



***Medieval Self-Coronations:
The History and Symbolism of a Ritual***

By Jaume Aurell

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Jaume Aurell's most recent monograph, a stunning and carefully curated work of meticulous scholarship, must surely be the jewel in the crown of his *longue durée* research into medieval self-coronation and political theology more generally. I first encountered his research having shared volume space in Laura Delbrugge's edited collection, *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (2015). His chapter, "Strategies of Royal Self-fashioning: Iberian Kings' Self-coronations," was but a taster of what was to come in this magisterial comparative study that takes account of the long story of ritual self-coronations from Antiquity to the near present day. Aurell seamlessly reconciles the temporal with the spiritual, the political, and the devotional, as well as tradition and innovation, achieving a potentially tricky balancing act by deftly calling into service a host of narrative, iconographical, and liturgical sources to argue against the tightly held, though ultimately misleading, idea of a progressive process towards the secularisation of coronation rituals.

He introduces his study into the long and diverse history and symbolism of medieval coronations by problematising the widely-touted, yet inaccurate, shock and awe exceptionalism of the 'modern' 1804 self-coronation of Napoleon I and his crowning of Empress Josephine. The event was captured and made (in)famous, burning itself into the popular global imagination by Jacques-Louis David's imposing tableau, *Sacre de l'empereur Napoléon Ier et couronnement de l'impératrice Joséphine dans la cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, le 2 décembre 1804* / *Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris on 2 December 1804*. It was commissioned strategically by the Emperor in 1804 as part of a deliberate iconographical programme and completed by David in 1807-1808.

This ritualised non-medieval French representation chimes with a late medieval Iberian image illustrating the inter-generational 'tradition' of self-

coronation that included the crowning of queens by their husband-kings in the crown of Aragon from the reigns of Alfons IV *el Benigne* (r. 1327-1336) to Ferran I *el Just* (r. 1412-16). An exquisite miniature of Alfons's heir and successor Pere IV *el Cerimoniós* crowning his fourth wife Sibilla de Fortià features in an annexe to Pere's *Ceremonial de consagració y coronación de los reyes de Aragón*, his autobiographical and well-ordered handbook of everything, the *Ordinacions de Cort*. Aurell draws our attention to the calculated and emotionally-charged autobiographical narrative of Pere's 1336 self-coronation at the age of sixteen in accordance with the Aragonese 'tradition' of self-coronation initiated by his father Alfons IV. The portrayal of Pere's self-coronation, and the carefully-fashioned instructions regarding the crowning of Aragon's queens by the hands of their kings, are described in beautifully-crafted Catalan, indicating the importance of its inclusion in the *Ordonacions*. In the lovely miniature accompanying the crowning of Sibilla de Fortià (BnF ms. 99, fol. 147r), like David's Empress Josephine, Queen Sibilla is shown in prayerful pose kneeling piously at Pere's feet in anticipation and readiness to receive her crown from her husband-monarch's authoritative secular hand—free from the interference or ownership of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who were nonetheless on hand to witness proceedings.

Of even greater interest to the reviewer is that there are two extant manuscripts of the *Ordinacions* held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Ms. Esp. 99 and Ms. Esp. 8). Ms. Esp. 99 appears to have entered the royal collection around 1400-1401, which coincides with dates of the arrival of Yolande d'Aragon, Pere IV's granddaughter, in France to marry Charles VI's cousin, Louis II d'Anjou. For its part, Ms. Esp. 8 seems to have entered the royal collection around 1461, dovetailing neatly (perhaps rather too neatly) with Yolande's eldest grandson Louis XI's accession on the death of his father, Charles VII.

As a Corsican-born son of the Mediterranean, one wonders if Napoleon, in his deliberate and equally strategic fashioning of his 'innovative' iconography and rituals of sovereignty, had access to these and/or knowledge of Iberian practices of self-coronation. Both suggestions are feasible as the kings of Aragon, from the reign

of Jaume II *el Just*, Pere IV's grandfather, were also kings of Sardinia-Corsica from 1296 until their direct rule ended in 1460. Napoleon excelled at history (and later at its strategic manipulation) and geography, with his first known piece of writing an attempt at a comprehensive history of Corsica.

Aurell proves, if further proof were needed, that the medieval Mediterranean is the ideal laboratory for comparative study of all manner of medieval phenomena and, in this case, the secularisation or otherwise of coronation and accession rituals. Most kings strove to delineate their temporal authority and autonomy from the burdensome yoke of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its tendency towards hegemony and interference in their affairs. Weak or nascent sovereignties, such as the contested Angevin kingdom of Naples, required the Pope's recognition, blessing, and protection, while established monarchies such as the Crown of Aragon needed no recourse to ecclesiastical involvement in accession ceremonies apart from the sacrament of holy anointing with unction, which emphasised the monarch's link to God rather than any subordination to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Aurell favours us with a detailed and expansive introduction outlining his deliberate choice of methodology and terminology and the questions these inevitably raise. He argues convincingly for a comparative approach across time and geographies providing as it does the most accurate rendering of ruptures and continuities, context, and indeed the evolution and devolution of succession rituals. Here, Aurell posits two significant questions, one historical and the other anthropological: "What is the long-term story of self-coronation?"; and "What does self-crowning reveal about the operation of ritual, and what is its symbolic meaning?" (4) Aurell's evidence-based responses to these interlocking concerns provide his study with the golden thread that unifies the diversity of context and royal agency in the rituals and iconographies he explores, from the classical period to the last-known self-coronation of Tupou VI of Tonga on 4 July 2015, which avoided the Tongan taboo of touching the king's head.

For ease of reading, the book is divided into three interconnected parts; "Heritage," "Infamy," and "Convention." In Part I, Aurell takes us on a journey from

unmediated consecration in Antiquity; to the influence of the idea of the Hand of God in succession rituals; to symbolic self-coronations in Byzantium; to the sacralisation of Carolingian accessions; concluding the “Heritage” exposition with a discussion of Anglo-Saxon and Ottonian Christocentrism. By focusing on specific contexts arising from these diverse periods and polities, Aurell’s first section brings the ruptures and continuities of succession rituals into sharp focus, arming the reader—specialist or otherwise—for the rest of his study. Part II concentrates on infamies perceived and actual, probing Roger II of Sicily’s imagining of self-coronation and Frederick II of Germany’s desacralising rituals. These two sections flow seamlessly into Part III, highlighting Alfonso XI of Castile’s journey from self-knighting to self-crowning, Pere IV’s conventionalisation of self-coronation, the juridical implications of Charles III’s of Navarra’s self-coronation. Aurell then circles astutely back to his introduction with a discussion of the early modern dramatisation of coronations, leading us back down the path upon which we first set out: Napoleon’s self-crowning and his crowning of the Empress Josephine.

The book concludes with Aurell’s finely-honed observations based on the multi-faceted study with which he has favoured us. His book is an exquisite, detailed, and yet surprisingly accessible work of scholarship, opening paths to further interrogation and study of global accession rituals past and present—particularly apposite as we enter the new Carolean age and the crowning of Charles III.

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