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The last ride of Henry II of France: Orbital injury and a king's demise

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ABSTRACT

Jousting was a popular pastime for royalty in the Renaissance era. Injuries were common, and the eye was particularly at risk from the splinters of the wooden lance. On June 30, 1559, Henry II of France participated in a jousting tournament to celebrate two royal weddings. In the third match, Gabriel de Montgomery struck Henry on the right shoulder and the lance splintered, sending wooden shards into his face and right orbit. Despite being cared for by the prominent physicians Ambroise Paré and Andreas Vesalius, the king died 10 days later and was found to have a cerebral abscess. The wound was not explored immediately after the injury; nevertheless, wooden foreign bodies were discovered in the orbit at the time of autopsy. The dura had not been violated, suggesting that an infection may have traveled from the orbit into the brain. Nostradamus and Luca Guarico, the astrologer to the Medici family, had prophesied the death of Henry II of France, but he ignored their warnings and thus changed the course of history in Renaissance Europe.

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1. Introduction

During the Renaissance, the sport of jousting flourished in Europe. Jousting was originally popular in the 11th century as a way for knights to train for combat, but it eventually evolved

into a form of entertainment. Landowners held jousting tournaments for their knights to battle against competitors representing other nobles.¹ The most skilled knights would occasionally auction their services to the highest bidder, a practice from which the term “freelancer” was derived.^A As

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the sport gained popularity during the Renaissance, members of the royal family began participating in the events to showcase their courage.

Jousting tournaments were a way for nobles to celebrate events such as a royal wedding, and in time regulations were developed for the sport. The riders rode towards each other on the right side of a rope barrier or “list” to prevent a head-on collision.¹ Each competitor wore heavy armor, often weighing over a hundred pounds. If a rider was unhorsed and stuck in the mud, their courtiers had to remove their armor before they could even stand up to mount the horse again. Each rider held a shield in the left hand to block the lance of his competitor. The lance, held in the right hand, was usually made of wood, with a metal tip. The jousting attempted to strike the right shoulder of his opponent with the lance, which would award a point. Knocking the other rider off his horse would award more points. If a competitor managed to strike his opponent in the right shoulder by navigating the lance past his shield and across his body, the custom was to drop the lance to the ground, as they had a tendency to splinter.²

Not surprisingly, injuries were common. Although riders wore helmets with visors fastened in place, it was possible for splinters to injure the face if the visor was not buckled. In fact, King Henry VIII of England was injured in just this way in 1524. His opponent, the Duke of Suffolk, struck the king and sent splinters into his face under the unbuckled visor. Although the eyes were spared, it was a near miss.² King Henry II of France, however, was not as fortunate.

Henry II of France was born in 1519 and crowned in 1547, ruling until his death in 1559 (Fig. 1). At the time of his coronation, France was in the midst of the Italian Wars, and Spain reigned as the dominant power in Europe.³ Eventually, in 1559, Henry II signed the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis that ended the Italian Wars. As part of the peace agreement, two royal weddings would take place. Emmanuel-Philibert, the Duke of Savoy, was engaged to Margaret, the sister of Henry II. The second wedding was of Henry’s daughter, Elisabeth of Valois, who was betrothed to Philip II, the powerful king of Spain. Despite the French monarchy’s poor financial status, Henry planned an extravagant celebration of the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis and the upcoming weddings. This celebration included a series of jousting tournaments, a favorite pastime for the king.³

2. The last ride of Henry II

There are varying accounts about the events that led up to the death of Henry II. The festivities occurred outside of the Hôtel des Tournelles, the modern-day site of the Place des Vosges in Paris.⁹ The tournament was to last 5 days and began on June 28th, the day after the betrothal of Margaret to Emmanuel-Philibert. King Philip II of Spain did not attend because, “Kings of Spain do not go after their brides.” Philip instead sent his proxy, the Duke of Alba, to claim his bride.³

On June 30th, Henry joined the competition. The king was an experienced jousting, and he had been training for the festival, although he entered the tournament against the



Fig. 1 – Henry II of France, by François Clouet. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

wishes of his wife, Catherine de Medici. Two separate astrologers and consultants to Catherine had prophesied that the reign of Henry II would end in a duel, and specifically with an eye injury. The field of astrology was fraught with figures who intentionally made indistinct predictions, but Catherine and the Medici family placed great weight on their prophesies. Nostradamus—in a passage widely believed to be referencing Henry II—predicted in a famous quatrain in 1555:

“The young lion shall overcome the old.
On martial field in single combat.
In a golden cage his eyes will be put out.
Two into one, then he dies a cruel death.”¹⁶

Catherine was more upset by the prophesy of Luca Guarico, the astrologer to the Medici family in Italy. Guarico actually wrote a letter to Henry II in 1556 warning the king:

“...avoid all single combat in an enclosed field, especially around his forty-first year, for in that period of his life he was threatened by a wound in the head which could bring about blindness, or death.”¹⁶

The night before his fateful joust, Catherine recalled Guarico’s prediction and dreamed that Henry would have an accident. She begged him not to compete in the tournament, but Henry laughed off the prophesies and ignored his wife’s warning.³

The following day, Henry II entered the tournament wearing black and white in honor of his lover, Diane de Poitiers. Diane had been Henry's favorite and confidant since he was a teenage heir to the throne and she had been well into her thirties. She exerted considerable influence in the court and was a natural rival to Catherine de Medici.³ Diane was renowned for her beauty, represented famously in a sculpture at the Louvre. Catherine, on the other hand, was known for "having the protruding eyes peculiar to the Medici family" (Fig. 2).⁸

Henry rode three courses on that day against different opponents. In the second course, his opponent struck the king and nearly unhorsed him.³ The Duke of Savoy and Catherine urged Henry not to ride a third course. One account suggests that Henry suffered a concussion after the second course.⁹ Henry stubbornly disregarded the warnings of Catherine and commanded Gabriel de Montgomery, the Captain of the Scottish Guard, to ride against him. Montgomery resisted initially, but would not disobey the king.¹⁵ As the riders prepared to joust, the king pulled down his visor, but did not fasten the buckle, perhaps because of his stubborn haste or because he had a lapse in awareness.^{3,15} Then, on the last ride of Henry II, Gabriel de Montgomery prevailed over the king and struck him in the right shoulder. Montgomery held onto his lance after striking the king, contrary to the custom of the sport. The lance splintered, sending wooden shards into Henry's forehead and right orbit (Fig. 3).¹⁵ Henry managed to stay on his horse, but was lifted off and carried into the Hôtel des Tournelles. The king lost consciousness twice in the aftermath of the injury. According to an eyewitness account by Bishop Antoine Caraccioli, Montgomery came to the bedside of Henry II and begged forgiveness.¹⁵ He asked the king to cut off his head and his hand. Henry II refused and stated that Montgomery had simply obeyed the king's wishes.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Montgomery feared for his life and quickly fled Paris.³

3. The king's "evil rest"

The night of the injury, the king "had a very evil rest."³ The king's physicians dressed his wound and removed splinters from his forehead, but chose not to surgically explore the orbit. They believed that the remaining splinters would wash out on their own by exfoliation.⁹ The French court physician was Ambroise Paré, a famous barber-surgeon who had begun his career by treating battlefield injuries and was thus uniquely qualified to tend to the king.⁴ Initially, the physicians gave the king purgings, and Henry was bled for "twelve ounces of blood."¹⁵ In order to determine the extent of the injury, the physicians simulated the accident by experimenting on the decapitated heads of four criminals executed in Paris the day before.¹⁰ They concluded that the splinter fragments had probably not pierced into the brain, but remained in the orbit. Perhaps fearing injury to the globe by surgically intervening, the physicians instead chose to observe the wound.⁵

King Philip II of Spain, upon hearing of the injury to Henry II, dispatched his court physician—the famous anatomist Andreas Vesalius—from Brussels to Paris "in all haste" to care



Fig. 2 – Catherine de Medici, by Francois Clouet. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

for the French monarch.^{12,15} Vesalius arrived on July 3 and agreed with the assessment that the dura had not been violated.⁹ At this point, Henry had little pain and was able to eat and attend to some affairs of state.³

Henry's condition worsened significantly on the following day, and he was overcome with fever.³ At one point during his visit, Vesalius had the king bite down on a cloth to elicit meningismus. When the king cried out in pain, Vesalius predicted that the king would not survive.⁵ On July 9, Henry experienced left-sided paralysis and had a convulsion on the right side of his body.¹¹ At this point, pus emanated from his orbit.³ Paré and Vesalius discussed trephining the skull to relieve cerebral edema, but decided not to intervene.⁵ It is unclear whether they realized that the pus coming from the orbit may have caused the neurologic deterioration. Before the infection spread to the brain, the two physicians probably had not entertained the idea of orbital exenteration, which was described by Bartisch in 1583.⁷ On July 10, 1559, Henry II of France received his last sacraments in the morning and died that afternoon.³ He was 40 years old.

4. The autopsy

Following Henry's death, Paré and Vesalius performed an autopsy. Vesalius noted in his report:

"The ... socket of the right eye ... contained a large number of splinters ... Their tips ... extended into it from as far as



Fig. 3 – Henri II, mortally injured during a jousting tournament. Etching circa 1749, image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

the superior part of the socket and the anterior region of the eye, which otherwise seemed uninjured and intact in content and appearance. The membranes of the brain and the brain itself at the forehead and at the right socket of the eye ... appeared quite unharmed, and the dural membrane appeared everywhere uninjured. But the membrane attached to it somewhat posteriorly at the vertex had a yellowish color ... The whole of the left part was observed to be filled with a serous ichor-like fluid which flowed away as if the whole had recently been affected by putrefaction or some sort of gangrene.”¹²

Vesalius concluded the king had had a cerebral abscess. The king had a lucid interval for a few days following the injury before suffering from fever and quickly deteriorating, suggesting he had developed a severe infection with sepsis from the retained wooden orbital foreign bodies. Intraorbital wood is known to cause infection.¹⁴ Had this injury occurred in the present day, physicians would have explored the wound to remove the organic foreign body and reduce the likelihood of contamination.⁶

5. Epilogue

The death of Henry II had important ramifications for France. Henry II was a popular king despite France's poor financial state and waning influence. His son, Francis II, was meek in his mannerisms and a weak monarch, dying within a year of his father.³ Two other sons became monarchs of France, but Catherine de Medici held a great deal of influence after Henry II's death. During this time, 30 years of civil unrest ensued between French Catholics and Protestants that came to be known as the French Wars of Religion.⁸

Catherine de Medici wore black for the rest of her life to mourn Henry II and adopted the broken lance as her symbol.³

She held a longstanding grudge against Gabriel de Montgomery for causing Henry's death. Ironically, many years after the event, Montgomery converted to Protestantism and lived in Normandy. He used his military prowess to lead battles against the royal troops on behalf of the Huguenot forces. In his final battle, Montgomery surrendered to the royal army on the condition that his life be spared. The terms of the surrender were agreed, but Catherine—serving as regent of France while Henry IV, the crowned monarch, was abroad—reneged on the terms of the surrender and brought him to Paris for trial. On June 27, 1574, nearly 15 years following the death of Henry II, Gabriel de Montgomery was beheaded and quartered with Catherine as witness.¹⁵ The queen finally had her long-awaited revenge.

Diane de Poitiers, the king's lover and confidant, was also banished from the court. She had, however, skillfully arranged for her daughters to marry into nobility and thus was able to live out the remainder of her life in peace outside of Paris.¹⁵ Ambroise Paré continued his illustrious career as surgeon to the monarchs of France. He developed his surgical skills on the battlefield as a barber-surgeon, but rose to the rank of master surgeon in the French court.⁴ He also developed an early form of an ocular prosthesis.¹³ After Henry's death, the popularity of jousting waned, although some historians think it was already in decline.¹ Catherine de Medici died in 1589. She was laid to rest next to Henry II at the Basilica of Saint Denis, in death finally reunited with her beloved husband.³

6. Disclosure

The authors report no proprietary or commercial interest in any product mentioned or concept discussed in this article.

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