8.8 The Umayyad Dynasty

Soon after Ali’s death, Mu’awiyah (mooh-AH-wee-YAH), the leader of the Umayyads, claimed the caliphate. Most Muslims, called the Sunnis (SOOH-nee), came to accept him. But a minority of Muslims, known as the Shi’ah (SHEE-ah), or “party” of Ali, refused to do so. They believed that only people directly descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali should be caliph. The schism between the Sunnis and Shi’ah lasts to this day.

Mu’awiyah put down a revolt by Ali’s supporters. He held on to the caliphate. He also founded the Umayyad dynasty. In 661, the Umayyads moved their capital to Damascus, Syria. From there, the caliphs ruled the huge Muslim empire for close to 100 years.

Slowly, the lands of the Muslim empire took on more elements of Arab culture. Muslims introduced the Arabic language. Along with Islam, acceptance of Arabic helped unite the diverse people of the empire. In addition, Arabs took over as top officials. People bought goods with new Arab coins. While it was not policy to force conversion to Islam, some non-Muslims began to embrace the new faith for a variety of reasons. These included personal belief in the message of Islam and social pressure to join the people of the ruling group.

The Muslim empire continued to expand. The Umayyad caliphs sent armies into central Asia and northwestern India. In 711, Muslim armies began their conquests of present-day Spain. However, at the Battle of Tours in 732, forces under the Frankish king Charles Martel turned the Muslims back in France. This battle marked the farthest extent of Muslim advances into Europe, outside of Spain.

Muslims held on to land in Spain, where Islamic states lasted for almost 800 years. Muslims in Spain built some of the greatest cities of medieval Europe. Their capital city, Cordoba, became a center of learning where Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars shared ideas. Through their work, Muslim culture made important advances in arts, science, technology, and literature.