THE HUNGARIAN HOLY CROWN

THE PLACE OF THE HUNGARIAN HOLY CROWN AMONG THE EUROPEAN CROWNS

There are various traditions concerning coronations and crowns all over the world, but even within Europe numerous differences can be observed. Both in the Middle Ages and modern times, rulers have generally had several crowns for various ceremonies, including masses or feudal assemblies. Prominent among these was the coronation crown, also known as the inauguration crown, which in most countries was linked either to the dynasty that founded the state, or to their saints. In the Holy Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Bohemia, it was customary to crown the ruler with the inaugural crown. It was often the case that the coronation would only be recognised as legitimate if it was carried out using this crown.

The medieval coronation regalia of England were destroyed in the 17th century, so only the crown of Charles II (1660-1685) is preserved in the Tower of London. Only a small part of the French regalia survived the revolution, which can now be seen in the Louvre. The Bohemian crown, known otherwise as the Crown of Saint Wenceslaus, dates from the 14th century and can now be found in the treasury of the Cathedral of Saint Vitus in Prague. The Polish coronation treasures were stolen by the Prussians in 1795, who later destroyed them. In contrast, the regalia of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire have – similarly to the coronation regalia of the Russian Czar – survived almost unscathed and are now preserved in the Schatzkammer of the Hofburg in Vienna. The regalia of the Holy Roman Emperor are linked to the empire's founder, Charlemagne. However, the imperial crown that has survived to this day was not made for him but rather for the coronation of Otto I the Great in 962, and assumed the form it has today in the 11th century. The imperial crown is the only coronation crown to have survived that is roughly as old as the Hungarian Holy Crown. However, since the Holy Roman Empire no longer exists as a state, the Hungarian Holy Crown – the symbol of Hungarian statehood and legal continuity – is the oldest inaugural crown.

This undoubtedly confirms the unique nature of the Hungarian Holy Crown, which, like no other, is a crucially important relic of over one thousand years of Hungarian history.

CORONA LATINA

The top part of the crown is formed by intersecting bands with enamel pictures, filigree – decorations made from fine gold wire –, genuine pearls and almandine stones shaped like red tears adorning their stems. The bands are soldered to a square plate at their cross section, while the parts connected to the Greek diadem are affixed with tiny pins. On the central, square plate, an enamel picture of Christ Pantocrator can be seen surrounded by twelve pearls and twelve almandine stones. The number 12 and multiples of it appear on the Latin crown, and a total of seventy-two stones can be found on the intersecting bands. Twelve is a symbol of the apostles, while seventy-two represents the number of Christ's disciples. The rectangular enamel pictures of the bands bear full-length depictions of the eight apostles. Their order originally followed the list of names as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: Peter, Paul, James, John, while on the lower plates are Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew and Thomas. However, at some point the pictures of Bartholomew and Thomas were changed. The reason for this may have been that the former was badly damaged and only its uppermost part has remained intact. Since the picture of Christ on the front covers this plate, the deficiency is not visible. The depictions of the apostles accord with the Romanesque art of Western Europe, while it is rather the Byzantine influence that comes to the forefront in the decorative elements on the intersecting bands: there is a stepped pattern in the picture of Peter and James, ornamental foliage on that of Andrew and Paul, and a sequence of circles in those of Thomas and Philip.

Peter
the Apostle

James
the Apostle

Paul
the Apostle

John
the Apostle

STRAIGHT OR CROOKED?

A cross was affixed to the intersection of the bands of the Holy Crown, i.e. to the plate showing Christ on the throne, thus the picture was penetrated at Christ's abdomen. According to most researchers, the clumsy execution unworthy of the holy picture suggests that the cross was attached at a later point, after the two parts of the crown had already been joined together, after the Árpád era, from the 14th century. The slanting position is also a point of debate. The first true-to-life depiction of the Holy Crown can be dated to the mid-16th century. Sources generally show the cross as straight up to the early 17th century, while it is clearly depicted as slanted from the 18th century, so the damage must have taken place during this period.

It can be ascertained from the dents in the intersecting bands that at one point the crown sustained significant damage from a strong force delivered from above. This resulted in its arch having collapsed, three of its bands having broken and the orb surmounting the cross becoming indented. However, the plaques of the Greek diadem have survived undamaged. It is probable that the blow was caused by the lid of the chest containing the regalia: this may have happened, for example, in 1638, during the coronation of Queen Maria, wife of Ferdinand III, in Pozsony (Bratislava). According to a contemporary account, the wrong key was brought from the treasury in Vienna, and since there was little time before the ceremony would begin, the chest containing the crown had to be forced open in a hurry.

THE SCEPTRE

The oldest piece in the ensemble of regalia symbolises the administration of justice. The cylindrical handle of the 29.5-cm-long coronation sceptre made of hazel wood is covered by a silver-gilded filigree decoration. The sphere fitted to the end of the sceptre is made out of Madagascan rock crystal and is likely to originate from 10th-century Egypt. Carved into its surface are three uniform figures of animals resembling lions, a traditional symbol of rulers. The sphere is held together by three pairs of gold ribbons, and two flower-shaped plates are set on its top and its bottom. The top of the upper plate is decorated with a so-called "Solomon's knot" – an endless knot that continually returns to itself – combined with a square. Twenty-six smaller golden globes hang down from the ribbons and the plates on delicate chains. The sceptre can be dated to the first half of the 11th century, probably to the period of Saint Stephen's rule. A sceptre resembling the Hungarian one was used by German rulers but disappeared from among the symbols of power at the end of the 11th century. Several objects made out of rock crystal have survived in the treasury of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry II; thus, it can be assumed that Hungary's first king received the sceptre as a gift from the emperor; this is also supported by the fact that the lead bulla issued by Henry II in 1003 shows him holding an object with a sphere at the end that is similar to the Hungarian sceptre.

SAINT STEPHEN'S MANTLE

The only piece that has survived from the coronation dress of state is the semi-circular, violet-coloured mantle densely sewn with gold thread. According to the Latin inscription on the mantle, King Stephen and Queen Gisela had it made in the 1031st year of the incarnation of Christ and gave it to the Church of the Virgin Mary in Székesfehérvár as a gift. It was originally a vestment that was turned into a coronation mantle at some point towards the end of the 12th century. It was presumably at this time that a collar originally forming part of another liturgical piece of clothing was attached to it; it is embroidered with vines and animal figures and decorated with pearls. A depiction on the mantle shows Christ on the right and Mary on the left surrounded by a circle of angels and standing under the hands held in a gesture of blessing, a symbol of God the father. Pictures of Christ appear several times on the fabric, together with prophets, apostles and various saints. This mantle also bears the only contemporary depiction of Saint Stephen, Queen Gisela and Prince Imre. Because of its special storage requirements, it is not preserved in the Hungarian Parliament like the other pieces of the coronation regalia but in the Hungarian National Museum.

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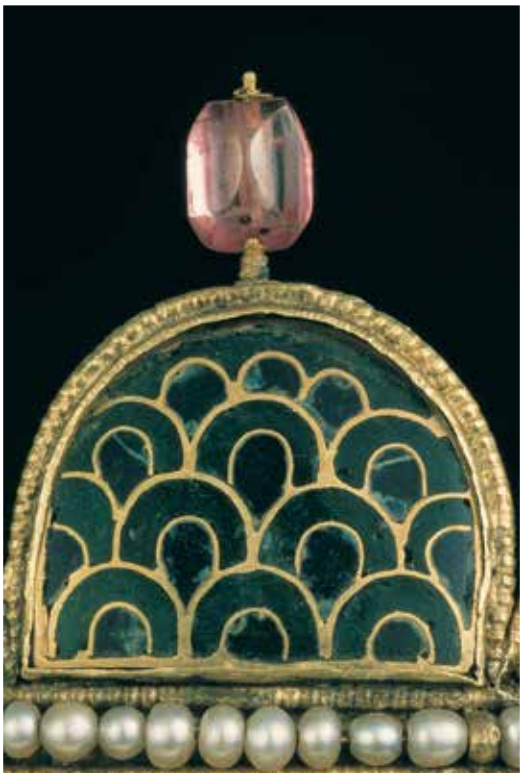


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