

# Example of ancient ideals in the song of roland essay

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A beautiful *chanson de geste*, or literary work celebrating the deeds of a hero, the Song of Roland could be easily dismissed by a casual observer to simply be a lovely poem. Such an observer might class it with the legend of King Arthur; he or she would not be far wrong. Though the Song of Roland is much older than the legend of King Arthur, it has both idealized heroes doing some impossible things such as fighting after they have burst their temples while blowing a horn. Yet this *chanson de geste* also has important historical significance for being the oldest surviving extensive work of French literature, in its portrayal of Roland and Charlemagne, and in its portrayal of ideals and stereotypes.

As the oldest surviving extensive work of French literature, the Song of Roland shows us two things about French culture in the 12th century. It shows us that even during the Dark Ages of religious fanaticism, or zealotry as it can be termed too, people in France – the educated and literate people in France – cared about their history. Also, it shows that people cared about their culture: they wanted to preserve the best of the heroism and the beauty, for the wording of the song is beautiful, for posterity.

Roland is the nephew of Charlemagne and one of his most trusted and beloved generals. These two have a special bond as king and commander. They portray the ideal relationship between a leader and a subordinate. For example, Roland puts the safety of his king and the men he, Roland, was set to protect: “ A fool I should be found;/In France the Douce would perish my renown./[unless] With Durendal I’ll lay on thick and stout,/In blood and blade, to its golden hilt, I’ll drown” (86). He also says, “[a soldier] his and and skin should offer up at need” (82). Roland willingly gives his life for his king and

country, while Charlemagne loves Roland as a leader should: “ In his great rage [upon hearing Roland’s cry for help] on canters Chalemagne;/Over his sark his beard is flowing plain” (142).

Not only does the Song of Roland portray the ideal relationship between leader and subordinate, it portrays the ideals of religion that were held in the 12th century: all things done by the soldiers are because of their love for religion or their lack of religion. It also portrays the stereotypes held in 12th century France, as well as in much of the world at that time, about the Muslims in the Middle East. The Song of Roland portrays the Muslims that Charlemagne and his men are fighting against as murderous brutes who will offer their children as hostages, knowing full well that they themselves will betray their children and cause their death: “ Proud is that King [Charlemagne], and cruel his courage;/From th’hostage he’ll slice their heads away./Better by far their heads be shorn away/Than that ourselves lose this clear land of Spain” (6).

The Song of Roland is not just another legend created by someone to celebrate a long gone period in history where the author imagines deeds of daring and heroism. No, this chanson de geste is a beautiful yet historically significant piece of old French literature. It shows us many things about the culture and the ideals in 12th century France. The Song of Roland should not be dismissed.

## **Works Cited**

The Song of Roland. eBook