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TECHNOLOGIES OF APPEARANCE: HAIR BEHAVIOUR IN EARLY MEDIEVAL  
BRITAIN AND EUROPE

Steve Ashby

*Summary*

Personal appearance in general – and the grooming of hair in particular – has long held a position of interest in historical, art-historical, and literary scholarship. The same cannot be said of archaeology, and the material aspects of personal grooming in the construction and communication of identity have not been fully synthesized. As a result, little attempt has been made to understand the social role of hair in less well documented societies, such as those of early medieval northern and western Europe. This paper considers archaeological, iconographic and documentary evidence for the significance of, and physical engagement with hair in early medieval northern and western Europe, and offers a model for the interpretation of grooming as a social phenomenon. It is argued that grooming was a socially meaningful practice, and that it played a key role in the construction of early medieval identities, as well as in the maintenance and manipulation of boundaries and distinctions between individuals and groups.

## INTRODUCTION [1]

Early medieval historians have long been aware of the symbolic significance of hair; so much is clear from the Burgundian and Salian Laws, and Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum* in particular (*LB*, passim; *LS*, passim; *HF*, 180-2). However, archaeologists have traditionally paid much less attention to the question (though see Gansum 1993; Williams 2003; 2007; cf. Aldhouse-Green 2004a; Aldhouse-Green 2004b). This means that the material implications of this rather abstract notion have not been fully widely applied for early medieval Europe. In what follows, I will outline the archaeological evidence for a concern with hair and grooming between the fifth and eleventh centuries AD, drawing upon archaeological, anthropological, documentary and iconographic evidence and consider how this phenomenon might be situated in social terms. While the key focus is on head hair, some of the evidence considered may equally relate to body hair, such that this study should be seen as a general treatment of approaches to the maintenance and transformation of appearance. Though any attempt to discern particular 'meanings' in such distant and diverse contexts is certain to meet with frustration, the paper examines the ways in which hair was used as a social technology.

The frame of reference will be wide, covering the period between the fifth and the eleventh centuries, extending beyond Merovingian Frankia (for which documentary references to hair are most prevalent), and embracing northern Europe more broadly. By incorporating Scandinavia, as well as 'Celtic', 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Viking' Britain, a comparative perspective should be possible. Of course, these areas were culturally heterogeneous, but the approach taken herein is not to seek out a common symbolic or abstract meaning for hair, but rather to think more 'anthropologically' about the mechanisms and structures that facilitated its meaningful constitution and use. In so doing, the net must be cast widely (it will be necessary to consider prehistoric and Roman hair technologies in order to situate their early

medieval successors) and our tools should include not just the documentary, archaeological and iconographic sources for the period, but also anthropological and sociological analogies.

Notwithstanding its conspicuous under-representation in archaeological discourse, hair has always been an important medium of communication within human societies past and present. For the early medieval period, its significance is clear in both the documentary record and in iconography, and is indirectly yet nonetheless powerfully conveyed through archaeological evidence, not least in what appears to be a considerable investment in associated material culture and technologies. There is thus little doubt that hair held significance to people in the past, but its particular resonances in different cultural contexts have rarely been examined in detail (with the notable exception of historical argument surrounding the meaning of hair in Merovingian kingship and the Burgundian Code; see Wallace-Hadrill 1962, 156-7; Dutton 2004; Johnsson 2010; Goosmann 2012).

In what follows, I review the evidence for past peoples having had a particular concern with hair, and how this interest was manifested. The review begins with a brief survey of what is known of hair and its significance in contemporary non-western societies. I then look briefly at attitudes to hair in Late Roman and early medieval Europe. This survey will incorporate studies of the archaeological evidence for the production and use of hair combs, the deposition of toilet implements in mortuary contexts, and the representation of hair in early medieval art.

First, however, a range of possible ways of interpreting this evidence is considered, with the ultimate aim not of explaining early medieval hair behaviour, but rather of understanding the context in which it took place, and the mechanisms by which it operated. Though

superficially the hair behaviour under discussion may seem rather alien, it will be argued that it differs from contemporary concerns only in detail. That is not to propose a common tradition, or general covering laws, but simply to say that there may have been shared elements in the mechanisms that supported the social construction of the ‘meaning’ of hair that can be found in the past and the present. The paper considers a range of models that may help to contextualize and analyze hair behaviour: models that draw variously on theories of symbolism, technology, display and social distinction. In closing, I propose one possible reading of the evidence, and call for a greater focus on the application of social theory in interpreting the agency not only of the early medieval body, but also of its associated material culture.

Though archaeological engagement with the question of hair has been relatively rare, a small number of important studies have been made. The most significant of these is M. Aldhouse Green’s *Crowning Glories* (Aldhouse-Green 2004b). Concerned primarily with later prehistoric hair behaviour, Green calls upon examples taken from contemporary non-western societies in order to develop an explanatory model. She notes the diverse references made by hair: to life, death and memory; to inclusion and exclusion; to identity. Such ideas are used to elucidate the otherwise incomprehensible phenomena evident in (*inter alia*) Iron Age bog bodies and toilet instruments. This model is complex and multidimensional, but it runs the risk of presenting hair as fundamentally symbolic. I am not sure that this provides a full explanation; in interpreting ‘hair behaviour’ in terms of semiotics, it is inevitable that one begins to focus on the grander, more extravagant acts of communication, whether they be acts associated with ritual and sacrifice, or with elaborate, self-consciously conspicuous acts of personal display. This approach is thus effective, but only takes us so far; it facilitates only a partial understanding of the full range of hair behaviour. If we are to begin to understand hair

behaviour on a broader canvas, I believe that we need a more nuanced model: theoretical apparatus capable of providing a finer-grained image of the past. Such a model needs to account for more than the bombastic public displays of identity that are the stuff of history and art history, but also for the more understated activities that tend to take place in private, are less easily visible to the archaeologist or historian, and which may, for the actors involved in their performance, have been nothing more than unconscious and habitual acts. I thus propose that we envision hair behaviour as a technology. Ingold (2000a; 2000b; 2010) has discussed how social context influences the ways in which we go about undertaking every activity (or ‘technology’) of our lives — from walking, to riding a bike, to writing, or cooking a meal — whether or not we are aware of it. Thus, social environment naturally influences the development of particular approaches to display and the maintenance of personal appearance. That is all very well, but with only a fragmentary record from early medieval Europe, actually accessing these relationships is much more difficult. Thankfully, there is a way into the topic through studying contemporary approaches to personal display, grooming, and hair behaviour today. Recent sociological studies (e.g. Shove 2003, 79-116; Hielscher 2011) clearly demonstrate that hair behaviour is best seen as a social practice; it is not what hair looks like or ‘means’ that is most important, so much as what we do, or don’t do, with it.

Obviously, it would be inadvisable to import this contemporary model wholesale to the early medieval period, but the work does serve as a reminder that we should consider practice as well as the meanings of appearance. Nonetheless, given the fragmentary nature of our evidence, one might ask whether we can actually say anything about early medieval hair behaviour with any confidence. Symbolic ‘meaning’ (itself rather indefinable) may be inaccessible, but one can be certain that the treatment of hair was of fundamental importance

in the setting of social boundaries, whether the concern is with social standing, ethnicity, gender, or kinship. Moreover, for those with the standing and will to do so, hair was likely just as important in blurring and transgressing these boundaries, and ultimately transforming them (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). It was this kind of subversive power that necessitated the maintenance of Merovingian and Burgundian hair ‘order’, and prompted the reproaches of Alcuin and John of Wallingford (see below). Hair, thus, has the power not just to create and maintain social order, but also to bend it, break it, tear it down and start again. This power surely stems from a combination of its visibility and pliability. Thus, while it does not facilitate the ‘broadcasting’ of social messages in the way that architecture, sculpture, or landscape do, hair does allow subtle communication to a more intimate audience. The easy manner in which it may be manipulated is key, as it permits a diverse range of social statements to be ‘worn’. Nonetheless, we should be careful not to think of hair simply as a medium, like clothes, jewellery or weapons. Its physical and spiritual connection with the self makes it much more than any of these, as does its pliability. Indeed, the latter is key to understanding its social significance. We must envision hair as a form of practice, rather than simply as a canvas on which to paint various symbols or messages. It has to be seen as such, as it is not true to state that it simply delivers emblematic messages in the way that dress or jewellery may do. The reason for this is its resistance. The very fact that hair is alive, and the fact that its qualities are dependent upon factors such as local climatic conditions, means that it is not always possible to make it do exactly what we want it to do (see Hielscher 2011, 153-156). Thus, styling hair is a negotiation between hair and stylist. Such an argument has been made for craft in general (Ingold 2000a; 2010), but any hairdresser would no doubt concur. Indeed, sociological work has shown that for many people today, the process of ‘doing your hair’ is as significant as the final look itself, if not more so (Hielscher 2011; see also Shove 2003, 102-116).

It is, therefore, legitimate for the archaeologist in search of social understanding to consider the act of hair preparation, rather than to focus entirely on its final appearance. This allows us to draw away from banal questions about what ‘Merovingian hair’, ‘Viking hair’, or ‘Norman hair’ looked like, and to focus instead on the idea of ‘hair’ in itself, and on the social significance invested in the process of dressing it. In short, one may state that the power of hair lies in performance, rather than in appearance (Ashby in prep.). Such performance may be undertaken by agents of any status; even those without the resources (or the freedom) to style their hair in the manner of the elite nonetheless engage in a process of bodily maintenance, whose very restrictions may in themselves prove instructive

That is a rather bland statement as it stands, and it may be worthwhile fleshing it out a little. Just how can the banal practices of cleaning and grooming, to which we pay little or no attention, tell us anything about social structure or ideas? A look at contemporary western society may be helpful in this regard. Now, of course, the rapidly changing fashions of the modern era will be reflected in hair behaviour, in the technologies and practices associated with particular haircuts (the bob, the afro, the ponytail, and so on). These need not concern us. Of more interest are the acts that develop out of social circumstance without our having any awareness of them. For instance, the degree to which our bodies require cleaning is not any kind of natural ‘given’, but is rather proscribed by the society in which we live. The innovation that is the electric shower allows us to wash our bodies and hair more frequently than was previously the norm, but more than that: social standards insist that we do just this. Hielscher (2011, 163-165) points out that it is normal practice to attempt to control the greasiness of hair (something which is, of course, entirely natural), and to replace this with



artificial substitutes (creams, products, waxes and gels). In no way could this practice be seen as natural or predictable; it has developed out of its own particular social circumstance. In detail, the practice emerges out of the battle to make hair do what we want it to do, and this is key; for all that we might privilege 'performance' over 'symbol', it is unrealistic to argue that those dressing hair had no interest in the ultimate result. The process of hairstyling is ultimately about negotiation between a sort of mental blueprint of a particular style on the one hand, and the restrictions placed upon the stylist by the qualities and condition of hair (in a particular microclimate). Success, however measured, ultimately emerges out of the qualities and condition of the hair being worked with, the materials and apparatus to hand, and the experience and skill of the stylist (cf. Ingold 2010). Given this nexus of people, materials, and environment, and the importance of context to social discourse, it is natural that particular occasions, audiences and places may become particularly significant in the performance of dressing and wearing hair. Such biographies make combs, mirrors, and similar objects particularly amenable to social analysis.

Clearly then, it is important that we appreciate the complexity and mutability of our relationships with our hair. These relationships are played out in what I would term 'hair behaviour'. Cleaning, styling and adorning hair are key to social production, to the extent that it is appropriate to state that the real importance of hair lies in its grooming. This ongoing negotiation between mental template and the natural qualities of hair was central to the creation of personal display (particularly, but certainly not exclusively amongst elite groups), but was also in itself emblematic of a particular level of social standing (according to age, gender, kinship and other social variables). In this light, what may superficially appear to be an inexplicable preoccupation with grooming equipment begins to make a certain amount of sense. Combs in particular, and grooming instruments more generally, were often

professionally manufactured and artistically ornamented in the early Middle Ages, because their role was well understood, and they were socially significant in themselves. They make a clear statement that the significance of hair, if it is to be found anywhere, lies in the technologies and behaviours developed around it.

#### HAIR IN CONTEMPORARY NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES [1]

Hair and its significance have long been important concerns in anthropology. We can look back to *The Golden Bough*, in which Frazer (1913, passim) describes the belief that spirits exist within the hair and head, or to the work of Berg (1951) and Leach (1958), who saw hair as playing a symbolic role in discourse relating to sex, gender, and sexuality. Hair is of course closely connected to ideas of personhood, as evidenced in its use in ritual and magic, in which it often acts as synecdoche, standing as representative of the entire person (e.g. Summers 2000, 192; Pointon 2002; cf. Armit 2012 on the significance of the head).

More recently, scholars have tied hair behaviour to concepts of social inclusion and exclusion, to group membership and identity (e.g. Hallpike 1969; Derrett 1973; Hildebeitel and Miller 1998; Banks 2000; Sieber and Herreman 2000). Of course, 'hair behaviour' may be all these things and more. It would be futile and misguided to attempt to invoke some form of covering law to identify the cross-cultural significance of hair. However, it may be possible to investigate why it has the significance it does in specific historical contexts. Just what is it about hair that allowed it to generate such overtones and associations? If one aims to progress in this field, it may be possible to go some way to understanding why engagement with hair developed along the particular trajectory evidenced in early medieval Europe.

There are a number of basic principles at play here, which combine to make hair useful in the communication of ideas relating to identity and power.

1. Hair is highly visible, being at eye level
2. Hair is naturally variable in length, thickness, , colour and texture
3. Hair is easily accessible and easily manipulated by the wearer

Although these qualities have resulted in a generalized response to hair, this is manifested through a wide array of social attitudes and behaviours. That is to say that diverse cultures and societies have developed specific principles about the ways in which hair must be worn (or covered) by particular members of the community, or in particular contexts. Thus we see proscriptive rules about the ways that men and women should wear their hair, and the particular manner in which it should be dressed in contexts that are highly socially charged, such as religious worship. Yet to state that hair — and personal display more generally — have to be adjusted according to identity and context is to say nothing more interesting than that societies operate a sort of ‘code of appearance’. Such a claim, though no doubt accurate on some level, has little explanatory power. We are no closer to understanding why Roman commentators used hair as a sort of shorthand for the differences between Rome and *Barbaricum*; why hair was so central to the legitimacy of the Merovingian dynasty; or why grooming equipment was subject to such artistic investment and was so valued. Items such as combs may have been circulated as part of an aristocratic and ecclesiastical gift economy, and were even implicated in eschatological belief. The origins of such associations are unclear, but in the following pages, it is hoped that some of these issues might find their resolution.

## HAIR IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE [1]

Notwithstanding the explanatory shortfalls outlined above, if the anthropology and history of hair tell us anything, it is that a concern with the presentation of hair was not unique to the early medieval period. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which the early medieval situation is distinctive, and it is worth considering it in its own terms. I do not claim that the significance of hair was anomalously strongly felt during this period — we have no barometer by which to measure this — but rather that the significance had particular characteristics during this period which are of especial interest. One such important phenomenon is tonsure (e.g. Venclová 2002), and while this will not be dealt with in detail here, it may be seen as a particular expression of the broader patterns under discussion.

Though the concern herein is with the early medieval period (*c.* AD 410-1066), it is necessary to begin by characterizing the situation in Late Roman Britain and northern Europe, as the complex ‘composite’ combs that are so characteristic of the early medieval period actually make their first appearance in the late third and fourth centuries AD. From the start their social function seems to have been closely articulated with ideas about hair and the production of identity. Of course, the particular identities in question were frequently transformed over the next millennium, in accordance with changing social, ethnic, political and religious points of reference. With this in mind, it is important to situate a concern with hair within its particular setting (in our case early medieval Europe), while simultaneously understanding the context of its long-term development. It is germane to begin with this longer biography.

It is possible to trace concerns with hair and grooming back to the earliest origins of modern humans (Dunbar 1998), and from the Bronze Age we have clear evidence for personal grooming in the form of razors and (less commonly) tweezers, which have been found in both settlement and burial contexts (Piggott 1946; Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 17-24; see also Treherne 1995; Illus. 1).

### **ILLUS 1 HERE**

However, in northern Europe a real concern with personal grooming seems to be most clearly evidenced in the Late Iron Age and Roman periods. The florescence at this point of technologies explicitly linked with care for personal appearance is striking, as is the way in which such material culture itself became part of an apparatus of social display. Thus we see the appearance of ornate toilet sets (Crummy and Eckardt 2003; Eckardt and Crummy 2008), including tweezers and 'nail-cleaners', hair and dress pins (MacGregor 1985, fig. 64; Cool 1990), while mirrors (Joy 2010) and combs (Galloway 1979, 246-8; 1983) are also particularly important (Illus. 2).

### **ILLUS 2 HERE**

It seems that, to a significant extent, Roman identity was grounded in a concern with personal appearance (see Carroll 2012 for a powerful example of this phenomenon), such that the associated paraphernalia became valued social signifiers in themselves. It is interesting to note that this concern parallels the classical representation of 'barbarians' as bearded, unkempt, hirsute and uncivilized outsiders. Of course, that is not to say that personal appearance was unimportant to the peoples of Germanic Europe and beyond, only that this

concern was differently manifested. Indeed, Tacitus reports the connections between hair treatment and rites of passage in his *Germania* (e.g. *Ger.*, 285). Thus, while hair behaviour within Germanic groups was sophisticated and multifaceted, to those uninitiated with its grammar, it was easy to dismiss these unkempt outsiders as some sort of ‘Other’. In short, hair was a multidimensional indicator of social division and group membership (Dutton 2004, 9-12). To the Roman observer, an easy and convenient distinction could be made between the hairy barbarian and the cleanly shorn citizen of Rome, but within ‘barbarian’ communities there were diverse forms of ‘hairiness’, allowing an informed audience to make unconscious judgments referring to gender, age, social status, and group membership.

In Merovingian Frankia, these social roles were rendered in particularly high relief. Here, long hair was an indicator of freedom, of status, and of ethnicity, and historians have long argued about the possible ‘pagan’ or ‘Christian’ origins of this fetish (e.g. Dutton 2004; Goosmann 2012). Herein, we are not concerned with the particular root of its symbolic meaning, but should simply note that this was not a trivial interest. Moreover, it is clear that this concern was not restricted to Merovingian Frankia; such was the seriousness of hair as a social cue in areas further east that its correct treatment was codified in law (*LB*, *passim*).

We have only limited evidence to demonstrate that similar beliefs or social structures were present elsewhere in northern Europe, but there are a few glimpses from the Anglo-Saxon and Viking worlds. Perhaps most significant is the well-documented circulation of combs as gifts. We know that they were important items of exchange amongst the high clergy; Alcuin was particularly effusive about an ivory comb he received as a gift from Archbishop Riculf of Mainz (Sorrell 1996), while Bede writes of a letter from Pope Boniface V to Queen Ethelberga, in which he exhorts her to bring about the conversion of her husband, King

Edwin of Northumbria. Notably, the request is sweetened with the gift of a silver mirror and a comb of gold and ivory (*Hist Ecc.* II. 12).

Furthermore, Andrea Smith (2003) has suggested that many of the highly ornate combs that are characteristic of post-Roman Britain were produced for the purpose of exchange as aristocratic gifts, a system intended to crystallize inter-tribal alliance and allegiance. This seems feasible, given the above references, and the fact that the gifting of combs is a tradition common to many societies (see MacGregor 1985, 82; Endicott 1988, 119-20; Cruse 2007, *passim*). If such items were seen as appropriate gifts in ecclesiastical and aristocratic circles, then this indirectly speaks to the moral and status associations of the practice of personal grooming itself.

Assessing the experience of such grooming later in the early medieval period is more difficult. In the Viking Age in particular, written references to hair are rare. Nonetheless, there are a few relevant passages in chronicles and other records written by Christian and Muslim commentators. Perhaps most famous of these is Ibn Fadlan's account of the Volga Rus, in which he describes – with no little revulsion – their daily toilet:

Every day they must wash their faces and heads and this they do in the dirtiest and filthiest fashion possible to wit, every morning a girl servant brings a great basin of water; she offers this to her master and he washes his hands and face and his hair - he washes it and combs it out with a comb in the water; then he blows his nose and spits into the basin. When he has finished, the servant carries the basin to the next person, who does likewise. She carries the basin thus to all the household in turn, and each blows his nose, spits, and washes his face and hair in it.

Ibn Fadlan, *Risala*, verse 84

This clearly demonstrates the importance of ideals and norms of hair behaviour (as opposed to the appearance of hair in itself) in the creation of group identity. Clearly the communal

grooming that was so central to the Rus way of life, and may have even operated in order to consolidate group identity and social bonds, jarred somewhat with this aristocratic observer from the Abassid caliphate, who saw grooming as a fundamentally personal, even private ritual. Back in western Europe, Alcuin's consideration of the problem — 'Are not these the people whose terror threatens us, yet you want to copy their hair?' — (see Alcuin, *MA*, 131) is hardly any less scathing. Even four centuries later, John of Wallingford bemoans the fact that the Danes' attitude to personal appearance — which included weekly bathing, daily combing of hair, and regular changing of clothes — allowed them to seduce married Englishwomen: even those of noble blood (John of Wallingford, *Chronicle*, 60). Both these references, of course, suggest that what was perceived to be 'Scandinavian' hair behaviour was seen to be not only distinctive, but also effective in its own terms, and in some way threatening. In a more general sense, these glimpses into medieval social mores and concerns provide further evidence that the treatment of hair was not a trivial matter, but rather had significant cultural associations.

Icelandic saga evidence is also of some indirect relevance. Given the distance in time and space between author and events described, it would be unwise to invest too much confidence in these sources, but some general conclusions can be drawn regarding the use of hair and its treatment as a literary device. Hair is a key characteristic in the description of characters, and at times, is referenced in the 'eke' suffix of personal names (Sigurðson 2007). Moreover, it is clear that the characteristics of hair symbolize or reference something otherwise intangible. Long, flowing hair (in both genders) is frequently encountered as an attribute of beauty and virtue, while a white or greying head stands for age (with either frailty or wisdom as its corollaries). At the other end of the spectrum, a lack of facial hair is famously the source of repeated insults in *Njal's Saga* (*Njal*, 74). Moreover, hair was sufficiently important to merit



protection: there are several references to the cleaving and bloodying of hair in warfare, and to the desire to hide it from such attacks (e.g. *Ólhelg* 47 and *Hákgóð* 31).

There is consequently no doubt that both head and facial hair played important roles in the communication of standards of maturity, experience, and masculinity, and it is likely that together they were seen as an extension of the vitality of its wearer, as has been seen in ethnographic accounts (see above). This is, of course, to be expected. But we may go further still; it is possible that head hair not only had symbolic significance as an indicator of life and vitality, but also had particular – perhaps magical – qualities. Thus, in *Njal's Saga*, locks of hair are invested with apotropaic properties (*Njal*, 7-14, 54), and in *The Tale of Audun* from the West Fjords, the perceived connection between personal prosperity and healthy hair is striking (*Audun* 2). Similarly, in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, there is a significant refrain concerning the hair of giants, and in particular, with the symbolic act of its plucking (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gest/ Dan.*, V, VIII, IX.). All these literary citations of hair in reference to magic are suggestive of some level of general cultural apprehension of considerable time-depth. For such references to be effective, the 'power of hair' cannot have been an alien concept to the intended audience (whether or not they actively believed in such associations).

At the very least, if the use of hair as a trope is anything to go on, medieval societies in northern Europe understood that the dressing of hair could be used to signify various social thresholds. Far more than a straightforward statement relating to wealth or status, it stood for everything from political power through to physical strength, from youthful vigour to wisdom and experience, from warrior potency to cultivated beauty. However, while in literature the properties of hair were simply called upon to act as indicators of qualities of character, these

passages suggest that in life particular ‘ways of wearing’ may have been deemed appropriate to certain demographic groups, or certain contexts.

Thus far, we have very briefly discussed Late Roman attitudes to civilized and barbaric identity, the Merovingian use of hair as a marker of royal, elite, free and unfree status (as well as its ostensible references to either biblical (Samson) or heroic ideals), the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with grooming and its associated equipment, and the later Norse literary use of hair as a vehicle for qualities of physical, mental, and moral character. Together, these examples are suggestive of the primacy of hair and grooming across the diverse societies of early medieval northern Europe. In order to test the legitimacy of any such claims, the paper now turns to archaeological and artistic evidence.

There is a range of archaeological sources to consider, from the preserved remains of hair itself, through toilet equipment such as combs, to artistic evidence in which hair and grooming, are given particular prominence. Very occasionally, excavated burials preserve evidence of hair itself; Illus. 2a shows a Roman example, and there are Viking-Age examples from Skopintull, Hovgården (Adelsö parish, Uppland, Sweden; Rydh 1936), and from a tumulus at Efaefsk, Russia, where individual locks are preserved as grave-goods (Sheppard 1904). Of course, taphonomy dictates that such examples are uncommon.

More frequently identified, and arguably more amenable to social analysis, are the hair-related paraphernalia excavated from both settlement contexts and certain forms of early medieval burial. The contextual analysis of this material may hold potential for our understanding of the connection between hair, social structure, and worldview, and in the

following passages, a number of examples from the archaeologies of settlement, burial, and art are explored.

#### PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION: HAIRCOMBS AND 'EVERYDAY LIFE'

It is a commonplace to see objects such as combs reviewed in volumes whose titles refer to 'everyday life' (e.g. MacGregor et al. 1999; Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2011). This is understandable, and it is clear that these *were* objects of everyday experience and use for many early medieval people. However, that is not to say that this outcome was inevitable. The manufacture of composite bone and antler combs was not only a highly skilled task involving specialist tools and particular raw materials, but was also a rather complex and protracted process; experimental archaeology has shown the manufacture of a single comb may have taken a working day or more (see Ashby 2013). Though the finished artefact emerging from this process was a finely crafted, hardwearing piece of equipment, one must ask why it was necessary. Something about the social, political and economic conditions that pertained in northern Europe during the Late Roman and early medieval period not only facilitated the manufacture, popularity, and persistence of this form of artefact, but actually required its innovation in hardwearing bone and antler.

Once developed, the composite comb does seem to have proliferated rather rapidly, to the extent that it is among the most commonly recorded artefacts of the early medieval period. One might argue that this is simply a function of these objects being manufactured in materials that are generally predisposed to good preservation, but this is in itself the indirect result of a conscious technological choice. Moreover, it is clear that their quantities are a result of more than accidents of preservation; combs are found in large numbers in the rural settlements of the early Anglo-Saxon period (e.g. at West Stow: West 1985), but they are also

known from contemporary burial contexts, wherein they are often treated in a manner that differs substantially from other forms of 'utilitarian' object (see below, also Williams 2003). Furthermore, excavations in the emporia and towns of the middle Saxon and Viking periods have revealed evidence of their manufacture, which does seem to have taken place on some scale; 20,000 fragments of waste material are known from the Six Dials site at *Hamwic* (Riddler 2001, 63), almost 17,000 from Ribe (Feveile 2006, 169, pl. 1), and a staggering 340,000 from Hedeby (see Ulbricht 1978, 117-9). None of this could have been predicted on an *a priori* basis; it is rather a result of the particular context in which these developments occurred. In this context, it was clearly important to have a well-made comb that was both a hard-wearing piece of kit and an aesthetically pleasing display piece. The inference is simple: hair mattered in early medieval northern Europe. Why might this have been?

In the fifth and sixth centuries AD, northern Europe was a world in which power structures were in flux. In England, the landscape was characterized by a rather flat hierarchy of dispersed, rural settlements tied into networks of trade, craft, and agricultural production. It appears that grooming equipment such as combs were known and used in the majority of such settlements (e.g. West 1985), though where they were produced is unclear (like many crafted items for this period). Notwithstanding this apparent homogeneity of structure, the diversity apparent in the burial record is certainly suggestive of social differentiation, as is the specialization in craft production.

In this context, one might imagine ornate combs to be a component of a package of portable items indicative of particular wealth and standing. That is not to say that they operated in the same manner, or in the same way as jewellery or weapons, but simply that they did hold significance in terms of status and identity. This must certainly be the case for the ornate,

high-backed (Type 1c, Ashby 2011) combs of the Northern Isles and Irish Sea region, amongst which idiosyncrasy appears to be a characteristic (Illus. 3; e.g. Curle 1982, 22). Such combs must have been made to commission by specialists working for aristocratic estates, and perhaps exchanged as diplomatic gifts or symbols of service (Smith 2000; 2003). We might also consider the implications of comb use in terms of kinship and bonds of fealty (see Ilkjaer 2000, 71-2; see also Ilkjaer 1993, 310-312 for a wider discussion of the cultural affinities of the Iron-Age combs from Illerup Ådal).

### **ILLUS 3 HERE**

As time progressed, and both economy and landscapes of settlement transformed, new markets emerged for the combmaker, together with a new role for the comb. The *wics* and trading sites of the eighth and ninth centuries allowed skilled specialists to undertake focused craftworking on a relatively large scale, to find an accessible market for their wares, and to take advantage of the increasingly networked nature of early medieval society (see Sindbaek 2010). This is the moment at which double-sided combs with differentiated teeth become really important in the south of England, and it has been suggested that the fine gauge with which these combs were equipped may have been a response to the increasing population density at these sites, and the growing problem of lice that was its corollary (Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2011, 137-8). This may have been the case, but it should be noted that single-sided combs remained in vogue at a number of sites across the country, and the coarseness of their teeth would have been of little use in lice control (see Riddler 2004, 147 for a summary characterization of comb diversity across England's *wic* sites). The emporia provided increasing numbers of consumers with access to combs, and may have facilitated an intensification of production for this market, but the significance of the objects themselves

remained largely unchanged: these were items for use in the maintenance of personal appearance.

The urban regeneration that accompanied the Viking Age facilitated further expansion, and just as the tenth century saw the movement of crafts such as textile manufacture into the towns, so it opened up new opportunities for the bone/antler-worker. Though now an urban craft, an articulation with the countryside remained fundamental for the supply of raw materials, and whether this was achieved via personal collection or through controlled or market-driven supply remains unclear. What is clear is that this period saw an expansion in the scale of production, and a diversification in terms of both form and quality. A larger range of objects was produced from the late ninth or tenth centuries, including rudimentary combs of bone and horn, produced no doubt for the less discerning consumer (Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2012). The reason for this is clear: combs, and the grooming culture to which they were both functionally and symbolically fundamental, were now attractive and attainable for a larger component of the demographic. To claim that grooming with finely crafted equipment had become democratized would be to go too far, but it was now a behaviour into which it was possible to buy. Sindbaek (2011) has discussed how Viking-Age towns provided a venue for the acquisition of small, portable items of exotic materials or specialist craftsmanship. The items that were manufactured at these sites, or arrived at them from other posts in the urban network — items such as beads, brooches and necklaces — may have been highly sought-after as gifts, particularly in relation to marriage, and perhaps in association with other rites of passage, or even funerals. It is notable that grooming equipment would have been available at these sites: combs, and possibly decorated tweezers, exclusively so. If consumers were visiting regional markets from some distance, with the aim of acquiring such items, then we might suppose that they played a role in just such exchanges. Grooming sets

played an important role in early Anglo-Saxon funerary ritual (see below), and there is some evidence to suggest that combs were exchanged as diplomatic gifts amongst the clergy and aristocracy, so it seems feasible that they may also have changed hands as marriage gifts. Indeed, in later contexts, the use of combs in courtship is made much more explicit (MacGregor 1985, 82).

This is, of course, simply a possibility that may have pertained in particular contexts. Indeed, I would like to stress the importance of cultural specificity. Such diversity is particularly apparent at the end of our period, when we see the intensification and expansion of comb manufacture in Scandinavia — and particularly in the towns of medieval Norway — but the apparent demise of the craft in England. Indeed, post-conquest England saw a change in the organization of combmaking, and a movement away from composite items of antler, with the comb-maker instead diversifying in materials, producing a larger number of relatively functional and rudimentary objects (MacGregor 1989; 1991). In contrast, the Scottish Northern Isles retained not only their political link with Scandinavia, but also the ornate trappings of Nordic grooming behaviour. Their combs must have been brought in from Scandinavia through travel or trade, as there is as yet no evidence for their manufacture locally, while many were clearly carved in reindeer antler (Ashby 2006; 2014; von Holstein et al. 2014). Some have suggested that these Late Norse combs retained quite specific identity referents (Clarke and Heald 2002), though one does not have to accept this suggestion in order to appreciate that their very importation to the Northern Isles denotes their cultural significance. The same can be said for the export of such objects to the colonies of the North Atlantic, where it has been suggested that local imitations were also made (J. Arneborg pers. comm.). The need for ornate, composite combs of antler and copper-alloy was clearly much less strongly felt in England, though rare examples are known (see Ashby 2006; in press; in

prep.). Furthermore, small numbers of miniature comb pendants, cast in copper-alloy and decorated in Ringerike ornament, and once thought to be a phenomenon unique to the eastern Baltic, are slowly coming to light through the efforts of metal-detectorists and the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Illus. 4; Ashby and Bolton 2010). Such ornate items, which seem to have formed a component of female dress, spoke of the importance of hair behaviour in their northern European homelands, but must have appeared relatively alien in the regions of eastern England in which they seem to have been lost.

#### **ILLUS 4 HERE**

#### DEATH AND GROOMING: HAIR EQUIPMENT IN EARLY MEDIEVAL GRAVES

Although combs are the objects most easily associated with early medieval hair behaviour, there are other finds that must be considered in this light. Shears, for example, were no doubt involved in sheep shearing and textile craft, but some examples could conceivably have had a role in hair-care (Illus. 5). Tweezers and razors were equally important, though their precise uses are not well evidenced. While the treatment of these elements of grooming equipment does not parallel that seen in combs, it nonetheless indicates a particular social investment in hair behaviour, and one which has even older antecedents.

#### **ILLUS 5 HERE**

As briefly alluded to above, specialized grooming equipment is first registered in the archaeological record in the later prehistoric period, with the appearance of Bronze Age razors (see Illus. 1), followed by Iron Age equivalents, together with tweezers and apparently novel items such as cosmetic grinders (see Jackson 2010). However, such items really find



their apogee in the Roman period, where toilet sets (consisting of tweezers, ‘nailcleaners’ and ear spoons) are well known. The period also gave us chatelaine brooches, which often incorporated miniature representations of these forms (see Illus. 2). Such equipment has been well researched in recent years, and it has been shown that Romano-British forms of such material culture differed substantially from their continental equivalents. The concern with personal appearance, and its maintenance using a specialized toolkit is not then a result of Romanization, but rather an insular reaction borne out of a much older native tradition (Crummy and Eckardt 2003; Eckardt and Crummy 2008).

Similar equipment is important in post-Roman Europe, though this should not be seen as a direct continuation of the Roman tradition (though see White 1988, 149; cf. Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 109-113). Rather, from the fifth century onward, Europe sees a florescence of new forms (Illus. 6). It is particularly notable — if unsurprising — that much of our evidence for early Anglo-Saxon equipment has been excavated from burial contexts. Such material has thus allowed some significant work to be undertaken on the gender and demographic associations of particular forms of grooming equipment (e.g. Crummy and Eckardt 2003; Eckardt and Crummy 2008; Stoodley 1999; Williams 2004; 2007), but much remains to be done on the place of such equipment in funerary ritual in itself.

### **ILLUS 6 HERE**

Early Anglo-Saxon burial evidence has allowed an orthodoxy to emerge: that the typical male ‘grooming kit’ consists of an iron razor, a pair of shears of copper-alloy or wrought iron, and sometimes an iron knife. The female kit, conversely, consisted of an ear scoop and one or two long picks or pins, which may have found use in nail-cleaning, skin maintenance, or even tattooing (Williams 2007, 70). Both genders could also incorporate tweezers amongst their

equipment, but it is interesting to note that the male set is concerned with (head or facial) hair, while the female package is dedicated to a more general concern with appearance. We have every reason to suspect that female sets were carried on the person, whether hung from a belt, girdle, or brooch, though not always in a manner that made them easily visible (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 110).

Female toilet sets are not common in early Anglo-Saxon burials, and have been interpreted as status-indicators (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 110), but while this is certainly true, one might ask why these objects were selected for such a role. Male examples are more frequently recorded, but more common than both is the isolated deposition of tweezers. Is this because tweezers were a more attainable invocation of the same ideal? They are often decorated (in ways that echo Roman designs), and miniature 'votive' tweezers are also known. Their use is complex, being found in both inhumations and cremations (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 111), while gender associations are highly variable, being contingent upon local context. The common factor is that they were seen to play some significant role in the funerary context. One may speculate on whether this work was undertaken in the preparation of the cadaver (through depilation, for instance), in the act of deposition itself (through forming a component of a burial tableau), or to be taken on in the next life. It is not possible to state definitively whether tweezers were used in depilation of the head, face, or body, but this in itself is insignificant; they played a role in the preparation and transformation of physical appearance through the work they undertook on hair as an understood category. Nonetheless, the various forms of grooming equipment were employed in a wide range of ways, according to chronology, geography and context. In the following passages, an attempt is made to chart some of this diversity.

Howard Williams has discussed in detail the utility of combs (Williams 2003) and toilet equipment (Williams 2007) in early Anglo-Saxon funerary practice. Williams argues that, rather than the weaponry or jewellery that we see in inhumations, the focus in cremation burial seems to be on objects associated with — or rather devoted to — the preparation and transformation of personal appearance and hair in particular.

Cremation burials may contain toilet sets, tweezers, or combs, and the ways in which these elements are treated are diverse. For example, there are toilet implements in fifty-three of the *c.* three hundred urns from the cemetery at Caistor-by Norwich, including a number of sets consisting of a small iron knife, a pair of iron shears, and tweezers of either copper alloy or iron. These items have been observed both as functional objects and in miniature, suggesting that their role in funerary ritual was significant and well understood (see below; Myres and Green 1973, 104).

Isolated tweezers are also an important find, being most common south of the Humber. They may be made of wrought iron or copper alloy, and though those of the former material are undiagnostic in this regard, those of the latter do occasionally show evidence of burning, indicating a place on the funeral pyre. There is much variation, however: at Cleatham (Lincs.), for instance, fifty-seven pairs of tweezers were identified — in both iron and copper alloy — and none show signs of burning (Leahy 2007, 209).

Combs are another artefact type well known from cremation contexts. Most examples are of the single-sided triangular and barred types (Types 1a and 1b, Ashby 2011), and while these are rarely recovered complete, in many cases they are unburnt; see for example Spong Hill (e.g. Hills 1977) and Sancton (Timby 1993). In some cases, as at Caistor-by-Norwich,

Loveden Hill and Bidford-upon-Avon, as well as Spong Hill (see Williams 2007), functioning combs and toilet implements may be accompanied by miniature variants. Though Williams (2007, 76-7) has pointed out the danger of uncritically applying the label 'miniature' to items whether or not they were capable of physically functioning, it is clear that some examples clearly had a role that was primarily symbolic or mnemonic. This also goes for the broken fragments of combs, which were clearly effective through the power of synecdoche (see below).

The way in which combs more generally were treated shows no obvious patterning. For instance, at some cemeteries, they appear to have been routinely burnt on the pyre (e.g. Lackford; Lethbridge 1951), while at others they were clearly never part of the cremation itself, and only added to the urn after the fact. At Caistor-by-Norwich, some examples were burnt, while others, though accompanied in the grave by other objects from the pyre, were unburnt (Myres and Green 1973, 92). Though McKinley (1994, 90) has argued that an unburned comb does not indicate that it was never on the pyre, the numbers of unburned combs now known (and particularly cemeteries in which few examples show evidence of burning; see Alwalton below) must raise the possibility that in some cases, this is precisely what was happening. Moreover, the idea that these combs were placed in the hair of the deceased (and thus fell from the pyre when the hair burnt) is unsustainable. Combs of this size and form were never intended as hair ornaments, but are rather grooming tools (Gibson 2007, 293).

The patterning is thus complex. In order to illustrate the key trends, and to articulate them with the object worlds in which they operated, it is worth comparing the situations encountered at two well-known sites: the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries excavated at Worthy

Park, Kingsworthy (Hants.), and Minerva Park, Alwalton (Cambs.). The mixed-rite cemetery at Worthy Park was excavated by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes in 1961-2 (Hawkes and Grainger 2003). Amongst an otherwise narrow range of items found in the cinerary urns, combs and iron toilet sets constitute significant finds. However, the key finding here was the presence in a number of these urns of both combs and toilet sets in miniature form (Hawkes and Grainger 2003, 199). Whether interpreted as amulets or objects made for the grave, it is interesting to note that such items could have been used to single out the funerals of particular individuals for special treatment.

At Alwalton, a mixed-rite cemetery excavated by Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust in 1999 (Gibson 2007), it is again the cremations that are of most interest here. A significant number of the cinerary urns contained an unburned fragment of a triangular (type 1a) comb.

Interestingly, these tended to be found in either the top or the bottom of the urn, suggesting that they were placed there either prior to or following the inclusion of the cremated remains. Contrary to the excavator's suggestions (Crummy 2007, 264), such fragmentation is probably not simply a function of prudence or poverty, but is rather a conscious and communal act of synecdoche. Through the breaking up and distribution of parts of the comb, the memory of both the individual and of the moment of their burial could be preserved amongst the community. The use of hair equipment in this way could therefore have served not just to remember the dead, but also to bind together the living (cf. Williams 2006, 79-116).

There was, thus, substantial diversity in the treatment of hair and grooming equipment in Anglo-Saxon cremation ritual, but there is no doubt that its treatment was considered and socially meaningful in different ways for specific communities. Indeed, the use of grooming equipment in funerary practice is yet more diverse, as such items may also be recovered from

inhumation graves. Once again, the situation is characterized by considerable heterogeneity of practice, and toilet equipment is in general much less frequently excavated from inhumation graves than from cremation contexts. There is a chronological and geographical component to this, but even in mixed-rite cemeteries such as Alwalton (Cambs.), such equipment is much more common in cremation graves (see Hills and Lucy 2013: 202-232 for a recent re-evaluation of grave goods in early Anglo-Saxon graves; see also Riddler and Trzaska Nartowski 2013, figure 2.61 for comb chronology). That does not, of course, mean that it played no substantive role in the inhumation rite. Even if an irregular practice, where undertaken, the inclusion of such objects must have had significance.

Combs are known from early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries, particularly in female graves, and where present they are often of the double-sided (Type 12) variety (e.g. Illus. 7a). However, most common are tweezers and toilet sets. These tend to be included as objects worn on the body, rather than as separate interments, though this, of course, does not mean that they are devoid of meaningful content. Toilet sets are rarely associated with children, but are present in the graves of some sub-adults (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 112). Perhaps this relates to a rite of passage of some kind, and grooming paraphernalia were used as symbols of having reached maturity (cf.; Williams 2007; Johnsson 2010).

### **ILLUS 7 HERE**

It is notable that while most toilet items in inhumations are associated with women, tweezers may be found with individuals of both sexes (Stoodley 1999, 31; Williams 2007, 72). Most examples of tweezers are found in positions that are suggestive of suspension from the belt or, less commonly, the neck (a similar situation pertains to toilet sets). Williams (2007, 71)

argues that this is indicative of these objects being easily accessible during life (and therefore presumably receiving regular use), while also acting as visible elements of personal dress (though it has been argued that some examples may have been hidden behind textiles; Walton Rogers 2007, 138).

Clearly this highly variable funerary use of grooming equipment has something to tell us about attitudes to the body and mortality, rather than simply being an informant as to status or social structure. Interestingly, Stoodley (1999, 140) argues that in early Anglo-Saxon England, attention to the body was more significant in the elite female inhumation rite than in the male equivalent. In the former context the cadaver was dressed in the jewellery and accessories of the deceased's friends and family, while weaponry was the key component in the latter. In this regard, it is interesting to remember that female burials are more frequently accompanied by combs than are male inhumations, and we might also note that certain women seem to have been buried with ornaments in their hair. In Grave 18 at Butler's Field, Lechlade (Glos.), for instance, a young adult female appears to have worn beads in her hair, as well as a toilet set around her neck, and counted a comb amongst her other grave-goods (Boyle et al. 1998, 61-2; see also Williams 2011, 250). Similarly, in graves at Abingdon (Oxon., formerly Berks.) and Brighthampton (Oxon.), Meaney (1981, 189-90) has noted the use of pins fitted with copper-alloy 'spangles', which she believes may have previously had a role in hair ornament. The hair of these wealthy individuals at least, was not only groomed but also accessorized, both in life and in death.

Though it is in the two hundred years after the Roman withdrawal from Britain that we see the clearest evidence for meaningful engagement with the apparatus of hair behaviour in the context of mortuary ritual, such equipment does not entirely disappear from the funerary

record with the onset of the seventh century ('Conversion Period'; e.g. Geake 1997, 63-64), and grooming objects continue to play a minor role in the princely burials of this period. For example, the lavishly furnished early seventh-century chamber-in-boat from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo incorporated a number of short knives, a small bowl containing three combs, and seven wooden bottles in a heap of material laid in the burial chamber at the feet of the cadaver (and arguably inside a coffin) (Evison 1979; see also Carver 2005, 190-1, fig. 91). This seems very likely to constitute some sort of elite toilet set. This burial is, of course, exceptional, and such equipment is not commonly found in inhumation contexts from this period. Geake (1997) has argued that the new grave assemblages that appear in the graves of the seventh century relate a sort of *Romanitas*, such that Germanic ideas and references move into the background of the burial performance. It is possible that this change of influence in some way led to the demise of grooming equipment as an effective component of funerary assemblages. The simplicity of these collections, dominated as they were by particular forms of jewellery and dress accessory, left little space for hair equipment. Alternatively, if Williams is correct in suggesting that the power of these objects lay in their ability to transform bodily appearance, thus acting as a metaphor for the ultimate transformation of the body through incineration, then we should not be surprised when such equipment is absent from more sparingly furnished inhumation burials.

Little more can be said about the role of toilet equipment in middle Saxon mortuary practice. Combs are known from a small number of graves (e.g. Hall and Whyman 1996, 127); most notable is the richly furnished late seventh-century tomb of St Cuthbert (Lasko 1956), but such examples are unusual, and this is not a dominant motif (cf. Petitjean 1995). This does not mean, however, that the significance of grooming was lost in the Christian context. This was certainly not the case, as skeuomorphic items of fundamentally symbolic or mnemonic



character attest. For instance, silver toilet implements in the shape of weapons and tools were interred at Kingston (Kent) (Meaney 1981, 149). Nonetheless, it does seem clear that the frameworks of meaning within which grooming operated were subject to some adjustment. Once again, the mutability and flexibility of hair behaviour are key to its understanding.

Indeed, during this period, material from settlement contexts tells us that the maintenance of hair and appearance remained an important and valued behaviour. As well as the combs that are common finds in middle Saxon settlements (see above), other toilet equipment has been identified. Bone and metal pins are common finds, though their function is unclear, and was probably not rigorously or dichotomously defined. From the sixth century onwards, tweezers are known from settlement contexts at sites such as West Stow (West 1981, 60, fig. 238) Shakenoak (Oxon.) (Brodrigg et al. 1972, 69-71), Fishergate and Coppergate (York) (Rogers 1993, 1387; Mainman and Rogers 2000, 2600), and Flixborough (Lincs.) (Rogers 2009). They tend to have expanded, often decorated terminals, suggesting that they played some role in display, whether public or private (Eckardt and Crummy 2008, 112).

In the British Isles, toilet equipment makes a reappearance in the burial record in the early Viking Age. Though other forms of grooming equipment are less frequently recovered, in the furnished graves that characterize the late ninth and early tenth century, combs are an important, if not ever-present component of the burial tableau. The number of Viking-Age furnished graves known from England and Wales is small, but there are c. 130 from northern and western Scotland, and more from Ireland and the Isle of Man. It is worth considering just a few examples.

Nineteenth-century investigations in the dunes near Pierowall, Westray (Orkney), led to the discovery of what may have been one of Viking-Age Scotland's largest cemeteries, though it has taken some considerable effort to reconstruct the topography of the cemetery (Thorsteinsson 1968). A number of graves are of note in that they contain hair combs, but particularly interesting are Graves 4, 12, and 14. These are well-furnished female inhumations, whose goods included several pieces of jewellery, accompanied by pairs of combs carefully positioned with respect to the cadaver. In Scandinavia, it is not uncommon for graves to include multiple combs (in the cemeteries around Birka for instance, thirty-one of the 269 comb-laden graves contained more than one example (Ambrosiani 1981, 24), but within the British Isles this is an unusual situation, and clearly has social significance.

At Scar, Sanday (Orkney), a boat burial contained an adult male, adult female, and juvenile (Owen and Dalland 1999). The bodies were accompanied by goods including weaponry, gaming pieces, textile equipment, a sickle, a whalebone plaque, and a gilded equal-armed brooch. Both adult individuals were accompanied by large, ornate combs of early Viking-Age type, one of which has been placed within the clasped hands of the adult male (Carlsson 1999a; 1999b; Illus. 7b) This context is evocative, as is the fact that its teeth show very few signs of wear. This was clearly another meaningful inclusion in the burial tableau.

Together, these Orcadian burials may be contrasted with a mound burial at Cambois (Northumb.), in which a sparsely furnished cist structure contained two males and a female individual, accompanied only by a comb and disc brooch (Alexander 1987). In such a sparsely accompanied context, the comb does take on significance, whether we see it as a deliberate act of interment or a dress accessory. Finally, we should note a cremation burial from Hesketh-in-the-Forest (Cumbria) (Hodgson 1832). Here, amongst the cremated bone, a

collection of grave-goods (including horse furniture and weaponry) was identified. Many of the artefacts had been either burnt or deliberately damaged prior to deposition, but the comb and its case remained intact and unburnt. Clearly, this single example does not allow us to suggest that in Viking-Age cremation, combs played a role similar to that reviewed above for the early Anglo-Saxon period. This is particularly true, given the large numbers of cremated combs from cemeteries at sites such as Birka; Ambrosiani 1981, *passim*). However, it is possible that the Hesketh burial provides further evidence of grooming implements being singled out for special treatment in the funerary rite. This must be significant.

This broad sweep through the burial evidence of the early medieval period highlights changing currents and trends, but it is important to consider what the various examples have in common. Clearly, care for one's appearance was a valued quality, and one thought worth reproducing in burial. Grooming equipment found a place in the theatre of commemoration either because it was needed to aid in the transformative aspects of the funerary ritual, because it was required for use in the next world, or because it was important that the deceased should be seen as an individual who would have had access to, use of, and appreciation of these technologies. These items therefore speak of much more than gender, and more than status; they mark out the deceased as part of a social group who understood this technology, with all that that implies about their place in the world. In life, these meanings were subtle and understated, but as part of the burial tableau they are thrown into sharp relief. They do not symbolize anything in particular, but rather serve to bring disparate ideas into sharp focus. In this case, the focus is on hair as a technology of self definition: a means by which to separate 'us' from 'them'.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF REPRESENTATION: HAIR AND GROOMING IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ART [1]

As a distinctive characteristic of human appearance, hair is an important theme in early medieval art across diverse media, and it is not possible to do justice to such a corpus here. For instance, anthropomorphic masks, often complete with head and facial hair, are an important motif in Style I and II animal art (e.g. Speake 1980; Haseloff 1981; Hines 1997; Dickinson 2002; Høilund Nielsen 2002; Suzuki 2008). Hair is also something of a motif in certain Scandinavian bracteates, known from the fifth century onward. Here, Hedeager (1999, 153) has argued that in the appearance of a human head whose hair is styled to mimic the crest of a bird, we can see the shamanic flight of the soul. It is also notable that on a bracteate from Trollhätten (Sweden), a striking individual, perhaps the god Tyr, is depicted with strikingly long hair (Hedeager 1999, 154). However interpreted, these images stand as further circumstantial evidence for hair holding associations with power and status, and perhaps even magical or otherworldly power.

However, hair is not the key feature of any of this art, and no attempt is made here to interpret the latter in terms of the former. Nonetheless, there are a number of artistic contexts in which hair genuinely does appear to be a particularly significant and powerful element. Perhaps the most striking of these is in the art of the so-called *Guldgubbar*. These small (1-2 cm long) pieces of hammered gold foil, decorated with single or paired figures, date to the period between the sixth and eighth centuries AD, and are most frequently recovered from long-lived settlement and manorial complexes: the cult sites and central places of Iron-Age Scandinavia. Around three thousand examples are now known from across Scandinavia, though over two thousand of these come from the site of Sorte Muld (Bornholm, Denmark), with a hundred further examples each from Lundeborg (Funen, Denmark) and Uppåkra

(Sweden). They have been interpreted in an explicitly religious context, as ‘temple money’, and as playing a role in certain ceremonies, such as marriage (see Watt 2004, 216-7). The scenes depicted focus on the human figure (though animals are also known), and include both single individuals and facing couples. Herein, their relevance lies in the artistic treatment of hair and its presentation.

The scenes depicted are formulaic, and may feature a couple embracing, or gesturing with their hands. The figures in such scenes are usually dressed in formal clothing, and their various attributes have been subjected to extensive iconographic analysis (e.g. Watt 1999).

The ways in which the hair is represented in *Guldgubbar* are diverse, but the hair of the clothed males depicted tends to be rendered as straight, and of shoulder length. This pattern is clearly observable in the large collections from both Sorte Muld and Uppåkra. However, there are a few examples of probably male figures from Sorte Muld and Bolmsö (Småland, Sweden) who are depicted with extremely long hair (Watt 2004, 201). This is clearly significant and meaningful in some way, and seems likely to be a means of representing political status, as the example from Sorte Muld wears a diadem as a personal attribute, as well as holding the ubiquitous staff (Watt 2004; 2009; Illus. 8a, cf. 8c). Watt relates this association of status and hair length to the Merovingian kings of Francia (cf. Wallace Hadrill 1962, 156-157), and while there is no reason to posit a direct relationship, we might predict resonances in the mechanisms by which kingship and status were represented and reproduced across space.

### **ILLUS 8 HERE**

We should not neglect the representation of female hair in the *Guldgubbar*. The hair of unambiguously female figures tends to be depicted as styled, coiled, or tied, rather than loose,

and is often knotted into a figure-of-eight (e.g. Watt 2004, 202; Illus. 8b). Such a knot may in itself have had significance, given that the motif is depicted in diverse other media (e.g. Gannon 2003, 49), and while the meaning of the reference may be inaccessible to us, the key point here is that such references existed at all. Hair clearly had resonances that invested it with the potential to be used as a powerful symbolic element in the formulae of artistic discourse.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the way in which these ideas are played out in coinage: a medium for which the political exploitation of art is arguably better studied and less problematic (see Gannon 2002; 2003; Blackburn 2007). These ideas have been particularly well studied for the Merovingian and Carolingian kings (e.g. Dutton 2004), but the motifs are equally prevalent in England and Frisia's seventh- and eighth-century *sceatta* coinage (Illus. 9). For instance, on Series Z *sceattas*, a key feature is a facing bust with prominent moustache and forked beard (Gannon 2003, 28-9; Illus. 9a), while the distinctively 'wild' hair of Series X has led to its being referred to as the 'Wodan' type (Gannon 2003:30; Illus. 9b). It is also notable that some of Offa's coinage shows the king with a distinctive curly hairstyle (Illus. 9c), mimicking representations of the biblical King David, which may, in turn, have been a way of imitating Offa's own contemporary, Charlemagne (Gannon 2003, 31-3). These are far from the only depictions of Offa that focus on hair. He was the first Mercian king to employ 'Roman' imperial busts on his coinage, enabling all manner of features to articulate aspects of royal power and authority. These busts are characterized by considerable diversity and elaboration of hairstyle, which was clearly intended to convey political sentiment. Moreover, Gannon (2003, 47) has noted a wider pattern in the early Anglo-Saxon coinage, wherein the designs that feature elaborate hairstyles tend to be the motifs most frequently copied. Some coins even show hair tied back into knots on either side of the head; a style

rarely encountered in other media (Gannon 2003, 50), while the well-known 'porcupine' sceatta design is popularly understood as a debased head, featuring spiky hair and diadem (Illus. 9d). That the bust is reduced to no more than the hair and headwear is significant, and reinforces the connection of the idea of hair with the structures and trappings of power (Gannon 2003, 49).

### **ILLUS 9 HERE**

Such ideas are not restricted to portable artefacts, but are also carried through into fixed and perpetual artistic media, such as sculpture (Illus. 10). Combs are a regularly recurring symbol in Pictish sculpture, where they often accompany the image of the mirror (Foster 1990, 162-165). The meaning of this pairing has been much debated, but is most frequently interpreted in symbolic or linguistic terms. This may be appropriate, but even if so, then the comb acquired its symbolic power from somewhere; the objects themselves were obviously significant in some way. One is tempted to find an explanation in the ways in which real combs were used, and a useful clue comes from another piece of Pictish sculpture, the famous stone from the Brough of Birsay (Illus. 10a). Dating to around the eighth century, at the base of this stone one may discern three figures: a pair of armed individuals clearly following a leader. The latter is marked out by his different attire and, most notably, his distinctive hairstyle. It is too simple to claim that members of different social orders could readily be identified by their hairstyles, but it is possible that, through more subtle means, hair behaviour was already playing a role in the production of elite status.

### **ILLUS 10 HERE**

A similar example comes from Niederdollendorf, in Germany, where a recumbent grave marker, dating to around the seventh century AD, depicts an elite warrior. The figure holds a large seax, but more unusually is combing his hair (Illus. 10b; James 1988, 142-144). This may perhaps be taken simply as an indicator of vanity, but perhaps its reference is more fundamental than that. Is this not an enactment in stone of the relationship we see in so many early medieval (and particularly Viking-Age) graves: the 'weapon burial' with comb? Again, grooming was an indicator of status, and it is interesting that the stone does show the warrior in the act of combing his hair, rather than simply being accompanied by the object itself: it was the practice that was significant in the production of status. Ownership of a comb was an important corollary, and a symbol of that practice, but it was not the comb in itself that was significant (cf. Williams 2003).

A slightly different example is provided by a panel on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, Ireland (Illus. 10c). It has been suggested that this image represents the saints Paul and Anthony, the latter being identifiable by his T-shaped staff (Harbison 1992, 82), but an alternative interpretation is possible. The figure in front is probably a bishop, equipped with a tau cross or crozier, and holding what may be a paten over his chest. The figure behind appears to be robed, and while he holds a book in one hand, his other arm — draped with a maniple — appears to be grasping the hair of the figure in front of him. Given its monastic context, it is possible that this represents an act of tonsure, though it is perhaps more likely that the scene shows two figures in preparation for officiation over mass. This is indicated by the paten for the presentation of the Eucharist, the book (probably a gospel or sacramentary), and the maniple. In such a context it is entirely plausible that the grasping of the head refers to the combing of the celebrant's hair prior to celebrating mass (J. Hawkes pers comm.). This ritual is not referred to in documentary sources before the



thirteenth century, but it has long been suspected that it is in just such a liturgical context that the ornate Romanesque combs of the eleventh and twelfth centuries — and St Cuthbert's much earlier ivory example — should be understood (e.g. Lasko 1956; MacGregor 1985, 78-79). The Clonmacnoise panel therefore makes a different statement to that produced by the Niederdollendorf image of the 'warrior at his toilet', but is not unrelated in broad terms; both privilege the hair as an element of appearance worthy of attention and preparation, and in a context of some solemnity and import.

## CONCLUSIONS: EARLY MEDIEVAL HAIR BEHAVIOUR [1]

It has been shown that hair and hair behaviours hold significance in diverse contexts across space and time; that particular styles held status, ethnic, and gender associations; and that they were seen as more or less appropriate for particular wearers, contexts, or audiences. They provided a key mechanism for distinguishing group members and outsiders. Most of all, however, it has been argued that these properties of hair frequently led to a concern with its grooming, to the extent that the process itself attained significant meaningful content. However, it is still unclear why such a situation ever developed, and, in particular, why it characterized early medieval Europe. What made it so important for the people of first-millennium AD Europe to maintain a well-groomed head of hair?

To the non-elite, the time and resources available to be spent on clothing and grooming would have been limited, but the situation for the aristocracy would of course have been very different. Thus, as a very visual reference to expendable time and resources, it is natural that personal appearance would come to be an important component of public communication in any society. However, of all the ways in which appearance can be transformed, of all the

means by which the body may be adorned, it is interesting to note the particular concern with hair.

The proliferation of hair combs perceptible in the Early Middle Ages is frequently taken as a sign of a growing concern with health and personal hygiene (e.g. Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2011, 137). In some sense that is of course true, but we should not project our own understanding of these concepts back into previous millennia. As has been shown by Shove (2003) and Hielscher (2011) among others (e.g. Ashenburg 2003), understandings and standards of cleanliness and its associations have been constantly transformed over time. So what did it actually mean to be clean, and to be well groomed in the early medieval period?

The first point to note is that the concept of ‘dirt’ is not universal or uniform across cultures. Rather than constituting a natural category, anthropologists, notably Mary Douglas (1966), has famously shown it to be a social construct. Moreover, the primary purpose of this construct is to produce and maintain hierarchies of power. Many of the examples discussed above feature hairstyles being used as markers of social status or belonging; the task now is to consider how these may have developed. The ability to invest in personal cleaning and grooming was contingent upon (1) ‘leisure’ time, and (2) availability of certain paraphernalia (combs etc.) which, given their extended and specialist manufacturing process, must have necessitated a corresponding economic investment on the part of the consumer. The circulation of such equipment may even have been restricted to the aristocracy in some contexts, such that it would consequently have been natural for grooming itself to develop as a pastime of the elite, and a well maintained head of hair to become a marker of good standing. This component of appearance stood apart from other expressions of identity (such as personal adornment), as while dress and jewellery may make voluble expressions about

identity, status, and wealth, expressions that are connected to the physical self are intrinsically more powerful (beliefs about hair, nails, magic and the dead tell us as much). Moreover, ostensible control over this most 'untamed' aspect of personal appearance might have been seen, on some level, as control over nature, and it is easy to understand why such power might be coveted as a quality of status (cf. Pointon 2002, 43). More generally, as a referent to personal hygiene and grooming practices, 'hair and body language' speaks eloquently to perceived status-based differences in moral behaviour and priorities, as well as to more straightforward disparities in available time and resources. Boundaries may have been policed (as in Merovingian Frankia), or may have been relatively flexible, leaving room for aspirational behaviour, but the crossing of boundaries often seems to have elicited comment. Moreover, standards naturally differed between societies, and it is unsurprising that hairstyles came to indicate ethnic distinction or group membership.

Thus hair, as a medium that allowed communication of ethnicity, group membership, gender, and social status, facilitated the production of an unusually complex and nuanced discourse of identity. By reference to the norms of the society in question, it would have been possible to situate an unknown individual as a 'member' or 'outsider' of a group, and to characterize them not just in terms of economic or political standing, but also with regard to various other social categories (aristocracy or clergy; freeman or slave). Marginal groups might also be easily distinguished, whether they be criminals, slaves, foreigners, political outcasts, religious ascetics, the diseased or insane. Even in the Roman world, the realization that hair had this vast potential for communication precipitated its exploitation in new, more considered ways. Thus, hair was appropriated by particular social groups as a medium for social display, even a weapon for political propaganda, and as its corollary, the significance of associated grooming equipment was itself privileged. This is the situation evidenced across early medieval Europe.

Personal grooming had been taken up not just as a benign and banal activity of the everyday, but as a more or less consciously political act, which not only rendered visible social difference within a given social context, but which actively produced, reproduced, and undermined such distinctions. Following its appropriation by the elite, and prior to the opening up of the urban market in the tenth century, this concern was communicated through investment in a technologically and aesthetically complex toolkit. Grooming items are thus more than simply the remains of banal everyday activities, but rather were active players in the construction and maintenance of social boundaries: agents in a discourse of social and economic status.

A concern with hair and its appearance has been a fundamental in well-documented past societies, and no doubt had a very early genesis. However, its ‘meanings’ are both diverse and flexible, such that no generalized understanding is attainable. Rather, hair’s position as a highly visible, highly malleable medium for discourse gives it a particular agency: an agency expressed differently in different contexts, and to deal with hair is to become enmeshed in a complex negotiation between practical skill and cultural knowledge. We need to incorporate an appreciation of this complexity into our studies of the early medieval period and beyond. Without it, the apparently elevated significance assigned to objects as superficially utilitarian as haircombs and razors will forever remain alien and inexplicable.

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## CAPTIONS

Illus.1

Bronze-Age razors from North Yorkshire (Photograph York Museums Trust)

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Illus. 2

Romano-British Hair and Grooming Equipment

(a) Preserved Hair from Railway Station excavations, York (Photograph York Museums Trust)

(b) Tweezers and Nail Cleaner from York (Photograph York Museums Trust)

(c) Hair and Dress Pins from York (Photograph York Museums Trust)



(d) A Type 10 Comb from Wellington Row, York (Drawing, H. Saul)

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Illus. 3

A Type 1c 'High-Backed' Comb from the Brough of Birsay, Orkney (Drawing by H. Saul)

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Illus. 4

A Copper-Alloy Comb Pendant from South Lincolnshire (Drawing by Pat Walsh,  
Northamptonshire Archaeology)

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Illus. 5

Shears from Anglo-Scandinavian levels at Parliament Street, York (Photograph courtesy  
York Museums Trust)

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Illus. 6.

Early Anglo-Saxon Toilet Equipment

(a) Male Grooming Kit (Razor, shears, and tweezers) from Spong Hill, Grave 2927 (Drawing  
by H. Saul, after Williams 2007, fig 7 (4))

(b) Type 1a Comb from Wellington Row, York (Drawing by H. Saul)

(c) Miniature Comb and Toilet Equipment from Worthy Park, burial 23 (Drawing by H. Saul,  
after Williams 2007, Figure 8 (3))

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Illus. 7

Anglo-Saxon and Viking-Age Combs

- (a) Type 12 comb from an Early Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Grave at Uncleby, Yorkshire  
(Photograph courtesy York Museums Trust)
  - (b) Type 5 comb from the male burial at Scar, Sanday, Orkney (Photograph S. Ashby,  
courtesy Orkney Museum)
  - (c) ‘Semi-double’ comb from York (Photograph courtesy York Museums Trust)
  - (d) Comb case from York (Photograph courtesy York Museums Trust)
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#### Illus. 8

##### Representations of hair in *Gullgubar*

- (a) A high-status male figure, with unusually long hair (Drawing by E. Koch, from Watt  
1999, fig 4a)
  - (b) A female figure, with tied hair (Drawing by E. Koch, from Watt 1999, fig 4a Watt 1999,  
fig 4b)
  - (c) A typical male figure with should-length hair (Drawing by E. Koch, from Watt 1999, fig  
4a Watt 1999, fig 4e)
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#### Illus. 9 Representations of hair in early medieval coinage

- (a) Series Z, Type 66 silver penny, showing facing bust with elaborate moustache and forked  
beard (Image courtesy Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)
- (b) Type 30 silver penny, with ‘Woden’ bust featuring ‘wild’ hair (Image courtesy Fitzwilliam  
Museum, Cambridge)
- (c) A Penny of Offa, featuring curly hair after King David (Image courtesy Fitzwilliam  
Museum, Cambridge)

(d) Series E 'Porcupine' coinage, showing debased hair and diadem motif (Image courtesy Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

Illus. 10

#### Representations of Hair and Grooming in Sculpture

- (a) The Brough of Birsay Stone, Orkney, showing three figures, the leader marked out with distinctive curly hair( Drawing by H. Saul)
  - (b) The Niederdollendorf Stone, depicting a 'warrior at his toilet' (Drawing by H. Saul)
  - (c) A Panel from the Cross of the Scripture, Clonmacnoise, arguably showing preparations for the celebration of mass (Photograph by D. Petts)
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