

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 4 ★ Issue 6

Ancient & Medieval:

## Tours (Poitiers)

DATE:

Mid-October, 732 AD

LOCATION:

Western France

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Franks:** Although accurate numbers on each side were never recorded, it's likely that Charles Martel led a Frankish army numbering between 20,000 and 30,000. This included his main Austrasian (eastern Franks) force, along with allies from Neustria, Brittany, Burgundy, Swabia, Aquitaine, and Lombards, and pagans from the Rhine.<sup>1</sup> Of this number, 2,000 to 3,000 were likely heavy cavalry from the wealthier landowners, led by Duke Odo of Aquitaine.

**Islamic Umayyad Caliphate:** Abu Said Abdul Rahman al-Ghafiqi (Abd ar-Rahman) led a mixed army of infantry and light cavalry made up of mostly Arabs, Berbers, and converted Spanish Visigoths. His army also numbered between 20,000 and 30,000.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Beginning in the seventh century, Muslim armies emerged from Arabia to conquer vast territories of the Byzantine and former Roman Empires. By 711 AD, they had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from Africa and moved into Visigoth Spain. After subduing the fractured Visigoth kingdom, the forces of the Umayyad Caliphate turned their attention further north toward Gaul and the heart of Europe. But Gaul was ruled by Charles Martel, a man who had spent his life in battle uniting the Franks. As Abd ar-Rahman led his Umayyad army north, looting towns and abbeys along the way, Charles assembled an army and moved to block the Umayyad's advance. In the climactic battle that followed, the Franks killed Abd ar-Rahman and soundly defeated his army. This win prevented further Muslim advances in Europe and paved the way for the new Carolingian dynasty that would soon become the Holy Roman Empire, shaping Europe for centuries to come.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Umayyad Caliphate** – After the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD, Islamic armies expanded from Arabia at breathtaking speed. With their new unifying faith, more egalitarian opportunities for advancement, and the lure of plunder and spoils, the armies of Islam became a powerful force on the world stage. Following the Rashidun Caliphate

to take Constantinople (674–678), they swept over Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, and other portions of the Byzantine Empire. And when the Byzantines withdrew from North Africa in 699 AD, these skilled raiders swept into the vacuum, moving west to the Atlantic Ocean and the Strait of Gibraltar.

Soon, they were looking north to Europe for new opportunities of conquest. The old Roman Empire was fragmented, European lands were fertile, and its churches and monasteries were full of treasure. In 711 AD, the Muslim governor of the northwest region of Africa launched an army across the Strait of Gibraltar. Within a few years, his army had taken over the Visigoth Kingdom of Hispania (Spain), and by 717 AD, it was pushing north with large raiding parties across the Pyrenees Mountains into Aquitaine and Gaul. Initially, these “razzias” (raids) were opportunities for the Umayyads to keep their enemies in the border region off-balance and gain loot from rich monasteries and churches. But these northern regions were becoming restive, and tensions arose between the Umayyads and the Berbers, who governed the areas.

In 732, Abd ar-Rahman, the recently installed governor of Moorish Spain (Al-Andalus), launched a much larger invasion. (*Map 1*) He had grown concerned over a new alliance between Duke Odo of Aquitaine (Odo the Great) and Uthman ibn Naissa (called “Munuza”), the Berber commander and deputy governor of the northeast territory along the Pyrenees. To break this alliance, reestablish control of the border region, and gain greater dominance in southern Gaul, Abd ar-Rahman planned an invasion that went far beyond the typical raids of the recent past.

Initially, Abd ar-Rahman launched a surprise attack on Munuza's stronghold in the eastern Pyrenees. After Munuza was defeated, he killed himself, clearing the way for Abd ar-Rahman's next move into Aquitaine. In the early summer of 732, Abd ar-Rahman moved his army of mounted Arabs and Berbers from Pamplona into Gascony in southwest Aquitaine. When Odo moved to stop them, he was defeated. Fortunately for him, he and the remnants of his army escaped to the north.

Over the next couple of months, Abd ar-Rahman continued pillaging and looting Aquitaine. In the words of one Arab chronicler, “That army went through all places like a desolating storm.” After attacking Poitiers, the army sacked the Abbey of