

JÁNOS EISLER, *KIS KÖNYV A SZENT KORONÁRÓL*,  
(LITTLE BOOK ABOUT THE HOLY CROWN OF THE HUNGARIANS  
BY JÁNOS EISLER), BUDAPEST, NAPKÚT KIADÓ, 2013, PP. 346

Between the times of publication of two monumental monographs on the subject, *The Interpretation of the Hungarian Holy Crown and Royal Insignia* by Arnold Ipolyi in 1896 and *Die Heilige Krone Ungarns* by József Deér in 1966, the Hungarian crown jewels were the object of scrutiny by art historians on several occasions. Being a liturgical object, once used for sacred ceremonial purposes, close scientific scrutiny of the Crown, as a goldsmiths' work, was seldom possible and then only under strict restrictions. While the available literature clarified several pertinent questions regarding the Crown, its scientific examination, using modern techniques, was not possible until its return to Hungary, from United States' safekeeping, in 1979. This date marks an important turning point in its scholarly examination.

Until the end of the Second World War, the Holy Crown was venerated as the insignia and emblem of the Hungarian State. Based on historical precedent, it was viewed as the coronation jewel of Saint Stephen, founder of Hungary, which was placed on his head sometime between Christmas 1000 and August 1001, by the Archbishop of Esztergom, ushering Saint Stephen's realm into the Christian community of Europe. In addition to being a political symbol, the existence of the Crown, a medieval liturgical implement, was foremost a theological statement. For a long time art historians considered it a goldsmiths' masterpiece, focusing on the history and circumstances of its construction: when and for whom was the two-part Crown assembled, and why were the two parts, the lower, so-called Greek band and the upper, so-called Latin loops fused, thus creating an incomparable piece of art among medieval coronations emblems?

In our review of the literature, we do not intend to give even a skeleton of scholarly research dealing with the Crown but do name the persons most responsible for our understanding and appreciation of the Crown's importance: Bock, Kondakov, Otto von Falke, among the foreign experts, and Hampel, Ipolyi, Varju, Tibor Gerevich, Gyula Moravcsik, Magda Bárány Obershall, Tamás Bogyay, Péter Váczi, József Deér, Éva Kovács, Zsuzsa Lovag and Endre Tóth, among the Hungarians ones. Their many observations and publications form the foundation of the book.

The Holy Crown's homecoming in 1979 gave impetus to new research on the topic in Hungary, raising numerous controversies. In 2000, on the millennial anniversary of the founding of Hungary, a group of researchers discussed these controversies at an international conference in Paris. These developments prompted me to write this book, focusing on two main inquiries: 1. Is the proposition that the

Crown's upper part originates in the 12<sup>th</sup> century tenable? And 2. Is there new evidence – political, historical and theological considerations as well as stylistic and typological observations – that might lead to new hypotheses regarding the fusion of the Crown's two parts? My book, addressed not only to specialists in the field but also to the lay public, contains also background information that will help the reader understand the ritual and spirit of the period's coronation rites.

I cite and in some instances elaborate on the significance of the Crown's iconography and present a selection of the period's written and pictorial representations that may help the reader understand the role of royal coronation in the "theory of the state" and church liturgy. From the historical record, the scientific literature and my understanding of the geopolitics of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, I conclude that Saint Stephen did indeed receive a crown, upon the instigation of Otto the First and Henry the Second, from Pope Sylvester the Second, with which on a festive occasion he was crowned king, sometime between Christmas 1000 and August 1001. But the crown might not have been entirely the Holy Crown of today! In my conclusion, I was guided principally by the re-interpretation of the text of the Hartvik legend.

This is followed by a description of the Crown's technical and pictorial features, as realized by goldsmiths, and their comparison with works of art of the period. This led to another hypothesis: is it possible that the Crown's upper part was made between 1050 and 1080? Support for this hypothesis derives from the examination of the (loop) plates and their filigree work components and their comparison with certain oriental images such as the Stroganov icon from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in the Hermitage, and the stylized images on the enamel plate representing Saint Severin, in Köln, tentatively dated to 1090.

The representation of only 8 apostles on the loops of the Crown's upper part was for researchers a cause for headache. It was suggested that the loops were shortened. In the book, I cite evidence, based on technical analysis of the Crown, performed after its homecoming, that from the beginning only 8 apostles were represented on the loops. I support my conclusion by pointing to representations of the Last Supper with only 8 apostles in Europe in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in such places as Köln, Cogolja and Wiener Neustadt. The conclusion is further supported from a Hungarian source, indicating that the writ of the Szabolcs Council, dated 1092, authorizes holy days for only 8 apostles in the ecclesiastical calendar.

The sitting figure of Christ, "Master" among his disciples, on top of the Crown along with representation of the Pantocrator (judge) on the lower band constitute an incomplete representation of the Holy Trinity. The symbolization of the Holy Spirit with the dove did not appear in the visual arts until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of the Trinity is, however, already expressed in the Credo recited at coronations after the Schism of 1054, which affirms the obedience of monarchs, among them that of

the Hungarian king, to the Roman Catholic Church. I illustrate with examples the place of the Holy Crown in the historical context of ideas and iconography and discuss, citing historical and pictorial relics from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ways in which it can be fitted in among the royal insignia of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The book's second hypothesis has to do with the time and place of the fusion of the two parts of the Crown. Based on stylistic analogies, I speculate whether the Crown's band could have been made between 1050 and 1080 and wonder what historical ecclesiastical event might have prompted the fusion of its two parts. I tentatively conclude that Saint Stephen was crowned, at his *elevatio corporis* in 1083, during the Process of his Canonisation, touching his skull with a crown, that was a part of today's Holy Crown.

At the end of the book, I raise the possibility that further research will prove that the lower half of the Crown was made in a Hungarian workshop, in the stylistic tradition of Venice and its eastern extension toward the Dalmatic coast, to add to the already existing northern Italian features of the Cathedral of Pécs, before the Cathedral was destroyed by fire in 1064.

The Little Book of the Holy Crown is a summing up of existing research. The two hypotheses it poses – one having to do with the origin of the band in the lower half of the Crown and the other with the fusion of its two parts – will undoubtedly stimulate further research.

(János Eisler, translation by Géza Simon)