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Topography and the Relative Realism of Battle Scenes in Chansons de geste*

The norms of epic writing militate against the chansons de geste being thoroughly realistic.¹ Their concern is with the heroic experience,² and their narrative outline is contrived to give pride of place to its expression in violent physical action, while what might be called their narrative substance is constituted by the moral and emotional reflexes of such action.³ Exaggeration is an essential feature of such writing, and the rhetoric of the chansons de geste is dominated by hyperbole.⁴ There are,

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¹It is controversial to what extent "realism" involves judgment on content and to what extent it results from conformity with current literary (or other) conventions. Rather than enter this controversy, I propose to use the following simply as a working definition: a text will be said to be realistic insofar as the fictional events it refers to resemble or are compatible with historically attested events, and specifically those which can be regarded as "normal" or characteristic in the circumstances in which they arose. My principal historical sources are: Villehardouin, *La Conquests de Constantinople*, 2 vols, ed. Edmond Faral (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1938-39); Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis*, ed. E. Jarry (Angers: J. Petit, 1941); J. H. Beeler, *Warfare in Feudal Europe, 730-1200* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1971); C. Blair, *European Armour circa 1066 to circa 1700* (London: Macmillan, 1958); F. Buttin, "La Lance et l'arrêt de cuirasse," *Archeologia*, 99 (1956), 77-178; R. Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960); and B. Throdemann, *Armour from the battle of Wisby, 1361*, 2 vols., Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm (Uppsala, 1939).

²See C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952), chapters 1-3.

³Witness the enormous interest in recent years in questions of ethics (e.g., G. F. Jones, *The Ethos of the Song of Roland* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963] and the spate of articles which followed it), and in the vocabulary of emotion (e.g., G. S. Burgess, "Orgueil and fierté in twelfth century French," *ZRP*, 89 [1973], 103-122).

⁴See P. Zumthor, *Langue et techniques poétiques à l'époque romane (XI^e - XIII^e siècles)* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1963), p. 18, and H. S. Kay, *Epic Style in Raoul de Cambrai* (D. Phil. Thesis, Oxford, 1977), 164-79.

however, such marked differences between the treatment of battle scenes from one text to another that it is reasonable to speak of a comparative, or relative, realism; and such an attempt at differentiation is perhaps the more desirable as recent scholarly concentration on formulaic composition has tended to emphasize similarities between battle scenes in different texts at the expense of variety.⁵

My contention here is that there is a direct relation between the precision, accuracy, and local character of the topography of some chansons de geste and the realism of their battle scenes. This is not simply reducible to the trivial statement that some poems are more realistic overall than others and hence—naturally—in these features too. Geographical setting clearly influences the style of warfare, while the size of a man's territory, under a feudal system of conscription, will affect the size of force he can raise. Where geographical reference is left vague, these influences for realism do not operate, and battle scenes are left free to become less realistic in other respects.

The points of difference I consider are: the kind of terrain on which battles take place, the types of engagement involved (pitched battle, siege warfare, etc.), what kinds of encounters are described within the battles and what their outcome is, and what numbers of troops are involved. The principal texts examined are the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Chanson de Guillaume*, *Raoul de Cambrai*, and *Garin le Loheren*.

The topography of both the *Poland* and the *Guillaume* is vague, inaccurate, probably outside the local knowledge of the two poets,⁶ and heavily overlaid with symbolic implications. It is not at all clear, in the *Roland*, how the topographical indications of the first half of the poem fit in with the narrative. Bédier follows Gaston Paris in contrasting the plain", scene of the battle, with the defiles, scene of Charlemagne's withdrawal;⁷ Menéndez Pidal, on the other hand, superimposes one on the other, seeing the defiles as the authentic setting of the battle and interpreting the introduction of the plain of Roncevaux as an inadequately integrated modification by a later poet.⁸ While I am not altogether persuaded by the

⁵E.g., C. W. Aspland, *A Syntactical Study of Epic Formulas and Formulaic Expressions containing the -ant forms in Twelfth Century French Verse* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1970), or R. Hitze, *Studien zu Sprache und Stil der Kampfschilderungen in den Chansons de Geste*, Kölner romanistische Arbeiten, N.F., 33 (Genève: Droz; Paris: Minard, 1965).

⁶See J.-C. Payen, "Encore le problème de la géographie épique," in *Société Rencesvals IV^e Congrès International, Actes et Mémoires* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1969), 261-6; an important dissenting voice is that of J. Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*, 3^e éd. (Paris: Champion, 1926-9), t. III, 303-5, who is committed by his theory of the origins of the chansons de geste to the view that the *Roland* poet knew Roncevaux.

⁷Ibid., p. 304.

⁸R. Menéndez Pidal, *La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des*

historical cast of this explanation,⁹ his judgment that "on ne trouve dans le vieux poème aucun paysage naturel" (p. 325) carries conviction. The only explicit reference to a plain in the battle of "Roncevaux" occurs in the lines:

Jo ai veüt les Sarrazins d'Espagne,
Cuverz en sunt li val e les muntaignes
E li lariz e trestutes les plaines.
(vv. 1083-5)¹⁰

Belief in these "plains" is considerably undermined by the previous line (v. 1084) and by the numerous allusions to Roland's being *as porz (d'Espagne)*:¹¹ vv. 824, 1057, 1152, 1193, 1209, 1949. Clearly they belong in a different landscape from the "riant plateau de Roncevaux, fort éloigné de toute hauteur" (Menéndez Pidal, p. 325), as also from the plain which provides the setting for the poem's second great battle:

Granz sunt les oz e les escheles beles,
Entr'els nen at ne pui ne val ne tertre,
Selve ne bois: asconse n'i poet estre;
Ben s'entreveient enmi la pleine tere.
(vv. 3291-4)¹²

Francs, 2^e éd., tr. by I.-M. Cluzel (Paris: Picard, 1960), 324-30.

⁹In seeing the account of the setting of the battle of Roncevaux in the Oxford MS as combining more than one historical stratum, Menéndez Pidal adopts the same explanatory approach as R. Louis, "Le Site des combats de Roncevaux d'après la *Chanson de Roland*," in *Studi in onore de Angelo Monteverdi* (Modena: Società Tipografica Editrice Modenese, 1959), 466-93. I feel a general reservation about resolving apparent problems of synchronic analysis by postulating the required number of historical intermediaries.

¹⁰All quotations and references are from F. Whitehead, ed., *La Chanson de Roland*, 2nd éd. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946). The word *lariz* (= slopes) further occurs in vv. 1125 and 1851 but does not help to determine whether the landscape is envisaged as essentially flat or essentially mountainous.

¹¹On the term *port*, see P. Aebischer, "Halt sunt li pui et li port tenebrus," *Studi Medievali*, N.S., 18 (1952), 1-22.

¹²This difference between the two battlefields is highlighted by the sudden appearance (from the valley where it was concealed) of Marsilie's great army, at a time when Roland's men, believing themselves victorious, have actually started to search for their dead (vv. 1445-7). The words *asconse n'i poet estre* in the description of the second battlefield could almost be taken as an allusion to this difference. For symbolic and thematic commentary on the "verticality" of Roncevaux and the "horizontalty"

Far from being presented as a "riant plateau," the poetic "Roncevaux" is depicted as a configuration of height and depth,¹³ light and darkness.¹⁴ The unrealistic and rhetorical character¹⁵ of this landscape is borne out by the fact that it somehow accommodates a cavalry engagement between Roland's rearguard of 20,000 knights (vv. 789, 802, 827) and two successive Saracen attacks, the first by 100,000 knights under Marsilie's nephew Aelroth (v. 991), the second by Marsilie's *grant ost* (v. 1448), presumably an even larger force, and anyway containing twenty battalions (v. 1451). Such figures are also, of course, quite unrealistic. Even medieval chroniclers, themselves generally mistrusted by modern historians,¹⁶ attribute far more modest numbers to medieval armies.¹⁷

The correlation between imprecision of setting and unrealistic size of forces is still more marked in the Charlemagne-Baligant battle which takes place on an unspecified plain to the south of Roncevaux¹⁸ (vv. 3291-3294, 3305) and confronts the entire forces of Christendom with those of Islam. The number of knights in Charlemagne's ten battalions totals 360,000;¹⁹ the Islamic forces are yet more astronomic with thirty battal-

of the later battlefield, see E. Vance, "Spatial Structure in the *Chanson de Roland*," *MLN*, 82 (1967), 604-23.

¹³E. R. Curtius, "Zur Literaturästhetik des Mittelalters, II," *ZRP*, 58 (1938), 129-232, p. 222: "Das wichtigste Schema zur Landschaftsgliederung ist aber die polare Formel 'Berg und Tal': see vv. 710, 1449, 2461 (valleys); 714, 1755, 1851, 2040, 2271 (mountains); and 809, 814, 856, 1084, 1830-1, 2112, 2185, 3125 (mountains and valleys). See also M. Delbouille, *Sur la genèse de la Chanson de Roland (travaux récents, propositions nouvelles): essai critique* (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1954), 149-50.

¹⁴P. E. Bennett, "Further Reflections on the Luminosity of the *Chanson de Roland*," *Olifant*, 4 (April 1977) 3, 191-204, esp. 192-4, 203-4. See vv. 814, 1830, 2461 (*tenebrous*) and 737, 1002-3, 1807-11 (images of light); and cf. the darkness which presages Roland's death, vv. 1431-2, with the prolongation of daylight for Charlemagne's revenge, vv. 2458-9.

¹⁵Cf. Curtius, op. cit., 233, and Delbouille, op. cit., 151, 153.

¹⁶Beeler, op. cit., 37, says that in the twelfth century even the count of Champagne could call upon the services of only 2,300 knights; and such theoretical figures were always greatly in excess of what might be expected to turn up.

¹⁷E.g., Villehardouin (section xcix, para. 188) reports that the disinherited emperor of Constantinople promised to come on crusade with 10,000 men at arms and to deploy 500 knights to guard the Holy Land.

¹⁸Menéndez Pidal, op. cit., 326, refers to a further lack of topographical precision in the fact that Charlemagne's army, although heading towards Spain, appears to pass through the defiles between Roncevaux and France (vv. 3125-8).

¹⁹I.e., 5,000 knights (v. 3019) + 15,000 (v. 3021-2) + 20,000 (v. 3029 + 20,000 (v. 3039) + 20,000 (v. 3046) + 30,000 (v. 3052) + 40,000 (v. 3063) + *plus de .xl.milie* (v. 3070) + 50,000 (v. 3078) + 100,000 (v. 3085).

ions (vv. 3217, 3262), *the* least of which contains 50,000 knights (v. 3219).

The *Chanson de Guillaume* recounts a series of battles on the plain of L'Archamp or Larchamp,²⁰ which, as the poem stands, has to fulfil the following geographical conditions: it lies on the estuary of the Gironde (vv. 14, 40),²¹ within sight of the walls of Bourges (vv. 99-103),²² three days walk from Barcelona (vv. 1016, 1061), and within apparently easy reach of Orange (vv. 2212-4). The battlefield is divided between mainland-*terre certaine*—and the shore where the Saracens have brought up their ships:

Cil [i.e., the Saracens] issirent fors al sablun e en la gravele,
Si purpristrent defors la certaine terre. (vv. 228-9)²³

Its flat expanse is relieved only by a little hill, from which Vivien surveys the state of the battle (v. 494), and a little stream, muddied and running with blood (vv. 525, 847-850).²⁴ This water Vivien drinks and vomits shortly before his death, a scene which helps to establish him, like Roland, as a Christ-figure.²⁵ This grim and unlocalisable landscape provides an appropriate setting for the massacre of successive armies, defend-

²⁰See J. Wathelet-Willem, *Recherches sur la Chanson de Guillaume: études accompagnées d'une édition*, 2 vols., Bibliothèque de la Fac. de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège, fasc. CCX (Paris: Soc. d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1975), t. I, 603-9, for a discussion of etymology and identification. D. McMillan, ed. of *La Chanson de Guillaume*, S.A.T.F. (Paris: Picard, 1949), observes (Notes, t. II, p. 135): "Le fait est que toute l'unité du poème repose sur les événements de l'Archamp; si, ailleurs, les données topographiques du poète sont d'ordre plutôt fantaisiste, sur ce point il est inébranlable."

²¹McMillan, ed. cit., identifies the text's *Girunde* with the river (Index des noms propres) and gives the vv. cited as *Amunt Girunde en est venu par force*; Wathelet-Willem, seeing *Girunde* as a corruption of an original *Gironne* (a town in Catalonia, op. cit., pp. 610-11), renders the line *A Munt Girunde . . .*

²²References and quotations from McMillan.

²³For the interpretation, of *certaine terre*, see McMillan, note to v. 229. The shore is referred to as *sablun* (v. 228), *sable gravele* (v. 1116), and *graver* (vv. 855, 925, 1097, 1688, 3064).

²⁴The only other water is the salt river of the estuary—cf. v. 846—hence the "major theme . . . of heat and thirst" in the *Guillaume*: see Bennett, art. cit., 199, and Wathelet-Willem, t. I, 306-7.

²⁵Cf. J. Frappier, *Les Chansons de geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange*, I . . . (Paris: Soc. d'Édition d'Enseignement Sup., 1955), 193-7, esp. p. 194.

ing Christian territory against Deramé's invading force of 500,000 Saracens (v. 577; it was earlier estimated at 100,000, v. 212). Vivien's army numbers 10,000 (v. 98), William then brings two successive forces of 30,000 each (vv. 1085, 1507), and Deramé's followers are finally overwhelmed by the combined forces of William's family, numbering 40,000 (v. 2801).²⁶

The battles in the *Roland* and the *Guillaume* are apocalyptic encounters, the supernatural implications of which are echoed in the superhuman achievements of the Frankish warriors. Most notable is the celebrated "coup de Roland," performed thrice by Roland (vv. 1325-34, 1584-9, 1644-50)²⁷ and once by Oliver (v. 1370-5), a single vertical sword stroke through knight, saddle, and horse, which must lie far outside the bounds of possibility. The battle of Roncevaux contains some twenty-six other accounts of single encounters, all but two of which (the cases of Margariz and Marsilie)²⁸ end in the immediate and gory death of the assailant's victim. The commonest death blow (twelve examples) is one from the lance penetrating the opponent's shield and hauberk, embedding the lance and sometimes the pennon too in his body, and throwing him dead from his horse.²⁹ The evidence is that such accounts are not unrealistic.³⁰ In some instances, however, there is considerable amplification:

Vait le férir li quens quanque il pout.
L'escut li freint e l'osberc li desclot,
Trenchet le piz, si li briset les os,
Tute l'eschine li deseuret del dos,
Od sun espiét l'anme li getet fors;
Enpeint le ben, fait li brandir le cors,
Pleine sa hanste del cheval l'abat mort,
En dous meitiez li ad briset le col. (vv. 1198-1205)

Sansun li dux, il vait ferir l'almaçur,

²⁶In fact the figure should be 45,000, as the muster goes as follows: Rainald de Peiter: 4,000 (v. 2548); Aymeri de Narbonne: 7,000 (v. 2559); Garin d'Anseune: 4,000 (v. 2560); Boeve de Cormarchiz: 4,000 (v. 2564); Hernald le flori: 3,000 (v. 2565); Guibelin: 2,000 (v. 2566); Baldewin de Flandres: 1,000 (v. 2572); King Louis: 20,000 (v. 2633).

²⁷A brief description in vv. 1871-2 may designate the same blow inflicted on Faldrun de Pui and twenty-three luckless others.

²⁸Vv. 1311 ff. and 1902-3.

²⁹Vv. 1225-9, 1245-50, 1261-8, 1269-73, 1282-7, 1297-1302, 1304-7, 1379-85, 1536-41, 1573-7, 1599-1603, 1618-22.

³⁰Buttin, art. cit., 79: "Le cavalier n'a pas besoin de faire appel à la vitesse de son cheval pour accroître la puissance de son coup. La force de pénétration que son bras donne à la pointe de son arme, est suffisante pour traverser les broignes et briser les écus."

L'escut li freinst ki est a flurs e ad or,
 Li bons osbercs ne li est guarant prod,
 Trenchet li le coer, le firie e le pulmun,
 Que l'abat [mort], qui qu'en peist u qui nun.
 (vv. 1275-9)

E Oliver chevalchet par l'estor,
 Sa hanste est fait[e], n'en ad que un trunçon,
 E vait férir un paien Malun,
 L'escut li freint ki est ad or e a flur,
 Fors de la teste li met les oilz ansdous;
 E la cervele li chet as piez desuz.
 (vv. 1351-6)³¹

Sword strokes (which include the "coup de Roland") are less frequent and more unrealistic. Oliver fells a Saracen with a single blow (vv. 1550-3), and Roland decapitates Marsilie's son (vv. 1904-5).³² General accounts of the course of the battle are quite prodigious. From the first attack of 100,000 Saracens only one, Margariz, survives; in the second, Roland, Oliver and Turpin between them kill more than 4,000 (v. 1685) and Roland, invincible (vv. 2152-9), dies, himself unwounded, surrounded by 400 enemy dead and injured (vv. 2092-4), and with the remainder of the pagan army put to flight (v. 2164).

The Charlemagne-Baligant battle contains few descriptions of single encounters³³ apart from the final duel between the two leaders in which Charlemagne, encouraged by the angel Gabriel, is enabled to deal the death stroke:

L'elme li freint o les gemmes reflambent
 Trenchet la teste pur la cervele espandre

³¹Further lance encounters are described in vv. 1290-5, 1504-7, 1610-12, 1625-7, 1891-4, 1945-7.

³²B. Thordemann, op. cit., p. 165, notes among the archeological finds at Wisby "several crania . . . in which the coif had been cut to pieces and the blow had partly penetrated the cranium." He continues: "several crania display remarkably deep cuts; fig. 172 shows a cranium with several cuts, the severest of which, striking sagittally from above, cut off a large portion of the left part of the cranium." At Wisby, however, the Gotlanders seem to have worn coifs without basinet (p. 105), whereas the knights in the *Roland* are equipped with helmets.

³³Apart from the Charlemagne-Baligant duel there are six encounters, one not fatal, in which the assailant's weapon is his sword (vv. 3429-43), and five, fatal, in which a lance blow pierces the victim's hauberk (in four cases the shield too) (vv. 3352-7, 3360-4, 3423-8, 3447-50, 3463-8). Clearly in this battle the poet is more interested in the fortunes of the opposing forces than in the achievements of individuals.

E tut le vis tresqu'en la barbe blanche,
Que mort l'abat senz nule recouvrance.
(vv. 3616-9)

The pagans then flee, according to God's will, in a cloud of dust (vv. 3633-4).

The opening battle of the *Chanson de Guillaume* follows similar conventions in including accounts of single encounters, of the general state of the battle, and of the lingering death of the hero. The five single encounters all result in the death of a pagan with, variously, his rib cage burst open (vv. 418-21), a blow piercing as far as the spine (vv. 437-9, 786-8), and the twice repeated sequence:

E fiert un paen sur sa duble targe,
Tute li fent de l'un ur desqu'a l'autre,
E trenchat le braz qui li sist en l'enarme,
Colpe le piz, e trenchad lui la coraille,
Par mi l'eschine sun grant espee li passe,
Tut estendu l'abat mort en la place.
(vv. 321-6, cf. vv. 441-6)

Another source of a lack of realism in this battle is the extraordinary endurance of the hero and his diminishing band of followers in the face of the appalling wounds they sustain. Vivien's forces are reduced from flight from 10,000 to 700, then, as these knights fall, to 300, 100, 20, then 10; and at the end Vivien is left alone against the pagan hordes. The force of 300 is described in these terms:

N'i ad icil n'ait saglante sa resne,
E d'entre ses quisses n'ait vermeille sele;
Devant as braz sustenent lur bouele,
Que lur chevaux nes desrunpent par tere.
(vv. 496-9)

The death for which they themselves are bound is presented through their eyes:

Tels set cenz homes trovent de lur terre,
Entre lur pez trainant lur bowele;
Par mi lur buches" issent fors lur cerveles
E de lur escuz se courent sur l'erbe.
(vv. 529-32)

The feats Vivien performs meanwhile are quite prodigious. At one point he is said to have killed 1,000 pagans (v. 567); he slays 100 just with his lance (v. 762), and whenever he strikes with his sword the blade does not stop until it reaches the ground (vv. 795-6), presumably slicing the victim in half. When at last he dies, Vivien's armor is cut to pieces,³⁴ his

³⁴Cf. Girard's gradually shedding of his armor under different but

scabbard is filled with blood and liver (v. 890), he has been wounded by repeated volleys of spears (vv. 854-9, 871, 877), and his bowels are falling about his feet (v. 886).

This grim tone continues through the next two battles but lightens somewhat with the introduction of Rainouart in the last. His exploits afford comic relief, but if anything they receive even more hyperbolic treatment than those of earlier battles. Knights are crushed to death by his club and their horses broken in half (vv. 3020-2, 3090-2, 3097-9); Rainouart starts the battle by killing 300 (v. 2989), and later an unspecified number of pagans get their backs broken (vv. 3045-6). These and analogous feats of strength assure the eventual victory.

In *Raoul de Cambrai*, the treatment of topography and of battle scenes is quite different.³⁶ The events of the first 5,555 lines of the text all take place within the area defined by a line running from Paris through Laon, Cambrai, Lens, Abbeville, Pontoise, and back to Paris, an area clearly well-known to the poet, whose narrative is packed with place names. This geographical precision extends to the first part of the so-called *Raoul II* (vv. 5555 - c. 6581),³⁷ and its local character is in contrast with the vaguely sketched topography of southern France and Spain, which forms the background to most of the events from v. 6582 onwards.³⁸ The land is the initial subject of the action, as Raoul attempts to gain possession of the Vermandois,³⁹ and barons are identified by the name of their fief—indeed are identified *with* it—which gives them both an area of influence and a specific amount of power.⁴⁰

almost equally gruelling circumstances.

³⁵The second battle contains the paired deaths of Girard (v. 1137 ff.) and Guischarde (v. 1178 ff.), a pagan is killed by William (vv. 1222-4) and a general description notes a further ten deaths (v. 1144); in the third, Gui is the hero of four single encounters (v. 1822 ff.) which culminate in a "coup de Roland" (vv. 1845-51), and William cuts right through the thigh of Desramé, then of Alderufe (vv. 1920-26, 2145-8), further wounding sixty and killing fifteen (v. 2089), then killing 140 (v. 2175).

³⁶What follows uses material from pp. 231-61 of ray thesis, already referred to; cf. W. Calin, *The Old French Epic of Revolt* (Genève: Droz; Paris: Minard, 1962), 184-5.

³⁷Quotations and references from the edition by P. Meyer and A. Longnon, S.A.T.F. (Paris: Picard, 1882).

³⁸The towns named—Blaie, Bordeaux, Saint-Gilles, Cordova—have obvious epic associations.

³⁹The list of the fiefs which make up the Vermandois is repeated, with variations, six times in the text: vv. 811-3, 876-8, 987-90, 1004-6 1194-5, 5882-3.

⁴⁰The exceptions are Guerri, referred to as Guerri le Sor, and Bernier, who has no lands; contrast the usage of the *Roland* and the *Guillaume* in this respect.

The geographical situation of the protagonists is directly relevant to the battle scenes. The proximity of the Vermandois to the Cambrésis, and to the king's capitals at Paris, Laon, and Soissons, permits the quick onslaughts and retreats (e.g., vv. 1218-21, where Raoul passes from the Arouaise into Vermandois) and the generally high pitch of hostility combined with small scale engagements. The sack of a small town, a siege, and ambushes make up much of the poem and seem to have been more characteristic of warfare at the period than full blown field encounters between opposing armies.⁴¹

Sizes of forces, though scarcely realistic, are more so than in the *Roland* or the *Guillaume*. The familiarity of the territory seems to exert a restraining influence here: thus when the whole Vermandois family unites to repel Raoul their army numbers 11,000 (v. 2097), but when Ybert alone ambushes Louis, he does so with a force of only 3,000 (v. 5893).

Raoul's first act as he marches on the Vermandois is to sack the small town of Origni. The palissade enclosing the pasturelands of the abbey there proves useless for defense. It is quickly hacked down (v. 1433 ff.) and the townsfolk, beaten back to the walls, can defend themselves only with stones and picks (vv. 1440-2). When the town is burned, we see the destruction of the nuns and domestic property, all grotesquely and pathetically unsuited to the needs of war:

Ardent ces loges, ci fondent li planchier;
 Li vin espendent, s'en flotent li celie[r] ;
 Li bacon ardent, si chiéent li lardie[r] ;
 Li saïns fait le grant feu esforcier,
 Fiert soi es tors et el maistre cloichier.
 Les covretures covint jus trebuchier;
 Entre .ij. murs ot si grant charbonier,
 Les nonains ardent: trop i ot grant brasier . . .
 (vv. 1483-90)

This motif of the vulnerability of the land recurs throughout the text, every campaign being preceded by accounts of foraging, pillage, and arson (vv. 122-3, 3854-5, 5897, 6674, 7712-3, 8566-7). It appears that these were normal accompaniments of strife at the time. The common people are seen as victims of war; the sack of Origni is provoked by its burghers' attempts to defend themselves against looting by Raoul's followers, when Gautier attacks Saint-Quentin a *bourgeois* is the first to be killed (v. 3857), and the townspeople are seen by Guerri as a source of booty at Saint-Cloud (vv. 6431-5). Only once do they play an effective rôle in defense, when they save the knights of Vermandois from Gautier's attack (v. 3907 ff.).

⁴¹Cf. Beeler, op. cit., p. 45.

⁴²R. Fossier, *La Terre et les hommes en Picardie, Jusqu'à la fin du XIII^e siècle*. Publications de la Fac. des lettres et sciences humaines de Paris Sorbonne, tt. 48 and 49 (Paris, 1968), p. 455.

The descriptions of scenes of battle are not marked by any grandeur. The first major battle, just beyond Origni, takes place in a field. It is raining and the terrain is boggy, so that the horses slip (vv. 2774-5, 2781-2). A later engagement involves the ambush, from a little wood (a *bruellet*, v. 6327), of a wedding party in a meadow.

This low key approach extends to descriptions of fighting. Up to line 6581, there are only sixteen single encounters resulting in death. Most of these involve a blow from the assailant's lance, which penetrates the opponent's shield or hauberk or both, and throws him dead from his horse (ten examples).⁴³ On five further occasions, a sword blow cuts through the helmet and coif of the hauberk, cutting into the brain (vv. 3104-7), sometimes as far as the teeth (vv. 2620-3, 3453-7, 4047-52), and on one occasion as far as the shoulder (vv. 2694-9). The only other description of a single encounter is the following:

Grant colp li done sor l'escu au lion,
Q'i li trencha son ermin peliçon,
Demi le foie et demi le poumon;
L'une moitié en chaï el sablon,
L'autre moitiés demora sor l'arçon,
Mort le trébuche del destrier d'Aragon.
(vv. 3339-44)

These may not be altogether realistic, but they are more so than the descriptions in the *Roland* and the *Guillaume*. Moreover there are several encounters which result in mutilation rather than death. Bernier loses an ear (v. 5012), Ernaut his hand (v. 2863), and Roucoul his leg below the knee (v. 2924). Such wounds are not inconceivable; Joinville, for instance, describes mutilations to the face in which a knight loses his nose (section xlvi) or his eye (liv), and the digging at Wisby uncovered several skeletons with severed bones.⁴⁴ There are also occasions when a knight attempts to engage an opponent and fails to do so because of the press (vv. 2490-2, 2526-9, 4025-7, 4235-7).

The general descriptions of the progress of battles are relatively restrained. In the first battle just outside Origni, Guerri kills fourteen with his sword (v. 2545), and Raoul decapitates more than twenty (v. 2670), then overturns more than seven (v. 2715). In the second battle, Guerri kills thirty (v. 3298), and three of the Vermandois kill three of the

⁴³Vv. 2495-9, 2506-10, 2533-8, 2726-30, 2752-6, 2766-70, 3281-6, 4211-3, 5926-9, 6108-12.

⁴⁴Thordemann, op. cit., p. 171: two severed shoulder blades, three ulnas, one femur, twelve tibias, eleven fibulas. The mutilations sustained by Ernaut and Roucoul are more realistic in that, although the *Raoul* is at the earliest a late twelfth century text, its knights do not appear to be wearing armor of any more recent design than the knights in the *Roland*, and specifically they seem not to have chain mail leggings or mittens of the kind which came into use in the course of the twelfth century.

Cambrésiens and vice-versa (vv. 3349-53, 3364-8). These battles, furthermore, are often inconclusive. The first ends with a temporary truce which is then broken. The second results in the rout of the Cambrésiens, but after a number of years they reassemble their forces and try unsuccessfully to lay siege to Saint-Quentin. The Vermandois then try equally unsuccessfully to take Cambrai. Two duels, both inconclusive, follow these engagements, and the events up to v. 6581 conclude with a series of ambushes in which the different factions inflict injuries on one another without securing a decisive victory, so that peace is eventually made by treaty.

In *Garin le Loheren* there is a further development towards greater realism. The poem is justly famous for its extraordinarily detailed and accurate topography.⁴⁵ Whereas in *Raoul* only a small area of northern France was involved in war, in *Garin* the struggle extends to the whole of France, because of the distribution of the two factions' fiefs. As Map I shows, these are so interspersed as to offer endless scope for ambush, siege warfare, and plunder.⁴⁶

Owing to the length of this epic, I propose to take some 3,000 lines from v. 2502⁴⁷ for detailed study, drawing on the remainder for corroborative or corrective material only. The scope and detail of the poet's geographical knowledge can be illustrated by the itineraries of the various campaigns which make up this section of the text:

a) [Map II] Fromont de Lens, having mustered his troops at Saint-Quentin, marches via Crèvecœur on Cambrai, to which he lays siege. He is joined there by Baldwin of Flanders, who brings an army down from Douai. Hues de Cambrai (a nephew of *Garin le Loheren*) sends messengers to *Garin* and the emperor Pepin at Laon, who in turn sends for *Garin's* brother Begues at Belin. Fromont sends for help to his uncle Bernart de Naisil (=Naix).

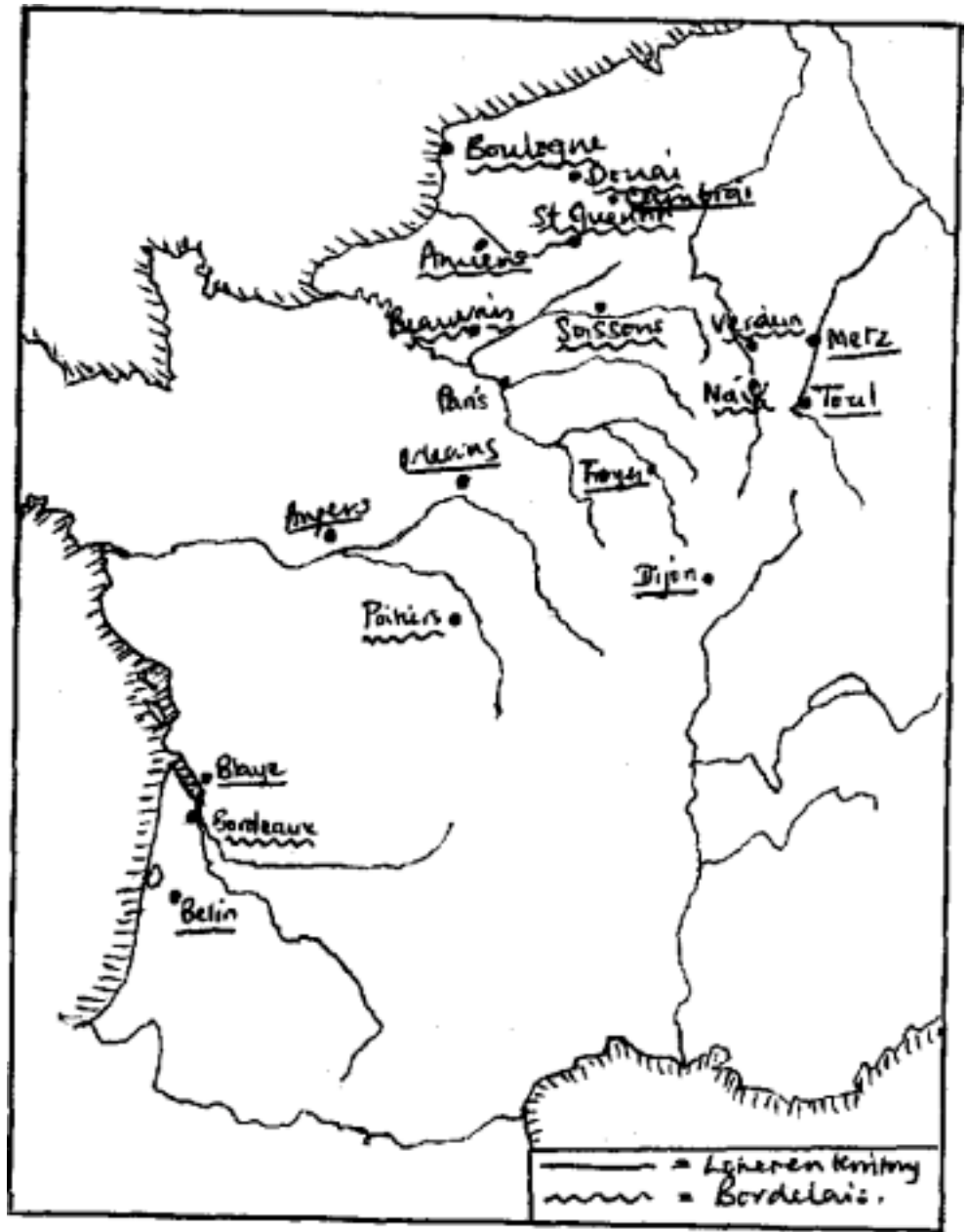
b) [Map III] Bernart de Naisil seizes and plunders the Loheren-held town of Toul, then proceeds via Til-Châtel to attack Dijon which is held by another nephew of *Garin's*, Auberi le Bourguignon.

c) [Map III] Begues raises an army and starts to march northwards, when he is intercepted by a further messenger, this time from Dijon rather than Cambrai. The poet records his itinerary via Bourbon-Lancy, Beaujeu and Belleville to Lyon, which he takes. He then seizes Mâcon, passes through the Loheren-held territories of Chalon-sur-Saône and Beaune, and details half his army to go to the relief of Dijon. However, when Bernart de Naisil learns of their approach he abandons his siege and retreats

⁴⁵See R. Parmly, *The Geographical references in the Chanson de Garin le Loheren*, Publications of the Institute of French Studies Inc., Columbia University (New York, 1935).

⁴⁶All three maps have been adapted from Parmly, op. cit.

⁴⁷References and quotations are from the edition by J. E. Vallerie (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Bros. Inc., 1947).



Map 1

towards Naix with Begues and Auberi le Bourguignon in pursuit. This Loheren force passes through Etang-Vergy, Til-Châtel, Grancy-le-Château, and Lengres to Châteauvillain, which is captured.

d) [Map II] Meanwhile back at Cambrai Hues has sent a further messenger to his brother Gautier de Hainault, who musters an army to relieve the siege of Cambrai. Fromont anticipates him, however, by taking fright and withdrawing to Saint-Quentin. He is pursued there by the combined forces of Pepin, Garin, Gautier and Hues, who institute a siege. We learn that Fremont too has sent out further messengers to Aimon, his brother and lord of Bordeaux, who sets sail from Bordeaux and lands at Boulogne, and then proceeds to blockade the towns of Ham, Chauny and Péronne in order to prevent supplies reaching the Loheren army.

e) [Map II] Begues continues his march through Rimaucourt, Reynel, and Gondrecourt to Naix. He takes Naix, Monclin, and Verdun, and then [Map III] marches to Saint-Quentin via Grandpré, Neufchâtel-sur-Aisne, Pierrepont, and Ribemont. After participating for some time in the siege, Begues sets out to take the blockaded towns Chauny, Ham, and Péronne, and then lays waste the countryside round Montdidier and Clermont, taking the latter. Fromont is forced to make peace.

The land, as in *Raoul*, is directly relevant to the action, since the hostilities between the Loherens and the Bordelais are initially sparked off by territorial disputes. The Bordelais feel threatened when Begues is given the duchy of Gascony (vv. 1055-70) and are then outraged when Pepin seizes Soissons, apparently originally a Loheren fief but at that time under Bordelais control, and gives it to Garin:

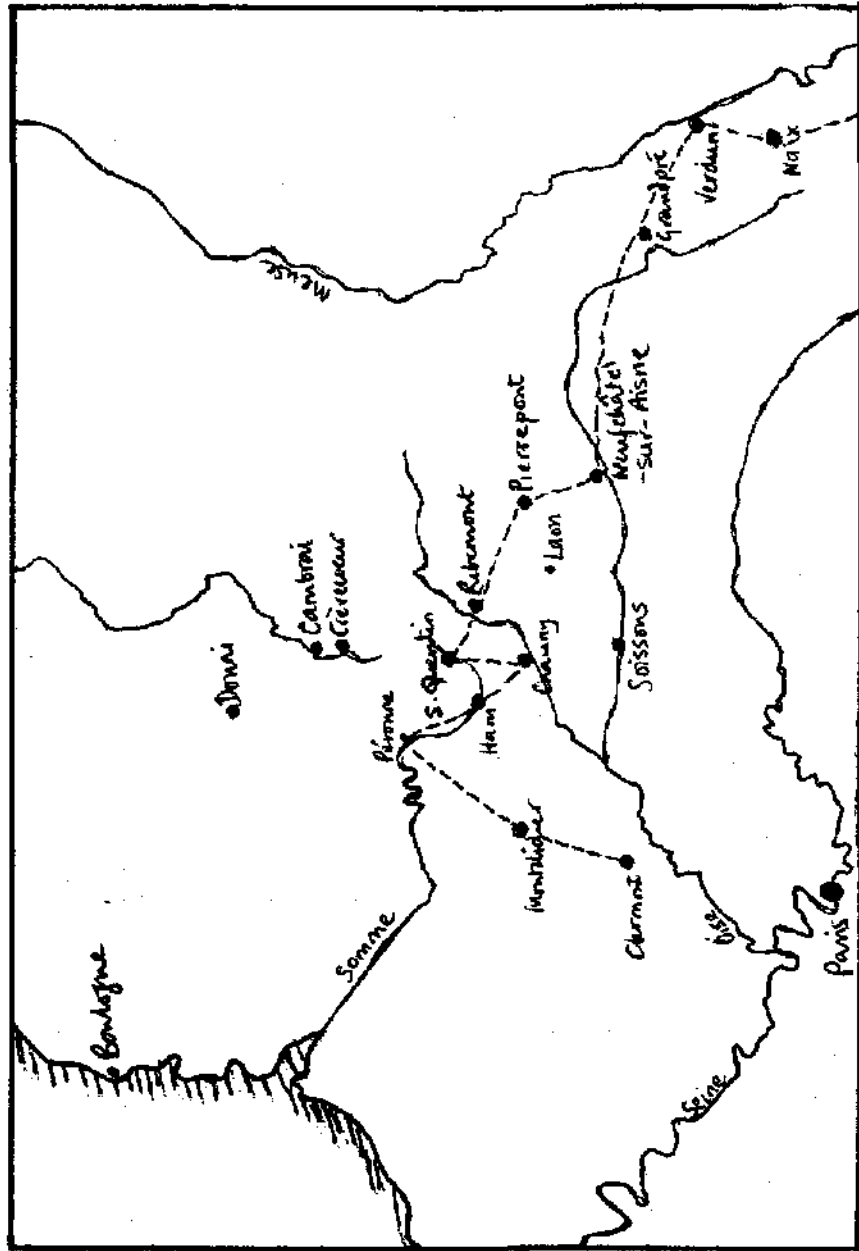
"Las!" dist Fromons, "or sui je mal baillis.
N'ai tant de terre o me couchasse vis,
Ne seré mors ou je fuisse enfois." (vv. 2707-9)

These lines bear a striking resemblance to Guerri's words to Raoul:

"N'as tant de terre, par verté le te di,
Ou tu peüses conreer .j. ronci."
(*Raoul de Cambrai*, vv. 663-4)

Also in common with *Raoul* is the identification of the protagonists by the name of their fief, and the identification with their territorial interests. And in *Garin* too the land suffers greatly in the course of warfare, each side using pillage and arson to impoverish the enemy, and each side striking terror into the peasantry (e.g., vv. 2951-61). The description of the firing of Bordeaux may be set beside that of the sack of Origni quoted above:

⁴⁸Cf. vv. 3331-43, 3361, 3586-9, 3644-50, 3853-9, 5252, 4400-3, 4595-7, 5246-8, 5261-3, 6587-9, 6655-8, etc.



Map II

Ardent ces sales et li fex s'esbaudist;
Li fex enforce qui tost les ot sospris;
Molt par i prennent nos jenz et vair et gris.
Li fex chei, remez est li estris;
Toz i fu arz et li pains et li vins,
Li palefroi, li mul et li roncins,
Et des borgois i ot arz .iiii.xx.
Estre les famés et les enfanz petiz.
(vv. 10073-80)

Again, as in *Raoul*, the familiarity of the territory may affect the poet's estimates of the size of armies. Although these tend to be somewhat erratic, it is noteworthy that the only really large forces (30,000, v. 3134 and 40,000, v. 4710) are those associated with Baldwin of Flanders. Some garrisons are extremely small—for example, Hues has only seven score knights in Cambrai (v. 2964)—and the great majority of forces are between 2,000 and 4,000.⁴⁹ Mercenaries, *serjanz*, and crossbowmen figure prominently in these armies. Begues's relief of Chauny, Ham, and Péronne is achieved with a force of 3,000 knights and four score crossbowmen and *serjanz* (vv. 5239-42); Bernart de Naisil's first action on taking Toul is to use the booty to pay his mercenaries (v. 3339 ff.); in a subsequent campaign, the Bordelais have 1,000 archers (v. 8552), and a Loheren has an army of only seven score knights plus 1,000 mercenaries (v. 11199).⁵⁰

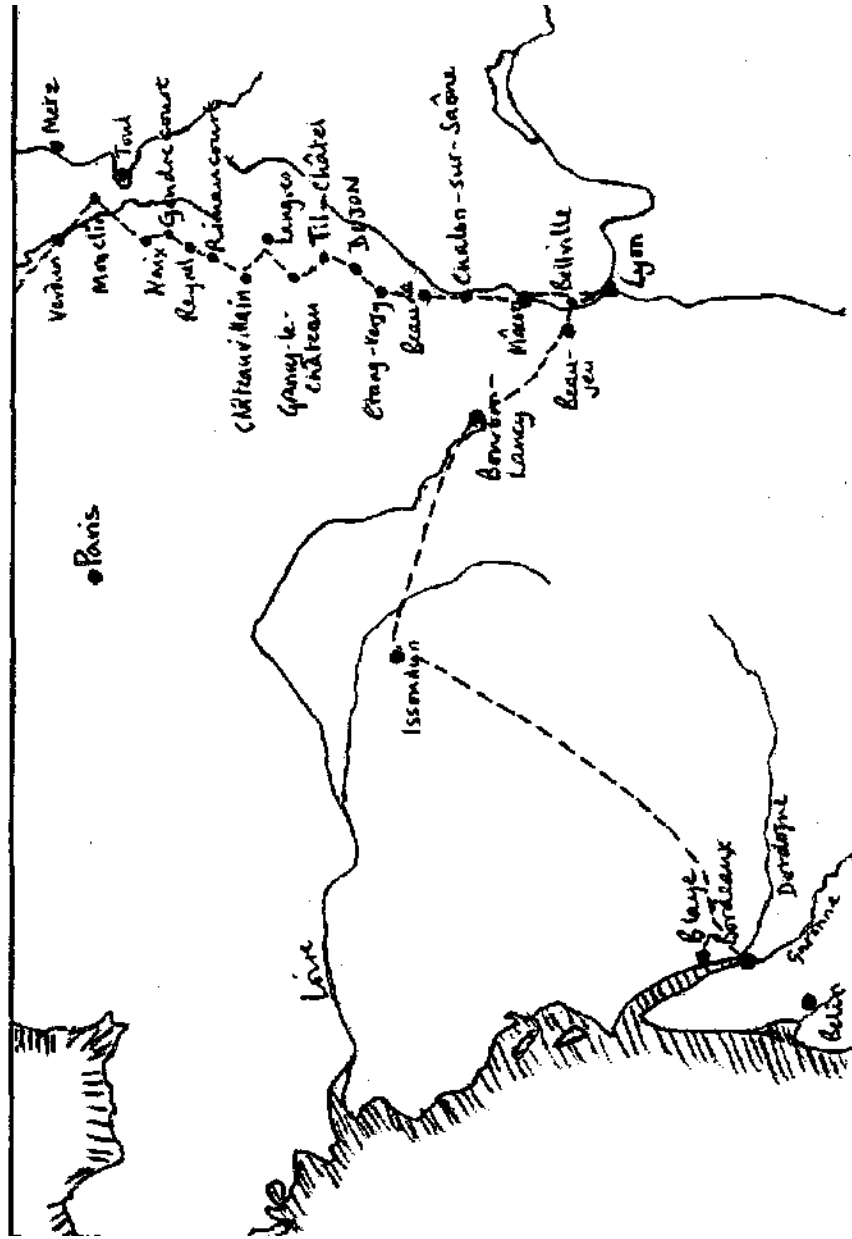
The majority of single encounters in this section of the text result not in death but in the unhorsing of the victim, who is then generally remounted by his companions (ten examples);⁵¹ in a further encounter, Bègues keeps his stirrups but receives a face wound which the Bordelais believe will prove fatal, but from which he in fact recovers (vv. 4961-73); and there are four brief accounts of knights' deaths, one by decapitation (v. 4831), the remaining three by a lance blow through the chest (vv. 3026-7, 4836-8, 4840-2). Descriptions of single encounters vary considerably, however, from one part of the text to another. For example, in a battle outside Bordeaux (v. 11202 ff.) there are eight, of which only one results just in unhorsing, the other seven all involving fatal lance wounds.⁵² A further battle at Verdun presents a different balance again.

⁴⁹Bernart de Naisil goes to attack Dijon with 2,000 (v. 3350), Begues is said to have a force of 3,000 knights and 1,000 *serjanz* (vv. 3540, 3543), Mâcon is guarded by a defense force of 2,000 (v. 3612), Aimon de Bordeaux sets sail with 2,000 knights (v. 4228), etc.

⁵⁰Though in the next line, the poet says *Il sunt si home, de lui doivent tenir*. Is he referring back to the knights? The text is not altogether clear,

⁵¹Vv. 3068-84, 4114-25, 4496-4500, 4543-5, 4758-61, 4786-9, 4802-3, 4815-21 (the victim breaks his back in his fall), 4828-30; 4308-18 (the unhorsed knight is taken prisoner).

⁵²Vv. 11224-9, 11235-8, 11240-4, 11250-5, 11258, 11270-4, 11291-6.



Map III

There are seventeen encounters: in five the victim is simply unhorsed;⁵³ in two the unhorsed knight is totally incapacitated, one with a broken neck (vv. 14999-15003), the other trampled underfoot by more than twenty horses so that his recovery is greatly in doubt and he ends his days in a monastery (vv. 15044-57); one man has his arm cut off (vv. 15118-21) while another sustains a thigh wound (vv. 15192-3); three knights die from unspecified strokes (vv. 15084-6, 15090-1, 15176-9); and the remaining five are pierced through the chest by lance blows.⁵⁴ These battle scenes seem impressive by their realism.

General reports of numbers slain are quite moderate too. In a sortie from Cambrai, Hues's followers unhorse 100 (v. 3141) and kill many (v. 3142); in a subsequent sortie they kill *pluisors* (v. 3156). Ysoré knocks down three and kills a fourth (v. 5201); and Bernart de Naisil's men later kill ten (v. 6931), but lose thirty-six (v. 6954).

The purpose of nearly all the fighting in *Garin* is the seizing of enemy towns, not so much for the gain of the attacking army (though plunder has an important economic function) as to inflict loss on the other side: the towns seized are generally destroyed. Two main tactics are used for gaining entry to a hostile town. The first, siege warfare, is described with far more detail than in *Raoul* and appears to offer scope for the deployment of strategy by both sides. The defendants harry the besiegers with constant sorties, especially at night (e.g., v. 3175 ff.); they fortify their keeps (e.g., vv. 7564-5) and defend them with archers; and if they have advance warning, they make the approach of the attacking force as difficult as possible (v. 4264 ff.). The assailants, for their part, have the choice between simply preventing supplies reaching the town (e.g., in the siege of Saint-Quentin the inhabitants have to start eating their horses, v. 5274), or taking it by storm (e.g., the siege of Bordeaux, v. 10041 ff.). The other means of taking a town is by ambush. The attacking army lies in wait before dawn for the townspeople to let out their livestock, and when they do so, the attackers rush the gates (cf. vv. 3552 ff., 9829 ff., 11203 ff.). With its accumulation of practical details, *Garin* reads like a cross between an art of war and a travelogue.

Finally, as in *Raoul*, the majority of the battles fought are inconclusive, and campaigns most frequently end not with a resounding victory but with a strategic withdrawal or surrender followed by treaty. Fromont, for example, prefers to relinquish his siege of Cambrai rather than fight the combined Loheren army; and the siege of Saint-Quentin is brought to an end by his asking for a truce and promising Pepin that he will submit to the judgment of the royal court.

Clearly in *Raoul* and *Garin* we find a different world from that of the *Roland* or the *Guillaume*, and one far more in conformity with historical reality. It remains to consider more closely how far this greater realism is related to the greater accuracy of their topography.

It could be argued that these two poems are more realistic in every

⁵³Vv. 15077-82, 15083, 15180, 15181, 15182.

⁵⁴Vv. 14982-7, 15021-5, 15092-6, 15112-5, 15161-6.

respect. It is impossible to deny that there is some truth in this. Yet the last part of *Raoul*, from v. 6582, shows a marked decline in realism which coincides with the shift from the precise and local northern French setting to southern France and Spain. The terrains of the duel with Auciber and the battle in which Bernier encounters Julien are not specified; numbers of forces are much higher (the Saracen army at Saint-Gilles is 60,000 strong, vv. 6618-20), and the fighting becomes less realistic with a return of the "coup de Roland" (vv. 7909-11), sword strokes through the head to the teeth predominating over lance blows (vv. 7808-10, 7817-9; 6638-42), numerous decapitations (v. 6647), and the inflicting of heavy losses (vv. 7894-5).

This suggests an alternative objection: that it is subject matter which determines the degree of realism, and that the distinction which should be drawn is not between more or less precise topography but between Christian fighting Saracen and one feudatory fighting another. Again there is undoubtedly truth in such an objection, but the first 2,500 lines of *Garin*, which deal with wars against pagans on French soil, suggest that topography still acts as an influence for realism in this poem at least. In these lines the poet's geographical expertise is as well instanced as subsequently. It must be admitted that they are in some ways less realistic: a miracle occurs (v. 533 ff.), numbers of losses are somewhat high (20,000 dead or wounded after an engagement at Sens, v. 351), and numbers of troops are high too, with the largest Saracen force mentioned being 200,000 strong (v. 1719), the largest Frankish one 100,000 (v. 1200). However the other Frankish armies are much smaller (30,000, v. 320, and 20,000, v. 371), and the descriptions of fighting are very restrained. There are nine descriptions of single encounters, of which eight result in death from a lance blow⁵⁶ and the ninth wounds the king Charles Martel and kills his horse (vv. 614-6). He is remounted, but is too weak to continue fighting and, in fact, dies soon after the battle. Two leading Franks are wounded by Saracen darts, one, Garin's father, being killed outright (v. 992), the other dying a few days after the battle (v. 1949 ff.). The fighting takes the form of sieges, with the tactical disposition of troops and strategic retreats, as well as pitched battles. In general, then, this part of the text does not deviate very markedly from the standard of realism of the rest.

A third possible objection is that I have taken too little account of dates: earlier texts might be typically less realistic than some of the later ones. Date does seem to me to be a factor of some importance, but the topographical distinction still applies in at any rate one text. The *Couronnement de Louis* is usually dated c. 1130, and is set alternately in France and Italy. The poet's knowledge of western France, notably Tours, seems good; his knowledge of Italy is sketchy.⁵⁷ The Italian episodes are

⁵⁵This blow also appears, however, in the final battle outside Arras, vv. 8676-80.

⁵⁶Vv. 213-5, 436-9, 513-9, 575-80, 634-7, 1895-7, 1920-3, 1930-2.

⁵⁷*Le Couronnement de Louis*, ed. E. Langlois, 2nd ed., C.f.m.a. →

epic set pieces, cast in a heroic mould, with teeming hordes of Saracens and decisive duels against pagan champions, of whom one is a monstrous giant; the French ones involve far smaller numbers of troops and less slaughter, long and arduous campaigns, and tactical fighting such as William's positioning of his troops at Tours, or the use of ambush by Richard of Normandy.

It is clear that there is a very wide range in the degree of realism found in the battle scenes of chansons de geste: and though this may be partly connected with poetic individuality, subject matter, and date of composition, it is also linked with the knowledge of topography which moulds the imagination of the poet and conditions the expectations of his audience.

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(Paris: Champion, 1925). The poet speaks of the Tiber (v. 1269), and landscapes his battlefields with hills (vv. 606, 683, 899, 1211) but that is all the topographical information he provides.