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The Making of a World Historical Moment: The Battle of Tours (732/3) in the Nineteenth Century

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‘The nations of Asia, Africa and Europe advanced with equal ardour to an encounter which would change the history of the world.’ This is the famous bombast with which Edward Gibbon introduced the eighth-century Battle of Tours (or Poitiers) of 732/3 in his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1788. It seemed a decisive moment in Western Europe: the Visigothic kingdom in Spain had imploded only a few years earlier, creating a power vacuum filled quickly by expansionist Arab and Berber forces from North Africa (Collins, 1989); while the long-standing Merovingian dynasty in Gaul suddenly seemed terminally powerless, eclipsed by the ambitious northern duke Charles Martel, who sought to extend his quasi-royal authority south into Gaul (Fouracre, 2000). In Gibbon’s dramatic telling of events, the Battle of Tours raged for a week between the two ascendant powers – Charles’s Christian Franks on the one side, Abd ar-Rahman’s ‘Oriental’ and ‘Mahometan’ force on the other. Finally, on the seventh day, ‘the Orientals were oppressed by the strength and stature of the Germans, who, with stout hearts and iron hands, asserted the civil and religious freedom of their posterity’ (Gibbon, 1906 [1788], vol. 9, chap. 52). By ‘change the history of the world,’ it seems, Gibbon had meant that the core of Western Europe would remain pretty much its Roman self for years to come: it was a turning point that did not turn.

The Battle of Tours continues to have powerful and highly political modern resonances. It generated the name for the French anti-Arab terrorist movement ‘The Charles Martel Group’ (named for the Franks’ victorious leader) in the 1970s and 1980s, and was mentioned by Breitbart’s Steve Bannon as a symbolic part of what he considered a Christian-Judeo struggle against Islam when he addressed the Vatican’s Dignitatis Humanae Institute in 2014. As Edward Said noted, the battle has long been considered an important moment in the genesis of Orientalism, when East and West started to become binary categories in the collective European imagination (Said, 1978, 70-1). Yet the reputation of the battle has never been secure, either for what happened or for what its consequences were. In the 1930s, the influential Belgian historian Henri Pirenne identified the seventh-century Arab conquests as a crucial process in the creation of Europe’s new medieval ‘community of civilisation’, now centred on northern Europe rather than the Mediterranean Roman world; but he still maintained that the Battle of Tours had ‘not the importance that has been attributed to it’ (Pirenne, 1937, 203). This really was, after all, a turning point that failed to turn and, moreover, it had left only the most modest of footprints in the contemporary sources. The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore some of the ways in which the reputation of the battle gained its reputation in the century or so after Gibbon, to become the important Orientalist moment it is sometimes considered to be now.

To explore the creation of a legend in nineteenth-century historiography is to engage with an intellectual history that was deeply political, religious, and situational. Events only ever find their historical meaning in narratives, as part of an explanatory whole (White, 1973). At the time in question, narratives about the early Middle Ages were firmly entrenched in debates about the rise and nature of nation states, the value of Germanic versus Latin culture, and the centrality of forms of religious belief to Europe and its nations (Wood, 2013). These interests could be

mutually supportive, for instance where historians wrote from national confessional positions. They could also sit in conflict. In the background, the professionalisation of history may have improved scientific standards of research, but that did not stop good Quellenkritik [‘source criticism’] being used for politicised ends. Nor did it stop historians wanting to engage with a wider public who demanded education, edification, and a good story, rather than technical precision per se. And we must not forget that historians and their audiences were affected by their local situations: to write in Bavaria in 1800 was not very much like writing in the USA in 1900. The reputation of an event was created through its role in many stories in many places. To expose this, in the present essay, I will take examples of writing about the Battle of Tours from the Francophone, Germanophone and Anglophone worlds in sequence to establish different contexts – but in each context, it will also become apparent that different times or different interests quickly generated a multiplicity of interpretations. Meaning, in short, is rarely stable, and history is rarely neutral.

The Battle in the Earliest Sources

We should start with what our early medieval sources say, so that we can gauge how they were used by later writers (for more, see Fouracre, 2000, 84-9). Even for Gibbon, most of the major accounts were well known, both in Latin and Arabic. He acknowledged himself that his understanding of these sources had been filtered through the thirteenth-century *Historia Arabum* by Archbishop Roderic Ximenes of Toledo and Denis Dominique Cardonne’s *Histoire de l’Afrique et de l’Espagne sous la domination des Arabes* (1765)¹ – the latter the work of the Arabic-speaking secretary-translator to Louis XV of France, working from sources found in the well-stocked royal library. Gibbon’s account was as well-informed as any writer thereafter,

making the colour of his story a matter of his interpretation rather than a lack of research. This is an important point to bear in mind for all the writers we will encounter.

The earliest Latin sources attribute the battle with importance in some contradictory ways. The official papal biographer of Pope Gregory II (715-31), in the *Liber pontificalis*, reported a letter sent from Duke Eudo of Aquitaine, who claimed to have defeated 375,000 Arabs at the loss of only 1,500 Christians (Duchesne, 1886, 401). But the number of Arabs should immediately raise doubt as that is significantly more than either the estimated populations of Constantinople (*circa* 40,000 according to Mango, 1985, 54) or Rome (*circa* 50,000 according to Meneghini & Santangeli Valenzani, 2004, 22-3) at the time. Nevertheless, historians from Gibbon onwards have treated it as hard fact. If Eudo lied, it is worth noting that the Continuator of Fredegar in Burgundy counter-claimed that the duke himself had invited the Arabs into Gaul himself in order to regain lands confiscated by Charles Martel (Krusch, 1888, 175). Eudo had lost control of the course of events as his new allies burned churches in Bordeaux and Poitiers, before encountering Charles and being defeated en route to Tours. If this was a major triumph for Charles, even partisan sources were relatively modest about it: the Continuator records it on a par with other major victories that decade, maybe even below further conflict in 737 (Palmer, 2015, 42-3), while the *Annals of Lorsch* included for 732 a simple note that ‘Charles [Martel] fought against Saracens on a Sunday at Poitiers’ (Katz, 1889, 29).² Charles’ defeat of the ‘Saracens’ was made to sound more final in Einhard’s famous ninth-century propagandist *Life of Charlemagne*, but the author still placed it on par with Charles’ victories against other peoples in Europe (Pertz, 1911, 4).

The account in the inward-looking Frankish chronicles can be compared to a story from Spain that did much to set the modern tone of reporting. The *Chronicle of 754*, sometimes

mistakenly called the *Chronicle of Isidore of Beja*, was composed by a Latin Christian with a wider perspective than most Frankish sources, with frequent details about Byzantine and Arab history that make it uncommonly global in outlook. The account of the battle is important to the development of the legend of Poitiers because it is far more dramatic than the Continuator's version (see Gil, 1973, 41-3). This may not be surprising, given that the Arabs had only recently conquered the Iberian Peninsula. In the build-up to the Battle of Tours, the chronicler painted Abd ar-Rahman as a man who 'made himself drunk on the blood of the Christians.' He suggested that Eudo's initial alliance was not with Abd ar-Rahman, but with a Moor named Munnuza who wished to lead a revolt against Arab rule in North Africa. Abd ar-Rahman marched north to attack rather than to aid Eudo (who fled), despoiled Tours, and then clashed with Charles for six days until on the seventh 'the Europeans'³ discovered that the Arabs had fled in the night. Here, more than in the Continuator's account, lies the origin of Gibbon's 'clash of civilisations' tone as it explicitly contrasts Christian Europeans versus Muslim Arabs. Yet even then, the story is still one of personal machinations and fragile alliances rather than of large-scale conflict between two unambiguously-defined civilisations.

Arab histories complicate the picture further. In al-Hakam's ninth-century history of North Africa and Spain, written in Cairo, the author covered the battle in a sentence and believed that it was little more than a raid by Abd ar-Rahman gone wrong. There is no sense that a full-scale invasion was planned, for either political or religious reasons. Meanwhile, a contemporary of al-Hakam's in Spain, Ibn Habīb, mentioned nothing about it at all in his history, betraying a typical lack of interest in events north of the Pyrenees (König, 2015, 191). The Battle of Tours, it seems, was not considered a great moment to commemorate in Arab historiographical tradition.

Even just in these early accounts, we are faced with interpretations of events that are difficult to reconcile. The Arabs may only have been causing trouble in Gaul as part of Franco-Gallic politics, or there might have been a real attempt at a full invasion, or they might only have been raiding. Each interpretation fits into its own textual discourse: for the Franks, it is one part of the triumph of Charles Martel; for the Spanish chronicler, it is a more complex morality play for Christians seeking to establish their new place in history; for the Arabs, there were simply more interesting things going on elsewhere. For no one, it seems, was this an obvious turning point in world history or a ‘clash of civilisations’ in anything more than an incidental manner – not least because these are modern ways of thinking about ‘progress’ anyway. But hindsight and the temptation to synthesise made it seem more dramatic. By the thirteenth century, for instance, the author of the entry in the famous *Grandes chroniques de France* created a dramatic nationalist narrative by fusing details from the *Liber pontificalis*, the Continuator, and the *Chronicle of 754* into a compelling story of French triumph. This French chronicle was crucial thereafter in shaping interpretations of events, as extracts from it were widely read or were translated in sourcebooks. The problem inherited by modern historiographical traditions, then, was that the battle had always meant whatever people needed it to, irrespective of what might actually have happened.

The Battle in French Historiography

In nineteenth-century France what people needed were events that spoke to them about what their nation was. The Battle of Tours was not guaranteed any grand status in such a context. In the decades following the July Revolution of 1830, Jules Michelet (d. 1874) – *maître de conférences* at the École normale supérieure – wrote a monumental multi-volume *Histoire de*

France. A committed republican, his primary interest was in the development of the peoples and institutions of his country as a continuous force in history. In the first volume, dedicated to Antiquity and the earlier Middle Ages, he did not see that the battle changed much about the nation he was seeking to define. Frankish and Carolingian histories played ambiguous roles in French identity because their epicentres were as much in Liège or the Rhineland as in Metz or Rheims – and they rarely extended south of the Loire or Ardennes. Charles Martel could thus be seen as a specifically German tyrant who invaded Gaul and despoiled its churches. He offered little to Michelet’s grand narrative except that he paved the way for more illustrious heirs such as his grandson, the famous emperor Charlemagne (d. 814). The battle itself, for Michelet, involved little more than speedy Saracen brigands finding themselves in difficulty against a heavily armed Frankish force and fleeing. Indeed, for the inhabitants of the region, Michelet considered that ‘there was more to fear from the Germanic invasion [i.e. from Charles’ Franks] than from the Saracens’ (Michelet, 1833, 290). Here the importance of the eighth century was filtered straight through nineteenth-century anxiety about competing nation states.

The French view of the Battle was often tied to national politics like this. A grand statement here was Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’ highly political 1874 painting *L’an 732: Charles Martel sauvant la chrétienté par sa victoire sur les Sarrasins* [‘The Year 732: Charles Martel saves Christianity with his victory over the Saracens’]. The work was one of several commissioned for the grand staircase of the new Hôtel de ville de Poitiers to celebrate great moments in a specifically-Poitevin history. Puvis’ painting embraced the triumph of northern Christianity over the south: triumphant knights sit on horseback before the church of Dame-la-Grande, with semi-naked, dark-skinned, kneeling Saracens in the foreground. An Orientalist sense of difference is clearly displayed and in keeping with other contemporary patriotic

appropriations of France's past. Still, for Puvis, this was intended as a highly political statement about reconciliation in a time of conflict: Charles could be seen healing his rift with the church as he approached the bishop of Poitiers, women offer consolation to the defeated, and a pale-skinned Saracen prevents a comrade from getting into trouble by speaking out. This all spoke to Puvis' concerns about the tensions between Christian factions, and between church, state, and working class radicals, in the uncertain years following the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) and the creation of the Third French Republic (Price, 2008, 88-90; Wood, 2013, 188-9).

As the century progressed, some tensions could be addressed by moving the focus from France to a more panoramic vision of Europe in which France was central. Gabriel Monod's *Histoire de l'Europe et en particulier de la France de 395 à 1270* (1891, with Charles Bémont) provides a good example. Monod had been trained in Germany under the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*'s Georg Waitz, giving him a strong sense of German traditions of scientific source criticism that he was able to promote in *Revue historique*, a periodical he founded. A sweeping history of France, however, did not need to be tied down by technicalities. In his account of the Battle of Tours, Monod stuck close to the story told by Michelet, a scholar he much admired.⁴ Yet the battle lines were subtly redrawn in keeping with the shift from a French to a European focus: this was no longer a three-way meeting of France, Germany and 'the Saracens,' but rather a conflict between two races (Indo-European vs Semitic), two religions (Christianity vs Mohammadism), and two fighting styles (Frankish infantry vs Berber cavalry). It is striking in particular that religious difference came more strongly to the fore as French historians sought to define a long-standing Europe of nation states. Even in the great interwar project *Peuples et Civilisations*, Louis Halphen used 'musulmans' and 'Arabes' interchangeably as he sought to include the Arabs as part of a more explicitly inclusive European 'barbarian'(!) past (Halphen,

1926, especially 144-5 on the battle). The intention to be inclusive and globalised, however, had led to a more exclusionary outcome: the multiplying of labels by which the Arab and Islamic worlds could be ‘othered’ in contrast to Christian Europe.

The Battle in German Historiography

To the east, new ideas about what Germanic national identities might mean also had bearing on the battle’s reputation. In 1840, the young Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt wrote a much-quoted essay in Berlin that, in Gibbon-esque style, proclaimed Charles Martel ‘a great founder of a new Western Christianity,’ whose actions prevented the ‘flags of the prophet’ from being flown from the towers of France (see Borgolte, 2006, 260). There was little such hyperbole in his 1843 Basel dissertation on Charles as he translated his principal thoughts into Latin (Burckhardt, 1843).

Perhaps it was the spirit of Burckhardt’s tutor in Berlin, Leopold von Ranke, and his concentration on establishing facts on the basis of *Quellenkritik*. Not that such strategies always silenced prejudice. Theodor Breysig’s *Jahrbücher des fränkischen Reiches 714-741: Die Zeit Karls Martells* (1869), initially written for famed cultural-patron and Prussia-sceptic King Maximilian II of Bavaria (d. 1864), offered a year-by-year account of Charles’ career with extensive references to the sources with only the lightest rhetorical turns. For the Battle of Tours, however, it was a rhetoric that emphasised the Franks as German Christians fighting the furious and ravaging [‘beutegierig’] Arab army of the zealous [‘glaubenseifriger’] Abd ar-Rahman. The quest for a German national identity was at a crucial point and people sought to understand themselves through what they thought they were not. Only a couple of years later, when Bismarck began to unite the German territories, Gustav Richter produced the *Annalen der deutschen Geschichte im Mittelalter 1* (1873) explicitly to meet the needs of the newly awakened

German identity. Commentary on events such as the Battle was minimal, but it remains striking how the Franks and events in Gaul could be appropriated for a consciously ‘German’ history.

As in France, religious sensibilities played a part in shaping the reputation of the battle and its hero. The reputation of Charles Martel was, for instance, firmly complicated by Heinrich Brunner in a classic 1887 article that attributed the mayor’s stunning successes to the despoliation of churches (Brunner, 1887). Albert Hauck, in his magisterial *Kirchgeschichte Deutschlands* 1 (1898 [1887], 516) similarly gave a rather muted appreciation of Charles – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that Hauck was a Ranke-trained Lutheran theologian attempting a balanced national church history. He explicitly sought to sidestep the problems of confessional polemics in his work as many Protestants did not value pre-Reformation history; he, on the contrary, saw the anthropological and historicist value in examining the different cultural and social manifestations of religion (Teubner, 2008). Nevertheless, he noted the reservations that one might have about Charles, and then concluded: ‘but he saved the Western world and Church from the inundation of Mohammedans.’ Efforts at providing balance do not always lead away from the old Grand Narratives. At the same time, for all the apparent significance he placed on the battle, Hauck gave no account of it. A conflict in France, won by a figure with a tainted reputation, was not necessarily essential to German ecclesiastical history, whatever its consequences.

The Battle from an Anglophone Perspective

Writers in England and the USA had a different connection with the Battle of Tours. It was, of course, not part of their history from a precise geographical or nationalist point of view. At the

same time, however, Gibbon had announced clearly that it was a crucial moment in a specifically European history – a moment when it could have become more attached to the Arab world politically and Islam religiously had events not turned out differently. Many historians were seduced by his sense of drama and continue to be so. Still, again, it is striking that there was little agreement on what the battle represented, even when there was agreement about nationalist, internationalist, and religious sentiment.

After Gibbon, one of the earliest English writers to assess the importance of the battle was Sir Edward Creasy, a professor at the University of London. He wrote the popular classic *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* in 1851 – inspired by comments by Henry Hallam, a lawyer-turned-historian in Oxford, who suggested that Tours ‘may justly be reckoned among those few battles of which a contrary event would have essentially varied the drama of the world in all its subsequent scenes: with Marathon, Arbela, the Metaus, Chalons, and Leipsic’ (Hallam, 1900 [1818], 8). Creasy himself wrote, not to celebrate war (whatever one might think from the title), but to reflect on its consequences at the beginning of what he hoped to be a long age of civilised peace. And, from his avowedly literary and unscientific perspective, he felt that the consequences of battles such as Tours were just obvious if one looked at the plain facts. In this context, the conclusion to be drawn was clear enough: ‘The progress of civilisation, and the development of the nationalities and governments of modern Europe, from that time forth, went forward in not uninterrupted, but, ultimately, certain career.’ It was a vision of Europe rooted in nation states, just as it was in France. At the same time, however, he felt that Michelet’s views typified a tendency in France to slight ‘the exploits of their national hero,’ who was, in Creasy’s own view, only fully appreciated by the English and Germans. One can be sure that a certain

competitiveness between Europe's nation states played its part in settling on the nature of the story.

One could play many of the same games and still invert the significance of the battle. Charles Oman, the second Chichele Professor of Modern History in Oxford and ostensibly a military historian, provides a good case in point with his textbook *The Dark Ages*, first published in 1893 to offer a more “continuous general sketch” of the period than Gibbon had provided (Oman, 1893, p. v). The book was explicitly for students and Oman mixed both excitable narrative and sober analysis. On the Battle of Tours, he noted that ‘hardly a detail of the great struggle has survived,’ but he still managed to provide a three-page, blow-by-blow account, largely based on a *Grandes Chroniques*-style synthesis. Self-consciously standing outside continental discourse, Oman felt that many writers had overestimated the importance of the battle. At the end, he declared: ‘So ended the danger of western Christendom from the Moslem invader, a danger which has not unfrequently been exaggerated, especially by French writers anxious to glorify the Austrasian mayor, whom they have chosen to make into a French national hero’ (Oman, 1893, 294). Here was a judgement that seemed to reverse the accusation made by Creasy a generation earlier against Michelet – and one that, once again, highlighted the importance of prejudices between European nations as a driver of analysis as people sought to capture an essential European-ness at the expense of the Arabs and Islam. Indeed, in his conclusion on Charles, Oman hailed him as ‘the inaugurator of a new and better era in the history of Europe’ for fighting battles against anyone and everybody to bring a new sense of unity to the continent.

The loaded, Orientalist analyses of textbooks were widespread in educational literature in the period. Take *Famous Men of the Middle Ages* (1904), written as a school primer by John

Henry Haaren and A. B. Poland, the District Superintendent of Schools for New York and Superintendent of Schools in Newark respectively. At the outset, they asserted the importance of giving American school children access to their cultural and moral heritage through biographical history, including ‘the Greek philosopher, the Roman lawgiver [and] the Teutonic lover of freedom.’ This was intended to meet recommendations laid out by the Committee of Ten and Committee of Fifteen in the 1890s on how best to revise and standardise high school and elementary school curricula respectively. Haaren and Poland offered a pedagogic rationale for focusing on great men in particular: they made history more memorable, not least by encouraging children to imagine themselves as those individuals; and, therefore, these people offered a framework for understanding everything else. Their chapter on Charles Martel clearly concerned the ‘Teutonic lover of freedom’ category. In their narration, the Arabs (‘Saracens’) invaded the land of the Franks ‘intending to establish Mohammedanism there’ (despite no real indication of this in the sources); but the Arabs were beaten back by Charles, the skilled and experienced military man who acted as king in practice even though he lacked the title. Haaren and Poland concluded much as Creasey had done: ‘[it] is regarded as one of the decisive battles of the world. It decided that Christians, and not Moslems, should be the ruling power in Europe’ (Haaren & Poland, 1904, 89). It is not that there was no space for non-Europeans to be important in their own context – they included chapters on Mohammed and the legendary Harun al-Rashid – but those extra-European worlds are not described as defining the cultures that Haaren and Poland ultimately believed shaped America.

Rejecting synthesis for an opportunity to read the source material itself did not change the framings for interpretation. In 1913, responding to similar needs as Haaren and Poland, William Stearns Davis, a professor at the University of Minnesota, published two volumes entitled

Readings in Ancient History. This was a sourcebook of extracts in translation, exactly as we still use a century later (indeed Jarbel Rodriguez recently used it for the extracts on the battle in his *Muslim and Christian Contact: A Reader* [2015]). In a preface to the publication, Davis's colleague Willis Mason West commented that the purpose of the volume was 'to illustrate the important facts mentioned in every good textbook.' In a preface to a section on the Battle of Tours, Davis described the unity of 'Teuton and Roman' in the figure of Charlemagne but also noted that 'in the background of the Western Christian world now looms the rival society and religion of Islam, which remains a menace to the very life of Christendom all through the Middle Ages, and which is destined to make important contributions to the sum total of modern civilization.' Davis was a firm believer in democracy, just nationalism, and the power of the spirit of Christianity to deliver happiness (Davis, 1926). His vision of history could embrace a positive role for Islamic culture, but that same culture as a 'rival' and 'menace' also served to define the positive virtues of Western Christendom.

Conclusion

The battle that took place between Tours and Poitiers in 732/3 had many meanings in the period in the century or so after Gibbon. Deployed within grand narratives about the fate of the Roman Empire, the meaning of Europe, Christendom, and nationalisms, the battle could bear the weight of a variety of interpretations, grand and modest. The sketchy source material helped considerably: from it, one historian could readily synthesise a dramatic account to fit his own story, while another could find something more modest to fit a different story. The available facts, however, did not change, and therefore it was not research alone that determined how people interpreted those facts and put them together in a narrative. Perhaps perversely, much of

the importance seen in the Battle of Tours came from the perception that it was a turning point that failed to turn: Europe as a concept and a story, as a perceived union of ‘Latin and Teutonic’ culture and a bastion of Christianity, could be ring-fenced for centuries more for those who wanted that reassurance from the past. This was an interpretative strategy built partly on counterfactuals about a battle of uncertain scale and, lest we forget, a very limited sense of what Europe comprised. Anyone, past or present, who invokes the Battle of Tours as a world historical moment does not appeal to hard historical facts, but to a legend that has grown in the telling to mean whatever people want it to mean.

Notes

¹ Later writers would also have the Spanish nationalist work of Conde, 1820-1.

² ‘Saracens’ is the common pejorative Latin term for Arabs from Late Antiquity: see Tolan, 2002.

³ ‘Europeans’ is a highly unusual collective term in this period.

⁴ Monod later wrote a biographical study by Michelet: Monod, 1923.

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