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## COASTAL FRINGES BETWEEN OPENING AND ISOLATION. INSULARITY AND *ÎLÉITÉ* AT SAINT-MALO: BASED ON LITERARY MEMORY.

*Abstract* - The aim of this study is to investigate, using a geo-literary approach, some of the fundamental concepts regarding city-island identity, starting with specific constitutive ideas of a literary work. Moreover, this essay is a contribution to the area of study regarding regional literature and the *roman de terroir*: a unique feature of French literature

Keywords

Geo-literary approach – insularity – *îléité* – archipelagic relationships – regional French literature

### 1- Introduction

This work focuses on the processes of opening/closure and the consequent centrality/marginality of certain coastal fringes. This specific case concerns Brittany and particularly Saint-Malo. This city, founded as a coastal island, is an ideal case study for detailed research into the concepts of insularity and *îléité* (Bonnemaison, 1991 e 1997; Gombaudo, 2007), and concepts that follow on from these, such as archipelago and network.

Brittany and the city of Saint-Malo were by no means a random choice. These concepts came to light in a broader research of Breton geo-literature. They emerged not only from the literary texts, but also from fieldwork investigation, which was carried out alongside the theoretical and literary research<sup>1</sup>. These two areas of study identified a set of specific features representing insularity and *îléité* in this urban centre as well as the tendency to reproduce stereotype Breton and *malouines* images. In any case, these images were exogenous to the city since they were created by *outsiders* to Saint-Malo and the region (Bertho, 1980).

### 2. Malouin fiction between insularity and *îléité*: the regionalist novel as a geographical case study

This research and the considerations regarding coastal fringes are based on the three volumes of the literary saga *Ces Messieurs de Saint-Malo* by Bernard Simiot, an exemplary case of French regional

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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*.

literature (Baron, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. The writer built the temporality of his novels on specific and founding spatiality. His literary work on the spatial and temporal dimension portrays a set of characteristics that are inherent in local and regional processes of change and on different geographical scales (European and planetary: the discovery voyages, colonisation) in concentric, centrifugal progression. In short, starting from Saint-Malo, the Ille-et-Vilaine and Brittany reaching Paris and some European capitals and lastly extending globally across the ocean routes<sup>3</sup>.

The scene set by the author provides five types of imaginary and progressively concentric spatial-temporality, which contribute to the spread of a specific model of coastal, Breton and *Malouine* spatiality. This typological structure is the guiding concept linking the social, cultural and economic changes through space and time in this French town and its inhabitants:

- 1- The local dimension, insular and *îléenne*, which concerns the daily spatiality of the characters described in the minute details of their socio-territorial identity. A concept of *îléité* seen as a closure particularly towards the nearby hinterland.
- 2- The «Atlantic-coastal» dimension is defined through the creation and consolidation of the network of relationships among the ship-owners of Saint-Malo – a concept of open *îléité* as the main pivot of a local maritime and terrestrial network, a concept of archipelago between land and sea.
- 3- The “hexagonal” dimension, a concept in progress, based on the economic and financial start-ups and bankruptcies of the different generations of *Malouins*.
- 4- The «corsair» dimension, a strong spatiality anchored in the local spatial imaginary: Saint-Malo was a focal point in the *Course d'Etat*.
- 5- The ocean and international dimension, from the foundation of the East India Company to the process of colonisation, triangular trade and contraband, as well as «licenses» and the discovery voyages.

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<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 Italian translation of the first volume entitled, *Saga dei Signori di Saint-Malo*, Milano, Rusconi, 1991 was used for this essay.

<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 East India Company, 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 city 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.

Considering these dimensions together enables us to understand the processes that this small coastal town underwent. This essay will focus on the first two socio-spatial dimensions, originating from insularity and *îléité*, as well as *malouin* archipelagic dynamics<sup>4</sup>.

### 3- *The island: a founding element of stormy relations*

A starting point for our research is the definition of insularity given by the author, Louis-André Sanguin: «[...] a geographical peculiarity that is lived and perceived as a particular feature even by outsiders, so that reality is transformed into myth. It should be understood that the feeling of insularity is not stable, on the contrary it consists of a wide range of opportunities (Sanguin, 1997, p. 11) ». This is a generalist definition that urges us to find a more conceptual meaning to discover the founding motivations of *malouin* insularity. These motivations emerge forcefully from the descriptions of Catherine Laurent: «In the proto-historic era, the island that would become Saint-Malo centuries later, was just a rock surrounded by marshes and it was referred to as Canalch. From the Iron Age there were traces of an agglomeration on the tip of Alet, located south-west of Canalch, at the mouth of the Rance estuary (1986, p. 1)». The progressive rise of the sea level, changed this area considerably; the marshes that separated Saint-Malo-de-l'Isle from Alet «[...] were transformed into coastal areas with tidal influences, but it also became a protected harbour [...]. This new situation meant that the island could be defended better. In fact the Sillon (a thin strip of sand which connected Saint-Malo to the mainland in later centuries) had not yet formed (ibidem) ».

The transformation of the island into a peninsular or «quasi-island», as Abraham Moles would say (1982), took place as a result of the stabilising process of one of the coastal strips «[...] that connects Saint-Malo to the mainland in the North-East. This ribbon of land, Sillon was not viable at high tide, but the city was accessible at low tide through the Saint-Thomas gate. From as early as 1509, the *Malouins* started to consolidate the Sillon and build the first rudimentary paving (Laurent, 1986, p. 3)». However, for centuries they were faced with the peculiarity of this urban centre: «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, 1991, vol. 1, p. 18)».

The Sillon was progressively transformed from a *trai d'union* into an isthmus. The rock, which became a city, continued to «break away» from the mainland for centuries, despite the efforts of nature and man to reduce the «split», until: «the roadway was consolidated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after being damaged in

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<sup>4</sup> The other dimensions have been analysed in essays and presentations at conventions and congresses cited in the bibliography. Some interpretations by Italian scholars have also been quoted in the bibliography.

equinoxial storms (1754-1762) and rebuilt in granite up to the jetty of Saint-Vincent. In 1794 it was paved with stone slabs for pedestrians and sandstone for vehicles (Laurent, 1986, p. 3)».

The «sandy» link with the mainland, which later became a permanent connection, should have contributed to a change in the *Malouin* representation, given that «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)». Despite these changes, deeply ingrained concepts were embedded in the collective memory. There was a need to perpetuate a «control of the perimeter» (ibidem), summarised by the novelist in a description of the daily dimension «I’m going to sail around the walls and bring you back a couple of lovely fish (1991, vol. 1, p. 250)».

This is no longer a case of insularity or physical isolation (Tissier, 1984), but rather a deeper and intangible position. If insularity «[...] is isolation, *îléité*, is a split; a broken connection with the rest of the world and therefore a space outside the realm of space and time, a bare and absolute space. There are various levels of *îléité*, but an island is considered more of an island when the split is strong and permanent, or at least when it is perceived as such (Bonnemaison, 1991, p. 119)».

#### 4. *Îléité or the Land-Sea opposition: a «disjointed» territorial split*

Bernard Simiot succinctly describes the *îléenne* situation of Saint-Malo: «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, 1991, vol. 1, p. 456)».

Joël Bonnemaison elaborates the concept of this ancestral split with the mainland by underlining that *îléité* «[...] consists of the awareness of insularity, or rather of the myths and symbols that surround the feeling of insularity (Bonnemaison, 1997, p. 122)».

Analysing the historic path of Saint-Malo and its inhabitants, two basic features emerge which can explain why *îléité* has persisted. (1) The fortification of the island and consequently, the separation /closure of the city and its inhabitants to the outside. (2) An inherent autonomy of the collective identity of Saint-Malo, mainly arising from its maritime fortunes.

##### 4.1 *The «mineral» split*

The rocky island became a «closed city» from the Middle Ages onwards, mainly due to the progressive building of the city walls «[...] between the 3<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries [...]. These defensive fortifications enclosed a much smaller area than the current city [...]. The part between the Carrée and Poissonnerie towers was occupied by the sea and made a natural port, the Mer-Bonne inlet (Laurent, 1986, p. 1)» (fig. 1).

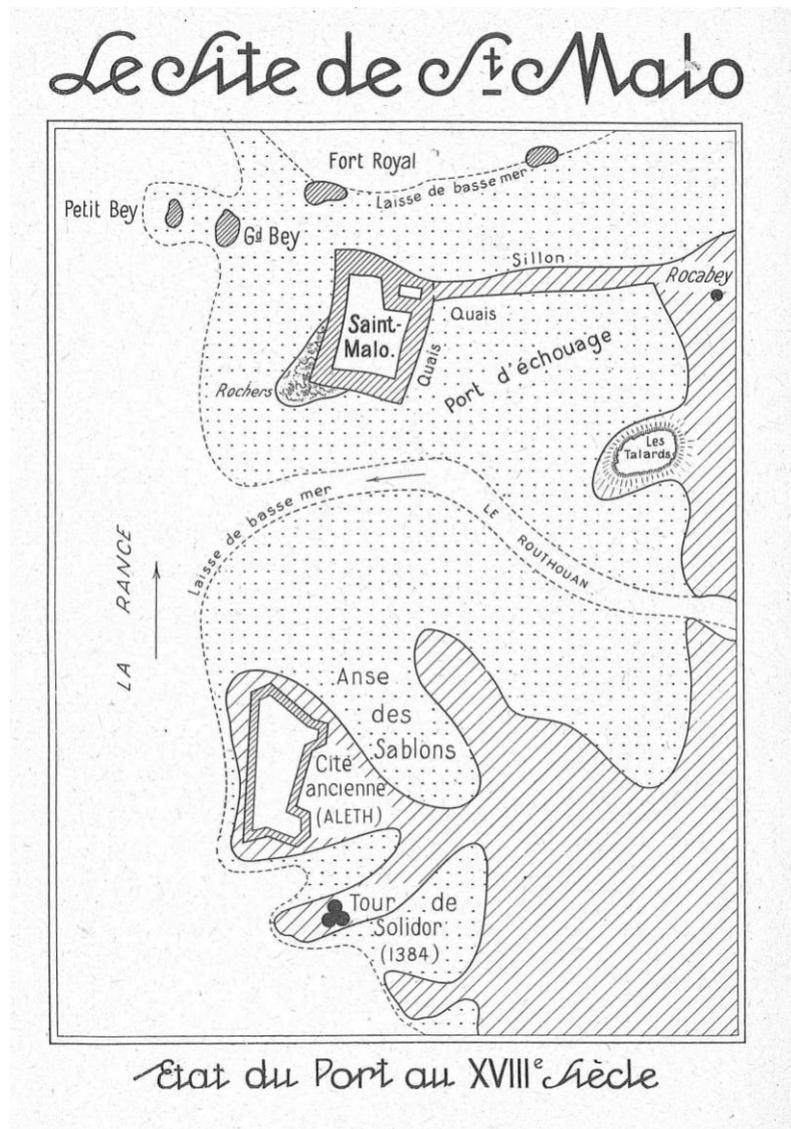


Fig. 1 - Saint-Malo and its port in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

Source: Le Lannou M., *Itinéraires de Bretagne. Guide géographique et touristique*, Paris, Baillière et Fils Eds., 1938.

Compared to its historic rivals/partners on the Atlantic coast, Saint-Malo's unusual geographical position made it much less attractive: «Saint-Malo, encased in its corset of stone and attached to terra firma only by the narrow sandy strip of the Sillon, unlike Nantes, Rouen or La Rochelle, did not possess a hinterland with which to trade and exchange the necessary products for daily life (Simiot, 1991, vol. 1, p. 292)». There was a stark asymmetry with its principal Breton rivals: «Nantes, whose inhabitants kept up a constant rivalry with the Malouins, was becoming an important market place thanks to its geographical location sheltered from enemy attacks, its river transport and the vineyards on its hinterland (*ibidem*, p. 456)».

In times of war, siege, famine or prolonged adverse weather, the *Malouins* had to face supply problems owing to the absence of a real hinterland: «Enclosed by their city walls [...] the granaries and cellars were almost empty. Only those with some savings could afford to buy cabbage and a few eggs that cost a fortune (*ibidem*, p. 608)». The small fishing hamlets along the coast, now part of Saint-Malo, sometimes offered unexpected solutions: «“At Paramé they had a vegetable garden that never froze”, said Rose Lemoal. “If you don’t want you children to go hungry, it might be a good idea to plant something there” [...] The next day, Marie-Léone and Rose Lemoal loaded a cart with spades and hoes and set off for Paramé, to prepare a small area of the vegetable garden (*ibidem*, p. 567)». Although the distances were short, travelling was very difficult, so as time went on, “annexing” the hinterland became more desirable than maintaining the island-continent split. However, the city and its inhabitants had a lifestyle and character traits that the coastal inhabitants did not readily accept: «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 (*ibidem*, pp. 108-109)». In short, there was a distinct conflict between the opulent, brazen dynamism of the walled city and the poor but serene immobility of the Clos-Poulet: «[...] M. de Couesnon rode off at a trot [...] in front of him lay a flat green and brown land of cabbage plots and reaped fields in a patchwork of hedges with an occasional oak tree here and there (*ibidem*, p. 118-119)».

Nevertheless, the distinct separation between the city and the nearby coastal area did not hinder Saint-Malo’s economic growth or its urban and demographic expansion. These processes were rapid and powerful, requiring: «[...] a considerable impetus to build new houses. The city’s population between 1651 and 1660 was approximately 15,000, and 20,000 at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The land registry highlighted the reticence with which concessions were given for new buildings: the lots were irregular strips, the houses had to be narrow and long (Laurent, 1986, p. 2)». Bernard Simiot confirms this rapid increase of urban and demographic density in his descriptions: «It was suffocating in this city all heaped together with more than ten thousand inhabitants crammed into tall wood and glass houses, lining stinking alley-ways (Simiot, 1991, vol. 1, p. 22)». It was so densely over built that: «Tens or maybe hundreds of rooves, it was difficult to count, touched, and overlapped in a mix of tiles, slate and shingle. He had to twist his neck to catch a glimpse of the sky (*ibidem*, p. 251)». These difficult living conditions, added to the risk of fire and epidemics, compelled the richer inhabitants to «[...] build large homes on the city walls, so that they could dominate the sea at a glance (*ibidem*, p. 472)».

#### 4.2 Corsair élité

The history of Saint-Malo attests the enterprises of its inhabitants: «Its exceptional development began in the 14th century and continued for another two centuries. By the end of the Middle Ages, the port of Saint-Malo was already involved in coastal and short-sea shipping, but *Malouin* ships could also be found as far away as Lisbon, Madera and northern England [...] these trading contacts allowed them to sell Breton cloth, Bordeaux wines and spices. [...] The *Malouins*' participation in the great discoveries, together with Jacques Cartier, and the development of cod fishing in the waters of Newfoundland were the crucial stages of the trading success of Saint-Malo's port. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had ascended to the position of first French port (Laurent, 1986, p. 2)».

Recounting this trajectory, one should not forget that: «[...] the *Malouins* set off from a tiny island to conquer the world (Simiot, 1991, vol. 1, p. 336)». Its winning card was the dynamism of the middle class: «[...] from the end of the 16th century, its ships were illegally trading with Spain, and its South American market, selling Breton and Norman cloth and lace as well as colonial products such as indigo. Moreover, many *Malouin* fortunes were made through trading gold from the Americas. In addition, the *Malouin* fishing trade established commercial ties with Marseilles and the Italian ports (Laurent, 1986, p. 2)».

The strength of the *Malouins* came from their profound and indissoluble relationship with the sea. This distinctive feature was also recognised by the State and 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, 1991, vol. 1, p. 145) ».

The audacious *Malouin* ship builders applied for exploration licences, despite the bans imposed by French international relations. This was seen as a way of pushing forward into the «South Sea», the Pacific Ocean containing inexhaustible treasure to replenish the coffers of Saint-Malo: «gold and silver are not in the Antilles, but on the other side of the Indies, on America's western coast (*ibidem*, pp. 397)».

Colonisation and exotic markets were a crucial mile stone in the global influence of Saint-Malo. Nevertheless, the rich ship builders decided to follow the example of other French merchants, particularly their friends/foes of Nantes, by entering triangular trading routes: «With shells from the Maldives and cotton fabric from Pondichéry, 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 (*ibidem*, pp. 334)» (fig. 2).

History recounts the actions and defines the financial and trading spatiality of the *Malouin* ship owners, but it is memory that 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. 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 corsairs: «The people of Saint-Malo kept the legends alive about the corsairs in their families 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 (*ibidem*, p. 35)».

Some ship builders and corsairs, at the height of their success, would trade this way in the British Channel where the Dutch and many British ships had to pass.

The corsair mentality nourished and perpetuated the feeling of *îlélite* as we mentioned before. Abraham Moles explains 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 (Moles, 1982, p. 285)». The *Malouin* case has no relationship with Breton irredentism. It refers instead to the awareness and the value of these sailors, not only in terms of their economic success, but also for their courage and audacity: «They 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, 1991, vol. 1, p. 563)».

The economic expansion of Saint-Malo went hand in hand with the ship builders' ability to «navigate» the intricacies of French and European finance: «If you want to convert your piasters and ducats, all you have to do is contact a discreet business agent [...] They come from Lions, 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 (*ibidem*, 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 East India Company was added to their list of illustrious prey: «Capitain 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 East India Company'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 (*ibidem*, p. 535)».

5. *The archipelagic dimensions of Saint-Malo: complex references between opening and closure.*

This essay, which focuses on the concepts of insularity and *îlélite* as described in a popular French novel, requires a final consideration that inevitably leads to further and deeper conceptual reflections. What emerges from scientific literature and the novel of Bernard Simiot is that this rocky and inhospitable island that became a peninsular and then a mainland, developed a powerful network of relations over the centuries, particularly from the oceanic and maritime aspect. This is demonstrated by its social network and the intense economic and financial relations that developed in and around this liquid medium. Depending on the era and the process of socio-economic and cultural development of Saint-Malo and its inhabitants, these relations extended near and far. The continental aspect, however, always remained one-step behind and relied on the «maritime» needs of the city and its courageous captains. Broader terrestrial and continental relations, national and international, were defined according to the requirements and strategies of the ship builders and financiers, such as: acquiring noble titles, administrative roles, navigation and exploration licences, and the management of the considerable fortunes of the *Messieurs de Saint-Malo*. It is somewhat paradoxical that the most important hubs of this network became firmly anchored on this neglected mainland of the *malouin* archipelago. The «solidity» of these «anchoring places», contrary to the dominating liquid dimension, offered new possibilities for social and economic advancement, as well as increasing ship builder and corsair fortunes.

These complex structures, developing horizontally and vertically, allow us to penetrate this opaque maritime/terrestrial archipelagic network. Joël Bonnemaïson effectively summarises this unusual network, never free from the ambiguous *Malouin* behaviour between opening and closure: «[...] living on an island does not mean living in a closed world, separated from the world, but rather on a shore, an interface which seeks contact, exchange and circulation. An island needs “a way out” [...] the issue is profoundly cultural; the island needs external allies, but remains nevertheless the centre of its own world (Bonnemaïson, 1997, pp. 128-129)». In the specific case of Saint-Malo, the asymmetric relationship between land and sea, combined with the binomial term insularity-*îlélite*, can be summarised in three main stages; the last one is still in progress. (Fig. 2):

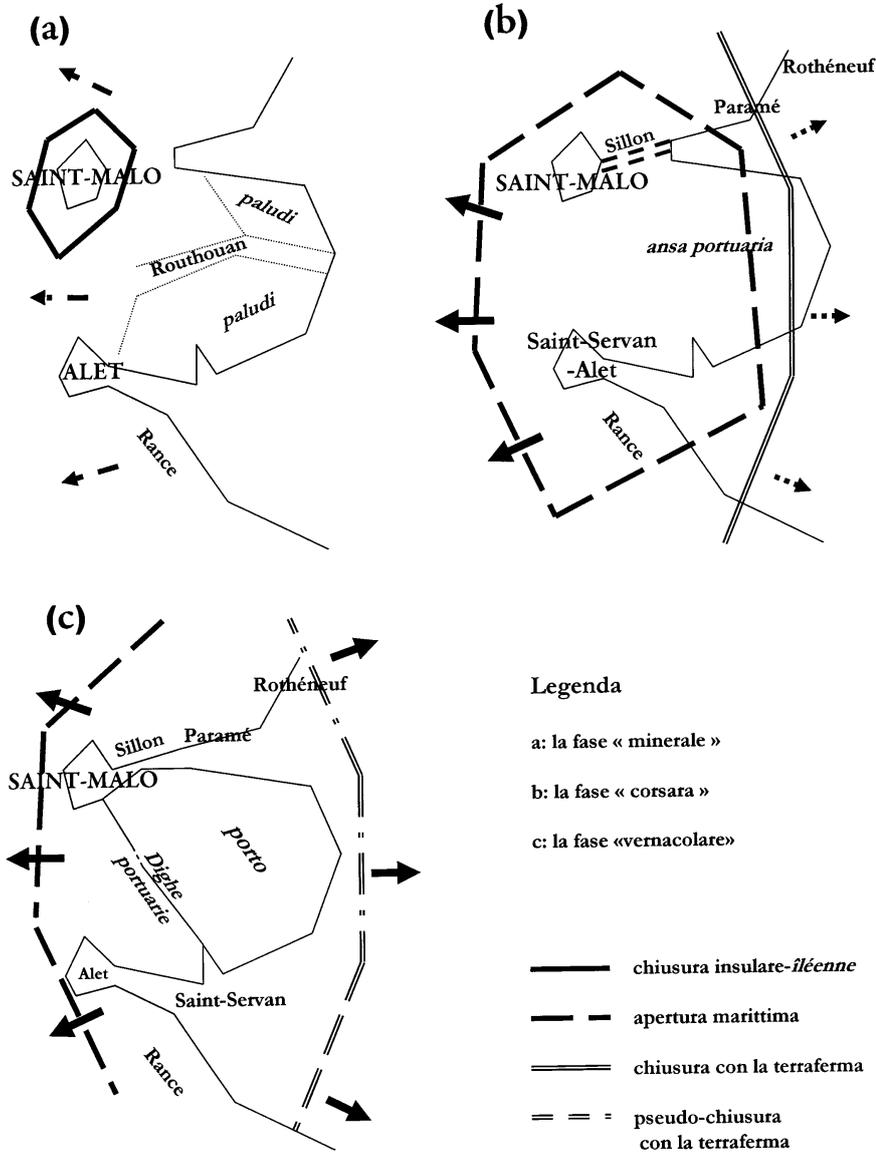


Fig. 2 The binomial insularity-îléité of Saint-Malo in time

1. The «mineral» stage from its foundation until the Middle Age: island-rock, island-unconquerable fortress are the origin of the «split» land-sea, which last over time and in the local memory.

2. The «corsair» stage from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the Restoration: the phase of Saint-Malo's great economic, urban and demographic development. The expression and assertion of *îléité* constituted a resource, a defence against the royal institutions (*l'Hotel des Monnaies!*) which often threatened *Malouin* success and profit.
3. The «vernacular» stage (Brinckerhoff, 2003; Collignon, 2005) from the 19th century to the present day: the «split» caused by *îléité* has become no more than a stereotypical element integrated in local memory.

Saint-Malo, now «terra firma», remains a corsair city that has transformed its *îléité* into an emblem and uses it in cultural-territorial marketing strategies because «Even though there are no longer any islands, we still look for them; their value remains despite the disappearance of their market (Moles, 1982, p. 288)».

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