

Hair and hair-binding in Ancient Greece, from the Minoans to Homer

The symbolism of hair, and hair in a religious context, in Ancient Greece is something that interests me a lot, especially when it comes to earlier periods. Most people know that female hair during the Classical and Hellenistic eras was tied up – relatively loose in earlier times, and culminating in a tight bun later on – and even veiled. But what about pre-Classical Greece? As someone who both binds her hair and focuses a lot on the period spanning from the historical Trojan War to Homer himself, I'm very curious to know if my practise has a historical precedent in those times. After discussing hair-binding recently and finding out that more people were interested or practised it than I expected, I thought I'd share the results of my research.

Bear in mind that I am in no way an expert on the subject. I know more than your average person but I am not an ancient history professor, let alone an expert on hair in Bronze Age Greece. There are very few articles dealing with this area of research, and the historical evidence itself is sparse, so I will not go into the details. Hopefully, though, you will get a general idea and will find inspiration for your own practise.

The period I will cover starts with the Minoans of Crete, whose civilisation flourished from 2000 to 1400 BC, continues with the Mycenaeans and what little we know about the Dark Ages, and I will conclude with a few insights into Homer and the society of the 8th century BC. Please note that, while I will do a brief survey of male hairstyles, I will mainly focus on women, as female hair care was both more elaborate and generally more symbolic in the context of religion.

Minoan Era (2000-1400 BC)

For 2400 years, the island of Crete was the home of a unique people, the Minoans, whose civilisation reached its peak in the Palatial period (Protopalatial and Neopalatial). This period was characterised by the development of huge labyrinthine complexes decorated with remarkably advanced frescoes of bulls and bull-leapers, women in flounced skirts, dolphins, octopuses and mysterious Gods and Goddesses. The rooms were filled with statuettes and pottery, as well as tablets of a new script, Linear A. While this uniquely Minoan writing system is as-of-yet undeciphered, leaving us to wonder what the Minoans had to say about their own culture, there is much we can deduce from the art they left behind.

Minoan men and women wore not only elaborate clothing, but also elaborate hairstyles. It seems that these had some importance. Based on frescoes found on Thera, an island largely under Minoan influence at the time, archeologist and art historian Ellen Davis theorised that different hairstyles identified the characters by age. The youngest Minoan children, boys and girls alike, had shaved hair: this is represented by the blue colour of their scalps. They only kept one lock of hair on their forehead, and one lock at the back of their head. This hairstyle may have been inspired by the Horus lock worn by Egyptian children.

Some Cretan figures have entirely shorn heads: this may identify them as toddlers, or simply show a divergence in fashion from Thera.



Left: detail of a young girl from the Saffron Gatherers fresco in Akrotiri (Thera). Right: two Goddesses and their divine child. Note the child's entirely shaved head. (All pictures are from Wikimedia Commons unless otherwise stated.)

Slightly older children kept their shaved hair, but grew one or more extra locks along the top of their head, as well as one on the right side. This hairstyle can be seen on an exquisite statuette of a girl found in the Psychro Cave, and that was likely offered as a votive. The statuette, unique in its kind, confirms the theory that blue scalps did indeed symbolise shaved hair.



Left: detail of two boys boxing from a fresco in Akrotiri. Right: statuette of a girl praying, from the Psychro Cave (Crete).

A new hairstyle marked the passage from childhood to adulthood, probably celebrated around the age of ten. Boys and girls alike stopped shaving their hair and cut off all their childhood locks, with the exception of those at the forehead and the back of the head. Minoan girls also began to wear a headdress at this age, a thin fillet encircling their forehead.



Detail of a girl from the Saffron Gatherers fresco in Akrotiri.

Then, as girls reached the age of marriage, they lost their forehead lock, donned a larger headdress, let their hair grow long and bound it in styles similar to those of adult women. Some frescoes depict these girls as wearing their back locks, the last of their childhood locks, knotted at the nape, and the hair of one girl, slipping out of its pin, could symbolise the final step into adulthood. Other steps seem to be the binding of one's hair more tightly into a variety of hairstyles, each more elegant than the next; often, when the hair was unbound, a headdress covered it.

Boys, meanwhile, let their hair grow long at adolescence and wore it unbound. The length of hair does not seem to have been attached to gender, as it is today: men's hair often reached halfway down their backs, and sometimes even their waists and hips. Due to the lack of distinctive styling, however, it does appear to have been less symbolic than women's hair.



Left: detail of a woman from the Xeste 3 fresco in Akrotiri. Right: detail of two gift-bearing men from a fresco in Knossos (Crete).

It is difficult to know whether this hierarchy of hairstyles applied to the entire Minoan population, or only to a specific class or caste. What's more, our lack of understanding of Linear A prevents us from getting first-hand knowledge of the beliefs behind the styling, leaving us in the dark as to whether it was religious or merely customary. But what little information we can glean comes not from the hairstyles themselves, but from Minoan hair accessories.

These seem to have held strong significance: headbands and headdresses, as seen above, were widespread among the adult female population, and a certain type of tall hat, the polos, appears in depictions of Goddesses and priestesses. Hairpins, too, seem to have held a particular and even religious meaning. Many have been recovered: made of the most precious metals, they are carved with pictures of flowers and plants that are sometimes accompanied by Linear A inscriptions. One of these, found in Mycenae on the Greek mainland, shows a Goddess seated in a nature scene; this strengthens the hairpins' connection to religion.

The symbolism of Minoan hair remains vague, but we can be certain that hair care held an important place in their society. For at least one group of people, hairstyles denoted age: children sported shaved heads, while adult hair was long, undone in the case of men, and tightly bound and accompanied by headdresses in the case of women. The binding of female hair, whether by fillets, headbands or hairpins, was highly ritualised and even religious, and the fact that it was not practised until a certain age is intriguing. This foreshadows later Greek history, during which hair, culture and religion were closely tied – but to what point there was a continuity is yet to be found out.

Mycenaean Era (1600-1100 BC)

The first recognisably Greek elements in hair care and symbolism appeared with the Mycenaeans. Named after Mycenae, a military stronghold and major political centre of the time, their civilisation stretched from central Greece to the coast of Turkey, and eventually south to Crete. It was from the Minoan Linear A that the Mycenaeans adapted their own script, Linear B, which has been deciphered and shown to be an early form of Greek. Like their writing system, Mycenaean culture was a remarkable blend of Minoan and pre-Greek: horses stood next to dolphins and octopuses on the walls of their palaces, and kings seeking the glory of Homeric heroes wore loincloths and married tight-bodied women in flounced skirts.

This fusion of cultures extended to hair. In their frescoes, it is clear that the Mycenaeans drew inspiration from the Minoans all whilst adding their own twist. Men's hair seems to have become shorter – shorter being relative, since it still reaches their shoulders – and facial hair is not uncommon. As for women, many of those depicted sport a similar hairstyle: forehead curls, a forehead lock, one or more buns at the back of their head or the nape, and long, curled hair either tumbling down to their waist or pulled up in a shoulder-length elongated bun.

Unlike in Minoan Crete and Thera, the forehead lock does not appear to connote youth, as it is worn by women of all ages. It does, however, belong in a specific context: it is commonly seen in ritual scenes. This suggests that it had some religious significance, though how and to what point is unknown.



Left: woman from a fresco in Mycenae. Note the small forehead lock.
Right: detail of bearded soldiers from the Warrior Vase, found on the acropolis of Mycenae.

Headbands and hair accessories were also linked to religion, in particular in the case of a crown-like headdress also attested in Minoan art but especially popular in Mycenaean Greece. This headdress, like the forehead lock, appears in many scenes of a ritual or religious character; it is not seen elsewhere. This gives weight to the idea that some sort of symbolism was attached to hair, or at least the head, and its covering.

The best guess we can make about the ritual significance of hair, however, comes from a collection of larnakes, small chest-like coffins, originally found in the town of Tanagra. Many of the images on these larnakes depict people pulling at their hair in mourning. Some of the paintings are relatively elaborate and show women in crown-like headdresses and Minoan-Mycenaean clothing, but whose expressions are neutral; others, crudely drawn people and even stick figures which

nonetheless display rawness of emotion. This style discrepancy is explained by Margaretha Kramer-Hajos as the difference between professionally pre-made larnakes, and scenes painted by the bereaved families themselves. Additionally, the latter would portray the immediate grief at the death of a loved one – possibly painted as a form of catharsis – while the former represent the more formal funeral.

The hair of the women, when included on the family-produced larnakes, is uncovered and undone. This would be due to the new, very Greek, expression of grief: it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep hair tidily bound and covered by a headdress while simultaneously pulling and tearing at it. Given the number of renderings of women with bound hair, this was likely seen as very unusual – a break in the norm.



Detail of mourning women wearing the Mycenaean crown-like headdress, from a Tanagra larnax.

While the meaning of each individual element is not yet known, it is obvious that binding and covering the hair with headbands and headdresses was expected of Mycenaean women in their everyday lives. The opposition between primal activities, such as mourning, when the hair was undone and voluntarily defiled, and formal or ritual activities, when the hair was given extra adornment, was taking root. Likewise, the bones of what defined hair in the context of Classical Greek religion – tying it up, adding headbands and other coverings, and ripping them all out in mourning – are present. There is something undeniably Greek about hair in the Mycenaean period.

Dark Ages (1100-800 BC)

With the fall of the Mycenaeans and many other Aegean civilisations, known as the Late Bronze Age collapse, came the Greek Dark Ages. The great palaces and city-states fell into ruin as people moved away from the coast and into mountain villages, the knowledge of writing was lost, leaving fifteen generations without a voice, and art came to represent abstract geometrical shapes instead of people. This makes reconstructing the beliefs of this period even more difficult than the previous two. However, we do have some clues.

It is thought that, though society experienced a drastic change in structure, Dark Ages fashion and hairstyling remained similar to that of the Mycenaeans. In the few depictions of people that have been found, both men and women have long, flowing hair, and children's hair is short and spiky. This mirrors Minoan and Mycenaean hairstyling, with one exception: women's hair is unbound.

Susan Langdon, in her book *Art and Identity in Dark Age Greece, 1100-700 BC*, suggests that this was not a reflection of reality, but rather symbolism: across cultures, hair has long been an indicator of health and beauty and a representation of the ideal self. In pre-Classical Greece, long male hair signified vigour and virility, while long female hair showed fertility and sexuality. Therefore, the women on Dark Ages pottery were likely not shown as real women were in everyday life but coded to appear young, feminine and desirable.

In fact, the development of a new religious idea during these times meant that many of these pictures were in fact contrary to reality. Sometime during the Dark Ages, the Ancient Greeks began to focus on ritual purity and civilised self-control: men began to show restraint, no longer weeping and tearing out their hair in mourning as women did, and women were not exempt from changes either. Their liminal, primal nature, connected to their ability to give birth and therefore their connection to death, which was seen as a birth into the afterworld, no longer had its place in everyday life. In concealing it, women concealed the extension of their identity, their hair: they veiled.

It must be noted that this new custom was not, in essence, misogynistic. Women's association with birth and death – both unclean and unrestrained times – was not shameful, but the belief in religious purity demanded that it be kept separate. Like the later practise of *katharmos*, of which the origins go back to this period, the veil came to represent a woman's participation in the moderate, clean part of life.



Detail of mourning figures pulling at their long, unbound hair, from the Hirschfeld krater.

This adds another meaning to the undone hair of girls in Dark Ages iconography: it identifies them not only as young and fertile, but untamed. It is likely that during this era, girls who had reached puberty but were not yet married wore their hair loose and uncovered, with the exception of a headband, as a reflection of their status. Interestingly, this once again echoes the Minoan and Mycenaean structure of children's hair being short or shaved, adolescents' being short or undone, and adults' being long and bound or veiled.

Besides the veil, headbands and fillets were still worn. The polos, however, had become old-fashioned, and for the remainder of Greek history it is only seen on the heads of Goddesses, probably to make them appear ancient. As for the crown-like headdress of the Mycenaeans, it seems to have vanished along with the people who first donned it.

By the end of the 9th century and the advent of the Greek alphabet, hair care had taken on a well-defined religious meaning. Bound hair in adult women still characterised everyday life, and unbound hair the events which broke its flow; a new distinction, however, was that of the ritually clean and ritually unclean. This was marked by a widespread usage of the veil, which embodied civilisation and purity. Even so, the headdress did not lose the significance it had in previous periods.

Homer and the early Archaic period (800-700 BC)

The reinvention of writing and the subsequent constitution of the Homeric epics gives us valuable insights into Greek society on the cusp of the Classical period. The resurgence of human figures in art, and especially the voice that is given to them in their own literature, provides a clear picture of Archaic religion, hair care, and the link between the two.

A term that defines Homer's Achaeans is εὔκομοι, lovely-haired. Unlike later men, they still wore their hair long, perpetuating the association between long hair and attractiveness. Women, meanwhile, continued to bind, veil and cover their hair with headdresses. The κρήδεμνον, a headband of metal or leather worn on the forehead, sometimes attached to a veil, was the staple of hairstyling: it is attested throughout art and literature and sported by many women of mythology. Hecate is described in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, written around the 7th century BC, as λιπαροκρήδεμνος, wearing a shining headband. Veils, too, were common, and among those wearing them was the Trojan queen Hecuba.

But it is from scenes which break from the daily routine that we can draw the best picture of what Archaic hair care was like. Like most mundane objects, headdresses were not given much attention in everyday life, but they are overwhelmingly attested in mourning. Upon Hector's death, both Hecuba and Andromache rip off their veils and headbands:

ἡ δέ νυ μήτηρ / τίλλε κόμην, ἀπὸ δὲ λιπαρὴν ἔρριψε καλύπτρην / τηλόσε, κώκυσεν δὲ μάλα μέγα
παῖδ' ἔσιδοῦσα

And his mother pulled out her hair, threw her shining veil far away, and loudly shrieked when she saw her child. (*Il.* XXII, 405-408)

τῆλε δ' ἀπὸ κρατὸς βάλε δέσματα σιγαλόεντα, / ἄμπυκα κεκρύφαλόν τε ἰδὲ πλεκτὴν ἀναδέσμην / κρήδεμνόν θ', ὃ ρά οἱ δῶκε χρυσοῦ Ἀφροδίτη / ἤματι τῷ ὅτε μιν κορυθαίολος ἠγάγεθ' Ἔκτωρ / ἐκ δόμου Ἡετίωνος, ἐπεὶ πόρε μυρία ἔδνα.

Far from her head she threw the glittering bonds, the diadem and the veil and the coiled band, and the headdress that golden Aphrodite had given her on the day Hector of the shining helmet had led her from Eetion's house, after offering him an immeasurable dowry. (*Il.* XXII, 468-472)

Homer's insistence on the destruction of hairstyles highlights the fact that this is an unusual situation. It implies that it was customary for women to have their hair bound and covered: undoing it and pulling at it, by contrast, exteriorised their grief and the break in the norm they were experiencing. Just as they soiled their bodies by tearing their clothing, lacerating their skin and covering themselves with soot, so they soiled their hair, their selves. They were free to return to the raw, natural state at the threshold of life and death.

But ritual purity remained central, and outside of events that transcended the boundary between worlds – events that were inherently miasmatic and therefore allowed cleanliness practises to be discarded – women’s hair was religiously bound. The more attractive and civilised a woman wanted to appear, the more she styled her hair. Even Goddesses are shown partaking in this tradition: before attempting to seduce Zeus, Hera perfumes her body, brushes her hair, braids it, and lastly, veils it with a κρήδεμνον (*Il.* XIV, 170-185).

While Goddesses, free from miasma by nature, partaking in ritual purification may seem counter-intuitive at first glance, it shows that, beyond its religious meaning, hair care eventually became a marker of femininity. In fact, it seems that by the Archaic period, hair and women had become so closely linked that men who tied up their locks and wore ornate accessories were considered effeminate and weak. Euphorbus, for example, whose hair was «tightly bound in gold and silver» (*Il.* XVII, 52), is portrayed as a coward who wounded Patroclus from behind and was later killed by Menelaus.

Gender roles played a part in many societies, and Archaic Greece was no exception. Men were defined through expression, manifested in their unbound and uncovered hair, while women, whose hair was styled, were defined through repression. To become civilised, men had to earn new characteristics such as courage, while women had to contain their innate connection to the primordial world. To achieve this, they tied up their hair – kept long as a manifestation of their health and desirability, but bound and covered to indicate restraint and purity. At first, this was mainly symbolic, but with time it came to represent womanhood itself: a woman was one who bound her hair every day, only altering it when her own life was altered.

Conclusion

The role of hair in Ancient Greek culture and religion is not to be underestimated. From the pre-Greek Minoans to Homer and beyond, hairstyling and especially women’s hairstyling retained strong significance; though new beliefs and practises appeared with time, hair-binding and covering were, for more than two thousand years, a central part of life. What’s more, it seems to have had some ritual meaning from the start.

Hair began as a marker of age, its connection to religion vague but present, and developed from there into a marker of the boundary between everyday life and events that disturbed it: most of the time it was tightly bound, but it was undone and ripped out in mourning. A third state of being, that of religious worship, was identified by the use of special locks and headdresses such as the polos. Later, with the introduction of ritual purity, this additional head-covering became a staple of women’s clothing and symbolised their clean and civilised way of life. Even so, the length of hair was shown off in braids and elaborate coiffures that displayed their femininity, good health and attractiveness. It was only in the Hellenistic period that conservatively restrained hair, and styles such as the bun, became popular.

Many Hellenic polytheists still bind and cover their hair today, some in their daily life and some only during ritual. Our reasons are as various as the methods we use: wearing headbands, baseball caps, headscarves, small hairpins or elaborate braids, we honour our religious vows, protect ourselves from miasma, or express our religion. But no matter how or why we do it, we all have one thing in common. By combining hairstyling and beliefs, we are partaking in a tradition that is over three thousand, possibly four thousand years old. A tradition that is, perhaps, one of our oldest.

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