

The Madrid Manuscript of Geoffroi de Charny's *Livre Charny* Poem and *Demandes* (Madrid Ms. 9270), Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, 1352

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By any standards the doughty French knight Geoffroi de Charny, regarded by many as the Shroud's first known owner, is an extraordinarily pivotal character in the Shroud story, yet up until now anyone wanting an authoritative contemporary likeness has been unable to find one. The best that I could provide for my last book on the subject, published eleven years ago, was an illumination in a Toulouse manuscript of Froissart's *Chronicles*, dating from a century after his time, depicting him in armour of the incorrect period, and with his face totally covered by a huge visor. The current Wikipedia entry for Charny does no better for him, reproducing this same erroneous and unhelpful image.

Now, thanks to a manuscript that is preserved in Spain's National Library in Madrid - one that had been untraceable until a few years ago - there are known to exist not just one, but literally dozens of immediately contemporary figurative images of Charny, some showing him (or a page in his livery), as a youth, but others as a bearded adult, correctly featuring him wearing a chainmail hauberk, and with his face uncovered. Today these images can be viewed online at <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?lang=en&id=0000139688&page=1>, the official website of Spain's National Library, where the manuscript is housed as Madrid Ms. 9270. As seen on the website the Charny images begin at frame 46, and one of the most appealing of them is reproduced as fig. 1 of this article.

Important to be noted is that although the images can be enlarged ad lib when viewed online, in the manuscript itself they are tiny, because each is set into an initial letter (technically known as a historiated initial), introducing one of the 134 *Demandes*, or questions on chivalric conduct, that Charny composed for the deliberation of members of the Company of the Star, France's very short-lived counterpart to England's Order of the Garter. This elite chivalric order is known to have been founded and abruptly disbanded by France's King Jean II the Good within the single year of 1352, a crucial piece of information because each of Charny's questions as they appear in the Madrid manuscript is followed by a blank space intended for the Company of the Star's official answer (fig. 2). The fact that, due to the Company's disbandment, these blank spaces were never filled-in enables the manuscript firmly to be dated to 1352, comfortably within Charny's lifetime.

From the viewpoint of the manuscript's production, which clearly in this instance was carried out by professional illuminators and scribes, Charny would have been the obvious person to advise on how much space needed to be left blank for each individual

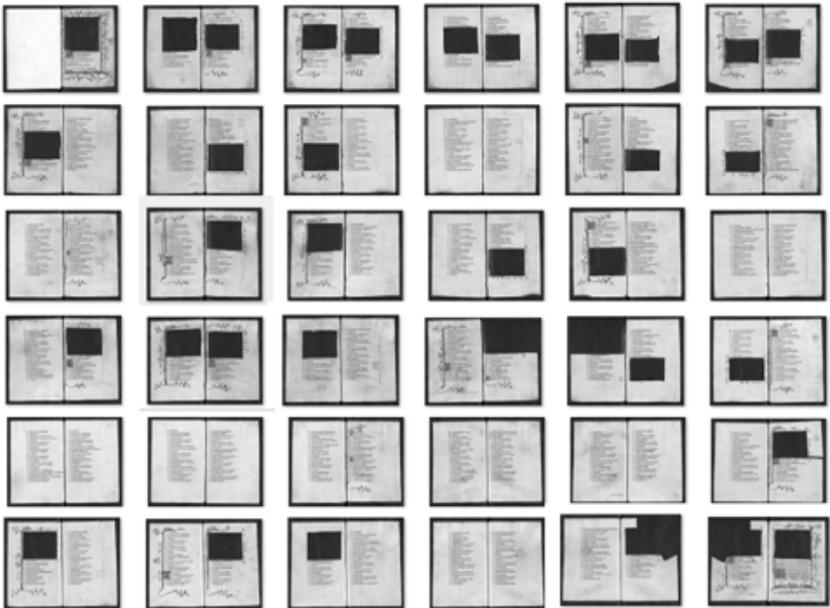
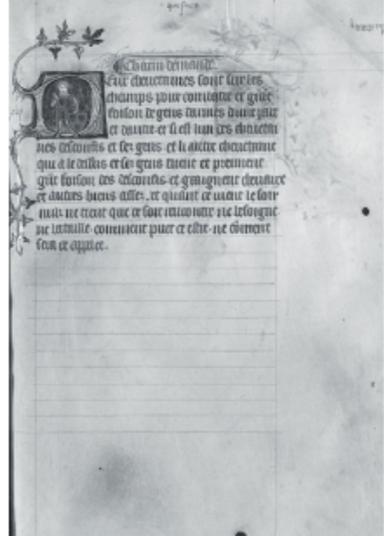


Fig. 1 (top left): Historiated initial from Charny's *Demandes* in Madrid Ms 9270, showing Jean le Noir's likeness of Charny; **Fig. 2 (top right):** Typical *Demande* in Madrid Ms. 9270, showing large blank space left for the answer; **Fig. 3 (below):** Computer view of the pages from Charny's poem in Madrid Ms. 9270, showing the scale of the damage that the manuscript has suffered, probably from a scrapbook collector.

answer¹. So it is reasonable to infer that he would have liaised quite closely with whoever was responsible overall, and this individual can actually be identified thanks to indications of his very distinctive handiwork in the margin illuminations.² He was Jean le Noir, whose talents as an illuminator were such that his clients were almost exclusively royalty, and whose Paris studio, where his daughter Bourgot assisted him,³ lay only a stroll across the Seine from where Charny owned a house. It is a reasonable inference, therefore, that le Noir and Charny met face-to-face, which would have enabled him to depict Charny quite accurately.

Fascinatingly, however, Madrid Ms. 9270 is of interest and importance for substantially more than merely its contemporary depictions of Charny. As will also become immediately evident to anyone looking up the manuscript online, its saddest feature is that it has suffered some very serious damage and mutilation (fig. 3). The Charny historiated initials have been spared probably because they are so tiny, and they occur only in the second part, containing Charny's *Demandes*. But the first 40 leaves of the manuscript, which were clearly its prime component, carry what is left of Charny's 1,937-line poem known as the *Livre Charny*, and readily apparent is that Jean le Noir had originally illustrated this with over twenty large panel illuminations, all created using the finest, most expensive pigments including real gold and silver (fig. 4). From these illuminations' accompanying text matter they would have featured Charny jousting, taking part in Hundred Years War battles, travelling overseas on crusade, and much else. Excruciatingly, every one of them has been crudely hacked out and lost, very likely the handiwork of an early scrapbooking enthusiast, a pastime which began during the eighteenth century. Probably this happened to the manuscript whilst it was in the possession of the Velasco family, counts of Haro in northern Spain, in whose library catalogues it can be traced back to the mid-fifteenth century, before which it can be found listed in catalogues of the royal library of France.

Obvious then is that although the manuscript solely comprises Charny's *Poem* and *Demandes*, which might suggest that it was he who commissioned it, the decision to make it such an expensive, deluxe production would have been well beyond Charny's relatively humble means, even during his heyday as a royal councillor. Instead it can only have been a royal commission, on all logic at the behest of King Jean II of France as the founder and self-designated 'Prince' of the Company of the Star for whose

¹ This varied substantially, as will be seen from the website.

² Jean le Noir is known to have created for King Jean II's first wife, Bonne of Luxembourg a prayer book today preserved in the Cloisters Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The margin illuminations of this book feature a plenitude of accurate depictions of wild birds, especially goldfinch, also whimsical images of old men with bird bodies, strikingly similar to those found in Madrid MS 9270.

³ For some fascinating background on Jean le Noir see Christopher de Hamel, *Meeting with Remarkable Manuscripts*, London, 2016

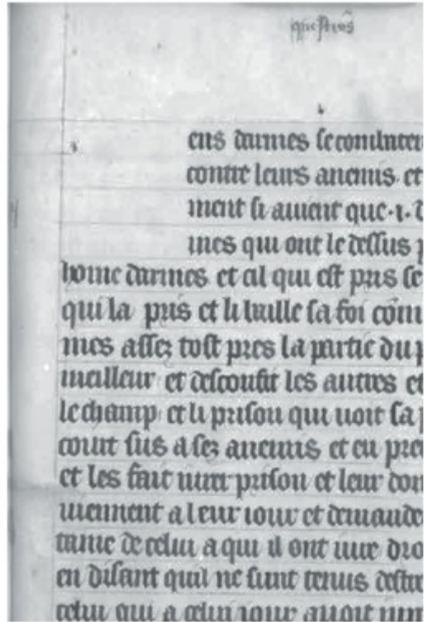


Fig. 4 (top left): Opening page of Charny's *Livre* poem in Madrid Ms. 9270, showing the missing opening illumination and Jean le Noir's characteristic margin decorations; Fig. 5 (top right): A page from the manuscript awaiting its historiated initial, showing work on the manuscript was suddenly abandoned; Fig. 6 (below): The inaugural feast of the Company of the Star, from a manuscript of the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

members' edification Charny's questions had been formulated. The further inference is that not only was Charny much more closely involved with the Company of the Star's foundation than historians have hitherto realised, he and his *Livre* must have deeply impressed King Jean for it to have been accorded such honoured treatment.

The surprise in this context is that although scholars have long known of the poem from its inclusion in a late fourteenth century manuscript preserved in Brussels,⁴ they have largely ignored it because of their low opinion of its literary qualities. According to the 19th century French savant Arthur Piaget, specifically referring to the poem: 'this brave knight did not know how to write; his phraseology is painful and sometimes incorrect.'⁵ For the present generation of scholars by far the preferred focus has been on another work in the same Brussels manuscript, a lengthy prose chivalric treatise known as the *Livre de Chevalerie*, of which a theoretically definitive critical edition, complete with parallel translation from the French, was published in 1996.⁶ This has left the *Livre* poem long neglected as very much the 'ugly duckling' of Charny's writings until the present year, which has seen the publication of my own academic study of it inclusive of a very fine translation into English by the highly esteemed medieval literature specialist Nigel Bryant.⁷

Pioneeringly, Nigel Bryant chose to translate the poem from its awkward tercet coué verse form unswervingly into straight prose, and because the Madrid manuscript has lost so much of its text due to the scrapbooker's excisions, he based his translation on the still intact text of the Bodleian library's Holkham Misc.43, a manuscript that I first brought to this Newsletter's notice back in 1992⁸ and which likewise has the poem and *Demandes*, though no *Livre de Chevalerie*. As is explained in my book the Holkham Misc. 43 manuscript just like Madrid Ms. 9270, can also now be firmly dated to 1352, and may well have been Charny's personal copy.

But of the poem itself Nigel Bryant's transmutation of it into prose is nothing less than a revelation. Suddenly we find ourselves listening to Charny across six and a half centuries speaking with a directness and self-deprecating candour as if the age of the Hundred Years War were but yesterday. He tells us how as a young adult the poverty that went with his 'third son' status forced him into heavy borrowing from

⁴ Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, MS 11124-26

⁵ Arthur Piaget 'Le Livre Messire Geoffroi de Charny', *Romania*, Paris, 1897, pp.394-411

⁶ Richard W. Kaeuper & Elspeth Kennedy *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny, Text, Content and Translation*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. As argued in my just published *The Book of Geoffroi de Charny*, the *Livre de Chevalerie* treatise has been wrongly attributed to the Geoffroi de Charny who died in 1356. Instead it was written by his son of the same name, who died in 1398.

⁷ For details, see the review by Mark Guscini also included in this Newsletter.

⁸ BSTS Newsletter no.32, Sept 1992

moneylenders in order to equip himself for competing at potentially lucrative tournaments, only to suffer being soundly beaten by a slightly built opponent much less well-mounted than himself. Of his Hundred Years War exploits, he describes a cavalry charge he led which resulted in his capture as a prisoner-of-war and his obligation to pay an absurdly high ransom. Referring to his having been first up the ladder' in an attempt to scale the walls of an enemy fortress he relates how a fusillade of rocks knocked him unconscious and he was saved from death only by his companions carrying him to safety on a shield. Unlike almost any other writer of his time he represents the lot of an aspiring man-at-arms (a label that in the poem he prefers to *chevalier*, or 'knight'), not as anything vainglorious but as a virtual martyrdom because of its many knockbacks and privations. Throughout the poem his piety is omnipresent, with repeated exhortations to attribute any successful achievements in life not to one's own efforts, but to God's grace and to that of the Virgin Mary acting as intercessor. Particularly evident from the poem is that Mary held pride of place in his devotions, Christ being rarely mentioned, mostly indirectly as Mary's son, whilst the Shroud, the very object for which he is so widely known, he mentions never at all.

However before this curious omission is considered, first needing to be addressed is why King Jean should have initially valued Charny's poem so highly that he lavished such high expense on it for a volume intended for the Company of the Star's instruction, only to brusquely abolish both the Company and the poem, together with Jean le Noir's fine illustrative work on it, all within the timespan of less than a year. For although Jean le Noir and his scribes had very nearly completed their work on the Madrid manuscript, evident from its *Demandes* section is that there were just a few tasks remaining to be completed when all further work on it was evidently ordered to cease⁹ (fig. 5).

Obviously the first point to be considered is why King Jean should have terminated the chivalric order of the Company of the Star itself, and so quickly. After all, its English counterpart, the Order of the Garter, which Jean's great rival King Edward III had founded only three years earlier, still flourishes to this day,¹⁰ so what circumstance could have prompted Jean to act so peremptorily? Curiously, no official explanation was given at the time, our best source of information being from the contemporary chronicler Jean le Bel. According to le Bel, at the Company of the Star's inaugural feast on 6 January 1352 (fig. 6), King Jean had required every member to swear a solemn vow never to flee the battlefield, an undertaking which misfired badly because upon its very first test at the battle of Maumont on August 14 that same year:

⁹ Buttressing this, there is evidence from library catalogues that the leaves of the manuscript were left lying loose for several decades until they were finally bound together in a proper volume and included in King Jean's grandson Charles VI's library during the 1380s.

¹⁰ Recently, the knights' chapel at Windsor castle was the setting for the 'Meghan and Harry' royal wedding, also for the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral.

No fewer than eighty-nine knights were killed there, and all because of their vow about not retreating; had it not been for that vow they would have been perfectly able to withdraw. Many others died too on their account: men they might well have saved had it not been for this vow of theirs and their fear of reproach by the Company. This noble order was never spoken of again and I think it has come to nothing and their House has been left empty.¹¹

So what had prompted King Jean to ask for such a fateful vow from the Company of the Star's members? Chillingly, the answer can be found in Charny's *Livre* poem, in which, telling of the cavalry charge that he led which resulted in his capture, he describes specially resolving to stay on the battlefield because to spur his horse to safety would have been dishonourable.

...your horse is still alive and fit; thanks to him you could save your skin: he could get you out of here – but without honour. If you stay it'll earn you everlasting honour; if you flee you'll bring dishonour on yourself.¹²

Towards the end of the poem Charny reinforces this same theme, declaring that you should never take up arms 'unless you are prepared to die rather than suffer shame', his fundamental motto being 'death before dishonour'.¹³

For King Jean to have been initially enthusiastic for this 'no retreat' policy is understandable. As he was all too aware, one of the main reasons why his late father King Philip VI had been so heavily defeated at the battle of Crécy six years earlier was that so many of the French army had run away. But if, as it would seem from the *Livre*, it was Charny who had put the idea to him, from whom, or from where, had Charny obtained it?

The answer is in fact clear enough. In my first Turin Shroud book, published back in 1978, I tentatively suggested a family link between Charny and his exact namesake the Geoffroi de Charny of the order of Knights Templar who, as the culmination of the order's suppression, was burnt at the stake alongside Grand Master Jacques de Molay in 1314. Back in 1978 I had little firm evidence of this Templar family link, and during the years since the suggestion has often been heavily criticised - until unexpected support came in 2012 with the publication of Dr Jochen Schenk's *Templar Families*.¹⁴

¹¹ Jean le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel 1290-1360*, trans. Nigel Bryant, Woodbridge 2011, p.217

¹² *Livre* Charny trans Nigel Bryant, lines 452-8

¹³ 'La mort avant que honte', *Livre* poem line 1901

¹⁴ Jochen Schenk, *Templar Families: Landowning Families and the Order of the Temple in France, c.1120-1307*, Cambridge University Press, 2012

This fine in-depth academic study has firmly established our Shroud-owning Charny's ancestors as belonging to a cadre of inter-marrying noble families who so admired Templar values that they provided the order with financial support and with personnel from amongst their own 'spare' family members throughout much of its history. That the Templar Geoffroi de Charny should have belonged to the same family is entirely likely and logical.

Furthermore, the earlier noted facts that the Livre poem expresses such special devotion to the Virgin Mary, also so earnestly attributes any successes in life to God's grace strongly reinforce that Charny was deeply influenced by Templar thought and ideals, deriving as these did from the Templars' closely affiliated monastic arm, the Cistercian monastic order which cherished the very same devotional leanings.

Most fundamentally Templar of all, however, and a special feature of their military discipline, was the vow never to retreat from a battlefield. Until France's King Philip IV dragged down the order's fine reputation with largely if not entirely unfounded allegations of sexual misconduct and idolatry, Templar knights, virtually all of whom were 'spare' second or third sons of their families, had been much admired for their heroic 'no retreat' vow, any breach of which was subject to severe punishment until the miscreant knight could win back his lost 'honour'. At the height of the crusades whole armies of Knights Templar, upholding this same honour, had undergone near annihilation rather than tactically withdraw from engagement with an enemy.

But a vow that was positively admirable when it was taken and upheld by 'dispensable' second or third sons of noble families who had devoted their lives to a religious order was not necessarily so, or even practical, when it was required of those same families' first sons who were heads of their dynasty and were its indispensable breadwinner, as was certainly the case with many of those who fell in such unacceptably high numbers at the battle of Mauron in August 1352. Fired up by his high Templar ideals, Charny would seem to have disastrously miscalculated the socio-economic consequences of these ideals, and even he himself may well have recognised that because the 'no retreat' policy had been so intrinsic to the Company of the Star's foundation, the entire project for it needed to be scrapped, and his poem along with it.

What can now be seen in the wake of this episode is a very sharp, albeit temporary, downturn in what had previously been a very high-profile military career. In October 1352, just a few weeks after the battle of Mauron, he is noted to have formally resigned his responsibilities as 'Captain-General' for the defence of France's northern frontier,¹⁵ and the royal Argenterie accounts show him handing over a sword.¹⁶ For the next year

¹⁵ Anselme de Sainte-Marie, Père, *Histoire Généalogique...*1703, p.201

¹⁶ Douet d'Arq, Louis-Claude, *Comptes de l'argenterie des rois de France au XIVe siècle*, Paris 1851, p.169

or more he seems to have retired to his country estates, because it is at his fief of Lirey in June 1353 that he is next documented, appending his seal to the Act of Foundation of the church where the Shroud would soon be displayed, though as argued in my first article in this series, not within his lifetime.

Now whilst some if not all these new findings might seem to be very far removed from the subject of the Shroud, particularly because the Livre poem makes not the slightest mention of it, this would be to fail to recognise that even omissions can be significant. For especially in the semi-autobiographical Livre poem of 1352, just as in the Lirey Act of Foundation of 1353 (the subject of my previous article in this series), we might reasonably expect the self-avowedly pious Charny to have made some mention of so stupendous a relic and of how he had acquired it, yet there is absolutely nothing of this kind. And after ten years of scrutinising all the known relevant documents relating to the period when the Shroud was in Charny hands, also taking into account a number of other indicators, it is now my firm opinion that such silence on the Shroud's origins was a quite deliberate policy on the part of all three Charnys – i.e. Geoffroi de Charny senior (died 1356), his son Geoffroi II de Charny (died 1398), and Geoffroi II's daughter Marguerite de Charny (died 1460). In my view this policy was because they did not perceive themselves to be the Shroud's long-term rightful owners, as we have all very understandably tended to assume. Instead they were holding it in trust, in succession to the Knights Templar, who had been under the same secret obligations towards it, one of which was at all costs avoiding it becoming controlled by the Roman Catholic church establishment. The argument for this, which pertains to some highly complex artistic, historical and literary circumstances during the quarter century prior to the Fourth Crusade's capture of Constantinople in 1204, is outside the scope of this present article, and will be properly addressed in future studies.

In the meantime there is an as yet untouched-on point arising from the discovery of the Madrid manuscript of Charny's Livre poem that deserves mention. Because of this article's finding that Charny had some hitherto unknown close dealings with an artist as naturalistic and talented as Jean le Noir, it is entirely to be expected that those who interpret the Shroud as the work of a medieval artist will be prompted to ask themselves: could Jean le Noir have been the Shroud's mystery forger? Whilst it is an entirely understandable argument there are two very strong objections to it.

First, from any reading of Nigel Bryant's quite brilliant translation of Charny's Livre poem, what shines out from it is a thoroughly likeable individual of the very highest Christian values and integrity. The idea that this is a man who could or would have been complicit in anything as squalid as forging the image of Christ crucified and trying to make money from it is incongruous and simply untenable, quite aside from the fact that there is no contemporary evidence that Charny ever disclosed that he even possessed the Shroud, let alone tried peddling it as a relic.



Fig. 7 (left). The lance wound in Jesus' side (John 19: 34) as depicted by Jean le Noir in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg; **Fig. 8 (right)** The same lance-wound as seen on the Turin Shroud

Second, talented as Jean le Noir undoubtedly was, it is actually possible to make a direct comparison of how he conceived Christ's wounds of crucifixion compared to those that are visible on the Shroud. Amongst his illuminations for the prayer book of Bonne of Luxembourg (died 1349) first wife of the later king Jean II, is a detailed depiction of Christ's wound in the side (fig. 7), as described in John 19: 34. If this illumination is set side by side with its equivalent on the Shroud (fig. 8) the chalk-and-cheese disparities should be obvious even to the most die-hard 'medieval forgery' proponent. In short, there is absolutely no way that Jean le Noir might have been responsible for forging the Shroud's image.

There remains only to thank two individuals, both of them closely connected to this Newsletter, without whose help this article's findings might never have happened. To Spain-based former editor Mark Guscini I will be forever indebted for his tracking down of the Madrid manuscript of Charny's *Livre* and *Demandes*. Over a decade ago Mark had happened to remark to me how helpful he had found the staff at the National Library of Spain. Knowing that scholars of the last century had failed to locate a damaged Charny manuscript rumoured to be in the National Library's collection, I quite casually

asked him if he might make some enquiries on my behalf. To my amazement, less than a month later a full DVD of digital images (then in black & white), of the entire manuscript arrived in my Queensland, Australia, mailbox. From my perspective, Mark had worked a miracle!

But I am even more indebted to France-based Hugh Duncan, a regular contributor of articles for this Newsletter. Around a decade ago, when I mentioned to him that I was struggling with trying to translate the difficult medieval French of Charny's *Livre* poem, Hugh most generously volunteered his help, buttressed by that of some of his fellow-teachers at the International School in Nice. During the ensuing years Hugh acted as a most admirable pacesetter, as a result of which together we achieved enough of a rudimentary translation to realise the *Livre* poem's high level of historical significance and interest. Although there remained a worrying number of passages the exact meaning of which remained obscure to us, enough had come to light for me to be able to write a pioneeringly revisionist biography of Charny. When this was offered to the specialist medieval publishers Boydell, the company's co-founder Richard Barber suggested that I write a shorter version of this biography accompanied by a fully professional translation of the *Livre* poem by Nigel Bryant, one of the world's foremost translators of medieval literature. From this very amiable partnership sprang *The Book of Geoffroi de Charny*, published this last April. However it was Hugh's very kind and continuing help that had provided the vital springboard for the entire project.

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Ian Wilson's *The Book of Geoffroi de Charny, with the Livre Charny edited and translated by Nigel Bryant*, is now available from the Boydell Press, and for readers of this Newsletter it should be available at a 35% discount by quoting the code BB135.

To order go online to: <https://boybrew.co/3uitmwy>