When you think of someone wearing a ribbon tied in their hair, what type of person comes to mind? A little girl with pigtails? A cheerleader with a ponytail? An ancient king with the symbol of his authority?

You probably didn't imagine the last one, but over two thousand years ago, some kings wore a special ribbon, a diadem, as a symbol of their royal power. The diadem has a deep cultural history, and the Bible uses the image of the diadem to illustrate Christ's authority as king.

Early Diadems

The word *diadem* comes from a Greek verb meaning "to bind around," aptly describing the way a cloth band or fillet would be wrapped around the head. Traditionally the diadem was tied in the back with a reef (square) knot, and the long ends were left hanging down, sometimes even to the wearer's shoulders.

Exactly which ancient culture introduced the diadem remains unclear, but by the late ninth century BC, the Neo-Assyrian kings were wearing a ribbon around the base of their turbans, a practice adopted by the subsequent Persian kings. And while the Neo-Assyrian rulers were certainly powerful, the Persian kings were even more so.

In the fifth century BC, the Persian Empire was a superpower, governing an estimated 44 percent of the world's population. At the heart of this massive empire was the *Shāhanshāh*, the "king of kings," whose right to rule was believed to have had divine origins. The Persians certainly weren't the first culture to hold to the concept of divine kingship, but later Persians depicted this investiture of power by carving stone reliefs in which rulers receive the diadem directly from Ahura Mazda, the supreme being in their religion.

Equating the diadem to the power of the "king of kings" was practiced across the ancient world. In fact, the world's oldest surviving drama, *The Persians*, uses the phrase "wore the regal diadem" to express assuming rulership of the Persian Empire. And for the next 140 years, wearing the ribbon continued to symbolize a Persian king's god-given authority—until the diadem was borrowed and adapted by the king with whom it would be associated for centuries.

Alexander's Diadem

By the time Alexander the Great reached his mid-twenties, he had created an empire stretching from his home in Macedonia through Asia Minor and the Levant to absorb parts of the former Persian Empire. Alexander was fond of integrating native customs with his original policies, so when he defeated the Persian king and took the title "king of kings," he also took to wearing the diadem.

Before him, the diadem had represented the office of the king but never the man himself. Over the

years Alexander wore it, the ribbon became less associated with Persian power and more associated with his personal power and success. But the inference of divine kingship remained, fueled by Alexander's claim to be the son of Zeus. From Alexander's time forward, the diadem was recognized as his personal hallmark and was closely identified with his unquestionable authority as king.

When Alexander died unexpectedly, he left no clear successor. Generals, bodyguards, and relatives grappled for power, each claiming a personal connection to Alexander. Unsurprisingly, four of the successors donned diadems. Just as Alexander had worn the diadem when he'd "inherited" the Persian Empire, his successors now wore diadems in an attempt to "inherit" his empire. Ultimately, the empire broke apart into smaller kingdoms, and over the next two centuries, the kingdoms in the Mediterranean were absorbed into the ever-expanding Roman Republic.

Roman Diadems

As the Roman Republic gained control of Greek territories, its people embraced many aspects of Greek culture, but the diadem was not welcome in the political sphere. A gem-studded diadem could be worn as a fashion accessory by wealthy women, but as a symbol of power, the plain white ribbon was despised. Romans in the republic had long rejected the idea of kingship, which they equated with tyranny and oppression, and the diadem's particular connection to divine kingship was extremely distasteful to them.

When Rome began the transition from a republic to an empire, Julius Caesar led the way. Caesar admired Alexander the Great, but when a supporter offered him a diadem, the distinctive symbol of a king, the populace strongly disapproved. Although Caesar declined, many suspected he'd arranged it and had refused only because of the people's adverse reaction. This event is often seen as having triggered Caesar's assassination one month later by supporters of the republic, and in the years following, the conspirators minted coins that show the goddess of victory trampling a scepter and ripping a diadem apart.

Having learned from Caesar's fate, the emperors of the early Roman Empire avoided the diadem entirely. They maintained the illusion that Rome was still a republic by masking autocratic power behind multiple political offices, using the title First Citizen, and dressing as an ordinary senator. For three hundred years, the Roman emperors dared not wear the diadem, despite having almost absolute power over an empire that encircled the Mediterranean Sea and stretched from Britain to Iraq.

There were some rulers who considered it, and even a few who tried, only to receive scathing criticism and serious consequences. The emperor Caligula wanted to wear a diadem

until he learned that doing so might cost his life, and about thirty years later Vespasian's son Titus, then a general, unintentionally started rumors of revolt by wearing a diadem. Even though there had been a legitimate religious reason for wearing the diadem, Titus's immediate departure to set the record straight in Rome shows the serious implications it had. Over 150 years later, the teenage emperor Elagabalus was said to have worn a jeweled diadem at home, though this is often attributed to his penchant for dressing in women's clothes. Either way, he reigned only a few years before his exasperated bodyguards killed him.

In fact, it wasn't until 284 AD that the diadem was tolerated as part of the emperor's official regalia. By this time, the republican façade had shattered, and constitutional reforms had openly shifted total power from the senate to the emperor. Now accountable to no one, co-emperors Diocletian and Maximian assumed diadems and lavish robes to match their imperial lifestyles. For a brief period, the empire was split among four rulers but was again united under Constantine the Great in the early fourth century. As the man who had consolidated the empire under a sole ruler, Constantine emulated Alexander in his portraits and, unsurprisingly, wore a diadem. Succeeding emperors would also wear the diadem, and as jewels were added and a ribbon could no longer support the weight, diadems were fashioned out of gold, slowly becoming what we think of as a Western crown.

Christ's Diadem

In describing Christ's second coming, the apostle John uses the image of the diadem (Revelation 19:12). This particular use of the word *diadem* is significant in light of the diadem's history. When Christ appears at Armageddon, He is not wearing a priestly turban, an athletic crown, or even a military crown—each of which would have been distinctly recognizable to John.

Instead, John identifies Jesus' crown as a diadem, the symbol of unquestioned royal power. It's a crown that isn't earned or awarded: it's worn because of the inherent sovereignty of the Wearer. Christ will return as king, coming to claim that which is rightfully His. Anything less than a diadem would imply that Armageddon is a battle either side can win, rather than a display of Christ's uncontested power.

What no emperor could wear, He can wear. The absolute authority no one person can have, He has. The divine kingship many claimed, He manifests. The diadem is the crown of a sovereign king, and its symbolism echoes the name written on His robe and thigh: King of Kings and Lord of Lords. ■

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