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*Antiquarian Horology*, Volume 36, No. 2 (June 2015), pp. 249–254

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### ANTIQUARIAN HOROLOGY

AHS THE  
ANTIQUE  
HISTORY  
SOCIETY

NUMBER TWO VOLUME THIRTY-SIX JUNE 2015



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# From Burgundy to Castile. Retracing and reconstructing a fifteenth-century golden clock

Víctor Pérez Álvarez\*

*A golden case clock, which Isabella I of Castile received as a present from Philip the Handsome, Duke of Burgundy, has not survived but a detailed description drawn up directly after her death in 1504 was published in an earlier article in this journal. The present article traces the history of this clock through the dynasty of the Burgundian dukes back to the mid-fifteenth century, which puts it in the same period, the same place and the same circle as the Nuremberg and London Burgundy clocks. It also offers a virtual reconstruction of its case based on the 1504 description.*

In an earlier article we published an English translation of a description of three domestic clocks owned by Queen Isabella I of Castile at her death in 1504.<sup>1</sup> One of them was a golden clock given by Philip the Handsome, Duke of Burgundy, who was married to Isabella's daughter. Two main reasons have encouraged us to write the present article on this outstanding piece. Firstly, we have identified the clock in several fifteenth-century documents from the ducal household, thus putting it in the same period, the same place and the same circle as the two oldest surviving domestic clocks: the *Nuremberg Burgunderuhr* in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum<sup>2</sup> and the Burgundian chamber clock on display in the British Museum (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, its description in the post-mortem inventory

of Queen Isabella is so detailed that it allows us to attempt a virtual reconstruction of the case which we present here.

## Tracing back the clock

Philip the Handsome brought the golden case clock to Castile in 1502 directly from the ducal treasure. According to the description in Isabella's post-mortem inventory, it exhibited two emblems that show its origin. One was the pair of coats of arms of Burgundy. The other was the fire striker on the top of the spire, a personal emblem of Philip the Good which he incorporated into the ducal arms and into the collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece, established by him in 1430. The clock does not appear in the inventory of gold and silver ornaments owned by Philip the Good

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1. Víctor Pérez Álvarez, 'Mechanical clocks in the medieval Castilian royal court', *Antiquarian Horology* 34/4 (December 2013), 489-502; the description of the three clocks is on pp. 501-502.

2. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, HG 9771. The clock was built around 1430 for Philip the Good. Klaus Maurice, *Die Deutsche Räderuhr. Band I* (München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 1976), pp. 85-86. For descriptions and photos in this journal see Eddy Fraiture and Paul Van Rompay, 'Clock and watchmaking in Belgium, 1300-1830', *Antiquarian Horology* 33/1 (September 2011), 27-45; pp. 30-32, and this issue, p. \*\*\*.

3. British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum loan, M11-1940. It comes from the court of Philip the Good and was built in the mid-fifteenth century; unfortunately it misses many parts, including the bell and the dial. David Thompson, *Clocks* (London, The British Museum Press, 2004), p. 18.



Fig. 1. The mid-fifteenth-century Burgundian chamber clock, height 295 mm, in the British Museum, on loan from the Victoria & Albert Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum.

in 12 July 1420,<sup>4</sup> so it did not exist then. It first appears in a goods inventory of Charles the Bold which can be dated 1467 or very shortly after that, and which I will discuss later. This means that the clock was made during the reign of Philip the Good (1419–1467) or at the very beginning of the reign of his successor, Charles the Bold (1467–1477). We have no further hard evidence to narrow this range. There are records of payments and of a delivery of gold to the clockmaker Pierre Lombart in the 1430, but the sources are so obscure that any attempts to link them to the clock under discussion can only be guesswork.

The inventory of Charles the Bold was published by Laborde in 1851. It is undated but on internal evidence it is clear that it was drawn up very soon after he had succeeded his father Philip the Good in 1467.<sup>5</sup> In a group of ornaments we find this entry:

*Ung aurloge d'or, assis sur six lions, à plusieurs ymaiges à l'entour, garnye de xxxix perles et de xxvii rubis, et au couppet a une salière sur laquelle a ung fusilz, pesant: vii m[arks]. vi o[unces]* <sup>6</sup>.

That is:

A golden clock standing on six lions with several figures around it, furnished with 39 pearls and 27 rubies, and a fire striker on a salt-cellar on its top. It weighs 7 marks 6 ounces.

All of this matches the clock description in Queen Isabella's post-mortem inventory. It is made of gold, has the fire striker on a salt-cellar on the top, and has many statuettes and six lions that match its hexagonal shape. The decisive fact is the number of pearls and rubies, the same as in Isabella's clock. The lions on the feet of the clock are not mentioned in Queen Isabella's inventory, but they may have been lost by then or the scribe did not pay attention to them. This is the earliest document we have found on this clock and it shows that it existed around 1467, so it may have been made for Charles the Bold as Count of Charolais or for Philip the Good. If we assume that the clock showed the coat of arms of Burgundy ever since it was built, Philip the Good would be its first owner and Duke Charles would have inherited it from his father with many other objects.

Charles the Bold died in the Battle of Nancy in January 1477. He only had a

4. M. Leon de Laborde, *Les ducs de Bourgogne, études sur les lettres, les arts et l'industrie pendant le XVe siècle et plus particulièrement dans les Pays-Bas et le duché de Bourgogne*, vol. 2 (Paris: Plon Frères, 1851), pp. 235–278.

5. De Laborde, *Les ducs de Bourgogne*, vol. 2 (Paris: Plon Frères, 1851), pp. III–IV (introduction) and pp. 1–202 (inventory). It was drawn up at the very latest early in 1469, witness a marginal note that an object was given to another person on 12 February 1469. It was not drawn up after Charles the Bold's death in 1477, as stated in Fraiture and Van Rompay, 'Clock and watchmaking in Belgium, 1300–1830', p. 30.

6. De Laborde, *Les ducs de Bourgogne*, ...vol. 2, p. 128, object no. 3140.

daughter named Mary, so she became Duchess of Burgundy. Seven months later she was married to Maximilian of Austria, the future King of the Romans from 1486 and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1493 to his death in 1519. Mary died in 1482 while her son Philip was too young to rule the Burgundian states, so Maximilian acted as regent until 1494. The next documentary evidence of the golden clock before it arrived in Castile dates back to Maximilian of Austria's reign and is found in accounting documents. The first evidence is in an account book from 1481:

*... 18 livres de Flandre, qui fut payée à Pierre Coustain, successivement valet de chambre et peintre de Philippe le Bon, Charles le Téméraire, etc., à cause de semblable somme qu'il a desboursée pour avoir fait remectre à point une orloge d'or appartenans à icellui seigneur, garnyes de perles et pierries, pour laquelle orloge remectre à point, il le a convenu hoster [ôter] par pièces, et après qu'elle a esté remise à point, on l'a remise sus, ainsi qu'il appartient et qu'elle estoit paravant, tant pour la paine et labeur des ouvriers, comme pour l'or et autres choses y employee.<sup>7</sup>*

That is:

... 18 Flemish pounds were paid to Pierre Coustain, manservant and painter of Philip the Good, Charles the Bold, etc. for the similar amount he paid when he ordered to repair a golden clock of the lord [Maximilian of Austria], ornamented with pearls and gemstones, and to repair the clock it needed to be disassembled, and after being repaired it was reassembled as it was before, for the effort and the work of the workmen and for the gold and other things spent on it.

According to this record it is made of gold and has many pearls and gemstones. As the

document does not contain more details we cannot be completely sure that it was the same clock we are studying, but it seems likely that it was.

We have further identified the golden clock as one of the objects that Maximilian of Austria pawned to pay the army against France and England circa 1486:

*Ung orloige d'or, garny de pluseurs personnaiges et sur le piet garny de douze rubiz et de douze grans perles, et plus hault entre les six pilers, six beaux rubiz et douze grandes perles, et, dessus l'omme qui monstre les heures, six rubiz et douze perles, et sur le couvercle garny de trois rubiz et trois belles perles, et sur le fretellet ung [...] pesant, parmi ung plonc qui est dedans et cinq lyons rompus ainsi qu'il est, viiim. Prisié à Ilc iiiix xii l.<sup>8</sup>*

That is:

A golden clock garnished with many figures, with twelve rubies and twelve pearls in the base, and six beautiful rubies and twelve big pearls in a higher place between the six pillars, and above that the man who shows the hours, six rubies and twelve pearls, and has three rubies and three beautiful pearls on the lid, and a [fire striker?] on the finial. It weighs 8 marks with a lead object that is inside and five broken lions. Valued at 292 pounds.

Again the number of pearls and rubies is the same as in Charles the Bold's and Isabella of Castile's inventories, so we can state that it was the golden clock we are studying. In addition the document describes other details that match this clock: the figure of a man showing the hours and the lid above it that is the pierced spire. According to Laborde's transcription there is a gap in the text where the fire striker should be mentioned. The piece of lead

7. Alexandre Pinchart, 'Archives des Arts des Sciences et des Lettres', in *Messager des sciences historiques, ou, Archives des arts et de la bibliographie de Belgique*, vol. 37 (1863), p. 435.

8. De Laborde, *Les ducs de Bourgogne*, vol. 2, pp. 441–2, no. 5295



could be the salt cellar mentioned in the Charles the Bold and Isabella's inventories. Even the distribution of the jewels on the case matches Isabella's clock. That five of the six lions are described as broken could explain why no lions appear in the later description of 1504.

We do not know how and when the clock was transmitted to Maximilian of Austria. As he married Mary of Burgundy some months after Charles the Bold died, it may have been passed from Charles to Mary in 1477 and then to Maximilian, as part of her dowry or as a present. We can assume that it then passed from Maximilian to Philip the Handsome, who gave it to Isabella of Castile in 1502 when he came to Castile the first time. In this year three months after Philip met Isabella, a payment from the Castilian household is registered for a garnished case for 'the golden clock' which could be for the present received by the queen from her son-in-law.<sup>9</sup>

In 1505, after Isabella's death, the clock was given back to Philip the Handsome, king's consort of Castile, and he gave it to Jean of Luxembourg, Mosior de Ville, his favorite courtier. Philip died in 1506 when he was very young and his courtiers went back to the Burgundian states as soon as they could, because they were not welcomed in Castile. They found themselves obliged to sell many precious objects from the Burgundian treasury to pay for the travel expenses. Most of these objects never returned to the imperial family and were lost forever.<sup>10</sup> Jean of Luxembourg was one of these courtiers, he had the golden clock and we don't know whether he sold it or whether he took it with him to Flanders. Unfortunately there is no post mortem goods inventory of Philip the Handsome. We have only two partial inventories, one of them is about his silver objects and the other one is about his

belongings that were in the possession of one of his courtiers in 1509. We find a clock only in the last one and it is not the golden clock he had given to Isabella of Castile. Neither it is in the postmortem inventory of his son the Emperor Charles V, nor does it appear in the inventory of his grandson Philip II. Probably it never came back to the Austria family and perhaps it was scrapped.

The golden Burgundy clock is lost but there is a mid-sixteenth-century table clock that has some features in common with it. (Fig. 2). It shows an emperor on a throne holding a sceptre and the imperial crown. This clock has two levels, the lower one is hexagonal and has six statuettes between the pillars.<sup>11</sup> The figure of the emperor is on the higher level and his sceptre resembles the 'stick' held by 'the man that shows the hours' in the golden Burgundy clock. Was the man in the Burgundy clock Philip the Good? The clocks were typologically similar.

### Reconstruction

From the Castilian description of the clock we know its main elements and we can have an approximate idea of what it looked like (Fig. 3), but its reconstruction has been quite complicated. In spite of the abundance of details in the description, it is very difficult to know how some elements were arranged, or where exactly the jewels (the white pearls and red rubies in the image) were placed. Many things remain unclear and must be interpreted for the reconstruction, and sometimes there are apparent contradictions in the text. It is unclear how the base of the spire was and how the fire striker was attached to the top of the spire. We have left out the movement, the lions and all human figures. On the lowest level should be the mechanism and in the gaps between the pillars should be the figures of three men and three women.

9. Víctor Pérez Álvarez, 'Mechanical clocks in the medieval Castilian royal court', p. 497.

10. Miguel Ángel Zalama, 'Felipe I El Hermoso y las artes', in Miguel Ángel Zalama, Paul Vandenbroeck (coord.), Felipe I El Hermoso. La belleza y la locura (Burgos: Latorre Literaria, S.A, 2006), pp. 43–44.

11. Hans von Bertele, Erwin Neumann, *Die Kaisermonument-Uhr. Monographie einer historisch bedeutungsvollen Figurenuhr aus der Spätzeit Kaiser Karl V. (1500-1558)* (Sammlung Joseph Fremersdorf, Luzern, 1965). Dr. Irmgard Müsch, curator at the Landesmuseum Württemberg, comments that the customary identification of the seated figure as emperor Charles V is questionable, as the crown does not quite look like the one of Charles V (personal communication to the editor, 20 April 2015).



Fig.2. The mid-sixteenth century *Kaisermonumentuhr* (Emperor monument clock) in the Landesmuseum Württemberg, inv. nr. 1973-22, provenance the Fremersdorf collection. Height 41 cm. Photo courtesy and © Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart.

On top of each twisted pillar should be a lion. On the second level should be the golden man who shows the hours and a

soldier should stand on each green pillar. There is no way to know the shape of the panel cut-offs, so we have tried to recreate

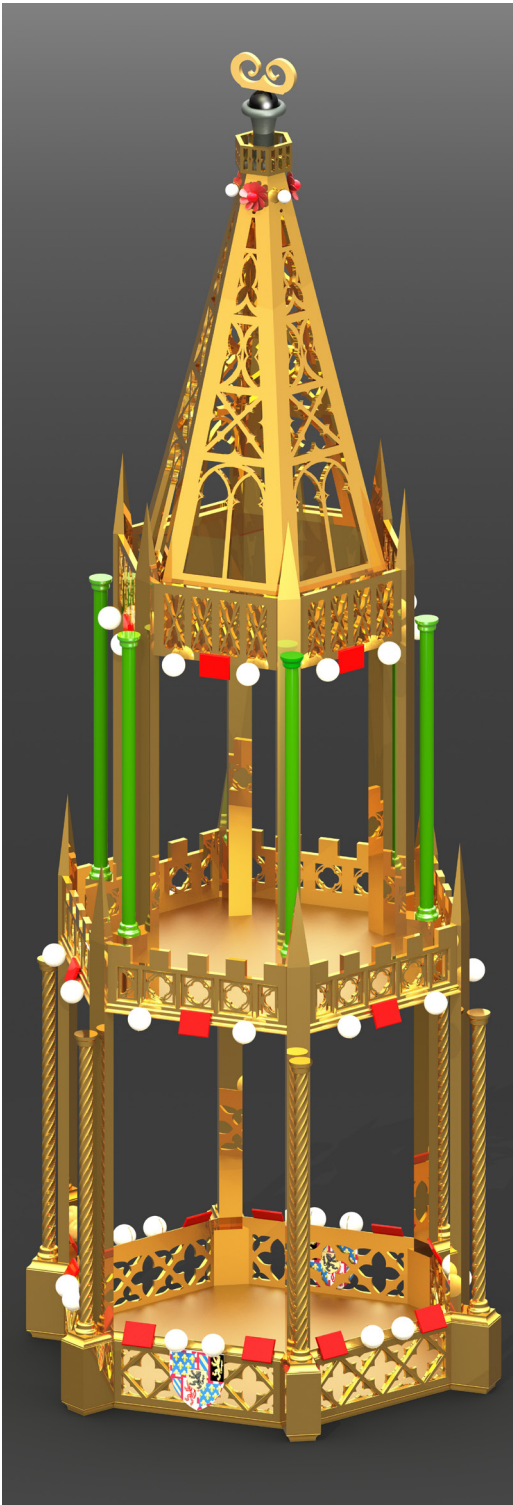


Fig. 3. An approximate idea of what the lost golden case clock described in the post-mortem inventory of Queen Isabella I (1504) may have looked like. Reconstruction drawn by the author.

gothic shapes from the mid-fifteenth century and copied some of them from the Burgundian chamber clock in London. It is unclear to us how the ribbons of the Burgundy arms were, so we have omitted them. We have placed the coats of arms on the lower level because we think they should be near to the clockwork barrels. Our reconstruction intends just to show how we believe it may have looked like, but many details of the reconstruction are disputable and many elements are arbitrarily arranged.

### Conclusion

In this article we have studied the history and the appearance of a golden clock contemporary to the Nuremberg and London fifteenth-century Burgundy clocks, the oldest domestic clocks in existence. We have traced its history from its probable origin in the time of Philip the Good to the death of Philip the Handsome at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In this period it had passed from Philip the Good to his political descendants, it was owned by at least four Burgundian dukes, a Castilian queen and a Flemish nobleman. After that we found no more documents on its existence, so maybe it has disappeared soon after 1506.

This object was more than a mere clock. In addition to his armours, Philip the Good put the fire striker on it, a personal symbol that was incorporated into the Burgundian arms. After it had been owned by several dukes, the passing of time had strengthened the political symbology of the clock and this made it a perfect diplomatic gift for Isabella of Castile.

But many doubts about the symbology of the elements on this clock remain unsolved. Who were the three men and three women on the first level? They were probably saints, but which? How did the figure showing the hours work? And was it just an anonymous man or did it represent a particular person or did it have special significance? Did it show the hours on a dial or was it an automaton that struck them on a bell? Any suggestions on these points and on the attempted reconstruction will be very welcome.