



## *Was the Hungarian Holy Crown made for Armenian King?*

*By Igor Grigorian*

*Some time ago I visited my friend Hovhannes Koshkakarjian for a cup of coffee. He offered to show me a short news segment he recorded from an Armenian TV channel about the Hungarian Crown (fig. 1) and its alleged relation to Armenia. It was very interesting to see how the research brought forward the claim that the crown was most probably ordered for the Armenian king Tiridates the Great who was the first of all rulers to proclaim Christianity as state religion. I would probably have filed this information in a far corner of my memory, where I usually keep interesting but not necessarily important information was it not for the fact that I remembered buying a souvenir sheet printed by Hungary (fig. 2) while pursuing my search of churches on stamps and religion stamps related to Armenia. The souvenir sheet depicted the Hungarian crown with images of Saints on it, two of them possibly that of apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus (Fig. 3) who were the first to preach Christianity in Armenia. "Oh," I thought to myself, "if there was one souvenir sheet with the crown, there would be more stamps with the crown on it." Little did I know that the sacred crown would be depicted on so many definitive, commemorative, semi-postal, newspaper, postage due stamps, have had numerous overprints and was used during occupation of Eastern European countries and territories! I wish that thought never occurred to me... ☺*

*Well, here I am, much later, trying to follow the odyssey of the crown and its philatelic incarnation.*

Not many crowns are widely known in the world, and the Hungarian Crown is a pearl among them. There is no other nation in the world whose national relic's source, origin and age are so much unanswered, surrounded with such a mystery, and went through so many ordeals, as the crown of the Hungarians. It was pawned and lost, stolen and seized, stashed and rescued; wars waged for this crown; it was dug underground, placed in an armored chest and in a crude oil barrel. It was even kept in Fort Knox for two decades!

It is said that in the year 800 AD the first king of France Charlemagne (fig. 4) was crowned by it.

Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, starting with King Stephen (fig. 5), all Hungarian kings were crowned by this magnificent crown. According to popular tradition during the coronation ceremony Stephen held up the crown to offer it to Virgin Mary (fig. 6) in order to seal a divine contract between her and the crown. According to this version, the Hungarian crown was not only holy but from the beginning it was the symbol of the country. In 1524, these words were spoken and written by the great lawyer Stephen Werboczy, "I am obliged to dispense justice to every man without personal favor and cannot deny it to any one who seeks it from me,





Fig. 1 - Hungarian Crown  
on 1938 Hungarian stamp.



Fig. 2 - Hungarian Holly Crown on  
Hungary 2001 souvenir sheet



Fig. 3 - St. Bortholomew & Thaddeus  
depicted on 1994 Armenian Stamp  
Registered letter mailed in 1997

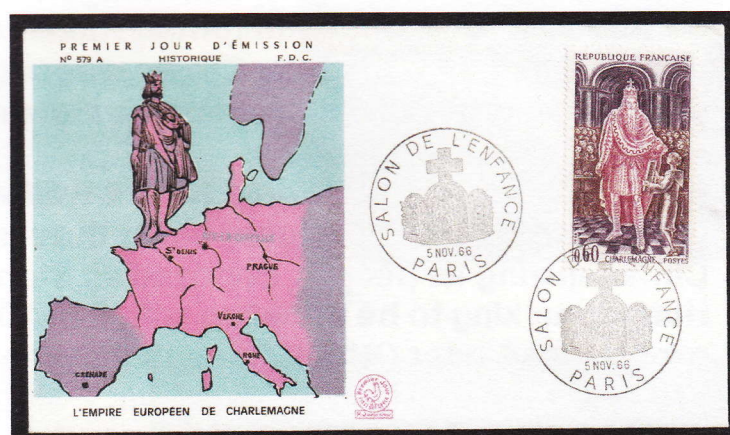


Fig. 4 - Charlemagne on 1968 France  
First Day Cover, standing on top of  
his empire's map



Fig. 5 - King Istvan on  
1970 Hungarian stamp



Fig. 6 - King Stephen  
offering the Crown to  
Virgin Mary on 1937  
Hungarian stamp



even if he be a Jew or a Gipsy, so long as he is one of the subjects of the Holy Crown of the Kingdom." Moreover, the crown represented the legitimacy of the ruler and that legitimacy was given by the Hungarian people as represented by their leaders, the nobility. So immense is the artistic value and spiritual power of the crown, that Charles Robert (Charles I of Hungary) had to be crowned three times because the coronation was considered not valid until he was crowned in 1310 with the Holy Crown and only then it was deemed legally binding. Another, more recent, example of the powers of the Crown: in between the wars (after the last Habsburg king of Hungary Charles IV (fig. 7) tried and failed to retain the throne in 1921) Hungary remained a kingdom without a king under regency of the last Austro-Hungarian Navy commander Miklos Horthy until 1946.

However, the history of the Crown starts in Armenia. Surprise: the author of the hypothesis is not an Armenian, as one would immediately speculate! Drawing upon history, hagiography, knowledge of the goldsmith's craft and art history, Father Istvan Szigeti, a Hungarian from the Aachen monastery, argues a novel view claiming that the Holy Crown was made in Armenia around 308 AD to the design and order of St. Gregory the Illuminator (fig. 8).

History tells us the following. King Istvan with the help of Franco-Roman King Otto III (fig. 9) takes Hungary along the road of creating a Hungarian state and Christianizing its people. Baptized as Stephen, Istvan becomes the first Hungarian king to be crowned with it in 1000 AD. A very cunning and experienced ruler Otto III through his mentor Pope Sylvester II (fig. 10) sends King Stephen a royal golden crown. The question arises - what kind of a crown did Otto III send to the Pope?

Otto III had a great admiration for his great predecessor, Charlemagne, and worshiped him. Charlemagne's burial place was unknown during the reign of Otto III; the grave was hidden and the references to it destroyed, which prevented the grave from being plundered by treasure hunters. For many years Otto III looked for his idol's grave. In the year 1000 arriving at Aachen Cathedral (fig. 11) Otto III ordered the assumed burial place in Aix-la-Chapelle (fig. 12) opened and entered the mausoleum. Charlemagne was buried in a sitting position with the crown on his head and the golden scepter in his hand. An open bible lay across Charlemagne's lap and his finger was resting on a specific verse, Mathew 16:26. "For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?" By historical accounts Otto III took only the cross from Charlemagne's chest and one of his teeth. But when 165 years later the grave was opened again, neither the crown nor the scepter were found. Although not confirmed, it was suggested that Otto III took these articles as memorabilia as well. Other sources claim that after reading the above verse from the bible Otto III walked out of the room saying, 'If the Pope wants Istvan to have it, so be it!' In any case, this crown was destined to become the Holy Crown of Hungary and to be placed on all royal heads since then.





Fig. 7 - King Charles IV  
on 1916 Hungarian stamp



Fig. 8 - St. Gregory  
the Illuminator on  
1994 Armenian  
Stamp.



Fig. 10 - Pope Sylvester II  
and Archbishop Astrik on  
1937 Hungarian stamp.

Fig. 9 - Otto III Stained  
Glass, Strasbourg  
Cathedral, 12 Century

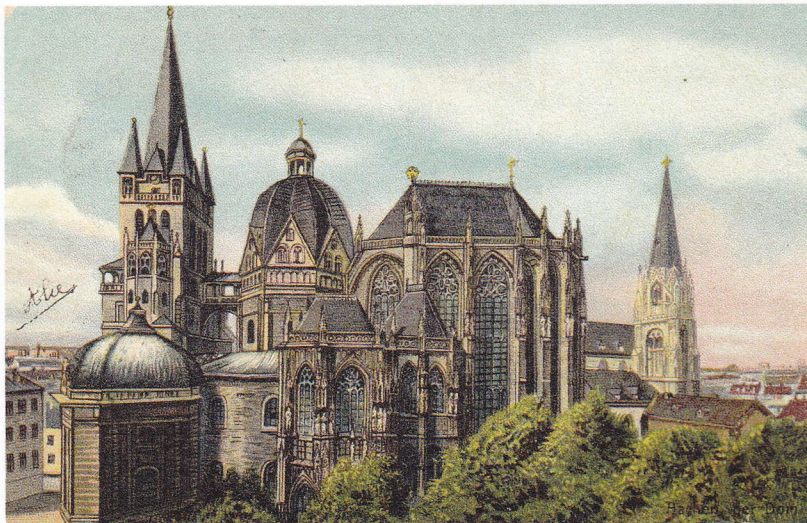
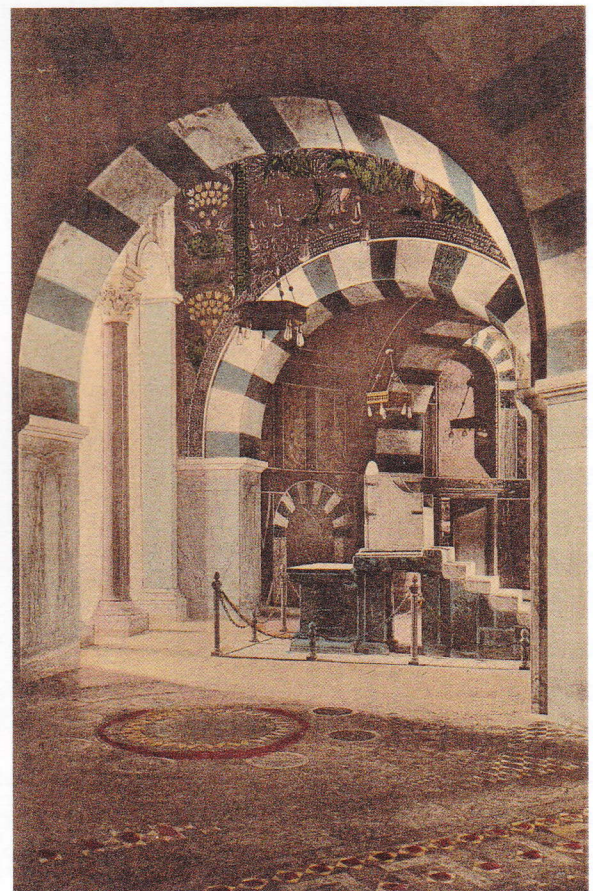


Fig. 11 - Aachen Monastery. Postcard mailed  
in 1901. Publisher Max Victor, Cologne,  
No. 9 in series

Fig. 12 - Aix - la- Chapelle,  
Charlemagne's hidden burial place





The analysis of the crown showed that the crown could not have been made in Germany and in any other place in Europe as well. So the origin of the crown should be looked for in the East. But where exactly should the origin be found? The hints lie in the workmanship and images on the crown, which are not Catholic, not even European.

The researchers suggest the following line of reasoning.

In order to weaken his Nemesis, Byzantium, Charlemagne supported Avar's raids on Byzantium territories, which, by the way, did not prevent him from sending his own troops against them. For example, in 796 AD a raid resulted in ransacking their territory and plundering 15 carts of gold and silver from Avars. Same year, one of the Avar's Khans presented so much gold to Charlemagne (fig. 13) that the latter being poor as a church rat became immediately one of the richest European rulers. It is said a gorgeous crown was among these gifts. This highly artisan crown was to be placed on Charlemagne's head in the year 800, when he was proclaimed King of Western Roman Empire and crowned as such by Pope Adrian I.

Over twenty theories exist about the origin of the crown. Due to limited space we would not consider all of them here, but will concentrate on those related to the alleged Armenian origin of the crown.

Some researchers suggest that there were two crowns, one received from Otto III through Pope Sylvester and the other one from the Byzantium, as it was customary for major empires to donate a crown to a smaller country ruler thus confirming his subordinate position. This is why, researchers claim, the crown consists of two parts, *corona graeca* (the lower diadem) and *corona latina* (the upper intersecting bands), called so because of Greek and Latin inscriptions (fig. 14). Could this be true? That theory existed until late 20<sup>th</sup> century as the crown was never allowed to be examined.

During World War II, the crown was spirited out of Hungary to protect it from the Germans and the Soviets. On May 2, 1945, the Holy Crown and other jewels were handed over by a Hungarian Army General to a U.S. Army Colonel near Eggesberg, Austria. The Crown had been packed in a large black satchel. It was initially sheltered in Wiesbaden, in the American Zone, but was later transferred to the United States Gold Reserve at Ft. Knox, Kentucky (fig. 15). It was not considered as spoils of war; rather, the U.S. Government stored it in hopes of returning it to the Hungarian people one day. In 1978 President Jimmy Carter made a decision to return the Crown. The decision was made based on the evidence that Hungary's record on human rights, its tolerance of religious expression, its facilitating of travel and communication, while not perfect, deserved recognition as an example to other Soviet-bloc countries. President





Fig. 13 - Charlemagne  
on 2014 Vatican stamp.



Fig. 14 - 2011 Hungary limited edition souvenir  
sheet Embossed foil with crystals attached,  
showing both corona graeca and corona latina.

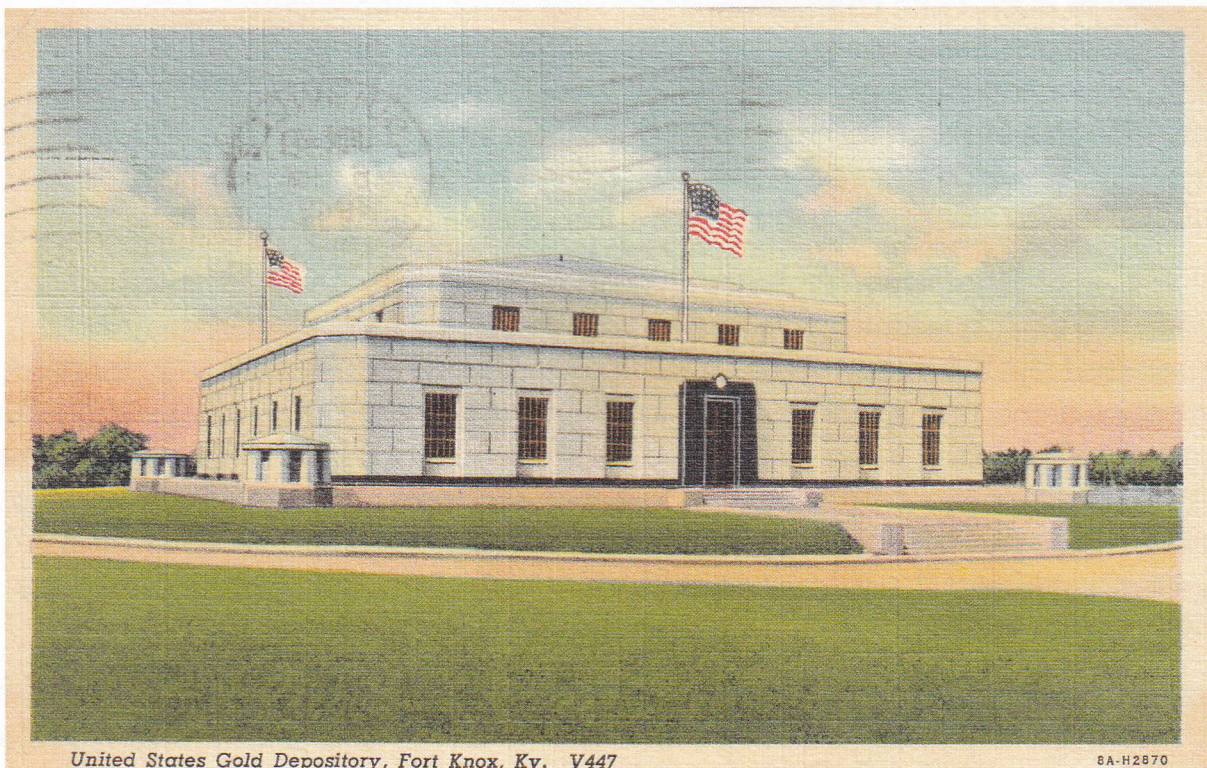


Fig. 15 - Fort Knox. Postcard printed by Chicago based  
"C.T. Art- Colortong" Company. Mailed in 1997.



After all, he said, the Crown belonged to the Hungarian people. The delegation that President Carter sent to bring the Crown to Hungary was a distinguished one, led by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. It included Senator Adlai Stevenson, Congressman Lee Hamilton, and Nobel Prize Winner Dr. Albert Szent-Györgyi. On the Hungarian side, the Cardinal, the Chief Rabbi, Protestant Bishops, and leaders of the academic, scientific and cultural communities participated in the ceremony, together with the representatives of the Hungarian state.

In the early 1980s, some engineers and goldsmiths were given permission to make a close examination of the Crown and these examinations brought about many new discoveries and surprising results. First, the group of engineers and the group of goldsmiths, independently of each other, came to the conclusion that there is no difference between the top cross section and the bottom band as far as workmanship, material or any other aspect. The whole crown was made in one workshop at the same time. The second astonishing discovery was based on the comparison made of the workmanship and material found in other jewelry and similar objects of the time. The crown had to have been fashioned around the late 300's or the early 400's A.D. in the area east of the Black Sea and south of the Caucasian Mountain divide.

Jenő M. Fehér in his history research book titled *In Pursuit of the Avar Treasures (Az Avar Kincsek Nyomában)* elaborated on his opinion that a part of the Western European goldsmith objects, dating from the middle ages is of Avar origin. His historical research touches on two points. In his first point he presents source materials that the Franks and their descendants made objects for church use from the Avar treasures and used them as such. The technical research also uncovered several objects of this nature in the West that are analogous with the Hungarian Crown. The other important point Jenő M. Fehér found from a historian's perspective is that these objects were of Avar origin; so did technical researchers. Could it have been made by Avars?

No, rightly notes Father Szigeti; being heretic Christians Avars did not accept the Holy Trinity, which was depicted on the crown, so they would not craft anything against their beliefs. Also, it is hard to believe that they will present their own royal crown as a gift to anyone. This means that they ransacked the crown during one of their own raids, for which they were best known. There are also references as to their participation in the Battle of Avarayr (fig. 16) on the Persians side. It is not a secret that the Armenians won only the spiritual battle, while the enemy raided the whole country. This is when, per Father Szigeti's speculation, the crown was taken by the Avars.

To summarize Father Szigeti's speculation: the crown was made in the Eastern Christian world as opposed to being made in the West, and the creation of the crown predates year 800 AD. Moreover, it was made several hundred years before, as some of the Apostles depicted on the crown martyred before the 4th century AD, so their incertion on the crown was done by early Christian memory.





Fig. 16 Scene at Avarair, Undivided back picture postcard, printed in Venice, Italy. Mailed from Dedeagatch franked with a 10 para stamp Austrian Offices in Turkish Empire to Paris, France in 1911.

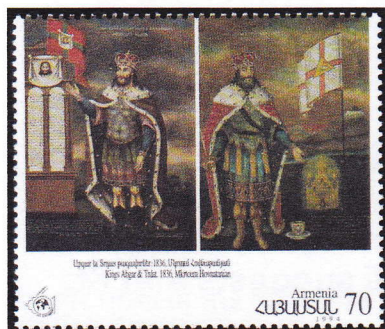


Fig. 17 - King Abgar of Edessa (left) and King Tridates III of Armenia (right) on 1994 stamp of Armenia. Design - H. Samuelyan



Fig. 18 - Caesar Diocletian on 2003 Albanian stamp



Fig. 19 - Baptism of Armenian people on 1994 stamp of Armenia. Artist - H. Aivazovsky, 1892. Design - H. Samuelyan



Fig. 20 - St. Bartholomew (left) on 1994 stamp of Armenia Design - H. Samuelyan



This narrows down the date and place of the creation of the crown, as now the choice should be made only between few countries.

Considering Kingdom of Edessa to be the first Christian Kingdom, Szigeti rejects the possibility of the crown being made for King Abgar (fig. 17); of the depicted martyrs the latest to die met his death in 305 AD, when the period of the Christian Edessa was already over.

Byzantium king Constantine the Great is also out of equation, claims Szigeti. In addition to the historical facts Szigeti points to the fact that Latin was considered barbaric language in Byzantium, while the inscriptions on the crown were made in both Greek and Latin. This mutually excludes the possibility of the crown being made either in Western Roman or Eastern Byzantium Empires. Considering Latin to be a barbaric language the Greeks would not allow any inscription in Latin. The opposite is true as well: the Holy Roman Empire with the center in Germany would never allow the inscription in Greek, as skirmishes between the two continued on regular basis.

At first sight Roman and Greek inscriptions excludes Armenia as birth place of the crown as well, but Szigeti reminds that in 287 AD Caesar Diocletian (fig. 18) crowned in Rome Tiridates III (fig. 17) who grew up in Rome as Armenian king and provided him with troops to win Armenia back; hence the Latin inscription. On the other hand, St. Gregory the Illuminator (who baptized Tiridates III and the Armenian nation – fig. 19) was raised in Greece and preached Christianity in Greek, hence the Greek inscription. This is a very logical explanation of existence of different language inscriptions on the crown. Based on Elizabeth Bauer's work *Armenia* the Hungarian researcher claims that ascending to the throne of Armenia and proclaiming Christianity as state religion should have resulted in a creation of a new crown. Besides historical facts, Szigeti also draws reader's attention to the fact that Armenians were traditionally experienced in goldsmith craft and crown-making art. Szigeti suggests that St. Gregory the Illuminator must be the designer of the crown.

Vahram Martirosyan, writer, translator (in and from Hungarian) and journalist from Armenia, considers Szigeti's analysis of the early Christian symbols and signs on the crown as the most important part of his research. Looking for the origin of the crown Szigeti puts a lot of emphasis on the so called *Armenian* Apostle, St. Bartholomew, pointing out that out of all Saints it is St. Bartholomew's (fig. 20) image that is placed next to the image of the Christ. This placement Szigeti considers pointing to the Armenian connection, as almost all of his preaching St. Bartholomew conducted among the Armenians. Looking at that part of the crown one could see that although the image of St. Bartholomew was not preserved, the letters *Bartolo* and *Ar* point to that direction. Szigeti suggests that Bartholomew was called Bartolo in Armenia, and the root -ar- points to such words as Armenia and Ararat. Also, he notes that on most of religious paintings angels are traditionally depicted as having fair complexion and light - color hair, while the darker colors and black hair are attributed to the Holy Family to underline their Jewish ancestry. On the crown two of the angels are depicted as having dark curly hair which reminds



Szigeti of the description of an Armenian person: per Elizabeth Bauer, an Armenoid is a person having a creole color of skin, round head, thick dark hair and eagle nose, which gives the person a noble and intellectual appearance.

The whole material of the crown, the cloths of the Holy Family and that of two Apostles are mostly of dark blue color, and this was done on purpose, continues his speculations Szigeti. In early Christian times colors were strictly attributed to different churches, with blue being the color of the Armenian warship tradition, called *Armeniacum pigmentum*, or *lapis lazuli* or *blue ultramarine*. This again proves the point that the crown could have originated in Armenia.

Szigeti continues with the religious analysis of the crown and comes to the conclusion that the crown most traditionally depicts unity of elements of Heavenly and Earthly realms, and this is especially true characteristic of the Armenian churches religious doctrine. Even Hungarian Wikipedia in the article about the Holy Crown points to the Armenian connection of the crown.

Thus, Szigeti concludes, the crown that was used for coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD and the first Hungarian King Stephen I in 1000 AD was first used to crown Armenian King Tiridates the Great in the year 309 AD, and the first Christian crown of the first Christian King of Armenia came to become one of the most treasured crowns of the Western world.

This all research was published in Father Szigeti's book *A Szent Korona Titka* in the beginning of the 1990s. It is yet to be known if his arguments changed views of other European researchers, although the Web is full of articles about the Holy Crown, and only recently published two or three that I have encountered cited Father Szigeti's research. The others were written much earlier and Father Szigeti's research was not familiar to them.

So, the question remains – was the Hungarian Holy Crown made for the Armenian king? Your guess is as good as mine.

#### Philatelic firsts of the Hungarian Crown:



First stamp fully dedicated to the Crown. Sc. 103a



First stamp with Madonna wearing the Crown, Sc. 381. Three-hole punched stamps were sold at post office, without holes were sold only to philatelists at 10% premium



First stamp depicting St. Stephen enthroned and wearing the Crown. Sc. 513



First commemorative over print (for restoration of territory seeded by Chechoslovakia), Sc. 535 - 536



First Image of the Crown, Sc. 13a



First watermark (WMK 135) with the crown. Sc. 35 ab



First image of the Crown with Turul. Sc. 47



Franz Josef I First image of a Hungarian King wearing the Crown, Sc. 63

#### References:

- István Szigeti, *A Szent Korona titka*. Antologia, 1996. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 146 pages
- Jenő M. Fehér, *In Pursuit of the Avar Treasures (Az Avar Kincsek Nyomában)*
- Lajos Csomor, *The Holy Crown of Hungary*
- SuzanTomory, *The Avars*
- Multiple Internet articles