

BATTLE OF TOURS (732 A.D.)

The Battle of Tours (often called the Battle of Poitiers, but not to be confused with the Battle of Poitiers, 1356) was fought on October 10, 732 between forces under the Frankish leader Charles Martel and a massive invading Islamic army led by Emir Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi Abd al Rahman, near the city of Tours, France. During the battle, the Franks defeated the Islamic army and Emir Abd er Rahman was killed. This battle stopped the northward advance of Islam from the Iberian peninsula, and is considered by most historians to be of macrohistorical importance, in that it halted the Islamic conquests, and preserved Christianity as the controlling faith in Europe, during a period in which Islam was overrunning the remains of the old Roman and Persian Empires.

Combatants

Franks, led by Charles Martel. Estimates of the Frankish army defending Gaul vary, but by most accounts were between 15,000 and 75,000. Losses according to St. Denis were about 1,500.

Muslims, between 60,000 and 400,000 cavalry, (most likely closer to the lower number) under Abd er Rahman; besides source differences, this army is difficult to estimate in size, since it was often fractured into raiding parties to carry out the pillaging and plundering of various richly cultured Frankish centers; however, the entire Muslim army was present at Tours by Arab accounts. During the six days he waited to begin the Battle, Abd er Rahman recalled all those columns raiding and pillaging, so that on the seventh day, when by both eastern and western accounts the Battle began,

both armies were at full strength.

Prelude

The Muslims in northern Spain had easily overrun Septimania, had set up a capital at Narbonne which they called Arbuna, giving its largely Arian inhabitants honorable terms, and quickly pacified the south and for some years threatened Frankish territories. Duke Odo of Aquitaine, also known as Eudes the Great, had decisively defeated a major invasion force in 721 at the Battle of Toulouse, but Arab raids continued, in 725 reaching as far as the city of Autun in Burgundy. Threatened by both the Arabs in the south and by the Franks in the north, in 730 Eudes allied himself with Uthman ibn Naissa, called "Munuza" by the Franks, the Berber emir in what would later become Catalonia. As a gage, Uthman was given Eudes's daughter Lampade in marriage to seal the alliance, and Arab raids across the Pyrenees, Eudes' southern border, ceased [1].

However, the next year, Uthman rebelled against the governor of al-Andalus, Abd er Rahman. Abd er Rahman quickly crushed the revolt, and next directed his attention against the traitor's former ally, Eudes. According to one unidentified Arab, "That army went through all places like a desolating storm." Duke Eudes (called King by some), collected his army at Bordeaux, but was defeated, and Bordeaux was plundered. The slaughter of Christians at the River Garonne was evidently horrific; Isidorus Pacensis commented that "solus Deus numerum morientium vel pereuntium recognoscat", 'God alone knows the number of the slain' (Chronicon). The Muslim horsemen then utterly devastated that portion of Gaul, their own histories saying the "faithful pierced through the mountains, tramples over rough and level ground, plunders far into the country of the Franks, and smites all with the sword, insomuch that when Eudo came to battle with them at the River Garonne, and

fled." Eudes appealed to the Franks for assistance, which Charles Martel only granted after Eudes agreed to submit to Frankish authority.

In 732, the Arab advance force was proceeding north toward the River Loire having already outpaced their supply train and a large part of their army. Essentially, having easily destroyed all resistance in that part of Gaul, the invading army had split off into several raiding parties, simply looting and destroying, while the main body advanced more slowly. A military explanation for why Eudes was defeated so easily at Bordeaux, after having won 11 years earlier at Battle of Toulouse, was simple. At Toulouse, Eudes managed a basic surprise attack against an overconfident and unprepared foe, all of whose defensive works were aimed inward, while he attacked from the outside. The Arab cavalry never got a chance to mobilize and meet him in open battle. At Bordeaux, they did, and resulted in absolute devastation of Eudes army, almost all of whom were killed, with minimal losses to the Muslims. Eudes forces, like other European troops of that era, lacked stirrups, and therefore had no armoured cavalry. Virtually all of their troops were infantry. The Muslim heavy cavalry broke the Christian infantry in their first charge, and then simply slaughtered them at will as they broke and ran. The invading force then went on to devastate southern Gaul, preparing it for complete conquest. One of the major raiding parties advanced on Tours. A possible motive, according to the second continuator of Fredegar, was the riches of the Abbey of Saint Martin of Tours, the most prestigious and holiest shrine in western Europe at the time. Upon hearing this, Austrasia Mayor of the Palace Charles Martel, collected his army of an estimated 15-75,000 veterans, and marched south avoiding the old Roman roads hoping to take the Muslims by surprise.

Location

Despite the great importance of this battle, its exact location remains unknown. Most historians assume that the two armies met each other where the rivers Clain and Vienne join between Tours and Poitiers.

The battle

Charles chose to begin the battle in a defensive, phalanx-like formation. According to the Arabian sources they drew up in a large square. Certainly, given the disparity between the armies, in that the Franks were mostly infantry, all without armour, against mounted and Arab armored or mailed horsemen, (the Berbers were less heavily protected) Charles Martel fought a brilliant defensive battle. In a place and time of his choosing, he met a far superior force, and defeated it.

For six days, the two armies watched each other with just minor skirmishes. The Muslims waited for their full strength to arrive, which it did, but they were still uneasy. No good general, and Abd er Rahman was one, liked to let his opponent pick the ground and conditions for battle -- and Martel had done both. Creasy says, and his theory is probably best, that the Muslims best strategic choice would have been to simply decline battle, depart with their loot, garrisoning the captured towns in southern Gaul, and return when they could force Martel to a battleground more to their liking, one that maximized the huge advantage they had of the first true "knights" mailed and armoured horsemen -- the Franks, without stirrups in wide use, had to depend on unarmoured foot soldiers. Martel gambled everything that Abd er Rahman would in the end feel compelled to battle, and to go on and loot Tours. Neither of them wanted to attack. The Franks were well dressed for the cold, and had the terrain advantage. The Arabs were not as prepared for the intense cold, but did not want to attack what they thought might be a numerically superior Frankish army. (most historians believe it was not) Essentially, the Arabs wanted

the Franks to come out in the open, while the Franks, formed in a tightly packed defensive formation, wanted them to come uphill, into the trees, (negating at once some of the advantages of their cavalry). It became a waiting game, which Martel won. The fight commenced on the seventh day, as Abd er Rahman did not want to postpone the battle indefinitely.

Abd er Rahman trusted the tactical superiority of his cavalry, and had them charge repeatedly. This time the faith the Muslims had in their cavalry, armed with their long lances and swords which had brought them victory in previous battles, was not justified.

In one of the rare instances where medieval infantry stood up against cavalry charges, the disciplined Frankish soldiers withstood the assaults, though according to Arab sources, the Arab cavalry several times broke into the interior of the Frankish square. But despite this, Franks did not break, and it is probably best expressed by a translation of an Arab account of the battle from the Medieval Source Book: "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."

It might have been different, however, had the Muslim forces remained under control. According to Muslim accounts of the battle, in the midst of the fighting on the second day, scouts from the Franks began to raid the camp and supply train (including slaves and other plunder). A large portion of the army broke off and raced back to their camp to save their plunder. What appeared to be a retreat soon became one. While attempting to restore order to his men, who had

managed to break into the defensive square, Abd er Rahman was surrounded by Franks and killed.

According to a Frankish source, the battle lasted one day. Frankish histories claim that when the rumor went through the Arab army that Frankish cavalry threatened the booty they had taken from Bordeaux, (Charles supposedly had sent scouts to cause chaos in the Muslim base camp, and free as many of the slaves as possible, hoping to draw off part of his foe, it succeeded beyond his wildest dreams), many of the Muslim Cavalry returned to their camp. This, to the rest of the Muslim army, appeared to be a full-scale retreat, and soon it was one. Both histories agree that while attempting to stop the retreat, Abd er Rahman became surrounded, which led to his death, and the Muslims returned to their camp.

The next day, when the Muslims did not renew the battle, the Franks feared an ambush. Only after extensive reconnaissance by Frankish soldiers of the Muslim camp was it discovered that the Muslims had retreated during the night.

Aftermath

The Arab army retreated south over the Pyrenees. Charles earned his nickname Martel, meaning hammer, in this battle. He continued to drive the Muslims from France in subsequent years. After Eudes died, who had been forced to acknowledge, albeit reservedly, the suzerainty of Charles in 719, his son wished independence. Though Charles wished to unite the duchy directly to himself and went there to elicit the proper homage of the Aquitainians, the nobility proclaimed Odo's son, Hunold, whose dukedom Charles recognised when the Arabs invaded Provence the next year. Hunold, who originally resisted acknowledging Charles as overlord, had no choice when the Muslims returned.

In 736 the Caliphate launched another massive invasion --

this time by sea. This naval Arab invasion was headed by Abdul Rahman's son. It landed in Narbonne in 736 and took Arles. Charles, the conflict with Hunold put aside, descended on the Provençal strongholds of the Muslims. In 736, he retook Montfrin and Avignon, and Arles and Aix-en-Provence with the help of Liutprand, King of the Lombards. Nîmes, Agde, and Béziers, held by Isalm since 725, fell to him and their fortresses destroyed. He smashed a Muslim force at the River Berre, and prepared to meet their primary invasion force at Narbonne. He defeated a mighty host outside of that city, using for the first time, heavy cavalry of his own, which he used in coordination with his planax. He crushed the Muslim army, though outnumbered, but failed to take the city. Provence, however, he successfully rid of its foreign occupiers.

Notable about these campaigns was Charles' incorporation, for the first time, of heavy cavalry with stirrups to augment his phalanx. His ability to coordinate infantry and cavalry veterans was unequaled in that era and enabled him to face superior numbers of invaders, and decisively defeat them again and again. Some historians believe Narbonne in particular was as important a victory for Christian Europe as Tours. Charles was that rarest of commonities in the dark ages: a brilliant strategic general, who also was a tactical commander par excellence, able in the crush and heat of battle to adapt his plans to his foes forces and movement -- and amazingly, defeated them repeatedly, especially when, as at Tours, they were far superior in men and weaponry, and at Berre and Narbonne, when they were superior in numbers of brave fighting men. Charles had the last quality which defines genuine greatness in a military commander: he foresaw the dangers of his foes, and prepared for them with care; he used ground, time, place, and fierce loyalty of his troops to offset his foes superior weaponry and tactics; third, he adapted, again and again, to the enemy on the battlefield,

cooly shifting to compensate for the foreseen and unforeseeable.

The importance of these campaigns, Tours and the later campaigns of 736-7 in putting an end to Muslim bases in Gaul, and any immediate ability to expand Islamic influence in Europe, cannot be overstated. Gibbons and his generation of historians, and the majority of modern experts agree with them that they were unquestionably decisive in world history. Despite these victories, the Arabs remained in control of Narbonne and Septimania for another 27 years, but could not expand further than that. The treaties reached earlier with the local population stood firm and were further consolidated in 734 when the governor of Narbonne, Yusuf ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Fihri, concluded agreements with several towns on common defense arrangements against the encroachments of Charles Martel, who had systematically brought the south to heel as he extended his domains. He believed, and rightly so, that it was vital to keep the Muslims in Iberia, and not allow them a foothold in Gaul itself. Though he won the battle of Narbonne when the army there came out to meet him, Charles failed in his attempt to take Narbonne by siege in 737, when the city was jointly defended by its Muslim Arab and Christian Visigoth citizens. It was left to his son, Pippin the short, to force the city's surrender, in 759, and to drive the Arabs completely back to Iberia, and bring Narbonne into the Frankish Domains. His Grandson, Charlamagne, became the first Christian ruler to actually begin what would be called the Reconquista from Europe proper. In the east of the peninsula the Frankish emperors established the Marca Hispanica across the Pyrenees in part of what today is Catalonia, reconquering Girona in 785 and Barcelona in 801. This formed a buffer zone against Islam across the Pyrenees.

Tours in history

In Western history

Christian contemporaries, from Bede to Theophanes carefully recorded the battle and were keen to spell out what they saw as its implications. Later scholars, such as Edward Gibbon, would contend that had Martel fallen, the Moors would have easily conquered a divided Europe. Gibbon wrote that "A victorious line of march had been prolonged above a thousand miles from the rock of Gibraltar to the banks of the Loire; the repetition of an equal space would have carried the Saracens to the confines of Poland and the Highlands of Scotland; the Rhine is not more impassable than the Nile or Euphrates, and the Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Qur'an would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Muhammed." Certainly, the Islamic invasions were an enormous danger during the window of 721 from Toulouse to 737 at the Arab defeat at Narbonne. But the window was closing. The unified Caliphate collapsed into civil war in 750 at the Battle of the Zab which left the Umayyad dynasty literally wiped out except for the Princes who escaped to Africa, and then Iberia, where they established the Umayyad Emirate in opposition to the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad.

Both ancient, mid, and modern historians agree that Martel was the father of western heavy cavalry, and literally stole the technology from his slain foe! He had no trouble using his enemies tools against them, no pride stopped him from seizing any advantage he could in defending his faith, his father's home and homeland, and his people, from what he saw was a danger that would destroy them if not checked. His foresight in moving to strike first, to stop them short of his "front door," reminds one of Winston Churchill's famous

statement, that "it is better to fight in your neighbors back yard, than have to defend your own front door." In 5 short years, from the Battle of Tours, to the Battle of Narbonne, he fathered western heavy cavalry, and used it in conjunction with his planax with devastating effect.

In the modern era, Norwich, the most widely read authority on the Eastern Roman Empire, says the Franks halting Muslim Expansion at Tours literally preserved Christianity as we know it. A more realistic viewpoint may be found in *Barbarians, Marauders, and Infidels* by Antonio Santosuosso, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Western Ontario, and considered an expert historian in the era in dispute in this article. It was published in 2004, and has quite an interesting modern expert opinion on Charles Martel, Tours, and the subsequent campaigns against Rahman's successor in 736-737. Santosuosso makes a compelling case that these defeats of invading Muslim Armies, were at least as important as Tours in their defense of western Christianity, and the preservation of those Christian monastaries and centers of learning which ultimately led Europe out of the dark ages. He also makes a compelling case that while Tours was unquestionably of macrohistorical importance, the later battles were at least equally so. Both invading forces defeated in those campaigns had come to set up permanent outposts for expansion, and there can be no doubt that these three defeats combined broke the back of European expansion by Islam while the Caliphate was still united. While some modern assessments of the battle's impact have backed away from the extreme of Gibbon's position, Gibbons's conjecture is supported by other historians such as Edward Shepard Creasy and William E. Watson. Most modern historians such as Norwich and Santosuosso generally support the concept of Tours as a macrohistorical event favoring western civilization and Christianity . Military writers such as Robert W. Martin,

"The Battle of Tours is still felt today", also argue that Tours was such a turning point in favor of western civilization and Christianity that its aftereffect remains to this day.

In Arab history

Contemporary Arab historians and chroniclers are much more interested in the second Umayyad siege Arab defeat at Constantinople in 718, which ended in a disastrous defeat. After the first Arab siege of Constantinople (674-678) ended in complete failure, the Arabs Umayyad Caliphate attempted a second decisive attack on the city. An 80,000 strong army led by Maslama, the brother of Caliph Umar II, crossed the Bosphorus from Anatolia to besiege Constantinople by land, while a massive fleet of Arab war galleys, estimated between 1,800 and 2,000, sailed into the Sea of Marmara to the south of the city. Fortunately for the Byzantines, the great chain kept the fleet from entering the inner harbor, and the Arab galleys were unable to sail up the Bosphorus as they were under constant attack and harassment by the Greek fleet, who used Greek fire to level the differences in numbers. (The Byzantine fleet was less than a third of the Arab, but Greek fire swiftly evened the numbers). Emperor Leo III was able to use the famed Walls of Constantinople to his advantage and the Arab army was unable to breach them. (it must be noted that Bulgar forces had come to the aid of the Byzantines, and constantly harassed the Muslim army, and definitely disrupted resupply to the point that much of the army was close to starvation by the time the siege was abandoned. Some Muslim historians have argued that had the Caliph recalled his armies from Europe to aid in the siege, the city might have been taken by land, despite the legendary walls - such a recall would have doubled the army laying siege, allowed a full attack while still beating off Bulgar forces attempting to end the siege by harassing the army from outside while the defenders held the walls.

Some contemporary historians argue that had the Arabs actually wished to conquer Europe they could easily have done so. Essentially these historians argue that the Arabs were not interested enough to mount a major invasion, because Northern Europe at that time was considered to be a socially, culturally and economically backward area with little to interest any invaders. Some western scholars, such as Bernard Lewis, agree with this stance, though they are in a minority.

This is also disputed by Arab histories of the period circa 722-850 which mentioned the Franks more than any other Christian people save the Byzantines, (The Arabian chronicles were compiled and translated into Spanish by José Antonio Conde, in his "Historia de la Dominación de los Árabes en España", published at Madrid in 1820, and in dealing specifically with this period, the Arab chronicles discuss the Franks as one of two non-Muslim Powers then concerning the Caliphate). Further, this is disputed by the records of the Islamic raids into India and other non-Muslim states for loot and converts. Given the great wealth in Christian shrines such as the one at Tours, Islamic expansion into that area would have been likely had it not been sharply defeated in 732, 736, and 737 by Martel, and internal strife in the Islamic world prevented later efforts. Other relevant evidence of the importance of this battle lies in Islamic expansion into all other regions of the old Roman Empire -- except for Europe, and what was retained by Byzantium, the Caliphate took all of the old Roman and Persian Empires. It is not likely Gaul would have been spared save by the campaigns by, and the loyalty of, Charles Martel's veteran Frankish Army. Finally, it ignores that 4 separate Emirs of al-Andalus, over a 25 year period used a Fatwa from the Caliph to levy troops from all provinces of Africa, Syria, and even Turkomens who were beginning conversion, to raise 4 huge invading armies, well supplied and equipped, with the

intention of permanent expansion across the Pyrenees into Europe. No such later attempts however were made as conflict between the Umayyad Emirate of Iberia and the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad prevented a unified assault on Europe.

Given the importance Arab histories of the time placed on the death of Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi Abd al Rahman and the defeat in Gaul, and the subsequent defeat and destruction of Muslim bases in what is now France, it seems reasonably certain that this battle did have macrohistorical importance in stopping westward Islamic expansion. Arab histories written during that period and for the next seven centuries make clear that Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi Abd al Rahman's defeat and death was regarded, and most scholars believe, as a catastrophe of major proportions. Their own words record it best: (translated from Arabic) "This deadly defeat of the Moslems, and the loss of the great leader and good cavalier, Abderrahman, took place in the hundred and fifteenth year." (Islamic Calendar) This, from the portion of the history of the Umayyad Caliphate, and the great Arab period of expansion, also translated into Spanish by Don Jose Antonio Conde, in his "Historia de la Dominacion de los Arabos en España," appears to put the importance of the Battle of Tours in macrohistorical perspective.

Contemporary analysis

Had Martel fallen at Tours the long term implications for European Christianity may have been devastating. His victory there, and in the following campaigns, may have literally saved Europe and Christianity as we know it, from conquest while the Caliphate was unified and able to mount such a conquest. Had the Franks fallen, no other power existed stopping Muslim conquest of Italy and the effective end of what would become the modern Catholic Church. In addition, Martel's incorporation of the stirrup and mailed

cavalry into the Frankish army gave birth to the armoured Knights which would form the backbone of western armies for the next five centuries. But had Martel failed, there would have been no Charlemagne, no Holy Roman Empire or Papal States. The majority view argues that all these events occurred because Martel was able to contain Islam from expanding into Europe while it could. His son retook Narbonne, and his Grandson Charlamagne actually established the Marca Hispanica across the Pyrenees in part of what today is Catalonia, reconquering Girona in 785 and Barcelona in 801. This formed a permanent buffer zone against Islam, with Frankish strongholds in Iberia, which became the basis, along with the King of Asturias, named Pelayo (718-737, who started his fight against the Moors in the mountains of Covadonga 722) for the origins of the Reconquista until all of the Muslims were expelled from the Iberia.

No later Muslim attempts against Asturias or the Franks was made as conflict between what remained of the Umayyad Dynasty, (which was the Umayyad Emirate and then Caliphate of Iberia) and the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad prevented a unified assault on Europe. It would be another 700 years before the Ottomans managed to invade Europe via the Balkans.
