THE DIVINITY which lent its name to the *Divine Comedy* was a triune godhead. For this reason Dante arranged his poem so that, as his reader progressed across the three realms of the Christian cosmos and up through the nine moving spheres of heaven to the empyrean tenth at the apex of all, that divinity implied in his title would be reiterated continually in the triads of the poem’s formal divisions as they resolved ceaselessly into unity. Thirty-three cantos of the *Inferno*, thirty-three of the *Purgatorio*, and thirty-three of the *Paradiso* are united into one hundred by the single canto of the introduction, while the terza rima, ABA BCD CDC, linking those hendecasyllable lines stressed always on the tenth, insistently restates the all-pervading pattern of the divine Trinity. For Dante, such an arrangement would be fitting because the divine Creator of the comedy which the poem treats was also the God who, according to Solomon, had ordered all things in measure and number and weight. Thus, when Dante ordered his poem in conformity with a numbered pattern, he followed a creative procedure which derived authority from the primeval creative act of God.

Before Dante, in Charlemagne’s time, Angilbert had designed
the Centula Abbey at Saint Riquier so that the cloisters formed a triangle with a church at each angle. One hundred monks served at each of the three churches, totaling three hundred in all; and thirty-three children formed the choirs of each—the whole arranged expressly in honor of the Holy Trinity.³

Somewhat later, about the year 1040, but still almost three centuries before the Divine Comedy, the poet who composed the Old French Vie de Saint Alexis arranged his poem in conformity with an arithmetic scheme based on the powers of five, a number which, because it represented the sum of 3, the first masculine number, and 2, the first feminine number, had symbolized marriage since the time of the Pythagoreans. Using a ten-syllable line with caesura after the fourth, and a five-line stanza, the poet chose to tell the story of Alexis in 125 stanzas (the third power of five) or 625 lines (the fourth power of five). Then counting from the end of the poem, he assigned 125 lines, or 25 stanzas (the second power of five), to a kind of coda treating the apotheosis of the saint. At this juncture he had remaining 100 stanzas or 500 lines in which to tell of the saint’s life on earth. The block of 100 stanzas he divided into three equal parts of 33 and ⅔ stanzas, causing the points of division to fall at crucial points in the narrative: the moment of the saint’s election as the Man of God (stanza 34, line 170), the moment of his death and ascent to heaven (stanza 67, line 334), and the moment when his body is prepared for burial (stanza 100, line 500).

In choosing for the main body of his poem a unit of 100, which he divided as equally as he could into three parts, the poet of the Alexis expressed in his way the same tripartite division of unity that Angilbert had attempted in the Centula Abbey and which Dante later accomplished in the Divine Comedy. In all cases the unity of the Christian Trinity was symbolized; and in the Alexis, the units 33⅓ would also symbolize the number of years traditionally ascribed as the span of the life of Christ, whose example the saint was imitating. Finally, in choosing the number five as the basis for his overall structure, the Alexis poet restated metaphorically the thematic message which he wished his poem to convey—in this case, marriage in the sense of the
saint's rejection of earthly marriage for the spiritual union of his soul with God.⁴

Ernst Curtius devotes one of the excurseses of his celebrated work to an exploration of evidence of "numerical composition" prior to Dante, and concludes that, in one way or another, combinations of numbers had been used in the structure of literary works since classical antiquity, at times simply to achieve harmonies and symmetrical proportions, but often to express symbolic meanings as well.⁵

The particular kind of numerical composition with which this study is concerned will be called "structural arithmetic metaphor," a term which may be defined as an ordering of poetic form according to an arithmetic pattern which uses numbers whose symbolic meaning restates metaphorically some basic idea inherent in the content of the poem. The usage of the number five in the Alexis would exemplify the procedure. Although no ars poetica describing such a device has come down to us, the evidence of the Alexis and of Dante's works is sufficient to justify an assumption that the practice was viable at least within the period between the composition of the Alexis and the writing of the Divine Comedy. It is the purpose of the present work to show that, in addition to its usage in the hagiographic literature of this epoch, the device was also employed for the special type of epic poem represented by the Oxford version of the Chanson de Roland.⁶ However, since the taste for the manipulation of numbers in literature is no longer viable in modern aesthetics, it will be necessary to discuss the evolution and background of medieval number symbolism before proceeding to the demonstration of its use in the Oxford Roland.


6. The works known to the writer which have attempted to formulate an arithmetic structure for Digby-23 have been limited to the statement of a possible numerical pattern and do not pretend to integrate the arithmetic device as a metaphoric expression of the sense of the content. C. A. Robson, “The Technique of Symmetrical Composition in Medieval Poetry,” in *Studies in Medieval French Presented to Alfred Ewert*, ed. E. A. Francis, pp. 26–70, treats arithmetic divisions in terms of the pagination of Digby-23; and in his master’s thesis, “The Mathematical Structure of the *Chanson de Roland*, MS Digby-23,” Robert Lucas treats a *schema* based on golden mean proportions in the numbers of the lines and the laisses, and proposes a reading of the line and laisse numbers at variance with that of Paul Mortier’s diplomatic edition, *Les Textes de la Chanson de Roland*, vol. 1. In neither case is there overlapping with the present study.