

THE IMPERIAL CROWN: WITNESS OF THE OCCIDENT

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Vienna's city centre is full of history and stories. The pedestrian discovers history with every step. Skilled tourism managers have understood how to market profitably the Habsburg heritage—admittedly mainly the 'myth' of Sissi—which caters to romantic needs and floods many millions into the city's coffers.

Almost off the beaten track of the tourist masses is the Treasury, in the oldest part of the Hofburg. Through the so-called Swiss Gate, one enters a square courtyard, at the right end of which is the entrance to one of the most important collections of precious objects of a secular and spiritual nature, assembled over centuries by the Habsburgs. While there are royal treasures in Europe that are far more valuable materially than those found in Vienna—the precious objects in the Tower of London, for instance, are certainly impressive—it is here we find what was a source of identity in Europe for almost a thousand years: the crown of the Holy Roman Empire and the imperial insignia and relics that accompany it.

Today, we have almost forgotten the Holy Roman Empire; yet it was the empire that determined the history of Europe for almost a thousand years, and which gave the Germans, this difficult people, a framework in which to develop. It was the true empire, in contrast to the Prussian usurpation of 1870/71–1918 and the perversion of 1933–1945. The idea of a common legal framework and the shared idea of a Christian Occident are condensed in the Imperial Crown.

A peculiar aura surrounds the Imperial Crown. This most important symbol of Western emperors rests quietly and with dignity in the centre of the other imperial regalia: the Imperial Gospels, the Imperial Cross, the St. Stephen's Burse, and the Holy Lance, the imperial relics, and the coronation regalia. In the Holy Roman Empire—"German Nation" was only added by Maximilian I in 1495—the imperial regalia had constitutional status. Only those in possession of the crown, those who had been crowned with it, were considered legitimate rulers. And no other crown is as significant and radiant as the Imperial Crown. Through contemplation and reflection, it establishes a relationship with all rulers and epochs in the history of the empire.

To this day, its spiritual content and origin are shrouded in mystery. It was almost certainly made in western Germany between 960 and 970, with Emperor Otto the Great being its first bearer. Roman-German emperors were then crowned with it over a period of 844 years, its last bearer being Emperor Francis II (later, as Francis I, the first Emperor of Austria.) The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was more durable than anything that came after. The uniform legal area gave the many tribes and different nationalities a flexible framework to develop, and the idea was that of a guiding culture of a Christian character. The crown still speaks to us today of this guiding culture; it is a monument to the political thinking of the Middle Ages and the construction of the empire. In its Christological statement, it defies nationalist interpretation, despite attempts in the 19th and the 20th centuries to misuse this symbol through the neo-Germanic myth.

The fall of the Holy Roman Empire was the tragedy for the Germans, as Otto von Habsburg, descendant of those who wore the crown for many centuries, has said.

In 1806, under the pressure of the Napoleonic Wars, Emperor Francis II was forced to declare the empire dissolved and laid down the crown. The danger seemed too great that the French usurper could also seize this most powerful dignity of the Occident. At the Congress of Vienna, there were voices in favour of re-establishing the empire, but they did not find a majority—and to this day there are discussions in constitutional law as to whether Emperor Francis could actually ‘end’ the Empire or whether it might still exist as a *sui generis* construction. After all, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, founded in 1804, saw itself as the secret successor to the old empire, and the Habsburg rulers sought to preserve the ‘Reichish’ idea, the idea of supranationality in the Danube region.

In the early 19th century, an imperial nostalgia soon set in; Germans sought their identity, which had been given to them for centuries through crown and empire. In the course of the small, national imitation of the Reich of 1871, they cautiously asked Vienna about the crown but they were rebuffed. What the 1871 Reich did not succeed in doing, Adolf Hitler finally did: the appropriation of the time-honoured Reich by neo-Germanic pathos. Soon after the Anschluss in 1938, the Reich’s jewels were transferred to Nuremberg, the city of the Reich’s party rallies. Rumour has it that Hitler retreated to the Treasury at night in March 1938 to meditate before the crown and the Holy Lance. After the war, the Imperial Regalia, which had survived the destruction of Nuremberg in the art bunker of the castle, were returned to Vienna.

Our ancestors could still ‘read’ the Imperial Crown and recognise its deep symbolism. It is a “glorious sign” of the firm connection between the sacred and the secular, between *rex et sacerdos*, king and priest, as with the coronation, the ruler was also ordained a deacon.

The octagonal form of the crown refers to the Augustinian vision of the world Sabbath, when humanity will celebrate the eternal eighth day in union with the Divine Glory. The arrangement of each stone and each bead relates to the biblical texts, and the number of beads (240) and stones (120) are each a multiple of twelve. The stones on the front plate are a faithful copy of the stones on the breast plates of the Old Testament priests as described in the second book of Moses. The picture plates in the Byzantine enamel style are remarkable and remind us of the traits of Christian rulership that we so sorely miss

today. The kings David, Solomon, and Hezekiah refer to a few, but clear are the principles of righteous rule: “Fear the Lord and shun evil” is written as a moral call on Solomon’s plate. King David stands for a culture of justice: “The honour of the king loves the judgment of the law.” The Hezekiah slab is designed as a *memento mori* and a reminder of the need for mercy: “Behold, I will prolong your days of life another 15 years.”

And, finally, the Christ slab: two cherubim hold the banner over Christ Pantocrator: “Through me kings reign.” Christ’s kingship limits earthly power. It goes without saying that an age dominated by an all-encompassing mania for power and incessant breaches of the law has no use for this message.

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