

= Battle of the Defile =

The Battle of the Defile or Battle of the Pass (Arabic : Waq'at al-Shayb) was fought in the Tashtakaracha Pass (in modern Uzbekistan) between a large Arab army of the Umayyad Caliphate and the Turkic Turgesh khaganate over three days in July 731 CE . The Turgesh had been besieging Samarkand , and its commander , Sawra ibn al-Hurr al-Abani , sent a request for relief to the newly appointed governor of Khurasan , Junayd ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Murri . Junayd 's army was attacked by the Turgesh in the pass , and although the Umayyad army managed to extricate itself from the pass and reach Samarkand , it suffered enormous casualties (some 25 ,000 ? 30 ,000 men) , while Sawra 's 12 ,000 men , who had been commanded to attack the Turgesh in the rear in a relief effort , were almost annihilated . The battle , for which one of the most detailed accounts of the entire Umayyad era survives in the History of al-Tabari , halted and even reversed Muslim expansion into Central Asia for a decade .

= = Background = =

The region of Transoxiana (Arabic : Ma wara ' al-nahr) had been conquered by the Muslims under Qutayba ibn Muslim in the reign of al-Walid I (r . 705 ? 715) , following the Muslim conquest of Persia and of Khurasan in the mid 7th century . The loyalties of its native Iranian and Turkic inhabitants and autonomous local rulers however remained volatile , and in 719 , they sent a petition to the Chinese and their Turgesh vassals for military aid against the Muslims . In response , Turgesh attacks began in 720 , and the native Sogdians launched uprisings against the Caliphate . These were suppressed with great brutality by the governor of Khurasan , Sa'id ibn Amr al-Harashi , but in 724 his successor , Muslim ibn Sa'id al-Kilabi , suffered a major disaster (the so-called " Day of Thirst ") while trying to capture Ferghana . For the next few years , Umayyad forces were limited to the defensive . Efforts to placate and win the support of the local population by abolishing taxation of the native converts to Islam (mawali) were undertaken , but these were half-hearted and soon reversed , while heavy-handed Arab actions further alienated the local elites . In 728 a large-scale uprising , coupled with a Turgesh invasion , led to the abandonment of most of Transoxiana except for the region around Samarkand by the Caliphate 's forces .

In the hope of reversing the situation , in early 730 the Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r . 723 ? 743) appointed a new governor in Khurasan , the experienced Junayd ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Murri , who had been recently engaged in the pacification of Sindh . The difficult security situation at the time is illustrated by the fact that Junayd needed an escort of 7 ,000 cavalry after crossing the Oxus , and that he was attacked by the Turgesh khagan while riding to link up with the army of his predecessor , Ashras al-Sulami , who in the previous year had advanced up to Bukhara in a hard-fought campaign . Although hard-pressed , Junayd and his escort were able to repel the attack and link up with al-Sulami 's forces . Bukhara and most of Sogdiana was recovered soon after , as the Turgesh army withdrew north towards Samarkand . The Muslim army followed , and scored a victory in a battle fought near the city . Junayd then retired with his troops to winter in Merv . During the winter , rebellions broke out south of the Oxus , in Tokharistan , which had hitherto been quiescent to Muslim rule . Junayd was forced to set out for Balkh and there dispersed 28 ,000 of his men to quell the revolt . This left him seriously weakened when , in early 731 , the Turgesh laid siege to Samarkand and appeals for aid arrived from the city 's governor , Sawra ibn al-Hurr al-Abani . Despite the opinion of the army 's veteran Khurasani leaders , who counselled that he should wait to reassemble his forces and not cross the Oxus with less than 50 ,000 men , Junayd resolved to march immediately to Samarkand 's rescue .

= = Battle = =

Junayd could not advance along the old Persian Royal Road , which led from Bukhara east to Samarkand and which was held by the Turgesh . Instead he led his army to Kish , about 70 kilometres (43 mi) due south from Samarkand . There he received news from his scouts that the Turgesh had sent detachments of their own to spoil the wells on his line of march . His counsellors initially suggested a route west around the mountains of the Zarafshan Range between Kish and Samarkand through the village of al @-@ Muhtaraqah , but al @-@ Mujashshir ibn Muzahim al @-@ Sulami , one of the Khurasani leaders , advised against it since the Turgesh could easily set fire to the uncultivated grasslands along that route . Instead he favoured a more direct approach over the steep but short ? some 2 kilometres (1 @.@ 2 miles) long ? Tashtakaracha Pass , and expressed the possibility that this would catch the Turgesh by surprise . Junayd followed al @-@ Mujashshir 's counsel , and encamped before the entrance of the pass . The decision was unpopular with the army , largely Khurasanis who distrusted the " outsider " Junayd . The usual tribal quarrels also re @-@ emerged , and some began deserting . Undeterred , Junayd pressed on with some 28 @,@ 000 men . The course of the subsequent events is described in detail in al @-@ Tabari 's History of the Prophets and Kings , which in turn draws upon the work of the earlier historian Abu 'l @-@ Hasan al @-@ Mada 'ini , written about a century after the events .

The two armies that met at the Tashtakaracha Pass represented two different military philosophies . While the Umayyad armies disposed of a sizeable cavalry contingent , both light and heavy , their mainstay was the infantry , to the extent that in battle the Arab cavalry was often limited to skirmishing during the initial phases , before dismounting and fighting on foot . This was in stark contrast to the Turgesh , a typical Central Asian nomad realm , whose army was composed exclusively of cavalry . Their unmatched skill in horsemanship , especially as horse archers , and their natural hardiness combined to make them extremely dangerous opponents , adept in a fluid and highly mobile fighting style of feints , ambushes and feigned retreats , which they exploited to outmanoeuvre the slower @-@ moving Arabs . As the historian Hugh N. Kennedy writes , " when the nomad [Turgesh] allied with the local Iranian princes , they provided what was perhaps the fiercest opposition the early Muslim armies ever encountered " .

Supported by troops from the rulers of Sogdia , Shash and Ferghana , the Turgesh attacked the Umayyad army within the pass , two days after they had left Kish (a Friday) , at a distance of six farsakhs ? ca . 24 kilometres (15 miles) ? from Samarkand . The Turgesh attacked while the Arab army had stopped to take a meal . The Arab vanguard , under Uthman ibn ' Abdallah ibn al @-@ Shikhkhir , was overwhelmed , but Junayd was able to hurriedly deploy the main body of his army , placing his troops according to their tribal affiliations , with the Tamim and Azd on the right , and the Rabi 'ah on the left . The Arabs hurriedly erected earthworks in front of their lines , and the initial Turgesh attack , directed against the Arab right , was pushed back . Junayd , who had placed himself in the centre to direct the battle , then joined the ranks of the Azd , who greeted him with hostility : their standard @-@ bearer is reported to have told him " If we win , it will be for your benefit ; if we perish , you will not weep over us . By my life , if we win and I survive , I will never speak a word to you . " Al @-@ Tabari reports that this man and seventeen successive bearers of the same standard were killed during the battle , indicative of the fierceness of the fight . The Arabs initially met the Turgesh attack on horseback , but as their casualties mounted , Junayd 's herald ordered them to dismount and fight on foot , crouching down behind the trenches and forming a spear @-@ wall . This measure helped the Muslims hold their ground , and eventually both sides wearied and the battle ceased for the day . The most grievous casualties among the Arabs were suffered by the stragglers and baggage , who gathered under Abdallah ibn Mu 'ammar ibn Sumayr al @-@ Yashkuri near Kish : they were attacked by the Turgesh and virtually annihilated .

The next day , the Turgesh launched renewed attacks on the Arabs , but these were repelled . The Arabs engaged in vigorous counterattacks whenever the Turgesh drew near , and the khaghan ordered his troops to besiege the Arab camp instead of attacking it . Having persevered through the initial onslaught , Junayd sent messengers to Sawra in Samarkand , ordering him to come to his assistance as a diversionary attack . Sawra and the Samarkand garrison were initially reluctant as they were aware that this was effectively a suicide mission , but Junayd 's threats forced Sawra to comply . Leaving behind a small garrison , Sawra led 12 @,@ 000 men out of Samarkand and with

the help of a local guide managed to reach within a farsakh ? roughly 5 ? 6 kilometres (3 @. @ 1 ? 3 @. @ 7 miles) ? of Junayd 's force by crossing over the mountains . There he was confronted by the Turgesh , who , reportedly on the advice of Ghurak , the Sogdian king of Samarkand , set fire on the dry grasslands . Sawra 's lieutenants advised a slow infantry advance fronted by a spear @-@ wall ? the standard Umayyad anti @-@ cavalry tactic ? but Sawra , knowing his troops to be weary and desperate , decided instead to launch a cavalry charge against the Turgesh in the hopes of breaking through with at least part of his force and reach Junayd . Sawra 's troops , " maddened by heat and thirst " in the description of H.A.R. Gibb , charged the Turgesh and broke their front , but the battle soon became a confused affair with both sides hindered by the smoke , dust and the raging flames . In the end , the Arab army lost its cohesion , scattered and was destroyed piecemeal by the Turgesh cavalry . All but a thousand of Sawra 's force perished .

Junayd used the diversion to break through to Samarkand , but as his army exited the defile , his officers persuaded him to make camp and spend the night there instead of making for the city . The advice proved sound , as the Turgesh caught up with them and would likely have annihilated Junayd 's army on open ground . As it was , the camp 's fortifications could not be completed before the next day , when the Turgesh renewed their attack . At this point , the Arabs were so hard @-@ pressed that Junayd even promised the army 's slaves their freedom if they would fight . Many did so , using saddle blankets as armour . The Turgesh attacks were repelled , and despite its heavy casualties the Umayyad army reached Samarkand after almost three days of battle .

= = Aftermath and impact = =

Junayd remained in Samarkand for about four months , until October 731 , allowing his army to recover . The Turgesh meanwhile made for Bukhara , which they besieged . Junayd again resolved to meet them in battle , and managed to inflict some defeats on the Turgesh in early November and raise the siege of Bukhara , which he entered on the day of Mihragan . Junayd then returned to Merv , leaving a token garrison of 800 men behind in Samarkand . Once the Turgesh had withdrawn north for the winter , he evacuated the city of its Muslim inhabitants .

Although Samarkand was relieved and the Arab army escaped annihilation , the battle " was not wholly an Arab victory " (M.A. Shaban) . According to Khalid Yahya Blankinship , it was " a Pyrrhic victory at best " , due to the high casualties suffered by the Muslims ; indeed , the sources record both Junayd and the Caliph Hisham publicly equating it with the disastrous defeat suffered at the hands of the Khazars in the Battle of Marj Ardabil a year before . The 10th @-@ century historian Ibn A 'tham al @-@ Kufi puts the Muslim casualties at at least 20 @, @ 000 out of a total of 43 @, @ 000 or 48 @, @ 000 , while poets of the time inflate the number to 50 @, @ 000 . Judging by the numbers of replacements ordered sent into or levied in Khurasan in the aftermath of the battle , Blankinship estimates the dead at between 25 @, @ 000 and 30 @, @ 000 . Although the Turgesh also suffered heavy losses ? Ibn A 'tham gives the unverifiable figure of over 10 @, @ 000 dead ? the Arab losses at the Defile led to a rapid deterioration of the Muslim position in Central Asia . Junayd remained as governor of Khurasan until his death in early 734 , but by this time the Muslims had lost control of everything north of the Oxus save for Bukhara , Kish and the region of al @-@ Saghaniyan .

The events of the Defile increased the Khurasani disaffection with the Umayyad regime and its representatives , as exemplified by the words of the Azdi standard @-@ bearer to Junayd . Al @-@ Tabari also reports the words ? albeit possibly a later addition ? of another Khurasani to Junayd before the battle : " It used to be said that certain of the troops of Khurasan would perish at the hands of a luxury @-@ loving man from the Qays . We now fear that you may be he " . According to Blankinship , these passages , as well as poems disparaging Junayd 's leadership , are an eloquent testimony to the Khurasanis ' frustration at being " forced to fight continuous , unrewarding campaigns for the benefit of vainglorious generals on one of the caliphate 's worst fronts , by a central government whose special Syrian army had not hitherto , in the Khurasanis ' opinion , faced similar hardships " . Blankinship observes that " after the Day of the Defile , many Khurasani tribal surnames never again appear as part of the army in Khurasan , leading one to suppose they had

been annihilated or their men had given up fighting . Some Khurasani troops remain , of course , but their divisions are now paralleled by Syrian ones . Thus it appears , particularly from Tabari 's emphasis , that the Day of the Defile was practically a turning point in the war with the Turks , at least as far as the Khurasanis were concerned [...] . " The subsequent period in Khurasan was turbulent , with revolts and anti Umayyad agitation among the local Khurasani Arabs , which necessitated the introduction of 20 000 loyal Syrian troops into the province in addition to the 20 000 Iraqis sent in after the Defile . Only in 739 ? 741 , after the Turgesh Khaganate collapsed following the murder of its leader Suluk , was the new governor of Khurasan , Nasr ibn Sayyar , able to largely restore the Caliphate 's position in Transoxiana , extending Muslim control again up to Samarkand .

In the aftermath of the setbacks at the Defile , Marj Ardabil and other similar disasters , the need to reinforce the buckling frontiers stretched the military and financial resources of the Caliphate . This was especially the case with the powerful Syrian army , the main pillar of the Umayyad regime , which was parcelled out to reinforce distant provinces . Eventually , this weakening of the Syrian army would be the major factor in the fall of the Umayyad dynasty during the civil wars of the 740s and the Abbasid Revolution that followed them .