All studies of the Charlemagne window assert that the iconography is based on three Latin texts, the *Descriptio*, the *Pseudo-Turpin*, and the *Vita Sancti Aegidii*. Although *The Song of Roland* is not a source, Roland has been identified so often he almost eclipses Charlemagne. Such a phenomenon is best explained by the overwhelming modern interest in the epic, not the iconographic evidence. This paper argues that the figure with the red tunic in panels nos. 12, 15, 16, and 17 is Charlemagne rather than Roland. In addition, the paper asserts that the vernacular version of the *Pseudo-Turpin* is a more likely source than the Latin one. The new reading offers insights into many scenes, for instance that of Roland with the olifant, and it places Charlemagne as the appropriate focal point of the window. As presented there, crusades, finding relics, and church building were Charlemagne’s life of action, and it is he, not Roland, who is the imagined model in the famous mounted combat scene.

The Charlemagne window at Chartres, dated between 1210 and 1220 (Prache 329), is a unique royal one. Only three other kings are given windows at Chartres, and only one other emperor, Constantine, is even indirectly depicted. Placed in a prestigious location, immediately to the right of the Chapel of the Apostles in the chevet, it illuminates significant episodes in the legendary life of Charlemagne. The springing point is approximately ten feet from the floor, so these scenes could be seen by all those in procession around the ambulatory. In the case of certain scenes, despite the lack of textual and iconographic evidence, Roland has been identified so often that he vies with the emperor for a central role. It is difficult, however, to accept that Roland would eclipse the royal figure, as Colette Manhes-Deremble maintains in her major study of the iconographic program of Chartres glass (*Les vitraux narratifs*, p. 267). For the epic hero to be so prominent, would be paradoxical if, as everyone acknowledges, the *Pseudo-Turpin*, not the *Song of Roland*, is one of the background texts for the window (see Maines, “The Charlemagne Window”). The largest number of the identifications can be traced to Lejeune and Stiennon who state that he figures in three central medallions and six half-circle scenes, while his story is implied in several others (*La légende de Roland*, p. 193). While their work was challenged by an early reviewer (Ross, “The Iconography of Roland”), many literary scholars have
repeated these identifications without question, and their influence on literary studies has remained strong.\(^1\) Clark Maines, in his 1977 study that still stands as one of the best on this window, rejects three of their attributions, but he adds two new ones, so he recognizes Roland in a total of eight panels (“The Charlemagne Window”).

It is conceivable that the sheer weight of our contemporary scholarship on the Roland has led us to see this window too often through the epic lens. Suggesting that epic studies could have any negative effect may border on the heretical, especially for an essay presented originally at the Société Rencesvals, but many who write on the window have little understanding of one of the source texts, the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* where Roland is a boy hero, but hardly a Christological figure. Also, if the Latin chronicle was originally written to circumscribe the legend of Roland, as Gabrielle Spiegel maintains (*Romancing the Past*, p. 69), why would the window then refashion him into a hero greater than the king? The point here is not to diminish Roland, but to correct a balance and return Charlemagne to his central role as crusader. The following is the first part of an extensive reinterpretation of the window I have completed which demonstrates the influence of the vernacular translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin*. Space does not permit a full explanation of why I believe this version (*The Old French Johannes Translation of the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*) that circulated in Capetian households at the turn of the thirteenth century is so important. Suffice it to say that it significantly alters our reading of details in certain panels and the order or arrangement of panels as they recount episodes in the narrative. My analysis here concerns primarily iconography, not text, and begins with the vocabulary of color and costume. The panel numbers refer to my sequence of reading (Fig. 1\(^2\)).

Based on color, it seemed very plausible to me at the outset of my research that Charlemagne, not Roland, might be the figure with the bright red tunic or mantle, in panels nos. 12 (taking a city in Spain), 15 (battle after the flowering of lances), 16 (mounted single combat), and 17 (single combat on foot), but this challenges the traditional wisdom (see Figs. 2, 3, and 4). The identification of the prominent Christian warrior in 12, 15, and 17 has been debated, but panel 16 is so well known as Roland that it may be difficult to dislodge this perception. There are no *titulli* in these four panels, as there are in earlier ones where Charlemagne is identified as Karolus. Yet, I cannot make my case solely on the presence of the color red; all attributes need to be considered. One would hope that consistency in representation would irrefutably support my argument for Charlemagne’s enlarged presence. The deployment of most attributes and symbols in the window is unfortunately not consistent.\(^3\) The exceptions themselves vary from one to many. That does not mean that there is a lack of coherence, however, and when we consider the vocabulary of costume and color on the whole, the argument for adding to the number of identifications of the king is convincing. Consider

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\(^2\) Figures 1-5 are found at the end of the article text.

\(^3\) Maines says there is no explanation for the presence/absence of the Milky Way in certain panels (“The Charlemagne Window,” p. 808). There is also the inconsistency of Bishop Turpin depicted with a mitre and with a “calote.”
how Charlemagne is depicted in first register, the Voyage to the Orient, panels 2-7 (Fig. 2), where he is identified by name in five of the six panels. He is sitting, standing, or mounted; wearing a simple crown in four and a crowned helmet in two; but he is nimbed only once. In all of these panels, he wears either the long garments of a monarch or a long mantle or tunic over mail. In panel 2 he carries a red shield, in 3 he appears on a red field with blue robe, in 5 with a flowing red tunic, and in nos. 4, 6 and 7 with a brownish/purple mantle.

In the first portion of the campaigns in Spain, panels 8-13 (Fig. 3), he is named in 8, 9, 11, and 13; he is crowned in 8, 9, 10, 11, and 13; but he is neither named nor nimbed in 10. No one doubts, however, that this is Charlemagne setting out for Spain. In each of these panels, he wears a long red or purplish mantle. The Christian warrior in panel 12, also garbed in a long red tunic, was identified by Grimme as Charlemagne leading the siege of Pamplona (cited in Maines, “The Charlemagne Window,” p. 810). Neither Lejeune and Stiennon nor Maines believe this is Charlemagne because the helmeted figure wears no crown, but Maines does not accept this is Roland either, as Lejeune and Stiennon had suggested, because there is no textual evidence for his presence at this point in the narrative. Maines demurs on identifying the figure and considers this a conflated scene with “a” Christian warrior leading the attack on one of many cities Charlemagne conquers (p. 811).

After panel 13, there are no more tituli in the window, and, if we followed Maines’s identifications, Charlemagne (as opposed to Roland) would not be represented in panels 14, 15, 16, and 17 (Fig. 4), although he obviously is in the Mass of St. Giles panel (22) that should be read, as Maines demonstrated, in position 16. The current panel 22 was mistakenly placed at the apex after a restoration in 1921 (Maines, pp. 805, 819). In the famous Mass scene, Charlemagne is again shown wearing a red mantle, crown, and has a halo. To return to the sequence, in panel 18, the mounted, crowned, nimbed figure with long red mantle is Charlemagne leaving Spain. Moving up to panel 21, he is not nimbed, but is crowned and wearing a long blue robe. In summary, in the panels where accepted interpretations see him, he is crowned, wears a long blue, or red/purplish garment, and often, but not always, is nimbed.

If red is reserved for Christ, the prophets, and the lineage of Jesse in the twelfth-century Tree of Jesse window at Chartres, in contrast, in the thirteenth-century Charlemagne window, red is connected to the secular king. Only two panels, 3 and 21, show Charlemagne in the twelfth-century tradition, with a blue garment. In the first, nonetheless, he is against a red background and in the second wears a red mantle; so long red and purple garments dominate in representations of the king.

One could almost make the case that he is clothed in the colors of his banner, the legendary oriflamme given by St. Peter to Charlemagne and latter associated with St. Denis. This is a symbol, as Gerard Brault points out, of the translatio imperii (ed., The Song of Roland, vol. 1, pp. 289-90). It is also the banner that Philip Augustus carried on crusade in 1190 and in 1214 at Bouvines (Baldwin, The Government of Philip
Augustus, p. 377). Charlemagne’s fighting under the red banner and wearing a red tunic or mantle is appropriate for the king, who embodies the historical transfer of power.4

Roland is figured quite differently in those scenes connected to Roncevaux where he is unequivocally present: panel 19 where he is shown blowing the olifant and attempting to break Durendal, and 20 where he is reclining against his shield. As is true of the other young man, Baldwin or Thierry,5 in panels 20 and 21, Roland is wearing a short brownish coat of mail, with or without a helmet, and is nimbed. If he were the red-clad figure in panel 12 fighting to conquer a city in Spain, leading the troops in 15, or fighting against Ferracut or Marsile in panels 16 and 17, why would he not be depicted in this bright red tunic in the Roncevaux scenes, his greatest moment? Surely there, when Charlemagne was absent, he could be said to “take the mantle” for the king. To acknowledge that red is the royal color, but say Roland can wear it, is illogical.6 It is not only the color symbolism that is off here; Roland’s encounter with Ferracut in the Pseudo-Turpin is a very small portion of the story of Charlemagne’s battles in Spain, and it certainly does not carry the day for the emperor. The army’s triumph over Aigolant is of far greater importance, and Charlemagne leaves Spain having killed him and many other kings. Roland’s greatest moments are at Roncevaux. In this scene, he is clothed as the young soldier that he was. Much is made of his youth in the Pseudo-Turpin, and both he and Baldwin/Thierry seem by their short coats of mail to be contrasted visually with the mature king in long flowing garments. There would certainly be no reason to dress Roland “down” from the earlier scenes once he gets to Roncevaux. I would also argue that if the window does allude to the fact that Roland is the product of incest, he would not have been depicted as worthy of standing in for the king, or wearing royal colors in the earlier scenes.

Among the attributes of Charlemagne and Roland, the haloes are the least consistent, but the iconographic vocabulary of dress and color powerfully suggest that the figure in panels nos. 12, 15, 16, and 17 is Charlemagne himself, leading his troops or fighting his own individual battles. The argument against this is that he does not wear a crown. But if Charlemagne is not present in any of these four scenes, it is strange that depictions of him would be so diminished in the next-to-last register. He is, after all, the principal hero of the Pseudo-Turpin. If he is not in this sequence, his frequent and most terrible adversary, Aigolant, would, as a consequence, also not be depicted in the window. Furthermore, we note that in these four fighting scenes, the red-clad figure fighting infidels has no titullus, no crown, and is nimbed only once (panel 17), but always wears a closed helmet. The inconsistencies of the haloes has not been accounted for, and the possibility that Charlemagne could be depicted in a helmet without a crown has not been entertained, except by Grimme when he sees Charlemagne in panel 12. Yet, as Christine Lautier points out in her study of the

4 Another contemporary example is the early thirteenth-century Charlemagne “in majesty” in the Strasbourg cathedral window where he is wearing a red mantle over a blue garment.
5 Interpretations vary, but I believe it is Thierry, based on the vernacular Pseudo-Turpin, and a new reading of panel 20 as Roland’s confession.
6 In reference to the panels where Roland supposedly fights Ferracut, Manhes-Deremble says the red tunic gives Roland the prestige of a mythic character (Les vitraux narratifs, p. 64).
Chartrain glass painters, the most significant variation of style in the figures is found in the heads, and these different heads reveal that several artists worked simultaneously on parts of windows located throughout the cathedral ("Les Peintres-Verriers," pp. 9-15). Although the Charlemagne window was not part of her study, others in the chévet were, and I believe we should consider the possibility that helmets with crowns represent one style (only in 2 and 5), the helmets without crowns may have been a more realistic or easier form favored by another artist. Not only could different artists have painted these heads, but also the attribute of the crown may not have been considered necessary. Charlemagne is the central character in the narrative, and his role as crusader, not king, is foregrounded. As those taking off for the first crusade claimed, the only king who led them was Christ.

A rebalanced look at Charlemagne and Roland begins with this iconography and is supported by the text of the Pseudo-Turpin. This is especially true for two panels to be described here.

After completing what I refer to as the mission assigned by St. Jacques, depicted in the second register (Fig. 1), Charlemagne returns to France. Soon, however, he hears of the formidable African king, Aigolant, who is retaking the territory. Charles departs again for Spain and his battles occupy the central part of the narrative. In fact, twice as many sections in both Latin and Old French versions are devoted to these as to scenes involving Roland. Prior to the Roncevaux story, Roland in a late entry into the Pseudo-Turpin has a fight with the giant Ferracut, but this interpolated episode is merely one part of the larger narrative of encounters with numerous Saracen kings.

The central core of Charlemagne’s battles is represented in the window beginning with the flowering of the lances, panel 14. In both versions of the Pseudo-Turpin, this type of miracle is mentioned twice. In the battle following the first flowering of lances, although the martyrs die, Charlemagne is reinforced by Italian troops and Aigolant flees, so the artist could be rendering in panel 15 the triumphant rout, rather than the first phase that included Christian deaths. Next in the narrative comes a brief exhortation or sermon to the audience to strengthen themselves against vice as soldiers prepare their weapons before a battle; then the text turns to Aigolant’s duplicitous manoeuvres and Charlemagne’s attack on the city of Saintes which is preceded by the second flowering of lances, “si come devant avint / a Saint Fagon” (The Old French Johannes, ch. 21, ll. 10-11). The text also mentions that, as in the first battle, Charlemagne’s horse is killed, leaving the emperor fighting on foot among a thousand Saracens; Aigolant escapes, Charlemagne kills several Saracen kings, and the army ultimately finds and kills Aigolant.

The importance of citing these textual details here is to reinforce the interpretation of the sequence in the window: panel 14 is a conflated flowering of the lances standing for two events; panel 15 is a conflated battle scene with Charlemagne, in red, at the head of his troops, and the Mass of St. Giles (panel 22) is read next. It is an iconic sermon, substituted for the textual exhortation in the Pseudo-Turpin and signaling a necessary turning away from vice; Charlemagne must confront his terrible sin and, as the message from the angel tells
him, he must not repeat it. Now he is prepared for battle. After the textual sermonizing, the *Pseudo-Turpin* picks up with the maneuvering of Aigolant. Given the fact that Charlemagne is twice described as fighting on foot, and that Aigolant, a major figure, has yet to appear in the window, it is surprising that panel 17 has been read as Roland fighting either Marsile or Ferracut. The posture of the Christian warrior has suggested it is Roland striking Ferracut in the navel, his vulnerable point, but this identification fails to account for two factors: Ferracut was a giant and was not a king. The figures here are the same size and the one being slain has a crown. Everyone notes this discrepancy but continues to say it is Roland. I hope to have shown that the importance of Charlemagne’s exploits and the red tunic argue for the figure being Charlemagne, showing him on foot, in single combat, triumphing against either Aigolant, who was a king, or one of the other named Saracen kings that the text makes clear he kills before Aigolant dies.

This single combat brings to a close the emperor’s battle scenes. The next panel in the window, 18, shows Charlemagne leaving Spain with Turpin and Ganelon, as the text tells us he does. It logically precedes panel 19, the scene of Roncevaux and is not his moment of preparing to return having heard the horn, as some have suggested.

It is only when we move to the central rondel, panel 19 (Fig. 5), located after those depicting Charlemagne’s battles, that Roland unquestionably enters the picture. In the commentaries, this famous panel is described without exception as a double scene: Roland, helmeted and nimbed, trying to break Durendal against the rock; Roland, nimbed, sounding the olifant. It has not been noticed before that here, not earlier, we see the giant Ferracut. He is at the bottom of this panel, cut in two pieces. The feet are under the rock on the left, directly below the point of Durandal. The thighs and half of the torso, clothed in green mail (or leather), stretch to the right, and blood gushes from the torso. The head with red pointed helmet, upper torso in green, and red shield, are completely separate, oriented in the opposite direction and lying partially on top of the lower half. The connection between the two halves is established by the green color of the armor and size of the body parts. The relative proportions make the point. The bareheaded Roland figure blowing the olifant is a measure of 3 (be it inches or centimeters), the other Roland, although bent over and helmeted is only slightly taller. The bottom half of the dead figure is a measure of 3 alone; the top half with helmet at least 2 more, so the ratio of Roland’s body to the giant’s is 3/5. Rather than depicting the giant as merely attacked through the navel, this shows him as cut completely in half (as his horse is according to the text), lying among Roland’s other victims.

The artist or designer has chosen to represent Ferracut here, not in the earlier panels of single combat on foot, or in the mounted combat that should be at the apex of the window, thus making this panel a composite celebration of great moments in Roland’s life. The implication is that the David and Goliath battle where he proves himself as a young warrior is almost as important as the moments before his death at Roncevaux. This

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7 There is a rich scholarly history on the sin of Charlemagne which does not concern us here, but I believe the connection to Roland is not the sole, nor even most important reason, the Mass of St. Giles is depicted in the window.
legendary Roland is consistent with the *Pseudo-Turpin* story, not the epic or tragic character of the *Song of Roland* version. For Roland to appear here in one complex scene depicting three different narrative moments and locations distinguishes him from Charlemagne. This panel “contains” the legend in two senses. It concentrates all the symbolic value of his life in one place while also constraining its meaning. He is the young warrior who can defeat giants; and, even near death, stand alone, blow the olifant, and attempt to keep the precious Durendal from enemy hands. In the *Pseudo-Turpin*, Roland sounds the horn at two different points, each with the hope of assembling the remaining troops, a clear military value. There are no horn scenes involving debates with Oliver and the attendant debate about honor, although Roland hopes the returning troops will pursue the pagans.

Adonc comença a soner son cor, se par/aventure aucun des Crestiens qui por la peor des/paiens fust tapiz es bois venist a lui, ou cil qui/avoient les porz passez, par aventure retornassent, et/fussent a sa mort, et prissent s’espee et son cheval,/et ensuissent les paiens. . . (ch. 57, ll. 11-16).

This is a fighting man’s use of the horn and commitment to protecting important military equipment, unlike in the *Song of Roland* where the horn scenes individualize Roland and Oliver and add to the pathos. The tripart panel (19) of Roland at Chartres, I would maintain, is of an idealized combatant but not a Christological figure (there is no death scene, no soul being taken to heaven). He is more a young David, a youth earning his stripes (and halo) as a Crusader. The loss of a beloved young hero and the defeat at Roncevaux justify the centrally placed memorial, but the fight will continue without him.

True to the narrative, where Charlemagne returns to Roncevaux with his army to slay 4,000 pagans, the window ends with a final battle (panel 16) that pits Christian and Saracen against each other. The apogee of the narrative program is the military confrontation between West and East, not the Mass of St. Giles. The post-Fourth Crusade period was filled with preaching crusades against the Albigensians beginning in 1209, and the Bishop of Chartres himself returned from one in 1210. A fifth crusade to the Holy Land was preached in 1215. The “decade of the window” was one of religious fervor, and the Bishop or the Chapter surely desired to please a reforming pope trying to motivate French leadership to join the crusading effort. While I have argued that the Christian warrior figure in panels 12, 15, 16, and 17 is Charlemagne, the absence of a crown allows the image to be multivalent—it is both the historical figure the warrior class erroneously believed preceded them on crusade and one of their own, the ideal *chevalier*. The window shows legendary characters and scenes, alluding to sins forgiven and a great defeat at Roncevaux, but focuses on the young hero as fighter and the king as always on the assault. Charlemagne dominates the scenes, and the window shows no hesitation to elevate the royal figure as the epitome of his class. The theology of crusade is here secularized into lively images inspired by vernacular literature, and thus the narrative window culminates in an image of Charlemagne in a joust, not alone in majesty, but tentatively balanced against an equal, threatening power who requires a response. For a still image, it manages to suggest action. As
presented by the window, crusades, finding relics, and church building were Charlemagne’s life of action, and it is he, not Roland, who is the imagined model.
Figures
Figure 2
Panels 1 to 7
Figure 3
Panels 7 to 13
Figure 4
Panels 13 to 24

Olifant
Figure 5
Panel 19
Works Cited

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


