# A Seat of Power: The Sustained Use of Thrones

## Introduction

Thrones have long been a symbol of power and authority, used by both secular and religious leaders to display their higher status to those in lower social classes. Being the "claimant to the…throne" (Wilson 2013: 14), for instance, is an abstract evocation of their role in exercising power. The aim of this research was to investigate the reasons why thrones have endured in Western society, from their origins to the form recognised today.

## Objectives

1. To research the origins of the thrones as objects associated with high status individuals.
2. To analyse the distribution and development of thrones through time as symbolic objects.
3. To examine how thrones have been viewed by past societies and compare past perspectives with some contemporary views.
4. To investigate why symbols and objects continue to be used by different societies.



Figure 1. *Sella curulis* of Dagobert, copying a chair design associated with Roman magistrates and priests (World Digital Library 2018).



Figure 2. Throne of Charlemagne, made by Otto I from reused Roman marble, an act known as *spoila* (Author's photo).

## Methodology

My research involved desk-based research to create a set of 20 case studies (left) from the past 2000 years in Europe. This was not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a representative data set that covered a wide time period, aiding the investigation of the broad themes within this project.
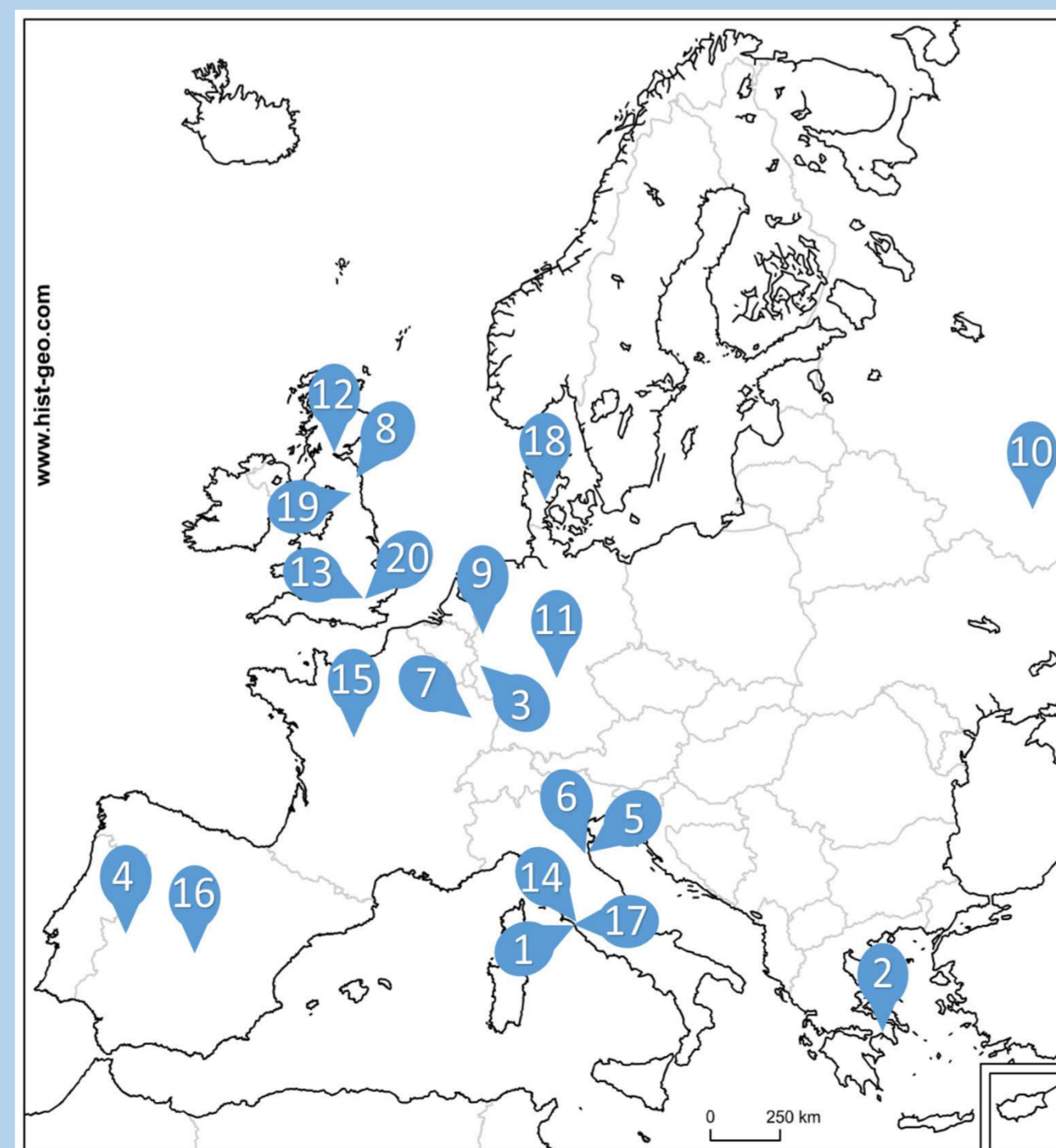
| Date | Thrones |
|---|---|
| 1st century | *Sella curulis* of Germanicus in the theatre, Rome, Italy. |
| 2nd century | The Biel Throne, Panathenaic Stadium, Athens. |
| 3rd century | Female grave with wicker chair image, Neumagen, Germany. |
| 4th century | Silver missorium of Theodosius, found in Merida, Spain. |
| 5th century | Portrait of Ostrogoth Theodoric on *sella curulis*, in Ravenna, Italy. |
| 6th century | *Cathedra* of Archbishop Maximian of Ravenna. |
| 7th century | Dagobert's throne, a Merovingian king, from Metz, France (*fig. 1*). |
| 8th century | Fragment of a stone gift-stool, from Bamburgh castle, UK. |
| 9th century | Charlemagne's Throne in Aachen Cathedral, Germany (*fig. 2*). |
| 10th century | Throne of the King of the Rusiya, a 'Viking' in Russia. |
| 11th century | *Kaiserstuhl*, Imperial Palace at Goslar, Germany. |
| 12th century | Seal of Scottish king William the Lion enthroned, UK. |
| 13th century | St Edward's Chair, throne and *cathedra,* Westminster Abbey, UK. |
| 14th century | Drawing of pope enthroned in Vatican City. |
| 15th century | Painting of Charles VIII enthroned with a canopy overhead. |
| 16th century | Engraving of Philip II enthroned on *sella curulis* in Madrid, Spain. |
| 17th century | *Cathedra petri* in St Peter's Basilica, Rome (*fig. 4*). |
| 18th century | Frederick VII's chair from visit to excavation in Jelling, Denmark. |
| 19th century | *Cathedra* built when St Nicholas' became a cathedral, Newcastle. |
| 20th century | Elizabeth II's throne to receive homage in Westminster Abbey. |



Figure 3. Map of Europe showing locations of the thrones listed to the left (Hist-geo n.d.).

## Heirloom Objects

- Royal succession is based on the descendence from a royal ancestor, by inheriting the objects used to express that power (Lillios 1999: 235,251), famously crowns, but also thrones.
- As gift-stools, thrones allowed the monarch to physically hand out gold to reward loyal followers (Pollington 2011: 27-28), and to give them orders.
- The throne is a practical tool for maintaining power, so by inheriting it the monarch gains their predecessor's authority as ruler.
- Some thrones are used for centuries, such as the *Kaiserstuhl*, Charlemagne's Throne, and St Edward's Chair, across royal dynasties.

## Roman Descendants

- Early medieval religious and secular rulers legitimised their power as descendants of Roman aristocrats and the Roman Empire's successors, by continuing to use the same symbols of power (Wormald 1991: 84; Wilmott 2006: 225,409), even after they had 'left'.
- The thrones of Dagobert (*fig.* 1) and Charlemagne (*fig.* 2) use the Roman forms and material representative of power (Weinstock 1957: 148; Steane 2001: 24).
- A later move away from 'Romanness', evident in the medieval Gothic architectural style – like St Edward's Chair – represents the gradual shift to personal authority over state administration rather than inheritors of a previous empire (Elliot 1968: 78-80), but thrones remained important symbols of power.

## Religious Authority

- The *cathedra* chair is representative of a bishop's political and religious power in their cathedrals (Little 1972: 11,136). Bishops are still members of the House of Lords today, remaining central to the political organisation of the UK.
- Maximian's *cathedra* had scenes of Joseph's life to display the ideal of clergy as state officials (Mussies 1979: 196-197), but other *cathedra* have symbols of the bishop's status as religious leader and representative of God (*fig.* 4).



Figure 4. Monumental bronze *cathedra petri*, symbolic of Papal authority as God's representative on Earth, acted as reliquary for a 9th century wooden throne inside attributed to St Peter (Cheam 1974: 69).

## Conclusion

- The use of thrones is based on contact and continuation across different groups and periods of time. Each society is not isolated, but instead share ideas and practices beyond contemporary political borders.
- Apart from those still used as *cathedra*, most historic thrones are confined to museums rather than remaining in royal use. A modern form of throne does exist, like that of the US President in the Oval Office to sign bills into law.
- Thrones continue to be symbols of power because rulers can use them to publically display their power, often physically raised above commoners on a stage, but are also still used as practical tools in the creation and exercise of power.

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