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A Historical Vignette (20)

A royal otitis

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Abstract. A royal otitis. The young king of France, Francis II, the eldest son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, died in Orleans from the effects of the complications of a chronic otitis on 6 December 1560. Based on texts of the time, the paper discusses the nature of the illness, the treatment, and the medical and political entourage of the king.

Figure 1. From the ideal to the reality: on the left, a posthumous medal by Jean Dassier (1676-1763); on the right an anonymous portrait from the time of Francis II.

Dramatis personae and dates

Henry II, King of France of the Valois dynasty (1519-1559)[1]
Francis II, King of France, eldest son of the former (1544-1560) (Figure 1)
Catherine de Medici, the wife of Henry II and mother of Francis II (1519-1589)
Mary Stuart, the Queen of Scotland and wife of Francis II (1542- 1587) (Figure 2)
Ambroise Paré, surgeon to the King (1509-1590) (Figures 3,4)
24 August 1558: marriage of Francis, dauphin of France and Mary, Queen of Scots
10 July 1559: Francis II is proclaimed King following the death of Henry II
5 December 1560: death of Francis II
14 August 1561: Mary leaves France and sets sail from Calais on her way to Scotland.

The weak constitution of the king

According to Régnier de La Planche (known as "François de l'Isle"), in his *Histoire de l'estat de France, tant de la république que de la religion, sous le règne de Francis II,* ed. 1576: "This unhealthy prince who, as a child, suffered from many indispositions because he did not blow his nose and did not spit through his mouth, emerged from a long quartan fever. His face was pale and swollen but it became redder and redder when a corruption developed in one of his ears which did the work of his very pug-shaped [flat and small] nose. All these things worried and frightened the Queen (Catherine de Medici) and she brought together the leading physicians in Fontainebleau. They advised her to take him to Blois to spend the winter there, because that country had the best and the most suitable air of the whole kingdom; indeed he had been breast-fed there during his first months. He would also be able to take some precious medicines there while waiting for the spring, when aromatic baths suitable for his disease could be prepared. It has been said that some physicians, who were in the pay of the Guises, immediately told them to watch out their interests all the more because the King would not live long. They also said that they should not expect the queen (Mary Queen of Scots), their niece, to be pregnant (except from somebody else) because of his weak general condition and because his genital organs were blocked and were prevented from doing anything. However, they thought that he may live two or three years more if he suffered no other adverse event, which would be prevented by the use of other protection against illness".[2] It was therefore thought to be necessary to separate him from Mary Stuart! The Duke of Alba, who lived at the court of France declared: "*He died because of her*"...

The illness which carried the king away

"In the evening, when the king attended vespers in the Jacobin church (on 17 November 1560), he suffered from a total **faint**, causing him to be taken away to his room quickly. When he recovered from his swoon, he began to complain of a headache in the left ear, where he had always suffered from a fistula, so that pain and **fever** afflicted him (Comments in the margin by the author: *God strikes the great blow through which, in an instant, what had been prepared a long time ago was undone immediately: the king was struck in his ear, which he had closed too long to the cries of the innocent*)... As for the King's illness, though **some very stinking humour was distilled from his ear** and despite the fact that he was purged and that cupping glasses were placed on him, and that **the discharge from the ear was retained by**

Figure 2. Oval medal dating from 1558. Chest of Francis II, wearing a fraise and a scarf. Chest of Mary Stuart wearing a necklace.

Figure 3. The Groslot town house (which is now the town hall of the city of Orleans, Etape Square) received Francis, who had fainted in the Jacobin church which opened onto the square. This is where he died. Today, it houses this painting (dated 1865) by Pierre Dupuis in a "Hollywood" romantic style. Its sole merit is didactic. Mary Stuart is kneeling at the foot of the King's bed, Ambroise Paré is standing with a trephine in his hand; the Guises (the general and the cardinal) are standing on the right; Catherine de Medici is sitting but looks as though she is ordering Paré not to operate.

fomentation (application of cataplasms or warm compresses), the fever continued to increase, with severe pain, **anxiety and hallucinations**. Accordingly, the Duke of Guise cursed the physicians a thousand times over and he enquired frequently whether the art of medicine or of something else could at least save the king or just prolong his life, taking into account the fact that the king was in the prime of life. In short, the Duke was in a great passion because he could not get the assurance from the physicians or from the surgeons that they could preserve the life of the King until the next Easter. So he accused them of killing the King themselves and receiving money from the heretics (the Protestants) to do it. He threatened them all with hanging. He said that they were all cowards and abusers of the people, that they were employed by the King and that all the service they gave him was that of shortening his life..."[2]

"... His suffering and his threats (i.e. those of the Duke) were accompanied by so many swear-words and blasphemies that they seemed to come more from a deranged man than from any thinking mind or adequate judgment. While the Duke of Guise was comporting himself thus, his brother, the Cardinal, resorted to pilgrimages, to vows to all the saints of heaven and to processions of priests and monks... However, despite all this, the illness did not abate; on the contrary, it worsened daily... And that caused an extraordinary sadness among all the Guises... they tried to manipulate the Queen Mother so that they could keep the corpse after the king's death until they could manage their affairs... but that proposal was immediately refused because there were already too many over-eager people watching for the death of the king. At that moment, the Queen Mother, seeing the king her first son at death's door, foresaw the difficulties she would now be facing because of this new, unhoped for, change in circumstances..."[2]

"Nevertheless, the illness of the king was going from bad to worse and, as all remedies were ineffective, the physicians and the surgeons considered **trepanation**. However, everyone was so put aback that nothing was decided, and so the aforesaid lord continued to be deprived of this remedy that was thought might cure him. And it was rumoured that the aforesaid physicians and surgeons were no less afraid than when the late king Henry had died. This led to a proverb that *it was not good to be a king in death*... On 14 December, at noon, the king was thought to be dead even though he finally expired at five o'clock p.m.... Such was the reign of Francis the Second, who had only been king in name, and it was observed that he died during the 17th month of his reign, on the 17th day of his illness, and on the 17th hour after midnight. During that reign, France was the stage on which several tragedies were played that posterity admired and hated all together for good reason."[2]

The cause of death according to contemporaries

Ultimately, the king died from "**a punctured abscess in the head** which flowed partly through the left ear" (In fact, what happened

was precisely the opposite). Catherine wrote, in early December: "for some days, the king my son has suffered from a **catarrh** which has afflicted him extremely and totally, accompanied by a high fever which has put him in extreme danger given the serious illness from which he suffers".

The poisoning hypothesis

On 27 November, the King fainted again (the first time was on 17 November, see above) when he was with the barber. It was necessary to put him to bed. His weakness was so great and his symptoms were so strange that the barber was suspected by some of having surreptitiously poured a violent poison into his ear "while arranging his hair". Others accused Paré of having done the same, for he alone had access to the king's ear. Catherine herself was also wrongly accused. She wrote, at the end of November: "When I think of the condition of the king, my son, suffering from such an extreme headache that I hope the Lord will not cause me such unhappiness as to take him from me, he who has such pain". After his death, she added: "God has taken your brother from me, whom I loved so much as you know, and left me with three small children". Catherine did not believe in the guilt of Paré: "No, no, Ambroise is a man of too much good and too much our good friend to have fomented that odious plan".

Some classic signs of the complications of otitis

Mastoiditis results in generalised symptoms: a high temperature of up to 40 degrees Celsius, headaches, **exhaustion or restlessness**. Locally, there is a **retro-auricular swelling**, **spontaneous retro-auricular pain** added to the **headache**; the amount of **otorrhoea** is inversely proportional to the pain.

The thrombophlebitis of the lateral sinus is accompanied by shivering, attacks of hectic fever, pain upon palpation of the posterior part of the mastoid, torticollis when there is propagation to the jugular vein upon the palpation of a high cervical cord, and exophthalmia with ocular congestion when there is propagation to the cavernous sinus.

Meningitis also results in headache, shivering, a temperature spike, photophobia, vomiting and a stiff neck.

The cerebral abscess can begin insidiously, with rapid coma and a quick death with a background of unspectacular headaches. When there is a static phase, there is bradycardia with a moderate fever, capricious headache and lethargy. Neurological signs such as epileptic seizures, palsies, motor or sensory aphasia, sensitive disorders depend on the localisation of the abscess.

The cerebellar abscess is even more insidious than a cerebral abscess. The headache is primarily occipital; vertigo and nystagmus with ataxia are more pronounced than in a cerebral abscess. The neurological signs are homolateral in cerebellar abscess and heterolateral in an abscess of the brain

Petrositis. The essential signs include the persistence, on an operated ear (most often a mastoidectomy), of a stubborn and nauseating discharge, and of permanent and throbbing pain in the temporo-parietal region, sometimes accompanied by paralysis of the 6th nerve (Gradenigo syndrome).

What was the most probable diagnosis?

Though each complication above could explain one or more of the King's symptoms, it seems to me that mastoiditis explains most of them, either in the simple form or possibly with meningitis as a complication.

Some texts refer to a "fistula". What does this mean in the case of Francis II: was it a synonym for otorrhoea or did it refer to a genuine retro-auricular fistula? I believe that "fistula" probably corresponds to "otorrhoea". At that time, it was thought that the brain emptied through the ear and that otorrhoea could purge the brain. The contemporary view was that, when the discharge stopped, the pus accumulated in the brain and death followed. The current view is that the presence of an autonomous otitis independent of the brain led to direct or indirect cerebral complications through mastoiditis, which was in turn accompanied by a complication: thrombophlebitis of the lateral sinus, petrositis or meningitis, a cerebral or cerebellar abscess, or pyaemia. We do not know exactly. By contrast with his father, Francis was not given an autopsy and Paré did not give us a detailed report of the evolution of the illness. Even though the trepanation suggested by Paré, and probably accepted by Mary (Figure 5), was refused, it is indirect proof that something needed to be evacuated from the king's head.

At what level? Bearing in mind the absence of any external trauma

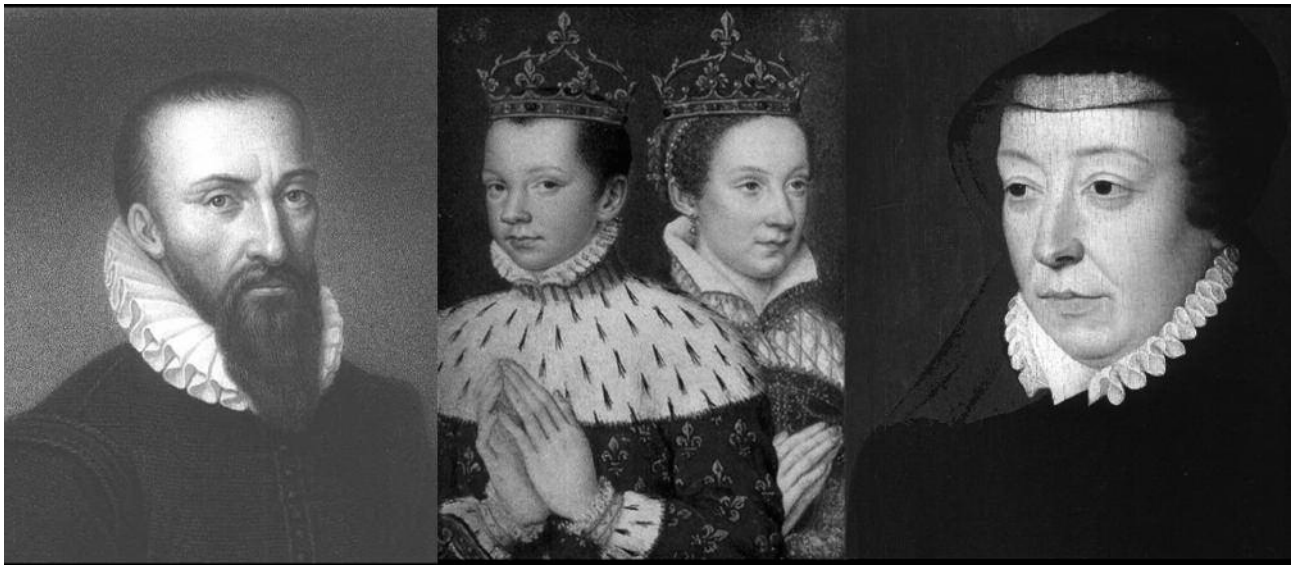

Figure 4. Ambroise Paré (1510-1590). As with Henry II, Paré prepared for trepanation but he was prevented from proceeding,
Figure 5. Francis II (1544-1560) and his wife Mary Stuart (1542-1582) at the time of their marriage.
Figure 6. Catherine de Medici (1519-1589). In 1560, the year of the king's death, Paré was 50 years old, Francis 17, Mary Stuart 19 and Catherine de Medici 41.

to guide Paré's hand, it is improbable that he planned the procedure solely on the grounds of the "anxiety and hallucinations" of the patient. A trepanation of the skull to look for a cerebral abscess without any sign of localisation when one is a surgeon suspected of Protestantism and, what is more, when the operation is on the King himself, would appear foolhardy. On the other hand, the mastoid seemed to be more within Paré's reach, and I favour that hypothesis: the trepanation of the mastoid apophysis. In other words, opening an abscess located in the bone and drainage to the outside (we no longer see this as a mastoidectomy).

Who did refuse the intervention: the physicians of the king or Catherine herself? Probably both. Let us remember these words attributed to Catherine: "To pierce the head of my son like a plank, and with this instrument (the trephine), Master Ambroise, I shall not bear it" (Figure 6).

From what type of otitis did the king suffer?

Was it an ordinary otitis, a mucous one with an inferior perforation with a tendency towards recovery after the acquisition of immunity? This is not very probable given the fatal outcome in this case. Could it have been the tuberculous otitis that some have claimed? In any case, there is a consensus about the tuberculosis which carried off the brother and successor of Francis II, Charles IX, at the age of 24 years. A simple tuberculous otitis must be considered in the case of painless otorrhoea with exuberant granulation and pseudopolyps. Two major complications make it serious: labyrinthitis, a frequent accompanying symptom, may end in cophosis and facial palsy by exposing the facial nerve in the middle of the granulation tissue. Osseous necrosis and the sequestra are much more important than in the ordinary chronic otitis. Tuberculous problems in the ear are not systematically associated with pulmonary tuberculosis. That type of otitis must be borne in mind in the case of Francis II, but there is no firm proof.

A less probable diagnosis, given the King's young age, is cholesteatoma with endocranial complications.

What became of the body of the king?

When the King closed his eyes for the last time on 14 December, the situation at Court was so agitated that neither his mother, his uncles or any prince of the family

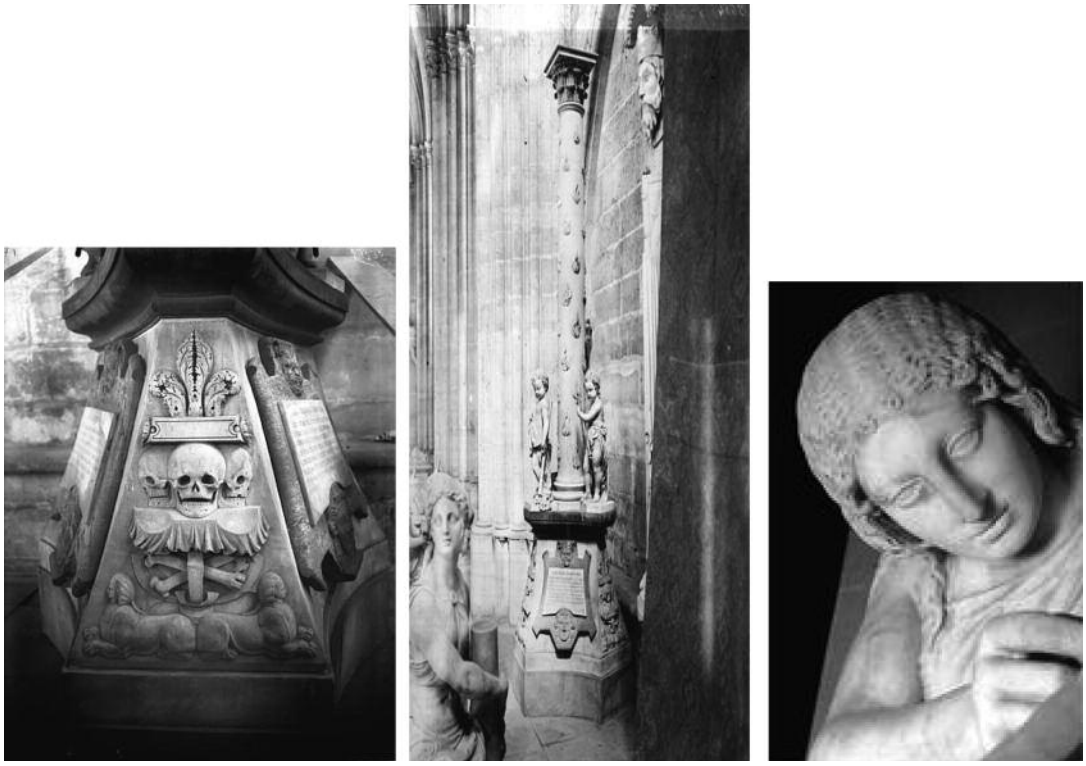

Figure 7. Pedestal of the commemorative column of Francis II in St Denis

Figure 8. Commemorative column of Francis II in St Denis, a view of the whole

Figure 9. We see the head of the angel writing the history of Francis II on a tablet. The angel was intended for the "carditaphe" destined for Orleans cathedral. However, the tomb was never completed and so the angel is now in the Louvre.

thought to pay their last respects. Nobody took charge of the funeral arrangements. The body was laid in a chapel where nobody went to visit it. When, finally, the funeral was considered, it emerged that there was no money to provide for it. The Guises, who were prodigiously rich, refused to loosen their purse-strings.

The body of the king was taken to **the basilica of Saint Denis** on 23 December 1560, accompanied only by two gentlemen, his former governors, and the blind Bishop of Senlis. Francis II was interred there, alongside his father in the Valois family vault built by his mother. The King's coffin bore the inscription: *Tannegui du Châtel, where are you?* The Breton Tannegui IV du Châtel was among the most faithful servants of Charles VII (the King anointed thanks to Joan of Arc in the previous century). He was living far away from the court when he was informed that his king was dead. Upon receiving the news, he left his place of exile to pay his last respects and to arrange a wonderful funeral at his own expense. To quote his name was a savage comment on the conduct of the Guises, which many thought scandalous: "A great fuss was made about the burial of the late King, which took place with a small candle, a thing that was thought very strange".

The heart of the king, in accordance with Valois custom, was transferred to the **Celestine monastery in Paris**. The column bearing the King's "carditaphe" (a monument symbolically containing the heart of the deceased) was originally destined for **Orleans cathedral** before it was moved to the **basilica of St Denis**, where it is today the only individual trace of this sovereign. However, an angel representing History that was an element of that column can now be found in **the Louvre** (Figures 7,8,9).

A jewel and a poem for Mary Stuart

Catherine de Medici accused Mary of having killed his son from exhaustion... Even the historian Michelet claimed: "*Francis II died because of that great red-haired female camel, Mary Stuart*" (Figure 10).

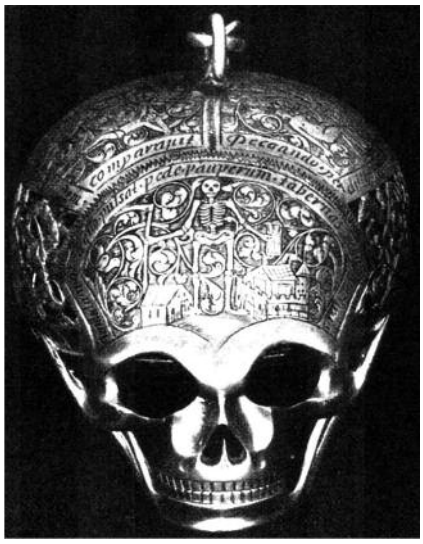

Figure 10. A portrait of Mary Stuart by Francis Clouet, National Library, Paris.
Figure 11. A work by Master Jeweller Moyse of Blois.

Upon the King's death, Mary became *persona non grata* for Catherine. She was forced to leave France and returned to Scotland. She took sail from Calais, albeit without haste, nine months after the death of the King (a coincidence?).

Before she left, she ordered, from a Master Jeweller in Blois, a city not far from Orleans, a watch which she wore as a pendant. Its macabre decoration seems to have been inspired by the death of her husband. She finally gave the pendant to one of her ladies-in-waiting, Mary Seaton. It is still in the United Kingdom to this day. (Figure 11).

In the name of France, before her departure, Ronsard dedicated to her one of these poems of which he understood the secret:

Comme un beau pré dépouillé de ses fleurs,
Comme un tableau privé de ses couleurs,
Comme le ciel, s'il perdait ses étoiles,
La mer ses eaux, le navire ses voiles,
Un bois, sa feuille, un antre, son effroi,
Un grand palais, la pompe de son Roi,
Et un anneau, sa perle précieuse:
Ainsi perdra la France soucieuse
Ses ornements, en perdant sa beauté
Qui fut sa fleur, sa couleur, sa clarté.

Like a beautiful meadow stripped of its flowers,
Like a painting deprived of its colours,
Like the heaven, if it were to lose its stars,
The sea its waters, the ship its sails,
A wood its leaves, a cave its terror,
A great palace the pomp of its king,
And a ring its precious pearl:
So worried France will lose
Its ornaments by losing her beauty
Which was its flower, its colour, and its light.

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