

The Question of Ecclesiastical Influences on French Academic Dress

by Yves Mausen

The talk given at the Burgon Society's Congregation in October 2005 on which this paper is based was intended as a tribute to Professor Bruno Neveu, one of the few French scholars to take an interest in academic dress. He had been made a Fellow of the Society *honoris causa* only shortly before his untimely death in 2004. I had the privilege of inheriting the archives on his favourite topic which he had collected during his lifetime, and I found amongst the documents an additional folder containing material for a history of ecclesiastical dress. My initial idea was to connect this field of research with my own interest in medieval ceremonial and thus try to establish whether the church gown had influenced the university robe in France, as one might be led to think from the appearance of the latter.

However, this question might lead nowhere if by 'ecclesiastical influences' we meant copying from the clergyman's outfit, for one has to admit that there are but few. First of all for no other reason than the very obvious one that for a long time there was no specific dress for the clergy. For centuries there was only the strong recommendation that they should avoid all signs of lavishness, such as jewels (naturally), but also other distinctive patterns of lay fashion in shoes, hairstyle, etc. In the eighth and ninth centuries and again in the twelfth and thirteenth, there is more than one example of legislation against the lure of luxury and the cleric's tendency to succumb to it. Some wills of members of the French clergy tell us that during the Middle Ages they wore a mantle—and they often bequeathed one to women they had been particularly close to. From 1583 onwards this mantle had to be black and in 1589 the classic cassock made its first appearance, before it came into general use in the seventeenth century. This brief chronology argues against any hypothesis that clerical attire had an influence on academia: the evolution of ecclesiastical dress took place at a time when university dress was already more or less fixed.

There is an essential difference between the two traditions in what the form of the dress signifies: whereas academic dress symbolizes the dignity of scholarship and the nobility of the mind, and thus is meant to 'show off', ecclesiastical garb (at least the everyday dress) aims at modesty.



Fig. 1. The author wearing the *grand costume* of a doctor in the Faculty of Law and holding up the robe of the *petit costume*

For both these reasons, one has to adopt a rather different perspective if one wishes to analyse ecclesiastical influences on French academic dress. So far as the dress of Law faculties is concerned (from which the dress of other faculties derives), closer scrutiny reveals that the shape of the gown is largely due to papal legislation; if the style of dress imitated anything, it was that of the professors in the Faculty of Canon Law at Paris.

Here is a brief outline of what French academic dress looks like today, before we consider more closely the origins of its various components.

1 Napoleon's legislation (1803/1809): the current gown

In 1793 the Convention abolished universities, faculties, colleges, degrees, diplomas and academic dress at a stroke. And it was only in 1804 that the Empire rescued law schools from the ashes, the different 'Faculties' being revived in 1808. One year later, on 31 July 1809, a decree restored and reintroduced gowns. But this document describes in particular the robes intended for Faculties of Medicine: it is not specific about the dress to be prescribed for Faculties of Law. For this reason, the distinctive patterns of the latter are determined by the customs of the Faculty of Paris, modelled on the gowns worn by judges; and this explains both the colour (a scarlet gown with a black cincture) and the fabric (fine wool instead of silk).

In all other respects, however, the robes of the various *Ecoles* are identical, in line with Napoleon's obsession with unifying everything. There are two variants of the same costume: full dress (*grand costume*) for ceremonies and undress (*petit costume*) for teaching. Each consists of several elements. A gown with broad bell-shaped sleeves is superimposed on a cassock (*simarre*). Gown and cassock being manufactured as one single garment, only the front portion of the *simarre* is visible and the facings down the front and on the sleeves belong to the gown. This combination may seem rather absurd: the *simarre* is made of silk and the gown of wool. In Law faculties the full-dress scarlet gown has facings made of black silk down the front and on the sleeves, whereas the undress black gown has the facings made in the same shape but of scarlet wool for the front and black silk for the sleeves (see Fig. 1).

Round their necks academics wear bands (*cravate* or *rabat*) made of cambric; round their waists, a cincture of watered silk with a knot (which serves as a buckle), with vertical bands hanging from it, ending in fringes. On their heads they wear a round, brimless cap (*toque*) inspired by the dress of the members of the Convention and the Directory: it is decorated with braid, the trimmings indicating office and the horizontal bands showing one's academic status (one band for professors, two for deans). The costume is worn with a stole (*chausse*—less accurately called an *épitoge*) trimmed with fur, formerly ermine (*vair*) and nowadays rabbit. The function of this stole is to indicate the degree level: for example, three bands of fur signify a doctorate. Even if this stole was created in its

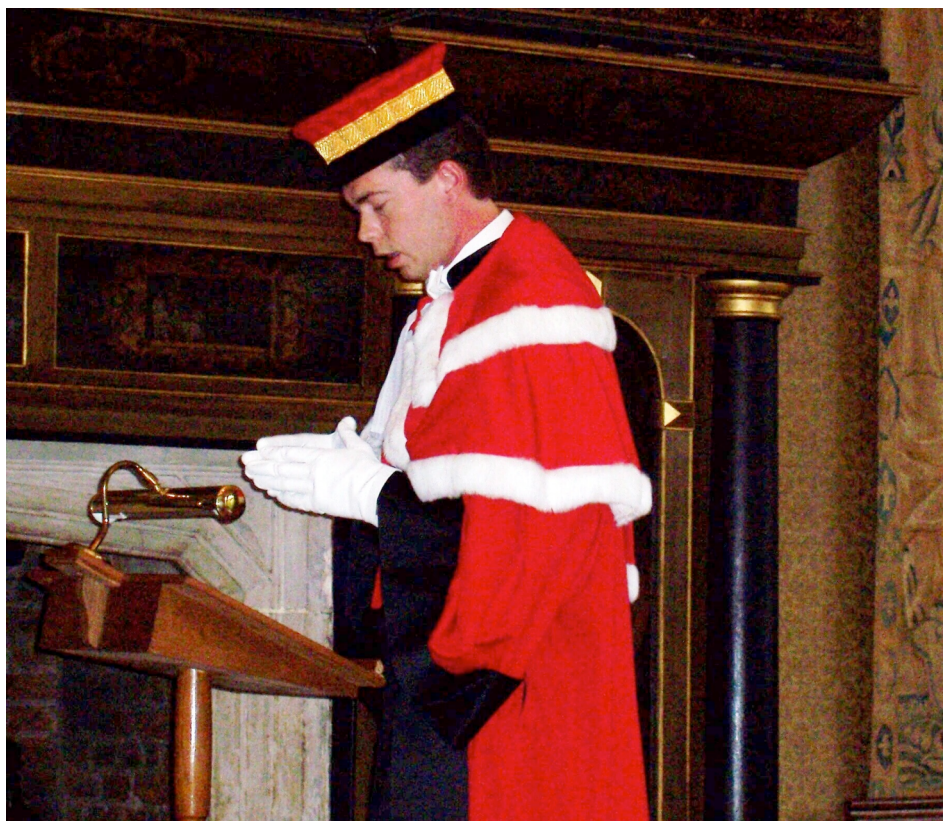


Fig. 2. The *double camail* worn with the *grand costume*

present form by Napoleon, it actually derives from the hood (*chaperon*) worn flattened out on the left shoulder during the Ancien Régime (see below). Today the Faculty of Law at Montpellier has reintroduced this piece of the medieval costume in the form of a *camail*, a sort of a small double cape worn around the shoulders. It comes from a shoulder-piece on which originally rested a hood; but this hood was worn opened up from the sixteenth century, giving rise to the *double camail*. This distinctive element of the costume stems from the tradition of the Medical Faculty of Montpellier, where professors formerly wore it in addition to the front portion of the *chausse*—a nonsensical practice, of course, since both evolved from the headdress. When it was taken over by some members of the Law Faculty, they rightly left the *chausse* aside when the *camail* was worn (see Fig. 2).

Of course, neither the Parisian tradition nor the academic dress in the imperial legislation was invented in the early nineteenth century. With some tiny

modifications (and discounting the cap and stole), the robes as we know them were taken over from the Ancien Régime.

2 The origins of the French robes¹

The foundation of universities goes back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe. And during the whole of the Middle Ages academic dress was determined freely by each university as a part of the privileges granted by the Pope. It therefore underwent many changes. In France, it was only in the seventeenth century that its form became fixed.

Lay influences on academic dress are indisputable.

In the fifteenth century they are threefold. The *chaperon* was abandoned as a lay fashion and was taken up by men of law and scholars in general. Originally used as a band to which a hat was fastened, it then took the form of a broad strip of stuff lying on one shoulder, the hat having become part of it in the form of the *bourrelet*, a padded circlet of cloth. Lawyers adopted a particular square form (*cornette*). The use of fur and embroidery also derives from a lay custom: the three rows of fur decorating the *chaperons* of doctors were originally a sign of royalty. It is the same story with the round pill-box *mortier* cap: formerly the distinctive sign of kings, princes and knights, it was taken over by scholars. Stemming from the lay fashion for large hats and bonnets, it typifies the evolution of the low *pileus* in its various forms, and from a round cap it became square in the sixteenth century, first soft, then rigid (*bonnet carré* or *pileus quadratus*). But the legal profession stuck to the originally round-shaped *mortier* for some time: the Faculty of Law at Montpellier, for example, adopted the square version as late as 1628.

Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, following the model of magistrates' (and perhaps clergymen's) costume, the *cravate* became the *rabat*, that is an enlarged version of the square collar, falling below the neck and made up of two rectangles of fabric. But Napoleon reintroduced the *cravate*.

Although academics borrowed from lay fashion, they drew chiefly on the tradition of the Faculty of Canon Law at Paris. First, the colour: in 1336 Benedict XII allowed the shoulder-piece to be red; in 1339 this privilege was extended to Montpellier; in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries red was generally used by professors of law and medicine on the model of Italian men of law and aristocrats who were part of the government. Second, the shape: originally a *cappa* (a large closed sleeveless mantle with one or two slits in front for the passage of the arms), it was taken over from the clergy. This hypothesis stems from the observation that an edict at the end of the ninth century forbade laymen to wear the *cappa*, which

¹ This attempt at a chronology has restricted aims. It is not a complete history of all the local variations of academic gowns but a teleological sketch intended to throw light on the origins of today's dress. It therefore contains nothing but major elements and landmarks and concerns mainly the costume of Law faculties.

indicates that it was intended to be an ecclesiastical garment only. Nevertheless this law was not complied with, and at the beginning of the thirteenth century, clerics were conversely forbidden to wear an open *cappa* with sleeves, to distinguish them from the laymen. In any event, scholars abandoned *cappae* in the sixteenth century for today's cassocks and gowns (first with tight sleeves, then with bell sleeves). This dress was generally used in Paris and in the centre, east and west of France, on the model of the members of the royal courts of justice.

Eventually, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries two sets of costumes were in use, according to rank. For their investiture, full professors (*antécenseurs*) received a purple robe, complemented by a scarlet shoulder-piece edged with wool, a black cassock with white bands, a girdle of black watered silk fastened on the left side, and a black square hat. For formal occasions after their investiture, they wore a full, long, open scarlet robe of wool with full bell sleeves and lined with black silk as well as a scarlet shoulder-piece dressed with miniver, a black cassock, white bands and a scarlet square hat. For informal occasions, they had an open black gown lined with red, a red *chaperon*, a black cassock with white bands and a black square hat. As for the assistant professors (*agrégés*), they were allowed an open black bell-sleeved gown with red *chaperon*, a black cassock with white bands and a black square hat.

Yet these arrangements aroused some discontent amongst assistant professors: sometimes *antécenseurs* were not doctors but even so they wore scarlet, whereas *agrégés* (who generally were doctors) wore scarlet only if deputizing for *antécenseurs* . . . This quarrel over precedence ended in 1766 when the Parisian Parliament decided that *agrégés* should be authorized to wear scarlet on all occasions when the *antécenseurs* did. In spite of the differences between today's *maîtres de conférence* (lecturers) and eighteenth-century assistant professors, it is my opinion that this decision should still be considered as being in force, to uphold the self-esteem of the former in the presence of the full professors (nowadays called *professeurs agrégés*, the *antécenseurs* having been put on a level with the former assistant professors). Should not the earnest wish of some of the *maîtres de conférence* to wear the gown indeed prevail over petty principles concerning rank? Especially nowadays, when academic tradition needs all the support it can get.

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