CHAPTER FOUR

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ALLEGIANCE IN
EARLY ISLAMIC LATE ANTIQUITY:
THE ACCESSION OF MUʿĀWIYA IN JERUSALEM, CA. 661 CE*

Andrew Marsham

Introduction

The public accession in Jerusalem of the fifth caliph, Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān, is unique among early Islamic ceremonies of accession because of the existence of a near-eyewitness account of events. An anonymous Syriac fragment, now known as the Maronite Chronicle, explains that, having been “made king” by the “Arab nomads,” Muʿāwiya went up to Golgotha, where a complex of Christian churches stood. There, he sat down and prayed, before setting out for Gethsemane, outside the east wall of the city, where he visited the church of the tomb of Mary, and prayed. A separate report states that “in July of the same year” the “emirs and many Arab nomads gathered.” They “proffered their right hand” to Muʿāwiya. An order went out that he should be “proclaimed king in all the villages and cities of his dominion;” their inhabitants were ordered to “make invocations and acclamations to him.” Coins were struck that lacked the cross that had been a feature of Roman coinage. Muʿāwiya chose not to wear a crown, unlike “other kings in the world.”1

For the historian familiar with the early Islamic historical tradition, at least some of this is unsurprising. Nonetheless, it is important, because no Islamic historical text took its extant form as early as the Maronite Chronicle, and so the chronicle confirms many aspects of Islamic ceremonial which are

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* I would like to thank the three organizers of the conference at the University of Cyprus, Alexander Beihammer, Stavrula Constantinou and Maria Parani, for the opportunity to present aspects of this paper in November 2010, and the other participants in the conference for many useful comments and much informative discussion. I would also like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to publish the written version of this paper, and for their editorial work, Alain George for guidance on the architectural history, John Healey for advice on Syriac and Simon Loseby for some useful critical comments. I, of course, remain entirely responsible for any errors in what follows.

1 For the full text and references, see pp. 93–94, below.
otherwise only firmly attested about a century later. The proffering of the right hand was a standard gesture of allegiance throughout the ancient and late antique Near East, and it found its Islamic corollary in the bay’a, ‘the pledge of allegiance’, which was contracted by a handclasp (ṣafqa)—as in a commercial sale, to which the term bay’a is related. In early Islamic thought, this “sale” or contract expressed the covenant between Man and God, first concluded between God and Adam at Creation.² The promulgation of the accession of the caliph throughout his dominions is also familiar.³ The striking of coins for an accession is known from later accession rituals;⁴ a case has been made that extant gold “Arab-Byzantine” coins, which have been modified so that they lack a cross may be related to Mu’awiya’s accession.⁵

Whereas an historian who knew only the later Islamic tradition would be unsurprised by much of the account, they might find the visits to Golgotha and Gethsemane a little more remarkable. There appears to be one precedent: following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is usually dated to 637 or 638, the second caliph, ‘Umar b. al-Khattāb, is said to have chosen to pray outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was adjacent to Golgotha and inside the Church of Mary. However, there are serious problems with this material, which may indicate that it was retrospectively connected with ‘Umar.⁶ If it is accepted that the account of Mu’awiya’s actions is based in fact—and there are good reasons to believe that it is—then this is an important insight into a particular moment in the history of the political culture of early Islam, which may help to contextualize the more tenuous evidence about ‘Umar’s actions.

Of course, accounts of ceremonial, like all literary historical evidence, are composed with a purpose—very often a polemical one. In this case, the

² On the pledge of allegiance in Islam, see A. Marsham, Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire (Edinburgh, 2009); the accession of Mu’awiya is discussed on pp. 86–90; on the Islamic source material, see pp. 11–16.
⁴ EI², “Māl al-bay’a” (H. Kennedy); Marsham, Rituals, pp. 218, 260.
⁵ C. Foss, “A Syrian Coinage of Mu’awiya?”, Revue Numismatique 158 (2002), 353–67. As was first noted by Michael Bates, Mu’awiya’s striking of silver on which crosses had been removed seems unlikely. However, Foss has recently suggested that this refers to the import of Sasanian silver struck in Mu’awiya’s name: C. Foss, “Mu’awiya’s State,” in Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria, ed. J. Haldon (Farnham, 2010), p. 86. Silver coins were struck only in post-Sasanian Iran and Iraq, where they were modelled on Sasanian types; the currencies in post-Roman Syria were gold and copper.
⁶ See below, pp. 102–03.