Royal Divine Coronation Iconography.
Preliminary Considerations

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Abstract: In recent decades, art historians have stressed the benefits of analysing medieval images and their contents within their specific context and, in particular, have underlined the importance of their visual impact on contemporary beholders to determine their functions and specific meanings. In other words, in the analysis of a medieval image, it has become fundamental to verify where it was collocated and whom it was aimed at, and which practical reasons it was made for (its visibility, fruition, and usability). As a result, new perspectives have been opened, creating an active historiographical debate about one of the most fascinating and studied iconographic themes of the Middle Ages: the royal divine coronation. Hence, there has been a complete rethinking of the function and meaning of this iconographic theme. For instance, the divine coronation of the king might not symbolically allude to his earthly power but to the devotional hope of receiving the crown of eternal life in the afterworld. Moreover, in the specific case of some Ottonian and Salian illuminations, historiographers have proposed that their function was not only celebrative (a manifesto of the political ideologies that legitimized power), but also liturgical and religious. This paper places this topic in a historiographical framework and provides some preliminary methodological considerations in order to stimulate new research.

Keywords: royal divine coronation; royal iconography; royal sacrality; power-religion relationship; medieval kingship

On 18 May 2019, at the sovereignist in Piazza Duomo in Milan, the Italian *leghista* leader Matteo Salvini publicly displayed and kissed a rosary in front of the crowd, praying to Mary's immaculate heart to bring his party to victory.[1] Sociological and politological as well as historiographical analysts have underlined that various systems of political communication (even those of twenty-first century democracies) make use of religious languages and messages in order to legitimate their power. In this regard, the Bible and its exegesis have been recognized as a real catalogue of models that can be used in both political reflection and state government ideology legitimation processes. In the same way, scholars have also highlighted the political function of the public display of religiousness (*pietas*) on the part of a leader of a specific social group.[2]

This consideration has been deemed even more valid for political leaders such as medieval kings, who ruled over particularly Christianized societies where personal religious beliefs were publicly exhibited.[3] In this regard, medieval historiographers have focused particularly intense attention on

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[1]   "Il Sole 24 ORE", 19 May 2019.

[2]   (Gaffuri and Ventrone 2014; Andenna et al. 2015; Herrero et al. 2016; Figurski et al. 2017). On *pietas* as a main element of Augustan propaganda (as well as of the Byzantine emperors and Norman kings of Sicily) see for example: (Zanker 1987; Torp 2005; Meier 2016; Ruffing 2016).

[3]   Consider, for example, that in a moral pamphlet written by the King of France Louis IX (1214–1270), for his son, the future Philip III (1245–1285), faith is afforded prime importance: (Gugliotta 2017).

so-called *sacral kingship* (or, it might be better to say, *royal sacrality*): a purely intellectual construct of political power that, thanks to the *mise-en-scène* of the special relationship between the king and the extra-human (as well as the image of a ruler who is particularly pious and obsequious towards the Church and the Christian faith), sets out to present itself as divinely established.[4] Classic studies may be pointed out in this regard such as those of Marc Bloch,[5] Percy Ernst Schramm,[6] and Ernst Kantorowicz[7] as well as the more recent investigations of Stefan Weinfurter,[8] Franz-Reiner Erkens,[9] Ludger Körntgen,[10] and Francis Oakley.[11]

In this type of research, particular attention has been given to the analysis of the iconographic sources[12] and, specifically, representations of royalty (above all in the act of being crowned or blessed by Christ or by the Hand of God from the heavens). In particular, historiographers have studied illuminations concerning some Carolingian, Ottonian, and Salian kings, for instance, *Charles the Bald in Majesty*, illumination, 870. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14,000, *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram*, fol. 5v (Figure 1); *Otto III in Glory*, illumination, 983–1000. Aachen, Domschatzkammer, Inv. Grimme Nr. 25, *Liuthar Gospels*, fol. 16r (Figure 2); or *Henry II Crowned by Christ*, illumination, 1002–1003. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4456, *Sacramentary of Regensburg*, fol. 11r (Figure 3).
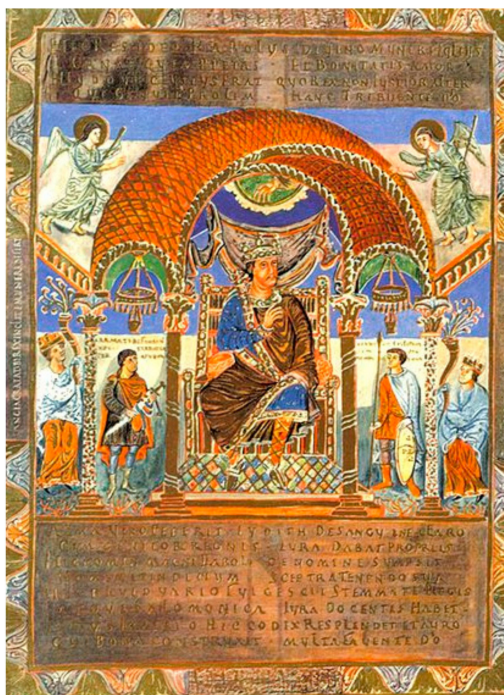

Figure 1. *Charles the Bald in Majesty*, illumination, 870. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14,000, *Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram*, fol. 5v. Public domain image (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_il_Calvo).

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[4] (Cantarella 2002, 2003; Cardini 2002; Erkens 2002; Al-Azmeh and Bak 2004; Beck et al. 2004; Mercuri 2010).
[5] (Bloch 1924).
[6] (Schramm 1928).
[7] (Kantorowicz 1957).
[8] (Weinfurter 1992, 1995).
[9] (Erkens 2003, 2006).
[10] (Körntgen 2001, 2002).
[11] (Oakley 2010, 2012, 2015).
[12] For two other recent examples in this direction see: (Krämer 2008; Serrano Coll 2016).
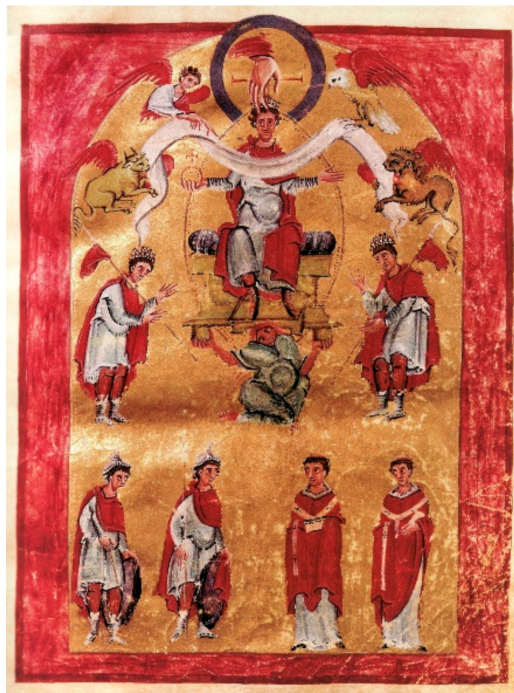
Figure 2. *Otto III in Glory*, illumination, 983–1000. Aachen, Domschatzkammer, Inv. Grimme Nr. 25, *Liuthar Gospels*, fol. 16r. Public domain image (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liuthar_Gospels).

Figure 3. *Henry II Crowned by Christ*, illumination, 1002–1003. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4456, *Sacramentary of Regensburg*, fol. 11r. Public domain image (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrico_II_il_Santo)

In the pioneering works of Percy Ernst Schramm[13] and Ernest Kantorowicz,[14] the above-mentioned depictions were considered as real self-representations of the king, and, by displaying the ideological concepts of the king *a Deo coronatus*, *rex et sacerdos* and *christomimetes*, visualizations of a specific political message of power legitimation (*Herrscherbilder*). Moreover, in the wake of the approaches taken by art historians Aby Warburg[15] and Erwin Panofsky,[16] they had only been read from an iconographical and iconological point of view. Since then, however, the exegesis of medieval images has been refined and, in particular, in recent decades, the necessity has been underlined to analyse these artefacts inside their context, namely while considering their commissioners, audiences, collocations and—on the basis of the concept of *image-object* formulated by Jérôme Baschet[17]—social functions.[18]

In light of these new methodological approaches, Donald Bullough[19] and Ildar Garipzanov[20] have emphasized that, in reality, these images were not commissioned directly by the king or by members of his court and they therefore cannot display a, so to speak, official visualization of the kingship (as Schramm thought). On the other hand, due to the fact that these illuminations were placed in religious texts written by clerics and monks in non-royal spheres, Otto Gerhard Oexle,[21] Joachim Wollasch,[22] and Wolfgang Eric Wagner[23] have in turn stressed their liturgical significance and function of evoking the memory of the royal person (*Memorialbilder*). Furthermore, for these reasons, Ludger Körntgen[24] has even suggested explaining the acts of divine coronation and blessing of the king not as symbolic representations of his earthly authority, but as expressions of the hope that he will receive the crown of eternal life in the afterlife.

Even more recently, the new epistemological scenarios that art historians have developed on the so-called *material* or *iconic turn*[25] and the increasing interest of historiographers in the visual act[26] have brought attention to the material and performative (i.e., pertaining to its use and fruition) dimension of the artistic artefact, namely its *visuality*,[27] *reception*,[28] and *performance*.[29] The ability of the work of art, at the moment of its *mise-en-scène*, to stimulate a process of action and reaction between itself and its beholder (namely, *agency*) has led to the theory that the artistic artefact has the capacity not so much to *represent* a specific charisma but to *create* it.[30] In particular, it has been proposed that, through the very act of visual perception, a series of technical and material aspects that characterize the image stimulate the mind of the beholder and create adherence, devotion, and loyalty towards the represented subject.

These interpretations have influenced some of the most recent research on the above-mentioned royal illuminations. For instance, for Paweł Figurski,[31] Stefano Manganaro,[32] and Riccardo Pizzinato,[33] these handiworks had the function of visualizing and presenting the king's reception of divine Grace

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13　(Schramm 1928).
14　(Kantorowicz 1957).
15　(Warburg 1922).
16　(Panofsky 1939).
17　(Baschet 1996a, 1996b).
18　On these aspects in general see: (Didi-Huberman 1996; Schmitt [1997] 2002; Castelnuovo and Sergi 2004; Melis 2007). Instead, for some practical examples of depictions of the holder of power see: (Paravicini Bagliani 1998; Dittelbach 2003; Görich 2014).
19　(Bullough [1975] 1991).
20　(Garipzanov 2004, 2008).
21　(Oexle 1984).
22　(Wollasch 1984).
23　(Wagner 2010).
24　(Körntgen 2001, 2003; 2005).
25　(Boehm 1994; Mitchell 1994; Belting 1995; Jay 2002; Alloa 2012; Mengoni 2012).
26　(Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998; Bredekamp 2010).
27　(Sand 2012).
28　(Areford 2012).
29　(Weigert 2012).
30　(Bedos-Rezak and Rust 2018).
31　(Figurski 2016).
32　(Manganaro 2017).
33　(Pizzinato 2018).

to the beholders during the same religious rituals that the illuminations were made for and used in. In this manner, these images stage, and anticipate, the eternal Salvation of the king, as, through his crowning, he was chosen for the Kingdom of Heaven in communion with the deity. However, these mainly spiritual purposes do not rule out that these pictures may have also had a political meaning. Indeed, as a sort of *speculum principis*, they were simultaneously functional to the will to display the special relationship between God and the king, and to portray his remarkable sacrality.

Therefore, in general, while from multiple sides, historiographers stress the functional connection with the liturgical performance and the religious (theological) message of the scenes of the divine coronation and blessing of the medieval kings, from my point of view in the understanding of the message contained in these images, there is not sufficient meditation on the consequences of this interpretation. Could a picture conceived of for a liturgical use really express both a celebratory and a political message (legitimating power) at the same time? Could these two different uses have been conciliated? Can these images really be considered political manifestos? Maybe, in this case, we can attribute a political meaning to the representation of royal religiousness: indeed, a king destined to the Kingdom of Heaven acts in the best way and is completely legitimate in all governmental activity. However, is this interpretation right within this context? Certainly, as said, the religious element had great importance in medieval kingship and in the general concept of power, but if these pictures were part of an essentially liturgical and religious context, is it right to explain their functions and meanings in this way? Might this research have taken the political implications of these images a bit too much for granted? In reality, should we not investigate with greater attention whether (and not just presume) they were part of a specific strategy of political communication put in place by the court in order to visually legitimate the royal power? In my opinion, according to the already quoted concept of *image–object*, the exegesis of these iconographic scenes should take into greater consideration the context of the images' creation, fruition and, as it were, usability in order to determine whether they really had the potential to both celebrate the coronation and transmit a real political message.

There is no doubt that aspects like the function, usability, visibility (with the consequent identification of the addressees), and performativity of the royal pictures as well as the political relationship between their contemporary beholders and the king, and their contextualization within a more general ideological background and specific strategy for the *mise-en-scène* of the royal image and sacrality have received inadequate attention from historiographers. However, these are fundamental aspects in the analysis of these pictures, and they require in-depth investigation in order to achieve a better understanding of the real political and, so to speak, sacralizing messages of the scenes of divine coronation and blessing of the king in medieval society. Research concentrating on these aspects has led to some interesting outcomes on some artefacts from the Norman kingdom of Sicily, namely *St. Nicholas Blessing Roger II*, enamelled plate, 1140–1149, Bari, Museum of the Basilica di San Nicola (Figure 4); *Christ Crowning Roger II*, mosaic, 1143–1149, Palermo, Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (Figure 5); and *Christ Crowning William II*, mosaic, 1177–1183, Monreale, Cathedral, choir (Figure 6). In particular, these studies have highlighted that these images did not have anything to do with celebratory purposes or ideological messages of legitimation of power but were instead inspired by devotional sentiments and prayers to God.[34] In this sense, it is absolutely indispensable and unquestionably significant for art historians and historians to perform additional analysis of the scenes of divine coronation and blessing following the mentioned methodological approach so that they may develop new considerations on some more general aspects of the *mise-en-scène* of power, royal imagery, and medieval royal sacrality.

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[34] (Vagnoni 2017a, 2017b, 2019).

Figure 4. *St. Nicholas Blessing Roger II*, enamelled plate, 1140–1149. Bari, Museum of the Basilica di San Nicola. Photo took by author.

Figure 5. *Christ Crowning Roger II*, mosaic, 1143–1149. Palermo, Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio. Photo took by author.

Figure 6. *Christ Crowning William II*, mosaic, 1177–1183. Monreale, Cathedral, choir. Photo took by author.

For example, we have already noted the consideration within historiography that politics and religion were particularly connected during the Middle Ages and underlined that every religious message also had a political meaning. Indeed, as mentioned, royal religiousness held great importance in medieval kingship, and it was unavoidable for a monarch in the Middle Ages to be viewed as a pious and faithful king. However, further in-depth analysis could better clarify if it is completely correct to explain every religious act done by a king during these centuries as having a political (or even propagandistic) sense alone. Namely, did the king not also have, in the same way as a simple subject, the possibility of expressing a real and sincere religious devotion that was independent from daily government administration? In other words, in a society immersed in devotional and religious (intensely perceived and, substantially, sincere) feelings and where everything was genuinely ascribed to Providence and the Divine Will,[35] did the king too not have the *intimate* and *private* necessity to do something in order to safeguard his soul and guarantee himself the acquisition of eternal Salvation in the afterlife?

In this regard, new achievements in research could better clarify the distinction, during the Middle Ages, between what could be called a *public* and a *private* field. Certainly, if there was no clear division between these two areas in medieval society, further acquisitions could explain if it is completely correct to evaluate religious acts that had totally different positions, visual impacts, and contexts of fruition in the same way. In other words, is it right to consider the king's participation in a procession through the city streets or the celebration of his faith, for instance, in letters and public proclamations read in front of his subjects or political enemies (or in images placed on coins, or on the facades of royal palaces, or city gates) in the same way as a picture of the king in the act of being crowned or blessed by God situated within a liturgical manuscript or in the presbyterial area of a church?

Finally, further information could be found on royal sacrality. In particular, we could better understand if it was exclusively a political fiction and the outcome of a specific governmental strategy

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[35] (Bacci 2000, 2003).

to legitimate power or, instead, if in some particular situations the relationship between the king and the sacral element could have had a different function, for example, to simply manifest a personal devotion and an authentic and real religious sentiment. Finally, we could understand if, in such a *hyper-sacralized*[36] society as the medieval one, the royal *consecration* (through the anointment ritual to which Marc Bloch brought historiographers' attention for the first time[37]) really systematically made the king a *special* being, worthy of particular veneration and respect from his subjects.[38]

This volume aims to propose some considerations on this topic by dealing with it from a wide and multidisciplinary point of view. Indeed, thanks to the contributions of both art historians and historians, the matter will be analysed from various slants while studying a timespan that goes from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries and a geographical area that ranges, from east to west, through the kingdoms of Hungary, Sicily, and Naples to England, Aragon, and Portugal.

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36 (Meier 2016).
37 (Bloch 1924). And for a more recent analysis see: (Cantarella 2007).
38 For some criticisms on the concept of *sacral kingship* see: (Engels 1999).

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