

More Than Mere Spectacle: Coronations and Inaugurations in the Habsburg Monarchy during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Edited by Klaas Van Gelder. New York–Oxford: Austrian and Habsburg Studies, Berghahn, 2021. 326 pp.

Royal rituals still fascinate the wider public in the twenty-first century, as amply illustrated by recent BBC statistics according to which around 28 million people in the UK watched the broadcast of Queen Elisabeth II's funeral on September 19, 2022. For some, the event may have been little more than a show involving royals and celebrities. However, apparently many were deeply touched by the death of their monarch and felt that they must follow the funeral ritual online, at least, so that they could virtually participate in a ceremony which was somehow related to the very essence of their political and national identity.

The interest shown in the queen's funeral confirms the continuing relevance of the research done by scholars who investigate the meanings, impact, and functions of political ceremonies throughout the centuries. The volume *More Than Mere Spectacle*, edited by Klaas Van Gelder, assistant professor of early modern history at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, seeks to examine these issues in the context of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Habsburg Monarchy, with a focus on coronations and inaugurations. The thesis of the book is succinctly summarized by the title, namely, that in the period in question, Habsburg inauguration ceremonies had relevant constitutional and political meanings and functions which need to be taken seriously.

For a long time, historians, trapped in the grand narrative of modernity, had a penchant for arguing that, with the advent of the Enlightenment, political ceremonies like coronations gradually lost their meanings and became empty shells of tradition. Consequently, they were keen to disregard them as anachronistic follies that were next to trivial compared to standard political history, which they saw as the “real thing.” In the 1970s and 1980s, however, drawing inspiration from cultural and social anthropology, historians began to take the study of rituals, popular or elite, more seriously and started investigating the different functions of these rituals. In the early 2000s, such endeavors drew new inspiration in Central Europe (and beyond) from the works of Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. In the context of the Holy Roman Empire, Stollberg-Rilinger argues that rituals such as coronations and associated ceremonies were essential parts of doing politics in the early modern period, as they made the constitutional order of the polity visible. The ten chapters of the present volume (plus the

introduction by the editor and the afterword by Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly) were also written in this spirit. Some of them are based on international conference papers presented in 2015 (Rotterdam) and 2016 (Ghent) by their authors, who have scholarly backgrounds in history, art history, and legal history.

In the introduction, in which Van Gelder provides a comprehensive overview of the main questions, he asserts that “historians seem to have largely neglected most of the lands of the sprawling Habsburg Monarchy” (p.2) when it came to making long-term analyses of coronations and inauguration ceremonies. The word “neglect” could be the subject of debate in the year of the book’s publication (2021), given the upsurge in the numbers of research projects and publications dealing with coronations and inaugurations, at least in the case of specific Habsburg rulers. It probably applies more to nineteenth-century ceremonies than the eighteenth-century ones, and to some Habsburg lands more than others. Van Gelder is certainly right, however, that this volume, with its focus on two centuries and its large geographical outreach (which covers a considerable part of the Habsburg Monarchy), offers a more comprehensive view of the subject than many other works, which often tend to restrict their scope to “national” contexts.

The studies in the volume essentially try to answer the questions of what Habsburg inauguration ceremonies *meant* and what they *did* in the mentioned period. In other words, the authors examine these ceremonies respectively as symbolic forms of communication and as political acts. Therefore, the analyses are characterized by a mixture of interpretative and functionalist-minded approaches aiming to better understand the relationship between politics and ceremonies in the Habsburg realm.

The chapter by Petr Mat’á compares the Habsburg inauguration practices to those of other European monarchies. Mat’á’s comparative study shows that the Habsburg rulers in the period between 1526 and 1800 needed to perform far more inaugurations than many other monarchs. This stemmed from the composite nature of their realm, which put a constitutional obligation on them to complete the transfer of power and obtain constitutional legitimation by performing inaugurations and coronations. Mat’á’s excellent analysis demonstrates that inaugural rites in the eighteenth-century Habsburg Monarchy do not point towards a clear tendency of decrease. Rather, they show “a peculiar mix of continuity, interruption, and resumption” (p.50). Under the term “inaugural rites,” he brings together “both coronations and acts of hereditary homage” based on their core attribute, namely that they stood for “the authorization and legitimation of a new sovereign to exercise full princely jurisdiction over a particular political

unit” (p.30). In the afterword, however, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly remarks that coronations had a more sacred character due to the act of anointment, which gave an irrevocable divine mandate to the newly crowned king.

In her study on imperial coronations in the Holy Roman Empire, Harriet Rudolph contends that, despite the disdainful view of the old ceremony expressed by some contemporary critics, even the last two coronations in 1790 and 1792 were not without relevance. She argues that the imperial coronations at the end of the century became the celebrations of the German nation. Similarly, William D. Godsey’s study on four inaugurations in the Austrian, Italian, and Hungarian parts of the Monarchy between 1790 and 1848 convincingly shows that not just monarchical governance, but also inauguration ceremonies were adapted to the needs of the era following the French Revolution and assumed the character of patriotic celebrations. Rudolph offers the crucial insight that the “semantic openness of the coronation ritual” (p.82) allowed it to acquire new meanings. This point captures a central aspect of the inaugurations studied in the volume, namely that, in spite of the fact that these ceremonies were heavily formalized events, shifts in meanings and emphasis could occur, and even changes in small details could have political relevance. Thus, the volume is not merely a collection of analyses of actual ceremonies. Rather, the emphasis is often placed on the surrounding political debates or symbolisms which were communicated through different media. The authors use these debates to further a more nuanced grasp of the various meanings and messages which the inaugurations conveyed.

Fanni Hende interprets the 1712 and 1790 coronation rituals in Hungary as expressions of compromise at times of changing power relations between the ruler and the estates. She investigates how these power relations became apparent in the ceremony and associated events. Werner Telesko, examining coronation medals minted to commemorate Maria Theresa’s 1741 coronation in Hungary, holds that their message sought to express “dynastic and sovereign continuity” (p.132). The chapter by Petra Vokáčová discusses the belated 1723 coronation ceremony of Charles VI in Prague. Summarizing the findings of an interdisciplinary project, she argues that Charles’ Bohemian coronation “was a vehicle for broadcasting important political messages” (p.144) about the stability of the Habsburg dynasty at a time when Charles was still waiting for a male successor, while the Wettins and Wittelsbachs first signaled their wish to become the inheritors for the Habsburg dominion.

When the emphasis is placed on the functions of inauguration ceremonies, one sees that they affirmed negotiations between ruler and the estates. Analogously,

they can be compared to a stamp on an official document, which validates what has been agreed on. One can observe this in the case of the annexation of Galicia, when, as Miloš Rezník shows, the transfer of sovereignty also required the crafting of an homage-paying ceremony in which new allegiances were made between the subjects and the new ruler. Klaas Van Gelder draws attention to the fact that ceremonies were used not just to create loyalties between the ruler and the estates, but also to annul them, as happened to Joseph II in Ghent when he was dethroned in a ceremony designed after the style of inaugurations. In the Austrian Netherlands, the estates had a strong bargaining position before the inaugurations, as Thomas Cambrelin demonstrates through the example of the Duchy of Brabant, where they could potentially block the ceremony if an agreement was not reached, as in the case of Maria Theresa's inauguration. Judit Beke-Martos highlights in her analysis of Francis Joseph's 1867 coronation ceremony in Hungary that, in the absence of a written constitution, this coronation validated the restoration of the constitutional order and the points of the Compromise.

What, perhaps, could have strengthened this volume is a more general examination of the social meaning and cultural functions of rituals. While some of the contributions, such as the chapters by Godsey and Rudolph, offer pertinent insights into the anthropological dimension of inauguration ceremonies, a more thorough examination of this theme across the volume would have made for a welcome addition. Relating the research results and observations to anthropological theory and debates would have helped substantiate the peculiarity of the findings and would have critically differentiated their context-specific features from those general characteristics of ceremonies which seem to mark the relationship between politics and rituals beyond the Habsburg context. Nevertheless, this book provides a rich overview of the varied functions and meanings of Habsburg inaugurations and coronation ceremonies and offers insights into the ways in which the Habsburg dynasty exercised its rule over many different lands. It will make useful reading both to those interested in Habsburg history and those who seek to understand the interplay between politics and symbolic representation in the period. Paraphrasing the famous dictum of the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), one could say that “ceremony is the continuation of policy with other means.” The authors of this volume certainly convince the reader that this is indeed the case.

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