

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold. ]

**page 9**

**A Military Revolution Reconsidered:  
The Case of the Burgundian State Under the Valois Dukes**

**David S. Bachrach**

On 31 July 1471, at the Somme river-town of Abbéville, Charles the Bold, the last of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, issued an ordinance ordering the recruitment and equipping of 1200 nine-man units called "lances." This ordinance also contained a series of regulations concerning the training, discipline, equipment and pay for these units as well as numerous other clauses including the disposition of these new companies in combat, the detection of deserters and benefits for wounded veterans.<sup>1</sup> For more than a century, historians studying this highly detailed set of regulations, and the subsequent military ordinances issued in 1472 at Bohain-en-Vermandois and in 1473 at St. Maximin near Trier, have concluded that Charles instituted immense, even revolutionary, change in the military organization commanded by the Valois dukes.<sup>2</sup> For example, Hermann Heimpel, one of the most influential specialists in Burgundian history during the first half of this century, argued that Charles the Bold's succession and subsequent reform efforts represented the victory of the values of the state against the values of chivalry--a change that could be seen nowhere more clearly than in the army. According to Heimpel, Philip the Good, the father of Charles the Bold, did not have a real army (*keine ordentliche Armee*). Instead, he utilized mercenaries (*Söldner*) whom he hired and let go from campaign to campaign. Heimpel drew a sharp contrast between Philip's mercenary army and the companies of the ordinance established by Charles in 1471. In Heimpel's view, these latter formed a standing army and thus were an important element in the creation of the state.<sup>3</sup>

Werner Paravicini, current director of the German Institute in Paris and a leading Burgundian specialist, also argues that the companies of the ordinance, established by Charles, changed dramatically the composition of the military forces available to the last Valois Duke. In Paravicini's view, the city militias and rural *fieffés*, that is, men whose land tenures entailed military service, whom Charles commanded between 1467 and 1471 were slow to mobilize and difficult to maintain in service during long campaigns. In contrast to these insufficient military

**page 10**

forces, Paravicini argues, Charles' reforms led in 1475 and 1476 to the creation of an almost entirely mercenary army, stiffened by the forces of the Duke's military household, that was capable of extended campaign service. Paravicini suggests that the service of the *fieffés* and city militias was restricted thereafter to paying taxes for the new army.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Vaughan, one of the most prolific contemporary scholars concerned with the Burgundian state, also embraces the view that Charles the Bold's military reforms had a major, even revolutionary, impact on the military organization commanded by the Valois dukes. Indeed, he argues that in the five years between the promulgation of the ordinance of Abbéville in 1471 and Charles' siege of Neuss in 1475-1476, "Charles the Bold's field army ... had been transformed from one composed of paid but conscripted feudal levies and civic militia, raised separately for each campaign among those obliged to perform military service, to an army of troops of the ordinance: that is a standing army of mercenaries."<sup>5</sup>

The model of dramatic change in military organization postulated by these three scholars--and the number could be multiplied many times--is of a piece with the phenomenon, common among historians, of trying to identify revolutions in their fields of study. One only has to consider the influence of Michael Robert's essay on the military revolution of the sixteenth century or Lynn White's work on the impact of the stirrup upon medieval warfare to appreciate the tendency among military historians in particular to favor models that emphasize dramatic change over continuity.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this paper is to test whether the military organization of fifteenth-century Burgundy lends itself to a model of revolution or rather to a model characterized by continuity. It would seem clear that to answer this question it is necessary to compare the military forces commanded by the Valois Dukes both before and after 1471, the point at which Charles the Bold introduced his military reforms.

There is general agreement among historians that *fieffés* and town militias constituted a significant portion of the military forces commanded by three successive Valois Dukes of Burgundy in the years before 1471, John the Fearless (1404-1419), Philip the Good (1419-1467), and Charles the Bold.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 1411 John the Fearless reportedly commanded an army, raised for his invasion of France, that included fifty thousand civic militiamen from Flanders as well as units composed of *fieffés* and mercenaries. Similarly, Philip the Good called upon the military resources of nobles of Burgundy, Flanders, Artois, Hainaut, and Holland, as well as a reported thirty thousand civic militiamen from the towns of Flanders and Holland, for his campaign against Calais in 1436.<sup>8</sup> For his part, Charles followed his predecessors' policy of utilizing civic militia during his campaign in 1467 against Liège. Indeed, Charles went to great lengths to secure military forces from the communes of Flanders sending three letters between 17 and 25 September asking for men.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the *fieffés* and civic militias, the military household of the duke formed an important element in the field forces of the Burgundian army.<sup>10</sup> The financial records produced by the Burgundian court make very clear that both Philip and Charles maintained a substantial military complement in their house-

page 11

holds. In 1433 Philip decreed that each member of his court was responsible for furnishing one soldier to the ducal household for every horse the courtier was allowed to maintain at court.<sup>11</sup> An examination of the financial records of the household for this year reveals that in addition to a complement of 24 mounted archers, Philip maintained some 260 mounted soldiers available for immediate military service.<sup>12</sup> Like his father, Charles also maintained a large military household. Indeed, in 1470 Charles maintained a complement of soldiers at court that numbered almost 2000 men.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, John the Fearless, Philip the Good, and Charles the Bold all made ample use of mercenary forces in order to reinforce the military forces provided by *fieffés*, civic militias, and the soldiers serving in the ducal household. Throughout the first seven decades of the fifteenth century, military expenses incurred by the Dukes of Burgundy, including the wages for mercenary soldiers, rose dramatically in periods of intense conflict.<sup>14</sup> A few examples of such expenditures should suffice to make clear the reliance of the Valois dukes upon mercenary units as a supplement to other sources of military manpower. In 1408 John the Fearless ordered his receiver general, Jean de Pressy, to make arrangements to pay the wages of fifty-eight military companies which the duke had employed during his occupation of Paris.<sup>15</sup> In 1452 Philip the Good used so many Picard mercenaries in his campaign against the rebellious city of Ghent that his soldiers attained the sobriquet "Picard."<sup>16</sup> Charles the Bold, in the wake of his failure to secure sufficient numbers of civic militia soldiers from Flanders, negotiated with King Edward IV of England to obtain license to recruit English mercenaries to serve against Liège during the campaigning season of 1467. He received permission from Edward to enroll 2000 English archers for this campaign, and Charles' household receipts for 1467 contain a payment of £1300 to support 500 of these archers.<sup>17</sup>

This quick overview of the field forces available to the Valois dukes in the period before 1471 should make it clear that John, Philip, and Charles all utilized three major sources of manpower. These were *fieffés*, civic militias, and mercenaries. In addition, both Philip and Charles maintained a fourth source of military manpower by retaining substantial military forces within the household. It now remains to determine whether the reforms instituted by Charles in 1471 altered this state of affairs in any significant way.

If we turn first to the *fieffés* it appears that the ordinance of 1471 did not have the dramatic effect upon military organization suggested by Heimpel, Paravicini, and Vaughan. Paravicini is correct to point out that Charles, on occasion, granted to men holding military tenures the option of paying a fine rather than performing their military service in person. For example, on 6 June 1475, during the siege of Neuss, Charles issued written orders to the holders of military tenures either to come and serve in person or to pay a tax equal to one sixth of their yearly income.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note, however, that Charles also exercised his prerogative to demand military service from his *fieffés* without giving these men the option to pay a fine in lieu of service. Indeed, on 15 January 1475, during the initial stages of the siege at Neuss, Charles demanded

page 12

military service from those holding military tenures and ordered that

the said fief and rear-fief holders are to be ready and armed in the field as quickly as possible when we command and order it. We have commanded and ordered through this letter that the said fief and rear-fief holders are to know that they are to provide the necessary equipment for the individuals whom, according to the said tax, they are required to provide ... [.19](#)

The importance of the services of these *fieffés* to Charles' military forces is made exceptionally clear by the measures taken by the Duke to insure compliance with his call to arms. On 16 August 1476 Charles issued a general ordinance for the confiscation of the property of any fief-holder who failed either to pay the tax of one sixth of his yearly income or to fulfill his military obligation in person.[20](#)

If we turn from the *fieffés* to the town militias, we can see that here, too, Charles continued to make use of these soldiers in his campaigns following the issue of the famous Abbéville ordinance. He drafted units of pikemen and archers from the communes in Flanders and organized them under ducal officers. Charles also utilized the militia units from non-Flemish towns such as Antwerp, Liège, and Malines as late as 1476. Indeed, in January of that year Charles demanded that Liège send no fewer than 500 pikemen to serve under the Duke, presumably for duty at the siege of Neuss.[21](#)

In addition to the military forces raised from the communes and *fieffés*, Charles also continued to utilize his military household as a key element in his military organization. Indeed, Paravicini argues that the soldiers of the household formed an elite corps within the Burgundian military organization. [22](#)

Paravicini's view would seem to be substantiated by the high regard in which Charles held the officers of his household soldiers. Olivier de la Marche, whom Charles chose to be the commander of the first new company of the ordinance, had served previously as the commander of the military household. Jaques de Montmartin, who served as the captain of the household archers, was chosen to inspect the men who Volunteered to serve in the companies of the ordinance. [23](#)

At this point it seems clear that Charles maintained at least some of the traditional norms of Burgundian military organization. He expended significant effort to ensure the participation of *fieffés* at the siege of Neuss in 1475-6. He provided officers to the militia units from the communes and utilized these companies in his campaigns as late as the summer of 1476. Finally, he not only maintained the military household as an elite force but used the officers of the military household to help organize the new companies of the ordinance to which we shall now turn.

As noted above, there is general agreement among scholars that Charles' military forces after 1471 included, and indeed were dominated by, companies of the ordinance. It is important, however, to examine the extent to which Charles was able to carry out his plans for recruiting these formations. A company of the ordinance was intended to be composed of one-hundred lances. Each lance was to have nine men: an armored cavalryman, his page, and his squire; three archers

**page 13**

with horses; and three infantrymen, including a pikeman, a crossbowman, and one man armed with a hand culverin.[24](#) Each company thus was to be composed of 900 men of whom 700 were primary combatants.

In 1471 Charles wished to recruit twelve companies of the ordinance, a total of 10,800 men. However, he found it impossible to find a sufficient number of recruits in his territories to create these new military units[25](#) and therefore found it necessary to employ mercenary companies to make up for these manpower shortages. In 1472 Charles attempted but failed to employ the service of the mercenary company that was commanded by Troylo de Rossano. The next year, he succeeded in hiring Cola de Montforte, count of Compobosso, to serve for three years with his company of 2,300 men. In 1474 Charles secured the services of Bartolomeo Colleoni and his 2,500 man unit for a period of three years. Finally, in 1475 he negotiated with King Edward IV for the services of 2000 English soldiers.[26](#) By hiring mercenaries such as these, Charles would seem to have maintained the techniques for the recruitment of this crucial source of military manpower that had been followed both by his father and his grandfather, the traditional methods that the Valois dukes had employed for three-quarters of a century.

It should now be clear that the Valois Dukes of Burgundy both before and after 1471 utilized very similar military resources. Both before and after 1471 *fieffés*, civic militias, household troops, and mercenaries were the key components of the Burgundian military organization. If Heimpel's description of Philip the Good's military as *keine ordentliche Armee* is accurate, this description must also be applied to the forces put into the field by Charles, which, parenthetically, were far less successful than those commanded by his father.

Similarly, although Paravicini is correct that a large proportion of the soldiers under Charles' command during the last years of his rule (1475-1477) were mercenaries, including those enrolled in the companies of the ordinance, it is not correct to say either that this was unprecedented or that Charles' armies were composed exclusively of mercenaries. As we have seen, Charles' predecessors also made extensive use of mercenaries during periods of intense military conflict. Moreover, as we have also seen, Charles called out his *fieffés* and civic militias to serve alongside these mercenaries as late as 1476, a fact which Paravicini does not address.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Vaughan's argument that the real revolution begun by Charles was the transformation of the Burgundian military from a haphazard polyglot force to a standing army of mercenaries misrepresents both the military organization inherited by Charles and the new military formations he tried to create. The civic militias and *fieffés* had long traditions of successful military organization and service. To describe them, using Vaughan's expression, as "paid but conscripted feudal levies and civic militias, raised separately for each campaign," misses the key point that Charles raised these armies by calling out for service already existing military units.

Moreover, to describe the companies of the ordinance as a "standing army of mercenaries" misses the point that those units of the ordinance that were actually

**page 14**

formed were not cantoned in military districts ready to serve at a moment's notice. Rather, they were dispersed across the countryside and in towns wherever an extra bed could be found for the individual soldier.<sup>28</sup> The suggestion that these professional units, characterized by high turnover in personnel through death, retirement, illness, and desertion, were a standing army, while the civic militias, *fieffés*, and military household all of which had long traditions of service in recognized units were not a standing army, seems absurd on the face of it. Finally, while the companies of the ordinance may have been something new, they seem much more like an expansion of the military household in so far as men from the military household organized and commanded the new companies. Whether we can consider such an expansion of the ducal household as a revolution is problematical. It is true that a hoped-for change of scale might be considered significant if it succeeded. However, the fact remains that the plan, if one existed, to eliminate the need for traditional sources of manpower failed. Moreover, after Charles' death in 1477 at the battle of Nancy his army disintegrated and his collection of territories was dismembered. For that reason, we may see Charles' efforts as, at best, potentially significant in the relatively minor matter of expanding the size of the military household but neither a military revolution in conception nor a military revolution in fact.

At this juncture, it is instructive to examine the heuristic value of "revolution" as a model for understanding various aspects of the past. While the term *revolution* has particular connotations of rapid and fundamental change, one is hard put to find a definition that is both necessary and sufficient--certainly no such definition has been offered by the historians whose work has been discussed in this study. Without a sound or even a useful working definition of the idea of revolution, the term has become so elastic as to encompass the changes in form of government in late eighteenth-century France, the Republican congressional victories in the American election of 1994, and the creation of the companies of ordinance by Charles the Bold between 1471 and 1477. In the last mentioned of these examples, it is clear that a model for revolution has been imposed upon circumstances and behaviors that are best characterized by continuity. It would seem that it is time for historians, particularly medieval historians, to abandon the satisfying but ultimately futile search for dramatic turning points and rather seek to grasp the incredibly complex processes of change over time.

## Notes

1. For the ordinance of 1471 see *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France et de Bourgogne*, 22 vols. (Paris, 1729), 2:285-94.
2. See H. L. G. Guillaume, *Histoire de l'Organisation Militaire Sous les Ducs de Bourgogne* (Brussels, 1848); J. de La Chauvelays, *Les Armées de Charles le Téméraire Dans les Deux Bourgognes* (Paris, 1879) and *Les Armées des Trois Premiers Ducs de Bourgogne de la Maison de Valois* (Besançon, 1880).
3. Hermann Heimpel, "Karl der Kühne und der burgundische Staat," in *Festschrift ... Gerhard Ritter* (Tübingen, 1950), pp. 144-45.
4. Werner Paravicini, *Karl der Kühne und das Ende des Hauses Burgund* (Göttingen, 1976), pp. 60-61.
5. Richard Vaughan, *Charles the Bold* (London, 1973), p. 213. For other scholars who share the views of Heimpel, Paravicini, and Vaughan, see Paul Fredericq, *Essai Sur le Role Politique et Social des Ducs de Bourgogne dans les Pays Bas* (Ghent, 1875); Colonel Charles Brusten, "Les Emblèmes de l'Armée Bourguignone sous Charles le Téméraire: Essai de Classification," in *Jahrbuch des bernischen historischen Museums in Bern* (1958), pp. 118-132, "Les Campagnes Liégeoise de Charles le Téméraire" in *Liège et Bourgogne: Actes du Colloqu Tenu a Liège les 28-30 Oct. 1968*, pp. 81-97, and "La Fin des Compagnies d'Ordonnance de Charles le Téméraire," *Annales de l'Est Mémoires* 62 (1979), 35-46; Colonel Ernest Léderrey, "Les Armées de Charles le Téméraire Durant les Guerres de Bourgogne," *Revue Militaire Suisse* 107 (1962), 368-82; Philippe Contamine, *Guerre, État et Société à la Fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1972); and Marie Thérèse Caron, *La Noblesse dans le Duché de Bourgogne 1315-1477* (Lille, 1987).
6. For the debate concerning the importance of stirrups in medieval warfare, see Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962), and Bernard S. Bachrach, "Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup, and Feudalism," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 7 (1970). For the importance of the military revolution thesis in the later middle ages and early modern period, see Michael Roberts, "The Military Revolution, 1550-1650," in *Essays in Swedish History* (London, 1967), pp. 195-225; *The Military Revolution and the State 1500-1800*, ed. M. Duffy (Exeter, 1980); Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1988); David Eltis, *The Military Revolution in Sixteenth Century Europe* (London, 1995); and *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers (Boulder, 1995).
7. Fredericq, *Le Rôle Politique*, p. 158; Léderrey, "Les Armées," p. 369; Contamine, *Guerre, État*, pp. 46-50; Paravicini, *Karl der Kühne*, p. 60; Caron, *La Noblesse*, p. 130; and Vaughan, *Charles the Bold*, p. 213.
8. Fredericq, *Le Rôle Politique*, pp. 157-158.
9. *Collections de Documents Inédits Concernant l'Histoire de la Belgique*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 1833-35), 1:154-62.
10. For information concerning the history of the military household as an effective military unit, see J.O. Prestwich, "The Military Household of the Norman Kings," *English Historical Review* 378 (1981), 1-35.
11. Werner Paravicini, "Structure et Fonctionnement de la Cour Bourguignonne au XVe S.," *Publications du Centre Européen d'Études Bourguignonnes XIVe-XVIe S.* 28 (1988), 69.
12. Werner Paravicini, "Die Hofordnungen Herzog Philipps des Guten von Burgund: Die Verlorenen Hofordnungen von 1431/32 Die Hofordnung von 1433," *Francia* 15 (1987), 195-212. The financial accounts for 1426/27 reveal a force of the same order of magnitude. See Paravicini, "Die Hofordnungen Herzog Philipps des Guten von Burgund: Die Verlorenen Hofordnungen von 1419/21 Die Hofordnung von 1426/27," *Francia* 11 (1983), 262-84.
13. Léderrey, "Les Armées de Charles," p. 371.
14. Michel Mollat, "Recherches sur les Finances des Ducs Valois de Bourgogne," *Revue Historique* 219 (1958), 311.
15. Bertrand Schnerb, "Un Aspect de la Politique Financière de Jean sans Peur: La Question des Dépenses de Guerre," *Publications du Centre Européen d'Études Bourguignonnes XIVe-XVIe S.* 27 (1987), 122.
16. Vaughan, *Philip the Good*, p. 322.
17. Mark Ballard, "An Expedition of English Archers to Liège in 1467, and the Anglo-Burgundian Marriage Alliance," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 34 (1990), 152-70. Maurice Arnould, "Le Premier Budget de Duc Charles de Bourgogne (1467-1468)," *Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. Commission Royale d'Histoire* (1984), p. 234, includes a payment issued on 16 October 1467 at Louvain for 500 of these English archers to serve in the Liège campaign.
18. *Bulletin de la Commission Royale Pour la Publication de Anciennes Lois et Ordonnances de Belgique* 31 (1982-84), 36 nr. 58.
19. *Collections de Documents Inédits Concernant l'Histoire de la Belgique* 1:239-40: "... lesditz fievez et arriere fievez soient plustost prestz et les armées plus prestement mises sus et aux champs, quant nous le commanderons et ordonnerons, nous avons ordonné et ordonnons, par cesdites presentes, que lesditz fievez et arriere fievez fourniront de habillemens necessaires, pour les personnes dont, selon ledit taux, ilz nous debvront faire service, assavoir."
20. *Bulletin de la Commission royale*, p. 39, nr. 70.

21. Fredericq, *Le Rôle Politique*, p. 161, note 1, and Vaughan, *Charles the Bold*, p. 220.
22. Paravicini, *Karl der Kühne*, p. 61.
23. Olivier de la Marche, *Mémoires*, in *Choix de Chroniques et Mémoires sur l'Histoire de France*, ed. J. A. C. Buchon (Paris, 1854), p. 530.
24. Brusten, "Emblèmes de l'Armée," p. 119.
25. Paravicini, *Karl der Kühne*, p. 61.
26. Vaughan, *Charles the Bold*, pp. 214-17. Olivier de la Marche, *Mémoires*, p. 533, noted the extensive Italian mercenary forces employed by Charles the Bold during the siege of Neuss in 1475. Olivier, the commander of Charles' household troops, was in a particularly good position to observe the military organization developed by his duke.
27. *Lois Militaires de Charles de Bourgogne de l'An 1473*, in *Der Schweizerischegeschichtsforscher*, 2 vols. (1817), 2:439: "The manner of the lodging is such that the men of war will have the choice, in the towns and other places where they are established in garrison, to take their lodging and hospitality in the inns which are bound to receive them or outside of the inns with the consent of the good people who wish to receive them where there

**page 17**

are not enough inns to satisfy the said men of war ..." (my translation).

28. For the problem of desertion in the Burgundian army, see Jean-Marie Cauchies, "La Desertion dans les Armeés Bourguignonnes de 1465 a 1476," *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire* 22 (1977), 132-48.