

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Battle of Tours

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

It was a decisive battle that marked the utmost reach of one civilization and the beginning of the advance of another. In the year 732, Muslim armies reached the farthest extent of their penetration into northern Europe and after the Battle of Tours, pulled back to the south. The Latin West stopped the Muslims and embarked on a counter offensive of its own.

The Battle of Tours must be understood in its historical context. In the 5th century, France, as did most of Western Europe, was overrun by barbaric Gothic (Germanic) tribes. The term barbaric means these tribes did not have a higher culture. But they did have a strong commitment to their tribes and their race (The term that Ibn Khaldun uses is *Asabiyah*). This commitment fostered cohesion and enabled them to overrun the Roman Empire. (Race, as a strong element in European political movements shows up even in our own times, for instance in the policies of Nazi Germany). The Visigoths (western Germans) overran Spain and southern France. The Ostrogoths (eastern Germans) captured Italy and the western reaches of the Adriatic Sea (today's Croatia and Slovenia). The Franks, another Germanic tribe, consolidated their hold on Gaul (central and northern France).

It was into this medley of barbaric kingdoms that the Church of Rome injected itself as a civilizing force. By the 6th century, the Goths had settled down in the conquered areas as landlords, taxing and exploiting the local population. The church established a series of monasteries throughout Western Europe and entered into a working relationship with the landlords and the strongmen. An agreement was reached between the ruling Visigoths of Spain and the Latin Church in the year 565, whereby the Church offered administrative support to the throne in return for freedom to preach the new faith. But the only administrative structure that the Church had to offer at that time was fiefdom and it was imposed on Spain as well. The local political structure of the church revolved around the abbeys and the monasteries, which levied their own taxes in return for dispensing ritual rites. In time, the abbeys and monasteries became rich and their power grew in proportion to their wealth. In many areas, the strongest forts were those around monasteries and abbeys, because it was only the Church that could afford the cost of such construction. Political and military power was shared between the Church, the landlords and the military strongmen, each of whom levied their own taxes on the peasants, impoverishing them.

Just as the history of northern Europe hinges on the Germanic peoples, the history of the Maghrib hinges on the Berbers. The Berbers, a sturdy, resilient and handsome race of people inhabiting the Atlas Mountains, had been subdued by Uqba bin Nafi in his advance towards the Atlantic Ocean. But periodic

uprisings continued for more than a century and repeated expeditions were required to contain the uprisings. It was not until the 9th century that the Berbers finally settled down and themselves became the bearers of the Islamic banner. There is a direct correlation between the advance of Muslim armies into Europe and the restlessness of the Berber peoples. When the Berbers were quiet, Muslim armies advanced. Whenever there was an uprising in the Maghrib, the advance either stopped or regressed. Once again, this fact reinforces our thesis that the primary driver in Islamic history has been its internal dialectic.

The invasion of France has to be understood against this background. Southern France was a part of the Visigoth territories and forays into France were an extension of the campaign against the Visigoths. The first incursion was made during the reign of Caliph al Walid and was successful in subduing Sorbonne and Lyons (713). A second raid made in 714 captured Normandy. An expedition in 731 under Anbasa bin Saheem extended Muslim dominions beyond Carcassonne; but Anbasa was killed during this campaign. After Anbasa, Abdur Rahman bin Abdullah was appointed the governor of Spain. He crossed the Pyrenees in the spring of 732 after careful preparations. The first Frankish resistance came from the Duke of Achetain near the port of Borden. The Duke was defeated and Borden was captured. After subduing all of southern France, Emir Abdur Rahman turned north and on the plains of Tours, near the modern city of Paris, he met the Frankish chief Charles Martel. Martel was the illegitimate son of Pepin II, another German chief who controlled northeastern France. In the fateful Battle of Tours, Martel had the support of neighboring Frankish and German chiefs. The Frankish infantry, armed with hammers and long scepters, stood its ground against the Muslim cavalry. Emir Abdur Rahman himself led the charge, but fell in combat on the second day of the battle. With their Emir fallen, the Muslim armies withdrew under the cover of night having lost more than 100,000 men in the battle.

This was the last major incursion of Muslims into northern Europe, but their inability to mount another offensive had more to do with the uprising of the Berbers in North Africa and the Abbasid Revolution (750) in far away Central Asia, than with the prowess of Frankish Chiefs. Muslim military power was at the limit of its reach. Their supply lines were over-extended and their troops were restive after a long campaign.

However, the retreat at Tours did not stop the Muslim advance elsewhere in Europe. Muslim presence continued in southern France for over a century. In 734, the Muslims captured Arles, St. Remy, Avignon and reoccupied Lyons and Burgundy. Successful raids were conducted on the western (Atlantic) coast of France throughout the 8th and 9th centuries. In the year 889, Muslims established a presence in western Switzerland, which lasted almost two centuries. During the reign of Abdur Rahman III of Spain, Fraxinetum, Valais, Geneva, Toulon and Great St. Bernard were captured and reinforced (939-942). The victorious armies then swung around Lake Geneva in 956 and established themselves in the mountain passes leading into Italy.

Thereafter, Muslim military power began to decline. The primary reason for this decline was the civil wars in Spain, which ultimately led to the disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain in the year 1032 and the establishment of petty principalities often fighting each other with the help of Christian princes. The Berbers in the Maghrib were always restless. The hold of the Abbasid Caliphate over North Africa waned with the rise of the Aghlabids (808) and gradually disappeared under the hammer of tribal uprisings. The Fatimids rose from the dust of the Aghlabids, consolidated their hold on North Africa and cemented it with the conquest of Egypt (969). Ideological and military battles raged among the Fatimids based in Cairo, the Abbasids based in Baghdad and the Umayyads based in Cordoba. Taking advantage of this mayhem, Christian armies ejected the Muslims from southern France, Italy and the Mediterranean islands during the early Crusades (1050).

The Battle of Tours was a defining moment in global history. The inability of Abdur Rahman to defeat Charles Martel ensured that Western Europe would remain Christian. Internal squabbles were soon to consume the Muslims and they were never able to mount a serious offensive at Western Europe again.

Comments are closed.

[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](#)