

OTHO de la ROCHE

By César Barta

According to a tradition among the descendants of La Roche, a French family established in the Franche-Comté, their ancestor Otho de la Roche obtained the Shroud as a prize when he joined the Fourth Crusade and he sent it to Ray sur Saône castle. He became Duke of Athens thanks to his actions during the sack of Constantinople in 1204. The Shroud was quietly inherited by the following family generations until it came to Jeanne de Vergy, Geoffroy de Charny's wife¹.

Another often mentioned variant is that the cloth was given to Otho's father, Ponce de la Roche, who gave it to the archbishop of Besançon, Amadeus de Tramelay, in 1206. This clergyman deposited it in the cathedral of Saint Stephen. This version, apparently better documented, means it is impossible for the Shroud to have come into the Charny-Vergy family. Moreover, special mention should be made of the fire in the cathedral in 1349, in which either it would have been reduced to ashes or it would have disappeared without leaving any trace in the cathedral inventories. There are in fact certain contradictions in this documentation as even though Dunod refers to cartularies and manuscripts² to illustrate the transfer from Otho to bishop Amadeus, he involves Otho's father Ponce in 1206. But we know from reliable sources³ that the father had died in 1203 even before the sacking of the Byzantine capital.

The coming of the cloth from Constantinople into the hands of Otho seems to be the better-documented hypothesis. The letter of 1205 in the *Chartularium Culisanense* informs us about the exact whereabouts of the "linen cloth our Lord Jesus Christ was wrapped in after his death and before his resurrection"⁴. It was in Athens, the duchy of Otho. Dunod de Charnage and an clergyman from Besançon⁵ mention a manuscript of El Escorial (Spain) in which Jérôme Turrita, a noble from Aragon, says that the crusader princes granted "the most beautiful of the relics that was in Constantinople" to Otho. These two documents support the possession of the relic by the Duke of Athens⁶. Unfortunately, the manuscript of El Escorial existed around 1656⁷ but nowadays, we only have second hand references and the manuscript is apparently lost.

The majority of crusaders who obtained relics during the Crusades sent them to their local church. This was what would have been expected of Otho in regard to the Shroud. After the 1205 letter, there is no more trace of the relic in the East. On the

¹ Bergeret Michel. *Linéol de Turin le trou historique 1204-1357*. Congress of Roma. 1993 and Raffard de Brienne D. *Enquête sur le Saint Suaire*. Remi-Perrin Paris (1998). p40

² Dunod de Charnage (1750) refers to manuscripts of Jules Chifflet (1610-1676) and cartularies from the abbeys of Acey and the Charité and a hand-written genealogy of Pierre of Luxembourg, Count of Conversano.

³ Girard Jean. *La Roche et l'Épopée Contoise de Grèce*. L'Atelier du grand Tétras. Besançon (1998) p26

⁴ Carta de Teodoro Angel Comnene al Papa Inocencio III. 1205 *Cartularium Culisanense*. Folio CXXVI. Translated into French in Bergeret o.c. Letter of Theodore Comnenus Angel to Pope Innocent III. 1205 *Cartularium Culisanense*. Folio CXXVI. Translated into French in Bergeret o.c.

⁵ Zaccone G. M. *Le manuscrit 826 de la Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon*. Proceedings from III Symposium of CIELT. Niza. 1997. p211-217

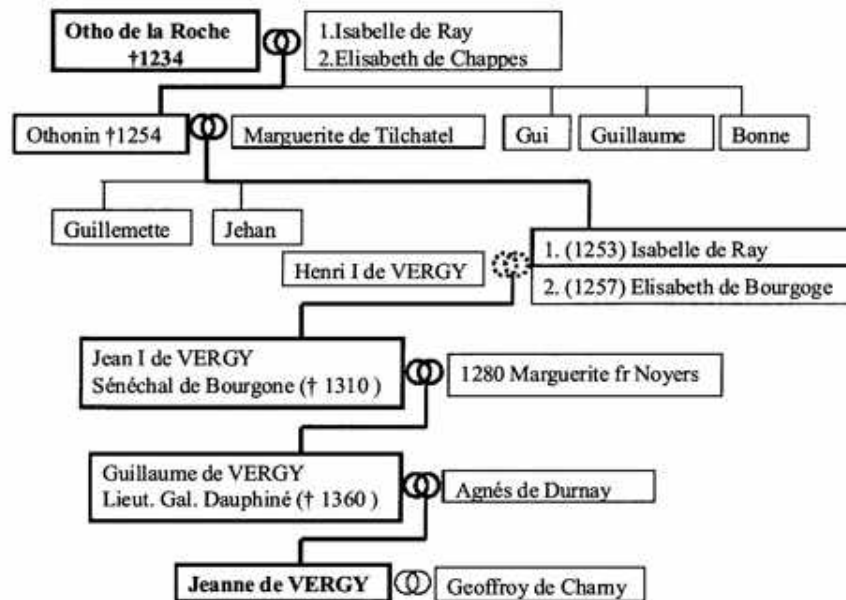
⁶ In addition, Otho's second wife, Elisabeth de Chappes, was related to the Bishop of Troyes, who was in charge of the distribution of relics. It cannot be argued that she had influenced the decision in benefit of her husband because the marriage probably took place after 1217. Girard Jean. *Roche ET l'Épopée Contoise de Grèce*. L'Atelier du grand Tétras. Besançon (1998) p102-103

⁷ Jules Chifflet, who is the source for Dunod and the clergyman, was chaplain of Philip IV of Spain from 1656 to 1659. The author of the manuscript would not be Jérôme Turrita but Jerónimo Zurita whose library had been deposited by that time in El Escorial.

other hand, as we have already said, there are documents that speak of their transfer to the Franche-Comté although with the incoherence of a dead man as the receiver. If the delivery by Otho to his father Ponce is untenable, then the most logical step is a transfer to Othonin, his elder son, the only child who remained in France. He resided at the castle of Ray sur Sône where his descendants still conserve a wooden coffer that was reputedly used to keep the Shroud in France after its transfer by Ponce de Lyon. The current owner of the castle and of the coffer, Diane de Salverte, is a direct descendent of Otho de la Roche. The Shroud of Turin would fit in the coffer if it were folded in 96 layers.

Genealogy is once again the argument to justify its arrival at Lirey. Othonin (Otho II) had three children. Isabel, the youngest, married Hugues de Vergy⁸, the great-grandfather of the first indisputable owner of the Shroud.

The letter of 1205, the coffer at the castle of Ray, still to be dated, and the unavailable manuscript of El Escorial support this hypothesis. In the genealogy there is a key link to be confirmed: the marriage of Isabel de Ray with Hugues de Vergy. But according to this version there is no fame for Geoffroy de Charny, as the Shroud would have become his property only as a dowry from his wife, which does not match easily either with the declaration of his granddaughter Marguerite nor with that of the priests of Lirey.



⁸ P. Anselme. Histoire généalogique des maisons de France. Paris. 1726. Referred to by Bergeret o.c.