

THE HISTORY OF HAIRSTYLES IN THE MIRROR OF ANCIENT COINS

PART I

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The admirer of the monuments of ancient Rome will certainly ask how ancient Roman women had their hair arranged, combed and decorated. The answers to these questions are preserved not only on wall paintings, reliefs and statues, but also on ancient coins. Especially Roman imperial issues with their effective and perfected classical depiction, superb composition of design on the small surface of the coin, are also remarkable from the iconographic point of view. The iconography of Roman rulers on coins is extraordinarily valuable from the historical point of view. They include a whole range of portraits not only of emperors, but also of an endless series of family members: wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters. Ancient coins with portraits of women have attracted the special interest of many collectors. This article is devoted to some famous women – empresses of ancient Rome, active in the 2nd to 4th centuries AD, whose perfectly realistic coin portraits appear on gold and silver coins. No collector would be ashamed to have them in his collection, because almost every woman in ancient Rome had her characteristic hairstyle typical of the period, in which she lived. We direct our attention to the appearance of the female head on Roman coins.

Hair has played an important and varied role in the life of people since early times. Hairstyle became an inseparable element of fashion. Its form changed depending on the taste of the period, tradition and on geographical and social conditions. From early times, people endeavoured to emphasize their exceptionality and position by means of unusual or impressive hairstyles.

As mentioned above, Roman coins provide an extraordinary gallery of hairstyle fashions. The way of arranging the hair on female coin portraits from the period of the Roman Empire also very much helps with identifying and dating individual coins. Similarly, we can chronologically determine the type of hairstyle by comparison with pictorial or sculptured portraits of women. Coin portraits of empresses on coins show remarkable craft skill and artistic creativity. They accurately reflect the style of their time and the appearance of the individual ladies. They owe their extraordinary appearance to skilful hairdressers. Their art is proved by the artistic hairstyles of the women from the simplest to the complex, which their coin portraits show us.

The Romans had simple hairstyles in the period of the Roman Republic of the centuries before our era. Men originally had long hair, but later short hair became fashionable. Young girls wore their hair combed down to the neck, strengthened with ribbons and hairpins, plaited or tied into a bun. Married Roman women had their hair combed up into a hairstyle called a tutulus. At the beginning of the Empire, in the first decades

of our era, Roman women wore hairstyles with a parting along the middle of the head. Curly hair was rolled up into ringlets during sleep.

In the first century of our era, striking and complex high hairstyles came into fashion. They were composed of curls arranged in steps above the forehead, so that they formed a rich headband. Various hairpins, flowers, garlands and diadems emphasized the striking character of the hairstyle. At the end of the 2nd century, lightly waved hair framing the face, with the hair plaited at the back, tied in a bun or wound around the head in the form of a diadem, were modern.

Some very rare gold aurei of the Empress Marciana (died AD 114), sister of the Emperor Trajan (AD 98 – 117), bear her portrait with a high, combed up hair and a coronet above her forehead (fig.1). The portraits of Sabina (died 136), wife of the Emperor Hadrian (117 – 138) are characterized by rich variation of hairstyles. Apart from simple plaited hair, there are highly combed up hairstyles decorated with a diadem or veils (fig.2).

Faustina Senior (died 141), wife of Antoninus Pius (138-161) was notable for her beauty and wisdom. When her husband came to the throne, she gained the title „Augusta“ and is depicted on coins as a woman of a mature age. The numerous coins with her portrait show her with highly combed up hair, decorated with a pearl embroidered coronet, sometimes with a veil (fig. 3). The daughter of Faustina Senior was Faustina Junior (died 175), who married the young Emperor Marcus



1. Marciana (died AD 114) aureus
2. Sabina (died 136) denarius
3. Faustina Senior (died 141) denarius

4. Faustina Junior (died 175) denarius
5. Manlia Scantilla (died 193) aureus

6. Julia Domna (died 217) denarius
7. Otacilia (244-249) Ag antoninianus

8. Galeria Valeria (died 315) aureus

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Aurelius (161 – 180) in 145. She was very similar to her mother and also noted for her beauty. Her features on coins are finer with a characteristic younger appearance and hair always tied in a bun. Instead of a diadem, wavy tresses of hair wave over her forehead, which is an important distinguishing feature (fig.4).

The name and portrait of the Empress Manlia Scantilla (died 193), like her daughter Didia Clara are known in history only from a small number of coins struck during a few months in Rome in 193 during the sixty day reign of her husband Didius Julianus. They are very rare. A gold coin shows her bust with the head adorned with a large bun of hair, which distinguishes her from other empresses (fig.5).

Julia Domna (died 217), wife of the Emperor Septimius Severus (193 – 211) brought a new fashion to Roman hairstyle and new customs to the imperial court. She did come from Rome, but from the city of Emesa in Syria, and her distinguished origin as daughter of Bassianus, priest of the Sun is clearly expressed in her portraits and especially in her unusual hairstyles. They were an innovation at the time and are characteristic of the hairstyle of the first half of the third century of our

era. The long dense hair has been combed from the top of the head above the forehead freely to the shoulder and only then rolled up and tied at the back. It is interesting that the literature mentions about 300 of the most varied types of striking with her portrait (fig.6).

The silver antoninianus brings us a coin portrait of Otacilia, wife of the Emperor Philip I (244 – 249). It depicts a younger or mature woman with hair traditionally arranged in horizontal stripes and ending with a roll reaching to the neck (fig.7). The beginning of the fourth century of our era is represented by an aureus of the Empress Galeria Valeria (died 315), daughter of Diocletian and wife of Galerius Maximianus (293 – 311). The coin portrait represents a young woman with smooth hair, plaited and raised above the forehead. A small diadem adorns her head (fig.8).

The aim of this short article was to show the variety of hairstyles in a particular period. It is natural that further historical development brought regular changes in hair fashions. Male fashion was also subject to changes, whether in the length of hair, or the shape of moustaches and beards. Therefore, we will speak of male hairstyles in a future article.