

RESEARCH ARTICLES (1)

THE TURIN SHROUD IN BILLIAT 1503-1506

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Back in 1999 I was following up on a research question posed by Ian Wilson in the BSTS newsletter: "What became of the piece of the Turin Shroud that Margaret of Austria gave to the town of Bourg-en-Bresse?" In her will, written up on 20 February 1508, she said that a piece of the Shroud should be given to the church of Brou in Bourg-en-Bresse (one theory is that it might have been one of the missing parts of the side strip). In Newsletter No. 51, the answer I gave to Ian included a quote from the will, supplied by the Brou Museum:

"I give to my church of St Nicholas all the holy relics that I have now and will have on the day of my death, the piece of the Holy Cross, the Holy Shroud, bones of saints that I have and will have on my death, which could decorate the church."



In retrospect, the will mentions a piece of the Holy Cross, but not a piece of the Shroud; it states the whole Shroud, or at least that's what seems implied. Whatever happened, looking at later inventories until 1534 no further evidence of any of these relics can be found. I did unearth some other information but my research lay forgotten for fifteen years until now. I have found some details about the little known period of the Shroud's stay in Bourg-en-Bresse and Billiat in the years leading up to Margaret's will.

Bourg-en-Bresse 1503

In 1999 Michèle Duflot of the Museum of Brou supplied me with several documents kept in the local archives - some of which can now be found online. The first details are from the book *'Marguerite d'Autriche, Duchesse de Savoie'* by Max Bruchet, 1927, pages 138-141. The Shroud was officially received in the Sainte Chapelle at Chambéry on 11 June 1502 in the presence of Margaret of Austria and her husband Philibert le Beau, to be taken the following year to Bourg to show Archduke Philippe le Beau who had come to Bresse to visit Margaret, who was his sister. The Shroud was first displayed to the people of Bourg on Good Friday, 14 April 1503, by three bishops, and then shown to the Archduke in the Duke's chapel. An eye-witness, Antoine de Lalaing, future chevalier d'honneur of Margaret gave this description:

"One sees it quite clearly stained with the precious blood of Our Redeemer as if it had been made yesterday. One can see the complete imprint of his holy body; head, face, mouth, eyes, nose, body, hands and feet; and strongly blood stained. As the shroud was unfolded under him, one sees the shape of his back, the hair on his head, the crown [of thorns] and shoulders. And to prove it was the real one, it was boiled in oil and tested by fire and still it was not possible to erase the image."

As the last known site of the Shroud before this time was Turin, in 1498, nothing is yet known of its exact whereabouts from 1499-1501.

Billiat 1503-1506

The Shroud of Turin also spent some time in Billiat Castle between 1503 and 1506. Billiat is a small town not far from Châtillon-de-Michaille about 70 km north of Chambéry. The question of its stay there was first raised in a local history magazine, *'Le Bugey'*, in 1974 by Jean Chaveyron (page 837). Le Bugey is also the name of the river in the area. To put the connection into context, Duke Philippe II of Savoy died in 1497 after having reigned for only 18 months, and was succeeded by his son from his first marriage, Philibert le Beau. Meanwhile Philippe's second wife, Claudine de Brosse-Penthièvre was a widow with four children. She retired to her domain in Billiat. Samuel Guichenon, who wrote two histories in the seventeenth century, states that Claudine took the Shroud with her but without giving any source. He gives two contradictory versions. In his *'Histoire de Bresse et de Bugey'* (1650), he says Claudine kept the Shroud in Billiat until 1503 and then took it to Bourg-en-Bresse on the request of her brother-in-law Philibert le Beau to present to Archduke Philippe for the ostentation of 14 April 1503 mentioned above. Author Greyfié de Bellecombe, in a work about Philibert of Savoy, gives the same version. However in *'l'Histoire Généalogique de la Royale Maison de Savoie'* (1660), Guichenon states: "the castle that Claudine de Brosse had built was her home, where she had the good fortune to keep the Holy Shroud until her death." This cannot be true, as she lived until 1513, while the Shroud is known to have already returned to Chambéry by 1509.

The writer Alexis de Jussieu gives another version of the Shroud's movements during this time. Duke Philibert had it taken to the Castle of Pont-d'Ain (in the same area) to show it to Philippe le Beau and from there the dowager Duchess took it to her retreat in Billiat, also in the same vicinity. It only returned to Chambéry in 1506. This author cites a papal bull by Pope Julius II dated 8 January 1506, instituting a brotherhood of the Holy Shroud in the Sainte Chapelle. Jussieu makes no mention of the presentation in Bourg.

An article about the Sainte Chapelle published by the Congrès Archéologique de France in 1965 states that the relic was kept in the Sainte Chapelle permanently from 1506 to 1536. In view of all the contradictions and lack of evidence, Jean Chaveyron has questioned whether the Shroud stayed in Billiat at all. However he mentions that another article about the Shroud staying in Billiat, by Delphine Arène, was published in the review of the Société Gorini (No. 12, Sept-Dec 1949). In 1975 *'Le Bugey'* had a follow up article about the stay of the Shroud in Billiat. On page 943 Chaveyron states that proof has now been found that the Shroud did indeed remain in Billiat from 1503-1506. Paul Cattin of the Ain Department Archives got hold of a copy of a letter from Lille dated October 1505 written by Claudine de Brosse to Margaret of Austria, inviting her to see the Blessed Shroud:

"1505. Madame, je me recomande très humblement à votre bonne grâce et vous playse savoir, Madame, que j'ai vu les lettres qu'il vous a pleu m'escrire et ai reçu de vous bonnes nouvelles par Monseigneur le maystre Verbo qui m'a dist qu'estiés en bonne santé don ay esté bien joyeuse et prie à notre seigneur, Madame, que longement vous y veuille tenir et vous doint bon vouloyr de venir voyr le Benoyst Saint Suayre auquel vous ay recommandé et qu'il luy plust vous garder et tous ceulx de vostre mayson d'épidémie parce que l'on me dysoit qu'il en avoyt bien près de Pont d'Ain."



The Louvre

[Margaret of Austria]

“Madame, you will be pleased to know that I have seen the letters that you so kindly wrote to me and I have had news of you from Monseigneur Verbo who said to me that you were in good health and have been very happy and I pray to Our Lord, Madam, that long may you keep in good form and that you must come to see the Blessed Holy Shroud which can protect you and your household from the plague as I hear it is quite near Pont d’Ain.”

The Shroud in Pont d’Ain?

In his book *‘101 Questions sur le Saint Suaire’* by Perluigi Baima Bollone, page 98, the author mentions that on the occasion of Good Friday 1503, the Duke took the Shroud to Pont d’Ain, his birthplace, with the aim of showing it to the Archduke Philippe. This is the date given for the ostentation in Bourg mentioned above. The distance between the Castle of Pont d’Ain and the Town Hall of Bourg is only 20km so perhaps these two events are in fact one and the same thing or it was shown in both places on the same day. The author continues, explaining that Philibert died in Pont d’Ain in 1504 and the new Duke Charles III transferred the Shroud to the Castle of ‘Brissac’ in the Bugey for the pleasure of his mother Claudine de Brosse. Well, I have not found a castle of that name in the Bugey, but there is one near Angers, way over in NW France. Personally, I think the name ‘Brissac’ has been misread and should be ‘Billiat’ (from my experience, the letters ‘s’ and ‘l’ look similar in old writing and even ‘c’ and ‘t’ can be confused, but I can say no more without seeing the original text, which is not given). Of course it could also just be a mistake by the author or a typo, or perhaps the Billiat castle was named Brissac. In 1506 Charles III and his mother Claude wanted ecclesiastic recognition of the Shroud and sent a supplication to Pope Julius II via their intermediary Louis de Gorrevod, bishop of Moriana, who later became cardinal. This was approved in a bull dated 9 May 1506.

For what it’s worth, French Wikipedia’s entry about Billiat Castle gives two references to the Shroud. According to Joseph Brossard in *‘Histoire politique et religieuse du pays de Gex et lieux circonvoisins’*, Millet-

Bottier, 1831, pages 582-583 and Jean-Iréné Depéry in *'Histoire hagiologique de Belley, ou Recueil de vies des saintes et des bienheureux nés dans ce diocèse, suivies de celles de quelques personnages morts en odeur du Sainteté et des actes des martyrs du 18e siècle'*, P.-F. Bottier, 1835, page 122, both mention that the Turin Shroud had been kept in the Castle of Claudine de Brosse for a few years during its travels in the 16th century. These citations have yet to be confirmed.

So, to summarise the known movements of the Shroud during this period 1498-1508:

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| 1498 | | The Shroud is in Turin. |
| 1502 | 11 June | Ostentation in the Sainte Chapelle in Chambéry |
| 1503 | 14 April | Exhibition of the Shroud in Bourg-en-Bresse and/or Pont d'Ain. |
| 1505 | October | Claudine writes to Margaret inviting her to come and see the Shroud which is in her castle in Billiat. |
| 1506 | 8 January | A papal bull approves a brotherhood of the Holy Shroud at Chambéry. |
| 1506 | 9 May | A papal bull makes 4 May the Feast Day of the Holy Shroud. |
| 1508 | 20 February | Margaret writes her will that offers the Shroud to Bourg-en-Bresse. |