



Abbé François de Langlade du Chaila

Unknown artist

Oil on canvas 44 x 34 cm

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The Abbé de Chaila 1648–1702: from tourist in Siam to persecutor in the Cévennes

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The former libertine and transvestite, the Abbé de Choisy, was coadjutant ambassador to the Chevalier de Chaumont in the embassy sent in 1685 by Louis XIV to Siam with the object of converting the king to Catholicism and obtaining better terms of trade (in both of which it singularly failed). On the outward journey, in addition to Choisy, there were three French Missionaries (from the Missions Etrangères in Paris), Vachet, Basset, and Manuel; Chaumont's personal almoner, the Abbé de Jully; the ship's almoner M. Le Dot; and six mathematical Jesuits on their way to China, namely, their superior de Fontaney, Bouvet, Gerbillon, Le Comte, Tachard, and de Visdelou. Of these, Tachard was to return to France with the embassy and play a significant and wholly deleterious role in Franco-Siamese affairs.

Also among the ecclesiastics on board was the Abbé François de Langlade du Chaila (who signed his name thus, though many documents refer to him as the Abbé du Chayla), who was travelling to Siam with no particular purpose. He was not a Missionary attached to the Missions Etrangères in Paris (though Forbin, writing in his memoirs (1729/1996: 32), thought he was), nor a Jesuit; neither was he a trader, an explorer or a scientist. He may have vaguely thought of becoming a missionary, but had not yet made up his mind on this score; clearly the object of the French embassy would have helped him decide if he had a vocation. He was therefore a tourist, travelling as much for the pleasure of the journey as for the opportunities it might afford to decide him on his career.

Chaila's background is curious in the extreme, and detailed in Poujol (1986), to whom we are indebted for the information concerning his family and early life. He was a scion of impoverished minor nobility in the Massif Central, a wild and inhospitable region. His mother died when he was twelve, worn out by thirteen pregnancies, three from her first marriage, and one for each year of her marriage to her second husband Balthazar de Langlade. De Langlade père was a swashbuckling character, constantly on the wrong side of the law (he commandeered the crops and possessions of others at whim), and was forever in debt: he had, in addition to ten children to provide for, a grand château to complete and support (it had two wings of 85 m long and a central one of 50 m, and is said to have had 365 doors and windows; built at an altitude of 1,230 metres it must have cost a fortune to heat in winter). He died in 1682, aged sixty-five, on the run from the long arm of the law, but in his bed (though he was condemned at the beginning of that year to have his head cut off for a whole string of crimes).

After the death of his mother in 1660, the same year when his father was condemned to the galleys and ordered to pay a hefty fine for seizing crops (he managed to avoid both punishments), François du Chaila, born in 1648, was, at the age of twelve, left largely to his own devices. His education was probably provided by stewards and servants. Very little is known about his early years. He was tonsured (that is, destined for the church) about 1660, and was made a bachelor of canon and civil law from Avignon in 1673; through a great-uncle he received the income of the priory of Molezon. It is not certain where or when he took orders, but it was probably in 1681 at Toulouse (where he may have become a doctor of theology in 1679). His vocation, if there was one, was thus rather tardy.

Between the death of his mother and his departure for Siam, he spent much time running the family estate and château in the part of the Cévennes known as the Gévaudan. In 1672, aged 24, he attacked the bailiff who had come to carry out two injunctions for the seizure of cattle by his father. The bailiff and his assistants were locked up in the prison of the château, and only released after two days. Seven years later, when he was 31, he had an encounter with the salt tax agents when travelling from Clermont; he spent more than three weeks in prison before being judged for striking with his pistol an agent of the state, and was fined 300 *livres* (reduced through family influence to 100 *livres*). He was returning with pictures to complete a room at the château. These two incidents show that he was a very worldly cleric, closer in temperament to his brothers, who were all in the army. The Abbé also periodically spent time in Paris, in order to follow up on the numerous law suits contested by his family.

In 1683 the château was attacked and set on fire while Abbé François, his eldest brother and some friends were playing cards. This incendiary act was carried out by members of the d'Apchier family, that of the first husband of du Chaila's mother, and a man was killed in the fracas. Astonishingly, there was no criminal case; instead a legal agreement was reached between the two families to settle their differences, with Abbé François signing for the Langlades.

Two years after his father's death, his eldest brother Joseph-Jean, viscount of Langlade, a captain in a cavalry regiment, managed to pull off the coup of marrying a rich heiress, Elisabeth de Bauquemare, whose father was a senior judge in the Paris Parlement, and whose mother frequented the literary salons of the capital, including that of Mme de Scudéry. The Abbé's sister-in-law Elisabeth took over the running and improvement of the château, giving Abbé François no reason to remain (he is also known to have been adverse to feminine company, giving him an additional reason to depart). He went to Paris in October 1684, frequented the salons, thanks to his brother's mother-in-law, and looked for an ecclesiastical position through the President Bauquemare. The president's wife probably introduced him to the Abbé de Choisy, who knew everyone at court through his scheming mother.

The two Abbés made an odd pair. The worldly Choisy, well-known for his transvestite aberrations (including dressing up young girls as men whom he, dressed as a woman, deflowered in his bed), had recently had a severe illness and had decided to renounce his frivolous past. He spent some time convalescing at the Missions Etrangères in the Rue du Bac, without formally joining the missionaries. At the time of his departure for Siam he was aged 41, and had still not been ordained a priest. Chaila, aged 37 in 1685, had probably taken orders some four years previously, as noted, but had led an extremely worldly, not to say combative, existence for most of his life. He had no connections at court (whereas Choisy was on familiar terms with the king's only brother, no less), and was a mere impecunious upper class provincial with few graces or interests and limited education. It was undoubtedly through Choisy's influence that du Chaila secured a place on board the *Oiseau* to go to Siam. Like Choisy, du Chaila had to borrow from a Parisian money lender, sieur Braque, 1,150 livres on 30 January 1685, to take part in the mission to Siam.

Choisy, in his delightful account of his *Journal of a Voyage to Siam 1685–6*, mentions the Abbé du Chaila four times in his account. The tourist cleric apparently fulfilled his duties as a priest on board competently. Choisy's first mention of du Chaila, on 4 March 1685, simply notes him among the Missionaries Basset and Manuel, and most of the six Jesuits making the journey, as throwing up half their souls in the rough Bay of Biscay crossing out of Brest. On 25 March, Choisy (who was only to take orders in Lopburi in December 1685) mentions Chaila again:

The Abbé du Chayla preached the sermon; it was well-reasoned, easily understood, and appropriate for sailors to whom one has to make oneself understood. He is an admirable person thus far, lending a hand to everything, always in the background. We do not yet know what role he will play in the Indies, but if he devotes himself to the missions, he will be a solid workman, for he has zeal and capacity. (Choisy trans. Smithies 1993: 55)

Chaumont, the ambassador, saw du Chaila (whom he spells Chailar) as “an able man who often preached to us” (Chaumont and Choisy 1997: 128); therein lay all his virtues for the upright and unbending envoy.

Choisy mentions his travelling companion du Chaila again on 26 February 1686 on the return journey: “The Abbé du Chayla just gave a discourse on [the] restitution [of items incorrectly acquired]. The subject is important...” (1993: 258); it certainly was, as far as du Chaila's father was concerned. Chaila appears for a final time in Choisy's account on Good Friday, 12 April 1686, on the return

journey: “The Abbé du Chayla has just preached a very fine Passion. I said he could have preached it at Saint Paul” (1993: 268); Choisy probably means here the parish church of his friend the Abbé de Dagneau in the Marais quarter in Paris, rather than to Saint Paul himself.

Choisy apparently had few reservations about du Chaila, a view not shared in the Foreign Missionaries’ headquarters in Paris. Dirk Van der Cruysse, in his edition of Choisy’s *Journal* (1995: 60) notes that the directors of the Missions Étrangères (in Paris) were extremely wary of du Chaila:

M. Fermanel [the bursar in Paris for Bishop Lambert in Siam] had written on 14 February 1685 to Mgr Pallu [Bishop of Heliopolis], then in Rome “I also think that the Abbé du Chayla, who is accompanying M. de Choisy, is a person about whom one should be extremely cautious, and, whatever good intentions he shows, one should attach little importance to it. I think I should indicate this to you so that in Siam one should not readily embrace him. I even advise the Abbé de Choisy to dismiss him if he can.” (Archives of the MEP, vol.9, p.522)

Choisy learnt soon after arriving in Siam that the hopes he had entertained of being an instrument in the conversion of King Narai were chimerical, and that he would return with the embassy at the end of the year. We know nothing about the activities of the Abbé du Chaila in Siam. He presumably was included in all the festivities arranged by Phaulkon, the de facto minister of trade and foreign affairs, and went to all the elephant round-ups with the other members of the embassy. In particular, du Chaila would have witnessed the forceful way of calming wild elephants prior to training, described in detail by Choisy on 11 December 1685 and Tachard in Book V of his first *Voyage de Siam*, and, of particular relevance, the unequal combat between a tiger and three elephants (again described by Choisy on 26 November, and by Tachard in passing), which perhaps later gave du Chaila ideas for the treatment of Protestants in France. This tiger and elephant fight is the subject of a naïve watercolour found in the Bibliothèque Nationale’s Cabinet des Estampes, Od.95.

Chaila certainly returned to France with Chaumont, Choisy, the Missionaries Bénigne Vachet and the Abbé de Lionne, the scheming Jesuit Guy Tachard (who omits to mention in his account of the voyage to Siam the presence of du Chaila on both outward and return journeys, probably considering him a provincial of no consequence), and the return Siamese embassy led by Kosa Pan, reaching Brest on 18 June 1686.

Chaila on his return made no attempt to contact the Missions Etrangères, perhaps aware of Fernel's opinion of him. He went to his eldest brother's town house, the Hôtel d'Anspach, where he was received by Joseph-Jean and his wife Elisabeth as a returning hero. But he still needed a position.

The religious situation in France in 1686 was conditioned by the revocation on 18 October 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, in which Henri IV had, on 13 April 1598, given Protestants the right of freedom of worship. The revocation was signed by Louis XIV at Fontainebleau on the very day the Chevalier de Chaumont in Ayutthaya was presenting King Narai with Louis XIV's letter and trying to secure his conversion to Catholicism, most probably with the Abbé du Chaila present. Repression became the order of the day in France, with "dragonnades" (the billeting of Catholic troops with Protestant families), and forced conversions of Protestants, especially in the densely Protestant areas of Poitou and du Chaila's native Languedoc. There, the administrator was the efficient Nicholas (sometimes François) de Lamoignon de Bâville, also spelt Basville (1648–1724). What better occupation than to become part of his administration on the religious side?

Chaila made contact in the traditional seventeenth (and sometimes twenty-first) century fashion, through family connections. His eldest brother's father-in-law, Nicolas de Bauquemare, worked alongside the brother of Bâville, Chrétien de Lamoignon, advocate-general of the Paris Parlement. Du Chaila was introduced and Bâville agreed to du Chaila's nomination as inspector of missions in the Cévennes in the diocese of Mende, after having secured the agreement of the Bishop of Mende, whose traditional hostility to the Langlade family had been mollified by the payment of a debt of 34,000 *livres* in dues owed by the family.

Chaila's experience in Siam may have been of some use. The Cévennes were considered "the Indies and Japan in heresy in France", and du Chaila became Bâville's trusted man. The situation was difficult; the Protestants were strong in the region, in some localities constituting as much as 95 per cent of the population, though overall they only formed about one-sixth. The Protestants were energetic and included some of the leading families of the region, though du Chaila's own family had always adhered to a somewhat feudalistic form of Catholicism. Chaila, who lost no time in calling on the Bishop of Mende in November 1686 to take up his duties, saw much of the problem in superficial (forced) conversions, and a lack of adequate priests to oversee them. He settled in Saint-Germain-de-Calberte, where Protestants were active, and established a seminary there.

His hand was strengthened in 1689 when Bâville, fearing insurrection at the heavy-handed suppression of the Protestants, and with troops needed on the frontiers, made du Chaila's eldest brother, Joseph-Jean, Vicomte de Langlade, commander of the provincial infantry regiment in Gévaudan.

The Abbé took his duties seriously and before long became one of the four archpriests of the diocese. He worked hard at the repression of Protestant plots, their preachers and open assemblies, and millenarian “prophets”. The precise tally of his exactions on the population is hard to establish; up to 1699 they included 11 executions, 61 condemnations to the galleys, five condemnations to life imprisonment, 145 forced incarcerations of young women in convents and 55 boys in religious colleges (many more Protestant youths were sent to perform military service). To those must be added about a thousand forced to flee aboard, usually to Geneva or Lausanne, several hundred cases of imprisonment, numerous cases of houses being devastated, and thousands of fines for non-attendance at mass and collective punishments. A slightly less onerous approach to religious orthodoxy at the end of 1699 did not stop du Chaila and the other agents of repression in the Cévennes from further condemnations.

Early in 1702 the anti-prophetic activities of du Chaila increased; his sermons became more direct and he authorized increased police interventions. He realized there were personal dangers to him. He took a retreat in June to decide whether to stay in the Cévennes; he was ordered to do so by the Bishop of Mende. In the middle of July 1702, a guide by the name of Massip led a group of three girls and four boys across the mountains with the object of reaching Geneva. They were intercepted, arrested, and taken to du Chaila’s house in Pont-de-Montvert. Massip was secured day and night between two beams, and the boys as well (though only by day); the three girls were incarcerated in a convent in Mende. Chaila sent for the hangman to come from Mende. Two local Protestant leaders, Mazel (who was not to die until 1710, fighting) and Séguier, decided to act.

Chaila was paid in kind on 24 July 1702 in Pont-de-Montvert, when the house he was staying in, which held his Protestant prisoners in its cellars, was attacked by some sixty Protestants (the figure was to be increased as the news was spread) and set on fire. Chaila was forced to flee from the upper floor windows, and was set upon by the mob. In the laconic words of the Count of Broglie, writing on 28 July to the Minister of War, Chamillart, “The Abbé du Chaila, missionary, in charge of the parishes of the diocese of Mende close to the Guévaudan, has just endured a disagreeable adventure... Recent converts numbering nearly two hundred... fired at him and despatched him with several blows of the dagger.” (cited in Poujol 1986: 243)

This untoward event is recorded in one of the classics of English literature, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), written by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894). In the last part of his book, ‘The Country of the Camisards’, the second chapter is called ‘Pont de Montvert’, and Stevenson writes:



Pont de Montvert, or Greenhill Bridge, as we might say at home, is a place memorable in the story of the Camisards. It was here that the war broke out [between the Protestants and the Catholics]...

Now the head and forefront of the persecution—after Lamoignon de Baviile—François de Langlade du Chayla (pronounced Chéïla), Archpriest of the Cévennes and Inspector of Missions in the same country, had a house in which he sometimes dwelt in the town of Pont de Montvert. He was a conscientious person, who seems to have been intended by nature for a pirate, and now aged fifty-five, an age by which a man has learned all the moderation of which he is capable. A missionary in his youth in China, he there suffered martyrdom, was left for dead, and only succoured and brought back to life by the charity of a pariah...

Where Stevenson obtained such inaccurate information is not known (indeed, he may have used literary licence to make his tale more interesting). There is no record of du Chaila having returned to the Orient after his three month stay in Siam or having gone on to China. He certainly suffered no martyrdom. Stevenson's castigation of him as a natural pirate may indicate he knew something of his adventurous youth and family background. Stevenson continues:

having been a Christian martyr, du Chayla became a Christian persecutor... His house in Pont de Montvert served him as a prison. There he closed the hands of his prisoners upon live coal, and plucked out the hairs of their beard, to convince them that they were deceived in their opinions. And yet had not he himself tried and proved the inefficacy of these carnal arguments among the Buddhists in China?

But Stevenson seems to be taking literary licence here, with his “live coal” and “plucked... beard”. Chaila may well have applied force in his attempts to secure conversions, but sadistic torture does not seem to have been his mark, and torture was only permitted for those accused of capital crimes. Nevertheless, one can see why the Foreign Missions had deep reservations about him.

Not only was life made intolerable in Languedoc, but flight was rigidly forbidden. One Massip, a muleteer, and well-acquainted with the mountain paths, had already guided several troops of fugitives in safety to Geneva; and on him, with another convoy, consist-



ing mostly of women dressed as men, du Chayla, in an evil hour for himself, laid his lands...

Stevenson then relates the events of 24 July 1702, when a crowd of Protestants, led by Pierre Séguier, at about ten at night, broke into du Chaila's house, forced the prisons, and set fire to the house. Du Chaila, in his nightshirt, and his men lowered themselves by knotted sheets from the upper floors "but the Archpriest fell, broke his thigh, and could only crawl into the hedge." The roof fell in, the flames showed where he had hidden, and, according to Stevenson, he was dragged into the town square (not so; he was knifed and died by the bridge in front of his house). The priest was stabbed, we are told, by each of the Camisards in turn, first by the leader of the revolt, Séguier.

"This," they said, "is for my father broken on the wheel. This for my brother in the galleys. That for my mother or my sister imprisoned in your cursed convents." Each gave his blow and his reason; and then all kneeled and sang psalms around the body till the dawn...

The source for this dramatic touch seems to be the account by the Protestant historian Antoine Court, *Histoire des troubles des Cévennes* (3 vols, Villefranche 1760).

Stevenson concluded this episode: "Du Chayla's house still stands, with a new roof, beside one of the bridges of the town; and if you are curious you may see the terrace-garden into which he dropped." Poujol (1986: 232) brings us up to date: "Only some of the cellars remain of the original house, the rest being a modern reconstruction... Fortunately the south terrace and the garden facing the Rieumalet have retained their appearance of 1702."

Du Chaila's body was taken by military escort and hastily buried on 26 July (for fear of further Protestant attacks), according to his desire expressed in his wills of 1694 and 1698, in the tomb he had prepared for himself in Saint-Germain-de-Calberte. His wills and prepared tomb show he was a prudent man, and perhaps aware of the dangers to which his position exposed him. Séguier, who had taken the first name of Esprit, was soon captured, and on 12 August 1702 his right hand was cut off and he was burnt alive in the public square at Pont-de-Montvert.

Some of Stevenson's account is undoubtedly romantic elaboration of facts, but the core would appear to be true. What is not in doubt is the ferocity of the repression of the Protestants in France in the reign of Louis XIV after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. It is an irony of history that on 18 October 1685, the day the French ambassador to Siam, the Chevalier de Chaumont, accompanied by his

co-adjutant ambassador the Abbé de Choisy, almost certainly in the presence of du Chaila, were presenting Louis XIV's letter to King Narai in Siam, seeking his conversion to Catholicism, such repression should have been licensed. It turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes in the not always glorious reign of Louis XIV, for the haemorrhage of talent and persons which the revocation caused was to cost France dearly.

None of the French who had gone to Siam in 1685 appears to have been deeply touched by the extreme religious tolerance practiced in the country, though several were to try to take advantage of it. The Siamese were held to conceive of heaven as a palace with many doors, and many paths led there. The absolutism of France (one king, one religion) had no echo in Siam in the religious sphere. But even Bâville, after watching a public hanging of two Protestant preachers on 14 February 1690 at Montpellier, is said to have remarked to the regiment colonel de Villevieille, "One has to admit, sir, that if the God which these people adore is the same as that we worship, we run a great risk of being extremely unhappy one day" (cited by Poujol 1986: 159). One wonders if du Chaila had his doubts. Perhaps not; he does not seem to have been that kind of person. He did his job competently, without apparent regrets, just like the interrogators at Tuol Sleng in Cambodia nearly three hundred years later.

The death of du Chaila caused the revolt of the Protestant mountain-dwellers, known as "Camisards", from the Langue d'Oc word *camiso*, meaning shirt. They were familiar with the land they operated in, and attacked Catholic châteaux to procure arms. The most famous leaders were Jean Cavalier (1680–1740), who fled to England and ended up governor of Jersey; Roland, who was betrayed and killed in 1704; and Abraham Mazel, executed in 1710. The armed revolt, brutally suppressed by Louis XIV's troops, largely fizzled out within a couple of years, though with sporadic renewals.

The persecutions continued, with occasional respites, until 1787, when Louis XVI signed the Edict of Tolerance. Protestants were henceforth permitted to exercise a trade, to marry legally, and to record the birth of their children before state officials. Two years later, with the Revolution, they were granted complete freedom of worship and full citizenship rights.

So much blood was spilt unnecessarily, and France lost a huge number of its nationals it could ill-afford to lose (estimates vary between 200,000 and half a million), largely by emigration of talent to the neighbouring countries of England, Holland, the German states, and Switzerland. France was weakened both diplomatically and economically by the exodus. King Narai's policy of tolerating and even assisting all religions was infinitely wiser, and contributed in no small degree to the prosperity of Ayutthaya during his reign.

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