

Student Handout #3A: The Battle of the Talas River

As you read this account, look for information that will help you develop an answer to the question, "To what extent was the Battle of the Talas River significant?" Record your thoughts in your CER graphic organizer. To help you identify important information, key parts of this text are underlined. Pay special attention to these sections.

Source: excerpt taken from: The Battle of Talas: A Little-Known Skirmish That Changed World History; By Kallie Szczepanski <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/centralasia/a/BattleofTalas.htm>

Consequences of the Battle of Talas

At the time of the Battle of Talas, its significance was not clear.

Chinese accounts mention the battle as part of the beginning of the end for the Tang Dynasty...

For the Muslims, too, this battle marked an unnoticed turning point. The victors are supposed to write history, but in this case, (despite the totality of their victory), they did not have much to say for some time after the event.

[Barry Hoberman](#) points out that the ninth-century Muslim historian al-Tabari (839-923) never even mentions the Battle of Talas River.

It's not until half a millennium after the skirmish that Arab historians take note of Talas, in the writings of (1160-1233) and al-Dhahabi (1274-1348).

Nevertheless, the Battle of Talas had important consequences. The weakened Chinese Empire was no longer in any position to interfere in Central Asia, so the influence of the Abbassids grew.

Some scholars quibble that too much emphasis is placed on the role of Talas in the "Islamification" of Central Asia.

It is certainly true that the Turkic and Persian tribes of Central Asia did not all immediately convert to Islam in August of 751. Such a feat of mass communication across the deserts, mountains and steppes would have been utterly impossible before modern mass communications, even if the Central Asian peoples were uniformly receptive to Islam.

Nonetheless, the absence of any counterweight to the Muslim presence allowed Abbassid influence to spread gradually throughout the region.

Within the next 250 years, most of the formerly Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Nestorian Christian 5 tribes of Central Asia had become Muslim.

Most significant of all, among the prisoners of war captured by the Abbasids after the Battle of

Talas River were a number of skilled Chinese artisans, including Tou Houan. Through them, first the Muslim world and then the rest of Europe learned the art of paper-making. (At that time, Muslims controlled Spain and Portugal, as well as North Africa, the Middle East, and large swaths of Central Asia.)

Soon, paper-making factories sprang up in Samarkand, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Delhi... and in 1120 the first European paper mill was established in Xativa, Spain (now called Valencia). From these Muslim-dominated cities, the technology spread to Italy, Germany, and across Europe.

The advent of paper technology, along with woodcut printing and later movable-type printing, fueled the advances in science, theology, and history of Europe's High Middle Ages, which ended only with the coming of the Black Death in the 1340s.

Student Handout #3B: The Battle of the Talas River

As you read this account, look for information that will help you develop an answer to the question, “To what extent was the Battle of the Talas River significant?” Record your thoughts in your CER graphic organizer.

Source: <http://epicworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/09/battle-of-talas-river.html>

The battle was not significant in the short term, because the Muslims did not press eastward to threaten China, but because of what followed in the long term. In the same year, nearer to home, the aborigines in Yunnan in southwestern China revolted and declared independence, creating a state called Nanzhao (Nan-chao).

Finally in 755 the Turkic general and once imperial favorite An Lushan (An Lu-Shan) began a rebellion that captured both Tang capital cities and threatened the throne.

The immediate result of events in 755 was the recall of Chinese forces from Central Asia, creating a political vacuum. That left the Muslims in a strong position. Likewise the power vacuum enabled the Tibetans and the Xixia people to expand their power at China’s expense.

Even as an ally the Uighurs expanded their power at the Tang’s expense. Without Chinese military protection the Buddhist states in Central Asia would fall to the rising power of Islam. Chinese power would not return to the region for another 600 years.

Student Handout #4D: The Battle of the Talas River

As you read this account, look for information that will help you develop an answer to the question, “To what extent was the Battle of the Talas River significant?” Record your thoughts in your CER graphic organizer.

Source: Excerpt taken from the Wikipedia entry on “The Battle of Talas”
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Talas

Shortly after the battle of Talas, the domestic [rebellion of An Lushan](#) (755–63) and subsequent [warlordism](#) gave the Muslims the opportunity to further expand into Central Asia as Tang influence in the region retreated.[10] The local Tang [tributaries](#) then switched to the authority of the Abbasids, Tibetans, or Uighurs and the introduction of [Islam](#) was thus facilitated among the [Turkic peoples](#). Well supported by the Abbasids, the [Karluks](#) established a [state](#) that would be absorbed in the late 9th century by the [Kara-Khanid Khanate](#).

...

The culture of Central Asia, once a mixture of Persian, Indian, and Chinese influences, disappeared under the power struggles between the empires of the Muslims, Chinese, Turks, Tibetans, and Uyghurs.[12] Islam grew as the dominant cultural force of Central Asia.

With the decline of Central Asian Buddhism, [Chinese Buddhism](#) was now cut off from Indian Buddhism and developed into an independent religion with distinct spiritual elements. Indigenous Buddhist traditions like [Pure Land Buddhism](#) and [Zen](#) emerged in China. China became the center of [East Asian Buddhism](#), following the [Chinese Buddhist canon](#), as Buddhism spread to Japan and Korea from China.[12]

The battle of Talas and the rise of Islam marked the end of Buddhist Central Asia. Chinese cultural influence in Central Asia declined with the deterioration of the Tang Dynasty, and would not reappear until after the Qing conquests of the 18th century.[10]

Among the earliest historians to proclaim the importance of this battle was the great Russian historian of Muslim Central Asia, [Vasily Bartold](#), of 20th century according to whom, "The earlier Arab historians, occupied with the narrative of events then taking place in western Asia, do not mention this battle; but it is undoubtedly of great importance in the history of (Western) [Turkestan](#) as it determined the question which of the two civilizations, the Chinese or the Muslim, should predominate in the land (of Turkestan)."[3]

The loss of 8,000 troops to the Tang empire can be compared to a troop strength of more than 500,000 before the Anshi rebellion.[13] According to Bartold, for the history of the first three centuries of Islam, [al-Tabari](#) was the chief source (survived in [Ibn al Athir's](#) compilation), which was brought down to 915. (Unfortunately, this important work was only compiled and published by a group of [Orientalists](#) in 1901. It is only in Athir that we find an accurate account of the conflict between the Muslims and the Chinese in 751. Neither Tabari nor the early historical works of the Arabs which have come down to us in general make any mention of this; however, Athir's statement is completely confirmed by the Chinese *History of the Tang Dynasty*.[14] In all Muslim sources, the events which occurred in the eastern part of the empire are often dealt with briefly.[15] Another notable informant of the battle on the Muslim side was [Al-Dhahabi](#) (1274–1348).[16]