The "Jaianz de Malprose" in Roland's Baligant: A Case for Onomastic Identification

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In my article entitled "Sven Forkbeard, Bjoern Ironside and the City of Jomsborg in the *Chanson de Roland,*" published in *Romania* in 1971, I asked the following question:

> Why does one seek to identify and pinpoint epic nomenclature? What difference does it make if Bire, reis Vivien, and Imphe are pure inventions of the poet, or places and people of authentic, historically documented existence?[1]

The answer I gave then still holds true for me today:

> The identification [of the above names] with a certain period of medieval history can shed more light on the person of the epic author, who remains traditionally anonymous. It also makes more meaningful the assessment of the culture, prejudices and interests shared by the poet with his audience; most important of all, such identifications should make more accurate the dating of the work.

This attitude is not always shared by some of the most prestigious scholars who have ever demonstrated their critical acumen in isolating and explaining the essence of the epic genre. Their enmity to any kind of serious identification of ethnic and geographic names in the French *chansons de geste* is notorious. Certainly no other passage of epic poetry had roused a more negative reaction from both the traditionalist and neotraditionalist camps than did the Baligant episode in the O MS. of the *Chanson de Roland*; no other critic-historian of world renown argued more devastatingly against the episode's euthenticity, its organic incorporation in the MS as a whole, and the aesthetic necessity of its raison d'être than did Ramón Menéndez Pidal.

Pidal disparages first of all the episode's organic relation with the rest

[1](Paris: Société des Amis de la Romania, 1971), Tome 92, 1971, 4, pp. 433-57.

of the poem. Citing the authority of Pauphilet, Pidal blames "Baligant" for converting the *Song of Roland* into a *Song of Charlemagne* which, as a result, acquires a badly balanced plot structure. Even the "individualists" among the critics who take the poem including "Baligant" as a conception of one single poet concede that the Rolandian theme suffers gravely by the shift in emphasis to Charlemagne occasioned by the inclusion of the Baligant episode. Unshaken in his traditionalist stance, Pidal claims:

> [the traditionalist approach] consistently maintains that Baligant is an addition

because the episode is "mal encajada," "poorly interpolated" in the plot, breaking violently its continuity. The "second revenge" brought on Baligant

> detracts from [Charlemagne's] revenge made possible through a Joshua-like miracle. [Hence] it can be viewed as definitely in bad taste . . .[2]

The aesthetic flaw seen by Pidal in the "intervention" of the episode lies in its tendency to convert

> the tragic epic of Roland into a sentimental romance appealing to the taste of most ingenuous spirits who thirst after the punishment of villains and the most complete exaltation of the good.[3]

This brings us to Pidal's major objection to the artistic talents of the French jongleurs as poets and mythologizers of history, a tendency which obfuscated their ability to render a historically and geographically faithful account of real events.

> We have it on the best authority that the French *jongleurs,* at least since the eleventh century, delighted in utilizing a *fantastic, totally unreal geography*; if some real name sang in their ears, which seems evident in some cases, they would not repeat it without disfiguring it.

Hence, all efforts of identification of ethnic or geographic *topoi* that contributed to the formation of this fantastic world of truly epic exaggerations are bound to lead to similar "disfigurations."

> It is foolish to waste efforts on the re-figuration and configuration [of the ethnic and geographic *topoi*] . . . what is involved here are *names* ("denominaciones") *which escape reality.*

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[2]*La Chason de Roland y el neotradicionalismo* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1959), 114-17. The following translations of passages from Pidal's book are mine.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 118.

Pidal's final condemnation strikes at the ahistoricity of the French epic caused by the total novelization of its subject matter.

> Charles' conquests in Spain prior to [the battle of] Roncevaux represent no more than *a repertory of fantastic* names, because the French epic found itself, at least since the eleventh century, in the process of novelization which delighted [in inventing] imaginary lands.[4]

Unlike the historically-minded *juglares* of the Iberian Peninsula,

> the *Song of Roland* . . . invents an unreal geography as a setting for memorable deeds, while the Spanish epic . . . is limited to the achievements of Mio Cid . . . [which have] a historic background, and shows a predelection for the use of exact geography. . . .[5]

An equally negative attitude, if not to the French "ahistorical" epic in general, then at least to the disruptive and aesthetically offensive nature of "Baligant," has been taken by earlier traditionalists like Gaston Paris, T.A. Jenkins[6] and R. Fawtier. The last-mentioned critic states:

> It is evident that our man [the author of "Baligant"] is having fun and that geographic exactitude is the least of his worries.[7]

Jules Horrent takes a more guarded position. Although the poetic art that created the objectionable episode "is not inferior to that of the main body of the poem," it is an art of a different kind, pointing to a different author.

> The Baligant episode seems to be . . . an addition to the *Song of Roland*, a skillfully incorporated one. . . . This revenge [on Baligant] was not organically necessary. . . . The punishment [resulting from] a pitched battle would have produced doubts as to the reality of Roland's victory. . . [By singing about the avenging victory of Charlemagne, the poet] effaces from our memory the other victory . . . achieved at the price of the supreme sacrifice.[8]

In spite of the fact that none of the other principal versions of the Roland legend that are extant deals with Baligant, Horrent finds in favor of the poetic and organic authenticity of the episode.

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[4]*Ibid.*, p. 150-51. My italics.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 458-59.

[6]J. Atkinson Jenkins, *La Chanson de Roland* (American Life Foundation, 1977).

[7]*La Chanson de Roland* (Paris: Boccard, 1933), 94. The following passages are my translations of the French original.

[8]*"La Chanson de Roland" dans la littérature française et espagnole au moyen-âge, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège,* fascicule CXX (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951).

> Neither the *Pseudo-Turpin,* nor the *Carmen de prodicione Guenonis,* nor the *Roelantslied*[9] [sic], nor . . . the *Karlamagnus Saga* report this glorious episode. . . . Still, . . . none of these versions . . . can be invoked in support of the thesis of an inauthentic and secondary [in art and plot value] "Baligant." [10]

A position diametrically opposed to that of Pidal and other neotraditionalists, regardless of how moderate, is the intransigently individualist approach of P. Boissonnade which extols uncritically the aesthetic and informative virtues of the Baligant episode.

> The *trouveur,* . . . tempering the caprice of imagination with *the concern* for reality . . . had distributed, methodically and symmetrically, for the sake of *precision* and *verisimilitude,* commensurate with the nature of his work and his genius, the points of reference of [his poem's] geographic layout. The action . . . takes place *not in an imaginary world of a fairytale, but in the real world of history, aggrandized only by an exaggerating vision, natural for the epic way of seeing things.*[11]

A more moderate position between the two traditionalist and individualist extremes is taken up by Martín de Riquer who recognizes the mixture of truth and fiction in the geography of the O MS as a whole, conceding to its composer the overriding tendency to poetize geography and ethnology, but always within the framework of the ethnic memory and imagination of his audience.

> The author seems to distribute at will place names that may have been vaguely known by his audience, and it is possible that he *preferred the sonority of a fictitious name of his invention and disfiguration* to the reality of an existing toponym.[12]

Riquer tones down Pidal's out-of-hand rejection of the effort to identify the historical prototypes of epic toponymy and ethnography, viewing it as "a risky undertaking" at best. The conversion of epic toponymy to "a geographic reality of the eleventh and twelfth centuries" is so difficult because of the "tendency to exaggeration" and to a prolix enumeration "of the fictitious hosts of Baligant."[13] As for the psychology of the Moorish enemy in the French epic, it gives rise to

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[9]By the monk Konrad of Regensburg; but this German version does in fact include the episode.

[10]Jules Horrent, *Roncesvalles, Etude sur le fragment de cantar de gesta conservé à l'Archivo de Navarra* (Pampelune) (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951), 120;134.

[11]P. Boissonnade, *Du nouveau sur la "Chanson de Roland"* (Paris: Champion, 1923), III. My italics.

[12]Martín de Riquer, *Los cantares de gesta franceses* (Madrid: Gredos, 1952), 24. My italics.

[13]*Op. cit.,* 34.

> picturesque and capriciously invented characters who practice a singular polytheistic paganism mixed with *reminiscences of classical mythology* and who bear fabulous and quite often burlesque names.[14]

I believe that Riquer has touched on a point of signal importance for the vindication of the enterprise of identifying names and nations in the *Chanson de Roland* (and, specifically, in the embattled "Baligant"), as well as for the broader significance of epic, i.e., *poetic truth,* as contrasted with the empirical truth of positive fact.

As I indicated in my earlier-mentioned article, "some epic names are obvious inventions . . . of a poetic geography, . . . others are more or less undecipherable corruptions of authentic toponymy and of historical (or mythical, i.e., poetically true) personages."[15] Unless we assume that the epic is to fulfill or, at least, complement the historiographer's search for empirical truth, the mythological truth that has become a universally cherished patrimony of a national consciousness is at least as rich in generating insights into a national spirit—nowadays accepted by many as something more than a Romantic chimaera—as is the deceptively "objective" truth of an archeological reconstruction of the "true" past.

As a good example of the value of deciphering elements of this once universal but now all but forgotten collective consciousness of an ethnic complex, proud to be what it is, can serve the enigmatic Jaianz de Malprose of vs. 3253 of the O MS in T.A. Jenkins' edition. They are the first echelon of the second series of heathen contingents listed as vassals and allies of Baligant. Leaving aside the structural, aesthetic and psychological virtues of the episode, but assuming that, in Riquer's words, its onomastic elements are fraught with "classical reminiscences," we will endeavor to prove that the gigantic people of Malprose are a once well-known, though now equally well-camouflaged legendary people belonging not to the French and Spanish mythological reality, but to an all-European cultural patrimony.

The verse in question reads

> La premiere est des jaians de Malprose.
> (The first is made up of giants of Malprose.)

It is unclear why Jenkins' commentary should associate these giants with the Cananaeans of vs. 3238 and 3269, except that Num. XIII: 32-34 of the Vulgate mentions the frequent occurrence of men of giant stature among the inhabitants of Canaan.

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[14]*Ibid.*, 25. My italics.
[15]Hanak, *op. cit., loc. cit.*

Gautier de Metz's *Image dou Monde* (Cf. Jenkins, 228) speaks of "Jaianz et Quenelieus" that lived in a country between Armenia and India, but this accounts for giants only, leaving Malprose unidentified. Tracing Gautier's report back to ninth century Latin Chronicles that deal with Goths and Scythians, the name Malprose begins to assume clearer features in the setting of a faraway magic land between Armenia and India.

William de Jumiège, whose *Gesta normannorum ducum* has helped us to identify the enigmatic *tere de Bire* (vs. 3995),[16] sheds also some light on Malprose. Quoting from the sixth century Gothic historian Jordanes, William recounts the legend of the origin of the Amazons. A mythical king of the Gots or Goths called Thanause or Thananeis undertook a campaign against the Egyptian king Veso(sis) or Veso(nis). Unhappy with being left behind to shift for themselves, the straw-widows of the Goths, "having given up intercourse with men," took up arms and elected two queens, Lampeteo and Marpessa (I, 7, Cf. Jordanes, *Getica,* 671.6). In Justinus's *Universal History* from the second century A.D., a queen of the Gothic Amazons appears under the name Marpesia, linguistically the closest variant yet to the O MS's *Malprose*. This too, is the spelling used in Jordanes's text which in William's transcription became Marpessa.

Jordanes locates the settlement of the Amazons in the area between the Dnieper and the Don rivers, extending all the way down to the Sea of Azov. He adds that the Amazons had been well trained in the use of weapons even before their husbands' Egyptian adventure.[17] Not only did they repel incursions by neighbors, but their leader Marpesia launched them on a raid as far east as the Caucasus. This "drive East" would have introduced Marpesia's name in the regions "between Armenia and India," the haunts of the legendary giants of Gautier's *Image*. A mountain range of the Caucasus had been named "Saxus Marpesiae," admittedly after the warrior queen. Its existence was known to Virgil; Alexander the Great left his mark there on a pass, calling it Pylas Caspias.

According to legend, the Amazons later moved to new conquests among which figure "Armenia, Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, Pisidia and other locales of Asia Minor." They were "Daniae proles," a Danish race, descended from the Goths who were first in the world "numero, armis, viribus . . . et potentia." They were called "Amazon warriors" among

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[16]Hanak, *ibid.*, cf. *Gesta normannorum ducum.*

[17]Hunc autem Asian minorem famose ille bellatrices Amazones, Danie proles, miliciaque Da ciam ultra Cannis sub sui iuris imperio tenebant . . . Jordanes, *Getica,* 671.6.

the Scythian nations of "Upper Scythia," and among the Masagetae; they occupied "vast regions not far from India."[18]

The confines of the area briefly mentioned by Guatier de Metz as the homeland of simply the "Jaianz" is now fairly well delineated. The Scythian "neighbors" of the Amazons' have enjoyed a general reputation for superhuman strength and stamina throughout antiquity. The *Regionis chronicum* (for the year 889) mentions Parthians, commonly believed to be exiled Scythians, as descendants of the Amazons. Among the Scythians, both sexes were reported to participate in heroic exploits; "laboribus et bellis asperi, vires corporum immensae."[19] This passage makes the Scythian descendants of the Amazons of both sexes giants in everything but name.

These accounts should suffice to support the theory that *the Scythian land between Armenia and India was once universally known by the name of the legendary superwoman Marpesia, the "mater familias" of the Amazon race, the Scythians and the Parthians*. The region had the reputation of a breeding ground of giants for the subjugated Slavs of Eastern Europe who ascribed to the Turco-Tartar Avars the fighting powers of *obri* (in Slav, giants). This superstition is reported by the Chronicler of Kiev.[20] Whence did these Avar raiders come that appear as the scourge of the Poles, Slovaks and Czechs after 558 A.D.? According to Niederle they came from farther east, beyond the Don and Dnieper rivers.

Nor did the legend of Marpessa-Marpesia die with the phasing out of the Dark Ages. Her name can be traced not only back, beyond Jordanes, Osorius and Justinus to Greek mythology where she emerges as the daughter of Evenus, king of Aetolia; she was abducted by Idas, one of the Argonauts who stole her from Apollo in Posseidon's chariot; she can be traced forward to the Renaissance courtly epic. In Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* she is the knight-errant Marfisa who makes the foremost champions "sweat in combat."

> La vergine Marfisa si nomava
> di tal valor che con la spada in mano
> fece più volte al gran Signor di Brava
> sudar la fronte . . .

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[18]*Scriptores rerum danicarum Medii Aevi* ed. Jacobus Lungbek (Hafniae: Godiche, 1772), XIV, 72.

[19]"Regionis Chronicum," *Monumenta Germaniae, Historia Scriptorum,* ed. Pertz (Leipzig, 1925), I, 600.

[20]Cf. Lubomír Niederle, *Slovanské starožitnosti* (Praha, 1906), 82. Si že obri vojevachu na Slavjeněch u primučiša Duljeby, suščaja Slovjeny i nasilie tvorjachu ženam duljebskim . . . *Byša bo obr telom velici u umom i gordi*. My italics.

di quà di là cercando in monte e in piano
con cavallieri erranti riscontrarsi,
et immortale e gloriosa farsi.

This shows that in the Renaissance period the memory of the Amazon Marpessa was very much alive as a symbol of her invincible, restless and immensely ambitious race whose superhuman strength was a sure indication of pagan super-humanity in league with the Antichrist.

To put to rest any objections that might be raised on account of the name of Marpessa appearing in isolation in the aforementioned Latin chronicles, the *Regionis Chronicum* for the very same year 889 mentions no less than five "barbar" nations easily identifiable with their counterparts in "Baligant."[21] The Pechenegs appear as the "Pinceneis engres" in verse 3241; the Avars, together with the Soltras in the following verse; the Carantani, a name kindred to Korutany-Kärnten were a Slavic tribe related to the Croati-Croatians; they are obviously the Gros of verse 3229. The Marahenses-Moravians of the *Chronicon* are the Marose of verse 3256. Finally, even the Vulgari-Bulgarians find their place under Baligant's banners, although not under their ethnic name; they are the infamous *gente Samuel,* named by antonomasia after their leader Samuel, scourge of the Byzantium until defeated in 1014 by emperor Basil II, surnamed for this feat *Bulgaroktonos*.

"Baligant" may well be "badly balanced" with the rest of the Oxford *Roland*; it may be, too, a poorly integrated addition by a poet different and probably younger than the putative Turoldus. It does, however, not reflect a completely fantastic and unreal geography, nor does it pullulate with names that "escape reality."

Thanks to convincing onomastic and topographic identifications like these, we may state with some authority that the admitted novelization of the French epic after 1000 A.D. unveils badly mutilated but extremely lively elements of geographic and ethnic truth, mythologized to a higher plane of self-awareness and of the universal enemy of the Christian West, as confused and onomastically amalgamated as the latter may become in the process of recitation, memorization and copying. These cohorts of Baligant, veritable superhuman demons, give a plastic relief to the struggle of twelfth century Christianity, fighting for survival in a sea of heathen

[21]Ex supradictis igitur locis gens memorata [i.e., the Gothic descendants of the Amazons] a finitimis sibi populis, qui Pecinaci vocantur, a propriis sedibus expulsa est.
Set into motion, the Gothic descendants of Marpessa
primo quidem Pannoniorum et Avarorum solitudines pererrantes, . . . deinde Carantanorum, Marahensium ac Vulgarum fines crebris incursionum infestationibus irrumpunt . . . *Monumenta Germaniae, op cit., loc. cit.*

forces apparently closing in on it from the two extreme confines of the European West and East. They are therefore a *convincing and psychologically defensible recreation of Balto-Slavic and Fino-Ugric barbarians* resisting the Teutonic *Drang nach Osten* on the one hand and, on the other, *militant Moors, descendants of Almanzor's* terrible renown, trying to push into Northern Spain and beyond, across the Pyrenees. In the collective consciousness of embattled Christianity of the era of the genesis of the O MS, these racially vastly different *painim* (''pagans'') became confused in one monstrous conspiracy under the aegis of Baligant of Babylon.

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One result of the increasing numbers and prestige of antipedobaptists has thus been, ironically enough, the decline of the Christian name in what is certainly the most self-consciously and vocally Christian of all lands, where God's name is minted into the very currency and He runs on all sides of every political campaign. It has also, incidentally, given rise to a new type of urban Christianity, quite unlike anything ever known in Europe and probably never known before even in this nation under God.

Thomas Pyles, ''Bible Belt Onomastics,'' in *Thomas Pyles: Selected essays on English Usage* (1979), p. 155.