

# THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE ABBESSES OF ST. GEORGE'S CONVENT IN THE MEDIEVAL CORONATIONS OF QUEENS OF BOHEMIA

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Coronations of the queens of Bohemia had a distinctive feature that had no parallel elsewhere in Europe: they were regularly attended by an abbess who played an active role in the ceremony as prescribed by the local coronation ordo.<sup>1</sup> The abbess was the superior of the Benedictine convent of St. George, which, founded around 970, was the oldest monastic institution in Bohemia and was situated adjacent to the coronation cathedral of St. Vitus within Prague Castle. The coronation was undoubtedly the most spectacular event in which St. George's Abbey could publicly present itself through the participation of its representatives. Traditionally, the abbess attended the coronation service together with the prioress and another older nun.<sup>2</sup> Such participation, however, was limited only to the coronations of royal consorts and did not extend to the coronations of kings or reigning queens.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of this practice are not very clear. According to the Czech baroque historian Jan Florian Hammerschmidt (1652–1735),<sup>4</sup> Emperor Charles IV (r. 1346–1378) granted the abbesses of St. George's Convent the privilege of crowning the queens of Bohemia and also bestowed them with the right to use a princely title and wear a princely crown (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> This unverified information circulated in the literature for centuries,<sup>6</sup> before it was recently

1 Josef CIBULKA, *Český řád korunovační a jeho původ*, Prague 1934, pp. 148–149.

2 The presence of the two other nuns is attested by sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; see Karel PACOVSKÝ, *Úloha svatojiřských abatyší při korunovacích českých královen*, *Folia Historica Bohemica* 32/1–2 (2017), pp. 151–178, at pp. 159, 165.

3 The only reigning queen of Bohemia was Maria Theresia of Austria (1740–1780), who was crowned as a ruling 'king' (*rex*) in 1743 without any assistance from the abbess of St. George; see Jaroslav PROKEŠ, *Marie Terezie a přípravy k české korunovaci roku 1742*, in: *Sborník prací věnovaných prof. Dru Gustavu Friedrichovi k šedesátým narozeninám*, ed. by Václav VOJTIŠEK, Prague 1931, pp. 331–350, at p. 349.

4 See Jiří MIKULEC–Karel PACOVSKÝ, *Art. Hammerschmidt, Joannes Florianus*, in: *Historiam scribere. Řádová historiografie raného novověku II. Biografický slovník*, ed. by Kateřina BOBKOVÁ-VALENTOVÁ–Jarmila KAŠPÁRKOVÁ, Prague–Olomouc, pp. 319–322.

5 Joannes F. HAMMERSCHMIDT, *Historia, in qua primaeva fundatio et institutio regiorum ac antiquissimorum monasteriorum S. Georgii in castro Pragensi, S. Spiritus vulgo ad Misericordias Dei in Antiqua Urbe Pragensi ordinis S. P. Benedicti Sancti-Monialium, cum omnibus tam pontificiis, quam caesareo-regiis et ducalibus privilegiis, exemptionibus, immunitatibus, concessionibus per distinctos paragraphos recensentur*, Prague 1715, pp. 51, 95; *Idem.*, *Prodromus gloriae Pragense*, Prague 1723, pp. 384, 387.

6 For example, František EKERT, *Posvátná místa královského hlavního města Prahy. Dějiny a popsání chrámů, posvátných soch, klášterů i jiných pomníků katolické víry a nábožnosti v hlavním městě království Českého I*, Prague 1883, pp. 81–82; Gia TOUSSAINT, *Das Passional der Kunigunde von Böhmen. Bildrhetorik und Spiritualität*, Paderborn 2003, p. 90.



Fig. 1

The Crown of the Abbesses of St. George, commissioned in 1553 by Abbess Ludmila of Blíživa, was worn by the abbesses during the royal coronations. It was often connected with the princely title of the abbesses which was allegedly conferred on them by Emperor Charles IV, although the earliest records of such title date to the mid-fifteenth century.

August 1456 to Abbess Elizabeth of Březnice (d. 1461),<sup>9</sup> a reference can be found in *Historia Bohemica*, written by Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–1464), later Pope Pius II.<sup>10</sup> Although the title became common by the sixteenth century, it still raised questions in the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The origin of this title for the abbess, which probably emerged after the Hussite wars, has yet to be clarified.

The first explicit mention of the abbess participating in a queen's coronation can be found in the coronation ordo of Charles IV from the mid-fourteenth century. Readers of Hammerschmidt's *Historia* of St. George's Abbey may find it surprising that, according to this medieval source, the abbess was not to crown the queen, but only to accompany her (Fig. 2).

7 PACOVSKÝ, Úloha (2017), pp. 152, 156. However, he was likely inspired by an enigmatic reference to the convent's privileges written by Jesuit historian Bohuslav Balbín; see Bohuslaus BALBINUS, *Epitome historica rerum Bohemicarum*, Prague 1677, p. 125.

8 See *Inventář všech při královském klášteře sv. Jiří na hradě pražském vynacházejících se privilegii* from 1692: Prague, Národní archiv, Archivy českých klášterů zrušených za Josefa II., inv. no. 2596; Prague, Národní knihovna, XVII E 48.

9 Prague, Národní archiv, Archivy českých klášterů zrušených za Josefa II., inv. no. 337: [...] *osvícená a nábožná kněžna a panna panna Elška abbatyše claštera svatého Jiří*.

10 Aeneae Silvii *Historia Bohemica*, ed. by Dana MARTINKOVÁ–Alena HADRAVOVÁ–Jiří MATL, Prague 1998, p. 168: *Sacerdos quoque sancti Georgii in arce Pragensi, quae principis honore defungitur et pastorali baculo utitur, sacris praefecta virginibus ab exilio remeavit*.

11 On 22 September 1719, Daniel Mayer, the auxiliary bishop of Prague, inquired with Archbishop Khuenburg about the appropriate title to address the abbess of St. George, whether it should be "fürstliche Abbtissin" or simply "Jungfrau Abbtissin". Prague, Národní archiv, Archiv pražského arcibiskupství I, inv. no. 3487.



Fig. 2 Queen crowned by the Bishops in the Pontifical of Albrecht of Sternberg, Bishop of Litomyšl, c. 1376. Prague, Strahovská knihovna, DGI 19, fol. 169r.

The coronation ordo of Charles IV was very likely written for his coronation in 1347 and is the first known such ordo in the Kingdom of Bohemia. It reflected the altered position of the (arch)bishop of Prague, who obtained a papal privilege on 5 May 1344 to crown the Czech kings.<sup>12</sup> This privilege was granted following the elevation of the Prague bishopric to an archbishopric. Before this, the kings of Bohemia were traditionally crowned in Prague Cathedral by the archbishops of Mainz, while the bishops of Prague merely assisted them.<sup>13</sup>

The new coronation ordo for Bohemia was compiled from several sources. The main part consists of an order from the tenth-century *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum*, enriched by ordinances and prayers from the French ordo of the first half of the fourteenth century and, finally, by uniquely Czech elements.<sup>14</sup> The section regarding the coronation of the queen differs from the prescription for the coronation of the king by its stronger reliance on the French model. The passage on the enthronement of the queen was directly borrowed, but it also includes a unique insertion that specifically mentions that the crowned queen should be “accompanied by the venerable lady abbess of the convent of St. George in Prague Castle of the order of St. Benedict, who should always be invited and requested to participate in the queen’s coronation”<sup>15</sup>.

The earliest evidence for the implementation of this norm can be traced back to 1400. In the description of the coronation of Sophia of Bavaria (1376–1428), the second wife of Wenceslas IV (r. 1378–1419), which took place on 15 March 1400, the abbess is mentioned at the

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12 Monumenta Vaticana res gestas Bohemicas illustrantia I, ed. by Ladislav KLICMAN, Prague 1903, no. 393, pp. 239–240.

13 Josef CIBULKA, *Český řád korunovační a jeho původ*, Prague 1934, p. 168; Václav ŽŮREK, *The Coronations of Bohemian Kings and Queens*, in: *Festivities, Ceremonies, and Rituals in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by František ŠMAHEL–Martin NODL–Václav ŽŮREK (East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages 82, Leiden 2022), pp. 9–52, at p. 45.

14 Václav ŽŮREK, *Korunovační řád Karla IV. jako ritualizovaný panovnický program*, *Časopis Národního muzea – řada historická* 176/3–4 (2007), pp. 105–143, at p. 141.

15 CIBULKA, *Český řád* (1934), p. 94: *Post istam oracionem barones, qui coronam eius sustentant, deducunt eam ad solium, ubi sede parata collocatur, associante ipsam venerabili domina N. abbatissa monasterii sancti Georgii in castro Pragensi ordinis sancti Benedicti, que propter sui dignitatem vocata et rogata coronacioni regine debet semper interesse, circumstantibus eam baronibus et matronis nobilioribus regni Boemie*. See also the recent

beginning of the ceremony. She – in this case Abbess Kunigunde (*Kunhuta*) of Kolowrat (d. 1401)<sup>16</sup> – is described as standing in the chancel of the cathedral alongside the queen. Richardis Catherine of Sweden (d. 1400), the widow of the king's brother John, Duke of Zgorzelec (d. 1396), also stood with them.<sup>17</sup> This is the only source that provides information about the event, and it is also the most detailed description of a Czech royal coronation from the Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup> In the case of other coronations, we often have to rely on very brief mentions in chronicles. Combining the information from both accounts – the coronation ordo of 1347 and the detailed report from 1400 – suggests that the abbess remained by the queen's side throughout the entire coronation mass, serving as her closest attendant. It is conceivable that she may have soon become involved in performing certain tasks that were deemed unfit for men, such as handling the queen's garments or assisting with the drying of the queen's skin following the royal anointing.<sup>19</sup> Regrettably, the medieval sources do not provide sufficient information to reconstruct her specific role in detail.

There are no other surviving records documenting the presence of an abbess at a coronation prior to the outbreak of the Hussite wars in 1419, although this practice likely originated in the Přemyslid era (i.e., before 1306). It is evident that this tradition could only have emerged due to the highly favorable location of St. George's Abbey. Given the convent's location, at the secular and spiritual heart of the kingdom, the abbess lived very close to the cathedral and did not need to undertake an arduous journey to the coronation city – Prague – which also served as the main royal residence. The abbesses were allowed easy access to the cathedral, as a chronicler's report documents that on 15 August 1260, the new abbess Judith 'was consecrated' in the cathedral by the bishop.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, during the twelfth

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critical edition of the Old Czech version of the coronation ordo: *Korunovační řád Karla IV.*, ed. by Martina JAMBOROVÁ, Dolní Břežany 2019, p. 118.

- 16 For Kunigunde of Kolowrat and her breviaries, see the essay by Maria THEISEN in this volume, pp. 311–333.
- 17 Prague, Archiv hlavního města Prahy, Sbirka rukopisů, sign. 993/1, p. 210: [...] *in chorum sancti Viti conducta fuit, ibi ab una parte fuit abbatissa sancti Georgii, ab alia relicta quondam ducis Iohannis Gorlicensis [...]* The text was edited and translated into Czech by Karel PACOVSKÝ, *Svatojiříský klášter v Praze očima pisatelů doby předhusitské*, Prague 2023, pp. 184–189.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 172–177; Václav ŽUREK, *Korunovace královny Žofie. Řád Karla IV. a jeho užití v praxis*, in: *Rituály, ceremonie a festivity ve střední Evropě 14. a 15. století*, ed. by Martin NODL–František ŠMAHEL, Prague 2009, pp. 203–212.
- 19 Jiří HRBEK, *České barokní korunovace*, Prague 2010, p. 98. For the first evidence in 1527, see Bericht von der Krönung Ferdinands und seiner Gemahlin zu Prag, ed. by Anton GINDELY, *Sněmy české od léta 1526 až po naši dobu I.*, Prague 1877, no. 159, p. 228: [...] *alsbald ist ein Äbtissin, so ein Cron auf ihrem Haupt getragen, zu dem Stuhl kummen und die Kunigin wiederum für den Altar geführt worden [...], dabei die gemelt Äbtissin und ihr kön. Mt. Hofmeisterin gestanden, und als sich das Lesen und die Salbung, so ihr der Bischof von Olmütz an ihre Hände und auf den Hals gethan, geendet hat, [...] ist sie darnach vom Altar in einen zierlichen Tabernakel galeitet, daselbst durch ihr Hofmeisterin und die obgemelte Äbtissin ihrs Haupts und Haars, so sie erstlich in eine guidone und perlin Hauben gebunden, und daruf ein roth Panet mit Perlin gesticket gehabt, emblösst, schlechts in offem fliegenden Haar wiederum zum Altar geführt.*
- 20 *Annales Bohemiae 1196–1278*, ed. by Josef EMLER (*Fontes rerum Bohemiarum* 2, Prague 1874), p. 297: [...] *consecrata est Judita, abbatissa sancti Georgii, in ecclesia Pragensi.*



Fig. 3

Abbess Agnes (d. c. 1228), Sister of King Ottokar I of Bohemia, may have witnessed the coronation of her nephew Wenceslas I and his wife Kunigunde of Hohenstaufen on 6 February 1228. Early thirteenth-century Relief from St. George's Abbey, Prague, Sbírky Pražského hradu, inv. no. HS 3153.

to fourteenth centuries, a covered stone passage known as the ‚long corridor‘ (*longa via*) connected the churches of St. Vitus and St. George. This passageway facilitated convenient communication between the cathedral and the abbey and was frequently used by the canons of St. Vitus' chapter during festive processions between the two churches.<sup>21</sup>

The exceptional connection between the abbey and the royal family, strengthened by the abbesses from the Přemyslid dynasty, undoubtedly played a significant role in the establishment of the coronation tradition.<sup>22</sup> In European coronations, it was customary for queens to be accompanied by their relatives or the wives of prominent royal dignitaries. Therefore, when the abbess had a familial relationship with the crowned queen, the probability of her presence at the coronation ceremony was likely increased.

If Abbess Agnes (d. c. 1228), who was the aunt of King Wenceslas I, was still alive, she could potentially have attended the coronation of his wife Kunigunde of Hohenstaufen in 1228 (Fig. 3). Similarly, Abbess Kunigunde (1302–1321) had the opportunity to witness two Bohemian coronations as the convent's

superior. The first was the coronation of her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Richeza of Poland (1303), who was married to King Wenceslas II. The second was the coronation of her niece, Elizabeth of Bohemia (1311), who was the wife of King John the Blind. Being a close relative to both queens, Abbess Kunigunde would undoubtedly have played a prominent role in the ceremonial events, regardless of the ecclesiastical office she held. By Kunigunde's participation in two coronations, the abbess' conspicuous presence alongside the queen may have become a customary and expected occurrence for observers. In doing so, Kunigunde would

21 Jan FROLÍK–Zdeněk SMETÁNKA, *Archeologie na Pražském hradě*, Prague–Litomyšl 1997, pp. 179–182; Jana MAŘÍKOVÁ-KUBKOVÁ–David EBEN, *Organizace liturgického prostoru v bazilice sv. Víta, Castrum Pragense 2* (1999), pp. 227–238, at. 235–236; Jana MAŘÍKOVÁ-KUBKOVÁ et al., *Katedrála viditelná i neviditelná. Průvodce tisíciletou historií katedrál sv. Víta, Václava, Vojtěcha a Panny Marie na Pražském hradě*, Prague 2019, p. 96.

22 ŽŮREK, *The Coronations* (2022), p. 46.

have bestowed her personal ‚dignity‘ (*dignitas*) as a relative of the queen on the position of the abbess of St. George’s Abbey, thus elevating its status and reputation. This heightened prestige persisted until the writing of Charles’ coronation ordo. By recording the tradition in written form, aligning with his goal of emphasizing the Přemyslid legacy, Charles IV secured its continued existence.

Alternatively, it can be argued that the regular presence of the Benedictine abbesses at the coronations held in the nearby cathedral was not based on their familial connections at all but rather stemmed from their prominent position as very influential figures in the Bohemian church. It should be noted that until the 1140s, St. George’s Abbey was the sole female religious community in Bohemia, and until the 1230s it remained the only one in Prague. The tradition of the Prague Benedictine abbess being present at the coronation of queens could thus potentially date back to the very first coronation in Prague in 1086.<sup>23</sup>

Although no surviving sources directly attest to the participation of St. George’s abbesses in coronations during the reign of the Přemyslid kings (1086–1306), Dana STEHLÍKOVÁ has suggested that the crozier of the abbesses could indirectly indicate their involvement.<sup>24</sup> The crozier, despite having undergone significant modifications over the centuries, still bears original Gothic inscriptional bands stating that it “was commissioned in 1303 by Wenceslas II, King of Bohemia and Poland, and given to his sister, Lady Kunigunde, the abbess of St. George’s Convent in Prague Castle, in the first year of her benediction”<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

The Crozier of the Abbesses of St. George. Under the Renaissance top showing St. George fighting the dragon, the original Gothic inscriptional bands can be found stating that it was made for Abbess Kunigunde in 1303.

<sup>23</sup> For recent research on the first Czech coronation, see Lukáš REITINGER, *Vratislav. První král Čechů*, Prague 2017, pp. 99–104.

<sup>24</sup> Dana STEHLÍKOVÁ, *Crosier of Abbess Cunegonde Premyslid*, in: *A Royal Marriage. Elisabeth Premyslid and John of Luxembourg – 1310*, ed. by Klára BENEŠOVSKÁ, Prague 2011, p. 486.

<sup>25</sup> *Anno Domini MCCCIII hunc baculum fieri fecit Wenceslaus II. Bohemie et Polonie rex et dedit germani sue domine Cunigunde abbatisse monasterii sancti Georgii in castro Pragensi anno primo benedictionis sue*. For a detailed description of the crozier, see Jaroslav SOJKA et al., *Ferdinand V. Dobrotivý a umění jeho doby*, Prague 2012, p. 144.

Fig. 5

Crown of St. Wenceslas, commissioned by Charles IV before 1347 for the Coronations of Ruling Kings. Following the Hussite wars, the queens were also crowned with this royal crown with the assistance of the abbesses.



The new crozier was not made in conjunction with Kunigunde's abbatial blessing, as might be expected, but rather less than a year after the event. Kunigunde assumed the Benedictine habit on 22 July 1302 and became abbess soon after, no later than 27 November of the same year.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is likely that the crozier was made and presented to Kunigunde by the king between January and November 1303. The coronation of Wenceslas' second wife, Elizabeth Richeza, on 26 May 1303, was the most significant occasion during this period on which Kunigunde could have appeared in public with her abbatial insignia.

After the Hussite wars, the role of the abbess in the coronation ceremony, along with that of the nobility,<sup>27</sup> notably increased. Suggestive in this regard is the passage of the Old Czech Annals regarding the coronation of Barbara of Celje (1437), the wife of Emperor Sigismund, in which the abbess of St. George is listed first, ahead of all the participants of the ceremony.<sup>28</sup> It is probable that during this period the abbess began to handle the royal crown, although the first documented instance of an abbess participating in the crowning of the queen dates back to 1562 (Fig. 5).<sup>29</sup> In the Middle Ages, the responsibility of performing these duties belonged to assisting bishops. Following the Hussite wars, however, the abbess took

<sup>26</sup> Kunigunde died on 27 November 1321 in the twentieth year of her benediction (Prague, Národní knihovna, VI G 16b, fol. 6r). Therefore, she must have been installed as abbess prior to 27 November 1302. The previous abbess, Sophia, died on 18 August of an unknown year (Prague, Knihovna Národního muzea, XIV D 13, fol. 3v; Prague, Národní knihovna, XIII E 14f, fol. 10v). While HLEDÍKOVÁ proposed the possibility that Sophia may have abdicated in favor of Kunigunde (Zdeňka HLEDÍKOVÁ, *Kalendáře rukopisů kláštera sv. Jiří, Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philosophica et Historica* 2 (1988), pp. 35–78, at p. 42), it is more likely that she simply passed away on 18 August 1302, shortly after Kunigunde joined the community on 22 July.

<sup>27</sup> For the nobility, see ŽUREK, *The Coronations* (2022), pp. 47, 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Staré letopisy české z vratslavského rukopisu novočeským pravopisem*, ed. by František ŠIMEK, Prague 1937, p. 73: *A při tom jest byla abatyše svatojiřská a jiní opatové a preláti, vejvody, páni, rytířstvo etc.*

<sup>29</sup> *Die Krönungen Maximilians II. zum König von Böhmen, Römischen König und König von Ungarn (1562/63) nach der Beschreibung des Hans Habersack*, ed. by Friedrich EDELMAYER–Leopold KAMMERHOFER–Martin C. MANDLMAYER–Walter PRENNER–Karl G. VOCELKA (*Fontes rerum Austriacarum, Scriptorum* 13, Vienna 1990), p. 123: [...] *ertzbischoff, welcher [...] ir nun die Cron auch aufsetzt, greiffen die zween beysteennde bischoffe, gemelte äbtissin und der obrist burggraf auch mit an die cron.*



**Fig. 6**  
The Only Known Depiction of an Abbess  
Participating in a Coronation, detail from Franz  
Christoph Khevenhüller's *Annales Ferdinandeae*  
(1723).

on these roles instead, as the bishoprics in Bohemia remained vacant, and it was not easy to bring enough faithful Roman Catholic bishops to Hussite Prague for the ceremony.<sup>30</sup> Although the Prague archbishopric was restored in 1561, and new bishoprics were established in Litoměřice and Hradec Králové after the mid-seventeenth century, the abbesses of St. George retained their privileged position during the coronation until the abbey's dissolution in 1782 (Fig. 6). Subsequently, Emperor Leopold II transferred the privilege of crowning queen consorts of Bohemia to the abbesses of the nearby Theresian Institute for Noble Ladies.<sup>31</sup> Founded within Prague Castle by Queen Maria Theresa in 1755, this institution could only be headed by an unmarried member of the ruling Habsburg-Lorraine dynasty.<sup>32</sup> They then fulfilled the original duties of the Benedictine abbesses in the queens' coronations until the last coronation in Prague in 1836 (Fig. 7).<sup>33</sup>

The remarkable medieval tradition of having a female religious leader present at the coronations of Czech queens was closely tied to the exceptional status of St. George's Abbey among other ecclesiastical institutions in the Crown of Bohemia, which can be attributed to historical, social, and topographical factors. The combination of its significance as the oldest monastery in Bohemia, its association with esteemed daughters of dukes and kings throughout the Middle Ages, and its distinctive position within the main ducal and royal residence all contributed to the great prominence of the convent. The original tradition, which entailed the abbess accompanying the queen, as codified in the coronation ordo of Charles IV in the mid-fourteenth century, underwent an unexpected development in the following centuries. Due to the Czech Reformation and the resulting crisis within the Roman

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- 30** Blanka ZILYNSKÁ, *The Utraquist Church after the Compactata*, in: *A Companion to the Hussites*, ed. by Michael VAN DUSSEN–Pavel SOUKUP (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 90, Leiden 2020), pp. 219–257, at pp. 242–244.
- 31** Karl SCHWARZENBERG, *Die Sankt Wenzels-Krone und die böhmischen Insignien*, Vienna <sup>2</sup>1982, p. 62.
- 32** Michaela ŽÁKOVÁ, *Tereziánský ústav šlechticů na Pražském hradě*, Prague 2021.
- 33** Milada SEKÝRKOVÁ, 7. 9. 1836. Ferdinand V. Poslední pražská korunovace, Prague 2004, pp. 105–111.





**Fig. 7**  
Coronation of Maria Anna of Savoy, the Last Crowned Queen of Bohemia, in 1836. The role of the abbess of the dissolved Benedictine convent was taken over by the abbess of Theresian Institute for Noble Ladies, who alongside the archbishop of Prague and the supreme burggrave of the kingdom participated in the crowning of the queen.

Catholic clergy in fifteenth-century Bohemia, the abbess, along with the highest representative of the Czech aristocracy, replaced the absent bishops as the archbishop's closest assistants in the ceremony. Consequently, the abbess of St. George became the only woman in premodern Europe to actively participate in the act of crowning during a royal coronation.

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