

Crown and Coronation in Hungary 1000–1916 A.D. By János M. Bak and Géza Pálffy. Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History – Hungarian National Museum, 2020. 264 pp.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and what happens in Hungary wotnedly stays in Hungary when it comes to academic research, alas. Characteristically, it took until 2020 for an English language volume to finally see the light of day and claim the international academic attention the Holy Crown of Hungary warrants. *Crown and Coronation in Hungary 1000–1916 A.D.*, by János M. Bak, recently deceased professor of Medieval Studies, and Géza Pálffy, head of the Holy Crown Research Group of the Research Centre for the Humanities in Hungary, puts long decades' research results into the pan of the scales held by the international academic community.

The first two chapters offer a breadth of perspective on Hungarian coronations. “The way to the Throne: Right of Blood – Right of the Estates – Right of the House of Austria,” surveys the changes in the customs of succession until primogeniture came to prevail and was ultimately superseded by an electoral principle. The politically-charged legal prerequisites of coronations and the power relations defining them are analyzed in the cases of 51 kings, an already exhaustive list supplemented by the discussion of four leaders of the Magyar tribal alliance from pre-documented times. This analytical survey is complemented by practical aspects of coronations in “Coronations Through Nine Centuries.” The scope now widens to lesser noted details, such as location, timing, and secondary participants, which paint vivid pictures of the ceremonies and narrate how the Holy Crown gained power to legitimate coronations. The volume nonetheless lets the reader wonder whether a heavenly or an earthly attribution granted “holy” status to the Crown: was it the almost overemphasized false attribution to Saint Stephen, the first king of the Christian Hungary (1000–1038), or the almost deemphasized *corona angelica* tradition, according to which the Crown was delivered to the country (and not to a monarch) by an angel?

Both international and Hungarian readers are served particularly well when the same chapter hesitantly taps on national feelings and raises distinctively Hungarian traditions to an international context. Among them, cities and churches chosen as official locations for coronations constitute a variety which is rare by international standards. While the ecclesiastical rites of royal inaugurations followed European patterns and maintained largely consistent standards over time, the secular acts acquired a national flavour and contributed to the nation's

self-identification. While the chapter investigates Hungarian customs with exemplary diligence, a deeper examination of the European patterns would have made the uniqueness of national traditions even more prominent, both for international and Hungarian readers.

The first two chapters indeed presuppose a foreign readership with a rather thorough knowledge of Hungarian history. A bit of basic information concerning the discussed monarchs' legacy would likely please non-Hungarian readers, at least in cases of milestone figures such as Saint Stephen, Saint Ladislav I (1077–1095), Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387–1437), Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490), or Maria Theresa (1740–1780), the only female ruler of both the Habsburg dynasty and Hungary. Milestone historical events, such as the 1526 “disaster” of Mohács (p.41), the 1703–1711 Rákóczi “uprising and war of independence” (p.65 and p.178), and Hungary's frequently referenced Ottoman occupation similarly need little introduction for Hungarians, but their synopsis would likely be welcomed by foreigners. The 1241–1242 Mongol Invasion, the 1514 György Dózsa Rebellion and peasant revolt, and the awakening national identity in the 1800s Reform Era are not spoken of in the volume, even though the challenges they presented to established authority were not without relevance for coronations and power perception. In the want of an intense reckoning with the historical context, the uncompromisingly strict focus on coronations may easily become a double-edged sword as both the biggest strength and greatest weakness of the volume, depending, of course, on the personal interests and background of the individual reader.

A slender but up-to-date summary of historical and art historical research results pertaining to the Holy Crown is left for the concluding chapter “Signs of Power and their Fate,” embedded in the analysis of a list of symbolic ornaments serving the display of majesty at coronations. Their order seems to be rather unaimed as the Crown is preceded by the throne, the copy of the imperial Holy Lance, and the coronation mantle, and followed by the crowns of queens, the sceptre, the orb, swords, the coronation regalia, chests, crosses, paraments, flags, batons, coins, and tokens. The Holy Crown, which “embodies the constitutional continuity of Hungary's statehood” according to the Constitution of Hungary (p.191), is introduced as little more than one item of regalia among many. This rich collection, however, is a solid strength of the book in its rarity, so much so that “Coronation and Insignia” as a title would have directed a more apt spotlight on what is arguably the volume's biggest asset.

The volume convincingly argues that “Crown and Coronation” are inseparable in Hungary, but, still and all, the preponderance of attention is devoted to the historical and social dimensions of coronations as enduring legacies of a not-too-distant past. In accordance with its aim of addressing a “scholarly but popular” audience, as noted on the back cover, the volume omits footnotes and endnotes but attempts to compensate with a thematic bibliography. The scarcity of English language works in the latter is primarily the toll of the ebb and flow of Hungarian scholarship, though the references could have been further embellished with the works of Zsuzsa Lovag and the late Éva Kovács, to whom the volume is dedicated. That said, the authors navigate with grace on a vast ocean of textual and visual sources, enclosing artworks and not disregarding oral traditions either. The volume’s contribution to scholarship is beyond question by the long-awaited international reach-out, which deservedly brings to surface a brilliant tip of Hungarian scholarship’s iceberg.

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