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THE ROUTE OF CHARLEMAGNE IN THE "CHANSON DE ROLAND"

«Au commencement était la route.» Such was the final expression of Bédier's theories about the origin of the chansons de geste. But in reality his thought was more accurately stated in an earlier remark, in his article in «Romania», XXXVI & XXXVII, on *Les chansons de geste et les routes d'Italie:* «Sauf Aspremont & Jehan de Lanson il n'y a pas, que je sache, ni une chanson de geste ni un épisode de chanson de geste qui soit localisé en Italie, si ce n'est sur une route de pèlerinage.» The last word is the one which was at the base of all Bédier's thinking on the subject. It is my contention the word *pèlerinage* is totally irrelevant, that all that concerns us when we try to identify place-names in a chanson de geste is that there should be a road, and the more we get into unknown country the more important the road becomes and the closer to it geographically a place must be before its name can be incorporated into the story-tellers' stock of names. These high-roads existed long before any pilgrims ; they were used by all travellers — soldiers, merchants, administrators, pilgrims, criminals — and the names which were known were the names on, or close to, the high-road.

Furthermore, since there were, relatively speaking, very few such roads and since everybody who travelled at all used them, the names of the places on them would be comparatively familiar to people who had never been there — just as we, although we may well not have been to Constantinople, almost certainly know the names of one or two towns situated on the main routes through the Balkans. But could we place them exactly? Even nearer home we often suffer from considerable geographical haziness — my own family had a long argument some weeks ago whether Durham or Newcastle were further north. Suppose the argument had been about

the relative positions of Omsk and Tomsk ! Our geographical know-
ledge, even now, is far more inaccurate than we should like to believe.
What then of Turoldus [1]? What geographical knowledge did he
have? What place names was he likely to have known? Our iden-
tifications must all be made within the probable field of Turoldus'
knowledge, and others, however tempting, rejected.

Let us start by examining the routes across the Pyrenees, and
the ways of arriving at the end of the «ports». The Pyrenees are
more than 400 km in length, stretching right from the Atlantic on
the west to the Mediterranean on the east, with no coastal plain at
either end to offer an easy way round them. Their peaks rise to over
3000 metres but perhaps more important from the point of view of
communications is that the average height of the passes aproaches
2000 metres — the Pyrenees in fact form a real wall between the
two countries. The passes, moreover, are not only high — they
are also very few in number. It is not easy to enter Spain from
the North — and, as Roland found out, but too late, it is even more
difficult to make the journey in the reverse direction.

Beginning at the West, the following possibilities present them-
selves :

1. *Irun-Hendaye*. This doubtless existed at all times. Easy of
access on the French side, it is less so on the Spanish, and does
not lead to any natural long-distance communications. As far as the
Roland is concerned it is out-of-the way, and the way to it from the
Ebro leads through the dangerous Basque country. Its real defect
however is that the crossing of the Bidassoa by boat was not a pos-
sibility for an army.

2. *Rhûne*. There are at present two minor roads on either side
of this mountain, 315 and 507 metres respectively. Presumably it
would have been possible for Charlemagne's army to have crossed
the Pyrenees here, but there appears to be little evidence that these
roads were used in the early Middle Ages, and they present practi-
cally the same disadvantages as the Bidassoa route, with little to
compensate for the absence of the river crossing.

3. *Pampluna-Cambo-les-Bains*. This is rather difficult on the
Spanish sides, and involves two, higher, cols instead of one — Col

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1. I use Turoldus as a convenient symbol for «the author of the Oxford version of
the Roland», without implying any theories about his real name or identity or about the
composition of the poem.

de Velate (847 m) and Col de Otsondo (602 m) — but would be the natural route coming from Pampluna, though scarcely from the direction of Saragossa.

4. *Roncesvales*. There are several variants possible (eg. summit road, valley road, etc.), but as far as we are concerned here the variants are irrelevant. Essentially we have a route which, although rising to 1057 metres at the Col de Ibaneta is still not excessively high. What is more important, the road difficulties of this route are confined to the very short descent on the French side. It is in fact the easiest and simplest way across the Pyrenees from Saragossa.

5. *Somport*. Although this is the way followed by the railway (Pau, Oloron, Jaca, Saragossa) it is not the easiest way from Saragossa over the Pyrenees, having a very long mountain portion on both sides of the crest, and presenting military dangers on at any rate the Spanish side. In spite of rising to 1631 metres it was none the less used by armies in the Middle Ages.

6. *Pourtalet* (1792 m). This, which offers no real advantages over the Somport, was in fact not opened up till the Nineteenth Century, and need not detain us here.
These «ports» are all relatively close together ; the next is considerably further east :

7. *Portillon-Vallée de la Garonne*. It is possible to go straight up the Garonne, or to cross into it from the valley of Luchon by the Col du Portillon (1308 m). The real difficulty is on the Spanish side of the frontier, where the road continues to rise by Viella to the *Port de la Bonaiga* (2072 m) before descending through Sort to Lérida. This road is incredibly long, difficult, and from a military point of view dangerous. Furthermore it is a road which for practical purposes goes nowhere. There might be good reason for using it in emergency ; there is no point in deliberately sending an army by it, particularly from or to the *upper* Ebro basin.

8. *Hospitalet-Envalira*. We now come, much further East again, to the roads which cross in Cerdagne. This is the most difficult, involving the long road up the valley of the Ariège from Toulouse, by l'Hospitalet over the Col d'Envalira (2407 m), then descending through Andorra and Seo de Urgel to Lérida. Involving the highest col of the Pyrenees, which for most of the year may be blocked by

snow, it offers great geographical difficulties, and is largely rendered unnecessary by the existence of the alternative :

9. *Hospitalet-Puymorens*. The Col de Puymorens (1915 m) is still high, but once crossed the high plateau of the Cerdagne lies before the traveller, and the descent to Lérida or Barcelona is relatively easy, though long.

10. *Cerdagne*. The Cerdagne can also be reached from Carcassone by Quillan and Mont Louis — Col de la Quillane (1714 m) — or from Perpignan via the valley of the Tet, the Col de la Perche (1579 m), and Mont Louis. These both involve long journeys on the present French side through narrow valleys in almost desert regions, but were relatively safe militarily. They descend into Spain by the same roads as the Hospitalet-Puymorens route.

11. *Le Perthus*. There is no further crossing until we reach the Col du Perthus, almost on the Mediterranean. At a height of no more than 290 metres this was the old Roman, and pre-Roman, way across the frontier. Although the Pyrenees are so much lower here, they offer no less an obstacle — the traveller on the East was almost automatically channelled through Cerdagne or Le Perthus.

12. *Coast*. Not only the railway, but more surprisingly, the coast road, were creations of the Nineteenth Century, and need not concern us here.

13. *Tracks*. There are naturally any number of paths and mule tracks leading, in summer at any rate, from one side of the crest to the other — particularly in the Basque region. They are, however irrelevant for our purpose since *a)* they are impossible for a man who does not know the country well — in other words for any stranger ; *b)* they are totally unsuitable for use by a large army ; *c)* they lead nowhere — they would have been highways if they had joined important places. In the high Central Pyrenees even paths of this kind almost cease to exist.

Of these few possibilities there are even fewer which are suitable for the needs of an army such as that of the historical Charlemagne, to say nothing of one the size of that which we meet in the *Chanson de Roland*. The choice is in fact limited to Roncevaux, the Somport, the Cerdagne roads, and Le Perthus.

For Charlemagne's exit from Spain the Roncevaux route has

normally been accepted, and certainly in the poem this appears to be the path taken by him, leading on to the normal western trunk road. The other western possibilities need hardly occupy us further here. What is important is that *a)* the Burguete-St Jean-Pied-de-Port route through Roncevaux was not just Charlemagne's route, but the normal one for all travellers ; and *b)* that it is the easiest. (The Jaca-Oloron road, as we have seen, has a mountain portion of at least double the length.) None of the *pied-de-port* towns is nearer to the crest than St Jean. On the East, the choice is between Cerdagne and Le Perthus. In Roman times and in our own the latter seems more natural — leading as it does to Tarragona and Barcelona. We must however remember that in the Middle Ages Barcelona was not the great metropolis that it is now, and that the relative importance of Saragossa was much greater. Furthermore the *roads to Saragossa led through the heart of the Christian king-*doms, where as Barcelona was for long either in the Moorish zone, or on the frontier of it. Whether the traveller from the North came from Toulouse or Narbonne it was therefore much more natural at that time to turn to the right and move towards Lérida and Saragossa. The places situated on the Cerdagne roads would consequently be much better know and we need to be on our guard against confining ourselves to the old Roman way through Le Perthus when seeking to identify the toponyms of the *Roland.* We must always take both crossings into consideration.

On the French side there is much greater theoretical liberty for *the traveller, and therefore for the Charlemagne of the Roland.* From about Dax there is an unbroken plain stretching to Saint Denis and Aachen — and indeed to Moscow and the Urals — and the only fixed points are the river crossings. In practice however travellers usually confined themselves to the traditional trunk roads, even across the plains — if only because these roads were the most direct and led them quickest where they wanted to go. It was not without some very good reason that they abandoned the trunk roads. Consequently the place names that were known were still the names of the places on or near the road, even though the cramping factors of Pyrenean geography were no longer present.

Boissonade *studiet the place-names* of the Ebro valley in infinite detail and there is no need at this stage to repeat this part of his work. The thesis I would defend here is that, leaving aside the clearly «exotic» toponyms of the *Roland,* the place-names occurring in the poem are to be identified either in the valley of the Ebro, or on one of the four key ways between France and Spain that we have

already discussed. Although Charlemagne in the poem comes back over Roncevaux, names occuring in the *Roland* may well in fact be situated on one of the Eastern routes.

Boissonade considered that his success in identifying names and places proved that Turoldus had himself visited northern Spain; the case does not however seem proved. What is clear from the poem is that Turoldus knew that the Pyrenees existed, that they were «away yonder, down south», that his contemporaries crossed them to fight the Moors, and that various places were in the general direction of the Pyrenees and beyond. There are many specific pieces of information in the poem, but they could all be common knowledge brought back by informants of Turoldus — soldiers, merchants, clerics, yes, and pilgrims. We all of us now have similar information about say the forests of Burma or the Nubian desert — and very vague and inaccurate it often is!

Turoldus was far less in a position to check his information than we are. Whether he ever crossed the Pyrenees or not, he certainly was not able to do it often. When he composed his version of the poem he had no encyclopaedias, atlases, geography text-books, tourist guides, or detailed maps at his disposal. His only sources were what he had seen with his own eyes, if he had in fact visited the area, and what other people told him. What wonder if the poem appears to reveal some geographical inexactitude? In would be surprising if it did not [2].

It is tempting to assume that the form we have in O is incorrect and should be emended to make sense, or that the identification should not be made with the obvious place, but with some other. We forget that Turoldus was a poet, using a poet's means to produce a poet's effects. Inaccuracies and inconsistencies in no way invalidate his intentions — most of the names which cause difficulty are factually unimportant, and are used to produce emotional effects and an impression of local colour. They are largely Pyrenean names — in other words for Turoldus and his audience, exotic, southern, names. When they have produced this effect, they have served their purpose, and in many instances there is little to be gained by trying to identify them. I would however like to finish by considering four notorius *cruces* of the Oxford text.

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2. The neo-traditionalist is of course in a position to transfer «blame» for inexactitude to a predecessor of Turoldus, whose «error» has been maintained by Turoldus, even though he himself may have recognised it as an error. This in no way invalidates our essential thesis however.

1) *Tere Certeine* (856)[3]. The two words in isolation may well mean solid ground *(terra firma)*, and in the Cycle de Guillaume do bear that meaning. In the *Roland* context however this interpretation would make no sense. In spite therefore of the objections of Bédier that the Moors were chasing the rearguard in the wrong direction (NE instead of NW) I would maintain the view that this is in fact the Cerdagne. The geographical error here is one which Turoldus, and still less his audience, would have found it very difficult to spot. From the north of France (or possibly even England!), Saragossa and Cerdagne are somewhere in the middle of the Pyrenees, with Cerdagne higher up. The name is a Pyrenean name, and, relative to Saragossa in the right direction, which is neither NE nor NW but *up,* towards the crest. The relative positions of Roncevaux, Saragossa, and Cerdagne that *we* see on our maps were not present to the mind of Turoldus. On the other hand there were several roads which crossed in Cerdagne and the name would be known in a general sort of way even by people totally unfamiliar with the area. The identification therefore satisfies our requirements both in the way in which the name is used and in the means by which it would be known to Turoldus.

2) *Nerbone.* This form occurs twice — the first time in the name Malpalin de Nerbone (v. 2995), one of the Christian warriors. No hesitation ever appears to have been felt about identifying this with Narbonne. The second time offers more difficulty :

> Repairez sunt a joie et a baldur
> passent *Nerbone* par force et par vigur.
> Vint a Burdeles, la citet de...   *(line incomplete)*
> desur l'alter seint Severin le barun
> met l'oliphan plein d'or et de manguns,
> li pelerin le veient ki la vunt,
> passet *Girunde* a mult granz nefs qui sunt *(sic)*
> entresque a *Blaive* ad cunduit sun nevold, *etc.* (Ed. Gröber, 3682-89.)

It is quite clear from this passage that Charlemagne and his army are coming up the west side of France, and the identifications Burdeles = Bordeaux, Girunde = Gironde, and Blaive = Blaye, have never been seriously doubted. The idea of Nerbone as Narbonne, practically on the Mediterranean coast, has inevitably caused

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3. En Sarraguce fait suner ses taburs.
   Mahumet levent en la plus halte tur;
   n'i ad paien, ne'l prit et ne'l aort
   puis si chevalchent par mult grant cuntencun,
   la tere Certeine et les vals et les munz.
   De cels de France virent les gunfanuns.   (Ed. Gröber, 852-857.)

great worry to literal minded scholars, and eventually a place Arbonne, formerly Narbonne, on the west side was discovered and proclaimed as the original of the Narbonne in this passage [4]. Unfortunately for this identification Arbonne is and was a place of little size or importance half way between St Jean-de-Luz and Bayonne, well away from all roads except the coast itself, and far away from the essential road· of the poem and of Turoldus' own contemporaries through Roncevaux. It is in fact a name which has no connection with the poem and is at the very least unlikely to ave been known in the North. The modern Narbonne is and always has been, a city of importance, known, by name at least, far and wide, and situated precisely on one of the trunk-roads into Spain. Furthermore in all subsequent versions of the *Roland,* from V4 on, and in the Cycle de Guillaume the Narbonne in question is always the modern Narbonne. If the author and audience of V4 could swallow this «inconsistency», there seems no good reason for not identifying the Nerbone of O also with the Mediterranean Narbonne. The *psychological* distance of Arbonne from the route of Charlemagne is considerably greater than that of Narbonne. The purpose of the line is to tie up Charlemagne's campaign with another of the great cities of the South, and nothing more.

3) *Galne* [5]. The first difficulty here is to decide what in fact the assonance is, and there appears to be uncertainty whether *ai* is a diphthong, assonating with the stressed *a* of the *Galne* of the MS, or has already become assonating with the *e* of 664 onwards. If this is so, then *Galne* would require at the very least emendation to *Gelne*. In what follows, this emendation is accepted.

Bédier made no attempt to identify the place mentioned in 662. Stengel, and others, identified it with Valterra in the upper Ebro valley — a name in the news at the time of Turoldus — and emended it to Valterne, following the other versions. The principle of *difficilior lectio* would suggest that for O we should keep at any rate something like *galne* as our reading, rather than accept this emendation.

4. Camille Julian, «Revue des Études Anciennes», t. I, p. 233 (1899).
5. Li empereres aproismet sun repaire,
        venuz en est a la citet de *Galne*
        li quens Rollanz, il l'ad et prise et fraite —
        puis icel jur en fut cent anz deserte
        de Guenelun atent li reis nuveles
        e le treud d'Espaigne la grant tere.
        Par main en l'albe, si cum li jurz esclairet
        Guenes li quens est venuz as herberges.   (Ed. Gröber, 661-668.)

Jenkins and others have suggested Gelsa or Jelsa near Saragossa. Boissonade with great ingenuity suggested no fewer than 14 identifications : Gelsa, Gessona (upper Segre valley, on the Cerdagne road), Gesa near Lérida, Guaso in Sobrarbe, Gistaa near Jaca, Gainiza near Pampluna — all of which he rejects — and Galdeano, Gollano, Gainza, Gallan, three places called Guendulain, and Gulina, all of which he considers possible, but all of which are in the dangerous Basque country, off the main roads, of little or no importance even in Turoldus' own time. Phonetically only Gelsa (rejected by Boissonade) seems acceptable of this list ; Gessona is on or near one of the probable roads, but offers some phonetic difficulty.

I would suggest that, if we must identify this name at all, we look on the other side of the Pyrenees — at the old Roman town of Elne. This is on the Roman road through Le Perthus, is of venerable antiquity and fame, and remains of Roman buildings may even be behind the remark about *cent anz deserte,* although it would be most unwise to push this too far. What is clear is that no more than a slight scribal corruption could have produced *Galne* in our manuscript, and that Elne fulfills the requirements of being a well-known place, on a trunk road, with the right kind of local colour attached to it. We might note finally that at this stage in the poem we are in no way compelled to look for our place-names on the western side, since Charlemagne has not yet set out on his return journey.

4) *Senz* [6]. The two lines in which this occurs are obviously corrupt, but by and large editors agree on the emendations *Seint Michel del Peril* (i. e. Mont Saint Michel) and *as porz de Guitsand* (i. e. Wissant on the French-Flanders coast). Many suggestions have been made about the identification of Senz (usually involving the emendation of *as* — presumably caused by diplography — to *a* - eg. Senz, Xanten (AD SANCTOS), Heiligenberg, and at Poitiers René Louis proposed a site in Britanny to us. None of these are altogether convincing· and a satisfactory answer seems to depend on a satisfactory answer to the question «What does Turoldus mean ?» In fact he means «all over France». If we plot our place names on a map, we have Mont Saint-Michel in the NW, Wissant in the NE, Besançon

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6. En France en ad mult merveillus turment,
   orez i ad de tuneire et de vent,
   pluies et gresilz desmesureement,
   chiedent i fuildres et menut et suvent
   et terremoete co i ad veirement.
   De *Seint Michel de paris* josqu'as *Senz*
   des *Besencun* tresqu'*as de Guitsand.*   (Ed. Gröber, 1423-29.)

in the SE, and one name which we must logically place somewhere
in the SW. The identification Saintes (which has of course been
made before), in spite of a slight, but not insuperable phonetic dif-
ficulty imposes itself (We must remember that the monosyllabic
form may not be due to Turoldus himself or to scribal corruption in
the O version). It completes the fourth corner, even if the France
it covers is really a very approximate «langue d'oil» area, and for
poetic purposes is accurate enough. Saintes is also an important
place, near to the main trunk road, and as far as the poem is con-
cerned directly on the main road leading north from Blaye. Saintes
is in fact the only place which corresponds with either our inter-
pretation of 1428-29 or with our postulate that the names occurring
in the poem must be found on the likely roads.

In short, we must not let our superior knowledge and ingenuity
lead us into looking for «midi à quatorze heures». When we seek
to identify place names in the *Roland* or any other work we must
look for them among the names that the author would be likely to
know, restricting ourselves more closely to the main roads the fur-
ther we venture into regions unknown for the author and his public,
and remembering that names may well be used to convey local colour
and emotion, as well as information.