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Two Otinel frescoes in Treviso
and Sesto al Reghena

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(Levico Terme)



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Two Otinel frescoes in Treviso and Sesto al Reghena*

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ABSTRACT

I due affreschi di Treviso e Sesto al Reghena incentrati sulla vicenda di Otinel rappresentano opere d'arte uniche, in quanto sono stati ispirati da una versione della *Chanson d'Otinel* diffusa nell'area del Veneto durante il Trecento e ora perduta. Molti critici hanno tentato di rintracciare le origini della leggenda di Otinel, tuttavia la questione è ancora oggetto di ricerca. I due affreschi confermano che la storia era piuttosto nota nel nord Italia del quattordicesimo secolo.

The two Otinel frescoes in Treviso and Sesto al Reghena represent unique works of art, being inspired by a version of the *Chanson d'Otinel* circulating in the area of Veneto in the fourteenth century, and now lost. Many critics have tried to trace back the origins of the *Otinel*; however, the subject is still matter for investigation. The two Italian frescoes confirm that the legend was popular throughout the fourteenth century in northern Italy.

KEYWORDS

Otinel – Affreschi – Sesto al Reghena – Treviso

Otinel – Frescoes – Sesto al Reghena – Treviso

In 1966, Rita Lejeune and Jacques Stiennon published a volume where, in a search for representations of the Carolingian hero, they examined Roland's iconography in Romanesque and Gothic art around Europe¹. They declared themselves bewildered at the discovery that the figure of Roland was unexpectedly absent from the art of fresco. This absence may be partly explained with the fact that in France and in other parts of Europe frescoes were destroyed during wars or replaced in time with more attractive and up-to-date wall decorations, according to the new fashions coming up in art. Another explanation is that the figures of many medieval frescoes in various regions of Europe are no longer recognisable due to excessive exposure to light that makes the fresco colours fade, and to lack of interest by local authorities, which eventually leads to extreme decay².

Among the number of frescoes that have been found in Treviso and in the surrounding region dating from the beginning of the 14th to the beginning of the 15th centuries, and representing scenes from the most popular French medieval tales, there is the Otinel fresco, which miraculously escaped the bombing of Treviso during World War II. It originally decorated the walls of

* All photographs are author's own.

¹ Cf. Lejeune – Stiennon 1966.

² Cf. Cozzi 1975: 247.

the upper rooms of a palace known as 'Palazzo Collalto', from the family who owned it. The Otinel fresco was removed from there in 1902 by the founder of the town museum's collection, Luigi Bailo, and it has been kept and looked after within the premises of the Museo Civico 'L. Bailo' in Treviso until 2014³. The 1902 removal was a very fortunate event, since 'Palazzo Collalto' was later destroyed under the 1944 bombings. It was even more fortunate if one considers that this seems to be the only fresco representing Roland still surviving in Europe. Recently, the great fresco has been removed from the wall where it was exposed in 1902, in order to be restored. It is currently kept within the Museo Civico Santa Caterina and it is not accessible to the public.

The work measures 7 metres in length and 2.80 metres in height. It is divided into three levels, two of which are very damaged [fig. 1]. The middle one is the best preserved and contains the most important scenes. The dominant colours are yellow, red and green (trees and vegetation). All three levels of the fresco contain a figure of a Saracen giant, but it is more visible in the middle level.

The fresco in Treviso attracted Rita Lejeune's attention, when she heard that it was identified with one episode of the *Entrée d'Espagne*. In fact, at a first glance, the figure of a Saracen giant [fig. 2] may suggest that the fresco represents the duel between Ferragu and Roland. Critics elaborated on this idea and for some time it was believed that it may have been inspired by the Franco-Italian *Entrée d'Espagne*. This conclusion, of course, was greeted as a sign of the popularity of the *Entrée* within the courts of the Venetian region. This fresco does indeed show how the themes and motifs of Franco-Italian chivalric literature were popular in the region of Treviso, under the domination of Padua and bordering on Venice, a territory that was a most interesting meeting point for *jongleurs* and writers coming from both the South of France and the other courts of northern Italy⁴. However, Rita Lejeune pointed out aspects of the fresco that called in question the hypothesis that it represented the duel between Ferragu and Roland, and proved that the scenes picture instead a sequence from the *Chanson d'Otinel*, in particular the episodes of the duel between Otinel and Roland, Roland's victory and Otinel's baptism. Lejeune also noted that the giant is without doubt the hero of the story.

While all other characters wear a round helmet that covers a part of the neck, the giant wears a big helmet shaped like a bowl. His weapons are also visible, the most outstanding of which is a one made of three chains and iron balls at the end [fig. 3]. This is the same weapon that Ferragu used during the duel. It is described in the *Entrée d'Espagne* (laisse XLIII, 887-895)⁵:

³ Cf. Coletti – Menegazzi 1959.

⁴ Cf. Pastore Stocchi 1981.

⁵ *Entrée d'Espagne*. I, 35-36. The passage is translated by *Entrée d'Espagne* (ed. Gresti).

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Quant fu armez Feragu le Païn,
Son baston le porterent deus fellons Saracin,
De **fers cerclez** et le **fust de sapin**,
Au bot devant un anel acerin,
Et **troi caenes roides** com se fust de mastin;
Ceschune avoit au chief de son termin
Une bellote de cobre alexandrin,
Et emplombés erent par tiel engin
Qe seul de l'une cheirot un hom sovin.



Fig. 1 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, full Orinel fresco

TWO OTINEL FRESCOES IN TREVISO AND SESTO AL REGHENA



Fig. 2 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco, detail: Roland and Otinel

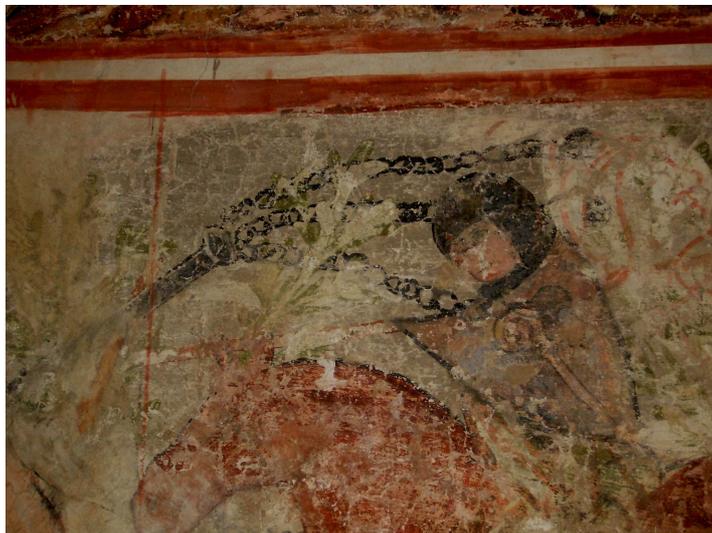


Fig. 3 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco, detail: Otinel's weapons

The same weapon is represented in a miniature of the manuscript of the *Entrée d'Espagne* in the Marciana⁶. However, the giant's size and this detail are the only two elements that allow to think that the fresco represents Ferragu. Other details in the fresco, in fact, reveal a different character, above all one scene representing a baptism [fig. 4]. In the *Entrée d'Espagne*, Ferragu was not baptised but instead died at Roland's hand.



Fig. 4 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco, detail: Otinel's baptism

As regards the physical description of Otinel, various texts that mention the Saracen are not consistent. Some describe him as a giant, for example Jacopo d'Acqui in the section of his *Chronica imaginis mundi* dedicated to Ottonellus⁷, while the so called *Enseignement Trebor* speaks of him as Ferragu's son who wants to vindicate his father. Others represent him simply as Ferragu's nephew, for example the standard version of the *Chanson d'Otinel*. On the one hand, being usually associated with Ferragu as either his nephew or son, it is natural that Otinel is pictured as a giant, and that his weapons are the same as Ferragu's. On the other hand, however, these two elements are not sufficient to assume that the character represented in the fresco is Ferragu.

The presence of a castle with a drawbridge [fig. 5] at the beginning of all three levels of the narrative ensures unity of action, and tells us something about the setting of this duel. The *Chanson* says that the duel between Otinel

⁶ Cf. Marcon 2003.

⁷ Cf. Bianchi 1925-1926: 264-265.

and Roland happened between the Marne and the Seine. According to Rita Lejeune it is more likely to have been the Seine, because the text also speaks of a monastery of Saint Mary, that is Notre Dame. The city represented in the fresco is thus likely to be Paris, which overlooks the Seine: it is there that Otinel went to see Charlemagne. The duel between Ferragu and Roland does not include a castle in the background and does not take place in Paris, but happens in an open plain.

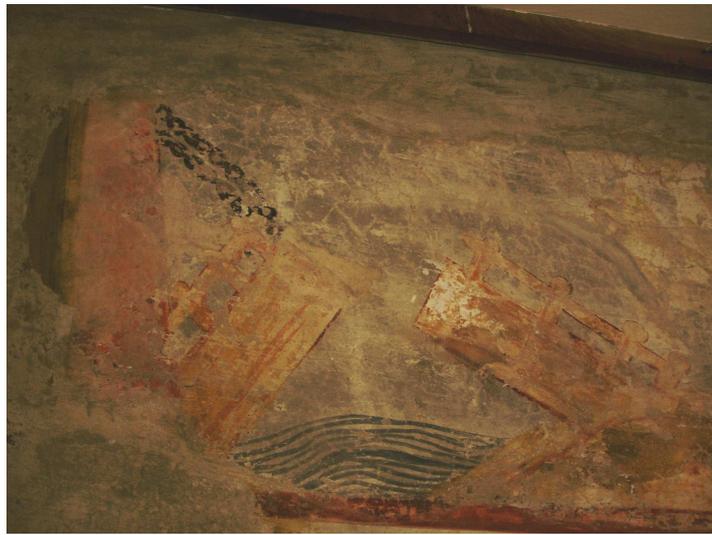


Fig. 5 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco: drawbridge

The middle level starts with the scene where Roland and Otinel prepare themselves for the battle. The smaller character (Roland) holds a gauntlet, which is a symbol of defy. In the *Chanson d'Otinel*, it is Otinel who defies Roland in order to vindicate Ferragu's death, while the dynamics of the clash between Ferragu and Roland, in both the Pseudo-Turpin and in the *Entrée d'Espagne*, do not involve a gauntlet at all (while a gauntlet features in the central scene of the *Entrée*, where Roland clashes with Charlemagne).

Finally, the two characters duel against each other, and we can see them mounting their horses. One of the knights behind Roland holds a shield with two Bs [fig. 6]. This is an enigma: while Rita Lejeune recognised the initials of Belissant, Charlemagne's daughter who armed Otinel for the duel, her name only justifies one B. Besides, in the scene of the duel Otinel still fights in his Saracen armour, while Belissant only appears in the level below. Furthermore, the figure holding the shield with the double B is a young white man, while Otinel is always represented as a black man (as in the baptism scene).

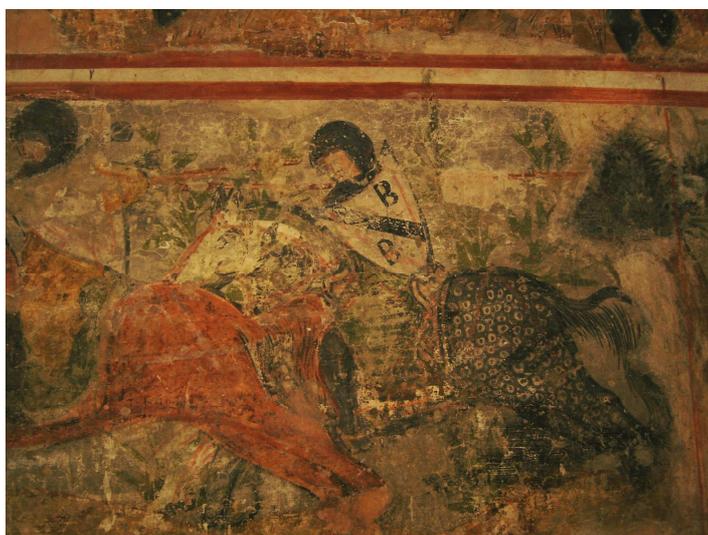


Fig. 6 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco, detail: a knight holds a shield with two Bs

However, on the upper left side of the shield it is still possible to distinguish a white dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, which lands on Otinel in all versions of the legend and anticipates that Otinel will eventually convert and be baptised.⁸ As discussed by Dante Bianchi, the presence of the dove indicates that the source for this scene is the *Chanson d'Otinel* and not the version of Jacopo d'Acqui⁹.

After the battle scene, separated by a tree in the style of miniatures (where trees are landmarks that sign passages between scenes), the hero is baptised by Turpin. After another tree, a crowned king (Charlemagne) attends the scene [fig. 7], while another character who can only be Roland, points at the baptism scene with his stretched finger. According to the text, it was Roland who brought Otinel to court, so this may be the scene when Roland shows how the Saracen has now become a Christian.

In the very damaged lower level, in front of the city gate, there is a female figure who welcomes Otinel and who is almost certainly Belissant. Then Otinel, now a Christian, entertains himself with Roland and receives a sword. This is the most important scene, when Otinel is invested as a knight.

The style of the fresco is popular, weakened by a certain naïve grandeur and it makes the dating very difficult. It is generally thought to belong to the late 14th century, precisely the last quarter according to Rita Lejeune¹⁰.

⁸ Cf. Ailes 1996-1997.

⁹ Bianchi 1925-1926: 268, n. 2: «quel po' di meraviglioso che è nella *chanson* intrecciato all'apparizione della colomba all'eroe maturo per la conversione, Jacopo d'Acqui non lo conosce neanche». Cf. also Bianchi 1923-1924.

¹⁰ Cf. Lejeune 1967: 114. See also Manzato 1991: 424-425.



Fig. 7 Treviso, Museum of Santa Caterina, Otinel fresco, detail: Charlemagne and Roland attend Otinel's baptism

However, Enrica Cozzi, who started her research on the Otinel fresco in the 1970s, observed that in Veneto and Lombardy at that time the fresco style was very much influenced by Giotto and his school, who had completed his masterpiece in Padua in the early 14th century, and thereafter was extensively imitated. The lack of influence from Giotto in the Treviso fresco is perhaps due to a humbler level of execution; or perhaps, as Cozzi maintains, the fresco should be dated back to the end of the 13th century or the early years of the 14th, before the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua was completed. Following Cozzi's theory, the execution of the fresco would coincide with the success that the French legend of Otinel enjoyed in Veneto, which would explain the choice of such an unusual subject¹¹.

Scenes that testify to the circulation of the Otinel saga in this area are found in another fresco at Sesto al Reghena in the Abbey of Santa Maria in Sylvis. Sesto is a small village near Pordenone, on the border between the regions of Venice and Friuli. This fresco, which represents episodes of the same story, is mentioned for the first time in documents in 1317, and is defined as 'new' up until 1320 and 1325, when Franco-Italian literature was blooming¹².

This fresco is much smaller and much more damaged. The east and south walls of a *loggetta* adjacent to the abbey's west prospect are decorated with scenes inspired by the *Otinel* plot. The fresco is unfortunately very fragmentary and in certain points extremely faded, so much so that up until a few years ago it was only possible to recognise very generic chivalric scenes or

¹¹ Cf. Cozzi 1979.

¹² Cf. Peron 1991: 518-520.

scenes of crusade, and it was only possible to date them generally anywhere between the 10th and the 13th centuries. They were discovered in 1954 and it was immediately acknowledged that they were exceptional from the point of view of their iconographic value. Their discovery was then encapsulated into what was then a subject at the centre of scholars' attention in different areas of study, namely the circulation of chivalric literature in the area of Veneto, in the light of a deeper understanding of the ways chivalric rituals were introduced and then officially adopted by the growing Lords' courts (*signorie*) of Veneto and Lombardy. As the only extant visual representation of Roland's epos, together with the Otinel fresco at the Collalto palace, these wall paintings were perceived as being an interesting step forward in the definition of this process. However, they had to wait a few decades before being made the object of adequate research. Cozzi devoted more attention to this fresco than anyone else, and was able in 1975 to identify the subject with more precision, starting from the south wall inside the *loggetta*.

This scene represents two figures sitting on a throne. One is a female figure and her name can be read beside her head, where a writing reveals to us that she is Belissant (BELIXANT) [fig. 8], Otinel's betrothed who the Saracen was allowed to marry only after being baptised.



Fig. 8 Sesto al Reghena, Abbey of Santa Maria in Sylvis, detail: Belissant

Contrary to what one might expect, the male figure sitting beside Belissant is not Otinel but Charlemagne [fig. 9], represented with his usual beard and a sceptre. Behind the shoulders of the two characters, a sort of curtain designed with lozenges separates two armed groups. In front of one group, a male character receives a gauntlet from Belissant. This detail is not

found in the standard version of the *Chanson d'Otinel*, which makes the fresco even more interesting. The artist may have referred to an episode that precedes the duel between Roland and Otinel, where Otinel is armed by Belissant according to Charlemagne's desire. Another element suggests that the version from which the artist took his inspiration is not the standard French version. This detail is a round shield of the type used by the Saracens, appearing in the lower part of the group at the left side.

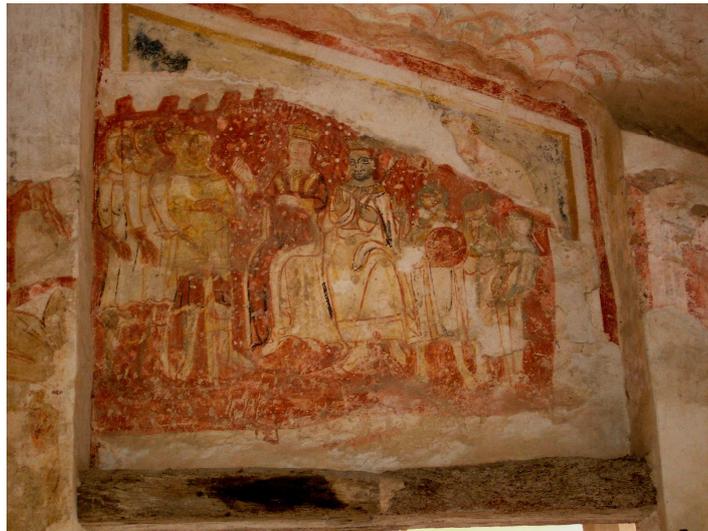


Fig. 9 Sesto al Reghena, Abbey of Santa Maria in Sylvis, detail: Charlemagne and Belissant

On the east wall couples of facing horses suggest clashes between Christian and Saracens soldiers [fig. 10]. What is really surprising about these fresco fragments is that they are situated inside a church, while the subject of Otinel is secular, although strictly connected with the defence of the Christian faith.

The two scenes inside the *loggetta* can be dated from the end of the 13th to the beginning of the 14th centuries. On the façade, the figures of Gabriel the Archangel and St. Benedict date back to the end of the 13th century, while at the top of a great stairway, at the junction between the abbots' residence and the upstairs hall, a 14th century fresco representing scenes from chivalric romances decorates the wall.

To find this mixture between Christian elements, chivalric culture and epic in a Benedictine abbey is quite unusual, but it can be explained through the great emphasis put on the knights as being the guardians of the Church in 13th- and 14th-century Italy. Furthermore, the figure of Charlemagne as founder of a Christian empire may have been welcome in ecclesiastical iconography. The celebration of chivalric society – where themes and motifs from both epic

and romance contributed to the creation of a mythology of chivalry as the defender of both society and Christendom – could take place in either a lord's palace or in a monastery. The purpose was, in fact, the same: to endow the newly born lordships with the right to identify themselves with the characters and to feel legitimated to govern in everyone's best interest.

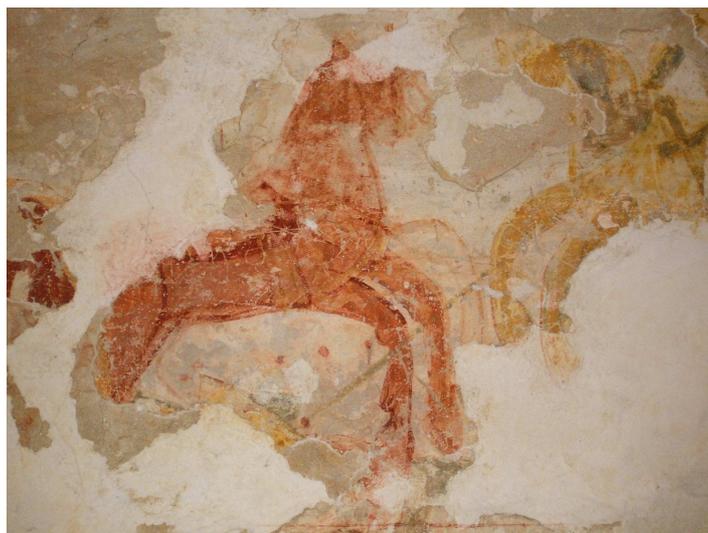


Fig. 10 Sesto al Reghena, Abbey of Santa Maria in Sylvis, detail: clashes between Christian and Saracens soldiers

Various versions of the name Otinel appear referred to both places' and people's names towards the end of the 13th century and up until the first two decades of the 14th century (for example, Jacopo d'Ottonello, bishop of Concordia, who died in 1317)¹³. Otinel, thus, seems to have been a character so popular that he inspired both these frescoes in Treviso and Sesto and onomastic and toponomastic elements in the neighbouring province of Padua. Names of places, Christian names of noble offspring of the area of Treviso and Friuli seem to be the result of such popularity. Cozzi suggested the possibility that there was a Franco-Italian *Otinél*, which is not to be excluded¹⁴.

Pio Rajna maintained that the legend of Otinel originated in Italy and particularly in the area south or south-east of Monferrato (in Piedmont)¹⁵. Against this, Paul Aebischer stated that the legend was known very early in Italy, and precisely in the eastern area of the Po Valley (Treviso and Padua), excluding that it may have originated in Italy¹⁶.

¹³ Cf. Cozzi 1975: 253, n. 22.

¹⁴ Cf. Cozzi 1975: 253.

¹⁵ Cf. Rajna 1889: 35 and ff.

¹⁶ Cf. Aebischer 1960.

Considering the topic of the *Chanson d'Otinel*, it is very likely that it may have become popular in the same area where Franco-Italian epics such the *Entrée d'Espagne* and its continuation, the *Prise de Pampelune*, were circulating.

Let us look closely at the subject of *Otinel*, according to the standard version, which is only known through three manuscripts, one of which (Cologne FBM 168) is a complete 14th century manuscript from Cologne (Suisse), and it originally belonged to the private collection of Sir Thomas Phillips at Middlehill-Fenwick (Cheltenham). This contains a version in Anglo-Norman. Another faulty manuscript is held by the Vatican Library in Rome (Città del Vaticano BAV Reg. lat. 1616). It contains a *Roman d'Otinel* and a *Fierabras*, and it dates to either the 13th or the 14th century, according to different opinions. This contains a version in western Old French. The Cologne and Rome manuscripts were used by Guessard and Michelant for their edition of the *Chanson d'Otinel*, contained in *Anciens poètes de la France*, published in Paris in 1858. A fragment is found in a 13th century manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and this version is in Anglo-Norman (Paris BNF Nouv. acq. fr. 5094).¹⁷ The legend circulated also in a number of other texts, mainly in the north of Europe, for instance it is included in the Norwegian *Karlamagnus Saga* and the Danish *Karl Magnus Kronike*, and also in England, for example *The sege of Melayne* and *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spyne*.¹⁸

Let us now look at the version of the legend properly known as the *Chanson d'Otinel* as we find it in the Guessard – Michelant edition. Charlemagne returns to France after the conquest of Pamplona. There he summons his court, expressing the desire to return to Spain and finish the war against the Saracens. However, a Saracen arrives at his court and introduces himself as Ferragu's nephew, sent by Marsile, who has now taken Rome and Lombardy. This is Otinel, who was sent on a mission to salute Charlemagne, to invite him to abjure the Christian faith and embrace the Saracens'. Otinel challenges Roland in order to vindicate his uncle Ferragu. Now, the last thing we know about Ferragu is that he had been defeated in a duel and killed by Roland in a short episode contained in the *Pseudo-Turpin*, then elaborated extensively in the *Entrée d'Espagne* (c. 1325). There, this episode acquires much greater relevance and importance to become one of the greatest episodes of the Franco-Italian work. Considering that Otinel's first idea was to vindicate his uncle, it is not at all to be excluded that a Franco-Italian version of *Otinel* may have circulated during the first half of the 14th century, when the continuation of the *Entrée*, the *Prise de Pampelune* was being written. This does not contradict neither Rajna nor Aebischer, in that they both speak of an early circulation of the legend, but

¹⁷ Cf. Langlois 1883: 433-458.

¹⁸ Cf. Camps 2015: 138-146.

they do not indicate which version may have been known, referring probably to a French version¹⁹.

What we know for sure is that the lack of manuscripts of a Franco-Italian version is compensated by the presence of the two frescoes in Treviso and Sesto, and by the numerous onomastic and toponomastic entries²⁰.

Even more interesting is the ending of the story as depicted in the Treviso fresco. At the end of the duel, not only does Otinel convert and is baptised by Turpin, he also marries Charlemagne's daughter Belissant to then return to Italy, defeat Marsile and receive the crown of Lombardy.

Towards the end of the 13th century northern Italy was emerging from a political crisis due to the failure of the commune (the semi-democratic administration of the cities of North and Centre Italy, mainly Tuscany, Lombardy and Veneto). Most of the communes were undergoing a radical change consisting in the development of a new political system based on the predominance of one family with its own administrative and military apparatus over the other families that traditionally took part in the political administration of the city. This is the process most commonly known as the birth of the *signorie* (high lordships). Thus, from the end of the 13th century, the Lords in power surrounded themselves with judges and notaries to give shape to new State administrations, with the purpose of extending their jurisdiction to the newly conquered neighbouring territories. This is how the city-states of Milan, Ferrara, Mantua and eventually Florence took shape, and acquired immense political power during the Renaissance, forming alliances with one another²¹. From the point of view of ideology, it was important from the very beginning of this process that the power of the Lord was justified and legitimated by creating genealogies and connections with the heroes of epics, both classical and of the Charlemagne cycle, for the purpose of political propaganda.

In Lombardy, the two most popular figures were Desiderius, king of the Lombards, and a revised version of Roland, more similar to a *baron revolté* than to the original French hero, as characterised in the *Entrée d'Espagne*²². These two were considered as local characters (as far as Roland is concerned, this is due to his Italian birth in Sutri). They both embodied the idea of local independence from foreign authorities, such as the king of France and the German emperor,

¹⁹ Maria Luisa Meneghetti recently noted that «[s]orge [...] il dubbio che [...] il testo iconografico possa essere la traduzione figurativa di una fase o di una versione di un determinato testo epico di cui non possediamo più tracce scritte» (Meneghetti 2015: 73). This may be the case of an early 14th-century Franco-Italian *Otinél*. Meneghetti also mentions briefly the Treviso and Sesto al Reghena frescoes as examples of the dissemination of certain themes in limited areas, as is the case of the Otinel legend in the eastern Venetian area; cf. *ivi*: 71.

²⁰ Cf. especially Rajna 1882; Bédier 1908: II, 255-270; Bianchi 1925-1926.

²¹ On this point cf. at least Tabacco 2000³.

²² Cf. Bradley-Cromeey 1993: 27-56.

the titular overlord and arbiter of Italian domestic affairs. Otinel is one such figure: having become a Christian, he was crowned king of the Lombards, thus acquiring a new identity, new land and a new status. Having married the emperor's daughter, he becomes an active member of the empire, though ruling his own territory. He, thus, was included in the number of mythical ancestors of the great people of Lombardy and Veneto, the two contiguous regions, in the company of Antenor and Desiderius, and connected with Roland through his marriage. Therefore, it is not at all strange that he should be remembered through names of places and people, as well as in these two great frescoes.

The frescoes in Treviso and Sesto do not seem particularly valuable from an artistic viewpoint. They are rather poor, bi-dimensional representations of a theme dear to the people of this area, and contain nothing of the artistic innovations of their age. The same can be said of the *Chanson*. Criticised by many scholars for lacking psychological introspection and any lyrical qualities, the author only repeated the epic technique he learnt from earlier more illustrious examples. As Aebischer put it, it is all about *application* rather than *chaleur* and *métier* rather than *âme*. The author invented nothing notable, but repeated a known pattern, just like the painter of the frescoes²³.

Nonetheless, these two sets of frescoes are of great importance for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the case of Treviso is particularly outstanding because it is to date the only extant fresco representing Roland in Europe. Both are important also because they testify to the circulation of the Otinel legend in this area. Moreover, they contain details that suggest the presence of a Franco-Italian version of *Otinel*, corroborated by the popularity that the hero's name acquired in this area. Finally, they add another element to the history of local identity and political propaganda within the territory of Veneto, in connection with the birth and rise of the *signorie*.

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Venice BNM fr. Z.21 (=257)	Venice	Biblioteca nazionale marciana	francese	Z.21 (=257)

²³ Cf. Aebischer 1960.

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