

Hairstyles in the Arts of Greek and Roman Antiquity

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Styling one's hair seems to be an innate desire of humans to emphasize their beauty and power. As reviewed here, hairstyles were influenced by preceding cultures, by religion, by those depicted for gods and emperors on sculptures and coins. In addition, they were determined by aspects of lifestyle such as sports, wealth, and the desire to display inner feelings. The historical changes in fashions can be exemplarily followed by a visitor to an art collection of Graeco-Roman antiquity. The study of hairstyles permits an insight into very basic aspects of the self-conception of individuals and of the respective societies.

Key words: hair/history/style

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Hairstyles reflect the self-image of individuals against the background of prevailing cultural and political views. Whereas the Egyptians shaved their heads and wore wigs, Greeks let their hair grow, as did Assyrians and Persians. They saw it as a source of life and gave sacrifices of hair for the dead (Il. XIII, 134). As in the bible (e.g., Samson), hair was associated with strength and purity, and, as with the ancient Germanic tribes, with male dignity and liberty. The following discourse will focus on classical iconography as well as the changing habits, fashions, ideas, and even politics concerning hair in the Graeco-Roman world.

Greece

Greek male hairstyle The Minoan period is well known from pottery and paintings in the great palaces, notably Knossos, showing dancers with shoulder-long black hair. Similarly, Aegean art shows males with single or double plaits. Homer's heroes had such hair, as did the warriors at the battle of Marathon (490 BC). During the archaic period (i.e., up to about 500 BC) the male youth or *kouros* (Grk) wore his hair long to the shoulders or even longer finely braided—an extremely artificial time-consuming style of the privileged nobles.

In the middle of the 5th century, males began to trim their hair. Historically, this has been attributed to the popularity of sporting activities. This “athlete” hairstyle, with the ears free, spread to Italy. A terracotta head (BA) of a stylish young man from a Greek colony in S. Italy (Fig 1) exhibits hair growing upward in short crops, obviously fixed in position with hair oil. It is reminiscent of portraits of Alexander the Great, whose famous anastole, i.e., ascending locks from a central parting, became the model for the Hellenistic kings. Since all younger Greeks had no beard,

Alexander continued to trim his beard, introducing youth as an ideal in his time. He was the first Greek king not to wear a beard. Thereafter, it became unfashionable for the ruler to wear a beard for several centuries.

Greek female hairstyle The maiden of the archaic period, the *kore* (Grk), wore extremely fine braids. Since men at the archaic period also had long hair, the visitor at a museum may find it difficult to distinguish the sexes. By the 5th century, however, a clear difference occurred. In contrast to men, women continued to wear long hair, usually curled on the forehead and sides of the head and drawn into a bun at the nape. Later, a very distinct youthful style was in fashion, the so-called “melon”, named because the hair was divided into a number of segments running like the ribs of a melon from the forehead to the back of the head (Hirschmann, 1998).

Hair jewelry had been known since Homer, who described the strings, nets, and circlets decorating Andromache's hair (Il. XXII, 468). Gifts in graves show that wreaths in the shape of leaves, made of silver or even gold, and ivory curlers and hair pins were in use as well. Later, fine Roman hairnets were in use, made of pure gold, studded with jewels such as rubies or pearls. Dyeing, bleaching, curling, or straightening of hair was common, and curling irons were used to create elaborate hairstyles. Curls and braids were arranged in elaborate settings with beeswax. Hair was colored using ashes or henna, and even colored wax was used, resulting in rather shrill hairdos.

Hair styles of Greek gods Many of the ancient gods can be identified by distinct hairstyles, and these served as models for human hair fashion throughout antiquity. Thus, Zeus, the main god, typically has his hair aligned in an upward, followed by a downward sweep, which then radiates outward, forming a corona of individual strands (Maestri, 1967). Asclepius, the healing god, is the only god to wear his hair similar to Zeus! He also appears as a mature bearded man, but with a milder expression (Graf, 1996).

Abbreviations: BA, an outstanding portrait or sculpture in the Berlin Antikensammlung, where a tour for the attendants of the conference was provided; Il, Homer's Iliad

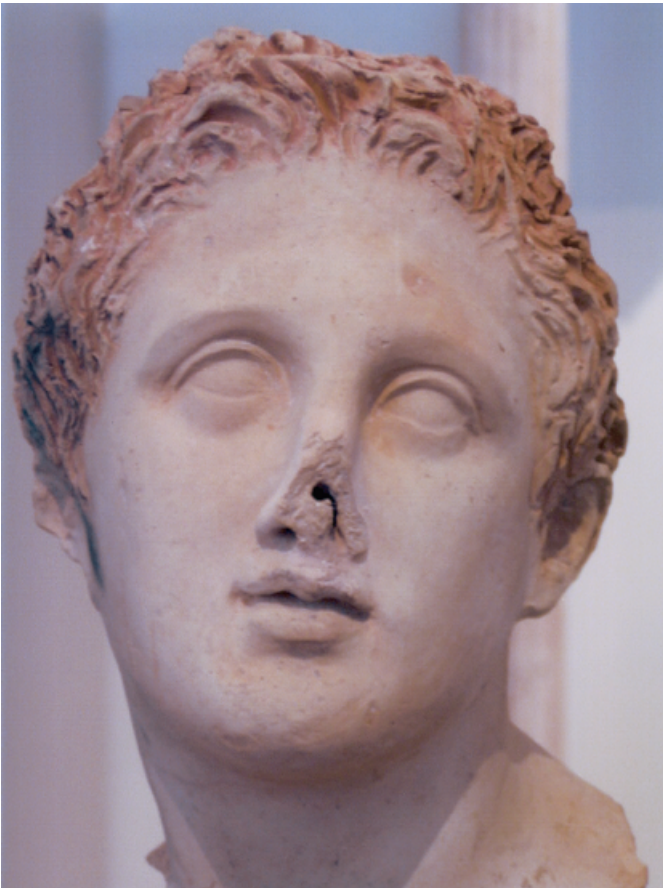


Figure 1
Greek youth. Photo courtesy of Berlin Antikensammlung.

Among the female gods, Hera, Zeus' wife and of royal stature, had shiny, perfumed locks (Il. XIV, 175) covered by a veil. Athena, the city protectress, wore a helmet, with fine curls protruding from underneath. Artemis (Diana) had tightly drawn back, straight hair, whereas Aphrodite (Venus), the Greek goddess of love and beauty, had a similar hairstyle, although with more seductive charm, with a bun on the crown. Demeter wore a diadem, as did Hera, but "with her front hair being unkempt, indicating her sadness because of her raped daughter", as noted by Winckelmann, a German archeologist.

In contrast to the hairstyles of these noble gods, an antithesis was formed by the world of Dionysos (Bacchus, god of wine) and of his followers who performed orgiastic rites. Dionysos himself is sometimes depicted with hermaphrodite features (BA), with broad hips, a slightly stooped posture, and the long hair combed back into a knot in the neck, ears covered. Satyrs are depicted on vases with front hair standing on end, pointed ears, and little horns on their heads. The maenads, female attendants of the Bacchanalia, left their hair uncombed. The silens had an ivy wreath to cover androgenetic alopecia, as in Homer's time baldness was seen as a sign of ugliness (Il. II, 218). Baldheaded Socrates compared his looks with a Silen. The ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates, was the first to report that eunuchs fail to become bald. The wreath of permanent hair encircling the back and sides of the head is sometimes

referred to as the Hippocratic wreath. Mild androgenetic alopecia is exhibited by Homer and by Euripides (BA), the Athenian tragic playwright, with his remaining oily hair hanging shaggy to the sides. In contrast, Plato, the great philosopher, displays full hair (BA), but he wore it unstyled, whereas Pericles (BA), an Athenian democratic statesman re-elected for 15 y, knew how to stage himself—in the fashion of the helmeted Athene, with carefully trimmed beard and locks.

Roman Period

In early times, Roman men wore their hair hardly different from the Greeks. Prior to 300 BC, a simple and natural hairstyle prevailed, and only dandies used curling irons and hair oil. Similarly, the hairstyle of women was simple at that time; the long hair was tied to a juvenile knot or a matron's bun. Only when the Greek style *toilette* became fashionable more complicated hairstyles were adopted. Romans learned to change their natural hair color. Red coloring was provided by substances from ashes, brown tones were achieved by mixtures such as "spuma batava" (imported from what is now the Netherlands), as reported by Pliny the elder, a scientist and critic. The use of wigs for nightly excursions was recorded by Petronius, author of the comic novel *Satyricon*. Blond hair from female prisoners of war from Germanic tribes became fashionable, as did black hair pieces imported from countries as remote as India. Romans must have loved to spend their time in the barber's shop, a frequent motif of the comedy of the time. Curling tongs were also used for men, as reported sarcastically by Ovid and Cicero.

Imperial male hairstyle During this period, the imperial dynasties markedly influenced contemporary hairstyles since their portraits and coins were distributed throughout the provinces. The neatly cropped hair of the young emperor Augustus, combed into a fringe on the forehead, set a new trend and was varied only by his successors. Tiberius and Claudius had short regular frontal hair; Nero's curls were corrugated with crimping tongs and carefully piled on each other in several rows (as branded by Sueton). Emperor Titus' head was a curly tangle, as shown by numerous portraits. According to Martial, these curls were also painted on the scalp if necessary, and in sculptures, the curly tangle arose from numerous drill holes in the marble (Fig 2). Emperor Trajan (AD 98–117), in conscious contrast, let his hair simply drop militarily in strands onto the forehead. The 2nd-century graecophil emperor Hadrian was the first bearded Roman emperor, a fashion continued by his successors. Innumerable sculptures, gems, and coins perpetuate Antinous, his beloved, posthumously deified, as a model of youthfulness with locks falling into his face.

Imperial female hairstyle In a strange contrast, Roman ladies came to wear increasingly complicated hairstyles. The first Emperor's sister, Octavia, had tresses tied in a loop above the brow and gathered into a bun behind—soon to become unfashionable. More popular was the emperor's wife Livia's center-parted perm. During the Flavian dynasty (69–138 AD), high-ranking Roman ladies preferred a hair



Figure 2
Flavian lady. Photo courtesy of Berlin Antikensammlung.

style composed of a) piled-up curls that became continuously higher, ending in tower-like masses constructed with toupees and probably iron wires for support (Fig 2), and, in the nape of the neck b) the so-called “Flavian nest”, made

of hair loops. This is the style that Juvenal, the most powerful of all Roman satiric poets, mocks when he describes “the woman who appears like Andromache from the front but quite the opposite from the back”. That these fashions were adopted in the provinces can be seen from the painted details of hairstyles on the faces of Egyptian (Fayum) mummies (BA). In the late imperial period hairstyles became simpler again, as seen in the compact, wavy hair mass that Julia Domna (mother of 3rd-century emperor Caracalla) wore, which had similarities to the “melon” hairstyle.

In conclusion, hairstyles, as described here with reference to masterful antique portraits, reflect in a fascinating way mankind’s quest for beauty and power. Furthermore, they provide an insight into humans’ views of themselves and of the culture they reside in.

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