

# Historical Perspective and the Song of Roland

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When reading the *Song of Roland* (French *Chanson de Roland*), it is apparent early on that Roland's death in the defense of his uncle Charlemagne will become the stuff of legend. Indeed, the popularity of the *Song of Roland* makes it the defining blueprint for the *chanson de geste*, songs of heroic deeds that highlight the protagonist's chivalric and martial prowess in combat. Outside of the medieval world, Roland's qualities of valor, loyalty, and sacrifice are in fact so popular that his tale serves as the French national epic to this day. Based on the actual August 15, 778 Battle of Roncevaux described in Einhard's *The Life of Charlemagne* in which Christian Basques ambush Charlemagne's rearguard while traveling through a Pyrenees mountain pass, the *Roland* is a highly fictional, dramatized retelling of a relatively minor event in the emperor's biography. In the retelling, the Basques are transformed into a Muslim hoard numbering in the tens of thousands, and Charlemagne's rearguard is made up of the greatest knights in Christendom, all of whom die in the defense of their emperor.

The central problem in reading the *Roland* is that it is faithful to the historical account of Einhard in name only. Only Roland and Charlemagne have any real connection to the eighth-century battle. Those who study the *Roland* must realize they are reading a late eleventh/early twelfth-century poem derived from an oral tradition stretching back 300 years that has been constantly reinterpreted in modern times. With that said, the *Roland* is an excellent example of how to understand secondary sources effectively; namely, it is a text that better reflects the time period in which it was written rather than the time period in which it is set. As a result, the *Song of Roland*, in its most popular recorded form, cannot be viewed as an analysis of eighth-century Carolingian military society; rather, the tale of Roland's sacrifice highlights the contemporary beliefs and ideals of its late eleventh and early twelfth-century knightly audience through its focus on the character of Charlemagne, the role of the feudal vassal, and the allure of the Crusades.

## *The Historical Account and Manuscripts*

The only surviving historical reference to the Battle of Roncevaux and the death of Roland appears in Einhard's *The Life of Charlemagne*. According to the courtier, Charlemagne's campaign in Spain is less a seven-year grand crusade as the *Roland* describes and more a brief foray into vulnerable territory in which the king "was vigorously and almost constantly pursuing the war with the Saxons."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the actual battle is, in reality, an ambush by Christian Basque raiders who attack Charlemagne's rear baggage train. This is in stark contrast to the *Roland*, in which four hundred thousand Muslim soldiers meet Roland and his twenty thousand Frankish knights in heated combat. The following is Einhard's conclusion of what can be described as Charlemagne's only real defeat in the biography:

In the battle, Eggihard, the overseer of the king's table, Anselm, the count of the palace, and Roland, the prefect of the Breton March, were killed, along with many others. The deed could not be avenged at that time, because the enemy had so dispersed that not even a rumor remained as to where they might be sought.<sup>2</sup>

These two sentences reveal the liberties the *Roland* takes with the historical account. Roland is upgraded from prefect of the Breton March to Charlemagne's nephew (and holds more influence than the king's own son, Louis the Pious), the armies on both sides are inflated to gargantuan proportions, and Charlemagne immediately avenges the massacre of his rearguard. These differences show a disconnect between the actual history of Roncevaux and the composition of the *Roland* roughly 300 years later. Whether intentionally altered or simply forgotten, these differences form the core of what the *Song of Roland* would become to its medieval audience—a story of knightly honor and sacrifice that coincided with the contemporary societal and political issues of early twelfth-century France.

The Battle of Roncevaux receives no attention in Notker the Stammerer's *The Deeds of Charlemagne*. Nevertheless, Notker's presentation of Charlemagne connects much more strongly with the *Roland* than Einhard's does. Compared to Einhard's humanizing, Suetonian-inspired biography, the Charlemagne of the *Roland* and of Notker's work is a hero of the French people, almost beyond the point of human comprehension. Professor Lewis Thorpe, a philologist of French and veteran of the Second World War views Charlemagne in this heroic role, claiming he sees "Notker as the first to record stories about Charlemagne" even though Einhard wrote his biography earlier.<sup>3</sup> The *Song of Roland* follows in this tradition. The Carolingian emperor is presented as a legendary, devout individual who brings together a massive empire through his strength of arms and devotion to God. He is beyond fault, his word is the law of Christendom, and those who serve loyally under him are the greatest barons of all France.

For those studying the *Song of Roland*, it is important to note that there are actually seven different recorded versions of the tale, the most popular being the Digby 23 manuscript housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. The manuscript has been dated between 1125 and 1170 and is most likely based on a lost original work composed as early

<sup>1</sup> Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, revised ed., trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 24, c. X.

<sup>2</sup> Einhard, "Charlemagne," 25, c. X.

<sup>3</sup> Notker the Stammerer, "The Deeds of Charlemagne," in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, revised ed., trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 51.

as 1060. Somewhat contemporary accounts of the epic seem to support this idea of its circulation, at least in the form of well-known oral poetry. The Anglo-Norman chronicler Wace writes in his 1160 *Roman de Rou* that a member of William the Conqueror's household, Taillefer, sung a version of the song at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Whether or not this was the case, the fact that Wace references Roland and Roncevaux shows that, at least in his own time, it was a popular work worthy enough to be included in his chronicle.

Of the seven different recorded versions of Roland's death, there is a general categorization of the works based on their specific syllabic repetitiveness. Two versions, including the Digby 23 manuscript, utilize assonance, the frequent repetition of vowel sounds within the individual lines of the poem. The other five follow a more distinct rhyming pattern at the end of each line. Both configurations help flavor the narrative of the poem and serve as useful mnemonic devices to those writing and reciting the legend, but the assonance and rhyming traditions also feature significant thematic differences. In the assonant version (i.e. Digby 23), the heroes often have conflicting values, as seen in the verbal arguments between Roland and Oliver. At the same time, all the main characters, even Ganelon and his Saracen allies, are described as worthy individuals. In comparison, the rhyming tradition of the Roland features the Franks as a united social unit, and utterly demonizes Ganelon and his compatriots.

Within this context of syllabic, thematic, and authorial differences between the various versions of the Roland, it is important to consider: who would have read it, to whom would it have been read, and for what purpose? Scholars have long debated the authorship of the *Roland*, ranging from "traditionalists" who see it as a long compilation of ongoing oral narratives since 778, to "individualists" who attribute the poem to a single individual. The Digby 23 *Roland* appears to take the individualist approach; the final line of the poem names a certain Tuoldus as the author (vv. 4002). Whoever wrote it, the sheer length of the Roland—4002 lines—and its emphasis on detailed, violent combat imply that the work was meant to be read over a period of time to a knightly audience. In his extensive study on the compilation and use of the Digby 23 *Roland*, Andrew Taylor makes an argument that only clerics could have presented such a work, "since only if it took the form of a written text would a poem have the prestige or authority to command a listener's attention for four thousand lines." The *Roland* certainly could be retold over the period of a few days. Possible "acts" for its performance could include the events up until the Battle of Roncevaux, the battle itself, and Charlemagne's vengeance and conclusion. Viewed as a poem read by clerics to a knightly audience, the *Roland* fits well into the knightly and religious ideals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the remainder of this paper will explore.

### **Charlemagne – "The Father of Europe"**

For all the pomp given to Roland's sacrifice, Charlemagne has an equal if not greater role in the poem. His name is the first word of the poem, and his endeavors in Spain are the frame that surrounds all of Roland's actions. Furthermore, it is made clear early on that the complexity of the Charlemagne of history is sidelined, as the Charlemagne of the *Roland* is first and foremost a holy warrior and conqueror. According to Ganelon, Charlemagne's conquered territory includes Apulia and Calabria in southern Italy along with England (vv. 370-76), none of which were historically conquered by Charlemagne. At his death, Roland expands upon his uncle's conquests, particularly the ones in which he had a direct role. According to his own accounts, Roland captured not only all of France and the lands listed above, but also Scotland, Ireland, and even Constantinople (vv. 2322-36). Simply put, the *Roland* presents Charlemagne very much at the head of a revitalized Roman Empire, which, by Notker the Stammerer's time, was already the popularly accepted image of the emperor. In the epic, Charlemagne controls more territory than he ever did historically (Spain can be added to the list by the end of the poem). In storytelling, the epics of Charlemagne and Roland are a source of pride. As Andrew Taylor puts it, a storyteller could "boast of their repertoire" by reciting tales of Charlemagne and Roland.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Charlemagne is meant to be portrayed as a larger-than-life figure who 'civilized' Europe for Christians. Furthermore, by listing the lands that belong to him, the lands not under his control and the people who live in them (i.e. non-Christians) are put in stark contrast.

As a Christian conqueror, the Charlemagne of the *Roland* is portrayed as a king tasked by God to continually fight on behalf of oppressed Christians everywhere. The theme of conversion is prominent in the poem, particularly with King Marsile's wife Queen Bramimonde, the most prominent Muslim character to convert in the story (vv. 3673-

<sup>4</sup> Jane Gilbert, "The Chanson de Roland," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22; Glyn Burgess, trans., *The Song of Roland* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 8; Andrew Taylor, "Was There a Song of Roland?" *Speculum* 76 (2001): 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, "Chanson de Roland," 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, "Song of Roland," 63. See also Robert Francis Cook, *The Sense of the Song of Roland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 133.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the supposed composition of the Oxford Roland (1125-1170), it is possible these places are listed to reference the roughly contemporary expansion of the Normans into England and southern Italy. As has been seen with the reference to Wace, the Normans certainly were not above using legends like the Roland to promote their own culture.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, "Song of Roland," 55.

74). Even more than a priest like Archbishop Turpin, Charlemagne is the center of religious piety. At the conclusion of the poem, the Archangel Gabriel approaches Charlemagne and tasks him to rally his army in order to help more Christians besieged by pagan forces (vv. 3993-98). By the twelfth century, Charlemagne was a symbol of Christian expansionism, reflecting the ideal that it was every good ruler's moral duty to defend his fellow worshippers. As shall be discussed later on, this idea of Christian authority, particularly in the context of the Crusades, is central to the *Roland* and its audience.

The final aspect of Charlemagne in the *Roland* is his duty and power as king and emperor. With the idea of Charlemagne as the medieval model of behavior in mind, Sarah Kay offers a thought-provoking analysis of the role of kingship within the *chanson de geste*. Simply put, the role of Charlemagne is not that of a literal king, but that of a representation of an "ideological hierarchy" in which one can explore secular and religious power.<sup>12</sup> This analysis revolves around the trial of Ganelon at the end of the poem. Even though Charlemagne is king and emperor, he does not hold the political power necessary to condemn Ganelon to death. His barons are the ones who render judgment, and they are won over by Ganelon's defense (vv. 3807-11). It takes a trial by combat and divine protection in order for Charlemagne's verdict to be enforced. Here again Charlemagne returns to a religious role, in which he is the ideal of the king serving in God's name to provide a source of unity and order.<sup>13</sup>

While he may not have direct power outside of the battlefield in the *Roland*, Charlemagne nevertheless "epitomizes value" in the form of his reputation as a warrior and arbiter and is therefore a model for future generations of monarchs.<sup>14</sup> His barons have the power to disagree with his judgment, but they still look to him for approval and support. These disagreements between the emperor and his vassals may be an allusion to the frequent Carolingian problem of rebellious magnates. Indeed, Charlemagne, his predecessors, and his successors spent much time bringing rebel counties back under royal and, later, imperial control.<sup>15</sup> However, there is also a strong allusion to the Capetian dynasty of twelfth-century France, which was the ruling dynasty of France at the time of the *Roland's* composition. At this time, the Capetians held very little monarchical power, nowhere near the strength of which Charlemagne boasted during his reign. Holding very little land outside of the royal domains, the Capetians in the first half of the twelfth century operated within the political webbing of French feudal practices. Just as Charlemagne dealt with rival barons, so too did the Capetians negotiate constantly with the powerful counts and dukes of areas like Champagne and Aquitaine, who held equal if not more political and military authority. The Capetians therefore could find a kindred spirit in the Charlemagne of the *Roland*, seeing him as a ruler struggling to assert his authority over rival and often rebellious vassals. Fortunately for Charlemagne, he has access to the greatest vassal of all in the form of Roland, whose deeds reinforce his own claim to kingship.

### ***Proper Feudal Vassalage***

Overall, the Charlemagne of the *Roland* is an ideal. He is the ideal Christian conqueror and the ideal Christian king, one who does not rule absolutely but through his barons and vassals. In turn, his vassals swear loyalty to him and operate in his name. Such a description is the very essence of the idealized medieval feudal system. As such, the proper role of the vassal in service to his king is also an important aspect of the *Roland*. In particular, the qualities of the worthy baron take shape in the form of Roland and his companion Oliver.

Roland is the baron par excellence of medieval vassalage, which he achieves through his incomparable fighting prowess. Indeed, Roland's reputation as a warrior is so great that his skill on the battlefield becomes the standard for future medieval tales. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* (The Knight with the Lion), for example, the titular hero's martial skill is directly compared to Roland's: "and see how he [Yvain] wields his sword when he draws it! Roland never caused such devastation with Durendal against the Turks at Roncevaux or in Spain."<sup>16</sup> Roland, himself, is also fully aware of his martial skill and frequently alludes to how he wishes to be remembered for his service to his uncle. In a subtle reference to the nature and legacy of the *Roland* itself, the titular character speaks multiple times of the "shameful song" that would be sung of him if he could not live up to his standards as a vassal (vv. 1014, 1466). As a result, his actions are as much the duty he owes to his lord as they are his way of being remembered through history.

Alongside Roland's need for glory and honor, he constantly provides insight into the complex nature of medieval vassalage. Before meeting in battle with the Muslim forces, Oliver shows some hesitation in a direct confrontation. Roland replies with a short lecture on their duties as the vassals of Charlemagne: "For his lord a vassal must suffer hardships / And endure great heat and great cold; / And he must lose both hair and hide" (vv. 1010-12). Likewise,

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 120.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe: 300-1000*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 311-312. One of the more infamous conspiracies Charlemagne had to put down was led by his illegitimate son, Pippin 'the Hunchback,' and a cabal of supporters who claimed never to have sworn allegiance to Charlemagne.

<sup>16</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, "The Knight with the Lion (Yvain)," in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 335.

there is a discussion about the different qualities a vassal may have. For example, Roland is described as a brave warrior while Oliver's virtue is wisdom (vv. 1093). The description of Roland's bravery in the context of the heated battle with the Muslims seems to suggest that Roland's quality is more important than Oliver's, but a later line notes that "both are marvelous vassals" (vv. 1094).<sup>17</sup> In the end, both knights display some level of the other's noble quality before they die. Such descriptions show that there was no single overriding quality to describe a loyal vassal. Surviving letters and charters written prior to the compilation of *Roland* contain examples of the ideal relationship between a vassal and his lord. A letter written by Bishop Fulbert of Chartres in 1020 to Duke William V of Aquitaine lists the many qualities a lord and vassal owe to one another. In particular, he notes that a vassal must be "harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, and possible" in order to prove worthy of his lord's favor.<sup>18</sup> Even Fulbert's heavily simplified version of the vassal-lord relationship shows that there is no single, perfect approach to proper vassalage. As such, Roland and Oliver cannot be seen as superior or inferior to one another, for they both embody worthy characteristics of loyal servants to Charlemagne.

In what is probably the most discussed section in all of the *Roland*, the horn scenes evoke the core difference between Roland and Oliver's ideals as vassals. As the Muslim forces prepare to attack, Oliver requests that Roland blow his horn to alert Charlemagne to their plight. Roland refuses, for to do so would show preemptive cowardice and dishonor his family (vv. 1062-64). As Charlemagne's greatest warrior, Roland believes he can deal with the enemy army on his own without calling for help. However, as the battle turns in favor of the Muslims, Roland begins to consider calling for aid, but Oliver rebukes him. As Oliver states, "a true vassal's act, in its wisdom, avoids folly; / Caution is better than great zeal" (vv. 1724-25). Roland has his chance to call for aid, but squanders it. Consequently, he must bear the burden of his mistake in order to die as a warrior rather than face his uncle and admit the deaths of all the men under his command. Ultimately, the argument is the exact same as the first horn dialogue, where Roland refused to blow the horn to avoid dishonor, except that now the roles are reversed; it is now Oliver who invokes shame as Roland tries to value logic and reason.<sup>19</sup> This once again highlights the complicated nature of vassalage, in which the vassal has to be constantly aware of a situation, whether on the battlefield at court, and model himself to best benefit his lord. There is no right approach; it all depends on the situation.

Roland is convinced by Archbishop Turpin to blow the horn so that Charlemagne and his army may avenge the death of Roland's rearguard. The notion of avenging the unjust death of a loyal servant highlights another ideal of medieval vassalage: avenging treachery. Just as Roland and Oliver embody ideal vassals, so, too, does Ganelon represent treachery. Through Ganelon, the *Roland* creates the standard for other examples of treachery in medieval literature. In *Cligés*, for example, Chrétien de Troyes compares the treachery of a count rebelling against King Arthur to Ganelon's treason against Roland and Charlemagne.<sup>20</sup> Treachery is the driving force behind the plot of the *Roland*. It is Ganelon's treachery which leads to the death of Roland, Oliver, and the Twelve Peers. Roland, in turn, fights in Spain to avenge the death of two counts who were beheaded by King Marsile after he had falsely called for peace with the Franks (vv. 194-213). The final instance in which treachery opposes proper vassalage arises in Ganelon's trial itself. Ganelon maintains he was obligated to have Roland killed since it was Roland who nominated Ganelon for the suicide mission into Spain in the first place (vv. 3768-78). This argument seems to win over the barons of Charlemagne's court. However, it is the emperor's champion, Thierry, who emphasizes the precedence of the lord-vassal relationship when he cites Roland's protected status as Charlemagne's vassal. As such, Ganelon's actions against Roland are seen as an insult to Charlemagne himself and are tantamount to high treason (vv. 3824-36). It is therefore established that disloyalty and treachery are the antithesis of everything that makes a knight a worthy vassal.

The *Roland* is first and foremost a story of warfare and, as such, much of the poem is dedicated to Christian knights fighting their Muslim equivalents. Within the context of the lord-vassal relationship, it is a vassal's sworn duty to defend his lord from harm. Proficiency in combat is therefore a requirement, and Roland and his knights must be able to defend Charlemagne with their lives. However, there is a strong disconnect between the combat of the *Roland* and actual medieval combat of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Medievalist John Benton highlights this trend with his reference to what he refers as the "epic stroke." At various points in the poem, Roland performs an attack with his sword in which he cuts through the enemy's head, chest, and groin and even into the body of the horse below (vv. 1325-34). Such a move is physically impossible to perform, and if it were executed, it would expose the warrior to harm as he lifted the sword above his head to deliver the blow. The attack is important because it is dramatic and expresses what Benton also calls the "encultrement" of the warrior class. Rather than a step-by-step guide to its knightly audience, the *Roland* creates the ideal in which a knight should think he belongs to.<sup>21</sup> The "epic stroke" is not a move to be

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert, "Chanson de Roland," 27.

<sup>18</sup> Fulbert of Chartres, "Letter to William of Aquitaine," in *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. L. Delisle, vol. 10 (Paris, 1904), 463.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 77-79.

<sup>20</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, "Cligés," in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 136.

<sup>21</sup> John F. Benton, "'Nostre Franceis n'unt talent de fuïr': the Song of Roland and the Encultrement of a Warrior Class," in *Culture, Power, and Personality in Medieval Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), 150-51.

used in actual combat. Rather, it provides knights with the mentality that when they do fight, they give their all for the sake of their lord. The “epic stroke” is a very subtle link to the lord-vassal relationship that epitomizes Roland’s relationship with Charlemagne, but it shows in practice that Roland will give his entire being to defend his king from any opponent. And no opponent is a greater threat to the knights and nobles of the Roland than the powerful and deadly Muslim horde.

### **Crusader Mentality**

So far, this paper has explored the nature of Charlemagne within the *Roland* and the concept of medieval vassalage. As a Christian conqueror, he commands the greatest knights of Western Europe. What this implies, and what the *Roland* shows, is that Christian medieval ideal being physically directed against its enemies, namely, pagans and Muslims. As a document of the late eleventh and early twelfth century, this depiction of Muslims and pagans as the enemies of Christianity was fueled by the contemporary Crusader ideology that launched the First Crusade in 1095. Overall, the *Roland* is very much an advertisement in support of holy war.

This ideology appears in the *Roland* in the theme of divine protection. Just before the battle between Roland’s forces and the Muslims begins, Archbishop Turpin speaks to the Frankish knights, granting them forgiveness of sin, martyrdom, and immediate entrance into heaven upon their deaths (vv. 1124-38). Throughout the battle, Charlemagne shows that he and his cause are divinely protected. For instance, God stops the setting of the sun so that Charlemagne and his army can attack King Marsile’s retreating forces (vv. 2458-59). In another subtle illusion to medieval history, Charlemagne’s sword pommel contains the very spearhead of the lance that pierced Christ (vv. 2504-06).<sup>22</sup> During his duel with the emir Baligant, Charlemagne’s own body is divinely protected when he lives despite a blow that cleaves off part of his head (vv. 3609-11). Likewise, his champion, Thierry, is divinely assisted in his combat with Pinabel during Ganelon’s trial (vv. 3923).

Such references to the First Crusade created an image of the Franks as divinely protected warriors. Indeed, this image was used to great effect by Pope Urban II during the Council of Clermont in 1095, the event that launched the First Crusade to the Holy Land. Of the multiple versions of the speech that exist, the one by Robert the Monk offers the greatest connection to the Franks and Charlemagne. In it, the Franks are God’s chosen and beloved race meant to drive out a people “utterly alienated by God.” Furthermore, he directly cites Charlemagne and Louis the Pious’ role in destroying pagan kingdoms, thereby linking the memory of Charlemagne as a Christian conqueror with the impetus for the Crusade.<sup>23</sup>

The nature of the enemy in the *Roland* is of particular importance in understanding this Crusader mentality. It is possible that Tuoldus, the supposed author of the *Roland*, had very little knowledge of Islam and its practices. The other possibility is that the anti-Muslim sentiment in the *Roland* is a deliberate attempt to belittle the Muslim faith as a whole, rather than the result of an overall misunderstanding. Whatever the case, Tuoldus’s *Roland*, as seen above with Urban II’s speech, is very much in service to the Christian militarization advocated by the papacy.<sup>24</sup> In it, the enemy is depicted as an “other” to the Frankish protagonists and is aided by a traitor, Ganelon, who must lose his identity with his own people as a result.<sup>25</sup> The historic enemies of Roncevaux were the Basques, but for the purpose of promoting the Crusades, they were transformed in the *Roland* into something outside of the Christian sphere. To further distinguish them, they are even sometimes described as being physically different from the Franks, as are the race of people from Occitan who forgo armor because their skin is as hard as iron (vv. 3246-3250). Finally, the *Roland* includes misconceptions about Islamic practices. Like other anti-Muslim texts, the *Roland* employs the common claim that non-Christian religions worship dead men rather than actual gods. The Muslims of the *Roland* do not worship Allah, but the long dead bodies of Apollo and Muhammad, and when they lose the battle with Roland, they throw the corpses into ditches in anger (vv. 2585-91).

Despite these instances in which the enemy is depicted as other, there are frequent references to non-Christians’ noble qualities. For instance, Blancandrin, King Marsile’s advisor, the emir from Balaguer, and Marcule from Outremer are all described as strong, handsome warriors who would make perfect barons if only they were Christians (vv. 24-26, 895-99, 3156-64). Why is this so? Why in the context of the Crusades, which justifies the slaughter of non-Christians in the name of God,<sup>26</sup> is the enemy presented favorably? Peter Haidu describes this depiction as a

<sup>22</sup> Burgess, *Roland*, 8. According to medieval history, the lance was discovered by the Crusaders as they were besieged in Antioch in 1098. The discovery improved their morale enough to break the siege and escape. The inclusion of the spear in the *Roland* is seen as another example of the poem’s compilation around the time of the First Crusade.

<sup>23</sup> Urban II, “Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095, Five Versions of the Speech,” in Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/urban2-5vers.html>

<sup>24</sup> George Fenwick Jones, *The Ethos of the Song of Roland* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1963), 146.

<sup>25</sup> Kay, *Chansons de Geste*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Haidu, *The Subject of Violence*, 206.

“projection of the self on the screen of the Other.”<sup>27</sup> To clarify this, it is helpful to consider the audience of the *Roland*. To a young knight learning chivalry, meeting with a worthy foe in head-to-head combat is the ideal challenge. Mass slaughter, while quite realistic to the Crusades, is not an honorable way to fight. Therefore, in order to justify the actions of a character like Roland, vassal and Christian knight, his non-Christian opponents must be equally honorable. This somewhat favorable look at Muslims may also stem from the cultural and historic ties between Christian France and Muslim Spain. Other chansons, such as *The Song of the Cid*, show a much more generous depiction of Muslims due to their Spanish origin.

### Conclusion

By looking at the *Song of Roland* as a primary source of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, readers are provided with a snapshot of the contemporary military and social issues of Western Europe. To suit the audience of its time, the *Roland* highlights the legend of Charlemagne, depicts the ideal form of lord-vassal feudal relations, and promotes a Crusader mentality. Yet, for all these points, the *Roland* is most remembered in France for its emphasis on courage, loyalty, and sacrifice, values held particularly dear to the French during the Franco-Prussian War and the Nazi invasion during World War II. As such, the *Roland* is a story that can be recited throughout history, constantly remolded to fit the needs of its changing audience. As such, it is crucial for historians to look beyond the specific details and themes of a source in order to trace its overarching impact on history, to see the forest for the trees, so to speak. For example, the *Roland* is at its most basic level a story about knights and war, but how did knights perceive themselves, and what was their mentality going into battle? These are the questions that must be asked regarding any primary source, and in this sense, the author or authors of the *Song of Roland* expertly created a story that subtly but effectively depicts their society and the relevant social issues of the time.

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<sup>27</sup> Haidu, *The Subject of Violence*, 36.

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