The Tension of Hairpins: An Examination of the Material

and Cultural Purposes of Roman Bodkins

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In 1909, Walter Dennison returned to Ann Arbor from Rome with hundreds of new archaeological artifacts that would add to Professor Kelsey's growing collection. Among these artifacts were Greek and Latin inscriptions and evidence of everyday life in Rome. One such item is a hairpin, also referred to as a bodkin (*discerniculum*) (Stephens 2008, 113). Object #21682 is seemingly plain– a piece of bone shaped into a rod. However, this piece also displays the troublesome intersection of feminine beauty and the contemporary expectation of modesty in imperial Rome. While elite Roman women were certainly expected to maintain their physical appearance, literary sources from the early Roman empire indicate that it was not always so clear when excellence met excess.

Object #21682 embodies this contrast within itself. It is approximately three inches long and made of white bone, crafted into the shape it holds today. The item is dated to sometime after the 1st century CE and was found in Rome. This centrality to the Roman empire, both in time and geography, enables us to hypothesize that it represented the general fashion trends of the empire. What is remarkable about this item is it's simplicity. Within the piece there is only a slight circular engraving at the top to represent any sort of adornment. There is modesty within the object, but since it's intended purpose was to adorn, there is immediately a conflict between the roles this item was intended to play.

Bodkins would have served a utilitarian role– to maintain the shape of a hairstyle– and an aesthetic one– to decorate the hair, without adding unnecessary pieces to the hairstyle, like clips or gems, to it. That being said, it was still possible for bodkins to be decorated. Some had subtle engravings, like Object #21682. Others had gems and metals inlaid in the piece– paring utility with an aesthetic (Stephens 2008, 117). Hairdresser-turned-historian Janet Stephens analyzed the functionality of bodkins and other Roman hairpieces and concluded that bodkins would have

been necessary for many, but not all, Roman hairstyles. They provided an element of isometric tension that was good for holding hair close to the head. When placed in the hair, typically they would be twisted into the hair in some fashion, with only the decorative end sticking out (Stephens 2008, 116). Bodkins would not have been appropriate for looser hairstyles (Stephens 2008, 119). There is also evidence that bodkins could have served a more violent, secondary purpose. There are multiple accounts of women using their bodkins as a weapon to defend themselves or exact vengeance. For example, Fulvia, wife of Mark Antony, supposedly stabbed the tongue of Caesar's dead body out of revenge (Stephens 2008, 117). However, the grooming rituals that would necessitate a bodkin like this, would require the luxury of time. This implies that bodkins might not have been used by every woman in Rome. Nonetheless, contact with an object like this might have cut across socioeconomic classes.

Beginning with lower class women, there is evidence of slaves being the primary source of labor for hairdressing. There is an established base of evidence that barber shops were common throughout the Roman empire, but they catered primarily to a male clientele and were staffed by men. There are no references of women working in barber shops, with the exception of some satirical sources that hint at women providing both beauty and sexual services. Female hairdressers would have likely worked in the privacy of an upper class woman's home, since most upper class women would have been restricted to the home (Toner 2015, 101). These female hairdressers (*ornatrix*) could have been slaves or former slaves, as the consensus among academics is that ". . . hairdressing was a low-status trade performed by slaves and former slaves." (Stephens 2008, 111) Even if they could not hire a third party to do their hair for them, Roman women would do their own hair "in the privacy of her home" (Bartman 2001, 4). Furthermore, there would have been a high demand for these bodkins, so it serves that craftsmen

and women would have had to create these pieces *en masse* to keep up with the high demand for these hairstyles (Stephens 2008, 117). Some bodkins might have been as simple as shaping wood into the smooth, wedged shape. Others would have required more attention to aesthetic detail and a more skilled hand.

For the women whose hair was being styled, two pieces of information can be assumed. First, they had the luxury of time and money. The coiffures depicted in surviving Roman art are incredibly complex requiring extensive time and resources. It is unlikely that for a woman of a high enough class this presented any issue: the necessary labor and free time was abundant (Bartman 2001, 8). Additionally, these women would have been conscious of the social implications of their hair. As I will discuss later, a woman's hairstyle reflected her value system, her social status, and her understanding of the social world around her. One prominent example is the contrast between men and women's hairstyles. There is a passivity presented in women's hairstyles. Bodkins were designed to keep female hair in place; set in a passive role that connotes the typically passive role women were expected to play in society. A man's hair, in contrast, was typically styled to be more free and "lively" which underscores a more active role in the household and in the state (Bartman 2001, 3). Another important difference in male and female hairstyles is the tendency of female hair to be depicted as ". . . more neatly and symmetrically coiffed than men's. . ." (Bartman 2001, 2). Though both men and women within the upper classes of Rome would have styled their hair, the differences in common styles reflect gendered norms for behavior.

At the top of Rome's social hierarchy was the imperial family. In addition to the political and financial power that the emperor would yield, his wife also had access to social influence over the general population of the empire. Their portraiture would have been spread across the

empire, primarily on coins. By tracking the movement and distribution of coins, it becomes relatively easy to track the evolution of Roman empresses' hairstyles. For example, Faustina the Younger's portraits changed at least nine times. However, Dr. Elizabeth Bartman notes that these changes "may be at least partially fictive responses to dynastic politics rather than changes made in the actual coiffure she wore" (Bartman 2001, 8). Bartman's point is made particularly interesting given that hairstyles might have been one aspect of women's appearance that they had some degree of agency in. Bartman continues this point by noting that many Roman women never changed their hairstyle across their lifetime (Bartman 2001, 19). However, it becomes apparent that the hairstyle of the empresses may have reflected, or even influenced, those worn by upper class Roman women (Dolansky 2012, 282). Again, it is difficult to suppose that the styles of the empresses would have diffused down into all classes of Roman society, since many of these hairstyles were too complex for many to do on their own or without resources.

Another rich source of evidence for the empresses influencing female aesthetic culture are dolls. The dolls that remain from the Roman world often have elaborate hairstyles that mimicked the coiffures of contemporary empresses. One particular doll, found in a tomb, has a hairstyle carved to mimic that of Faustina the Elder (and later, her daughter). This has helped date the doll's manufacture to around the same time that Faustina the Younger was in power (Dolansky 2012, 261). For young girls, these dolls would have provided a model for feminine beauty under the guise of a play thing. Dolansky further notes in her analysis on dolls and gender ideals that, upper-class girls might have watched their female relatives get their hair styled for hours a day, which might have reinforced the goal of obtaining "a perfect hairdo" (Dolansky 2012, 272). There is additional evidence of young girls actually engaging in grooming rituals (as

opposed to simply mimicking or observing), based on combs, mirrors, and other cosmetic goods being found in the graves of young girls (Dolansky 2012, 275).

What underlies the entire conversation with hairstyles in Rome are the complex attitudes about *cultus*. The term *cultus* is a broad term that refers to "all manner of adornment and refinement" (Toner 2015, 92). Roman literature is relatively limited to male voices, but from these perspectives, there are conflicting ideas towards *cultus*. Livy cites *cultus* as being one of three indicators of femininity, among with *munditia* (elegance) and *ornatus* (adornment) (Livy 34.7.9). *Cultus* reflected a woman's moral standing (Toner 2015, 98), communicated their status in society, and displayed individuality and power (Dolansky 2012, 274). However, having too much *cultus* was an indicator of "extravagance, vanity, unchastity, and frivolity" (Dolansky 2012, 270). The ultimate goal was to strike an undefined balance between too little and too much *cultus*. How a woman presented herself would not only affect society's perception of her, but also of her family and the state.

Since hairstyle was a method of expression and self-care, they became a reflection of *cultus* within a woman. There was a set standard among Roman women– long hair with a center part (Bartman 2001, 2)– but there was also room for self-expression within that. A hairstyle could become individualized, as long as it maintained cultural indicators of gender, like neatness and passivity. This standard was based in a general Roman disdain for anything that could be perceived as "natural" or "untamed." Bartman notes that *cultus* and the cultivation of a structured hairstyle was in direct contrast with a "natural" look that would be associated with "a state close to beasts and barbarians" (Bartman 2001, 6). Ovid confirms these views by informing women that their hair shouldn't be "lawless" or "untamed" because the basis of a woman's attractiveness was her neatness (Dolansky 2012, 271). When the study of hairstyles is infused with the notion

of *cultus*, we see that women had agency with their hairstyle to the extent that it didn't violate Roman norms.

There is clear evidence that such violations took place, so finding the balance between *cultus* and modesty was no easy task. Both were required to be a woman of good social standing, but one can barely exist alongside the other. A woman who sits for two hours every day to have her hair done can suggest a dedication to maintaining a positive appearance of the household and the luxury of taking two hours to be immobile. It can also imply the vices mentioned earlier by Dolansky: extravagance, frivolity, unchastity, and immortality (Dolansky 2012, 287). Hairdressing did not exist as a concept by itself; it "evoked a web of associations" (Bartman 2001, 4). Of these associations, *cultus* was only one, which means that hairstyles served as much more than an aesthetic.

This cultural tension around hair and women's appearances continues into today. As Western society becomes progressively more accustomed to female nudity, there is a growing discourse about female modesty. Too much modesty has been declared as oppressive to female sexual expression. A common example of this is found in discussion around the *hijab*; adherents often see it as empowering, but outsiders are sometimes too quick to condemn it as a form of oppression. However, choosing to dress modestly as a form of rebellion may be a symptom of "elitist project of sociocultural self-positioning"; this does not sound too far off from Ovid's warning about spending too much time or money on one's appearance. All the while, there remains a camp of people in Western society who continue to speak out against female nudity, even in the most benign forms of exposure, such as breastfeeding in public (Fry 2017). What we learn from our Roman counterparts is that society's imposition of female self-expression through fashion is a deeply-rooted phenomenon. Just as Ovid warned women of the dangers of

hairstyling, modern commentators and op-ed writers are far from lacking on opinions about how women should express themselves.

There are some limitations to this analysis, which are common to much of the study of Roman women. Most of the surviving literary sources come from the point of view of men. Additionally, these sources typically present as criticism of women. It is possible that women did not find balancing *cultus* or their appearance to be a difficulty. Perhaps, violations of norms of *cultus* did not occur a lot. Upper class women certainly received ample training for the lifestyle of a proper *matrona* (the wife of a Roman citizen). Additionally, when analyzing these male-written texts, Bartman states:

"Whether taking at face value satirical and moralizing texts about women's coiffures or imposing a contemporary and anachronistic perspective onto the imagery, [modern scholars] have misinterpreted the evidence and thus impeded our understanding of the many meanings women's hair held for the Romans." (Bartman 2001, 2)

Given this possibility for scholarly error, it remains to be seen how much agency or power hairstyling may have given women. More importantly, the elite women of Rome only represent a minority of the women living in the Roman empire. Evidence about what slaves or lower class women would have done with their hair or their physical appearance is lacking. It can be safely assumed, given the time and resources required by the intensive hairstyles often depicted in statuary, that their day-to-day hairstyles were not as complex.

From bodkins, we get a message of tension. In their most practical sense, these tools were designed to create tension within braids, curls, and buns in order to keep them in place. Within imperial Roman culture, they also represented the difficult balance between the cultivation of modesty and *cultus* for women. Women were expected to display signs of their resource wealth

and they possessed the universal need for self-expression, which their choice of hairstyle allowed them to do. However, they were limited by a culture that held contempt for women who jeopardized the appearance of the home or the state. The Kelsey Museum's collection of bodkins demonstrate this tension within their design; they uniformly have a simple design adorning the functional tool. Object #21682 is no exception to this rule. Within their appearance and use, bodkins embody the cultural value of *cultus* that guided the behavior of many Roman women.

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