

The Growth and Erasure of the Papal Beard

The growth and then erasure of the papal beard in the years from 1510 to 1700 is one of the more curious phenomena in papal history. First Julius II (r. 1503–13), then Clement VII (r. 1523–34) and every subsequent pope until Clement XI (r. 1700–21) cultivated facial hair of some description. Yet Clement XI abandoned the beard and no successor has worn one since. Of course, there may have been—in fact, almost certainly were—bearded popes pre-sixteenth century, during the era before a strict obligation on Latin clerics to shave came into force at the Council of Toulouse in 1119.¹ Nevertheless, the sudden appearance of papal beards in the sixteenth century, and their equally abrupt disappearance in the eighteenth, merits analysis. It hints at a history of individual micro-climates or local cultures of the beard which intersected with the wider beard cultures, their significances, and concerns as discussed in this set of essays.

My analysis here is brief but its starting point is this: each pope's styling choices were, of course, up to a point his own—yet a broader *habitus*, in which facial hair came with meaning (asserted and contested), also shaped his choices. Julius II and Clement VII have been the focuses of analysis of papal beard culture thus far, but holistic consideration of the chronology of papal beards (such as is presented here) suggests Paul III (r. 1534–49) ought to be seen as a more pivotal figure in the beard's transformation from situationally-excused aberration into a “normal” feature of Roman curial clerics. Paul's choices, like Julius' and Clement's, underscore how all Roman curialists, priests and prelates alike, engaged constantly in performances of status. Hair was always a resource to draw on in their performances. The moments when the tale of the pope's beard begins and ends both saw radical changes in the meanings Western Europeans attached to different presentations of the male body, its hair in particular. We might observe that papal self-fashioning reflected this. The premium attached to cultivating a beard therefore arguably also reveals something important about how popes, and by extension many of the clergy below them in the great ecclesiastical hierarchy, saw themselves in relation to other men at this time. Theirs is, above all, a story of changing clerical performances of gender: Julius II's gambit of growing his facial hair may have been occasioned by quite specific objectives but it spawned a movement with varied and lasting spiritual and cultural implications.

Beards and the clergy: a medieval history

Beards have long been a major dividing line between Western and Eastern clergy in the Christian tradition.² The origins of this division are debatable, but they reflected competing traditions for high status presentation of male hair in Late Antiquity as well as a certain scriptural ambiguity. Leviticus 19:27, for instance, prohibits a man from cutting the hair on the sides of his head or the

¹ Textual references to bearded medieval popes include Paul Payan, “Images du pouvoir pontifical dans les livres de Clément VII et Benoît XIII,” *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 51 (2016), 107–30; Etienne Baluze, *Vitae paparum avinionensium*, ed. Guillaume Mollat, 4 vols. (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1914), 2:496; Joëlle Rollo-Koster “Castrum Doloris: Rites of Vacant See and the Living Dead Pope in Schismatic Avignon,” in Joëlle Rollo-Koster (ed.), *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 245–77, at 276.

² Edward Siecienski, *Beards, Azymes, and Purgatory: The Other Issues that Divided East and West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 17–76.

edge of his beard, but 1 Corinthians 11:14 describes long male hair as a “disgrace to him”. Jerome characterised the beard as a mark of sorrow.³ He, other early Church Fathers, and the Apostles were often depicted as bearded in the centuries that followed. The Latin Church moved strongly against beards only after 1000, as a result of the so-called Gregorian reform. This movement, which aimed to return ecclesiastical practice to a purer, earlier form also sought to distinguish cleric from layman. Proscriptions against clerical beards appeared at the Councils of Limoges (1031) and Bourges (1031), Coyac in Spain (1050), and Toulouse (1119). Gregory VII (r. 1073–85), for whom the reform was named, himself branded the growing of a beard by a priest as a serious crime.⁴ Gregory’s eponymous successor Gregory IX (r. 1227–41) also prohibited them in his decretals.⁵ Gregorian reform nevertheless created a problem for Latin clerics which Jo Ann McNamara first identified (the so-called “Herrenfrage”).⁶ How should such men perform their masculinity when the normative channels—sex, sport, and martial activity—were not open to them? Ruth Mazo Karras, another medievalist, has provided a partial answer: many continued to engage in masculine competition according to the same categories and criteria as their lay counterparts.⁷ Karras and others elaborate on the inconsistency with which they therefore applied rules of canon law in the context of sexual activity. However, their transgressions were equally felt across more subtle categories of gender performance. Growing of facial hair, in imitation of trends amongst the secular elite, was one of the many such transgressions that related to dress and appearance.

The late fifteenth century saw a major revision in attitudes towards beards in some parts of Western Europe—and this eventually had a major bearing on the papal court. One factor in medieval Latin criticism of beards was a connection with ancient pagans, pre-Christian heathens, Jewish prophets (see Michael Barbezat’s contribution), and unwashed peasants. The English monastic chronicler Orderic Vitalis (1075–c.1142) wrote a fabulously condescending passage that men who wear beards look like stinking goats.⁸ Douglas Biow, who has studied the rise of beard fashions amongst Renaissance Italy’s wider elites, argues that only the peninsula’s rapidly urbanising societies re-evaluated beards’ association with backwardness and rusticism. Humanist discourses rehabilitated facial hair as a sign of classical virtue and as a resource for individual self-expression.⁹ This reappraisal nevertheless still had to contend with another competing tradition: that of the Roman senatorial elite who had to be clean-shaven (as Lea Niccolai shows, this was still true under Augustus). Many aspirant republicans in late medieval Italy looked to

³ On Jerome’s discussion of beards, see Giles Constable, “Beards in History”, in Burchard of Bellevaux, *Apologiae Duae*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985), 47–130, at 57.

⁴ Gregory VII, *Register*, VIII, 10, ed. Erich Caspar, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH), *Epistolae Selectae*, vol. II, 529.

⁵ Gregory IX, *Decretales*, III, I, 7, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Emil Freidberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1879) II: 450.

⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: the restructuring of the gender system, 1050–1150,” in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–29.

⁷ Ruth Mazo Karras, “Thomas Aquinas’ Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe,” in Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (eds.), *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 52–67.

⁸ Quoted in Reginald Reynolds, *Beards: An Omnium Gatherum* (London: Unwin, 1950), 64.

⁹ Douglas Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, their Professions, and their Beards* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 181–224. More generally, see Jean-Marie Le Gall, *Un idéal masculin? Barbes et moustaches (XVe–XVIIIe siècles) suivi de Le Barbu ou Dialogue sur la barbe d’Antoine Hotman, traduit de latin par Guillaume Flamerie de Lachapelle* (Paris: Payot, 2011); Stefan Hanß, “Face-Work: Making Hair Matter in Sixteenth-Century Central Europe,” *Gender & History* 33 (2021): 314–45.

Rome for their models and so styled themselves after her politicians. Ironically, it may therefore be the degradation of those republican (and early imperial) models during the fifteenth century that created the cultural space for beards to be reconsidered.

Maya Maskarinec has shown the on-going conflict between both traditions in depictions of Gregory the Great—an early Church father but also a scion of a Roman senatorial family.¹⁰ Arguably, this shows the ongoing power of the classical ideal even at a time when it was coming under contestation. Elliott Horowitz has also advanced a somewhat different, albeit not necessarily incompatible, thesis which may explain the enthusiasm for beards beyond Italy.¹¹ Medieval Latins had spurned them because they associated them with the Jew or the Turk—figures of Oriental alterity. However, their sixteenth-century descendants instead valued them as important signifiers of difference between themselves and the beardless indigenous groups they encountered with increasing frequency across the globe (e.g. native Amerindians).

Pope Julius' beard

Julius II's beard has naturally been the main focus of inquiry into early modern papal beards, so it makes sense to concentrate on him here. The legend behind this beard is quixotic and easily recounted. Julius, having lost the city of Bologna in the Italian Wars (1494–c.1530), vowed not to shave until he had recaptured it. The recapture came quickly enough, and so the beard did not last long (about nine months). In fact, the story is a simplification. Contemporary evidence suggests that Julius had not been shaving for some months before Bologna's capture on May 23, 1511 probably due to illness (the logic was that one did not have to shave if one was ill).¹² The beard's value as propaganda was only recognised after Bologna's loss. Giles of Viterbo, a clerical humanist, offered a "spiritual" interpretation of the beard, likening it in a sermon to Aaron's as High Priest.¹³ Sebastian Tedallini's *Diario Romano* compares him to a hermit (*romito*).¹⁴ Ferraran propaganda against Julius also invoked the beard negatively (Antonio Gatico, the Mantuan envoy to Julius' court, said he resembled a bear).¹⁵ Ludwig Pastor, who documented some of these references, would seem to have found the first to link the beard to sorrow and protest: an anonymous Bolognese chronicle whose author wrote that the pope "grew

¹⁰ Maya Maskarinec, "A Question of Tradition: Catholic Reformers on Gregory the Great's Beard", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 51 (2021): 651–86.

¹¹ Elliott Horowitz, "The New World and the Changing Face of Europe," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (1997): 1181–1201.

¹² Mark Zucker has pieced together a chronology, "Raphael and the Beard of Julius II," *The Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 524–33. Opher Mansour, "Prince and Pontiff: Secular and Spiritual Authority in Papal State Portraiture between Raphael's Julius II and the Portraits of Pius V and Clement VIII", in Jill Burke and Michael Bury (eds.), *Art and Identity in Early Modern Rome* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 209–29.

¹³ Loren Partridge and Randolph Starn, *A Renaissance Likeness: Art and Culture in Raphael's Julius II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 45.

¹⁴ "Diario Romano dal 3 maggio 1485 al 6 giugno 1524 di Sebastiano di Branca Tedallini", in L. A. Muratori, ed. *Raccolta delgi storici italiani*, XXIII, Pt. III, (Città di Castello, 1904), 321.

¹⁵ Massimo Rospocher, *Il papa guerriero: Giulio II nello spazio pubblico europeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 218–20. Alessandro Luzio, "Federigo Gonzaga, ostaggio alla corte di Giulio II," *Archivio della Reale Società Romana di Storia Patria* 9 (1886): [509–83](#), at 569.

the beard to avenge himself, saying that he would not shave again until he had thrown King Louis off Italian soil.”¹⁶

Julius may indeed have wanted his beard to be interpreted as a mark of sorrow. This is certainly how Catholic apologists since his time (such as Pastor) have spun it. However, the pope’s decision to maintain facial hair after his illness can also be understood in other ways. Both Mark Zucker and Opher Mansour, another art historian, note the multiplicity of potential meanings of the beard—as well as the fact that they were far from mutually exclusive. For Zucker, Julius’ beard was a symbol of his determination, but also a form of penance and self-stigmatism. It was, above all, also an imposing physical characteristic on a man who wanted to be perceived as soldier rather than scholar (there was a long tradition of military beards in the Roman Empire even down to Tetrarchic times, albeit that they had been shorter than Julius’).¹⁷ Giles Constable showed the medieval beard’s status as a marker of testosterone, and this stereotype was surely also relevant.¹⁸ Most obviously, the beard invited comparison with the first pope, St Peter, who was almost always depicted as bearded (even at times when contemporary clergy were not allowed to be). Peter’s example points to one of the unproblematic contradictions in beard symbolism (at least to medieval and Renaissance audiences): Peter was famously tonsured and thus shaved (and cited all the time for that fact), although he had long been portrayed iconographically with an elder’s beard. Mansour adds further points to these: Raphael’s inclusion of the beard in his portrait of Julius placed the papal person in hybrid mode as both spiritual and secular. This would certainly have resonated both within and beyond the papal court.¹⁹

Within the court Julius’ beard could plausibly be explained as a mark of sorrow—he was repenting failure to defend the Church’s territory—but it also made a powerful statement that the pope was above canon law and could thus dispense with any of its proscriptions (including that against not shaving). Beyond the court, of course, it showed Julius to be a modern man of fashionable aristocratic tastes. His beard was nevertheless shocking to contemporaries and the scandal it caused was real and telling. The main complicating factor seems to be that Julius’ beard sat in contradiction with the wider image he had been fashioning. Julius had self-consciously based himself on Caesar, even changing his birth name Giuliano to Giulio for that reason. Suetonius relates how Caesar too let his beard grow after a defeat of his soldiers.²⁰ Was Julius simply aping his eponymous idol? The problem was that Julius’ new beard also made him look less like Caesar than like Julian the Apostate—a reversion to the most famous bearer of his birth name. This was especially problematic because Julian wore his beard to signal his paganism (see Lea Niccolai’s article).²¹ Perhaps this is why Julius removed his quickly, as soon as papal rule over the Romagna was restored.

Papal beards from Julius to the late sixteenth century

¹⁶ “[Lui] portava la barba per vendicarsi et diceva che non la voleva più rasar per insino a tanto che non aveva anco fuori scazato el re Ludovico de Franza d’Italia,” Pastor, *History of the Popes*, 6:339n.

¹⁷ Zucker, “Raphael and the Beard of Julius II,” 526–27.

¹⁸ Constable, “Beards in History”, 59–60.

¹⁹ Mansour, “Prince and Pontiff”, 210.

²⁰ **Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin, 1957), 38 (Life of Caesar 67).**

²¹ Rospocher, *Il papa guerrero*, 283–84.

Julius' immediate successors as pope reverted to clean shaving after his death. Leo X, a youthful thirty-eight on his election in 1513, remained clean-shaven throughout his life. He certainly has very glabrous cheeks in surviving portraits. An ordinance of Leo's successor Adrian VI (r. 1522–23) expressly forbade clerics from wearing beards. Its target may in fact have expressly been Leo's nephew Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, whose decision to grow one to mourn his uncle had scandalised Adrian.²² Elected pope himself (as Clement VII, r. 1523–34), Cardinal Giulio remained clean-shaven until the notorious 1527 Sack of Rome.²³ Herbert Vaughan, in his early 20th-century history of the Medici popes, suggests that Clement grew a beard only because he was so unattractive.²⁴ However, Anne Reynolds offers a more charitable explanation: taken prisoner by troops loyal to the Emperor Charles V, he cultivated it as a retaliatory gesture which genuflected to Julius' earlier example.²⁵

Clement seems to have promised to shave the beard as part of his programme of reconciliation with Charles at the end of the decade. Yet this never happened. In fact, the entire papal court in exile seems to have begun to grow beards from this date.²⁶ Clement's post-1527 coins also show him bearded. As Clement himself put it in a letter to Charles: "Our grief for the ruin of Italy, manifest to every eye, still more for the ruin of this city and for our own misfortune, is immeasurably heightened by the sight of Rome." The beard—and Clement's ongoing maintenance of it—was therefore part of a political performance which also showed growing awareness on the pope's part of the power and importance of visual propaganda at Rome and abroad. The diary of a French resident in Rome noted in 1531 how the pope had passed a new ordinance: "In January 1531, Pope Clement VII promulgated a bull which allowed all priests to sport beards."²⁷

Papal beards beyond Clement

Had Clement been the last pope to wear a beard, the story of how such beards were revived in the High Renaissance would be interesting enough. But, in part thanks to his ordinance, and to wider efforts to promote the growing of beards, Clement was succeeded by popes who maintained facial hair for another 166 years. Paul III (r. 1534–49) was the key figure in ensuring this as sustained practice. If Paul had abandoned the beard which he, as Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, had grown in solidarity with Clement then it might have withered (or at least become patchier). Yet Paul's pontificate was the longest of the century and his longevity ensured that

²² Pastor, *History of the Popes*, 9:69–70. Sheryl Reiss, "Adrian VI, Clement VII, and Art," in [Kenneth](#) Gouwens and [Sheryl](#) Reiss (eds.), *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2005), 339–62, at 345.

²³ "Ha una barba longa canuda, cavalca con 8 cavalli et 30 fanti di la sua guardia. Sta sempre malinconico," Sanudo, *Diario*, XLVIII, 226, in Pastor's notes, *History of the Popes*, 10:5n.

²⁴ Herbert Vaughan, *The Medici Popes* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 292.

²⁵ Anne Reynolds, "The papal court in exile: Clement VII in Orvieto, 1527–28," in [Kenneth](#) Gouwens and [Sheryl](#) Reiss (eds.), *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 143–64, at 161.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷ "En moy de janvier 1531, pape Clément VII fit une bulle que tous presbiters puissent porter la barbe," *Barb. Lat.* 3552, "Diary of a French resident in Rome, 1509–40," 52. The diary note also coincides with the publication of Valeriano's treatise *Apologia pro sacerdotum barbis* dedicated to Cardinal Ippolito [de' de'](#) Medici, of course. Not that we can be totally clear about the date of Valeriano's treatise.

beards had time to become well-established at the papal court. Quite a number of portraits of individual cardinals survive from the 1530s and they exhibit the same long, flowing, slightly wild style of beard that the pope himself had. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), the humanist whom Paul created a cardinal, is the subject of some of the best portraits of the 1540s and they are particularly significant because depictions of Bembo up to the point of his creation as a cardinal in 1539 still show him clean shaven.²⁸ Paul III's successor Julius III (r. 1550–55) and his successor Marcellus II (r. 1555) both also maintained heavy beards. The next pope, Paul IV (r. 1555–59) had a particularly imposing beard which was often referenced in *Pasquinades* (satirical poems) composed at the time of his death.²⁹ Pius IV (r. 1559–65) has a slightly more kempt beard in the well-known portrait by Scipione Pulzone but Pius V's beard in the equally famous portraits by Pulzone and Bartolomeo Passarotti is once again wispy but wild.

Papal beards in later sixteenth-century portraiture alternate between the Pius IV and Pius V models—variability which could be explained by styling choices but also simply by cycles of kemping and grooming. The 17th century brought further noticeable developments. Paul V's beard in contemporary portraits, such as that by Caravaggio, is shorter and more focused on the neck and chin. Later copies sometimes remove any ambiguity whatsoever as to whether it covers any part of his cheeks. Paul's successor Gregory XV (r. 1621–23) is unambiguously clean-shaven except around the mouth and chin in all surviving portraits. The same is true of Urban VIII (r. 1623–44) in the famous portraits by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Pietro da Cortona, even though Urban was known as the pope “of the beautiful beard”.³⁰ Interestingly, a Caravaggio portrait of a much younger Urban from 1598, before his promotion even to bishop, is much more ambiguous about the extent and shape of his facial hair (although this ambiguity is partly the consequence of Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro* technique). Diego Velázquez's celebrated portrait of Innocent X (r. 1644–55) shows the pope with a similar style of beard to Urban, though with noticeably less hair available on his chin to sculpt it. Portraits of the next two popes, Alexander VII (r. 1655–67) and Clement IX (r. 1667–69) show a further regression to moustache and a separate goatee. The final four bearded popes, Clement X (r. 1670–76), Innocent XI (r. 1676–89), Alexander VIII (r. 1689–91), and Innocent XII (r. 1691–1700) maintained this style. This progression is consistent with wider developments, especially as fashions emanated from the French court.

Interpreting the pope's beard

How then should we interpret the rise of the pope's beard during and after Clement VII's reign? Piero Valeriano's *Pro sacerdotum barbis* may be the key text. Valeriano, a humanist whose real name was Giovan Pietro dalle Fosse (1477–1558), found favour with the Medici clerics in Rome and is perhaps best-known for his symbolical work (e.g. on Egyptian hieroglyphs).³¹ However,

²⁸ Alfred Armand, *Les medailleurs italiens des XVe et XVIe siècles* (Paris: E. Plon Et Cie, 1883–87), 1:150–51 and 1:163 note the existence of a medal from 1537 fabricated by Leone Leoni depicting Bembo clean-shaven. By contrast Tizian's portrait of Bembo in the National Gallery (London), c. 1540, shows him heavily bearded.

²⁹ *Avviso di Roma*, August 26, 1559, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Urb. Lat.* 1039, 76r.

³⁰ A famous *Pasquinade*, “Papa Urbano dalla barba bella/Doppo il Giubileo, mette la gabella” [Pope Urban of the beautiful beard, imposes a gabelle [tax] now the jubilee is over], Gaetano Bossi, *La Pasquinata quod non fecerunt barbari fecerunt Barberini: ricerche storiche* (Rome: Enrico Filiziani, 1898), 33.

³¹ Piero Valeriano *Bolzani*, *Hieroglyphica sive de sacris Aegyptiorum literis commentarii* (Basle, 1556).

Valeriano published this revisionist text in 1531, dedicating it to Clement's nephew Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici. The *Pro sacerdotum barbis* is an apologium which selectively quotes the Old Testament to show the existence of beards in biblical times, notably those of Aaron (Psalm 133:3) and David (1 Samuel 21:13; 2 Samuel 10:5; 1 Chronicles 19:5). It concludes that "not only is the beard not forbidden but God himself recommended wearing it and not removing it".³² In good humanist fashion, Valeriano pours over the ancient texts to locate the moment in which the Latin Church came into error. Surprisingly, this was not the Council of Carthage of 398, which had declared that *clerici neque comam nutrient neque barbam* [clerics must cultivate neither their hair nor their beards] but rather in Gratian's *Decretum* which had copied this text wrongly. The phrase was missing a further verb, "radant" [shaved], at its end, Valeriano contended. The Council's intention was thus quite different to how it had come to be understood. Would it not be quite improper for a pope to prohibit beards because of an ignorant mistake by medieval canonists? Valeriano further pointed to the range of further medieval texts which seem to presume that clerics do in fact have beards, to how Leviticus forbade Jewish priests from shaving beards off and to how Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles all maintained them. This example alone was enough to justify a cleric wearing a beard, he said.

The key questions with Valeriano's text are, of course, why he came to write and how seriously we should take it at face value. Jean-Marie Le Gall and Kenneth Gouwens have both offered valuable readings, which both recognise it as a form of "serious parody"—that is, it is clearly a mock apologia which nevertheless advances arguments that the author at least partially believes to be true (something we might not was also true of its ancient counterpart text, Synesius' praise of baldness).³³ Gouwens further notes the text's gendered language and essentially propagandistic value as a jeremiad: it "locates the cause of Rome's sufferings in the 'feminine' delicacies of the Roman clergy, which had provoked the wrath of God and threatened to do so again."³⁴ Jeff Persels, who has studied the reception of Valeriano text amongst French Protestants, shows how it in fact provided those Protestants with a series of arguments which they could turn back on Catholic clerics to show the unnatural nature of their behaviour prior to 1517.³⁵ This surely cannot have been what Valeriano intended—and yet in writing it with an edge of comic irony he can scarcely have been surprised that it would be repurposed by papal critics. What does this mean for Clement's beard? Clement himself may even have conceived of the beard as a means of silently rebuking his fellow clerics for allowing the Sack of Rome to happen—he covered his face with the "mark of the beast" as Persels would have it. It is difficult to corroborate such a thesis without better access to Clement's inner feelings. Yet Clement was a skilled performer of rhetoric and emotion. Paolo Giovio reports a highly contrived ceremony of

³² "Constat enim in vetere lege barbam non modo non prohibitum sed etiam decreto habendam imperiisque dei ipseis nequaquam amovendam," Piero Valeriano Bolzani, *Pro sacerdotum barbis* (Paris: Andreas Wechel, 1558), 15.

³³ Jean-Marie Le Gall, *Un Idéal masculin? Barbes et moustaches (XVe–XVIIIe siècles) suivi de Le Barbu ou Dialogue sur la barbe d'Antoine Hotman, traduit de latin par Guillaume Flamerie de Lachapelle* (Paris: Payot, 2011); Jean-Marie Le Gall, "On Priestly Hair and Beards," trans. Jean-Pascal Gay, in Jean-Pascal Gay, Silvia Mostaccio, and Josselin Tricou (eds.), *Masculinités sacerdotales* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 155–75. George H. Kendal (ed.), *Synesius: In Praise of Baldness* (Vancouver: Pharmakon Press, 1985).

³⁴ Kenneth Gouwens, *Remembering the Renaissance: Humanist Narratives of the Sack of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 151.

³⁵ Jeff Persels, "Bearding the pope, circa 1562," in Jeff Persels, Kendall Tarte, and George Hoffmann (eds.), *Itineraries in Renaissance French Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 228–44, at 239.

reconciliation between him and Cardinal Pompeo Colonna after the Sack in which tears and ritual forgiveness loomed large.³⁶

Of course, to understand the significance of bearded popes we must also look beyond Valeriano to the wider context of facial hair in early 1530s Italy. Douglas Biow's work, which shows the beard's growing popularity in elite Italian social circles at this time, would suggest that the arguments in favour of bearded clerics were indeed convenient rationalisations which allowed those clerics to partake of an increasingly important practice that marked social status. Apropos of this, the original insistence on Latin clerics being clean-shaven in the 1100s came at a time when secular princes were also keenly adopting such practices (perhaps because, per Elliott Horowitz, they increasingly associated beards with non-Latinate otherness). Clerical fashions tracked secular ones as they were also later to do in other matters such as the shift from beards to wigs (discussed in more detail below). Mandates that clerics be clean-shaven thus sought to distinguish them from peasants but not from kings. Any visual differences between prelate and secular prince were secondary to this basic distinction.

But what then of the Protestant Reformation idea of the beard as a sign of spiritual authenticity?³⁷ This complicates the question somewhat but is not at all incompatible with the general observation. For one thing, beards were becoming increasingly high-status in northern European societies too, so it distinguished a reformer to have one (in the positive rather than differential sense of that verb).³⁸ The beard was one of the most obvious statements possible of a reformer's opposition to the Catholic priests, which was certainly another consideration. Perhaps tellingly, even Martin Luther grew one while holed up in the Wartburg in 1521.³⁹ Later, Luther was the only major such reformer not to cultivate facial hair, perhaps because his face was so well known clean-shaven that he did not want to jeopardise his image. Moreover, secondarily to all these things, it is possible to view the rise of Protestant beards as tapping into longer-standing cultural tropes of the beard as a sign of age and wisdom. This was, after all, why early Church Fathers had consistently been portrayed with them and why some Latin clerics even before 1500 had grown them against canonical regulations.

The erasure of the papal beard

Before moving on to discuss the erasure of the papal beard it is worth pointing out two things. First, not all contemporary clergy, even elite Italian clergy, bought into the idea that beards were a desirable attribute. And second, there are serious methodological limitations in discussing this topic because bearded/not-bearded was not necessarily a binary state. Carlo Borromeo (1538–84), Pius IV's own nephew, in his capacity as Archbishop of Milan strongly discouraged beards. Borromeo's 1565 provincial synod demanded clerics forgo any cultivation of them. A 1576

³⁶ Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome: 1527* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1972), 209.

³⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 361. Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99–101.

³⁸ On the meaning of beards to reformers, see Hanß, "Face-Work," 322–24.

³⁹ Lyndal Roper, *Living I was Your Plague: Martin Luther's World and Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 20–22. Tellingly, the intimation is that, at this stage, Luther wore the beard not as a display of masculinity but so as not to be recognised, Moritz Meurer, *The Life of Martin Luther Related from Original Authorities*, trans. anon (New York: Carter, 1848), 230.

pastoral letter addressed to his Milanese clergy argued that a man who took holy orders but continued to sport a beard showed an inappropriate, even sinful, attachment to the secular.⁴⁰ A 1578 diocesan synod restated his prohibition on beards even more forcefully.⁴¹ Much of what we know about these clerics and their shaving habits, on the other hand, comes, ultimately, from a relatively small number of images which necessarily idealise their subjects. As Giles Constable and Robert Bartlett pointed out years ago, actual shaving practices amongst the medieval clergy left a considerable grey zone for interpreting their facial hair. Cistercian monks shaved only seven times a year, Carthusians six—so even when “clean shaven” they were not necessarily smooth-cheeked.⁴² Ironically, this ambiguity is exactly what Julius II exploited in 1510–11 and we see it in the sources in which his beard makes a “sudden” appearance. A 1563 medal of Carlo Borromeo also shows him bearded (although this was before his transfer to Milan).⁴³

In 1700 Clement XI became the first non-bearded pope in nearly two centuries. So how did that happen? On one level, the ever-decreasing size of papal beards during the seventeenth-century would seem to have prefigured this. Clement, thirty-five years younger than his predecessor as pope, came from a different generation and was one of a considerable number of relatively young cardinals who would seem to have chosen to remain clean-shaven. Thereafter, following his election, a simple feedback cycle, the reverse of that which had operated under Paul III in the 1530s, reinforced the tendency away from beards. The pope forewent one, so they were no longer a default choice. Benedict XIII (r. 1724–30), a Benedictine monk, was fanatically against both beards and wigs (that century’s other fashionable choice for the socially-aspirant male). He insisted at one point that that the Jesuit cardinal Giambattista Tolomei shave his beard off.⁴⁴ Luis Belluga y Moncada (1662–1743) may thus have been the last cardinal to remain bearded, although most surviving images of him seem derived from a single mid-life original.⁴⁵ Yet both Tolomei and Belluga were behind the times. Even Jesuit Superior Generals had been completely clean-shaven since 1705. Protestant divines too lost their beards on a surprisingly similar trajectory. Perhaps just as tellingly, neither Pius VI (r. 1775–99) nor Pius VII (r. 1800–23) is depicted as growing a beard, even when each was in captivity at Napoleon’s hands. The same was true of Pius IX in and after 1848. More interestingly still, when a group of German clerics petitioned to be able to grow beards in sorrow at Pius’ loss of the Papal States to the Kingdom of Italy in the 1860s, their archbishop bluntly denied them permission.⁴⁶

Since the 1917 Code of Canon Law, priests have once again been able to wear beards.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Carlo Borromeo, *De barba radenda*, English translation in John R. Cihak (ed.), *Charles Borromeo: Selected Orations, Homilies, and Writings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 96–101.

⁴¹ *Acta ecclesiae Mediolanensis tribus partibus distincta* (Milan: Pacifico da Ponte, 1582), pt. 1, 10v (First Provincial Synod, “De clericorum vestitu, et reliqua vitae moderatione”); pt. 2, 168r (Fifth Diocesan Synod, Decretum IV).

⁴² Giles Constable, “Beards in History”, 54–55, 116–17. Robert Bartlett, “Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series 4 (1994): 43–60.

⁴³ Minou Schraven, “Miracle-Working Portraits of a Cardinal Saint, in Piers Baker-Bates and Irene Brooke (eds.), *Portrait Cultures of the Early Modern Cardinal* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 319–39, at 322.

⁴⁴ Ignaz von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Politischen, Kirchlichen, und Culture-Geschichte der Sechs Letzten Jahrhunderte*, 3 vols. (Vienna: Manz’sche K. K. Hofverlags, 1882), 3:4. Miles Pattenden, “Priests and their Wigs in Eighteenth-Century Rome”, *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 93 (2024), first view online.

⁴⁵ E.g. Johann Rudolph Conlin, *Roma Sancta* (Augsburg: Kolb, 1726), plate between 138–39.

⁴⁶ Valentin Thalsofer, “Über den Bart in Geistlichen,” *Archiv für katholisches Kirchenrecht* 10 (1863): 93–109, at 108–09.

⁴⁷ The 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law does not mention beards in its relevant clause on clerical appearance (136.1) and nor does its 1983 successor. Emphasis is placed only on the need of clerics to remain decorous in their appearance: <https://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0813/ PC.HTM> [accessed January 30, 2025].

The French Enlightenment scholar Jacques-Antoine Dulaure (1755–1835), who wrote an eighteenth-century treatise on beards, noted sardonically, however, that “when the pope has a large beard, the priests will have the same; if he have a shaved chin, they will likewise, because they all aim at the papacy.”⁴⁸ Such remarks, and the observations behind them, caution about the difficulty of separating out religious meaning of hair from wider cultural associations. They also acknowledge that such fashions operate through a series of dialectics—their meanings are never stable but are often situated in relation to established practices which percolate through society and its individual institutions, including the papal court and the wider Catholic Church. In some senses this should not surprise. In the papal case, beard-practice reflected more general and dominant cultural dynamics associated with that nebulous concept of reform which drove Christian progress throughout much of the second millennium West.⁴⁹

~~Yet~~ 16th-century popes transformed the religious significance of the clean shaven medieval Latin cleric—that he was a pious man, not a barbarian, and that he eschewed the most culturally obvious outward sign of virility—into a statement about their supreme place within the Latin Church, and, by extension, the cosmic order. They could have beards even when lesser priests could not because they were Christ’s representatives on earth. Their actions underline what Simon Goldhill, in his contribution, calls the “fascinating entanglement of a constructed normative religious tradition and the situated contingencies of time and place”. That such an entanglement allowed popes to ape trends among other princes was felicitous but perhaps not coincidental. Context is everything when reading any hair correctly. The curiosity that Protestant reformers came to similar conclusions to their Catholic counterparts about the need for beards, and at around the same time, should not escape us either. It reminds us once again that more united than divided early modern Christianity’s confessions.

⁴⁸ Jacques-Antoine Dulaure. *Pogonologia, or a Philosophical and Historical Essay on Beards*, trans. anon (London: Cadell, 1786), 106.

⁴⁹ See John O’Malley, *Trent and All That: Reforming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 16–17.