PRACTICE OF POWER AND LEGITIMATION
UMAYYAD EFFORTS AT LEGITIMATION:  
THE UMAYYADS’ SILENT HERITAGE

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Introduction

The Umayyads (ruled 661–750 CE) left to their successors in the Islamic world – not only to their successors as rulers of the empire, the ‘Abbāsids, but also to Muslims at large – a formidable political, intellectual, and communal legacy. This legacy, however, has often been poorly appreciated. Sometimes it has been dismissed completely, at other times acknowledged only grudgingly, even by modern scholarship. The origins of this dismissive attitude toward the Umayyads are well-known. A powerful stream of anti-Umayyad rhetoric had begun to circulate already during the years of their rule among groups who opposed them, especially the supporters of their ‘Alid rivals. This anti-Umayyad outlook was further cultivated and eventually set down in written form under the ‘Abbāsids who, in 750, supplanted them as rulers of the empire. As Wellhausen put it, “[…] their enemies had the last word, and their history in consequence suffered severely.”¹ One aspect of this process was a denigration of the Umayyads as usurpers, that is as rulers who were by their very nature illegitimate because they were not of the prophet’s clan of Hāshim (to which both ‘Alids and ‘Abbāsids belonged). To this illegitimacy of the Umayyads as non-Hashimites were added allegations that the Umayyads were not concerned with piety and the “true” Islamic values. This charge found shorthand expression in the many reports that smear the Umayyads.

¹ Julius Wellhausen, The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall (transl. Margaret Graham Weir, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927; reprint Beirut: Khayats, 1963), xv. Cf. Wellhausen, Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz (Berlin Georg Reimer, 1902), XIII: “Bei den Arabern haben eben ihre Feinde das letzte Wort behalten, darunter hat ihre Geschichte stark gelitten.” Wellhausen speaks of “the Arabs” in this sentence, but in his thoroughly nationalist view, the Umayyads represented the “Arab” movement and the “Arab kingdom” was that of the Umayyads, who are the subject of the preceding sentence. G. R. Hawting, The First Dynasty of Islam. The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 11–18, offers a concise summary of the attitude of Muslim tradition to the Umayyads.