

The Umayyads: The First Muslim Dynasty

The Umayyads were the first Muslim dynasty—that is, they were the first rulers of the Islamic Empire to pass down power within their family. Under their rule, which lasted from 661 to 750 AD, the early Islamic community was transformed into the most powerful empire of the day. In many ways, the Umayyads defined how an Islamic Empire would be ruled. Nonetheless, their lack of descent from Muhammad, their controversial practice of handing down power from father to son, and their mistreatment of non-Arab Muslims made them a controversial dynasty, a topic of debate among Muslims even to this day, and ultimately led to their fall.

Muawiya, the First Fitna, and the Rise of the Umayyads

When Muhammad first began preaching his message, the Umayyad clan comprised his greatest opposition. They were the richest and most powerful clan in Mecca, and they were threatened by the changes that Islam brought. Muawiya, the first Umayyad ruler, was the son of Abu Sufyan, Muhammad's most bitter opponent. Abu Sufyan embraced Islam after Muhammad's forces marched on Mecca, and Muawiya joined his father and older brother, Yazid, in becoming a late convert to the new religion. A younger son and scion of Muhammad's enemy, Muawiya was not a likely candidate to be the leader of the Islamic community. But his skill and intellect, combined with a lot of luck, enabled him to build the first Muslim dynasty.

After his conquest of Mecca, Muhammad gave many Quraysh elites, including members of Muawiya's Umayyad family, high-ranking positions in his government. Muawiya joined the army of his older brother Yazid in the conquest of Syria. Yazid was granted governorship of Syria by Caliph Umar, and Muawiya continued to serve him. In 640 AD, however, Yazid died of the plague, and Muawiya replaced him. Muawiya quickly set about turning Syria into his own power base. He launched successful attacks against the Byzantines, which brought him great booty and respect from his soldiers. His power extended when Uthman, his uncle and fellow Umayyad, succeeded Umar as the third caliph. Uthman, however, was killed by Muslims who were angry at his concentration of power in the hands of fellow Umayyads, and he was succeeded by Ali.

Muawiya was outraged by the murder of his uncle, and insisted that the assassins be handed over for punishment. Muawiya had the support of powerful Muslims, such as Muhammad's widow Aisha, but Ali refused, saying that he was unable to do this. Muawiya refused to recognize Ali as caliph, and in response Ali demanded that Muawiya give up his governorship of Syria. The conflict turned into a civil war, called *Fitna* in Arabic. Ali defeated Aisha and other prominent Muslims at the Battle of the Camel in Iraq, but was unable to defeat Muawiya at the Battle of Siffin in Syria. After a stalemate, the two men agreed to arbitrate the dispute.

Shortly thereafter, Ali was assassinated due to dissent in his own camp, and Muawiya, in a very powerful position, convinced Ali's son Hasan to give up any claim to the caliphate and retire from public life. Then, in 661 AD, Muawiya was proclaimed caliph. Muawiya set about creating a strong and somewhat centralized government.

He moved the capital and administrative center of the empire from Medina to Damascus, Syria, his powerbase. He gave Christians, especially former Byzantine officials, positions in his own government, using their expertise in governing the provinces, and adopting Byzantine financial and administrative systems. Muawiya also attempted to conquer the rest of the Byzantine Empire for Islam. The Islamic conquests had been temporarily interrupted by the civil war, but Muawiya began them again. He achieved some successes, but his ultimate goal was Constantinople. He launched the first Arab siege of Constantinople, but the attack failed. The Byzantines, aided by a new incendiary weapon known as *Greek fire*, defeated the Muslims. Muawiya was forced to sign a treaty with the Byzantines in which he agreed to pay them an annual subsidy and refrain from further attacks. He died soon after, in 680 AD.

The Second Fitna

Muawiya had broken convention by naming his son Yazid his successor. Because he made rule of the caliphate hereditary—passed down from father to son—Muawiya is said to have begun the first Islamic dynasty. Many Muslims felt that this was wrong. Some felt that the new caliph should be chosen by members of the community, rather than inheriting the title. Others believed that the caliph should be from the family of Muhammad, which neither Muawiya or his son could claim. A rebellion took place immediately after Yazid became caliph.

Ali's son Hasan had agreed to give up all claim to the caliphate and retire, but his younger brother Hussein had made no such agreement. Opponents of Yazid flocked to Hussein to support him as caliph. However, Yazid was eager to remove this threat before it could grow. He sent an army to surround Hussein and his family as they were traveling. In what is known as the "Battle of Karbala" (though it was little more than a massacre), the army of Yazid slaughtered Hussein and his family, including his six-month-old son. This was a major event in the Shia-Sunni split, and rebellion from Shiite supporters of Ali's family would continue to plague the Umayyads.

Many Muslims continued to oppose the passing down of the caliphate from father to son. A new and more dangerous opponent of the Umayyads appeared in 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, son of one of Muhammad's closest companions. Ibn al-Zubayr made a powerbase in Mecca and claimed to be the true caliph. Yazid sent an army against Ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca. They besieged the city, bombarding it with catapults and severely damaging the Kaaba, but failed to take the city. Yazid prematurely died soon thereafter, and was succeeded by his young son Muawiya II. With this, the resistance to Ibn al-Zubayr fell apart. Many Muslims were unhappy with the Umayyads, and most of their provinces turned to Ibn al-Zubayr and accepted him as caliph. Muawiya II was weak and unwilling to fight. He abdicated the throne and died soon thereafter.

This was not the end of the Umayyad Dynasty, however. A new Umayyad, Marwan, from a separate branch of the family, took the throne and opposed Ibn al-Zubayr, claiming power for the Umayyads. As a result, a civil war broke out between Marwan in Damascus and Ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca. This was the Second Arab Civil War, or Second Fitna. Marwan did not survive long, ruling only about a year. But he

was succeeded by his son, Abd al-Malik, who would be remembered as perhaps the most important Umayyad caliph.

In the meantime, another revolt broke out in Iraq as the Shiites, acting as a guerilla army, began killing anyone responsible for Hussein's death. Ultimately Abd al-Malik rallied his forces and defeated the Shiites. Next he sent a fresh army to Arabia to besiege Mecca. The Umayyad army stormed the city, and Ibn al-Zubayr was killed in a last stand at the Kaaba. Opposition to Abd al-Malik was crushed, and an Umayyad ruler was once again in firm control of the caliphate.

The Reign of Abd al-Malik

Abd al-Malik was perhaps the most important early caliph, and he made a number of significant reforms. It is during his reign that the empire broke from following the ways of its Byzantine and Persian predecessors, and instead developed its own unique character that would define Islamic states from then on. Abd al-Malik emphasized the importance of Islam to the state, and claimed the role of leader of Muslims, as well as leader of the empire. He used state money to build mosques, and also constructed one of the most important buildings in Islam—the Dome of the Rock.

The Dome of the Rock is not a mosque, but a monument built upon the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Its location has great symbolic meaning. It was upon this spot that the Jewish Temple stood until it was destroyed by the Romans under Titus. This is also the spot where Muslims believe Muhammad ascended to heaven. The Dome may have been built by Abd al-Malik as a pilgrimage site, since the Kaaba was for some time in the hands of his enemy, Ibn al-Zubayr. But it was also meant to show Islamic domination over Jerusalem, and that Islam had surpassed Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, it may have been built to overshadow the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and it is decorated with verses from the Qur'an, some of which directly rebut Christian beliefs. For example, some of the writing on the Dome says: "There is no god but God alone, without partner. Say: He is God, One, God the Everlasting, who has not begotten and has not been begotten."

Under Abd-al Malik, the government of the caliphate abandoned the use of Greek and Persian language among its officials. All records were to be kept in Arabic, which became not only the primary language of religion (since the Qur'an was written in Arabic) but also the primary religion of government. This was a major factor in the spread of Arabic, which replaced Greek in Syria and Egypt as the most common language. Abd al-Malik also began minting the first coins with Islamic motifs on them. Previously, the caliphate had taken over the Byzantine and Persian mints and produced coins based on their models. Under Abd al-Malik, completely new coins were made, inscribed with text from the Qur'an, emphasizing that the Islamic Empire was not a continuation of Byzantine or Persian rule, but a new state based on Islam.

Abd al-Malik solidified control of Iran and Iraq after his victory in the Second Fitna. He also continued the rapid expansion of the Islamic Empire. He sent armies to complete the conquest of North Africa, and in 695 AD his soldiers captured Carthage, the crown jewel of Byzantine North Africa. When Abd al-Malik died in 705 AD, the

Umayyad caliphate was stronger than ever before. Islam had been successfully placed at the center of the state, and the Byzantines were weak and vulnerable.

Under Abd al-Malik's son and successor, Al-Walid, the Umayyad state expanded even more. Having taken North Africa from the Byzantines, Islamic forces began the invasion of Western Europe. In 711 AD, a Muslim army crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and entered Spain. Spain was ruled by the Visigoths, a Germanic nation that had taken Spain from the Romans, but who had gone on to embrace Roman culture and become Catholics. The Visigothic kingdom rapidly collapsed under Islamic attack, and within four years Spain was successfully integrated into the Umayyad caliphate. The Umayyad caliphate had become the largest empire so far in history, with lands ranging from Spain to the borders of modern-day China.

Decline of the Umayyads

Al-Walid was succeeded by his brother Sulayman in 715 AD. Sulayman began the Second Arab Siege of Constantinople, determined to end the Byzantine Empire once and for all. This siege involved even more soldiers than the first, and was meant to learn from the failures of the first siege. While the attack seemed unstoppable, a mixture of Byzantine trickery and bad weather hampered the Muslims. The siege lasted over a year, but the Islamic forces were eventually forced to give up, and many were killed as they fled, or drowned in a series of storms that wrecked the departing Muslim fleet. This would be the last attempt by the Arabs to conquer Byzantium. From that point on, it was generally held that the Islamic Empire would have to accept the continued existence of the Byzantine Empire. They would continue to fight over land, but neither would be able to completely conquer the other.

Sulayman was succeeded in 717 by his cousin Umar ibn al-Aziz, who became known as Umar II. He was the last great Umayyad caliph. Umar II was known for his piety, and he continued Abd al-Malik's efforts to integrate Islam into the state. He exempted new converts to Islam from having to pay the *jizya* tax (which first-generation converts previously still had to pay). This encouraged many people of the empire to become Muslims. His kind treatment of the *mawali*, non-Arab converts to Islam, made him very popular, though his successors would not continue this policy. Umar II built bridges to the Shiites by ending the public cursing of Ali, and he avoided luxuries. Instead of spending government money on himself, he gave generously to the poor and needy.

Umar II only lasted three years in power, and he was followed by a series of less capable rulers. The caliphate's military prestige had been damaged by the failure of the second siege of Constantinople, and more defeats followed. Spain was firmly under Muslim rule, but the Islamic invasion of France was crushed by the Franks under Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 AD, halting Muslim expansion in Western Europe. Islamic expansion in the Far East mostly halted as well. The borders of the Islamic Empire became fixed, and in many ways the empire was already too big to effectively govern.

The Third Fitna and the Abbasid Revolution

In 744 AD, a new civil war, called the Third Fitna, tore the Umayyad caliphate apart. In the end, the descendants of Abd al-Malik were wiped out, and power went to Marwan II, a grandson of Marwan I (by another son). This civil war weakened the Umayyad military and made it more susceptible to rebellion.

The major areas of rebellion against the Umayyads were the eastern lands that had once been the Persian Empire. While the Umayyad base of power remained in Syria, many Arabs in Iran were unhappy and felt overlooked by the government. In addition, non-Arab Muslims, called *mawali*, had inferior status to Arab Muslims under the Umayyads. Only Muslim Arabs were first-class citizens. The largest group of *mawali* was the Persians, who lived in the eastern part of the empire. These eastern lands were also home to a large number of Shiites, and they believed that the Umayyad caliphate was illegitimate because it was not ruled by the family of Muhammad. Members of Muhammad's family—his uncle Abbas's line, known as the Abbasids—started a rebellion. The Abbasids appealed to the disaffected Arabs of Persia, to the *mawali* of the region, and, thanks to their descent from Muhammad, to the Shiites. Soon a large confederation of enemies of the Umayyads had come together under Abul 'Abbas as-Saffah

The Abbasids under as-Saffah marched west, and met the Umayyad caliph Marwin II at the Battle of the Zab. Marwin II was defeated and killed. As-Saffah captured Damascus and was proclaimed the new caliph. He invited the remaining members of the Umayyad family to a feast and had them slaughtered. Only one member of the Umayyad dynasty, Abd al-Rahman, escaped. Through a series of adventures and close calls, Abd al-Rahman made it to Spain, which declared itself independent from the Abbasid caliphate. Spain was too distant and independent for the Abbasids to regain. The Umayyad Dynasty would continue to rule Islamic Spain until the eleventh century. The rest of the empire, however, fell under the control of the Abbasids. The Abbasids started their own dynasty, and ushered in the golden age of Islamic civilization. They moved the capital from Damascus to a new city, Baghdad, built near the old capital of the Persian Empire. Unlike the Umayyads, who continued many Byzantine traditions of rule and governance, the Abbasids would be highly influenced by Persian customs, and they admitted the *mawali* as full members of the Islamic community.

successor state to its own unique state, with Islam as its central ideology and Arabic as its language.

- In 711 AD, the Umayyads conquered Spain from the Visigoths. The Umayyad Empire was the largest yet in history, but its military expansion was halted after the failed second siege of Constantinople in 717 AD and the defeat of Muslim forces in France at the Battle of Tours in 732 AD.
- While Umayyad caliph Umar II treated the mawali—the non-Arab Muslims of the empire—very well, under most caliphs only Muslim Arabs were first-class citizens. This caused widespread discontent under the Umayyads.
- In 750, at the Battle of the Zab, the Umayyads were overthrown by a new dynasty, the Abbasids, who had support from the Arabs living in the East, from the mawali, and from the Shiites.
- Spain remained in the hands of the Umayyads, but the rest of the empire came under the control of the Abbasids, who moved the capital to Baghdad.