

The Lost “Banner of Péronne” Commemorating The Siege Of 1536 – Identified At The IStG

The unique embroidery unveiled publicly in Maastricht on occasion of The European Fine Arts Fair (TEFAF) on 15 March 2019 is the historic “*Bannière de Péronne*” which was lost in 1916, in the turmoil of World War I. For over a hundred years, a few photographs and a 19th century lithograph had been the only known remnants of this cultural treasure - until an image resurfaced at the IStG – *Institut für vergleichende Städtegeschichte* which played a crucial role in its identification.

Péronne’s townhall is well known from the iconic World War I propaganda postcard printed to denounce German war atrocities: The upper story of the historic building is badly damaged and a large hand-written sign sarcastically advises the spectator in German: “Don’t huff, just marvel!” (*Nicht ärgern, nur wundern!*). Few would nowadays identify the building also as the site of Péronne’s municipal museum, the *musée Alfred-Danicourt*, once an unrivalled treasury of Picardy’s cultural history and the original repository of the embroidery presently on exhibition.

The *musée Alfred-Danicourt* was the only French museum to be completely destroyed during World War I. Few pieces of its collections were saved by the curator Felix Louis or by German soldiers to re-emerge later. The exact circumstances of the embroidery’s disappearance are still unknown. In September 1914, Péronne was quickly taken by the invading German troops and became part of the occupied back area with innumerable troops passing through the place to cross the Somme on their way to the front. Despite the use of the townhall building by the German military, the museum collections long remained intact. The Battle of the Somme in 1916 came to a halt just before reaching the river, but now Péronne’s museum was severely damaged by grenades and several eye-witnesses described the destruction caused by the explosions. The German military set up a dressing station for the wounded in the basement of the building and forcefully evacuated the civilian inhabitants leaving the town to be openly pillaged by the soldiers. During the infamous *Operation Alberich* (16-19 March 1917), the strategic retreat to the *Siegfried-Linie (Ligne Hindenburg)*, the German army left the land purposefully devastated and the townhall booby-trapped with explosives.

A pre-1914 photograph, however, still shows the remarkable textile as a centrepiece in the museum’s exhibition surrounded by bundles of halberds and other Renaissance weaponry. This is how Henri Dusevel, inspector of historic monuments, must have found it in the early 19th century. Summing up his impressions after a visit to the museum he called the piece “*infiniment curieuse sous le rapport de l’art et de l’histoire*”. And indeed, not only the make and fabric of the ancient textile embroidered in silk with gold and silver threads are awe-inspiring. It relates back to historical events surpassing local, regional and national significance: the struggle between two formidable Renaissance monarchs for supremacy in Western Europe in the early 16th century. From 1519 onwards, the antagonism between emperor Charles V (1500–1558) and the Valois king of France, Francis I (1494–1547) who found his realm surrounded by Habsburg dominions in Spain, the Netherlands, Franche-Comté and Italy led to a succession of wars fought in various theatres including the former Burgundian lands now divided between Habsburg (Artois) and France (Picardy). When imperial troops invaded Picardy in 1536, not only the fate of the town of Péronne was at stake, but the integrity of the realm of France as well as the territorial ambitions of her king.

Francis I had aggressively pursued his claims in Savoy, Piedmont and Milan, disregarding the risk of an attack from the Netherlands which, if successful, was bound to threaten Paris. Imperial commanders Henry III of Nassau († 1538) and Adriaan van Croÿ († 1553) led the incursion, but met unexpected resistance in Péronne which was strategically located as a sentinel guarding the crossing of the river Somme, defended by marshal Robert III de la Marck († 1536) and other captains. The siege to ensue on 12 August 1536 lasted for thirty-two days. The “Banner” portraits the situation looking south-east with the town in its medieval walls in the centre and the river to the right. Péronne castle, under heavy attack, guards the entrance to the town which controls the Somme bridge connecting to the *faubourg*

de Paris and, eventually, the French heartland. On the left side lies the abbey of Mount St Quentin where the imperial troops had set up camp, but their tents extend well into the foreground.

The embroidery gives a vivid account of the siege of 1536, condensing into a single image numerous events that took place in and around the town walls over a period of thirty days: The cavalry excursion reported to have taken place on 18 August 1536 is depicted on the left as a skirmish between two parties on horseback shooting pistols. It appears simultaneously with assaults on the castle (20 August and 6 September) and attempts to scale the town walls with ladders after the moat had been drained (25 August), including the graphic display of the bodies of the slain. Also, in the background, there are soldiers wading the moat towards the town. Sources report that this way new supplies of gunpowder were brought into Péronne after the besieged had run out. These reinforcements eventually made apparent the futility of the siege that ended on 10/11 September 1536. The scene in the foreground in which cavalry flying the two-headed imperial eagle standard cross the Somme on an improvised boat-bridge at a different location to surprise another military camp requires further research in the continuation of the campaign.

While set in a larger political context, the depiction of the siege is steeped in the local history of Péronne. On the town wall to the right, amidst another attack at close quarters, a female figure tosses an enemy standard down into the moat. Local lore has given this valiant heroine the name Marie Fouré, also known as Catherine Poix. Commemorated by a statue up until today, the figure represents the Péronnaise will to bravely resist adverse circumstances. Further to the right, a bareheaded figure speaks and gestures to two noblemen. This scene has been interpreted as a treasonous miller informing the besiegers of how to drain the moat for the attack. More likely it represents Jean de Haizecourt who is said to have slipped away during the siege so as to give word of Péronne's distress, and gunpowder shortage, prompting the Dukes de Guise and de Vendôme to send the relief forces.

The successful resistance during the siege of 1536 is ever since remembered as a fundamental feat of Péronne's inhabitants. King Francis I rewarded their bravery with tax-exemptions and by adding the royal fleur-de-lys to the town's coat of arms. The "Banner" itself testifies to the pride taken in the success: The collegiate chapter of St Fursy (the most prominent church in the embroidery) in 1537 decided to celebrate the victory and to give thanks to the town's patron saint (depicted at the top) by holding an annual religious procession in his honour. On that occasion, the civic authorities were to march under "a great standard", probably the present embroidery.

But when was it made? Written sources mention a payment to a local tailor so as to create an embroidered banner as an exact copy from a painted model only in 1703/05. So far, this was accepted as the genesis of the lost "Banner" substituting an older, painted original. However, a recent analysis of precious metal threads from the embroidery suggests an earlier date, calling for a re-evaluation of this question. Either way, many of the minute details – the use of pistols in combat (not before 1545) and the costumes suggestive of the reign of King Henry IV (1589–1610) – place some of the graphic content in the second half of the 16th century. The missing parts in the corners and from the top will have been cut off during the French Revolution when insignia of the nobility and saint's images were frowned upon.

Early Modern pictorial sources are vital to our understanding of past urban spaces, their form and development. The textile form of the "Banner" is unusual among what is predominantly printed *vedute* and bird's-eye views. It shows the state of the fortifications (without the damages caused by the besiegers' cannons), the *faubourg de Bretagne* on the left dismantled so it may not serve the assailants as cover, and a fire raging inside the town walls. It also reveals the state of ecclesiastical buildings and the arcaded townhall, but most importantly the Belfry (dismantled in 1844), a type of civic building commonly found in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Northern France. After the piece dramatically reappeared at a London auction, it was the match of the Belfry's depiction with other historic images at the IStG – *Institut für vergleichende Städtegeschichte* (Institute for Comparative Urban History) in Münster which led to the identification of the town as Péronne and, eventually, the precious embroidery as the "Banner" commemorating the siege of 1536.

The embroidery has not been under direct scrutiny by researchers for the last century. Thus, the open questions concerning the piece – its imagery and materiality – are abundant. Future enquiries will re-open the discussion concerning the date and circumstances of its production, analyse the composition of the graphic scenes and their originality (or dependency on models), and strive to understand its actual use as a banner to be carried and displayed during religious processions. Despite its successful identification, the “Banner of Péronne” retains a mysterious quality. It will inspire the public for generations to explore its meaning, to marvel in delight over its embroidered details, and simply to take in the view this ‘window to the past’ opens up for us.



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