The Nun’s Crown

Julie Hotchin

The nun’s crown, a white linen circlet with overlapping bands forming a cross worn over her veil, formed part of the dress of monastic women in northern Germany [figure 1]. Each woman received her crown in a ceremony of consecration, or coronation, in which her virginity was dedicated to Christ. This distinctive headdress symbolized—more so than the veil and ring—her privileged status as a Bride of Christ.

The crown has a long tradition in Christian iconography as a symbol of the rewards due to the faithful in heaven. This held special meaning for religious women, for whom the crown they received in this world presaged the celestial reward granted to virgin brides of Christ in the next. The nuns at Rupertsberg under Hildegard of Bingen’s leadership wore long, white, silk veils and golden crowns adorned with crosses on both sides and the back, with a figure of the Lamb on the front. Hildegard was forced to defend this practice against criticism, arguing that the white garments symbolized her nuns’ betrothal to Christ, while the image of the Lamb signified that they followed him wherever he goes, likening her nuns at Rupertsberg to the virgins called to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Gertrude the Great composed a lyrical meditation on a nun’s coronation as the spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ in her Spiritual Exercises, and Birgitta of Sweden incorporated the linen crown into the distinctive habit worn by nuns of her order, adding five dots of red cloth sewn onto the linen bands where they joined to represent the outward signs of Christ’s Passion. Similarly, in northern Germany, red crosses embroidered onto the linen crown were, in the words of one young nun from Ebstorf, “worn as a sign of Christ’s wounds upon our heads, so that we always remember our
Figure 1. Guidonische Hand image, Hs V3, fol. 200v from Ebstorf. Reproduced by permission of Lüneburger Klosterarchive, Kloster Wienhausen.
spouse as in the Canticle, where he says, *You have wounded my heart, my sister, my bride* [Cant. 4,9], namely through love. This ornamentation on the crown also carried associations with the crown of thorns, strengthening the symbolic identification of the wearer with Christ’s suffering at the passion. Nuns also likened their crowns to “the *aureola* which [Christ] is accustomed to give to martyrs and virgins.” By the later Middle Ages the *aureola* was understood as a reward reserved to special categories of the blessed, and the nuns at Ebstorf saw themselves as meriting reward both for their virginity and for martyrdom through their penitential sufferings within the cloister in imitation of Christ.

Coronation conferred a privileged status upon the nun through her mystical marriage to Christ. The rite of coronation, dating back to the fourth century, was performed by a bishop as Christ’s representative. The ceremony was incorporated into a solemn mass and was to be performed on a Sunday or high feast day. The ceremony had three main elements: the entrance procession, the blessing of the veil (signifying contempt of the world), the crown (signifying virginity), and the ring (signifying fidelity to Christ), and the solemn prayers offered by the bishop before these insignia were placed on the coronands. The language of the ceremony draws heavily from the legend of St. Agnes, a third-century virgin martyr, to enhance dramatic effect and the nuns’ identification as the virgin bride of Christ. In the rite as it was performed at the Benedictine convent of Lüne in the late fifteenth century, the nuns encapsulated the significance of the ceremony by chanting an antiphon from the liturgy of Agnes after the bishop placed the crown upon their heads: “I am betrothed to him whom the angels serve, whose beauty the sun and moon admire.”

The significance of coronation for the spiritual identity of monastic women also emerges in contests between nuns and church officials about the timing of the ceremony. The process through which a girl became a nun involved at least three separate ceremonies: reception as a postulant, investiture as a novice, and her profession. Coronation, in contrast, was understood as a particular honor and thus could be celebrated at different times, unlike monastic entrance rites. Canon law held that a woman should not be crowned until after she had made her solemn vow of profession, and that she was to be at least twenty-five years of age. In the later Middle
 Ages monastic visitors regularly reproved nuns for flouting this law by continuing to permit nuns to be crowned before they were professed. For example, in the final decades of the fifteenth century, the profession of several girls at Ebstorf was brought forward to an earlier date so that their coronation could be celebrated on the designated day in compliance with the requirements of canon law. From the monastic perspective, the vow of profession was the constitutive element of religious life, but for the women, their coronation in a ceremony replete with bridal imagery granted them a distinction of greater import for their religious self-understanding.

The crown’s associations with virginity had secular parallels. Secular brides also wore floral wreaths over unbound hair on their wedding day. During the wedding festivities the bride presented the groom with her wreath as a symbol of her virginity and in recognition of his future claims over her sexuality. Similar practices were performed in northern German convents. Girls entering the Cistercian convent of Holy Cross in Rostock offered crowns of finely wrought gold filigree to the Virgin. During the rite of investiture as it was performed at Lüne in the late fifteenth century, the postulant wore a plain linen band crown to signify her spiritual betrothal. During the ceremony she removed this and placed it at the feet of a statue of the convent’s patron, St. Bartholomew, mirroring her secular counterpart in presenting her virginity to the representative of her intended spouse. The crown was retained by the prioress, who arranged for the red crosses to be embroidered on it before the bishop returned it to her at her coronation.

This link between the wreath and virginity is also evident in punishments meted out to women. By the sixteenth century, women who were known to have slept with their husbands before marriage were required to wear a mock wreath of straw or a wreath open at the back in a public exhibition of their “shame.” The headdress of monastic women similarly represented a means to display punishment inflicted upon them for “disobedience.” For example, Bishop Gebhard of Halberstadt lost patience with the continued refusal of the nuns of Helfta to comply with his directions to observe regular life, and in 1468 he withdrew their privilege to wear their crowns.

Because the crown worn atop the veil was a visible sign of the virgin’s
privileged spiritual status, it also served to reinforce distinctions between the various categories of women within the cloister. Nuns in these convents were drawn from privileged social rank, from the urban patriciate and the regional nobility. Choir nuns, who were also consecrated virgins, were thus set apart from lay sisters and other women in the community. Dress was one of the few means available to nuns to delineate social distinctions within the cloister. Later medieval monastic reformers, who sought to impose a return to strict observance of the rule upon professed religious, encountered forceful opposition from nuns who did not want to lose their time-honored practices. In Saxony all convents succeeded in preserving the right to wear their crowns, the sole item of dress not specified in minute detail in the various orders’ statutes. Retaining their crowns as a visible indicator of their status enabled these women to preserve a central aspect of their self-perception as religious.

The fundamental importance of dress as a marker of status was apparent in the struggle to impose Lutheran reforms upon Saxon convents in the mid-sixteenth century. The removal of the nuns’ crown was at the top of the list for the visitors commissioned by the Duke of Brunswick to introduce the new faith to the nuns of the duchy. To the evangelical visitors, these objects were akin to the work of Satan, and the women who refused to lay them aside were likened to the devil. It is not surprising, then, to find that during the brief period of re-Catholicization beginning in 1547, the nun-chronicler at Heiningen records the event with the remark that “we put on our crowns again [. . .] that our unworthy lords had forbidden us to wear.” This means of expressing her status as Christ’s bride was so significant that she used it to signal events and shifts in time. It represented an enduring means for this woman and her sisters to articulate their sense of self in relation to their spiritual purpose and the world around them.

Notes

1. Cistercian nuns wearing the crown are depicted in the richly illuminated gradual copied and painted by the nun Gisela of the convent at Rulle, c.1300, now Osnabrück, Bistumsarchiv. This manuscript is the subject of a recent study by Judith Oliver, *Singing with Angels: Liturgy, Music and Art in the Gradual of Gisela von Kersenbroeck* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007). Anonymous female artists in the Cistercian convent at Medingen (near
Lüneburg) also represented their community wearing crowns in the borders of their liturgical manuscripts, for example in the early sixteenth-century collection of prayers for Easter, now Hannover, Ms 174, fol. 114 (www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de/hs/katalogseiten/HSK0235_a067_JPG.htm).


4. Uller Sander Olsen, “The Habit of the Order of St Birgitta of Sweden,” Birgittiana 9 (2000): 22. The red dots symbolized the cross, crown of thorns, and the five wounds. Birgitta herself is not usually depicted wearing this crown, but in the white veil of a widow, because she was not a member of the order she founded. The crown is described in the rule for her monastic order; Sancta Birgitta, Opera Minora I: Regula Salvatoris, ed. Sten Eklund (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksells, 1975), chap. 4, pp. 63–64.


6. Borchling, “Litterarisches Leben,” 400: “Ipse sponsus et amator virginum, qui in hunc statum dignatus est nos vocare, dignetur eciam perminimam eligere sub nomine sponsae fidem ad seruandum, quatusen post hanc uitam conspectui suo presentemur ac ab ipso introduciamur in celestem ciuitatem, ubi muri et platee sunt auree et porte ex mar-
garitis nitidis, ab ipsoque coronemur cum aureola que solet martiris dari ac virginibus” (That spouse and lover of virgins, who calls us to this status, deems it worthy to elect even the most insignificant [woman] in the name of faith as his wife to serve him, since after this life we will be presented to him and led by him into the heavenly city, where the walls and streets are gold and the gates shine with pearls, from whom we will be crowned with the aureola which he is accustomed to give to martyrs and virgins).


9. Lüne, Klosterarchiv, Hs. 14, fol. 39r: “Ipsi sum desponsata, cui angeli serviant, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur.” The text is from Ambrose of Milan’s Passio of St. Agnes and was sung on the vigil of the feast of Agnes (January 21); see Patrologiae Cursus Completa, Series Latina, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 17 (Paris, 1879), col. 813. The language of the ceremony refers to a torquis or corona, which in this context refers to a wreath or circlet worn upon the head. The practice of wearing linen crowns was unique to Germany. The consecration ritual as it was performed in England omitted reference to the crown, although it is possible that a floral wreath may have been worn. On the consecration as it was performed in England, see Anne Bagnall Yardley, “The Marriage of Heaven and Earth: A Late Medieval Source of the Consecratio virginum,” Current Musicology nos. 45–7 (1990): 305–23.

10. The rites for entering a convent in Germany are outlined by Schlothueber, Klostereintritt und Bildung, 104–296.

11. Schlothueber, Klostereintritt und Bildung, 159.


Honemann (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1–45, esp. 9 and plate 8.


17. Cornelia Oefelein, Das Nonnenkloster St. Jacobi und seine Tochterklöster im Bistum Halberstadt (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2004), 112. The nuns must have had this privilege reinstated, because in 1496 they were criticized in a visitation for permitting members of their convent to be crowned prior to profession; see p. 52.

18. Another means of distinction was language; the accomplished Latinity of the choir nuns in northern German convents in the fifteenth century was a further marker of status between groups within the monastic community. Schlotheuber discusses the Latin proficiency of these women in Klostereintritt und Bildung, 268–96.

19. Hildesheim, Cathedral Library, Ms 546d, fol. 20r.