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The Ideas and Motivations behind *The Song of Roland*

Anakin Cary

In the time of the first crusade, crusade ideas were beginning to sweep throughout Europe, in large part due to the pro-crusade propaganda sponsored by the church. It is not always clear, however, what literature was specifically intended as propaganda, and what was only the result of crusade ideas infection of society. One such piece of literature is *The Song of Roland*, written by an unknown author in the time of the first crusade about Charlemagne's conquest in Spain. Despite the fact that he died in 814 CE, long before Pope Urban II began preaching the first crusade in 1095 CE, Charlemagne was viewed as an iconic holy warrior in the popular literature of the time. This means that although the action of the poem is set before the first crusade, it is a direct reference to the crusades that were of special relevance during the time that it was written. Although *The Song of Roland's* relationship to the Crusades is undeniable, the nature of this relationship is not nearly as clear. Some scholars argue that *The Song of Roland* is an example of crusade propaganda that had taken the form of entertainment, while others argue that it is only entertainment that had been influenced by crusade ideas. This paper will discuss the nature of *The Song of Roland's* relationship to crusading, first by proving that this relationship is positive through a discussion of the behavior that *The Song of Roland* attempts to promote, and then by analyzing the last episode of the poem in order to prove that the pro-crusade themes in the poem are only the result of influence from ideas outside of the writer's intentions.

In order to understand *The Song of Roland's* position on crusading, it is important to look at the behavior that the song portrays as positive. Most of the positive action takes place at the hands of the story's heroes, Charlemagne and Roland. Although Roland is the title character, Charlemagne is just as much as, if not more of a hero. These two men are made heroes through

their actions, so understanding what those actions are is key to understanding what behavior the author approves of.

Being a Christian is clearly the most important part of being a hero in *The Song of Roland*. Throughout the story, the author praises the heroes for their righteous behavior. In the battle of Roncevaux Pass, Roland declares that the Christians are in the right. “The pagans are wrong and the Christians are right.”¹ Later on, Charlemagne even receives help from God during his pursuit of Marsile, the Muslim King who treacherously led his army in an attack on Charlemagne after agreeing to peace. First, God stops the sun from setting so that Charlemagne can continue his chase. “God performed a great miracle for Charlemagne, for the sun remained where it was.”² He then sends an angel to protect Charlemagne while he slept. “God sent saint Gabriel to him; He gives him orders to guard the emperor.”³ These incidents show that, for the author of the poem, being a Christian was of the utmost importance, and necessary for the formation of good character.

Christianity is not the only quality shown to be highly valuable in *The Song of Roland*, as the poem also values military ability as an essential heroic quality. Throughout the poem, the author frequently praises the Christian characters and derides the Muslim characters. There is one Muslim, however, that he commends. “An emir is there from Balaguer... He bears his arms with great ferocity... Had he been a Christian, he would have been a worthy Baron.”⁴ By saying that a man would be worthy “if only he were a Christian,” the author provides their reader with a list of the qualities outside of religion that make a good person. Skill with arms is shown to be an important quality through this example. This same quality is shown to be possessed by Roland

¹ Glyn S. Burgess, *The Song of Roland*. London. England: Penguin Books, (1990) 61.

² Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 107.

³ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 109.

⁴ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 57.

and Charlemagne throughout the poem. In one episode, the archbishop traveling with Roland complements him for his behavior in the battle. “The pagans take flight before Roland. The archbishop said: You act very well. A knight should have such valor, Who bears arms and sits astride a good horse. In battle he should be strong and fierce.”⁵ Charlemagne is even praised by his enemies. “The Saracen said: ‘Great is my amazement at Charlemagne... So many powerful kings has he vanquished in battle. When will he ever tire of waging war?’”⁶ These qualities are of special interest because they relate directly to the behavior that was prized in the First Crusade. Christians with strong faith and strong arms. This was the image of the holy warrior described by Pope Urban in the Council of Clermont. Fultcher of Chartres’ account of the sermon directs the Christians to focus their wars on enemies of the faith, “Let those... who are accustomed wantonly to wage private war against the faithful march upon the infidels in a war which should be begun now and be finished in victory.”⁷ In another account of the sermon written by Robert of Rheims, Pope Urban II even makes a reference to the military conquests of Charlemagne. “Let the deeds of your ancestors move you and incite your minds to manly achievements; the glory and greatness of King Charles the Great... who have destroyed the kingdoms of the pagans.”⁸ The poems support for the idea of a holy warrior is evidence that it was written with a favorable view of the crusades, as this idea was an important motivating factor behind the First Crusade.

Although before the crusades the idea of a holy warrior certainly existed, the image became much more popular during the First Crusade. Chronicles of the First Crusade show how certain figures of the Crusade were looked up to as Holy Warriors. Ralph of Caen’s account on the deeds of Tancred is one such chronicle, as its positive portrayal of Tancred certainly fits the

⁵ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 89.

⁶ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 46.

⁷ Christopher Tyerman, ed. *Chronicles of the First Crusade*. Penguin Books (2004), 10.

⁸ Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 3.

mold of a Holy Warrior. “Tancred said a prayer and took up his arms. He sought out those still resisting... The fields did not see any more of the battle. Tancred advanced and brought death to those in the interior.”⁹ Christians began to look up to the heroes that had contributed to the success of the First Crusade. Heroes like Bohemond used their status as crusaders to muster armies and accomplish their own political objectives.¹⁰ The heroes in *The Song of Roland* were meant to represent this image of a righteous crusader lord. Even though Charlemagne had lived well before the time of the first crusade, he was being used as a model for crusading by the mid-twelfth century in works such as *Roland*. *The Song of Roland* was one of many Chansons de geste that would describe the conquests of Charlemagne in order to celebrate crusading ideas.¹¹

It is clear that the ways people fought in *The Song of Roland* were modeled after crusading values, and, with further evidence from the poem, it seems that their reasons for fighting were similarly inspired. During the battle of Roncevaux Pass, the archbishop promises the men that they will go to heaven for fighting in the battle. “We are promised this... Holy paradise is open to you.”¹² This idea of a remission of sins granted for fighting is very much inspired by the speech given by Pope Urban II, in which he offered a remission of sins for anyone who fought in the crusade. “undertake this journey for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of the imperishable glory of the kingdom of heaven.”¹³ Both promise entrance into heaven as a reward for fighting. The author then praises the Christians for their actions in the battle. “The Franks have struck with courage and vigour... The archbishop said: “Our men are

⁹Bernard and David S. Bachrach, *The Gesta Tancredi of Ralph of Caen*. Ashgate (2010), 145.

¹⁰ Nicholas L. Paul, “A Warlord’s Wisdom: Literacy and Propoganda at the Time of the First Crusade” *Speculum* 85 No. 3 (2010): 557-558.

¹¹ Jace Stuckey, “Charlemagne as Crusader? Memory, Propaganda, and the Many Uses of Charlemagne’s Legendary Expedition to Spain.” *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages* (2008): 141.

¹² Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 77.

¹³ Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 4.

very brave; no one on earth could have better men.”¹⁴ This support for the idea that fighting in a holy war can help Christians get into heaven shows that the author clearly approves of the ideas that motivated the First Crusade. For this reason, it can be surmised that the attitude taken by *The Song of Roland* is pro-crusade.

The poems positive attitude towards crusading does not in itself prove that *Roland* was in fact crusade propaganda. There is the possibility that it was a result of crusade ideas influence on society, not a conscious effort to inspire crusades or improve their public image. Recognizing this distinction and attempting to understand which circumstance applies to *The Song of Roland* is important in understanding the influence that crusade ideas had on society. Specifically, it offers insight into the methods used by the church and other pro-crusade groups to spread crusade ideas.

The poems approval of forced conversions makes it highly unlikely that it was written by a member of the clergy, which means that it is not a form of clerical recruiting propaganda. This is a problem for the interpretation of the poem as propaganda, as the job of promoting the crusade was generally held by the clergy.¹⁵ At the end of the poem, after Charlemagne captures Saragossa, he forcibly converts large groups of Muslims to the Christian faith. “They take the pagans up to the baptistery; If there is anyone who withstands Charles, He has him hanged or burned or put to death. More than a hundred thousand are baptized.”¹⁶ A similar event happened during the first crusade, when some groups of crusaders attacked communities of Jews and forced many to convert. Albert of Aachen describes this incident in his account of the first crusade. “From this cruel slaughter of the Jews a few escaped; and a few because of fear, rather

¹⁴ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 75.

¹⁵ Stuckey, “Charlemagne as a Crusader?” 147.

¹⁶ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 75.

than because of love of the Christian Faith, were baptized.”¹⁷ The church reacted very negatively to these actions, as Albert states later in the same account. “The Lord is a just judge and orders no one unwillingly, or under compulsion, to come under the yoke of the Catholic faith.”¹⁸ The Church’s negative reaction to this incident shows their stance on forced conversions, and makes it highly unlikely that a member of the clergy would include them in a work intended to inspire crusades.

Although it is highly unlikely that *The Song of Roland* was propaganda created by the clergy, there still exists the possibility that it was propaganda created by another source who held slightly different ideas about the crusades. After all, there were some crusaders who thought forced conversions of Jews were in keeping with the ideas that motivated them to take the cross. Stuckey suggests that *The Song of Roland* could have been propaganda written by the laity, as crusade lords such as Bohemond used propaganda to campaign for their own crusade.¹⁹ However, Bohemond used many forms of propaganda, and Nicholas Paul notes that his primary form of persuasion was performance and spectacle.²⁰ Paul argues that it would be a mistake to assume that historical narratives would be an effective form of propaganda just as they are today.²¹ Carol Symes offers a different conclusion, arguing that crusade veterans were able to use literature to shape public opinion.²² Clearly, historians are divided on the role that literature played as crusade propaganda. To understand the truth specifically for one source, *The Song of Roland*, close reading of the source itself must be employed.

¹⁷ Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 35.

¹⁸ Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 36.

¹⁹ Stuckey, “Charlemagne as a Crusader?” 147.

²⁰ Paul, “A Warlords Wisdom,” 565.

²¹ Paul, “A Warlords Wisdom,” 566.

²² Carol Symes, “Popular Literacies and the First Historians of the First Crusade.” *Past & Present* 235 no.1 (2017) 67.

Scholars like Sharon Kinoshita argue that the poem was clearly written as propaganda because the presence of crusading ideas and values shows the intent to pass on these values, but a closer reading of the poem reveals several things that do not line up with traditional crusade values. Kinoshita argues that the lack of focus on conversion in the *Song* shows that it was intended as propaganda.²³ However, this argument severely downplays the importance of conversion to the song. Throughout the poem, Charlemagne attempts to get his enemies to convert to Christianity in order to be saved. This is his offer to Marsile in the beginning of the story, “He will follow me to Aix, my home, where he will receive our most holy faith. He will become a Christian, and hold his lands from me.”²⁴ But upon hearing this offer and reading Charlemagne’s letter, Marsile grows angry and refuses. “Marsile was white with rage; He breaks the seal and threw aside the wax.”²⁵ This refusal is what drives the conflict for the rest of the story. Kinoshita argues that this example only exists to argue that Muslims cannot be trusted, and that conversions should not be used because one can never be sure of the motives of the convert.²⁶ With a surface level reading of the song, this explanation seems to be supported, as Roland states this exact position on conversion as soon as Charlemagne makes his intentions known. “Believe Marsile and you will regret it.”²⁷ Furthermore, Roland seems to be correct, as Marsile conspires with Ganelon, the man tasked with delivering Charlemagne’s offer to the Muslim King, to lie to Charlemagne about his intentions to convert and then kills Roland. This incident of a rejected conversion that resulted in the death of a Christian seems, at first glance, to be strong support for Kinoshita’s argument and the conclusion that *The Song of Roland* is

²³ Sharon Kinoshita. “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right”: Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the Chanson de Roland.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no.1 (2001): 86

²⁴ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 35.

²⁵ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 44.

²⁶ Kinoshita, “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right.” 86.

²⁷ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 35

propaganda. However, looking deeper at the story shows that this may not be the best interpretation of the song.

In order to correctly interpret the author's intentions as they are expressed through the characters, the poem must be read closely to determine which of these characters carry the author's message. First, it should not be assumed that just because Roland is the title character, he is always right. Charlemagne occupies an equal if not greater status in the poem than Roland, and is Roland's superior. Despite his many heroic characteristics, Roland is not without flaw. For one, he suggested that Ganelon be sent to negotiate the deal with Marsile after Charlemagne refused to allow Roland to go himself. This ended up being a fatal decision, as Ganelon betrayed Charlemagne and conspired to kill Roland for nominating him to deliver the message. This may be considered a mistake by Roland, but it is not detrimental to his character. However, a much larger flaw is Roland's refusal to blow his Oliphant during what would be his last battle, resulting in the deaths of all his men. At the start of the battle, Roland is approached by Oliver and told to blow his horn and call for reinforcements. "Companion Roland, blow your horn... Roland replies: That would be an act of folly; throughout the fair land of France I should lose my good name."²⁸ Roland refuses to blow the horn because he wants to win the battle by himself, a decision that ultimately causes the complete destruction of his army of twenty thousand men. Oliver later reproaches Roland for his failure during the battle. "The Franks are dead because of your recklessness." Roland does eventually blow the horn, but it is too late to save him or his men, when, "Roland with pain and distress sounds his Oliphant in great agony."²⁹ Roland's eventual decision to blow the horn shows that he recognized that he made a mistake.

²⁸ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 62

²⁹ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 85

This incident serves to show that Roland was not the unquestioned hero, as even he makes mistakes. For this reason, Roland's opinion that converts can't be trusted should not be taken as the opinion of the writer just because it is expressed through one of the heroes. Charlemagne's opinions on conversion should be considered equally as important as Roland's. Charlemagne clearly holds very different views on conversion than Roland. Even after he has grieved the death of Roland, a death that occurred only because Charlemagne decided to try and convert the Muslims rather than kill them, Charlemagne still does not change his position on conversion. In the final battle against the Emir, Charlemagne offers him the chance to surrender and convert to Christianity, just as he offered it to Marsile at the beginning of the story. When the emir refuses, Charlemagne kills him. After taking Saragossa, he again offers the inhabitants the chance to convert, and kills those who refuse. Bramimonde, Marsile's wife, receives the opportunity to convert at her own pace, and is kept alive and brought back to France. Even after he learns of the treachery of Marsile, Charlemagne offers every Muslim the chance to convert before he kills them. This is important as it seems to deviate from the standard ideas of crusading. In the first crusade, upon conquering Jerusalem, the crusaders kicked the Muslim population out of the city rather than attempt to convert them. This showed that for the majority of crusaders capturing the city and making it Christian was far more important than converting its population. Raymond of Aguilers' account of the capture of Jerusalem shows that many crusaders cared little for the lives of the Muslims, and were instead focused only on reclaiming the city. "Indeed, it was just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies."³⁰ It seems unlikely that a writer attempting to convince people to take up the cross and fight Muslims would

³⁰ S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds. *The Crusades: A Reader*. 2nd ed. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, (2014) 71.

show conversions as the best option for dealing with Muslims, as this was not the way the crusaders acted. It seems to be evidence against the idea that *The Song of Roland* was intended as crusade propaganda.

To find more evidence to understand the intention of *The Song of Roland*, we must look to the final events of the poem. Charlemagne has captured Saragossa, and now returns home to conduct the trial of Ganelon. This last section of the song is of special importance in understanding the intentions behind *The Song of Roland*, as its content shows that the song was not intended as propaganda. The first interesting point about the end of the book is not the events that it focuses on, but rather the events that it does not focus on. The capture of Saragossa, which has been the Christians objective since the beginning of the poem, is given very little attention. Only a few lines are devoted to the actions surrounding the capture of the city, something that would seem to be of prime importance to a work intended to inspire that very action. The poem quickly switches to focus on the trial of Ganelon, as if that particular event was of the most importance. It seems in this context that the primary focus of the poem is not the capture of the Muslim city, but rather Ganelon's betrayal. If it is the case that the poem is primarily focused on Ganelon's betrayal, the propaganda explanation is significantly weakened.

A piece of propaganda written with the intent to inspire military action would likely be more concerned with the success of the campaign, and would thus focus on the success of the Christians with the help of God, ending on the positive note of a Christian victory over the Saracens. But *The Song of Roland* does not do that. The poem does not end until Ganelon has been tried and sentenced. This on its own may not be convincing enough to prove that *The Song of Roland* is not propaganda, as the capture of Saragossa is still clearly important. However, there is more to the trial of Ganelon that casts the propaganda reading into doubt.

In order to understand the ways that the trial of Ganelon applies to the role of *Roland* as either crusade propaganda or the result of crusade ideas, it is important to first understand exactly what happens in this episode of the poem. First, Charlemagne gathers his vassals to conduct Ganelon's trial. Ganelon's friend, Pinabel, uses his skill at speaking to convince the men conducting the trial to side with Ganelon and get Charlemagne to absolve him of his crimes. Thierry is the only one who does not agree. When the men tell Charlemagne their decision, he is upset, until Thierry steps forward and says that he believes Ganelon should be hanged for his treason. In response, Pinabel challenges Thierry to a trial by combat, which Thierry wins, killing Pinabel. In response to the verdict of the trial, Charlemagne has all the men who supported Ganelon hanged, and has Ganelon himself drawn and quartered. After this, Bramimonde converts to Christianity, "In the baths at Aix there is a vast gathering; There they baptize the Queen of Spain... She is a Christian, convinced of the truth."³¹ After this, the poem ends.³²

Although the conversion of Bramimonde may be a logical place for the poem to conclude, it seems entirely out of place as the conclusion for a poem written to inspire further crusades, as the conversion of Muslims was not the primary motivation behind crusading. The First Crusade began at the Council of Clermont in 1095 CE, where Pope Urban II delivered a speech that set forth the crusade ideas that would go on to sweep throughout Christian territory in the years to come. Multiple accounts offer different versions of the speech, but all contain certain details that remain constant. Key to the accounts is the idea that Christians should band together, take up the cross, and go east to kill the Muslims. "God exhorts you... to hasten to exterminate this vile race from our lands."³³ It was important for those preaching the crusade to get Christians

³¹ Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 156.

³² Burgess, *The Song of Roland*, 148-156.

³³ Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 10

to work together to defeat the threat to the east, and so it is strange that a poem intended to inspire further crusades would choose to end their story, not with the deaths of Muslims and the capture of a Muslim city, but with the deaths of Christians at the hands of the poem's hero. To be clear, this information in no way undermines the argument that *Roland* is pro-crusade. Ganelon betrayed his Christian brothers by conspiring with the Muslims, so killing him was entirely justified. But for a poem specifically designed to encourage Christians to band together and go kill Muslims, ending with an episode of Christians killing other Christians seems highly ineffective.

For this reason, it seems that the most plausible answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper is that *The Song of Roland* was written as a result of crusade ideas influence on society, but was not intended as crusade propaganda. The presence of pro-crusade ideas is clear, but the structure of the poem, especially the decision to end with the deaths of Christians at the hands of other Christians, seems to indicate that the poem was not written with the primary intent to inspire further crusades. If it had been, any details that would seem to counter the objective would have been left out of the story, and the ending would be focused on Christians defeating Muslims and celebrating their victory. Instead, it seems that the poem was written with heavy influence from crusade ideas, but that the author did not feel the need to only include details that aided in the promotion of further crusades.

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