

**FRANKISH GAUL (486-  
987): THE BATTLE OF  
TOURS 732 CE**



# FRANKISH GAUL (486-987): THE BATTLE OF TOURS 732 CE

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources including excerpts from contemporary accounts on both sides of the conflict, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the importance of the Battle of Tours (732 CE), how the Frankish army at Tours under Charles Martel was able to stand its ground against overwhelming Muslim forces, and how the battle set the stage for the eventual re-conquest of all of Western Europe by Christians in the centuries to come.

## Subjects

European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Martel Statue, Palace of Versailles
- St. Denis Crypt, Paris

## Essential Questions

- What was the Battle of Tours (732 CE)? What were the two opposing forces?
- Who was Charles Martel? How was he able to unite the Christians in Western Europe under his command? How was Martel's army able to carry the day at the Battle of Tours?
- Why is the Battle of Tours considered to be a turning point in world history for both Christians and Muslims?

# Academic Summary

## Isidore of Beja's Chronicle

Then Abderrahman, [the Muslim emir] seeing the land filled with the multitude of his army, crossed the Pyrenees, and traversed the defiles [in the mountains] and the plains, so that he penetrated ravaging and slaying clear into the lands of the Franks. He gave battle to Duke Eudes (of Aquitaine) beyond the Garonne and the Dordogne, and put him to flight---so utterly [was he beaten] that God alone knew the number of the slain and wounded. Whereupon Abderrahman set in pursuit of Eudes; he destroyed palaces, burned churches, and imagined he could pillage the basilica of St. Martin of Tours. It is then that he found himself face to face with the lord of Austrasia, Charles, a mighty warrior from his youth, and trained in all the occasions of arms.

For almost seven days the two armies watched one another, waiting anxiously the moment for joining the struggle. Finally they made ready for combat. 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].

At last night sundered the combatants. The Franks with misgivings lowered their blades, and beholding the numberless tents of the Arabs, prepared themselves for another battle the next day. 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 Saracens were drawn up for combat, they sent out 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. Then without troubling to pursue the fugitives, they contented themselves with sharing the spoils and returned right gladly to their own country.

## Chronicle of St. Denis

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 a great slaughter upon the enemies of Christian faith, so that---as history bears witness---he slew in that battle 300,000 men, likewise their king by name Abderrahman. 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 that battle 1500 men. The tents and harness [of the enemy] were taken; and whatever else they possessed became a prey to him and his followers. Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, being now reconciled with Prince Charles Martel, later slew as many of the

Saracens as he could find who had escaped from the battle.

### **Arab Chronicler: The Battle of Tours, 732**

The Muslims defeated their enemies, laid waste the country, and took captives without number. And that army went through all places like a desolating storm. Prosperity made those warriors insatiable (greedy). At the passage of the river, Abderrahman overthrew the count, and the count retired into his stronghold, but the Muslims fought against it, and entered it by force, and slew the count; for everything gave way to their scimitars (swords), which were the robbers of lives. All the nations of the Franks trembled (were afraid) of that terrible army, and they pleaded to their king, Charles Martel, and told him of the havoc made by the Muslim horsemen, and how they rode at their will through all the land of southern France... Then the king told them not to worry, and offered to aid them. . . . He mounted his horse, and he took with him an army that could not be numbered, and went against the Muslims. And he came upon them at the great city of Tours.

Abderrahman and other prudent soldiers saw the disorder of the Muslim troops, who were loaded with spoil (riches from conquest); but they did not venture to displease the soldiers by ordering them to abandon everything except their arms and war-horses. And Abderrahman trusted in the skill of his soldiers, and in the good fortune which had ever attended him. But such defect of discipline always is fatal to armies. So Abderrahman and his army attacked Tours to gain still more spoil (wealth), and they fought against it so fiercely that they stormed the city almost before the eyes of the army that came to save it; and the fury and the cruelty of the Muslims towards the inhabitants of the city were like the fury and cruelty of raging tigers. It was manifest that God's punishment was sure to follow such excesses; and fortune thereupon turned her back upon the Muslims.

Near the river Loire, the two great armies of the two languages and the two religions were set against each other. The hearts of Abderrahman, his captains and his men were filled with wrath and pride, and they were the first to begin to fight. The Muslim 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 down of the sun. Night parted the two armies: but in the grey of the morning the Muslims returned to the battle. Their Muslim horsemen had soon fought their way into the center of the Christian army. But many of the Muslims were fearful for the safety of the spoil (wealth) which they had stored in their tents, and a false cry arose in their ranks that some of the enemy were plundering (stealing from) the camp; whereupon several squadrons of the Muslim horsemen rode off to protect their tents. When they fled; the whole army was in trouble. And while Abderrahman strove to check their tumult, and to lead them back to battle, the warriors of the Franks came around him, and he was pierced through with many spears, so that he died. Then all army fled before the Franks, and many died in the flight...

10 October 732 CE, early morning, just south of Tours in modern day France... Charles Martel, Duke and Prince of the Franks, looked out across the plain at the enemy before him. Outnumbered at least four to one, Martel understood the gravity and the desperation of the situation. His forces had the high ground, but the enemy had the advantage of numbers and heavy cavalry. Behind him, Martel had approximately 20,000 of the best warriors Christendom could muster, an odd

collaboration of Franks, Gauls and others from across Europe, including veteran Frankish infantrymen who had fought alongside their prince for years and would obey his orders to the death defending Christianity. They had come together in a last ditch effort to stop the Muslim invasion of Western Europe. There could be no retreat. The Frankish commander knew that the line had to be drawn at Tours.

Across the field of battle, Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi commanded an army of over 80,000. He, too, understood the situation at hand. With a Fatwa from the Caliph giving him legal justification and absolute authority over the faithful soldiers of Allah, Rahman's mission was simple: to destroy the Christian army in front of him and to extend the Caliphate for the glory of Allah against the non-believers. Over the previous week, Rahman had used his cavalry to soften up the Christians in front of him. Time had come for the all-out assault on Martel's forces.

That fateful morning, Martel put his soldiers into a thick defensive formation, a square phalanx reminiscent of the strategy used by the Ancient Greeks (who often faced similar hopeless odds). In this configuration, Martel hoped the Christians could withstand the multiple cavalry charges he was sure would come. Any gap in the line could be plugged with soldiers from one of the other sides. Martel knew his army stood no chance in the open field, and so as dawn broke, he looked into the distance across the field. Suddenly, he saw thousands of horsemen riding across the field. The Battle of Tours had begun.

Wave after wave of Muslim horsemen came at the Christians throughout the day, but Martel's defensive strategy proved sound. Late that afternoon, Muslim forces lost hope and suddenly broke in defeat. Rahman himself rode valiantly out into the battle trying desperately to rally his forces, but it was for naught. As his soldiers continued to run, Rahman was surrounded by Christians and killed. The remaining Muslim commanders, unable to agree on a common plan of attack, then ordered a full-scale withdrawal. That night, the Muslim forces abandoned their encampment and headed towards the Pyrenees Mountains. The Battle of Tours was over. The Muslim invasion of Western Europe had been stopped.

As Martel surveyed the battlefield afterwards, even the hardened commander was appalled. Accounts vary widely, but historians agree that thousands from both sides perished fighting for God. The war was far from over. Muslim forces would regroup in al-Andalus, going on over the next few centuries to create a civilization that would profoundly influence modern Spain and Portugal. Christians for their part would fight over 700 years in Iberia trying to accomplish what became known as the "Reconquista" until it finally ended on 01 Jan 1492, when Granada, the last Moorish kingdom on the Iberian peninsula, surrendered to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.

Martel's victory brought the Franks closer to the papacy in Rome, and the Church would express its gratitude and appreciation over the centuries. As early modern France developed, the Church would play an integral role. Monarchs in turn would back the papacy in what became almost a symbiotic relationship, one that would last until the terror of the French Revolution in the 18th century. It is thus hard to underestimate the importance of the Battle of Tours as the turning point in the history of France, Western Europe, the Islamic Caliphate and even the world.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources including excerpts from contemporary accounts on both sides of the conflict, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the importance of the Battle of Tours (732 CE), how the Frankish army at Tours under Charles Martel was able to stand its ground against overwhelming Muslim forces, and how the battle set the stage for the eventual reconquest of all of Western Europe by Christians in the centuries to come.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic narrative and story of the Battle of Tours (732 CE).
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Frankish Army under Charles Martel was able to stand its ground at the Battle of Tours (732 CE) against overwhelming Muslim forces.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Battle of Tours (732 CE) is seen as a defining watershed moment in Western, Islamic and World History.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Define and give examples of turning points in history. (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Battle of Tours / Poitiers, 732 CE (20 min)
- Video – Battle of Tours 732 AD (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Battle of Tours (732 CE), taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion – How were Martel's Christians able to withstand wave after wave of Muslim attacks during the Battle of Tours? What mistakes did the Muslim forces make during the battle? Why is the Battle of Tours considered a turning point in Western, Muslim and World History? (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the importance of the Battle of Tours (732 CE), how the Frankish army at Tours under Charles Martel was able to stand its ground against overwhelming Muslim forces, and how the battle set the stage for the eventual re-conquest of all of Western Europe by Christians in the centuries to come.
- Alternate Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Using the primary sources from both sides of the conflict, explain how each side saw the Battle of Tours and its aftermath. How can each side's description be so different?

## Extension

### **On tour: St. Denis Basilica, Paris**

While on tour in Paris, students can visit the St. Denis Basilica, where they can see for themselves the final resting place of Charles Martel, the man whom Charles Gibbon in his late 18th century massive tome *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* described as “the hero of the age”, who delivered Christendom because of his “genius and good fortune.” Martel died in 741 CE and was buried at St. Denis in a chapel no longer standing. The basilica students will see today is from the 12th century and was the first building constructed with medieval gothic architectural techniques. The basilica was the traditional burial plot for all French kings and queens, and students can see dozens of Europe’s most famous monarchs, including Martel, Clovis I, Francis I, Henry II and his wife, Catherine de’ Medici, and Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette. Be advised, there is a small admission fee charged by the basilica, but it is well worth the price.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/732tours.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/732tours.asp)  
Arabs, Franks and the Battle of Tours 732: Three Accounts (primary source) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/arab-poitiers732.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/arab-poitiers732.asp)  
Anon Arab Chronicler” the Battle of Poitiers, 732 (primary source) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.standin.se/fifteen07a.htm](http://www.standin.se/fifteen07a.htm)  
The Battle of Tours (book chapter) – from Edward Shepherd Creasy’s book Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World, originally published in 1851. Highly recommended, but students need to recognize the pro-European bias found in Creasy’s writing. It is important to remember that the author was a product of the same Victorian Age thinking that produced the ideas behind Social Darwinism. Thus, although this chapter on Tours is a great read, perhaps it’s more useful as a critique on 19th century England.
- [burnpit.legion.org/2012/10/battle-tours-franks-turn-islamic-tide](http://burnpit.legion.org/2012/10/battle-tours-franks-turn-islamic-tide)  
Battle of Tours (website article) – good basic information on the battle and its significance
- [www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/tours.html](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/tours.html)  
Battle of Tours, 732 AD (website)
- [filebox.vt.edu/users/bgilkers/digitaltimeline/toursdepth.html](http://filebox.vt.edu/users/bgilkers/digitaltimeline/toursdepth.html)  
Battle of Tours: In Depth (website) – from Brian Gilkerson at Virginia Tech
- [www.discover-poitou-charentes.com/what-to-see/battle-of-poitiers-site.htm](http://www.discover-poitou-charentes.com/what-to-see/battle-of-poitiers-site.htm)  
What to See: Visit the site of the Battle of Poitiers / Tours (website)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5itBgiz35T8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5itBgiz35T8)  
Battle of Tours 732 AD (video). This 10-minute video is part of the History Channel’s larger video on the “Dark Ages” and is perfect for in-class showings. Highly recommended for students and teachers.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Tours](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Tours)  
Battle of Tours – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Martel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Martel)  
Charles Martel – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/country_profile)  
On the Road: France (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/tours](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/tours)  
On the Road: Tours – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain)



Al-Andalus: Islamic Spain

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/reconquista-of-iberia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/reconquista-of-iberia)  
Reconquista (711-1492)
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/holyland/islam-muhammad-the-prophet](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/holyland/islam-muhammad-the-prophet)  
Islam – Muhammad the Prophet
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/holyland/islam-five-pillars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/holyland/islam-five-pillars)  
Islam – The Five Pillars

## Key Terms

- Battle of Tours / Poitiers, 732 CE
- Charles Martel
- Christendom
- Franks
- Muslim
- Umayyad Caliphate

