The theme chosen to research in the Song of Roland is the rejection of outside influences into the French society. On the other side of that coin is that the Song of Roland reinforces traditional French/Christian values.

"King Charles replies: 'He may yet save his soul.'"

Charlemagne says this to Blancandrin upon the false offer of peace between the Saracens and French. This is important because it shows that right from the beginning of the poem, the Saracens are considered to have damned souls. They are considered sinners and bound for hell, essentially worthless. Also of import is the Christian overtones, this idea that that because they were not Christian they were not of the same cloth and therefore had less value. This is the beginning of the dehumanization of the Saracens in the story.

"Now when he sends to ask you to have mercy,
it would be a sin to do still more to him."

This is taken from when Naimon the Duke is counseling Charlemagne on what to do about King Marsilions offer of peace. This is interesting because it seems blind to the moral implication that follows. If it is a sin to do more then surely what they have already done is sin. Attacking those people surely must be wrong, if hurting them more would be wrong too. But the French seem blind to these ideas, and I believe it is purposefully shown that way by the poet. Their own sins forgiven but the enemies sins magnified.

"Said the pagan."

Numerous times throughout the poem they refer to the Saracens as pagans. The reason this is emphasized so much is because the poet wanted to show their otherness to the French. There needed to be a differentiation and an obvious one. Further the use of the word pagan marks them not as people but as simply that "pagans". It's much like a racist term would be used, or other such word. What does it matter if they are killed, they are pagans. What does it matter if they suffer, they're not us. The use of the word pagan is done with intention to push Christian values and dehumanize those who are not Christian, creating an mind set ready made for war with outside cultures.

"Marsilions nephew has come forward
riding a mule that he goads with a stick:"

There are all kinds of little pieces of propaganda about the Saracens thrown into the song of Roland. Not just propaganda but what amounts to racist comedy. Why would the kings nephew be riding a mule and making it go with a stick? Would it not be more truthful to show him riding a horse? This was done intentionally to poke fun at Marsilion and his family, as well as the Saracens in general. It is written almost as if to say, look at these backwards and unsophisticated
people, we’re surely better than they are.

Annotations

Fitz, Brewster E. "Cain as Convict and Convert? Cross-cultural Logic in the Song of Roland."


This journal article examines cultural perspectives of the Franks in the Song of Roland. The article shows how both Jews and Muslims were not separated culturally in the minds of the Franks because the two groups were both viewed as pagans and enemies.

“"In the Oxford _Chanson de Roland_ Muslims and Jews are designated as "pagans" and differentiated only from Christians but not from one another. Indeed after having defeated Baligant and taken Saragossa, Charlemange has the “idols” smashed in synagogue and mosque alike, and converts the “pagans” who remain alive—except Bramimunde—to Christianity at swords point.”

“This apparently “naïve” indifferetiation among Muslim, Jew and Pagan may stem from an intentional erasure of difference between the exterior Muslim enemy and the interior Jewish enemy, who owing to a God-given sign, had lived in relative peace among Muslims and Christians until the time of the First Crusade.”

“It is my hypothesis that the narrative of the Song of Roland projects a new order of Christianity, which stands in relation to the precrusading order as the New Testament era to the Old Testament era. Such a narrative is guilt driven. Its telos is to judge, convict, slay or convert all forms of the Other, whether within or without, while sacrificially absolving radical guilt.”

“Gerard Brault has speculated that the olive haute under which Ganelon begins his conversation with Blancandrin on their way to Saragossa may service to link Ganelon to the Jewish nation, to the treason of Judas in the Garden of Olives, and to the despair of Judas, who according to tradition, hanged himself in an olive grove (69).”

“Given the increase in violent anti-semitic incidents linked to recruitment for the First Crusade—some historians like Riley-Smith even refer to this period as the ‘first Holocaust’ (34, 50-51)—it would not be entirely unreasonable to speculate that the illustrator of the Heidelberg manuscript may have depicted Ganelon wearing a Judenhut not just to distinguish him from the Franks, but also to underline his felonious relation to Judas, Cain and Jewry, and vice versa, to underline the Jews relation to Ganelon.”

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The author of this article thinks that we can gain more from Song of Roland by expanding the interpretation if the poem from simply a “clash of civilizations” focus to one more layered and complex. The article explores different ideologies and how the work can relate to Western-Arab relations today.

“Due attention should be given to the ways the poet distinguishes the Saracens from the Christians throughout in terms of the personal characteristics of each group. The poet gives few explanations for characters behavior. Instead, characters are stereotypes defined by a few salient traits. For instance, the author vilifies the Saracens as treacherous and hateful, and idealizes the Franks, particularly Roland and his men, as the embodiment of Christian knightly virtues.”

“Since the period we call the time of the Reconquest and the Crusades spans over eight centuries, with long break periods that were the result of Christian in-fighting, divisions and quarrels among the Crusaders themselves should be emphasized; their portrayal attenuates the blindly ideological thrust of the poem.”

“Teaching the epic in the context of crusading requires closer examination of the poems history ‘transformations’. These ‘embellishments’ were die in part to feudal sentiments cause the twelfth-century Roland poet to ‘imagine’ events in such a way as to ‘explain honorably’ the defeat of Charlemanges army. Distortions serve ideological purposes, as described by Jenkins:

‘The Roland is plainly a work written (or rewritten) on behalf of a ‘cause’: its inner purpose is propaganda, […] in its present form, […] written and sung after the capture of Jerusalem, as an incitement—an ‘excitatoriam’—to French and Norman knights, urging them to greater and renewed exertions against Turks, Arabs, and Moors, the Moslem enemies of the Christian Church. (Chanson lxxvi-sci).’”

“The poem is a propaganda tract for the undertaking of future crusades. Rolands single-minded loyalty to feudal duty and his virtues—valor, piety, loyalty to feudal duty, and manliness—according to Jenkins, would have pleased chevaliers, bishops, and abotts, public spirited barons who could rise to the conception of a French nation, and women, who would send their husband to their duty as Crusaders and to their death(Chanson xc-xci).”


This article is about French medieval society and the culture that is shown in the Song of Roland. Further it describes the shame culture in which the Song of Roland takes place.

“…when the Saracens are shown at very first sight plotting to break faith with Charles, and when Ganelon is introduced as he ‘ki la traision fist,’ they are thus branded as criminals. The cry of vengeance is heard at every critical moment and the theme of vengeance shapes the plot.”
Annotated Bibliography #2

"Historically, such a social ethic has severe political limitations. It expresses a viewpoint virtually encompassed by the immediate group. Inherently inimical to the growth of any larger social organization, it is equally inimical to the progress of civilization. It divides the world into one’s own group and ‘the others,’ so that among primitive people the outsider may not quite have the status of a human being, and even in the most advanced societies he is viewed with suspicion."

“The point is that this final great struggle [against Baligant] in the story is far more a communal effort than that fought by the ill-fated rear guard. It is a united and highly successful effort, and united in the name of Charles.”