

THE HUNGARIAN HOLY CROWN IN BURNE-JONES'S AVALON

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Avalon, originally a Celtic paradise (Coghlan 51), has long been regarded as the ultimate place of peace, profusion, and beauty. It is described as “Avallo,” the “Fortunate island,” by Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Vita Merlini* 903); as the “Vale of Auylyon,” the magic place of Arthur’s healing of his “greuous wounde” by Thomas Malory (591), and as “the island-valley of Avilion,” a land “Deep-meadow’d happy, fair with orchard-lawns / And towery hollows crown’d with summer sea” by Alfred Tennyson (“Morte d’Arthur” 259-63). For Edward Burne-Jones, Avalon assumed a profound spiritual significance: it was “a land ... more true than real,” a place “where [he had] striven to be with all [his] might” (*Memorials* 1:116; 2:169). Accordingly, in *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (1881-98), his most ambitious treatment of the theme, he depicts a timeless, heavenly realm, a visionary world in complete segregation and alienation from ordinary reality. What strikes the Hungarian viewer most, however, is the meticulous copy of the Hungarian Holy Crown – also known as the Crown of St. Stephen – placed almost in the centre, at the feet of Morgan le Fay, below the head of the sleeping king. Its presence seems idiosyncratic, yet a closer study offers possible explanations that suggest a latent relationship between the temporary rest of the legendary King Arthur of Britain and the Hungarian Holy Crown, the symbol of Hungarian national identity.

Burne-Jones regarded the mere imitation of the visible world as science and not art,¹ and his recoil from realism is manifest in his conscious effort to sustain a vision that is imaginary, even when it looks real:

One of the hardest things in the world is to determine how much realism is allowable in any particular picture.... For instance, I want a shield or a crown or a pair of wings or what not, to look real. Well, I make what I want, or a model of it, and then make studies from that. So that what eventually gets on to the canvas is a reflection of a reflection of something purely imaginary. (*Memorials* 2:261)