

The Frankish war ethos: views from France and Byzantium

The Song of Roland was a *chansons de geste*, a song of heroic deeds, based on the Battle of Roncevaux Pass fought in 778, in which Roland, prefect of the Breton March and commander of the rear guard of Charlemagne's army, was defeated by the Basques. It was extremely popular around the 11th to 14th centuries, and thus is able to reveal to us how the Frankish people viewed themselves in the context of the crusades. The Alexiad, written by Anna Comnena (daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexius I), accounts Alexius's interaction with the Franks during the First Crusade, and provides for us an outside view of Frankish crusaders. In The Song of Roland, the Franks view themselves as good vassals, celebrating their strength and ferocity in relation to their loyalty to God, their lords, and their fellow knights, where in The Alexiad, Franks are portrayed as strong but without wisdom, ferocious but without piety, and able to only feign loyalty.

The Song of Roland concerns itself heavily with portraying the Franks as the ideal "good knights". The narrator explicitly praises Frankish heroes for qualities such as strength and ferocity, using graphic descriptions of one-on-one battle to emphasize the violence and power of their blows:

[Oliver] goes to strike a pagan, Malun;
 He breaks his shield, wrought with gold and flowers,
 And smites both his eyes out of his head.
 His brains come spilling out over his feet;
 He sends him toppling to his death with seven hundred of their men.¹

¹ *The Song of Roland*. Trans. Glyn Burgess. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 72, lines 1353-1357.

The narrator does not attempt to censor violence any way; rather, he exaggerates it, not sparing his audience any vividness of this illustration of strength.

Notably, the Frankish heroes seem to be driven to the use of such violence in two main situations: first, in vengeance for fallen brothers, and second, in defense of their lord Charlemagne's honor. In lines 1545-1635, several of the Peers are killed, and in response to each death, Roland, Oliver, and Turpin rush forward to slay the offenders with a shout of revenge ("May God grant me revenge"², "May God send down evil upon you. / You have slain this man and brought sorrow to my heart."³, "You have slain a man for whom I think you will pay dearly."⁴). Not only is this indicative of the Frankish categorization of vengeance as justice, but these passages also show the importance of brotherhood among knights who serve the same lord. Furthermore, the love that characterizes this brotherhood contrasts strikingly against the ferocity these knights show their enemies. Upon receiving a mortal wound, Oliver loses so much blood that he cannot see clearly and strikes at Roland, mistakenly thinking he is an enemy. A touching passage illustrating the closeness of Oliver and Roland's friendship follows:

At this blow Roland looked at him
 And asked him in gentle, tender tones:
 'Lord companion, do you intend to do this?
 This is Roland who loves you so dearly;
 You had not challenged me in any way.'
 Oliver said: 'Now I can hear your voice,
 But I cannot see you; may God watch over you.'

² *Roland*, 78, line 1548.

³ *Roland*, 80, lines 1608-1609.

⁴ *Roland*, 81, line 1633.

Did I strike you? Pardon me for this.’

Roland replies: ‘I have not been hurt;

I pardon you here and before God.’

With these words they bowed to each other;

See how they part with such great love!⁵

Though they stand in the middle of the battlefield, Oliver and Roland know that they would never betray each other; there is an acknowledgement of a loyalty that is carried until death.

The Frankish conviction of seeing a knight as a defender of his lord’s honor is perhaps most clearly seen in the opening passages of the battle, where Roland responds to Marsile’s nephew’s claim that Charlemagne has abandoned his knights to death, and that France will lose its honor:

When Roland hears these words, O God, what anger!

He spurs on his horse, lets it race ahead;

The count rides on to strike him with all his might.

He breaks his shield and tears his hauberk open;

He splits his breast and shatters all his bones,

Severing from his back his entire spine.⁶

Oliver and Turpin, with similar enragement, proceed to slay the next two of Marsile’s soldiers that insult Charles as an irresponsible lord. Here, Roland, Oliver, and Turpin are reflecting the importance of being a good vassal. Roland, of course, is the ultimate vassal, being the “right-hand” of Charlemagne, and the Song later tells us that he “never loved a

⁵ *Roland*, 92-93, lines 1998-2009.

⁶ *Roland*, 67, lines 1196-1201.

coward, / Nor arrogant men nor those of evil character, / Nor any knight, unless he were a good vassal”;⁷ a knight, in other words, is nothing unless he upholds the principles of good vassalage.

What, then, makes a vassal good? Obvious characteristics of a good vassal as seen in The Song of Roland are courage and the willingness to battle. In line 1039, Oliver reports an enemy of a hundred thousand coming to fight their army of twenty thousand; regardless, Oliver calls out to his men: “Frankish lords, may God grant you strength; / Stand firm, lest we should be defeated.”⁸ In other words, war is a duty, battle a way of expressing loyalty to one’s lord, and impossible circumstances simply a path towards even more glory. Oliver’s men fittingly reply, “A curse on him who flees. / No one of us will fail you for fear of death.”⁹

This idea of battling for one’s lord is extended in the Frankish view that they are God’s chosen; very often, Roland asserts that “The pagans are wrong and the Christians are right.”¹⁰ War and violence, in fact, is quite literally an expression of devotion to God, and in turn, the Frankish “piety” (the fact they fight against pagans) is rewarded in terms of military victory: the sun is held still while Charles chases Marsile’s men to their deaths,¹¹ and Charles is saved from Baligant’s blow, and slays Baligant instead.¹² More important, however, is the sense of martyrdom that is associated with the battle occurring in The Song of Roland – that is, the emphasis that these Franks are not only fighting but dying for Christendom. For when Turpin says, “For our king we must be prepared to

⁷ *Roland*, 97, lines 2134-2136.

⁸ *Roland*, 62, lines 1045-1046.

⁹ *Roland*, 62, lines 1047-1048.

¹⁰ *Roland*, 61, line 1015.

¹¹ *Roland*, 107, lines 2458-2459.

¹² *Roland*, 144, lines 3609-3619.

die”,¹³ he speaks not only of Charles. Roland too, at his death, makes his final gesture that of offering his right glove to God – a symbol of forever fealty.¹⁴

In The Alexiad, Anna Comnena of Byzantine clearly also aligns herself with “correctness” in terms of following the will of God. But while the Franks viewed themselves as soldiers of Christendom, she obviously considers the Franks barbaric and immature people, seeing their hotheadedness as nothing more than selfish zeal. At first, in her account of the Crusades, the Franks indeed seem to enthusiastically respond to conquest as a form of religious duty:

[Peter Koukoupetros] said... that all should ... set out to worship at the Holy Shrine and with all their soul and might strive to liberate Jerusalem from the Agarenes...It was as if he had inspired every heart with some divine oracle. Kelts assembled from all parts, one after another, with arms and horses and all the other equipment for war. Full of enthusiasm and ardour they thronged every highway.¹⁵

This itself is not seen as disagreeable by Anna. She continues the paragraph illustrating how the “barbarian Ishmaelites” are “slaves of drunkenness” and “nothing more than slaves ... of the vices of Aphrodite”.¹⁶ Even if she grudges the view of the Franks seeing themselves in the right, she agrees that the pagans are indeed wrong.

What, then, is so objectionable about Frankish passion for war, if the Franks are utilizing it for the defeat of Muslims? Quite simply, it is the issue of motivation. Though she admits that the simpler folk on the crusade do genuinely seem to want to do God’s work, she is convinced that the Frankish nobles, for the most part, are on crusade out of

¹³ *Roland*, 65, line 1128.

¹⁴ *Roland*, 105, line 2389.

¹⁵ F.R.A. Sewter, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena. Readings in Medieval History*. Ed. Patrick J. Geary. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 430.

¹⁶ Geary, 430.

greed and not for God: “As I have said before, the Latin race at all times is unusually greedy for wealth, but when it plans to invade a country, neither reason nor force can restrain it”.¹⁷ Thus, she is unable to perceive the Franks the way they are depicted in The Song of Roland -- as martyrs. Ignoring Alexius’ advice to wait for the other counts, Koukoupetros and his men head to Nicaea, driven by a rumor of great spoil, and are ambushed by the Turks. Anna writes, “Near the Drakon they fell into the Turkish ambuscade and were miserably slaughtered. So great a multitude of Kelts and Normans died by the Ishmaelite sword that when they gathered the remains of the fallen, lying on every side, they heaped up... a mountain of considerable height and depth and width, so high was the mass of bones”.¹⁸ In The Song of Roland, the slaughter of Charlemagne’s rearguard is depicted as glorious defeat. Here, the slaughter of Franks is “foolishness... misfortunes that had come upon [Koukoupetros] through not listening to [Alexis’] advice”.¹⁹

Furthermore, from Anna’s perspective, the Franks not only do not fight for Christendom, they actually threaten it. In The Alexiad, the Frankish counts seem to place love of battle over Christian unity and respect for Christ’s sacrifice. For example, after Count Godfrey reaches Constantinople, he stalls there, waiting for Bohemond and other counts to arrive. In the meantime, some of the counts who had accompanied Godfrey are invited to meet with emperor Alexius for advice. However, somehow (the fault being attributed to the Franks’ “love of long speeches”²⁰) a false rumor that the counts had been kidnapped begins to circulate, and Godfrey’s army begins to march on Constantinople.

¹⁷ Geary, 432.

¹⁸ Geary, 432.

¹⁹ Geary, 432.

²⁰ Geary, 435.

Rather than reacting militarily, Alexius insists on not attacking the Franks for two reasons: “because of the sacred character of the day (it was the Thursday of Holy Week, the supreme week of the year, in which the Savior suffered an ignominious death on behalf of the whole world); and secondly because he wished to avoid bloodshed between Christians”.²¹ The Frankish response, however, is to reinforce their assault. This is a far cry from The Song of Roland’s condemnation of Ganelon for conspiring with the Muslim enemy to bring harm to his Christian brothers.

The narration of Alexius’ interactions with Godfrey also reveals Anna’s views on Frankish loyalty. Fealty is portrayed as a shallow promise, used as a tool for manipulation; honor and a Frankish promise of allegiance do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Earlier in the narration, Godfrey rebukes a fellow count for lowering himself to the status of the emperor’s liege-man, calling him a “slave”.²² Despite this, after being defeated by Alexius, Godfrey swears an oath of submission to Alexius and seems to be content in taking a generous gift of wealth and supplies, displaying no shame in being defeated.²³ Alexius’ interactions with Bohemond also demonstrate Frankish use of fealty for manipulative ends. In this instance, Bohemond comes to Alexius to try and gain access to the emperor’s resources and goodwill, though Bohemond inwardly holds Alexius in hostility. After proclaiming himself Alexius’ friend, he is offered a place to rest and a generous meal. However, Bohemond refuses the food, suspecting poison, and has his own cooks prepare other food. The very next day, Bohemond takes an oath of loyalty to Alexius.²⁴ Unlike Roland and Oliver’s deep-rooted loyalty to each other, the fealty of the

²¹ Geary, 435.

²² Geary, 436.

²³ Geary, 436.

²⁴ Geary, 439.

Franks in The Alexiad does not seem to reflect authenticity. In fact, the only Frankish count that is deemed as holding the emperor's affection, Raymond of Saint-Gilles, is held as such because he "honored truth above all else".²⁵

While the Franks praise certain qualities of themselves, Anna views Frankish use of these qualities as incomplete -- Frankish strength and ferocity is portrayed as admirable to an extent, but for the most part seen as reckless and foolishness; Frankish loyalty overall seems to hold no water, as the custom of fealty throughout The Alexiad is depicted merely as a formality that Frankish nobles seem to disregard the gravity of, or use as leverage for comforts in the emperor's courts. Though these different views of the Franks are largely drawn from obvious biases of each text, they are also indicative of the larger rift between the eastern and western kingdoms. This rift was wrought out of the conflict between the eastern and western churches and helped shaped each church's role in their respective states -- in the east was born an emphasis on truth and orthodoxy, while a culture praising vassalage and loyalty to God formed in the west. Thus, in The Song of Roland, we see unwavering Frankish soldiers, while in The Alexiad, Anna's depiction of the Frankish nobles emphasize their lack of honesty. It is interesting to think about what Roland would have thought about a view such as Anna's; he, in his pride, would not have tolerated her scorn.

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²⁵ Geary, 440.