

Beards of Bygone Eras by Dylan Siebert

Among the many fascinating and exciting subjects that I get to pursue as a student in the University of Waterloo Classics and Medieval Studies department, one of the most intriguing is facial hair. My own research has been highly fruitful in this field: I produced my first successful beard during my second term in university, and since then I have greatly relished the personal freedom to either shave or not shave as I see fit.

But as a pupil of ancient times, I always like to be aware of the historical context of my actions, and this new element in my personal hygiene stirred up many questions for me. After a bit of research, I discovered that beards, just like any other fashion trend, have risen and fallen in popularity from Classical times right up until the nineteen-seventies and beyond.

One very important trendsetter from antiquity was Alexander the Great, who is most famous for conquering most of the ancient world near the end of the fourth century BC (his empire stretched from modern-day Greece through Turkey, Iraq, and Iran). Alexander, born into the royal family of Macedon, is always depicted in sculpture as a dreamy-eyed youth with impossibly good physique and not a single hair on his chin. He was also an indomitable general, and is said to have ordered his soldiers to shave off their beards so that enemies couldn't grab them in the heat of battle. This made good tactical sense, but it also prevented his soldiers from appearing more manly than himself. Alexander, after all, ascended to his father's throne at age twenty, and perhaps he simply hadn't yet had the time to cultivate a fine crop of facial hair.

After Alexander, clean-shavenness became the hippest thing since leather sandals, at least in Macedon. It wasn't until the Romans conquered Macedon and its neighbouring Greek states in the second century BC, making them into Roman provinces, that shaving really began to catch on in Italy. The Romans may have beat the Greeks militarily, but in terms of fashion they were slaves to their eastern counterparts. As the poet Horace put it, "*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*" - "conquered Greece took her fierce master captive". Romans of the Late Republic ate up Greek culture as fast as they could import it: theatre, poetry, philosophy, bread (Romans had hitherto been accustomed to a large quantity of porridge in their diets), and, most importantly to this investigation, slaves with attractively smooth cheeks. A whole new world of style began to appear in opposition to the traditional Roman ideal of manliness in the face of Celtic invasion, which required a manly (bearded) face. Some older Roman poets were very upset by these tumultuous cultural changes (as older poets always are) and retreated from mainstream society in order to compose odes to the good old days, when real men ate their grits and grew their beards long and wild.

Beardlessness now enjoyed the patronage of the most powerful state in the Mediterranean region, and Roman leaders from Julius Caesar to Trajan, another great conqueror in the East, proudly displayed clean-shaven faces in their official marble busts. Only in 117 AD did a new lord of facial fashion arrive on the scene in the form of the Emperor Hadrian.

Hadrian, it is said, had many warts and scars on his face, and grew a beard partly to cover them. He was also a great lover of anything to do with Greece, which had by this

time swung back toward hairiness. As emperor, Hadrian had a great deal of clout not only in the Senate but also in the world of fashion, and Romans everywhere picked up the new trend. Once again, style in the ancient world had been irrevocably altered by one man, and almost all Roman emperors after Hadrian grew out their beards. Having a thick beard became handy in later years, when barbarian invasions began to threaten Rome's borders and emperors needed to appear tough. Facial hair remained popular throughout the Middle Ages for similar reasons.

The great pendulum of fashion swings back and forth, even throughout history, and I was glad to learn that my humble chinstrap has such a noble lineage. Whether you yourself, dear reader, shave every day or perhaps much less often (or never), you would be wise to keep in mind the historical significance of your choice.