

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC



Xabier Irujo

Charlemagne's Defeat in the Pyrenees

The Battle of Rencesvals

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The Early Medieval North Atlantic

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Cover illustration: Roland's death. Detail of the stained-glass window of Charlemagne in the Chartres cathedral representing the hero blowing the oliphant asking for help and trying to break his sword against the rock right before dying. Dr Stuart Whatling, used with permission.

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Preface

Abstract

Distinguishing between myth and reality has been the greatest challenge in writing this book. The image of Roland in the Basque oral tradition is quite different from the noble courtier of literature and the image of Charlemagne diverges from the Frankish chronicles written in the monasteries of northern Europe. While the Frankish tradition exalted its heroes, the Basque oral tradition, largely unknown to English readers, had a very different interpretation of the events. Charlemagne and Roland represent bringers of war, foreign paladins ignorant of the customary law of the Basques and their way of life. This book is based entirely on original historical sources, contemporaneous with the events, translated from the original Latin by the author, some presented in English for the first time. The author has also examined the terrain exhaustively, enabling him to provide a totally new image of the battle and its consequences.

Keywords: Rencesvals, Way of Saint James, Epic traditions, historiography, Charlemagne, Roland

This book examines the events that took place in the Pyrenean pass of Errozabal (Rencesvals) on August 15, 778.¹ Not only a mere battle, Errozabal is also the most dramatic episode of a historical event that affected Vasconia, the land of the Basques, for almost the entire eighth century. Indeed, the battle was not an isolated military incident but part of a complex military and political process that began after the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 and culminated with the creation of the Kingdom of Pamplona in 824.

¹ The battle of Rencevals is known under a variety of different names, Rencevals (French and English), Roncevalles (Spanish), and Errozabal (Basque). The original Basque term has been preferred. However, it should be remembered that the names are interchangeable.

Following the penetration of Islam into Europe, the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo—the traditional rival of Vasconia since its formation in the early sixth century—suddenly disappeared in the early eighth century, giving rise to a new political landscape. Indeed, when Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into the Iberian Peninsula, the Visigoth King Rodrigo was in the vicinity of Pamplona leading a new campaign to punish the Basques. Therefore, the Basques viewed the collapse of the Visigothic order with caution, but not without a certain satisfaction and even optimism.

The course of the eighth century would pit Vasconia between East and West, forcing its rulers and people to cope with the ambitions of the Christian kings of the north and the impetuous expansionism of the Caliphate of Damascus in the south. Between 714 and 732 Franks and Basques allied against Islam, but after the defeat at Poitiers the situation changed. Pepin the Short, having deposed Chilperic III in 751, became king of the Franks and, taking advantage of the weakness of Vasconia under Waiofar, wrested Aquitaine from the Basques after a bloody eight-year war (760-768), which culminated in the Basque ruler's murder at the hands of Pepin's assassins.

In 768, Charlemagne inherited from his father Pepin not only a crown, but also a political project. Pepin's war with the Lombard Kingdom had allied him with Rome, giving way to the dream of a Christian Empire. And the collapse in 750 of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus led to the Frankish expansion to the south. Abd al-Rahman, last survivor of the Umayyad dynasty, established an emirate in al-Andalus in 755 but faced a serious challenge from the Muslim *walis* (governors) of the Ebro valley, who took advantage of the power vacuum to free themselves from the yoke of the central power.

The relative weakness of the Basque Kingdom, the desire to stop the Muslim advance to the north, and, finally, the project of creating a Western Christian Empire as the heirs of the Roman Empire, convinced Charlemagne to propose in the Paderborn Diet of 777 the creation of the *Marca Hispanica*. This was a political venture with a certain religious streak, the genesis of the Early Medieval Crusades. However, the first aim of the *Marca Hispanica* was the conquest and pacification of Vasconia. It was then that Charlemagne crossed the Pyrenees. The year was 778.

The consequences of the Carolingian defeat affected not only the Basque Country but the whole of the Western political picture. Charlemagne had to cope with new uprisings in Saxony in the autumn of that year and was forced to undertake a political and administrative reform of the Frankish Kingdom and its newly acquired possessions in Aquitaine and Lombardy. The defeat did not enhance the emirate, which, despite embarking on a

punitive campaign on Vasconia in 781, was unable to capitalize on its victory. As regards the Basque Country, their victory cemented the alliance between the Banu Qasi, Islamized southern Basques, and the mountain leaders, including Eneko, the father of the first king of Pamplona, Eneko Aritza.

While Charlemagne abandoned the idea of creating the Marca Hispanica after the 778 defeat, his son Ludovico, who became king of Aquitaine, resumed the project twenty years later and, between 797 and 812, succeeded in dominating the lands of the Basques east of the Pyrenees. After the uncertain outcome of the campaign of 812 and the disaster of the third battle of Errozabal in 824, the empire definitively abandoned the project of creating a Marca Hispanica comprising the whole Pyrenean range and replaced the original dream with a less ambitious *Marca Gothica* limited to the eastern Pyrenees.

In the shadow of these political and military vicissitudes and after fighting three battles in the pass of Errozabal, the Kingdom of Pamplona arose around the figure of Eneko Aritza, whose father had fought in the first Rencesvals.

The Battle of Errozabal is one of the most important military events of the reign of Charlemagne. Since it was one of the few defeats of the imperial army this singular episode inspired one of the earliest and most famous epic poems in Western Europe. And, even more than its impact on literature and, by extension, European culture, Errozabal also had profound political repercussions.

Distinguishing between myth and reality in the eighth century has been my greatest challenge in writing this book. The few surviving historical sources have been strongly imbued with fantastic elements through the passage of time, and the literary sources have distorted reality through the incorporation of hyperbolic elements. However, we owe to these literary texts the memory of those men whom history made warriors and literature heroes. While we expect prudence, zeal, and respect for historic events—and the suffering they cause—from our chroniclers, we must never deny the pleasure of reading our history, the history of humankind, written as literature as was done nearly a thousand years ago by the master Tuoldus.

And if this is true for all our Medieval history, then it is even more so in the case of the events that took place here in the Pyrenees on August 15, 778, 1,240 years ago. The Basques have lived with the legend of Rencesvals for over a millennium. The ancient marketplace of the kings of Navarre in Lizarra/Estella, city of my grandparents and great-grandparents, has a capital—the crowning head of a column—that shows a fragment of Charlemagne's legend. There eight hundred years ago a stonemason named Martinus carved a depiction of the single combat between Roland and Ferracutus



that, according to legend, occurred at the gates of Naiara (Najera), the burial place of the kings of Navarre.

On the left side of the capital, Ferracutus rides to meet his rival wearing a large round shield bearing a star, the city's symbol. The giant protects his body with a heavy coat of mail, made of iron, which gave him his name, Ferracutus, the Iron Chainmail Colossus. And hefted to his left there should be a long lance bearing his banner. On the capital's front, Ferracutus, left, unwinds a long turban, which picks up, blowing in the scene's violent wind to create a long veil. Roland confronts him, also wearing chain mail and carrying a triangular shield bearing the cross of his faith. The crash of the two heroes is brutal: Ferracutus's spear is broken on impact with Roland's shield, while the impact of Roland's pike at Ferracutus's navel sends the giant reeling, losing his stirrups and elevating his legs almost to his waist. Ferracutus does not, however, drop his shield.

On the capital's right face, Roland and Ferracutus continue the fight on foot. Roland bears his huge triangular shield, which protects practically all of him from the giant's mace which is brandished overhead. Ferracutus by contrast has no shield and has lost his turban, which allows the master Martinus the opportunity to fully represent the fierce warrior: He screams, with his mouth wide open, and has long hair and a thick beard, which is as curly as those of the stained-glass figures of Charlemagne in the Chartres cathedral. The giant arches back as if building momentum to hit Roland, while the latter, rising from his knees, tries unsuccessfully to stick his knife in to Ferracutus's iron chest.

Everyone in Lizarra/Estella knows that Roland could only unseat Ferracutus by wrenching his thick, curly black beard and could only kill him—through divine intercession—by plunging his dagger into Ferracutus's navel, the chainmail giant's only weak point. Even then he did not manage to kill the colossus, who, mortally wounded and imploring Mohammed, was assisted to Naiara's gates. Here Martinus did allow a little license. On the front of the capital, in the background, he sculpted Ferracutus on the ground, decapitated, the image of the biblical giant Goliath.

Beyond the royal market in Lizarra/Estella, which is a rare and beautiful example of the non-religious European Romanesque, climbing the steep stairs to the austere church of San Pedro de la Rua, built in the twelfth century, we see another capital that tells the same story; this time Ferracutus's spear breaks while Roland unseats the giant from his horse.

Early on, epic poems sung in romance language were produced, which exalted Roland and the rest of the Frankish warriors in legend. A beautiful example of this tradition can be found in the *Roncesvalles navarro* that

includes Charlemagne's speech before the body of his nephew Roland, in the stained-red fields of Rencesvals, the Errozabal of the Basques. These hundred verses were written by an educated official of the court of Charles III *El Noble*, King of Navarre, who may have known the kingdom well enough as he walked it to complete the 1366 census.

But while the Frankish epic tradition exalted their sons killed in Errozabal, the Basque oral tradition forged a quite different interpretation from that of the poets of the *Camino de Santiago* (the Way of Saint James). In the eyes of this tradition, Roland represents the bearer of war, a paladin belonging to a foreign court ignorant of the customary law of the Basques and their way of life; as Basque mothers say, they do not want their sons to be soldiers. Xabier Diharce's poem 'Orreaga' reflects this view. The author, writing in exile under the pseudonym of Iratzeder, whose brother was killed fighting the Nazi occupation, compares the arrival of the troops of the Reich and the events that took place in Errozabal. He raises his voice against all those cases in which a man has sought to impose a political project by force of arms, beyond reason and the rights of peoples and their lives:

The beech is the most beautiful trees of the black forest
 On the mountains of Rencesvals goes the soul of the Basques:
 Between wars and gales still standing along the centuries
 Mature beech stands silently in the future of Europe.
 Some warriors, eager to slaughter, thirst for blood and fire,
 Wishing to crush the Europeans have been here.
 If Mount Ibañeta could talk about them
 It would first mention Roland and Charlemagne.
 Would have liked to behead, rob and oppress the heart
 And all the people, make everyone vassal.
 But the Basque people, always alert, have managed to rise,
 So that in these mountains man continues being man, with head high.
 Poised to breach our borders, pushed on by violence,
 When will the Basque soul will fly like the eagle?
 When will free men come out of Rencesvals?
 As wise and earnest as Azpilikueta?
 The mountain stream jumping from the mountain is so beautiful...
 Sons of the Fatherland, drink with all your heart the spirit of your fathers!
 Lift up the front and sing all at once, the War of the Basques
 So that hearing our cry, all of Europe will arise.²

2 Diharce, Jean Mari, "Orreagako mendi gainetan", *Eguna*, 4th year, No. 269, 1989, p. 26.



Near my parents' house in Alzuza is the hill of Alzuzate, a natural stronghold that protects Pamplona's access from Esteribar, which is where Charlemagne began his retreat through the port of Zize, before being ambushed in Errozabal by the Basques. And just 24 kilometres east of Alzuza, in Urrotz, there is a block of stone, three feet long, that Roland launched from the heights of Erro, more than 20 kilometres away, when he was about to die. As in the case of Ezpeleta, the legend says Roland missed because as he was preparing to launch a huge boulder, he slipped on some cow dung. But he seized the stone with such force it bears the imprint of his fingers.

Visitors may still see the hoof prints of Roland's steed Veillantif, in Gainekoleta, from when the hero fought, mortally wounded on the Zize pass. As recounted by Jose Maria Satrustegi, Roland covered with a jump the 13 kilometres separating Astobizkar from Luzaide, later known as Valcarlos, where the stone was engraved with the horse's hoof at Loulone.

The Roland of the Basque oral tradition is quite different from the noble courtier. But both the Roland of the *Chanson* and the Roland who threw rocks from the heights of Erro are legendary figures, twelve centuries from their historical reality. Equally, the Charlemagne of the Frankish chronicles which were written in the monasteries of northern Europe close to the court of Aachen, is far from the person who should have been Charles, the son of Pepin the Short and Bertha, the queen with the goose-foot. The tribulated emperor who could hear the best men of his army, his and his father's friends, dying while fleeing in terror was behind the legendary Frankish warrior; he was also the man who took on an empire's fate, who decided the life and death of the kingdom's inhabitants and the fates of surrounding nations.

And it was these same Basques who erected a hermitage in honour of the soldiers who were there defeated and killed and gave the name of *Valcarlos* (Charles's valley) to the town that hosted the emperor that terrible night of August 15, 778. The twelfth-century pilgrim Aymeric Picaud bequeathed to us the first and most startling description of the place where the battle took place and where Charlemagne prayed to Saint James before his troops descended on Pamplona, the strongest city of the Basques:

In the land of the Basques, on the road to Santiago, there is a very high mountain called Zize pass, either because this is the entrance to Hispania, or because said mountain is the transport route from one land to the other, and the rise is eight miles [thirteen kilometres] and the descent it also eight. In fact, its height is such that seems to touch the sky. He who ascends there seems to be able to reach heaven with his hand. From its summit you can see the sea in Brittany and the western sea [...]. On top of



this mountain there is a place called the Cruz de Carlos, because in this place, with axes and pickaxes, hoes and other tools Charlemagne opened a path to go to Hispania with his armies and for the first time erected a cross and kneeling in the face of Galicia, he prayed to God and Santiago. Therefore, kneeling, pilgrims usually pray in this place looking towards Santiago and they all stick their crosses so that there they can be counted in thousands. And so, this is the place to raise the first prayer to Santiago.³

The present book is based entirely on original sources, contemporaneous with the events, many of which were published in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* collection and have been translated from Latin, Romance, or Basque by the author. Some of these contemporary sources are here first presented in English, mainly Latin and Arabic sources and fragments of the Basque tradition recounting the battle. There is no other geographical study of the battle's locale. For ten years I have studied the terrain from Altzuzate to the Pyrenean Zize pass, taking photographs and measurements along the way, exploring the topography of the battlefield and walking the road that the Carolingian army traversed more than one thousand years ago.

3 Rialle, Girard De; Vinson, Julien (eds.), *Revue de Linguistique et de Philologie Comparée* 15 (Maisonneuve de Cie, Libraires-éditeurs, 1882), 14–15. An English version may be found in Melczer, William (ed.), *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela* (New York: Italica Press Inc., 1993). For this passage see pp. 93–94.

