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THE MONOMACHOS CROWN: TOWARDS A RESOLUTION

The so-called “Crown of Constantine Monomachos” has long been a perplexing and contentious object¹. 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 forgery². A recent author, Etele Kiss, suggested, in passing, what may well be a resolution to the questions³. 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

1. The crown has been widely illustrated. Colour images of the crown may be found in, *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843-1261*, eds. H. EVANS – W. WIXOM, New York 1997 (hereafter EVANS – WIXOM, *Glory of Byzantium*), 210-212

2. N. OIKONOMIDÈS, La couronne dite de Constantin Monomaque, *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994), 241-262

3. E. KISS, The State of Research into the Monomachos Crown and Some Further Thoughts, in: *Perceptions of Byzantium and Its Neighbours (843-1261)*, ed. O. Z. PEVNY, New York 2000 (hereafter KISS, State of Research), 60-83.

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 later⁴.

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 centuries⁵. 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 Hungary⁶. 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 coronets⁷, 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 characteristic⁸. When worn on

4. KISS, *State of Research*, 76.

5. KISS, *State of Research*, 65. This idea was pursued most forcefully by J. DEÉR, *Mittelalterliche Frauenkronen in Ost und West*, in: *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, ed. P. E. SCHRAMM, Stuttgart 1955 (hereafter DEÉR, *Mittelalterliche Frauenkronen*), vol. II, 434

6. J. DEÉR, *Die Heilige Krone Ungarns*, Graz-Wien-Köln 1966, 53, recognised the base 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.

8. J. L. BALL, *Representations of Secular Dress*, New York 2005, 13; P. A. DROSSOYANNI, *A Pair of Byzantine Crowns*, *JÖB* 32/3 (1982), 529-538; É. KOVÁCS – Z. LOVAG, *The Hungarian Crown and Other Regalia*, Budapest 1980; M. PARANI, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images. Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th-15th Centuries)*, Leiden-Boston

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)⁹.

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 pearls¹⁰. Otherwise, what normally sets the royal versions of regalia items apart from those of lesser persons is the routine addition of gems and pearls¹¹. 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

2003, 28; E. PILTZ, *Kamelaukion et mitra: Insignes byzantines impériaux et ecclésiastiques*, Stockholm 1977.

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

10. Gilded regalia items include batons, collars, swords and scourges, and are mentioned much too often in the *Book of Ceremonies* to be cited in detail. Batons of the *silentiarioi* had gems as well as gilding, Constantini Porphyrogeniti, *De cerimoniis aulae byzantinae*, ed. J. J. REISKE, v. 1, Bonn 1829 (hereafter Const. Porph. *De cer.* ed. REISKE), 81, 17-18; 100, 3; 167, 23-24. Some staves carried by *ostiarioi* were also jewelled, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 10, 1-2. 4; Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 574, 16-18; 640, 6-7; 721, 18-20. The regalia torques of the *protospatharioi* had gems, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 709, 20ff., and other collars worn by "Saracen friends", were both bejewelled and pearled as well as gilded, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 584, 1ff. Even a belt, called *baltidion*, had gems, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 710, 21ff.

11. For example, two parade shields bearing gems and pearls were held in the chapel of St. Theodoros attached to the Chrysotriklinos, almost certainly for imperial use, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 640, 12-14. More clearly, while several ranks named for the item routinely carried gilded swords (*spathia*) (for example, *spatharokoubikoularioi*: Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 574, 20ff.), those of the emperor and kaisar had gems and pearls, Const. Porph. *De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 80, 9ff.; 167, 9-10; 188, 4. 9. 24.

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 campaign¹². 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 arm¹³. 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.

13. *Const. Porph. De cer.*, ed. REISKE, v. 1, 506, 1ff.; *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, ed. J. F. HALDON (CFHB 28), Wien 1990, 148, 846-849.

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 bracelets¹⁴, 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 saints¹⁵, 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 adventi, as well as particular association they had with victory¹⁶. 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 centuries¹⁷. Furthermore, if the crown

14. Such as the pair of enamelled bracelets in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki, EVANS - WIXOM, *Glory of Byzantium*, 243, fig. 165A; and the nielloed bracelet in the Kanellopoulos Museum in Athens, EVANS - WIXOM, *Glory of Byzantium*, 249, fig. 174.

15. Nikephoros Phokas, "Praecepta Militaria", ed. E. McGEER, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth. Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*, Washington 1995, 34, 24ff. For primary source pictures and reconstructions of such military equipment see T. DAWSON, *Byzantine Cavalryman: Eastern Roman Empire, c. 900-1204*, Oxford 2009.

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 repoussée 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, Psellos, 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, Psellos 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

dress, see T. DAWSON, Propriety, Practicality and Pleasure: the parameters of women’s dress 1000-1204, in: *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience 800-1200*, ed. L. GARLAND, Aldershot 2006, 41-75.

18. Michele Psello, ed. S. IMPELLIZZERI, Imperatori di Bisanzio (*Cronografia*), Milano-Roma 1984, (hereafter Psellos, *Chronographia*), VI.123, 13-16.

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. HAUSSIG, *A History of Byzantine Civilization*, New York 1971, fig. 126) to the imperial portraits embroidered on the *skaranika* of the

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 Pergamēnos 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 Pergamēnos a Triumph. Michael McCormick is of the opinion that Monomachos decided to allow the parade "only at the last minute"²⁰. Skylitzes says it took place "some days after" the return of the army to the capital²¹. McCormick further observes that Pergamēnos' 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 Porphyrogenitus²². 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 itself²³. The possibility that the crown is an armilla made for the triumph of Stephen Pergamēnos, could further help

Palaiologian court, Pseudo-Kodinos, ed. J. VERPEAUX, *Traité des Offices*, Paris, 1966, 152, 1ff.; 153, 13-17; 156, 24-157, 4; 158, 11ff.

20. M. McCORMICK, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West*, Cambridge 1986 (hereafter McCORMICK, *Eternal Victory*), 181.

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.

22. McCORMICK, *Eternal Victory*, 182-183.

23. Psellos, *Chronographia*, VI.88, 1ff.

to explain some of its quirks. Besides the defective decoration, the crown's construction is notably flimsy, compared even to the two roundels that were found with it, let alone other surviving comparable metalwork²⁴. 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 Pergamēnos, 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 Balkans²⁵.

A recognition that the Crown of Constantine Monomachos was a ceremonial armband to be presented by the Eparchos to a triumphant commander to be worn on his biceps, and possibly made for the eunuch Stephen Pergamēnos 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.

24. See above note 13.

25. Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. I. L. VAN DIETEN (CFHB 11/1), Berlin 1975, 545, 45ff.

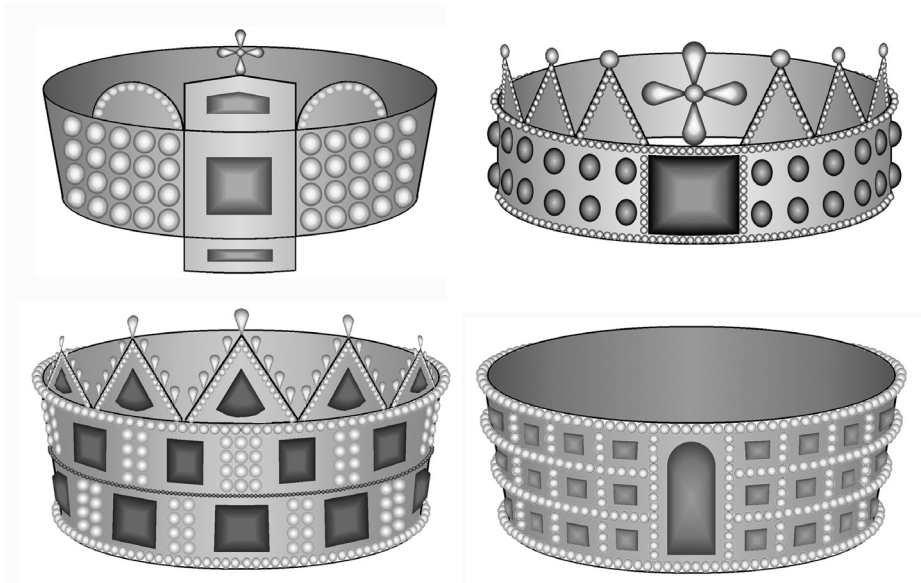


Fig. 1: A selection of typical women's crowns from the late ninth to late eleventh centuries. Top left, crown of St. Helena, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Par. Gr. 510, 889 a.D.; top right, coronet of St. Helena, ivory, Staatliches Museum, Berlin, tenth century; bottom left, crown of Empress Zoë, mosaic, Hagia Sophia, after 1028; bottom right, crown of Maria of Alania, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Coislin 79, 1071-79 a.D. (Diagrams by the author).



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 *kaisarikion* 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 (*epilorikion*) outermost (Picture and reproductions by the author).

ΤΟ ΣΤΕΜΜΑ ΤΟΥ ΜΟΝΟΜΑΧΟΥ: ΜΙΑ ΝΕΑ ΠΡΟΤΑΣΗ

Το Στέμμα του Μονομάχου έχει αποτελέσει αντικείμενο συζητήσεων 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.

