

THE BATTLE OF TOURS

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SEMINAR 1 INTRODUCTION TO MILITARY HISTORY

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According to the tenth addition of *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* the term watershed carries two primary meanings. First, the word carries a geographic meaning dealing with “a region or area bounded peripherally by a divide and draining ultimately to a particular watercourse or body of water.”¹ A second use of the term watershed defines “a crucial dividing point, line, or factor, i.e. a turning point.”² History is full of watershed events, moments that change not only the direction of history's flow but establish its future course for years to come. In the minds of many historians the Battle of Tours, also known as the Battle of Poitiers, fought October 10, 732 A.D., stands out as a watershed event which redirected the follow of history.³

Previous to Tours, the Muslim armies had enjoyed one hundred years of conquest controlling territory bordering China in the East and extending across the entirety of North Africa and the Straits of Gibraltar into modern day Spain in the West.⁴ The Battle Tours, in the minds of many, serves as the high water mark for Islam's advance into Europe and is credited with saving Christianity and Western Civilization from forced Muslim occupation.⁵ In addition, the Muslim defeat at Poitiers and the resulting Frankish victory is credited with establishing “the Franks as the dominant population in Western Europe, establishing the dynasty that led to Charlemagne.”⁶ Historians such as Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke, among others, “felt that Poitiers was the turning point of

¹ Merriam Webster, *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th Ed. (Springfield: Merriam Webster, 1997), 1336.

² Ibid., 1336.

³ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Tours#Footnotes (Accessed January 28, 2007).

⁴ William Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*. (Franklin Lakes: New Page Books, 2004) 170.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁶ Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 103.

“one of the most important epics in the history of the world.”⁷ Modern historians are divided on the landmark nature of the Battle of Tours. Some have questioned the conclusions of Gibbon and his generation of historians arguing that Poitiers was not the watershed event that eighteenth and nineteenth century historians painted it to be.⁸

This essay is written in support of the notion that the Battle of Tours was in fact a landmark battle which redirected the flow of history. The current thesis will be supported by considering the following aspects of the Battle of Torus; the rapid spread of Islam, the Frankish political situation between the fall of the Roman Empire and the battle, military strength and leadership of both armies, their engagement in battle, the battles aftermath, and finally the various macrohistorical views of the Battle of Tours.

In order to fully appreciate the watershed nature of the Battle of Tours one must first grasp the rapid spread of Islam in the ancient world. “In the mid-seventh century, the followers of Muhammad moved westward from Arabia with the intention of converting the world to the teachings of the prophet.”⁹ “They swept down through Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, land sacred to the Christians and Jews, determined to conquer the world and to prepare to fight to achieve their aims.”¹⁰ Victor Davis Hanson points out that the prophet Muhammad died exactly one hundred years before the Battle of Poitiers.¹¹ Hanson further details the rapid ascendancy of Islam in the intervening century by stating:

⁷ Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2001) 166.

⁸ Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Tours#Footnotes (Accessed January 28, 2007).

⁹ Matthew A Price, and Michael Collins, *The Story of Christianity: 2,000 Years of Faith*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88

¹¹ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 146.

In that century between 632 and 732, a small rather impotent Arab people arose to conquer the Sassanid Persian Empire, wrest the entire Middle East and much of Asia Minor from the Byzantines, and establish theocratic rule across North Africa.¹²

“By the mid-eighth century, the suddenly ascendant kingdom of the Arabs controlled three continents and an area larger than the old Roman Empire itself.”¹³

By the late 600s A.D. the Damascus based Umayyad Caliphs had spread their religion through force of arms across all of North Africa.¹⁴ In 710 Musa bin Nusair, the Muslim governor of the region decided the time had come to cross the Straits of Gibraltar and began raiding Spain.¹⁵ According to Paul Davis, Musa bin Nusair lacked the necessary fleet to cross Gibraltar, correcting the problem, Nusair borrowed four ships from a Byzantine official named Julian.¹⁶ Julian was only too willing to loan the vessels because of a grudge he held against Roderic, the king of Visigoth who ruled Spain.¹⁷ Using his newly acquired fleet, Nusair ferried 400 men across Gibraltar. They returned with enough plunder to whet his appetite for more.¹⁸ Finally, in 711, a mixed North African Muslim army of 7,000 men,¹⁹ comprised of Arabs and Berbers, under the command of the Umayyad general Tariq Ibn Ziyad, invaded the Visigoth controlled Iberian Peninsula.²⁰

¹² Ibid., 146.

¹³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴ “The Battle of Tours.” *All Empires Online History Community*.

http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=battle_tours (Accessed January 28, 2007).

¹⁵ Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 103.

¹⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ Ibid., 103.

²⁰ William E. Watson, “The Battle of Tours Revisited.” *deremilitari.org*

<http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/articles/watson2.htm> (Accessed January 25, 2007), 2-3.

Unfortunately the surviving Muslim records of their Iberian invasion are of questionable reliability according to William E. Watson.²¹ However, Watson does write:

Although the accuracy of many of the details of the Muslim invasion of Iberia recorded by later Arabic historians has been questioned by many scholars, we know that the backbone of the Visigoth army was defeated in one fateful battle on the Rio Barbate, and that the Visigoth king, Roderick (710-711), was killed in the action.²²

After suffering the defeat of their main army along with their monarch many of the Visigoths lost their resolve to fight and succumbed to the invading Muslim forces.²³ By 713 the Muslim armies possessed a foothold in Europe; it was only a matter of time before they turned their attention north of the Pyrenees to the Frankish domain of Gaul.²⁴

In *Carnage and Culture*, Victor Davis Hanson attributes the rapid conquest and spread of Islam to the unique marriage of war and religion.²⁵ Hanson writes, “Arab armies won because of the peculiar nature of their newfound religion, which offered the nomad singular incentives to fight. There was to be a novel connection between war and faith, creating a divine culture that might reward with paradise the slaying of the infidel and the looting of Christian cities.”²⁶ Furthermore, Hanson points out Muslim incursions into Persia, Byzantium, and European territories were considered a predestinated or fated act.²⁷ “The world was no longer bound by national borders or ethnic spheres, but was properly to sole domain of Muhammad—if only his followers were courageous enough to fulfill the Prophet’s visions.”²⁸ “Finally, race, class, and status themselves were

²¹ Ibid., 3.

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ “The Battle of Tours.” *All Empires Online History Community*.

http://www.allempires.com/article/index.php?q=battle_tours (Accessed January 28, 2007).

²⁵ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 147.

²⁶ Ibid., 147.

²⁷ Ibid., 147.

²⁸ Ibid., 147.

secondary to faith. The slave, the poor, both the darker- and the lighter-skinned foreigner were all welcomed into the army of Muhammad—once they professed fealty to Islam.”²⁹

Meanwhile Gaul was anything but organized. Sir Edward Creasy paints the picture of pre-Tours France in his landmark book *Fifteen Decisive Battle of the World from Marathon to Waterloo* by stating:

Although three centuries had passed away since the Germanic conquerors of Rome had crossed the Rhine, never to repass that frontier stream, no settled system of institutions or government, no amalgamation of various races into one people, no uniformity of language or habits, had been established in the country at the time when Charles Martel was called on to repel the menacing tide of Saracenic invasion from the south.³⁰

Like many of the barbaric kingdoms that replaced the rule of the Caesars in Western Europe, few had any permanency lacking organized civil and political institutions; in short, Gaul was not yet France.³¹ “The Frankish Merovingian kings, descended from one of the chiefs who helped defeat Attila, had degenerated into a line of feckless playboys who frittered away their power.”³²

As a result, internal power plays weakened the Franks from within, which resulted in favorable timing for the invading Muslim hordes. “Upon the death of Pepin II in 714, the Frankish throne was disputed between Pepin’s legitimate grandson and illegitimate son.”³³ Charles Martel, the illegitimate son of Pepin of Heristal, won the dispute and seated a puppet leader on the Frankish throne in 717,³⁴ before taking the throne for himself in 719.³⁵ In the meantime Duke Eudo of Aquitaine seized the opportunity to

²⁹ Ibid., 147.

³⁰ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*. <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/readings/tfdbt10.htm#text> (Accessed January 28, 2007).

³¹ Ibid., 2.

³² Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 170.

³³ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 103.

³⁴ “The Battle of Tours.” *All Empires Online History Community*, 1.

³⁵ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 103.

declare his independence from Frankish domination further fragmenting and dividing the Franks.³⁶

Upon being crowned king, Charles turned his attention to unifying the Franks by subduing Duke Eudo's defection. Charles defeated Duke Eudo's military but was forced to leave before finishing him off because of Germanic aggression in the northeast portion of Gaul.³⁷ Martel's hasty departure would prove costly as Eudo sought and found other allies. Paul K. Davis writes,

While Charles was off fighting in Germany, Eudo feared for his future because he was located between aggressive Moslems to the south and a hostile Charles to the north and east. Eudo entered into an alliance with a renegade Moslem named Othman ben abi Neza, who controlled an area of the northern Pyrenees. That alliance provoked Abd er-Raham, Moslem governor of Spain, who marched against Othman in 731. After defeating him, Abd er-Rhaman decided to drive deeper into Gaul, spreading Moslem influence and, more importantly, looting the wealthy Gallic countryside. He defeated Eudo at Bordeaux and proceeded north toward Tours, whose abby was reputed to hold immense wealth.³⁸

Sensing the gravity of the situation Eudo escaped to Paris where he met Charles Martel and begged his assistance in turning back the Muslim advance.³⁹ "Charles agreed on the condition the Eudo would swear loyalty and never again try to remove himself from Frankish dominion. With that promise, Charles gathered together as many men as he could and marched toward Tours."⁴⁰

By the time Martel's forces reached Tours, the Muslims had already looted the city.⁴¹ Ad bar Rahman, the Muslim general, had already turned south toward the city of

³⁶ Ibid., 103.

³⁷ "The Battle of Tours." *All Empires Online History Community*, 1.

³⁸ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 103.

³⁹ "The Battle of Tours." *All Empires Online History Community*, 1.

⁴⁰ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 103.

⁴¹ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 172.

Poitiers a town they had by-passed in their haste to loot the abbey at Tours.⁴² “The exact location of the Battle of Tours remains unknown. Surviving contemporary sources, both Muslim and Western, agree on certain details while disputing others.”⁴³ “Most historians assume that the two armies met where the rivers Clain and Vienne join between Tours and Poitiers.”⁴⁴

In addition to the uncertainty of the exact location of the battle site, the size of each army is also disputed by historians. Relying on non-contemporary Muslim sources, Sir Edward Creasy numbered the Muslim forces at around 80,000 men.⁴⁵ In contrast, modern historian, Paul K. Davis, estimates the size of the Frankish army at around 30,000 and the invaders at around 80,000.⁴⁶ On the other hand, modern historian Victor Davis Hanson, writes that both armies were approximately the same size numbering around 30,000 men.⁴⁷ Hanson highlights a point that most modern historians have agreed upon, medieval figures that numbered the strength of the Muslim army around 300,000 men were grossly exaggerated.⁴⁸ “Modern historians may be more accurate than the medieval sources as the modern figures are based on estimates of the logistical ability of the countryside to support these numbers of men and animals.”⁴⁹ “Both Davis and Hanson point out that both armies had to live off the countryside, neither having a commissary system sufficient to provide supplies for a campaign.”⁵⁰

⁴² Ibid., 172.

⁴³ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 104.

⁴⁷ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 141-143.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁹ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.

According to surviving accounts, Charles Martel's arrival with his army in the vicinity of Tours/Poitiers caught the Muslim general Abd-er-Raham, by surprise thinking Martel's army was still in the northwest.⁵¹ Upon achieving the desired element of surprise, much to the dismay of the Abd-er-Raham, Martel chose to begin the battle in a defensive, phalanx-like formation.⁵² Executing his battle plan, Martel deployed his forces across from the Umayyad forces with some trees and an upward slope between them to break up any cavalry charge.⁵³ The ancient *Chronicle of Isidore of Beja* reports that "for almost seven days the two armies watched one another, waiting anxiously for the moment to join the struggle."⁵⁴ Modern historian, William Weir, corroborates the ancient account stating that the two armies spent a week in "minor skirmishes, feeling each other out," before the battle began.⁵⁵

During these seven days the Umayyads waited for the full strength of their army to arrive.⁵⁶ Abd-al-Rahman, despite being a good commander, had allowed his opponent to choose the ground and conditions for battle.⁵⁷ "Furthermore, it was difficult for the Umayyads to judge the size of the army opposing them, since Martel had used the trees and forest to make his force appear larger than it probably was."⁵⁸ However, by delaying his attack seven days, Abd-al-Rahman allowed Martel more time for his troops to arrive from the outskirts of his empire.⁵⁹

⁵¹ "The Battle of Tours." *All Empires Online History Community*, 2.

⁵² "Battle of Tours." *Wikipedia.org*, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ William Stearns Davis, *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), 1912-1913, Accessed through the Medieval Sourcebook, www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/732tours.html. (Accessed February 1, 2007).

⁵⁵ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 172.

⁵⁶ "Battle of Tours." *Wikipedia.org*, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

The stage was now set for one of the great turning points in history. The Muslims had enjoyed over one hundred years of virtually unchecked military dominance while the Franks had been a disorganized feuding group of tribes previous to the Battle of Tours. On the seventh day, Abd-al-Raham, trusting in the tactical superiority of his cavalry, commenced the battle by ordering his cavalry to charge the infidels position.⁶⁰ William Weir describes the opening act of the battle in his book *50 Battles That Changed the World* by stating:

The Abd-ar-Raham sent his horsemen charging the densely packed mass of Frankish footmen. The Arabs and Berbers hurled javelins as they approached, but all the Franks had large shields. Most of them wore metal helmets and those in the front ranks had mail shirts. The Franks answered the javelin attack with their national weapon, the *francisca*, a short-handled throwing axe. A francisca thrown by an experienced axe-man could split a shield or cleave most mail. Few Moors had either shields or armor.⁶¹

The Muslims scattered and charged again, but the Frankish line remained unbroken. The “Chronicle of Isidore of Beja” describes the results of the initial Muslim attack, “And in the shock of the battle the men of the North seemed like a North 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 hewed down the Arabs.”⁶²

With no known detailed account of the battle surviving, what happened next depends on which version of the battle one chooses to favor. A Muslim chronicler reported,

The hearts of Abd-al-Rahman and his captains were filled with wrath and pride, and they were the first to begin the 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

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁶¹ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 172.

⁶² William Stearns Davis, *Reading in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 1912-1913.

down of the sun. Night parted the two armies, but in the grey of morning the Moslems returned to the battle. Their cavaliers had soon hewn their way into the center of the Christian host.⁶³

If there was a second day the Muslims did not tarry long given that most Christian sources deny that there even was a second day.⁶⁴

According to Christian historians, on the first day, not the second, a moderate number of Umayyad troops did penetrate the Frankish phalanx in an attempt to kill Charles Martel and end the battle; however, they were quickly surrounded and put to death.⁶⁵ Furthermore, according to Frankish historians, the battle was still in doubt when “a rumor went through the Umayyad army that Frankish scouts threatened the booty they had taken from Bordeaux.”⁶⁶ As a result, some of the Muslim cavalry were redeployed back to their camp to secure their loot, thus weakening the Umayyad attack.⁶⁷

Redeployment to guard the booty appeared to the rest of the Muslims as a full-scale retreat which it soon became.⁶⁸ “Both Western and Muslim histories agree that while trying to stop the retreat, Abd-al-Rahman became surrounded, which led to his death, and the Umayyad troops then withdrew altogether to their camp.”⁶⁹

At dawn on the second day the Franks again prepared to do battle, but there were no Muslims in sight.⁷⁰ Apparently the now leaderless Umayyad lieutenants bickered amongst themselves over who would become the next leader. Unable to decide, in the

⁶³ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 173.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁵ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁰ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 173.

night they began withdrawing over the Pyrenees back into Spain.⁷¹ Once again the *Chronicle of Isidore of Beja* reports the following:

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 Saracen were drawn up for combat, they sent 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.⁷²

According the to *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754* the Franks proceeded to collected the plunder left behind by the Muslims in their tents.

A tactical analysis of the Battle of Tours reveals the mistakes made by Abd-al-Rahman which lead to his defeat. First, “Abd-al-Rahman either assumed that the Franks would not come to the aid of their Aquitanian rivals, or did not care, and he thus failed to assess their strength before invasion.”⁷³ Second, “He failed to scout the movements of the Frankish army, and Charles Martel,” thus allowing the Franks, who avoided the roads, to ship through the mountains undetected and take the Muslims by surprise.⁷⁴ “According to Creasy, the Muslim’s best strategic choice would have been to simply decline battle, depart with their loot, garrisoning the captured town 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 in their mailed and armored horsemen—the first true knights.”⁷⁵

⁷¹“The Battle of Tours.” *All Empires Online History Community*, 3.

⁷² William Stearns Davis, *Reading in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 1912-1913.

⁷³ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Charles Martel on the other hand has been praised for his execution of military strategy. Martel was able to strike a delicate balance between not confronting his enemy too soon and not waiting too long. Consider the words of Sir Edward Creasy,

when we remember that Charles had no standing army, and the independent spirit of the Frank warriors who followed his standard, it seems most probable that it was not in his power to adopt the cautious policy of watching the invaders, and wearing out their strength by delay. So dreadful and so widespread were the ravages of the Saracenic light cavalry throughout Gaul, that it must have been impossible to restrain for any length of time the indignant ardor of the Franks. And, even, if Charles could have persuaded his men to look tamely on while the Arabs stormed more towns and desolated more districts, he could not have kept an army together when the usual period of a military expedition had expired.⁷⁶

“Strategically, and tactically, Martel probably made the best decision he could in waiting until his enemies least expected him to intervene, and then marching by stealth to catch them by surprise at the battlefield of his choosing.”⁷⁷

Moreover, Charles Martel emerged from Tours as the undisputed leader of Frankish Gaul. The *Chronicle of St. Denis* depicts Charles’s post Tours hero status as follows:

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 the great slaughter upon the enemies of the Christian faith, so that history bears—witness he slew in the battle 300,000 men, likewise their king by name Abderrahan. 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 the battle 1,500 men. The tents and harness [of the enemy] were taken; and whatever else they possessed became a prey to him and his followers. Eudes [Eudo], Duke of Aquitaine, being now reconciled with Prince

⁷⁶ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*. <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/readings/tfdbt10.htm#text> (Accessed January 28, 2007).

⁷⁷ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 9.

Charles Martel, later slew as many of the Saracens as he could find who had escaped from the battle.⁷⁸

As discussed earlier the casualty figure offered in the *Chronicle of St. Denis* while distorted, serve as a measuring stick of Martel's post Tours popularity.

William Weir also argues that although the Frankish infantry defeated the Muslim cavalry, Charles Martel saw the need to reform the Frankish military system. Weir further argues that these reforms served as the genesis of the European system of chivalry that would dominate Western history for the next 700 years.⁷⁹ Specifically Weir writes:

Charles Martel initiated a reform to the Frankish military system. He concluded that although infantry was effective in a set-piece battle, it was too slow to deal with the many threats to his kingdom—Moors, Saxons, Danes, Swains, Lombards and others who could attack from every direction. He organized a cavalry unit to be his personal bodyguard which slowly developed into a requirement that all Franks who could afford it must appear mounted when called out to fight. Charles's encouragement of cavalry was one of the principal factors in creating European chivalry, an institution that would be a major influence in Western history for the next 700 years.⁸⁰

After the Battle of Tours in 732, Charles Martel put down Umayyad invasions of Gaul in 736 and 739,⁸¹ until internal struggles within Islam limited their plans for further expansion.⁸² “When factional fighting broke out in Arabia, the effects spread throughout the Moslem empire. This not only divided the fighting forces, it also isolated the Moslem occupants in Spain from any religious leadership from the Middle East. Thus consolidation seemed preferable to expansion.”⁸³ The city of Narbonne the last Muslim

⁷⁸ William Stearns Davis, *Reading in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 1912-1913.

⁷⁹ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 173.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸¹ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 10.

⁸² Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 105

strong hold in Gaul finally fell to the Franks in 759 thus ending the immediate Islamic threat to the Christian West.⁸⁴

Riding the coattails of his victory at Tours, Charles Martel seized the opportunity “to become king in name as well as in fact, and he founded the Carolingian Dynasty.”⁸⁵ Martel’s grandson, also known as Charles, later termed “the Great,” or Charlemagne⁸⁶ “founded an empire he declared to be a restoration of the Western Roman Empire and was, in fact, the political base of Western Civilization.”⁸⁷ While commenting on the importance of the contributions of Charlemagne to Western Europe, Sir Edward Creasy writes:

This monarch has justly been termed the principal regenerator of Western Europe, after the destruction of the Roman empire. The early death of his brother, Carloman, left him sole master of the dominions of the Franks, which, by a succession of victorious wars, he enlarged into the new Empire of the West. He conquered the Lombards, and re-established the Pope at Rome, who, in return, acknowledged Charles as suzerain of Italy. and in the year 800, Leo III, in the name of the Roman people, solemnly crowned Charlemagne at Rome, as Emperor of the Roman Empire of the West. In Spain, Charlemagne ruled the country between the Pyrenees and the Ebro; but his most important conquests were effected on the eastern side of his original kingdom, over the Sclavonians of Bohemia, the Avars of Pannonia, and over the previously uncivilized German tribes who had remained in their fatherland. The old Saxons were his most obstinate antagonists, and his wars with them lasted for thirty years. Under him the greater part of Germany was compulsorily civilized, and converted from Paganism to Christianity, His empire extended eastward as far as the Elbe, the Saal, the Bohemian mountains, and a line drawn from thence crossing the Danube above Vienna, and prolonged to the Gulf of Istria. Throughout this vast assemblage of provinces, Charlemagne established an organized and firm government.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 10.

⁸⁵ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 173.

⁸⁶ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 106.

⁸⁷ Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World*, 173.

⁸⁸ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*.

“Thus, the establishment of Frankish power in Western Europe shaped the continent’s society and destiny, and the Battle of Tours confirmed that power.”⁸⁹

The macrohistorical views of the Battle of Tours vary between Eastern and Western writers as well as between medieval, mid-ear, and modern historians.⁹⁰ Western historians, beginning with the *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754*, suggested that Charles Martel had literally saved Christianity from Muslim domination.⁹¹ Edward Gibbon and his generation of historians agreed with the conclusion of the *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754*, that the Battle of Tours was a decisive watershed moment in world history. Gibbon is recognized for penning the most famous statement regarding the historical place of the Battle of Tours when he wrote:

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 Koran 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 Mahomet.⁹²

“Most of the renowned historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like Gibbon saw Poitiers as a landmark battle that marked the high tide of the Muslim advance into Europe.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 106.

⁹⁰ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹² Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol. II*, Found in *Great Books of the Western World*, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 293.

⁹³ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 165.

Sir Edward Creasy echoes the sentiments of Edward Gibbon in his seminal work *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World from Marathon to Waterloo*. When commenting on the historical impact of the Battle of Tours, Creasy writes,

This region has been signalized by more than one memorable conflict; but it is principally interesting to the historian, by having been the scene of the great victory won by Charles Martel over the Saracens, A.D. 732, which gave a decisive check to the career of Arab conquest in Western Europe, rescued Christendom from Islam, preserved the relics of ancient and the germs of modern civilization, and re-established the old superiority of the Indo-European over the Semitic family of mankind.⁹⁴

The German historian Schlegel⁹⁵ speaks of the “‘mighty victory’ in terms of fervent gratitude; and tells how ‘the arms of Charles Martel saved and delivered the Christian nations of the West from the deadly grasp of all-destroying Islam.’”⁹⁶

Leopold Van Ranke also weights in on the landmark nature of Tours characterizing it as:

“one of the most important epochs in the history of the world, the commencement of the eighth century; when, on the one side, Mahommedanism threatened to overspread Italy and Gaul, and on the other, the ancient idolatry of Saxony and Friesland once more forced its way across the Rhine. In this peril of Christian institutions, a youthful prince of Germanic race, Karl Martell, arose as their champion; maintained them with all the energy which the necessity for self-defence calls forth, and finally extended them into new regions.”⁹⁷

Finally, historian Henry Hallam argued, “there would have been no Charlemagne, no Holy Roman Empire, or Papal State; all these depended upon Martel’s containment of Islam from expanding into Europe while the Caliphate was unified and able to mount such a conquest.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*.

⁹⁵ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 11.

⁹⁶ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*

⁹⁷ Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*

⁹⁸ “Battle of Tours.” *Wikipedia.org*, 11-12.

In *Carnage and Culture* historian Victor Davis Hanson identifies a few mid-era scholars who took a more moderate view of the Battle of Poitiers. Sir Charles Oman and J.F.C. Fuller were not as convinced that Western civilization had been saved outright at Poitiers, however, they did observe that the tactical emergence of infantryman supported by mounted cavalry that developed during the Carolingian time period as vital to victory in subsequent conflict with both Muslim and Viking opponents.⁹⁹

Modern Western historians are divided on the watershed nature of the Battle of Tours. William E. Watson in his essay “The Battle of Tours-Poitiers Revisited” wrote, “the importance of the Battle of Tours has been greatly exaggerated over the passage of time, and that the only reason it’s noteworthy at all, is that after the conclusion of the battle, Muslim invasions of Western Europe ceased.”¹⁰⁰ However, this is not an insignificant event. A line had been drawn in the sand at Tours, aside from the Spanish taking back their homeland, the Crusades, and the fall of the Byzantine Empire the two cultures would endure no further conflicts.¹⁰¹ Despite his contention that the Battle of Tours has been over hyped, Williams does view the battle as an important macrohistorical event. Watson writes,

There is clearly some justification for ranking Tours-Poitiers among the most significant events in Frankish history when one considers the result of the battle in light of the remarkable record of the successful establishment by Muslims of Islamic political and cultural dominance along the entire eastern and southern rim of the former Christian, Roman world. The rapid Muslim conquest of Palestine, Syria, Egypt and the North African coast all the way to Morocco in the seventh century resulted in the permanent imposition by force of Islamic culture onto a previously Christian and largely non-Arab base. The Visigothic kingdom fell to Muslim conquerors in a single battle on the Rio Barbate in 711, and the Hispanic Christian population took seven long centuries to regain control

⁹⁹ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 166.

¹⁰⁰ “The Battle of Tours.” *All Empires Online History Community*, 4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

of the Iberian peninsula. The *Reconquista*, of course, was completed in 1492, only months before Columbus received official backing for his fateful voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Had Charles Martel suffered at Tours-Poitiers the fate of King Roderick at the Rio Barbate, it is doubtful that a "do-nothing" sovereign of the Merovingian realm could have later succeeded where his talented *major domus* had failed. Indeed, as Charles was the progenitor of the Carolingian line of Frankish rulers and grandfather of Charlemagne, one can even say with a degree of certainty that the subsequent history of the West would have proceeded along vastly different currents had 'Abd ar-Rahman been victorious at Tours-Poitiers in 732.¹⁰²

In his work *An Islamic Europe*, Dexter B. Wakefield encapsulates the modern view of Tours as a landmark battle stating, "European schoolchildren learn about the Battle of Tours in much the same way that American students learn about Valley Forge and Gettysburg."¹⁰³

Victor Davis Hanson identifies current historiographical trends Western writers have employed when writing on the Battle of Tours. Hanson observes "recent scholars have suggested either that Poitiers—so poorly recorded in contemporary sources—was a mere raid and thus a "construct" of Western mythmaking or that a Muslim victory might have been preferable to continued Frankish dominance."¹⁰⁴ For example, consider the work of Alessandro Barbero who wrote, "Today, historians tend to play down the significance of the battle of Poitiers, pointing out that the purpose of the Arab force defeated by Charles Martel was not to conquer the Frankish kingdom, but simply to pillage the wealthy monastery of St. Martin of Tours."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Watson, "The Battle of Tours Revisited," 7.

¹⁰³ "Battle of Tours." *Wikipedia.org*, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ "Battle of Tours." *Wikipedia.org*, 14.

The observations of Victor Davis Hanson and sentiments of Alessandro Barbero are further supported by the writing of Tomaz Mastnak and Franco Cardini. Consider the following statement from the pen of Tomaz Mastnak:

Modern historians have constructed a myth presenting this victory as having saved Christian Europe from the Muslims. Edward Gibbon, for example, called Charles Martel the savior of Christendom and the battle near Poitiers an encounter that changed the history of the world... This myth has survived well into our own times... Contemporaries of the battle, however, did not overstate its significance. The continuators of Fredegar's chronicle, who probably wrote in the mid-eighth century, pictured the battle as just one of many military encounters between Christians and Saracens - moreover, as only one in a series of wars fought by Frankish princes for booty and territory... One of Fredegar's continuators presented the battle of Poitiers as what it really was: an episode in the struggle between Christian princes as the Carolingians strove to bring Aquitaine under their rule.¹⁰⁶

In *Europe and Islam*, Franco Cardini articulates his position that the Battle of Tours has been vastly overstated by writing:

Although prudence needs to be exercised in minimizing or 'demythologizing' the significance of the event, it is no longer thought by anyone to have been crucial. The 'myth' of that particular military engagement survives today as a media cliché, than which nothing is harder to eradicate. It is well known how the propaganda put about by the Franks and the papacy glorified the victory that took place on the road between Tours and Poitiers. . .¹⁰⁷

Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker summarize the modern thinking on the Battle of Tours in the introduction to *The Reader's Companion to Military History*. Cowley and Parker state that the old drum and trumpet approach to military history is no longer sufficient, arguing that changing attitudes and new research have altered views of what is most important in writing military history. Specifically they state, “. . . several of the battles that Edward Shepherd Creasy listed in his famous 1851 book *The Fifteen Decisive*

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 14.

Battles of the World rate hardly a mention here, and the confrontation between Muslims and Christians at Poitiers-Tours in 732, once considered a watershed event, has been downgraded to a raid in force."¹⁰⁸

Unanimity amongst Eastern historians on the historical significance of the Battle of Tours is equally fragmented. "The Arab historians, if they mention this engagement [the Battle of Tours] at all, present it as a minor skirmish," according to Bernard Lewis.¹⁰⁹ Gustave von Grunebaum explains how the Muslims in 732 probably viewed their defeat to Charles Martel stating, "This setback may have been important from the European point of view, but for Muslims at the time, who saw no master plan imperilled thereby, it had no further significance."¹¹⁰ Contemporary Muslim scholarship emphasises the second Umayyad siege of Constantinople in 718, and their subsequent defeat as infinitely more influential than the Muslim defeat at Tours.¹¹¹ Sir Edward Creasy also attempts to describe the battle from the point of the view of the defeated when he wrote:

The enduring importance of the battle of Tours in the eyes of the Moslems, is attested not only by the expressions of "the deadly battle," and "the disgraceful overthrow," which their writers constantly employ when referring to it, but also by the fact that no further serious attempts at conquest beyond the Pyrenees were made by the Saracens.¹¹²

Authors of the 13th century have called the road between Tours and Poitiers the "path of the martyrs," identifying the religious overtones of the conflict.¹¹³ Still other Eastern

¹⁰⁸ Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker, *The Readers Companion to Military History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Books, 2001), xiii.

¹⁰⁹ "Battle of Tours." *Wikipedia.org*, 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹² Sir Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World From Marathon to Waterloo*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

historians have characterized the defeat at Tours as the beginning of the end of the Umayyad caliphate.¹¹⁴

After considering the rapid spread of Islam in the pre-Tours world, the Frankish political situation between the fall of the Roman Empire and the battle, the military strength and leadership of both armies, their engagement in battle, the battle's military and political aftermath, and finally the macrohistorical views of the Battle of Tours, it is the opinion of this author that the Battle of Tours was a watershed event which redirected the flow of history. As stated earlier, between 632 and 732 Muslim armies enjoyed one hundred years of unprecedented military success. The crescent had been spread through force of arms from the borders of China in the east, across the Arabian Peninsula, Asia Minor, over the vast deserts of North Africa, ferried across the Straits of Gibraltar, and in 732 over the Pyrenees into Christian Gaul. Charles Martel united the fragmented Frankish tribes of Gaul and soundly defeated an invading Muslim intent on subduing the region under Muslim rule like the rest of their conquered lands. Historians who wish to portray the Battle of Tours as a mere raid seem to be ignoring the facts of over one hundred years of Muslim history.

Moreover, the aftermath of Tours bears witness to the watershed nature of the event. The question of whether Gibbon exaggerated the significance of the battle appears immaterial; the fact remains that France along with the rest of Western Europe did not fall to the armies of the crescent. In addition, the ascendance of the Carolingian Dynasty through the progeny of Charles Martel leads directly to Charlemagne and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire. Furthermore, Tours served as a turning point for military style and tactics as well. As seen earlier, Charles Martel's marriage of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

infantry with mounted cavalry planted the seeds of European Chivalry which would influence Western European society for the next 700 years.

Those who question the watershed nature of the Battle of Tours should consider the following questions. What would have happened to Western Europe had the Muslims defeated the Franks at Tours? Would Western culture as we know it exist today? What would have been the fate of Christianity in Europe? Was there anyone else in Europe strong enough at the time to stop further Umayyad invasion? While any answers offered for these questions would no doubt be mere speculation, they do illustrate the significant outcome of the Battle of Tours. The facts speak for themselves; the Muslims lost and never again possessed any real direct threat to Western Europe. Second, Charles Martel united Gaul and laid the foundation politically, religiously, and militarily for Europe during the rest of the Middle Ages. “Having established their position in the Peninsula, the Moslems scaled the Pyrenees and entered Gaul, intent upon making Europe a province of Damascus. Between Tours and Poitiers, a thousand miles north of Gibraltar, they were met by the united forces of Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, and Charles Duke of Austrasia. After seven days of fighting, the Moslems were defeated in one of the most crucial battles of history.”¹¹⁵

Remember that according to the tenth addition of *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, the term watershed means “a crucial dividing point, line, or factor, i.e. a turning point.” The Battle of Tours was a watershed movement a turning point in history. The Muslim defeat at Tours ended the Muslim threat to Western Europe, and Frankish

¹¹⁵ Will Durant, *The Age of Faith*. (New York: MJF Books, 1950), 292.

victory established the Franks as the dominate population in Western Europe, and established the dynasty that led to Charlemagne.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Davis, *100 Decisive Battle: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 106.

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