

Geoffrey de Charny, Edward de Beaujeu and the first battle for Smyrna in 1344-5. That little-known campaign's possible relevance to Geoffrey's acquisition of the Shroud... by Ian Wilson

For one of relatively lowly social background the life of the French knight Geoffrey de Charny, earliest-known European owner of the Shroud, is actually quite well-documented by mediaeval standards. Nevertheless there is one event in it which has been the subject to a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation - his supposed involvement in the 'Crusade' against the Turks of the French dauphin Humbert II de Viennois in 1345-6.

By way of historical background, although for school history books the period of the 1340s is mostly associated with the opening stages of the so-called Hundred Years War between France and England, for the European powers of the time, including France, a no less critical cause of concern was the ever-burgeoning Ottoman Turkish encroachment, both by land and by sea, into Eastern European territories to the east. Even though France might have seemed geographically safer than the rest, its 'colonial' interests in the east were extensive, there was deep outrage that Christianity's holiest places were now under Islamic rule, whilst still living out there in the east were enough high-born Frenchwomen, some of them married to seriously-endangered eastern rulers, to arouse some intense chivalric concerns for their welfare.

When our Shroud-owning Geoffrey de Charny began appearing in the historical record during the late 1330s/early 1340s his earliest deployments were conventionally enough against the English, and by September 1342 he had evidently earned sufficient respect for his military capabilities to be given command of the first line of French cavalry to be ordered into an attack on English forces that were besieging the town of Morlaix in Brittany. Most frustratingly for him, it would not rank among his finest moments. Some well-prepared English defences, including pits cleverly disguised with greenery, easily checked both Geoffrey's line of charge and the one that followed it, and he quickly found himself haplessly shipped over to England as a by no means badly treated prisoner of Richard Talbot at Goodrich Castle near Ross-in-Wye.

Arguably characteristically, Geoffrey appears to have sufficiently persuaded Talbot of his personal high code of honour to be allowed to return to France to raise the money for his ransom. An English letter patent of October 1343 specifically refers to 'Geoffrey de Charniz, knight, lately taken prisoner in Brittany', apparently 'gone to France to find the money for his ransom'.¹ Froissart's Chronicles shortly after record him in charge of the rear-guard of a French army under the command of John Duke of Normandy, the future King John II the Good, near Vannes in Brittany not long before 19 January 1343, when envoys of the Avignon Pope Clement VI successfully brokered a three years truce between the English and French at the Brittany town of Malestroit. For Geoffrey, the downside of this treaty was that it made any services from him fighting the English during the next three years effectively redundant.

And it is what Geoffrey, together with certain of his companions in arms, would do during that three years - specifically, the period 1343-6 - which forms the prime interest of this present enquiry. The French historian Philippe Contamine, author of the most authoritative scholarly study of Geoffrey's life, lists among Geoffrey's principal companions in arms 'Beaujeu, Bailleul, Bauchain, Cayeu,

Houdetot, Le Coq, Moisy, Montendre, Noyers and Pons', and it is the name 'Beaujeu' that principally interests us in this instance.

Born in 1316, Edward de Beaujeu was of much the same age as Geoffrey, whose birth date, although undetermined, was most likely sometime around the fourteenth century's second decade. Of somewhat higher social status than Geoffrey, Edward's domains were very broadly the 'Beaujolais' territory that is now part of south-eastern France, where among his feudal loyalties were both the Dauphiné, the territory of the last independent 'dauphin', Humbert II de Viennois, and that of the then 'county' of Savoy. Perhaps significantly, Edward shared with Geoffrey both an enthusiasm for the arts of chivalry and a name with a prominent connection to the now defunct order of Knights Templar. For as a de Beaujeu Edward could not but have known the story of Templar Grand Master William de Beaujeu's heroic death, staying true to his oath never to flee the battlefield, vainly defending Crusader fortress of Acre against overwhelming numbers of Mamluk Muslims. And with William de Beaujeu's death on the battlements at Acre in 1291 that western Christendom had lost its last bastion in the Holy Land.

Arguably in this same context, quite definite is that in the early 1340s, when Edward was still only in his twenties, he became very intensely resolved to do whatever he could to reverse what was now the Ottoman Turkish Muslim empire's ever tightening grip on the Holy land and on much else throughout the eastern Mediterranean. During the autumn of that first 'redundancy' year of 1343 he told Avignon Pope Clement VI of his anguish over the stories that he was hearing of Turkish atrocities towards the Christians of the East whose lands had been overrun.² He declared his eagerness, along with a group of ready companions, to go to Rhodes, a still surviving Christian stronghold held by the Knights of St. John, better known as Hospitallers, who had effectively taken over from the now defunct Knights Templar as would-be protectors of the Holy Land.

Anxious not to discourage Edward's enthusiasm, on 23 September 1343 Clement wrote to Hélión de Villeneuve, the Hospitallers then Grand Master on Rhodes, recommending Edward de Beaujeu's services. And the very next day Clement granted Edward what to our eyes might seem a rather trifling privilege, a portable altar, enabling any priest in Edward's entourage to hold mass wherever his lord might be encamped, rather than needing to find some permanent-built church.

Even though our documentary information about the timing and details of the ensuing events is thin and patchy in the extreme, particularly with regard to Geoffrey's involvement in them, we do know that one encouraging development early in 1344 was a Western naval victory over Turkish ships occupying the Chalcidic peninsula in Greece. For western European observers here was an encouraging sign that the Turks, despite their impressive naval prowess, were not necessarily invincible. And the next snippet of information, although seemingly of the most minor import, actually does involve Geoffrey. It is the clerical record that on 7 July Pope Clement granted him the right to have his own portable altar for the hearing of daily mass while on active military service, exactly as Clement had granted to Edward de Beaujeu just a few months earlier.³ Although no documentary source tells us specifically what military Geoffrey service was about to embark on, or how, when and by which route he and/or Edward might have travelled out to the eastern Mediterranean, Geoffrey's 1800 line poem the *Livre Charny*, which BSTS member Hugh Duncan and colleagues are in the process of translating from its original Middle French, does provide a vivid picture of the trials and tribulations of a voyage that Geoffrey definitely made 'oultremer', a voyage generally regarded by historians as the sole one that he made to the eastern Mediterranean during

adulthood.⁴ Whilst the poem mostly points out in general terms the hardships to be expected for anyone taking up a military career, Geoffrey does manage to convey how the sailing ship carrying him became becalmed by a lack of wind, so prolonging its voyage that all bread on board became hardened to a tooth-breaking consistency, while the water supply turned too foul-smelling to drink. Then just when the wind picked up they became attacked by pirates...

Aside from whatever can be gleaned from Geoffrey's poem, our next snippet of relevant factual information concerns 28 October 1344, when we learn of a Christian fleet, one that specifically included 'Hospitaller' ships from Rhodes, launching a surprise attack on the then Turkish-held fortress that commanded the harbour at Smyrna, today Izmir in eastern Turkey. In the event the attack captured only the harbour fortress itself, rather than the surrounding town. Even so this enabled western vessels to come and go from Smyrna in relative safety, a vital foothold that, if it could be suitably reinforced, promised the groundwork for further progress.

And we can be sure that Edward de Beaujeu and some as yet unnamed companions had played a significant part in Smyrna's successful capture, and spent that winter of 1344-5 holed up in the harbour fortress confines. This is quite definite because of the historical record of a terrible slaughter of many of the fortress's defenders that took place on the 17 January of 1345. That day many of them rather rashly left the relative safety of the harbour fortress to attend mass at a nearby church. Maybe they had thought that there were sufficient of them to deter any attack by the Turks, or that the Turks would graciously respect the fact that they were merely going about their religious observance. Whatever, any such optimism proved to be seriously misplaced. The Turks took the churchgoers by surprise and ruthlessly slaughtered many, though definitely not our Edward de Beaujeu or (as we may assume), our Geoffrey de Charny. And, as it would seem, this would have been entirely thanks to Pope Clement having granted them their portable altars, obviating their need to attend a church as such. Because of the protracted nature of mediaeval communications it would take until mid-March for the news of the disaster to reach Pope Clement at Avignon, but when it did Clement lost no time writing to de Beaujeu's wife informing her of her husband's safety, likewise to de Beaujeu himself congratulating him on his part in the Smyrna fortress's capture. And it is largely thanks to this courtesy on the pope's part that we even know of de Beaujeu's and his as yet unnamed companions' successful 1344/5 expedition to Smyrna - it having otherwise largely escaped historians' notice due to the second, much better known Humbert de Vienne expedition to Smyrna that would (relatively) quickly follow.

For although exactly how long Edward (and arguably Geoffrey with him), may have stayed on at Smyrna is unrecorded, later on in this year of 1345 there entered onto the historical stage another character fired up with a lifetime's ambition to mount a Crusade against the Turks, Humbert II de Vienne, lord of the then independent region of France known as the Dauphiné. Described by historian Sir Steven Runciman as 'a weak, vain man', 'genuinely pious and without personal ambition',⁵ Humbert had spent his own personal fortune and a very long time getting an army together for this purpose, and it was only at the end of August 1345, and again with some help from Pope Clement, that he and his forces managed to set sail from Marseille. Even then their progress was painfully slow. First they landed at Genoa, then they marched overland through northern Italy, then they boarded fresh ships at Venice, overall taking eight months merely to reach Negreponete, a predominantly Venetian entrepot on what is now the island of Euboea, Greece. It was not until the end of June 1346 that they at long last reached Smyrna, at which point they actually did manage to bring some welcome support to the harbour fortress's stalwart garrison and also to inflict what

would prove to be only a very temporary defeat of the Turkish Moslem forces holding Smyrna proper.

Now for us, of course, the crucial question in all this is: where was Geoffrey de Charny? Had he travelled to Smyrna along with Edward de Beaujeu back in 1344-5, as we have been tentatively suggesting throughout? Or was he part of Humbert de Vienne's later so slow-moving 1346 enterprise? Mostly ignorant of Edward de Beaujeu's preliminary expedition, virtually the entirety of historians, both mainstream and those of the pro-Shroud variety, have assumed that it must have been the altogether better-known expedition of Humbert's in 1346 which Geoffrey de Charny accompanied. They formed this opinion largely because of a document which does indeed link Geoffrey to Humbert's expedition, a manuscript of soldier/author Philip de Mézières (1327-1405), who while still very young definitely did accompany Humbert's venture. In de Mézières' document (not any kind of chronicle, but a plan for a new order of knights), immediately following his mention of a particular knight's death at Smyrna, we find the following:

The Dauphin de Vienne [i.e. Humbert] was then in Smyrna and quite soon afterwards there was another cavalcade and invasion of the Turks. The young and poor Ardent Desir [Philippe de Mézières' third-person way of referring to himself] had become a knight there, and he was not worthy. It was the year after the courageous baron de Beaujeu who was Marshal of France, Geoffroy de Charny, Boucicaut who was Marshal of France, Thomas de Chandeny, Xaintre and the other brave knights had been in Smyrna, which was then the year of Our Lord 1346 or thereabouts.⁶

Note here (and thereby extremely valuable to our argument), the very specific linking of Geoffrey de Charny to Edward de Beaujeu, together with some other notable knightly names. This definitely most helpfully corroborates our earlier suggestions that whenever Edward de Beaujeu went to Smyrna, our Geoffrey de Charny was amongst those who accompanied him. But also needing to be scrutinised carefully is what Philip de Mézières says of the exact sequence of events, which by any standards is extremely loosely and confusingly phrased. For although it *sounds* as if Geoffrey de Charny and Edward de Beaujeu had been at Smyrna in 1346, in actuality what de Mézières was referring to was 1346 as the year of his own knighting in Smyrna. And once the passage is read more carefully, particularly in the light of our certain knowledge of the earlier 1344/5 de Beaujeu expedition, what becomes apparent is (and French Shroud scholar the late Daniel Raffard de Brienne formed much the same opinion), is that de Mézières was in his turn confirming that Edward de Beaujeu and his companions had made their attack on Smyrna one year 'or thereabouts' prior to Humbert's expedition of 1346. They definitely did not accompany that expedition.

Furthermore this really is the only sensible interpretation that can be arrived at from all else that we know of the timeline for Edward's and Geoffrey's return to France. Although no document tells us how and when they made that return, what we do know from the chronicler Froissart is that an apparently calm and non-breathless Edward de Beaujeu was already present on the battlefield of Crécy in August 1346, a mere two months after Humbert's expedition had arrived in Smyrna, with Humbert himself not returning back to his home domains until well into 1347. In Geoffrey's case his supposed post-Humbert expedition 'return' to France would have to have been even swifter. As early as 2 August 1346 he is recorded as receiving pay for himself and his men for the part they had played in respect of the 'Hundred Years War' siege of Aiguillon in south-western France. So for them to have played any significant part in that particular action would have demanded a return from Smyrna that, by mediaeval communications standards, would have been as fast or faster than even the swiftest messenger.

In essence the only logical explanation is that historians have hitherto been completely wrong in supposing that Geoffrey had accompanied Humbert's expedition. In actuality Geoffrey accompanied Edward de Beaujeu's little known earlier expedition of 1344-5, both knights probably making a normally paced return from Smyrna - quite possibly to call for, or advise on

reinforcements for the harbour fortress - sometime between the end of 1345 and early 1346. It is quite possible that at some stage during that return journey they met up with and usefully advised Humbert de Vienne. But they would certainly have been very far away from him by the time he had his direct confrontation with the Turks at the end of June 1346.

Such a scenario, along with some otherwise unsung heroism on Edward de Beaujeu's and Geoffrey de Charny's part during the capture and holding of the Smyrna harbour fortress in late 1344/early 1345, also explains the quite meteoric escalation of esteem and recognition that both Edward and Geoffrey received once back at home, from 1346 onwards. Edward was quickly created Marshal of France, not, it should be made clear, a rank as such, but France's highest available military distinction, one that was only awarded for some exceptional achievement, somewhat equivalent to Britain's Victoria Cross, though much more exclusive. Geoffrey for his part was knighted as chevalier' at the siege of Aiguillon,⁷ and made Captain of St Omer. And as is well-known he would subsequently be created Porte Oriflamme, bearer of the sacred banner of St. Denis, an honour that once again would only be awarded to a knight of the most outstanding bravery and integrity.

Further evidence of such post 1346 high esteem is to be found in Froissart's Chronicles account of an incident from the summer of 1347. In this we find Geoffrey and Edward again together amongst a group of four envoys sent by French king Philip VI to England's King Edward III in the hope that they might be able to negotiate some way of relieving the starving citizens of Calais, after every military attempt to dislodge the English army's protracted siege of the town had been beaten back with heavy losses. As recorded by Froissart:

After mass the next morning King Philip sent four envoys, on the advice of his council, to the King of England [i.e. Edward III, present with his army, controlling the approach to Calais] They [the envoys] were Sir Geoffrey de Charny, Sir Eustace de Ribemont, Sir Guy de Nesle and the Lord of Beaujeu. With the Earl of Derby's permission they crossed the bridge at Nieuley and as they went they looked closely at its strong defences and formed a high opinion of the Earl and his men who were guarding it. They rode on, unmolested, on King Edward's orders, until they came to where the King was waiting, surrounded by a large number of his knights...⁸

It has to have been a moment of the most exquisite high tension: four seasoned French knights, one of them our Shroud-owning Geoffrey, calmly riding their no doubt magnificently caparisoned horses at rock-steady walking pace into the very heart of the English camp, knowing that England's legendary bowmen had their arrows trained on them, and that the slightest false move would mean certain death. While the outcome of that tense parley with England's King Edward III was that Edward de Beaujeu, Geoffrey de Charny and their fellow-envoys would leave from it empty-handed, necessitating the citizens of Calais' abject surrender (immortalised in a famous sculpture by Rodin), they at least survived the encounter - though only for the moment.

For it was Edward de Beaujeu's sad fate to die at English hands only four years later, during an incident near Ardres in which he and Geoffrey were yet again riding together leading their respective forces when they happened to come upon seven hundred English troops leaving Calais. The swift attack that the pair launched was very successful, with virtually the entire English troop either killed or taken prisoner. But most sadly for Geoffrey, his friend Edward de Beaujeu, only thirty-five years old, was one of the French fatalities. And of course for Geoffrey himself, his death would follow only five years later, on September 19, 1356, on the battlefield of Poitiers.

What fresh significance, therefore might all this new historical understanding have for our otherwise continuing total ignorance of how, when and from whom Geoffrey de Charny obtained the cloth that we today know as the Turin Shroud? Conceivably the key may lie in whoever Geoffrey, whether or not in immediate company with Edward de Beaujeu, may have called on either during his outward journey to Smyrna, or during his return. With the deep insecurity that the Turkish menace had created all along the eastern Mediterranean, the 1340s would have been a very opportune time for anyone in the east who had been quietly nurturing some sacred treasure to try to get it to the west for safety - with a very pious-minded in-transit knight like Geoffrey de Charny certainly promising to be a suitably trustworthy recipient or carrier.

For the historical record, however, the absolutely huge problem posed by the last years of the 1340s is that this was also the period of a source of terror that was even greater than the Turks - the Black Death. Emanating from the east, this most fearsome of epidemics began appearing the west in 1346, reached its height between 1348 and 50, and is estimated to have wiped out a staggering one in two of the entire European population. In the throes of such deeply stressful events the normal scribal routines of recording and chronicling had in many instances to be among the first to be abandoned, or at the very least seriously disrupted. As for Geoffrey himself, from all that can be gleaned of him, he was not the kind of man inclined to write boastful memoirs of his military achievements. Hence even the story of Geoffrey and Edward's exploits at Smyrna, of which we have here been able to glean only the merest glimmerings, never came to be recorded in the way that it otherwise might.

In the light of information that has invariably been more inadequate than we would have wished, we have therefore, been able to make merely one rather minor correction to the general historical understanding of one episode in first Shroud owner Geoffrey de Charny's distinguished military career. Nevertheless it is a rather crucial correction, and potentially it could lead to some further insights yet to be unravelled...

¹ Calendar of Patent Rolls 1343-45, 130

² For full sources concerning Edward de Beaujeu's expedition to Smyrna, see Kenneth M. Setton *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204-1571*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1976, pp.18, 191 and 194.

³ Act of Clement VI dated 7 July 1344, text in P. Savio, *Ricerca Storica sulla Santa Sindone*, Turin, SEI, 1957, p.108

⁴ There are some indications that Geoffrey may have spent part of his boyhood in Greece, his father and brother having been associated with the Peloponnese.

⁵ Steven Runciman, *History of the Crusades III, The Kingdom of Acre*, Cambridge 1951-4, p.452

⁶ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris, manuscript no.2251 (153 B.F.). Translation from article by Daniel Raffard de Brienne, see 'Further Reading' below.

⁷ A puzzle here is that both English and French sources refer to him already being a knight as early as 1343.

⁸ Froissart, *Chronicles*, Penguin edition p.102

Further reading:

Daniel Raffard de Brienne 'Document, Voyage de Geoffroy de Charny en Orient'. *Revue Internationale du Linceul de Turin*, no.14, 1999 [?-undated], pp.23-5

Michael Anthony Taylor, *A Critical Edition of Geoffroy de Charny's 'Livre Charny' and the 'Demandes pour la Joute, les Tournois et la Guerre'*, dissertation for the University of North Carolina, 1977

Philippe Contamine, 'Geoffroy de Charny (début du XIVe siècle-1356), *Histoire et Société, Mélanges offerts à Georges Duby*, Aix-en-Provence, Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1992.

Froissart, *Chronicles*, selected, translated and edited by Geoffrey Brereton, Penguin Books, 1968

Richard W.Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny, Text, Content and Translation*, University of Philadelphia Press, 1996