

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

MEDVL 250R / SI 250R – The History of Islamic Civilisation from Late Antiquity to 1300

Essay Question Addressed: Compare and contrast the manner and circumstances behind the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid takeovers. In what way were these events similar or not similar? Which do you feel represented more of an improvement on its predecessor? Why?

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The Umayyad and the Abbasid empires are perhaps the two most notable Islamicate empires known to the Islamic civilization. While some may see them as part of the greater Islamicate, the similarities and differences of how these empires came into being must be understood. This will help us understand the characteristics of these two empires to appreciate, as well as critique them. The aim of this research essay is to study these empires based on the similarities and differences of their takeovers. The comparative analysis between the two empires will help us establish the improvements that the Abbasids made in respect to their predecessors, the Umayyads.

Naturally, as the Umayyad Empire is the predecessor to the Abbasid empire, we will discuss it before we discuss the respective successor. The process of the establishment of the Umayyad Empire began in 656 during the reign of the Third Rightly Guided Caliph, Uthman.¹ During Uthman's reign, the 'tribal factor' from the pre-Islamic era returned. Many of Uthman's clan, the Banu Umayyah, had remained enemies of the Prophet until right before the conquest of Makkah, but Uthman was accused of nepotism which caused unrest amongst the people.² The policy of nepotism alienated many Muslims and contributed to the tensions which eventually led to his murder. This policy helped the Banu Umayyah gain positions of power and essentially laid the foundations that would ultimately lead to the establishment of the Umayyad Empire.

After his murder, Uthman's relative and tribesman, Muawiya, who was the Governor of Damascus, refused to accept the authority of the fourth Caliph, Ali, until the murderers of Uthman were

1. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History In a World Civilization, Vol. 1*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/2027/fulcrum.rx913q03c>, 214

2. Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 2003), <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/2027/fulcrum.rn3011916>, 71-72

brought to justice.³ The escalation of this demand led to the first civil war, which led to an arbitration between the camps of Ali and Muawiya and the Islamic Caliphate was divided into two parts.⁴ After Ali was killed in 661, his son, Hasan, was elevated as the next Caliph but he abdicated and gave the right to caliphate to Muawiya.⁵ Muawiya is not considered a rightly guided Caliph, although he was a companion and brother-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶

Before Muawiya died, he named his son, Yazid, as his successor and the next Caliph, which laid the foundation for dynastic rule over the Muslim world.⁷ Hence, the Umayyad Empire came into being in 661. In 680, Ali's son, Husayn, who was deemed a political threat, was killed under the rule of Yazid.⁸ This left the Shia-Tu-Ali to oppose the rule of Yazid; this was a very important point as it played a part in the eventual rise of the Abbasid Empire.

The Umayyads ruled with a mixture of Byzantine and Arab tribal systems.⁹ The tribal system of governance meant that the Caliph was not the "Supreme Leader" and had to negotiate his policies with the tribe.¹⁰

The Umayyads adopted Jihad as their social, economic, and military policy.¹¹ This policy worked well as an incentive to expand the abode of the Islamicate from Spain to China. However, it would be this very policy that would collapse upon itself, due to its socio-economic limitations.

3. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 215

4. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 214

5. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 216

6. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 216

7. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 219

8. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 219

9. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 245

10. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 245

11. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 200

When the Umayyads came into power, they imposed *Jizya* (head tax) on the conquered people.¹² As an incentive to avoid this tax, these people converted to Islam.¹³ The Umayyads, however, would not recognize the conversion of their non-Arab subjects because more Muslims meant less *Jizya*.¹⁴ The lack of recognition of these non-Arab Muslims led to a two-tier citizenship system, where non-Arabs were treated as second class citizens and were charged *Jizya* despite their conversion to Islam. This led these second-class citizens to seek protection and become clients of an Arab tribe. The clients of these Arabs tribes were called *Mawali*.¹⁵

The Umayyad empire began to overstretch its boundaries and met tougher enemies who yielded an unimpressive war booty which generated less revenue for the empire to sustain its expansionist policy.¹⁶ In order to sustain the empire, the second-class citizens, now *Mawali* of Arab tribes, were exploited even more.

This lead the *Mawali*, such as Abu Muslim ibn Muslim, to make connections with the *Khurasaniya*.¹⁷ The *Khurasaniya* were non-Arab converts to Islam, who had to pay *Jizya*, and were trained warriors who became the military wing for the Abbasid revolution.¹⁸ Abu Muslim connected the *Khurasaniya* to his protector clan, the Banu Hashim, who were the rival clan of the Umayyads. The dismayed *Mawali*, the Banu Hashim, the *Khurasaniya* and possibly the dormant

12. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 242

13. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 249

14. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 249-250

15. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 249

16. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 212

17. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 104

18. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 114

Shia-tu-Ali successfully overthrew the Umayyads in 750.¹⁹ The Umayyad Empire then existed in the Iberian Peninsula until the Reconquista in 1492.²⁰

When the Abbasids came into power, the question of their legitimacy became an unanswerable one. Although they were from the Banu Hashim, they were not from the lineage of Ali and Fatima-Prophet Muhammad's daughter.²¹ The Abbasids countered the Shia narrative and became patrons of 'Sunni' Islam to sustain their claim to the throne.²² They kept the Prophet's descendants under close watch and ensured that they were not a political threat. This was very similar to what the Umayyads did with Imam Hussain.

Eventually, the Abbasids stated their governance in a very different way than the Umayyads. They recognized the conversions of the Mawali to Islam²³ and created the Millet system, which finished the two-tier citizenship system.²⁴ They integrated Persians into the bureaucracy and ruled in a way that contrasted the Byzantines. They adopted a non-expansionist military policy and relied heavily on agriculture and trade as part of their economic policy.²⁵ The Abbasids started the translation movement and introduced the Bait-ul-Hikmah, which was a centre of learning of scholars of all backgrounds.²⁶ Their rule saw the "Golden Age" of Islam²⁷ and the development of various schools of Islamic Theology, jurisprudence, and exploration of Sufism. Bureaucrats, such as Nizam Ul

19. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 106, 244

20. Ibn Abd-el-Hakem, "The Islamic Conquest of Spain," in *History of the Conquest of Spain*, 1858, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/conqspain.asp>

21. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 105

22. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 105

23. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 275

24. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 266

25. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 235

26. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 250

27. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 114

Mulk, developed modern curriculum such as the Nizamiyya to counter the Shia-Fatimid narrative.²⁸

However, the Abbasids saw a process of slow decline as opposed to a relatively quick Umayyad overthrow. Their slave soldiers eventually rose to positions of power and hijacked the caliph to issue his cloak of investiture to legitimize their rule.²⁹ This practice continued until the empire was defeated by the Ottomans in the 16th century.³⁰

In conclusion, both caliphates dominated most parts of the Islamicate till the period of a little after Late Antiquity. It is however necessary to understand a comparative conclusion of which empire treated its people in a better way and provided for more opportunity. It can be said, that the expansionist centered socio-economic policies and tribal governance structure led the Umayyads to stratify social classes on an ethnic basis.³¹ In the modern world, we would see this as racism. The Abbasids were more accepting of diversity and the introduction of the Millet system led the empire to survive for longer. However, this also led them to be taken hostage, and issue their investiture to martial entities under their caliphate.

Both communities deemed the Shia a political threat and hence did not properly integrate these communities into the structure of society. It must be noted, how the empires always rested on foundations of religious patronage and sectarian divide.

Overall, it is imminent to point out that the Abbasids built upon the weakness of the socio-economic policies of the Umayyads and hence built a more sustainable social system. Although

28. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 180

29. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 485-488

30. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 181

31. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 200-245

the Umayyads can be credited for the spread of the Islamicate to as far as Europe, their racist policies were the reason for its quick degradation.

Abbasid tolerance of different sects, religions, and ethnicities helped them to benefit from the contributions of these communities in peripatetic philosophy, Islamic theology, scholarship and jurisprudence, and the natural sciences.³² They are attributed with the Greek turn, translation movement and for the free flow of knowledge. The development of these times have set up our world for a more developed and advanced society. Had the Abbasids not governed the way they had, the Muslim world would not have been able to rationally reconcile religion, natural science, agnosticism, and metaphysics.

Despite their many shortcomings, the Abbasid dynasty shows that a society can change and progress despite its rigid history of bad governance. It is not only a great case study for the people, but also for the rulers.

32. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 266

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