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 the 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.

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.

Heirloom Objects

- Royal succession is based on the descendence from a royal ancestor, by inheriting the objects used to express that power (Lillos 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).

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.

Select Bibliography


Acknowledgements

This project was supported by a Newcastle University Research Scholarship.