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CHARLEMAGNE AND ROLAND. A MYSTERIOUS RELATIONSHIP?

It is well known that although Charlemagne's rule denoted considerable political and cultural advance, his personal morals remained those of his semi-barbaric predecessors. His concubines and illegitimate progeny were legion; the chronicles speak of Louis the Pious' efforts to stop the debauchery, especially that of the princesses, at Aix on his arrival there after Charles' death. It is obvious, too, that Einhard, in his *Vita Karoli Magni*, was faced with «*matières épineuses*», as Halphen puts it, in trying to explain Charles' refusal to give his daughters in marriage and insistence upon having them with him until his death, «*dicens se earum contubernio carere non posse*»¹.

Historians are more concerned over Einhard's conspicuous silence on Charles' youth, claiming that nothing was known of this period in his life. They understand why he may not have wished to divulge the circumstances of Charles' birth², but why should he have chosen to bypass his entire formative period? Was there cause for shame? No one has been more vehement in his distrust of Einhard's assertion than Calmette: «*C'est un voile adroitement jeté... pour dissimuler le vice initial sur lequel il serait malséant d'attirer l'attention. Quoi de plus expédient pour n'avoir rien à en dire ou laisser entendre, que de reléguer dans l'ombre tout ce que précède la mort de Pépin?*»³.

Soon after his death there began to circulate a series of Latin «visions» in which holy men were purported to have seen Charles tortured in Purgatory for having committed a grievous sin. In his

1. Cfr. Louis Halphen, *Charlemagne et l'empire carolingien*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1949, p. 91.

2. It is almost certain that Charles was born out of wedlock. Cfr. Joseph Calmette, *Charlemagne, sa vie et son oeuvre*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1945, pp. 42-43.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

poem of 842-849, the *Visio Wettini*, Walafrid Strabo, hiding Charles' name under an acrostic, specifies the sin as being of a carnal nature. Whereas scholars have often considered this «visio» an imitation of one previously applied to Charles Martel in the *Vita S. Eucherii*, M. Gaiffier would remind us that the paragraph here describing Martel's plight is an interpolation of at least 878, based on a letter written by Hincmar to Louis of Germany in 858⁴. Between the tenth and twelfth centuries the theme of Charles' «sin» also formed an integral part of the *Vitae* of Saints Gilles (Egidius) of Provence and Théodule of Valais, for it was through them that he supposedly received absolution. The *Pseudo-Turpin* gives Charles still another intermediary in the person of Saint James⁵. It seems that the Church could not stifle a tradition within its own ranks, and possibly reminiscent of some historical act, that since Charles' death had continually been applying a damper to his glory.

Even if the primitive, strictly oral epics had made use of such a theme, we could hardly expect it to flourish at the time we come upon our first literary texts, just when the image of the Emperor «canonisé» was setting the standard for Western Christendom in an expanded Church-influenced *Roland* and in official Church-State propaganda publicizing the Crusades in Spain and the East. Yet in Germany itself, where clerical attachment to Charles also remained strongest, the vernacular texts, beginning with the *Kaiserchronik* (ca. 1130) and including the *Rolandslied* and the Stricker's *Karl* (1230-1235), are forever alluding to Charles' mysterious sin⁶. Nor does the twelfth century *Huon de Bordeaux* shed any light on his «sin», telling us that the Emperor was forbidden to drink from Auberon's magic cup because he was not «nes et purs et sans peccié mortel»⁷. We are somewhat stunned when the thirteenth century *Karlamagnús saga*, based, as we now know, on lost, primitive epics, in repeating the tale of Egidius' remission of Charles' sin, describes the sin itself: Charles had illicit relations with his sister Gille, who was to give

4. Baudouin de Gaiffier, *La légende de Charlemagne. Le péché de l'empereur et son pardon*, in *Recueil de travaux offert à M. Clovis Brunel par ses amis, collègues et élèves*, Paris, Société de l'École des Chartes, 1955, vol. I, pp. 493-494.

5. Some versions also add Saint Denis. Cfr. Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, Paris, Emile Bouillon, 1905, p. 427, n. 1, and C. Meredith-Jones, *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi ou Chronique du pseudo-Turpin*, Paris, Droz, 1936, p. 16.

6. Cfr. Robert Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l'empire germanique médiéval*, Paris, «Les Belles Lettres», 1950, pp. 167-168, 320 and 478-479. Critics have several times looked on v. 2096 of the Oxf. *Roland* («Ii ber Gilie, por quie Deus fait vertuz») as an allusion to Charles' sin.

7. Cfr. Paris, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

birth to a male in seven months. God willed that Charles marry Gille to Milon d'Anglers. He fulfilled the order and in seven months a boy was born and baptized Roland⁸.

G. Paris, pointing out that the fourteenth century *Tristan de Nanteuil* also defines the sin («Que se fut le peché quant engendra Roulant / en sa sereur germaine...»), presumes that both works rest on «plusieurs textes aujourd'hui perdus»⁹. We have since discovered that the Provençal *Ronsasvals* is fully conscious of Roland's «real» identity, when Charles admits: «Bel neps, yeu vos ac per lo mien peccat gran / de ma seror...», and in dramatic outburst calls him «mon neps et mon enfant»¹⁰. The prose *Myreur des Histors* of Jean d'Outremerse (1338-1400) tells us that Charles knew his sister «charnellement» and twice refers to Roland's illegitimate birth, calling him, «Rollans, niers ou fils Charle»¹¹; it has been shown that much of the *Myreur* is based on «légendes épiques, qui sont différentes de celles que nous connaissons; des traces de poèmes perdus»¹².

Medieval iconography takes us further back in time. While a wall scene in Charles' shrine at Aix (after 1166) and the famous window at Chartres Cathedral depict Egidius pardoning the Emperor, a fresco discovered at the Priory of Saint-Laurent in Laroux-Bottereau (twelfth-thirteenth centuries) does likewise, but at the same time shows Milon d'Anglers giving his hand to Gille!¹³. Finally, M. Horrent claims that this tradition offers the key to a mysterious sentence in the *Pseudo-Turpin*: immediately after Roland is described as «nepos Karoli, filius ducis Milonis de Angleris, natus Bertae sororis Karoli...», we read: «*Alius* tamen Rotholandus fuit, de quo nobis nunc silendum est»¹⁴.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 378, and Paul Aebischer «Karlsmagnús saga», «Kaiser Karl Kronike» danoise et «Karl Magnus» suédois, «Studia Neophilologica», XXIX, 1957, p. 160.

9. Paris, *op. cit.*, p. 382. It is noteworthy that the so-called German «chronicle of Weihestephans», which probably goes back to the fourteenth century, and which Paris himself says «repose... surtout sur un récit, demeuré jusqu'à présent inconnu» (p. 502), also mentions the incest. See also Folz, *op. cit.*, p. 479.

10. Cfr. Jules Horrent, *Roncesvalles. Études sur le fragment du cantar de gesta conservé à l'Archivo de Navarra (Pampelune)*, Paris, «Les Belles Lettres», 1951, p. 194.

11. See Louis Michel, *Les légendes épiques carolingiennes dans l'oeuvre de Jean d'Outremerse*, Brussels, Palais des Académies, 1935, pp. 168-170.

12. Georges Doutrepoint, *Les mises en prose des épopées et des romans chevaleresques du XIV^e siècle*, Brussels, Palais des Académies, 1939, p. 162.

13. See Caiffier, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

14. M. Horrent writes: «Selon moi, la dernière phrase doit... se comprendre: ... «cependant Roland fut autre, différent». Différent de ce que précède, de *nepos Karoli*... Ne serions-nous pas ici devant une allusion volontairement obscure à la tradition de la naissance incestueuse de Roland?» (*Op. cit.*, p. 150, n. 1.) Throughout Carolingian legend there is constant confusion between Gille (or Gilain) and Bertie, the name of Charles' mother often being applied to his sister.

W. O. Farnsworth, hesitant to accept the theory of incest, noted nonetheless that «the sentimental relation between uncle and nephew is much closer than that between father and son» (i. e., Charles and Louis), and supposed that such a relation was «plainly the most ancient part of the poems»¹⁵. Menéndez Pidal thinks that Einhard may purposely have omitted Roland's name from the first edition of his *Vita* (which, according to J. W. Thompson, probably «coincides with Louis the Pious' reform of the court»¹⁶), but added it to his second edition when he could no longer ignore the «lays» centered about Roland that were «una voz pública... imposible de acallar»¹⁷. If our suspicions are right, then Einhard's reticence may have been motivated by the same interests that forbade the clerical authors of the Latin «visions» to expound upon Charles' «sin», but did not prevent an oral or epic tradition from doing so.

The little we claim to know of the historical Roland would make him an important person. Einhard tells us that Hruodlandus was «Prefect (*praefectus*) of the Breton March», a title not easily come by in the Carolingian hierarchy. We have recently learned that a Count «Rothlandus» (and we are at once reminded of «li quens Rollant» of the *Roland*!) occupied second place in a nine-man tribunal set up to judge a suit at the Palace of Herstal between 772 and 774¹⁸. The two «deniers» bearing *Car lus* on one side, and *Rod lan* on the other, in letters equally as large as the former, betray an exceptionally close relation between this «Rodlan» (Menéndez Pidal considers this form

15. William Oliver Farnsworth, *Uncle and Nephew in the Old French Chanson de Geste. A Study in the Survival of Matriarchy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1913, pp. 89 and 244. The author claims that Milon is of such slight importance in comparison to Charles or Roland that he must be referred to as «Milan, qui fut père de Roland» (p. 243). Of course, we must bear in mind that under Frankish law the uncle became guardian on the father's death. Interesting, too, is the literary parallel of Arthur and Mordred (i. e., the incest motif).

16. James Westfall Thompson, *The Manuscripts of Einhard's Vita Karoli and the Matter of Roland*, in *Mélanges d'histoires offerts à Henri Pirenne*, Brussels, Vromant et Cie., 1926, vol. II, p. 526. Thompson also thinks this the probable reason for Einhard's «discreet allusion» to Charles and his daughters.

17. Menéndez Pidal, *La "Chanson de Roland" y el neotradicionalismo (orígenes de la épica románica)*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1959, pp. 257 and 269. The critic bases his claims on Thompson's study which aimed to show that the prototype of the *Vita* mss. which omit Hruodlandus was a first edition presented to Louis the Pious. André de Mandach attributes the addition of Roland's name to some interpolator revising Einhard's text after 840, but admits that such an interpolation may well be the result of «un chant populaire» or «l'incubation épique» of the ninth and tenth centuries (*Naissance et développement de la chanson de geste en Europe: I. La geste de Charlemagne et de Roland*, Geneva, Droz, 1961, pp. 30 and 82).

18. See Philippe Lauer, *Les plus anciennes mentions de Roland*, «Romania», LXVIII, 1944-1945, pp. 381-385, and Jacques Stiennon, *Le denier de Charlemagne au nom de Roland*, «Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale», III^e année, 1960, pp. 87-95.

an «*abbreviatura monetale*» of *Rodlan*[*dus*]) and Charles; since they antedate the monetary reform of 781 (our «*Hruodlandus*» was killed in 778) by which monograms replaced names on the backs of such coins, M. Stiennon has justly indicated that this only serves to narrow down our very limited choice of eighth century *Hrodlands*, *Chrodlands*, *Roadlants*, etc.¹⁹ In the French edition of his *La Chanson de Roland*, Menéndez Pidal concedes that if the «*Rothlandus*» of the tribunal and the «*Rodlan*» of the coins are one and the same, «*Cette identification... n'infermerait en rien — bien loin de là — les positions du traditionalisme*»²⁰.

We may now note that Einhard's labors to minimize the Frankish disaster in the famous passage dealing with the Pyrenean incident are matched in the next paragraph by a like procedure in describing the Breton revolts that occurred after Roland's death²¹. If Einhard *did* omit Roland's name from the first edition of his *Vita*, as seems likely, it may later have struck him or his readers as particularly awkward that a possible main cause of the rebellion (that is, the death of the Breton «*praefectus*»)²² should be ignored, certainly if Roland's popularity was such that he had already become the subject of «*lays*». The very possibility of Einhard's reticence to mention Roland, his efforts to «*play down*» the Spanish defeat (with his omission of Charles' consorting with the Arabs and the «*shameful*» Pamplona episode in which the Christian Emperor destroyed a Christian bulwark in northern Spain) and the subsequent revolts in Brittany, hint that the whole affair may really have been of a very «*intimate*» and «*personal*» nature to Charles. Who could better appreciate its «*intimacy*» and want to save his master from permanent disgrace (through the *written* word) than Einhard, one of his closest associates? Was «*this wound that the King received in Spain*» («*Cuius vulneris accepti dolor magnam partem rerum feliciter in Hispania gestarum in corde regis*

19. M. Stiennon writes: «... la liste de Föörstemann... ne dénombre pas *sept* individus différents, mais *sept* mentions différents du nom. Parfois, plusieurs mentions concernent un même personnage. Parfois on a affaire à des variantes orthographiques» (*op. cit.*, p. 92).

20. Menéndez Pidal, *La "Chanson de Roland" et la tradition épique des Français*. Deuxième édition revue et mise à jour par l'auteur avec le concours de René Louis et traduite de l'espagnol par Irénée-Marcel Cluzel, Paris, Picard et Cie., 1960, p. 287.

21. Halphen observes that Einhard «*simplifie à l'excès*» these rebellions which had dire consequences for Charles. See his edition of Einhard, *Vie de Charlemagne*. Troisième édition, revue et corrigée, Paris, «*Les Belles Lettres*», 1947, pp. 30-32, especially n. 6.

22. Halphen notes, «*Depuis qu'il [Roland] avait été tué en 778, de nouveaux desordres s'étaient produits aux frontières du pays*» (*Charlemagne et l'empire carolingien*, p. 91).

obnubilavit», say the *Annales Laurissenses Maiores* of ca. 829 in describing the Spanish disaster) like that felt on losing a son? Was Charles' defeat, together with the loss of Roland (product of incest?), caused by a rare error in «politico-religious» judgment (we refer here, of course, to Charles' consorting with the Arabs, etc.), looked upon as the «wages of sin» and considered an expurgation for same? ²³. Was *this* the motivating force behind our epic?

That an oral tradition might retain certain historical reminiscences for hundreds of years before being written down should come as no shock to us today when «archaeology has demonstrated that Biblical references even to the times of Abraham almost a thousand years before any Biblical records could possibly have been put into written form, contain remarkably correct historical memories of the events they mirror» ²⁴. What has remained inexplicable is the *cause* for the *Roland's* birth and growth which one critic has called «the most astonishing thing in literary history and beyond explanation» ²⁵ for this one defeat had more poetic efficacy than all of Charles' triumphs combined. For a «lay» to have been based on Roland's death alone, certainly there must have been, as Menéndez Pidal points out, «numerosas y fuertes causas de destacarse entre los muchos caídos en el desastre... Tenemos que pensar en el canto noticiero que en un momento de profundo dolor conmovió a toda Francia...» ²⁶. It is barely possible that our own insinuations may help to clarify the origins of the *Roland's* mysterious birth and «popularity».

For M. Aebischer it is «pour le moins curieux» that the primitive *Karlamagnús saga* tells us that Charles, upon giving Gille to Milon d'Anglers, made him «duc de la Bretagne», an office similar to that held by the historical Roland ²⁷. The Breton origins of Roland are apparent in several legends; they are given prominence in the twelfth

23. Léon Gautier noted, «Charlemagne, c'est Roland devenu vieux» (*Les épopées françaises*. Seconde édition, entièrement refondue, Paris, H. Welter, 1878-1892, vol. III, p. 164), and A. B. Lord thinks, «we must admit the possibility that Roland is a substitute for Charlemagne» (*The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 206). The latter discusses the epic motif of «death by substitution», already present in the *Gilgamesh* when Enkidu, the deuteragonist, dies for the hero (p. 201). Can Roland's death be cited as another example?

24. Nelson A. Glueck, a noted Biblical scholar, wrote an article on this theme, *Book of Faith and of History*, for the «New York Times Magazine», September 25, 1960, pp. 29, 76-77. One can understand Menéndez Pidal's plea for continued work on excavations in the Roncevalles area (*op. cit.*, p. 209, n. 77).

25. C. E. Russell, *Charlemagne, First of the Moderns*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930, p. 155.

26. Menéndez Pidal, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-251.

27. Paul Aebischer, *Textes norrois et littérature française du moyen âge*, Geneva, Droz, 1954, p. 59.

century epic of *Aquin* which critics have considered to be a remnant of an ancient epic tradition centered in Brittany ²⁸. There are frequent allusions in other epics to Charles' wars with the Bretons, and G. Paris thought that v. 2047 of the Oxford *Roland* («Ço est Gualter ki cunquist Maelgut») referred to an episode of some lost poem in which Gualter, Roland's vassal, fought against a Breton named Maelgut, thus conserving «le souvenir de la fonction de son héros [Roland] comme comte de la Marche de Bretagne» ²⁹. Just what role, if any, a brother-in-law of Charles' may have played in Brittany, is a matter for wide conjecture, especially since we know that Charles' only sister, Gisla, entered the Church in her youth. Einhard's reference to her is all too terse. We know that Gisla, «quam similiter ut matrem magna coluit pietate», was an active member of the court in spite of her duties as an abbess, and that Charles granted her much wealth; we also know that he once prevented her marriage to a Lombard. Winston notes: «Just as in later years he was unwilling to give up his daughters, he was now reluctant to let his sister marry abroad» ³⁰. Yet it is always Gille or Berte (cfr. n. 14) who is Roland's mother in epic tradition! The secret behind this tradition remains to be discovered, doubtlessly lying buried in that moment of time when the primitive epics first cut loose from actual history and chose a more fictionalized or «literary» path of their own.

28. Joüon des Longrais discusses these matters in the prologue to his edition of *Le Roman d'Aquin; ou La Conquête de la Bretagne par le Roi Charlemagne; chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, Nantes, Société des Bibliophiles Bretons, 1880, pp. xxv-xlvii and li-lii. Cfr. also G. Paris, *op. cit.*, p. 296, and Gautier, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-365.

29. See Joüon des Longrais, *op. cit.*, p. xlvii, and G. Paris, *La légende du saint Rolland*, «Romania», XII, 1883, p. 114.

30. Richard Winston, *Charlemagne from the Hammer to the Cross*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1954, pp. 51-52. He adds in a footnote: «Because Gisla entered a convent in her girlhood, most historians have assumed that she felt a religious vocation and was unwilling to marry. In view of her age and the customs of the time, this is improbable. The decision was obviously Charles'.» Charles' exaggerated religious compulsions, especially those of his last years (cfr. Winston, pp. 123 and 306-310), also need probing. For instance, what reasons of conscience may have made him draw up an «extraordinary will — which reserved for his children and grandchildren only a twelfth part of his treasure», the rest being donated to the Church and the poor, all «for the sake of his soul?»