

# Battle of Karbala

**Battle of Karbala**, (October 10, 680 [10th of Muḥarram, AH 61]), brief military engagement in which a small party led by al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of ʿAlī, the fourth caliph, was defeated and massacred by an army sent by the Umayyad caliph Yazīd I. The battle helped secure the position of the Umayyad dynasty, but among Shiʿi Muslims (followers of Ḥusayn) the 10th of Muḥarram (or ʿĀshūrā) became an annual holy day of public mourning.



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*Battle of Karbala*, oil on canvas by Abbas Al-Musavi, c. late 19th–early 20th century.

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Gift of K. Thomas Elghanayan in honor of Nourollah Elghanayan, 2002.6

Yazīd I succeeded his father, Muʿāwiyah I, to the caliphate in the spring of 680. In the city of Kūfah (in modern-day Iraq), those who maintained that the leadership of the Muslim community (*ummah*) rightly belonged to Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his descendants invited Ḥusayn to take refuge with them, promising to have him proclaimed caliph there. When Yazīd learned of the rebellious attitude of the Shiʿah in Kūfah, he sent ʿUbayd Allāh, governor of Basra, to restore order. The latter did so, summoning the chiefs of the tribes, making them responsible for the conduct of their people, and threatening reprisal. Ḥusayn nevertheless set out from Mecca with his family and retainers expecting to be received with enthusiasm by the citizens of Kūfah. However, on his arrival at

Karbala, west of the Euphrates River, on October 10, he was confronted by a large army of perhaps 4,000 men sent by ʿUbayd Allāh and under the command of ʿUmar ibn Saʿd, son of the founder of Kūfah. Ḥusayn, whose retinue mustered perhaps 72 fighting men, nevertheless gave battle, vainly relying on the promised aid from Kūfah. He and almost all his family and followers were killed. The bodies of the dead, including that of Ḥusayn, were then mutilated, only adding to the consternation of later generations of the Shiʿah. The women who had accompanied Ḥusayn, including at least one of his wives, his sister Zaynab, and his surviving children, were taken first to Kūfah and then across the desert to Yazīd in Damascus. Shiʿi tradition has it that Zaynab, among others, in Kūfah formally rebuked ʿUbayd Allāh and in Damascus challenged Yazīd and rejected his claim to the caliphate. She died in 681. The Shiʿah maintain that she was buried in Damascus, and her supposed tomb is an important site of pilgrimage for the Shiʿah. Sunni tradition has it that she was buried in Cairo.

ʿUmar, ʿUbayd Allāh, and Yazīd came to be regarded by ʿAlī's supporters as murderers, and their names have since been reviled by the Shiʿah. Shiʿi Muslims across the world observe the 10th of Muḥarram as a day of public mourning; some perform dramas (called *taʿziyyah* in Arabic), similar to Christian passion plays, which commemorate the events at Karbala. Some also practice self-flagellation (*matam*). The tomb of Ḥusayn at

Karbala is a very holy site for the Shi'ah.

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Citation Information

Article Title: Battle of Karbala

Website Name: Encyclopaedia Britannica

Publisher: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Date Published: 03 October 2019

URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Karbala>

Access Date: August 24, 2020