Ancient Roman hairdressing: on (hair)pins and needles

Janet Stephens

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 art of hairdressing, let alone describe its mechanics. 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 hairstyle — 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. Mannsperger have written extensively on the history of Roman hairstyles and hairdressing.  

Yet virtually all commentators demonstrate modern technological biases that lead to anachronistic speculations: in both looking at images and interpreting literary passages, they assume that the Romans used the same hairdressing technologies as do moderns. 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 pila-based coiffures in favor of more elaborate fashions, 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 problematic...