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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH TRUST

A Search for *Le Prince*: Underwater Archaeological Prospecting in the French Archives

By James Spirek

I had barely reached my office on the first day of work at the Institute when stories of *Le Prince*, a French corsair that had wrecked off the coast of South Carolina in the 16th century, swirled about my ears. I supposed that some of my new colleagues knew of my previous involvement with the excavation of a 16th-century Spanish galleon in Pensacola Bay, Florida. They had assumed correctly my interest in hearing about a contemporaneous wreck located in state waters. Learning more about the circumstances surrounding the wreck of the corsair through translated Spanish documents, I became intrigued with searching for documents about the corsair from the French perspective. Funds from an Archaeological Research Trust grant provided the opportunity to undertake a limited foray into the French archives. The following article relates the story of the ill-fated voyage of the corsair based on

translated Spanish documents and is supplemented with material from documents recently acquired from French archival sources. Information obtained from these Spanish and French documents provide the foundation from which to guide future archival and archaeological investigations of the wrecked corsair.

Voyage of *Le Prince*, 1576-1577: The Spanish Perspective

In early January 1577 a heavily-armed French galleon, *Le Prince*, or *El Principe* to the Spanish, wrecked on a sandbar in Port Royal Sound (Figure 1). Apparently the corsair had departed France in early 1576 to raid and trade with Spanish colonial possessions in the New World. The captain of the vessel was Nicolas Strozzi, an Italian from Florence. Strozzi and his crew of approximately 180 men sacked three Spanish towns: Margarita Island off the coast

of present-day Venezuela, Cumuná on the Spanish Main, and Guadianilla on the island of Puerto Rico. The corsair also raided other unspecified towns and preyed on shipping in the Caribbean basin. Sailing along the leeward side of Hispaniola, the corsair was chased away from Cape Tiburon by the Spanish Indies Armada stationed at La Yaguana. Reportedly, the vessel suffered minor damage during the encounter with the armada. Nevertheless, the corsair escaped and steered to the north coast of Cuba. Several leagues east of Havana at Matanzas Bay, the vessel took on victuals and water provided by a Spanish colonist. After resupplying, the corsair sailed north and anchored off St. Augustine in late 1576. The corsair remained anchored for several days while the town's population anxiously speculated about the vessel's intentions. Blown off the anchorage by a storm, *Le Prince* sailed further north, perhaps to seek a safe harbor, and struck the shoals at the entrance to Santa Elena in early January 1577. All the crew survived the incident and the survivors proceeded to the recently abandoned Spanish capital of Santa Elena, possibly led by Felix, a pilot who had previously served with Jean Ribault. Arriving at the burned and ruined town they tossed several cannons into the water from one of the hastily abandoned forts. They then moved to a nearby, but presently unknown location in the Port

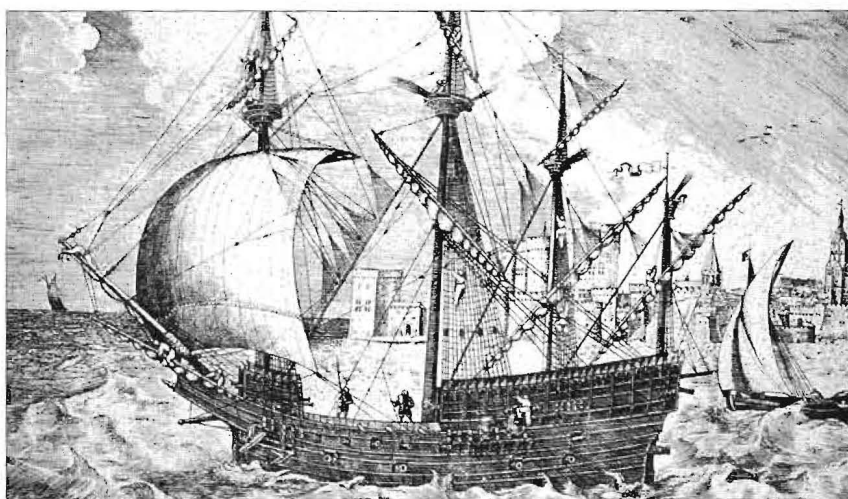


Figure 1: Archtypal galleon from the 16th century. (Woodcut by Pieter Brueghel)

Royal Sound environs, to build a fort. The fort was armed with one bronze cannon and numerous arquebuses retrieved during the wrecking. Shortly afterwards, the local Native Americans, incensed with the appearance of more Europeans, attacked the fort and reduced the number of survivors to around 40 men. The remaining Frenchmen were taken inland and distributed among local villages and held as slaves or as forced guests.

Learning of the French shipwreck survivors' presence in Port Royal Sound from Indian allies, a Spanish force from St. Augustine mobilized to capture the Frenchmen and to refortify Santa Elena. The Spaniards hastily erected a pre-fabricated fort, San Marcos, and garrisoned it with 53 men. For the next three years, the Spaniards employed search and destroy tactics to methodically ferret out the Frenchmen from their native hosts. The Spaniards eventually succeeded in rounding up most of the crew members, including Strozzi, although many of the Frenchmen fought to the death rather than to be captured. One of the crew, captain Le Roque, was brought to the Spanish from Indians living in the Appalachians. The Frenchmen were taken to St. Augustine where, according to the Spanish commander, "justice was meted." In other words, most of the crew were hung for their crimes against Spain. In a report about the judicial proceedings, a Spanish officer noted that Strozzi offered 3,000 ducats to ransom his life, but the plea fell on deaf ears. Some pleas, however, managed to spare some of the crew from the noose. A German gunner pleaded he had been impressed into service against his will after the ship he was originally on was attacked by the corsair. He, along with the ship's

barber-surgeon, was spared from punishment and given a rate and ration and entered into the service of the King of Spain. Several young boys and men were also reserved for the King's service—they were condemned as galley slaves.

The French Twist

The tale of *Le Prince* up to this point has been gleaned solely from translated Spanish documents. While useful in portraying the corsair's activities in Spain's New World dominions, a more balanced version of the voyage requires information available through French documents. Information such as the size of the ship, armament, and ship tackle, or possibly a fuller description of the wrecking incident are accessible only in French archives. To launch a preliminary search for *Le Prince* documents in France, a grant of \$1,490 was awarded by the Archaeological Research Trust Board in late 1997. The funds were used to hire Mr. John de Bry, director of the Center for Historical Archaeology based in Melbourne Beach, Florida, and a Ph.D. candidate at the Université de la Sorbonne in Paris, to undertake the initial foray into the French archives. Before departing for France, de Bry cautioned us that the desired documents may have been destroyed in the 16th and 17th centuries during the Wars of Religion in France. Nonetheless, we remained hopeful that written materials existed somewhere in France. de Bry spent seven days conducting research at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Archives Nationales in Paris, and at the Service Historique de la Marine, all in or near Paris. Shortly after his return from France, de Bry submitted a written report stating that while documents specifically related to *Le Prince* were not located,

important and relevant ancillary data was obtained about two individuals mentioned in the Spanish documents: the Florentine captain Nicolas Strozzi and the pilot Felix.

In the Spanish accounts, right before his execution, the captain, Nicolas Strozzi, claimed he was from a wealthy Florentine family and offered 3,000 ducats to spare his life. The offer was ignored on the grounds of his past crimes and potential for other misdeeds if set free. Modern historians who have written about the incident assumed Strozzi was related to the French Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici. The Strozzi's were cousins to the illustrious Medici family, both families hailed from Florence, and members of the Strozzi family living in France had benefited from this connection and were very prominent in French military and political circles. de Bry located several Strozzi family documents, including a family genealogy spanning from the 1200s to the 1600s, but not one of them mentions a family member named Nicolas. The only mention of a Nicolas Strozzi in the genealogy was from the 1300s, much too early for the Nicolas in question. One possible explanation for his absence from this list comes to mind—perhaps he was a disavowed bastard son. However, this particular genealogy was quite thorough and documented several illegitimate children sired by the family. Nevertheless, in spite of the genealogical evidence, someone from the French corsair represented themselves as a Strozzi of high note in France. One conclusion that jumps to mind is that this person, "Nicolas Strozzi" claimed relationship with a powerful French-Italian family to save his neck.

No documents were found concerning the pilot Felix, who was

See *LE PRINCE*, Page 12

reported to have served in the past with Jean Ribault. Ribault, a French Huguenot, founded Charlesfort at Santa Elena in 1562; that fort was abandoned a year later. Ribault was later executed by the Spanish in 1565 following a disastrous venture to protect a second French fort, Fort Caroline, near present-day St. John's River in Florida. As the records from the first voyage that established Charlesfort are believed to be non-existent, de Bry examined the crew manifest and other documents from Ribault's second voyage to protect Fort Caroline, for a crewman named Felix. The crew manifest did not list a Felix. I propose that he may have been involved with the first expedition that established Charlesfort. This may explain why the corsair wrecked off Port Royal Sound and the survivors, shown the way by the pilot Felix, apparently traveled directly to the recently abandoned site of Santa Elena, and the now known site of Charlesfort on Parris Island.

Besides consulting archival

sources, de Bry contacted several French maritime historians for assistance in the search. The historians offered suggestions, but no concrete information or leads for archival sources concerning the corsair. Following his arrival back in Florida, de Bry wrote to various repositories along the French coastline asking curators about any materials relating to *Le Prince*. To date, he has not received any leads from the curators. Then one day, a letter arrived out of the blue to de Bry from a French-Canadian researcher living in Bordeaux, France, who had heard through the grapevine about our research quest. The letter stated he had copies of several documents related to *Le Prince* in his possession. Several months later the researcher, Bernard Allaire, sent another letter and a copy of one of the documents to de Bry. Later, Allaire directly sent to me four additional documents related to the corsair dating from 1575 to 1576. Allaire provided a brief synopsis of each of these documents that sheds a

little more light on the voyage. These documents still require translation to reveal their full content.

The copy of the document sent to de Bry was a loan agreement between two Italians, Rosso and Fapoco, and a lender for 100 "livres tournaiss" for the 300 ton *Le Prince* in 1576 (Figure 2). Interest on the loan was 55%, a seemingly usurious rate. The stated mission of the vessel was to undertake a voyage to Peru. Two items are of particular interest in

this document: one, there is no mention of a Nicolas Strozzi, and two, the hull size of the corsair is reported as 300 tons. As for "Nicolas Strozzi," Allaire suggests that the Strozzi mentioned in the Spanish documents may have been a member of one of the lesser Strozzi families who were living on the margins of the more prosperous branch of the family during this period. Again, if there was a Nicolas Strozzi on board, as reported by the Spanish, then he may have declared relationship to the wealthy Florentine branch to spare his life as suggested, or more likely, it was either Rosso or Fapoco who made this declaration.

Extremely relevant to future search endeavors to physically locate the wreck was the stated tonnage of the ship at 300 tons in the French loan agreement. A Spanish commander sent to capture the French survivors did not know where the hull had struck when entering the sound, but did report observing the poop deck, or the uppermost portion of the stern superstructure, lying in the marshes inside Port Royal Sound. Using the size of the poop deck as a gauge, the Spanish commander speculated the galleon was 500 tons. Tonnage during the 16th century was related to burthen or cargo capacity, rather than tonnage based on hull displacement as in modern times, and the two conflicting tonnage figures have a bearing on the anticipated size of the ship's remains, although presumably the French figure is the more accurate one. In any case, the difference in size is important to planning a survey strategy and anticipating the potential magnetic signature associated with the wreck.

The remaining four documents reveal that *Le Prince* was on the Normandy coast in the spring of 1575

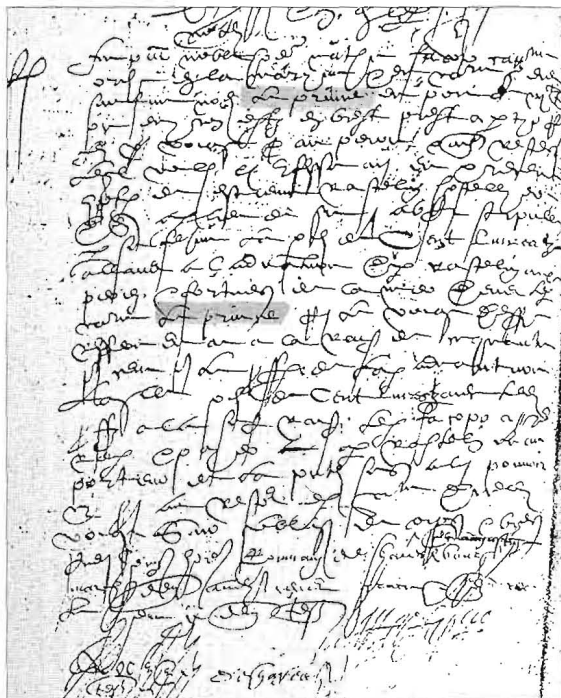


Figure 2: The loan agreement with *Le Prince* highlighted. (SCIAA photo)

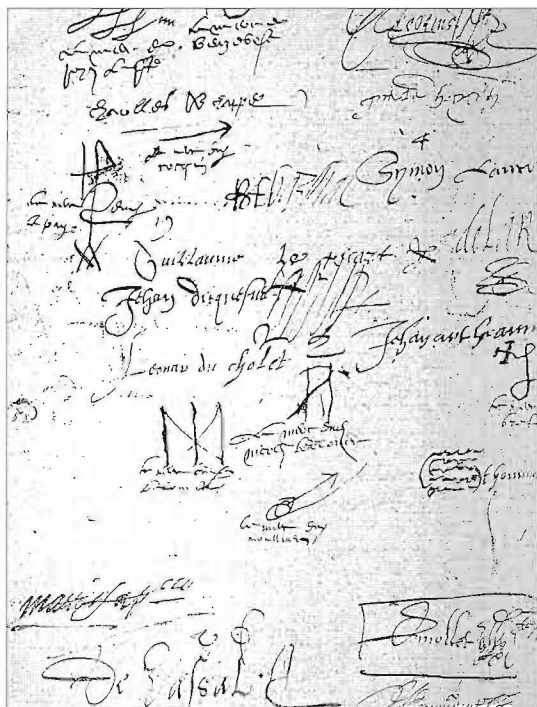


Figure 3: Signatures and tugrahs of crew members. (SCIAA photo)

and later in the spring of 1576 on the Brittany coast. Key names associated with the venture figure in this material, especially the name of Philippe Strozzi. Philippe Strozzi was a member of the prominent Strozzi family, a cousin to the Queen Mother, and an important military commander. According to Allaire, Strozzi encouraged corsair activity and was backed by Henry III, King of France, in these enterprises. The documents reveal that Strozzi, along with another gentleman, was a victualler or a supplier of the necessary foodstuffs and other miscellaneous materials to the corsair. The two Italians, Rosso and Fapoco, also figure in these other documents as well. One of the documents was the sale of part of *Le Prince* to Claude Gielles, sieur de Rocque, in 1576. Rocque was the crew member carried to the Appalachians by his Indian captors, and apparently a principal investor in the enterprise. According to the Spanish commander, Captain Le Roque

hailed from Rouen and was described as having a particularly fine military countenance. At the end of one lengthy document are the fascinating signatures and *tugrahs*, (a caligraphic signature to prevent counterfeiting) of the various crew members (Figure 3).

Future Plans

One of the rewarding aspects of historical archaeology is the pursuit, not only of archaeological remains, but also the search through dusty archives for materials and facts otherwise unattainable or only hinted at in

the archaeological record. Study of the French shipwreck offers an excellent historical archaeology example where the archaeological site has a history and is therefore accompanied by written documents. Weaving both the documents and the vessel's remains together will serve to interpret more fully the history and archaeology of the corsair. From the perspective of a nautical archaeologist, discovery of this corsair would represent the first known opportunity to explore a 16th-century French shipwreck in the Western Hemisphere. The shipwreck offers the potential to study French seafaring and corsairing, naval ordnance, shipboard life, and produce evidence of the type of goods and products commandeered from the Spanish ships and towns. Archaeological examination of this French shipwreck would also provide the means for comparative analysis with previously recorded Spanish shipwrecks from the same century.

Evidently, documents relating to *Le Prince* survived a tumultuous century of social conflict in France. Allaire feels confident that an intensive search of French archival repositories at the places mentioned in the documents, Spain, and elsewhere will provide quality information about the corsair, and he is preparing a cost estimate for his services to conduct the necessary research. Current research plans include seeking funds to continue additional archival research and to commence marine remote sensing operations in conjunction with the Port Royal Sound Survey (See *Legacy* 2(3), Dec. 1997, pp. 24-25). The remains of the corsair represent one of the many shipwrecks recorded to have sunk in and around Port Royal Sound. The targeted area to search for the corsair has historically been a major ship trap from the 16th century onwards, and as we systematically comb the waters of Port Royal Sound, we will undoubtedly come across other victims of the treacherous sandbars present in and around the sound. Even if the remains of the wreck are not found, this brief archival foray has allowed a glimpse of a forgotten episode in the violent and tumultuous struggle to control the southeastern US coast by France, Spain, and also the Caribbean.

The author is grateful to the ART board for providing seed money necessary to begin this research project. If you would like to help sponsor additional archival research, the translation of the documents at hand, or field work activities for continuing the investigation of the French corsair, please consider a tax-deductible contribution to the Archaeological Research Trust. For additional information about the project contact Jim Spirek at (803) 777-8170 or spirekj@garnet.cla.sc.edu.