

Article by Marcello Semeraro, ‘An Art Commission by Geoffroy I de Charny the ‘Knight of the Shroud’, in the Church of Saint Mary of Casale’ [Brindisi]

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A review by Ian Wilson

Marcello Semeraro, a researcher of medieval heraldry and sigillography, lives in Puglia, southern Italy, and what drew him to write this study is a fresco hitherto unknown to Shroud studies [pic 1], in the nearby Church of Santa Maria of Casale, Brindisi. This fresco features the heraldry of the Charny family in whose possession the Shroud first appears in Europe, and the question that Semeraro addresses is why should a depiction of the Charny coat-of-arms, along with heraldry of other French noble families, be found located at the port of Brindisi on Italy’s heel, far removed from the Charny family’s home territory in Burgundy, central France?



Pic 1: The fresco in the Church of Santa Maria of Casale, Brindisi, featuring the Charny heraldry and horned crest.

Semeraro argues persuasively that the heraldry is indeed that of the Charny family so controversially associated with the Shroud. His theory is that the Geoffroi I de Charny who founded the church at Lirey commissioned the fresco with this heraldry either before or after his voyage across the Mediterranean on a crusade to Smyrna during the mid-1340s. He has been commendably conscientious in his research and has rightly recognised problems to the orthodox historical understanding that Charny accompanied Dauphin Humbert de Vienne’s Smyrna crusade of 1345-7. As he has noted, Charny may alternatively have accompanied the earlier, more successful, though ultimately ill-fated, 1344-5 capture of Smyrna’s harbour fortress led by papal legate Henri d’Asti, Latin Patriarch of Constantinople. In the light of my own researches this latter alternative is definitely the more likely, but whichever of the alternatives is correct, Semeraro suggests that Charny and his Burgundian companions made a stop-over at

Angevin-held Brindisi, broadly half-way between France and Smyrna (today's Izmir on Turkey's west coast), where they commissioned the painting of the heraldry as a votive offering to the famous statue of the Virgin preserved in the Church of Santa Maria of Casale.

It is a most interesting theory that is based on genuinely original, well thought-out research. To evaluate it comprehensively it is important to look at the entire scheme of wall-paintings at the Santa Maria of Casale church, together with what is known of their historical background. For this purpose, Marcello Semeraro kindly referred me to the following profusely illustrated website: <http://bitly.ws/8Qeb>. Via Google a serviceable enough translation into English can be obtained from this. What the website makes clear is that the main patrons of the church's decoration were the local Angevin ruling dynasty comprising Philip I, Prince of Taranto up to 1331, followed by Philip's eldest son from his second marriage, Robert II, Prince of Taranto, who lived until 1364. Successive phases of decoration, by different artists, were carried out during these reigns (and beyond), and the difficulty presented by the wall on which the Charny heraldry appears is that some quite extensive historical damage has robbed us of being able to understand the complete scheme. What can be glimpsed is that various different noble families, along with their armies, are being presented to the Virgin and Child of Santa Maria of Casale, some of these families, such as the Tocco, being local to the immediate Angevin territory, others, such as Brienne, Charny and Thil, deriving from Burgundy.

Historically the main point of contact between Burgundy and Taranto relates to the fact that the princes of Taranto counted themselves as lords of the Frankish territory of Achaia, in Greece, and it was via the marriage of Louis of Burgundy into the dynasty (a very complicated diplomatic alliance), that they were enabled in 1316 to overthrow an attempt to take it from them by rival claimant Ferdinand of Majorca. Louis of Burgundy's victorious army included our 'Turin Shroud' Geoffroi de Charny's father Jean de Charny and his eldest brother Dreux, with Dreux de Charny acquitting himself so well that he was awarded two Achaian baronies, Vostitza and Nivelet, located just the other side of the Adriatic to Brindisi.

However, Dreux was dead by 1325, and as Semeraro rightly insists, the distinguished art historians Giulia Perrino and Gaetano Curzi both authoritatively date the part of the Santa Maria of Casale's decorations with the Charny coat-of-arms to between 1340 and 1360, i.e. the period of Geoffroi de Charny's expedition to Smyrna under the leadership of papal legate Henri d'Asti. With regard to this expedition, which captured Smyrna's harbour fortress from the Turks on 28 October 1344, Taranto's ruler Robert II supplied

two well-armed galleys for it. So again, Burgundians and nobles from Robert's Taranto region fought side by side for the kind of common cause that might well have been commemorated by their respective heraldries being featured in the Santa Maria of Casale wall-paintings. Marcello Semeraro has further pointed out to me that these heraldries are 'almost all ex-votos, made by the patrons while they were alive', their composition being 'typical of a knight from the mid-14th century'.



Pic.2 Example of a Charny seal showing his horned crest, from a manuscript of 1345. Paris, BnF MS Clairambault 29, p.2137, nr.74. Photo Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Overall, because of the extent of the damage to the wall-paintings at Santa Maria of Casale, it is impossible with any conclusiveness to determine whether the presence of the Charny heraldry may derive from a retrospective commemoration of Charny involvement in the 1316 recapture of Philip I of Taranto's territories in the Achaia, or represent a directly contemporary gift of thanks from Geoffroi de Charny and other Burgundians, for their successfully accomplished capture of Turkish-held Smyrna, along with Robert II of Taranto's troops, in October 1344. To be frank, I have unashamedly seesawed between both possibilities, the one firm conclusion to be drawn being that all future serious research on the Charny family and its relationship to the Shroud needs to take Marcello Semeraro's findings into account.

These issues aside, a most welcome extra source of fascination for me is that Marcello Semeraro has brought to light some fascinating examples of Charny seals, of which I was previously unaware [pic 2]. Fascinatingly, these show that the crest which Charny would have worn on his helmet featured horns, which are also to be seen on the Santa Maria of Casale wall-painting. Such horns would certainly have given him a most fearsome appearance whenever he wore his helmet, either on the battlefield, or during a peacetime joust. Marcello Semeraro's article, written in Italian, is available online at <http://bitly.ws/8Qer>.

The Microsoft Word 'Review' option's translation facility makes a serviceable translation of it into English relatively easy. For anyone interested in the Shroud's fourteenth century history the article's genuinely pioneering researches should make this well worth the effort.