**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. The majority of his subjects, however, never encountered him in person. Outside of the urban centres, with their imperial *fora* and statues, the only ruler portraits that the inhabitants of the Roman empire had regular access to were those on coins.[[1]](#footnote-1) Through these, any emperor was able to communicate with his subjects, not only by providing at least a stylised 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 what had been Roman territory. In the majority of the emerging western kingdoms, the emperor retained his role as the primal reference of authority, as is best attested on imperial coinage minted throughout most of continental western Europe until at least the sixth century. In Visigothic Spain, for example, pseudo-imperial coinage bearing the portrait of the current emperor ruling from the eastern capital is attested until the late 570s,[[3]](#footnote-3) and in Gaul, these coins were only largely abandoned in the mid-580s, while quasi-imperial coinage, i.e. gold coins with the names and portraits of the current emperor on the obverse, was minted in southern Gaul until the later part of that century.[[4]](#footnote-4)

When the new regional rulers commissioned their own portraits, they adhered to imperial models. As the imperial coinage remained in use, the first images of the new kings were issued on seals attested on signet rings. These bore images carved into precious stone 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. These rings, therefore usually bore the name of the relevant authority, which in most cases surrounded a portrait, both being mirror-inverted 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 attested on coinage whose composition and style diverged from the usual imperial mints, among which the festive triple *solidus* minted on the occasion of the *tricennalia* of Theoderic the Great (d. 526) in 500 is one of those best known.

Signet rings are attested throughout the Roman world, including the Frankish, the Lombard and the Visigothic kingdoms. The majority among those belonging to the gentile kingdoms[[6]](#footnote-6) have been preserved from Merovingian Gaul, in which case 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 manned with 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 the one 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 referred to the image of a signet ring printed on wax to underline the need to produce accurate copies and reports.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Merovingian historian Gregory of Tours mentions that the king’s *referendarii* could apply 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, while their less formalised appearance made them a platform for the new kings to seek their own style of representation. The results were portraits which combined new features with imperial models. The most prominent and ostensibly gentile element attested 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, arguing that the length and shape of a figure’s hair were significant and helped to indicate the bearer’s identity on different levels: while short hair and a shaven face could be related to Roman civilisation, long hair and beard was read as a reference to gentile identities.[[12]](#footnote-12) Wood emphasises that at the same time allegedly un-Roman hairstyles had long ceased to be foreign to the Roman world or the imperial courts; he refers to a Roman law issued in 416, a few years after the Gothic sack of Rome, which seemingly reacted to the recent experience by penalising the wearing of long hair within the eternal city. The impression that long hair, nevertheless, remained a sign of gentile identity, is backed, for example, by a case when 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 intends to discuss the above examples and other ruler portraits attested on seals and coins to analyse 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 able to stand for much of the remaining body of evidence, on the other, need to suffice. The first section focuses on portraits characterised by long and short hair, followed by a discussion of images showing rulers with beards or moustaches. Although the study concentrates on pieces dating around the year 500, examples dating up to the later seventh century are considered whenever relevant.

**Long and Short Hair**

Long hair was the Merovingian kings’ distinctive mark, characterised 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 put forward, a comparable notion is also attested for 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 recognisable through tonsure, slaves had shaven heads, and authorities below the kings had longer hair.[[18]](#footnote-18) Children retained their hair long until ritually cut, as indicated by the reference to sanctions against their unlawful trimming.[[19]](#footnote-19) The significance attributed to hair is confirmed by archaeological finds like the many combs discovered in burials located in the Frankish heartland,[[20]](#footnote-20) or pictures like a late-seventh-century funerary stele found in 1901 near Niederdollendorf (Germany) showing an armed man seemingly combing his hair.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, the 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 signet gold 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 containing imperial goods and coins, alongside seemingly gentile elements like the remains of horses or weapons like a *francisca,* an axe that has been explicitly related to 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 armour 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 correspond to Roman imperial iconography. Thus, the signet ring bears a notable combination of Roman elements, as references to imperial traditions and function, and gentile features, in particular Childeric’s long hair and royal title. This goes well with his position as the administrator of the province Belgica II attested 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}

There has been a lot of research on this particular signet ring. 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 armour plate. The latter is a defining feature of Roman officials which indeed is attested in the king’s burial, although it is not clearly recognisable on the ring itself. According to Odenweller, the best prints of the lost item show on the bust’s left shoulder what may be the remains of such a fibula.[[25]](#footnote-25) Furthermore, Odenweller suggests that the designation as *rex* may have referred to the neighbouring rival “king of the Romans” Syagrius, a ruler who is located by Gregory of Tours in the region around Soissons.[[26]](#footnote-26) Deborah Karl-Brandt even argued, as other scholars did 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 rather as a Roman official than as an ambitious king. This suggests that although this ring clearly adopts imperial traditions, there is no reason to believe it was meant to be anything more than representing a regional authority in the north of Gaul.

The king’s hair is usually conceived as a gentile feature. In his important study on the ‘habit of barbarians’, Philipp von Rummel challenged this view by comparing Roman and gentile depictions. He argued that long hair had become quite common in the Roman world and that this barbarian attire (*habitus barbarus*) had gone through a process of Romanisation, entailing that by the end of the fifth century, long hair could be regarded as a feature of the Roman military.[[28]](#footnote-28) By the end of the fifth century, long hair thus, in a Roman context, first of all, pertained to a military hairstyle, referring to the imperial guard, even if it never entirely lost its barbarian connotation.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, 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 no sufficient evidence proving that overlong hair already had the significance in the late fifth century it would have among the later Merovingians. She suggests that Childeric’s hairstyle, therefore should primarily be interpreted as a sign of social distinction and a marker of his profession as a high-ranking Roman military and that, in consequence, Childeric’s hair should not be seen as antagonistic or 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 show 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 has recently argued for an attribution to the king’s namesake Childebert II (d. 596), [[32]](#footnote-32) but this thesis has failed to convince.[[33]](#footnote-33) Other than his predecessor Childeric, this king’s portrait is shown in profile, although with the same military attributes as the former. In addition, Childebert is carrying a shield, and his hair is a little shorter and unbraided (figure 2a). Odenweller has rightly stressed that the king’s face and hairstyle are both less exceptional as they follow Roman style more closely.[[34]](#footnote-34) The cross, which is included between the two words composing the inscription, is a new element that is meant to point towards the king’s identity as a Christian ruler. Karl-Brandt once again relates its iconography to imperial style and argues that the profile view corresponds to Byzantine tradition as attested 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}

We have further signet rings attributed to Merovingian kings. One example may have belonged to Sigibert III (figure 3a), as suggested by the initials R and S added to the sides, which, given the figure’s long hair pointing to royal status, 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 much less sophisticated and lacking a distinctive garment and spear.[[36]](#footnote-36) The hair looks very similar to the style used on some late Roman sculptures supposedly characterising 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 some 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 potentially contemporary portrait of a Merovingian king is attested on a ring discovered in the village Géronde near Siders in the Wallis region, today in the Swiss Landesmuseum Zürich. The figure has long hair that flows unknotted towards its back, with a diadem and cross on the front and pendula on the back of the diadem, elements that are also attested on imperial coins. The face is in profile and again characterised by a long and pointed 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 attested 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 from Sitten, St. Maurice and Lausanne which are related to Dagobert I,[[41]](#footnote-41) which means that it may show 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-42) 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 attested. The long royal hair, in combination with the fact that no king with this name is known, has led to the assumption that the inscription does not refer to the ruler portrayed, but to the official who used his signet,[[43]](#footnote-43) or to whom this ring was gifted.[[44]](#footnote-44) The addition *utere felix* (‘use with success’) may be interpreted to relate to the user’s function as a royal official.[[45]](#footnote-45)

{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), has been carved into an aquamarine-coloured sapphire, which is today located 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 armour plate, but lacks the *paludamentum* and spear. The king’s large nose has a rather unusual shape of a trapeze, 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 indicated 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 armour plate. The ring is usually attributed to Alaric II as the king’s first namesake did not carry the regal title.[[46]](#footnote-46) The ring also differs from the earlier examples discussed so far in that, comparable to Dagobert’s signet ring, it identifies its bearer as the king over a specific *gens*.[[47]](#footnote-47) In the Frankish world, the characterisation of a Merovingian as king of the Franks became more common only from the early years of Childebert II. This change may be dated to the mid-580s and could have occurred in consequence of the Byzantine support of Gundovald to be installed as a king of the Franks with the intention to have them expel the Lombards from Italy.[[48]](#footnote-48)

{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 assessing the physical appearance of the Vandals, the Byzantine historian Prokopios would confirm that the Vandal kings indeed preferred a Roman habitus and clothing.[[49]](#footnote-49)

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 attested 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 show the current emperor, but his own portrait. Still, the figure on these coins was clearly modelled 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-50) On the obverse, the emperor wears cuirass and spear, on the reverse, an angel holds what is usually identified as long cross and *globus cruciger*.[[51]](#footnote-51) The earliest coinage attributed to Theudebert refers to him as *VIC*(*TOR*), followed by the word *INC*(*LITUS*)*,* thus emphasising 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-52) Other coins include the inscription *PAX ET LIBERTAS* or they refer to the king as *VICTOR*.[[53]](#footnote-53) 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-54)

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

# Beards and Moustaches

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

Odoacer’s portrait is attested on the last group of coins minted under his authority, the only ones that bear his name and portrait. It is different from Roman types, not only as it lacks a diadem, but also because of the mentioned moustache (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-62) 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-63) The inscription is usually rendered as *Flavius Odoacer,* ‘Flavius’ being a popular name among the Roman emperors.[[64]](#footnote-64) It was not only used by Odoacer, but again also by Theodoric after him.[[65]](#footnote-65) In both cases, the likely intention was to underline their Roman identity in a context that also required emphasis of them belonging 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-66) The inscription identifies the king as *REX THEODERICVS PIVS PRINC(EPS) I(NVICTUS) S(EMPER*). He is shown in frontal view, with hair reaching towards his ears, curling at the end, and a moustache. He wears a *paludamentum*, held by a fibula on his right shoulder, and a cuirass. His right hand is raised in an *adlocutio* gesture, his left hand holds a winged Victory with a laurel wreath standing on a globe (figure 8a).[[67]](#footnote-67) Again, the missing diadem is striking. According to von Rummel, Theoderic did not require a diadem given that his natural hairstyle and appearance sufficed to present him as ruler.[[68]](#footnote-68) The iconography thus appears genuinely Roman,except for his longer hair and moustache. The 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 has pointed out 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-69) which means that it may not have been conceived as alien at the time of Theoderic. Still, although Jonathan J. Arnold rightly pointed out that moustaches were more common in the Roman world than one would expect,[[70]](#footnote-70) it seems likely that they were more alien to the Roman eye than full beards, and thus could be used as a gentile maker. Although Theoderic’s portrait thus primarily included Roman imperial features, it still does relate to the ambivalence of this ruler’s status as bearing gentile and Roman authority.[[71]](#footnote-71)

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

A less-known picture is carved into an amethyst gem, which is also usually attributed to the same Ostrogothic king Theoderic. The identification of the ruler is difficult, however, as any identification is based on an ambiguous monogram added to the gem below the figure (figure 8b), which may also refer either to the Visigothic king Theoderic I or Theoderic II.[[72]](#footnote-72) According to Karl-Brandt, the image’s style may 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 civilisation” (“legitimer Nachfolger der spätantiken römischen Zivilisation”) and the “Roman emperors”.[[73]](#footnote-73) The ruler is depicted in Roman garments, i.e., toga and tunic, alongside shoulder-length hair parted in the middle, and maybe a moustache. Thus, the portrait again seems to combine Roman and gentile elements. The last Ostrogothic king, Theodahad (d. 536), is also depicted with a moustache 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 emphasise the king’s military identity. Von Rummel therefore also relates his moustache to a military style and suggests that Theodahad wears an undefinable robe.[[74]](#footnote-74)

{insert fig. 9}

While current research tends to agree that hairstyle should not be understood to have represented a particular *gens*,[[75]](#footnote-75) the Lombards were the exception that proves the rule. They were famously related to carrying long beards in their origin story.[[76]](#footnote-76) The Lombard signet rings, of which at least sixteen are known mostly from the seventh century, attest that the significance attributed to their beards was not limited to this narrative and 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-77) None of these rings bear the name of a king, which is why scholars debated whether these portraits show the ring’s bearer or the ruler in whose name the latter used their ring. One ring, for example, contains the inscription *+ RODC / HIS VIL*, the last three letters probably referring to *vir illustris*.[[78]](#footnote-78) 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 seems to be the gesture of *adlocutio* (figure 10a). Although von Hessen suggested that it shows King Agilulf,[[79]](#footnote-79) 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-80) Other figures have been identified with more confidence as a king, given that a cross appears above the head that was interpreted as part of a diadem. However, these crosses seem to belong to the inscription rather than a diadem. This is the case, for example, for a signet ring found in Trezzo, which bears a portrait with a beard and hairstyle that compares to the picture just discussed (figure 10b) and the inscription *ANSV+ALDO*.[[81]](#footnote-81) Von Hessen suggests an identification with the Lombard king Rothari, whose famous edict, the *Edictum Rothari* of 643, was signed by an *ANSVALD*.[[82]](#footnote-82) He argued that the dative case of its inscription confirms that the figure is not the person who owned the ring,[[83]](#footnote-83) although Kurze is right that not much weight should be given to such grammatical finesses.[[84]](#footnote-84) 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 parallels to the ANSOVALD-ring, in particular regarding its hairstyle and cross in the middle of the head and the inscription *MARCHE+BADUS VIV(AS)*. The addition *VIV* reminds of the *uter felix* on Graifarius’ ring – provided that it was not meant to be *VIL*, i.e., *vir illuster*.[[85]](#footnote-85)

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

Although it is possible that none of these portraits belonged to a king, it appears that the latter used a comparable iconography, as the images on these signet rings largely correspond to the portraits of the Lombard monarchs as attested 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 signs of Lombard identity.[[86]](#footnote-86) The Lombards only abandoned pseudo-imperial coinage under King Cunipert (d. 700), which means that beards are only attested since the eighth century, when national coinage came up.[[87]](#footnote-87) Nonetheless, the mints discussed above confirm that the representations of Lombard kings did not significantly differ from the portraits showing members of their nobility.

# Conclusion

How did gentile rulers adopt or combine Roman and gentile traditions to create a new vision of rulership to present themselves on their signet rings and coins? Although the present study could only consider a sample of the available evidence, some tentative general conclusions may 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 in opposition to the former, this was not limited to the kings. For the Goths in Italy, and Odoacer, the new element was the moustache. For the Visigoths, no such marker is attested.

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 moustaches. They 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 attesting to the significance attributed to such distinctive markers. While in Gaul, long hair soon represented royalty, moustaches were introduced in Italy as a new and conspicuous maker 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 suggested that kings like Theoderic ruled their *gens* as kings and the Roman population as the representatives of their emperor.[[88]](#footnote-88) The fact that genuinely Roman signet rings relate to the men they depicted as kings, however, begs the question whether these roles were indeed conceived as separate. If we look at contemporary descriptions of imperial hierarchies, the king is placed in rank 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* heading 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-89) This might suggest that these rulers conceived their status 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 elite and authorities, this local population continued to define early medieval societies, and we should not imagine the gentiles as foreigners forcing a new culture onto them. The new authorities were born into what had remained of the Roman world themselves, and there was nothing more natural for them than to adopt imperial means of representation to 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 the sense that they first adopted the imperial coinage, as had been the case in most other regions, but eventually turned towards a more distinct style to represent their own *gens*. Altogether, however, labelling these royal portraits as the product of *imitatio imperii* does not seem appropriate, a presumption that is also implied when modern scholars refer to these rulers as the “successors” of the Roman emperors.[[90]](#footnote-90) Roman models were not adopted as an alien but useful means of representation, they were adapted as an expression of what these rulers considered part of their own tradition. Although these portraits differed in detail, they show a largely coherent approach that may altogether be related to 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 to refer to any people or authority without Roman descent, as an alternative to the term “barbarian” that is just as well attested by the evidence, which regularly characterises 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-42)
43. Geiger (1971) 146; Kaiser (1994), 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Kaiser (1994), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cf. Kaiser (1994), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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-46)
47. Odenweller (2022), 279–280. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This is a topic that 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-characterisation of a Frankish king. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Rummel (2007), 257–258, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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-50)
51. See Sommer (2010), 39, nr. 2.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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-52)
53. Callu (1980), 189–190. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Prokopios*, Goth.* 7.33.5–6 (ed. Veh). See also Collins (1983), 27–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Wood (2018), 110–111. See also Diesenberger (2003), 185–186. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Zanker (1995), 198–266. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See his *Misopogon* (ed. Wright). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Grierson (1965), 211–213. See, e.g., an example at numismatics.org/collection/1968.131.76 (07.11.2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Wood (2018), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Berndt (2009), 48–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Cf. Karl-Brandt (2020), 175, who exceedingly highlights the difference by suggesting that whileChilderic’s I appearance would have been nothing unusual in the late Roman world, Odoacer or Theoderic would have adopted a more regal, authorial representation. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ehling (1998/9), 33–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Object number 18262522, access ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18262522 (04.11.2022); Ehling (1998/9). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See Rösch (1978), 49–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Scholl (2017), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Radtki (2015), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Rummel (2007), 258–260; Arnold (2013), 152–153; Radtki (2015), 80, assuming that he also wears a crown. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Rummel (2007), 260, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Rummel (2007), 258–260. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Arnold (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See Radtki (2015), 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Berndt (2009), 51–52; Karl-Brandt (2020), 192. On late Roman and early medieval monograms, see Garipzanov (2018), 109*–*285. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Karl-Brandt (2020), 194. Similar Radtki (2015), 79, arguing that Theoderic „de facto [sich] nicht so sehr als Stellvertreter des oströmischen Kaisers sah, sondern vielmehr als Nachfolger der weströmischen Kaiser“. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Rummel (2007), 261, suggesting 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-74)
75. Karl-Brandt (2020), 193–194, with further references. This does not mean that hair was of no relevance as a marker for specific ethnic groups, see Bartlett (1994), 45–46; Pohl (1998), 51–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
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-76)
77. Jones (2019), 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Von Hessen (1983), 148; Kurze (1986), 415–419. See Geiger (1971); Kaiser (1994); Jones (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Von Hessen (1983), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Kurze (1986), 417–419. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Kurze (1986), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Von Hessen (1983), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Von Hessen (1983), 149; Kurze (1986), 419–421. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Kurze (1986), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Von Hessen (1983), 150–151; Kurze (1986), 421–427, arguing for the reading *VIVAS*, but stressing that none of these rings show a king. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Karl-Brandt (2020), 181–185. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
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 in general, see Rovelli (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
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-88)
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-89)
90. Cf. Radtki (2015), who argues that rulers like Theoderic were largely integrated into the imperial world and considered its culture their own, but nevertheless at several occasions refers to the notion of *imitatio imperii*, e.g. at p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)