

1 The emergence of brandy spirits

The rise and significance of the brandy trade

Spirits were an almost unknown product in 1600, and where they did exist, as in Ireland or Scotland, they were the subject of curiosity to the visitor from the outside world. Their story is later one of growth, at first in modest and obscure stages, and finally and rather dramatically, a rise to a major place in alcohol consumption in the north of France and in northern Europe. If key periods have to be singled out, they are, obscurely, the 1670s–1680s and, with a wealth of detail, the 1710s–1720s and the 1760s. It is, at one level, the story of both the development and refinement of a product (and of the matching taste which was the motor force for it). At another level it involved the creation of the necessary centres of supply to meet an emerging market. That supply could come from local grain, from wine-based alcohol from farther afield or even from sugar-based rum from outside Europe. They are all interlinked, and the products were in competition with one another on the emerging consumer markets. Surplus in grain was as important as the earlier surplus in wine, which had for a long time been the long-distance beverage trade of Europe. It was precisely the fluctuating supply of cereals – in demand for bread as well as for alcohol – that accounts for the precocious prominence of brandy in the international spirits trade, just as new-found surplus in grain as well as in rum from outside regions was necessary to keep the prices of spirits low enough, once an expanding market for them was created, to prevent an excessive price rise from choking off any expansion in consumption. Brandy also had complex internal currents within its marketing: for instance, prices along the coast or the immediate hinterland in wine-producing regions could be affected by the greater or lesser abundance of rum and gin (or whiskey) on foreign markets, just as frost damage to the vines along the Loire could lead price-insensitive Parisians to outbid the agents of foreign merchants who could often replace brandy with cheaper competing spirits from home or from across the Atlantic.

If brandy was part of the larger and worldwide story of different spirits, it also had its own history of specialisation in types of product (variously

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mediocre and of high quality) and of a changing pattern of localisation in which specialist regions thrived to cater for more stable and predictable markets, and production contracted in the less convenient locations in an older and more diffuse pattern of brandy making. In other words, the eighteenth-century brandy trade reflected robust developments within the economy and within brandy itself as marginal producers and regions declined relative to the more specialised producers and districts. Hence the trade admitted of increased sophistication either by way of a better quality product for less price-conscious markets or by innovation in organisation to market a low-grade brandy distilled by more industrial methods. In districts close to the Loire, in Armagnac, and above all in Cognac, the former response was the one adopted. Elsewhere, in Languedoc, which was less conveniently placed for markets in the north of France, the response took the form of producing an inferior brandy, rectified by specialist distillers in central points rather than throughout the region. In Bordeaux's hinterland, with its large coastal and foreign trade in wine, the brandy business contracted from the early decades of the eighteenth century and, beyond the ups and downs of port distilling, never picked up again. Armagnac, on the fringe of the larger Bordeaux region, alone resisted the trend. In Languedoc, farther from the international markets for wine, brandy both grew and absorbed normally the greater proportion of wine output within the region. The combination of a rising trade in wine to the Toulouse region and of a growing switch in a rising total output from wine to brandy should in fact have resulted in an increase in the aggregate purchasing power of what had hitherto been one of the most disadvantaged regions of France. The response was a perfectly rational one to the situation of a region whose wine prices had been among the lowest in France.¹

At the outset brandy comprised a comparatively unstable and small traffic. However, if the brandy trade was to expand, it needed not only to replace a loose business pattern with a better-defined and more solid one but to acquire an effective financial framework to ease the execution of external transactions. In essence both developments were greatly accelerated in the 1710s and especially at the end of the decade. La Rochelle began to lose its place as the distribution centre of foreign commissions as houses in Charente and Cognac began to process direct commissions from abroad. Financial speculation in 1719–20 and spiralling prices also created financial links from Cognac with Bordeaux to replace La Rochelle which was too small a market to cope with demands for soaring

¹ On prices, see George Freche, *Toulouse et la région Midi-Pyrénées au siècle des lumières (vers 1670–1789)* (Paris, 1974), pp. 726–8.

credit and foreign exchange needs. Paris was also increasingly used to underpin, with the proceeds of foreign bills, the provincial bills which financed much of the trade, and Bordeaux became the centre in which to acquire, by the sale of bills on Paris or on London, the specie necessary for the ultimate purchase of brandy. In time, with the continued growth of its financial market, Bordeaux rivalled Paris as an outlet even for bills on foreign centres.

Thus the brandy trade was not a simple peasant product, devoid of a coherent market context. It was characterised over the century by significant patterns of market specialisation. One pattern was for viticultural regions to shift into or out of brandy distilling over time. Another was specialisation by quality, whether a high-quality product in Cognac or a rectified one on the quays of Bordeaux or at focal points in the wide rural tracts of Languedoc: both responses reflected the changes in the international market and maximised the comparative advantage of the respective regions. There was also a significant redistribution of wealth and power from La Rochelle to its hinterland and a concomitant rise in the importance of Cognac, Jarnac and Angouleme, and of smaller centres like Aigre and Ruffec on the older and newer routes respectively to Paris.

Merchants in brandy regions also increased in wealth and confidence. The growth of trade reflected the strengthening of the local economy. The cognac markets in Paris, supplied overland, and the coastal regions of the north of France, supplied by *cabotage* (coastal sailings), were at a record level in the 1780s. A recovery in the coastal trade to some extent mitigated the bad fortune that La Rochelle, in contrast to the inland suppliers of the Paris market, had experienced in the 1760s and early 1770s. The export trade too, which had lost its lustre in these years, recovering in the 1780s from the gravitational effects of high prices in the north of France, competed on more equal terms with alternatives on foreign markets, whether in London or in Dunkirk (at two contrasting levels of quality the prime international markets for spirits). The overall export total for 1783 compared favourably with all but a handful of exceptional years during the century and the level was even higher in 1789, despite the countervailing pull of Paris. Within the total, the key business with London was on an unprecedented scale in the 1780s, and Martell's benefited disproportionately precisely because they had already become the dominating house in the London trade.

The changes inevitably also translated into close ties between the bigger houses and the prime Paris banks of greatest repute, ever closer links with Bordeaux from the time it entered into its great boom from before mid-century, and into participation by brandy merchants in fashionable freemasonry and, through that, some association with the

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region's noblemen. As late as the 1740s Augier, though at that time the leading house in Cognac, had been eager to leave the town, since buying by Paris houses was putting brandy out of reach of exporters. However, over the longer term, confidence increased, and the deprecating tones in which merchants spoke of themselves and their town ceased. The growing strength of local families is reflected in the fact that, while outsiders had played a powerful part in the trade from 1718 to the 1760s, no outsiders, that is those not already in the region by the end of the 1760s or not drawing on existing ties, made a mark later. This was the basis which made it possible for the Otards and Dupuys, the Hennessys, and with some lag the Martells, to do surprisingly well out of the economic upheavals of the 1790s. How much benefit the ordinary peasants drew from all this is harder to say. What can be said with confidence is that brandy itself was not a passive force in the region, a mere receptacle for surplus or glut in the Labroussian sense, but a positive force for development. No doubt here as elsewhere economic change was a double-edged phenomenon for the humble tillers of the soil, conferring some gains and bringing some drawbacks. On balance, the combination of more stable markets and the premium in the market for quality or for strength helped to create a stable custom for wine and generated a demand for foodstuffs from other regions, as specialist viticulture and distilling emerged.

The origins of brandy and early trade

The origins of spirits as a consumer beverage are obscure. The earliest reference to brandy on a vessel in Bordeaux is in 1513, and on a vessel for Ireland in 1519.² In the celebrated Sound registers – the record of tolls levied from 1494 on commodities passing into the Baltic through the channel dividing Sweden from Denmark – brandy featured infrequently and in small quantities in the cargo details from 1562. Only in the 1610s for the first time did the quantities become somewhat more important.³ However, after very modest peaks of 200 pipes (600 barriques) in 1625 and 295 pipes (885 barriques) in 1638, they entered into a valley period again. Only in 1657 did they regain ground when 270 pipes were reached.

The term *brandwijn* itself may cover spirits other than wine-based ones. In most years up to 1660, the principal source of supply of spirits to the Baltic was Holland: it remains uncertain as to whether this was French or

² Jacques Bernard, 'The maritime intercourse between Bordeaux and Ireland c. 1450–c. 1520', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 7(1980), p. 14.

³ N. E. Bang, *Tables de la navigation et du transport des marchandises passant par le Sund 1497–1660* (Copenhagen, 1922).

Spanish brandy transhipped or spirits made in Holland. Apart from uncertainty as to whether in practice *brandwijn*, despite its etymology, invariably implied brandy, the hint at a Dutch role in the origin of brandy suggested by the word *brandwijn* (later anglicised as brandy) may be quite misleading. The term may have simply originated in Dutch recognition of a new and exotic product from abroad. The term used in Bordeaux in 1513 was *eau ardente*, which still remains a word for strong brandy in Spain (*aguardiente*). *Brandwijn* then became the word to designate imported spirits in northern Europe; and in customs usage in England and Ireland, where it was already archaic, it seems to have been used well into the eighteenth century to denote all categories of imported spirits. If the Dutch contribution was largely linguistic, the technical origins of the emerging wine/brandy distilling of the early decades of the seventeenth century owed nothing to the initiative of the Dutch despite their ubiquitous presence as traders.

Despite the later versions, vague and confused in detail, of a Dutch role in the French origins of brandy, from as early as 1568 small quantities of brandy from Spain and on occasion even Portugal or Italy passed through the Sound. The widespread, even if obscure, diffusion of spirits in early modern Europe embraced both the sixteenth-century Mediterranean, where the Dutch presence came only at the very end of the century, and the remote Gaelic-speaking fastnesses of Ireland and Scotland, where, in total isolation from the currents of international trade, spirits had become the festive drink of the rural upper classes. Of course the role of the Dutch later became important because their growing taste for spirits reached both foreign and domestic products. This evolution was made easier by the presence of Dutch trading communities in Nantes, La Rochelle and Bordeaux, and of Dutch paper manufacturing families in the hinterland of the Charente. What the Dutch (or Flemings) contributed was simply the word used by later foreign buyers, and which early on was also taken into English to differentiate imported spirits from *uisge beatha*, the festive drink of the Celtic fringe already known to visitors or administrators from non-spirit-drinking England.

References to brandy occur in La Rochelle notarial acts from the sixteenth century onwards, though acts such as those of 1549 and 1571 provide no evidence of wide activity.⁴ The first sustained reference in the

⁴ P. Martin-Civat, 'Le monopole des eaux-de-vie sous Henri IV et le départ du cognac', *Actes du 100e Congrès national des sociétés savantes* (Paris, 1977), pp. 187–8. See also E. Trocmé and M. Delafosse, *Le commerce rochelais de la fin du xv^e au début du xvii^e siècle* (Paris, 1953). Another source for later decades from the Angoumois are the references cited in G. Delaye, *L'Angoumois au temps des marchands flamands (17^e siècle)* (Paris, 1990), pp. 188–97. The book reflects the widely held view that brandy was more important than wine (p. 191).

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west of France occurs in 1604–10. In 1604 a decree by the council of state created a monopoly for ten years in the export of brandy out of the kingdom from the *généralités* of Tours, Poitou, Languedoc and Guyenne in favour of Isaac Bernard. More strikingly still the monopoly was intended to embrace distillation as well as sale. However, new letters patent obtained by Bernard in 1605 referred to Flemish merchants and others who distilled brandy and ‘cherchent tous moyens de continuer le dit transport . . . tant par charroy que par bateaux’. This dispute also provides the first evidence of activity in brandy in Cognac as the council of state, responding to Bernard’s complaints, ordered that Jacques Roux, Michel Levesque, Jacques Ranson, Guillaume Haguemon and Pierre Gilles, inhabitants of Cognac and Tonnay-Charente, ‘s’expliqueront au sujet des rebellions et voies de fait qu’ils auraient commises en violation du privilège accordé à Isaac Bernard, trésorier des Mortes paies de Bretagne seul fabriquer et faire transporter de l’eau de vie dans les généralités de Tours, Poitiers, Toulouse, Guyenne, Limoges et dans les comtés de Nantes et de Blois’.⁵ Vested interests in the *comté* of Nantes had caused Bernard to renounce his privilege in 1610, and the absence of further mention of it may suggest that resistance to his pretensions led to the abandonment of it elsewhere. Despite a broad geographical diffusion, market penetration by the product was shallow, thus making monopoly theoretically plausible, not only in trade but in production, even if in the event opposition quickly made it impossible. Reference to Flemish merchants may even suggest that some rise in foreign trade had provided the urge to monopolise. There was some upturn in brandy traffic through the Sound in 1605–6.

The projected monopoly embraced a region running from Languedoc via the Atlantic coast as far north as Nantes, in other words corresponding to the full extent of the future diffusion of the industry within France. While the ‘folklore’ about the origins of distilling visualises a crisis in wine sales along the Charente in the seventeenth century, in reality the hinterland of La Rochelle enjoyed enormous prestige for its celebrated sweet wines, much sought after by the Dutch, especially from the inland districts of the Borderies and Champagne, later the most intensive and prestigious brandy districts in the region. The reverse of a glut in wine existed. Salt and wine were the basis of La Rochelle’s trading prosperity. Like Saint-Malo, it enjoyed an early and precocious prominence in the exploitation of France’s new world across the Atlantic, and in the number of vessels on long voyages La Rochelle easily surpassed Bordeaux until the end of the seventeenth century.

⁵ AN, Paris, E, t.25, no. 15268, quoted in Martin-Civat, ‘Le monopole’, p. 191.

The brandy trade in the second half of the seventeenth century

Even if activity in brandy paled by comparison with later times, a transition was evident, and from early in the second half of the seventeenth century the quantities passing through the Sound exceeded earlier levels. In 1681 and 1682 the total was 1,430 *barrisques* and 1,330 *barrisques* respectively. Moreover, the provenance began to change, with ‘brandy’ direct from France gradually replacing ‘brandy’ from Holland. Of the 1,330 hogsheads in 1682 for instance, a mere 25 had come from Holland. Whether this was a replacement of other spirits by grape brandy or simply the result of more frequent direct shipments because the growth of a real market made larger consignments worthwhile is a matter of speculation. By 1700, 2,769 hogsheads coming from France were recorded as passing through the Sound, a further 159 hogsheads coming from Holland.⁶

The shift in the pattern within the Sound registers may hint at a broader rise in brandy relative to grain spirits. If the Irish parallel is relevant, the growing taste of the upper classes for spirits in the second half of the seventeenth century was met by imported brandy, not whiskey. Moreover, as French brandy grew in prominence, it became more dominant in international trade. The small quantities of brandy from Spain in the early registers, as was the case for brandies of Dutch provenance, were not a prelude to a later trade through the Sound. Nor did Cognac or La Rochelle at this stage assume the mantle of the leading sector in the French industry. The thin wines from the hinterland of Nantes and the embarrassingly large surplus of red wine with a short keeping life from the huge Bordeaux hinterland watered by the rivers Garonne and Dordogne made both regions the focus of distillation at this stage, doubly so as both ports had regular connections with northern Europe. In contrast, the sweet white wines of La Rochelle, which were produced by an art encouraged by La Rochelle’s early leadership in long-distance voyages, were still sought after for their durability. Around 1700, Nantes is said to have exported 7,000 *pièces* or 21,000 *barrisques* of brandy.⁷ This is a large

⁶ N. E. Bang and K. Korst, *Tables de la navigation et du transport des marchandises passant par le Sund, 1661–1783* (Copenhagen, 1930–53). Trade in brandy was given in the Sound registers mainly in hogsheads (*barrisques*) and *pièces*. Brandy in other measures, apart from pipes, is ignored in calculating these totals, as the amount involved was insignificant. It is assumed that the *pièce* amounted to its more or less standard eighteenth-century size in Charente of 81 *veltes*. If it was smaller, for instance containing 50 *veltes* (the figure Huetz de Lempis employs for his Bordeaux calculations, and which is confirmed later in ADC, Angoulême, 5C5 and in AN, Paris, F¹² 1666), the volume of trade would have been significantly smaller. This would, however, simply reinforce the argument of this chapter: i.e. that the growth of the brandy trade occurred late and strongly. ⁷ P. Jeulin, *L'évolution du port de Nantes* (Nantes, 1929), pp. 2–44.

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quantity, equalling or exceeding Bordeaux's exports, except in a year of great wine surplus like 1700–1 when Bordeaux's exports were 34,000 barriques of brandy. In the two preceding years Bordeaux's shipments, even if coastal shipments are added to the total, were only 12,500 and 12,917 barriques. The 1700–1 brandy exports were the consequence of the remarkably abundant vintage of 1700: wine exports in that year were exceeded only in a single year in the following half-century.⁸

If brandy shipments are added to exports and estimated home consumption of wine in Bordeaux and its hinterland, the figures would suggest that almost 9 per cent of the vintage in the region was destined for the still, a proportion which rose to 22 per cent in 1700–1.⁹ Outside the port of Bordeaux, distillation centred on the middle reaches of the Garonne and on the Gers where the vine occupied the poorer ground and was cultivated in conjunction with other products.¹⁰ The absence of a stable distilling base in the hinterland was from the outset reflected in speculative distilling within the port itself or more precisely in the Chartrons just outside the walled town: in 1700 some 5,000 to 6,000 tons of wine 'qu'on ne put pas vendre à cause de la mauvaise qualité' were said to have been distilled into brandy.¹¹

This crude estimate suggests that as many as 4,000 barriques of brandy (6,000 tons of wine would distil into approximately 4,000 barriques of brandy) may have originated in the port itself. Distilling in the Bordeaux region was a highly fluctuating business, destined to recede in the course of the eighteenth century, and to survive mainly as a port-based activity. Shipments never reached the 1700–1 level again, and even the level of the

⁸ Christian Huetz de Lemps, *Géographie du commerce de Bordeaux à la fin du règne de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1975), pp. 101, 104–5, 216–17, 231. Huetz de Lemps gives the quantities of brandy shipped in hectolitres. From the total shipped in 1700–1, the amount of 8,400 hectolitres shipped along the coast (*Géographie du commerce*, p. 217) should be deducted in order to arrive at the quantity exported. For purposes of comparison, both contemporary and international, these have been converted back into barriques. In his glossary (p. 650) Huetz de Lemps gives an equivalence of a velte equalling 7.258 litres. In fact, in his text, the equivalence he uses seems to be 7.52 litres (see p. 216), and various conversions in his text are consistent only with a barrique (the Bordeaux barrique of 32 veltes) based on this rate of conversion and therefore containing approx 240 litres.

⁹ Based on a total of 200,000 tons of wine for domestic consumption and shipment (Huetz de Lemps, *Géographie du commerce*, p. 103, and similar estimate for the *sénéchaussé de Bordeaux* in J. Savary des Bruslons, *Dictionnaire universel du commerce* (1742 edn)), and the optimistic assumption that 6 barriques of wine were required to produce 1 barrique of brandy. These calculations ignore local consumption of brandy, assuming that it was not significant. If the conversion ratio for wine into brandy was less favourable, say the more probable rate of 8 barriques of wine to 1 barrique of brandy, then the importance of brandy would be further reduced.

¹⁰ 'La distillation parait n'y avoir été le fait que d'un petit paysannat dont la viticulture n'était pas toujours l'activité essentielle et qui se trouvait établi dans des secteurs un peu marginaux et à l'écart des voies navigables'. Huetz de Lemps, *Géographie du commerce*, p. 223. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

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two preceding years was not passed again until late in the first decade of the century and then only briefly. Another upswing occurred in the years 1717 to 1721 and peaked at 27,000 *barriques* in both 1720 and 1721.¹² It was a final upturn, a short-lived response to the new-found international buoyancy in the spirit trade in and after the mid-1710s. Exports halved during the remainder of the 1720s.¹³ With its great waterways and burgeoning demand for food and wine in a large port and in expanding overseas plantations, the hinterland switched either to specialist wine production, successfully making longer-lasting wines in the process, or to cereal and animal husbandry. Only in Armagnac, itself barely on the fringe of the Bordeaux region, did a brandy business thrive. By the 1760s Armagnac was for the first time being designated as a distinct brandy in the letters of merchants in Cognac, and in 1789 almost as much brandy was shipped through Bayonne, the outlet for Armagnac, as through Bordeaux.

Rapid expansion in distilling within the closing decades of the seventeenth century would explain why, against the historical evidence as far as we know it, there was a belief, for instance in Bordeaux in the early eighteenth century, that the industry had originated within the preceding hundred years.¹⁴ In Cognac the later assumption was that the industry emerged around 1622. This fact itself, given the vagueness of early recorded knowledge of the first stages of the industry, suggests a recollection within the generation living in 1700 of a transformation of the trade in the preceding generation. In whatever way the belief emerged, the date seems plausible enough as marking the timing of significant change in brandy making. As far back as the 1640s exports of brandy from Bordeaux were a sizeable 3,000 *barriques*.¹⁵ In Cognac by 1681–6, regular market quotations for brandy existed. This is evident from the earliest sustained record for brandy, the letter book of the Augiers for those years: however, even there brandy still took second place to wine.¹⁶

The brandy trade, 1680s–1720s

According to the Augier letter book, at the sharply increased prices of August 1683 (reflecting a poor outlook for the vintage), 500 to 600 *pièces* (1,500 to 1,800 *barriques*) would be available on the Cognac market. August represented a point in the calendar of the distilling year three

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 235–6.

¹³ ADG, Bordeaux, C 4268–4271, 4385–4390, *états de la balance du commerce*. I am grateful to Professor Paul Butel who gave me a copy of his detailed breakdown of the brandy exports from the port. ¹⁴ Huetz de Lemps, *Géographie du commerce*, p. 219.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁶ AAC. The letter book, 1681–6, a small one, has been badly damaged by water stains in several places. Some of it is difficult to read, and a few sections are now completely illegible.

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months ahead of the opening of a new season: the preceding season's distilling would have come to a halt in April. What Augier seems to be saying in modern terms is that the total stocks on the local market towards the end of the old season were of the order of 1,500 to 1,800 *barriques*. Within the preceding year Augier purchased about 200 *pièces* (600 *barriques*) of brandy, a small volume compared with the purchases of an established Cognac house in the 1710s or 1720s, but if we understand the stock position aright, a significant proportion of turnover in his day. If we assume crudely that the amount of brandy still on hand would be sold before the new distilling season began and that as much again might be sold within the season itself, we may be talking of 3,600 *barriques* as the approximate shipments from Cognac in a year. This is not an implausible figure, though it may err on the high side given the modest scale of Augier's buying. We would of course have to add production in the Aunis and on the islands of Ré and Oléron. That could double or more than double the grand total.

Brandy quotations were given fairly regularly, but the active market itself was limited. Even in abundance and with no demand in March 1686, 'il y a peu de gens qui veulent se résoudre à vendre'.¹⁷ Wine was a more regular item in commerce: the terms 'champagne' and 'borderies' as such were specified by Augier only for wine, not brandy. That explains both the speculative withholding of brandy and the bunching of Augier's brandy orders, either in the autumn (in August and September) when the fate of the new vintage was predictable and speculation warranted either the sale or purchase of older brandy, or in December or in the following months, when the effective outcome of the wine trade had determined the prospects for distilling wine into new brandy. The level of activity within these restricted seasons fluctuated from year to year. For the same reason, the pattern of supply varied widely: thus there were large supplies from Ranson in nearby Jarnac in September 1682, and in May 1683, with brandy scarce, Augier offered a price in far-off Angoulême. In the abundant vintage of 1685 Augier's activity seems at first to have been exclusively in wine, brandy quotations disappeared until December, and actual brandy dealings seem to have resumed only in February. He then handled only 28 *pièces*. The predominance of wine over brandy was mirrored contemporaneously in the minutes of La Rochelle's great mercantile *étude* of the notary Teuleron.¹⁸ In overseas trade with northern Europe, even in the late seventeenth century, salt overshadowed wine at least in bulk, and

¹⁷ AAC, letter book 1681–6, 3 March 1686, to Theodore Tersmitten.

¹⁸ ADCM, La Rochelle, Teuleron *étude* (notarial minutes), 3E 1294–1319 (1645–81). This *étude* is exceptionally informative on maritime trade, and the minutes are also very comprehensive.