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THE SONG OF  
ROLAND

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(63)

## INTRODUCTION

### I. THE POEM

IN the year 777, a deputation of Saracen princes from Spain came to the Emperor Charlemagne to request his assistance against certain enemies of theirs, also of the Moslem faith. Charlemagne, who was already engaged in a war against the Saxons, nevertheless accepted their invitation, and, after placing garrisons to fortify his frontiers, marched into Spain with all his available forces. He divided his army into two parts, one of which crossed the eastern Pyrenees in the direction of Gerona; the other, under his own command, crossed the Basque Pyrenees and was directed upon Pampeluna. Both cities fell, and the two armies joined forces before Saragossa, which they besieged without success. A fresh outbreak of hostilities by the Saxons obliged Charlemagne to abandon the Spanish expedition. As he was repassing the Pyrenees, the rear-guard of his army was set upon by a treacherous party of Basques, who had disposed an ambuscade along the high wooded sides of the ravine which forms the pass. Taking advantage of the lie of the land and of the lightness of their armour, they fell upon the rear-guard, slaughtered them to a man, pillaged the baggage-train, and dispersed under cover of the falling night. The chronicler Eginhardt, who recounts this sober piece of history in his *Vita Caroli*, written about 830, concludes: "In the action were killed Eggihard the king's seneschal, Anselm count of the palace, and Roland duke of the Marches of Brittany, together with a great many more." Another manuscript of the ninth century contains an epitaph in Latin verse upon the seneschal Eggihard, which furnishes us with the date of the battle, 15 August 778. The episode is mentioned again in 840 by another chronicler, who, after briefly summarising the account given in the *Vita Caroli*, adds that, since the names of the fallen are already on record, he need not repeat them in his account.



GANELON BEFORE THE COUNCIL

### CIVIL COSTUME

Note the simple form of dress which consisted of tunic, super-tunic or bliaut, and mantle.

The tunics were often girdled and pulled up and were made of linen or fine wool. The super-tunic was sometimes made of silk when worn by the nobility. Decoration was in the form of woven or embroidered bands round the neck, hem, or sleeves. The sleeves tended to be very long and were often pushed up, thus producing a wrinkled effect on the lower arm.

The mantle was rectangular in shape and was either three-quarter or full length. It was draped about the figure and held in place by a brooch or pair of clasps (or owches) on the shoulder. People of importance often had their mantles lined with fur (note Ganelon's costume in the illustration).

The legs were covered by stockings or by leggings made of strips of material and flat leather shoes were worn on the feet. Heads were normally uncovered and hair styles were short.



THE FRENCH AT RONCEVAUX

### MILITARY COSTUME

The armour consisted of a Hauberk, i.e. a long knee-length garment of chain mail which protected the body and the thighs. The Byrny was an older form of the Hauberk; it was made of leather, upon which metal rings were sewn in various patterns. The helmet with its protective nasal is worn over a chain hood.

Note the strappings from knee to ankle and the short boot and spurs.

Note also the long pointed shields often with a simple device, the shape of the saddle, the length of stirrup and the method of holding the lance as a thrusting weapon (see description in the text).

## THE SONG OF ROLAND

### I

CARLON the King, our Emperor Charlemayn,  
Full seven years long has been abroad in Spain,  
He's won the highlands as far as to the main;  
No castle more can stand before his face,  
City nor wall is left for him to break,  
Save Saragossa in its high mountain place;  
Marsilion holds it, the king who hates God's name,  
Mahound he serves, and to Apollyon prays:  
He'll not escape the ruin that awaits.

AOI

### 2

Marsilion sat in Saragossa town,  
He sought an orchard where shade was to be found,  
On a bright dais of marble he lies down;  
By twenty thousand his vassals stand around.  
He calls before him all his dukes and his counts:  
"Listen, my lords, what affliction is ours!  
The Emperor Charles that wears fair France's crown  
Invades our country our fortunes to confound.  
I have no host but before him gives ground,  
I find no force his forces for to flout;  
Wise men of wit, give counsel to me now,  
Save me from death and loss of my renown."  
There's ne'er a paynim utters a single sound,  
Till Blancandrin, Valfonda's lord, speaks out.

L. 8 *Apollyon* (Apollo) – see Introduction, p. 20, and cf. L. 1392.

And some of them made shorter by the head.  
 So tells the Geste; so he that fought there tells:  
 The worthy Giles, whom God with marvels blessed,  
 In Laön minster thus-wise the charter penned;  
 Who knows not this knows nought of what befel.

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The County Roland fights bravely as he may,  
 But his whole body in heat and sweat is bathed,  
 And all his head is racked with grievous pain  
 From that great blast which brake his temples' veins.  
 Fain would he know if Charles is bringing aid;  
 His Olifant he grasps, and blows full faint.  
 The Emperor halts, hearing the feeble strain:  
 "My lords," quoth he, "this tells a woeful tale;  
 Roland my nephew is lost to us this day,  
 That call proclaims his breath is nigh to fail.  
 Whoso would reach him must ride with desperate haste  
 Sound through the host! bid every trumpet play!"  
 Full sixty thousand so loud their clarions bray  
 The hills resound, the valleys ring again.  
 The Paynims hear, no lust to laugh have they:  
 "We'll soon have Charles to reckon with," they say.

AOI

## 157

The Paynims say: "The Emperor's turned about;  
 Of those of France hark how the trumpets sound!  
 If Carlon comes, we shall have rack and rout,  
 If Roland lives, once more he'll war us down,  
 We shall not keep one foot of Spanish ground."

1. 2096 *the worthy Giles* - St Giles, who had a hermitage in Provence, and became the hero of many legends.

Straightway four hundred helmed warriors rally round,  
 The finest fighters that in the field are found;  
 A fearful onslaught they'll make upon the Count;  
 Truly Lord Roland has got his work cut out.

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Whenas Count Roland sees their assault begin,  
 Right fierce he makes him, and strong and menacing;  
 While life is in him he'll never quail or quit.  
 He sits his horse that is named Veillantif,  
 Into his flanks the golden spurs he pricks  
 And sets upon them where most the press is thick.  
 The Lord Archbishop, brave Turpin, rides with him.  
 Paynim to paynim cries: "Comrade, go to it!  
 Have we not heard the Frankish trumpets ring?  
 Charles is returning, the great, the mighty king!"

## 159

The County Roland ne'er loved a recreant,  
 Nor a false heart, nor yet a braggart jack,  
 Nor knight that was not a good man of his hands.  
 He cried to Turpin, the Churchman militant,  
 "Sir, you're on foot, I'm on my horse's back;  
 For love of you here will I make my stand,  
 And side by side we'll take both good and bad.  
 I'll not desert you for any mortal man.  
 Go we together these Paynims to attack;  
 The mightiest blows are those of Durendal."  
 Quoth the Archbishop: "'Twere shame our strokes to slack;  
 Carlon is coming, our vengeance shall not lack."

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Now the Bavarians, the men of Germany  
 And Brittany, Poitou and Normandy,  
 But first, the French, are then and there agreed;  
 Ganelon's death by torture is decreed.  
 So to this end they order up four steeds,  
 And bind him to them by the hands and the feet.  
 High-mettled stallions they are, exceeding fleet;  
 Four sergeants take them and urge them at full speed  
 Towards a mare running loose in a field.  
 Ganelon's torment is fearful and extreme,  
 For all his sinews are racked from head to heel,  
 His every limb wrenched from the sockets clean;  
 His blood runs bright upon the grassy green.  
 Ganelon's dead – so perish all his breed!  
 'Twere wrong that treason should live to boast the deed.

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The Emperor's debt of vengeance now is paid;  
 Next, his French bishops he summons to his aid,  
 Bavarian bishops, and bishops of Almayn:  
 "Lodged captive here I have a noble dame.  
 Sermon and story on her heart have prevailed  
 God to believe and Christendom to take;  
 Therefore baptize her that her soul may be saved."  
 "Provide her then with godmothers," they say,  
 ["Nobly-born ladies, instructed in the Faith."  
 Great the assembly about the Baths at Aix;  
 There they baptize Bramimond, Queen of Spain,

L. 3968 *mare* – reading with Léon Gautier *ewe* < *equa*; other editors read *ewe* < *aqua* and render "water". The mare seems to give the more vivid picture, though the other rendering has rather more critical support.

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And Juliana they've chosen for her name;  
 Christian is she, informed in the True Way.

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The Emperor now has ended his assize  
 With justice done, his great wrath satisfied,  
 And Bramimonda brought to the fold of Christ.  
 The day departs and evening turns to night;  
 The King's abed in vaulted chamber high;  
 St Gabriel comes, God's courier, to his side:  
 "Up, Charles! assemble thy whole imperial might;  
 With force and arms unto Elbira ride;  
 Needs must thou succour King Vivien where he lies  
 At Imphe, his city, besieged by Paynim tribes;  
 There for thy help the Christians call and cry."  
 Small heart had Carlon to journey and to fight;  
 "God!" says the King, "how weary is my life!"  
 He weeps, he plucks his flowing beard and white.

Here ends the geste Tuoldus would recite.

*recurrence of battle*

*air of fatality thru-out*

*sober piece of propaganda*

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