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**Old hat**  
**The evolution of your mortarboard**

July/August 2008  
 by Angus Trumble

Angus Trumble is senior curator of paintings and sculpture at the Yale Center for British Art. He is grateful to Lydia Shook '07 for her valuable assistance in preparing this article. His own Master's mortarboard, nonelasticized, of pure new wool with silk trim, was created by the firm of R. W. Bredin & Son Limited, Academic, Legal and Civic Robe-Makers of Melbourne, Australia.

**One of the small mysteries of commencement**, for new graduates, proud parents and grandparents, honorees, and even at times for bewildered faculty, is: how on earth did we come to wear such preposterous ceremonial hats?

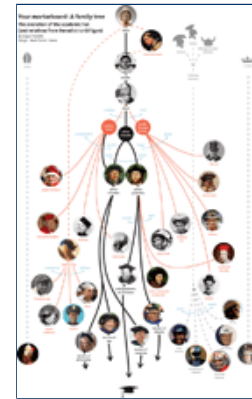
From President Levin's splendid round hat, down through the various squashy velvet caps or bonnets worn by doctors and professors, to the humble graduands' mortarboards or trenchers (these days with their extraordinary array of unauthorized homemade adornments) -- in each case the answer is bound up with the long history of universities themselves. Their evolution, which may be traced in an antiquarian literature that is enormous, enjoyable, and entirely pointless, may prove intriguing not merely to milliners and connoisseurs of headgear, but also to anyone who has noticed, on that big day in May, the vigorous survival of this most enduring of all fashion accessories. Other forms of official hat are exceedingly old -- for example, crowns, full-bottomed wigs, miters, helmets, turbans, diadems, tiaras, and wimples -- but few if any have evolved with such inherent logic over the past thousand years as has the humble scholar's hat.

**All academic headgear descends from that worn in Bologna (the *alma mater* of us all).**


**Pious beginnings: 1000-1200**

All academic headgear descends from the ecclesiastical *calotte*, or skullcap, worn somewhat indiscriminately throughout Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by canons of cathedrals and other church dignitaries. It passed into the conventions of dress that rapidly developed in the brand-new universities: Bologna (the *alma mater* of us all, founded in 1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), Modena (1175), and so on. According to long and slightly wobbly tradition, this skullcap, of quite shallow form, was itself descended from the floppy *pileus* or "cap of liberty" that was worn by ancient Roman freedmen to cover their newly shaved heads.

At the time of the French Revolution, when the new republic searched for potent symbols of civic virtue, that ancient Roman cap of liberty was somewhat imaginatively envisioned



Your mortarboard: A family tree  
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as "peaked" and repackaged for the modern age. Indeed, all peaked headgear shares this common intervening source and, of course, is now worn variously by naval officers, airline pilots, police, ticket collectors, and ice cream vendors. The baseball cap (somewhat bafflingly at times worn these days back to front) is therefore an essentially bona fide collateral descendant of the Roman *pileus*, although I am not quite sure how many wearers nowadays ruminates on this handy link to the noble concept of freedom.

There is very little written evidence for the origins of the scholar's hat, because it was three or four centuries before universities started to generate a mass of written regulations and bylaws governing costume, but tomb sculpture and brass rubbings tell us what we need to know about the earliest forms of academic headgear. Even by these early dates, however, much discussion arose from the question whether it was not a presumption, or vanity, or dangerous solecism to wear a hood *and* cap, both at once. After all (as the antis argued), the hood or cowl was an ancient monastic accessory, stretching all the way back to St. Benedict (*ca.* 480-547 CE), and had long been worn over the head both liturgically and, at times, out of necessity for warmth. The fact that today we still wear caps and hoods (jauntily trailing them behind, over our academic gowns) demonstrates that this matter was firmly resolved in the negative. The practice of wearing hoods lined with silk or fur -- not over the head, but dangling behind to signify by their different colors and textures which degree we have earned -- arrived in universities comparatively recently, in the sixteenth century.

**We still wear caps and hoods (jauntily trailing them behind, over our academic gowns).**

#### **Tasteful developments: 1200-1500**

The *calotte* or skullcap solidified in the course of the twelfth century into a basic brimless cloth form called, like its ancient Roman progenitor, the *pileus*. Between 1300 and 1500, a period of unprecedented volatility in European fashion, the *pileus*, like everything else -- sleeves, shoes, hair -- gradually got bigger. Its rim crept farther down over the brow, covering more and more head. It continued to be worn by clerics, but also as a distinctive form of dress by doctors, masters, bachelors, and officers of universities. However, its evolution appears to have been driven largely by secular fashion -- particularly in mid-fifteenth-century Paris, already the center of *haute couture*. It was now called the *pileus rotundus*.

By this date the round hat had spawned numerous offspring, some with brims and some without, and in due course these migrated into the spheres of military, civic, even commercial life, from the beadle to the burgher and up to the prince. In a real sense, therefore, the topper, the bowler, the tall round chef's hat, even Pope Benedict's cozy, fur-lined *camauero*, all trace their ancestry back to the natty prototype of the *pileus rotundus*.

#### **The square revolution: 1500-1550**

Within about 60 years, the first "square cap" or *pileus quadratus* was invented. Sewing four pieces of cloth together produced four "horns," or corners, and four seams or ridges on top. The point was to save time and money, because round hats required more cloth, more cutting and sewing, and more-difficult, radiating seams. The black or purple *pileus quadratus* was at first worn by priests and bishops, and is now, thanks to exceptionally detailed portraits by Hans Holbein the Younger, associated principally with Tudor England. There it denoted high status, perhaps because of the measure of protection it

afforded senior clerics during painfully long services in drafty, unheated abbeys and cathedrals at the height of the Little Ice Age.

From the second quarter of the sixteenth century two further types of square cap diverged from the prototype. One, which was floppier and less sharp and thin, but always four-cornered, was reserved for certain senior Oxford graduates and English bishops and secular statesmen. It was made of softer, more expensive cloth, occasionally velvet, and was more generous, form-hugging, and therefore very comfortable. Satisfactorily, it covered the ears. Holbein caught it perfectly in his incomparable portrait of Sir Thomas More. A form of it was and still is worn by certain doctors of divinity.

**Reserving the square cap for VIPs merely served to make it deliciously attractive to the lower ranks.**

The other form of early-sixteenth-century English square hat, plainer but still essentially four-cornered, was worn by undergraduates, choristers, and other persons of decidedly junior rank.

#### **Round versus square: 1550-1700**

Meanwhile, the round hat or *pileus rotundus* developed with vim and vigor on its own in the Tudor period, alongside the *pileus quadratus*, and spread through ranks of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century junior lay officials likewise captured early on by Holbein. At the same time, the *pileus rotundus* also found application among certain graduates and doctors in the lay faculties of universities, particularly law, "Physic" (the forerunner of what we now call the sciences), and music -- to distinguish them from doctors of divinity and clergy, who preferred the newer, grander *pileus quadratus*. For its part, propelled forward by the Counter-Reformation in Europe, the square hat ultimately gave rise to the modern biretta of the Catholic church, with its jaunty vanes for ease of doffing, and on top, its cuddly tuft or "tump."

#### **Square triumphant: 1675**

The round scholar's hat seems to have reached its pinnacle in the seventeenth century at Oxford, when, for much of that period, *pilei rotundi* were compulsory for undergraduates. But, consistent with human nature, reserving the *pileus quadratus* for VIPs merely served to make it deliciously attractive to the lower ranks. Finally, in 1675, "gentlemen-commoners" -- that is, aristocratic undergraduates -- were given permission by the vice chancellor of Oxford to put aside the pedestrian round hat, and adopt the square.

From this date the evolution of today's mortarboard or trencher or square or college cap may be directly traced. Now usually worn with a long silk tassel hanging four inches over the edge, it is a distant but direct descendant of that leaner, squarer form of *pileus quadratus* allotted to junior-rank choristers. Though the seams are now absent from many polyester versions of the mortarboard, the button on top remains -- and handily, as a place to hang the tassel.

The evolution of the current mortarboard has been driven chiefly by economy, such that today in America fine wool or poplin has given way to synthetic fabrics, and the brim is -- shockingly -- elasticized. One


**Academic headgear stands as a vivid reminder that the scholarly**

size fits all, and gone are the days when students and junior fellows went for fittings at Ede & Ravenscroft in Chancery Lane, London; or Gieves of Sidney Street, Cambridge; or Cotrell & Leonard of Albany, New York.

**traditions it symbolizes are exceedingly ancient.**

As for President Levin's beautiful *pileus rotundus*, a distinctive form of headgear *ex officio*, it was adapted from the separate repertoire of ceremonial hats in the University of Amsterdam, for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. Perhaps -- and this is off the top of my head -- this snappy model was selected to distinguish the office of the president of Yale from that of the unreformed vice chancellors of British and other English-speaking universities.

Compared with most "secular" hats, academic headgear stands as a vivid reminder that the scholarly traditions it symbolizes are exceedingly ancient and largely impervious to short-term fashion. After all, the cocked, three-cornered, or tricorne hat made of beaver skin was widely worn only for about a hundred years, roughly coinciding with the full span of the eighteenth century. It has now vanished completely, except in Hollywood and theme parks.

Only the most jaded cynic would venture to describe our great university as a theme park, although its buildings and grounds are occasionally exploited to the best of their ability by Hollywood. Yet on that exciting day each May, when at commencement we reach for our hoods, gowns, bonnets, trenchers, and mortarboards, we are doing far more than putting on fancy dress: within and around each successive class of Yale graduates we are, in a meandering but unbroken historical line that extends back more than 900 years, celebrating as a living academic community the achievements of students, friends, professors, distinguished honorees, and devoted families alike -- simply by taking off our hats to them, and to each other. Long may it be so. 

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Readers respond

### The miter was a crown

**I really enjoyed this article** and passed it around to several people. However, upon showing the "[family tree](#)," I found myself correcting the chart. The chart would indicate that there is no relationship between the miter and the crown. That simply is not true. The miter began its life as the papal tiara as seen in the papal insignia -- until changed by the current pope, if I am not mistaken. The three-tiered tiara evolved into a cone-shaped hat, and then eventually into what we know of today as the miter, which is worn by Roman, Anglican/Episcopal, and some other bishops. From its earliest days, the miter was considered a type of crown; after all, cardinals are the princes of the church, and bishops are sovereign in their own see. So the miter and crown have not descended from ancient times until today as they have always been. But I wouldn't take my word for it. Check it out with Professor Bryan Spinks in the Divinity School.

The Reverend Daniel C. Gunn '02STM  
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