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Reviewed Article:

Recreating the Fonseca Hairstyle

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Roman women's hairstyles of the late first century AD are notable for their voluminous frontal hair. Described by Juvenal as "tiers upon tiers" of curls (Sat. 6. 502-3), and by Martial as a "circle of hair" (Ep. 2.66.1) the development of this style is epitomized by the portrait of an anonymous woman known as the Fonseca bust (Figures 1, 2 and 3. Rome, Museo Capitolino, Stanza degli Imperatori, 15, Inv. 434, photos courtesy of Catherine Stephens). It is commonly held that such frontal arrangements required wigs or hairpieces supported on wire frames.



Sophisticated cutting is essential to duplicating the Fonseca style, but the styling techniques (back combing and stitching) make it long lasting and therefore wearable.

This article corrects that misconception by showing how the Fonseca hairstyle may be recreated with real hair using period appropriate tools and techniques.

Method

The choice of tools and techniques used for this recreation is explained in detail in my article, *Ancient Roman Hairdressing: on (hair)pins and needles* (Stephens 2008)(See Stephens, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 21(2008) 110-132, for video tutorials, see my [YouTube channel](#)). I demonstrated how some of the most complex Roman hairstyles can be constructed on real hair by sewing with needle and thread rather than bodkins (single prong hairpins) (see Stevens-Cox 1984,s.v. bodkin) or anachronistic U-shaped hairpins, and without the necessity of wigs or hairpieces. The practice of hair sewing in Roman antiquity is supported by linguistic and artifact evidence and I have confirmed it empirically.

To recreate the Fonseca hairstyle, the following equipment was used: a manikin head with wavy human hair, leaf spring shears (*forfex*) (See Biagiotti 1990,163 no. 163), hair bodkins (*discerniculum, discriminalia*) (See Biagiotti1990, 105-7), wooden comb (*pecten*) (Biagiotti1990, 113), a *calamistrum* shaped curling iron (modern electric, to reduce fire hazard) (See also Biagiotti 1990, 87 no. 39), oil based pomade (*unguentum*) (See Lucas 1964, 87, 89, 327-337), a bone needle (*acus*) and wool thread (*filum*) (See Figure 4).

Structure of the Fonseca hairstyle

The hair is divided by an ear to ear parting over the top of the head (See Figure 2). From this division, the voluminous hair nearer the face is directed forward, the rest is directed backward. The back hair is divided into many small braids that are then coiled into a wide bun (See Figure 3). The ends of the braids are tucked into the centre of the bun. I estimate the length of back hair necessary to recreate this braided bun to be approximately 50-75 cm depending on head circumference). This is well within the norm for maximal hair length (the longest a person's natural hair can grow, provided it is never cut).

By comparison, the front hair is much shorter than the back hair (See Figure 1). At least three tiers of overlapping spiral curls form a rigorously horseshoe-shaped frame around the face. These curls show signs of artificiality because of their symmetrical directional movement. This is particularly evident in the row of curls touching the forehead: all the curls rotate toward the centre of the face, clockwise on the left and counter clockwise on the right. As one's gaze travels from the forehead to the apex of the horseshoe, the length of hair in each tier increases: the lowest tier must be shorter than the top tier because, if all the front hair were as long as the top tier, the strands nearest the forehead would cover the face. For these tiers

to be different lengths, sophisticated hair cutting is required. The Fonseca hairstyle may be recreated as follows.

Dressing the back

With a hair bodkin, divide the back hair from the front hair using an ear to ear parting over the top of the head. Secure the front hair out of the way with bodkins. Divide the back into small braids. Wind the back hair into a wreath bun and stitch in place.

Cutting the front

The front hair will be divided into four equally sized ear to ear strip sections (See Figure 5). During cutting, all sections share a common 'guide' length at the ear (heavy black dot) but, at the centre of the face, each section is disconnectedly longer than the section beneath it. Begin cutting in Section 1, working back to Section 4 at the top of the head. All sections should be combed forward onto the face. For control, cut with tension (pulling).

Section 1:	Establish a 5 cm stationary guide length next to each ear. Section 1 is cut in a curving line around the face in such a way that, across the forehead, the hair length reaches the tops of the eyebrows and blends into the temple with no 'corners'.
Section 2:	From the stationary guides at the ears, cut so that the centre length reaches the tip of the nose.
Section 3:	From the stationary guides at the ears, cut so that the centre length reaches the upper lip.
Section 4:	From the stationary guides at the ears, cut so that the centre length reaches the chin.

The completed cut can be seen in Figure 6.

Dressing the front

The tiers of curls will be shaped using heat. Before curling, apply a small amount of oil based pomade to the midshaft and ends of all of the cut hair. Oiling minimizes frizziness in subsequent steps and increases the curls' holding power and resistance to humidity. Oiling, back combing and stitching provide the cohesion and support necessary for a long lasting result - of critical concern before the invention of hairspray.

Tier 1:	Release the hair of strip Section 1. Secure the other hair out of the way with hair bodkins. Spiral curl small strands of hair using the tip of a heated <i>calamistrum</i> . All curls should rotate toward the nose. Avoid contact between the <i>calamistrum</i> and the skin or severe burns may result (See Figure 7).
Tier 2:	Release the hair of strip Section 2. Make a series of small spiral curls from midstrand to ends only. After creating each curl, grasp it firmly at midstrand and back comb until the strand stands erect from the head. For this action I prefer fine tooth wooden combs. Check that all curls stand similarly tall.
Tier 3:	Repeat, same as strip two, but with taller back combing.

Back stitching tiers 2 & 3

The horseshoe contour will be established by delicately back stitching the teased bases of Sections 2 and 3. Thread a blunt bone needle with at least an arm's length of wool, matching the colour of the hair (See Figure 8). Stand in front or in back of the model according to preference. Begin at one side. Knot the end of the thread through the backcombed base of a curl nearest the ear. Stitch 'out' from the scalp, passing the needle through the regions of back combing nearest the spiral curls (See Figure 9). Enforce height by tugging on the ends of the curls where you are stitching. In the temple, stitch with slight tension so as to lift and over-direct the temple curls slightly closer to the head; this shapes the horseshoe contour. Over the top of the head, stitch loosely, so the curls remain evenly fanned out over their bases. Check the shape visually as you stitch. Stitch all the way to the other ear and back (two lines of stitching). Cut off the thread. Refine the ends of the curls with the calamistrum if needed.

Spiral curl all the hair in Section 4, back combing each curl so it stands tall and erect. Since this strip remains visible from behind, gently smooth the rearmost back-combed surface to reduce frizziness. Lightly drape these curls over the top of strip 3, visually checking the arrangement for balance and contour. Re-thread the blunt bone needle with at least an arm's length of wool. Standing behind the model, connect Section 4 to Sections 2 and 3, using shallow, loose, narrow back stitches (See Figure 10). Stitch deeply enough to grab hair from strip 3, but not so deeply that the stitching shows from the front view. Stitch from ear to ear at least twice, staying on or just behind the apex of the frontal hair (See Figure 11). Gently shake the head to check for unsecured curls. If necessary, continue stitching until the form is stable. When satisfied, clip off the remaining thread. With the calamistrum, refine any disordered curls. The style is complete.

Conclusion

The frontal hair (See Figures 10, 11 and 12) of this manikin recreation compares favourably with the Fonseca portrait model (See Figures 1, 2 and 3) (See also Fittschen 1983, no. 69). Sophisticated cutting is essential to duplicating the Fonseca style, but the styling techniques (back combing and stitching) make it long lasting and therefore wearable. It is likely that the elite subject of this portrait commanded the services of both a highly skilled *ornatrix* (hairdresser) and, at least periodically, a *tonstrix* (female barber, hair cutter). It is also possible that an individual of either profession possessed adequate interdisciplinary skills to create such a virtuosic style.

Given the popularity during this period of similarly curly, voluminous frontal hair, hair cutting and appropriate styling may have been utilised far more than wigs and hairpieces for its creation. Cutting would have permitted Roman women of any economic class to conform to fashionable hair silhouettes with little expense or effort. Women with naturally curly hair needed only to cut and fluff their hair to achieve acceptable fullness. Women with straighter

hair had the option of artificial curling with a *calamistrum* (as above) and they may have resorted to wet curling techniques, such as rag curling with felt (See Figures 13, 14 and 15) (compare variations in Fittschen 1983, no. 63, 64, 68, 70). While rag curling is not attested in ancient sources, it is a safe, possible do-it-yourself method for creating tight, durable curls.

In antiquity, how long it took to dress these styles, and how long they endured after being dressed, depended on the individual hair characteristic of each woman and the climate in which she lived. In damp climes, a woman with straight, wiry hair might struggle to keep her hair in curl for more than a few hours, while a different individual, with natural curl, enjoyed humidity because it made her curls tighter. Then. As today, every woman chooses which styles and techniques best suit her unique circumstances.

🔖 Keywords **hair**

🔖 Country **USA**

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| Gallery Image



FIG 1. FRONT, FONSECA BUST. ROME, CAPITOLINE MUSEUM. PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHERINE STEPHENS.



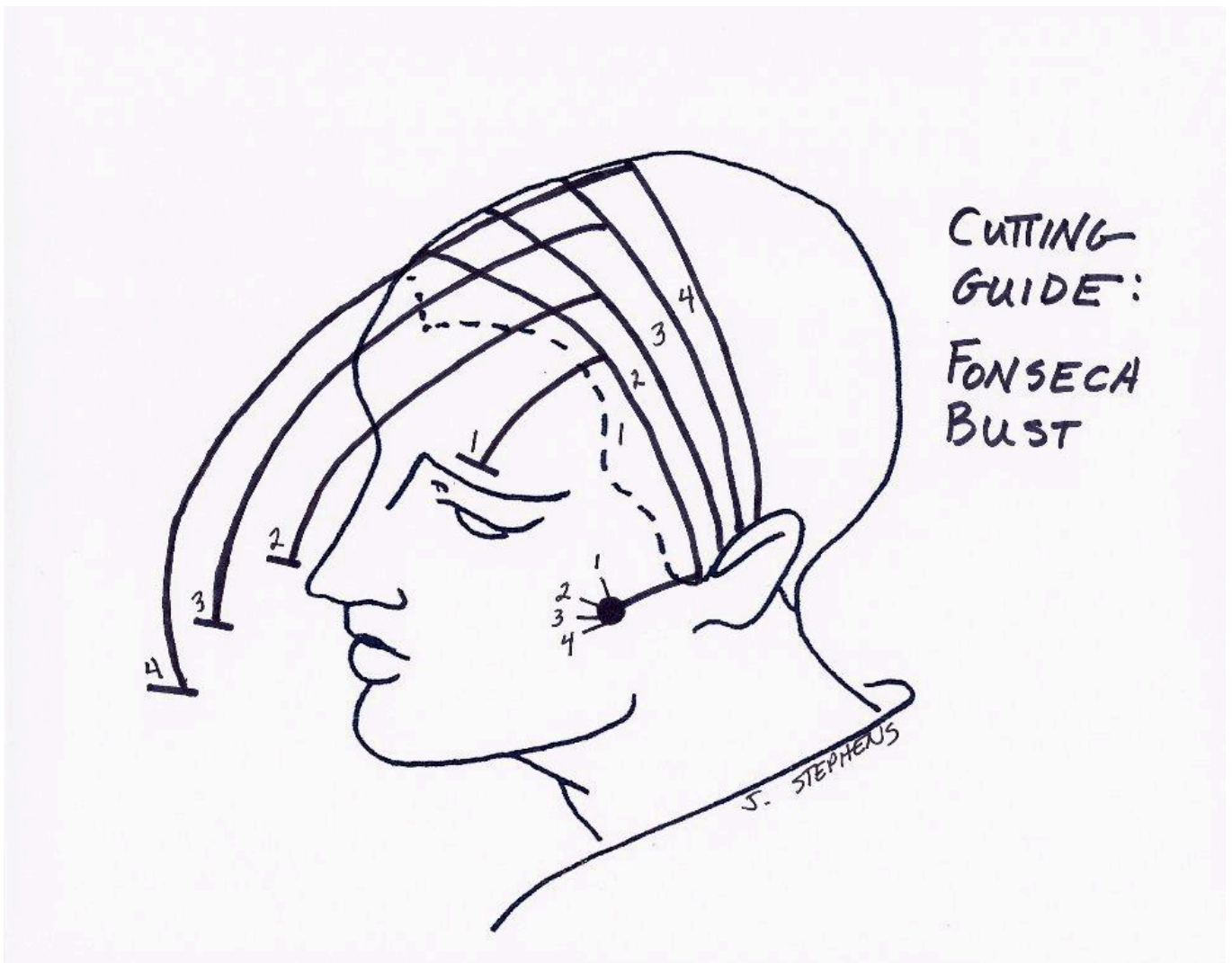
FIG 2. PROPER LEFT PROFILE, FONSECA BUST. ROME, CAPITOLINE MUSEUM. PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHERINE STEPHENS.



FIG 3. PROPER RIGHT PROFILE, FONSECA BUST. ROME, CAPITOLINE MUSEUM. PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHERINE STEPHENS.



FIG 4. PERIOD APPROPRIATE TOOLS USED TO RECREATE THE FONSECA BUST'S ORBIS COMARUM. CLOCKWISE FROM FAR RIGHT: MODERN ELECTRIC CURLING IRON WITH A "CALAMISTRUM" SHAPED BARREL, FORFEX TYPE SHEARS, OIL BASED POMADE (UNGUENTUM), WOODEN COMB (PECTEN), BLUNT BONE NEEDLE AND WOOL THREAD (ACUS, FILUM), HAIR BODKINS (DISCERNICULUM, DISCRIMINALIA).



CUTTING
GUIDE:
FONSECA
BUST

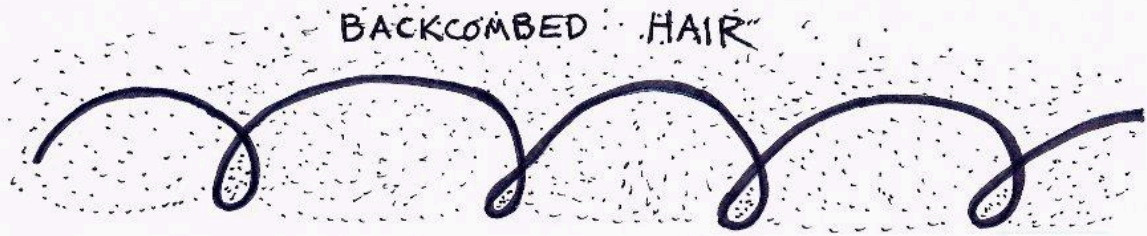
FIG 5. CUTTING GUIDE FOR THE FONSECA BUST ORBIS COMARUM.



FIG 6. THE FINISHED CUT, WITH BACK HAIR DRESSED IN BRAIDS.



FIG 7. CURLING THE HAIR NEAREST THE FACE, USING CALAMISTRUM TECHNIQUE. HAIR BODKINS HOLD THE INACTIVE FRONT HAIR OUT OF THE WAY.



BACKSTITCHING

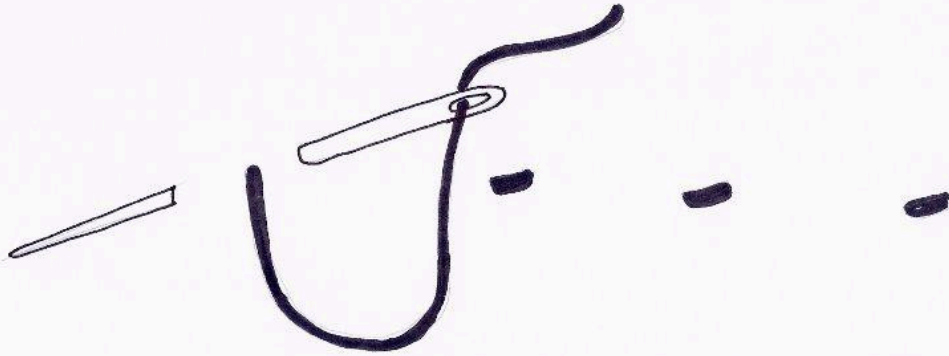


FIG 8. HOW TO BACK STITCH. MULTIPLE ROWS OF LOOSE BACK STITCHING STRENGTHEN AND SHAPE BACK-COMBED HAIR.



FIG 9. BACK STITCHING AS IT APPEARS ON THE INTERIOR SIDE OF A ROW OF BACK-COMBED CURLS.



FIG 10. BACK STITCHING AS IT APPEARS ON THE EXTERIOR OF THE HAIRSTYLE.



FIG 11. VISIBLE BACK STITCHING SHOULD BE PLACED BEHIND THE APEX OF THE FONSECA ORBIS COMARUM.



FIG 12. THE FINISHED FONSECA ORBIS COMARUM RECREATION, FRONT.



FIG 13. A TYPICAL RAG-CURL, WRAPPED ON A STRIP OF FELT (COACTILE).



FIG 14. RAG-CURLED ORBIS COMARUM, PROFILE. MODEL: CATHERINE STEPHENS.



FIG 15. RAG-CURLED ORBIS COMARUM, BACK. (THE WREATH BUN IS FALSE.) MODEL: CATHERINE STEPHENS