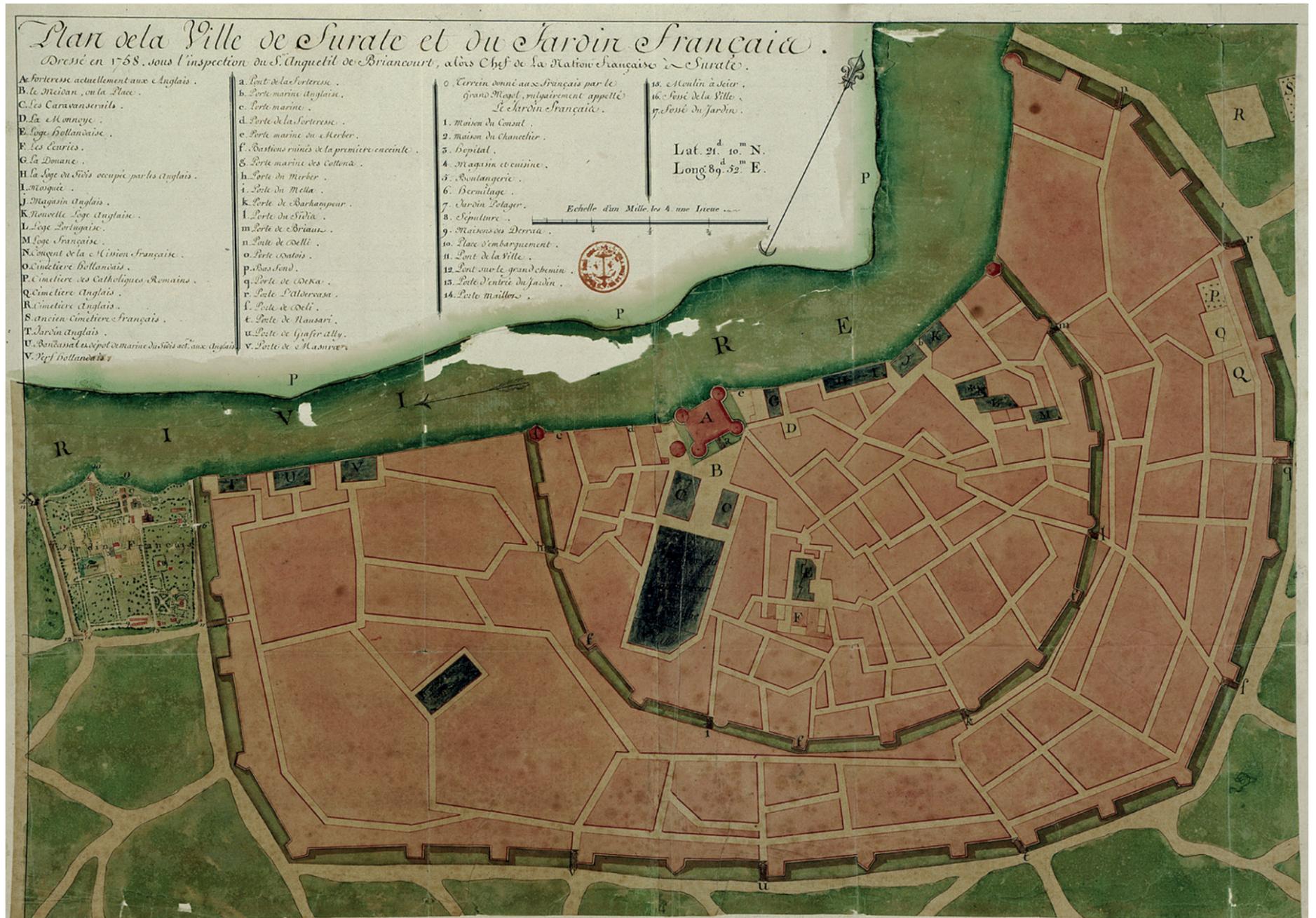


SURAT: THE FIRST STEPS OF THE FRENCH ADVENTURE IN

Sara Keller | résidente à l'IEA de Nantes

Historienne et archéologue du bâti formée en France et en Allemagne, les recherches de Sara Keller portent sur les monuments et les structures urbaines historiques comme source d'information pour l'étude de contextes socio-culturels pluriels. Spécialiste de l'architecture médiévale et moderne de l'Inde du Nord, elle travaille notamment sur les villes portuaires du Gujarat et les transferts culturels et technologiques entre l'Orient et l'Occident, dont ces cités sont le théâtre depuis plusieurs millénaires.



The French “comptoir” in the great Mughal port of Surat (1668–1778) tells the story of the first enterprising steps of the French colonial adventure. Surat, one of the greatest port towns of both Indian Ocean and Indian History, presents a complex and fascinating socio-political picture which is repeatedly re-discussed. In this colourful debate, the French presence goes practically unnoticed. Yet its resonances in 19th and 20th century Gujarat demands to raise the question of the French presence in Surat and its meaning for the French episode in India.

17th century Surat was a populous and extremely dynamic port town: it was the gateway to Mughal India and the place to be for European Companies developing commercial links with the East during the late 16th and early 17th century. Following the English and the Dutch East India Companies, the French East India Company (*Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales*, CFIO) founded a factory

in Surat in 1668. The French representative of the CFIO soon sensed the limits of their economic perspectives in Surat as late comers in an extremely complex socio-economic system. Their efforts pushed them towards other local and extra-regional littorals, to the benefit of other factories and settlements (with Pondicherry as the most successful enterprise). The French factory of Surat lost all major commercial activities within few decades after its foundation. It bitterly impacted the French economic and political expectations, and in Versailles, the question of Surat was a recurrent trouble spot. The French establishment (reshaped in 1773 into a Consulate) was forgotten soon after the takeover by the British in 1778.¹

Yet the French factory and consulate of Surat laid the foundation stone of the construction of the French presence in India, and in this light, it represents the first diplomatic and cultural encounter between France and

India. Rather than questioning the economic and political meaning of the French Factory in Surat, my study aims to reconstruct the reality of the French presence in the port town. What are the topographical and architectural traces of this presence in and around Surat? A pluridisciplinary study based on historical and archaeological evidences conducts me to reconstitute the picture of the French political and economical establishment. This reconstruction brings essential elements of understanding concerning the place and visibility of the French presence in Surat. It also opens the question of the cultural and informative flow between the French nationals and other individuals and social groups from Surat.

Though the main economic activity of North-West India shifted from Surat to Mumbai during the late 18th and early 19th century, Surat remained a busy urban center which underwent multiple development phases. Very few

remains from the glorious age of Surat are visible today, and the architectural elements of the French establishment in Surat were not spared by this modernizing urge. This infrastructural silence brings fuzziness around the meaning of the French presence in Surat. The plurality of terms used in archives regarding the French establishment contributes maintaining the misunderstanding concerning the reality of the French factory. The reason is that the French establishment was not a unique infrastructure, but a set of plots and buildings distinguished by complex jurisdictional realities. The French print on the surti territory can be reconstituted with the help of historical documents produced in the second half of the 18th century. On one hand are the maps created by the French and British administrations, on another hand the written surveys done by the French agents in the 1770s, that is, in the framework of the reshaping

of the factory into a Consulate, and following the seizure of the Consulate by the British authorities. In these regards, the archival documents of the consulate (1773–8) conserved at the “Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes” represent an extraordinary source of data which proved to be the core information of my study.² My residence at the *Institut d'Etudes Avancées de Nantes* offered me the opportunity to access this archive in excellent conditions. My topographical and archaeological survey done in Surat brought the missing elements to link the data extracted from the historical documents.

The French establishment in Surat was composed by two major set ups, a “loge” located in the heart of the city, and a land called the French garden (“Jardin Français”) situated outside the southern outer city wall. Two other plots were used by the French: a plot at Suvali beach, the anchoring place for

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Europeans (directly located on the Gulf of Cambay, about 20 km East from Surat), and a cemetery near Katargam gate, the northern outer city gate. Additionally to these bases in and around Surat, a French agent or a merchant working with the CFIO was posted in each big market and manufacturing place of Gujarat, like Ahmedabad and Bharuch. This shows that the French establishment, commonly referred to as the “comptoir”³, was an institutional unit, but a split functional and territorial reality. By a reverse metonymy, the “loge” mentioned in the archival sources mostly refers to the institutional reality of the factory (le “comptoir”), and not to the place and building used by the French members of the CFIO in the walled city of Surat.

The “loge” was an architectural set rented by the CFIO (later the Consulate) within the city wall to accommodate the commercial and political activities of the factory. The Mughal authorities were refusing to give a plot in property to the Europeans within the walled city, in fear of militarization and questioning of the local political authority. Therefore the French, like other European companies, had to rent a place. They found a building on the northern side of the walled city, close to the French Capuchin mission and in the vicinity of other European establishments. The “loge” was a timbering building constructed in the local fashion. It included offices for the Director and other members of the council, as well as living spaces for them and those who had a family. It also had warehouses capable of storing the imported and to-be-exported goods. Finally the “loge” proposed necessary facilities for the economic activities and the daily life of the French community (a kitchen, a place for the “palanquin” or litter, a stable with carts and cows, and probably a well and/or a cistern and a *chabutro* or bird mast). Few other French families and individuals lived on a permanent basis in Surat, most of them resided near the Capuchin church. The ‘Capuchin church – loge’ set was the core of the French settlement in Surat. Its location, and that is confirmed by contemporary encounters, favored the contact with other European nationals, while the members of the French community developed poor relationships with other merchants and local inhabitants.

The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb wrote in 1668 a *farman*, or royal order, to answer the

request of the French envoys Beber and La Boullaye le Gouz and to allow the French to start their commercial activi-

personal and important documents always remained based in the “loge” located near the Capuchin church in the walled

the river side. This architectural set was enhanced by symmetrical flowerbeds and well-ordered plantations laid out according

plants, such as the “schampa” tree or “frangipancier” (*plumeria*) or other essences which French were appreciating or fascinated by. This garden possibly served as a botanical resource which was drawn to supply the “jardin d’acclimatation” (the acclimatization garden), its counterpart in the metropolis. After the takeover of the French establishment by the British in 1778, the treatise of 1783 restored the French establishment but the French did not returned and never claim their properties in Surat. The few remaining French nationals moved out of Surat, and the gardens and buildings of the *Jardin Français* did not survive the lack of maintenance. The small France built in Surat during the 18th century vanished. Yet it would be too hasty to pretend that the isolated French presence did not leave any traces in Gujarat. During the 19th century, the interest of Gujarati princes and aristocrats towards French culture and architecture rather speaks as a resonance to the French living style established and demonstrated in Surat. Let us not forget that “démontrer la grandeur du Roy de France” (“demonstrate the grandeur of the King of France”) was a major point of the French agenda in India: The *comptoir français* of Surat modestly but successfully introduced in the East the model of the French cultural identity program.



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ties in the Mughal port of Surat. On the basis of this document, the French got permission to rent a house for their factory in the city (the above mentioned “loge”). The Nawab of Surat also granted them for leisure a large land located outside the southern city wall. The then called “Jardin Français” (French garden) enjoyed the view of the river and its fresh breeze, far from the narrow and congested city streets. It had a “diwan” or pavilion which was used for lounging and festivities.

In 1719 the Mughal governor Haider Kuli Khan completed the construction of a second fortification wall to protect the increasing urban center from the repetitive Maratta attacks. Consequently the city covered a thrice larger area, which although did not suffice to include the French Garden. It remained exposed to military raids. For this reason, the French factory including its

city. Yet the French agents soon glimpsed the potentials of the large land which was given in property to the French crown, in contrary to the “loge” which was a rented place. The French Garden was developed in such a way as to support the efforts of the *comptoir* related to diplomacy, livelihood and health. The surveys done in the second half of the 18th century by Anquetil de Briancourt, Chief of the French Nation (1758-1773) and then Consul of Surat (1773-1778) and his second in command depict the French garden as a well exploited 10.2 hectares land.⁴ Several buildings such as the “Maison du Consul” (House of the Consul), the “Maison du Chancelier” (House of the Chancellor) and the “salle octogone” (octagonal room) served representation purposes of the French establishment. Meetings and reception were hosted in these solid brick and timber buildings located in the most attractive part of the land, on

to the contemporary French garden art. A grand entrance followed by a large planted aisle introduced the visitor into this impressive scenery arranged according to the French architectural and landscaping art of the time. Aside from these representative areas, the garden also hosted a hospital where navy surgeons and doctors treated French (and occasionally other European) mariners and agents.

A big part of the *Jardin Français* was dedicated to agricultural functions and served the livelihood of the establishment: This included fields for vegetables and crop and necessary farming buildings (barn, stable, farmyard etc.). The written sources fail in giving details about the botanical essences which were grown in the French Garden, but it is probable that it included plants imported from Europe (and we know that Europeans grew grapes in Surat in order to make wine), as well as local

Notes

1. On the history of the “Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales”, see the voluminous work of Philippe Haudrère (especially *La Compagnie Française des Indes au XVIII^e siècle (1719-1795)*, 2 volumes, 2005), and the work of Jacques Werber. Also see Ménard-Jacob, Marie, *La première Compagnie des Indes*, 2016. On Surat, see the abundant literature by Ashin Das Gupta, Irfan Habib, Michael Pearson, Michelguglielmo Torri, Lakshmi Subramaniam, Ernestine Carreira, also the ‘mémoire’ presented by Jean Bouczo in 1992: *La loge française de Surat de 1666 à 1783*.
2. “Archives rapatriées du consulat de France à Surate, 1759-1787 (10 volumes)”, reference: 659PO/1/1-10. The “Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer à Aix-en-Provence” also conserves an important number of unclassified documents related to the French establishment in Surat.
3. The “comptoir” is used in the bibliography, while the archival documents refer to the “Nation Française” (The French Nation).
4. See the reconstruction model of the *Jardin Français* done in Nantes in the frame of this study, 25.11.2015 (historical reconstruction: Sara Keller, model creation: Anand Vyas).

