

The history of syria history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The History of Syria is rooted in an ancient past; archaeologists have demonstrated that civilization in this country was one of the most ancient on earth. Near Ebla, in the north of Syria, it seems that between 2500 -2400 B. C. was founded a relevant Semitic empire able to trade with the cities of Sumer, Akkad and Egypt. After the decade of this reign, probably started around 2300 BC, the region was populated by Canaanites, Arameans (Semitic tribes) and Phoenicians (a maritime trade culture which has not yet discovered the real origin even if are probably related with Canaanites).

During the Ancient age, Syria was finally occupied by Persians, Alexander the Great and Romans; at the end of this historical period, the region was a hybrid expression of different cultures: the Semitic, the Persian, the Hellenic and the Roman. After Jesus Christ's death, Christian religion found fertile ground in Syria, not only in Damascus, but also in different urban communities, as Aleppo, Hama and Antioch (Antakya); in this town (today not in Syria but in Turkey) was created one of the most significant theological and hermeneutical (for exegesis of Gospels) school of early Christianity.

The Arab-Islamic conquest and the Omayyad caliphate.

With the Yarmuk's battle in 636, the Arabs-Islamic conquerors defeated the Byzantines of Constantinople and occupied the entire Syria. In 661, Muawiya I, previously governor of Syria, became the first Omayyad caliph, choosing Damascus for his residence. For one century, until 750, Syria was the core of an Arab-Islamic process of expansion ruled by the clan of Banu Umayyad and the country enjoyed a considerable degree of prosperity. During this century, Syria was much larger than what we find in contemporary; we could speak of

a Great Syria that during the Umayyad caliphate was divided in districts: Filistin (Palestine) with Ramleh and after Jerusalem, as capital; Urduun (Jordan) with Tiberias as capital; Damascus, including Baalbek, Tripoli and Beirut; Hims, including the town of Hama; Kinnesrin, corresponding with the north of Syria and including Aleppo and finally the border area with the Byzantines Empire. During the Omayyad caliphate, the Arabs-Islamic generals were able to occupy on the West the entire north Africa coast (Algeria and Morocco), landing on the European Spanish coast (al-Andalus) in 711, and occupying the peninsula until the Pyrenees Mountains; on the East, Syrians armies reached Afghanistan and Turkmenistan occupying Bukhara, Kabul and Samarkand and deciding to not proceed to China and Indian Subcontinent, even if were able to defeat armies from both of them. The Omayyad tried to conquer Constantinople two times, in 678 and 717, but for both of them the city walls resisted without difficulties.

The caliphate was ruled until 684 by Sufyanids, descendant of Abu Sufyan, and more closed with the founder of the dynasty, Muawiya I. The family clan of Marwanids took the power in 684 and maintained it until 750. The clan of Banu Omayyad, originally from Mecca, as others Arab clans, were internally divided in different families often in conflict with each other to obtain more political power. The last great Omayyad caliph was Hisham who ruled the reign from 724 until 743, acquiring new territories to the Empire, however, the excessive use of Syrian and Yemeni (different south Arabia clans were strictly allied with Banu Omayyad) armies, for these ongoing military campaigns, weakened the offensive power of Damascus, who was easily defeated by Banu Abbas, an Arab clan, more closed to Prophet Muhammad's

family, when from the Iranian region of Khorasan, started a conquering campaign in 748, reaching Syria, in 750.

Syria today: the Alawite

With the end of Omayyad caliphate, Syria started a long period of decadence, or better, of not centrality in policy decisions; the Abbasids relegated the region to a status of lesser importance compared with other regions as Egypt, Khorasan, and Khwarezm etc. During this long period of time, Syria was partially ruled by local dynasties as Hamdanid and Ikhshidid which fighting each other encouraged the re- conquest by Byzantines of some north Syrian regions in X-XI centuries. During the Crusades, Syria was occupied, Damascus and Aleppo were conquered for one century, even if the region was under control of the principality of Antioch.

The main peculiarity of Syria today, it is the dominion of a minority Islamic syncretic sect, the Alawi, which even if resides in the region from XI century, it would be under the French mandate, with the end of the First World War, that this clan would gain a great importance especially in the military class. The Alawis origin is disputed, they trace their origins to the followers of the XI Shiite Imam Hassan al-' Askari (d. 873), and his pupil ibn Nusayr (d. 868), however, the sect is precisely related with a follower of Ibn Nusayr, al-Khasibi, who died in Aleppo in 969. In 1032, Al-Khasibi's grandson, named al-Tabarani, moved to Latakia, a Syrian coastal town, which was then controlled by Byzantine Empire. Al-Tabarani became the main religious authority of the ' Alawi faith through his numerous writings. He and his pupils converted the rural population of the Syrian Coastal Mountain Range and the plain of Cilicia to the ' Alawi faith.

During the Ottoman empire, Alawi were persecuted and still today the Sunnis not considered them as members of Islamic Umma (community); on the contrary, Iran Ayatollahs, after 1979, have recognized Alawi as a sect of Shi'a and the political relationship between these two countries has become ever more stronger. In Syria today, the Alawi are not more than 20% of the population but ruled the country from the 1970 when al-Asad family took the power.

Marco Demichelis

References and further readings

Gerald R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate, AD 661-750*, Routledge, London, 2000.

Alan George, *Syria, neither bread nor freedom*, Zed books, New York, 2003.

Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: a history of struggle and self-expression*, McFarland, 2002.

Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria. The history of an ambition*, Oxford University Press, 1992.