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The Battle of Tours Reconsidered

Paul Aitchison
Liberty University

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Abstract:

This paper examines the Battle of Tours/Poitiers in 732 between the Merovingian Mayor of the Palace, Charles Martel, and the Umayyad governor-general of al-Andalus in modern-day Spain, Abdul Rahman Al-Ghafiqi. Since the pivotal works of Sir Edward Gibbons were published in 1776, the battle has been seen as keeping Europe from falling completely to Islam. More recent scholarship highlights the battle as pivotal in Charles's quest to consolidate power in his ultimately successful bid to create a new power in western Europe, the Carolingian dynasty, which would eventually be created in the crowning as the Holy Roman Empire his grandson, Charlemagne. The historical view of the battle tends to fall into three great phases or categories. First, beginning contemporary chroniclers, observed in their writings and eyewitness accounts that the battle literally saved Christianity and Europe. More modern scholars tend to focus on two distinct interpretations: Some that agree with the chroniclers and others that tend to argue that the battle has been massively overstated in its importance. The battle tended to be little more than an organized and yearly Muslim raid into northern Gaul from an established position on the west side of the Pyrenees and southern Gaul, mainly Septimania. This coupled with internal problems that shifted the attention of the Umayyad Caliphate away from Europe, resulted in the battle being forgotten by Islamic chroniclers quickly after the middle of the eighth century AD. Regardless, what is clear is that the battle marked a time in which the borders of western Europe changed little and Charles Martel went on to continue to expand Frankish power and influence back into territory that had previously been occupied by Islam.

Revision History

Prelude to the Battle:

The early Middle Ages was a time of transition in western Europe. The fall of the Western Roman Empire open up leadership vacuum that was quickly filled by a number of Germanic tribes who previously worked for the Romans. The end of the Merovingian line of Frankish kings was another such period of transition. The weakest of the Visigothic kingdom to the west, in Iberia, allowed Umayyad Arab armies to sweep in and take control of the peninsula in the early 8th century. The continue advancement of Islam into western Europe was not stopped by the Franks after the battle of Tours/Poitiers, but rather a number of internal factors within the Caliphate itself caused for a halt to expansion into Europe, a consolidation of power that ended with the transition to the Abbasid Caliphate in most of the Muslim world twenty years after Tours.

The battle of Tours, or Poitier, depending on the geographic point of view, fought in 732, was in a region between the Merovingian Frankish kingdom and the semi-independent duchy of Aquitaine. The battle took place between the Duke and Prince of the Franks, Charles Martel and a punitive expedition of the Umayyad Caliphate led by Abdul Raman Al Ghafiqi, the Governor-General of al-Andalus, a region of Iberia peninsula controlled by the Caliphate.

Since the 18th century and the seminal works of Edward Gibbons, the battle of Tours/Poitier has been seen as a turning point in the wars between Roman Catholic Europe and the Islamic world. The location of the battle was close to the border between the Frankish kingdom and the then independent Duchy of Aquitaine. Ninth century chroniclers, such as Fredegar and the anonymous Chronicler of 754, interpreted the outcome of the battle in a semi-divine pronouncement of God's favor of the Christians over the Muslims, and laying the groundwork for much medieval works combining warfare and sanctification, which was

personified in the Crusades in the Levant, North Africa, and in the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula. Additionally, Charles was given the nickname Martellus, the Hammer, which possibly recalled Judas Maccabeus in the 2nd century BCE Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire.¹

There are many aspects of the battle that are still unknown to this day, such as exactly where it took place, likely closer to Tours, or the exact number of combatants on both sides. What is known is the country side could not have supported tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides for any length of time, and it is suggested by both Christian and Arab historians that the armies squared off against one another for up to seven days. What is understood is that Charles's Frankish army defeated the Islamic army and, in the aftermath, Charles consolidated power, and extended his rule of most of modern France and the Low Countries prior to his death and the end of the Merovingian dynasty and the beginning of the Carolingian.²

It could be argued that the battle itself was of little consequence to the Umayyad Caliphate which was already consumed by political and rebellions in the Moorish North Africa, known as the Maghreb, and with the governor general Al-Rahman attempted to create zones of control in southern Gaul, having already taken control of Narbonne and stabilized the Pyrenees after defeated the Duke of Aquitaine ally, the Moorish rebel Uthman ibn Naissa, also called Munuza in modern day Catalonia. The forces that the governor general took into southern Gaul in 731-732 could be categorized as a raiding force, attempting to find food, plunder and to spoil

¹ Nicolle, David *Poitiers AD 732: Charles Martel Turns the Islamic Tide*, 8-10; Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of Fredegar with its Continuations*; Greek, Eric. "The Myth of Charles Martel: Why the Islamic Caliphate Ceased Military Operation in Western Europe After the Battle of Tours," 7-10.

² Greek, Eric. "The Myth of Charles Martel: Why the Islamic Caliphate Ceased Military Operation in Western Europe After the Battle of Tours," 8-11; Ballan, Mohammad, *Comitatus*, 41, no.1 (2010): 24; Hawting, Gerald, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*, 83.

churches in the region to sow despair and terror in the citizens of the poorly maintained region between Aquitaine and the Frankish kingdom.³

The size of the forces involved in the battle, chronicles do not agree on the size and disposition of the Frankish troops. At most, 30,000 men were made up almost entirely of foot soldiers, with very limited cavalry primarily for commanders and little cavalry scouting. The Umayyad forces are also in question both by contemporary Muslim and Christian scholars, and are estimated to be at around 50,000 to 80,000.⁴

After the consolidation of power in Iberia, the failure of Munuza revolt and the reduction of power of the Duke of Aquitaine that require Odo to appeal to Charles Martel for assistance, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Muslims were confident in their ability to meet and defeat any organized or disorganized resistance they met as they continue to travel north. Additionally, the lure of spoils of war, foodstuffs and confidence in defeating previous Christian armies all contributed to the movement towards Tours.⁵

The alliance between Moorish Munuza and Odo also pressed Al Rahman and Charles Martel into action, and pushed the opposing sides closer for battle in 732. Charles wanted greater control of the southern border of his kingdom, with Aquitaine and the Umayyad border regions centered around Narbonne and further east, which could give Charles another route into Italy. Furthermore, the forces of Al Rahman, landed as they were with the spoils from the sacking of Bordeaux and the Abbey of Saint Martin of Tours just north of the Aquitaine border provided

³ Greek, Eric. "The Myth of Charles Martel: Why the Islamic Caliphate Ceased Military Operation in Western Europe After the Battle of Tours," 9-12; Ballan, Mohammad, *Comitatus*, 41, no.1 (2010): 25-26. Hawting, Gerald, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*, 84.

⁴ Baker, Patrick. *The Crescent and the Hammer: The Frankish-Moorish War 718-759* 54-55.

⁵ Greek, Eric. "The Myth of Charles Martel: Why the Islamic Caliphate Ceased Military Operation in Western Europe After the Battle of Tours," 9-10.

additional reasons for the Muslim forces to continue to press north. Al Rahman, who was the tenth governor general in as many years in Al-Andalus also wanted to consolidate power and gain a reputation as a faithful defender of Islam and reduce the problems in the province.⁶

The Battle:

For the battle itself, Charles had many of the tactical disadvantages. He relied upon the phalanx, he had little to no cavalry, and the ones that he did have were not heavy, and with lesser troops he needed to decide the location of the battlefield, a place with many trees to disrupt the Muslim heavy cavalry that could also provide cover and protection to the phalanx. With the battleground chosen by Charles, al- Rahman had no choice but to wait for his cavalry and veteran troops, which had been ranging in the countryside to be recalled. This delay provided a number of days for skirmishes to occur, food to be consolidated in the hands of one or the other of the armies and for one side to decide to attack or not. Charles, having gain the ground that he wanted and with the lesser of the two forces, decided to wait until the Islamic army decided to withdraw or to fight. The Arab forces were required to charge uphill and into a tree line in order to engage the phalanx of the Frankish troops.

The charges of the Arab heavy cavalry did not break the phalanx, protected as it was by the forest. With food becoming short, the threat of Frankish raiders flanking the main body and pillaging the spoils from Bordeaux as well as threats of bad weather with winter approaching, and the overall fatigue from fighting caused a withdraw of forces that led to al Rahman being surrounded by Frankish soldiers while he attempted to stop the retreat and was killed. The

⁶ Ballan, Mohammad. "Fraxinetum: An Islamic Frontier State in Tenth-Century Provence." 26-29.

Muslim forces then withdrew and abandoned what they could not carry, and moved back over the Pyrenees.⁷

The Aftermath:

The next day the camp of the Arabs was found abandoned by the Franks, with the tents still in place. The Arab forces continued to retreat back towards Al-Andalus. Martel continued to consolidate his gains in southern Gaul, while the Umayyad forces returned in the years after the battle, with the new governor renewing the raids and attempting to spread Islam in the along the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The reconquest of Gaul continued until 739 with Charles retaking areas around Burgundy and Piedmont. Narbonne continue to be under Islamic rule until 759; with annual raiding occurring almost every year since. This is another indication that the battle was not decisive as though in the eighteenth century, regions in Septimania and Aquitaine continued to be under Muslim control for another generation.⁸

It is generally agreed among scholars that Charles Martel found the best possible site for a battle and; with that position of relative advantage, tempted the Umayyad forces to fight. Al Rahman did not have to fight; he simply could have departed from the area and taken the spoil back to Al-Andalus to live to fight in another campaign. The decision to fight the Franks was taken rashly and it had disastrously resulted for Al Rahman but not necessarily for the Arab forces as a whole. The Umayyad dynasty was beset by internal problems at the same time of a southern European invasion, with the Berber revolts being especially troublesome for years to

⁷ Nicolle, David *Poitiers AD 732: Charles Martel Turns the Islamic Tide*, 35-38

⁸ Palmer, James T. "The Making of a World Historical Movement: The Battle of Tours (732/3) in the Nineteenth Century." *PostMedieval* 208-210.

come, ending with the Great Berber Revolt of 740; the battle of the Zab and the destruction of the Caliphate.⁹

Conversely, Charles was able to isolate the Arabs in Narbonne and Septimania; instead in concentrating on expanding his influence over the Frankish duchies in the area around Aquitaine and Burgundy in the 730s. The battle of Tours/Poitiers was a victory for Frankish/Christian forces in Europe but was not a great historical battle that changed the course of Christian history in the early Middle Ages, the Islamic expansion in the first century after the Prophet's death was remarkable; but in Visigoth Hispania and southern Gaul it was stopped by a number of internal factors that splintered the Caliphate.

Charles was able to consolidate power, conduct expeditions into Iberia that would continue under his grandson, Charlemagne that would usher in a crusade that lasted longer than any in the Near East and one that would ultimately be successful for Christianity in pushing Muslim control out of Spain. In addition, Charlemagne would be crowned the Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day, 800 A.D. in an attempt to link the new Frankish dynasty to the glory that was Rome. These were far ranging goals that would outlast the Carolingian dynasty and continue until the beginning of the 19th century.

⁹ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of Fredegar with its Continuations*

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