

# Royal bones revealed

Assassinated in 1419, Jean sans Peur, Duke of Burgundy, now rests – partially – in the Nicholson Museum, writes Senior Curator, Michael Turner

In early 2006, a lavish gilt framed tableau of some 19th century wax impressions of English Royal and Episcopal seals was inspected in the storeroom of the Nicholson Museum as part of a routine stock-take. From the original donation of Sir Charles Nicholson, it had been in the Museum since the 1860s.

On closer inspection, it was found that the cardboard on which the seals were mounted had been cut to fit closely over the glass of a different, underlying tableau. On removing the card, a bizarre sight was revealed; human bones comprising a rib, a finger bone, two vertebrae and part of a lower jaw, some fragments of leather and fabric, a metal ring or buckle, and some resinous lumps of balm, all mounted with wire alongside descriptions and comments written in French. The title of the tableau was “The Remains of the Dukes of Burgundy”.

This had all the makings of a curator/researcher’s dream come true: a highly unusual object of apparent historical significance that had lain unrecognised in the museum for nearly 150 years.

The first step was to translate the French. Across the bottom was written in part, ‘In 1791, the bodies of Philippe le Hardi [Philip the Bold] and Jean sans Peur [John the Fearless] as well as that of his wife Marguerite de Bavière were

moved from the Charterhouse to the [Cathedral] of St. Bénigne.’ The rest of the writing identifies the various objects, for example, “a fragment of balm which had been used to embalm the bodies of the Duke and Duchess of Burgundy”.

Jean sans Peur, Duke of Burgundy, was a controversial figure during the Hundred Years War; following the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, he had signed a secret treaty with Henry V of England. In 1419, he was assassinated by the Dauphin on a bridge over the River Yonne at Montereau in northern France. He was buried in a magnificent tomb with his wife, Marguerite, in the Chartreuse (Charterhouse) de Champmol in Dijon. Jean’s father, Philippe le Hardi, who is also buried there, had founded the Carthusian abbey in 1383.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Kings and Queens of France made an annual *joyeuse entrée* to Dijon where they would visit the tombs and be taken to the vault to view the embalmed bodies. On being shown the fatal damage done to Jean’s skull, François I (1515-47), was told by the Prior: “Here is the hole through which the English entered France”.

In 1791, during the French Revolution, the Chartreuse was dissolved and sold to a Parisian developer on condition that he remove all human remains for reburial. During a delay in the paper-

work, the revolutionary mob looted the building, opened the coffins, looking for anything of value, and desecrated the “aristocratic” bodies. A few days later, the surviving remains of Philippe, Jean and Marguerite were thrown into hastily dug graves in Dijon’s cathedral.

On 22 July 1841, the Commission des Antiquités de la Côte d’Or excavated the bones on behalf of the Bishop. Having been studied, they were placed in lead coffins and re-buried with full honour. As is the way however, it appears that an interested member of the Commission had gathered “souvenirs” in both 1791 and 1841. The teeth are described as, “1791. Removed from the tomb in the Chartreuse”. While the finger bone was “extracted on the 22nd July 1841 from the tomb of Jean sans Peur”. “For more information on the ring, removed in 1791,” the writer suggests, “see the notes of my father on this object”.

Louis-Benigne Baudot, a magistrate, was involved in the reburial in 1791; he was also on the Commission in 1841. His son, Henri, a lawyer, was secretary to the Commission. The handwriting on the tableau has now been identified by Sophie Jugie, Director of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Dijon, as that of Henri Baudot. It would seem likely that it was Henri Baudot who sold our macabre tableau to Sir Charles Nicholson. ■