Rome Sacked...again

by Paul Chrastina

Charles de Bourbon was only fifteen years old when he inherited a dukedom in France and became the wealthiest man in Europe in 1505. During the next decade he spent his money freely, buying the fastest horses and the most stylish clothing obtainable. His chief interests were playing tennis, jousting in tournaments, and fighting in the army of King Louis XII of France.

Despite his extravagances, Bourbon was not the worst spendthrift in France. That distinction belonged to his friend and cousin, the Dauphin, who became King François I of France when Louis XII died in 1515. The twenty-year-old King promptly elevated Bourbon to the office of Constable of France, or supreme general of the national army.

Both Bourbon and his King were eager to expand the boundaries of France, so they decided to invade the Italian province of Lombardy. They discovered that there was not enough cash in the national treasury to raise an army, but various merchants offered to lend them money if they would pledge land as collateral.

Bourbon and the King felt confident of their ability to pay off any debt. They assumed that, after they conquered and plundered the rich province of Lombardy, they would have all the money they needed.

The King borrowed heavily to finance an army. Bourbon also contributed to the war effort by spending his own money to raise and equip troops. Bourbon felt that the regular French infantry of peasant conscripts would be inadequate for the mission at hand. He knew that the dukes of Lombardy had hired a formidable army of Swiss mercenary soldiers to protect their homeland from French aggression. These Swiss infantrymen were well-armed, well-trained, and disciplined.

To counteract the Swiss mercenaries, Bourbon decided to augment the French army by hiring his own mercenaries. He recruited twenty-five thousand infantrymen from Protestant regions of Germany. These German mercenaries were armored foot-soldiers who carried long pikes and huge, two-handed swords. They used the pikes against mounted knights and the broadswords against enemy infantry. The Germans called themselves Landsknechts, or “men of the plains.” They were perfectly willing to fight against the similarly armed Swiss mercenaries, who were the “men of the mountains.”

In the summer of 1515, King François I and Charles de Bourbon led their army over the high mountain passes that led to Italy. In July, 1515, their combined French and German troops defeated an army of Swiss mercenaries near the Italian town of Marignano. Bourbon and his King then advanced to the city of Milan, which surrendered. These victories cost Bourbon over 100,000 livres both to retain the services of the Landsknechts and for the upkeep of his own French troops.

When Charles de Bourbon was welcomed back to France as a conquering hero in 1516, he found that he did not have enough money to pay off his creditors. When Bourbon asked King François for reimbursement of these expenses from the Royal Treasury, the monarch asked for a delay. The king was having trouble repaying his own war debts, but he promised to reimburse Bourbon in the future, when the fruits of their Italian victory began to pay off in the form of new taxes and tributes.

These taxes and tributes, however, turned out to be inadequate to pay off the King’s own debts. During the next two years, the King failed to reimburse Bourbon for any of his expenses.

In the spring of 1518, Charles de Bourbon asked King François again for money, requesting an annual pension in reward for his services to the Crown. King François promptly agreed to the general idea of the
pension, but he did not seem to be in any great hurry to make good on his promises. Bourbon resented the King’s offhand disregard for his financial situation.

Desperate for income to make up for the fortune he had spent on the French conquest of Lombardy, Bourbon sent messengers to petition another one of his royal relatives, nineteen-year old Charles of Austria, for funds. Bourbon’s request was favorably received by the wealthy young prince, who agreed to pay Bourbon a generous pension.

Bourbon was now financially secure, but he found himself in a new sort of difficulty in 1519, when Prince Charles was elected Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, making him ruler of Austria, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands. King François of France, who had reason to believe that he should have been chosen Emperor instead of Charles, began a war to stake his claim to the Holy Roman Empire.

Bourbon now had to decide which of his masters to support. In a calculated attempt to test Bourbon’s loyalty, King François proposed that Bourbon marry his widowed forty-five year old mother, Queen Louise de Savoie.

The proposal to marry Queen Louise was taken to Bourbon by a private secretary of the Queen, who pretended that his answer would remain confidential. The messenger reported back to Louise and King François that Bourbon had spurned the idea, claiming that the King’s mother was “the worst woman in the country,” and insisting that he would not marry her “for all the wealth in Christendom.”

King François and Louise retaliated by laying claim to Bourbon’s French estates. A tortuous civil trial began in Paris, during which lawyers for King François and Bourbon argued for eighteen months over the inherited rights to ownership of huge tracts of French real estate.

Although the King was publicly attacking him, Bourbon received private messages in which the King systematically offered all of his remaining female relatives as prospective brides to Bourbon. Increasingly resentful of his cousin’s double-edged attentions, Bourbon opened secret negotiations with his other master, Emperor Charles V.

In 1523 Bourbon gathered together several cartloads of his family’s wealth and fled France. He joined forces with Emperor Charles V in Spain, where Charles was preparing an army to invade France.

Bourbon took command of a large army of troops of the Holy Roman Empire, including large numbers of German Landsknecht mercenaries. After invading southern France and bombarding the city of Marseilles, Bourbon directed his attention to Lombardy, the same territory he had helped the French King take possession of nine years earlier.

On February 24, 1525, Bourbon and Charles V led their forces against the army of King François I at Pavia, twenty miles from Milan. After a six-hour battle, King François was captured by imperial troops and the French army was defeated.

Bourbon demanded the restoration of his French lands, his pension, and his expenses from the captive King François. After lengthy negotiations, the French King agreed to these and other terms of surrender to the Emperor and Bourbon. He was released from the custody of Emperor Charles V in February, 1526.

As soon as he returned safely to Paris, King François refused to honor his promises to Bourbon. Instead, he denied that he had been defeated and he quickly sold off almost all of Bourbon’s land holdings to other members of the French aristocracy.

Short of money again, Bourbon asked Charles V for more financial help, but the “emperor of the world” now had more important problems to worry about. Incessant rebellions within the Holy Roman Empire and dwindling cash reserves now weighed more heavily upon Charles than the relief of his ambitious distant
relative. Instead of money, Bourbon was granted the title of Duke of Milan, and was given command of another large army of French troops and German Landsknechts with which to occupy northern Italy.

In the summer of 1526, Bourbon’s control over this army began to deteriorate when the Emperor failed to provide enough money to pay the mercenaries’ wages. Bourbon complained to the Emperor that the Landsknechts had “become so mutinous and disobedient as to be completely uncontrollable.”

Unable to provide for his troops in any other way, Bourbon began selling off the last of his family heirlooms and jewels to pay the soldiers’ salaries. Early in 1527, when his treasures were all sold, he decided to allow the army to attack neighboring Italian cities, permitting the mercenaries to pillage for their compensation. From February to May, 1527, Bourbon’s troops ravaged the northern Italian countryside, while remaining on the brink of open mutiny. Gold and silver ornaments were seized from churches and melted down to pay the mercenaries, while Bourbon vainly appealed to Charles for more money.

Finally, in April, Bourbon decided to attack and loot the fabulously wealthy city of Rome. The city was poorly defended, because for centuries it had been considered the sacred and inviolate capital of Christendom. But Bourbon’s Protestant mercenaries were eager to loot the city.

As Bourbon’s army approached Rome, Pope Clement VII nervously ordered the inhabitants to defend the holy city. About 500 men answered this summons.

On May 5, Bourbon’s army arrived at the walls of Rome, which were guarded by a few old cannon and the small troop of frightened defenders.

The next morning, Bourbon gave the order to attack. While leading the first assault on the Eternal City through a thick fog, Bourbon was struck by a Roman crossbow bolt and killed. The Italian artist and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini later claimed to have fired the shot that killed Bourbon.

Leaderless, the renegade army easily overwhelmed the city’s meager defenses, and went on a bloody rampage through its streets.

An estimated 45,000 Roman men, women and children either fled the city as refugees or were killed by Bourbon’s army, while the churches, shrines and other historic monuments were looted or destroyed. Only the Sistine Chapel, where Charles de Bourbon’s body had been taken to rest in state, was spared attack. Witnesses to the sack of Rome were unanimous in stating that both the Catholic soldiers of the Emperor and the Protestant Landsknechts participated equally in the unbridled desecration of the city.

When news of the sack of Rome reached Emperor Charles V, he quickly sent his deepest apologies to the Pope, claiming that Bourbon’s renegade army had acted without his approval.

King François I greeted the news of Charles de Bourbon’s death with open satisfaction. The few remaining estates of the turncoat duke and his family were immediately confiscated by royal decree. The doorways of the Bourbon palace in Paris were symbolically painted bright yellow, a mark of humiliation reserved for French nobles judged guilty of high treason.

SOURCES:
