

Michele Bacci

BEARDS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FACIAL APPEARANCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES*

When I presented a first draft of this paper at the *Micrologus* conference that took place in Saint Petersburg in July 2019, I confessed my perhaps unreasonable fear of addressing my topic in a magnificent town that owes its existence, and even its name, to Czar Peter the Great, one of the most implacable opponents of beards in human history. As is well known, his efforts to modernize Russia even went through the imposition of razors and clean-shaved faces by law, as is vividly shown in a frequently reproduced engraving from the early XVIIIth century, showing an Old Believer's beard being cut by a barber¹. As the Englishman John Perry remarked in his *State of Russia*, published in 1716:

It had been the manner of the Russes, like the Patriarchs of old, to wear long beards hanging down upon their bosoms, which they comb'd out with pride, and kept smooth and fine, without one hair to be diminished; they wore even the upper-lip of that length, that if they drank at any time, their beard dipp'd into the cup, so that they were obliged to wipe it when they had done, although they wore the hair of their head cut short at the same time; it being the custom only for the popes or priests, to wear the hair of their heads hanging down upon their backs for distinction sake. The Czar therefore to reform this foolish custom, and to make them look like other Europeans, ordered a tax to be laid, on all gentlemen, merchants, and others of his subjects

* The present paper discusses data gathered in the frame of the SNSF-project Royal Epiphanies.

1. See esp. L. Hughes, «'A beard is an unnecessary Burden': Peter I's Laws on Shaving and their Roots in early Russia», in *Russian Society and Culture and the long Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. Bartlett, L. Hughes, Münster 2004, 22.

(excepting the priests and common peasants, or slaves) that they should each of them pay 100 rubles *per annum*, for the wearing of their beards, and that even the common people should pay a copeck at the entrance of the gates of any of the towns or cities of Russia...

At least in the view of this Western European observer, Russian beards were an unpractical burden, associated with religious purposes, even if it differed from that of priests which also wore a long hair. Peter the Great's radical decision aimed at forcing his time's aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and partly also the urban lower classes, to emancipate their look from the impact of traditional, that is religious constructs of male appearance and adopt the Western practice of daily shaving. Not without surprise, Perry remarked that this decision caused a widespread resistance:

It is most certain, that the Russes had a kind of religious respect and veneration for their beards; and so much the more, because they differed herein from strangers, which was back'd by the humours of the priests, alledging that the holy men of old had worn their beards according to the model of the picture of their saints, and which nothing but the absolute authority of the czar, and the terror of having them (in a merry humour) pull'd out by the roots, or sometimes taken so rough off, that some of the skin went with them, could ever have prevailed with the Russes to have parted with their beards. On this occasion there were letters drop'd about the streets, sealed and directed to his czarish majesty, which charged him with tyranny and heathenism, for forcing them to part with their beards².

The reaction of Russian subjects to their emperor is symptomatic of the multiple meanings the wearing of beards came to be invested with in traditional societies. In the anthropological debate, scholars have often raised the question whether facial hair works more as an indicator of such notions as male gender identity and masculine strength and authority, that happened to be transfigured into what E. Leach described as a sort of 'magical' agency, or as symbols of social, ethnic, religious, and professional distinctiveness³, and, since the topic has become fashion-

2. John Perry, *The State of Russia under the Present Czar*, London 1716, 195-96.

3. E. R. Leach, «Magical hair», *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 88 (1958), 147-66.

able also in historical sciences in these last years – to such an extent that we can consider our age as experiencing a real revival of the scholarly trend that, in XVIIIth century Europe, came to be known as ‘pogonology’⁴ – there is a large consent as to the principle that such meanings and their combination may vary according to specific, contextual and relational, factors⁵.

Indeed, it is hardly surprising that Russians may have felt reluctant to shaving on different, social, religious, and psychological grounds. First, they were worried for the physical stress that an abrupt removal of hair would have caused: this was much like losing a long cherished and nourished body part and, consciously or unconsciously, it could have been perceived as a surrogate castration. On a more intimate level, they must have feared that altering their physical aspect would have resulted in losing their self-awareness by departing from the image of themselves they were accustomed to acknowledging in the mirror: how could they identify with a hairless chin, that seemed to contradict not only their gender identity, but also their status as adult males? It was as if they had to step back to boyhood or undergo a sex change.

Such a radical disruption of behavioural – and visual – conventions lasting from time immemorial and being hitherto regarded as a foundational element of community life could also create serious problems as to the individual’s self-understanding as a social agent. Moreover, given that a clean-shaved look was associated with Western usages, the lack of a beard could be perceived as contradicting the community’s self-definition on ethnic grounds. This leads us to the inescapably controversial issue of group identity, which, in XVIIth century Russia as in many Medieval and Modern societies, was largely conceptualized in

4. The most significant contributions were those by O. Regnaut, *Pogonologie ou discours facétieux des barbes*, Rennes 1589; J. A. Dulaure, *Pogonologie ou histoire philosophique de la barbe*, Paris 1706; J. W. Pagenstecher, *De barba. Prognosticum historico-politico-juridicum*, Steenvoorde 1708; A. Fangé, *Memoires pour servir à l’histoire de la barbe de l’homme*, Liège 1774; J. V. Vannetti, *Barbologia, sive dissertatio de barba*, Rovereto 1760.

5. For a comprehensive survey of the study of beards from a diachronical perspective see C. Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men. The revealing History of Facial Hair*, Chicago, London 2016.

religious, more than linguistic, terms. Beards were regarded as visual markers of Orthodoxy and were therefore invested with a sort of sacralising authority, stemming not only from their association with priestly looks, but also from their role as iconographic attributes of holiness in countless images of saintly men. In a sense, wearing a beard was much like adopting, or evoking, an icon-like look and providing one's face with iconic efficacy.

On account of its capacity to be manipulated, hair contributes more than any other body part to the construction of an individual's self-representation, which can be a rather complicated process and responds to both personal-psychological and social-cultural factors. The decision to either shave or grow a beard, to have it long, short, sparse, flowing, or unkempt, leads to what can be considered as a visual act by which men aim, more or less consciously, to convey their own self-perception to both themselves and others: in a sense, it results from the more or less successful outward materialization of an inward image, mirroring the ways in which each individual man negotiates his identity in cultural and social terms. Depending on specific circumstances and contexts, such an image can be idealized, conventional, or even disruptive, and can work as either a strategy of distinction or, just on the contrary, as a means to emphasize one's conformism, even if it is perfectly possible that a thoroughly mainstream look may have been perceived as an original marker of distinctiveness, for example vis-à-vis other human communities.

In this sense, the messages conveyed by beards depend not only from the symbolic meanings and conceptualizations they are invested with in given societies, but also by the impact they have on human relations and the extent to which their presence or absence is perceived, in the same time, as destabilizing by some and reassuring by others. For Christian authors in the IVth and Vth centuries, wearing a beard, and especially a flowing one, came to be regarded as a marker of consecrated life not only as this fashion could be perceived as echoing Biblical archetypes (such as Aaron's beard anointed with oil, celebrated in Psalm 132-133), but also because it enabled the new believers to adopt a look clashing with the conventions of Hellenistic and Roman tradition, where the removal of hair on chins and bodies had

always been more appreciated than growing a beard⁶. This is especially true of hermits and ascetics, who soon acknowledged that, in late antique society, beards combined with long hair were disruptive on different grounds. First, they signalled their cultural/religious distinctiveness vis-à-vis their Pagan contemporaries. Second, inasmuch as facial hair was largely perceived as an attribute of either outcasts or marginal people, they bore material witness to their bearers' refusal of common social habits, more or less in the same way as contemporary philosophers also adopted a beard to mark their distinctive role as intellectuals or holy men. Third, abstaining from the razor enabled them to manifest their self-dedication to God in the way typified by Old Testament Nazirites and suggest their permanent penitential status. Fourth, beards were deemed to unequivocally declare their bearers' gender identity and proudly visualize their contempt of Pagan men's depilated looks.

As the writings of several Church fathers make clear, there was large consent as to the need to avoid gender confusion. In his *First letter to the Corinthians* (II, 3-16), Saint Paul had warned men against adopting a womanish or effeminate look, since this betrayed lack of respect for the excellence of God's creation, made in his own image and likeness. As Clement of Alexandria explained, only the man's outward appearance covered with a profusion of hair fully corresponded to the model conceived by the Lord: «The mark of a man, the beard, is older than Eve, and is the token of the superior nature», sentenced he. «In this God deemed it right that he should excel, and dispersed hair over man's whole body». The woman had been created from whatever smoothness and softness was in Adam's body, so that the latter could be described, in Galenic terms, as drier and warmer as the female one, and accordingly as producing more hair. In this sense, shaving could even be deemed as a blasphemous act: «It is therefore impious to desecrate the symbol of manhood, hairiness»⁷.

6. G. Bormolini, *La barba di Aronne. I capelli lunghi e la barba nella vita religiosa*, Florence 2009, 73-105.

7. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, II, 1, 3, ed. M. Markovich and J. C. M. Van Winden, *Clementis Alexandrini Paedagogus*, Leiden 2002, 158-59.

Nothing better than beards, the sole attribute of men, could prevent all misunderstandings of sexual identity, even if the Apostle did not make any hint at them and limited himself to blame long hair. As the example of ascetics makes clear, the latter was tolerated and widely accepted only if combined with facial hair. Nevertheless, the uncontrolled multiplication of hairy looks among hermits in the Eastern Mediterranean gradually encouraged ecclesiastical authorities to work out a discipline of hair fashion. Several authors manifested their anxiety vis-à-vis the construction of one's look as a visual strategy to suggest an alleged charism of holiness⁸. This was largely due to the increasingly important role played by the exercise of sight in devotional practice and the widespread idea that a kind of blessing may be obtained by inspecting the outward appearance of holy men, whose unconventionality was deemed by many to embody the latter's spiritual excellence. Inescapably, unscrupulous people took advantage from such widespread beliefs. For example, Saint Jerome warned the young girl Eustochium, Saint Paula of Rome's daughter, against those impostors who simulated a saintly life by adopting an ascetic's look:

But I don't want to give the impression of criticizing only women: you should also avoid those men who will appear in chains, with womanish hair contrary to the Apostle, a goat's beard, and naked feet suffering coldness. All these are arguments of the devil. Rome had once to stand one Antimus and more recently one Sophronius: after entering the houses of noble people and deceiving silly women burdened with sins – who were always instructed and never came to the science of truth – the latter simulated austerity and protracted their allegedly long-lasting fast by eating furtively during the night⁹.

In paralleling a long beard with a goat's look Jerome was repeating a literary joke that ancient authors had already attributed to fake philosophers. The argument was the same: the mise-en-scène of one's bodily appearance could be misleading

8. G. Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to living saints in Christian late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2000.

9. Jerome, *Epistola XX ad Eustochium*, 28, ed. I. Hilberg, Leipzig 1910 (CSEL, 54), 185.

and deceitful, even if it was admittedly efficacious in visual terms. On the authority of Jerome, many Medieval Western authors repeated the same parallelism: *Si barbae sanctum faciunt, nil sanctius hirco* («If beards make a saint, then nobody is holier than goats»), wrote Eugene of Toledo (VIIth century)¹⁰, whose words were evoked (with attribution to Jerome) by the conciliar fathers of Worms in 858¹¹ and further developed in the XIIth century by Odo of Cherington: *Si quem barbatum faceret sua barba beatum, in mundi circo non esset sanctior hirco* («If a bearded man were made a saint by his beard, then nobody would be holier than goats in the earthly circus»)¹².

Nevertheless, the church father was not disturbed by the beard as such, but rather by its combination with long hair. This look was especially destabilizing, since it could be read as contravening all social conventions, gender rules, and ethnic definitions. Accordingly, it was privileged by ascetics as a physical manifestation of their utter disdain for the world and its vanities. Such a radical choice would have been unsuitable for deacons, priests, and bishops, whose outward appearance was meant to convey not so much their pursuit of holiness, yet rather their role as representatives of the ecclesiastical institutions and administrators of liturgical activities. A mural painting from Saqqara, Egypt, shows this shift in the hair code: whereas the holy hermit's appearance is a triumph of hispidity, the monk (perhaps a hieromonk) bowing close-by stands out for his short, combed, and well-trimmed hair and beard¹³.

Based on a specific interpretation of some Biblical passages (in particular *Psalms* 133 and *Leviticus* 19,27 and 21,5), emphasis was laid especially on the beard as a symbol of the priestly role and as a sign of distinction vis-à-vis both the ascetics' hairy, almost animal-like look and the laity's habit of shaving. The

10. Eugene of Toledo, *Carmen* 69, 3, ed. F.Vollmer, MGH SS AA, XIV, 266.

11. *Responsio contra Graecorum haeresim de fide sanctae Trinitatis*, MGH Concilia, IV, 292-307: 307.

12. Odo of Cherington (*Parabola*, 52), as quoted in E. Voigt, *Kleine lateinische Denkmäler der Thiersage aus dem zwölften bis vierzehnten Jahrhundert*, Strasbourg 1878, 48.

13. M. Zibawi, *L'arte copta. L'Egitto cristiano dalle origini al XVIII secolo*, Milan 2003, 87.

wearing of a beard was described as something normative for the clergy already in the IVth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* and was initially adopted also in the West¹⁴. Early authors appreciated its decorative efficacy and its capacity to invest the face with an especially dignified appearance. Augustine observed that the presence in the human (and especially male) body of parts deprived of any utilitarian purpose and meant to be pure ornaments, such as beards, was a clue to the special status given by the Lord to the human genre¹⁵. In this sense, being careful about one's appearance and therefore also having one's hair cropped manifested one's respect for God's creation and was a moral imperative for men and especially priests. Clement of Alexandria gave precise indications as to how men should appear, namely with cropped hair and a flowing beard:

Since cropping is to be adopted not for the sake of elegance, but on account of the necessity of the case; the hair of the head, that it may not grow so long as to come down and interfere with the eyes, and that of the moustache similarly, which is dirtied in eating, is to be cut round, not by the razor, for that were not well-bred, but by a pair of cropping scissors. But the hair on the chin is not to be disturbed, as it gives no trouble, and lends to the face dignity and paternal terror¹⁶.

In Byzantium, this 'paternal' look became almost standard among clerics, whose dignified, well-kept beards worked as material symbols of their awe-inspiring status, age, and authority. Those who acted as spiritual fathers and guides were marked by an immediately acknowledgeable indicator of their adulthood: as is shown, for example, in an VIIIth century mosaic in Saint Demetrius in Thessaloniki, the cleric's grave look with abundant beard and short hair deliberately contrasts with the martyr's beardless appearance, hinting at an idealized, youngish beauty¹⁷.

14. M. Bacci, *The Many Faces of Christ. Portraying the Holy in the East and West, 300 to 1300*, London 2014, 188-91.

15. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XXII, 24, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, Turnhout 1955 (CCSL, 48), 850.

16. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, III, 11, ed. Markovich and van Winden, 183.

17. R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold. Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, London 1985, 91; L. James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World. From Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge 2017, 273-74.

As is known, the Latin church happened to soon diverge from this path. A mural painting from ca. 757–767 in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome shows two holy bishops standing out for their pretty different looks: whereas the Eastern thaumaturge, Nicholas of Myra, wears a beard and the so-called ‘crown of Saint Peter’, Fermo of Gaeta, a thoroughly Western saint, is shown beardless and tonsured¹⁸.

As Giles Constable has shown, several factors contributed to this difference in hairstyles: the enduring impact of Roman shaving tradition; the possible use of a clean-shaved chin as a marker of distinction vis-à-vis German habits; the misinterpretation of the beard passages in the *Leviticus* in the transmission of a sentence in the *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua*; and, finally, an anagogical/moral interpretation of superfluous body hair as a manifestation of vices and sensual pleasures that priests were expected to remove¹⁹. Whereas later Latin authors tried to explain this habit as a priestly effort to look like beardless angels or to imitate the tortures inflicted on the apostles’ bodies, Aeneas of Paris (d. 870), in his *Adversus Graecos*, did not indicate any special reason apart from mode and hygienic measures (*ob munditiam*)²⁰. In any case, this corresponded to a widespread perception of all kind of down as something filthy, which also nourished Aeneas’ condemnation of Byzantine laymen’s long hair. It can be wondered if such a contempt was stimulated only by practical considerations or may have also been influenced by Aristotelian and Galenic medical notions that described beard and body hair as the products of heat in men’s organisms and the equivalents of menstruation in women²¹.

18. G. Pollio, «Il culto e l’iconografia di san Nicola a Roma», in *San Nicola. Splendori d’arte d’Oriente e d’Occidente*, ed. M. Bacci, Milan 2006, 137–44: 137.

19. G. Constable, «Introduction», in *Apologiae duae. Gozechini Epistola ad Walcherum. Burchardi, ut videtur, abbatis Bellevallis Apologia de barbis*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, Turnhout 1985 (CCCM, 62), 47–150, esp. 70–75.

20. Aeneas of Paris, *Adversus Graecos*, 186, PL, 121, 747. On the role of the beard argument in Latin accusations against the Byzantine church cf. H.-W. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter (5.–12. Jahrhundert)*, Berlin 2013, I, 743.

21. As stated, e.g., by Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, 3:2, 2, ed. H.

Be this as it may, the conceptual divide between East and West about the looks of consecrated people certainly played an impact on the iconographic instability that characterizes Christ's images in the Middle Ages: the Nazirite- and philosopher-like appearance of many early representations was substituted, in Byzantine times, by a scheme laying emphasis on his dignified face with well-trimmed hair and a medium-size beard²². Despite the gradual success of this Byzantine type also in the Latin West, it is impressive to observe that beardless variants kept circulating until relatively late, although their meaning seems to have undergone a very profound transformation in the course of time²³. An idea that lingers is the possibility that Christ may have grown or lost his beard in a particular moment of his passage on earth: so, for example, in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna he is represented beardless in the representation of his public life and miracles, whereas he wears a beard in the scenes of the Passion and Resurrection²⁴. On the contrary, a late Medieval tradition, reported e.g. in the early XIVth century *Meditationes vitae Christi*, suggested that he may have lost his beard as part of the mockeries inflicted on him by Pilate's soldiers, so that he would have shown a naked chin when hanging from the cross²⁵.

The authoritativeness of shaving was undoubtedly associated with an ideal of male beauty (and strength) dating back to antiquity and to an Apollonian model of warrior's look established by Alexander the Great, promoted in Rome by Scipio the African, and later adopted by most Roman emperors, with the exception of a few – such as Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and Julian – who presented themselves as wise rulers with philosophical ambi-

Stadler, Münster 1916, I, 316. Cf. J. Cadden, *Meanings of sex difference in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1993, 171, 181–82, 192.

22. Bacci, *The Many Faces*, 197–218.

23. J. Wirth, «Le portrait médiéval du Christ en Occident», in *Le portrait: la représentation de l'individu*, ed. A. Paravicini Bagliani, J.-M. Spieser and J. Wirth, Florence 2007, 77–94.

24. F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, Wiesbaden and Stuttgart 1958–1989, II, 1, 160–61; J.-M. Spieser, *Images du Christ des catacombes au lendemain de l'Iconoclisme*, Genève 2015, 412.

25. *Meditationes vitae Christi*, 80, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, *Iohannis de Caulibus Meditationes vite Christi olim S. Bonaventuro attributae*, Turholti 1997 (CCCM, 153), 281.

tions²⁶. In other terms, the shaved look was invested with a specifically political charism which was certainly not ignored by the leading élites of Medieval societies. Its exemplary function was appropriated by Charlemagne in his coinage and, probably, the Carolingian kings' bearded look with moustache was stimulated not only by a wish to differentiate themselves from the Barbarian appearance of the Merovingian *reges criniti*, but also by an effort to look like the statues and coins of ancient rulers²⁷. It can be suspected that this model still played an impact on the Kings of France's decision to shave, starting from Louis VII in the mid-12th century, even if this, at the same time, went hand in hand with an effort to sacralise the royal institution by introducing a hint at the Latin clergy's beardless appearance²⁸.

Indeed, for rulers shaving or growing a beard is not just a matter of personal taste, since it inescapably conveys messages that can be intentionally or unintentionally read as indicators of political aims. In the mid-Byzantine period at least, there were no doubts that beards were viewed as an inescapable attribute of virility, whereby men could be easily distinguished from women and eunuchs²⁹. Yet, this principle took some time before becoming commonplace in the Eastern empire. Until the early 7th century, Byzantine emperors remained basically loyal to shaving as «the custom of the Romans», as the historian Leo Grammaticus put it³⁰, and, accordingly, beardlessness was a prominent visual

26. Oldstone-Moore, *Of beards and men*, 38–62.

27. P. E. Dutton, *Charlemagne's mustache and other cultural clusters of a dark age*, New York 2004, 3–42; H. Bredekamp, *Der schwimmende Souverän. Karl der Große und die Bildpolitik des Körpers. Eine Studie zum schematischen Bildakt*, Berlin 2014, 45–49.

28. This is the thesis strongly fostered by Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men*, 97–104.

29. M.-F. Auzépy, «Prolégomènes à une histoire du poil», *Travaux et mémoires* 14 (2002), 1–12; Eadem, «Tonsure des moines, barbe des moines et barbe du Christ», in *Histoire du poil*, ed. M.-F. Auzépy, J. Cornette, Paris 2011, 71–91; G. Sidéris, «Jouer du poil à Byzance: anges, eunuques et femmes déguisées en moines», *ibid.*, 93–114; S. Tougher, «Bearding Byzantium. Masculinity, eunuchs, and the Byzantine life course», in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, ed. B. Neil and L. Garland, Farnham 2013, 153–67. Cf. also B. Krsmanović and L. Milanović, «Beards that matter. Visual Representations of Patriarch Ignatios in Byzantine Art», *Zograf*, 41 (2017), 25–36.

30. Leo Grammaticus, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1842, 139.

detail in their most diffused images, those imprinted on coins³¹. Justinian's coinage, for example, insisted on his shaved appearance in his *solidi*, and this traditional look was emphasized also in his monumental images, such as the mosaic portrait in San Vitale in Ravenna³². Nevertheless, wearing a short beard was not regarded as something improper in palatine circles, given that it is distinctively used in the representation of some officers in the Ravenna panel. Furthermore, it is known that this look had occasionally been adopted already in previous centuries, as numismatic evidence seems to suggest. For example, some facial hair appears on Leo I's image in some *solidi* minted in the 460s³³. It is hard to say on which grounds such iconographic changes were introduced in coins and the extent to which they corresponded to a distinctive visual strategy in the emperor's construction of his body image. It may be that a short beard was not perceived as contradicting the ideal of the shaven military leader, given that a perfectly clean-shaven chin was often difficult to obtain, and that shaving did not necessarily take place regularly.

The first emperor to intentionally adopt this fashion as a sign of distinction was Phocas (602-610), but scholars have been reluctant to consider him as the real responsible for a new imperial look: given the hatred he solicited in Constantinople's people, he can be hardly suspected to have been a model for later rulers³⁴. Furthermore, as he is regularly described as having a misshapen figure, it has been assumed that he may have grown his beard to cover a large scar disfiguring his face. Thus, the real

31. Sh. Tougher, «Bearding Byzantium: Masculinity, Eunuchs and the Byzantine Life Course», in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, ed. B. Neil and L. Garland, London and New York 2013, 153-66.

32. Ch. Barber, «The Imperial Panels at San Vitale: a Reconsideration», *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1990), 19-43; I. Andreescu-Treadgold, W. T. Treadgold, «Procopius and the imperial panels of S. Vitale», *Art Bulletin*, 79 (1997), 708-23; K. Gulowsen, «Liturgical Illustrations or Sacred Images? The Imperial Panels in San Vitale, Ravenna», *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, n.s., 11 (1999), 115-46.

33. Ph. Grierson and M. May, *Catalogue of Late Roman Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection. From Arcadius and Honorius to the Accession of Anastasius*, Washington, D.C., 1992, 162-63.

34. Head, «Physical Descriptions», 230; B. Baldwin, «Physical descriptions of Byzantine emperors», *Byzantion*, 51 (1981), 8-21: 18-19.

shift came with Heraclius in the early decades of the VIIth century, even if the promotion of a bearded look seems to have undergone different stages. When the exarch of Carthage ascended the throne, in 610, he shaved his chin, since he clearly aimed to manifest his power by conforming to the traditional imperial style. Later on, the visual promotion of his bearded look went hand in hand with his gradual reformation of the state structure and the imperial role, which implied a break with many late antique habits, established the title of *basileus* and introduced the principle of dynastic/hereditary, instead of elective succession of the sovereign. In his *solidi* minted between 615 and 625 he was shown bearded and large-sized, close to his heir Heraclius-Constantine, shaven and diminutive. From 629 onwards, the dimensional gap between the two figures is less evident, but the differentiation is ensured by their distinctive hairstyles: if the heir now wears a medium-size beard, his father stands out for a long, thick beard and large moustache (Fig. 1)³⁵.



Fig. 1. Golden *solidus* of Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine, mint of Constantinople, 629–31. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Creative commons licence).

35. Ph. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, Berkeley 1982, 102–3.

It has been suggested that such changes may have been purely iconographic devices enabling beholders to quickly acknowledge the more or less advanced age and, accordingly, the institutional role of each figure. Undoubtedly, it can be easily assumed that some features were intentionally exaggerated, but at the same time it is clear that the coins, and especially the latest ones, came to diffuse a facial type which no subject had been hitherto accustomed to associate with lay rulers. Heraclius' extremely long beard was a patriarchal one, as only prophets, some apostles, and a few ecclesiastics were entitled to harbour. But, at the same time, he could not be mistaken for a religious figure, since none of the latter would have been represented with imposing moustache, protruding beyond the side boards.

The selected scheme is so unconventional that it can be hardly regarded as a simple visual strategy to differentiate his role from that of his heir. It should also be stressed that most of his successors in and beyond the Heraclian dynasty departed from this solution in their coinage: it was avoided by Constantine IV and Justinian II³⁶, whereas its appropriation is evident in Constans II's gold *solidi*: if, as proposed by some scholars, the latter is to be identified with Emperor Constantine «Pogonatus», i.e. «the bearded», a nickname mentioned in a number of sources³⁷, the use of this scheme would have been intentionally meant to visualize a distinctive sign of his outward appearance and, perhaps more crucially, his wish to look, or be said to look, like his grandfather, so that he may be credited with embodying his renowned predecessor's political and military virtues.

It is probably not coincidental that Heraclius' extravagantly long beard appeared in his coinage immediately after the end of the Greek-Persian war, in 629, and was regularly repeated until the end of his realm in 641³⁸. The conflict had been invested with strong religious meanings especially after 614, when the

36. On the Heraclian dynasty's coinage in general cf. *ibidem*, 84-149. On Justinian II cf. J. D. Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II (685-695, 705-711 A.D.)*, New York 1959.

37. E. W. Brooks, «Who was Constantine Pogonatus?», *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 17 (1908), 460-62.

38. J. Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts*, Leiden 1976, 16-20; Ph. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, 102-3.

Sassanian king Khusraw II devastated Jerusalem and stole the relic of the Holy Cross, and it was with the latter's solemn restitution to the holy city that the war's end and the Persian defeat were celebrated. The attack on Christian symbols invested Heraclius, as military and political leader of Byzantium, with unprecedented expectations, and it was in this context that he must have decided to renounce to his short-cropped beard and let it grow freely. Such a behaviour was traditional for military rulers under some special circumstances: already Julius Caesar had made a vow to abstain from shaving until he had avenged a Gallic attack on one of his troops, and similar uses were widespread among the German populations³⁹. In a Christian perspective, such habits could be associated with the Biblical model of Nazirite self-dedication and thus invested the act of growing a beard with a strong penitential meaning: indeed, several sources witness that whoever engaged in a penitential activity, such as those who went on pilgrimage, were expected to abstain from the razor⁴⁰.

Desire of revenge and pious self-commitment to God's service, associated with some form of self-contempt, were something that Heraclius, in the exceptional circumstances of the

39. As reported by Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, I, 77, ed. J. C. Rolfe and D. W. Hurley, Cambridge, London 1998, 118. Also Antony and Augustus are reported to have adopted the bearded look as a sign of mourning and engagement in taking revenge for a military defeat or a murder. Cf. H. Mötefindt, «Studien über die Geschichte und Verbreitung der Bartracht», *Anthropos* 22 (1927), 828-64: 631-32; R. Much, *Die Germania des Tacitus*, Heidelberg 1937, 292-93; J. Pollini, *The portraiture of Gaius and Lucius Caesar*, New York 1987, 72.

40. G. G. Meersseman, «I penitenti nei secoli XI e XII», in *I laici nella Societas Christiana dei secoli XI e XII*, Milan 1968, 306-45: 323; Constable, «Introduction», 66-67; R. Bartlett, «Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages», *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4 (1994), 43-60: 53; M. C. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners. Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France*, Ithaca and London 1995, 180-81; D. Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*, New York 2001, 171-72; K. L. Jansen, *Peace and Penance in Late Medieval Italy*, Princeton 2018, 181-82. The association of wearing a beard and penance is clearly described by the Anglo-Norman writer Ordericus Vitalis in ca. 1130, in the context of a general criticism of the bad habits of his day's young people. Cf. Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 8, 10, ed. MGH SS, XXVI, 23: «Olim poenitentes et capti ac peregrini usualiter intonsi erant longasque barbas gestabant indicioque tali poenitentiam seu captionem vel peregrinationem spectantibus praetendebant».

Greek-Persian war, had many good reasons to feel and manifest through its freely flowing beard, altering the appearance of his face and giving shape to a sort of hairy mask. In this way, he exposed himself to mockery, but, if we are to believe an old Georgian text – the probably IXth century *Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* included in the *K'art'lis ts'xovreba* («The Life of K'art'li»), attributed to Juansher Juansheriani – he didn't care at all:

People in the fortress of K'ala [that is present-day T'bilisi] did not submit; and the chief of the fortress abused the Greek Caesar, saying: 'You have a goat's beard and a goat's neck'. Then Caesar [Heraclius] ordered: 'That man calls me a goat, these words should have some basis'. And he took the book of the Prophet Daniel and found there the following lines: 'And a goat comes forward from the West and destroys the horns of the ram of the East'. And Caesar rejoiced, convinced that he would gain a victory over the Persians⁴¹.

Far from being disturbed from this worn-out joke – the same already known to Saint Jerome – Heraclius understood those insulting words as a good omen, since he was reminded of the vision in the *Book of Daniel* (8), where, as the archangel Gabriel explains, the ram, symbolising Persia, is destined to be defeated by the goat, standing for «the king of Greece». The text suggests that the emperor's unusual, goat-like beard, looking ridiculous to his adversaries, manifested his special relationship to God, who was ready to ensure his victory on those who had dared mortifying the Christian empire. Time was ready for emperors to abandon razors: beards had become a tremendously efficacious symbol of their self-dedication to the Lord and reminded viewers of their status as penitents, who received power from heaven in reward for their role as material defenders of Christian believers.

41. Juansher Juansheriani, *Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali*, ed. D. Gamq'relidze, in *Kartlis ts'khovreba. A history of Georgia*, ed. R. Met'reveli and S. Jones, Tbilisi 2014, 109. On the dating of this text, cf. S. H. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts*, Leuven 2003, 196–242. The same story occurs also in the *Conversion of K'artli*: cf. C. B. Lerner, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography*, London 2004, 149.

ABSTRACT

Michele Bacci, *Beards and the Construction of Facial Appearance in the Middle Ages*

The present paper explores the multiple meanings attributed in the Middle Ages to beards as indicators of both conventional and disruptive behaviours. It focuses on a comparative analysis of the ways in which facial hair was used, in both Byzantium and Western Europe, to construct individual identities in their interrelation with shared notions of masculinity, social marginality, patriarchal authoritativeness, priestly roles, penitence, and self-dedication to God. A special emphasis is laid on the “iconicity” of beards and the ways in which they managed to convey individual men’s self-understanding of their role in the world.

Michele Bacci

University of Fribourg (CH)
michele.bacci@unifr.ch

SISMEL - EDIZIONI DEL GALLUZZO

