



11 October 732

The Battle of Tours

Charles Martel Defeats the Moors

'As regards the people of the northern quadrant... such as the Franks – their religious beliefs lack solidity, and this is because of the nature of cold and the lack of warmth.'

Al-Mas'udi (c.896-c.956) speculates

The victory near Tours of the Frankish army over Arab forces led by Abd ar-Rahman destroyed the expansionist ambitions of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) which, from its capital in Damascus, had presided over the rapid Islamicization of the southern Mediterranean. The conquest of Carthage had secured the Arab domination of North Africa from Egypt to the Maghreb. An Arab army then crossed the straits of Gibraltar in 711 and destroyed the kingdom of the Visigoths which covered most of the Iberian peninsula. Visigothic Spain had become officially Catholic following the conversion of its ruler Recared I (r. 586-601) from the Arian form of Christianity which denied Christ's divinity. The *Lex Visigothorum*, a legal code binding on both Goths and the Romans, showed how Visigothic Spain aimed to fuse the traditions of the conquerors with those of the conquered. The Visigoth monarchy in Iberia would eventually be replaced by the creation in 756 of the Emirate of Cordoba, an autonomous state administered by the Umayyad dynasty and one whose rule over most of Spain lasted until the eleventh-century onset of the campaign for the re-Christianisation of the Iberian peninsula, known as the *Reconquista*. But the defeat of 732 entailed the loss of the Umayyads' authority in the rest of the Arab empire and led directly to their replacement as the dominant Middle Eastern power by the Abbasid dynasty.

The Arab army which headed north through Spain had hoped to profit from the divisions which had developed in the Frankish kingdom during the seventh century which, now comprising the heartlands of the old Gaul, was nominally ruled by the Merovingian dynasty. By 718 the Arabs had occupied the surviving Visigothic enclave of Septimania, including Narbonne, on the south-west coast of France. From this base North African Berber tribesmen were sent by the Arabs on raiding parties into Gaul. A setback near Toulouse in 721 caused the Arab forces to branch out to the Rhone valley and they pillaged Autun before first returning west to pillage Aquitaine and then turning north towards Tours where they discovered to their cost the deep roots of Frankish civilization.

Between the middle of the third and the fifth centuries AD the tribe of the Franks (from *frekkz*, the Old High German for 'bold' or 'courageous') had expanded from the frontier of the Rhine towards the south-west and the Somme. Their infantry successes were based on each man carrying his own weapons: the shield, the throwing axe which broke the enemy frontline, the bow and spear, the barbed lance and the javelin which were used for long distance combat, while the scramasax (a dagger) and the longsword were used for hand-to-hand combat. Clovis (or Chlodweg, meaning 'path to glory') (r. 482-511) removed what was left of Roman rule in Gaul by his victory over the kingdom of the Roman Dux Syagrius and consequently obtained the land between the Somme and the Loire. Between 496 and 500 he pushed the Alamans in eastern Gaul back towards the upper Rhine. But he realised that in order to gain control of Burgundy and the areas of Aquitaine controlled by the Visigoths he would need the support of their Gallo-Roman inhabitants. And since that population was Catholic Christian a clear divide existed between them and their Arian rulers. Clovis, already married to and influenced by the Burgundian and Catholic Clotilda, was therefore baptized by Bishop Remigus at Rheims. His campaign, which started with the battle of Vouillé and ended at Toulouse, was hailed by the native Catholic Aquitanians as a war of liberation. The consequence was a homogeneous merger of

Franks with Gallo-Romans, just as had happened in the territory north of the Seine which was now called 'Francia'.

The Frankish fusion contrasted with the system of another Germanic invader: that of Clovis' contemporary Theoderic the Great (r.493-526) whose Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy segregated the Goths from the Romans and prohibited inter-marriage. Here the Goths had received a third of the available land in recognition of their services as warriors. Civil administration remained in Roman hands and Italo-Roman civilization was surviving because it had enlisted the invaders as federated allies. Tensions between segregated Catholic Romans and Arian Goths led to the collapse of Ostrogothic Italy in the mid-sixth century and the Byzantines returned to control the south.

All the first generation Germanic settlements, with the exception of the Spanish Visigoths, collapsed in the sixth century. But the Franks belonged to the second generation of invaders – to which the Anglo-Saxons, Alamans, Bavarians and Lombards also belonged – and this group maintained their vital links with the Germanic hinterland. Further Frankish control of the south followed after Clovis' death when the Ostrogoths surrendered Provence. Burgundy was dismembered and partitioned in two campaigns. Further victories over the Thuringians, the Alamans and the Bavarians made the whole of southern Germany subject to Frankish tribute so that Gaul and Germany were now within a common political framework. In the seventh century the Franks could also return to the right bank of the Rhine and colonize a region (Franconia) which still bears their name.

Charles 'Martel' (the hammer), who led the Franks to victory at Tours in 732, was the illegitimate son of the equally formidable Peppin II who had been mayor of the palace or chief retainer of Austrasia and it was his family which restored Frankish unity under the continuing, nominal, suzerainty of the Merovingians. In 687, at the battle of Tertry in western France, Peppin defeated the mayor of the palace of Neustria and then established his authority over the Frisians on the north-east coast. But his authority was non-existent south of the Loire, in the Duchy of Aquitania, and in Burgundy. Charles Martel extended his father's achievements and earned his nickname on account of his bloody suppression of a Neustrian revolt at the battle of Vinchy and because of the blows he inflicted afterwards on the secessionist aspirations of the Frisians, Alamans, Burgundians and Provençals.

At the battle of Tours, fought at a site between Tours and Poitiers, some 15,000 Frankish infantrymen unprotected by armour confronted over 60,000 Arab cavalrymen who were either armoured or wore chainmail – these were history's first true warrior knights. For six days the two forces faced each other – Martel having drawn up his infantry to form a square in a defensive position. He had calculated that the lure of plunder in Tours would eventually force the Arab army into battle. Moving uphill, the Arab army first of all lost its cavalry advantage and it then tried to break up a tightly packed formation of Frankish infantry that was, wrote an Arab chronicler afterwards, 'like a sea that cannot be moved'. Towards the end of one day of fighting the Arab cavalry learnt that Frankish scouts, sent by Martel, were threatening their plunder back at base camp. In the ensuing withdrawal from the site of the battle Abd-ar-Rahman was killed. The next morning the Franks discovered that the entire Arab army had disappeared.

The engagement's consequences were profound. The kingdom of the Franks acquired celebrity as the force which had stopped the Arab advance. It therefore became the most important European power and chief bulwark of the Church.

Clovis and his successors ensured the assimilation of the victors and the vanquished of Roman Gaul within a Romano-Germanic civilization which, although new in form, was also a continuation of Roman imperial unity: the Frankish kings, like other Germanic rulers, assumed the responsibilities of the Roman praetorian prefects and were served by Roman officials. But whereas the Vandals in Africa, the Ostrogoths in Italy and the Visigoths in Spain had established a coexistence with the Roman administration by diplomatic understanding, the Frankish continuation was based on conquest. A zone between the Somme and the Loire was the melting-pot of two civilizations and the Germanic-Latin linguistic frontier which was established there survives as the German-French linguistic divide. Latin had only retreated between 100 and 200 kilometres from the Rhine and the Franks therefore used Latin when they recorded their original legal code: the Salic Law. Both in their culture and religion, Frankish Germanic barbarians became Roman Christians. The Church was the heir to the old Roman order and also to the unity which had characterized *romanitas*. It therefore supplied the Franks with a motive for continued dynamic expansion while at the same time grounding them in Christian culture. Although the Franks were officially converted in c.496 the paganism of Gaul was only really extinguished because of the missionary energies of Irish monks who worked among them from the late sixth century onwards. As enthusiasts for the Roman primacy the Irish also moulded the Franks' attachment to the See of Peter. Bishops had already demonstrated their influence during the early barbarian invasions by ransoming members of their flock who had been enslaved and thereby showing how Christianity, literally, set people free. Subsequently, the Irish-inspired establishment of a penitential system, including fasting, for misdemeanours and sins, affected Frankish conduct and the development of a parochial system shaped Frankish administration.

From 737 Charles Martel ruled the Franks without a Merovingian king sitting on the throne. The authority of his son Peppin III (r. 751-68) was confirmed when he was anointed 'king of the Franks' first by Boniface the papal legate and subsequently by Pope Stephen II. The last of the Merovingians, Childeric III, was dethroned and sent to a monastery: the originally pagan dynasty whose charisma had been attested by the long hair of its kings was replaced by the Christian Carolingians whose charisma issued from their consecration. Sacramental power had replaced blood-lineage as the source of authority. The fusion of the Germanic, the Roman and the Christian was now achieved and with explosive results: the military-political threat of Islam had created the matrix for the creation of a Frankish empire and the martial memory of Clovis would inspire the baptism of every French regal Louis.