed them to accumulate

substantial fortunes: “Capitan Le Coz explained that he had sold his three ships to enter a partnership with Saudrais and Le Fer. Now, he wanted to rig independently as a corsair and he had applied to the Admiralty for a privateering licence. He only needed a small sum to reach the full amount necessary for the rigging ‘Do you want to be my partner?’” (Simiot, pp. 43-44). Saint-Malo’s pride in its captains and ship-owners, gave rise, not only to wealth, but also the accumulation and transmission of tales and legends about its privateers: “The people of Saint-Malo kept the legends of the corsairs in their families alive and carefully embellished them, in the same way as a fire is stoked with dry wood and the flame is roused by blowing on it. They had rigged their ships on the request of the kings of France for four centuries. They had helped Philippe Auguste to drive John Lackland out of Normandy, and assisted Saint Louis Luigi in forcing Henry III to leave Saintonge, they plundered the Channel and sunk the British fleet in the bay of Mont-Saint-Michel, discovered Newfoundland and Canada, and besieged La Rochelle at the time of Luigi XIII” (Simiot, p. 35).

Even today, Saint-Malo owes its reputation to its privateers, rather than its exotic voyages and exploration licences. It is thanks to them that the feeling of *îléité* has never diminished, but on the contrary, it has been carefully cultivated and is used today in cultural, territorial marketing strategies that continue to perpetuate, in what is now a rather stereotyped way, this unusual “trait” of the city.

### **Conclusive remarks about the assumptions of this research**

In an attempt to draw some conclusions, even though they are merely tentative, I have been helped by a Breton geographer, Maurice Le Lannou. In spite of the fact that he had never dealt with this subject before, he wrote in his provocative booklet published several decades ago: “Good *romans de terroir* are those in which the *terroir* is useful for something [...] I believe the ‘localised’ novel catches the sense of facts which are oversimplified and deformed by systematic science during the

process of classification [...] a novel can educate the geographer in as much as it is a story of people, cannot be written without geography” (1967, p. 36). The analysis and theories of this scholar actually demonstrate how regional literature can help the “simple” reader as well as academics, to penetrate the spatial-temporal and socio-economic processes that are often somewhat complex and unclear. The issues regarding insularity and *îléité* clearly demonstrate that complex scientific concepts can be effectively explained by the descriptions of a novel.

I would like to elicit further reflection on the binomial term “insularity-*îléité*” and the “quasi-islands” by quoting Abraham Moles: “You cannot reach an island on foot so the islands that can be reached on foot at low tide [...] fail in some way their insular duty; in reality, they are not ‘real’ islands” (Moles, 1982, p. 282).

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the ‘Breton’ portion of a more extensive research on *Le roman du terroir: histoires de territoires et territorialisations dans les contextes urbains et ruraux français*.

<sup>2</sup> The saga consists of three volumes: *Ces messieurs de Saint-Malo*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1983 ; *Le Temps des Carbec*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1986 ; *Rendez-vous à la malouinière*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1989. The quotations are taken from the first volume of the saga. They are identified by the author’s name and the reference page.

<sup>3</sup> A summary of the saga’s plot. The story begins in the 17th century when a small tradesman from Saint-Malo, Mathieu Carbec, buys three shares in the Compagnie des Indes Orientales, which was set up a short time before by Colbert. This courageous act takes place at a time when many middle class, maritime Bretons, seek new ways to make money (South American silver piasters), important official positions and noble titles. The plot created by Simiot follows Mathieu Carbec’s descendants through the centuries as they accumulate material riches, prestige and power, without worrying too much whether their wealth comes from deep sea fishing, privateering, or tax fraud, trading spices and fabric or slaves. The story reaches up to the end of World War II. Saint-Malo has been bombed. The devastated town reminds us of the little fishing port it once was. Numbering the stones of their destroyed house, the post-war Carbec family start planning new adventures and opportunities for themselves and their city.

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