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BEDE AND THE TONSURE QUESTION

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Denis Bethell's religious sensibilities gave him, seemingly without effort, that understanding of and sympathy for the religious world of the past which many medievalists strive for. In the course on Bede which we taught together for six years he brought his sensitivity to bear on the problems of conversion, on saints and miracles and, most notably, on the Easter question. Not only could he explain, more clearly than anyone else I have known, how Easter should be calculated and why there was so much disagreement over methods of calculation from Nicaea to Whitby, but also just why it was so important to the clerical contemporaries of Cummian and Bede. I do not remember Denis ever talking about that strangely related question, the tonsure–'nam et de hoc quaestio non minima erat'.[1] And indeed the whole early history of the tonsure has never attracted the attention which it deserves. I hope in what follows to indicate that the practice of tonsuring throws in its own way a light on the early medieval mentality which is just as interesting as that shown by the Easter question.

Bede himself provides our best introduction to the problem, in the letter from abbot Ceolfrith to king Nechtan of the Picts, which he quotes in HE v 21. The passage on the tonsure begins with a Gregorian comment on the harmlessness of variety in ecclesiastical practice, pointing out that the apostles themselves had different types of tonsure, and that Job cut his hair in times of tribulation and Joseph in times of joy.[2] But the tonsure worn by Peter was the best to imitate; it was worn in memory of the passion, in the likeness of a crown of thorns, and was a symbol also of the crown of eternal life 'which God hath promised to them that love Him' (James 1: 12). And the tonsure of Simon Magus was to be detested and rejected: 'in the front of

[1] HE III 26.

[2] cf. HE I 27.

the forehead it does seem to bear the resemblance to a crown, but when you come to look at the neck, you find that the crown which you expected to see is cut short'.[1] This tonsure was fitting for simoniacs, for it deceived people into thinking they deserved an everlasting crown whereas in fact they were doomed to eternal punishment. The author of this letter (whether Ceolfrith or Bede himself) admits that many of those who wore this tonsure were in fact holy and worthy men, such as abbot Adomnán of Iona. A conversation between Adomnán and Ceolfrith follows, in which the former is reported as saying that he wished to follow Peter in all things. The letter sadly (and oddly) relates how Adomnán could not persuade his own monks of Iona to follow his teaching: 'if he had had more authority he would have made them correct their tonsure'. Nechtan was convinced, however and ordered all clerics in Pictland to receive the tonsure in the form of a crown. Iona was converted to the Petrine Easter and tonsure a few years later, in 716.[2]

Other references to the tonsure in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* show, firstly, that it was the act of tonsuring which symbolized the change from lay to clerical status;[3] secondly, that it, rather than dress perhaps, was the primary distinguishing mark of the cleric;[4] and, thirdly, that there was at least one other form of tonsure known to Bede, for he describes how the Syrian monk Theodore had to wait for four months until his hair, tonsured in the Pauline fashion, 'after the eastern manner', grew long enough for it to be cut into the shape of a crown.[5]

No-one today accepts the standard sixth- or seventh-century concept of apostolic origins for the various kinds of tonsure. The notion of the Petrine origin of the *corona* most probably derives from the iconography of St Peter, which from an early date portrayed him as the apostle with the bald patch on the top of his head. Nor are historians willing to accept any longer the once common theory that the christian tonsure was a survival of the pagan custom of the shaving of priests in the Mediterranean world.[6] The corresponding idea that the 'Celtic' tonsure originated with the druids does however still seem to be generally accepted. To quote the most recent editors of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, 'it is known that the druids wore a tonsure and the descriptions which have survived point to the fact it was not unlike the Celtic tonsure. Hence it was easy for its opponents to associate it with Simon the arch-magician and druid'.[7] The 'descriptions' are in fact scanty and ambiguous; they

[1] B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (ed and trans), *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people* (Oxford 1969) 549 (=HE v 21).
[2] HE v 22.
[3] HE v 12; 19.
[4] HE iv 14; v 12.
[5] HE iv 1.
[6] Since P. Gobillot, 'Sur la tonsure cléricale et ses prétendues origines païennes', *Rev d'Hist Ecclésiast* 21 (1925) 399–454.
[7] Colgrave and Mynors, 548n.

do not appear in the writings of Greek or Roman ethnographers, but only in relatively late Irish sources. 'Orthodox' Irish churchmen might well have had an interest in associating the unorthodox tonsure with the former druids, and could do so easily through the mythical figure of Simon Magus, *Símón druí*. Thus the Collectio canonum Hibernensis linked the tonsure of Simon Magus, 'from ear to ear', with that of the Irish *magi*.[1] But more substantial evidence for druidic origins has been found in Tírechán's Life of Patrick, which described the conversion of Máel by Patrick: 'and the hair of his head was shorn off, that is, the (hair cut in) druidic fashion (which was) seen on his head, *airbacc giunnae*, as it is called'.[2] Leaving aside the question of the doubtful meaning of the Old Irish,[3] we can hardly say, as Bieler did, that *airbacc giunnae* was 'obviously' the druidic tonsure from ear to ear[4] – this passage in fact does not demonstrate any link between pagan and christian priestly hair-styles. It is probably more judicious on the basis of the evidence to return 'not proven', or even to return to Plummer's judgement that 'here, as in their Easter practice, the Celts were merely perpetuating an older system which had long been obsolete elsewhere'.[5]

To understand the importance of the tonsure in the early medieval church it is not enough to look at the rationalisations of early medieval churchmen about its origins or symbolism; it is much more relevant to attempt to determine the significance of hair and its cutting in society as a whole. We shall see that the cutting of hair was able to carry a whole bundle of meanings to an early medieval mind. By investigating these we may begin to understand not only the importance of the tonsure question within the early English church, but also something of the status of the tonsured clergy and of the way in which they were regarded by laymen in early medieval Europe.

A useful starting point is Judges 16: 17, in which Samson told Delilah 'There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man'. The idea of strength residing in the hair seems widespread among human societies, including the early Germans;[6] equally common is the notion of a vow being

[1] F. W. H. Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig 1885) 212–3.

[2] L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 10 (Dublin 1979) 144.

[3] On which see M. Joynt, 'Airbacc giunnae', *Ériu* 10 (1926–8) 130–34.

[4] Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 225.

[5] C. Plummer (ed), *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (Oxford 1896) ii 354.

[6] See R. Schmidt-Wiegand, 'Haar', A. Erler and E. Kaufmann (ed), *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte* i (Berlin 1971) 1880–84. Schmidt-Wiegand's note on 'Haarscheren', ibid., 1885–7, is also very useful.

made public by either cutting or not cutting the hair. Samson's vow, sworn on his behalf by his parents, made him a perpetual Nazarite, that is (according to Numbers 6: 1–21) a man or woman separated from others as a sacrifice to the Lord. At the end of the period of separation the Nazarite offered a sacrifice to the Lord, shaved his head, and placed the hair on the sacrificial fire.

The offering of shorn hair to God or the gods seems to be known throughout the ancient world. Pliny reported a tree in Rome called the Hair Tree on which the vestal virgins used to hang offerings of hair;[1] according to Pausanias the statue of Hygeia at Sikyon was covered with the offerings of women's hair.[2] Such customs continued into the christian period (and, indeed, until very recently in Greece, according to the modern translator of Pausanias).[3] The rite of baptism in the Greek church included the offerings of the first hairs.[4] Paulinus of Nola dedicated the shavings of his beard to his heavenly patron St Felix;[5] a century later the pilgrim Antony described how on Mount Sinai 'many people on account of their devotion shave off their hair and beard. I too took off my beard at this place'.[6] This religious custom may be a reflection of the secular habit of the offering of hair by one man to another, which signified respect and submission. The imperial princes Justinian and Heraclius sent locks of hair to pope Benedict II;[7] in the 730s Charles Martel sent his son Pippin to king Liutprand of the Lombards, 'that the latter should take his hair according to custom. And the king, cutting his hair, became a father to him'.[8] It has been argued that the ritual of adoption among a number of Germanic peoples was accomplished by the cutting of hair.[9]

There were other social contexts in the ancient and medieval worlds in which hair-cutting might take place. Mourning was one: 'in that day the Lord God of Hosts called to weeping and mourning: to baldness and girding with sackcloth' (Isaiah 22: 12). The *Gesta Dagoberti* show us one of the last

[1] Pliny, *Nat. hist.* XVI 85 = H. Rackham (ed), *Pliny: Natural history* (London 1945) 4.538–9.

[2] Pausanias II 11.6 = W. H. S. Jones (ed), *Pausanias: Description of Greece* (London 1918) i 306–7.

[3] P. Levi, *Pausanias: Guide to Greece. 1: Central Greece* (Harmondsworth 1979) 157.

[4] Gobillot, 'Sur la tonsure', 448.

[5] Carmen 13: PL 61, 586.

[6] PL 72, 912.

[7] L. Duchesne, *Le liber pontificalis*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, sér. 2, 3 (Paris 1886) i 363.

[8] Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* VI 53 = ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRG us 48 (1878) 237.

[9] E. Ploss, 'Haarfärben und -bleichen (zu Standeszeichen und Schwurritual der Germanen)', *Ger-Rom Monatsschr* 40 (1959) 409–20: 420.

Merovingian kings cutting his nails and hair as a sign of mourning.[1] And, among both Romans and Germans, there was a secular version of the Nazarite vow by which the hair would not be cut until the fulfilment of some deed: thus Augustus swore after the loss of the four legions;[2] thus the sixth-century Saxons swore on seeking vengeance on the Swabians;[3] thus Harold Fairhair swore before his campaign to unite Norway.[4]

The clerical tonsure has therefore to be seen against the background of a ritual that might signify a vow, a sacrifice, mourning, respect, submission. But there was another whole category of situations which demanded not voluntary gestures such as these, but involuntary and enforced tonsuring. There are two contexts in which the involuntary cutting of laymen's hair appears particularly dramatically in the historical record: the deposition of kings and the punishment of criminals.

On 14 October 680 king Wamba of the Visigoths fell unconscious in his palace at Toledo. Julian, the metropolitan of Toledo, was called by the agitated courtiers, who feared that the king was near death; he cut Wamba's hair and clothed him in a monastic habit. The king emerged from his coma, to find that he had become a monk and could not resume royal office. The law of the church was clear about that: 'those who have become clerics or who have entered a monastery should neither enter the army nor take on secular honours'.[5] The Visigothic church had enacted similar legislation: 'no one tonsured under the habit of religion or shamefully scalped or having a servile origin or a foreigner shall come to the head of the kingdom'.[6] Wamba therefore signed documents attesting his acceptance of clerical status, and named one of his nobles, Erwig, as successor. That, at least, is the story recorded in the minutes of the twelfth council of Toledo, called by Erwig after his accession. It is the official version. Much later sources report baldly that Erwig deposed Wamba, or that he drugged him and tonsured him while unconscious.[7] The latter story, popularly held in Spain for a very long time,

[1] *Gesta Dagoberti* III 9 = MGH SRM 2 (1888) 517.

[2] This, according to Ploss, is what Suetonius II 23 is about; J. C. Rolfe (ed), *Suetonius* (London 1913) I. 154–5.

[3] Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* V 15 = MGH SRM 1.1 (1937–51) 214. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* III 7 = MGH SRG us 48 (1878) 115–6.

[4] *Heimskringla* III 4 = E. Monsen and A. H. Smith, *Heimskringla, or the lives of the Norse kings* (Cambridge 1932) 46.

[5] Council of Chalcedon (451), c. 7. Cf. K. Sprigade, 'Abschneiden des Königshaares und kirchliche Tonsur bei den Merowingern', *Die Welt als Geschichte* 22 (1962) 142–61: p 144n.

[6] VI Toledo (638), c. 17: J. Vives (ed), *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, España Cristiana, Textos 1 (Barcelona-Madrid 1963) 244–5.

[7] E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford 1969) 229–32; F. X. Murphy, 'Julian of

was probably the invention of a later age which found it difficult to explain the actions of an earlier one. What no doubt happened in fact was the forcible tonsuring of the king in order to depose him.

The forcible tonsuring of kings is known in all the christian barbarian kingdoms of pre-Carolingian Europe: Konrad Bund has recently collected the examples together.[1] The most famous instance occurred in 751, when the last Merovingian king was tonsured and put into a monastery by the first Carolingian king. The cutting of hair had particular significance among the Merovingians, of course: it was the removal of the sign by which the *reges criniti*, the long-haired kings, distinguished themselves. 'For it is the rule for Frankish kings never to be shorn; indeed their hair is never cut from childhood on, and hangs down in abundance on their shoulders ... their subjects have their hair cut all round and are not permitted to grow it further'.[2] The importance of this hair, its significance and the significance of its removal, have been the objects of much scholarly debate.[3] Hoyoux, Schramm and others have thought that the tonsure of a deposed king was not a clerical tonsure, but a particular method of scalping. In part their conclusion rested on philological grounds: the verb *tondere* was used of clerical tonsure, while *tundere*, used in connection with royal depositions, means 'to strike with a blunt instrument'. Numerous blows of a stick inflicted such scars upon the scalp that hair would never grow again and the recipient would be left with a permanent badge of his shame. The Visigothic laws in particular provide ample evidence for scalping. Although the penalties laid down in the code include execution, blinding, castration, amputation, enslavement and exile, the commonest of all were fines, flogging and *decalvatio* (scalping).[4] One Visigothic law (xii 3.2) specifies the method of scalping 'by means of one hundred blows'. As P. D. King says, 'scalping rather than simple shaving of the head is ... conclusively indicated by' the fifteenth canon of the Council of Mérida, which declared that a bishop could not impose the 'most savage

Toledo and the fall of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain', *Speculum* 27 (1952) 1–27: 2.

[1] K. Bund, *Thronsturz und Herrscherabsetzung im Frühmittelalter*, Bonner Historische Forschungen 44 (Bonn 1979) 172, 227, 341–3, 595, 762–4.

[2] Agathias, transl. in A. Cameron, 'How did the Merovingian kings wear their hair?', *Rev Belg Philol Hist* 43 (1965) 1203–16: 1209.

[3] See J. Hoyoux, 'Reges criniti: chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens', *Rev Belg Philol Hist* 26 (1948) 479–508; P. E. Schramm, 'Zur Haar- und Barttracht als Kennzeichen im germanischen Altertum und im Mittelalter', P. Schramm (ed), *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik* i, Schriften der MGH 13/1 (Stuttgart 1954) 118–27; E. Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige', *Z Savigny-Stiftung Rechtsgesch Ger Abt* 72 (1955) 177–85; Sprigade, 'Abschneiden des Königshaares'; Cameron, 'How did the Merovingian kings wear their hair?'.

[4] P. D. King, *Law and society in the Visigothic kingdom*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, ser 3, 5 (Cambridge 1972) 89–90.

penalty' of 'shameful *decalvatio*' upon a criminal – just as he could not impose the death penalty.[1]

Scalping existed in the early middle ages. But the evidence is against its relevance to the problem of royal depositions. *Tondere* and *tundere* were used interchangeably in Merovingian Latin, and the classical meaning of *tundere* had been lost. But, more important, it is clear that the scalp was not mutilated, for there are frequent references to the reappearance of the hair. The earliest case among the Franks was under Clovis who, only a short time after his conversion to Catholicism, introduced this new process of deposition. He captured the rival Frankish rulers Chararic and his son, and had them tonsured and ordained as priests. Chararic burst into tears, but his son said 'These leaves have been cut from wood which is still green and not lacking in sap. They will soon grow again and be larger than ever; and may the man who has done this deed perish equally quickly'.[2] Clovis heard of this, realised the failure of the new procedure, and had them decapitated.

The policy of tonsure followed by relegation to a monastery was, in fact, more often a failure than a success as a means of deposition, at least in the Frankish kingdoms. No sooner was Merovech tonsured than he escaped from the monastery, and made his way to Tours.[3] Dagobert II was tonsured and packed off to Ireland, but was able to return to the throne again, with the help of bishop Wilfrid of York. Theuderic III was tonsured, grew his hair again and regained power. Clearly, the tonsuring has some effect: there is always this reference to the regrowth of the hair, or to waiting for the hair to grow again. Kings can do nothing while their hair is shorn. Nor is this restricted to kings. Ebroin was himself stripped of his power as mayor of the palace, tonsured and thrown into a monastery. He too waited for his hair to grow before gathering an army and attempting to regain control.[4] At a less exalted level, when bishop Bertram of Bordeaux wanted to seize the property of a Syrian merchant called Eufronius, he had him forcibly tonsured. But, says Gregory of Tours, Eufronius 'treated the whole matter with ridicule, going off to another town until his hair grew, and then returning'.[5]

Men, not just kings, seem unable to act with their hair shorn. Why? What is the importance of the ritual of tonsure in these cases? We have seen Chararic's reaction to his forcible tonsure: he broke into tears. Humiliation is probably also reflected in another story told by Gregory.[6] The senator Arcadius was sent to queen Clotild by two of her royal sons; he entered the chamber

[1] King, *Law and society*, 90n.

[2] Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* II 41 = L. Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours: History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth 1974) 156.

[3] Gregory of Tours, *Lib. hist.* V 14.

[4] *Liber Historiae Francorum* 45 = MGH SRM 2, 318.

[5] *Lib. hist.* VII 31 = Thorpe, *History of the Franks*, 413.

[6] *Lib. hist.* III 18.

with a pair of shears in one hand and a naked sword in the other. Her reply to his offer of alternative fates for her three grand-children (sons of the dead king Chlodomer) was 'I would rather see them dead than tonsured'. Two were killed; the third, Chlodovald, escaped, cut his hair short with his own hands and became a monk and, in due time, St Cloud. The story seems to illustrate the great difference there is between voluntary and forcible tonsure: Chlodovald performs a perfectly honourable act by his self-tonsure, while his two brothers are saved from humiliation by their deaths. And an obvious point needs to be added: the church was quite clear on its position that someone who was forcibly tonsured did not become a cleric or a monk according to canon law. Deposed and tonsured kings - like Bede's own king Ceolwulf - could and did emerge from their monasteries to become kings again. But the tonsuring served a purpose; it seems to have withdrawn kings from political action while a usurper could consolidate his position, and it avoided the danger of a prolonged feud with kinsmen which an assassination might have provoked. In rare cases, as with Eadberht Praen of Kent at the end of the eighth century, a compliant church could be prevailed upon to anathematize a tonsured king who presumed to abandon his 'clerical' status.[1]

The extreme humiliation of forcible tonsure is reflected in the law-codes. In the Pactus Legis Salicae, for instance, if a *puer crinitus*, or, in some manuscripts, *puer ingenuus* - the terms 'long-haired' and 'free' seem synonymous - was shorn without the consent of his parents, the heavy fine of 45 solidi was imposed.[2] Among the Burgundians there were heavy fines for cutting the hair of a freewomen, while if a slave presumed to do it he would suffer the death penalty.[3] Alongside involuntary and illegal tonsuring there was, of course, involuntary but legal tonsuring: shaving the head as a punishment is to be found among Germanic societies from the time of Tacitus[4] down to the capitularies of the Carolingians.[5] It has been suggested that slaves were either shaved or distinguished by a particular cut of hair in the ancient world: the Burgundian law which punished a man who 'made hair' for a slave or a fugitive - possibly supplying him with a wig - may be evidence of similar practice surviving into the early sixth century.[6] The idea that the colour or style of hair was an indicator of class seems to have been common among both Romans and Germans (hence, according to Ploss, the frequency of dye-

[1] Bund, *Thronsturz*, 664-6.
[2] *Pactus legis Salicae* 24.2: MGH LNG 4.1 (1962) 89.
[3] *Leges Burgundionum* 33.1; 92.1; 92.4: MGH LNG 2.1 (1892) 67; 111.
[4] *Germania* 19 = W. Peterson and M. Hutton (ed), *Tacitus: Dialogus, Agricola, Germania* (London 1914) 290-91.
[5] MGH LL 2.1 (1837) 284; 2.2 (1837) 96.
[6] *Leges Burgundionum* 6.4: see K. F. Drew, *The Burgundian code* (Philadelphia 1972) 27n.

ing and bleaching). Differing length could indicate a different class among the Suebi,[1] among the Visigoths[2] and, as we have seen, among the Franks. A distinctive hair-style could be an ethnic indicator as well. The Suebi were distinguished from other German peoples in this way,[3] while others, like the Lombards and the Frisians, were even named after their particular fashion of styling beard or hair.[4] In 590 queen Fredegund ordered the army of the Saxons in the Bayeux area to attack a Frankish duke, but to disguise themselves as Bretons by cutting their hair in the Breton way.[5] If hair indicated ethnic, and hence often political, membership, it could also be used to demonstrate the change of political membership; when the leading men of the duchy of Spoleto surrendered to pope Hadrian I they had their cut in Roman fashion.[6]

Against this background, how should we view the tonsuring of clerics? To begin with, it would have been natural in the barbarian kingdoms of the west to have clergy distinguished in some such way from the people among whom they lived; legally, according to the principle of personality, Frankish or Anglo-Saxon laymen gave up their kinsmen and their nationality upon taking the tonsure, for clergy lived according to Roman law.[7] Secondly, it is hardly conceivable that the clerical tonsure could have been entirely divorced in the minds of laymen from the shameful connotations that it retained. In a world in which ritual and gesture had great social significance, it must have been noted that in the case of mourning, offerings or vows, the hair was removed by its possessor; only in the case of royal depositions, the punishment of criminals, possibly the making of slaves, and the acceptance of laymen into the clergy or the monastic community was the removal done by the hand of another.

The insights of anthropologists may give us further understanding of the role the tonsure played in early medieval society. Van Gennep, in his seminal *Rites of passage*,[8] defined the rituals by which individuals passed from one state to another in terms of these stages: separation, liminality and aggrega-

[1] Tacitus, *Germania* 38; Peterson and Hutton, 316–7.
[2] King, *Law and society*, 164–5.
[3] Tacitus, *Germania* 38; Peterson and Hutton, 316–17.
[4] Schmidt-Wiegand, 'Haar', 1382.
[5] Gregory of Tours, *Lib. hist.* X 9, cited by L. Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic lands* (London 1932) 205 in connection with 'Celtic' habits of tonsure.
[6] Duchesne, *Liber pontificalis*, i 495; P. Llewellyn, *Rome in the dark ages* (London 1971) 234.
[7] Most clearly stated in the seventh-century Frankish law-code Lex Ribvaria 61.1 = MGH LNG 3.2 (1954) 109.
[8] A. Van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (London 1960), transl. from 1908 original.

tion. In christian terms, one good example would be the process of penance in the early church, in which the penitent was separated from the community by tonsure, stayed in a liminal state during his penance and then rejoined the community in a ceremony of aggregation. Pilgrimage has been seen as a process which could be explained in similar terms.[1] In numerous societies around the world the phase of liminality is marked by abasement and humiliation. In puberty rites, for instance, boys are not treated like adults, but rather as animals, being beaten, even tortured, and being given nauseating food. In the installation rites in some west African kingdoms, the king-elect was spat upon, kicked, pelted with refuse - and then installed as king and given every show of respect. Other characteristics of liminality may include total obedience, fasting and renunciation of sexual relations. Comparisons with christian practice are inevitable (and are made by Turner, in a book which first interested me in this topic).[2] The ritual of separation from the community is accomplished by the ceremony of tonsure, a symbol of renunciation not only because it was a symbol of shame, but because it was a denial of the free status that had been the birthright of most clerics, and was to be followed by a lifestyle that was a negation of the norms of lay society.[3] The cleric was an outsider, and was made such not 'by a long drawn-out, solemn ritual of dissociation',[4] as in the case of an ascetic, but by the act of tonsure. We have already seen how three classes of person were associated in a Visigothic law of 638, which prevented those tonsured as clerics or shamefully scalped, or of servile status, from becoming kings: it was quite natural for a seventh-century Visigoth to mention these three in one breath, for each had renounced their rights as free men, either willingly or unwillingly, and proclaimed their renunciation by abandoning the hair-style of a free-born man.

The cleric had, of course, voluntarily accepted this badge of shame. The distinction was not perhaps appreciated by the cultured senatorial families of the fourth or fifth centuries, who greeted with horror the announcement that one of their members was joining the clergy, nor by the semi-pagan inhabitants of late Roman towns: Salvian of Marseilles described how these people 'could scarcely look without reviling and curses at a man pale and in

[1] V. and E. Turner, *Image and pilgrimage in christian culture: anthropological perspectives* (Oxford 1978).

[2] V. Turner, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (Harmondsworth 1974).

[3] cf. E. James, 'Beati pacifici: bishops and the law in sixth-century Gaul', J. A Bossy (ed), *Disputes and settlements: law and human relations in the west* (Cambridge 1983) 25-46: 44.

[4] P. Brown, *Society and the holy in late antiquity* (London 1982) 131.

monkish garb, his flowing locks cut even to the shaved skin'.[1] But to the christian this voluntary acceptance of shame, this self-imposed humiliation, was one with the more heroic impulses of the holy man, the Syrian pillar-squatter or the Irish exile for God.[2] In Turner's term the cleric was in a state of 'permanent liminality',[3] characteristic of a religion in which 'abasement and humility are regarded not as the final goal ... but simply as attributes of the liminal phase through which believers must pass on their way to the final and absolute states of heaven, nirvana, or utopia'.[4] The church represented, in Turner's terms, an inverted society, with the 'slave of the slaves of God' at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, and with values - humility, chastity, a love of the poor and of peace - which were those of the lay world turned upside down. Anthropologists would thus recognise the tonsure as an element in a process of status elevation: separation, followed by a period of liminality in which society's norms are reversed, followed by aggregation into a heavenly but invisible *communitas*.

This system only became fully established within the framework of the barbarian kingdoms. It was there that the idea of a specifically shaped clerical tonsure, which many in Bede's day felt was of crucial importance, was established. Wearing short hair had long been customary for clergy and monks: in part it was a reaction against the earliest monks, who wore the hair long like perpetual Nazarites - the *criniti fratres* of whom Augustine complained[5] - and in part it was a logical extension of the attitude expressed by St Paul in I Corinthians 2: 14-5: 'Doth not even nature itself teach you that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her'. Legislation on Pauline lines began to appear in the fourth century. An imperial decree of 390 forbade women to cut off their hair, and threatened a bishop who allowed such a woman to enter a church with deposition;[6] a Coptic version of the acts of Nicaea declared 'Do not wear long hair, for that is only for women. If you love your hair like a silly woman, you are no better than her'.[7] No doubt such ideas accommodated themselves well with respectable Roman habits: 'only philosophers - and fancy-boys - wore long hair in Roman households'.[8] But in the fifth century ecclesiastical ad-

[1] *De gubernatione Dei* VIII 4: E. Sanford, *Salvian: On the government of God,* Records of Civilisation, Sources and Studies 12 (New York 1930) 230.
[2] See T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The social background to Irish *peregrinatio*', *Celtica* 11 (1976) 43-59.
[3] Turner, *Ritual process,* 133.
[4] ibid., 185.
[5] PL 40, 578-9.
[6] Theodosian Code 16.2.27; C. Pharr (ed), *The Theodosian code and novels and the Sirmondian constitutions,* Corpus of Roman Law 1 (Princeton 1952) 445.
[7] Gobillot, 'Sur la tonsure', 407.
[8] J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and aliens* (London 1979) 215-6.

monitions seem concerned only with the length of hair. Even the earliest reference to the question in a Gallic council, that of Agde in 506, simply says that clerics who allow their hair to grow long will have it cut by the archdeacon.[1] The earliest reference to the *corona* in the proceedings of a church council comes from IV Toledo in 633, where it was decreed that 'all clerics must shave the whole front part of the hair, leaving only a circular crown on the back'.[2] But the idea had clearly spread earlier than that: one of the most revealing texts is the story by Gregory of Tours that his uncle Nicetius was born, in the late fifth century, with his hair growing in a circle on top of his head, thus revealing that even from birth he was intended for the episcopate.[3] If nothing else, the passage shows that when Gregory wrote, in the late sixth century, the *corona* was the norm in Gaul. Divine providence resolved, for Gregory, the tonsure question as unerringly as it resolved the Easter question.[4]

The infrequency of references to the *corona* in the sixth and early seventh centuries is, however, noteworthy. Gregory of Tours uses the word only in that one place. Early discussions of the symbolism of tonsure make no reference to the *corona*. Like the prayers which accompany the rite,[5] Gregory the Great emphasises the symbolism of renunciation. 'The hairs of the head are thoughts in the mind'; hair should be cut, as worldly cares should be avoided. But, with typically Gregorian moderation, he adds that priests have to remember those in their care, so the hair should not be cut too short: he recalls Ezekiel 44: 20, 'Neither shall they shave their heads, nor suffer their locks to grow long: they shall only poll their heads'.[6] Gregory the Great appears to be referring to a short hair-cut, not unlike the Eastern 'tonsure of St Paul', rather than to the 'Roman' *corona*. Isidore of Seville likewise concentrates on renunciation, and calls the tonsure an imitation of the Nazarites (although these cut their hair at the completion of vows, not at their onset).[7] But, as is appropriate for the man who presided at the Fourth Council of Toledo, where the *corona* first appears in the canons of the church, he went on to argue that the crown was symbolic of the authority of the priest, recalling

[1] c. 20 = C. Munier (ed), *Concilia Galliae, a.314-506*, Corpus Christianorum Ser Lat 148 (Turnhout 1963) 202. [2] c. 41 = Vives, *Concilios*, 206-7.
[3] *Liber vitae patrum* 17.1 = MGH SRM 1.2, 278.
[4] *Lib. hist.* V 17; X 23; *In gloria martyrum*, 23 = MGH SRM 1.2, 51-2.
[5] L. Eisenhofer and J. Lechner, *The liturgy of the Roman rite* (Edinburgh 1961) 397 and A. Michel, 'Tonsure', *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 15 (Paris 1946) 1228-35: col. 1232.
[6] *Regula pastoralis* II 7 = PL 77, 41-2; cf. Epist VII 4 = PL 77, 856 and Jerome, *In Ezekielem* XIII 44 = PL 25, 436-7. [7] *De ecclesiasticis officiis* II 4.1-3 = PL 83, 779-80.

the tiara of the Hebrew priests.[1] After Isidore the next to mention the symbolism of the *corona* are in England: the anonymous author of the first Life of Cuthbert and Eddius Stephanus, in his Life of Wilfrid. Both use the phrase 'in modum coronae spineae caput Christi cingentis' although it is not clear whether Eddius is quoting the anonymous Lindisfarne monk, or whether both are quoting an earlier authority.[2]

The emphasis among the orthodox on a specific style of tonsure seems closely connected with ecclesiastical controversy. The canon of IV Toledo which refers to the *corona* also mentions the different tonsure worn by heretics in Galicia.[3] King may be right in naming these heretics Priscillianists, against Thompson who assumes that they are Arians.[4] But if Arians did have a different tonsure, the insistence of Gregory of Tours on the orthodoxy of his uncle Nicetius, born in an Arian kingdom, might be explained: it is part of his polemic against the heretics. The emphasis on the *corona* by the Visigothic church, and shortly afterwards by the church in England (it is not impossible that the two are connected, given the speed with which Isidore's writings reached the British Isles)[5] was born out of a need for church unity, out of a need to find a symbol of orthodoxy in a church that was threatened by rival beliefs. Just as the adoption of a particular hairstyle might signify membership of a class or an ethnic group, so the adoption of a particular tonsure was the outward expression of membership of a single unified church. Ceolfrith said to Nechtan that the shape of the tonsure was irrelevant to personal salvation, but that nevertheless it demonstrated the headship of St Peter over the true church.[6] Just as St Peter should be followed on the question of Easter, as king Oswiu knew,[7] so should his tonsure - a tonsure no doubt perfectly visible on the paintings brought from Rome by Benedict Biscop.[8] The *Romani* of Ireland and England thus adopted the distinguishing mark of their allegiance, as did the inhabitants of Spoleto under Hadrian I.[9] As Ceolfrith said, there had been no controversies about the tonsure at the time of the church fathers; the controversy only arose in the seventh centu-

[1] *De eccles. offic.* II 4.4 = PL 83, 780.

[2] *Vita S. Cuthberti* II 2 = B. Colgrave (ed), *Two lives of Cuthbert* (Cambridge 1940) 76-7; and *Vita S. Wilfridi* 6 = B. Colgrave (ed), *The life of bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge 1927) 15.

[3] c. 41 = Vives, *Concilios*, 206.

[4] King, *Law and society*, 130 n 4; Thompson, *Goths in Spain*, 41.

[5] cf. E. James, 'Ireland and western Gaul in the Merovingian period', D. Whitelock, D. N. Dumville and R. McKitterick (ed), *Ireland in early medieval Europe* (Cambridge 1982) 362-86: p 372-4.

[6] HE V 21; Colgrave and Mynors, 516-9.

[7] HE III 25.

[8] See now P. Meyvaert, 'Bede and the church paintings at Wearmouth-Jarrow', *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979) 63-77.

[9] See above p 93 and at n 6.

ry, out of the accidental conjuncture of disparate hairstyles and beliefs, and within a society which took more regard of such external signs than had the imperial world of the fourth or fifth centuries. To see the tonsure, therefore, together with the calculation of Easter and the question of ecclesiastical organisation, as one of the fundamental differences between the native British and Irish churches on the one hand and the English and Roman churches on the other is, in my view, a misreading of the situation. The real issues were ecclesiastical organisation – in particular, perhaps, the jurisdiction and powers of the metropolitan sees decreed by Gregory I – and Easter calculation. As the opposing sides lined up and attitudes hardened, the tonsure came to be seen by individuals on both sides as a way of publicising their allegiance. Bede, whose *Historia ecclesiastica* can be interpreted in part as an attempt to paper over the cracks created within the church by the Easter controversy and by the career of Wilfrid, plays down the importance of the tonsure, as might be expected. But in the middle of the seventh century it may have contributed much to the bitterness of the dispute which split the newly established English church down the middle and was, on the eve of archbishop Theodore's arrival, threatening its very existence.[1]

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