



HEROIC HUMANS

Introducing Roland – the
archetypal medieval hero



PART ONE

Who was Roland?



The Story

- Emperor Charlemagne
- Saragossa
- Muslim King Marsilla
- Roland leads the rear guard
- Ambush at Roncesvals
- Oliver and the 12 peers fight
- Roland blows his oliphant
- Ganelon's betrayal is discovered

Halt sunt li pui e mult halt les arbres.
Quatre prius i ad luisant de marbre.
Sur l'erbe uerte liquens roil se pasmet.
En sarrasins tute uete lesquardet.
E se feinst mort sigist entre les atres.
Del sanc luat sun cors 7 sun uisage.
Or et sei en piez 7 de curre saster.
Hels fut 7 forz 7 de grant uasselage.
Par sun orgoill cumencet mortel rage.
Roil saist 7 sun cors 7 ses armes.
7 dist un mot uencut est li mes carles.
I ceste espee portrai en arabe.
E uel tueres liquens sapent alques.
Co sent roil que sespee li tolt.
7 uirt les oiz filiad dit un mot.
En esciencie tu mes mie des naz.
tient l'olifant que unkes p dire ne uolt.
Si fiert en l'elme ki gēmet fut a or.
frusset lacer 7 la teste 7 les os.
Amis d'ous les oiz del chef le ad mis fors.
I us a ses piez fil ad tresturner mort.
Après li dit culvert paen cū fust unkes si os.
que me saist ne adreit ne a cors.
N el orrat hūme ne tētiengat poi fol.
Fenduz en 2 mis olifans el gros.
cū en est licristals 7 hors.
Co sent roil la uie ad p due.
Or et sei sur piez quanqu'il poet sesuer aue.

The Manuscript

- MS Digby 23 fol. 41v
- Held in Bodleian Library, Oxford
- Earliest surviving copy of 'The Song of Roland'
- Copied in England c. second quarter of the twelfth century

Chansons de Geste

- Literally 'Song of Deeds'
- Old French medieval narrative
- Form of epic poem
- Earliest examples date from late eleventh/early twelfth century
- Originally sung or recited by minstrels
- 'The Song of Roland' is one of around 100 examples that have survived





Why Roland?

- Earliest example to survive in written form
- Was recited on the eve of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066
- Propaganda for the First Crusade – early form of Christian Holy War



PART TWO

Some historical context



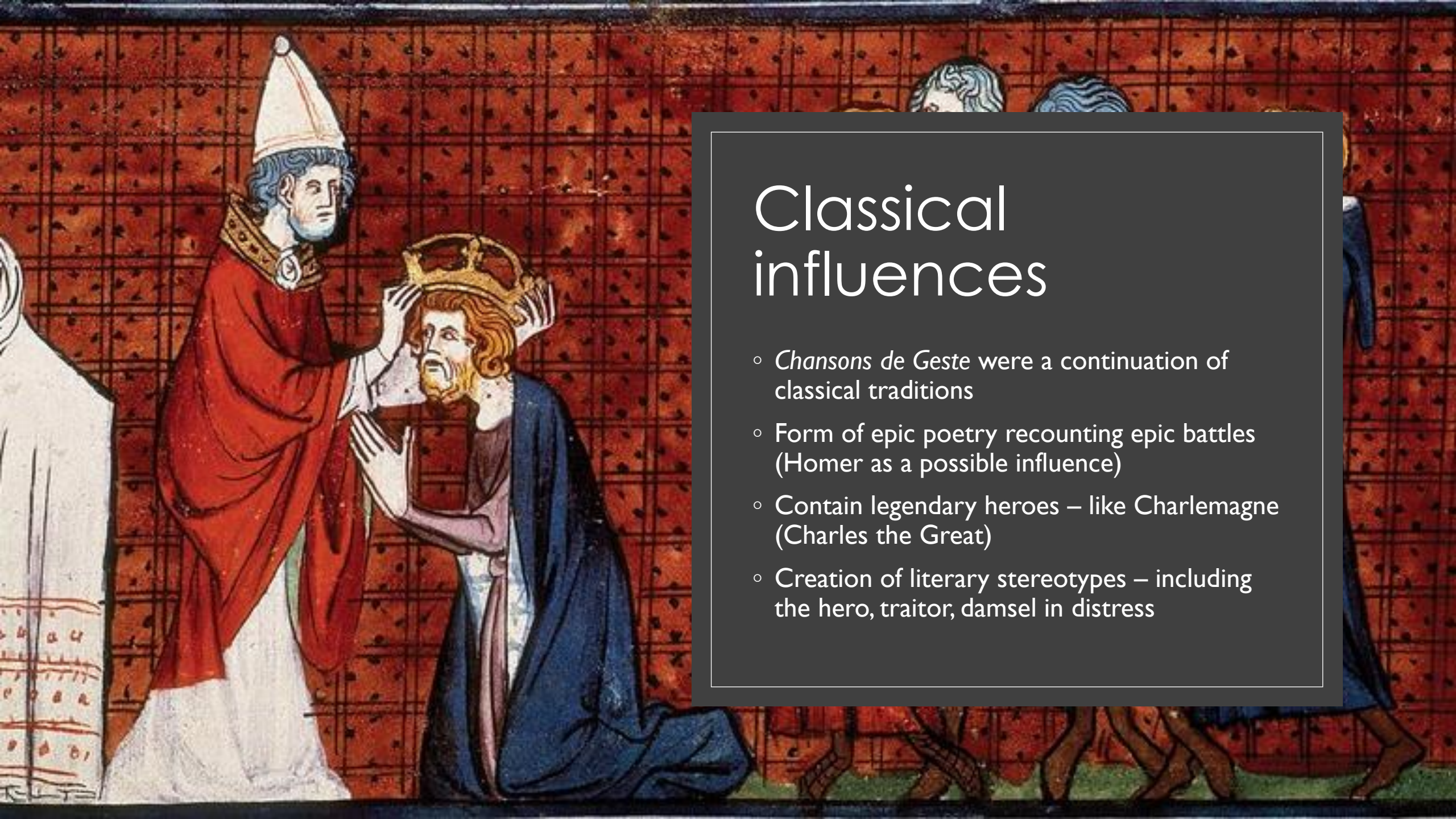
The nobility and violence

- Challenge of establishing peace
 - Lack of control
 - Feuds and vendettas
 - Young nobles
- Church imposed restrictions
 - Vulnerable groups
 - Banned warfare
 - Crusade
 - *Milites Christi*



Development of the knight

- Growth of 'aristocracy'
- Dubbing ceremony
- Vows to protect the Church
- Institutionalised violence
- Bernard of Clairvaux and the Templars
- *Chanson de Geste* literature

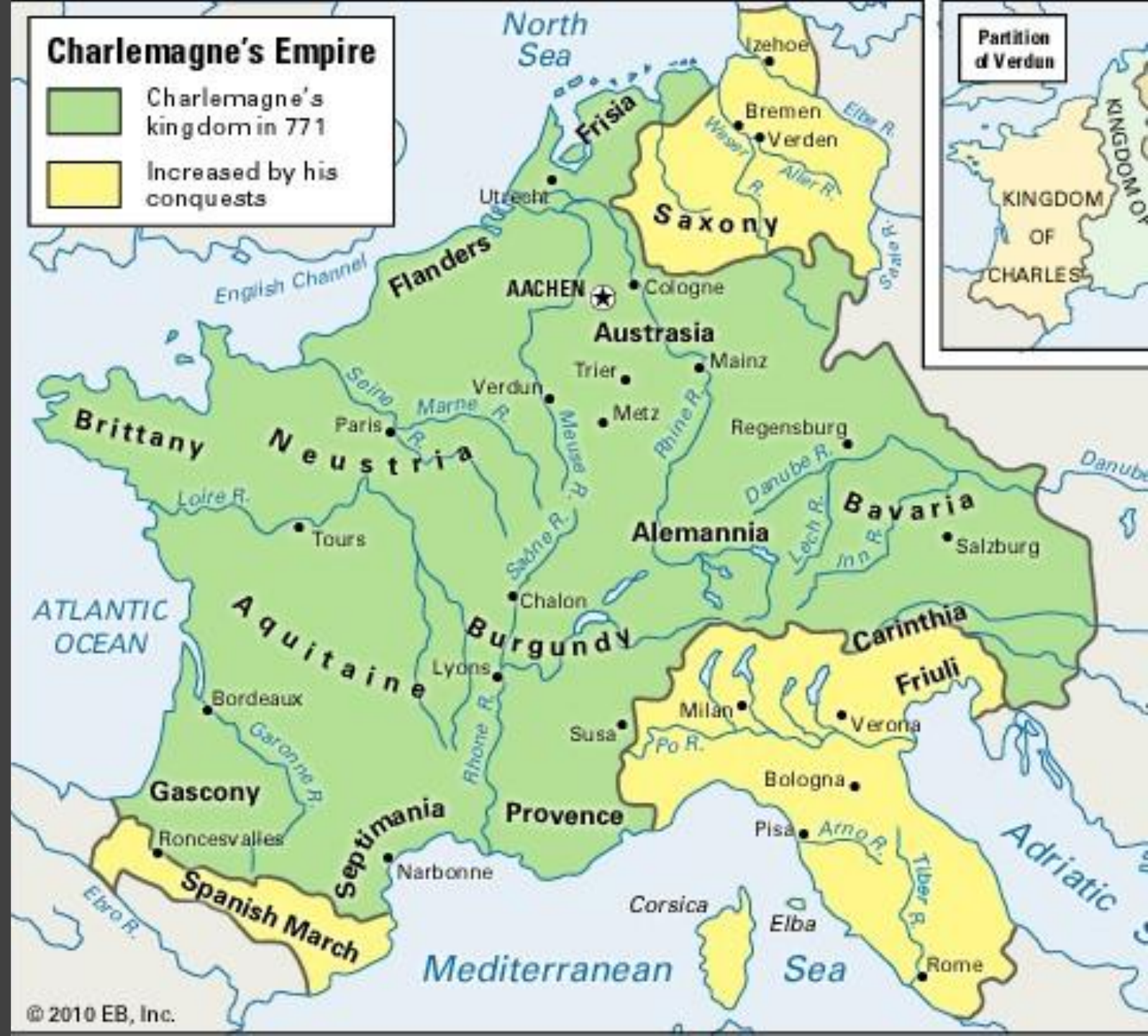


Classical influences

- *Chansons de Geste* were a continuation of classical traditions
- Form of epic poetry recounting epic battles (Homer as a possible influence)
- Contain legendary heroes – like Charlemagne (Charles the Great)
- Creation of literary stereotypes – including the hero, traitor, damsel in distress

CHARLEMAGNE'S EMPIRE

Why do you think Charlemagne was such a good choice of hero?





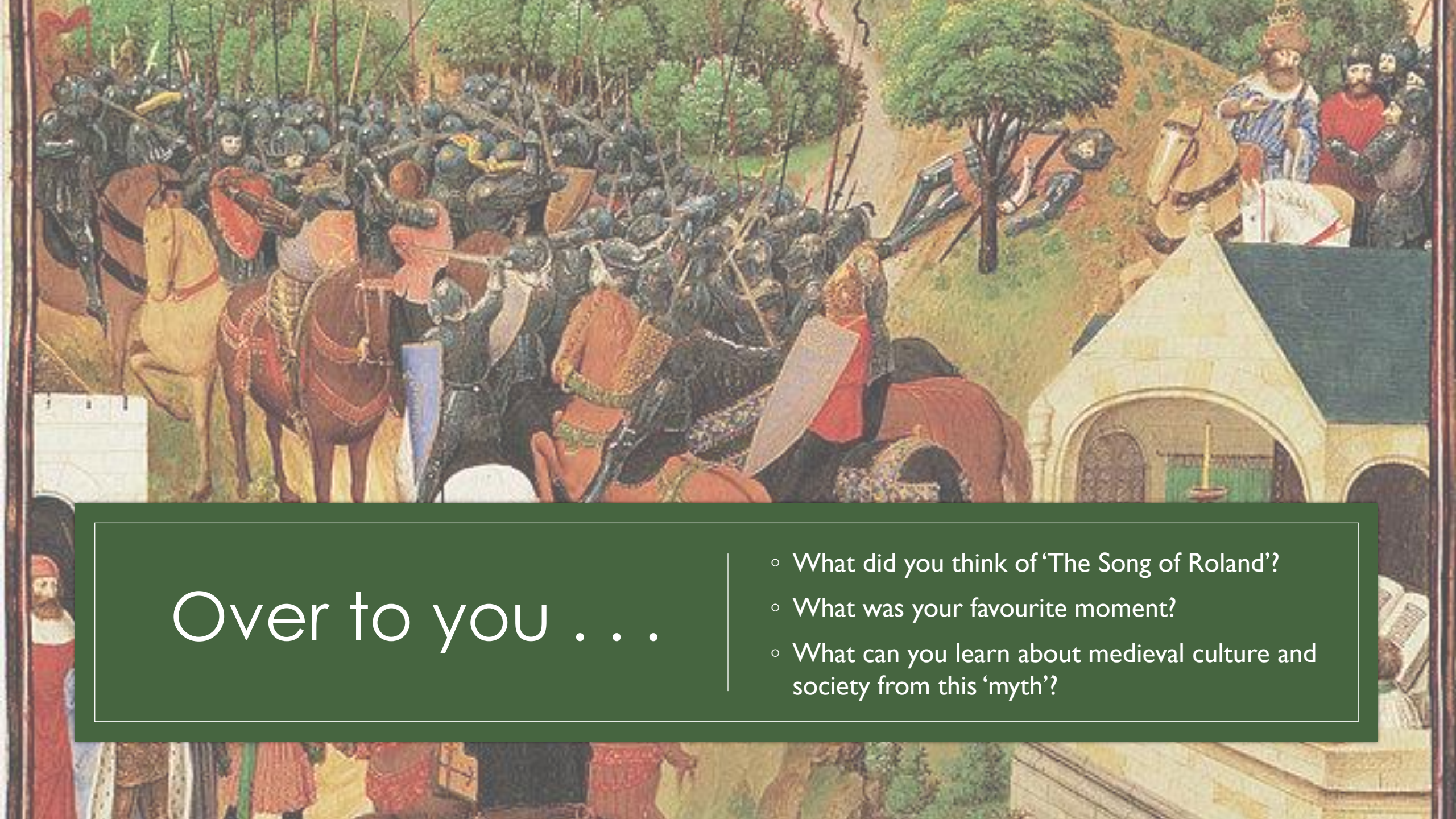
Performance and Audience

- The majority of medieval society was illiterate
- *Chansons* were a popular form of entertainment as they were recited orally
- Everyone could understand and engage with the story
- May have been performed in public spaces
- Some debate on this though: were they really popular literature?
- Certainly many themes would appeal to aristocratic audiences and knightly types



PART THREE

The Song of Roland



Over to you . . .

- What did you think of 'The Song of Roland'?
- What was your favourite moment?
- What can you learn about medieval culture and society from this 'myth'?



Historical value

- Charlemagne was a real person (c.714 – 814)
- He really did try to drive the Muslims out of Spain
- He really did have an empire stretching across most of Western Europe
- He was the first emperor to be crowned by a pope (on Christmas day in 800AD)
- He quickly became a legend: the perfect Christian king, proto-crusader, and all-round heroic human

Being a good knight

Roland and Oliver together embody everything required in a gallant warrior:

Common the fight is now and marvellous.
The count Rollanz no way himself secures,
Strikes with his spear, long as the shaft endures,
By fifteen blows it is clean broken through
Then Durendal he bares, his sabre good
Spurs on his horse, is gone to strike Chemuble,
The helmet breaks, where bright carbuncles grew,
Slices the cap and shears the locks in two,
Slices also the eyes and the features,
The hauberk white, whose mail was close of woof,
Down to the groin cuts all his body through
To the saddle; with beaten gold 'twas tooled.
Upon the horse that sword a moment stood,
Then sliced its spine, no join there any knew,
Dead in the field among thick grass them threw.
After he said "Culvert, false step you moved,
From Mahumet your help will not come soon.
No victory for gluttons such as you."





The worthy opponent

Running there came Margariz of Sibile,
Who holds the land by Cadiz, to the sea.
For his beauty the ladies hold him dear;
Who looks on him, with him her heart is pleased,
When she beholds, she can but smile for glee.
Was no pagan of such high chivalry.
Comes through the press, above them all cries he,
"Be not at all dismayed, King Marsilie!
To Rencesvals I go, and Rollanz, he
Nor Oliver may scape alive from me;
The dozen peers are doomed to martyrty.
See here the sword, whose hilt is gold indeed,
I got in gift from the admiral of Primes;
In scarlat blood I pledge it shall be steeped.
Franks shall be slain, and France abased be.
To Charles the old, with his great blossoming beard,
Day shall not dawn but brings him rage and grief,
Ere a year pass, all France we shall have seized,
Till we can lie in th' burgh of Saint Denise."
The pagan king has bowed his head down deep.
AOI.



Lords, vassals, and homage

Clear shone the sun in a fair even-tide;
Those ten men's mules in stall he bade
them tie.

Also a tent in the orchard raise on high,
Those messengers had lodging for the night;
Dozen serjeants served after them aright.
Darkling they lie till comes the clear
daylight.

That Emperor does with the morning rise;
Matins and Mass are said then in his sight.
Forth goes that King, and stays beneath a
pine;

Barons he calls, good counsel to define,
For with his Franks he's ever of a mind.
AOI.



Treachery

Fore all the rest, 'twas voted by the Franks
That Guenes die with marvelous great pangs;
So to lead forth four stallions they bade;
After, they bound his feet and both his hands;
Those steeds were swift, and of a temper mad;
Which, by their heads, led forward four serjeants
Towards a stream that flowed amid that land.
Sones fell Gue into perdition black;
All his sinews were strained until they snapped,
And all the limbs were from his body dragged.
On the green grass his clear blood gushed and ran.
Guenes is dead, a felon recreant.
Who betrays man, need make no boast of that.

And so much more!

- Holy War
- Poetic forms
- Christian expansionism
- The importance of facial hair
- Named swords are a thing
- God's role in events
- Cliff-hanger endings are not new!

When the Emperor his justice hath achieved,
His mighty wrath's abated from its heat,
And Bramimunde has christening received;
Passes the day, the darkness is grown deep,
And now that King in 's vaulted chamber sleeps.
Saint Gabriel is come from God, and speaks:
"Summon the hosts, Charles, of thine Empire,
Go thou by force into the land of Bire,
King Vivien thou'lt succour there, at Imphe,
In the city which pagans have besieged.
The Christians there implore thee and beseech."
Right loth to go, that Emperor was he:
"God!" said the King: "My life is hard indeed!"
Tears filled his eyes, he tore his snowy beard.