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The funeral procession of an aristocrat: Guy XVII of Laval

17 August 2023

It has been suggested that, paradoxically, the death of an aristocrat was one of the highlights of his life. The event led to mourning, the composition of epitaphs celebrating the dead person's life, and pomp in the form of a large scale funeral procession. Certainly, this was true for the count of Laval Guy XVII who died in 1547 when he was still in his twenties.



Guy XVII, count of Laval, painted by [François Clouet](#) circa 1545, [Timken Museum of Art](#), San Diego.

Guy XVII was from a prominent noble line of western France and one of the main aristocratic figures of his time. Contemporaries recognised his importance, with one English observer commenting that he was “oon of the greatist inhereters in all France”.¹ Having married Claude de Foix, the heiress to the house of Lautrec, he was not just count of Laval, but also of Montfort-sur-Meu, Quintin, Rethelois and Beaufort-en-Champagne, viscount of Rennes, Fronsac and Saint-Florentin, as well as baron of Vitré, La Roche-Bernard, Lohéac, La Roche-en-Nort, Donzy, Donval, and Lescun – lands in areas as diverse as Brittany, Maine, Champagne and South-western France.²



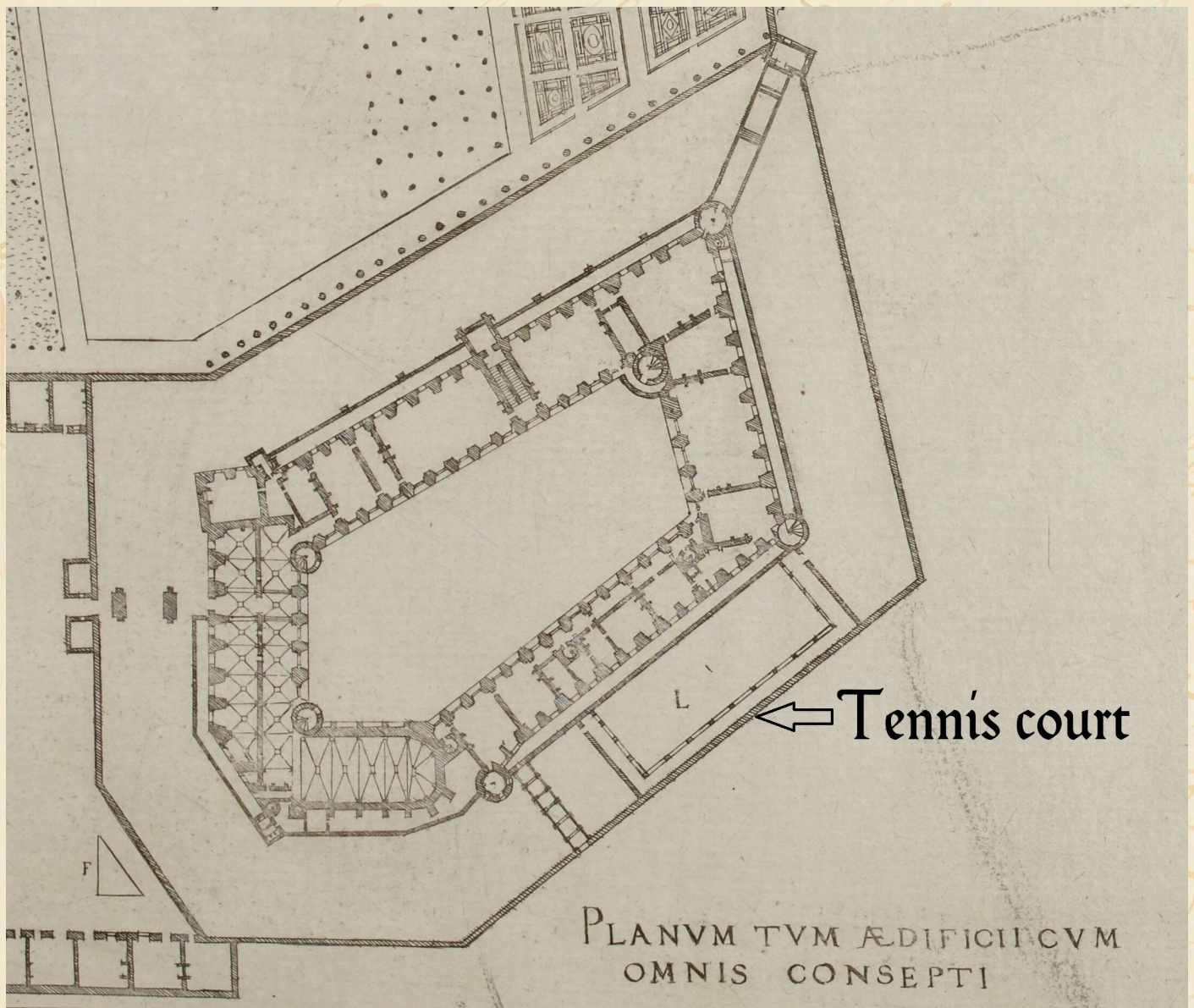
The Renaissance gallery in Laval built by Guy XVII, photo from [wikipedia commons](#).

His death was an unfortunate affair and was said to have followed a [game of real tennis](#) played at court. There was even a rumour that suggested that it resulted from a stab wound inflicted by King Henry II during the game – something completely unsubstantiated but still often repeated – not least by the later historian Charles Maucourt de Bourjolly and those who took his word as gospel truth.³ This was denied by one of Guy XVII’s entourage, the well-informed Jean Legay, who wrote that he died of pleurisy after having been convinced by the King to play tennis at Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris despite having been bled that very morning...

¹ Lisle to Paget, 26 July 1546, *State Papers*, published under the Authority of His Majesty’s Commission: *King Henry the Eighth* (London: 1830-52) X, p. 250.

² On Guy XVII and the Lavals, see my *The Counts of Laval. Culture, Patronage and Religion in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

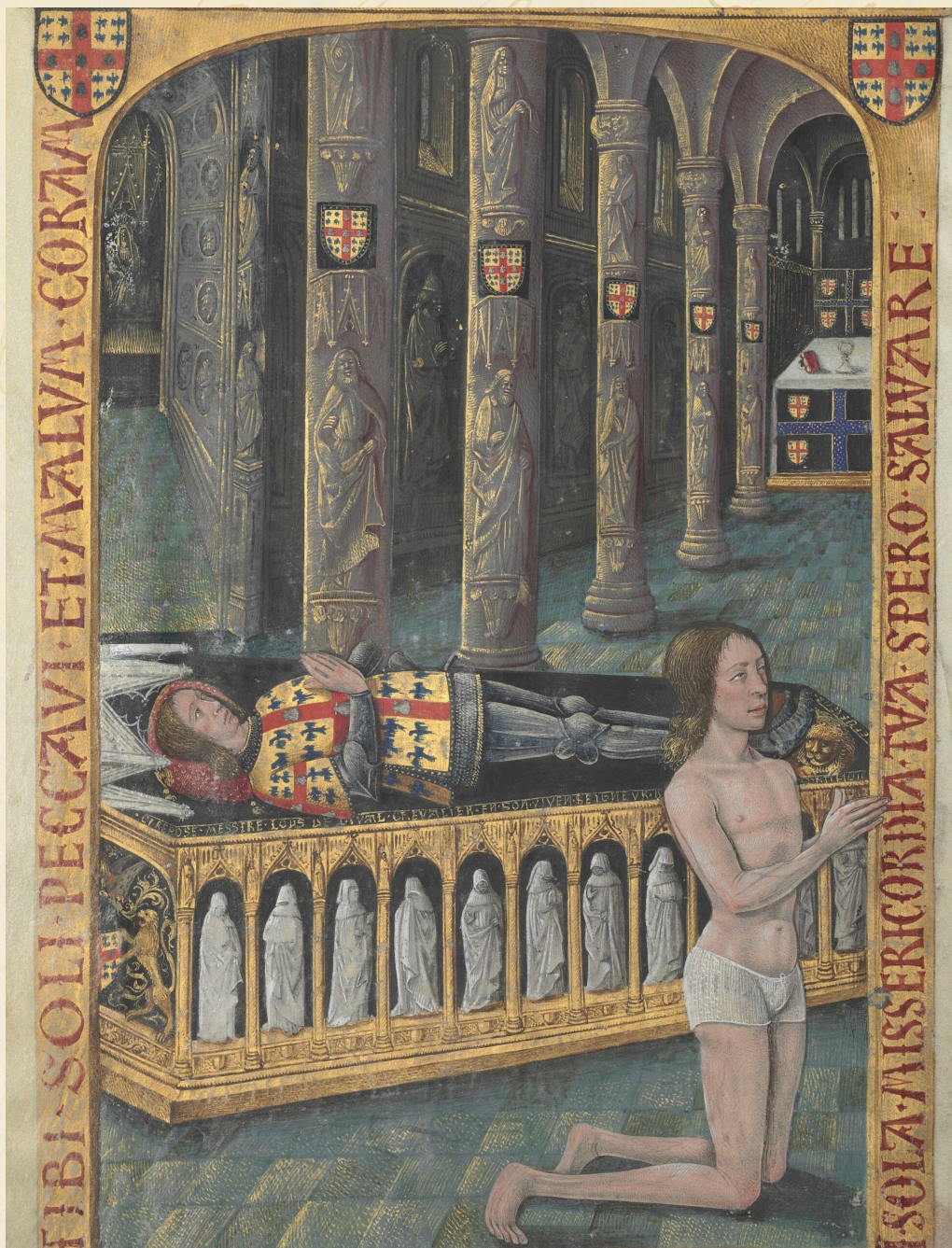
³ See A. Bertrand de Broussillon’s edition of the *Mémoire chronologique de Maucourt de Bourjolly sur la ville de Laval* (Laval: L. Moreau, 1886).



The tennis court at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, from the plan drawn by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau from *Le premier volume des plus excellents bastiments de France* (Paris, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, 1576), [USTC 45358](#), digitised by [Gallica](#).

His funeral was divided in different stages. He was first of all laid to rest in the [parish church of Saint-André-des-Arts](#) in Paris, close to his residence in the city before the body was returned to Laval where it was buried in the local Dominican convent in 1548. However, three years later, he was reburied in the collegiate church of Saint-Tugal alongside his ancestors.

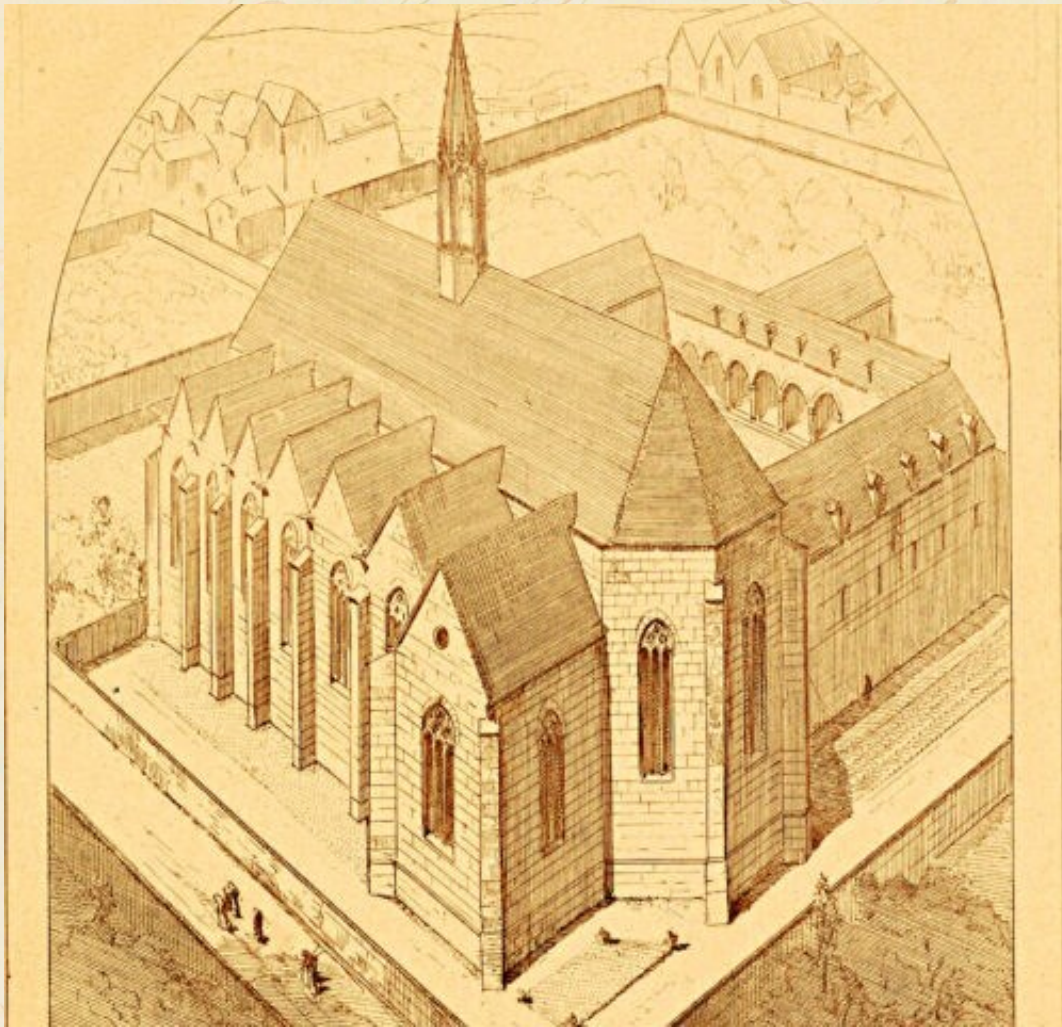
The church was unfortunately destroyed during the French revolution, but the beautiful Hours of Louis de Laval-Châtillon painted some decades earlier offer us a tantalising glimpse of its interior: an illuminated page shows Louis kneeling beside his tomb in a romanesque church with the family arms on the pillars and altar.



Horae ad usum Romanum, BnF, Latin 364, digitised by [Gallica](#).

The translation of Guy XVII's body to Saint-Tugal was the occasion for the funeral procession, described in a contemporary document and copied out again at the start of the seventeenth century when a similar procession needed to be organised for the last count, Guy XX.

It tells of how the clergy gathered to accompany the body amidst the ringing of bells. The thurible and the coat of arms were polished, and five copes of black velvet were carried forth. The assembled congregation sung the *Subvenite sancti Dei*, then a service for the dead began containing three lessons and nineteen psalms. The body was then placed in the church of the Dominicans surrounded by candles for a night-long vigil.

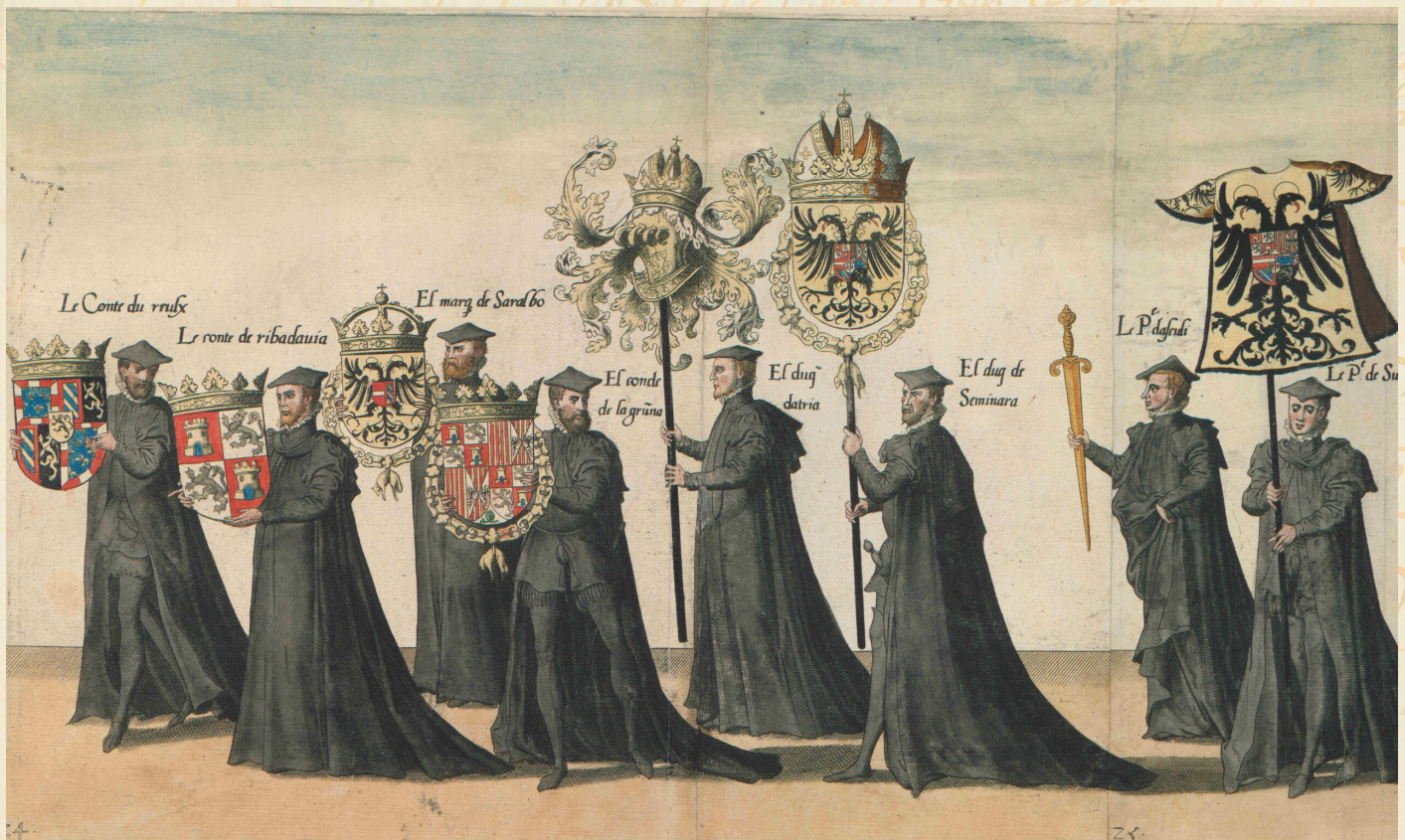


The Dominican church of Laval before the Revolution, from G. Rohault de Fleury, *Les Couvents de St Dominic au moyen âge* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1903).

The next day, the body was taken to the collegiate church, with the bells tolling. The funeral service was conducted by Jean de la Massonaye, auxiliary bishop of Mâcon, titular bishop of Hippos, but described here as the suffragan of the archbishop of Rouen, Georges d'Amboise – presumably because this was a particularly important rôle. But what is most interesting is the procession that followed.

Behind the clergy and the noblemen, there followed his standards and a whole host of personal items, carried with reverence. First came trumpets, then his spurs, his gauntlets, his coat of mail, his armet (a combat helmet), a banner of simple taffeta half white half red, an escutcheon, followed by a standard of the arms of Laval surrounded by the collar of the order of Saint Michel. Next in line were Guy XVII's hat and arms with a mule covered with black velvet and his war horse bringing up the rear. All of which must have been preserved for three years in order to be able to be part of the procession.

The procession may seem quite bizarre to us today. The objects all evoked his military and political role, but were also intensely personal items, re-creating his physical being, piece by piece. It would also have made for a very colourful procession, contrasting with the dour black robes of the clergy and the mourners in a way typical of royal Renaissance funerals in France.⁴ Or, indeed, in the funeral procession of Emperor Charles V that took place a few years later.



Detail from *La magnifique et sumptueuse pompe funebre faite aus obseques et funerailles du tresgrand et tresvictorieux empereur Charles cinquième, celebrées en la vile de Bruxelles*, (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin, 1559), [USTC 41636](#), digitised by the [Plantin-Moretus Museum](#).

The original document describing the funeral procession is still in private hands. It was part of the collection of [Louis-Julien Morin de La Beauvuère](#) (1798-1861) – a local historian who edited and wrote a number of texts on Laval and the surrounding area. A significant part of his cabinet is still preserved at the Château du Tertre in Nuillé-sur-Vicoin in Mayenne by his heirs.

⁴ See Jennifer Woodward, 'Funeral rituals in the French Renaissance', *Renaissance Studies*, IX (1995), pp. 385-394.



Postcard of the Château du Tertre in Nuillé-sur-Vicoin

However, it was microfilmed by the [Archives Départementales](#) and kept at pressmark 1 Mi 144 (R 69) Here is a transcription I did many years ago (and have not been able to check) of the main part of the description:

Description of Guy XVII of Laval's funeral procession:

« Item tout ce clerge ainsi assemblé allerent jusques au cimetiére dieu à la rencontre du-
dict corps et sonnerent les deux grosses cloches à la partie
Item à la reception du dict corps on recommença à sonner les dictes cloches
Item fut frottés les encenciers et des armoiries pour la croix et chandeliers
Item furent portées cinq chappes de velours noir
Item apres le subvenite fut commencé vigilles des mors à trois lecons dont furent dix
neuf pseaulmes devant lesdictes lecons
Item fut posé ledict corps aux Jacobins en une chapelle ardente couverte de cierges blancs
Item le lendemain ledict college acompagné des cordeliers et jacobins au son de la grosse
cloche partirent processionelle entrer huict et neuf du matin pour aller aux Jacobins et
sonnerent les grosses cloches
Item ettoient messieurs les cordeliers revetus de tous ornemens et chappes de velours noir
pour dire la grande messe laquelle fut dite en grande solemnité et quand fut environ
l'evangile de la messe sonnerent les deux grosses cloches bien longuement
S'ensuit ce qui fut fait à l'enterrement du corps de deffunct mondit seigneur le conte de
Laval lequel fut inhumé en l'église collegiale de monsieur Saint Tugal de Laval le dix-
huictieme jour d'aoust mil cinq cent cinquante et un

*Et premier fit l'enterrement le suffragent de monseigneur l'archeveque de Rouen nommé
Massonaye natif de Vitre
Ordre de marcher et premier
Les cordeliers
Les jacobins
La paroisse de Grenouze
La paroisse d'Avesnieres
Les paroisses de Ste Melanie et St Venerand
La paroisse de Ste Trinite
les religieux de Ste Catherine
En huictieme et dernier lieu marchent la croix et chanoines du cimetiere dieu et St Tu-
gal ensemble les chanoines du dict cimetiere dieu presider par les chanoines du St Tugal
Item apres marcherent cent pouvres vestuz de dueil portant chacun une torche flambante
Item apres marchent messires les gentilhommes
Item apres marche l'enseigne de feu monseigneur
Item apres marchent les deux trompetes
Item apres marchent les deux ettandardes
Item apres marchent les esprons
Item apres marchent les gantelets
Item apres marche la cotte d'armes
Item apres marche l'armet
Item apres marche l'enseigne de taffetas simple mi partie de blanc mi partie de rouge
Item apres marche l'escu
Item apres marche l'enseigne des armes de Laval circuits du collier de l'ordre
Item apres marche le chapeau du comte
Item chacun a son endroit ont rendu les armes
Item apres marche un mulet couvert de velours noir
Item apres marche le cheval d'armes
Ce qui fut fait a la messe de requiem pour venir a l'offrande
Item marchent a l'offrande messires qui portent le dueil l'un a pres l'autre conduits par
le maistre des ceremonies
Nota le lendemain qui estoit le dix neufiesme fut fait un grand anniversaire solomnel
pour le dit seigneur en la dite eglise
Nota que le xx^e jour d'aoust fut fait deux sermons solomnels pour le dit seigneur ».*

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