

# Awe and Disgust at the King's Body: What Wilhelm I's Sideburns Reveal About Popular Views of Royal Power

by Eva Giloi

It can be difficult to assess ordinary people's feelings towards their rulers, especially in the nineteenth century. Even if subjects had access to publishing their views in newspapers or books – which most people did not – lèse-majesté laws and other journalistic practices kept them from airing candid views. To circumvent this potential bias in published texts, historians often turn to non-textual sources to help unearth popular attitudes towards institutions of power. They examine material culture, for instance, to see how certain objects were circulated, what was done with them as they passed hands, and where they were situated in daily life, in the understanding that the social practices governing these exchanges give insight into the unspoken mindset of the objects' owners.

What, then, do Wilhelm I's sideburns, and other relics like them, reveal about popular views of royal power? By 1871 the Prussian king's whiskers had become widely recognizable emblems of his public persona. As a full-page spread in the *Leipziger Illustrirte* of 1897 (above) illustrates, whether in uniform, royal regalia, or civilian clothes, the emperor's image remained remarkably consistent over time thanks to his abundant facial hair. The emotions attached by viewers to that hair could vary between awe, affection, and aversion, however, depending on the circumstances in which they encountered it.



On one level, the beard's whiteness was associated with Wilhelm's role as *Heldengreis*: the august hero who unified the German Empire in battle with France. The sideburns were thus the basis of his popular depiction as *Barbablanca* – literally: "white beard" – in allusion to the Barbarossa myth. As popular legend had it, the red-bearded Friedrich I Hohenstaufen, and Germany with him, had fallen asleep in the Kyffhäuser mountain in the twelfth century. Wilhelm I had now awakened that dormant power as he unified the empire. The whiskers also styled Wilhelm in folksy terms as a "good old governor" who, like that other white bearded saint, went around at Christmastime patting children on the head as he passed out their presents. Awe, admiration, and gratitude, but also sentimental yearning, gentle amusement, and a feeling of coziness were subsumed in the emperor's facial hair.[1]

Disgust was also a possibility, however. In 1878, Wilhelm's left sideburn had to be removed after Karl Nobiling shot him in the face with a shotgun, in what was the second assassination attempt against the emperor that year. Karl Liman, the renowned professor of forensic medicine who attended the emperor at the scene, shaved the whiskers off to treat the bloody wounds. Liman had the presence of mind, amid all the commotion, to slip the hairs into a theater play-bill, which he sealed and had notarized for authenticity the next day. To the trained surgeon Liman, the whiskers remained precious despite their association with the emperor's blood, near death, and slow recovery. When Liman tried to donate the sideburn to the Hohenzollern Museum just after Wilhelm I's death in 1888, however, the museum's curators were hesitant to display the gift. Instead of exhibiting it with open admiration in the glass case dedicated to the assassination attempt – a case containing hundreds of letters congratulating the emperor on his recovery – the museum kept the sideburn in storage along with the blood-splattered clothes that Wilhelm had worn that fateful day.

The museum's reticence requires some explanation. After all, personal relics were the museum's stock-in-trade. Founded in 1877, the Hohenzollern Museum consciously promoted the "tender-hearted historical commemoration" of the monarchy by showing "the Hohenzollern rulers as real people". For Robert Dohme, the museum's first director, revealing "how the individual members of the royal family lived and acted in their private rooms" evidently meant exhibiting their teacups and toothbrushes, baby shoes and childhood toys, handmade Easter eggs and wedding bouquets.[2]

The museum also displayed bodily relics, including many locks of hair belonging to Wilhelm I's mother, Queen Luise. Visitors to the museum were familiar with the cult of hair in their own lives: throughout the nineteenth century, locks of hair were widely used as symbols of affection for the living and *memento mori* to commemorate the dead. Luise's curls likewise held strong emotional potential as markers of her early death, which, in the nationalist narrative, had resulted from the hardships she faced during the Napoleonic wars. To drive the point home, the museum provided captions to the relics to guide viewers' emotions, for instance the heartbreaking note "Mama!", hand-written by the 13-year-old Wilhelm just after his mother's death. The effect was not lost on the *Berliner Tageblatt*, which enthused about the museum in 1877: "What feelings awaken in us when we step into the 'Luise Room'!"[3]

What was it about the emperor's whiskers that put them in a different category than his mother's hair, and

made his disembodied sideburn, shaved off and placed under glass, unable to carry the same emotional power? Symbolic poverty was not the problem: the *Leipziger Illustrirte's* repetitive, fixed depiction of Wilhelm I's face suggests that his hair, too, had the potential to be fetishized. Did the museum's curators regard the sideburn as too sensual, too close to facial features involved in the expression of personality: the mouth, the eyes? Or were Luise's locks more acceptable because they alluded to her death indirectly – hence the need for the emotionally charged captions – while Wilhelm I's sideburn was literally tainted by his blood?

What makes this question so puzzling is that the museum was not squeamish about displaying other bodily relics, for instance Frederick the Great's umbilical cord, a "gem" that the museum assumed would prompt "moving empathy" in its visitors. The curators' enthusiasm for this all-too-human proof of Frederick's birth ran counter to established custom in the nineteenth century, when many medical museums were closed to women for fear of upsetting their sensitive nature, and when veiled euphemisms such as being "in a delicate way" were used to describe pregnancy.

Even more intimate was the silver belt buckle swallowed in 1693 by Friedrich I's five-year-old son, the future Friedrich Wilhelm I, which the child excreted three days later "without pain or damage". The buckle was displayed as a token of divine deliverance of the dynasty (since the child had not died from the accident); this was the meaning that Friedrich I, as king and father, ascribed to the object in the seventeenth century. But did the buckle equally foster "moving empathy" in nineteenth-century viewers? Jeannot Emil von Grotthuss, the literary critic who wrote about the museum in 1909, had the opposite reaction: he was fixated on the "route" by which the buckle "came back out into the light of day". Using only these few, suggestive words, Grotthuss presumed that his contemporaries would read the object with the same emotions as he: ridicule and repulsion, not gratitude at divine intervention.[4]

But even here, it is premature to assume that Grotthuss was right about his readers' emotions, as they often had greater tolerance towards royal bodily waste. The Chancellor of Halle University was said to cherish the globules of sweat and powder that stained a cello he had received from Friedrich Wilhelm II; he regarded the "grayish-white, little mounds", which had dripped from the monarch's forehead, as "a monument to the royal love of art". The owner of a bathtub Frederick the Great had used in Bad Landeck likewise displayed it proudly to visitors, even though the tub evoked the king's physicality, illness, and nakedness. And then there were the many collectors who traded in historical artifacts – a well-established, lucrative business by the mid-nineteenth century. Among these commodities, handkerchiefs supposedly used by Frederick the Great were especially popular. They were mostly fakes, of course, produced in large numbers by counterfeiters who went to great extremes to make them appear authentic: as a devotee of snuff tobacco, the king's handkerchiefs were famously stained and tattered. Even so, collectors overcame their distaste and interpreted the "dirty rag[s]" as objects of value.

As these contradictory examples suggest, there was some uncertainty about proper behavior – and proper feeling – towards royal bodies in the nineteenth century. In fact, this confusion reveals a clash between two long-term changes in kingship, captured in two classic scholarly works, Ernst Kantorowicz' *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) and Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process* (1939).[5]

Kantorowicz famously called attention to the fact that, since the Middle Ages, European political theory regarded monarchs both as having a corporeal body and as representing the larger "body politic" of the state – in other words, two bodies, one physical and one legal, which were intertwined and yet separate. By the nineteenth century, as civil populations demanded greater political participation in the state – for instance in the German "body politic" with Wilhelm I as its "head" – subjects also demanded greater access to the royal family's personal lives as part of that participation in the center of society. This helps to explain the success of dynastic museums like the Hohenzollern Museum, which humanized monarchs by showing them "as people" made of flesh and blood.

Elias, on the other hand, argued that European society had undergone a "civilizing process" since the late Middle Ages. In the early modern period, absolutist monarchs had shored up their power vis-à-vis aristocrats, and aristocrats had retained their social distinction against a rising class of wealthy merchants, by developing an ever more elaborate code of manners and self-restrained bodily behavior. While early modern etiquette books still had to teach princes that it was unacceptable to blow their noses on tablecloths or to pick their teeth with their knives, by the nineteenth century the repression of physical functions had become second nature, accompanied by a disgust at the human body that spread down the social scale through the middle class and into the lower classes.

The relics of kings and queens stood at the intersection of these conflicting views of the royal body. The question then naturally arises: if subjects' admiration for royal relics trumped their disgust at royal waste, was this evidence of a blind love of authority that placed the monarchy outside of the realm of criticism? Were these relic collectors the spiritual cousins of Diederich Hessling, the protagonist of Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan* (1914)? In Mann's novel, the slavish Hessling falls over himself – literally into a puddle of mud – as he prostrates himself before his beloved master Wilhelm II.[6]

While it would be easy to read subjects' reverence for distasteful relics as evidence of their subservience, such an interpretation is too simplistic as it ignores how these objects were used between peers and the broader range of emotions that governed their exchange. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes, objects have a "social life," that is, they are collected, circulated, and consumed within specific social

circumstances and according to known rules of what is acceptable. The way individuals use the objects thus illuminates how they position themselves within their social hierarchies.[7] If one applies this insight to royal relics, it becomes clear that "ownership" determined how individuals interpreted the objects. Admiration and disgust were only secondary emotions to the more primary sense of possession and its attendant feelings of pride (in the self and the family), anxiety about social status, and desire for social prominence.

Specifically, relic owners enacted their feelings of social entitlement by developing narratives of "singularization" – of being special among their peers. These claims to social significance often relied on anecdotal encounters with vital moments in national history. As Karl Gutzkow astutely observed in the mid-nineteenth century: "Do not people sometimes live on one single fact? These once saw Napoleon I; those sat on a chair that was part of Luther's household". Possessing relics went a step further: the fact that they could be touched and manipulated made the owners' connection to life-defining historical events seem solid and real.[8]

The feeling of "singularization" was also often passed down through inheritance, as people described their historical relics as "family heirlooms" that made the clan as exceptional as the objects it possessed. It was with this spirit of filial pride that Dr. Kuntzmann, for instance, sent King Friedrich Wilhelm IV two fake teeth that his father, the royal dentist, had crafted for Frederick the Great. With his great passion for the flute, Frederick had knocked out his front tooth on a music stand as he hastily picked up a sheet of notes that had fallen on the floor. Two years later, the king knocked out a second tooth in what Kuntzmann tactfully called "a very similar accident". To Kuntzmann, the value of the "relics" was self-evident, as his pride in having aided the king ran down the lines of family lineage.

Friedrich Wilhelm IV was more dubious about the teeth's value, however. Although the king was a great admirer of Frederick the Great and a well-known collector of his relics, he declined the gift as unfitting to his royal ancestor. His act of rejection suggests that ownership also guided the monarchy's feelings of admiration or disgust towards its own historical artifacts: in the Hohenzollern Museum, the monarchy exhibited objects that had long been in its possession (Frederick's umbilical cord, the ingested belt buckle) but drew the line at bodily relics owned and donated by outsiders (Frederick's teeth, Wilhelm I's sideburn).

Finally, Frederick's teeth also indicate that, when it came to their own feelings of social self-importance, subjects did not always allow for royal dignity. As peer-related emotions, pride and entitlement were directed at subjects' local networks: people used the relics to "talk" to their peers about their social significance, and only secondarily expressed feelings to the monarch. Rather than stand at the center of this social interaction, the monarchy became a conduit through which subjects communicated their sense of self among their fellows. The ability to overcome disgust at the royal body was not necessarily proof of a Hessling-esque subservience, but of having found a tool through which to articulate pride and self-regard.

[1] For more information on the objects described in this essay, including source citations, see the author's book: Eva Giloi, *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[2] Robert Dohme, *Das Hohenzollern-Museum im K. Schlosse Monbijou* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1878), 1-2.

[3] *Berliner Tageblatt*, Nr.69, Erstes Beiblatt, March 23rd, 1877.

[4] Jeannot Emil von Grotthuß, *Aus deutscher Dämmerung: Schattenbilder einer Übergangskultur* (Stuttgart: Greiner & Pfeiffer, 1909), 93-94.

[5] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978).

[6] Heinrich Mann, *The Patrioteer*, trans. Ernest Boyd (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921), 54-55.

[7] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

[8] Karl Gutzkow, *Rückblicke auf mein Leben* (Berlin: A. Hofmann, 1875), 168-170.

## Citation

Giloi, Eva. "Awe and Disgust at the King's Body: What Wilhelm I's Sideburns Reveal About Popular Views of Royal Power", in: *History of Emotions - Insights into Research*, October 2013, DOI: 10.14280/08241.2