

Four Accounts of the Battle of Tours (Poitiers)

Overview:

"October 10, 732 AD marks the conclusion of the Battle of Tours, arguably one of the most decisive battles in all of history."—Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.us-israel.org>

One century after the beginnings of Islam, a huge Muslim army (estimated at anywhere from 60,000 to 400,000 soldiers) crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and began a northward conquest of territory in Spain. The army was confident, even arrogant, as it had already conquered territory and seriously damaged Christianity in Syria, Egypt, and Northern Africa. The army was under the leadership of Abd-er Rahman, governor of Spain. The soldiers marched across the Pyrenees and toward the Loire River, where a French army led by Charles Martel (known as "The Hammer") met it in battle just outside the town of Tours and conquered it decisively. (The exact location of the battle has not been determined by historians. Some believe that the town of Poitiers, France, may also be the site.) The battle pitted Muslim mounted soldiers against the Frankish infantry, and it stands as one of the few times during the Middle Ages that soldiers on the ground were able to defeat a mounted attack. Muslim primary sources claim the battle lasted two days, while Christian sources report it went on for seven days. It ended when the French captured and killed Abd-er Rahman. Martel expected a return attack, but without their leader the Muslims retreated peacefully that night. The French had successfully repelled a Muslim incursion into Western Europe.

Introduction:

Almost immediately after the death of Muhammad, Muslims followed the Prophet's commandment to spread his teachings and the Muslim Empire steadily expanded its territory. Muhammad's successor was Abu Bakr (632–34), one of Muhammad's fathers-in-law (the prophet had ten wives) who was chosen by the Meccan community to lead them as the "deputy of God." Bakr battled against the Bedouins, who had at first converted to Islam, then rejected it. The Bedouins were defeated, bringing the entire Arabian Peninsula under Muslim control. Immediately following this victory, Muslims began to conquer parts of the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Empire (Persia and Iraq), proclaiming a *jihad* (meaning "holy war") to spread Muhammad's teachings. Muslim forces crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711, entering Europe. In 732 Muslim and Christian armies fought at Tours, France, in a battle that would decide who would control Europe.

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Medieval Sourcebook: Arabs, Franks, and the Battle of Tours, 732: Three Accounts

[Davis Introduction]

The following opinion was expressed about the Franks by the emir who conquered Spain, and who—had he not been recalled—might have commanded at Tours. It shows what the Arab leaders thought of the men of the North up to the moment of their great disillusionment by "The Hammer."

From an Arabian Chronicler

Musa being returned to Damascus, the Caliph Abd-el Melek asked of him about his conquests, saying "Now tell me about these Franks—what is their nature?"

"They," replied Musa, "are a folk right numerous, and full of might: brave and impetuous in the attack, but cowardly and craven in event of defeat."

"And how has passed the war betwixt them and thyself? Favorably or the reverse?"

"The reverse? No, by Allah and the prophet!" spoke Musa. "Never has a company from my army been beaten. And never have the Moslems hesitated to follow me when I have led them; though they were twoscore to fourscore."

Isidore of Beja's *Chronicle*

[Davis Introduction]

The defeat of the Saracen invaders of Frankish lands at Tours (more properly Poitiers) in 732 A.D. was a turning point in history. It is not likely the Muslims, if victorious, would have penetrated, at least at once, far into the north, but they would surely have seized South Gaul, and thence readily have crushed the weak Christian powers of Italy. It is very unfortunate that we do not possess scientific accounts of Charles Martel's great victory, instead of the interesting but insufficient stories of the old Christian chroniclers.

Then Abderrahman, [the Muslim emir] seeing the land filled with the multitude of his army, crossed the Pyrenees, and traversed the defiles [in the mountains] and the plains, so that he penetrated ravaging and slaying clear into the lands of the Franks. He gave battle to Duke Eudes (of Aquitaine) beyond the Garonne and the Dordogne, and put him to flight—so utterly [was he beaten] that God alone knew the number of the slain and wounded. Whereupon Abderrahman set in pursuit of Eudes; he destroyed palaces, burned churches,

and imagined he could pillage the basilica of St. Martin of Tours. It is then that he found himself face to face with the lord of Austrasia, Charles, a mighty warrior from his youth, and trained in all the occasions of arms.

For almost seven days the two armies watched one another, waiting anxiously the moment for joining the struggle. Finally they made ready for combat. And in the shock of the battle the men of the North seemed like North a sea that cannot be moved. Firmly they stood, one close to another, forming as it were a bulwark of ice; and with great blows of their swords they hewed down the Arabs. Drawn up in a band around their chief, the people of the Austrasians carried all before them. Their tireless hands drove their swords down to the breasts [of the foe].

At last night sundered the combatants. The Franks with misgivings lowered their blades, and beholding the numberless tents of the Arabs, prepared themselves for another battle the next day. Very early, when they issued from their retreat, the men of Europe saw the Arab tents ranged still in order, in the same place where they had set up their camp. Unaware that they were utterly empty, and fearful lest within the phalanxes of the Saracens were drawn up for combat, they sent out spies to ascertain the facts. These spies discovered that all the squadrons of the "Ishmaelites" had vanished. In fact, during the night they had fled with the greatest silence, seeking with all speed their home land. The Europeans, uncertain and fearful, lest they were merely hidden in order to come back [to fall upon them] by ambushments, sent scouting parties everywhere, but to their great amazement found nothing. Then without troubling to pursue the fugitives, they contented themselves with sharing the spoils and returned right gladly to their own country.

Chronicle of St. Denis

The Muslims planned to go to Tours to destroy the Church of St. Martin, the city, and the whole country. Then came against them the glorious Prince Charles, at the head of his whole force. He drew up his host, and he fought as fiercely as the hungry wolf falls upon the stag. By the grace of Our Lord, he wrought a great slaughter upon the enemies of Christian faith, so that--as history bears witness--he slew in that battle 300,000 men, likewise their king by name Abderrahman. Then was he [Charles] first called "Martel," for as a hammer of iron, of steel, and of every other metal, even so he dashed; and smote in the battle all his enemies. And what was the greatest marvel of all, he only lost in that battle 1500 men. The tents and harness [of the enemy] were taken; and whatever else they possessed became a prey to him and his followers. Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, being now reconciled with Prince Charles Martel, later slew as many of the Saracens as he could find who had escaped from the battle.

Source.

From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, pp. 362-364.

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Medieval Sourcebook: Anon Arab Chronicler: The Battle of Poitiers, 732

From 711 Muslim forces crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, conquered the Visigothic Kingdom, and in less than a decade crossed the Pyrenees. In 732, under the command of Abd-er-rahman, they were decisively defeated by Charles Martel and the Franks at the Battle of Poitiers [or Tours]. This event looms much larger in Western history than Muslim - leading to a famous passage of purple prose by Edward Gibbon about minarets rather than spires in Oxford if the Muslims had won. The event was notice the Muslim world, however, and the following is from an Arab chronicle.

The Moslems smote their enemies, and passed the river Garonne, and laid waste the country, and took captives without number. And that army went through all places like a desolating storm. Prosperity made those warriors insatiable. At the passage of the river, Abderrahman overthrew the count, and the count retired into his stronghold, but the Moslems fought against it, and entered it by force, and slew the count; for everything gave way to their scimitars, which were the robbers of lives. All the nations of the Franks trembled at that terrible army, and they betook them to their king Calvus [Charles Martel], and told him of the havoc made by the Moslem horsemen, and how they rode at their will through all the land of Narbonne, Toulouse, and Bordeaux, and they told the king of the death of their count. Then the king bade them be of good cheer, and offered to aid them. . . . He mounted his horse, and he took with him a host that could not be numbered, and went against the Moslems. And he came upon them at the great city of Tours. And Abderrahman and other prudent cavaliers saw the disorder of the Moslem troops, who were loaded with spoil; but they did not venture to displease the soldiers by ordering them to abandon everything except their arms and war-horses. And Abderrahman trusted in the valour of his soldiers, and in the good fortune which had ever attended him. But such defect of discipline always is fatal to armies. So Abderrahman and his host attacked Tours to gain still more spoil, and they fought against it so fiercely that they stormed the city almost before the eyes of the army that came to save it; and the fury and the cruelty of the Moslems towards the inhabitants of the city were like the fury and cruelty of raging tigers. It was manifest that God's chastisement was sure to follow such excesses; and fortune thereupon turned her back upon the Moslems.

Near the river Owar [Loire], the two great hosts of the two languages and the two creeds were set in array against each other. The hearts of Abderrahman, his captains and his men were filled with wrath and pride, and they were the first to begin to fight. The Moslem horsemen dashed fierce and frequent forward against the battalions of the Franks, who resisted manfully, and many fell dead on either side, until the going down of the sun. Night parted the two armies: but in the grey of the morning the Moslems returned to the battle. Their cavaliers had soon hewn their way into the center of the Christian host. But many of the Moslems were fearful for the safety of the spoil which they had stored in their tents, and a false cry arose in their ranks that some of the enemy were plundering the camp; whereupon several squadrons of the Moslem horsemen rode off to protect their tents. But it seemed as if they fled; and all the host was troubled. And while Abderrahman strove to check their tumult, and to lead them back to battle, the warriors of the Franks came around him, and he was pierced through with many spears, so that he died. Then all the host fled before the enemy, and many died in the flight. . . .