

Ali

Upon Muhammad's death, Muhammad's father in law, Abu Bakr, was elected to be the secular head of Islam. However, many believed that Muhammad had designated Ali as a successor, for the traditions had Muhammad naming him as both his brother and his successor. Meccan and Medinan leaders gave their allegiance to Abu Bakr as Caliph and attempted through force of arms to coerce Ali into acknowledging Abu Bakr as well. However, during the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and his successor, 'Umar, not only did 'Ali not advance any claims to the Caliphate, he even participated in the government of 'Umar. It was not until the Caliphate passed to 'Uthman, who ruled somewhat degenerately and was a member of the Umayya family, that 'Ali was provoked into accepting the Caliphate. 'Uthman was a bad leader and was assassinated. The prominent families of Medina and other areas persuaded 'Ali to become Caliph, which he did in 656; 'Ali had been chosen and became the fourth Caliph of Islam.

The Umayyads in charge of the various governments would not accept this arrangement and rose up in rebellion naming Mu'awiyya caliph. Eventually, 'Ali would be forced to flee Medina. 'Ali would have to contend with dissension in his own army while fighting the Umayyads; later he would be assassinated.

From this point onwards, authority was divided in the Islamic world. The Umayyads continued to pass the Caliphate down through the ages among their family; but there now existed in Iraq a separate Islamic community that did not recognize the authority of the Umayyad Caliphs. They recognized only the successors to 'Ali as authorities, and they gave these successors the title **Imam**, or spiritual leader of Islam. The two factions were the Shi'a who supported Ali and his descendants and the Sunni that follow all caliphates.

1. Why did the Islamic world become divided?
2. What is the difference between Shi'a and Sunni?

The Umayyad Dynasty 661-750

The Umayyads saw a great expansion of the Islamic empire and were responsible for building a highly efficient and lasting governmental structure. The Umayyad caliphs could be startlingly brilliant both militarily and politically. And there is no question, that Islamic material and artistic culture has its roots in the Umayyad dynasty and the courts of Umayyad power.

The first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyya, also introduced a new method of selecting caliphs. The caliphate was a unique institution in that the caliph was elected by a small group of tribal leaders. Mu'awiyya convinced them to recognize his son, Yazid, as the next caliph. This would become the model of succession—the reigning caliph would name his successor and the notable would elect that named successor. So the Umayyad caliphate was essentially a hereditary dynasty.

The Umayyads most significant change in government was the adoption of Byzantine administrative and financial systems. Mu'awiyya had moved the administrative center of Islam from Medina to Damascus in Syria. During his tenure, Islam enjoyed twenty years of internal peace and solidified its control over Iraq and Iran. Mu'awiyya was an effective administrator and staffed administrative positions with the best administrators he could find. At the same time, however, the establishment of a court culture began a rise of Islamic culture in art, architecture, and writing.

1. What were some achievements of Mu'awiyya?
2. What were his changes to the system of succession?

The Later Umayyads

With the Islamic world enjoying a measure of stability, al-Walid I began Islamic conquests and took the early Islamic empire to its farthest extents. He reconquered parts of Egypt and moved into Carthage and to the west of North Africa. Then, in 711, Muslim armies began to conquer Spain. By 716, the Visigoths of Spain had been defeated and Spain was under Muslim control. This would be the farthest extent of Islamic control of Europe—in 736, they were stopped in their expansion into Europe south of Tours, France. In the east, Islamic armies made it as far as the Indus River in 710—under al-Walid, the caliphal empire stretched from Spain to India.

Al-Walid also began the first great building projects of Islam, the most famous of which is the mosque at Damascus. The long history of Islamic architecture really begins with al-Walid. This is also the period, however, in which Islamic court culture begins to develop. With the caliph as a patron, artists and writers begin to develop a new, partly secular culture based on Islamic ideas.

It was also al-Walid that coupled islamization with arabization. Conversion was not forced on conquered peoples; however, since non-believers had to pay an extra tax and were not technically citizens, many people did convert for religious and non-religious reasons. This created several problems, particularly since Islam was so closely connected with being Arab—being Arab, of course, was more than an ethnic identity, it was a tribal identity based on kinship and descent. As more and more Muslims were non-Arabs, the status of Arabs and their culture became threatened. In part to alleviate that threat, al-Walid instituted Arabic as the only official language of the empire. He decreed that all administration was to be done only in Arabic. It was this move that would cement the primacy of Arabic language and culture in the Islamic world.

1. How did al-Walid change the Umayyad Dynasty?
2. How did he treat people of other religions?

The Fall of the Umayyads

None of the remaining Marwani caliphs enjoyed long reigns except for Hisham, who ruled from 724-744. During this period, the Muslims expanded out of Spain and into France until the Franks finally stopped their advance in 736. When Hisham died in 743, the empire collapsed into a series of rebellions mostly by disaffected non-Arabs and by the Kharjites. It was one such rebellious group, the 'Abbasids, which would finally overthrow the dynasty. The 'Abbasids were descendants of al-Abbas, the paternal uncle of Muhammad. Like the followers of 'Ali and the Kharjites, the 'Abbasids believed that the spirit of Islam had been betrayed by the secular-minded Umayyads—as relatives of Muhammad, their pietism had a concrete character to it. It was when the 'Abbasids allied themselves with the 'Alids that the death-knell of Umayyad power was sounded. With their combined forces, they defeated the last of the Marwani caliphs, Marwan II (744-750), who was later murdered. The leader of the 'Abbasids, Abu'l-'Abbas, went about systematically and ruthlessly killing as many Umayyads as he could find.

1. How was the Umayyad advance stopped?
2. How did the dynasty fall?