

Customs and Traditions

The beliefs, rituals, and superstitions of early civilizations varied from one ethnic group to another, depending on the region and social interactions with other groups. There was a general belief among many groups that hair clippings could bewitch an individual. Hence, the privilege of haircutting was reserved for the priest, medicine man, or spiritual leader of the tribe.

According to the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras, the hair was the source of the brain's inspiration, and cutting it decreased an individual's intellectual capacity. The Irish peasantry believed that if hair cuttings were burned or buried with the dead, no evil spirits would haunt the individual. Among some Native American tribes, it was believed that the hair and the body were so linked that anyone possessing a lock of hair of another might work his will on that individual.

In almost every early culture, hairstyles indicated social status. In ancient Greece, boys would cut their hair upon reaching adolescence, while their Hindu counterparts would shave their heads. Following the invasion of China by the Manchu, Chinese men adopted the queue as a mark of dignity and manhood. Noblemen of ancient Gaul indicated their rank by wearing their hair long, until Caesar, upon conquering Gaul, made them cut it, as a sign of submission. At various times in Roman history, slaves would be allowed or disallowed to wear beards, depending on the dictates of the ruler.

Coloring agents were often used to add further dimension. The ancient Britons, extremely proud of their long hair, brightened blond hair with washes composed of tallow, lime, and the extracts of certain vegetables. Darker hair was treated with dyes extracted and processed from plants, trees, and various soils. The Danes, Angles, and Normans dressed their hair for beautification,

adornment, and ornamentation before battles with the Britons. In ancient Rome, the color of a woman's hair indicated her class or rank. Noblewomen tinted their hair red, those of the middle class colored their hair blond, and poor women were compelled to dye their hair black. Much later, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth in England, it would become fashionable for men to dye the beard and cut it into a variety of shapes.

In later centuries, religion, occupation, and politics also influenced the length and style of hair as well as the wearing (or not) of beards. Clergymen of the Middle Ages were distinguished by the [tonsure](#) (TON-shur), a shaved patch on the crown of the head. During the seventh century, Celtic and Roman church leaders disagreed on the exact shape the tonsure should take. The circular tonsure, called the *tonsure of St. Peter*, left only a slight fringe of hair around the head and was preferred in Germany, Italy, and Spain (Figure 1-6). The Picts and Scots preferred a semicircular design, known as the *tonsure of St. John*. After much argument, the pope eventually decreed that priests were to shave their beards and mustaches and adopt the tonsure of St. Peter.

Figure 1-6

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The circular tonsure (tonsure of St. Peter) left only a slight fringe of hair around the head of the clergymen who wore it.

Although the edicts of the church maintained some influence over priests and the general populace for several centuries, beards and longer hairstyles had returned by the eleventh century. Priests curled or braided their hair and beards until Pope Gregory issued another papal decree requiring shaved faces and short hair. It was not until 1972 that the Roman Catholic Church finally abolished the practice of tonsure.

Most rulers and monarchs became trendsetters by virtue of their position and power in society. Personal whim, taste, and even physical limitations could become the basis for changes in hairstyles and fashion. For example, in the sixteenth century, when Francis I of France accidentally burned his hair with a

torch, his loyal subjects had their hair, beards, and mustaches cut short. During the reign of Louis XIV in the seventeenth century, noblemen wore wigs because the king, who was balding, did so. During the nineteenth century in France, men and women showed appreciation for antiquity by wearing variations of the “Caesar cut,” the style of the early Roman emperors.