

The Romans were very concerned about their hair, how it looked, how much of it there was or wasn't. They weren't the only ones, of course; throughout history men and women have wanted good hairdressers, and moralists complained about too elegant hair styles or angry parents about too inelegant ones.

Hair was very important in politics and government. Men in the Imperial court wanted a politically correct coiffure, one that exuded *auctoritas* and *dignitas*. After Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world with a medium-short haircut featuring careless wispy bangs over his noble and virile brow, many would-be rulers such as Pompey the Great wore their hair in the same way. Julius Caesar was partially bald, so substituted a wreath of laurel, but 'the look' seemed to work well for Augustus, and it became quite popular. Throughout the Julio-Claudian period there are many examples of the Alexander haircut on statues of the family members, as any walk through a Roman sculpture room in museums will show you. The haircut was still in fashion with the Emperor Trajan in the second century.

After that the Imperial crowd favoured another Greek look, made popular by the Emperor Hadrian. A carefully sculpted crown of curls on the head and also a curled beard framed the upper face, emphasizing the eyes and brow, creating perhaps a philosophical or intellectual, cultured look. In Hadrian's case it also hid a disfigured face. This look lasted throughout the third century and was also widely imitated, when intellectual activity ceased to be important to some of the Imperial pretenders. The clean-shaven look returned with Constantine the Great, at least among the Romans. Sidonius Apollinaris, a Roman Gaulish writer of the 5th century, informs us that barbarians didn't know how to properly dress their hair, using rancid butter (instead of proper perfumed oil) on their shaggy and unkempt locks. He implies the butter might actually have improved their natural odor.

Men weren't the only ones concerned with their hair. Women too spent time and energy on their coiffures. During the early Augustan period a neatly made knot at the nape of the neck, with a single braid pulled up and forward in the middle of the head, was favoured by women of the Imperial family. Octavia, the wife of Mark Antony and sister of Augustus, had such a hair style. It seemed suitable for a busy housewife, unlike some of the later fashions for women's hair. In the Flavian period highly piled curls in front

and a series of tight braids in back must have taken hours for a slave (or two or three) to put together and required the wearer to keep her head in the same position at all times. Moreover, the wearer didn't look like the same person coming as going, according to rude comments by writers. But variety seems to be the norm; Ovid in *Ars Amatoria* Book III describes many hair styles, with the proviso that each woman should suit herself.

Both sexes made use of dyes and lotions to preserve the colour, wigs and false hairpieces for fashion or to cover thinning hair. Curling irons were used by both sexes for hair styles and men's beards. Unlike modern electrically heated irons, the Roman ones were heated in the fireplace or stove over hot coals, and could burn or singe if too hot. Sometimes a crew-cut was obtained from over-hot irons rather than the desired set of curls. Women especially seemed to prefer to be blonde, and bleaches and blond wigs from the northern barbarian countries were very popular -- and expensive.

Body hair was not considered attractive, except for women's eyebrows, which were penciled in if too thin. Ovid advised women during the Augustan period not to allow a wild goat to infest their armpits nor to allow their legs to become bristly. Hairy armpits were not fashionable for men either, and there were professional armpit hair-pluckers to be found in bath houses, who for a small fee and a great deal of pain would pluck all the hair out of a patron's armpits.

The lavish attention given to hair was debauchery as far as the early Christians were concerned. Christian men kept their hair short and were clean shaven. Women kept their hair covered, and spent no time on elaborate hair styles. And excessive body hair was considered an asset in some instances. During the reign of the Emperor Diocletian, the Christian maiden Agnes refused the advances of a praetor's son, so the story goes, and was stripped naked in what is today the Piazza Navona. She was protected from prying eyes by a miraculous growth of hair which even the flames would not burn as she stood tied to a stake. (Dofasco should do this well.) St. Agnes was finally dispatched by a sword, and buried outside Rome on the Via Nomentana and the church of Sant'Agnese was built over her. Visitors may see her grave below, and her portrait as a pink-cheeked teen-ager in a lovely mosaic in the apse. Those wanting perhaps a closer visit with the saint may go and see her now hairless head in her church in the Piazza Navona, where it is stored separately from her body.