

BOOK REVIEW

## Teszelszky, Kees. *The Holy Crown and the Hungarian Estates: Constructing Early Modern Identity in the Kingdom of Hungary*

Translated by Bernard Adams. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023.  
Pp. 396.

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Kees Teszelszky's new monograph is an excellent scholarly achievement, covering a topic of great interest about a specific, historically turbulent time when the old medieval interpretation of the Holy Crown was undergoing a major change. Making its findings available to the international research community for the first time, this book is both a revised synthesis and a translation of the Hungarian edition (2009). The title change (*The Unknown Crown: Meanings, Symbols and National Identity* [translation my own]) corresponds to the subsequent analytical developments in scholarship that provided the impetus for this new edition of Teszelszky's work. With that in mind, the introduction consciously puts less emphasis on theories of nationalism, instead adapting the topic to the latest historiographical trends in early modern political history and political thought. It offers a genealogical (Skinnerian constructivist) approach to the period 1526–1664, when the political applications of the concepts of nation and crown in texts, images, and rituals paved the way for the conceptualisation of a general theory of the Holy Crown.

*The Holy Crown and the Hungarian Estates* is divided into eight chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 provide further introductory arguments to the political context of the subject. Chapter 1 highlights the continuity in the growing importance of St. Stephen's crown in medieval and Renaissance political thought. Chapter 2 deals with the historical circumstances (with the contribution of István Werbőczy) that shaped the political identity of the estates and fuelled the emergence of the political concept of nation (*natio Hungarica*), laying the ground for the rise of the idea of Holy Crown. Chapter 3 traces emerging conflicts between the Hungarian estates and the king, Rudolf II, and provides insights into the course of intellectual ferment in which the Holy Crown first appeared. Chapter 4 examines the Bocskai rebellion (1604–1606) and delineates how the image of the crown was developed and merged with other arguments (the liberties of estates and the new concept of nation) in key texts of Bocskai propaganda. Chapter 5 dwells on the intellectual workshop of Bocskai propaganda and provides a detailed analysis of an until now unexplored key text, *Hungaroteutomachia* (Hungarian-German battle), which was intended to provide political legitimization of Bocskai's rebellion. Chapter 6 focuses on the political crisis of Rudolf II's reign and examines how the subtle change in the meaning of the Holy Crown as a divine legitimator contributed to restoring the balance of power and set the stage for reconciliation between the subsequent king, Matthias II, and Hungarian estates.

The longest chapter, chapter 7, deals with Péter Révay's influential work on the Holy Crown of Hungary (1613), providing a detailed textual analysis of the ideas and perceptions used to compose a general theory of the Holy Crown (including the Bodinian political theory and the historical evidences of crown's deeds). As discussed in chapters 7 and 8, although Révay's theory was constantly used by Protestants and Catholics and had a lasting impact on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century polemic debates on the clergy and secular power, its associative power to shape the identity of the estates was always dependent on the given political situation. Consequently, as Teszelszky argues in his conclusion, this situatedness was also true for the history of the idea of the Holy Crown, which, despite its reinvention as a political doctrine in the nineteenth century, survived only in "forgotten

writers, unknown images, unstudied archives, lost manuscripts and surprising ideas” rather than in the modern national consciousness (327). In this respect, the work of the Dutch-Hungarian scholar is not only a strong impulse for historiography, but also a demanding, high-quality theoretical reflection and critique that does not hesitate to question and challenge the methods and approaches of early modern research.

However, despite its indisputable merits and critical potential, the book deals with a topic that is usually mentioned on the periphery of international research. From this point of view, one may wonder whether the lack of a more nuanced introduction, which would have situated the story of the Holy Crown in a comparative European context rather than as an exception, is not a missed opportunity for the author’s noble mission. Due to Bernard Adams’s quality translation, the book’s prose is easy to read and follow, even in the case of meticulously detailed sections of textual interpretations (chapters 6 and 7). The typos and the rather clumsy artistic work of the images (compared to the quality of the photo paper of the first edition) can be considered the greatest drawback of this new edition. However, since the book unfortunately does not include an appendix or further explanations of names and titles (e.g., [Habsburg] archduke Mathias and Mátyás II, king of Hungary, are the same person), it is recommended primarily for the specialists of Hungary, Habsburg studies, and early modern history, and for readers with prior knowledge of the subject.