**Bearded and Long-Haired Kings: Representations of Rulership on Seals and Coins in the Early Medieval West**

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The Roman emperor was a public figure, yet most of his subjects never encountered him in person. Outside urban centers, with their imperial *fora* and statues, the only ruler portraits to which inhabitants of the Roman empire were regularly exposed were printed on coins.[[1]](#footnote-1) Through these, any emperor could communicate with his subjects, not only by associating a stylized face to a name but also by propagating important or current successes and aspirations.[[2]](#footnote-2) This medium survived the late Roman regression of imperial power in the western regions and the establishment of royal authorities throughout most parts of Roman territory. In most of the emerging western kingdoms, the emperor retained his role as the central figure of authority, as is evidenced by imperial coinage minted throughout most of continental western Europe until the sixth century at least. In Visigothic Spain, for example, pseudo-imperial coinage bearing the portrait of the current emperor, ruling from the eastern capital, was used until the late 570s.[[3]](#footnote-3) In Gaul, these coins were largely abandoned only in the mid-580s, though quasi-imperial coinage, i.e., gold coins with the names and portraits of the current emperor on the obverse, were minted in southern Gaul until the later part of that century.[[4]](#footnote-4)

When the new regional rulers commissioned their portraits, they adhered to imperial models. As the imperial coinage remained in use, the first images of the new kings were issued on seals imprinted on signet rings. These bore images carved into precious stones or metal, largely conforming to the composition of numismatic portraits. These rings had a long tradition, going back to earlier Roman times, when they were carried by members of the elite as markers of social status. In the late Roman era, signet rings had become particularly common among Roman officials who used them to authenticate letters and other pieces of writing. Thus, these rings usually bore the name of the relevant authority, which in most cases surrounded a portrait. Both name and portrait were mirror-inverted so as to produce a positive readable image when printed on wax.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most prominent among these objects is the now lost signet ring and portrait of the Frankish king Childeric I (d. 481). Other ruler images are found on coinage whose composition and style differ from the usual imperial mints, among the most famous of which is the festive triple *solidus*, minted on the occasion of the *tricennalia* of Theoderic the Great (d. 526), in 500.

Signet rings are found throughout the Roman world, including the Frankish, the Lombard, and the Visigothic kingdoms. Most of the signets belonging to the gentile kingdoms[[6]](#footnote-6) were preserved from Merovingian Gaul, about which there is also some relevant written evidence. In a letter by King Clovis himself, the ruler explains that any clergymen freed after the war against the Visigoths should be given sealed letters as proof of authenticity.[[7]](#footnote-7) The early-eighth-century *Liber Historia Francorum* mentions a signet ring that must have belonged to Clovis and had come into Clothilde’s possession before her marriage to the king. Like that of his father Childeric I, this ring bore a portrait and inscription.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is also some relevant evidence from Italy. In a letter addressed to the scribe Deusdedit in Ravenna, Cassiodorus refers to the image of a signet ring printed on wax to emphasize the need to produce accurate copies and reports.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Merovingian historian Gregory of Tours mentions that the king’s *referendarii* could employ royal signet rings,[[10]](#footnote-10) comparable to the Visigothic and Aleman authorities who, for example, used them in the context of legal summons by letter.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The signet rings and their prints had a much smaller range of distribution compared to coins, and their less formalized appearance made them a platform for the new kings to seek their own style of representation. The results were portraits that combined new features with imperial models. The most prominent and ostensibly gentile element found in most of these portraits is an unusual hairstyle. Ian N. Wood recently offered a concise study of the early medieval perception of hair and beards and argued that the length and shape of a figure’s hair were significant and helped determine the bearer’s identity on different levels: whereas short hair and a shaven face could be related to the Roman civilization, having long hair and a beard was associated with gentile identities.[[12]](#footnote-12) Wood emphasizes that, at the time, allegedly un-Roman hairstyles had long ceased to be foreign to the Roman world or the imperial courts. Wood refers to a Roman law, issued in 416, a few years after the Gothic sacking of Rome, which seemingly reacted to the recent experience by penalizing the wearing of long hair within the eternal city. Another example that supports theimpression that long hair, nevertheless, remained a sign of gentile identity is a case in which potential soldiers were compelled to have their hair cut before they were allowed to serve in the Roman army.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The present study discusses the above examples and other ruler portraits found on seals and coins to analyze how imperial models were adopted and adapted to represent new regal authorities in a changing world. It is impossible to discuss the entire body of evidence in a limited study, which is why a sample of the most important pieces, on the one hand, and a selection of pieces that can represent much of the remaining body of evidence, on the other, will have to suffice. The first section focuses on portraits characterized by long and short hair, followed by a discussion of images showing rulers with beards or mustaches. Although the study concentrates on pieces dating around the year 500, examples dating up to the seventh century are considered when relevant.

**Long and Short Hair**

Long hair was the distinctive mark of the Merovingian kings, who are characterized by the sources as “curly” kings (*reges criniti*).[[14]](#footnote-14) Only long-haired Merovingians were meant to rule.[[15]](#footnote-15) This notion may be related to the Biblical story of Samson, whose strength depended on his hair.[[16]](#footnote-16) As Wood suggests, a comparable notion also arises in the case of the Visigothic king Wamba, who lost his power when tonsured.[[17]](#footnote-17) Merovingian sources are particularly informative when it comes to hair as, it seems, every social group carried a distinguished headdress, which was first of all defined by the length of the hair: while the clergy was recognizable through tonsure, slaves had shaven heads, and authorities under the kings had longer hair.[[18]](#footnote-18) Children retained their long hair until it was ritually cut, as the existence of sanctions against their unlawful trimming makes evident.[[19]](#footnote-19) The significance attributed to hair is confirmed by archaeological findings, e.g., the many combs discovered in burial sites located in the Frankish heartland,[[20]](#footnote-20) or pictures, such as a late-seventh-century funerary stele discovered in 1901 near Niederdollendorf (Germany) showing an armed man seemingly combing his hair.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, one’s hairstyle was not chosen randomly or according to personal taste but as an indicator of societal role and status.

Long hair is a prominent feature on the now lost gold signet ring attributed by its inscription *CHILDERICI REGIS* to King Childeric I. It surrounds the king’s frontal portrait and bust. The ring was discovered in 1653 in Tournai in an impressive burial site containing imperial goods and coins alongside seemingly gentile elements, such as the remains of horses and weapons like a *francisca,* an axe that has explicitly been associated with the Franks.[[22]](#footnote-22) On the ring, the king is depicted wearing the garments of a Roman military leader, including a military commander’s cloak, the *paludamentum*, an armor plate, and a spear (figure 1).[[23]](#footnote-23) This largely corresponds to late Roman styles known from coinage. However, Childeric’s hair is not only long but also braided, an element that often remains unnoticed, and it lacks a diadem, which would be consisten with Roman imperial iconography. Thus, the signet ring bears a notable combination of Roman elements, as references to imperial traditions and functions, and gentile features, in particular Childeric’s long hair and royal title. This goes well with his position as the administrator of the Belgica II province, as indicated in a letter addressed to his son Clovis.[[24]](#footnote-24) The signet ring thus perfectly reflects the ambiguity of Childeric’s position as a gentile king and a Roman official.

{insert fig. 1}

This particular signet ring has been studied extensively. Most recently, Michael Odenweller suggested that the composition of the image conforms, although not entirely, to the depiction on a famous ivory diptych usually assumed to show the *magister utriusque militae* Stilicho, although a shield and crossbow brooch would have replaced the armor plate. The latter is a defining feature of Roman officials, which is indeed evident in the king’s burial, although it is not clearly recognizable on the ring itself. According to Odenweller, the best prints of the lost item show what may be the remains of such a fibula on the bust’s left shoulder.[[25]](#footnote-25) Furthermore, Odenweller suggests that the designation *rex* may have referred to the neighboring rival “king of the Romans” Syagrius, a ruler who Gregory of Tours located in the region around Soissons.[[26]](#footnote-26) Deborah Karl-Brandt even argued, as other scholars have before her, that given that in the Roman world the frontal portrait was mainly used on festive imperial gold coinage, the intention behind this depiction was to put forward the king’s imperial pretensions.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, it should be noted that the picture on this seal was not meant to be widely distributed and that the evidence suggests that Childeric was presented as a Roman official rather than as an ambitious king. This suggests that, although the ring clearly adopts imperial traditions, there is no reason to believe that it was meant to be anything more than a representation of a regional authority in northern Gaul.

The king’s hair is usually understood as a gentile feature. In his important study on the ‘habit of barbarians,’ Philipp von Rummel challenges this view by comparing Roman and gentile depictions. He argues that long hair had become quite common in the Roman world and that this barbarian attire (*habitus barbarus*) underwent a process of Romanization, entailing that, by the end of the fifth century, long hair could be regarded as a feature of the Roman military.[[28]](#footnote-28) Thus, in a Roman context, by the end of the fifth century, long hair primarily pertained to a military hairstyle, referring to the imperial guard, even if it never entirely lost its barbarian connotation.[[29]](#footnote-29) As a result, according to von Rummel, Childeric was primarily buried as a Roman army leader, not as a gentile king.[[30]](#footnote-30) More recently, Karl-Brandt endorsed von Rummel’s argument by stressing that there is insufficient evidence to prove that, in the late fifth century, overlong hair already had the significance it would have among the later Merovingians. She suggests that Childeric’s hairstyle should, therefore, primarily be interpreted as a sign of social distinction and as a marker of his profession as a high-ranking Roman military official. As such, she argues, Childeric’s hair should not be seen as antagonistic or as a product of the acculturation of a barbarian into Roman society.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Childeric’s signet ring is not the only Merovingian representation of a king. A less-known depiction may be of King Childebert I (d. 558). Although its authenticity is difficult to assess due to its unknown provenance, it is usually considered genuine.Based on the genitive inscription *+HILDEBERTI REGIS*, Axel Gerd Weber recently argued that the depiction should be attributed to the king’s namesake Childebert II (d. 596), [[32]](#footnote-32) but this thesis has failed to convince.[[33]](#footnote-33) Unlike his predecessor Childeric, this king’s portrait is shown in profile, although with the same military characteristics as the former. Additionally, Childebert is carrying a shield and his hair is a little shorter and unbraided (figure 2a). Odenweller rightly emphasized that the king’s face and hairstyle are both less exceptional, as they follow Roman style.[[34]](#footnote-34) The cross, which is placed between the two words composing the inscription, is a new element that is meant to indicate the king’s identity as a Christian ruler. Karl-Brandt once again relates its iconography to the imperial style and argues that the profile view corresponds to Byzantine tradition, as is portrayed on contemporary *tremisses* and *semisses*,[[35]](#footnote-35) although here the similarities are far from overwhelming (compare this to the example in figure 2b).

{insert fig. 2a / fig. 2b}

Additional signet rings have been attributed to Merovingian kings. One example may have belonged to Sigibert III (figure 3a), as suggested by the initials R and S placed alongside the figure, which, given the royal status suggested by its long hair, is usually rendered as *rex Sigibertus*. The composition is somewhat comparable to that of Childebert, with long hair and what scholars have defined as a distinctive “Greek nose,” although it is much less sophisticated and is lacking a distinctive garment and spear.[[36]](#footnote-36) The hair looks very similar to the style used on some late Roman sculptures supposedly characterizing Germans, as shown, for example, on a late-fourth-century herm from Welschbillig.[[37]](#footnote-37) Another later Merovingian example is a bronze signet template with the inscription *DAGOBERTUS REX FRANCORUM*. Apart from its centrally partitioned long hair, which compares to the style on the signet ring of Childeric I, its frontal figure is difficult to recognize. The composition is rounded up with a cross on each side of the figure (figure 3b). The existence of similar late-seventh- and early-eighth-century wax seals suggests that this was a common model at that time.[[38]](#footnote-38)

{insert fig. 3a / fig 3b}

A possibly contemporary portrait of a Merovingian king is imprinted on a ring that was discovered in the village Géronde, near Siders in the Wallis region, and can now be found in the Swiss Landesmuseum Zürich. The figure has long hair that flows unknotted toward its back, with a diadem and cross on the front and pendula on the back of the diadem, elements that are also found on imperial coins. The face is in profile and is, again, characterized by a long pointy nose, this time showing the right side of the face, in the manner of the Justinianic model (figure 4).[[39]](#footnote-39) The cross on the diadem is an element that is found on imperial coins since Tiberius II (d. 582).[[40]](#footnote-40) Hans-Ulrich Geiger argued convincingly that it shows significant similarities to some numismatic portraits of Dagobert I,[[41]](#footnote-41) from Sitten, St. Maurice, and Lausanne, which suggests that it may depict that same king. The portrait is accompanied by the negative carving of the inscription *+ GRAIFARIUS ‧ VTEE FEL(I)X*. Although the sources mention a *dux* of King Guntram (d. 592), located in the *pagus UItrauranus*, that is called *Vaefarius*, which is close enough to Graifarius,[[42]](#footnote-43) the dating suggested by Geiger makes it improbable that he was the bearer of this ring, which means that it probably belonged to an official whose name is not otherwise know. The long royal hair, along with the fact that no king with this name is known, has led to the suggestion that the inscription does not refer to the ruler portrayed, but to the official who used his signet,[[43]](#footnote-44) or to whom this ring was gifted.[[44]](#footnote-45) The addition *utere felix* (‘use with success’) may be understood as relating to the user’s function as a royal official.[[45]](#footnote-46)

{insert fig. 4}

Kings were not distinguished by particularly long hair outside the Merovingian kingdoms. A well-known portrait of a Visigothic king, probably that of Alaric II (d. 507), was carved into an aquamarine-colored sapphire, which can now be found in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna. It is accompanied by the inscription *ALARICVS REX GOTHORVM*. The figure’s frontal composition compares to that of Childeric I and includes an armor plate, but it lacks the *paludamentum* and spear. The king’s large nose has a rather unusual shape of a trapezoid, and his seemingly short hair is combed to the front (figure 5a). Guido M. Berndt suggested that his hair was bound at the back, as a ribbon seems to be evident on the right-hand side. This would imply that the king was meant to have longer hair. The carving, however, is inconclusive, and short hair seems more likely given that there is no further evidence that the Visigothic kings wore their hair long. Berndt also argued that given the lack of military gear, the figure is probably meant to be clothed in a rich garment rather than an armor plate. The ring is usually attributed to Alaric II, as the king’s first namesake did not carry the regal title.[[46]](#footnote-47) The ring also differs from the earlier examples discussed so far in that, like Dagobert’s signet ring, it identifies its bearer as the king over a specific *gens*.[[47]](#footnote-48) In the Frankish world, the characterization of a Merovingian as king of the Franks became more common only from the early years of Childebert II. This change may be attributed to the mid-580s and could have been the result of the Byzantine support of Gundovald to be installed as king of the Franks with the intention that they expel the Lombards from Italy.[[48]](#footnote-49)

{insert fig. 5a / fig. 5b}

Vandal regal depictions are only known from coins with images that largely correspond to the Roman models. Vandal silver coins were first struck under Gundamund. The busts were usually portrayed in profile, with a diadem, a *paludamentum* held on the right shoulder by a brooch, and a breastplate (figure 5b). The portrait is surrounded by the inscription *D(ominus)N(oster) REX* followed by the ruler’s name. This strictly Roman model, which suggests that the Vandals were not interested in establishing a distinctly Vandal representation, was maintained until the fall of their kingdom. Von Rummel notes that even if these depictions do not allow us to assess the physical appearance of the Vandals, the Byzantine historian Prokopios confirms that the Vandal kings indeed preferred Roman habitus and clothing.[[49]](#footnote-50)

We also have an example that stands out among the Franks, with a king represented more strictly in the manner of a Roman emperor. It is imprinted on coins issued around 544 by the Frankish king Theudebert I (d. ca. 548), who decreed the minting of gold coins, which, as it seems, were not meant to portray the current emperor, but his own portrait. Still, the figure on these coins was clearly modeled according to earlier Roman examples, as attested, for example, by coins minted under the emperor Theodosius II (d. 450, compare figure 6a–b).[[50]](#footnote-51) On the obverse, the emperor wears a cuirass and spear, on the other side, an angel holds what is usually identified as a long cross and *globus cruciger*.[[51]](#footnote-52) The earliest coinage attributed to Theudebert refers to him as *VIC*(*TOR*), followed by the word *INC*(*LITUS*)*,* thus emphasizing his Roman identity. This is confirmed by some *solidi* minted in Marseille with the inscription: *D(OMINUS) N(OSTER) THEODEBERTVS P(ER)P(ERTUUS) AVG(USTVS)*.[[52]](#footnote-53) Other coins include the inscription *PAX ET LIBERTAS* or refer to the king as *VICTOR*.[[53]](#footnote-54) The exceptionality of this coinage is confirmed by a reference by the Byzantine historian Prokopios, who reprimanded the Franks for issuing gold coins with the king’s portrait.[[54]](#footnote-55)

{insert fig. 6a / fig. 6b}

# Beards and Mustaches

Let us now turn to another notable feature characterizing the portraits of early medieval rulers: their beards and mustaches. If later sources can be trusted, Clovis I not only had long hair, as every Merovingian king did, but he was also bearded.[[55]](#footnote-56) It is important to note that beards were not a strictly gentile feature, as the cases of the emperors Hadrian[[56]](#footnote-57) and Julian the Apostate[[57]](#footnote-58) demonstrate. Besides, Byzantine emperors regularly appeared bearded on imperial coinage, since the time of Phokas (d. 602).[[58]](#footnote-59) Max Diesenberger and Ian Wood showed how in the early medieval world beards could define the function of a man within his own society, for example, by identifying him as a clergyman. Furthermore, beards could be related to masculinity and physical strength.[[59]](#footnote-60) For example, the late-fourth-century garnet gem found in a Lombard burial site in Castel Trosino, now in Museo dell’Alto Medioevo in Rome, which is thought to depict the army leader Stilicho shows a bearded portrait.[[60]](#footnote-61) However, while the Roman emperors tended to wear full beards, comparable to the Greek philosophers, gentile rulers preferred more sophisticated styles. Around 500, the mustache became popular; a facial ornament still prominently associated with Charlemagne. It is found on the portrait of the first gentile king of Italy, Odoacer (d. 493), and soon after on that of his Ostrogothic successor, Theoderic I.[[61]](#footnote-62)

Odoacer’s portrait is depicted on the last group of coins minted under his authority, the only ones that bear his name and portrait. It differs from Roman portraits, not only because it lacks a diadem, but also because of the mentioned mustache (figure 7).These coins were minted from around the summer of 490, a time when Odoacer was besieged in Ravenna by Zeno’s Ostrogothic envoy Theodoric.[[62]](#footnote-63) A silver coin from Ravenna, for example, with the inscription *FL OD-OVAC*, was found in Sirmium (Pannonia) and is now located in the Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.[[63]](#footnote-64) The inscription is usually rendered as *Flavius Odoacer,* ‘Flavius’ being a popular name among the Roman emperors.[[64]](#footnote-65) It was not only used by Odoacer, but again also by Theodoric, after him.[[65]](#footnote-66) In both cases, the likely intention was to highlight their Roman identity in a context that also required emphasis of their connection to the gentile communities.

{insert fig. 7}

On his *tricennalia*, in the year 500, Theoderic issued a notable festive triple *solidus*. The festive coin was later converted into a fibula and is known today as the Medallion of Senigallia. The king’s portrait was exceptional, as it represents a gentile ruler according to Roman tradition and style.[[66]](#footnote-67) The inscription identifies the king as *REX THEODERICVS PIVS PRINC(EPS) I(NVICTUS) S(EMPER*). He is shown in frontal view, with hair reaching toward his ears, curling at the end, and a mustache. He wears a *paludamentum*, held by a fibula on his right shoulder, and a cuirass. His right hand is raised in an *adlocutio* gesture and his left hand holds a winged Victory with a laurel wreath standing on a globe (figure 8a).[[67]](#footnote-68) Again, the missing diadem is striking. According to von Rummel, Theoderic did not require a diadem, given that his natural hairstyle and appearance were enough to present him as ruler.[[68]](#footnote-69) The iconography thus appears genuinely Roman,except for his longer hair and mustache. His two-fold role as a Roman official and a gentile king is confirmed by his titles *rex* and *princeps.* We should, however, remain cautious about attributing a Roman or gentile character to a particular hairstyle. Von Rummel argued that Theoderic’s hair largely corresponds to how Justinian’s officials were depicted a few decades later on the famous mosaic in Ravenna,[[69]](#footnote-70) which means that it may not have been conceived as alien during Theoderic’s time. Still, although Jonathan J. Arnold rightly pointed out that mustaches were more common in the Roman world than one would expect,[[70]](#footnote-71) it is likely that they were more alien to the Roman eye than full beards, and could thus be used as a gentile marker. As a result, although Theoderic’s portrait primarily included Roman imperial features, it still does reflect this ruler’s ambivalent status as bearing gentile and Roman authority.[[71]](#footnote-72)

{insert fig. 8a / fig. 8b}

A less-known picture, which is usually attributed to the same Ostrogothic king Theoderic, is carved into an amethyst gem. The identification of the ruler is difficult, however, as it is based on an ambiguous monogram added to the gem below the figure (figure 8b), which may refer either to the Visigothic king Theoderic I or Theoderic II.[[72]](#footnote-73) According to Karl-Brandt, the image’s style can be compared to three examples from the Constantinian era using a model meant to represent the king’s authority as the “legitimate successor of the late Roman civilization” (“legitimer Nachfolger der spätantiken römischen Zivilisation”) and the “Roman emperors.”[[73]](#footnote-74) The ruler is depicted in Roman garments, i.e., a toga and tunic, with shoulder-length hair parted in the middle, and maybe a mustache. Thus, once more, the portrait seems to combine Roman and gentile elements. The last Ostrogothic king, Theodahad (d. 536), is also depicted with a mustache on his coins. His hair is a little longer than that of Theodoric on the Medallion of Senigallia. The most unusual element is the helmet (figure 9), which seems to emphasize the king’s military identity. As a result, von Rummel also associates his mustache with a military style and suggests that Theodahad wears an undefinable robe.[[74]](#footnote-75)

{insert fig. 9}

While current research tends to agree that hairstyle should not be understood to have represented a particular *gens*,[[75]](#footnote-76) the Lombards were the exception that proves the rule. In their origin story, they were famously known to have worn long beards.[[76]](#footnote-77) The Lombard signet rings, of which at least sixteen are known mostly from the seventh century, attest to the fact that the significance attributed to their beards was not limited to this narrative and to the name that emerged from it. While these portraits differ in detail, they all show a frontal figure with different types of ear-long hair, mostly parted in the middle, and a full beard. There has been some discussion of whether they show Lombard kings.[[77]](#footnote-78) None of these rings bear the name of a king, which is why scholars have debated whether these portraits show the ring’s bearer or the ruler in whose name the rings were used. One ring, for example, contains the inscription *+ RODC / HIS VIL*, where the last three letters probably refer to *vir illustris*.[[78]](#footnote-79) The figure has longer hair, parted in the centre, a long beard, and is clothed in what seems to be a rich garment. His left hand is raised in what appears to be the gesture of *adlocutio* (figure 10a). Although von Hessen suggested that it shows King Agilulf,[[79]](#footnote-80) it has been noted that the figure lacks distinct regal insignia. Wilhelm Kurz, therefore, suggested that the portrait may be that of a *dux* or *gastald*.[[80]](#footnote-81) Other figures have been identified, more confidently, as being of a king, given that a cross that was taken to be part of a diadem appears above the head. However, these crosses seem to belong to the inscription rather than to a diadem. This is the case, for example, with a signet ring found in Trezzo, which bears a portrait with a beard and hairstyle that compares to the picture just discussed (figure 10b) along with the inscription *ANSV+ALDO*.[[81]](#footnote-82) Von Hessen identifies it with the Lombard king Rothari, whose famous edict, the *Edictum Rothari* of 643, was signed by an *ANSVALD*.[[82]](#footnote-83) He argued that the dative case of the inscription confirms that the figure is not of the person who owned the ring,[[83]](#footnote-84) although Kurze is correct that not much weight should be given to such grammatical subtleties.[[84]](#footnote-85) Another comparable ring, which was discovered in a stone sarcophagus in the church of S. Ambrogio in Milano, together with other goods like a sax, spatha, and comb, is now lost (figure 10c). It shows significant similarities to the ANSOVALD-ring, in particular with respect to its hairstyle, the cross in the middle of the head, and the inscription *MARCHE+BADUS VIV(AS)*. The addition *VIV* is reminicent of the *uter felix* on Graifarius’ ring – assuming that it was not meant to be *VIL*, i.e., *vir illuster*.[[85]](#footnote-86)

{insert fig. 10a / fig. 10b / fig. 10c}

Although it is possible that none of these portraits belonged to a king, kings appearto have used comparable iconography, as the images on these signet rings largely correspond to the portraits of the Lombard monarchs, as can be seen in other formats. One famous example is the Agilulf plate, another is the gold foil cross of Beinasco. They also confirm the significance of beards and hair as markers of Lombard identity.[[86]](#footnote-87) The Lombards only abandoned pseudo-imperial coinage under King Cunipert (d. 700), which means that beards are only found since the eighth century, when national coinage emerged.[[87]](#footnote-88) Nonetheless, the mints discussed above confirm that the representations of Lombard kings did not significantly differ from portraits of members of their nobility.

# Conclusion

How did gentile rulers adopt or combine Roman and gentile traditions to create a new vision of rulership and present themselves on their signet rings and coins? Although the present study could only consider a sample of the available evidence, some general conclusions may tentatively be drawn. The new rulers adopted imperial models to represent themselves. This is not surprising given that most of these authorities had emerged from inside the Roman world. Still, most of these portraits do include seemingly new elements that could be related to their gentile identity. For the Merovingian kings, the most distinctive feature was their long hair; for the Lombards, it was their beards, although unlike the former, this was not limited to the kings. For the Goths in Italy, and for Odoacer, the new element was the mustache. For the Visigoths, no such marker can be found.

More recent research has shown that these features were not entirely new, as they had already evolved inside the Roman world. Long hair had become a marker of the late Roman military, while Romans, at least occasionally, wore mustaches. These did not need to be understood as gentile features. Still, gentile authorities combined them with ostensibly Roman elements to create new forms of representation, a procedure that proves the significance attributed to such distinctive markers. While in Gaul, long hair soon represented royalty, and mustaches were introduced in Italy as a new and conspicuous marker that went well with an overall imperial appearance. In any case, the significance attributed to a distinct hairstyle or beard is remarkable.

Some signet rings, in particular, attest to the ambivalent position of these early kings: while Roman officials, like the administrator of Belgica II, Childeric I, must have used their signet rings in the context of their imperial function, the inscriptions regularly identify their bearers as kings (*rex*). Thus, although these rings clearly emerged from a Roman imperial framework, and were obviously used in that very context, the title *rex* denotes a more independent sphere of authority. Scholars have suggested that kings like Theoderic ruled their *gens* as kings and ruled the Roman population as representatives of their emperor.[[88]](#footnote-89) The fact that genuinely Roman signet rings refer to the men they depict as kings, however, begs the question whether these roles were indeed conceived as being separate. If we look at contemporary descriptions of imperial hierarchies, the king is ranked between the emperor and the remaining officials. The *Decurio de gradibus*, a list that only survived in a single manuscript and is likely to have been produced in Merovingian Gaul, at fols. 157v to 158r (cols. 2), is a case in point: it lists the *decanus, centurio, tribunus, vicarius, comes, dux*, and *patricius*, with the *rex* ruling one or more *gentes* and the emperor the entire world. A second relevant reference in the same source explains that the *patricius* ranks either below the king or (*vel*) the emperor.[[89]](#footnote-90) This may suggest that these rulers conceived of their statuses of king and Roman official as two closely related functions, and that, for this reason, they chose to represent their authority as the amalgamation of Roman and gentile rulership.

Although gentile rulers governed most western regions since the later fifth century, we should not forget that they ruled over a populace with a Roman majority. Despite the new elites and authorities, this local population continued to define early medieval societies, and we should not imagine the gentiles as foreigners forcing on them a new culture. The new authorities, themselves, were born into what had remained of the Roman world, and there was nothing more natural for them than to adopt imperial means of representation toward their own ends. The results were largely Roman portraits that included new elements. The Lombards, who were less acquainted with the empire before they came to rule over northern Italy, differed in that they first adopted the imperial coinage, as had been the case in most other regions, but eventually turned towards a more distinct style by which to represent their own *gens*. Nonetheless, labeling these royal portraits as altogether the product of *imitatio imperii*, a presumption that is also implied when modern scholars refer to these rulers as the “successors” of the Roman emperors, does not seem appropriate.[[90]](#footnote-91) Roman models were not adopted as an alien-but-useful means of representation, they were adapted as an expression of what these rulers considered as part of their own tradition. Although these portraits differ in details, they show a largely coherent picture that may reflect a supra-regional regal culture of power that had emerged from inside the fading Roman world.

1. For an excellent survey of late Roman and early medieval coinage, see Rovelli (2018). All figures have been redrawn by myself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g., Martin (2011), 91–138. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grierson/Blackburn(1986), 46–49, with some pseudo-imperial examples at pp. 438–441. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Uhalde (2002), 134–169; Hendy (1988), 29–78; Grierson/Blackburn (1986), 92–93, with some pseudo-imperial examples at pp. 463–471. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a general survey of the different signet rings, including private and non-royal official rings, see Karl-Brandt (2020), 170–178;Odenweller (2022). See also Weber (2014). A first important study of these images of power has been offered by Schramm (1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I use the term “gentile” here, as an alternative to the term “barbarian,” to refer to any people or authority lacking Roman descent. This is equally supported by the evidence, which regularly characterizes these groups as *gentes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Capitularia Merowingica 1 (p. 2, ed. Boretius): *si veraciter agnoscitis vestras epistulas de anulo vestro infra signatas*. Avitus of Vienne, *Epist*. 78 (p. 97, ed. Piper) contains a detailed description of an episcopal signet ring. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Liber Historia Francorum* 12 (p. 257, ed. Krusch): *anolum, Chlodovechi inscriptionem vel imaginem inscriptum.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cassiodor*, Var.* 12.21 (p. 378, ed. Mommsen): *exemplar velut anulum ceris imprime, ut sicut vultus expressa non possunt signa refugere, ita manus tua ab authentico nequeat discrepare.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gregory, *Hist.* 5.3 (p. 198, eds. Arndt/Krusch): *Siggo quoque referendarius, qui anolum regis Sigyberthi tenuerat.* See also the discussion of these and other written sources in Berndt (2009), 68–69. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Berndt (2009), 69, n. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wood (2018), 107–116, referring to *CTh* 14.10.4 (p. 788, ed. Mommsen/Meye: ban of long hair) and Claudian*, In Eutropium*, ll. 383–384 (ed. Platnauer: cutting of long hair). See also the discussions of early medieval hair in Pohl (1998), 51–61; Diesenberger (2003), 173–212; Bartlett (1994), 43–60; Cameron (1965), 1203–1216. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Codex Theodosianus 14.10.4; Wood (2018), 108–109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, e.g. Gregory, *Hist*. 3.18; Cameron (1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wood (2018), 109. See, e.g. Gregory, *Hist*. 3.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Goosmann (2012);Wood (2018), 113–114. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wood (2018), 115, referring totheCouncil of Toledo 12.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sarti (2013), 254–255. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Pactus* 24.2 (p. 89, ed. Eckhardt): Si quis puerum crinitum sine consilio parentem totunderit. See also

    Bartlett (1994), 47–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. E.g. Gutsmiedl-Schümann (2012), 257–258. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schienerl (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Richter (2004), 364, see Isidore, *Ety*. 18.6.9 (p. 84, ed. Lindsay). See also the discussions in Quast (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On the burial finding and signet ring, see Müller-Wille (1998); Richter (2004); Périn/Kazanski (2007); Berndt (2009), 52–56; Quast (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sarti (2013), 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Odenweller (2022), 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Odenweller (2022), 278, see Gregory, *Hist*. 2.27, referring to *Siacrius Romanorum rex*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Karl-Brandt (2020), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rummel (2007), 265–268. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rummel (2007), 221–225. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rummel (2007), 265–268. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Karl-Brandt (2020), 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Weber (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Review Prien (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Odenweller (2022), 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Karl-Brandt (2020), 175–176. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Karl-Brandt (2020), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier. Inv. no.: 18870, see also Wrede (1972), 70–71, accessible arachne.dainst.org/entity/2260861 (20.10.2022). For a discussion of this and other comparable findings, see Rummel (2007), 220–227. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Stieldorf (2003); Karl-Brandt (2020), 178–179. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Geiger (1971) 146–148. On the name, see Kaiser (1994), 273. See also the discussion in Jones (2019), 341–343. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Geiger (1971) 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Geiger (1971), 147–148; Von Hessen (1983); Berndt (2009), 62–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Kaiser (1994), 280–281. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Geiger (1971) 146; Kaiser (1994), 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Kaiser (1994), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Cf. Kaiser (1994), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Richter (2004), 365; Berndt (2009), 56–58; Karl-Brandt (2020), 191–192; Odenweller (2022), 279–280. For a concise survey on gems, see Karl-Brandt (2020), 188–190. Karl-Brandt (2020), 191, stresses that the ribbon at the back is difficult to identify. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Odenweller (2022), 279–280. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. This topic will be further discussed in my forthcoming monograph on *Merovingian connections*. See also Handley (2020), who convincingly argues that the inscription *GILDEB(ER)TUS REX FR[ANCORUM]* discovered in 1973 in the church of St-Germain-des-Prés on a sarcophagus dating around 558 should be considered the first known example of a gentile self-characterization of a Frankish king. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Rummel (2007), 257–258, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. On this coin and the historical context, see Callu (1980), who relates the style to the coinage of Justin I and Justinian (p. 190). See also Fanning (2002), 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. See Sommer (2010), 39, nr. 2.2.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. See López Sánchez (2019), 108–110, although unconvincingly concluding that “Théodebert Ier fut proclamé roi d’Italie d’abord, puis empereur d’Occident par la cité de Marseille” (p. 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Callu (1980), 189–190. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Prokopios*, Goth.* 7.33.5–6 (ed. Veh). See also Collins (1983), 27–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Wood (2018), 110–111. See also Diesenberger (2003), 185–186. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Zanker (1995), 198–266. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. See his *Misopogon* (ed. Wright). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Grierson (1965), 211–213. See, e.g., an example at numismatics.org/collection/1968.131.76 (07.11.2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Wood (2018), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Berndt (2009), 48–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Cf. Karl-Brandt (2020), 175, who suggests that whilethe appearance ofChilderic I would have been nothing unusual in the late Roman world, Odoacer or Theoderic would have adopted a more regal, authoritative, representation. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Ehling (1998/9), 33–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Object number 18262522, access ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18262522 (04.11.2022); Ehling (1998/9). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. See Rösch (1978), 49–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Scholl (2017), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Radtki (2015), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Rummel (2007), 258–260; Arnold (2013), 152–153; Radtki (2015), 80, assuming that he also wears a crown. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Rummel (2007), 260, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Rummel (2007), 258–260. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Arnold (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. See Radtki (2015), 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Berndt (2009), 51–52; Karl-Brandt (2020), 192. On late Roman and early medieval monograms, see Garipzanov (2018), 109*–*285. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Karl-Brandt (2020), 194. Similarly, Radtki (2015), 79, argues that Theoderic „de facto [sich] nicht so sehr als Stellvertreter des oströmischen Kaisers sah, sondern vielmehr als Nachfolger der weströmischen Kaiser“. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Rummel (2007), 261, suggests that the robe may be either “eine mißverstandene Panzer-Chlamys-Kombination darstellen soll oder einen über einer Tunika getragenen offenen Mantel.” Given that he wears a helmet, this may, however, also be a mail shirt. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. See Karl-Brandt (2020), 193–194, for further references. This does not mean that hair was of no relevance as a marker of specific ethnic groups, see Bartlett (1994), 45–46; Pohl (1998), 51–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (ed. Waitz). See also the excellent discussion of the gradual process of creating a Lombard identity in Italy in Borri (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Jones (2019), 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Von Hessen (1983), 148; Kurze (1986), 415–419. See Geiger (1971); Kaiser (1994); Jones (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Von Hessen (1983), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Kurze (1986), 417–419. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. Kurze (1986), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Von Hessen (1983), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Von Hessen (1983), 149; Kurze (1986), 419–421. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. Kurze (1986), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Von Hessen (1983), 150–151; Kurze (1986), 421–427, argues for the reading *VIVAS*, but stresses that none of these rings show a king. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Karl-Brandt (2020), 181–185. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Rovelli (2018), 75–76. See, for example, the early example from the time of Ratchis (p. 146, ed. Wroth); Karl-Brandt (2020), 186. For a discussion of the wider context and related processes of change, see Borri (2014), on Lombard coinage more generally, see Rovelli (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. See, e.g., the inscription in CIL 10.6850–1, reading *rex Theodericus semper augustus*, and the discussion of relevant research in Wiemer, ed. (2021), 29–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, lat. reg. 1050, extracts from fols. 157v–8r, with ‘Patricius qui ad latus regis sedet et, ne molestias rex accipiat, ipse dispensat quicquid ad imperatorem vel ad regem adlatur causarum provindentiarum et populorum. rex qui super unam gentem vel multas. imperator qui super totum mundum aut qui precellit totum mundum aut qui precellit in eo. […] dux sub patricio sub rege vel imperatore fit Caesar sub Augustus,’ according to Conrat (1904), 248. Cf. the interpretation in Beyerle (1952), 18–21. See also Fortunatus, *Carm*. app. 2, ll. 11–13 (p. 275–276, ed. Leo): ‘gloria summa tibi, rerum sator atque redemptor,/ qui das Iustinum iustus in orbe caput. rite super reges dominantem vindicat.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Cf. Radtki (2015), who argues that rulers like Theoderic were largely integrated into the imperial world and considered its culture their own, but at several occasions nevertheless refers to the notion of *imitatio imperii*, e.g., at p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)