The Monomachos Crown: Towards a Resolution

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The so-called “Crown of Constantine Monomachos” has long been a perplexing and contentious object. Its unique characteristics have led to much speculation about where and why it was made, and even to the argument that it may be a modern forgery. A recent author, Etele Kiss, suggested, in passing, what may well be a resolution to the questions. Her proposition has great merit, but requires elaboration to confirm its effect in the face of the past debate.

To summarise, the major issues with the crown are threefold. The casual, error-ridden nature of its decoration and inscriptions were central to Nicolas Oikonomidès’ argument for the crown being a forgery. Another issue is its construction in discrete, disjointed segments, and form of oblong plates with rounded tops, evidently intended to be fixed to some flexible backing. A third problem is the limited span encompassed by the assemblage of plates as found.

In her article, Etele Kiss persuasively showed that the errors in the inscriptions and in the representations of dress on the central panels of

2. N. Oikonomidès, La couronne dite de Constantin Monomaque, *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994), 241-262
the crown, and the figures of the dancers in the flanking panels are not
unprecedented in Byzantine artworks of the middle period, thereby
undermining the majority of Oikonomides' bases for deeming it to be a
forgery. A point made by Oikonomides which was accepted by Kiss, that
the construction of the crown is quite shoddy is of some significance, as
will be discussed later.  

As numerous previous commentators have observed, the rounded tops
on the plates do remind one of some of the upper projections on women's
crowns and coronets of the ninth to twelfth centuries. Middle Byzantine era
art contains many realistic representations of women's crowns, the forms of
which are broadly corroborated by the eleventh-century coronet that forms
the base of the so-called Holy Crown of Hungary. All this evidence, however,
indicates that those upper ornaments, whether rounded or pointed, were
an optional addition to entirely solid circlets. The decorative schemes on
illustrated crowns, and the Holy Crown of Hungary, emphasise the horizontal
element over the vertical projections (fig. 1). If it was to be a crown to be
worn upon the head, the segmented construction of the Monomachos Crown
is unique in the Roman Empire. The ancient root meaning of diadema, a
common term for crowns throughout the period, was indeed “tied around”
(from διαδέω), implying a flexible material, and coronets literally retained
that quality in antiquity, yet, while there are Western medieval examples of
segmented coronets, there is no evidence in the middle Byzantine period
that any crown meant for ceremonial wear upon the head in the Roman
Empire retained anything like such a flexible characteristic. When worn on

4. Kiss, State of Research, 76.
5. Kiss, State of Research, 65. This idea was pursued most forcefully by J. Deér,
of the Holy Crown of Hungary as made for a woman.
7. Discussed by Deér, Mittelalterliche Frauenkronen and shown in plate 60; see also
note 4 above.
A Pair of Byzantine Crowns, JÖB 32/3 (1982), 529-538; É. Kovacs – Z. Lovac, The Hungarian
the head, the effect of the vertical segmentation of the Monomachos Crown must be quite odd to anyone habituated to the known forms of middle Byzantine royal portraiture (fig. 2). An additional difficulty with the comparison with royal women’s crowns is the lack of opulence in the Monomachos Crown. The pictorial sources and the surviving base of the Holy Crown of Hungary are all consistent in being adorned with gems and pearls, in addition to enamels, as, indeed, are many other surviving pieces of middle Byzantine elite metalwork. In the Book of Ceremonies regalia items for many ranks or functions are gilded, and some belonging to relatively undistinguished or functions ranks have gems and pearls. Otherwise, what normally sets the royal versions of regalia items apart from those of lesser persons is the routine addition of gems and pearls. This observation suggests that the crown is not a royal object, an observation which could be explained by the new hypothesis presented below.

A further problem with the idea that the Monomachos Crown is a crown in the usual sense is the fact that the cumulative extent of the plates is just 32 cm. A full head circumference for even an average woman is in the

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9. Thanks are due to Stephen Lowe of the New Varangian Guard re-enactment group for this picture of his version of the crown.


vicinity of 54 cm. Hence, if the crown were made up in a manner to be worn upon the head an additional expanse of at least 22 cm is required. Bridging that gap raises some difficult questions. One might posit a plate or plates missing, but of what sort? The least aesthetically difficult possibility, given the carefully graduated design of the plates would be to imagine missing pieces interpolated between the surviving ones – that would be seven plates, each approximately 3.5 cm wide. Yet the idea of such comprehensive but specific losses is entirely implausible. A lesser number of plates, or a single plate, to bridge the gap, presumably at the back (as in fig. 2), would be a more credible loss. If that were so, would the diminishing height motif be continued or would it be mirrored to another peak? It is notable that the widths of the plates are graduated as well as their heights. How would that be accommodated by a continuation? What would be represented on them if the continuation were of similarly decorated plates? The decorative schema is one of the hotly debated issues as it is. Certainly it cannot be entertained that the additional span would be filled with an unadorned expanse of any material. In reality, the proposition that the crown could be extended somehow to fit a head does nothing more than confuse the already complex issues of the crown with further baseless speculations.

Towards the end of her article, Etele Kiss mentions, as one possibility, the presentation of a crown to an emperor returning from a military campaign. The author offers this idea diffidently, but it may well hold the key to the conundrum. The relevant source for this notion is the composite manual on the conduct of imperial expeditions prepared by, or at the behest of, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and appended to the Book of Ceremonies. That work presents two historical accounts of imperial triumphal entries into Constantinople as paradigms. Both say that the Eparchos presented a crown to the emperor as he entered the City. The second account goes further, saying that the ruler then wore this crown on his right arm. That presentation crown cannot have been a full sized item of the usual sort, for there is no practical way the wear such on the arm. It would at best dangle at the elbow, a precarious and undignified sight, and would be in constant danger of falling away completely (fig. 3). If, however, the plates of

12. Kiss, State of Research, 76.
the Monomachos Crown are mounted on a flexible backing in a contiguous loop, its 32 cm circumference is ideal to be slipped up a man's arm to sit comfortably around his biceps (fig. 4). This application allows the assembly in an unbroken circle, and does not require an opening and fastening in the manner of surviving wrist bracelets, as its size is more than sufficient to be slipped over the hand and up to the upper arm. The largest plate then occupies the bulk of the length of the upper arm, while the smaller sizes of the plates opposite avoid causing obstruction with the garments on the inside of the arm, as well as embodying their lesser importance. The portrait of Basil II in triumphal garb in the Saint Mark's Library Psalter does show his upper arms encircled in a comparable manner. Those armbands are patterned in the style commonly used for the longitudinally quilted or splinted *manikia* often seen attached to the *klibania* of military saints, but they are not attached to his body armour, thus precluding the possibility that they are meant to represent anything functionally protective.

If the Monomachos Crown was a triumphal arm-ring, it could further help to explain the quirks of the decoration. Etele Kiss discussed the artistic and other precedents for dancing women, and noted Restle's connection of them to ceremonial advent, as well as particular association they had with victory. One might further note also the Bamberg Tapestry whereupon the personifications of Rome and Constantinople presenting triumphal *toupha* crowns to Basil II are both dressed in a manner typical of representations of dancers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Furthermore, if the crown

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16. Kiss, State of Research, 73.

17. As Kiss noted, pictures of dancers in similar styles of dress to those on the crown, as well as women dancing for pleasure dressed in more usual clothing, do occur quite widely across the period, and are positively profuse on works of minor art of the tenth to twelfth centuries, such as ivory caskets and repoussé bowls, *Kiss, State of Research*, 72ff. For variations in women's clothing in this era, including a discussion of theatrical dancers’
were indeed made for this application, it would be used just once as one relatively minor element in a lengthy ceremonial excursion, and seen at close quarters by very few people whose attention would, no doubt, be focussed upon rather grander matters than the fine details of iconography. The craftsmanship required, therefore, would justifiably be less exacting than would be expected of a real crown to be worn often and for longer periods in one of the most ritually significant of locations – a ruler’s head.

The reign of Constantine Monomachos afforded several occasions when a triumph was, or could have been, celebrated. The episode which is described least by the sources is that of the Rus fleet attacking Constantinople in the latter part of 1043. When it was defeated, Psellus, a contemporary observer, says that the emperor “returned triumphantly to the palace” from the sea front whence he and courtiers had watched the engagement, but does not mention a ceremony as such. The most troublesome event was the revolt of Leo Tornikios in 1047 which got as far as besieging the capital. Once that was suppressed, Psellus said that Monomachos staged a celebration which outshone all that had gone before18. A triumph with all possible pomp must surely have included the presentation of an armilla, as precedent required, yet there are two reasons why the Monomachos Crown would not have been that one. The first reason has already been discussed – it is too plain a work to have been made for royalty. The second reason is that it would be contrary to established practice to have the wearer depicted on the item worn. The base of the Holy Crown of Hungary illustrates the paradigm precisely. On the centre front is Christ, flanked by angels. Then on the centre rear is emperor Michael Doukas, flanked by Kaisars. In this manner is illustrated the hierarchy to which the unknown woman for whom it was made owed allegiance19. If the arm-crown Constantine Monomachos must have worn for


19. Other examples show how persistent this practice was, from the imperial portraits on the tablia of cloaks worn by empresses depicted on several late antique ivories (one in the Bargello Museum, D. TALBOT RICE, Byzantine Art, New York 1959, fig. 21; another in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, H. W. HAUSSEG, A History of Byzantine Civilization, New York 1971, fig. 126) to the imperial portraits embroidered on the skaranika of the

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the Tornikios triumph had had a portrait, it must have been of the personage to whom Monomachos owed fealty, that is, Christ, perhaps, accompanied by warrior saints, given the military context, rather than the angels found on the Hungarian crown.

The victorious occasion which is described at some length by several chroniclers was the end of the rebellion of George Maniakes in 1043. Maniakes had been a highly successful, and hence popular, general, and this had established the support base within the army for his attempt to seize the throne. Constantine chose not to lead the metropolitan army against the usurper himself, but, concerned about the possibility of yet another general getting ideas above his station in the wake of a victory, he appointed a court eunuch, Stephen Pergamenos rather than an experienced general. The imperial army’s victory seems much more a matter of Maniakes’ bad luck than the eunuch’s abilities in command, but win it did, and the Rulers decided to grant Pergamenos a Triumph. Michael McCormick is of the opinion that Monomachos decided to allow the parade “only at the last minute”\(^\text{20}\). Skylitzes says it took place “some days after” the return of the army to the capital\(^\text{21}\). McCormick further observes that Pergamenos’ triumph was very much in keeping with tradition, a view evidently based upon Psellos’ moderately detailed description of the event, which is indeed suitably reminiscent of the paradigms set out by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus\(^\text{22}\). Hence, although not specifically mentioned, the ceremony should have included the presentation of an arm-crown by the Hyparchos to the general early in the proceedings. The emperor is said to have watched the parade seated on a dais at the Chalke Phylake with the two empresses enthroned on each side of him, an arrangement similar to the crown itself\(^\text{23}\). The possibility that the crown is an armilla made for the triumph of Stephen Pergamenos, could further help

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\(^{21}\) Joannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum, ed. J. Thurn (CFHB 5), Berlin 1973, 427, 67ff. The mere fact that this author mentions the event suggests it was regarded as somehow significant, as he makes no mention of celebrations for the other two victories.


\(^{23}\) Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI.88, 1ff.
to explain some of its quirks. Besides the defective decoration, the crown’s
collection is notably flimsy, compared even to the two roundels that
were found with it, let alone other surviving comparable metalwork. This
feature could be explained by it being prepared quickly to be worn once for a
brief time. The clumsiness of the decoration and inscriptions could also have
been exacerbated by the very short time the workshop had to make it. Its
plainness, furthermore, would be due in part, perhaps, also to the brief lead
time, but possibly more to the relatively lowly status of the recipient. The
presence of the emperor and empresses on the crown would be particularly
appropriate in this context in representing the rulers for whose authority
the eunuch-turned-general had fought and been victorious. The presence
of the figure representing Humility, which Oikonomidès had questioned,
would similarly be appropriate as a tacit injunction for the wearer not to
become unduly ambitious, an injunction which was overlooked in time.

A final question is that of how the crown came to be in the place in
which it was found. The suggestion made by Etele Kiss that it made its way
there at some time close to when it was made is possible, but unconvincing
without additional evidence. If it were an armilla presented to the emperor,
it would naturally have found its way back into the imperial treasury after
the festivities. Had it been presented to Pergamenos, there are two primary
possibilities. One is that it again returned to the treasury as his assets were
confiscated at the time of his disgrace. Another, more in accord with Kiss’
notion of the timing, but equally speculative, is that it was spirited away
on the eunuch’s behalf and hidden in order to prevent its confiscation. Had
it ended up in the imperial treasury, it might then have been amongst the
thousand pounds of gold and “imperial ornaments” carried off by emperor
Alexios III Angelos as he fled the Latin siege in 1204, and then sold or given
in trade to facilitate Alexios’ initial peregrinations in the Balkans.

A recognition that the Crown of Constantine Monomachos was a
ceremonial armband to be presented by the Eparchos to a triumphant com-
mander to be worn on his biceps, and possibly made for the eunuch Stephen
Pergamenos during the triumph he celebrated for defeating the rebel George
Maniakes could provide an elegant resolution to many of the vexatious
issues that have so dogged this remarkable item for a century and a half.


Fig. 2: A replica diadem based upon the Monomachos Crown worn upon the head (Courtesy of Stephen Lowe).
Fig. 3: A full sized replica of a *kaisarikon* showing its unsuitability for use as a triumphal armilla as triumphal protocol demands. In any other arm position it would fall away (Picture and reproductions by the author).

Fig. 4: A full sized replica of the Monomachos Crown assembled with the plates contiguous on a flexible base and worn in accordance with triumphal protocol. The garments accompanying are a *kolobion* with a civilian / parade version of the military surcoat (*epilorikon*) outermost (Picture and reproductions by the author).
Το Στέμμα του Μονομάχου: Μια Νέα Πρόταση

Το Στέμμα του Μονομάχου έχει αποτελέσει αντικείμενο συζήτησεων όσον αφορά τη σημασία του, τον σκοπό κατασκευής του και την αυθεντικότητά του. Πρόσφατη συζήτηση έχει δώσει νέα κατεύθυνση στο θέμα, επιβεβαιώνοντας την αυθεντικότητά του. Στο παρόν άρθρο μια νέα ανάγνωση γνωστών φιλολογικών πηγών, σε συσχετισμό με έναν αριθμό πρακτικών παρατηρήσεων, ίσως συμβάλει στη λύση του προβλήματος.