

Charles Martel

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This article is about the Frankish Ruler. For other uses, see [Charles Martel \(disambiguation\)](#).

Charles Martel, Frankish Ruler

ca. 688 – 22 October 741 (aged 52–53)



Charles Martel is primarily famous for his victory at the [Battle of Tours](#), his stopping the [Umayyad](#) invasions of Europe during the Muslim Expansion Era, and his laying the foundation for the [Carolingian Empire](#). (oil on canvas, painted by [Charles de Steuben](#) from 1834 till 1837)

Nickname "the Hammer"

Place of birth [Herstal](#) ([Belgium](#))

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Campaigns of Charles Martel

[Cologne](#) – [Amblève](#) – [Vincy](#) – [Soissons](#) – [Tours](#) – [Boarn](#) – [Nîmes](#) – [Avignon](#) – [Narbonne](#) – [River Berre](#)

Carolingian dynasty

Pippinids

- [Pippin the Elder](#) (c. 580–640)
- [Grimoald](#) (616–656)
- [Childebert the Adopted](#) (d. 662)

Arnulfings

- [Arnulf of Metz](#) (582–640)
- [Chlodulf of Metz](#) (d. 696 or 697)
- [Ansegisel](#) (c.602–before 679)
- [Pippin the Middle](#) (c.635–714)
- [Grimoald II](#) (d. 714)
- [Drogo of Champagne](#) (670–708)
- [Theudoald](#) (d. 714)

Carolingians

- **Charles Martel** (686–741)
- [Carloman](#) (d. 754)
- [Pepin the Short](#) (714–768)
- [Carloman I](#) (751–771)
- [Charlemagne](#) (d. 814)
- [Louis the Pious](#) (778–840)

After the [Treaty of Verdun](#) (843)

- [Lothair I, Holy Roman Emperor](#) (795–855)
([Middle Francia](#))
- [Charles the Bald](#) (823–877)
([Western Francia](#))
- [Louis the German](#) (804–876)
([Eastern Francia](#))

Charles Martel ([Latin](#): *Carolus Martellus*) (ca. 688 – 22 October 741),^{[1][2][3][4][5]} literally **Charles the Hammer**, was a [Frankish](#) military and political leader, who served as [Mayor of the Palace](#) under the [Merovingian](#) kings and ruled *de facto* during an [interregnum](#) (737–43) at the end of his life, using the title [Duke and Prince of the Franks](#). In 739 he was offered the title of [Consul](#) by the [Pope](#), but he refused.^[6] He is remembered for winning the [Battle of Tours](#) in 732, in which he defeated an invading [Muslim](#) army and halted northward Islamic expansion in western Europe.^[7]

A brilliant general, he lost only one battle in his career (the [Battle of Cologne](#)). He is a founding figure of the [Middle Ages](#), often credited with a seminal role in the development of [feudalism](#) and [knighthood](#), and laying the groundwork for the [Carolingian Empire](#).^{[8][9]} He was also the grandfather of [Charlemagne](#).

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[\[edit\]](#) Birth and youth

Martel was born in [Heristal](#) (Herstal in present-day [Belgium](#)), the illegitimate son of the mayor, duke [Pepin II](#) and his concubine [Alpaida](#).^[10]

The following tale is told of Charles and the origins of his name:^[*citation needed*] in 676, Pepin and his wife [Plectrude](#) were talking together in private when they were intruded upon by a messenger, bringing news that the Mayor's mistress, [Alpaida](#), had given birth to a son at Herstal. The messenger, fearful of arousing the wrath of Plectrude, decided not to announce the news directly. Instead, he said: "Long live the king, it is a *carl*" ('man'). Pepin, equally cautious of his wife, dismissed the messenger as follows: "A *carl*, is it? Then let him be called that." This was

done, and, so legend claims, the child was named "Carl". In German-speaking countries he is known as **Karl Martell**. Alpaïda also bore Pepin another son, Childebrand.

[\[edit\]](#) Contesting for power



The Frankish kingdoms at the time of the death of Pepin of Heristal. Note that Aquitaine (yellow) was outside of Arnulfing authority and Neustria and Burgundy (pink) were united in opposition to further Arnulfing dominance of the highest offices. Only Austrasia (green) supported an Arnulfing mayor, first Theudoald then Charles. Note that the German duchies to the east of the Rhine were *de facto* outside of Frankish suzerainty at this time.

In December 714, [Pepin of Heristal](#) died. Prior to his death, he had, at his wife Plectrude's urging, designated [Theudoald](#), his grandson by their son [Grimoald](#), his heir in the entire realm. This was immediately opposed by the nobles because Theudoald was a child of only eight years of age. To prevent Charles using this unrest to his own advantage, Plectrude had him imprisoned in [Cologne](#), the city which was destined to be her capital. This prevented an uprising on his behalf in [Austrasia](#), but not in [Neustria](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Civil war of 715-718

In 715, the Neustrian nobles proclaimed [Ragenfrid mayor of their palace](#) on behalf of, and apparently with the support of, [Dagobert III](#), the young king, who in theory had the legal authority to select a mayor, though by this time the [Merovingian](#) dynasty had lost most such powers.

The Austrasians were not to be left supporting a woman and her young son for long. Before the end of the year, Charles Martel had escaped from prison and been acclaimed mayor by the nobles of that kingdom. The Neustrians had been attacking Austrasia and the nobles were waiting for a strong man to lead them against their invading countrymen. That year, Dagobert died and the Neustrians proclaimed [Chilperic II](#) king without the support of the rest of the Frankish people.

In 717, Chilperic and Ragenfrid together led an army into Austrasia. The Neustrians allied with another invading force under [Radbod, King of the Frisians](#) and met Charles in battle near

Cologne, which was still held by Plectrude. Charles had little time to gather men, or prepare, and the result was the only defeat of his life. According to Strauss and Gustave, Martel fought a brilliant battle, but realized he could not prevail because he was outnumbered so badly, and retreated. In fact, he fled the field as soon as he realized he did not have the time or the men to prevail, retreating to the mountains of the [Eifel](#) to gather men, and train them. The king and his mayor then turned to besiege their other rival in the city and took it and the treasury, and received the recognition of both Chilperic as king and Ragenfrid as mayor. Plectrude surrendered on Theudoald's behalf.

[\[edit\]](#) Military genius


At this juncture, however, events turned in favor of Charles. Having made the proper preparations, he fell upon the triumphant army near [Malmedy](#) as it was returning to its own province, and, in the ensuing [Battle of Amblève](#), routed it. The few troops who were not killed or surrendered, fled. Several things were notable about this battle, in which Charles set the pattern for the remainder of his military career: First, he appeared *where* his enemies least expected him, while they were marching triumphantly home and far outnumbered him. He also attacked *when* least expected, at midday, when armies of that era traditionally were resting. Finally, he attacked them *how* they least expected it, by feigning a retreat to draw his opponents into a trap. The feigned retreat, next to unknown in Western Europe at that time—it was a traditionally eastern tactic—required both extraordinary discipline on the part of the troops and exact timing on the part of their commander. Charles, in this battle, had begun demonstrating the military genius that would mark his rule. The result was an unbroken victory streak that lasted until his death.

In Spring 717, Charles returned to Neustria with an army and confirmed his supremacy with a victory at the [Battle of Vincy](#), near [Cambrai](#). He chased the fleeing king and mayor to [Paris](#), before turning back to deal with Plectrude and Cologne. He took her city and dispersed her adherents. However, he allowed both Plectrude and the young Theudoald to live and treated them with kindness—unusual for those [Dark Ages](#), when mercy to a former jailer, or a potential rival, was rare. On this success, he proclaimed [Clotaire IV](#) king of [Austrasia](#) in opposition to Chilperic and deposed the [archbishop of Rheims](#), [Rigobert](#), replacing him with [Milo](#), a lifelong supporter.

[\[edit\]](#) Consolidation of power

After subjugating all [Austrasia](#), he marched against [Radbod](#) and pushed him back into his territory, even forcing the concession of [West Frisia](#) (later [Holland](#)). He also sent the [Saxons](#) back over the [Weser](#) and thus secured his borders—in the name of the new king Clotaire, of course. In 718, Chilperic responded to Charles' new ascendancy by making an alliance with [Odo the Great](#) (or Eudes, as he is sometimes known), the [duke of Aquitaine](#), who had made himself independent during the civil war in 715, but was again defeated, at the [Battle of Soissons](#), by Charles. The king fled with his ducal ally to the land south of the [Loire](#) and Ragenfrid fled to [Angers](#). Soon Clotaire IV died and Odo gave up on Chilperic and, in exchange for recognising his dukedom, surrendered the king to Charles, who recognised his kingship over all the Franks in return for legitimate royal affirmation of his mayoralty, likewise over all the kingdoms (718).



 The Saracen Army outside Paris, 730-32, in a early nineteenth-century depiction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

[edit] Foreign wars from 718-732

The ensuing years were full of strife. Between 718 and 723, Charles secured his power through a series of victories: he won the loyalty of several important bishops and abbots (by donating lands and money for the foundation of abbeys such as [Echternach](#)), he subjugated [Bavaria](#) and [Alemannia](#), and he defeated the pagan [Saxons](#).

Having unified the Franks under his banner, Charles was determined to punish the Saxons who had invaded Austrasia. Therefore, late in 718, he laid waste their country to the banks of the [Weser](#), the [Lippe](#), and the [Ruhr](#). He defeated them in the [Teutoburg Forest](#). In 719, Charles seized [West Frisia](#) without any great resistance on the part of the [Frisians](#), who had been subjects of the Franks but had seized control upon the death of Pippin. Although Charles did not trust the pagans, their ruler, [Aldegisel](#), accepted Christianity, and Charles sent [Willibrord](#), [bishop of Utrecht](#), the famous "Apostle to the Frisians" to convert the people. Charles also did much to support Winfrid, later [Saint Boniface](#), the "Apostle of the Germans."

When Chilperic II died the following year (720), Charles appointed as his successor the son of Dagobert III, [Theuderic IV](#), who was still a minor, and who occupied the throne from 720 to 737. Charles was now appointing the kings whom he supposedly served, *rois fainéants* who were mere puppets in his hands; by the end of his reign they were so useless that he didn't even bother appointing one. At this time, Charles again marched against the Saxons. Then the Neustrians rebelled under Ragenfrid, who had left the county of Anjou. They were easily defeated (724), but

Ragenfrid gave up his sons as hostages in turn for keeping his county. This ended the civil wars of Charles' reign.

The next six years were devoted in their entirety to assuring Frankish authority over the dependent Germanic tribes. Between 720 and 723, Charles was fighting in Bavaria, where the [Agilolfing](#) dukes had gradually evolved into independent rulers, recently in alliance with [Liutprand the Lombard](#). He forced the [Alemanni](#) to accompany him, and Duke [Hugbert](#) submitted to Frankish suzerainty. In 725 and 728, he again entered Bavaria and the ties of lordship seemed strong. From his first campaign, he brought back the Agilolfing princess Swanachild, who apparently became his concubine. In 730, he marched against [Lantfrid](#), duke of Alemannia, who had also become independent, and killed him in battle. He forced the Alemanni capitulation to Frankish suzerainty and did not appoint a successor to Lantfrid. Thus, southern Germany once more became part of the Frankish kingdom, as had northern Germany during the first years of the reign.

But by 730, his own realm secure, Charles began to prepare exclusively for the coming storm from the south and west.

In 721, the [emir of Córdoba](#) had built up a strong army from [Morocco](#), [Yemen](#), and [Syria](#) to conquer Aquitaine, the large duchy in the southwest of Gaul, nominally under Frankish sovereignty, but in practice almost independent in the hands of the Odo the Great, the Duke of Aquitaine, since the Merovingian kings had lost power. The invading Muslims besieged the city of Toulouse, then Aquitaine's most important city, and Odo (also called Eudes, or Eudo) immediately left to find help. He returned three months later just before the city was about to surrender and defeated the Muslim invaders on June 9, 721, at what is now known as the [Battle of Toulouse](#). This critical defeat was essentially the result of a classic enveloping movement by Odo's forces. (After Odo originally fled, the Muslims became overconfident and, instead of maintaining strong outer defenses around their siege camp and continuous scouting, they did neither.) Thus, when Odo returned, he was able to launch a near complete surprise attack on the besieging force, scattering it at the first attack, and slaughtering units caught resting or that fled without weapons or armour.

Due to the situation in Iberia, Martel believed he needed a virtually fulltime army—one he could train intensely—as a core of veteran Franks who would be augmented with the usual conscripts called up in time of war. (During the [Early Middle Ages](#), troops were only available after the crops had been planted and before harvesting time.) To train the kind of infantry that could withstand the Muslim heavy cavalry, Charles needed them year-round, and he needed to pay them so their families could buy the food they would have otherwise grown. To obtain money he seized church lands and property, and used the funds to pay his soldiers. The same Charles who had secured the support of the *ecclesia* by donating land, seized some of it back between 724 and 732. Of course, Church officials were enraged, and, for a time, it looked as though Charles might even be excommunicated for his actions. But then came a significant invasion.

[\[edit\]](#) **Eve of Tours**

Historian [Paul K. Davis](#) said in *100 Decisive Battles* "Having defeated Eudes, he turned to the Rhine to strengthen his northeastern borders - but in 725 was diverted south with the activity of the Muslims in Aquitaine." Martel then concentrated his attention to the Umayyads, virtually for the remainder of his life.^[11] Indeed, 12 years later, when he had thrice rescued Gaul from Umayyad invasions, [Antonio Santosuosso](#) noted when he destroyed an Umayyad army sent to reinforce the invasion forces of the 735 campaigns, "Charles Martel again came to the rescue".^[12] It has been noted that Charles Martel could have pursued the wars against the Saxons—but he was determined to prepare for what he thought was a greater danger.

It is also vital to note that the Muslims were not aware, at that time, of the true strength of the Franks, or the fact that they were building a real army instead of the typical barbarian hordes that had dominated Europe after Rome's fall. They considered the Germanic tribes, including the Franks, simply barbarians and were not particularly concerned about them. The Arab Chronicles, the history of that age, show that Arab awareness of the Franks as a growing military power came only after the Battle of Tours when the Caliph expressed shock at his army's catastrophic defeat.

[edit] Battle of Tours

Main article: [Battle of Tours](#)

[edit] Leadup and importance

"It was under one of their ablest and most renowned commanders, with a veteran army, and with every apparent advantage of time, place, and circumstance, that the Arabs made their great effort at the conquest of Europe north of the Pyrenees."^[13]

—[Edward Shepherd Creasy](#), *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*

The [Cordoban emirate](#) had previously invaded [Gaul](#) and had been stopped in its northward sweep at the [Battle of Toulouse](#), in 721. The hero of that less celebrated event had been [Odo the Great](#), Duke of Aquitaine, who was not the progenitor of a race of kings and patron of chroniclers. It has previously been explained how Odo defeated the invading Muslims, but when they returned, things were far different. The arrival in the interim of a new [emir of Cordoba](#), [Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi](#), who brought with him a huge force of Arabs and [Berber](#) horsemen, triggered a far greater invasion. Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi had been at Toulouse, and the Arab Chronicles make clear he had strongly opposed the Emir's decision not to secure outer defenses against a relief force, which allowed Odo and his relief force to attack with impunity before the Islamic cavalry could assemble or mount. Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi had no intention of permitting such a disaster again. This time the Umayyad horsemen were ready for battle, and the results were horrific for the Aquitanians. Odo, hero of Toulouse, was badly defeated in the Muslim invasion of 732 at the battle prior to the Muslim sacking of Bordeaux, and when he gathered a second army, at the [Battle of the River Garonne](#)—Western chroniclers state, "God alone knows the number of the slain"—and the city of Bordeaux was sacked and looted. Odo fled to Charles, seeking help. Charles agreed to come to Odo's rescue, provided Odo acknowledged Charles and his house as his overlords, which Odo did formally at once. Charles was pragmatic; while most

commanders would never use their enemies in battle, Odo and his remaining Aquitanian nobles formed the right flank of Charles's forces at Tours.

The [Battle of Tours](#) earned Charles the [cognomen](#) "Martel" ('Hammer'), for the merciless way he hammered his enemies. Many historians, including [Sir Edward Creasy](#), believe that had he failed at Tours, [Islam](#) would probably have overrun [Gaul](#), and perhaps the remainder of Western Europe. [Gibbon](#) made clear his belief that the Umayyad armies would have conquered from Rome to the Rhine, and even England, having the English Channel for protection, with ease, had Martel not prevailed. Creasy said "the great victory won by Charles Martel ... gave a decisive check to the career of Arab conquest in Western Europe, rescued Christendom from Islam, [and] preserved the relics of ancient and the germs of modern civilization" (bearing in mind that Arab-Islamic invaders had already forcibly converted most of the population of North Africa and the Middle East, which had been the cradle of Christianity, almost completely eliminated the Zoroastrians from Persia and destroyed the Royal Zoroastrian libraries, and that Muslim invaders would later demolish or destroy thousands of Buddhist and Hindu places of worship and learning within the Indian subcontinent). Gibbon's belief that the fate of Christianity hinged on this battle is echoed by other historians including [John B. Bury](#), and was very popular for most of modern historiography. It fell somewhat out of style in the twentieth century, when historians such as [Bernard Lewis](#) contended that Arabs had little intention of occupying northern France. More recently, however, many historians have tended once again to view the Battle of Tours as a very significant event in the history of Europe and Christianity. Equally, many, such as [William Watson](#), still believe this battle was one of macrohistorical world-changing importance, if they do not go so far as Gibbon does rhetorically.

In the modern era, [Matthew Bennett](#) and his co-authors of *"Fighting Techniques of the Medieval World"*, published in 2005, argue that "few battles are remembered 1,000 years after they are fought ... but the Battle of Poitiers, (Tours) is an exception ... Charles Martel turned back a Muslim raid that had it been allowed to continue, might have conquered Gaul." Michael Grant, author of *"History of Rome"*, grants the Battle of Tours such importance that he lists it in the macrohistorical dates of the Roman era.

It is important to note however that modern Western historians, military historians, and writers, essentially fall into three camps. The first, those who believe Gibbon was right in his assessment that Martel saved Christianity and Western civilization by this battle are typified by Bennett, Paul Davis, Robert Martin, and educationalist [Dexter B. Wakefield](#) who writes in *An Islamic Europe*

“ A Muslim France? Historically, it nearly happened. But as a result of Martel’s fierce opposition, which ended Muslim advances and set the stage for centuries of war thereafter, Islam moved no farther into Europe. European schoolchildren learn about the Battle of Tours in much the same way that American students learn about Valley Forge and Gettysburg.”^[14]

The second camp of contemporary historians believe that a failure by Martel at Tours could have been a disaster, destroying what would become Western civilization after the [Renaissance](#).

Certainly all historians agree that no power would have remained in Europe able to halt Islamic expansion had the Franks failed. [William E. Watson](#), one of the most respected historians of this era, strongly supports Tours as a macrohistorical event, but distances himself from the rhetoric of Gibbon and Drubeck, writing, for example, of the battle's importance in Frankish, and world, history in 1993:

“ There is clearly some justification for ranking Tours-Poitiers among the most significant events in Frankish history when one considers the result of the battle in light of the remarkable record of the successful establishment by Muslims of Islamic political and cultural dominance along the entire eastern and southern rim of the former Christian, Roman world. The rapid Muslim conquest of Palestine, Syria, Egypt and the North African coast all the way to Morocco in the seventh century resulted in the permanent imposition by force of Islamic culture onto a previously Christian and largely non-Arab base. The Visigothic kingdom fell to Muslim conquerors in a single battle on the Rio Barbate in 711, and the Hispanic Christian population took seven long centuries to regain control of the Iberian Peninsula. The Reconquista, of course, was completed in 1492, only months before Columbus received official backing for his fateful voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Had Charles Martel suffered at Tours-Poitiers the fate of King Roderick at the Rio Barbate, it is doubtful that a "do-nothing" sovereign of the Merovingian realm could have later succeeded where his talented major domus had failed. Indeed, as Charles was the progenitor of the Carolingian line of Frankish rulers and grandfather of Charlemagne, one can even say with a degree of certainty that the subsequent history of the West would have proceeded along vastly different currents had ‘Abd ar-Rahman been victorious at Tours-Poitiers in 732. ^[15] ”

The final camp of Western historians believe that the importance of the battle is dramatically overstated. This view is typified by Alessandro Barbero, who writes, "Today, historians tend to play down the significance of the battle of Poitiers, pointing out that the purpose of the Arab force defeated by Charles Martel was not to conquer the Frankish kingdom, but simply to pillage the wealthy monastery of St-Martin of Tours". ^[16] Similarly, Tomaž Mastnak writes:

“ Modern historians have constructed a myth presenting this victory as having saved Christian Europe from the Muslims. Edward Gibbon, for example, called Charles Martel the savior of Christendom and the battle near Poitiers an encounter that changed the history of the world... This myth has survived well into our own times... Contemporaries of the battle, however, did not overstate its significance. The continuators of Fredegar's chronicle, who probably wrote in the mid-eighth century, pictured the battle as just one of many military encounters between Christians and Saracens - moreover, as only one in a series of wars fought by Frankish princes for booty and territory... One of Fredegar's continuators presented the battle of Poitiers as what it really was: an episode in the struggle between Christian princes as the Carolingians strove to bring Aquitaine under their rule. ^[17] ”

However, it is vital to note, when assessing Charles Martel's life, that even those historians who dispute the significance of this one Battle as the event that saved Christianity, do not dispute that Martel himself had a huge effect on Western European history. Modern military historian [Victor Davis Hanson](#) acknowledges the debate on this battle, citing historians both for and against its macrohistorical placement:

“ Recent scholars have suggested Poitiers, so poorly recorded in contemporary sources, was a mere raid and thus a construct of western mythmaking or that a Muslim victory might have been preferable to continued Frankish dominance. What is clear is that Poitiers marked a general continuance of the successful defense of Europe, (from the Muslims). Flush from the victory at Tours, Charles Martel went on to clear southern France from Islamic attackers for decades, unify the warring kingdoms into the foundations of the Carolingian Empire, and ensure ready and reliable troops from local estates.”^[18] ”

[\[edit\]](#) After Tours

In the subsequent decade, Charles led the Frankish army against the eastern duchies, Bavaria and Alemannia, and the southern duchies, [Aquitaine](#) and [Provence](#). He dealt with the ongoing conflict with the [Frisians](#) and [Saxons](#) to his northeast with some success, but full conquest of the Saxons and their incorporation into the Frankish empire would wait for his grandson Charlemagne, primarily because Martel concentrated the bulk of his efforts against Muslim expansion.

So instead of concentrating on conquest to his east, he continued expanding Frankish authority in the west, and denying the Emirate of Córdoba a foothold in Europe beyond Al-Andalus. After his victory at Tours, Martel continued on in campaigns in 736 and 737 to drive other Muslim armies from bases in Gaul after they again attempted to get a foothold in Europe beyond Al-Andalus.

[\[edit\]](#) Wars from 732-737

Between his victory of 732 and 735, Charles reorganized the kingdom of [Burgundy](#), replacing the counts and dukes with his loyal supporters, thus strengthening his hold on power. He was forced, by the ventures of [Radbod](#), [duke of the Frisians](#) (719-734), son of the Duke Aldegisel who had accepted the [missionaries](#) Willibrord and Boniface, to invade independence-minded Frisia again in 734. In that year, he slew the duke, who had expelled the Christian missionaries, in the [battle of the Boarn](#) and so wholly subjugated the populace (he destroyed every pagan shrine) that the people were peaceful for twenty years after.

The dynamic changed in 735 because of the death of Odo the Great, who had been forced to acknowledge, albeit reservedly, the suzerainty of Charles in 719. Though Charles wished to unite the duchy directly to himself and went there to elicit the proper homage of the Aquitainians, the nobility proclaimed Odo's son, [Hunald of Aquitaine](#), whose dukedom Charles recognised when

the Umayyads invaded Provence the next year, and who equally was forced to acknowledge Charles as overlord as he had no hope of holding off the Muslims alone.

This naval Arab invasion was headed by Abdul Rahman's son. It landed in [Narbonne](#) in 736 and moved at once to reinforce [Arles](#) and move inland. Charles temporarily put the conflict with Hunold on hold, and descended on the Provençal strongholds of the Umayyads. In 736, he retook [Montfrin](#) and [Avignon](#), and Arles and [Aix-en-Provence](#) with the help of [Liutprand, King of the Lombards](#). [Nîmes](#), [Agde](#), and [Béziers](#), held by Islam since 725, fell to him and their fortresses were destroyed. He crushed one Umayyad army at Arles, as that force sallied out of the city, and then took the city itself by a direct and brutal frontal attack, and burned it to the ground to prevent its use again as a stronghold for Umayyad expansion. He then moved swiftly and defeated a mighty host outside of Narbonne at the River Berre, but failed to take the city. Military historians believe he could have taken it, had he chosen to tie up all his resources to do so—but he believed his life was coming to a close, and he had much work to do to prepare for his sons to take control of the Frankish realm. A direct frontal assault, such as took Arles, using rope ladders and rams, plus a few catapults, simply was not sufficient to take Narbonne without horrific loss of life for the Franks, troops Martel felt he could not lose. Nor could he spare years to starve the city into submission, years he needed to set up the administration of an empire his heirs would reign over. He left Narbonne therefore, isolated and surrounded, and his son would return to liberate it for Christianity.

Notable about these campaigns was Charles' incorporation, for the first time, of heavy cavalry with stirrups to augment his [phalanx](#). His ability to coordinate infantry and cavalry veterans was unequalled in that era and enabled him to face superior numbers of invaders, and to decisively defeat them again and again. Some historians believe the Battle against the main Muslim force at the River Berre, near Narbonne, in particular was as important a victory for Christian Europe as Tours. In *Barbarians, Marauders, and Infidels*, [Antonio Santosuosso](#), Professor Emeritus of History at the [University of Western Ontario](#), and considered an expert historian in the era in dispute, puts forth an interesting modern opinion on Martel, Tours, and the subsequent campaigns against Rahman's son in 736-737. Santosuosso presents a compelling case that these later defeats of invading Muslim armies were at least as important as Tours in their defence of Western Christendom and the preservation of [Western monasticism](#), the monasteries of which were the centers of learning which ultimately led Europe out of her [Middle Ages](#). He also makes a compelling argument, after studying the Arab histories of the period, that these were clearly armies of invasion, sent by the Caliph not just to avenge Tours, but to begin the conquest of Christian Europe and bring it into the Caliphate.

Further, unlike his father at Tours, Rahman's son in 736-737 knew that the Franks were a real power, and that Martel personally was a force to be reckoned with. He had no intention of allowing Martel to catch him unawares and dictate the time and place of battle, as his father had, and concentrated instead on seizing a substantial portion of the coastal plains around [Narbonne](#) in 736 and heavily reinforced [Arles](#) as he advanced inland. They planned from there to move from city to city, fortifying as they went, and if Martel wished to stop them from making a permanent enclave for expansion of the Caliphate, he would have to come to them, in the open, where, he, unlike his father, would dictate the place of battle. All worked as he had planned, until Martel arrived, albeit more swiftly than the Moors believed he could call up his entire army.

Unfortunately for Rahman's son, however, he had overestimated the time it would take Martel to develop heavy cavalry equal to that of the Muslims. The Caliphate believed it would take a generation, but Martel managed it in five short years. Prepared to face the Frankish phalanx, the Muslims were totally unprepared to face a mixed force of heavy cavalry and infantry in a phalanx. Thus, Charles again championed Christianity and halted Muslim expansion into Europe, as the window was closing on Islamic ability to do so. These defeats, plus those at the hands of Leo in Anatolia were the last great attempt at expansion by the Umayyad Caliphate before the destruction of the dynasty at the [Battle of the Zab](#), and the rending of the Caliphate forever, especially the utter destruction of the Umayyad army at River Berre near Narbonne in 737.

[\[edit\]](#) Interregnum

In 737, at the tail end of his campaigning in Provence and [Septimania](#), the king, Theuderic IV, died. Martel, titling himself *maior domus* and *princeps et dux Francorum*, did not appoint a new king and nobody acclaimed one. The throne lay vacant until Martel's death. As the historian [Charles Oman](#) says (*The Dark Ages*, pg 297), "he cared not for name or style so long as the real power was in his hands."

Gibbon has said Martel was "content with the titles of Mayor or Duke of the Franks, but he deserved to become the father of a line of kings," which he did. Gibbon also says of him, "in the public danger, he was summoned by the voice of his country."

The interregnum, the final four years of Charles' life, was more peaceful than most of it had been and much of his time was now spent on administrative and organisational plans to create a more efficient state. Though, in 738, he compelled the Saxons of [Westphalia](#) to do him homage and pay tribute, and in 739 checked an uprising in Provence, the rebels being under the leadership of Maurontus. Charles set about integrating the outlying realms of his empire into the Frankish church. He erected four dioceses in Bavaria ([Salzburg](#), [Regensburg](#), [Freising](#), and [Passau](#)) and gave them Boniface as [archbishop](#) and [metropolitan](#) over all Germany east of the Rhine, with his seat at [Mainz](#). Boniface had been under his protection from 723 on; indeed the saint himself explained to his old friend, Daniel of Winchester, that without it he could neither administer his church, defend his clergy, nor prevent idolatry. It was Boniface who had defended Charles most stoutly for his deeds in seizing ecclesiastical lands to pay his army in the days leading to Tours, as one doing what he must to defend Christianity. In 739, [Pope Gregory III](#) begged Charles for his aid against Liutprand, but Charles was loath to fight his onetime ally and ignored the Papal plea. Nonetheless, the Papal applications for Frankish protection showed how far Martel had come from the days he was tottering on excommunication, and set the stage for his son and grandson to rearrange Italian political boundaries to suit the Papacy, and protect it.

[\[edit\]](#) Death



Tomb of Charles Martel, [Basilique Saint-Denis](#).

Charles Martel died on October 22, 741, at [Quierzy-sur-Oise](#) in what is today the [Aisne département](#) in the [Picardy](#) region of France. He was buried at [Saint Denis Basilica](#) in [Paris](#). His territories were divided among his adult sons a year earlier: to [Carloman](#) he gave Austrasia and Alemannia (with Bavaria as a vassal), to [Pippin the Younger](#) Neustria and Burgundy (with Aquitaine as a vassal), and to [Grifo](#) nothing, though some sources indicate he intended to give him a strip of land between Neustria and Austrasia.

Gibbon called him "the hero of the age" and declared "Christendom ... delivered ... by the genius and good fortune of one man, Charles Martel."

[\[edit\]](#) Legacy

At the beginning of Charles Martel's career, he had many internal opponents and felt the need to appoint his own kingly claimant, Clotaire IV. By his end, however, the dynamics of rulership in Francia had changed, no hallowed Meroving was needed, neither for defence nor legitimacy: Charles divided his realm between his sons without opposition (though he ignored his young son [Bernard](#)). In between, he strengthened the Frankish state by consistently defeating, through superior generalship, the host of hostile foreign nations which beset it on all sides, including the heathen Saxons, which his grandson Charlemagne would fully subdue, and Moors, which he halted on a path of continental domination.

Though he never cared about titles, his son [Pippin](#) did, and finally asked the [Pope](#) "who should be King, he who has the title, or he who has the power?" The Pope, highly dependent on Frankish armies for his independence from Lombard and [Byzantine](#) power (the [Byzantine Emperor](#) still considered himself to be the only legitimate "[Roman Emperor](#)", and thus, ruler of all of the provinces of the [ancient empire](#), whether recognised or not), declared for "he who had the power" and immediately crowned Pippin.

Decades later, in 800, Pippin's son [Charlemagne](#) was crowned emperor by the Pope, further extending the principle by delegitimising the nominal authority of the Byzantine Emperor in the Italian peninsula (which had, by then, shrunk to encompass little more than [Apulia](#) and [Calabria](#) at best) and ancient Roman Gaul, including the Iberian outposts Charlemagne had established in the [Marca Hispanica](#) across the [Pyrenees](#), what today forms [Catalonia](#). In short, though the Byzantine Emperor claimed authority over all the old [Roman Empire](#), as the legitimate "Roman" Emperor, it was simply not reality. The bulk of the [Western Roman Empire](#) had come under Carolingian rule, the Byzantine Emperor having had almost no authority in the West since the sixth century, though Charlemagne, a consummate politician, preferred to avoid an open breach with Constantinople. An institution unique in history was being born: the [Holy Roman Empire](#). Though the sardonic [Voltaire](#) ridiculed its nomenclature, saying that the Holy Roman Empire was "neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire," it constituted an enormous political power for a time, especially under the [Saxon](#) and [Salian dynasties](#) and, to a lesser, extent, the [Hohenstaufen](#). It lasted until 1806, by then it was a nonentity. Though his grandson became its first emperor, the "empire" such as it was, was largely born during the reign of Charles Martel.

Charles was that rarest of commodities in the Middle Ages: a brilliant strategic general, who also was a tactical commander *par excellence*, able in the heat of battle to adapt his plans to his foe's forces and movement — and amazingly, to defeat them repeatedly, especially when, as at Tours, they were far superior in men and weaponry, and at Berre and Narbonne, when they were superior in numbers of fighting men. Charles had the last quality which defines genuine greatness in a military commander: he foresaw the dangers of his foes, and prepared for them with care; he used ground, time, place, and fierce loyalty of his troops to offset his foe's superior weaponry and tactics; third, he adapted, again and again, to the enemy on the battlefield, shifting to compensate for the unforeseen and unforeseeable.

Gibbon, whose tribute to Martel has been noted, was not alone among the great mid era historians in fervently praising Martel; Thomas Arnold ranks the victory of Charles Martel even higher than the victory of [Arminius](#) in the [Battle of the Teutoburg Forest](#) in its impact on all of modern history:

"Charles Martel's victory at Tours was among those signal deliverances which have affected for centuries the happiness of mankind." [History of the later Roman Commonwealth, vol ii. p. 317.]

German historians are especially ardent in their praise of Martel and in their belief that he saved Europe and Christianity from then all-conquering Islam, praising him also for driving back the ferocious Saxon barbarians on his borders. Schlegel speaks of this "mighty victory" in terms of fervent gratitude, and tells how " the arm of Charles Martel saved and delivered the Christian nations of the West from the deadly grasp of all-destroying Islam", and Ranke points out,

"as one of the most important epochs in the history of the world, the commencement of the eighth century, when on the one side Mohammedanism threatened to overspread Italy and Gaul, and on the other the ancient idolatry of Saxony and Friesland once more forced its way across the Rhine. In this peril of Christian institutions, a youthful prince of Germanic race, Karl Martell, arose as their champion, maintained them with all the energy which the necessity for self-defence calls forth, and finally extended them into new regions."

In 1922 and 1923, Belgian historian [Henri Pirenne](#) published a series of papers, known collectively as the "Pirenne Thesis", which remain influential to this day. Pirenne held that the Roman Empire continued, in the Frankish realms, up until the time of the [Arab conquests](#) in the 7th century. These conquests disrupted Mediterranean trade routes leading to a decline in the European economy. Such continued disruption would have meant complete disaster except for Charles Martel's halting of Islamic expansion into Europe from 732 on. What he managed to preserve led to the [Carolingian Renaissance](#), named after him.

Professor Santosuosso^[12] perhaps sums up Martel best when he talks about his coming to the rescue of his Christian allies in Provence, and driving the Muslims back into the Iberian Peninsula forever in the mid and late 730s:

"After assembling forces at Saragossa the Muslims entered French territory in 735, crossed the River Rhone and captured and looted Arles. From there they struck into the heart of Provence, ending with the capture of Avignon, despite strong resistance. Islamic forces remained in French territory for about four years, carrying raids to Lyon, Burgundy, and Piedmont. Again Charles Martel came to the rescue, reconquering most of the lost territories in two campaigns in 736 and 739, except for the city of Narbonne, which finally fell in 759. The second (Muslim) expedition was probably more dangerous than the first to Poitiers. Yet its failure (at Martel's hands) put an end to any serious Muslim expedition across the Pyrenees (forever)."

In the Netherlands, a vital part of the Carolingian Empire, and elsewhere in the [Low Countries](#), he is considered a hero. In France and Germany, he is revered as a hero of epic proportions.

Skilled as an administrator and ruler, Martel organized what would become the medieval European government: a system of fiefdoms, loyal to barons, counts, dukes and ultimately the King, or in his case, simply *maior domus* and *princeps et dux Francorum*. ("First or Dominant Mayor and Prince of the Franks") His close coordination of church with state began the medieval pattern for such government. He created what would become the first western standing army since the fall of Rome by his maintaining a core of loyal veterans around which he organized the normal feudal levies. In essence, he changed Europe from a horde of barbarians fighting with one another, to an organized state.

[\[edit\]](#) **Beginning of the *Reconquista***

Although it took another two decades for the Franks to drive all the Arab garrisons out of [Septimania](#) and across the [Pyrenees](#), Charles Martel's halt of the invasion of French soil turned the tide of Islamic advances, and the unification of the Frankish kingdoms under Martel, his son Pippin the Younger, and his grandson Charlemagne created a western power which prevented the Emirate of Córdoba from expanding over the Pyrenees. Martel, who in 732 was on the verge of excommunication, instead was recognised by the Church as its paramount defender. [Pope Gregory II](#) wrote him more than once, asking his protection and aid,^[19] and he remained, till his death, fixated on stopping the Muslims. Martel's son [Pippin the Younger](#) kept his father's promise and returned and took Narbonne by siege in 759, and his grandson, [Charlemagne](#), actually established the *Marca Hispanica* across the Pyrenees in part of what today is Catalonia, reconquering Girona in 785 and Barcelona in 801. This sector of what is now Spain was then called "The Moorish Marches" by the Carolingians, who saw it as not just a check on the Muslims in Hispania, but the beginning of taking the entire country back. This formed a permanent buffer zone against Islam, which became the basis, along with the King of Asturias, named Pelayo (718-737, who started his fight against the Moors in the mountains of [Covadonga](#), 722) and his descendants, for the [Reconquista](#) until all of the Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula.

[\[edit\]](#) **Military legacy**

[\[edit\]](#) **Heavy infantry and permanent army**

[Victor Davis Hanson](#) argues that Charles Martel launched "the thousand year struggle" between [European heavy infantry](#) and [Muslim cavalry](#).^[20] Of course, Martel is also the father of heavy cavalry in Europe, as he integrated heavy armoured cavalry into his forces. This creation of a real army would continue all through his reign, and that of his son, Pepin the Short, until his Grandson, Charlemagne, would possess the world's largest and finest army since the peak of Rome.^[21] Equally, the Muslims used infantry - indeed, at the Battle of Toulouse most of their forces were light infantry. It was not till Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi brought a huge force of Arab and Berber cavalry with him when he assumed the emirate of Al-Andulus that the Muslim forces became primarily cavalry.

Martel's army was known primarily for being the first standing permanent army since Rome's fall in 476, ^[21] and for the core of tough, seasoned heavy infantry who stood so stoutly at Tours. The Frankish infantry wore as much as 70 pounds of armour, including their heavy wooden shields with an iron boss. Standing close together, and well disciplined, they were unbreakable at Tours.^[22] Martel had taken the money and property he had seized from the church and paid local nobles to supply trained ready infantry year round. This was the core of veterans who served with him on a permanent basis, and as Hanson says, "provided a steady supply of dependable troops year around." While other Germanic cultures, such as the Visigoths or Vandals, had a proud martial tradition, and the Franks themselves had an annual muster of military aged men, such tribes were only able to field armies around planting and harvest. It was Martel's creation of a system whereby he could call on troops year round that gave the Carolingians the first standing and permanent army since Rome's fall in the west.

And, first and foremost, Charles Martel will always be remembered for his victory at Tours. Creasy argues that the Martel victory "preserved the relics of ancient and the germs of modern civilizations." Gibbon called those eight days in 732, the week leading up to Tours, and the battle itself, "the events that rescued our ancestors of Britain, and our neighbors of Gaul [France], from the civil and religious yoke of the Koran." Paul Akers, in his editorial on Charles Martel, says for those who value life and freedom "you might spare a minute sometime today, and every October, to say a silent 'thank you' to a gang of half-savage Germans and especially to their leader, Charles 'The Hammer' Martel."^[23]

In his vision of what would be necessary for him to withstand a larger force and superior technology (the Muslim horsemen had adopted the armour and accoutrements of heavy cavalry from the Sassanid Warrior Class, which made the first knights possible), he, daring not to send his few horsemen against the Islamic cavalry, used his army to fight in a formation used by the [ancient Greeks](#) to withstand superior numbers and weapons by discipline, courage, and a willingness to die for their cause: a phalanx. He had trained a core of his men year round, using mostly Church funds, and some had been with him since his earliest days after his father's death. It was this hard core of disciplined veterans that won the day for him at Tours. Hanson emphasizes that Martel's greatest accomplishment as a General may have been his ability to keep his troops under control. This absolute iron discipline saved his infantry from the fate of so many infantrymen - such as the Saxons at Hastings - who broke formation and were slaughtered piecemeal. After using this infantry force by itself at Tours, he studied the foe's forces and further adapted to them, initially using stirrups and saddles recovered from the foe's dead horses, and armour from the dead horsemen.

[\[edit\]](#) Brilliant generalship

Martel earned his reputation for brilliant generalship, in an age generally bereft of same, by his ability to use what he had and by integrating new ideas and technology. As a consequence, he was undefeated from 716 to his death against a wide range of opponents, including the Muslim cavalry (at that time, the world's best) and the fierce barbarian Saxons on his own borders—and all this in spite of virtually always being outnumbered. He was the only general in the Middle Ages in Europe to use the eastern battle technique of feigned retreat. His ability to attack when and where he was least expected was legendary. The process of the development of the famous chivalry of France continued in the [Edict of Pistres](#) of his great-great-grandson and namesake [Charles the Bald](#).

The defeats Martel inflicted on the Muslims were vital in that the split in the Islamic world left the [Caliphate](#) unable to mount an all out attack on Europe via its Iberian stronghold after 750. His ability to meet this challenge, until the Muslims self-destructed, is considered by most historians to be of [macrohistorical](#) importance, and is why [Dante](#) writes of him in Heaven as one of the "Defenders of the Faith." After 750, the door to western Europe, the Iberian emirate, was in the hands of the Umayyads, while most of the remainder of the Muslim world came under the control of the Abbasids, making an invasion of Europe a logistical impossibility while the two Muslim empires battled. This put off Islamic invasion of Europe until the [Turkish](#) conquest of the [Balkans](#) half a millennium later.

[H. G. Wells](#) says of Charles Martel's decisive defeat of the Muslims in his "Short History of the World:

"The Moslim when they crossed the Pyrenees in 720 found this Frankish kingdom under the practical rule of Charles Martel, the Mayor of the Palace of a degenerate descendant of Clovis, and experienced the decisive defeat of Poitiers (732) at his hands. This Charles Martel was practically overlord of Europe north of the Alps from the Pyrenees to Hungary."^[24]

[John H. Haaren](#) says in "*Famous Men of the Middle Ages*"

"The battle of Tours, or Poitiers, as it should be called, 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. Charles Martel is especially celebrated as the hero of this battle."

Just as his grandson, Charlemagne, would become famous for his swift and unexpected movements in his campaigns, Charles was legendary for never doing what his enemies forecast he would do. It was this ability to do the unforeseen, and move far faster than his opponents believed he could, that characterized the military career of Charles Martel.

It is notable that the Northmen did not begin their European raids until after the death of Martel's grandson, Charlemagne. They had the naval capacity to begin those raids at least three generations earlier, but chose not to challenge Martel, his son Pippin, or his grandson, Charlemagne. This was probably fortunate for Martel, who despite his enormous gifts, would

probably not have been able to repel the Vikings in addition to the Muslims, Saxons, and everyone else he defeated. However, it is notable that again, despite the ability to do so, (the Danes had constructed defenses to defend from counterattacks by land, and had the ability to launch their wholesale sea raids as early as Martel's reign), they chose not to challenge Charles Martel.

[\[edit\]](#) Conclusion

J.M. Roberts says of Charles Martel in his note on the Carolingians on page 315 of his 1993 *History of the World*:

It (the Carolingian line) produced Charles Martel, the soldier who turned the Arabs back at Tours, and the supporter of Saint Boniface, the Evangelizer of Germany. This is a considerable double mark to have left on the history of Europe."

Gibbon perhaps summarized Charles Martel's legacy most eloquently: "in a laborious administration of 24 years he had restored and supported the dignity of the throne..by the activity of a warrior who in the same campaign could display his banner on the Elbe, the Rhone, and shores of the ocean."

[\[edit\]](#) Family and children

Charles Martel married twice:

His first wife was [Rotrude of Treves](#), (690-724) (daughter of [Leudwinus](#), Bishop of [Trier](#)). They had the following children:

- [Hiltrud](#) (d. 754), married [Odilo I, Duke of Bavaria](#)
- [Carloman](#)
- Landrade (Landres), married [Sigrand, Count of Hesbania](#)
- Auda, Aldana, or Alane, married [Thierry IV, Count of Autun and Toulouse](#)
- [Pepin the Short](#)

His second wife was [Swanhild](#). They had the following child:

- [Grifo](#)

Charles Martel also had a mistress, [Ruodhaid](#). They had the following children:

- [Bernard](#) (b. before 732-787)
- [Hieronymus](#)
- [Remigius, archbishop of Rouen](#) (d. 771)

Carolingian Dynasty

Born: 686 Died: 741

Preceded by
Pepin II the Middle

Mayor of the Palace of Austrasia
717–741

Succeeded by
Carloman

Preceded by
Ragenfrid

Mayor of the Palace of Neustria
717–741

Succeeded by
Pepin the Short