
SOVEREIGN'S DIVINITY IN THE MEDIEVAL EUROPE REPRESENTATIONS IN VISUAL ARTS

Raluca Minea*

*'G. Enescu' University of Arts, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, 189 Sărărie Street,
Iași, 700451, România*

(Received 27 October 2013, revised 14 March 2014)

Abstract

The coronation in the Middle Ages was a ritual with spiritual and political meaning. The event was usually officiated by the highest ranking clerk in the state, as the future king was deemed to be the ecclesiastical representative of God on earth. He would therefore receive an earthly crown which preceded the one symbolizing the post-mortem beatification. In medieval iconography, this type of divine coronation firstly appears as being done explicitly by Jesus himself, and later through the intercession of an angel, starting with the XIth century. This theme of divine legitimating appears in miniatures found in medieval documents, in bas-reliefs, in mural paintings and in weavings.

Keywords: crowning angel, divine legitimating, coronation

1. Introduction

The medieval mentality, steeped in legend, superstition and mysticism had established a connection between reality and the truths of the eternal world through the means of symbols [1]. The character of the European medieval civilization is explicitly religious, and time, along with space, has a sacred-profane dichotomy [2]. The ritual practices and the medieval symbolic code depict a realm of meanings, messages and cultural interpretations. The king represents an universal reality [3], and the sovereign of the Middle Ages is merely a legacy of the Antiquity [4].

In essence, the medieval man was a *homo religiosus* who believed in signs, miracles and relics. He did not perceive the sacred dimensions of the Universe. To this surrounding reality (signs, messages from divinity) only the initiates had access. The monarchs were initiated by excellence because the coronation ceremony was in essence one of initiation [5].

*E-mail: ralucaid@yahoo.com

The concept of wise sovereign that belongs to a distinct spiritual class, placed between gods and people, can be observed ever since Greek antiquity, but it is also present in the Old Testament, as a characteristic of Jewish rulers: Saul, David and Solomon. The term of ‘king’ designates the leader of the people, a virtuous and noble ruler, and above all, wanted by the people [6].

The sacred character of the royalty is a concept whose origin cannot be established in time and space. Marc Bloch wrote: “its origins are unknown to medieval and modern European history; they are unknown, in truth, to history as a whole; only the comparative ethnography appears to be able to shed some light on them. The civilizations, from which ours arose, without doubt, received this legacy from even older civilizations, lost in the fog of prehistory.” [7]

Mircea Eliade found arguments to support an older theory, one stating that the sacred kingship in Europe has its roots in the world of Germanic tribes, where “the kingship had an origin and a character that was sacred: the founders of the dynasty descended from gods, especially Wodan [...]. Even after the conversion to Christianity, the genealogy of the sovereigns – meaning their affiliation with Wodan’s tribe – has had a decisive importance.” [6, p. 92]

In the medieval world it was known that the emperor on Earth could not exist without the Emperor from the Heavens. The sovereign himself recognized this situation, issuing all his official documents with the words “by the grace of God”, “by divine grace” or “in Jesus God”. In the East, in the area named by Dimitri Obolensky - *medieval commonwealth* [8], the Russian expert in the Byzantine era, consisting of the Byzantine Empire and the states that were under its politico-religious influence, asserts that this situation was also found in the coronation ceremony [9]. According to a medieval tradition, the crown belonged to God and it was Him who would offer it to the sovereign, through a representative [10]. The coronation was usually done by the highest ranking clerk in the state and as the ecclesiastical representative of God on Earth he offered, in a ceremonial ensemble, the sacred title of emperor or prince to a mortal [11].

2. The first artistic representations of the divine legitimating

By receiving the crown from the hands of a bishop (usually a patriarch or archbishop), the sovereign was entitled to believe that it was received from the hand of God Himself. This earthly crown preceded and announced the one of his post-mortem beatification. “May God crown you with the crown of praise and honour so that you earn the one of the eternal kingdom”, says the archbishop in France; and the officiant resumes with: “May you live in righteousness, mercy and reverence so that you may receive the eternal crown from Our Lord Jesus Christ in the synaxis of the saints” [3, p. 289]. The medieval iconography, both Eastern and Western, has maintained this type of divine coronation, firstly in a more explicit way, done by Jesus Christ himself, and then through an intermediary, an angel. In the Byzantine art, Christ, or Christ and the Virgin, are often depicted when crowning a king or queen, just as it is attested on the ivory

diptych at the National Library in Paris, depicting the coronation of Romanos IV and Eudokia by Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Figure 1a), or the Palermo mosaic which shows the King of Sicily, Rugerri II receiving the crown from the hands of Jesus. The position of the monarch's hands highlights the importance of the gesture. Another famous miniature depicts Charles the Bald (875-877), with a sceptre in his hand, seating on a throne, receiving a crown from angels, while the hand of God is above everyone.

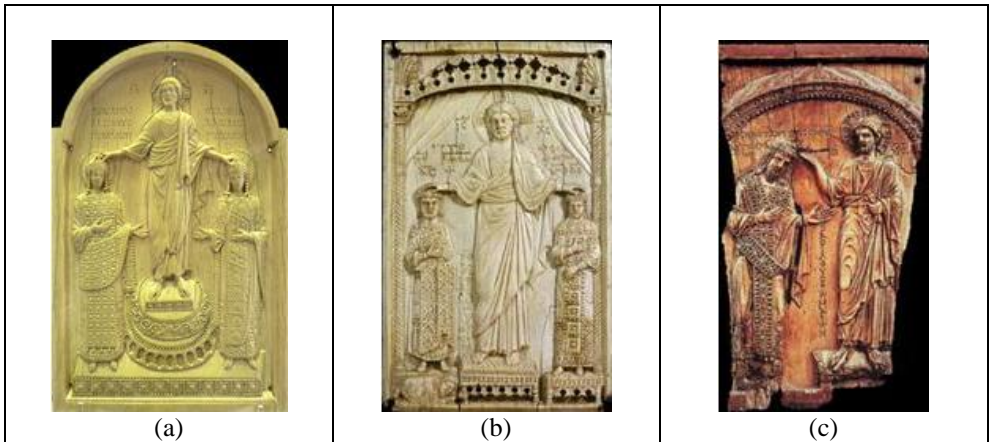


Figure 1. (a) The coronation of Romanos IV Diogenes and Eudokia Makremolitissa by Jesus, on ivory panels (1068-1071) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Romanos_et_Eudoxie.JPG]; (b) Christ crowning Otto II, Holy Roman Emperor, and his consort Theophana, ivory panel, (973-983) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Otton_II_et_Th%C3%A9ophano.JPG]; (c) Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (905/959) blessed by Christ - a piece of carved ivory from the Pushkin Museum [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Porphyrogenetus.jpg>].

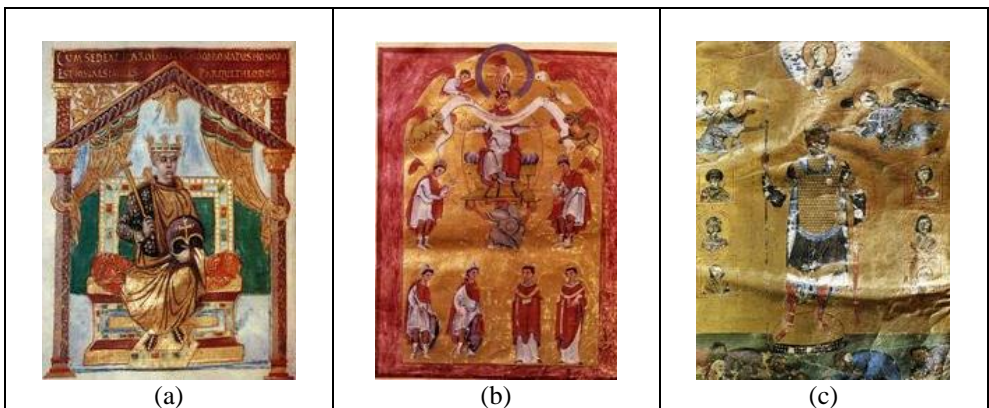


Figure 2. (a) Charles the Bald (crowned in 875), image from his psalm book, manuscript number: lat. 1152, folio nr. 3v [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Carlo_calvo.jpg]; (b) Apotheosis of Otto III, Liuthar Gospel, Reichenau, 990 [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Liuthar-Evangeliar.jpg>]; (c) Miniature depicting Basil II the Porphyrogenitus, in a manuscript from the XI century [<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BasilIII.jpg>].

Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus appears to be crowned by Christ Himself, thus achieving the divine legitimating for a title he held by virtue of birth (Figure 1c). Starting with the XIth century, the symbolic representation of the coronation becomes more diversified, in that the intercession is indirect, through an angel. In a miniature, dating approximately from the year 1019, is illustrated the divine legitimating through the intervention of an angel as intercessor of God, but also directly, by Jesus himself.

Basil II is depicted in military clothing, having at his feet several male characters in the act of *proskynesis*, thus suggesting, probably, the victories of Basil II in the battles with the Bulgarians, which later gave him the nickname of ‘the Bulgar-slayer’ (Bulgarohton) [12].

In the upper part of the image, Jesus holds a crown above the head of the king, while one of the two angels places the crown on his head and the other a lance in his hand [13]. Also in the Apotheosis of Otto III from the Liuthar Gospel (990, Reichenau) [<http://www.scribd.com/doc/67171441/Arta-anul-1000>], standing characters, dressed in military clothing, are depicted at the bottom of the image, at the feet of the sovereign (Figure 2). The sovereign, represented with a halo, surrounded by evangelists, holds in his left hand the *globus cruciger*, symbol of authority, which highlights the idea of divine origin of the power he exerts. Otto III had proclaimed himself “servant of Jesus Christ and the august emperor of the Romans according to the will of God, our saviour and liberator” [14].

3. Aspects of the representation of the crowning angel in the Slavic territories

In the ensembles of mural painting, the types of scenes in which a coronation is done by angels have begun to appear starting with the XIIIth century, in Serbian ecclesiastical sanctuaries. One example is at Gračanica monastery where the votive painting of the Serbian king Stephen Uroš II Milutin and his wife Simonis is kept. The sovereigns are represented in princely suits, above each of them descends an angel, in flight, who places a crown on their heads (Figure 3a) [15].

Through the marriage of king Milutin with Simonis, the daughter of Byzantine emperor Andronikos II, in 1299, the relations between Serbia and Byzantium consolidated, fact which led to some of the cultural-religious influences obvious in the Serbian fresco. Later on, in the XIVth century, this representation acquires new connotations in Serbia. Stephen Dušan, after being crowned king of Serbia in 1331 and after several victorious military campaigns, expands the territory, aspiring to take the throne of Constantinople. In 1345 he was entitled ‘Emperor and autocrat of Serbs and Romans’ and ‘Emperor of Serbs and Greeks’ [16]. This title had to be recognized by a spiritual authority. The new patriarch, Joanikije II, appointed by the synod convened by Stephen Dušan, crowned him as ‘Emperor of Serbs and Greeks’ [17]. The new form of government, the transition from a king to an emperor, and from a kingdom to

an empire, is reflected in the mural representations too. At Decani, he is portrayed in the Nemanjić family tree receiving from the angels the signs of divine investiture, while already having the crown (Figure 3b).

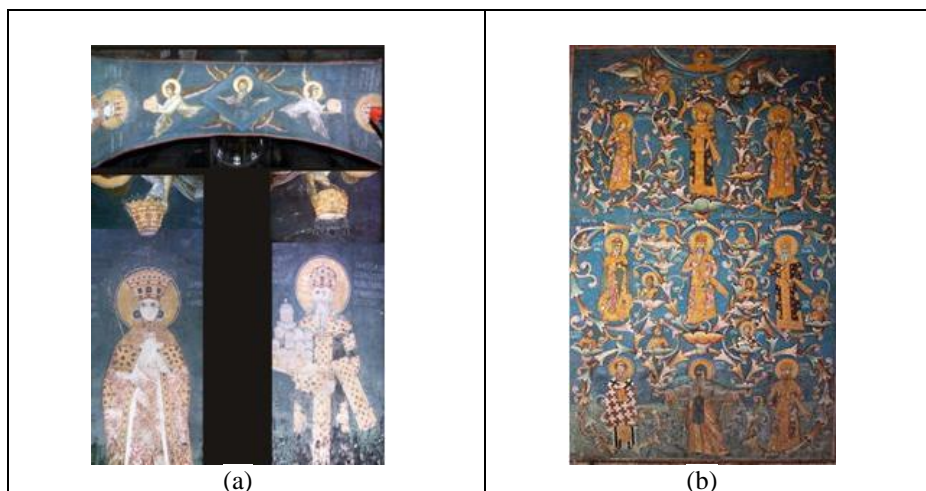


Figure 3. (a) Stephen Uroš II Milutin and his wife Simonis, Gračanica fresco (1321) [<http://www.srpskoblago.org/Archives/Gračanica/exhibits/digital/det10.html>]; (b) The Nemanjić Family Tree, Decani, Nartex [<http://www.srpskoblago.org/Archives/Decani/exhibits/Collections/NemanjicFamily/CX4K3271.html>].



Figure 4. (a) Altar curtain given by Alexandru Lăpușneanu in 1561 to Slatina monastery [http://www.cultura-romana.com/Tabl147_1.pdf]; (b) Radu Paisie and his son, Marcu, votive painting, infirmary of Cozia monastery, nave, western wall.

On the other hand, the Bulgarians tried the same strategy, aspiring to the title of emperors at Constantinople as well. In 1331, Ivan Alexander gives himself the title of emperor, just like Stephen Dušan [18]. In ‘Manasses Chronicle’ (1344-1345), currently preserved in the Vatican Secret Archives in

Rome [http://www.isnare.com/encyclopedia/Ivan_Alexander_of_Bulgaria] the Bulgarian sovereign is shown wearing the imperial crown received from Christ, just as other Byzantine emperors, having Jesus at his right side, and on his left the chronicler Manasses. He holds a sceptre and on his feet he has red footwear (sign of the Byzantine imperial power), and above him there is an angel that places the crown on his head. In the Tetraevangelia of the Tsar Ivan Alexander (1355–1356), considered to be one of the most important literary and artistic values of the Bulgarian medieval culture, now exhibited at the British Library, the sovereign and his family are shown dressed in ceremonial red clothing, with God blessing them from the sky. Another depiction of the Bulgarian tsar, that strengthens what we already mentioned above, is the one from Bachkovo, an XIth century monastery, patronized by Tsar Ivan Alexander during the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, where the sovereign is crowned by angels.

4. Representations of the crowning angel in the Romanian territories

In the Romanian territories, up until the XVIth century, there haven't been found any representations of crowning angels. There are some iconographical versions regarding the divine investiture of the sovereign. In a first version, an angel puts the crown on the head of the lord and Jesus blesses him from the sky and hands him a scroll which could represent a symbolic document of divine investiture, through which the legitimacy of the kingship is guaranteed, but also the divine law that the future ruler must uphold [19]. In some cases, the angel holds the crown with both hands. Instead of the angel, a seraph can appear, as is the case of the altar curtain present at Slatina monastery (Figure 4a) which depicts Ruxandra, the half-sister of Chiajna, future princess of Moldova through the marriage with Alexandru Lăpuşneanu (1552-1561, 1564-1568). She and her husband are each depicted as being crowned by a seraph. The replacement of the angel with the higher fire seraphim may represent a symbol of power, or it may highlight the sacred dimension of it. According to Scripture and the writings of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite [20], the nine orders of angels are grouped in three levels that correspond to the state of perfection, which each of them has reached with the support of the divine grace imparted by the Creator. The highest level, closest to God is comprised of Thrones, Cherubs and Seraphs.

In the votive paintings in the infirmary of the Cozia monastery, the voivode Radu Paisie and his son Marcu are portrayed in royal robes (Figure 4b). From the upper right part of the sky, Jesus blesses voivode Petru I and his foundation, while one flying angel puts the crown on his head and another one does a similar gesture towards voivode Marcu. This type of representation appears in the Romanian territories in the context of an increased Ottoman suzerainty over Wallachia, Radu Paisie having to pay one million aspri (currency – derived from the Greek áspron) upon his coronation, as a gift [21]. Through this type of iconographical representation, Paisie was trying to regain, ideologically, what he had lost in a political way. The instability of his reign

forced him to choose a successor, even if he was still alive, therefore he associated Marcu to the reign, after an older model which the rulers of the Romanian lands borrowed from the Byzantine Empire and other Slavic countries. In this way, upon his death, the sovereign hoped that the succession of the crown from him to his son would go more easily [22].

It is possible that the model of representations depicting the sovereign being crowned by an angel to have their roots in the Greek territories, brought by painters like David and Radoslav, authors of the ensemble present in the infirmary of the Cozia monastery [23], or in the Serbian territories (one example being the votive painting from Manasija monastery, through the influence manifested by Wallachian ladies, especially by Princess Milița Despina [24] and after by Princess Chiajna, the step-daughter of Elena Brankovici of Moldavia and the wife of Mircea Ciobanul [25]. In the votive paintings of Snagov, Chiajna is depicted as being crowned by an angel, just as Byzantine and Serb princesses were. Daughter of Petru Rareș, she was preoccupied by her own political legitimacy (just as her mother, who had her own bicephalous eagle). Just as in the case of Mary of Mangop, the Serbian princess Jelena Branković brought with her as a dowry the renowned emblem. This is proven by a covering – seemingly for a tetrapod – given to the Putna monastery, whose decorations differ from the autochthonous ones. In both cases, the main theme is the bicephalous eagle. In the Snagov painting, Chiajna is portrayed along with her husband and sons, in a painting from which their daughters are missing. This type of representation is a continuation of the dynastic painting created at Curtea de Argeș, its aim probably being the political legitimating. With the same political purpose, queen Tamar of Georgia was also portrayed in the mosaics from Betania and Qintsvisi, next to her father and husband, in a painting from which her daughter is missing. Even at Bertubani she appears as being the only sovereign [26].

Another version of angel representing appears in the times of Mircea Ciobanu, and after that, at Matei Basarab. The sovereign is depicted in the votive painting while receiving the ruler's sceptre, already having the crown on his head (just like in the mural ensembles from Snagov, Arnota and Sadova).

5. Conclusions

The iconographical representations that focus on the sovereigns being crowned by angels have made their appearance in the IXth-Xth centuries in the Byzantine Empire but also in the West, at first in the miniatures from religious books, then on wooden panels, on the walls of churches and on monetary currencies. In the medieval iconography the divine coronation firstly appears as being done directly by Christ himself.

As a testimony to this are the ivory panels representing the coronation of Roman and Eudoxa by Jesus and the Virgin Mary or the wooden panels on which appears Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus crowned by Christ and the Palermo mosaic depicting the King of Sicily, Rugerri II. Starting with the

eleventh century, the intercessors angel of God appears in the coronation scenes. A miniature dating from approximately 1019 illustrates the divine legitimating through the intervention of the angel, but also directly by Christ Himself, of Emperor Basil II.

In the ecclesiastical ensembles, the representation of divine coronation firstly appears in the Serbian territories in the XIIIth century and later in XVIth century in the Romanian territories. Examples are the votive paintings of the Serbian king Stephen Uroš II Milutin at Gračanica Monastery. Stephen Dušan was crowned as 'Emperor of Serbs and Greeks' and in this quality he is depicted in the fresco from Decani, receiving the divine legitimating. Ioan Alexandru, the Bulgarian sovereign, is as well represented wearing the imperial crown received from Jesus in a miniature from Manasses chronicle, XIVth century.

There are several iconographical version of sovereign's divine investiture. In a first version, an angel places the crown on sovereigns head and Jesus blesses him from a section of the sky while giving him a scroll. Another version is the one in which the sovereign receives the ruler's sceptre from an angel while he is depicted as already wearing the crown on his head. Instead of the angel, a seraph can appear, like in the case of the altar curtain from Slatina. The angel can hold the crown with one or two hands or he can offer the sceptre from a segment of the sky. Regardless the ways in which the theme of divine legitimating was depicted, it has appeared in the South-East Europe, in the Slavic regions or in the Romanian lands as a result of the Byzantine influence on these territories.

Before becoming a reference point of civilization and multiculturalism, Europe has always had an important Christian dimension, which circumscribes it within the global historical evolution of humanity.

References

- [1] M. Pastoureaux, *O istorie simbolică a Evului Mediu occidental*, Cartier, Chişinău, 2004, 7-24.
- [2] M. Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1995, 21.
- [3] J.-P. Roux, *Regele. Mituri și simboluri*, Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1998.
- [4] J. Le Goff and J.-C. Schmitt, *Dicționar tematic al Evului Mediu occidental*, Polirom, Iasi, 2002, 644.
- [5] A. van Gennep, *Riturile de trecere*, Polirom, Iași, 1996, 102.
- [6] M. Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. III, *De la Mahomed la epoca Reformelor*, Editura Științifică, Bucureşti, 1991, 91.
- [7] M. Bloch, *Regii taumaturgi*, Polirom, Iași, 1997, 14-15.
- [8] D. Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de răsărit, 500-1453*, Corint, Bucureşti, 2002, 528.
- [9] L.M. Ilie, *Arhivele Olteniei*, 22 (2008) 10.
- [10] Gilbert Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: étude sur le «césaropapisme» byzantin*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995, 81.
- [11] A. Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin*, Les Belles lettres, Paris, 1936, 112.
- [12] G. Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'état byzantin*, Payot & Rivages, Paris, 1996, 322-340.
- [13] D. Talbot Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1977, 100-102.

- [14] J. Paul, *Biserica și cultura în Occident, secolele IX-XII*, vol. I, *Sanctificarea ordinii temporale și spirituale*, Meridiane, București, 1996, 202.
- [15] M. Cazacu and A. Dumitrescu, *La royauté sacrée dans la Serbie médiévale*, in *La royauté sacrée dans le monde chrétien*, EHESS, Paris, 1992, 91-104.
- [16] G.C. Soulis, *The Serbs and Byzantium during the Reign of Tsar Stephen Dušan (1331-1355) and His Successors*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., 1984, 29-30.
- [17] H. Mihăescu, R. Lăzărescu, N.-Ș. Tanașoca and T. Teoteoi, *Izvoarele Istoriei României*, vol. IV, *Scriitori și acte bizantine. Secolele IV-XV*, Academia Română, București, 1982, 343
- [18] I. Dujčev, V. Velkov, I. Mitev and L. Panayotov, *Histoire de la Bulgarie des origines à nos jours*, Horvath, Roanne, 1977, 485.
- [19] E. Negrău, *Cultul suveranului sud-est european și cazul Țării Românești. O perspectivă artistică*, Lumen, Iași, 2011, 119.
- [20] Sfântul Dionisie Areopagitul, *Opere complete și Școlile Sfântului Maxim Mărturisorul*, Paidea, București, 1996, 10.
- [21] C. Rezachevici, *Cronologia critică a domnilor din Țara Românească și Moldova, a. 1324 – 1881*, vol. I, *Secolele XIV-XVI*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2001, 194.
- [22] L.M. Ilie, *Analele Universității 'Dunărea de Jos' din Galați*, 7 (2008) 75-90.
- [23] C.L. Dumitrescu, *Pictura murală în Țara Românească în veacul al XVI-lea*, Meridiane, București, 1978, 74.
- [24] P.P. Panaitescu, *Cronicile slavo-române din sec. XV–XVI*, I. Bogdan (ed.), Academia Română, București, 1959, 22.
- [25] C. Gane, *Trecute vieți de doamne și domnițe*, vol. 1, Universitas, Chișinău, 1991, 67.
- [26] A. Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, Pennsylvania State University Press, PA, 1998, 216.