

GEOFFROY DE CHARNY'S SECOND FUNERAL: PART II

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A curious observation by François de Belleforest, erudite litterateur of the XVIth century, caught my attention. In his account of Arnoul d'Audrehem, Pere Anselme writes that toward the end of 1368, the Maréchal d'Audrehem, advanced in age, no longer felt capable of fulfilling his responsibilities. He therefore resigned his charge to his king — that would have been Charles V — who, in return, gave him the Oriflamme to carry. And here Anselme drops the phrase from Belleforest: "...chose non octroyée qu'a des chevaliers vieux et experimentez, et renommez de grand prud'homme". That is, that the Oriflamme, sacred banner of France, was not given except to old knights, experienced and renowned as great *prud'hommes*. The description fits well the Marechal d'Audrehem, for he had fought the battles of his kings, was esteemed even by the enemies of France and, already in his seventies, he could have been considered old. And yet, in 1367, he had accompanied Bertrand du Guesclin to Spain and taken an active role in the campaign against Peter the Cruel.

I asked myself if this obscure and somewhat trivial remark of the erudite litterateur could possibly be a clue to Geoffroy de Charny's years. Searching for some confirmation that the Oriflamme was given only to "old" knights, I perused those histories which might be pertinent.

Anselme cites a letter of 15 October 1372, signed by King Charles VI, announcing the appointment of Pierre de Villiers, seigneur de l'Isle-Adam, to the responsibility of unfurling the vexillum dictum Oriflamba in battle. From Belleforest we glean the following concerning the movements of Charles VI before another of the interminable battles in Flanders: When his army was ready, he went to Saint Denis and took the Oriflamme, which he handed to an old and valiant knight named messire Pierre de Villiers: who, before taking it, received the Body of Jesus Christ and gave the oath customary in these cases.

In 1414, Guillaume Martel was appointed Porte-Oriflamme "but being excused from carrying the royal banner because of his advanced age, the king gave him two aides". Martel was killed a year later before Azincourt, as was Jean de Bauffremont, widowing Marguerite de Charny.

Pierre d'Aumont received the Oriflamme in 1397 and again in 1412, after 40-odd years in the wars. Clearly a man of experience,

but still active, as he died besieging Bourges in 1413.

Miles VI, seigneur of Noyers and Vendevre, Marshal of France, carried the standard in 1328 but lived another 22 years. And Guy V de Tremoille received the banner in 1377 and again in 1383, but lived until 1398.

From such meagre statistical material, no deduction can be drawn suggesting that Geoffroy de Charny was "old" when, by letters of 25 June 1355, he was appointed to this honor.

"Prud'homme", yes: that is, a man of "great deeds", of unblemished chivalry, unimpeachable integrity, unswerving fealty to his suzerain. Froissart calls Geoffroy de Charny "The most prud'homme of all the others, and the most valiant", worthy to carry the sacred banner.

For this was the palladium of France, carried to war only when the king took the field in person. In times of peace, it was suspended over the tomb of St. Denis in the basilica erected to house his relics. Denis was the first to evangelize the Franks of Lutetia, and the first bishop of Paris. Martyred in A.D. 250, he was buried in a vast Gallo-Roman cemetery north of Paris. A little chapel soon marked the spot; this was replaced by a basilica erected on the initiative of St. Genevieve. By the VIIth century, a community of Benedictine monks established what was to become one of the most important abbeys in Gaul. The Merovingian Dagobert made many rich donations to the abbey church and chose to be buried there. Only three of all the kings of France were buried elsewhere than St. Denis Abbey church.

And the Oriflamme — *aurea flamma*, golden flames — was the banner of the Abbey where the relics of St. Denis rested. It was in the charge of the Protector, who carried the standard before the abbey's vassals when the community was threatened. Pere Anselme reports that the Protectors of St. Denis were the Counts of Vexin. It was only after the crown annexed this county that the kings of France assumed the right to carry the banner.

The first to do so was Louis VI (r. 1108-1137), whose consort was Alix of Savoy. When he rode out against Henry V of Germany, in 1124, his army adopted the rallying cry *Montjoie Saint-Denis!*. Accompanying him were the troops of the newly-elected abbot of St. Denis, Suger, a man of such extraordinary talents and achievements that he was called The Father of his Country.

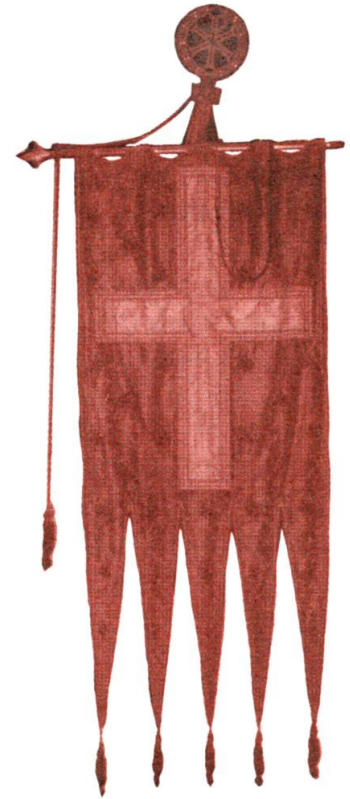
The son of a serf, Suger was born in 1081, the same year as the future Louis VI. These two boys of such different origins had been schoolmates at St. Denis Abbey and remained lifelong friends.

When Louis VI armed for combat with the Emperor of Germany, a monk of St. Denis, recording the event, described the Oriflamme; it is, he wrote, in the form of an ancient banner or gonfanon, with three points, with green tassels without gold fringe. An inventory of 1465 tells that the banner is of red taffeta strewn with gold

flames; now it has two points, is bordered with green fringe, attached to the end of a lance. In 1543 the inventory describes it as a standard of very heavy *cendal*, split in the middle in the style of a gonfalon, in very bad condition, wrapped around a staff covered with gilded copper and a longish pointed lance-head at the top.

Anselme writes that the Oriflamme was last carried in 1465 by Louis XI; he too had married a princess of Savoy. All through 1465, Louis XI was skirmishing with Charles of Burgundy, but Commynes does not mention the Oriflamme. Other sources have given Roosebeck as the last time it was carried. On the 21st day of November 1382, the weather was overcast at Roosebeck: "Finally, the two armies approached each other," writes Belleforest, "and as soon as the King had the Oriflamme unfurled, the weather immediately turned clear and beautiful ... Some say that it was at this battle that the Oriflamme was lost, though it is known that it was carried on the second expedition against the Flemish and English, this highly honored banner of France known as the Oriflamme, without anyone ever knowing what became of it...."

Still other annalists give Azincourt as the last time the banner was on the battlefield. But was it? Charles VI, it seems, remained at Rouen that dreadful day, and the banner was carried only when the king took the field in person. After that disaster, for fear it might fall into the hands of the English, the monks of St. Denis hid it and "it was never seen again".



A centuries-old replica of the Oriflamme preserved in the Abbey Church of St. Denis. Photo by D. Crispino

The earliest mention of the Oriflamme coincides with the recent election of Suger as abbot; perhaps this is the circumstance that led some authors to claim that the Oriflamme was Suger's personal banner. But since abbeys, churches, corporations had their banners to carry in processions just as royalty and nobility had theirs, one might as easily suppose that this was the ensign of the abbey. Indeed it is written that when Henry V menaced France, Louis VI "took at St. Denis the banner of the saint who protected France". And in another place it is written that after his victory at Courtray, Charles VI returned the Oriflamme to the Church of St. Denis and

* *Cendal* is a silk taffeta fabric much used from Carolingian times.

gave thanks to God and to "the martyrs who are the protectors of the kings and the crown of France".

If history can say nothing about it, legend knows its origins: An angel appeared to Charlemagne foretelling that the Holy Land would be delivered from the Saracens by a knight armed with a golden lance from whose tip marvelous flames darted. Whereupon the chivalrous king set out for Jerusalem carrying the Oriflamme.

A similar legend is told of Clovis, first Frankish king to embrace Christianity, thanks to his wife, St. Clotilde. On the eve of a decisive battle, Clovis received a visit from a hermit of the Augustinian order, to whom an angel had appeared bearing a shield of blue strewn with golden fleur-de-lys — thereafter the hereditary arms of French royalty. *In hoc signo vines*, said the hermit to the king. Gregory of Tours, more piously, gives only Clovis' prayer.

But those who really knew where the Oriflamme came from were the monks; and they whispered about that the Oriflamme had descended from heaven, and they were keeping it hidden in the Abbey....

If Charlemagne never delivered the Holy Land, King St. Louis tried twice, carrying the Oriflamme on both crusades. As Joinville reports, before taking Damiette (1250), Louis "called together all his good knights and asked their counsel, and then the king commanded the gonfanon of St. Denis and his banners..."

Its presence floating above the knights was no guarantee of a victory, alas! One decisive battle to its credit was waged and won by Philip IV, not yet with Templar blood on his hands, two years after the Flemings had massacred the French at Bruges. On the 18th of August, 1304, Anseau de Chevreuse, seigneur of Maincourt, carrying the Oriflamme, rode before Philip the Fair onto the battlefield at Mons-en-Pevelle; and never returned to the baronial chateau whose massive ruins still rise above the town where he was born.

How many others, in medieval times, expired, not from wounds, but from suffocation, heat and thirst, inside steel armour? Anseau's daughter, Jeanne, dame de Chevreuse, mourning, could still rejoice that her husband, Pierre d'Amboise, had survived the day.

Jean de Charny also, after Mons-en-Pevelle, returned to his wife, Marguerite de Joinville, and his sons, Jean, Dreux and Geoffroy. Jean de Charny was a knight in the service of Louis, Prince of Achaia and the Morea, son of Robert II, Duke of Burgundy. In 1315, in a palazzo of Venice, Louis made his will, appointing as executors his cousin, Miles, seigneur of Noyers who, in 1328, carried the Oriflamme to the battle of Montcassel; and Jean de Charny. The prince named his witnesses: "...our beloved and loyal knights, to wit: the noble men Monseigneur Jehan Seigneur de Charny..." etc.; and upon the folded document each lord set his seal.

In an age of pageantry and rich ceremony, even the dubbing of a

knight could festoon the monastery and cover its grounds with pavilions of festivity. The bestowal of the Oriflamme followed a Mass; the special prayers still exist in the Abbey archives. Steeped in solemnity, the candidate swore his oath to return the sacred Oriflamme to the Abbey after the battle and to die rather than relinquish it. Then the king himself placed it in the candidate's hands.

The appointment was not for life, nor was it hereditary. All the appointees were officers of the crown in other capacities; in the military, the king's household, his councils, etc.

The honorarium varied. In 1403, Pierre d'Aumont received "1000 gold francs from the revenues of Rouen for his guardianship of the Oriflamme". Guillaume de Bordes, guardian from 1383 to 1387, received 2000 francs a year. For guardianship and carrying of the Oriflamme — and other services — Pierre de Villiers was granted 1000 livres a year for life. Among other well-remunerated services, Pierre de Villiers had also been the king's Chief Maitre d'Hotel.

A glance at the biographies of the guardians of the banner shows, indeed, that not only had each one displayed prowess in battle, but also integrity and efficiency in the government of the realm. By the time Geoffroy de Charny was appointed Porte-Oriflamme, he had already distinguished himself, under the reigns of Philip VI and Jean II, not only in warfare but also as a highly valued diplomat and councillor. His career was cut short on 19 September 1356 when he fell, at Poitiers, the sacred banner of France still in his grasp.

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