

“Song of Roland”

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Epic Summary

- King Marsilon in Saragossa, sends Embassy to Charlemagne; he will convert in exchange for peace
- Charlemagne sends Ganelon
- Ganelon's Plots Revenge: kill the Christian "war party" and gain peace.
- Ganelon Proposed Roland lead the Rear Guard
- Ambush on Rear Guard: Roland dies blowing Oliphant
- Charlemagne kills Muslims in Revenge
- Ganelon's Trial: Ganelon dies in Trial by Combat, God's judgement and Charlemagne's rule Validated

Key Themes

- God validates King; King serves God
- Epic theme of comradeship: **Roland and Oliver**: Gilgamesh and Enkidu; Achilles and Patroclus; Nisus and Euryalus
- Revenge theme: **Charlemagne for Roland**; Achilles for Patroclus; Aeneas for Pallas
- Crusading Culture: War is just and approved by God; Even Clerics fight
- Feudal Honor: Vassal and Lord

Historical Context

- 778, Battle at Roncevaux in the Pyrennes
- Einhard's version in the *Life of Charlemagne*:
 - 1) Charles to aid a Saracen ally in Saragossa
 - 2) Basques slaughter rearguard, steal baggage train and escape under cover of darkness
 - 3) Eggihard, surveyor of royal table; Anselm, count of the palace; and Roland, prefect of the Breton marshes, were slain
 - 4) No revenge was possible

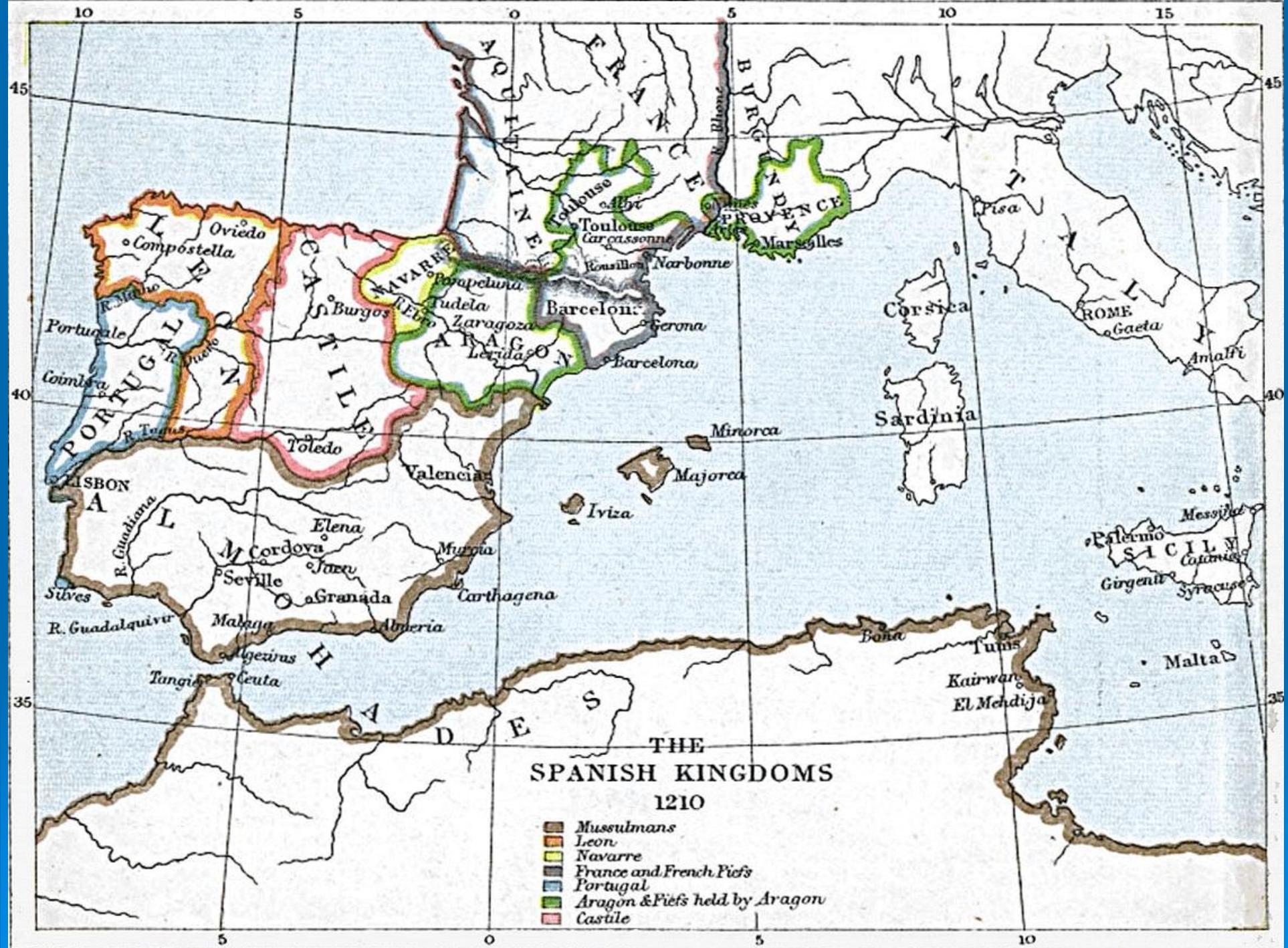
Historical Inaccuracies

- 1) Christian Basques, who opposed Charlemagne, transformed into Muslim “Saracens”
- 2) Treachery of Basques becomes treachery of Muslims and Roland’s step father, Ganelon
- 3) Charlemagne will exact revenge for defeat
- 4) Charlemagne will conquer Spain; in reality, he never got further than Saragossa

Fictional Characters

- 1) Charlemagne an Old King, like a biblical Patriarch; reality, only 36 in 778.
- 2) Fictional Characters: Ganelon; Oliver; Baligant, King of Babylon; Archbishop Turpin





Poem and its Poetry

- Written down in late 11th c. or early 12th c
- By the time it is fixed in writing, the Crusades are underway—this may explain how the story has changed.
- Oral tradition: formulas and repetition
- 298 units, Laisses of varying length
- Mostly decasyllabic verses connected by Assonance
- Caesura after 4th syllable
- Example of Laisse 34

Ambush and Battle at Roncevaux: Crusading Context

- Archbishop Turpin: “In God’s name, I pray you, hold your ground, That no man mock you in a malicious song—better to die with honor on this field! We cannot hope to live beyond today. But this is without doubt: the gates of Paradise stand open to you; you’ll take your places beside the Innocents.”



Oliver: Blow the
horn.

Roland: “May God
forbid! No man
on earth shall
have the right to
say that I for
pagans sounded
the Oliphant! I
will not bring my
family to shame.”

Blowing the Oliphant: Heroic Hubris



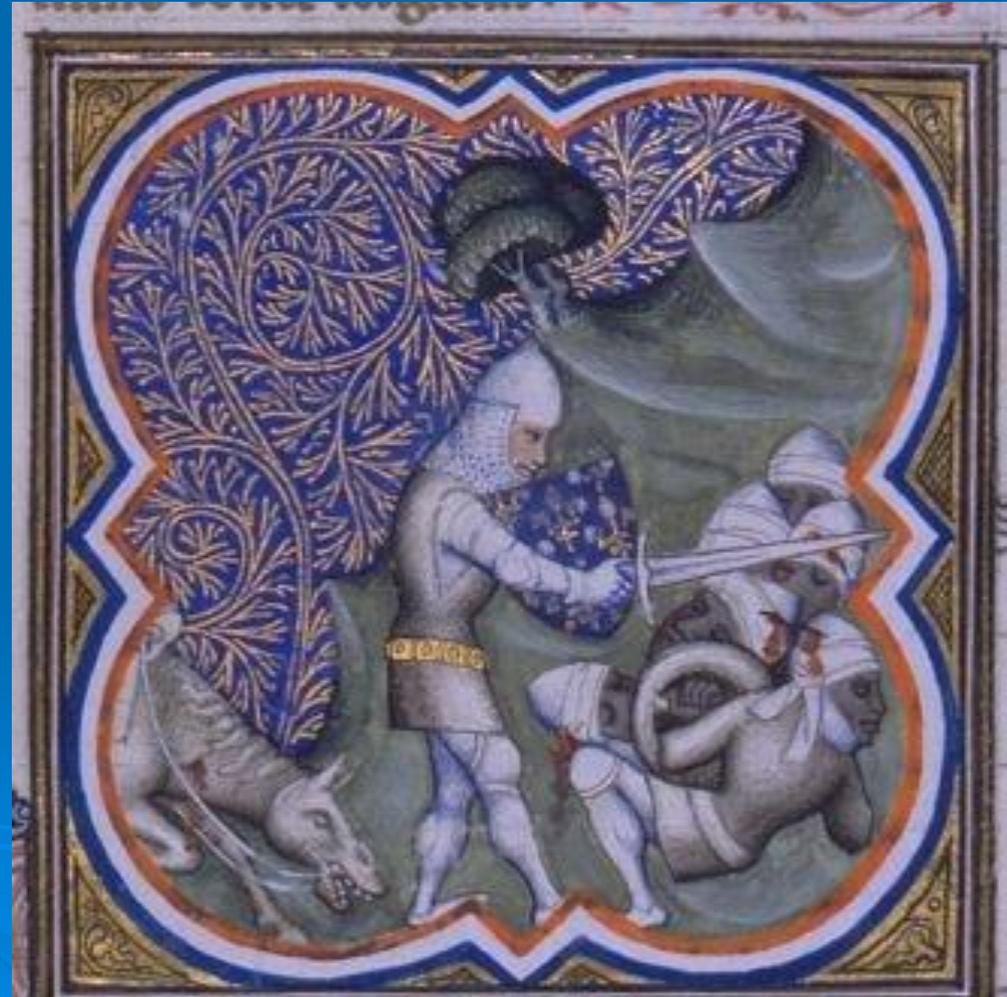
Death of Roland: Notre Dame de Chartres

- “And now Count Roland, in anguish and in pain, with all his strength sounds the great horn again. A fountain of bright blood leaps from his mouth; His brain is bursting against his forehead’s bone.”



Charlemagne Avenges Roland: God helps him

- “For Charlemagne God worked a miracle: the sun stops moving; it stands still in the sky. The pagans flee, the Franks pursue them hard,”
- Joshua: 10:12-13



Thierry Battles Pinabel

- Trial of Ganelon
- Battle between Pinabel and Thierry: God's Justice determined by Combat



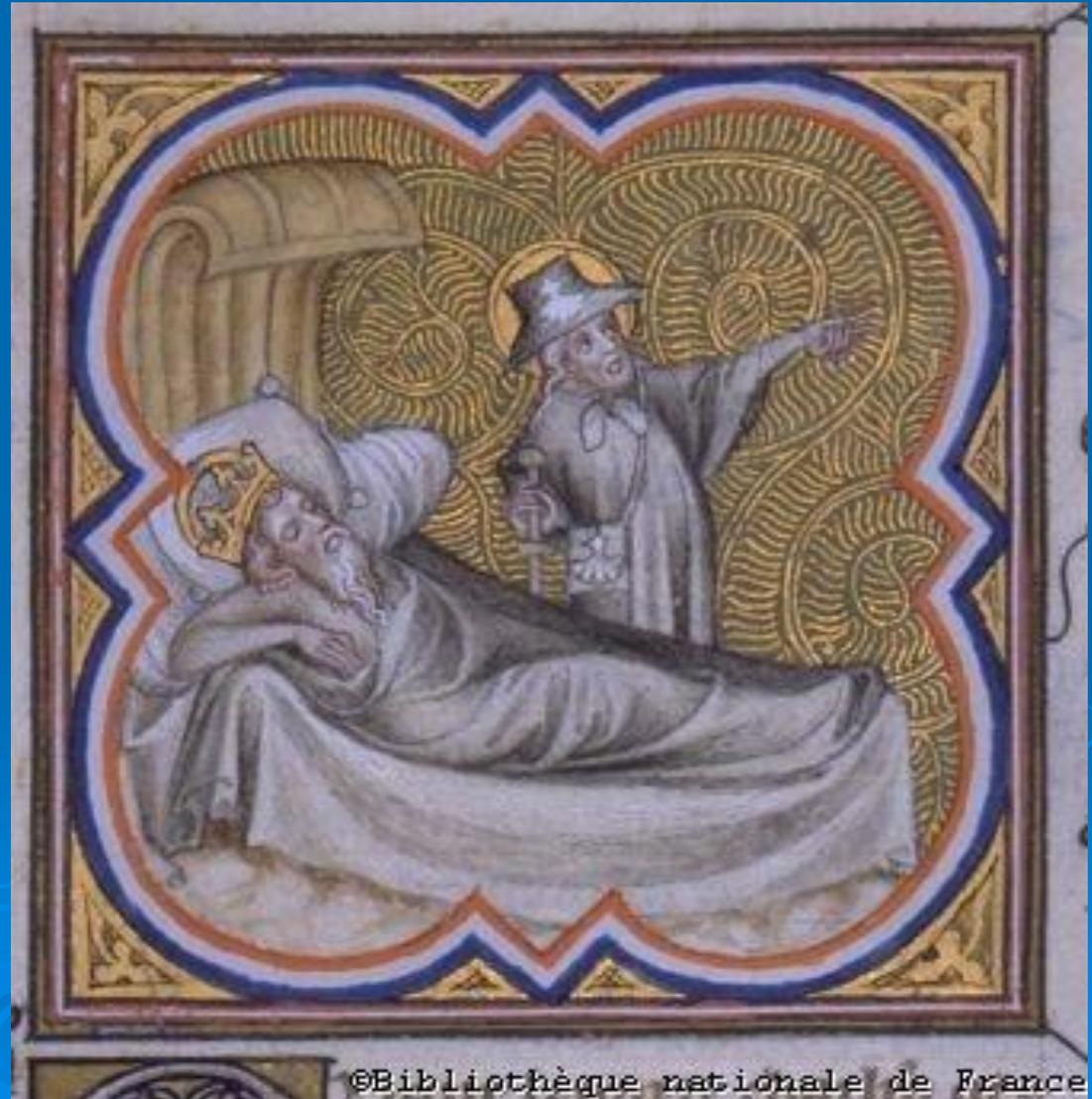
Ganelon Drawn and Quartered

- Ganelon and 30 kinsmen killed as punishment
- Ganelon drawn and quartered



Gabriel comes to Charlemagne in a Dream

- Baptism of Queen of Saragossa
- Dream of Charlemagne: Go back and Conquer all of Spain



Final Laisse

The Emperor Charles has no desire to go.
“God!” says the King, “how weary is my life.”
He pulls his beard, the tears flow from his
eyes.
Here ends the poem, for Tuoldus declines.

Closing Observations

- 1) Good versus Evil: Saracens are monstrous and evil and treacherous
- 2) God helps Christians: God stays the Sun
- 3) Duty and Bravery are the Ultimate Values: Feudal relationship of Lord and Vassal
- 4) Vassal and Lord parallels that of Man and God; Even Unwilling, Charlemagne must fight if God wills it