

Maidens' Garlands: Funerary Crowns and Wreaths across Europe and Beyond



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across Europe and Beyond

Edited by Rosie Morris

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables.....	ii
Acknowledgments	vii
Foreword.....	ix
Introduction	xi
Chapter 1. ‘Pride of the Village’: The Special Funeral Custom of Maidens’ Crowns and Garlands in England, Wales and Ireland.....	1
Rosie Morris	
Chapter 2. Funerary and Votive Crowns and Floral Bouquets Recovered in the Course of the Archaeological Investigation of the St Theodore Church Site in Pula (Croatia)....	46
Tatjana Bradara	
Chapter 3. ‘Monuments of Love’: Totenkronen (‘Death Crowns’) in Germany – With a Look at Their Wider Distribution in Europe and Worldwide	67
Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck	
Chapter 4. Maidens’ Garlands in Germany: An Archaeological Approach.....	116
Juliane Lippok	
Chapter 5. Conservation of the Maiden’s Garland at St Michael’s Church, Theydon Mount, Essex.....	143
Jim Spriggs and Sarah Kingsley	
Chapter 6. Maidens’ Crowns and the Weight of Legacy: An Exploration of Crown Creators, Participants, Rites of Passage, Celebrity, and Superstition	162
Rosie Morris	
Index	193

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 1. ‘Pride of the Village’: The Special Funeral Custom of Maidens’ Crowns and Garlands in England, Wales and Ireland

Figure 1: St John’s, Sherbourne, Hampshire. Margarete, the sister of Raulin Brocas c. 1360 (Haines 1861: cxxxiv).....	7
Figure 2: St Cross, Holywell, Oxfordshire. Of the three angels depicted, the central one – and arguably the most important – shows Elizabeth receiving a laurel wreath with the words, ‘Receive thy crowne’ (permission granted from Balliol College, Oxford).....	9
Figure 3a–b: 18th-century Tombstone, St Peter’s Falstone, Northumbria (photos: Norman Hammond)	10
Figure 4: 17th-century woodcut depicting a Maiden’s night burial, including a crown (Thiselton-Dyer 1892: 102).....	13
Figure 5: Distribution of Maidens’ Crowns and garlands in Britain. (Map redrawn by author from ‘Map of Diocesan Geography before 1835’, in Best 1964: 468, 469).....	17
Figure 6: Drawing of earliest extant crown giving detail and measurements (drawing: Rosie Morris)	19
Figures 7 and 8: Illustrate the dome of the crown and the skills of the carpenter and blacksmith. The jointing of the wood and the metal hook to hang it by leave in no illusion as to its endurance. The flowers have been painted to ensure longevity too (photos: Rosie Morris)	20
Figure 9: Mary the Virgin, Abbotts Ann, Hampshire. Sewing paper rosette onto the frame (photo: Rosie Morris).....	20
Figure 10a: Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire. In both cases, ‘scrim’ was bound around the wooden frame. Close-up of the binding of the wooden frame with ‘scrim’ (photo: Rosie Morris).....	21
Figure 10b: Rosette construction made from early 18th century wallpaper. Found at Holy Trinity, Minsterley, the paper is thick not unlike emery paper. It is possible to witness ‘bubbling’ of the ‘Prussian Blue’, also known as ‘Berlin Blue’ that took place during manufacture. See Figs 30a and 30b (photo: Rosie Morris).....	21
Figures 11 and 12: Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire. Close-ups of the use of pins to secure floral decoration (photos: Rosie Morris).....	22
Figure 13: 1899 drawing of the Minsterley ‘Garland’ by Timms (coloured by author from eye-witness accounts).....	23
Figure 14: Holy Cross, Ilam, Staffordshire. Crown hanging right and circlet hanging left. The glove (length: 24 in) in the circlet is woven through the finished work; both are made entirely of paper (postcard c. 1910).....	24
Figures 15 and 16: St Giles, Matlock, Derbyshire, photographed in 1999 when the crowns were kept in a cupboard by the church door. Today only one crown has been conserved (see also Chapter 6, Figure 13) and displayed in the church (photos: Rosie Morris).....	25
Figure 17: Drawings of crowns found at old St Stephen, Fylingdales, Yorkshire depicting the design and colour of ribbons, and the section of the top of crown construction (drawing: Rosie Morris).....	26
Figure 18: St Stephens, Fylingdales, Yorkshire. (photo: Rosie Morris).....	27
Figure 19: St Mary, Walsham-le-Willows, Suffolk. In situ wooden ‘crant’ awarded to Mary Boyce 1685 (photo: Simon Knott).....	28
Figures 20 and 21: Close-ups of the carving of Mary Boyce’s ‘crant’, showcasing intricate <i>memento mori</i> symbols. i.e. the skull and bone alongside a depiction of love. Arrows guide the viewer to key details, highlighting the symbolism of the carving (photos: Simon Knott).....	28
Figures 22 and 23: St Mary the Virgin, Abbotts Ann, Hampshire. Views of the nave showing some of the crowns in situ (photos: Rosie Morris).....	29

Figure 24: Postcard of the Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire (first published by Francis Frith c. 1911, author's collection).....	30
Figures 25 and 26: Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire. Above: opened rosette displaying design (photos: G.Storey, Britton & Storey).....	31
Figures 27–29: Wallpaper designs. Design of domino paper: Hilary Jenkinson (1925) (drawings and photos: Rosie Morris).....	32
Figures 30 and 31a–b: Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire. Some of the decorative elements used (photos: Rosie Morris).....	33
Figures 32 and 33: Each crown is unique in its use of the same decorative elements (photos: Rosie Morris).....	34
Figure 34: Attachment of the gloves to the crown. Also shows the crown's frame covering to allow for sewing the gloves in place (photo: Rosie Morris).....	35
Figure 35: The funeral of Miss Wisewell in 1952 The crown bearers wear long white gloves to signify the crown is untouched (photo Jack Garnham kindly donated by Elizabeth Day nee Penny).....	36
Figure 36a–b: Astley Abbots, Shropshire. The replacement crown of 1862 in situ (photos: 36a Neville Hoskins, 36b: Rosie Morris).....	37
Figure 37: Drawing and measurements of renewed crown at Astley Abbots, Shropshire (drawing: Rosie Morris).....	38
Figure 38: Holy Cross, Ilam, Staffordshire. Paper glove (length: 24 in) interwoven into the paper circlet (photo: Gereth Spriggs).....	39
Figure 39: Illustration from Washington Irving's sketch book depicting the importance of the gloves within the overall symbolic design. The wreath is hung above the pew where the recipient had sat. (Irving 1848: 422).....	39

Chapter 2. Funerary and Votive Crowns and Floral Bouquets Recovered in the Course of the Archaeological Investigation of the St Theodore Church Site in Pula (Croatia)

Figure 1: Aerial view of the St Theodore quarter during investigative work, with the position of the church (photo: AMI Documentation Department).....	47
Figure 2: Fragments of a funerary crown and/or a floral bouquet; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	50
Figure 3: Fragments of a funerary crown and/or a floral bouquet; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	50
Figure 4: Hoop of thin wire (copper alloy); Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	51
Figure 5: Conceptual reconstruction of a crown (after Scheidemantel 2017: 320, Taf. 4:8, 2, based on finds recovered from the tombs of the St Theodore church in Pula) (drawing: Vjekoslava Sošić Žuža).....	51
Figure 6: Various crown parts made of paper, metal, gilding; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	52
Figure 7: Wires of round and flat section; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	53
Figure 8: Decorations made with wire of round section; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	54
Figure 9: A flower bud decoration made with fabric and a mesh of fine gilt threads; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	54
Figure 10: Various floral forms and decorations; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	54
Figure 11: Spiral motifs; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	55
Figure 12: Cut beads and beads in series; Tomb 1 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	56
Figure 13: Cut beads and beads in series; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	57
Figure 14: Glass tubes wound with glass thread; Tomb 3 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	58
Figure 15: Three-sided glass forms; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	59
Figure 16: Glass pieces fixed with leonic wire; Tomb 1 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	59
Figure 17: Elements of wire and spun fabric thread; Tomb 2 (photo: Tanja Draškić Savić).....	60

Chapter 3. ‘Monuments of Love’: Totenkronen (‘Death Crowns’) in Germany – With a Look at Their Wider Distribution in Europe and Worldwide

Figure 1:	Finsterwalde, parish church of St. Trinity: Gravestone of Magdalena von Diskau who died in 1555 (photo: Hans Ludwig)	70
Figure 2:	Brandenburg, cathedral: Gravestone of Dorothea von der Schulenburg who died in 1629 at the age of one (photo: Hans Ludwig)	70
Figure 3:	Bad Freienwalde, parish church of St. Nikolai: Coffin portrait of Caspar von Uchtenhagen who died at the age of nine in 1603 (photo: Hans Ludwig)	72
Figure 4:	Ferch, village church: Crown boards with Totenkronen on the gallery (drawing 1906)	75
Figure 5:	Menkin, village church: Crown boards from 1795 and 1798 (photo: Hans Ludwig)	75
Figure 6:	Menkin, village church: Walls and galleries are decorated with Totenkronen on console boards (photo around 1929)	76
Figure 7:	Rathebur, village church: Epitaph of the pastor’s daughter Anna Elisabet Reimar who died in 1711 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	78
Figure 8:	Langen, village church: Four Totenkronen recovered from the rubble (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	79
Figure 9:	Wokuhl, parish archive: Collection of Crown boards and Totenkronen from the village church (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	80
Figure 10:	Wokuhl, parish archive: Board with pillow and crown for a girl from the Wokuhl village church who died at eleven months in 1796 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	81
Figure 11:	Wokuhl, parish archive: Totenkronen from the Wokuhl village church (photo: Holger Vonderlind)	82
Figure 12:	Kühndorf, cemetery chapel: Crown boxes and Crown boards on the gallery (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	83
Figure 13:	Bernau, parish church of St. Marien: Restored crown box from 1827 for a young man who died unmarried (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	84
Figure 14:	Luckau, parish church of St. Nikolai: Crown box for Caroline E. Jenichen, who died in 1774 (photo: Hans Ludwig)	85
Figure 15:	Luckau, parish church of St. Nikolai: Totenkronen for Caroline E. Jenichen from 1774 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	86
Figure 16:	Luckau, Niederlausitz Museum: Totenkronen from the parish church of St. Nikolai (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	87
Figure 17:	Luckau, Niederlausitz Museum: Crown box for a girl from the parish church of St. Nikolai who died in 1833 at 23 weeks (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	87
Figure 18:	Hinterhermsdorf, village church: Crown box for a bachelor and a boy who died in 1748 and 1800 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	88
Figure 19:	Kamenz, St. Just Church: Crown box with numerous Totenkronen for an eight-year-old boy who died in 1768 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	89
Figure 20:	Kamenz, Municipal Collections: Totenkronen from the Catechism Church (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	90
Figure 21:	Bechlin, village church: Wreath frame for a noble virgin who died in 1842 at the age of 18 (photo: Hans Ludwig)	92
Figure 22:	Kaakstedt, village church: Crown boards and wreath frames on the gallery (photo: Hans Ludwig)	93
Figure 23:	Friedland, parish archive: Wreath frames for female and male deceased who are unmarried (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	94
Figure 24:	Dambeck, village church: Wreath boxes with inscription boards from the 19th century (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	95
Figure 25:	Derwitz, village church: boxes with pillows after restoration in 2022 (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	96
Figure 26:	Ansbach, Markgrafenturm: Loan crowns for the upper class (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck)	98

Figure 27: Zahsow: Virgin laid out as a Wendish bride (photo: Serbski muzej – Sorbisches Museum Bautzen).....	100
Figure 28: Burg Kauper: Funeral procession for a virgin who died in 1931. The Totenkronen is carried forward on a cushion by a virgin (Foto Steffen, Burg).....	100
Figure 29: Horno, village church: Wreath frame for a husband who fell in the First World War (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck).....	101
Figure 30: Burg: Room memorial for a bachelor who died in the Second World War (photo: Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck).....	102
Figure 31: Austria: Coffin portrait of the virgin Anna Maria Landsberger who died in 1664 at the age of 20.....	104
Figure 32: Visby (Sweden): Drawing of a maiden with a crown from a medieval tombstone (Hamner 1940, p. 108, fig. 12).....	105
Figure 33: Skokloster (Sweden): Coffin portrait of the infant Hannibal Gustav Wrangel who died in 1643 (Hagberg 1937, p. 197).....	106
Figure 34: Strängnäs (Sweden): Corpse bride laid out (photo from 1876, Hagberg 1937, p. 197).....	107
Figure 35: Gamla-Drev (Sweden): Wreaths and crowns from children’s coffins in the church (photo: Ann-Hild Fischer 2011).....	107
Figure 36: Farewell (After a painting by Angelo Dall’Oca Bianca, 19th century).....	109

Chapter 4. Maidens’ Garlands in Germany: An Archaeological Approach

Figure 1: Map showing the locations of maidens’ garlands from archaeological investigations in Germany. One location may include more than one archaeological site e.g. several graveyards in one city. (Map: J. Lippok).....	118
Figure 2: Wreath made of plant materials, schematic drawing (drawing: A. Kegel).....	123
Figure 3: Diadem from St Mary’s Church, Neubrandenburg, Germany (drawing: A. Kegel).....	123
Figure 4: Bonnet from the Collegiate Church, Bützow, Germany (drawing: A. Kegel).....	124
Figure 5: Ornaments featuring river mussel pearls and gilded copper wire from the Pritzen Church, Germany (photo: BLDAM, E. Bönisch).....	130

Chapter 5. Conservation of the Maiden’s Garland at St Michael’s Church, Theydon Mount, Essex

Figure 1: The garland lowered for inspection in 1999 (photo: D. Andrews).....	144
Figure 2: Imagined reconstruction (drawn by S. Kingsley).....	144
Figure 3: Two monochrome patterns found joined together (photo: authors).....	145
Figure 4: Leaves and paper fragments attached to lower hoop (photo: authors).....	146
Figure 5: Paper bow (photo: authors).....	147
Figure 6: Paper tassel (photo: authors).....	147
Figure 7: Plan of garland elements, identified and labelled to aid reconstruction (S. Kingsley).....	149
Figure 8: Dust removal with vacuum tweezers (photo: authors).....	150
Figure 9: Partially cleaned (photo: authors).....	150
Figure 10: Chemical reaction of Parylene C during polymerisation (CC / Public Domain).....	151
Figure 11: Preliminary parylene tests on box leaves (photo: authors).....	154
Figure 12: SEM photomicrograph of untreated leaf tip (photo: Durham University).....	154
Figure 13: SEM photomicrograph of leaf tip coated with 15-micron layer of Parylene C (photo: Durham University).....	154
Figure 14: Garland segments being loaded into the parylene vacuum chamber (photo: Cooksons).....	155
Figure 15: Fitting garland elements to Perspex armature (photo: authors).....	157
Figure 16: Vertical lath fixed to armature (photo: authors).....	157
Figure 17: Garland conserved and mounted on Perspex armature (photo: authors).....	158
Figure 18: Garland in its display case in St Michael’s Church (photo: authors).....	159

Chapter 6. Maidens' Crowns and the Weight of Legacy: An Exploration of Crown Creators, Participants, Rites of Passage, Celebrity, and Superstition

Figure 1:	Elizabeth Day (née Penny) and Valerie Chivers wear long white gloves to suspend the crown over the head of the grave of Miss Wisewell in 1953 (photo: the late Jack Garnham, with the kind permission of Elizabeth Day).....	166
Figure 2:	From the left: the crowns of Lily Myra Annetts, Mary Jane Baker, and Lily's brother, William George, awarded 55 years earlier (photo: A.I. Spriggs).....	168
Figure 3:	Sylvia Meade and Ruth Keene Carry the crown awarded to Miss Lily Annetts in 1973 (with the kind permission of Sylvia Rubery, née Meade).....	169
Figure 4:	Measurements (inches) of virgin's crown in St Mary the Virgin, Abbots Ann, Hampshire (drawing: Rosie Morris).....	171
Figure 5:	St Mary the Virgin, Abbots Ann, Hampshire. View of the nave from the bell tower (photo: Rosie Morris).....	173
Figure 6:	Miss Myra Annetts's Crown being held by Ruth Keene and Sylvia Meade. St Mary the Virgin, Abbots Ann, Hampshire (a still taken from the 1973 film).	174
Figure 7:	Paper flower made by Jesse and Ethel Threadgill. St Mary the Virgin, Abbots Ann, Hampshire (photo: Rosie Morris).....	176
Figure 8:	Miss Price's crown, Holy Trinity, Ashford-in-the-Water, Derbyshire. The cardboard frame was made by the then vicar; the decoration of white ribbon/lilies of the valley made by the wife of the churchwarden. The crown is suspended over the pew Miss Price occupied (photo: Rosie Morris).....	177
Figure 9:	Interior of St Michael, Theydon Mount, Essex (1903). The photograph kept in the church clearly shows two crowns hanging from the roof. Only one survives today, which has been conserved (see Chapter 5) (photo: Ernest Freshwater).....	178
Figure 10a:	St Mary, Shrawardine, Shropshire. Dolly Newcombe's nameplate, found during lockdown 2020, conserved and kept in the church; 13.5" wide by 11.5" deep (photo: Rosie Morris)...	179
Figure 10b:	St Mary, Shrawardine, Shropshire. A Special Service was held welcoming Dolly Newcombe back to the church following conservation of her nameplate. Date of service 268th anniversary of her funeral on 29th August 2021 (photo: Rosie Morris).....	179
Figure 11:	All Saints, Trusley, Derbyshire (photo: Neville Hoskins).....	183
Figure 12:	<i>For of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven</i> by Frank Bramley (oil on canvas, 1891). Bramley was a student of the Newlyn School of Art, Cornwall. Now in the Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamāki, New Zealand (reproduced with permission).....	184
Figure 13:	'The Tolling Bell', in <i>Hymns and Pictures</i> . London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1861).....	185
Figures 14a, b, c:	St Giles, Matlock, Derbyshire. Top left: a) pre-conservation crown which went to Thomas Bateman Museum. b) Conserved crown on display in the church. c) One of the four crowns that remains in the attic of the church (drawing: Llewellyn Jewitt, 1860; photos: Rosie Morris).....	186
Figure 15:	Holy Trinity, Ashford-in-the-Water, Derbyshire. Conserved crowns hang from the roof of the nave and are identical in colouring and decoration (photo: Rosie Morris).....	187
Figure 16:	St Mary, Alne, Yorkshire (photo: Rosie Morris).....	187
Figures 17a–b:	Holy Trinity, Minsterley, Shropshire, pre- and post-conservation (photos: Rosie Morris).....	187
Figure 18:	St George and St Lawrence, Springthorpe, Lincolnshire (photo: A.I. Spriggs).....	188
Table 1:	Locations in England where examples of maidens' crowns can still be found.....	189

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To all I give a heartfelt thanks.

Rosie

November 2025

Foreword

A visit to a church with your Pevsner, or equivalent, in hand will tell you all you want to know about the founding and early construction, any famous saints involved, and the many changes to it which have happened during its turbulent history. You will also learn about the glories of its architecture, its carvings, painted glass windows and grand monuments to medieval knights and landed gentry, symbols of status, piety and benefaction.

But what you don't generally hear about in the guidebooks, or elsewhere, is much to do with the ordinary people, farm workers, artisans, professional folk and their families for whom their local church was a cherished centre of their community, which they cared about deeply, and which would represent a haven from the vicissitudes of life. Despite the effects of iconoclasm, famine and plague, 'ordinary folk' will leave their marks as graffiti and other vestiges of their continuing presence. In better times, even the simpler country churches without wealthy local benefactors would be kept simply and tastefully furnished and fitted out by local craftsmen, and always be decorated with flowers and greenery on high days and holidays, feasts and weddings. The maiden's crown, which this book is about, would have fitted so naturally into this environment as both a decorative element, yet one with a great depth of meaning to those who created it and to those who saw it whenever they came to church, as a perpetual reminder of a sad loss to their community.

One way of looking at maidens' crowns is as a type of folk art, the practical creative product of working people. Folk art has no connection with the highbrow art found in grand churches or in large houses, but finds its place more in farmhouses, cottages and inns, and rises naturally from the local vernacular traditions akin to the local dialect, folk music, food recipes, and other expressions of local particularity. From an academic or aesthetic point of view such simple decorated products of local craftsmanship might seem crude and naïve, but this is because they spring from a specific human need to express a plurality of meanings in the skilled use of symbolism. These signs and symbols which the maidens' crowns contain were widely understood, and stem from Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. Economical as artefacts, and perishable or discarded over time, they are nevertheless skilfully and attractively made and deeply meaningful to those who were part of that tradition. It is so important that this particular type of folk art is understood and valued, and the last few surviving examples cherished and conserved, preferably in situ – but not least as memorials to a specific, and often named, local young person.

Rosie Morris, editor and major contributor to this book, has made a life-long study of maidens' crowns and is a noted authority on the subject. She is to be congratulated

for bringing this mass of knowledge together, both from English sources and now – for the first time – by commissioning the chapters from her colleagues about parallel maidens’ crowning practices across Europe. For me, this is a fascinating, multi-dimensional topic which is suggestive of pan-European cultural links that deserve more research to be further unravelled and better understood.

Jim Spriggs DipCons, ACR, MCIFA, FIIC, FSA

Introduction

A study which began as an investigation of a local English custom has proven to have wider ramifications, both geographically and culturally. The early modern practice of awarding funeral ‘crowns’ to those who died in a state of virginity seemed initially to be concentrated only in a few rural communities of England. But further research has revealed parallel usages in Northern Europe, notably Germany, Flanders, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Estonia, Spain, and Croatia. This book will offer a broader view of the custom, focusing on its likely origins, religious imagery, dates, and forensic details, and also conservation of an English crown that represents the only extant example of one originally covered with the evergreen ‘box’ (*Buxus sempervirens*).

The authors have contributed a new breadth of understanding to this once widespread funeral custom, of which very little had been previously documented, either in academia or the public arena. Greater importance should be attached to raising awareness in the all-but-forgotten customs and rituals observed by our forebears since their legacy shapes our attitudes to death and memorial today. We therefore make no apologies for documenting a tradition amongst ‘humble people’: the virgin, whether female or male, who, at their death were ritually honoured by their community. Perhaps at last this new knowledge will generate interest in and understanding of a commonplace little-known funerary custom offering comfort and solace to the mourners.

The rituals that surround death and burial eased the soul’s passage to the next world and prevented its return. Fear has surrounded death, and often this has been channelled into elaborate rituals designed to help and protect not only the living but also the newly departed. Family and friends always tried to make the passage of a dying person easier and aid the soul along the difficult road to the next world, and to lay their body to rest with respect and honour.

The commissioning and fabrication of maidens’ crowns for funeral ceremonies could be for girls and women, but occasionally also boys and men as well. This adornment took the form of regal headgear representing the Crown of Glory. There are obvious Christian iconographical references here: the coronation of Mary the Virgin by Christ represents a triumph and a comfort in which all the family mourners can share. But, instead of the rich headgear depicted on Mary’s head in mosaic and oil paint, we find crown shapes in wood or wire overlaid with artificial flowers as well as pearls and even mirrors. Customs like this evolve – early crowns would not have had the same appearance seen in more recent times.

No doubt the forerunner of the crown is the chaplet or circlet of flowers, found in early folklore costume and ritual. But in the Protestant Reformation an evolution took place leading to the more elaborate types. Over some five hundred years these crowns acted as an outward expression of grief and a token of love and respect. They were awarded to an individual who had lived a good, Christian life and was a regular part of their local church community. They were hung in the parish church to embody a deep affinity to the idea of a 'decent' burial. Catholic in their symbolism, maidens' crowns have formed part of post-reformation burial ceremonies up to as recently as 1995. Yet in Germany they were awarded by both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, particularly during the 19th century; also found in towns and cities and rural locations; for females, and occasionally males and children.

The design and fabrication of crowns came to overlap with the ancient tradition of floral tribute. The oldest example of grave flowers dates to nearly 14,000 years ago (Ghose 2013). Since time immemorial, there has been a world-wide practice of placing flowers on the graves of a loved one. In Mexico, 'The Day of The Dead' (*Día de Muertos*) is celebrated each year over three days (31 October - 2nd November). During the 16th century, the date was moved from the beginning of summer to the Western ritual of All Hallows Day, All Souls' Day, 31 October. In Transylvania, a 'Wedding of the Dead' is an important ritual performed in the small hamlets of Maramures (Gail Kligman). The death of a virgin, especially of a young woman, has long been honoured with floral decoration, and evidence of this has been found in pre-Christian archaeology. The use of fresh flowers as an outward expression of grief and love continues the funerary symbolism. Flowers fade and represent the transience of life, as many quotes from the Bible remind us. By the 17th century, the need to make floral tributes permanent became imperative. Materials used included wood and dried leaves, waxed and coloured papers, fine wire and glass beads, dyed horn, ribbon, or a selection of these dependant on their country of origin.

The Visitation of the Sick, written c. 1380, may be considered to be Northern Europe's first vernacular guide to the deathbed (Appleford 2015). To the medieval mind, death rituals were rooted in the belief in heaven, hell, and purgatory. Funerals were embedded in the rhythms of church life; concerted moral teachings sought to persuade the laity of the transience of earthly pleasures and goods, and the need to seek eternal salvation at all costs (Duffy 2005). Until well into the 18th century, most of those involved with the custom, both in the construction, and as recipients, of a virgin's crown, would have been illiterate. Written or printed information would not have been helpful or understood; most education would have been church-led through formal sermons or simple instruction by word-of-mouth. An aspect of the ritual – more developed, perhaps, in Germany – is the symbolism of the 'compensatory' wedding. Many mourners would have derived comfort from imagining the deceased girl having the wedding she had been denied.

The *Pearl* is a poem written in Middle English in the late 14th century, contemporaneously with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It has been suggested that the poet was John Massey, who lived in the north-west Midlands region, possibly from Cotton, Cheshire (Peterson 1974: 257–266). *Pearl* is thematically linked to the biblical parable of the 'Pearl of Great Price', found in Mathew 13: 44–46, and illustrates the revelation and inestimable value of the Kingdom of Heaven. The poem explores themes of youthful death, the transience of life, and purity. We note that Queen Elizabeth I is depicted adorned with pearls in many portraits, drawing upon their symbolism to portray her virginity and purity. The *Pearl* poet used the allegory to account for the loss of a young child – an experience that still seems impossible to describe. The dead infant daughter appears to him in a dream as a crowned virgin in heaven, a member of the train of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by suggestion one of the 144,000 virgins in the *Book of Revelation* (Chapters 7 and 14). Central to the poem is a play on the word 'Marguerite'/'Margaret', as a synonym both for daisy and a pearl (it is possible that the little girl was herself called Margaret). During the course of the poem the child is transformed from a daisy (transient, like all flowers) into a pearl (an eternal jewel). This resonates with the flowers and jewels that form part of the 'crants' and funerary deposits discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Among English commentators who have been aware of the custom, only a minority realised that Continental parallels existed. This present book brings together scholars in the field of history, archaeology, and conservation to provide the first ever European comparative study of the custom. Funerary crowning of deceased virgins, a ritual deeply rooted in European cultural and religious history, finds its first comparative study in this book, which gathers insights from authorities in history, archaeology, and conservation.

An overview of the practice in Britain is provided by myself, where the provision of 'garlands' evolved into a significant Anglican funeral rite from the late Middle Ages through the post-Reformation period. Funeral crowns, crafted by local artisans, were mitre-shaped wooden frames adorned with greenery, flowers, textiles, and other decorative elements, usually reflecting a localised (or parochial) tradition, the 'knowledge' of which was often passed down through families. Although records of these customs are scarce, the tangible evidence underscores their role as celebrations of innocence and virtue within rural British communities.

Sylvia Müller-Pfeifruck offers a broader European context, examining the *Totenkronen* tradition, symbolising a spiritual marriage with Christ, which was practised across Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and beyond. Her research connects the origins of the custom to the late Middle Ages and its evolution into a widespread phenomenon by the early modern period. Illustrated by typologies of memorials, her work highlights the custom's resonance within religious and social networks.

Similarly, Juliane Lippok's archaeological investigations in Germany document 1,039 maidens' garlands from 163 sites, providing new perspectives on burial practices and their socio-religious implications.

The contribution from Tatjana Bradara further extends the exploration to Croatia, where funerary crowns and bouquets from Benedictine tombs in Pula reveal a mix of local and Germanic influences, dating from the 16th to the 18th centuries. These artefacts, often granted to individuals who led exemplary lives, align closely with findings elsewhere in Europe, underscoring a shared heritage.

Jim Spriggs and Sarah Kingsley, archaeological conservators, emphasise the cultural and material significance of these artefacts. Their work on analysing, recording, and preserving a maiden's garland from St. Michael's Church, Theydon Mount, Essex, underscores the importance of preserving these rare survivals of often ephemeral materials, sometimes requiring innovative conservation techniques.

Lastly, I examine examples of virgins' crowns in Britain, awarded across centuries. My ethnographic lens reveals their roles as symbols of community memory, ritual, and identity, blending the sacred and the social.

These varied perspectives illuminate the rich tapestry of a tradition that bridges historical, cultural, and spiritual realms.

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