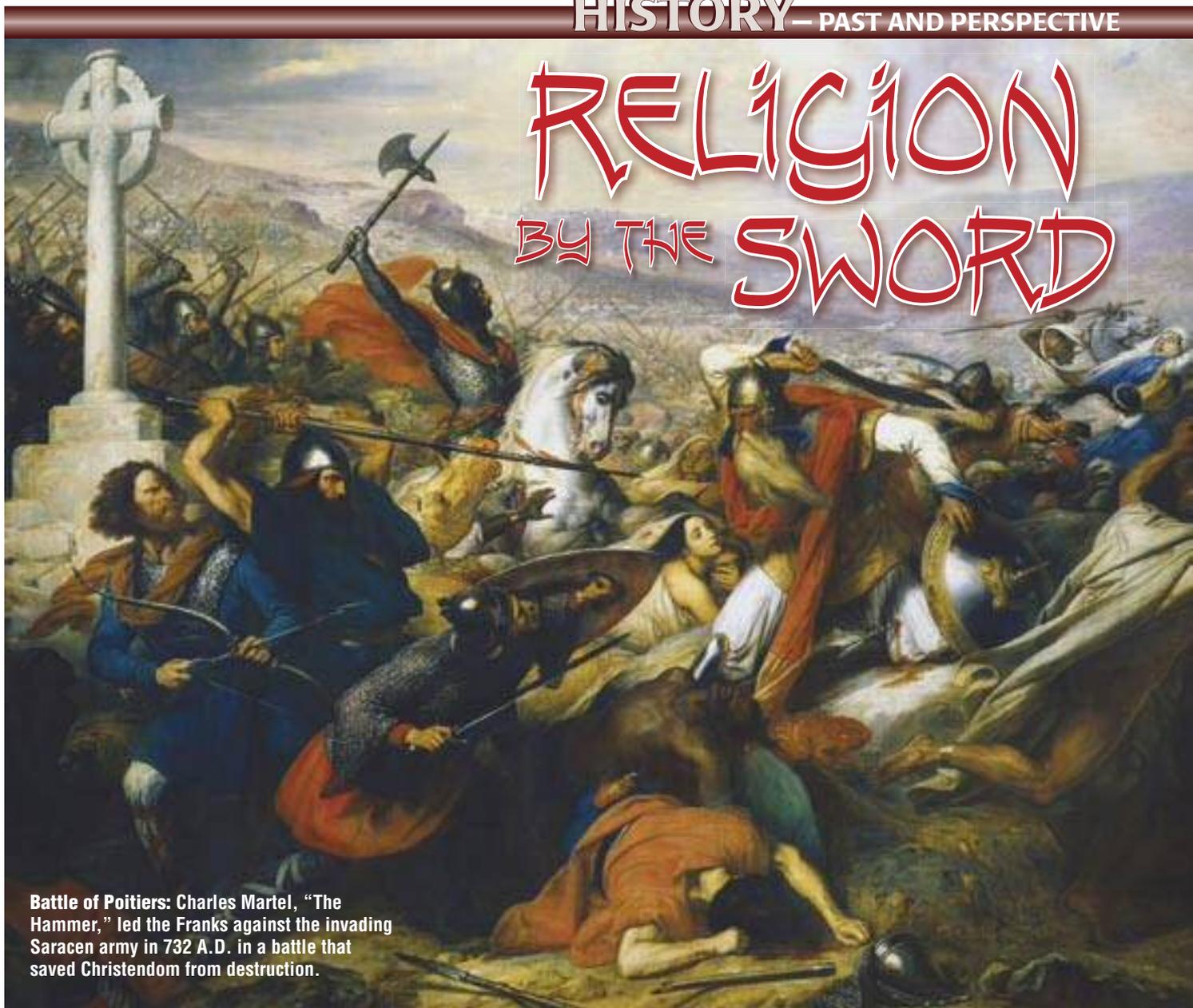


RELIGION BY THE SWORD



Battle of Poitiers: Charles Martel, “The Hammer,” led the Franks against the invading Saracen army in 732 A.D. in a battle that saved Christendom from destruction.

In the century following the death of Muhammad, the religion of Islam formed the basis for the rapid conquest of the Christian lands of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East.

by *Dennis Behreandt*

The fate of Christendom hung by a thread. It was October 732 A.D. Arrayed on a hill, partially obscured by forest, the flower of Frankish chivalry stood waiting for the bloody onset of battle. Their leader, a fearsome Germanic warrior named Karl, the illegitimate son of the former commanding warlord of the Franks, watched with trepidation as the numberless enemy, the same Saracens who had conquered Visigothic Spain, gathered far below the slope of the hill. As days passed,

more and more arrived, until the invading host outnumbered the Frankish infantry by as many as two to one.

Yet Karl had been shrewd, to the same degree that the enemy commander of the Saracen army had been careless. The Saracen general, overconfident as the result of previous victories, had not invested the time or the effort to determine if the Germanic warriors of the north would stream south to resist his invasion. After all, as one sympathetic chronicler of the time noted, his armies “smote their enemies ... and laid waste the country, and took cap-

tives without number. And that army went through all places like a desolating storm.” Buoyed by that success, the invading general was not terribly concerned about what the Franks might do — they would be, as others had been, fodder for his archers and cavalry, heretics and infidels to be put to the sword.

This, perhaps, would be a fatal mistake. In an earlier and glorious age, Karl’s ancestors had swept down from the cold forests of the north to become the bane of the Roman Empire. They had known continual warfare ever since, and though they

now had long adopted the veneer of civilization, the blood-lust of the barbarian still simmered just beneath the surface. In the German warlord's veins, and in the veins of his hardened infantrymen, the blood of conquerors still flowed hot and strong.

For six days the Frankish infantry waited for the charge of the Saracen army. The Franks were clad in rude armor and armed with the infantry weapons of the time, including the much feared *francisca* throwing axe, a spear known as the *angon*, which was similar to the ancient Roman *pilum*, and the three-foot-long *scramasax* sword. They were, Edward Gibbon recounted in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, "with stout hearts and iron hands" ready to assert "the civil and religious freedom of their posterity" against the invading sons of Arabia.

On the seventh day, the battle was joined. The Saracen general, 'Abd ar-Rahmân al-Gafîqî (often given as Abderrahman or Abderame by historians like Thomas Hodgkin or Edward Gibbon, respectively), the governor of Moorish Spain, ordered a charge up the hill against the Franks. "A terrible battle followed," recalled Hodgkin in his monumental study, *The Barbarian Invasions of the Roman Empire*. "The fervour of the sons of the desert, who perchance like the first warriors of Islam deemed that they already saw the flashing eyes of the houris waiting to receive them into paradise, was met, was chilled, was broken by the stolid courage of the soldiers from the Rhineland, who stood ... rigid and immovable as a wall of ice."

Again and again the spears and swords of the Frankish defenders repulsed the invaders. The heavy and lethal blows dealt by Karl, better known as Charles, earned him the legendary surname "Martel": The Hammer. On the bloody field of battle between Poitiers and Tours so many Arabs fell that Saracen chroniclers named the battlefield "the pavement of martyrs." Among the dead was 'Abd ar-Rahmân al-Gafîqî. Though the numbers are heavily exaggerated, the lopsided nature of the Frankish victory can be distilled from the report of the near-contemporary chronicler Paulus Diaconus, who reported that the Franks killed 375,000 of the enemy while suffering only 1,500 casualties themselves.

The blow struck that day, many historians have since concluded, was of



Medina: Having left a hostile Mecca behind, Muhammad and his followers traveled to Medina, the city from which they would begin to build an empire.

world-historical importance. The Frankish repulse of the Saracen army preserved Western Europe as a Christian land and Charles Martel was then, and in the words of Hodgkin continues to be regarded as "the great deliverer of Christendom." According to modern historian Efraim Karsh, had the invaders "not been contained in Northwest France by ... Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers, they might well have swept deep into Europe."

But the victory of the Franks, great though it was, could hardly have been noticed by the Caliph Hisham from his Syrian palace. The leader of the Umayyad Caliphate, the Empire of Islam, ruled over lands stretching from Pakistan through the Middle East and North Africa and into Spain. It was an empire built in the century after the death of Muhammad, not on the spiritual elements of the new religion of Islam, but on the sword. And that conquest was made possible because Islam itself is characterized by its retention of the dual nature of its founder, a man and a prophet

capable of both intense spirituality and intense ferocity in the pursuit of political power. Following his example, set personally within his own life, the early leaders of Islam used religious fervor and terror to extend their dominion over the former Christian lands of the Byzantine Empire and Western Europe, setting the template for a strategy of conquest that continues to be used by some of the followers of Muhammad to this day.

The Beginning of Political Islam

The political variant of Islam, that which seeks to build a political entity on a religious foundation, is not a new phenomenon. It was, in fact, part of the original work of Muhammad himself.

Born, approximately, in 570 A.D., Muhammad's stature among his people as a prophet solidified in about 610 when he began having religious visions during his customary periods of contemplation. He gradually came to believe that these revelations were real and that he was God's

messenger. At this time living in Mecca, he began preaching against the prevailing polytheism of the city and calling for prayer, almsgiving, and kind treatment of the poor.

In Mecca, his followers grew in number and influence, eventually drawing the increasing ire of the ruling Quraysh clan. Due to Quraysh opposition, conditions for Muhammad's followers gradually deteriorated to such an extent that a number of them crossed the Red Sea to seek refuge in the ancient and venerable Christian kingdom ruled from Aksum in modern Ethiopia. There, the Christian Aksumites were favorably impressed by the piety of the early Muslims and agreed to grant them asylum and protection from their persecutors.

Still facing further opposition in his home city of Mecca, in 622 Muhammad and his followers traveled to the Arabian city of Yathrib. There, in the city that was to be renamed Medina — “the Prophet's city” — Muhammad found a more welcoming atmosphere. In Medina, wrote professor Fred M. Donner of the Uni-

versity of Chicago's Oriental Institute in the *Oxford History of Islam*, “Muhammad consolidated his control over the town's disparate population.”

Once in Medina, Muhammad became more than the leader of a new religion. According to scholar John L. Esposito, professor and director of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy at Georgetown University, he began building a theocratic state on the foundation of Islam (a word meaning, literally, submission) and “he oversaw and governed its affairs, serving as its political and military leader, judge, and social reformer.” Mark A. Gabriel, a former Egyptian Imam turned Christian and author of the book *Islam and Terrorism*, puts a finer point on the development of the Islamic state under Muhammad: “Sent to show the mercy of God to the world,” Gabriel wrote, Muhammad “became a military dictator, attacking, killing and taking plunder to finance his empire.”

More troubling still, the new conquering religion attracted others eager for a

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share of the plunder. By sharing the spoils of military victories with the warriors who fought the battles, early Islam ensured the growth of aggressive military power in Arabia. “From all sides,” said Edward Gibbon, “the roving Arabs were allured to the standard of religion and plunder: the apostle [Muhammad] sanctified the license of embracing female captives as their wives or concubines, and the enjoyment of wealth and beauty was a feeble type of the joys of paradise prepared for the valiant martyrs of the faith. ‘The sword,’ says Mahomet, ‘is the key of heaven and of hell; a drop of blood shed in the cause of God, a night spent in arms, is of more avail than two months of fasting or



Invasion: Following a route used centuries earlier by the Persian Emperor Xerxes to attack the Greek cities of Sparta and Athens at Thermopylae, Muslim armies maneuvered to attack the Byzantine Empire

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prayer: whosoever falls in battle, his sins are forgiven: at the day of judgment his wounds shall be as resplendent as vermilion, and odoriferous as musk; and the loss of his limbs shall be supplied by the wings of angels and cherubim.” This is a martial faith, ripe for use as means toward conquering innocent peoples and establishing political hegemony.

Already in the seventh century, the new Islamic state was willing to use terror to achieve its ends. Among the first victims were local Jewish communities. According to Gibbon, a Jewish community in Medina was seized “on the occasion of an accidental tumult.” Muhammad “summoned them to embrace his religion, or contend with him in battle.” The resulting conflict was no contest. According to Gibbon, it

was “with extreme reluctance that [Muhammad] yielded to the importunity of his allies, and consented to spare the lives of the captives. But their riches were confiscated ... and a wretched colony of seven hundred exiles was driven, with their wives and children, to implore a refuge on the confines of Syria.”

Another group of nearby Jews was not treated nearly so well. These, the Qurayzah, were accused of disloyalty and attacked. According to Gibbon, they resisted for 25 days but then surrendered. They then “trusted to the intercession of their old allies of Medina.... A venerable elder, to whose judgment they appealed, pronounced the sentence of their death: seven hundred Jews were dragged in chains to the market-place of the city; they descended alive into the grave prepared for their execution and burial; and the apostle [Muhammad] beheld with an inflexible eye the slaughter of his helpless enemies.” This brutality was accomplished in front of the victims’ wives and children. But even then the horrors were not over. According to Serge Trifkovic, author of the book *The Sword of the Prophet*, “The women were subsequently raped; Muham-

mad chose as his concubine one Raihana bint Amr, whose father and husband were both slaughtered before her eyes only hours earlier.”

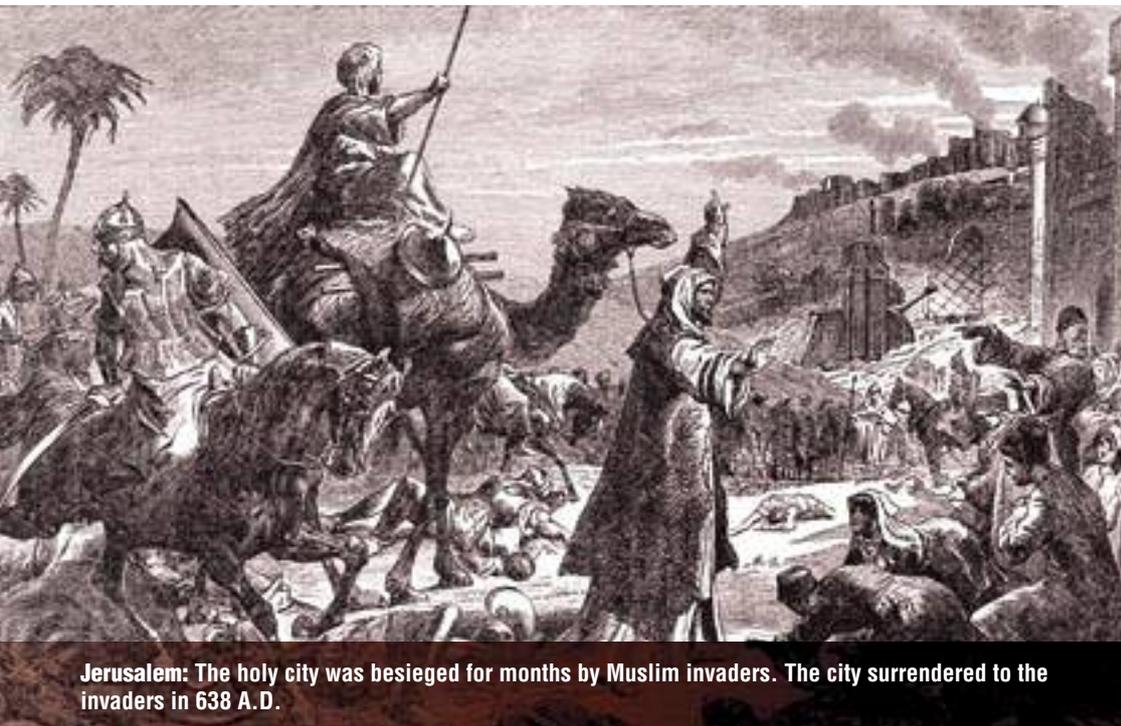
It hardly needs to be noted that Muhammad’s behavior stands in stark contrast to the behavior of Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian faith, who spread the word of God by means of peace, love, and charity rather than by the sword.

The Great Conquest

Perhaps cowed by this reign of terror, the Quraysh, Muhammad’s old enemies in Mecca, were unable to resist his growing strength, and in 630 A.D. Muhammad added Mecca to his small but growing empire. This, though, could have been the end, for Muhammad took ill and died just two years later. But his followers, having tasted blood, looked northward and saw two swollen and anemic empires ripe for conquest.

These were the remnants of the Byzantine Roman and Sassanian Persian empires. Old rivals, they had lately come to blows. The Byzantines under the emperor Heraclius, at the end of a long and brutal struggle, were thoroughly victorious. While the remains of the once-powerful Persian empire fell into chaos, Heraclius returned to Constantinople in victory, entering the city in a chariot drawn by four elephants.

This should have marked the height of Byzantine power, but the formerly energetic Heraclius was as diminished by long campaigns against the Persians as were his treasury and his army. Some 200,000 soldiers had perished according to Gibbon, and the empire was made subject to new and onerous taxes to pay for the expenses the war incurred. In its weakened state, the Byzantine Empire probably did not immediately notice events on its southern frontier. Nevertheless, “while the emperor triumphed at Constantinople or Jerusalem, an obscure town on the confines of Syria was pillaged by the Saracens, the peoples of the Islamic Arab Empire and they cut in pieces some troops who advanced to



Jerusalem: The holy city was besieged for months by Muslim invaders. The city surrendered to the invaders in 638 A.D.

its relief.” This was, said Gibbon, “an ordinary and trifling occurrence, had it not been the prelude of a mighty revolution.”

Buoyed by their successes and hungry for more, Muhammad’s followers billowed up from the south like a mighty sandstorm threatening to bury the world. No force of arms could stop the onrushing storm. “The chronology of the military events of the thirties and forties of the seventh century is obscure and confused,” noted Russian historian A.A. Vasiliev in his two-volume *History of the Byzantine Empire*, but one thing is abundantly clear: no one could withstand the Arab onslaught. “In the year 634,” Vasiliev recounts, “the Arabs took possession of the Byzantine fortress Bothra (Bosra), beyond the Jordan; in 635 the Syrian city of Damascus fell; in 636 the battle on the River Yarmuk led to the Arabian conquest of the entire province of Syria; and in 637 or 638 Jerusalem surrendered after a siege which had lasted for two years.” Within only six years of Muhammad’s death, his followers had carved out a significant chunk of the Byzantine Christian heartland.

The Persia of the Sassanids, debilitated and plunged into chaos by the Byzantines, was likewise easy picking for the new Muslim armies. Immediately after Muhammad’s death, the Arabs began to move into the Persian territories. They were led initially by the Lieutenant of the Caliph, a man named Caed who had earned, presumably by both his piety and ferocity, the appellation “Sword of God.” Under his leadership the Arabs poured into the ancient domain of the Persians. So successful was the invasion, noted Gibbon, “The conquerors, and even their historians were astonished . . . : ‘In the same year,’ says Elmacin, ‘Caed fought many signal battles: an immense multitude of the infidels was slaughtered; and spoils infinite and innumerable were acquired by the victorious Moslems.’” This is the boast of court historians from throughout the ages. But here, where the Muslim conquest of the Persian and Byzantine Empires is concerned, the well-known outcome of events is more than adequate to confirm the boast.

That well-known outcome, however, would not be achieved without a final attempt at resistance from the Persians. Always able to raise great, polyglot armies, the Persians this time assembled, according to Gibbon, an army of 120,000 troops. These met the much smaller, but much more ferocious, army of invaders at a plain known as Kadesiyya in 638. The battle was fierce, but the Persian general was overconfident and was caught unawares in his tent. Injured, his attempt to flee failed and the Arabs brought his head back to the battlefield. The Persians, at the sight of their leader’s demise, presumably lost heart and next lost the battle. Iraq, hitherto a Persian province, submitted to the Caliph.

The rest of the Persian Empire would follow soon enough. “The [Persian] king fled precipitately from his capital,” recalled historian H. St. L. B. Moss in his book *The Birth of the Middle Ages*. “The Arab forces advanced on Ctesiphon [the



Constantinople: The real object of the Muslim invasion of Christendom was Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire. The Christian city was besieged repeatedly by the armies of the Caliphate, but under Emperor Leo the Isaurian, the Byzantines thoroughly routed the invaders in 717 A.D., preserving the Byzantine Empire for many centuries.

UGLY TRUTHS OF HISTORY

It is not uncommon for critics of Islam who recount the history of the early Islamic conquests to be themselves criticized for attacking a religion that has otherwise also had a beneficial impact in important ways on the development of civilization. Those who focus on Islam’s salutary effects make a good point that should not be overlooked. The Islamic world, particularly under the leadership of the Abbasid Caliphate, the successors to the Umayyads, did make many important contributions. This is particularly true in the encounter of Arab thinkers with the works of Aristotle and in other areas of scholarship and exploration. Men like the scientist and philosopher Avicenna and the cartographer Al-Idrissi were just two who made signal contributions to the growth of knowledge and science.

Perhaps based on this legacy, it is often claimed that Islam is, at its root, solely a religion of peace, and that any wars that it engaged in were no different from the wars, like the Crusades, that were begun by Christians. Historically, however, that isn’t true. War certainly existed in Christendom prior to the birth of Muhammad, but it was almost always conducted on political grounds rather than religious ones. Medieval Christendom’s turn to arms in the cause of religion, if viewed properly, was a reaction to the Islamic conquest, an attempt to recover Christian territories lost to jihad.

Still, it is wrong to condemn the entire Islamic world. There are many good and decent people who find peace, beauty, and spiritual comfort and guidance in the Muslim faith. Nevertheless, failure to examine the aggressive elements of Islam and to put them into proper historical perspective is to make a perilous mistake at a time when those elements are increasingly at the center of the world’s conflicts. ■

— DENNIS BEHRENDT

By the time the Islamic wave had crested at Constantinople and been repulsed at Poitiers, it had demonstrated that the faith of Muhammad was at its origin a crusading and militaristic religion dedicated to spreading by terror and sword.

Persian capital], which was taken and pillaged. Mesopotamia was soon overrun, and Muslim bands pushed up the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, and penetrated the Armenian mountain ranges. Meanwhile in the south and east the remaining provinces of the Persian Empire were steadily reduced to obedience, and the last of the Great Kings, fleeing eastward before the invader, found a miserable end at Merv, on the confines of Turkish territory.... By 650 the Persian Empire was no more.”

Constantinople’s Last Stand

The next 50 years saw the continuation of the Saracen conquests. The Byzantines lost Egypt, long the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. After the invading army captured Alexandria, its leader wrote to the Caliph Omar: “I have captured a city from the description of which I shall refrain. Suffice it to say that I have seized therein 4000 villas with 4000 baths, 40,000 poll-tax-paying Jews and four hundred places of entertainment for the royalty.” They then moved through the rest of North Africa and finally into Spain where the weak Visigoths succumbed.

All the while, however, the real gem yet to be conquered was Constantinople. To that end, the Umayyad Caliphate, rulers of the Islamic empire, began launching a series of huge campaigns against the city, first in 669 and again in the years 674-680. The motivation was as much political as religious: the Umayyads sought to expand their empire. The attempted conquest was “motivated by a desire to extend Islamic rule,” Fred M. Donner wrote in the *Oxford History of Islam*. But there were other benefits sought as well: “The caliphs also doubtless hoped to affirm their legitimacy among Muslims by sponsoring such campaigns of jihad against non-Muslim

states,” Donner noted.

The final attempted conquest of Constantinople came in 716 and 717 A.D. An enormous Arab army approached through Asia Minor — today’s Turkey — and encamped outside the city’s walls prepared for a long siege. They were reinforced by an armada from Egypt, “a moving forest” according to Gibbon, that discharged yet more troops.

But inside the city, a shrewd administration had prepared for the siege and a new emperor, Leo the Isaurian, a capable and efficient military leader, was prepared to resist. The initial action was naval, and Byzantine fire ships, using the legendary incendiary material known as “Greek Fire,” laid waste to the Egyptian armada. Denuded of that support, the invaders settled in for the winter, hoping to starve the city into submission, but unspeakable cold and unusual snows weakened their resolve.

In spring, Leo’s skilled diplomacy brought in an army of Bulgarians from the north. With a providential victory foreshadowing the one that would be won a little more than a decade later by Charles Martel and the Franks, the Byzantine world was saved in a pitched battle. “These savage

auxiliaries,” Gibbon said of the Bulgarians, carried out “the defeat and slaughter of twenty-two thousand Asiatics.” Moreover, “A report was dexterously scattered, that the Franks, the unknown nations of the Latin world, were arming by sea and land in the defence of the Christian cause.”

The defeat and the rumor of a rising storm from the northwest induced the Caliph to order a final retreat. For many centuries to come, Christendom’s eastern flank would be spared the Arab onslaught. The Byzantine success, historian H. St. L.B. Moss concluded, “may well rank as one of the decisive battles of history. When the discomfited invaders turned homewards, after a year-long siege which had seen their transports burnt or captured, their troops numbed by the bitter weather or ravaged by plague and famine, they relinquished their last serious enterprise for many centuries against the capital of the Roman Empire.”

By the time the Islamic wave had crested at Constantinople and been repulsed at Poitiers, it had, however, demonstrated that the faith of Muhammad was not solely one of contemplation of and reverence for God, but was at its origin a crusading and militaristic religion dedicated to spreading by terror and sword, its early conquests a warning for centuries to come. ■

Ruins of empire: The remains of the palace at Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sassanian Persian Empire, an empire extinguished by Muslim invaders.

