

THE STORY OF THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

In 1885 the town council of the French city of Calais commissioned Rodin to produce a sculpture that would pay tribute to the burghers of Calais, heroes of the Hundred Years' War and symbols of French patriotism.

In 1347, according to the fourteenth-century *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart, King Edward III of England laid siege to the French town of Calais. After eleven months, with the people desperately short of food and water, six of the leading citizens, or burghers, of Calais offered themselves as hostages to Edward in exchange for the freedom of their city. The king agreed, ordering them to dress in plain garments, wear nooses around their necks, and journey to his camp bearing the keys to the city. Although the king intended to kill the burghers, his pregnant wife, Philippa, persuaded him to spare them, believing that their deaths would be a bad omen for her unborn child.

The story of the burghers of Calais appears in the work of earlier artists, most of whom focused on the single figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Rodin, however, decided to include all six burghers. He had read Froissart's *Chronicles* and elected to use the text as the basis for his sculpture.

Froissart describes how each man, a rich and well-respected citizen, announces his intention to offer himself as a hostage to King Edward III. Froissart then writes of the men's departure after removing the fine clothing that would have identified them as wealthy citizens, wearing instead their "shirts and breeches" (undergarments).

Rodin chooses to portray the moment in the narrative when the men, believing they are going to die, leave the city. He shows the burghers as vulnerable and conflicted, yet heroic in the face of their likely fate.

THE INDIVIDUAL BURGHERS

Pierre de Wiessant
(SIDE VIEW)



Eustache de Saint-Pierre

Jean d'Aire

Pierre de Wiessant
(FRONT VIEW)



FRONT VIEW OF SCULPTURE

SIDE VIEW

The council originally had conceived of the sculpture as a monument to Eustache de Saint-Pierre, leader of the group and the most famous of the burghers. Rodin, however, decided to follow Froissart's text as closely as possible and include all six burghers, according them equal status.

The following is an excerpt from Froissart's *Chronicles*:

... the richest burgher in the town, Sir Eustache de Saint-Pierre, got up and said: "Gentlemen, it would be a great shame to allow so many people to starve to death, if there were any way of preventing it. And it would be highly pleasing to Our Lord if anyone could save them from such a fate. I have such faith and trust in gaining pardon and grace from Our Lord if I die in the attempt, that I will put myself forward as the first. I will willingly go out in my shirt, bareheaded and barefoot, with a halter [noose] around my neck and put myself at the mercy of the King of England."

... Another very rich and much respected citizen, called Jean d'Aire, ... rose up and said he would keep him company. The third to volunteer was Sir Jacques de Wiessant [*sic*], who was very rich both by inheritance and by his own transactions; he offered to accompany his two cousins, and so did Sir Pierre his brother. Two others completed the number, and set off dressed only in their shirts and breeches, and with halters round their necks, as they had been told.

John Jolliffe, ed. and trans., *Froissart's Chronicles* (London: Harvill Press, 1967), p. 155, quoted in Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin*, p. 182

Froissart mentions four of the six burghers by name: Eustache de Saint-Pierre, Jean d'Aire, Jacques de Wiessant, and Pierre de Wiessant. (The other two, whose names are mentioned in a manuscript found in the Vatican Library in 1863, are Jean de Fiennes and Andrieu d'Andres.)

Jacques de Wiessant
(SIDE VIEW)

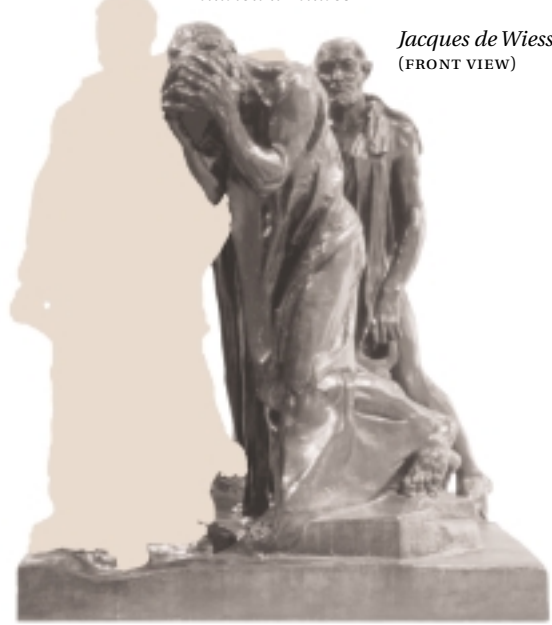
Jean de Fiennes



BACK VIEW

Andrieu d'Andres

Jacques de Wiessant
(FRONT VIEW)



SIDE VIEW

Although Froissart narrates the sequence of events and describes how the burghers looked when they were leaving Calais (dressed in plain garments, wearing nooses around their necks, and bearing the keys to the city), he does not describe their facial features, postures, or specific gestures. Rodin used his imagination to create figures that he believed would be true to the spirit of Froissart's account.

Rodin had models pose for certain parts of the figures, although in the end the figures assumed more generalized types. Auguste Beuret, Rodin's son with his companion, Rose Beuret; the painter Jean-Charles Cazin, a native of Calais who claimed to be a descendant of Eustache de Saint-Pierre; and Pignatelli, an Italian peasant, all posed for the sculpture at various stages. Rodin observed his models' features but modified them in creating his figures. He made

numerous studies of each of the six burghers, first modeling them as nudes and then rendering them as clothed figures. After Rodin had developed each figure individually, he joined them into a single work of art.

Eustache de Saint-Pierre



Eustache de Saint-Pierre is the richest, oldest, and most prominent citizen of the group and the first to volunteer.



Eustache de Saint-Pierre and Jean d'Aire

Jean d'Aire



Jean d'Aire, the second to volunteer, stands firmly in place, his jaw set, holding one of the keys to the city.

Pierre de Wiessant



Pierre de Wiessant, Jacques de Wiessant's younger brother and the fourth to volunteer, turns sideways toward Jean de Fiennes with one arm raised and his mouth open.



Jacques de Wiessant



Jacques de Wiessant, the third to volunteer, has one arm raised and stands behind Eustache de Saint-Pierre



Jean de Fiennes



Jean de Fiennes, the youngest burgher, stands with arms outstretched and mouth open.



Andrieu d'Andres

Andrieu d'Andres buries his head in his hands. His bent posture and enormous hands obscure his face.



Jean d'Aire and Andrieu d'Andres

As a group, the figures convey emotions ranging from pain, hesitation, and doubt to conviction and determination. Rodin presents his "heroes" as complex, conflicted individuals.