The idea of “decisive battle” is a well-established concept among both military professionals and academics. Numerous scholarly studies and a great many popular books have focused on the identification of particular battles throughout history as decisive. These efforts generally include examples from the medieval west. However, as with many other historical concepts, proper definitions, that is, definitions that meet the epistemological criteria of both necessity and sufficiency, are simply not to be found in historical works dealing with the decisive-battle phenomenon. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is little specific agreement regarding what characteristics make a battle decisive and, as a result, which battles are, in fact, to be considered decisive by modern scholars and their audiences.

Decisive Late Antique Battles in Gaul

Despite a lack of epistemologically valid criteria, two battles of the late antique and early medieval era, Châlons in 451 and Poitiers (sometimes referred to as the Battle of Tours) in 732, are found on many lists. For example, Sir Edward Creasy, writing in 1851, identifies the victories by Aëtius and Charles Martel as two of the fifteen decisive battles on a worldwide basis from Marathon to Waterloo in 1815. J. F. C. Fuller also recognizes Châlons and Poitiers among the world’s decisive battles. By contrast, however, Fletcher Pratt includes neither of these battles among the sixteen that he chose to study as “battles that changed

1 See, e.g., Joseph Dhamus, Seven Decisive Battles of the Middle Ages (Chicago, 1983).
history.”

More recently, Joseph Dhamus, the only medievalist in this group, includes Châlons but omits Poitiers. Although many more works could be cited, I conclude this brief review by taking note of a recent world military history in which 175 battles are listed in the index. Both Châlons and Poitiers are included. None of the above-cited works, however, chooses to identify the victory won by the Merovingian king Clovis over the Visigothic monarch Alaric II at Vouillé in 507 as worth mentioning, much less to classify it either as a decisive battle or a battle that changed history.

Criteria For Decisiveness: Châlons and Poitiers

Although, as noted above, there is nothing resembling an epistemologically sound definition for a decisive battle among these list makers, they do try, more or less, to justify their choices. Of special interest here are the observations of Pratt, who not only fails to include Châlons and Poitiers, but also omits the Battle of Hastings. Pratt avers that “one of the striking features of Western European culture has been its ability to achieve decisive results by military means.” Thus, Pratt identifies two primary criteria for a decisive battle. First, “the war in which the battle took place must itself have decided something, must really mark one of those turning points after which things would have been a good deal different if the decision had gone in the other direction.” Second, the battle must “represent a positive decision.” He argues, for example, that Creasy’s choice of Châlons and Tours does not fit these criteria because they “were both preventative decisions.” He continues that the “special genius of Western European culture when it takes up arms is for really changing the course of history in battle, not merely arresting a movement, but completely altering its direction.”

Fuller, who includes both Châlons and Poitiers on his list, sees war and peace as “conflicts of ideas and values and not merely struggles between men.” He glosses this point by discussing decisiveness in terms of “ideas which are

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5 Fletcher Pratt, *Battles That Changed History* (New York, 1956).
8 George Bruce, *Harbottle's Dictionary of Battles*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1981), 63, 255, treats the victories by Aëtius and Charles Martel. However, at 201, 270, Vouillé is mentioned and considered a decisive battle. Unfortunately, the author gets some of the key facts wrong.
9 Pratt, *Battles That Changed History*, 11.
10 Ibid., 12.
11 Ibid.
going to live and ideas that, growing senile, are going to die.” It is in this context that he accepts Thomas Hodgkin’s view that the Battle of Châlons “decided that Europe was to belong to the German and the Roman, not to the Tartar race.”

Yet, Fuller also recognizes that Attila and the remnants of his army were permitted to escape after being defeated. He argues that Aëtius concluded that the Huns “should not be decisively defeated.” He continues in this vein and observes that Châlons “in itself … was not a decisive engagement, for it was fought when the Huns were in full retreat.” Thus, at the tactical and perhaps even at the strategic level, Fuller would seem to agree with Gibbon, who observed regarding the effects of the Battle of Châlons: “Neither the spirit nor the forces nor the reputation of Attila were impaired by the failure of the Gallic expedition.”

Like Fuller, Creasy seems to eschew the notion of “decisive battle” with regard to Châlons. He avers, “Aëtius was unwilling to be too victorious.” He claims that Aëtius permitted Attila to escape with the defeated remnant of his army because he feared that if the Huns were destroyed, the Visigoths could become too powerful. It is assumed that Aëtius expected once again to be able to use Hunnic auxiliaries to strengthen his forces as he had during previous decades. The importance of Aëtius’s victory, according to Creasy, rests on the view that Attila never again imperiled the civilized world as he had menaced it before his defeat at Châlons. Contrary to Gibbon, Creasy implies that the failure of Attila’s invasion of Italy was a result of his defeat at Châlons and not of the specific situation as it evolved in the malarial swamps north of Rome during summer 452.

Dhamus, echoing both Gibbon and Fuller, concludes that the Battle of Châlons saw “no clear cut victory.” He follows Creasy and those who believe that Aëtius permitted Attila to escape with what was left of his army because he feared that if the Huns were destroyed, the Visigoths could become too strong. As noted above, it is assumed that Aëtius expected once again to be able to use Hunnic auxiliaries as he had earlier in his career. Dhamus makes clear that he believes there was no decisive winner on the field of battle at Châlons. He concluded, nevertheless, that it must be considered a decisive battle. This is because it proved to the western Roman Empire and to the Germans that the

12 Fuller, *Decisive Battles*, 1.144; and Thomas Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders* (Oxford, 1880–99), 2.159, for the quotation.
13 Fuller, *Decisive Battles*, 1.144.
16 Ibid., 157.
17 Dhamus, *Seven Decisive Battles*, 51.
Huns could be defeated. In short, Aëtius’s victory “hurried to its end the existence of the most ruthless barbarian invader Europe had ever suffered.”

Poitiers

While Dhamus rejects Poitiers as worthy of inclusion among the seven decisive battles of the Middle Ages, he does, however, credit Charles Martel with “blunting Islamic expansion” and considers this encounter “the only great battle fought during the Merovingian period.” Thus, by inference, Dhamus makes clear that Clovis’s victory at Vouillé does not compare favorably on some unexplained calculus of greatness with Charles Martel’s victory at Poitiers. Fuller, who considers Poitiers a decisive battle, makes claims that are far more sweeping than those of Dhamus. He argues that the victory at Poitiers made “Charles Martel the supreme power in France, and enabled him to establish his dynasty.” He then follows Gibbon, who affirms that “the victory of the Franks was complete and final; Aquitaine was recovered by the arms of Eudes; the Arabs never resumed the conquest of Gaul and they were soon driven beyond the Pyrenees by Charles Martel and his valiant race.” Indeed, Gibbon goes so far as to claim that Britain was saved from “calamities” such as “the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mohamet.” Creasy considers Poitiers “a decisive check to the career of Arab conquest in Western Europe.” He goes on to declare that the battle “rescued Christendom from Islam, preserved the relics of ancient and the germs of modern civilization, and reestablished the old superiority of the Indo-European over the Semitic family of mankind.”

What Makes a Battle Decisive?

For those historians who have ventured opinions on a broad scale regarding decisive battles in the early Middle Ages, long-term impact, indeed very long-term impact, the more far reaching the better, tends to be at issue. What actually happened on the battlefield seems far less important than its long-term consequences. Many of these studies obviously fall victim to the post hoc fallacy. They have constructed chains of causal explanation as though they were

18 Ibid., 54.
19 Ibid., 15 and 6, for the quotations, respectively.
20 Fuller, Decisive Battles, 1.166.
21 Ibid., 1.17-18.
22 Gibbon, Decline and Fall, 6.15, for the quotation.
23 Creasy, Fifteen Decisive Battles, 159.
discussing historical laws. Rather they were demonstrating the lack of logical validity of their arguments. The main force driving these excursions into causal fantasy is the ahistorical question: what would have happened if the other side had won? It is obvious to professional historians that we cannot study that which did not happen because it leaves no evidence of having happened. Counterfactual propositions are meaningless, as we cannot even try to rethink the ideas of actors on the historical stage that never were thought.\textsuperscript{24} It must be admitted, nevertheless, that scenarios contrary to fact have a certain unhealthy attraction for those uninitiated into the proper study of history and its methods.

As seen above, historians, even ones as distinguished as Sir Edward Gibbon, when dealing with the concept of decisive battle during the early Middle Ages, have been unable to provide insight of even heuristic value in regard to its contemporary context. They merely project a long-term historical chain of causation to explain “decisiveness.” Therefore, we may perhaps gain some insight into this matter of decisive battle from military theorists, who, at the least, on occasion, may have planned to fight such a battle or to have advised others who actually did make and execute such plans. The very idea of decisive battle, in military terms, was given wide modern circulation before the mid-19th century through Clausewitz’s justly renowned \textit{Vom Krieg} published in 1829.\textsuperscript{25}

Clausewitz devoted an entire section of \textit{On War}, book 4, to battle and discusses it on other occasions, as well. In dealing with the nature of battle, Clausewitz has much to say that is of relevance to the late antique era. He avers that troops move calmly into position.\textsuperscript{26} This, of course, is relevant to most if not all set-piece battles, that is, those in which surprise is not a factor. Not only were both Châlons and Poitiers set-piece battles but insofar as can be ascertained so too was Vouillé. In short, in all three battles, one side, that is, the Romano-Visigothic army, the Visigoths, and the Muslims, at Châlons, Vouillé, and Poitiers, respectively, were intent upon pursuing the tactical offensive, while the Huns, Merovingian Franks, and Carolingian Franks, respectively, were willing to defend the ground in their possession and, thus, to give battle.

Clausewitz also points out that in most modern battles, there are various exchanges over the course of a day’s hostilities. Such efforts, e.g., charges by small groups, both of foot and horse, exchanges of fire in various patterns and for various purposes, feints and flanking initiatives, tend, in general, to be


\textsuperscript{25} All references here are to Carl von Clausewitz, \textit{On War}, ed./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976).

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{On War}, 226.
inconclusive. On the whole, darkness puts an end to the day’s engagement. Clausewitz exposes the inconclusive nature of most “modern” battles as a means of reproach. He asserts that the purpose of war is to defeat the enemy and the purpose of battle is to destroy the enemy forces. The “destruction” of the enemy’s forces “by death, injury, or any other means” must be either complete or “enough to make him stop fighting.” He continues, “The complete or partial destruction of the enemy must be regarded as the sole object of all engagements.”

It is in this respect that a battle may be considered decisive.

It is startling that in regard to the treatment of both Châlons and Poitiers by the historians discussed above little or nothing survives of Clausewitz’s analysis except the term “decisive battle” itself. Of course, Edward Gibbon cannot be held responsible for not knowing Clausewitz’s classic study. But, the specialists in military history discussed above cannot have been ignorant of the idea of decisive battle, the German military theorist’s most important idea. In this context, the example of General Fuller may be noted. Fuller professional reputation, in fact, rests upon his work as a military theorist and not as a military historian. He knew Clausewitz’s work very well.

Perhaps most surprising, however, is the treatment of these battles by Hans Delbrück, one of the early 20th century’s primary experts on Clausewitz’s thinking and the father of the modern study of military history. Delbrück considers Châlons to have been a great battle, but says nothing of its decisiveness. He mentions the Battle of Vouillé merely as an example of Gallo-Roman fighting men having been integrated into the armies of the newly created Romano-German kingdoms. By contrast with Châlons and Vouillé, Delbrück waxes eloquent regarding Charles Martel’s victory at Poitiers. He observes, echoing many of the scholars discussed above, “There was no more important battle in world history than the Battle of Tours, in which Charles Martel stopped the Arabs and threw them back.” He goes on to proclaim that

27 On War, 226, gives a much more limited description and makes clear that he does so, largely because many of these details are dealt with in other contexts.

28 On War, 227.


30 Hans Delbrück, Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1900–1936), of which vol. 2 deals with the period under discussion here. This volume is now available as History of the Art of War: Within the Framework of Political History, ed. Walter J. Renfroe (Westport CT, 1980), and will be cited here for the convenience of the reader. Regarding Delbrück’s career as an historian, see Gordon A. Craig, “Delbrück: Military Historian,” in Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret et al., 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1986), 326–53; and as a theorist, see Gat, History of Military Thought, 371–77.

31 Delbrück, History of the Art of War, 328.

32 Ibid., 398–400.
although “we know almost nothing about the details of the battle … the warriorhood which was developed in the Frankish kingdom … saved the future of the Germanic-Romanic and Christian world.” None of Clausewitz’s teaching in regard to the nature of decisive battle enters into Delbrück’s discussion of this encounter. Rather, he sounds much like Gibbon.33

By contrast, the work of J. F. Verbruggen is of exceptional interest in regard to Clausewitz and the concept of decisive battle. Throughout his *The Art of War in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, Verbruggen works diligently to prove that medieval warfare was the equal of that in the ancient world and in the early modern period. The traditional view of medieval warfare, as, for example, expressed by the noted theoritican Liddell Hart, “in the west during the Middle Ages the spirit of feudal chivalry was inimical to military art,” is rejected.34 To sustain his views, Verbruggen compares medieval military strategies to Clausewitz’s model and finds that they fit together very well. He declares, in this context, that Clovis sought “decisive” battle in 507 at Vouillé and Charles Martel did the same at Poitiers in 732. Thus, these efforts meet Clausewitz’s criteria. Verbruggen, however, does not analyse either of these battles and, in fact, misleads his readers when he asserts that in 732 Charles “attacked” the Muslims.35

Finally, we come to the basic treatment of medieval warfare, *War in the Middle Ages* by Philippe Contamine. Like Verbruggen, Contamine believes that

33 Ibid., 441, for the quotation. It is to be noted, however, that Delbrück (375–84) characterizes the Byzantine victories in the field over the Goths as decisive, but does not explain the criteria he used. Among the major specialists in medieval military history, whose works are traditionally consulted, the record is not illuminating regarding the decisive battle phenomenon. Charles Oman, *History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (orig. 1924; repr. New York, 1964), says nothing of decisiveness in regard to any of these battles, but argues (21) that “cavalry” was the decisive arm of both sides at the Battle of Châlons. Ferdinand Lot, *L’Art militaire et les armées au Moyen Age et dans la Proche-Orient* (Paris, 1946), 1.26, discusses Châlons for the purpose of speculating that the Romans could not have defeated the Huns without the help of the Visigoths. He discusses Vouillé (80–83) and mocks previous writers, mostly former military officers, who have tried to reconstuct the battle on the basis of Gregory’s account, which he quotes in full. Lot says nothing regarding the decisive nature of the battle. Regarding Charles Martel’s victory at Poitiers (111–14), Lot observes that the Frankish victory was “plus decisif que le wali Abd-ar-Rahman avant trouvé le mort dans l’action.”


the study of war in the Middle Ages is very important and avers, “It is pure blindness to leave a medieval gap in a list of military talents from Caesar to the sixteenth century.” Contrary to Verbruggen, however, Contamine does not use Clausewitz’s categories to make his case and does not, in fact, focus on battles. Rather, he demonstrates that battles were very rare during the Middle Ages because military leaders maintained a “siege mentality.” However, when Contamine does treat battle, he invokes Clausewitzian tones and observes, without supporting evidence, that “it remains the case that the pitched battle was conceived as the culminating point of a war, the chief episode which, although limited in area and concentrated in time, was the object of all fears, expectations and hopes.”

Contamine does not treat the Battle of Châlons, which according to his chronology falls into the domain of Roman history. The Battle of Vouillé is mentioned twice but is not examined in military terms. Finally, Contamine does not treat the Battle of Poitiers in detail and implicitly rejects any notion that it was decisive in the manner quoted above, that is, as a “culminating point of a war.” Contamine’s influence in rejecting a discussion of decisive battle, despite the importance of the ideas of Clausewitz and, perhaps even more importantly those of Verbruggen, seems to have taken hold. Thus, for example, Halsall begins his textbook in 450, but ignores the Battle of Châlons, says nothing about the nature of Clovis’s victory at Vouillé, and treats Poitiers as an insoluble source problem. Strategy, in general, much less the idea of decisive battle, is ignored.

Application of the Clausewitz Model

Clausewitz’s model permits us to gain some insight into the battles of Châlons, Vouillé, and Poitiers with regard to modern professional military ideas regarding decisiveness. It is clear that in all three engagements, the defeated army, that is, the Huns, Visigoths, and Muslims, respectively, suffered losses that were of a sufficient order of magnitude to convince the commanders in all three situations that they could not continue the battle the next day. In this regard, the evidence shows that both the Visigoths in 507 and Muslims in 732 fled. In both cases,

37 Ibid., 219.
38 Ibid., 228–29.
39 Ibid., 17, 262.
40 Ibid., 22, 24, 179–83.
the field of battle was abandoned to the victorious Franks. At Châlons, Attila withdrew his badly defeated army into his fortified encampment and refused to continue the battle.

It is important to make clear, in this context, that further offensive action by the Romano-Visigothic army at Châlons would have required that it enjoy great superiority in numbers, i.e., at least a 4–5:1 ratio. In addition, with the Huns’ heavy reliance on their highly effective recurve bows, any effort to storm Attila’s encampment would have resulted in massive casualties to Aëtius’s army. An alternative was for the allies to lay siege to the encampment and starve out the Huns. This was impractical because the Huns could eat their horses and thus hold out for a very long time. In addition, Aëtius’s Visigothic allies were in a great hurry to return home. Thus, with the connivance of Aëtius, who probably hoped to be able to use Hunnic troops at a later date, Attila was permitted to retreat from his camp without opposition a day or so after the battle and fled east across the Rhine. Despite his losses at Châlons, Attila still was capable of raising an army in 452 for the purpose of invading Italy. It cannot be ascertained, however, what percentage of this new army was drawn from among the survivors of Châlons and what percentage were new recruits.

Like Aëtius at Châlons, Charles Martel did not order a pursuit of the fleeing enemy. Thus, he failed to cause a vastly increased number of casualties and to take large numbers of prisoners, that is, to destroy the enemy army effectively. The immediate reason for the lack of a vigorous pursuit by Charles’s army is obvious. The Muslim force, which was on the offensive, broke off its attacks against Charles Martel’s phalanx of foot soldiers as night fell. Frankish pursuit in the dark would have been tactically unsound for several reasons. First, the Arab armies were practiced in the feigned-retreat tactic. Therefore, drawing the Franks from their defensive position would have been an effective ruse to destroy the cohesion of the Frankish phalanx. Maintaining unit cohesion is especially difficult for a pursuing force in the darkness. The Franks also were well informed regarding the feigned-retreat tactic, and Charles was not about to be outmaneuvered at the end of the day. Finally, the Frankish army had been

42 B. S. Bachrach and Rutherford Aris, “Military Technology and Garrison Organization: Some Observations on Anglo-Saxon Military Thinking in Light of the Burghal Hidage.” Technology and Culture 31 (1990): 1–17; and reprinted with the same pagination in B. S. Bachrach, Warfare and Military Organization in Pre-Crusade Europe (London, 2002), where it is emphasized that the quality of the defenses are far less important than the “fire power” that the defenders could generate.


operating to the north of the battlefield and had not had the opportunity to reconnoiter the territory to the south, the direction in which the Muslims withdrew. Were the Frankish army to have undertaken a pursuit as night fell, it would have been handicapped by ignorance of the terrain as well as by darkness. Thus, Charles ordered his forces to retire into their own fortified camp, castrum, to await the continuation of battle the next morning.45

On the morning of the next day, the Frankish army marched from its camp against the fortified Muslim camp, but found it largely deserted. The greater part of Abd al Rachman’s forces had retreated during the night. The enemy castrum was manned by a relatively small delaying force that rapidly fell to Charles’s army when it stormed the defenses. The Muslims had abandoned most of their equipment and were traveling light and fast. The booty that they had gathered over the previous weeks and whatever prisoners they had taken were left behind. As a result of what may have been even as much as a ten-hour head start, the Muslims could outrun any pursuit that Charles might have wished to mount. In addition, there still was the matter of Charles’s ignorance of the terrain further to the south and the capacity of the retreating Muslim force to lay ambushes along the route.46

In strategic terms, Charles was certainly pleased by a victory that forced the enemy to retreat. His primary objective was to stop the further northward movement of the Muslims and the danger these operations posed to the shrine of Saint Martin at Tours. This objective had been achieved. The Frankish army surely was pleased with the booty that had been obtained with the capture of the enemy camp. Finally, Charles gained a certain renown not only for having stopped the Muslims but for having freed numerous Christian prisoners who were being taken back to Spain to be sold as slaves.

Charles also was operating in a strategic alliance with Duke Eudo of Aquitaine. Thus, the Frankish forces were not the only army in Gaul that was opposed to the Muslims. Charles had made a treaty with Duke Eudo, and the Frankish campaign that culminated in victory at Poitiers was based upon a mutual aid pact. By moving his armies further to the south at this time, even in pursuit of a retreating Muslim army, Charles probably would have infringed upon Eudo’s autonomy, which had been arranged by the above mentioned treaty. This treaty, in point of fact, was maintained until 760.47 Only when Waiofer, Eudo’s successor as duke of Aquitaine, broke the treaty with King Pippin, Charles Martel’s son, did the Franks invade Aquitaine and conquer it in a series of campaigns that lasted until 768.48

46 Ibid., 170–72.
47 Ibid., 30–32.
48 Ibid., 207–10.
Military historians who focused particularly on the Battle of Vouillé have expended considerable effort to reconstruct the details of the battle, largely in its presumed topographical context. Although these efforts have enjoyed little success in unearthing the details of the battle, they have engendered much fruitless controversy. A survey of modern works dealing with the reign of Clovis and late antique Gaul indicates that they have little or nothing to say regarding the decisive nature of the Battle of Vouillé. For example, Wood observes: “There he [Clovis] defeated Alaric II.” Nothing is said regarding whether the battle was decisive or anything of its military significance. By contrast, Eugen Ewig considers Vouillé “einen vollständigen Sieg,” which implies decisiveness. While Michel Rouche does not discuss the decisive nature of Vouillé in Clausewitzian terms, he does place great weight on Clovis’s victory. He sees it as the fundamental action that made possible the accomplishments of the remainder of Clovis’s reign. Karl Ferdinand Werner, without actually

49 See Mathisen’s essay on Voulon in this volume Vouillé.
50 In addition to the works cited by Lot in L’Art militaire 1.80–83, see Colonel Lecointre, “La Bataille de 507 entre Clovis et Alaric,” Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de l’Ouest 3rd ser. 4 (1916–18): 423–56, whose main contribution has been to cast doubt on the traditional location of the battle. By contrast, Godefroid Kurth, Clovis (Paris, 1901), 2.77–78, who was not a military historian, provides a plausible reconstruction of the actual battle from which my account varies little. Kurth (75) does venture the opinion that the Battle of Vouillé decided “les destinées de l’Europe,” but does not raise the question of “decisive” battle.
51 For historians several points are important in the context of decisive battle. This was a concept that was well understood in the west well prior to Vouillé and one that has a continuous history to the present. Thus, with regard to the planning and execution of battles our ancient and medieval predecessors sometimes planned to fight a decisive battle and sometimes even succeeded. The idea of Vernichtungskrieg, e.g., did not originate with Clausewitz. I have identified fifteen books dealing with Clovis and the Merovingians by a broad spectrum of French scholars that appeared between 1995 and 1997. These, in general, have nothing to say about the nature of Vouillé in terms of its military decisiveness. Those works meriting notice are treated below.
53 Eugen Ewig, Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich (Stuttgart, 1988), 26, 28, does not pursue the idea of decisiveness in Clausewitzian terms, but makes clear that the victory made possible further conquest.
employing a Clausewitzian model, comes close when he avers that Vouillé “les Visigoths fuerent écrasés. … Le ‘Royaume de Toulouse’ disparaissait.” 55

Diplomatic Background

The Battle of Vouillé was the opening military encounter of a campaign that some have seen as orchestrated by the Frankish king Clovis (481–511) to destroy the Visigothic kingdom in Aquitaine and to conquer the southwestern quadrant of Gaul. It must remain a matter for speculation, however, whether the idea for this campaign of conquest was initiated in Constantinople. An imperial policy intended to strengthen the position of the Franks, now Nicene Christians with the support of the episcopal hierarchy in the north against the Arian Visigoths and Ostrogoths, surely would have been attractive to Emperor Anastasius. 56 A strong case, nevertheless, can be made that at this time Clovis had the diplomatic and monetary support of the imperial government for Frankish military operations against the Visigoths. 57

Emperor Anastasius’s envoys met with Clovis, probably at his capital in Paris. 58 The Frankish king, in accordance with traditional late Roman policy, probably was awarded the rank of an imperial general. At this time he also may have been provided with an appropriate uniform. 59 In addition, it also may have

56 For a contrary view that the conversion did not happen until after Vouillé, see D. R. Shanzer, “Dating the Baptism of Clovis: The Bishop of Vienne vs. the Bishop of Tours,” *Early Medieval Europe* 7.1 (1998): 29–57; and Wood’s essay in this volume. In this context, attention must also be given to the ill-timed revolt of Hispano-Romans in Catalonia led by a certain Peter. See Rouche, *L’Aquitaine*, 48.
57 Greg, *Hist.* 2.38 (*Libri Historiarum X*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, SRM 1.1). The coins that Clovis later used during his victory ceremony at Tours probably formed part of this subsidy. Regarding the Byzantine use of subsidies to support their policies in Gaul, see, e.g., Greg, *Hist.* 3.32; 6.2, 42; 7.36; 8.18. This is a subject in need of more study. For a case for extensive Byzantine involvement with the Franks at this time, see Anthea Harris, *Byzantium, Britain, and the West: The Archaeology of Cultural Identity, AD 400–650* (Stroud, Gloucestershire/Charleston SC, 2003), 26–33.
58 Regarding these negotiations, see the discussion by Kurth, *Clovis*, 2.61–62.
been at this time that the imperial envoys provided Clovis with a monetary subsidy. Anastasius’s envoys additionally may have conveyed several promises to Clovis from the emperor that would be fulfilled should he be successful in defeating the Visigoths and driving them out of Aquitaine. Clovis would be elevated to the status of patricius and would be named honorary consul or perhaps even regular consul. Finally, if victorious, Clovis was to be recognized at Constantinople as a high-ranking imperial governor with the title equivalent to the Egyptian “augustal prefect” or some similar form of honorific. The provinces to be considered under Clovis’s regnum consisted, it would seem, at least of Aquitania Prima and Secunda and perhaps also Narbonensis Prima and Secunda and Novempopulana.

It is not at all clear exactly when Anastasius’s envoys made this arrangement with Clovis, which presupposed an understanding of the effectiveness of Frankish military power and the potential for support in Aquitaine. The Byzantine government surely knew that as early as ca. 486, the Visigothic monarch Alaric II showed fear of Clovis or, at least, of the army he could potentially mobilize for military operations south of the Loire. By 506 Clovis

71; and reprinted with the same pagination in B. S. Bachrach, Armies and Politics in the Early Medieval West (London, 1993).

60 Greg. Hist. 2.38, is to be read in concert with the pathbreaking assessment of this chapter by McCormick, “Clovis at Tours,” 155–80. See also R. W. Mathisen, “Clovis, Anastase et Grégoire de Tours: consul, patrice et roi,” in Rouche, Clovis, 1.395–407, who juxtaposes the imperial role of these titles with that of Clovis’s royal aspirations and leans toward the latter. I see no reason why it is necessary to pursue an either/or interpretation as contrasted to a both/and view of the situation.

61 Greg. Hist. 2.38, observes: ab ea die tamquam consul aut augustus est vocitatus (“from this day he was addressed like a consul or an augustus”). It is obvious that Clovis was not made an augustus by the emperor. However, it is also likely that Gregory did not obtain information from a written source such as the codicilli sent from Constantinople, but more probably through a somewhat corrupted oral tradition based on these documents. Whereas other areas of the late Roman Empire had Vicars, in Egypt the Augustal Prefect served in the capacity of a Vicar with authority extending over several; see A. H. M. Jones, The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey (Norman OK, 1964), 1.281. In regard to the tendency of inaccuracies or confusions to enter orally transmitted information, see Andrew B. Gallia, “Reassessing the ‘Cumaean Chronicle’: Greek Chronology and Roman History in Dionysius of Halicarnassus,” JRS 97 (2007): 50–67; and from a more general perspective, see Jan Vansina, Oral Traditions as History (Madison, 1985). In this interpretation, I part company with with Olivier Guillot, “Clovis ‘August,’ vecteur des conceptions romano-chrétiennes,” in Rouche, Clovis, 1.705–37. It is my view that Guillot’s excellent study in the very broadly based history of ideas regarding rulership departs too far from context and, in effect, credits Gregory or his western source with making claims regarding Clovis’s status that Emperor Anastasius would neither grant nor recognize.

62 Greg. Hist. 2.27. Regarding the development of Clovis’s army during the two decades preceeding his invasion of Aquitaine, see two studies by B. S. Bachrach, “The Imperial Roots of Merovingian Military Organization,” in Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society
had demonstrated his military effectiveness in conquering northern Gaul during the previous decade.\textsuperscript{63} In this context, there is good reason to believe that at least several Nicene bishops in Aquitaine were working to support the cause of the Roman-Christian king of the Franks against the Arian Visigoths.\textsuperscript{64} Alaric surely was as well informed regarding Clovis’s military effectiveness and his likely interest in Aquitaine, as were the Byzantines. Alaric even may have learned that Emperor Anastasius, as suggested above, was interested in using Clovis’s army against the Visigoths.\textsuperscript{65} Alaric’s close ally and father-in-law, the Ostrogothic king Theoderic, who ruled much of Italy, also seems to have believed that Clovis’s war aims were coming to focus on Aquitaine and the Visigothic kingdom. Thus, Theodoric strove through diplomatic efforts to dissuade the Frankish ruler from attacking the Visigoths. Additionally, he made it known that he would lend his support to Alaric.\textsuperscript{66} Theodoric also contacted various other kings on the borders of the \textit{regnum Francorum}, e.g., the rulers of the Heruli, Warni, and Thuringians, in order to recruit them to help stop Clovis’s foreseen aggression in Aquitaine against the Visigoths.\textsuperscript{67} It seems clear


\textsuperscript{64} Greg. \textit{Hist}. 2.36, calls attention to Bishop Quintianus of Rodez. For other bishops who would seem to have opposed Visigothic rule, see B. S. Bachrach, \textit{Merovingian Military Organization, 481–751} (Minneapolis, 1972), 7; and Rouche, \textit{L’Aquitaine}, 45–46. See also Wood, \textit{Merovingian Kingdoms}, 46–48, who appears to be more interested in showing the biases of Gregory of Tours than in understanding opposition to Alaric among non-Arians in Aquitaine. In order to do this, Wood often reads sources other than Gregory as plain text. This, of course, is no more valid that reading Gregory as plain text.

\textsuperscript{65} Kurth, \textit{Clovis}, 2.60–67, suggests that such information was likely to come from Theodoric the Ostrogoth. The latter’s relations with the east Roman emperor had been deteriorating and by 506 were very poor. Theodoric, however, was very well placed to learn that Anastasius was courting a military alliance with the Frankish king. In this context, it is to be noted that following Clovis’s victory over the Visigoths, war broke out between the Ostrogoths and the empire, which, with the benefit of hindsight, we can suppose was Theodoric’s worry as early as 506 and part of Anastasius’s overall plan. See the peculiar treatment of these events by Wood, \textit{Merovingian Kingdoms}, 48–49.

\textsuperscript{66} Theodoric advises Clovis to cease his aggressive activities with regard to the Alamanni (Cass. \textit{Variae} 2.41) and tries to blunt what seems to be Clovis’s intention to go to war against Alaric (\textit{Hist}. 3.4). In this latter communication, Theodoric makes clear that the “maliciousness” of a foreign power is at work in trying to bring Clovis to war against Alaric. Theodoric also emphasizes that he will not stand by and let Clovis attack Alaric if mediation fails. For a useful commentary on this letter, see Rouche, \textit{Clovis}, 420–21.

\textsuperscript{67} Cass. \textit{Variae} 3.3.
that when Theodoric wrote to these kings, he believed that King Gundobad of the Burgundians would support him against Clovis. \(^{68}\) Ultimately, Theodoric was proved wrong in this regard. \(^{69}\)

In light of both Visigothic and Ostrogothic concerns regarding Clovis, Alaric called for a conference with the Frankish king in 506. The two monarchs met on an island located in the Loire River, not far from the *vicus* of Amboise. \(^{70}\) The meeting of the two rulers on an island in the river illustrates symbolically that the Loire served as the border between the two kingdoms. The major result of this conference was the establishment of a nonaggression pact in which both rulers promised mutual friendship. \(^{71}\) It also has been argued that Alaric agreed to pay a *stipendium* of some sort to Clovis. \(^{72}\) And it is probably at this time that Alaric agreed to accept Clovis’s *ditio* over the fortress cities of Nantes, Angers, Tours, and Orléans, \(^{73}\) which, for all intents and purposes, gave the Frankish ruler control of the lower Loire valley with its immense agricultural and commercial importance. \(^{74}\) As in other Gallic cities, the overwhelming majority

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68 Cass. *Variae* 3.3 alludes to Gundobad’s support for Theodoric’s policy.


70 Greg. *Hist*. 2.35.

71 Greg. *Hist*. 2.35. It is important to emphasize here that Gregory, who was abnormally partial to Clovis, frankly admits that the Frankish king, who already was a Christian, broke his oath when he went to war against Alaric. Gregory writes *promissa sibi amicitia*, which is usually understood by modern scholars to mean that there was a sworn pact. Thus, Gregory may perhaps have used the language of promise rather than of oath-taking to absolve Clovis of perjury.

72 Based on additions to the Copenhagen manuscript of Prosper’s chronicle, Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 47, speculates that Alaric paid tribute to Clovis after the latter had attacked Bordeaux in 498, but these additions mention neither Clovis nor tribute. The chronology of Clovis’s reign and the logistics for such a campaign in 498 make it virtually impossible for the Frankish king to have been involved personally. See, Bachrach, “Procopius.” However, the letter by Avitus (*Epist*. 87), which calls attention to financial matters in the context of this war, may support the suggestion that Alaric agreed to pay a subsidy to Clovis in 506. See D. R. Shanzer and I. N. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Selected Letters and Prose*, TTH 38 (Liverpool, 2002).

73 For a contrary view, see Mathisen’s essay on the First Franco-Visigothic War in this volume.

74 In light of Clovis’s strong record of conquest and of the successful military operations in the Loire valley undertaken by his father Childeric, it is clear that Alaric regarded the Frankish king with some trepidation. As a result, he was prepared to make significant concessions. Theodoric, who evaluated the Visigothic army as weak and unprepared, had advocated that Alaric maintain peace with Clovis at virtually any cost. See Cass. *Variae* 3.1. Perhaps more importantly, Greg. *Hist*. 2.37, while listing Clovis’s conquests following the victory at Vouillé, makes no mention of Nantes, Angers, Tours, and Orléans as being taken by the Frankish army. These omissions permit the inference that Clovis had gained possession of these cities before the battle. Finally, prior to the invasion of 507, Clovis’s envoys are seen to operate freely at Tours. Finally, when the
of the populations of all four of these civitates, that is, the urbes and their administrative circumscriptions, were Roman Christians, who, led by their Nicene clergy were, at least in principle, hostile to the Arianism of the Visigoths.

Indeed, with respect to the “religious card,” Gregory of Tours tends to credit or at least to infer that bishops such as Quintianus of Rodez, Volusianus of Tours, Aprunculus of Langres, and Verus of Tours were engaged in actions against Arian domination primarily for religious reasons. The situation in each case, however, may have been far more complex. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that simply because Gregory’s parti pris was to emphasize religious motivation when he treated especially those bishops whom he regarded as virtuous is not a valid reason to assume that information presented in the Ten Books of History, which depicts a prelate acting for religious reasons is to be considered suspect or even to be rejected tout court. And Roman opposition also would have arisen because Gallo-Romans often found Visigothic behavior to be objectionable in regard to their efforts to occupy various cities (such as Clermont), their actual occupation of cities (such as Arles), along with the implantation of garrisons, the destruction of crops, and the confiscation of property.

It is not clear whether Clovis negotiated in good faith with Alaric at Amboise or whether the Frankish king already had made his arrangements, noted above, with Emperor Anastasius. If the agreement had already been made with Constantinople, then the meeting at Amboise and the pact negotiated between the two kings may be seen as ruse perpetrated by Clovis to mislead Alaric and Theodoric, his Ostrogothic ally, into relaxing their vigilance. Had Clovis refused to meet with Alaric or had he refused to agree to seal a pact of amicitia, both Gothic kings would have had their suspicions confirmed regarding Frankish aggressive intentions south of the Loire. However, if Clovis had not yet made his agreement with Anastasius, the pact with Alaric may have been negotiated in good faith, since the Visigothic king had made so many important concessions. Nevertheless, whatever concessions Alaric may have made, it is obvious that the Byzantines simply outbid the Visigoths and bought themselves a Frankish ally.

Frankish army crossed the Loire in the environs of Tours, there is no mention of a Visigothic garrison providing opposition.

76 For Gregory’s controlling assumptions, see Walter Goffart, The Narrators of Barbarian History (550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon (Princeton, 1988), 112–234; and note also the ambiguous manner in which Wood, Merovingian Kingdoms, 46–47, treats the matter of religious motivation in regard to opposition by Roman Christian prelates to the Visigothic monarchy.
Prior to mobilizing his army for the invasion of Aquitaine, Clovis arranged a military alliance with the Burgundian king, Gundobad. This pact called for Burgundian forces to undertake military operations against various Visigothic fortress cities and lesser strongholds in the south, e.g., Limoges, and to aid Clovis’s forces in besieging the fortress cities of Arles and Carcasonne. It also seems likely that as part of the campaign strategy a Burgundian army was to move west into Gaul. This would have two tactical goals. If Theoderic sent an army to support Alaric, it was the task of the Burgundians to interpose themselves between that force and the Visigothic army so that the Ostrogoths would be unable to provide direct support against Clovis. If the Ostrogothic army did not appear in a timely manner, however, then the Burgundian expeditionary force could move north either in an attempt to catch the Visigoths in a pincer or to seize any strongholds that the retreating army might use to regroup. The distances involved had a direct impact on both the speed with which communications could be exchanged and military forces could be deployed. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Gundobad was expected to send troops directly against Alaric’s army in order to aid Clovis north of Poitiers.

War

It cannot be ascertained exactly when Alaric obtained sufficient intelligence to conclude that the “island accord,” negotiated the previous year in the environs of Amboise, was a dead letter. However, it may be assumed, in the worst case, that the Visigothic king learned of Clovis’s intentions when the latter issued orders throughout the regnum Francorum for the mobilization of the army. At roughly the same time, Clovis also sent a circular letter to all of the bishops into whose sees the army was likely to pass, making clear that he had ordered his men to respect the people and property of the church. These orders probably were

78 See, Rouche, Clovis, 311–12, which remains the best study of Clovis’s reign and of the sources. However, I disagree with Rouche’s implication that the Burgundians somehow acted without following a prearranged plan. In premodern times, because of the pace of communications and troop movements, the detailed planning of campaign strategy well prior to deployment and engagement was essential. See the discussion by Bachrach, Early Carolingian Warfare, 202–42.
79 Rouche, Clovis, 309–11, covers the Burgundian operations, but does not comment on the overall strategic picture.
80 Clovis issued a capitulary for the purpose of mobilizing troops throughout the regnum Francorum. See Capitularia Regum Francorum, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Leges 2.1 (Hannover, 1883). This document, in its present form, is the letter sent by Clovis to the
sent out in late February or early March 507.\textsuperscript{81} Alaric sought military support from Theodoric and ordered the mobilization of the Visigothic army in response to Clovis's obvious provocation and his abrogation of the pact negotiated at Amboise.\textsuperscript{82} Alaric's march north, approximately 340 kilometers from Toulouse to the Poitiers region, and Clovis's march south from Paris to the area around Vouillé, approximately 310 kilometers, permits the inference that the Visigothic king learned of Clovis's plans shortly after the Frankish king issued mobilization orders. In response, he mustered his troops as rapidly as did his adversary.\textsuperscript{83}

The Visigothic Army

Alaric's military forces were composed of both Visigoths and Gallo-Romans. The former were the descendants of those men who had fought so successfully more than a half-century earlier under Aëtius's overall command against Attila at Châlons. By the early 6th century, many of the Visigothic soldiers based in Aquitaine had benefited over several decades from the gradual mutation into landed estates of the shares of tax revenue (\textit{sortes}) their forbearers had received from the imperial government to support their military efforts. Therefore, many of the Visigoths, as a result of their landed wealth, were able to continue to

\begin{itemize}
\item [81] Regarding the traditional time of the year for the muster of the military forces of the \textit{regnum Francorum}, see B. S. Bachrach, “Was the Marchfield Part of the Frankish Constitution?” \textit{Medieval Studies} 36 (1974): 78–85; and reprinted with the same pagination in B. S. Bachrach, \textit{Armies and Politics in the Early Medieval West} (London, 1993). N.B. The “normal” or institutionalized period of time for the mobilization of the military forces of the \textit{regnum Francorum} can be identified. However, the exigencies of any particular situation could and did result in modifications. In the present context, it is noteworthy that the traditional high point of flooding in the Loire valley is March. It is probable, therefore, that the invasion was timed to postdate these floods. Regarding the flood period, see Roger Dion, \textit{Histoire des levées de la Loire} (Paris, 1961), 51–66.
\item [82] Procop. \textit{BG} 5.12 provides a substantial quantity of information regarding the diplomatic and military situation that culminated in Clovis’s victory at Vouillé. However, the account, as a whole, is rather muddled and much of it is simply inaccurate. One bit of information that can be trusted is Procopius's statement that Alaric requested military aid from Theodoric. Unfortunately, Averil Cameron, \textit{Procopius and the Sixth Century} (London/New York, 1996), 198–99, does not treat Procopius's views regarding Theodoric very thoroughly and fails to see the historian's bias against the Ostrogoth ruler.
\item [83] See, \textit{Vita Aviti} 1–4, 361–62 (\textit{Acta Sanctorum quotquot tot urbe coluntur} [Brussels, 1643–1894], 3 June). Although this \textit{vita} is a late source, it provides considerable useful information regarding the details of mobilization of the Visigothic army. See the discussion of this text by Rouche, \textit{L’Aquitaine}, 46, 351, with the literature cited in the notes.
\end{itemize}
support themselves as well-equipped mounted troops in the tradition of the units that had been victorious in 451. Some Visigoths, however, perhaps the less affluent, were archers who fought on foot.84

The Gallo-Roman expeditionary levies were mobilized in each of the civitates of Alaric’s regnum and served under the count of the city. These levies generally were composed of Gallo-Romans, since the Visigoths constituted only a very small portion of the total population and a proportionally small segment of able-bodied men of military age.85 In this context, it is important to emphasize that Gallo-Romans, both men and women, were required to support a militia man in expeditione, that is, beyond the borders of their home civitas, if they possessed a quantity of landed wealth. Later, this lower limit of landed wealth would be characterized in the regnum Francorum as a manse.86 Wealthier subjects of the Visigothic king provided militia troops according to their means at the above-noted rate.87 This system of military obligation resembled later imperial practice. The major difference was that the latter provided recruits for a standing army while the former provided forces on a campaign-by-campaign basis. The expeditionary militia troops raised by the Gallo-Romans went home to their farms after each campaign.88

The locally mustered expeditionary forces were comprised overwhelmingly of militia men who lacked both horses and sophisticated military equipment. This was the result of the low level of the minimum wealth requirement. In fact,


86 Concerning these developments in the regnum Francorum, see Bachrach, Early Carolingian Warfare, 54–57; and Walter Goffart, “Frankish Military Duty and the Fate of Roman Taxation,” EME 16 (2008): 166–90.

87 The most famous case being that of Apollinaris, the son of Sidonius Apollinaris, who, according to Gregory of Tours (Hist. 2.37) fought accompanied by the levy from the Auvergne: Maximus ibi tunc Arvernorum populus, qui cum Apollinare venerat, et plurimi qui erant ex senatoribus corruerunt.

many of these militia men, often the landholder himself, served on campaign on the basis of his possession of the single manse that was sufficient to support such service. Indeed, the myth that Roman citizens were disarmed by the imperial authorities was ably shattered by Peter Brunt with special attention to Gaul and with a positive focus in regard to the use of civilian forces.\(^8^9\) It is important that the Roman government deployed rather large numbers of civilian militia men for military purposes and especially for urban defense during the later empire. This tradition was operative in Gaul, as indicated in numerous instances. In 260, for example, the *cives* of Tours are recorded to have repulsed a Frankish attack.\(^9^0\) Indeed, civilians, as shown at Autun in 270, could give a good account of themselves even against regular Roman troops.\(^9^1\) It is likely that the rescript of Valentinian III, which reflects even earlier edicts, had more or less institutionalized such civilian efforts.\(^9^2\)

Among these levies, at least some, and probably many, were archers of varying quality. It was well established that adult males throughout the empire and, therefore, obviously in Gaul were required to practice regularly with the bow and arrow. It was well recognized that preparing a civilian, who was to fight as a militia man, to engage the enemy at a distance with the bow and arrow was likely to be a more effective use of manpower than trying to train such a man to engage the enemy at close quarters with a spear or sword.\(^9^3\) By contrast with these foot soldiers, a rather small minority of the men who served in these expeditionary forces were the household troops of the Gallo-Roman aristocrats. These men were well-armed and well-trained mounted troops and not inferior to their Visigothic counterparts.\(^9^4\)

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92 See, e.g., *Nov Val.* 5.2; 9.1; and the discussion by Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare*, 52–53.
93 See Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare*, 100–102, with the literature cited in the relevant notes.
The Frankish Army

Clovis’s military forces were composed of a wide variety of groups drawn from many different institutional structures. The core of his army was Clovis’s military household or obsequium, and central to this group were the antrustiones, composed of Franks and others. These presentales probably amounted to several thousand troops, while other units of Clovis’s obsequium served in garrisons and other strategic locations throughout his regnum. In addition, there were Franks, many of whom still held military lands, that is, terra Salica, which had been awarded by the Roman government to their ancestors two centuries earlier. Augmenting these elite troops were the military households of the magnates of the kingdom, Franks and Gallo-Romans alike. Further, there were elements in Clovis’s army that were the institutional descendents of various later Roman units of regular troops and laeti. Finally, there were medium level landholders who owed expeditionary service. In short, Clovis’s army was not very different from that of Alaric II, as described above.

Campaign Strategy

It was Clovis’s campaign strategy to cross the Loire and to move south of the river as rapidly as possible in order to “liberate” the fortress cities of Aquitania Prima and Secunda, from Visigothic control. The Frankish king had reason to believe that he would be welcomed by disaffected Gallo-Romans of political and military importance in Aquitaine. These men were opposed to domination by the Visigoths for a wide variety of reasons, including religious differences. In addition, Clovis probably believed that he could integrate the militia levies of these civitates into the Frankish army. As mentioned earlier, Clovis’s Burgundian allies were to act as a blocking force against a potential Ostrogothic

95 For the composition of both the Visigothic and Frankish armies at this time, see also Young’s essay in this volume.
96 For the composition of the Frankish army at this time, see a series of studies by B. S. Bachrach: Merovingian Military Organization, 3–17; “Imperial Roots of Merovingian Military Organization,” 25–31; and “Quelques observations,” 689–703.
97 Although Greg. Hist. 2.37 is often characterized as depicting Clovis’s campaign as a “crusade” (see, e.g., the clever rhetoric employed by Wood, Merovingian Kingdoms, 47), the evocation of the word “crusade,” much less attributing it, even by inference, to Gregory, is fundamentally anachronistic and highly misleading. For the campaign tactics, see also Mathisen’s essay on Vouillé in this volume.
98 Greg. Hist. 2.37.
99 The existence of such levies can be inferred from Greg, Hist. 2.37, where a Gallo-Roman contingent from the Auvergne fights on the side of Alaric.
relief army. If possible, they were to try to catch the Visigothic army in a pincer from the south.

Alaric’s campaign strategy was reactive and, in fact, the contrapositive of Clovis’s plan. Alaric’s aim was to stop Clovis’s advance as quickly as possible, that is, as far north as he could manage. Therefore, he ordered his troops, units drawn from throughout the civitates of Aquitaine and those civitates of the Auvergne that were under his regnum, to concentrate at Poitiers.100 This fortress city was approximately 100 kilometers south of the Loire, where the river ran through the environs of Tours. The timing of Clovis’s strategy and of Alaric’s counterstrategy, however, probably precluded the possibility that Ostrogothic reinforcements could reach northern Aquitaine before the Visigoths and Franks would encounter each other on the field of battle.

Procopius, who evidences frequent hostility toward Theodoric, expends considerable effort to explain that the Ostrogothic ruler was an unreliable military ally. He contends that Theoderic rarely met his obligations and that he committed his troops to military operations only reluctantly and tardily. Procopius also suggests that Alaric wanted to wait for Ostrogothic reinforcements to arrive, but his restless troops threatened mutiny if he did not seek battle immediately. This confrontation between the king and his soldiers is unlikely to have occurred. It probably represents Procopius’s efforts to show the foolishness of the Visigoths in going to war unprepared and the unreliability of Theodoric, who failed to send reinforcements in a timely manner.101

Simple awareness of geographical realities, however, makes clear that Theoderic’s troops could not make a rendezvous with Alaric’s army in the environs of Poitiers. Theoderic could only order the mobilization of his army after Alaric’s request for aid reached him in the Ostrogothic capital at Ravenna. At this point, orders had to be issued and disseminated for mobilization. An Ostrogothic army, however rapidly mustered in northern Italy, probably at Milan or Pavia, then would have to travel approximately 750 kilometers over the Roman road system in order to reach Poitiers. This march probably would have to include passage through the high western alpine passes, which might not be fully open until the end of March. Bad weather in April could still cause difficulties for a large army marching through the Great Saint Bernard. In fact, the Ostrogothic army would have to travel more than twice the distance that the armies of Alaric and Clovis had to march in order to reach the environs of Poitiers.

Although Alaric’s mobilization at Poitiers was sufficiently complete to move his army north, he still lacked Ostrogothic reinforcements. In addition, Clovis’s

100 It is obvious from Greg. Hist. 2.37 that Alaric ordered his troops to concentrate at Poitiers.
101 Procop. BG 5.12.
forces already had crossed the Loire in the environs of Tours, unopposed, and were on the road to Poitiers. In fact, Clovis's army also had crossed the Vienne, despite the fact that recent rains had swollen the river and obscured the markings of the ford. This flooding problem was solved by Clovis's scouts, who followed the hallowed tradition of observing where wild animals crossed rivers and thus discovered where the ford was located. With the river to his back, Clovis moved toward Vouillé and established his camp. When Alaric received exact intelligence regarding Clovis's line of march, he ordered his army at Poitiers to break camp and march north to intercept the Frankish invaders. The Visigothic king had decided that he would give battle as soon as possible in order to drive Clovis's forces out of Aquitaine.

Clovis surely knew from intelligence provided by disaffected Gallo-Romans that Alaric had ordered his army to muster at Poitiers. The rather early acquisition of such information probably accounts for Clovis's line of march to Tours and then south from the region of Tours in the direction of Poitiers. With this information in hand, the Frankish king dispatched scouts to obtain fresh intelligence regarding the movements of Alaric's force. When the order was issued to the Visigothic army to march north, probably on the day before the battle, Clovis's scouts sent a signal that night to provide this intelligence to Frankish headquarters. These spies set a huge fire not far from the Church of

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102 Greg. Hist. 2.37 obtained some information regarding the problem faced at the ford of the Vienne and created a story to demonstrate God's intervention to help Clovis's army. For some general observations regarding Gregory's understanding of military matters, see B. S. Bachrach, “Gregory of Tours as a Military Historian,” in The World of Gregory of Tours, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and I. N. Wood (Leiden, 2002), 351–63.

103 An inference necessitated by the fact that Vouillé is located northwest of Poitiers; see Mathisen's essay on Vouillé in this volume.

104 There has been extensive discussion regarding the location of the battle. For what I regard to be the most sound treatment of the problem, see Mathisen's essay on Vouillé in this volume.

105 For Clovis's line of march passing in the region of Tours, see Greg. Hist. 2.37, where some of the troops forage on Saint Martin's lands and are punished by the king for their transgressions.

106 Fires were a very important means of sending military signals during the late antique period. This included night signals when flames could be seen and day signals when smoke could be seen. See, Vegetius, De re Militari 3.5.17–19. Regarding the knowledge and importance of Vegetius's work during the early Middle Ages, see three studies by B. S. Bachrach: “The Practical Use of Vegetius: De Re Militari during the Early Middle Ages,” Historian 47 (1985): 239–55; and reprinted with the same pagination in B. S. Bachrach, Warfare and Military Organization in Pre-Crusade Europe (London, 2002); “Gregory of Tours, Vegetius, and the Study of War,” in Famille, violence et christianisation au Moyen Âge: Mêlages offerts à Michel Rouche, ed. Martin Aurell and Thomas Deswarte (Paris, 2005), 299–308; and “A Lying Legacy’ Revisited: The Abels-Morillo Defense of Discontinuity,” Journal of Medieval Military History 5 (2007): 154–93.
Saint Hilaire, located in the western quadrant of Poitiers.\(^{107}\) Obviously, the cords of firewood traditionally stored near monasteries for heating the buildings and cooking the food would have provided an easily available source of fuel for Clovis’s agents.\(^{108}\)

Clovis’s encampment was located on the left bank of the Vienne in the environs of Vouillé, and the distance between Poitiers and the battlefield was about 14 kilometers. From a perch in a tree only ten meters in height, a lookout stationed ten kilometers north of Poitiers easily could see the walls of the city on the horizon. An immense fire or a column of smoke, of the type said by Gregory of Tours to have risen from Saint Hilaire, would have risen more than fifty meters in the air and been seen for several dozen of kilometers in every direction.\(^{109}\) In short, as a result of this signal, Clovis’s army was well positioned to meet Alaric’s force on a field of battle of its own choice. This, of course, is of great importance for any army composed largely of foot soldiers fighting in a phalanx formation when faced with a heavily armed mounted force.\(^{110}\)

The Battle of Vouillé

Although there are no surviving eyewitness accounts of the battle, tradition has it that the encounter opened with an exchange of missiles at a distance, probably archery but perhaps spears, as well.\(^{111}\) This is plausible because both Frankish and Visigothic forces, as described above, are known to have had complements of archers. In addition, it was standard tactical procedure to begin battle at a distance when such assets were available.\(^{112}\) After this exchange of missiles, it is

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108 In a flourish of religious topology, Gregory of Tours (Hist. 2.37), who obviously knew something about the story of the signal fire, describes a fire in the sky as a sign from Saint Hilary of Poitiers that presaged Clovis’s victory. It should be noted, in this context, that the story is told in much the same way by Fortunatus, *Liber de virtutibus Sancti Hilarii* 7.20 (9) (Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati, Opera Pedestria, ed. Bruno Krusch in MGH AA, new ed. [Berlin, 1961]).


111 This is what Greg. Hist. 2.37, means when he writes *confligentibus his eminus, resistunt comminus illi*. The eminus terminology is obvious here.

generally agreed that the Visigothic mounted troops charged the Frankish phalanx of foot soldiers. These were the normal tactics traditionally employed by each group. Indeed, the successful mounted charge by the Visigoths at Châlons was still very well remembered in the mid-6th century. The phalanx of Gallo-Roman and Frankish foot soldiers, however, was not broken by the enemy charge, as also would be the case more than two centuries later at Poitiers.

We have no way of knowing how many charges the Visigothic mounted forces executed or whether the troops drawn from the military households of the Gallo-Roman magnates participated in these attacks. It is clear, however, that Alaric’s troops attempted at least one feigned retreat to lure Clovis’s foot soldiers from their positions. This effort failed. In what would be the decisive offensive action of the battle, Clovis led his comparatively small force of mounted troops, which had been held in reserve, in a flanking movement, against the position where Alaric had stationed himself with his body guards. The Visigothic king was killed in this assault, and tradition has it that Clovis was directly responsible for Alaric’s death. However, more importantly, the death of Alaric, and very probably the loss of his standard at this time, resulted in the disorderly retreat of the entire Visigothic army.

It is in this phase of the battle that Clovis’s victory at Vouillé differs markedly from the efforts of Aëtius at Châlons and Charles Martel at Poitiers.

113 Greg. Hist. 2.37, as the confligentibus terminology is traditionally interpreted. On the meaning of these terms see, e.g., Rouche, Clovis, 308–9.
114 See, e.g., Jordanes, Getica 38–40.
115 Greg. Hist. 2.37, as the terminology resistunt comminus is generally understood.
116 Greg. Hist. 2.37 observes secundum consuetudinem Goti terga vertissent. Then, he intentionally misrepresents this well-known tactic of the feigned retreat to suggest that the Visigothic maneuver was, in fact, a real retreat and it was the consuetudo of the Goths to flee from battle. Information regarding feigned retreat tactics was thoroughly disseminated at this time, and Gregory himself (Hist. 9.31) describes the Visigoths as using it. In short, it was the consuetudo of the Visigoths to use the feigned retreat tactic, not to run away. Regarding the feigned retreat, see, e.g., Bachrach, Early Carolingian Warfare, 126–27, 129–31, 198–99. Halsall, Warfare and Society, 200, treats the sources as plain text and fails to understand that the Visigoths executed a feigned retreat.
117 Greg. Hist. 2.37. What is relevant here is that two of Alaric’s bodyguards are reported almost to have killed Clovis but that the Frankish king was saved by the speed of his horse and the high quality of his body armor. It is noteworthy that Gregory does not explicitly state that God saved Clovis, in this context, and provides a “realistic” explanation. With regard to Clovis’s mounted troops, Rouche, Clovis, 308, suggests that they were Armoricans. Regarding these, see Bachrach, “Origin of Armorican Chivalry,” 166–71.
118 Greg. Hist. 2.37 makes a hash of the sequence of this part of the battle by trying to conflate the Visigothic use of the feigned retreat tactic and their general retreat from the battlefield.
Clovis’s forces are indicated to have pursued the fleeing elements of Alaric’s army. Not only was the Frankish army left in possession of the battlefield, but it is reported to have accomplished a great slaughter of the enemy.119 The massive losses suffered by the levies of Auvergne were remembered some four score years later.120 These losses serve to epitomize the success of Clovis’s pursuit, which probably had a no less devastating effect upon the largely Gallo-Roman foot soldiers who had been levied from the other civitates. Indeed, large numbers of prisoners also were taken.121 Subsequent memories of this engagement, e.g., the remarks of the poet Fortunatus, a contemporary of Gregory of Tours, are interpreted to refer to piles of corpses left on the battlefield at Vouillé.122 It is to be emphasized in this context that both professional military men and historians recognize that in the course of a headlong retreat or rout under the pressure of pursuit a defeated army generally suffers most of its casualties.123

Postbattle Strategy

Clovis followed up this victory in the field by having elements of his army under the command of his son Theoderic move south quickly in order to take the Gothic-ruled cities of the Auvergne, while other elements of the Frankish army, some under Clovis’s direct command, took most of the fortress cities of Aquitania Prima and Aquitania Secunda. When the king himself ended the campaigning season, he moved into winter quarters at the fortress city of Bordeaux.124 The Visigothic capital at Toulouse in Narbonensis Prima was captured along with the royal treasure. Clovis’s Burgundian allies, who played no role at Vouillé, took Narbonne. However, sieges by combined Burgundian and Frankish forces at both Carcassonne and Arles failed, as a result of the intervention by an army sent by Theodoric the Ostrogoth from Italy. Shortly thereafter, the Ostrogoths recaptured both Narbonne and Toulouse.125 In fact,

119 Greg. Hist. 2.37.
120 Greg. Hist. 2.37.
121 Although Alaric’s army was soundly defeated, not everyone was killed or even wounded. See, e.g., *Vita Aviti* 4, which indicates that the future holy man, who served in Alaric’s army at Vouillé as a Gallo-Roman member of the select levy from Périgord, was taken prisoner. *Vita Eptadii presbyteri Cervidunensis* 8–12 in MGH SRM, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hannover, 1896) provides additional information regarding prisoners. Rouche, *Clovis*, 308–14, discusses several additional sources that deal with casualties and prisoners.
122 Fortunatus, *Liber de Virtutibus Sancti Hilarii* 7.20 (9); Shanzer’s essay in this volume.
124 Greg. Hist. 2.37 not only exaggerates the extent of Clovis’s conquests, but fails to make clear that some of his conquests were, in fact, not permanent.
125 See Greg. Hist. 2.37.
the entire Mediterranean coast of Gaul either remained in Gothic possession or was restored to the Goths.\textsuperscript{126}

When Clovis returned to Tours in spring 508, he celebrated the triumph of a Roman general. As promised, Emperor Anastasius awarded Clovis the title of patricius, made him a “consul,” whether regular or honorary is not clear, and provided him with the proper documentation to serve as an imperial governor in southern Gaul. The emperor also probably regularized within the structure of the imperial administration Clovis’s de facto status as ruler in the northern half of Gaul. Four years later Clovis exercised the authority delegated to him by the emperor and convoked the first of what were to be several church councils to meet under royal direction at the city of Orléans. It is important to emphasize that this council in 511 included not only representatives of the cities that Clovis had liberated from the so-called Arian yoke in 507. Bishops from the north also attended, and the assembled prelates recognized that they acted in response to a set of tituli that Clovis submitted for their approval.\textsuperscript{127}

Was Vouillé a Decisive Battle?

When one compares the Battle of Vouillé with the criteria employed by military theorists such as Clausewitz, it is clear that Clovis won a decisive victory. King Alaric was killed, his army was slaughtered and was unable to withstand the further conquest of Aquitaine. Visigothic rule in Aquitaine was destroyed. In the short-term aftermath of the battle, much of the region was integrated into the regnum Francorum. Clovis received imperial recognition of his conquests. He celebrated a military triumph. In addition, he was elevated to the status of an imperial official, which made him the obvious ruler of not only the greater part southwestern Gaul but also the north. He was the legitimate ruler not only over Franks but also over Gallo-Romans.

In the longer term also, the victory at Vouillé was decisive. For more than a century after the battle, no serious military operations were undertaken against Frankish Aquitaine by the Visigoths, who held on to Septimania and ruled in Spain. Whatever efforts were taken against Frankish rule, by and large, were unsuccessful. More often than not, the good working relationship that Clovis had established with the imperial authorities continued to be enjoyed by his successors. Various of Clovis’s descendants continued to recognize the ditio of the government in Constantinople, and this was evidenced on the royal coinage,

\textsuperscript{126} See Samuel Dill, Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age (London, 1926), 102; who, in emphasizing this matter, is followed by Wood, Merovingian Kingdoms, 48–49.

\textsuperscript{127} For discussion, see Halfond’s essay in this volume.
which followed the imperial gold standard down to ca. 570. Some Frankish kings provided troops in support of imperial military operations in Italy, and others connived with the emperor to install a Byzantine puppet ruler in the south. The Frankish victory at Vouillé therefore had a continuing significance that decisively shaped the course of the future of western Europe.

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