The Battle of Tours and How it Shaped Europe’s Future

Alexander Thompson
Senior Division
Historical Paper
Paper Length: 1,907
After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the Catholic faith filled the empire’s void and dominated Western Europe through the immense unifying power that was the Papacy. In the seventh century C.E., a threat to the Pope’s control over the region arose; the Moorish Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula, who sought to violently promote their ideologies through conquest. This led to conflict between the Franks and the Muslims, a battle referred to as the Battle of Tours (also the Battle of Poitiers) in 732 C.E. This bloody battle took place at the crucial entry point to the rest of the European continent. It not only displayed the conflict between the Islamic and Catholic worlds, but also the compromises made to restore peace, and to keep Catholicism and the Papacy as the true leaders of Western Europe.

The Franks Before Muslim Incursion

In 476 C.E the Western Roman Empire fell to Germanic invasions. This left all of Western Europe ruptured. The only remaining piece of unity lay within the Catholic Church, but contrariwise barbaric tribes of pagans still ravaged the land. Then, in 496 C.E. the king of the Salian Franks, Clovis, united the Frankish kingdoms through ruthless conquest.\(^1\) Clovis became a Catholic, aligned with the church, and leading to his empire becoming the first unification of the Franks since the Roman Empire. In 511 or 513 C.E.\(^2\) Clovis died leaving his empire in the hands of his three sons. Indecisive on who should rise to power, Clovis divided control into three separate regions. Unlike other empires, such as that of Alexander the Great’s, the split of power was unsuccessful. This effectively left Europe completely disjointed, with the only remaining

---


power in the form of the Catholic church. However, the church only united people ideologically and culturally. What the Europeans needed to truly succeed, was a political leader, whether it be found within the Frankish kingdoms, or instead, the Muslim empire in the south.

Conflicts Leading to the Battle of Tours

In 711 C.E., the Umayyad empire seized power in Spain, seizing control from Roderic after the Visigoth loss at the Battle of Guadalete. Roderic sought to rid the invading Muslims who initiated a number skirmishes from their holdings in North Africa. The Visigoths, under command of Roderic, met the Muslims at Lake La Janda on the 19th of June 711 C.E. where the Visigoths were favored to prevail. Not all Visigoths who accompanied Roderic were there with the intent to support him; instead, they planned to overthrow him and abandoned him on the battlefield. However, the Muslim invaders pursued the deserters and eliminated them, securing Muslim victory. Now with the Iberian Peninsula under Umayyad control, the Moors developed plans to infiltrate the Frankish Kingdoms to the North.

In 732 C.E., the Moors marched northward into the southernmost region of the Frankish lands, the region of Aquitaine. From this invasion the Moors intended to convert the Europeans, practicing their belief of Jihad. Furthermore, they also desired the lumber present in the woodlands of Europe. So, under the command of the caliph of the Iberian peninsula, the Muslims invaded Aquitaine. This drove Odo the Great, Duke of Aquitaine, into the Eastern reaches of the

---

Frankish kingdoms, Austrasia. In pursuit of the duke, the Moorish troops marched upon Austrasia, invoking the wrath of Austrasian governor Charles Martel.

**Charles Martel The First Carolingian**

Charles Martel, the bastard son of Pippin II, was born in 688 C.E. Because he was not a true son of Pippin, he was not considered in the hierarchical lineage. Despite this, he managed to become governor of Austrasia. This was achieved through the assassination of his half-brothers, who were the true heirs to the throne. Afterward, only his father’s grandchild remained, leading to rebellion under the Charles Martel’s command. Once in control of the Frankish realm Charles Martel focused on expansion, until the increased threat Muslim invasions in the south arose. This threat eventually reached Charles’ region, forcing him to respond. Charles’ part in the Battle of Tours led to the Carolingian dynasty cementing itself as the symbolic leader of Western Europe. He gained the trust of commoners and nobles alike, as he promised both protection and prosperity for all people involved with his kingdom. His alliance with the Catholic church even further pushed his dominance, as it was a power the commoners revered and nobles wanted to be aligned with.

**The Battle of Tours**

In the Frankish region of Austrasia, stood the shrine of St.Martin, a shrine Charles Martel believed to be threatened by the progression of the Moors. He rallied his troops and led them to intervene with Moors at the grounds between Poitiers and Tours, the two sites the battle would eventually be named after. To the Muslims the Frankish interference was simply a hiccup in

---


6 Ibid

their pursuit of Duke Odo, they would dispose of the Franks and continue forward into Europe. However, if the Muslims ventured East, further into Europe, more than Duke Odo would be available to them. They would have the raw materials and the fertile lands of Europe at their disposal. On the other side, for the Franks, it was more than the shrine of St. Martin at risk. For them their entire way of life was at risk, their culture and religious ideologies were threatened by this advancement of the Muslims.

The Moorish army of roughly 50,000 troops\(^8\) (perhaps more) came upon the forces of Charles Martel between Poitiers and Tours. In comparison to the prodigious Umayyad cavalry, the Frankish army, which was composed of farmers, assembled by Charles Martel and funded by the Catholic Church, was minuscule and barbaric. Once face to face, the two armies representing their two faiths and conflicting ways of life, stood idly, waiting for the other to initiate the battle. It took six days of anticipation until the Moorish troops initiated combat. In order to counter this, the defending Franks formed shield walled squares of infantry\(^9\), akin to the testudo formation used by the Roman military.

Despite their advantage in numbers, the Moors were overwhelmed by the Frankish forces. This allowed the Franks to pilfer the hoard of riches accumulated by the Moors during their passages through Aquitaine. Because of this event, the individual Moorish soldiers had no inspiration to continue their fighting. With his forces abandoning him, the Moorish general, Abd er-Rahman, succumbed to Frankish forces, ending the battle and driving the remaining Moorish

forces home. Charles Martel was celebrated as the hero of the battle, as his expertise on the battlefield provided the advantage that the Franks needed.

If the Muslims had won this battle, it would have changed the course of European history forever. Instead of the rulers being Catholic they would have certainly been Muslim. This does not confirm whether or not the commoners would convert. Muslim rule in Europe might have increased the rate at which Europe advanced technologically, as the Muslim empire had made advances in the sciences to a further extent than the Europeans had. In the event that the Muslims had won the battle, they would have had access to all of Europe’s land. They could have ventured North into the lands of England and Germany, and eventually Scandinavia making it so the entire Atlantic ocean in the North Hemisphere would belong to the Muslim forces. This could have prompted them to explore westward much sooner than the Europeans did. If they went South into Italy, the Muslims would have threatened the Papacy, which is a reason the Catholic Church supported Charles Martel’s Frankish army. The Muslims, had they gone East, would have also had the upper hand on the Byzantine Empire, as the would have pressured them from both the North and the South, possibly making it so the empire would have descended much sooner than it did in reality. Today all the details are up for to debate if Muslims did make it past the Frankish defenses between Tours and Poitiers, would they have succumbed to another force in Europe? Or would they have achieved domination within Europe? Either way history, especially within Europe, would have been completely changed.

A major compromise in the aftermath of this battle was the fact the Franks allowed the Muslims to return to Spain. This meant they could continue practicing Islam within Europe. This is unlike many events in history including previous Muslim attempts into Spain in which the
Visigoths pushed them back into North Africa. Eventually, the Muslims in Spain parted with the Muslim Empire, becoming Al-Andalus and practiced Islam within the Iberian Peninsula. This was until the Reconquista, in which the Christians within Iberia brutally slaughtered the Muslim residing in what they believed to their land. This ended when the last Muslims were driven out of Spain in 1492, the same year Columbus embarked on his journey westward. As the Spanish drove the people they believed to have been subjugated by away, they left to eventually destroy and effectively enslave the natives of the Americas.

**The Rule of the Carolingian Dynasty**

The Carolingians were the members of Charles Martel’s legacy. Their power was a direct result of the Battle of Tours and an example of compromise. Frankish peoples saw the power that was demonstrated by Charles Martel in the success of the Battle of Tours and they wanted that power watching over them. With the support of the common people, the Carolingian dynasty became the first body of power in the Frankish lands since the time of Clovis. ¹⁰ This power, unlike Clovis’ situation, continued with Charles Martel’s child, Pepin III. Peppin expanded the Frankish power and fully cemented the rule in Western Europe, but it wasn’t until Pepin's son took power that the Carolingians attained massive power.

Charlemagne, the son of Pepin III, was the most powerful of the Carolingian leaders. He was so powerful that the Catholic Church realized they had to make a compromise. The Pope crowned him Emperor on Christmas Day 800 C.E.¹¹ While this granted massive power to Charlemagne, it provided a power even greater to the Pope. This was due to the fact the Pope

---


¹¹ ibid
was the only man with the power to name Charlemagne Emperor, something he could revoke, making him more powerful than the actual emperor.

Another example of compromise within the Carolingian dynasty was the split in the empire between Charlemagne’s grandchildren. The three grandchildren were each entrusted with equal divisions of empire, preventing squabbles between the brothers. However, this split was not helpful to the empire and led to its eventual collapse. Many different empires, such as Alexander’s Empire, have survived division in its land, but those people had been granted large sums of land and given training in proper political administration. In the case of Charlemagne’s grandchildren, they had not been properly taught nor given a significant sum of land. Because of the collapse of the Carolingians, Western Europe was left with only the church as a unifying force.

The Battle Of Tours threatened the power of many groups. The Catholic Church saw the prospect of their grasp on the European peoples diminishing and provided the Franks with arms because they also saw their power fleeting and were in need of protection from the Moorish invaders. The Moors also feared losing their position in Spain if they lost the Battle of Tours. In the end, all groups kept their power after the battle took place. The compromises taking place after the Battle led to power remaining within the entities who held it before the battle while also turning the Muslim advancement into Europe from a unavoidable event, into a fear from the past.
An artistic rendering of Charles Martel with his traditional Latin name “Carolvs Martellvs”. In this image he is seen donning purple robes, a sign of royalty as wealth was necessary to acquire purple dyes. He is also inspecting his hammer, a weapon he was known for using, in fact his name “Martel” was old French for hammer.
Charles de Steuben [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

This Scene depicts the active battle between the Muslims and Franks. In this Picture both Frankish Leader Charles Martel and Muslim leader Abd-Al Rahman are represented in this image. In the background one can see armies entered into combat representing the immense size of this battle.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Scanned in and modernized by Dr. Jerome S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton.

Provided statements by the Muslims and Frankish on what they thought of each other and why conflicts arose between the two groups


A chronicle of history by a Christian living in Spain under Muslim rule. Explained the significance of certain events during the time period.

Secondary Sources

"Battle of Tours." Muslim Museum, Muslim Museum Initiative, 19 Nov. 2013, muslimmuseum.org.uk/battle-of-tours-poitiers/.

Provided details of the Muslim army in the Battle of Tours and allowed for further understanding into the reasons for the Muslim Incursion

Described the number of troops within the Muslim army and provided insight into the
development of Charles Martel’s army.

Duckett, Eleanor Shipley. “Charles Martel.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia

Gave insight into the life of Charles Martel and his rise to power as Frankish Governor,
despite being a bastard child of the previous Governor.


Provided details into the events leading up to the Battle of Tours and the progression of
the battle.

Lewis, David L. God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215. N.p.: W.W.

“The Darkness of Barbarism.” The Horizon Concise History of France, by Marshall B.
Davidson, American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1971, pp. 19–33

Demonstrated the importance of the Battle of Tours within French History as a whole.
Also provided insight into the rule of Clovis and Charlemagne.