



# THE BATTLE OF MARIGNAN IN 1515

By Philippe & Gilles HOUDRY

Clad in Yellow and Red, Collection Genus Familia  
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Swiss piquier, 15th century

## **From January to July 1515: Milanese claims of King Francis Ist.**

On January 1, 1515, King Louis XII died out without a direct heir. Thus his cousin, Francis I, became king on January 25, 1515. This king showed great courage, and had a political vision not less frightening than that of the former King of France who had conquered Burgundy, Louis XI.

In regard to the Duchy of Milan, King Francis had the same claims as his predecessor. To prepare for it, he melted down the gold plate of Louis XII, and from some of the million crowns that it paid, he bought the neutrality of Henry VIII of England. From the remaining funds, he recruited German fighters to replace the Swiss who were not available. They were armed with portable fire weapons, similar to a primitive gun whose matchlock was triggered for firing by a hook, and whose barrel rested on a fork pricked into the ground.



Francis I (1494-1547), son of Charles de Valois-Orléans and Louise of Savoy  
(Engraving by Lacroix, from le Titien).

King Francis had seen the Swiss fighting in Agnadel and he admired their chivalrous character. Attempts were made to have them join again in July 1515 with the allies of the previous year, but the response of the Diet of Zürich was cold. The unpaid sums remained from the previous time. He instructed his uncle, the Duke of Savoy, to continue the negotiations while proposing to the Swiss the payment of the 400,000 crowns promised by Louis of the TRÉMOILLE in the treaty of Dijon. The dissensions of the preceding reign persisted and the payments remained unpaid.

King Francis did not want to give up the Milanese Duchy, of which he had become the Duke at the same time as King of France. The anti-French policy of Swiss Cardinal Matthew SCHINNER of Sion continued to prevail in these districts. The Emperor had signed the area of Verona to the Venetians, which did not permit the annexation of the Duchy of Milan by the French. Confrontation became inevitable, and in August 1515 the various parties furbished their weapons...

## From January to July 1515: Preparations of the Swiss in Italy.

The preparations in Italy began by Duke Maximilien SFORZA of Milan, the Emperor and Pope Leo X. They sent troops to Piedmont to protect the Plaisance, which belonged to the duke. More than 30,000 Swiss were massed at the two principal outlets of the Alps to prevent entry into the plain of the Pô River. They were gradually reinforced between May and August by various expeditions of the Swiss in the Italian Alps. More than 5,000 Zürich enlistees had taken part in it.

Machiavel, historian and political thinker of the time, said that the Swiss people were the only ones to have preserved the military institutions of old. They followed the combat style of the Greek phalanges and the Roman tactics. They advanced their wholesale infantry battle spread out on several lines. The groups were close enough together to be protected mutually but sufficiently distant to deploy themselves as riflemen or to beat a retreat.

The organization of the campaign and of the manoeuvres of the Swiss army was designed in three bodies. The avant-garde was used to inform the command about the position and the intention of the enemy about to start the combat. They were generally considered as those to be sacrificed from among the volunteers recruited from the troops, often seemingly cruel because they were armed only with the crossbow and later with arquebuse!

Next came the corpsmen of battle, trained fighters arranged in a square (in "redoubt" as said at the time). These battalions were made up of seven or nine rows of halberdiers with long-handled spears or spades and arquebusiers with firearms ready to engage in combat. Only the men in the first rank wore helmets and armor. The spade used was eighteen feet long and ended with a four-edged iron. This made it possible for the Swiss to oppose attacking riders armed with shorter lances by supporting their spade on the ground. The unit charged with the pace of the course.

Finally the rear-guard was where other arquebusiers with firearms among the general reserves, were ready to be called to carry out a turning around or an enveloping movement.



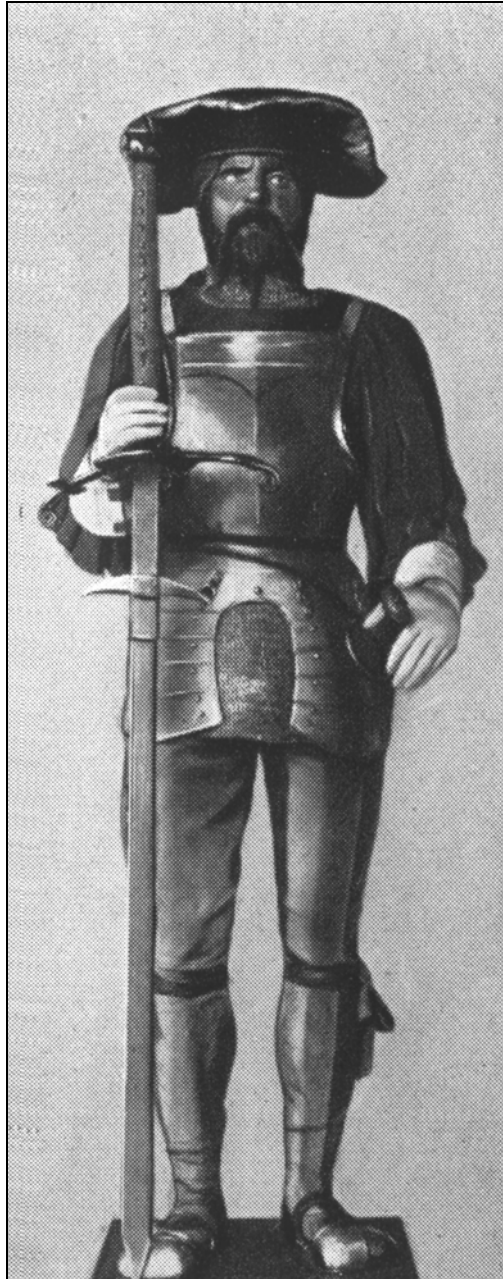
The three Swiss armies soldiers of the 15th and 16th centuries.



French infantryman of 16th century carrying the arquebus  
(According to Cesare Vecellio, 1590).



Use of powder (main canon at the start of the 16th century). This weapon could be propelled to its optimum by use of small sacks filled with powder containing charcoal, sulfur, salpeter, as well as camphor, mercury and oil of petrol. Primitive use of powder was already being used by the army of King of France, Louis XI. But the Swiss, Germans and also the Italians were already using it for higher performance during this period.



Swiss soldier during the wars of Italy  
(Museum of the Army, Paris, France).

### **In August 1515: The entry of the French in Italy.**

July 12, 1515, the French army was mustered up at Lyon and counted 2,500 fighters in groups, each with six combatants, comprising a man-at-arms, two archers or arbalestiers with mounted crossbows, a coutillier or knife man for finishing off the enemy, and two pages or servants. With these troops were added 60 French heavy canons and numerous other canons of smaller caliber. The presence of such an artillery was completely new for the time.

King Francis had also recruited 2,500 pioneers as support workers for the battle, such as terrassiers, carpenters, blacksmiths, carriers, etc., showing the "genius" of modern armies. Other reinforcements would enlarge these troops to 50,000 men.

At the beginning of August 1515, the Swiss troops barred the high Alpine valleys. Informed of this situation, the King decided to circumvent this obstruction. Marshal Jean-Jacques TRIVULCE learned from mountain dwellers that there was a series of higher trails making it possible to enter Italy (today the Col of Larche).

Just as formerly the troops of HANNIBAL did, those of Francis I crossed the Alps on simple trails at higher altitude. Roads were widened by using explosives, bridges were built with logs for crossing torrents, and sometimes canons were lowered from rock to rock by cables.

The French army emerged in Conti on the side and at the back of the confederated Swiss troops. With this manoeuvre changing the front, the Swiss withdrew toward Milan.

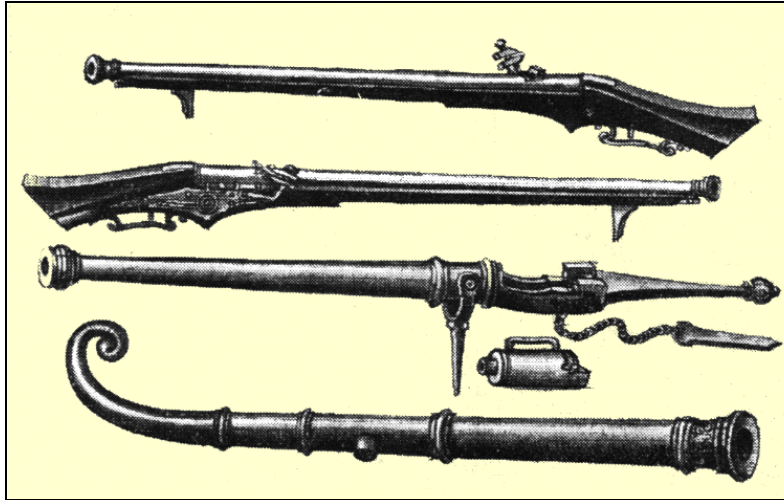


Pierre Terrail (ca 1475-1524), Lord of Bayard. Page of the Duke of Savoy, he passed to the service of King of France. He took part in all the campaigns of Louis XII and was called for that « the knight without fear and reproach ». He was announced particularly to Marignan. He was killed by a shoot of arquebus at Abbiategrosso (National Library, Paris).

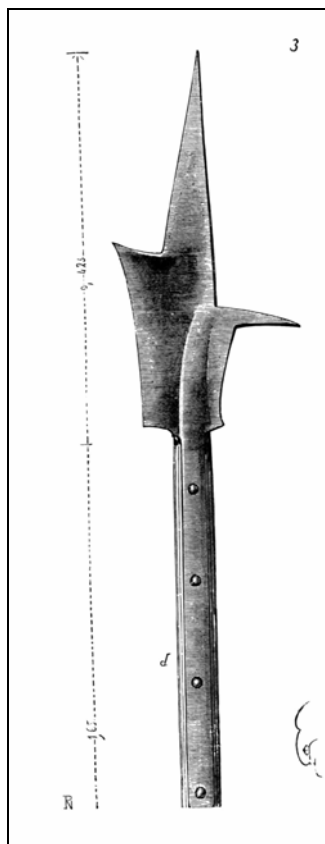
During the night of August 13, the Knight BAYARD and Jacques of CHABANNES by the orders of Anne of MONTMORENCY decided to attack the enemy cavalry. With 500 men-at-arms advancing at the head, they crossed the Pô and attacked the Swiss papal troops and a Spanish company who camped at Villafranca. The battle was violent, and the effect of surprise made it possible for the French to seize several hundred horses and capture their Commander Prospero COLONNA.

This attack gave a morale blow to the Swiss. Discord arose among some of their leaders to the extent that some companies returned to their bases, but many did not turn back and awaited confrontation.

On August 30th, all the French troops joined together at Novarre. The Swiss regrouped again without delay towards Milan. On September 8th, King Francis tried again to negotiate with the Swiss by proposing to place immediately into an account 150,000 gold crowns for the unpaid sums, but without success.



Firing weapons of the 16th century: Arquebuses and small handguns (Art of Artillery).



A vouge. The Swiss infantry were served by many of these spears type weapons and they carried them still the beginning of the 16th century.

### **September 12th, 1515: Enemy armies face to face close to Milan.**

That day, the French army established themselves a little in the south of Milan between San Giuliano and Marignan. King Francis, Commander-in-chief, appointed the Constable of Bourbon as deputy. Four Marshals, including Louis of the TREMOILLE and TRIVULCE, led 18,000 horse riders, 30,000 infantrymen, including 12,000 German foot soldiers, and a total of 372 canons. A great part of the French knighthood was there, for example, the Duke of Alençon, brother of the king, who controlled the rear-guard, the Count of GUISE as well as the celebrated Knight BAYARD.





View of the castle of Milan to the 16th century (From a book of Paul Lacroix).

In Milan and its environs, rallied by Cardinal Matthew SCHINNER, 30 to 40,000 soldiers of the Swiss Cantons were at the point of engaging battle under the orders of their most prestigious leader, Louis d'ERLACH of Bern.



The Cardinal Matthew Schinner (1456-1522), Bishop-Prince of Sion, visiting the battlefield of Marignan on september 13, 1515 (Engraving of Jean-Melchior Füßli).



## September 13th, 1515: The first day of the battle at Marignan.

Some of the Swiss were still tempted to accept the proposal of settlement made by King Francis in Gallarate on September 8th, but Cardinal Matthew SCHINNER could rally the Swiss troops to keep their warlike spirits.

At the beginning of day, the three groups of the royal French Army had been forcefully cut off at San Donato, Santa Brigida, Zivido and San Giuliano, not far from the village of Marignan. The French had been able to deploy their important artillery on favorable foothills, and this position enabled them to supervise the neighborhoods.

If this position was advantageous for the canons, it was rather a handicap for the remainder of the army. The marshy ground was intersected with many channels, ditches and brooks, which would block the action of the cavalry. It was on that stage that a scene worthy of the Middle Ages would very soon be played out. Many French horse riders, however, left for reconnaissance towards Milan. The Swiss Confederates, believing an attack started, sounded the alarm bell and rushed into combat. Swiss fighters, halberdiers with long-handled spears and spades, and arquebusiers with firearms, approached in haste the French camp. The dust which the Swiss raised put the French on alert, who in turn sounded their own call to action. It was then mid-afternoon.

An hour and half later, the Swiss columns made contact with the French outposts. They started to drive the French back and uncovered an impressive artillery strategy that king had ordered to be installed. At this time, 30,000 Swiss genuflected to pray in front of the Cardinal Matthew SCHINNER. Then, by signal, the troops raised up and launched out in battle with their long spears and spades ahead.



Wars of Italy, Francis I in the heart of the battle (Magellan Archives).

At 6 o'clock, the Swiss Confederates had forced through the first line of the French, at which time the royal artillery started shooting. The firing of the arquebuses answered, but the fray became horrible. Blood, sweat and powder permeated the air. The French guns randomly pulverized their adversaries in a bloody pulp. The Swiss, invisible in thick, nauseating smoke, did not retreat even after facing the bloody hands of the German footmen.

To smash the attack of the Swiss, the Constable of Bourbon launched his heavy cavalry on their flanks. They did not sink into the marshes and hence loosened the hold of the Swiss, who, however, reasserted themselves and vertically drew their long-handled spades like a forest. Smashing the shields of the French horse riders, they disarmed them and finished them off with their spears.

After an hour of relentless combat, the outcome of the battle remained dubious. The Swiss accelerated their pace while the horns of the mountains resounded above their helmets. The fastest were going to reach the canons, but were risking their return. The sun was going to set soon, and so the French would react. The French King launched his cavalry with thirty charges against the immovable squares of the Swiss fighters, who were on several occasions in difficult position.



Battle of Marignan, Francis I with the head of the French cavalry  
(French manuscript, National Library, Paris, France. Photo Catala).

The moon rose on an immense carnage whereas the clash of arms continued. The night fell and the confrontation transformed into an anonymous corps-to-corps. The French ebbed slowly in front of the Swiss, who seemed not to be able to be stopped.

About midnight, the combat ceased because no one seemed to be able to continue. The calls of horns or trumpets resounded in the darkness, accompanied by the cry of the suffering. Time to time, firing answered them. Each one tried to find safety near one's own, stumbling sometimes upon sticky corpses or debris. Some found themselves in an enemy group, and stabbed by blows, succumbed at once. Because of the proximity of the adversaries, firing certainly did not bring any comfort. This forced truce continued until the first light of dawn.

### **September 14th, 1515: The second and last day of the battle.**

In middle of the night, the King brought together his generals. Despite their overall numerical superiority and especially their good use of their canons, the French shifted their batteries to safer positions. They also sent out an urgent command for reinforcement by their Venitian allies not yet involved in combat.

With the rising of the sun, an alert was sounded by the Swiss horns. In spite of the violence inflicted by the French artillery, the Swiss columns advanced right in front of them. The French canons were placed and protected better than on the preceding day. The Swiss were pulverized by canon fire, but the remaining survivors continued to advance with their halberds or long handled spades lowered. Whole rows chopped down were sacrificed to allow followers to attack the French defenses.

On both sides, the losses were enormous, and the bulk of the leaders were killed. Among the French, succumbed the Sire of ROYE, brother of Robert II of the MARK, Francis of BOURBON, brother of the Constable, and Charles, the Prince of TALMONT, only son of the TREMOILLE, who was mortally wounded by 62 blows. On the Swiss side, two Grison leaders, Rodolphe of MARMELS and Rodolphe of SALIS, the Basler Arnel of WINKEHIED, the Knight von ESCHER as well as many others were casualties. The Zürich banner rose visibly on the battle field with the surviving flag holder.

At 8 o'clock in the morning, 3,000 Venetian horse riders under command of General d'ALVIANO arrived just in time to support the French left wing pierced by the Swiss, but the latter were pushed back.



Battle of Marignan, Tactical use of the spade and the halberd by the Swiss against the French cavalry Armed with the lance (Low-relief of the tomb of Francis I, Abbey of St-Denis, France. Photo Giraudon).



By 11 o'clock, the Swiss, riddled by the French artillery destroying their thousand-year old Roman tactic, retreated upon the arrival of the Venitian infantry. They withdrew towards Milan while taking along their casualties, fourteen enemy standards and their honor intact.



Retreat of Marignan (Fresco of Ferdinand Hodler,  
Swiss National Museum of Zürich).

By 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the French King won a bloody victory, which would mark the beginning of his reign. On the reddened plain of Marignan, the Swiss left more than 12,000 dead, while the French had about 4,000. This battle was regarded for a long time as one of the most terrible of the 16th century.

At twilight of this last day of confrontation, the King of France ordered a cessation of the pursuit of the Swiss infantry. He always considered reconciliation with the Swiss Cantons, although he could not avoid the massacre of Marignan. In the evening, BAYARD made the king a knight.

King Francis wrote to his mother: "I assure you, my Lady, that it is not possible to fight with greater fury and boldness than the Swiss. For a thousand years, no one has witnessed such a proud but so cruel battle.". A little later, the king had a medal engraved commemorating his victory with the words: "I overcame those whom only Caesar could conquer.".

### **After September 15th, 1515: Reconciliation between the French and the Swiss.**

Milan capitulated on September 15th, and the news of the French victory spread all through Europe.

The Swiss defeat was essentially caused by the force of the French artillery on the battle field, which resulted in a great number of deaths in the Swiss lines. The French King, who always wanted to be allied with the Swiss Cantons, tried to alleviate the massacre by a royal gesture as

well as human one. He ordered that all Swiss wounded be given care, and returned to their homes with material arrangements.

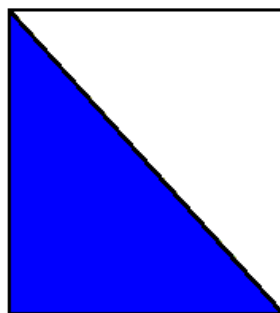
This royal generosity dissipated the tight pecuniary practices that marked the reign of Louis XII and inflamed strongly the anti-French policies of Cardinal Matthew SCHINNER. That clear victory at Marignan gave France a strong role in Italy and ended the influence of the Swiss in the Duchy of Milan.

On October 4th, Maximilien SFORZA entrenched himself with several Swiss in his castel at Milan since the capitulation of the city. He went to the French King at Pavie to make peace. He renounced his rights to the Duchy of Milan, and negotiated in exchange the sum of 94,000 crowns as well as an annual pension of 36,000 crowns. Maximilien died fifteen years late in Paris.

The Swiss Cantons and France signed a treaty of peace in the Fribourg Canton on November 21, 1516, which had been negotiated at Geneva on November 7th in the previous year. This peace reinforced considerably the bonds which earlier linked the two countries. Some of the Swiss Cantons refused to sign this treaty in 1516, among them being the Zürich Canton, but its terms were respected by all until the French Revolution in 1789.

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