

Ancient Roman hairdressing: on (hair)pins and needles

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Introduction

The reconstruction of ancient hairdressing techniques might seem a simple task, but it is not. There are few surviving ancient sources that even mention the act of hairdressing, let alone describe its mechanics.¹ Like all body-related services in Rome, hairdressing was a low-status trade performed by slaves and former slaves. It is probable that Roman hairdressers learned their craft by watching, listening, and doing, rather than by reading. Despite the difficulties, some modern scholars have taken an interest in the study of ancient hairdressing, even if they tend to focus on its final result — the hairstyle² — rather than the physical ‘how-to’ necessary to re-create ancient hairstyles with period-appropriate equipment on real hair. Since the 1980s, however, interest in the technical aspects of Roman hairdressing has grown. E. Bartman has asserted, correctly, that most Roman hairstyles can be arranged using the wearer’s own hair instead of needing a wig, while P. Virgili and M. Maunsperger have written extensively on the history of Roman hairstyles and hairdressing.³

Yet virtually all commentators demonstrate modern technological biases that lead to anachronistic speculation: in both looking at images and interpreting literary passages, they assume that the Romans used the same hairdressing technologies as do moderns.⁴ In addition, not being hairdressers, they fail to understand the technical possibilities of the tools that the Romans did have at their disposal. I will analyze the physical capabilities of the single prong hair-pin in order to show the impossibility of its application in many contexts. As an alternative I will propose sewing needles, arguing that, as Roman women of the 1st c. A.D. abandoned *vitta*-based coiffures in favor of more elaborate fashions,⁵ they used needles (artifacts well attested in antiquity) invisibly to stitch together the style’s various components. To demonstrate my thesis, I will re-create a number of the best known and most complicated Roman coiffures on real hair using needle-and-thread. I will also examine some of the more problema-

1 Isid., *Etym.* 10.5.7, 11.1.31, 19.31.8, 19.31.9, 20.13.4; Juv., *Sat.* 6.490-94; Mart. 2.14, 2.66, 6.52, 7.83, 8.52, 9.37, 11.84, 14.24, 14.36; Ov., *Am.* 1.14, *Ars. Am.* 3.133-55, 3.168, 3.225-30, 3.239-46, *Rem. Am.* 379; Quint., *Inst.* 2.5.12; Sen., *De. Brev. Vit.* 12.3; Tert., *De cult. fem.* 7.2

2 For many, the hairstyle serves as a means of supporting (or challenging) portrait identification, of chronicling the styles of a particular period, or of illustrating particular social phenomena such as wig wearing.

3 E. Bartman, “Hair and the artifice of Roman female adornment,” *AJA* 105 (2001) 1-26; M. Maunsperger, *Frisurenkunst und Kunstfrisur: die Haar-mode der römischen Kaiserinnen von Livia bis Sabina* (Bonn 1998); P. Virgili, *Acconciature e maquillage* (Rome 1989). See also now a 7-minute video, made by E. Bartman and B. Bergmann, of a contemporary hairdresser creating Faustina the Elder’s hairstyle at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jpwGG37y2I>.

4 For example, Bartman (*ibid.*) uses 20th-c. technical terminology to explain curl phenomena that can occur naturally: e.g. “fingerwaves” and “pin curls” (14, 18, 19 and 9-11, 18, respectively). She also presumes the use of hair extensions/“extender tresses” (1), “hairpins” (3), “bleach” and “gel” (5), but all these terms imply a distinctly modern technical framework and can be misleading. Virgili (*ibid.* 35) presumes the existence of “*forcine in metallo*” (J-shaped wire hair-pins), Maunsperger (*ibid.* 24-25, 60, 94) the kind of 19th-c. papillote curls which required tissue paper. The process depicted in the YouTube video utilizes bobby pins and steel pin-curl clips and does not clarify that Roman “metal and ivory pins” were not designed in the same way as modern bobby pins.

5 Cf. Isid., *Etym.* 19.30.4, 19.31.6; Ov., *Am.* 3.6.55, *Ars. Am.* 1.31, *Met.* 1.477, *Pont.* 3.3.51, *Rem. Am.* 386; Pl., *Mil.* 792; Prop. 4.11.34; Tib. 1.6.67; Val. Max. 5.2.1; Verg., *Aen.* 7.403. *Vittae* were linen or woollen ribbons used to tie the hair together when arranging it. *Vittae* can be seen in Etruscan sculpture and the Hellenistic art of S Italy. I speculate that the transition from *vittae* to hair-sewing began sometime around 50 B.C. The wide dissemination of the *nodus* hairstyle (epitomized by Livia) was probably most influential in promoting hair-sewing techniques. After this transition, the use of *vittae* became primarily associated with ceremonial (bridal) and hieratic (Vestal) hairdressing.