The Song of Roland, the Historia Turpini, and Anti-Islamic Stereotypes in Europe Before and During the High Middle Ages

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Abstract

Anti-Islamic portrayals of Muslims as demonic pagans appeared in modern-day France as early as the ninth century and continued to materialize throughout Europe over the next two hundred years. These stereotypes of Muslims, who the majority of medieval authors called "Saracens," were often recorded in Latin manuscripts, but they circulated, instead, in vernacular oral traditions such as *The Song of Roland*, the *Historia Turpini*, and the *chansons de geste*. This paper refutes the common scholarly argument that the portrayal of Muslims as pagans was "created" as part of a propaganda campaign that supported the First Crusade. Instead, it argues that the existing anti-Muslim rhetoric predisposed Europeans to approve of and participate in the First Crusade.

Keywords: Crusades, Islamophobia, Roland Tradition

Introduction

The First Crusade famously and bloodily symbolized what medieval crusaders saw as the ultimate battle between Muslim and Christian religions. However, Pope Urban II could not have proposed, let alone carried out, a war of this magnitude and expense (both in money and in human lives) without a history of European Christian attitudes that supported it. This brings up

the questions: what were medieval Christian attitudes towards Muslims, when did they arise, and how were they transmitted? Two prominent contemporary texts provide some answers. *The Song of Roland* is a medieval epic poem written in Old French that tells a story from the time of Charlemagne. As it portrays him, he was a king, a war commander, and a heroic slayer of Muslims. The story mostly focuses on his nephew, Roland, until Roland dies in the Battle of Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees, at which point it pivots to Charlemagne's revenge on the Muslims for his nephew's death. The poem celebrates both Roland's and Charlemagne's great bravery and their expansion of Christian lands as they battle Muslims (who were supposedly led by the king of Saragossa) in the Battle of Roncesvalles.[1] The *Historia Turpini*, written in Latin prose and falsely attributed to Archbishop Turpin of Rheims, also tells the story of the Battle of Roncesvalles (among other stories), has very similar themes to *The Song of Roland*, and was written down around the same time.[2] The idea of an almost divine battle between Islam and Christianity was so important to the story of *The Song of Roland* and the *Historia Turpini* that Old French speakers (who circulated both texts orally) incorrectly attributed the name of the places of battle, Roncesvalles (which means "valley of thorns") to the legend that "hawthorne bushes grew out of the corpses of the Saracens, as a way to distinguish them from the French corpses."[3] However, the true story of the Battle of Roncesvalles is glaringly different from that retold in *The Song of Roland* and the *Historia Turpini*. In reality, the Battle of Roncesvalles was fought between Charlemagne's armies and the Christian Basques.[4]

This distinction between reality and the pseudo-reality portrayed in *The Song of Roland* and the *Historia Turpini* prompts many questions. For instance, why did their authors, Turold and Pseudo-Turpin, exchange Basques for Muslims in the story of the battle?[5] How did they

portray these Muslims? To what larger "project" did this portrayal of Muslims contribute?

These questions must be considered within the context of the world in which both of these

texts were originally written down. Turold recorded *The Song of Roland* circa AD 1115 and

Pseudo-Turpin wrote down the *Historia Turpini* around AD 1145, both within 50 years of the

end of the First Crusade.[6] Both of these texts, along with almost all of the *chansons de geste*

comprising the *Roland* tradition, portray Muslims as demonical pagans from which Christian

lands needed to be "liberated." However, their characterizations of Muslims were not new or

unique. Rather, an anti-Islamic attitude that incorporated the idea of Muslims as pagans

existed, at the latest, more than a century before either *The Song of Roland* or the *Historia*

Turpini existed in manuscript form. Therefore, this stereotypical pagan and demon-worshipping

Muslim was not created as a method of propaganda during and after the First Crusade, as some

scholars have argued.[7] The stereotype itself inspired the First Crusade and was a potent and

widely accepted concept long before Pope Urban II organized the First Crusade.

A Note on "Muslim" versus "Saracen"

Throughout all of the texts relevant to this paper, the word "Muslim" is rarely

mentioned. In place of "Muslim," medieval authors most commonly used "Saracen." This term

comes from the medieval belief that Muslims claimed to be descendants of Abraham and his

wife Sarah because they were ashamed of their actual descent from Abraham and his slave,

Hagar.[8] Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh argues that the use of "Saracen" implies that "Muslims are

presumed guilty of fabricated genealogy, of co-opting Christian history, of misrepresenting

themselves and their faith, [and] of manipulating those around them."[9] In addition, John Tolan

has written multiple books about Muslims as they were imagined by medieval Europeans,

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including one of his most influential works, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*.[10] "Saracen," therefore, was a medieval derogatory term for Muslims and contributed to Muslim demonization throughout all of these texts. In addition, because the word "Saracen" has such a biased history, it will only be used in this essay where it is included in quotes from other texts.[11]

Muslims as Pagans in the Twelfth-Century *Roland* Tradition

Examining twelfth-century versions of the story of the Battle of Roncesvalles is vital to understanding Western European Christian attitudes towards Muslims immediately after the First Crusade. While literate, Latin-speaking regular and secular clergy produced most written texts, vernacular oral traditions better reflect the general attitudes of the majority, including the illiterate. One of the most famous and accessible oral traditions of the time was that of the *chansons de geste*, which is a group of closely-related epic poems that comprises the Roland tradition.[12] There are far too many *chansons* to analyze in this short paper, so the focus here is on *The Song of Roland* (Oxford version) and the *Historia Turpini*, which together "served as the matrix for the *chansons de geste*."[13] Reflecting the pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment that preceded and accompanied the crusading period, Turold and Pseudo-Turpin rewrote the story of the Battle of Roncesvalles (AD 778) to both explicitly characterize Muslims as pagans and implicitly identify them with Satan.

Throughout *The Song of Roland*, Turold portrays Muslims as pagans. To medieval Europeans, like Turold, paganism generally referred to the practice of non-Abrahamic religions, which often predated Christian control in many parts of Europe. Although Islam is an Abrahamic faith, Turold still refers to the Muslims in *The Song of Roland* as "pagans" multiple times. In fact,

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Turold uses the term "pagans" specifically to refer to Muslims (e.g. "The Franks and pagans strike with swords").[14] In addition, near the end of the tale after the Franks retake the city of Saragossa from the Muslims, they "smash the statues and all the idols, / No sorcery or false cult will remain there."[15] Here, Turold unwittingly reveals one supposed justification for his designation of Islam as paganism: his characterization of Muslims as idol-worshippers, which, of course, they were not. Immediately following this, he asserts the righteousness of the Franks by stating that "The king [Charlemagne] believes in God," ignoring the fact that the Muslims, in fact, believe in that same God (though even learned medievalists may have thought of Allah as a different deity because of the Muslim Unitarian, versus the Christian Trinitarian, nature of God).[16] Turold's illustration of Muslims as practitioners of primitive, idol-worshipping paganism may result from a lack of understanding of Islam on his part. Turold's disdainful depiction of Islam supports the contemporary aspiration to drive Muslims away from Christian-held or Christian-desired lands.

Pseudo-Turpin also portrays Muslims as pagans throughout his chronicle. In fact, he uses the word "pagan" 22 times throughout his book.[17] He also calls Muslims "perfidious," "infidels," "cruel," and a source of "heretical evil."[18] Pseudo-Turpin also describes the alleged idolatry of Muslims in even more detail than that of Turold. Pseudo-Turpin entitles the fourth chapter of the *Historia Turpini* "About the Idol Muhammad," and spends the entire chapter describing the only idol Charlemagne did not destroy during his time in Spain, a statue called the "Salam Cadis. According to Pseudo-Turpin, the "Salam Cadis" is a representation of one of the Muslims' gods, Muhammad, that, in fact, Muhammad supposedly fabricated himself. He also suggests that Muhammad hid "a legion of demons" within the idol "using his magic arts."[19]

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This short chapter exemplifies both the justification for the use of "pagan" in reference to Muslims as well as the wildly inaccurate picture of Islam that Pseudo-Turpin draws, notwithstanding some small kernels of truth, such as his awareness of the name Muhammad.

In addition to referring to Muslims as "pagans," Turold asserts that the Muslims flee before Charlemagne and his army because God wills that the Muslim lands fall back into Christian hands. After Charlemagne kills the emir, Turold recounts that "The pagans turn and flee, God does not wish them to remain."[20] He then repeats similar versions of this line twice more.[21] This repetition reinforces Turold's argument that God supports Charlemagne's expulsion of the Muslims from Christian lands. He likely expected contemporary readers and listeners to make an analogy between the Battle of Roncesvalles and the expulsion of Muslims from other "Christian" lands, such as Jerusalem.

Intriguingly, *Historia Turpini* also depicts Muslims fleeing in the knowledge of the superiority of Christianity. Pseudo-Turpin mentions that the idol "Salam Cadis" (discussed above) "holds a giant key. Many Saracens say that this key will fall from his hand the year in which the future king of Gaul — the one who will subjugate all of Spain to the laws of the Christians in the end times — is born. As soon as the people see that the key has fallen, they will bury their treasures in the ground and flee."[22] Pseudo-Turpin also mentions Muslim soldiers "fleeing" from battle on multiple occasions.[23] He reinforces his disdain for soldiers fleeing from danger in the story of a battle between the soldiers of Charlemagne and Aigoland (a pagan African king who reconquered Spain and led Muslim forces in the war that included the Battle of Roncesvalles).[24] Charlemagne and Aigoland choose equally-sized groups of soldiers for multiple rounds of battle; the Christians win in every round except one, when the Christians

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tried to run "out of fear of being killed." Turpin then tells the reader that the soldiers that fled

"teach us of one type of faithful soldier of Christ; those who wish to fight for the faith of God

should never turn back. Just as these soldiers were killed because they fled, the faithful in Christ

who should fight valiantly against sin will die shamefully in sin if they turn away."[25] Though

Pseudo-Turpin directs this polemic towards cowardly Christians, his audience could easily

transfer the meaning to his repeated characterization of Muslims as cowardly, especially

because he uses the same language of flight for both groups.

In addition to portraying Muslims as pagans, Turold implies something much worse: that

Muslims were allied with and represented Satan. The scenes in which Charlemagne fights and

eventually kills the emir contain an allegory of Jesus's temptation in the desert.[26] While fighting

Charlemagne, the emir tells him, "You very unjustly challenge my right to this country. /

Become my vassal and I shall give it back to you as a fief. / Come serve me from here to the

Orient."[27] This offer is quite similar to that which Satan extends to Jesus in the Gospel of

Matthew: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms

of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall

down and worship me.'" Jesus responds, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the

Lord your God and serve only him.'"[28] Charlemagne similarly responds to the emir, "This strikes

me as a very contemptible notion. / I must bestow neither peace nor friendship on any pagan. /

Accept the religion that God reveals to us, / Namely Christianity."[29] In the earlier biblical story,

Satan tempts Jesus three times. Turold references this tripartite structure of the story of Jesus's

temptations in *The Song of Roland* by recounting the fight between Charlemagne and the emir

in three parts: an initial clash, the emir's offer, and Charlemagne final (and graphic) killing of the

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emir.[30] In addition, both Jesus and Charlemagne receive divinely-sent help in these stories. After Satan finishes tempting Jesus and leaves him, "angels came and waited on him."[31] Similarly, right before Charlemagne kills the emir, "Saint Gabriel returned to his side."[32] This allegory, both in its portrayal of Charlemagne as Jesus and of the Muslim emir as the devil, suggest a fundamentally Christian justification for killing Muslims.

Pseudo-Turpin further emphasizes his opinion that Muslims are deplorable by employing the language of liberation. In the first sentence of *Historia Turpini*, Pseudo-Turpin expresses the purpose of his book: "As I lay in Vienne not too long ago, suffering from the scars of my wounds, you [Luitprand, Dean of Aachen] ordered me to write down how our emperor, the most famous Charlemagne, *liberated* the Spanish and Galician lands from the Saracens [emphasis added]."[33] Pseudo-Turpin further stresses the purpose of Charlemagne's war by putting this language in the mouth of a saint. Saint James, at the beginning of the chronicle, speaks to Charlemagne in a dream and orders him to take his armies to Spain:

> I am Saint James the Apostle, disciple of Christ, son of Zebedee, brother of John the Evangelist; I am he whom our Lord chose at the shores of the Sea of Galilee, through his ineffable grace, to preach to the nations; whom Herod executed with a sword, and whose body lies forgotten in Galicia, a place still shamefully oppressed by the Saracens. I am deeply disturbed by the fact that you, who have conquered so many cities and nations, have not liberated my lands from the Saracens. So I have come to tell you that, just as the Lord has made you the most powerful of the kings of the earth, he has chosen you from among them all to prepare my path and to liberate my lands from the hands of the Muslims.[34]

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This use of the concept of liberation, which recurs throughout the chronicle, both underscores the seemingly horrific nature of Muslims and bolsters the heroic image of Charlemagne and his armies.

The Song of Roland's and the Historia Turpini's reimagined stories of the Battle of Roncesvalles, which include negative characterizations of Muslims, fit comfortably into the medieval culture of anti-Islamic fervor in the wake of the First Crusade. Though neither Turold, Pseudo-Turpin, nor their audiences appear to have understood Islam and its beliefs, these stories were incredibly popular after the crusaders returned at the end of the tenth century. In fact, the Roncesvalles "story occupied a position of great cultural prominence over a period of several centuries," which "is clear not only from its survival in multiple textual forms but also from references to the story in other medieval literary texts" and "from artistic representations of it in several pieces of monumental sculpture."[35]

Earlier Occurrences of Muslim Demonization in Europe

Though these twelfth-century texts consistently and vigorously demonized Muslims, their portrayal of Muslims was not new. In a ninth-century Christian chronicle, Aimoin, a monk of the Frankish monastery Saint Germain de Prés, referred to Muslims as "pagans" and "ministers of the devil."[36] A German nun, Hrotsvitha, who authored a Latin poem around the year 1000, similarly portrayed Muslims in "pagan garb."[37] In her poem, Hrotsvitha wrote that "the Saracen pagan king, inspired by the demons whose idols he worships, lusts after pure Christian boys and decapitates them when they do not surrender their bodies to him. In fury, he directs his flaming sword against those Christian provinces such as Galicia whose people rebel against the cult of the idols."[38] Around the same time, Ademar of Chabannes, a monk

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from Angoulême and Limoges, depicted Muslims as "heretic[s] or enem[ies] of the faith."[39] Multiple chroniclers attest that when Pope Urban II called Europeans to the First Crusade, he referred to Muslims as "pagans."[40] In fact, John Tolan contends that

> Over and against these meager references in a handful of manuscripts in a few libraries scattered across Europe, the reader in the year 1000 would have a wealth of information readily available in the many manuscripts of the Bible, Jerome, Isidore, and Bede; there, of course, he would learn that the Saracens were pagan idolaters and stone-worshippers. It should thus come as no surprise that when (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries), Latin authors began to take an interest in the religion of the Saracens, they described it (in increasingly lurid detail) in the familiar and despised guise of pagan idolatry.[41]

Thus, frequent stereotypical depictions of Muslims as pagans proliferated through Western Europe as early as 200 years before the beginning of the First Crusade.

There is also evidence that *The Song of Roland* existed long before its manuscripts appeared in the early twelfth century. In fact, a chronicler of the Battle of Hastings (AD 1066) recorded that "Taillefer, a very good singer, rode before the Duke [William of Normandy] on a swift horse, singing of Charlemagne and of Roland, of Oliver and of the vassals who died at Rencesvals [Roncesvalles]."[42] In addition, Burland mentions that there was "a documented trend toward naming pairs of sons Roland and Oliver well before the Oxford *Roland* was written down."[43] It is impossible to know when exactly *The Song of Roland* was first sung, but it is certain that it existed as an oral tradition for, at the least, much of the eleventh century.

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The predominant modern scholarly theory states that the twelfth-century "portrayal of Saracen idolatry grows out of a propagandistic effort to justify and glorify the actions of the first and second Crusades."[44] This theory fails, however, if the oral Roland tradition stereotypically portrayed Muslims as pagans well prior to the beginning of the First Crusade in AD 1096. It is possible to imagine that the Muslim stereotype was only introduced later, when the Roland tradition was recorded in manuscript form, specifically for the purpose of spreading Crusade propaganda. However, given that *The Song of Roland* has survived in dozens of manuscripts, written down independently in various locations across Europe, in multiple languages, varying greatly in content, but generally including depictions of Muslims as pagans, it is more plausible to postulate that the Muslim stereotype was present in the pre-Crusade oral tradition.[45] The medieval Catholic Church did not have pervasive control over lay cultural traditions. It is unlikely that the Church transformed the entire Roland tradition across various locations, languages, and cultural contexts within the 20 years between Pope Urban II's ordering of the First Crusade and the first recording of *The Song of Roland* in manuscript form. Rather, it is much more feasible that the original oral Roland tradition reflected the contemporary, pre-Crusade belief that Muslims were demonic pagans. In essence, the Roland tradition may have encouraged undertaking the First Crusade, rather than served as a propagandistic justification for its occurrence.

Conclusion

The representation of Muslims as demon-worshipping pagans in twelfth-century texts such as *The Song of Roland*, the *Historia Turpini*, and the entire genre of *chansons de geste* is vivid and explicit. However, it is clear that this image of Muslims existed long before it was

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written down in these manuscripts in which we find most of it today. Thus, the relatively common scholarly argument that medieval audiences transmitted this image as a part of a formal propaganda campaign does not make sense. There is no question that this derogatory portrayal of Muslims contributed heavily to the justification of the First Crusade, but the First Crusade was one result of existing anti-Muslim rhetoric; the rhetoric was not created as a method of propaganda for the First Crusade. This begs the question, where did this anti-Islamic stereotype of Muslims come from if not from the First Crusade? Tolan recounts that

> In the ninth century, a time of Byzantine military recovery in Asia Minor, the church created a ritual formula of abjuration, which converts from Islam to Christianity had to proclaim publicly before being baptized. This formula contained a twenty-two-point condemnation of supposed Islamic doctrines; the strangest of these is the following: "And before all, I [the convert] anathematize the God of Muhammad about whom [Muhammad] says 'He is God alone, God made of solid, hammer-beaten metal; He begets and is not begotten, nor is there like unto him any one.'" This is, curiously enough, based on a translation of Koran 112; an accurate translation except for one key word, *samad,* which means "solid" or "eternal" in the Koran but here is rendered "of solid, hammer-beaten metal."[46]

The Byzantine emperor, who knew enough about Islam to understand that Muslims did not worship idols, nevertheless changed this language before the formula of abjuration was passed, despite much contemporary opposition to the change. It is therefore significant that the original version still survives for historians to examine today.[47] It is impossible to know whether this mistranslation intentionally portrayed Muslims as idolaters. Either way, however, the

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resulting language supported a negative Christian stereotype of Muslim religion and could have

contributed to the misconception that Muslims worshipped idols. Despite their systematic

inaccuracies, all of the texts discussed contained some kernels of truth about Islam. For

example, many medieval writers referred to Muslim idols by names that are very similar to

Muhammad (e.g. "Mahomet," "Mahon," "Mahoum," and "Mawmet").[48] Though the depictions

of Muslims as pagans and idolaters inspired hatred, it is possible that hatred did not inspire

their original misrepresentation. Instead, small mistranslations may have inspired much of the

misinformation that fueled anti-Muslim rhetoric and supported Pope Urban II's campaign to

launch the bloody First Crusade. Although it may be difficult to discover the detailed

provenance of the oral traditions of *The Song of Roland* and the *Historia Turpini*, it is clear that

they both reflected and propagated anti-Muslim rhetoric that existed in Western Europe well

prior to the beginning of the First Crusade.

Endnotes

1. Eugene Smelyansky, *The Intolerant Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 126.

2. Kevin R. Poole, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin: Book IV of the Liber Sancti Jacobi (Codex Calixtinus)* (New York: Italica Press, 2014).

3. Margaret Jewett Burland, *Strange Words: Retelling and Reception in the Medieval Roland Textual Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 60 and 280; Robert Morrissey, *Charlemagne & France: A Thousand Years of Mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 45.

4. Smelyansky, *The Intolerant Middle Ages*, 126.

5. "Thorold [Turold,]" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 4 February 2021, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-27891;jsessionid=A648740E82B4784135CFE130411233A3; because the authorship of the *Historia Turpini* is unknown, I refer to the author as "Pseudo-Turpin" throughout this paper (see Poole, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin*, locs. 252-268).

6. Smelyansky, *The Intolerant Middle Ages*, 127; Poole, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin*, loc. 321.

7. See John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 106 for his version of this scholarly argument.

8. Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, "The depoliticized Saracen and Muslim erasure," *Literature Compass* 16, nos. 9-10 (2019): 2.

9. Rajabzadeh, "The depoliticized Saracen and Muslim erasure," 3.

10. Tolan, *Saracens*.

11. See Rajabzadeh, "The depoliticized Saracen and Muslim erasure."

12. For further reading, see D. J. A. Ross, "Old French," in *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*, ed. A. T. Hatto (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1980), 79–133.

13. Morrissey, *Charlemagne & France*, 51.

14. Turold, *The Song of Roland*, line 3561.

15. Ibid., lines 3664-5.

16. Lane Baker, email message to the author, March 6, 2021.

17. *Liber Sancti Jacobi* IV.1-26 (*Historia Turpini*), translated by Kevin R. Poole (New York: Italica Press, 2014).

18. *Liber Sancti Jacobi* IV.1-26 (*Historia Turpini*), locs. 1051, 1061, 1207, 2152.

19. Ibid., locs. 1130-1131.

20. Turold, *The Song of Roland*, line 3623.

21. Ibid., lines 3625, 3634.

22. *Liber Sancti Jacobi* IV.1-26 (*Historia Turpini*), loc. 1140.

23. E.g. ibid., locs. 1433, 1600, 1614, 1764.

24. Ibid., loc. 1152.

25. Ibid., loc. 1365.

26. Turold, *The Song of Roland*, lines 3560-3624.

27. Ibid., 3592-4.

28. Matthew 4:8-10 (NRSV).

29. Turold, *The Song of Roland*, lines 3595-7.

30. Ibid., lines 3560-3624.

31. Matthew 4:11 (NRSV).

32. Turold, *The Song of Roland*, line 3610.

33. *Liber Sancti Jacobi* IV.1-26 (*Historia Turpini*), loc. 969.

34. Ibid., loc. 1049.

35. Burland, *Strange Words*, 2.

36. Tolan, *Saracens*, 100-1.

37. Ibid., 106.

38. Ibid., 107.

39. Michael Frassetto, "The Image of the Saracen as Heretic in the Sermons of Ademar of Chabannes," in *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 83.

40. Brian Bonhomme and Cathleen Boivin, eds., *Milestone Documents in World History: Exploring the Primary Sources That Shaped the World, Volume 2, 1082-1833* (Dallas, TX: Schlager Group, 2010), 506-512.

41. Tolan, *Saracens*, 104.

42. Patrick S. Baker, "The Death of Roland," *Medieval Warfare* 3, no. 6 (2013): 17.

43. Burland, *Strange Words*, 2.

44. Tolan, *Saracens*, 106.

45. Burland, *Strange Words*, 2, 280.

46. Tolan, *Saracens*, 124.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 126.

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