

Hoc est Signum Dei

Hoc est signum Dei. Charles the Bold spoke these words on the 5th of January 1476 (now 1477) when he was getting ready for what was to be his last battle against the young Duke of Lorraine, René II, before the city of Nancy. When Charles was putting his helmet on the gilded lion on the crest became loose and fell to the ground. Charles, filled with a sense of doom, sadly said: “Hoc est signum Dei. (This is a sign from God, transl.).

At least that is how the story is told in a number of biographies and chronicles.



The first time I encountered the anecdote was in the biography of Charles the Bold written by Ruth Putnam. I could not remember encountering it in any of the contemporary chronicles I had read so far. I was curious and decided to trace the original source of the tale.

What became clear early on is that the versions of the anecdote that are recounted in the biographies all differ slightly. In some cases Charles had the helmet repaired, in other cases he left the lion where it was on the ground and hastily rode away to the battlefield on his black warhorse. In

yet other biographies it is written that the crest fell on the battlefield, when Charles was struck in the head in the midst of battle.

The chronicles and biographies

Some authors refer to Philippe de Comines as the source of the anecdote. Two things must be kept in mind regarding this: Philippe was already in the service of the French king Louis XI and as such not an eyewitness, and the anecdote is not mentioned in his chronicle. However, he could have heard it from Burgundian eyewitnesses after the battle. I checked several editions of his memoirs but have not been able to find a reference to the anecdote so far.

Olivier de la Marche who was present during the battle and taken prisoner afterwards, does not mention the anecdote. Jean de Haynin and Jean Molinet do not mention it either. Georges Chastellain had already died in 1475 and Jacques du Clerq in 1467.

In the modern biographies (from the 19th century onwards) the anecdote appears regularly. Prosper de Barante recounts the story in his History of the Dukes of Burgundy without mentioning the source. Ruth Putnam too mentions it without source in her biography of the duke. Georges Minois, a more recent biography, does not mention it. I have not been able yet to check what Richard Vaughan has to say. There is no e-version of his biography, so I'm trying to get hold of a physical copy. In *De Bourgondiërs*, the most recent book about Burgundy I have lying around, Bart Van Loo mentions Juliaan van Belle as the source. So far I have not been able to trace a copy of van Belle's book either. So if you have any of those books, and an indication of the original source, much obliged.

One other book that could count as some sort of contemporary source is the *Nanceidos* by Pierre de Blaru (he died 1510). The *Nanceidos* is a Latin poem about the wars of Charles and René of Lorraine, especially about the battle of Nancy and the death of Charles the Bold. I checked a few editions, both in Latin and French, but none of them seem to refer to the anecdote.

The Chronique ou dialogue entre Joannes Lud et Chretien, secretaires de Rene II. Duc de Lorraine sur la defaite de Charles-le-Temeraire devant Nancy 5. Janvier 1477, published by Jean Cayon, tells us how Charles the Bold left his camp quietly in the morning of the fifth of January, but there is no mention of the fallen crest while he prepared to do battle.

I have not found the anecdote in Pontus Heuterus either.

Augustin Calmet (1626-1757) is sometimes mentioned as a source. After a bit of searching around, I found two editions of his History of Lorraine. The first edition does not mention the anecdote, but the second does. Calmet refers to a manuscript of *La vie du duc René II*. I don't know if Calmet refers to the manuscript by a certain Jean Loys Calaber, contemporary and employee of René. In any case, I did not find a reference to the lion in Loys's very short biography of René II either.

Note that Calmet also wrote a book about vampires and revenants, so we are on the right track to find a corpse in any case. Just kidding.

I read somewhere – can't remember where - Calmet also referred to Nicolas Rémy as a source of the anecdote. Rémy (1530-1616) was first and foremost a notorious witch hunter, but also an historian and he wrote a history of Lorraine. The Signum anecdote is referred to in his work: *Discours des choses advenues en Lorraine, depuis le decez du duc Nicolas, jusques à celui du duc René (1605)*. Now it gets more complicated. Rémy stated that his history is an abbreviated version of a history of Lorraine that was a 100 years older: *The chronicle of Lorraine*. As Augustin Calmet apparently also

based his history of Lorraine on this older chronicle, besides the work of Rémy, it is like running in circles.

A pitiful end

There are more sources to check. In *Les mémoires historiques de la république séquanoise et des princes de la Franche-Comté de Bourgogne (1592)*, Loys Gollut recounts how he heard of the way the duke died from old people of his country, who heard it from their fathers who were present at the battle. They said that Charles received a blow from a halberd on his helmet which made him sway and nearly fall off his horse. The Sieur de Cité who was guarding him, steadied him but was killed by a pike while doing so. The duke returned to combat immediately after.

The 19th century Swiss historian Frédéric Charles Jean de Baron Gingins la Sarraz tells the story in a more spectacular way in *Lettres sur la guerre de Suisses contre le Duc Charles-le-Hardi*. He tells how Charles was hit by a halberd and the lion on his helmet came loose and fell to the ground. Whereupon Charles uttered his almost literal punch line: *Hoc est signum Dei*. The Sieur de Cité fastened the Duke in his stirrups but was struck by a pike while doing so and fell dead at the feet of his master.

Double trouble

What is even more interesting is that an almost identical anecdote predating the incident before the battle of Nancy exists.

The scene happened during the battle of Veneto on 25 February 1266, when Manfred of Hohenstaufen entered the battle against Charles of Anjou, with few men left and with the knowledge he could not win the battle. He preferred to die in battle like a king and not flee the battlefield (this is exactly how the attitude of the duke of Burgundy is described in some texts). When he put on his helmet, the silver eagle of his crest fell and he allegedly said: *Hoc est signum Dei*. Manfred entered the battle nonetheless and was killed. At least this is how it was later told by a Florentine banker named Giovanni Villani in his *New Chronicle*:

Manfred, being left with few followers, did as a valiant lord, who would rather die in battle as king than flee with shame; and whilst he was putting on his helmet, a silver eagle which he wore as crest fell down before him on his saddle bow; and he seeing this, was much dismayed, and said to the barons, which were beside him, in Latin: "Hoc est signum Dei, for I fastened this crest with my own hand after such a fashion that it should not have been possible for it to fall"; yet for all this he did not give up, but as a valiant lord he took heart, and immediately entered into the battle, without the royal insignia, so as not to be recognised as king, but like any other noble, striking bravely into the thickest of the fight; nevertheless, his followers endured but a little while, for they were already turning; and straightway they were routed and King Manfred slain in Purg. iii. 118, 119. the midst of his enemies, it was said by a French esquire, but it was not known for certain...



Conclusion

So this leaves us with a chicken or egg question: Is the Bold incident an apocryphal tale, inspired by Villani or had Charles read Villani's chronicle got his inspiration from him?

Illustrations

1: Source: Histoire de France, Théodore Burette, Société Belge de librairie, Brussels, 1842.

2: Source: Giovanni Villani's Nuova Cronica.