



The bearded lady Helena Antonia from Liège (1579–1621)

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The Wittert Museum of the University of Liège, in Belgium, has among its collections an astonishing and unique engraving from Antwerp artist Dominicus Custos (c. 1560–1612). The print, from 1597, represents Helena Antonia, in a rich aristocratic dress with jewelry and a thick, long beard. Indeed, from the age of nine, she developed hirsutism, with evident features of hyperandrogenism (facial hair and frontal hair loss, see Fig. 1). In 1595, sixteen-year-old Helena Antonia was depicted by one of the court painters, and in the following years she had three more portraits by Dominicus Custos (Fig. 1), Johannes Löselius, and Ulises Aldrovandi (1522–1605) [1, 2].

Her parents were poor, so they entrusted their daughter to the bishop's court in Liège Ernest Wittelsbach—bishop of Lüttich-, who later placed Helena Antonia in the custody of Archduke Charles of Austria [1, 2]. This is how a woman with a beard came from Liège to the Habsburg court, as a favorite of Margaret of Austria, Queen of Spain. Dr. Gisbert Vosse of Vossenbourg (1558–1630), who was in direct contact with Helena Antonia at the Archduke Court in Graz, wrote that “20-years-old Helena Antonia had a thick beard and black hairs grew on either side of her face. Her figure was moderately tall, her breasts small, and her period had not yet started, but she was healthy” [1, 2]. Helena Antonia probably died at the age of 42 years old [1, 2].

The hirsutism features of Helena Antonia [1, 2] as well as the case of Maddalena Ventura [3], another bearded lady, could appear extraordinary for sixteenth and seventeenth century people. Bearded ladies [1–3] and women with male appearance such as the “Ensign Nun” Catalina de Erauso [4] are impressive artistic representations contributing to the debate about gender identity and its possible biological mechanisms. From a contemporary view, hirsutism is a disorder manifested by excessive hair growth in the telogen phase in androgen-dependent area. Hirsutism can be a manifestation of ovarian or adrenal hyperandrogenism such as ovarian polycystic syndrome, hyperthecosis, ovarian and adrenal tumors. However, since the first signs of hirsutism of Antonia Helena started at the age of nine and that she appeared healthy, some possible, thought unproven causes of hirsutism associated with an apparently female phenotype should include congenital adrenal hyperplasia as well as idiopathic hirsutism.

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Fig. 1 Engraving by Dominicus Custos, 19,2 × 14,6 cm, c. 1597, Wittert Museum, University of Liège, Belgium, inv. 4604 (reproduced with the permission of the Museum Authorities). It represents a portrait of Helena Antonia in a rich aristocratic dress with jewelry and a thick, long beard. The text confirms in Latin and in old German that she was born in the Archbishopric of Liège and at the age of 18 was raised by the widowed Archduchess Maria of Austria: “*Helena Antonia nata in Archiepiscopatu Leodiensi Aetatis sua 18. a Serenissima Archiducissa Austr. Maria Vidua Gracii educata*”. “*Helena Antonia geboren im Ertzbistum Littich Ihres alter 18 jar Ertzoge zue Grätz*”



Declarations

Conflicts of interest The authors states that there is no conflict of interest.

Informed consent For this type of study, formal consent is not required.

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