

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 327: Coronations: The Deep History

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So that, ladies and gentlemen, was the theme tune for the UEFA Champions League.

Very good, very good. Top banter you get on the Rest is History, coronation theme banter.

So that, of course, is Zaidok the Priest by Georg Friedrich Handel.

And it was written for the coronation of George II in 1727.

And Tom, the moment is upon us. The first coronation in Britain since 1953 will be taking place this weekend.

It's a very exciting moment, actually, isn't it? It's clearly going to be a great spectacle, a great kind of patriotic moment, a national moment, a punctuation mark.

And a great historical moment, I think. Because I think it is, I mean, it doesn't matter whether you are a Republican, a secularist, an atheist, whatever.

I think if you have any interest in history and ritual, I mean, this is the World Cup final, Eurovision, Song Contest final, everything all rolled into one spectacular.

I wrote a feature about it in The Observer last Sunday in which I compared it to going to a zoo and seeing a triceratops.

Because it is such that the roots of this ritual are so fabulously ancient.

But actually, I think I got that wrong because I think it's like going on safari and seeing a mammoth.

And I will tell you why. So, you know, the joke is, isn't it, that all flummery and pomp and circumstances in Britain is Victorian?

Yeah, invented traditions.

Invented traditions. That's not the case with the coronation. So you can trace the order of service, the liturgy, back to the 10th century in a kind of continuous line.

Obviously, it's evolved, it's changed, it's been kind of new versions of it. But the lineage is pretty clear.

It's probably even older than that. It goes back to the age of Charlemagne, this idea that the kings should go through specific rituals.

These rituals themselves hark back to the later Roman Empire, back to the age of Constantine.

And other rituals are drawn from the Old Testament.

Yeah, biblical.

Taking you back to kind of, you know, 1000 BC.

And those rituals in turn seem to have derived ultimately from Egypt and Syria going right the way back to 3000 BC.

And that's an age when mammoths were still alive.

Oh, cracking.

So, you know, these traditions haven't been continuously practiced, but they've always been living traditions.

They've always been taken seriously by the people who use them.

A comparison might be with the Olympics, the way that the Olympics were kind of brought back, you know, brought back into existence.

But for that parallel to work, the modern Olympics would have to have been going on for a thousand years and more

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and have been reintroduced by people who actually still believed in the Greek gods.

Yeah.

So, you were saying the sort of spiritual nature of the coronation, because it is a religious ceremony, it's a service.

That has a consistency, because, you know, the king, King Charles, is a very sort of keen believer, I think.

I mean, he's a man who's often talked about his relationship with faith and all this sort of stuff.

So, that has a consistency that the Olympic ideal does not, because the Olympic ideal now is purely secular, right?

There's nothing to do with the gods.

So, people have always taken these rituals seriously.

I mean, the question of whether people take them seriously now, of course, is a really fascinating question that we might come to

at the end of these podcasts that we're going to be doing.

But people have taken them seriously, and they've taken them seriously in different ways.

The theological and cultural and moral underpinnings of those rituals have changed and evolved, but they've always been taken seriously.

And they've been taken seriously in a way that does, I think, take us right the way back to the Bronze Age.

Essentially, there is no other civic ritual that can compare for that.

So, you think, I mean, the Japanese monarchy dates back to the 1st millennium AD, the papacy obviously dates back to 1st century AD.

But the ultimate roots of this go even further back.

And so, it's a stupefying sense in which past and present are kind of cojoined.

And how you feel about that, whether you think that that, you know,

whether it's insane that in the 21st century, we should be celebrating something that can ultimately trace its roots back to the Bronze Age,

or whether you think that's kind of amazing, will be very much down to your personal temperament.

But I think purely from the point of view of seeing something that is, I mean, it's an unprecedented chance to see something that has properly ancient roots.

Okay, excellent. So, before you get stuck into the all Bronze Age stuff, Tom, to give people a sense of what we're doing, this is the first of a mighty trilogy, because Tom is going to be talking about the deep roots of coronation, so the Anglo-Saxons over the Confessor.

Yeah, but I'll be trying to justify this claim that you can kind of, you know, trace this as a living tradition a long, long way back.

The Stone of Destiny, all of these elements.

In the second episode, we will be doing a whistle stop tour of some medieval coronations, but then going really, there's some tremendous stories about Tudor and Stuart coronations.

There's some absolutely fascinating stuff, a kind of window into the kind of religious and political turbulence of the early modern period,

but also some excellent stories about people being sick, behaving very badly, rioting, all this stuff.

And then in the third episode, we shall do coronations in the modern age.

And there, there are some absolutely shambolic Hanoverian coronations,

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which I think will make some very good stories, and we should bring it right up to date by coming into the 20th century. And I think the fascinating thing, Tom, is that each of these episodes, each of these coronations, rather, is a window into the sort of political, social, economic, ideological climate of a moment in England's history, isn't it? Well, preparing for these, I mean, again, it reminded me of doing the episodes we did on the Olympics and indeed the World Cups, because that was part of the fascination of those, was that it wasn't just the sporting contest themselves, it was the way that they hold a mirror up to changes in the broader world.

Yeah.

And in a way, you know, the continuities that you can trace back through British and English, and indeed Scottish history, serve that role for the histories of these islands.

I mean, it's really fascinating.

So let's start by looking at some aspects of the coronation, Tom.

So you want to start, don't you, with the actual, with the stuff, with the regalia, is that right?

Well, so when you say, you know, the roots of coronation are ancient, you can trace them back through time, they're not just Victorian inventions.

On what basis can you make that case?

Well, so there is bling, coronation, regalia, orbs and septas and swords and gloves and garters and all kinds of things will be coming out.

And most of this stuff dates back to the time of Charles II.

Yes.

So he gets crowned in 1661 after he's come back from exile.

And the reason that he has to have all the crown jewels made for him is because, you know, they've gone missing in the Interregnum that separated Charles II's coronation from the execution of his father, Charles I,

because obviously for the Republic that gets established in the wake of Charles I's execution, the royal regalia are seen as possessed of a kind of malevolent power.

Right.

Their potency is something to be disposed of.

Not everything is destroyed.

So you have, there were three ceremonial swords that were used in the coronation of Charles I.

But a lot of the regalia was much older than that, that got destroyed.

And really the only medieval piece of regalia that seems to have survived is a spoon that they use for the anointing.

So they kind of dip it in the holy oil that we will definitely be coming to, which is used for the anointing of the monarch.

Perhaps goes back to the, I don't know, coronation of Richard I, something like that.

Richard the Lionheart.

It would be great to have Richard the Lionheart spoon, wouldn't it?

Yeah, well, Archbishop of Canterbury will be using it.

I mean, very exciting.

Yeah.

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And so the question of where the medieval regalia came from, again, people in the Middle Ages assumed that it ultimately came from Edward the Confessor. I mean, probably didn't, probably kind of, you know, collected over the course of the decades and the centuries.

But the assumption was that it was very, very old, that it went back to the time of Edward the Confessor. And every item is kind of suffused as a result of that, because it's touched by this royal saint with a, can I say, sacral meaning? You almost certainly will.

Well, I have.

Yeah.

And so Edward the Confessor is really the kind of the presiding genius of the medieval coronation, because the coronation has also always been held in Westminster Abbey, which again, Edward the Confessor built.

Yes.

It was originally built by Henry the Third, but in a way that did not erase the memory of Edward the Confessor who'd originally built it. So Edward the Confessor's try and stands at the heart of Westminster Abbey.

There's this incredible pavement, a Cosmati pavement, kind of very, very exquisite, distinct kind of mosaic, that ultimately goes back to kind of Byzantine practice and is imbued with all kinds of geometrical and hermetic and weird significance. So that is paved both on the spot where the coronation takes place and around the tomb of the Confessor.

So it's kind of joining each monarch as he or she is crowned with the idea of Edward the Confessor as the presiding genius. Because you're on that spot, you're on that spot where Edward the Confessor, or you're connected by the tiles, basically, to Edward the Confessor.

Yeah.

Essentially, yes.

And then the coronation chair, which again, Charles was sitting commissioned by Edward the First, but again, named after Edward the Confessor.

So for those people who don't know, by the way, Edward the Confessor is the penultimate Anglo-Saxon king, isn't he?

Yes.

He's the saint who builds Westminster Abbey.

He either gives or doesn't give according to who you believe is kingdom to Harold Godwin's and then it ends up being taken by William of Normandy.

So this really is a link with the Anglo-Saxons, isn't it?

Well, it's believed to be a link by kings who were crowned over the course of the Middle Ages.

So Edward the First is Plantagenet.

He's named after Edward the Confessor.

Yeah.

And he's sentries later and it's really important to him to proclaim, I guess, his Englishness.

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Is that right?

Yes.

So by Edward's time, the English monarchy has lost its lands in France.

And so in a sense, it's forced to fall back on the traditions of the English monarchy.

And by emphasizing the degree to which they stand in line from a saintly predecessor, they are bulking up their own status, their own prestige.

And so on the throne, this wooden throne that Edward commissions, you get a painting of Edward the Confessor on the back.

It's absolutely a kind of sense of identification with this.

So you've got the regalia and you've got the abbey, the location,

both of which go back to the memory of Edward the Confessor.

But you also have what in Latin was called the ordo,

basically the order of service, the liturgy, the words that are used to structure the ceremony.

And this ultimately goes back even further in time than that of Edward the Confessor.

So there have been various iterations of this kind of order of service, various recensions of it.

There was a kind of key stage in its development in 1377 when Richard II is crowned.

So that's the son of Edward III, who was the boy king.

So it's called the Libba Regalis.

And it's still preserved in the Library of Westminster Abbey to this day.

And it's been the basis for every coronation that's followed

and will be the basis for the ritual that is staged on Saturday.

But there are always twists on the tom because we'll go into those in some of the later episodes, particularly when England is sort of being roiled by religious controversy.

People are always fiddling with it to make it more or less Catholic or Protestant or whatever.

Yes, in much the same way that you might change, say, the number of sports at the Olympics or the opening ceremony or that kind of thing.

But the core idea remains the same.

Right. So what is the core idea?

Well, so this is an order of service that we know goes back to the 10th century.

So that is a century before Edward the Confessor and the events of 1066.

Yeah.

And specifically, it goes back to the 973, which is when a king called Edgar is crowned.

And Edgar is the great grandson of Alfred the Great.

He is the nephew of Athelstan, the first king of England.

He is commemorated as specificus, the peaceable, the peace giver.

This doesn't mean that he's a hippie, quite the opposite.

He is incredibly brutal.

It means basically that under his rule, England is kept at peace.

And Edgar imposes order with a great degree of brutality.

He does it, Dominic.

And you might say that he's right to do it.

I would.

So he blinds criminals.

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He scalps them.

He hangs them, so 969.

So that's four years before his coronation.

There are bandits in Kent who kidnap and rob some merchants who've come down from York.

And Edgar's response to this is to ravage the entire county.

So he puts it, you know, so robust, very swailor-bravaman approach to law and order.

Definitely.

But hold on.

Sorry, is that before his crown?

So his king before his crown?

He is.

And so the coronation is quite late.

It's several years into his reign and dispute as to what this may be.

But it's clear, I think, that what is going on is a desire on the part of probably the greatest churchman in the Anglo-Saxon, in the history of the Anglo-Saxon church, a man Dunstan who subsequently becomes a saint.

Incredible stories are told of him.

He's meant to have surprised the devil with a pair of tongs and grabbed the devil by the nose and kind of dragged him around.

So he's a great prince of the church.

And I think Dunstan and Edgar, between them, trying to proclaim this nascent kingdom of England, this united kingdom of England.

Which has only existed, you know, for a matter of decades, presumably.

Dunstan, who is commemorated as the first king of England, he's stitched together Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex, into this kind of kingdom that, since Athelstan has died, bits of it have dropped off, they've been sewn back on together again, under Edgar, with his robust approach to law and order, and also indeed to coinage.

So it's under Edgar that the king proclaims that only he can mint legal tender.

Right.

So there's this idea that they're trying to create a unitary state in what will become England.

And I think there is an ambition to stage a coronation ritual that will make this manifest.

Yeah.

And Edgar's interest in this is obviously that he will rule it as not just as a king, but as an emperor or as an emperor.

And Dunstan's interest is that he sees his control of all kinds of rituals that may still have slight pagan connotations and Christianizes them.

Ah, okay.

So everything about it has a kind of symbolic heft.

So the coronation is staged in Bath, which is still littered with fragments and remains of Roman rule.

So that's a sort of very visible sign that you are the heirs to the Roman emperors, who people think of as these tremendous mystical, you know, characters.

Absolutely.

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And so that's the significance of Edgar calling himself emperor or emperor.

Right.

And he is crowned on Pentecost, which is the day that the Holy Spirit comes down and descends on the apostles.

And this idea that the Holy Spirit descends on the king is a crucial part of the ritual as it evolves over the decades and centuries that follow.

And indeed, you know, as we'll see is part of the prehistory of this ritual.

Right.

So the order of service seems to have been drawn up by Dunstan, and it's based on an earlier liturgy going back at least to the time of Athelstan, but maybe much, much earlier than that.

So it's something that scholars furiously debate.

It is spectacular in a way that no previous coronation seems to have been spectacular to the extent that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle actually describes it twice, once in prose and once in poetry.

And this seems to be why it is written up so the accounts we have of it are actually quite a bit later.

Yeah.

But the memory of it is preserved as something that is really worth kind of commemorating. And it's evident that as well as the splendor of the occasion, there is also the specter of Edgar's humility.

So remember, Edgar is a tough, hard man, but when he comes into the abbey, he takes off his crown, puts it on the altar and then prostrates himself before the altar.

And it's said that Dunstan at the sight of this wept with joy at the spectacle of this abasement before God, before Christ.

Right.

Yeah.

And this serves to preface a series of three oaths that are sworn by Edgar, where he promises to observe true peace, to show justice and mercy in all things, to refrain from violence.

And previously, these were oaths that his subjects had had to swear.

But now Edgar is casting himself as the servant of his people.

And this again is something that passes into the kind of the mainstream of the coronation ritual.

Yeah.

And will be a feature of the ritual on Saturday.

Exactly.

So this is a fascinating element, you know, the Anglo-Saxon Age is one in which people take oaths incredibly seriously.

You swear an oath to your Lord, you make all kinds of promises.

If you read one of the Nor sagas or something or one of the Anglo-Saxon sort of poems, I don't know, Bear Wolf or something, you know, you don't swear an oath and then break it.

No.

So for Edgar to swear this oath in the eyes of his people, I mean, he's swearing to his people, right?

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And this idea of the servant of the people.

He's swearing to God really.

He's pledging himself to God as the servant of his people.

So is that new, Tom?

I mean, a Roman emperor would not have seen himself as the servant of his people, would he?

So Alfred clearly had a sense of himself as someone who would answer before God for what he did as king.

I think that Christian kings absolutely did have that sense.

But I think that what seems to be new about this is that Edgar is making it part of the ritual surrounding his formal enthronement.

And this is, I think, the most decisive aspect of the coronation ritual that gets established for future generations, but that, you know, there are others.

So the king on Saturday will be escorted by two bishops, the Bishop of Durham and the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

And Edgar, likewise, when he comes into the Abbey of Bath to be crowned, is escorted by two bishops.

We're not told who they were, but it seems likely that it would have been, you know, the Bishop of Wells perhaps, because that's the closest Bishop Rick to Bath.

And since we know that subsequently it was the Bishop of Durham, it was probably the Bishop in Chesterle Street, which is where St. Cuthbert had his relics.

So that's probably, hooray, a link to Cuthbert there.

And also the idea that the Archbishop of Canterbury is the man who will crown the king.

So Dunstan clearly is the person who has taken charge of this ritual.

Yeah.

There have been a few interesting exceptions through the years.

Yeah.

There have been a few exceptions.

So William the Conqueror was crowned by the Archbishop of York and the young son of Henry II, who was crowned while Henry II was still alive, Henry the Young King, he was crowned by the Archbishop of York as well.

William and Mary, Tom.

Yeah.

Anticipating our next episode.

There's all kinds of religious ructions going on in the 17th century and Archbishops refusing to take part in coronations.

But by and large, the idea that it should be the Archbishop of Canterbury again seems to be established at this point.

And again, looking at what will be happening on Saturday, where Camilla will be crowned as queen, we know that Edgar's wife, Alfrith, that she is anointed and crowned alongside Edgar.

And this idea that at coronations, queens as well as kings should be crowned.

Again, this seems to be established at this ritual because prior to that, there was a kind of tradition certain that derived from the monarchy of Wessex.

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You didn't have queens.

The wives of kings were not to be crowned.

There was a notorious queen called Idbur, who was actually the daughter of Arthur the Great King of Mercia, who'd behaved very badly.

She was said to have poisoned her husband and run away to the mainland, turned down Charlemagne, become the abbess of a convent, scandalous goings on with all kinds of people, gets expelled and ends up a beggar on the streets of Pavia in North Italy.

So the Salichutale, and so that had basically meant that English kings didn't have queens, but this gets changed probably under the influence of continental monarchies.

And so this is what's intriguing is that even though we've gone back right the way through, the century is back to the 10th century.

So the regalia, going back to Edward the Confessor in a kind of way at Westminster Abbey.

And depending on how you count them, there've been either 38, 39 or 40 English kings and queens, British kings and queens who've been crowned there.

And the order of service going all the way back to Edgar.

But then the question is, where are the elements of this ritual coming from?

I mean, Dunstan isn't just making them up.

So it goes back even further.

It does go back even further.

Excellent.

There are lines of strange and unexpected ways.

So should we take a break here?

We should take a break and Tom will be delving deeper into the mysteries of coronations after the break.

Please don't go away.

Welcome back to the Rest is History.

We promised you the mysteries of coronations and that Tom Holland, yes, your task to deliver on that promise.

Okay.

So we talked about Edgar whenever it is 973, was it, or something like that?

Yeah.

Yeah, it is 973 in Bath.

Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, it's a great opportunity for him to sort of assert his primacy, I suppose.

Yeah.

But you were saying at the end of the first half, Dunstan doesn't make up the coronation service and the coronation rituals.

He's getting it from somewhere.

Yeah.

Am I right in thinking that he's not just getting it from Christian traditions, he's getting it from pagan ones as well.

There seem to be kind of shadowy hints of pagan practice beneath it.

So one of the ways in which kings in the pre-Christian period in the Anglo-Axian world seem to have been crowned and actually across the barbarian kingdoms that follow the Roman Empire is that

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their initiation as a king is marked not with a crown but with a helmet.

So Athelstan seems to have been the first king to have been crowned with a crown rather than with a helmet.

Also the idea that a king should be escorted by bishops rather than by his thanes.

I think it's an attempt to get rid of the kind of the folk memory of a pagan king being lifted by vital statistics in asterisks up on a kind of shield by his warlords.

So I think that's what's going on.

There's also a deliberate echoing of Christian traditions in Britain that are themselves very ancient.

So the idea of Dunstan as Merlin to Edgar's Arthur, this again is something that goes back a very long way in Britain.

And actually, I mean, it's kind of wonderful irony that perhaps our Irish listeners will enjoy that the first man to inaugurate a king in Britain is actually an Irishman.

And that's St. Colomber, the enemy of the Loch Ness Monster, we've talked about several occasions.

So he's come over, he's left Ireland and he's come to the kingdom of Dalriada, which kind of spans the seas between Ireland and the west coast of Scotland.

And that was what, late sixth century?

Yeah.

So he famously establishes a monastery on Iona, the island of Iona, and an angel appears to him and orders him to go and crown a king called Aden.

And Colomber doesn't want to do this because he's keener on Aden's brother.

But the angel draws out a whip and lashes him and the mark of that lash, it is said, stayed on Colomber's body for the rest of his life.

And the angel says, if you don't go and do it, I'll give you another lashing.

And so Colomber goes and does what he's told.

Now, the account of this predictably isn't contemporaneous, so it's a century later.

It seems to be pretty authentic.

And if it is authentic, then it's the first clear account of a Christian inauguration ritual anywhere in Britain.

And more than that, anywhere in Europe, is that right?

Yeah, pretty much.

And whether it's authentic or not is definitely the case by the late seventh century, Abbots of Iona are consecrating kings of Dalriada in exactly the same way that Archbishop Canterbury will go on to consecrate kings of England.

Very quick question.

This is taking place in Scotland, Tom.

And my understanding of Scottish coronation rituals is perhaps not as close and intimate as it could be.

But my assumption is they involve enormous stones.

Is that correct?

Right.

Okay, yes.

So stones is another feature of, seems to be kind of insular traditions in Britain.

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So Athelstan is crowned on a stone at Kingston on Thames, seven other kings as well are crowned on the stone in Kingston and Thames, which is still there, supposedly.

That really might be a kind of invented Victorian tradition, whether the stone is authentic or not, we don't know.

But if you're in Kingston, you can go and see that.

But the famous stone on which kings are crowned is, of course, the stone of Schoon.

And there's a sense in which over the course of early medieval Scottish history, the place where kings are being crowned migrates eastwards.

So it goes from Iona to a place called Dunad in mid-Argyle.

And this is where there's a rock with an indentation that resembles a foot.

And the king will put his foot into this indentation.

And it kind of symbolizes his marriage to the living rock of the lands that he's coming to rule.

Right.

But by the time that Dahlriada in the west of Scotland and Pickland in the east has kind of been fused into the land of the Scots, what will become the Kingdom of Scotland.

The centre of coronations has migrated to Schoon, which is in Perthshire.

And famously, kings there are crowned on the stone of Schoon.

Stone of destiny, people call it.

Stone of destiny.

Now what is the stone of destiny?

Now there are various stories that are told about this.

So one tradition says that it is the stone that Jacob, who is the grandson of Abraham, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel in the long run.

He lies down to sleep and he rests his head on a stone for a pillow and he sees a great vision of angels.

And this stone is that very stone that that was Jacob's pillow.

It had then been taken by the prophet Jeremiah and the daughter of the last king of Judah before it's sacked by the Babylonians, a woman called Thea.

They go to Egypt.

She then takes on the name Scotter and she then takes the stone of Schoon to Ireland.

And it's in Ireland that it gets the name the stone of destiny.

It's said to have been on the site of Tara, the holy hill on which the High Kings of Ireland were crowned and then it's brought by Colomber to Iona, then to Dunad and then to Schoon.

So those are the stories.

Complication with that is that these stories actually are quite late.

They follow what is probably the most notorious episode in the history of this stone, which is its abduction by Edward I, the hammer of the Scots, who is trying to conquer Scotland and thinks that by removing the stone of destiny to Westminster Abbey, where he has the coronation throne of Edward the Confessor built so that it can contain the stone of Schoon, that by doing that he will be delegitimising any would be kings of Scotland.

And it's the English who tell the story about how this is actually the stone used by Jacob as a pillow.

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And it's the Scots who say how it came from Tara and Ireland.

The depressing truth about this is that geologists have looked at the stone and it seems to have come neither from the Holy Land nor from Ireland.

It seems to have come from Persia.

So very sad.

That remains a living link with those fabulously ancient traditions because the stone of Scone will be brought back from Scotland where it got sent by John Major in I think 1996.

And it will be brought back, I think it's already been brought back, and Charles will be enthroned sitting on top of it.

There's a very famous story about it, isn't there, in the, was it in 1950 or so?

Yeah, 1950, yeah.

Yeah.

Some students, so nationalist students, they stole it, didn't they?

They stole it and tried to smuggle it back to Scotland.

They did because there were roadblocks everywhere, but they managed to get it and as they took it over, they kind of baptised it with whiskey to celebrate the fact that it was back where it should be.

And then they hid it in the ruins of our brother Abbey and it got found and sent back to Westminster Abbey in 1952.

It's a good place to hide a big stone.

Yeah.

And the weird thing is, even Cromwell seems to have taken it quite seriously.

So when he was installed as Lord Protector, he was installed sitting on the throne that had the stone underneath it.

And the irony is that Charles II, long before he was crowned in Westminster Abbey in 1661, he'd been crowned a decade earlier in Scone where, of course, the stone of destiny had long gone.

Cromwell had it.

Right.

So again, one of the wonderful ironies that seems to shadow this whole story.

So that's the backdrop of weirdness that I think is feeding into the coronation rituals that come from Britain.

Yes.

The truth is that there are other elements of the ritual that look to the continent.

So some of these rituals are clearly Roman.

So I really wanted to ask about this.

Roman emperors weren't crowned in any meaningful way, were they?

They come to be crowned in the third century.

So when the empire is collapsing.

They had a coronation every three days in that case.

Right.

Well, they may not have coronations, but they come to be portrayed with the crowns that kind of show the rays of the sun, kind of radiant crowns.

And with Constantine and then his heirs, the wearing of a diadem comes to be part of the

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kind of the ritual display.

And certainly by the end of the fifth century, you were having formal coronations of Roman emperors in the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

And over the centuries that follow, these coronation rituals in Hagia Sophia become kind of more and more sacral, can I say?

Yeah.

More and more ritualized.

And that Cosmati pavement in Westminster Abbey that we talked about in the first half is modelled ultimately on the marble pavement in Hagia Sophia that under Roman presumptions mark the centre of the world on which the Roman emperors are crowned.

So this desire to emulate Roman models, it's there in the reign of Henry III, but it's also much earlier because say, Athelstan, when he's having himself crowned as king with a crown rather than with a helmet, you know, he can look at examples from Roman coins. Of people with crowns and they're wearing crowns because of the sun.

That had never occurred to me before.

That's really interesting.

Yeah.

For Athelstan, as with Edgar, Athelstan is describing himself as an imperator, which is the Latin name for emperor.

The fact that he is laying claim to the rule of Britain, he's consciously aiming at an imperial dignity.

And so that idea that they are drawing on the legacy of Roman imperial rank and status, I think again is another element of what is feeding into this ritual.

But to go back to that idea of wearing something special on your head, Alexander the Great, when he went to Persia and he conquered the Persian Empire, he shocked his generals and his pals by wearing a diadem, by wearing a kind of ribbon around his head to circle it.

I mean, the idea of something in circling your head that is immediately identifiable and only you can wear.

So he gets that from the Persians.

Could you argue that when King Charles has been crowned on Saturday and his head is being encircled with gold, that that is ultimately a Persian inheritance, Tom?

I suppose if you were Ali Ansari, you could potentially argue that.

Professor of history at St. Andrew is very keen on the Persians.

I think that the reason that crowns come in is because of the Roman echoes.

I mean, that's what the interest is for the Anglo-Saxon kings.

When we talk about Roman emperors, of course, they're not just in Constantinople.

They are also from 800 A.D. onwards on the continent because in 800 A.D. tellingly on Christmas Day, so a kind of great sacred day, Charlemagne had been crowned by the Pope in Rome and that provides the other great model.

And there's a sense in which the coronation rituals that are being practiced in England, although they are drawing on its traditions, ultimately they are deriving from the Carolingians. So the Carolingians are the dynasty of which Charlemagne is the greatest figure.

And crownings are one manifestation of this, but there is another that is even more telling

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and even more significant, I think, and that is the ritual of anointing.

This is what you've been building up to, isn't it?

Because you love all this stuff, sacral oils.

Sacral oils.

And so this is seen, I mean, it was seen by Elizabeth II when she was crowned as being the holiest moment of the ritual, ditto for Charles III on Saturday.

It's not to be filmed.

It's seen as being too holy.

And so the tradition is that a canopy made of silk or cloth of gold is held over the monarch traditionally held by four knights of the garter, which is very exciting for fans of Edward III.

Yeah.

So that could be John Major.

I don't remember who the others are.

Yeah.

It's quite disappointing.

Yeah.

So not the black prince or anyone like that.

And they are anointed with holy oil and at the time when anointings are starting to be used in early medieval Europe.

So actually the earliest reference we have to this isn't from the Carolingians.

It's not in Francia.

It's a Physiogothic king in Spain, the brilliant name of Womba, who's anointed in 672.

But the key anointing takes place in 751 when Pippin, it's a very Tolkien-esque name, who is the first Carolingian king, is anointed as a place called Swassil.

And the dynasty that he is overthrown of the Merovingians, who we talked about in the Holy Blood and Holy Grail episodes.

So they likewise claim a kind of sacral authority by virtue of descent from a sea monster.

And obviously the Carolingians can't claim that and they are anxious about being cast as usurpers.

And so they need the kind of dignity, the kind of authority, the kind of legitimacy that an anointing can provide them with.

And the reason that an anointing can provide them with legitimacy is because this is a tradition that harks back to Old Testament kings.

Oh, so they are anointed.

Yeah, right.

Well, it's confusing.

So actually the first Carolingian king to be both crowned and anointed is actually the son of Charlemagne, Louis the Pius.

So the pope crosses the Alps in 816 after the death of Charlemagne and both crowns and anoints Louis the Pius.

The crowning, of course, marks him out as a Roman emperor, but it also marks him out as a king in the line of descent from the ancient kings of Israel because David is crowned.

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But the key ritual in the Old Testament that marks out all the kings of Israel is the fact that they are anointed.

And the people who are anointing Pippin and Louis the Pius and in due course, so the first reference we have to an anointing in England is the son of Offa, the king of Mercia and then Edgar and into the Middle Ages.

They can feel that they are joined by a living tradition to the Old Testament kings because actually people in the church have been anointing priests and anointing holy implements since the very beginnings of Christianity.

And they're doing that because in the Old Testament they read about how priests and the holy gear that you use for rituals in the Old Testament.

The holy gear.

The holy, holy pertinence is whatever regalia, but these are being anointed.

And so the practice of anointing is seen by Christians as a living tradition that they've inherited from the Israelite past.

And for bishops in particular, they get anointed by a particularly potent holy oil called chrysm, which is believed to have incredible supernatural power.

It's believed that if you're sailing at sea and there's a storm, you just scatter the chrysm over the waves and the demons will fade away and the sea will be calmed.

You scatter it on a field, the fields will be blessed.

And if you anoint a living body with chrysm, its sacral power will pass through the pores, penetrate the body, seep deep into the soul.

And that this is what elevates bishops above other priests and particularly above the laity.

And to start touching kings with chrysm, which is something that starts to happen in this period is touching them with an element of the sacred as well.

It's turning them into kind of priests, kingly priests.

So when you're talking about, you say anointing them in this period, you're talking about the Merovingians, the Carolingians rather, Pippin and Co.

Yeah.

And so you remember that I said about how there's this idea that the Holy Spirit descends on kings.

Yeah.

That's what the anointing is all about.

Right.

So basically, right the way from the ninth century, the anointing of a king has been marked by a particular anthem, a Latin hymn.

So Veni, creator of Spiritus, come Holy Ghost, come Holy Spirit and kind of fill us with inspiration.

It's basically the idea.

And there's this idea then that by anointing a king or a queen, they are literally being touched by the Holy Spirit.

So deep magic, Dominic.

Very deep magic.

But if this is part of the kind of the living Christian tradition that goes back to the beginnings of the church.

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Of course, it is also going back to what Christians can read in the pages of the Old Testament about the kings of the Israelites.

So originally, the Israelites did not have kings.

They had judges, but they then ask God for a king and the prophet Samuel, who's the kind of the big cheese among the Israelites at this point.

Yeah.

He's the columbar, he's the Dunstan, he's the prototype for the holy man who inaugurates a king.

Gandalf.

Merlin.

Gandalf, Merlin, all that.

He anoints and crowns a man called Saul, who turns out not to be a great king.

He's a rotter, isn't he, Saul?

He turns out to be a rotter, yes.

And he's succeeded by David, who is the shepherd boy who kills Goliath, but then goes on to become...

He's a great fellow, unless you're Bathsheba's husband.

Right.

So yes.

So there's definitely the sense that David ends up being crowned and anointed.

And a lot of the Psalms, many of which are attributed to David, there are descriptions of him being crowned and anointed.

So it's kind of famous lines from one of the Psalms, I have found David my servant, with my holy oil have I anointed him, with whom my hands shall be established, my arm all social strength in him, the enemy shall not exact upon him, nor the son of wickedness afflict him, and I will beat down his foes before his face and plague them that I hate him.

So this is the kind of stuff that kings in the early Middle Ages are buying into.

Yeah.

That if they can get this anointing, then they're kind of getting a superpower.

And also, of course, because in this certain degree of relevance for Charles III as well, David is, as you said, he's a notorious adulterer.

So he lusts after Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who is a great captain in the Israelite army. In fact, has him killed.

Yeah.

But this doesn't invalidate David's anointing.

So that again is kind of good news for badly behaved medieval kings.

Well, for like George IV or somebody, you know.

Yes.

But the ultimate king and the king whose model really lies behind all the rituals of the medieval kingship going into the present day is Solomon, who is the archetype of wisdom.

And so we opened with Zedok the priest, this great anthem that has been sung in coronations right the way back to the time of Edgar, but of course, he's best known in the version composed by Handel.

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And these are drawn from verses in the Old Testament.

It reads Zedok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king and all the people rejoiced and said, God save the king, long live the king, God save the king, may the king live forever.

Amen.

Hallelujah.

And this is exactly replicating the order of service that you get that is narrated for Solomon's crowning and anointing.

So that what you get in the Old Testament version of Solomon's crowning is you get anointing of oil by a priest.

Then you get the people acclaim him, and then you get the king sitting in a throne.

And this is basically the pattern that the Christian rituals of coronation and anointing inherit and which we will be seeing on Saturday.

And so, you know, that's kind of an amazing thing.

And what makes it all the more amazing, I think, is that the only evidence we have for the anointing of Israelite kings is the Old Testament.

And so how reliable are these accounts?

People have been very skeptical about them.

But I think that they probably do preserve authentic traditions.

And the reason for that is that it seems that the Israelite traditions are influenced by the kings of the neighboring great powers, so Syria and Egypt, where there is evidence for anointing rituals happening right the way back into the Bronze Age.

And I think the surest evidence for this is the fact that in the Old Testament, so the narrative accounts of the lives of Saul and David and Solomon, but also in the Psalms, there's a certain anxiety about what exactly this ritual of anointing means.

Because the translation of anointed, kind of anglicized form of Hebrew, is Messiah.

And the anglicized Greek form of it is Christ.

So Christ is an anointed one.

And it seems that certainly the Syrian kings, when they were anointed, that they became in a way the Son of a God, or they became divinized, they became divine.

And obviously this isn't what, this is unacceptable for the writers of the Old Testament, the Tanakh.

Because there's only one God.

Because there is only one God.

And the idea that an earthly king could become a Son of God is shocking and scandalous.

But they kind of work around it.

And this, again, is what Dunstan seems to be drawing on with his order of service for Edgar, is this idea that becoming a Son of God, becoming an anointed one, becoming a Christ for the Israelite kings, is a process of service that you are being pledged to service the Son of God.

In other words, you are, you're the servant of God and you're the servant of his people.

And this is, again, a kind of incredibly potent idea.

And obviously for Christians, this idea of an anointed king who is the servant of his people gets an extra kind of theological dimension because that is the role that Jesus comes

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to serve for Christians.

So that idea of, say, David or Solomon as the servant of his people, in the Christian reworking of it in the New Testament, this provides the kind of the ultimate model for any Christian.

And so in a way, kings are being anointed and enthroned as kind of Christian archetypes in that sense, which is why kings have to pledge themselves to be servants of their people.

Right.

But the king is kind of the image of God, right, or the vehicle of, I mean, God's representative on earth to some extent.

Is that fair?

So that is something that changes and evolves over the course of time.

Because the degree to which a coronation of an anointing makes a king a sacral figure, the degree to which he can stand rank, say, with bishops or archbishops, the degree to which he is appointed directly by God, all of these have huge theological and therefore cultural implications for the peoples that he's ruling.

And so these are things that have changed and evolved over the course of time.

But I think the core idea, the idea that an anointing in some way is a religious ritual that marks an individual ruler out as someone with a particular responsibility for the care of his people to God is something that is fabulously ancient.

And the ritual that will happen on Saturday is basically the last surviving example of that.

Wonderful.

That still endures into 21st century.

I think the same thing happens in Tonga, actually, but it is a kind of copy of the British ritual.

Right.

So I think that that is, it's a properly weird thing to be watching in the 21st century.

But you're using weird in your special Tom Holland way.

Yes.

The English sense.

Yes.

The weird sisters.

It's uncanny.

You're not disapproving of the coronation, Tom, otherwise we'll have to have stern words.

There are, of course, you know, there are lots of people who would absolutely see it as weird.

And I think that one of the interesting questions about what the impact of this coronation will be will be, will people be moved and impressed by this, this sense of a kind of very ancient sacred ritual, or will they regard it as wholly grotesque and ludicrous and say, well, why are we doing this kind of mumbo jumbo in the 21st century?

Well, for those people, all I say is France is only a short change, only a way if that's your history.

Listen, one of the many interesting things about it, Tom, that was absolutely fascinating,

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by the way, is the contrast between the dignity, the grandeur, the spiritual profundity of the ceremony and the often absolutely ludicrous and preposterous characters who have played the central parts.

Right.

I mean, George IV, Henry VIII, James I, Mary Elizabeth, there's some great characters and what we're going to do in the next two podcasts is to see how the sort of meaning, the tremendous spiritual meaning and significance, how it survives its encounter with historical reality.

Yeah.

You know, horses going the wrong way, things collapsing, people getting drunk, people rolling down steps, eating sandwiches.

Yeah.

Exactly.

People getting bored during coronations and starting to have picnics.

I don't think we'll see that on Saturday.

So there are some traditions that we haven't kept up, Tom, which is a shame.

So we will be back next time and we'll be beginning our great sweep through the history of coronations and the way in which they provide a window into different eras of English history.

So Tom, thanks for the tour de force and on that bombshell, we'll see you next time.

Bye-bye.

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