On Valentine’s Day 1481 it rained blood in Dijon, capital of the duchy of Burgundy. Especially soaked were the castle, which King Louis XI of France had recently begun, and the Franciscan convent where the town council met. Five weeks later Dijon experienced another bloody rainfall, shocking the residents and defying Louis XI, who scoffed at reports he had received about the first one and prohibited any interpretations of such a portentous event. Ignoring Louis’s ban, the heavens continued to pour gore on Dijon, and the succeeding years would see other ominous signs in the heavens above the capital of ducal Burgundy.

Despite the horror these downpours should have engendered, no Dijon chronicle, letter, or town council deliberation mentions them. Instead, they were reported in such effusive detail by Jean Ludin, one of twelve governors who administered the imperial city of Besançon. From his vantage point less than fifty miles east of Dijon, Ludin set down his impression in a brief memoir, one of three small, vernacular texts from the period that provide contemporary Comtois reactions to the tumultuous events of the later fifteenth century. The largest at thirty-three folio pages, Ludin’s memoir primarily focuses on traditional topics: battles, rumors, famine, plague, and the actions of the mighty. Bisontin politics and rituals were especially important to Ludin; his response to losing the council seat that he had held for twenty-seven years to a “mere apothecary” is a fascinating study in injured pride, political manipulation, and pure vitriol. Throughout his memoir also runs an implicit theme that links his obsession with personal status,
so typical of urban elites in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to broader events in the duchy and county and gives meaning to his odd, atypical reports of bloody rain: the qualities of a true Burgundian. For Ludin and other Comtois chroniclers of his time, being Burgundian in the early modern Franche-Comté was a process of assertion and distinction. They asserted a perpetual personal, spiritual, and geographic connection between themselves and their overlord, while distinguishing between themselves and other “false” Burgundians who repudiated the qualities that they saw as fundamental to “true” Burgundianness. 

Betrayals of “true” Burgundianness, such as those by Dijon’s oligarchs, necessitated heavenly commentary. Dijon’s bloody rainfalls in particular were appropriate signs of Dijon’s treachery best appreciated by legitimate and loyal Burgundian subjects, such as Jean Ludin, precisely because of the plurality of meanings associated with blood in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Such a strong bond between perceptions of the Burgundian dukes and Bisontin oligarchical identity can appear paradoxical given the determination with which these same oligarchs asserted the prerogatives that came with Besançon’s status as an imperial city. They stressed any legal and fiscal distinctions between Besançon’s residents and those of the county of Burgundy, which surrounded the city and which the Valois Burgundian dukes ruled as counts. Yet throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, the jurisdictional, financial, and ideological ties of Besançon’s only oligarchs to the Burgundian dukes were strong, despite their assertions of imperial autonomy. Although a city of approximately 6,000, Besançon only controlled a small hinterland and remained dependent on the neighboring county for most of its food and raw materials. During disputes with its archbishop in the

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2 In this sense, Besançon’s elites and the residents of the county emphatically rejected the political model of the league responsible for the death of the last Burgundian duke: the Swiss. Despite some concern by Maximilian I that the region might “turn Swiss” in the 1490s, there is no convincing evidence that Besançon’s and the county’s urban leaders ever seriously considered it. For the concept of “turning Swiss” as developed in the politics and identities of the German southwest, see Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450–1500 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

3 In this article, I have chosen to use the most common appellations for the county’s rulers: the Valois dukes or the Burgundian dukes. Although clearly they held the Franche-Comté as the counts of Burgundy, traditionally scholars have referred to them using their most prestigious ancestral title. Given that this article is not attempting to distinguish administrative and fiscal prerogatives due to the Valois in the duchy and county—itself a complex task—for the sake of brevity I have followed common terminology.