

Fact-finding on ‘Jeu de Mail’ (Pall Mall): Marseille

By Sara Nijs



Much is written about *jeu de mail* in France, especially about the cross-country game as played in Montpellier until the Second World War. All over France, there are some three hundred indications where the game could have been played on laid out alleys in castle gardens and in towns and villages, as well as the cross-country variant. In Marseille, there were two public mail alleys, a small one and a large one, initially both outside the city walls.

The small *jeu de mail* was installed at the beginning of the 17th century. The course was bounded at the north side by what is long since La Canebière. The course had a length of 175 metres and a width of 27 metres, where the players started on the east side and from the side of the harbour, they played back to the starting point to have a 350 metres course. [1]



Detail of the city of Marseille in 1642. The arrow points to the Porte Royale and the small *jeu de mail* is partly hidden by the index. – Drawing of Jacques Maretz ‘Histoire de la ville de Marseille’ by Antoine de Ruffi, 1642 – www.edition-originale.com

In 1622, King Louis XIII visited Marseille. The Communal Archives of Marseille have a manuscript in which this visit is described: ‘Ils sortirent par la porte Royale à cause de la presse du peuple, joint la compagnie du sieur de Cabries qui estoit encore au chemin de la Tuilliere, passèrent du côté du jeu de mail et à l’autre chemin tirant au Roet pour se rendre à

ladite plaine Saint Michel, en laquelle ne furent pas plustost arrivés que voila le train du Roy.’ [2]

The whole town had turned out, which is the reason why the reception committee, being delayed, left the town via de Porte Royale to go along the *jeu de mail* to the so-called St Michel Plain where they arrived almost at the same moment as the king and his entourage.



Detail of a drawing, probably made just before the Arsenal des Galères was built in 1665. At the bottom left the *jeu de mail* with, at the side of the harbour, its turning point. [3]

On a painting, dated 1666, one can see a player on the small *jeu de mail*. The painting is property of the Musée de la Marine of the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie Marseille Provence (CCIMP) and alas, when visiting the museum, the picture was not on exposition but stocked 'somewhere' in the building. The painting is in a very bad condition, as one can see in the image the CCIMP was kind enough to provide.

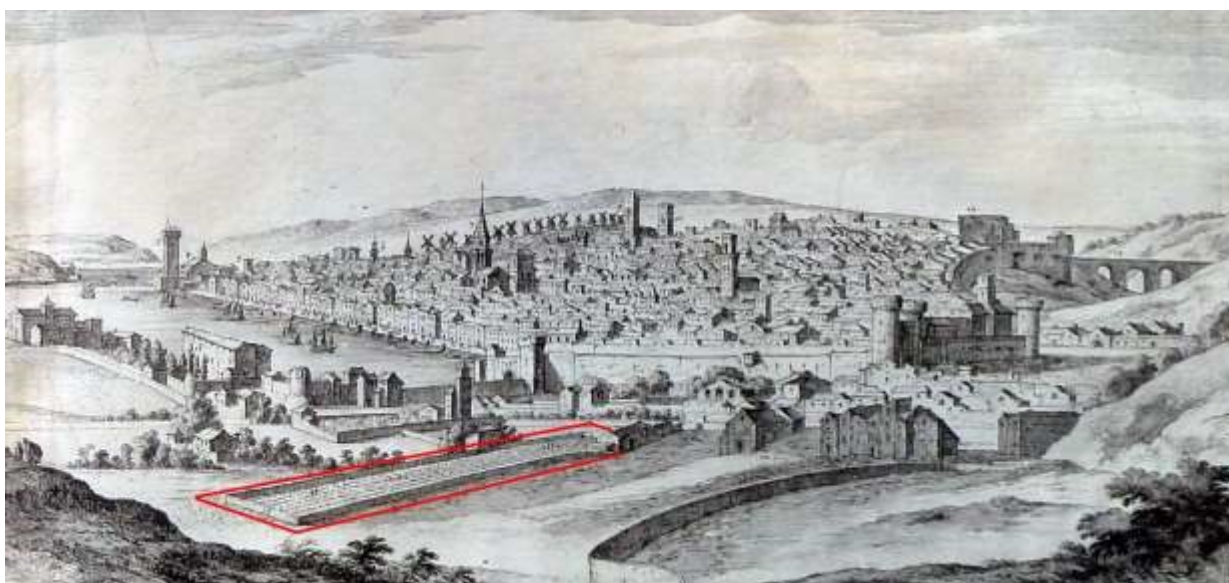
After the town extension from 1666, the family Vellin who owned the course, wanted to replace it by a street to connect the Arsenal with the new laid out course, but the plan was not carried out.



Already in 1693, or even earlier, the course was no longer used for *jeu de mail* since in that year the brothers Gautier leased the ground for nine years and built an opera on it. [4]



On the left the 'Port de Marseille et l'Arsenal des Galères', attribué à Jean-Baptiste de la Rose, 1666. In the detail (see above) in the middle on the left, behind the wall, a mail player is about to make the turn back to the starting point of the small jeu de mail. On the other side of the wall labourers construct the Arsenal des Galères. This is so far the oldest painting of a mail player I have come across. - © CCIMP



When Silvestre drew this plan of Marseille, the great jeu de mail (red outlines) was still outside the city walls, although one can see that the town is beginning to extend, and the first buildings appear on the plains. It looks as if there was already a gatehouse at the entrance of the mail court. According to Marc Bouiron (1), the mail course could be situated along today's Rue de Rome. – Detail of 'Marseille', drawing Israël Silvestre, engraving Pérelle, between 1640-1653 – By courtesy of <https://israel.silvestre.fr> – 'Israël Silvestre et ses descendants'.

I did not find any information as to when the great *jeu de mail*, or simply the *jeu de mail*, was founded.

In 1636, the course was leased out to Marc Antoine Rousson [1]. He was probably responsible for the maintenance of the course, collecting the 'green fees' and the money for the

hiring out of the clubs and balls, storing and repairing the equipment and collecting the fines. And perhaps, he exploited a wine-house as well. In the city plan of Israël Silvestre (see picture previous page), the *jeu de mail* is clearly visible. Silvestre drew this plan somewhere between 1640 and 1653, the period in which he made three journeys to Italy before he settled in Paris.

In 1678, more than a third of the course was incorporated in the extension of the Rue de Rome [1].

During the Great Plague of 1720-1722, the name '*jeu de mail*' turns up again. The capacity of the existing sickbays was far too insufficient to admit all the sick people, who thus ended up in the streets. The need for straw and tent-cloth was so great, that many even did not have this comfort.

The town council chose the *jeu de mail* alleys to build a new hospital because of its dimensions and its location outside the town centre. Moreover, at the entrance of the mail course was a large house, probably the gatehouse or perhaps even the wine house, which had all the facilities needed. For the emergency, the hospital was constructed from a wooden frame, covered with tent-cloth. Due to lack of materials and manpower (healthy people had fled the town) and great expenses, a sickbay was in the process of being built when a strong northern wind demolished the whole construction which then had to be rebuilt [5, 6, 7].



Detail of the city plan after the plague with (in red) the former jeux de mails. The 'grand jeu de mail' (great jeu de mail) went up to the Porte de Rome. If this course still existed in 1743, I do not know. The 'petit jeu de mail' (the small one), bordered by La

Canebière, has been replaced by the opera which still existed in 1743. – Joseph Razaud, 1743 – <https://journals.openedition.org/liame/262>

Finally, in mid 1722, the town was declared clean of the disease. In the evening of July 24, the city celebrates the aldermen and members of the health council, all of them carrying a flambeau in their hands, heading the cortege which followed the musicians: two trumpets, violins and the oboe playing in turn, while Pouget, the palemardier (club and ball maker), showed up with his 'chevalet' (little horse) and while two dancers danced around the horse, the armourer started to sing the song of the 'Danse du chevalet' [8], a custom in the South of France when there was really something to celebrate [9].

The fact that there was still a clubmaker in town, makes it likely that the great *jeu de mail* still was in use until 1720.

I did not find any proofs that the game was played again after 1722.

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