A Cultural History of Combs in Medieval England, c. 400-1400 AD

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Short Abstract

Combs are one of the most common objects found in medieval England, yet their presence, use and meaning has been under-interrogated. This thesis uses combs to understand more about medieval ritual behaviour, and how they forge connections between people, re-centering them as valuable and vibrant historical sources.

Given the relative consistency in style and form, combs are uniquely able to provide a spyhole into the past, one that stretches across large time scales. For this reason, this thesis uses combs over a thousand-year period to understand how their use changed in relation to medieval rituals. The thesis is divided chronologically, into three chapters which cover 400-699 AD, 700-1099 AD, and 1100-1400 AD. Within these divisions they examine the combs thematically, exploring how combs were used in relation to *Life*, covering daily life and life transitions, *Death* and their role in death rituals, and *Worship*, seeking to understand how combs were used in the liturgy and other Christian rites.

This work of cultural history brings together a wide range of sources, making the most of the opportunities an uneven evidence base affords. Combs, letters, liturgical books, stories, etiquette manuals and manuscript illuminations are assessed in order to understand how these objects can help us understand medieval rituals.

Combs are both quotidian and sacred, but by only focusing on the materially distinct, luxury combs, or the everyday, bone or antler examples, we are unable to understand their full use. This thesis reveals the value of studying the most everyday of objects alongside their elaborate counterparts, and how it is the very things that characterise their daily use that also lend power to their presence in more heightened ritual contexts.

Long Abstract

Combs were owned by everyone in medieval society. They were made from materials that would have been readily available: bone, antler, horn or wood. But there were some combs that were different, carved from elephant ivory, mended with silver and gold, or encrusted with gems. This thesis questions why some combs were so unique while others were not, and what this might have meant for their use c. 400-1400 AD. It uses a wide evidence base to understand the full range of affordances of medieval combs. Combs are particularly able to support a longue durée approach, as they broadly look similar whenever they were made, and trends or changes in their design are long-lasting. This means that combs in the fifth and combs in the fifteenth century bear some resemblance to each other, and as a result, their meanings, uses and symbolism are able to be compared and contrasted. Because the thesis stretches over a thousand years, its geographic scope is narrower. There are some comparisons to combs from Ireland, Wales or the continent, but the focus is on English combs c. 400-1400 AD. Fundamentally, it is a work of cultural history, that uses combs as the material lens through which to understand how medieval people connected to each other.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, which are separated chronologically. Within these chronological boundaries, the evidence is arranged thematically. How combs were considered in relation to daily life is examined in *Life*, how they were used in relation to dying and death rituals in *Death*, and finally, how they were thought of in relation to the medieval church is explored in each section on *Worship*. The first chapter looks at the period c. 400-699 AD, and so there is not a section on *Worship*. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the main evidence base for this period comes from grave goods, which are studied in depth in the section on *Death*. Secondly, this period encompasses the conversion to Christianity, and so not all rites explored were Christian in nature.

Chapter One starts by exploring combs in relation to daily life, using small numbers of combs found disposed of in domestic contexts, in excavated settlements. In 625 AD, Bede records a comb given to the Queen of Northumberland, Ethelburga, by the Pope. This evidence demonstrates that by the seventh century at least, combs were being considered both quotidian and special. In the absence of much more evidence, I then consider the wider environments in which people combed their hair. Small buildings suggest that privacy was hard to come by, but as hair veiling was a practice in this period, it

is possible that the times when people combed their hair, rather than the environments, were restricted.

As a result of a much larger evidence base, the second section of chapter one is longer than the first. Despite being chronologically overlapping rites, combs are treated differently in early medieval cremations and inhumations, and so they are considered separately. They are the most common object found in cremation urns, whereas in inhumations they are rarer, with only thirty-eight inhumed combs being considered, compared to over 800 ones from cremation cemeteries.

Combs are found equally across male and female cremations. Whether the comb was burnt or broken, and where the comb was found in the cremation urn, are studied to understand how they were used in the rite. Because combs were so frequently broken, and occasionally burned, I suggest that they take on a proxy form for the deceased, mirroring the destruction of the body. The presence of small numbers of unusable dummy combs shows the form and symbolism of the comb was most important to the rite.

In contrast, combs in inhumations are rare. Despite few well-dated examples, combs are overwhelmingly associated with female inhumations. They are found broadly in graves alongside other goods that indicate a ritual specialism. This suggests that combs might have been a grave good that served to demonstrate the status of the deceased. Considering the intimate associations of combs in life, I also argue that when combs do appear in male graves, they were gifts presented at the grave side, so that the living could benefit from a shared association with the dead. I also argue that Cuthbert's comb shows that combs in inhumations could be Christian objects within a seventh-century context.

Chapter Two is divided into three sections, c. 700-1099 AD. The evidence for this chronological section shifts. In *Life*, manuscript illuminations and stories make it easier to understand how people covered their hair. Higher numbers of waste from comb-production sites show an increase in comb ownership. In this period, loose, uncovered hair became explicitly associated with the sexual availability and vulnerability of women, as well as demonstrating wildness for both men and women. Combs would also have been tools involved in administering medicine and caring for the sick. One remedy in the *Medicina de Quadripedibus* demonstrates that, in addition to being tools, they could be active ingredients as well, a possible continuation from their pre-Christian ritual associations.

Comb numbers in graves decrease dramatically from the eighth century onwards. The few remaining examples are assessed in *Death*. Five combs are found in later graves, and all are discovered in ecclesiastical contexts. Four combs under the church floor at Ripon are thought to have been buried with priests, whereas one comb, buried with a woman in the doorway of a chapel in Heysham, also suggests that women continued to be in positions of status, and combs might have continued to be symbols of this. Finally, the first evidence of a comb being handed down in a bishop's will is found. Sigeward's will, 1062 AD, is written evidence of combs being passed from an individual into church ownership.

In *Worship*, I examine where the use of 'liturgical combs' (first named in the Victorian era), might have originated from, and whether this is an accurate label. The first example of them in a vesting prayer, in the *Sacramentary of Ratoldus*, is found in the tenth century. However, this was only one way combs could be powerful objects in relation to the church. Combs became relics, were engraved with charms, used as decorations, and possessed by multiple people, collating meanings over their long lives. The comb said to belong to Charles the Bald, and found in Pavia cathedral, is an earlier example of what was demonstrated by Sigeward's will – that combs were given to ecclesiastical establishments, but after they had been owned by an individual of a certain status.

The last chapter focuses on the period c. 1100-1400 AD. By this point, horn is the predominant material everyday combs are made from, and because it is so unstable, few examples survive. In contrast, there are more references to combs in stories and sources, including household accounts and books of manners, so a greater understanding of how combs were used in daily life can be appreciated. Combs become even more strongly associated with women, building on their earlier connections between sexuality and intimacy, and they are listed as betrothal gifts in contemporary romance manuals. While previously elaborate ivory combs have been considered ecclesiastical, in this period these kinds of combs are also made for lay individuals.

Combs are present, though in low numbers, in wills in this period. I examine five instances, though there are no clear reasons to their sporadic appearances. There is one instance of a comb described as a relic, indicating that this practice continued, however the others appear to have been kept with items associated with dressing. I suggest it is because of how personal they were, that they were not considered appropriate objects to hand down.

The final section explores combs in relation to the later medieval church, c. 1100-1400 AD. I first consider the four ivory 'liturgical' combs that were either made, or purchased, in England. These combs appear to be designed to commemorate either a battle or scenes from the Bible, suggesting a use that has not been recorded in writing. The majority of the evidence is found in manuscripts. Combs continue to be found in vesting prayers. Their mentions are sparse but consistent with *Ratoldus*, suggesting the reason they were little-recorded was because they were so ubiquitous. Treasury lists are then studied. Ivory combs are listed in some churches and cathedrals, though they were not essential apparatus. Some are mentioned by their association with a person, for instance the comb-gift from Henry III. Most, however, are recorded without attribution. This is a change in the way liturgical combs were considered. In earlier centuries their use derived predominantly from personal associations, but by the end of the medieval period they become, I argue, objects that were considered communally within the church.

Over a thousand years of history, combs appear to have been ritually significant in remarkably consistent ways, even if the immediate contexts in which they were used differed. I suggest that it is *because* of the way they were used as everyday objects, that they became valuable in various rites. Their associations, of intimacy, order, and transitions, that sprung from their use to comb and control hair, were what made them so useful. This thesis demonstrates the value of studying everyday objects. By only focusing on the elite, ivory examples, we miss how connected they were to people's daily lives. Instead, by looking at what might at first be a mundane object, we are provided with a way to understand some of the shared ideas and practices that connected people within society, and over a thousand years.

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For Grandpa. Thank you.

Introduction

Combs were ordinary medieval objects. Nearly everyone had one. And yet, some combs, carved from ivory, encrusted with gems, with painted surfaces and extraordinary dimensions, were intentionally crafted to look special, or be found in special contexts. Why were some combs different, and what did this mean for the people who owned, held or made them? This thesis uses combs as a way to interpret connections between medieval people, offering a cultural history through a specific material lens.

One of the main reasons material culture is so insightful, is because it connects us with the past, and connects people in the past with their and others' bodies, and these bodies with the wider material realm. Combs are one of the few objects consistently present across the entire medieval period, from c. 400-1400 AD. Their ubiquity makes them especially useful as a type of object to examine – we can use them not just to study the behaviour of the elites, but also the vast majority of people who lived during this time. They provide us with an infrastructure through which we can understand a broad range of connections between people, things and their communities. And their consistent appearance across a thousand years ensures they are especially suited to look at long-term changes in those connections, to understand everyday attitudes towards connections and community, that other types of sources are not. Medieval combs are an especially useful spyhole into the past.[1]

Inspired by recent works by Maureen Miller, who used clerical clothing to understand relationships between medieval people,[2] and John Blair's work on early fonts

[1] Chris Wickham describes clues the historian follows and uses to construct the past as 'spyholes through which we could look to pinpoint elements of a social reality.' Chris Wickham, "Problems in Doing Comparative History," in *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: the legacy of Timothy Reuter,* ed. Patricia Skinner (Brepols, 2009), 12.
[2] Maureen Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: virtue and power in medieval Europe c. 800-1200* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

which were, he argued, likely buckets or other household objects,[3] I was first looking for a body of objects to work with to help shed light on how liturgical rituals were experienced. The experience itself was the most interesting part to me – what did it feel, sound, or look like to be involved in these types of rites? I became intrigued by what were described in museum collections as liturgical combs, as they seemed a pre-packaged such body of objects. These tended to be ornate, ivory combs often decorated with Biblical imagery, which nineteenth-century historians of the liturgy, such as Henry John Feasey and William Maskell, had already labelled as liturgical, suggesting that they were used in the consecration of bishops, though the evidence for this is predominantly found at the very end of the medieval period.[4] After 150 years of scholarship, and very different approaches to material culture,[5] it seemed the ideal time to reanimate and more fully interrogate what these combs were, and to appreciate the breadth of what they could tell us about the medieval past. While 'what a liturgical comb was', remained one of the conceptualising questions of this thesis, the more I studied them, the more it became clear that these new approaches would help inform a wider study of an oft-overlooked object. Rather than work backwards from this question, this thesis instead works forwards from the fifth century to create a holistic cultural history, and not a single-issue explanation.

Howard Williams' work on combs in cremations in the early medieval cemetery at Spong Hill, where combs were frequently deposited in the urns as part of the funerary rite, was another turning point.[6] Although a demonstrably pagan rite,[7] that on the surface

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[3] John Blair, "The prehistory of English fonts," in *Intersections: The Archaeology and History of Christianity in England, 400-1200: Papers in Honour of Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle,* eds. Martin Henig and Nigel Ramsay (BAR Publishing, 2010), 149-79.

[4] This evidence is explored in detail in Chapter 3.3: *Worship*. Henry John Feasey, "The Use of the Comb in Church Ceremonies," *The Antiquary*, 32 (1896): 312–16; William Maskell, *A Description of the Ivories, Ancient & Medieval, in the South Kensington Museum* (Chapman & Hall, 1872), lx-lxiv.

[5] For a general starting point to the changes in approaches to material culture, see Christopher Tilley, ed. *The Handbook of Material Culture* (SAGE Publications, 2006).

[6] Howard Williams, "Material Culture as Memory: Combs and Cremation in Early Medieval Britain," *Early Medieval Europe*, 12, no. 2 (2003): 89–128.

[7] Christopher Scull has argued that due to its destructive nature, cremation is 'not compatible' with Christianity. Christopher Scull, "Chronology, Burial and Conversion: the case of England in the Seventh

appeared to have no relation at all to the so-called liturgical comb which may have emerged over 500 years later, this was the second time I had encountered combs as central to a heightened ritual moment. While the societies they were used in were almost entirely alien to each other, it was still interesting to consider whether there was something about combs as objects that had appeal for both groups of people, and I could find no comparable analysis that considered rituals through their material residues, over the longue durée. Every further question seemed to expand the scope of the project – if meanings of material culture are based in the contexts in which they are being used, it seemed vital to understand combs not just in terms of how they might have been used in liturgical rites, but within society more broadly. This opens a much wider set of research questions. Examining how people used combs, what combs meant to them, and whether these meanings changed over time, is required to understand how combs were used, and thought of, in the medieval period, which in turn informs why they were considered useful ritual tools in the first place. In order to properly assess this set of questions, an approach that used a wide range of sources was essential.

This thesis is a work of interdisciplinary cultural history which studies combs across a thousand-year period. The combs studied were made nearly exclusively in England, with some exceptions included in order to make comparisons to practices on the continent, Wales and Ireland. The evidence is regionally patchy, which is predominantly a result of the spread of what objects survived and in what contexts. Because it is a work of cultural history, it does not provide, or produce, a typology of combs, or a catalogue. It does not look at all combs in England from this period, or question in depth how combs were made, or why they looked the way they did. This thesis is much more concerned with what they meant to people, and what this might then, in turn, mean for our understanding of medieval life.

Century," in *Dying Gods: Religious Belief in Northern and Eastern Europe at the time of Christianisation,* eds. Vera Brieske and Christiane Ruhmann (Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2015), 78.

It is also a comparative study, though the comparative scope of the project stretches across time rather than space. This long temporal scope is a result of wanting to answer that central question, and realising that in order to do so I needed to look both backwards and forwards. The choice of starting c. 400 AD and ending c. 1400 AD is in many ways artificial. This could easily extend in either direction – people in the Roman period had interesting relationships with hair combing, and hairstyles had gone through a dramatic shift in the period immediately preceding this thesis.[8] At the other end, the more elaborate fashions emerging after the fifteenth century would also be an interesting point of comparison. The choice of starting c. 400 was made due to the presence of combs in cremation urns, which was not typical in the Roman period in Britain, and so is an interesting place to begin. The end of the fifteenth century is generally accepted to be the end of the 'medieval' period. As many combs by that point become artistically similar, it made sense to conclude along pre-established lines of periodisation. In response to the long temporal scope, the geographical scope is much narrower. Its focus is primarily on combs made, or used, in England.

As objects, combs change little in their construction and their style, which means that the long timescale was also necessary in order to assess change. Material cultural forms, generally, as Gosden has pointed out, tend to be long lasting,[9] and this is especially true for combs, which are recognisable as combs, no matter when they were made. Those from before the thesis' temporal boundaries – late Roman combs – are mainly double-sided composite combs, meaning they are made from several pieces of material often riveted together with iron or sometimes copper.[10] Composite combs continued to be popular up until the later medieval period, though there are a few combs made from a single piece of

[8] The dramatic reduction in hair pins, well before 410 A.D., has been used as evidence to argue for a change in hair-styling practices from the fourth century onwards, as desires for elaborate, Roman hairstyles were replaced by something simpler. H E M Cool, "The parts left over: material culture into the fifth century," in *The Late Roman Transition in the North: Papers from the Roman Archaeology Conference, Durham 1999,* eds. Tony Wilmott and Pete Wilson (BAR Publishing, 2000), 48.
[9] Chris Gosden, "What do objects want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12.3 (2005): 197.
[10] Arthur MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn: The Technology of Skeletal Materials since the Roman Period* (Routledge, 1985), 73.

raw material. The popularity of composite combs is generally because this enables the combs to be larger, whereas if they are made from one piece of material, they are limited to the size of the raw material, especially as the teeth have to be cut in the direction of the grain.[11] Single-sided combs could take several forms. Most unusual and short-lived was the triangular comb, which does not continue beyond the sixth century, though they do appear to be the design base for later forms.[12] These combs had a widespread distribution across the North Sea basin in the later fourth and fifth centuries.[13] Their decorations include ring-and-dot motifs and incised lines, and they are well sized to be held in one hand (e.g. London, British Museum, OA 4952). Rectangular, single-sided combs were also in use throughout the medieval period, and have been summarised by Steve Ashby.[14] Though Ashby's work generally focuses on Viking combs, the typology extends both before 700 AD and up until 1400 AD, making it useful for this thesis.[15] Double-sided combs are the other basic type of comb – these can be more 'upright', like the H-shaped comb that Cuthbert was buried with, with an appearance that is later mirrored in the Carolingian ivory combs made in France (e.g. London, V&A Museum, A.544-1910). Or they can be more elongated. These are usually highly decorated, with the space on the central panel capitalised to share scenes of courtly romance (e.g. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, WA1947.191.222), Biblical tales (e.g. London, V&A Museum, A.27-1977), or commemorative moments (e.g. New York, Metropolitan Museum, 1988.279). These, when made from ivory, tend to be more common in the later medieval period. Despite various choices as to single or double-sided combs (there are small-scale regional fluctuations), generally trends in comb designs span hundreds of years.

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[11]MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn,* 73.
[12] Steven P. Ashby, "Time, Trade and Identity: Bone and Antler Combs in Northern Britain c. AD 700-1400," (Unpublished, PhD diss. University of York, 2006), 42.
[13] John Hunter, with Julie M Bond and Andrea N Smith*, Investigations in Sanday, Orkney Vol 1: Excavations at Pool, Sanday* (Oxbow Books: 2007), 464.
[14] Steven P. Ashby, *A Typological Guide for the Spot-Identification of Medieval Bone/Antler Combs from the British Isles and Northern Europe,* Unpublished Datasheet of the ICAZ Worked Bone Research Group, (2010) http://www.wbrg.net.
[15] For instance, Steven P. Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life: Combs and Communities in Early Medieval Britain* (Amberley Publishing, 2014).

Even the most short-lived comb style, the triangular comb, still was in use across the fifth and sixth centuries.[16] A study of medieval combs associated with ritual over a shorter period would therefore be more difficult, as any differences suggested by a change in their design would not be included with narrower timelines.

Combs can be made in a range of ways, though the most common is the composite version that has been mentioned above. These are predominantly made from bone or antler, and the comb-maker would have been a skilled craftsperson, though it is unlikely they only made combs, but rather specialised in their raw material.[17] Combs made from a single piece of material, like Cuthbert's comb (Fig. 1.18), were limited in size to the raw material, which can be especially restricting as the teeth must be carved with the grain.[18] In contrast, composite combs can be, as their name suggests, made up from multiple different pieces of raw material, which when assembled allows them to be larger.

Making a comb was a multi-step process that took several days.[19] For an antler comb, the antlers would have been gathered as they were shed, resulting in a seasonal rhythm to the production of combs. The raw material was split in half, and half again. Antler has a hard outer shell and a spongy inner material. When both are removed it reveals a smooth, hard surface. This is filed down into long and narrow slices, matched up together to make either side of the comb handle. The teeth of the comb were made from more of this central plate, but cut down into smaller rectangular pieces that were slotted in between the longer handles. Small holes were drilled into these layers, and iron rivets inserted and secured.[20] The silhouette of the comb was then finished. Teeth were sawn in using a very sharp saw,

[16] Steven P. Ashby, *An Atlas of Medieval Combs from Northern Europe*, Internet Archaeology 30, 2011. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.30.3.
[17] Much has been written on the debate over what kind of production model medieval comb-makers were part of, whether they were itinerant craftspeople or more static within communities. For the most up to date summary, see Ashby's PhD introduction, Ashby, "Time, trade and identity,"32-36. See also Macgregor *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn,* 44-54, for an analysis which includes horn-working.
[18] MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn,* 73-4.
[19] Personal correspondence, Adam Parsons, Blueaxe Reproductions, 26 January 2023.
[20] Ashby, *Viking Way of Life,* 55.

filing down until they were smooth. The teeth plates would have had to be inserted very specifically, filed down to match in thickness and also so they were laying parallel to one another.[21] Decoration was added with a scribing tool – ring and dots were popular motifs, as were decorative hatchings and line work. The comb was then polished, and considered ready.[22] Most composite combs constructed from other material, including those made from bone and wood, were made in a similar process, and involved multiple rounds of sanding, polishing, and drilling.[23] The production of any comb was fiddly, and required skill and familiarity with the raw material.

Double-sided combs had the benefit of having two sets of teeth, which were often spaced differently – this makes detangling a range of knots more effective. Wide-set teeth are useful for bigger knots, whereas finer teeth are used at the end of the brushing process when most knots were removed, or only particularly dense knots remain. These are distinct from combs which have an extremely fine set of teeth on one side, which would have been more useful for the removal of lice.[24] Not all combs were double sided however, and the existence of many single-sided combs with wider-set teeth also suggest that removing lice was not the primary function of all hair combing. Instead, the appearance of the hair, as Ashby suggests for the Vikings particularly, was the predominant concern.[25] The *Trotula*, the twelfth-century text written in Salerno, and one of the only manuscripts we have dedicated solely to women's health, also contains two remedies for the treatment of lice but

[21] MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn,* 74.
[22] Ashby, *Viking Way of Life,* 55.
[23] For a detailed breakdown of the different material qualities between antler and bone, see Chapter 2 of MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn,* 23-30.
[24] Archaeological evidence for remains of lice on comb teeth does not exist in Britain. Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life,* 100. However, this is partly a result of preservation conditions – digs in the Middle East have revealed evidence of lice being preserved in the teeth of combs from the fifth and sixth centuries. Ricardo L Palma, "Ancient Head Lice on a Wooden Comb from Antinoë, Egypt," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 77 (1991): 194–194. For evidence of lice being preserved in Roman combs, see Kosta Y. Mumcuoglu, and Gideon Hadas, "Head Louse (Pediculus Humanus Capitis) Remains in a Louse Comb from the Roman Period Excavated in the Dead Sea Region," *Israel Exploration Journal* 61, no. 2 (2011): 223–29. The lack of evidence might also be a result of few microscopic investigations on combs, as suggested by MacGregor, *Technologies of Skeletal Material,* 73. It seems likely that the wider spacing of teeth on many combs, as suggested by Ashby, shows that lice were not always a major factor in why people would comb their hair. Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life,* 100.
[25] Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life,* 100.

neither of them refer to lice in hair, instead they are concerned with lice in armpits and the pubic area, and lice around the eyes.[26] It is highly possible the lice that were irritating the eyes lived in the hair, and in the thirteenth century Bartholomew Anglicus, a Franciscan monk, had written his compendium on the order of things, noting combing as part of the maintenance of hair: 'against the grieving of lice, oft washing, combing and medical cleansing of hair helpeth…'[27] Not all communities would have been more focused on hair appearance than lice removal, however, removing lice was not the sole reason people combed their hair. As many of the combs in this thesis do not have evidence of lice or extremely fine-set teeth, it is suggested that for the people who were using the combs, the arrangement of the hair was a leading concern.

As a result of the long time period, and the significant changes it witnessed, different sections of the thesis rely on different kinds of evidence, and this is distributed unevenly based on what has survived. The thesis as a whole has been arranged chronologically, with three chapters, which have been further divided thematically. Chapter 1 focuses on c. 400-699 AD, Chapter 2 on c. 700-1099 AD, and Chapter 3 on c. 1100-1400 AD. For the first chapter the sources are almost entirely archaeological, and heavily centred around grave goods. Chapter 2 has a mixture of archaeological and historical sources, and Chapter 3 relies almost entirely on historical and art historical sources, with the remaining combs being the special, ivory combs, as nearly no ordinary combs survive. This spread of evidence has necessitated an interdisciplinary approach which draws from methods used in archaeology, history and anthropology. It is impossible to present a single consistent methodology that runs throughout the thesis because the fluctuation of the evidence demands an agile,

[26] *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compedium of Women's Medicine,* ed. and trans. Monica H. Green, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 99.
[27] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Batman Vppon Bartholome: His Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum, Newly Corrected, Enlarged and Amended: With Such Additions as Are Requisite, Vnto Euery Seuerall Booke: Taken Foorth of the Most Approued Authors, the like Heretofore Not Translated in English. Profitable for All Estates, as Well for the Benefite of the Mind as the Bodie,* ed. and trans. Stephen Batman, (Imprinted by Thomas East, dwelling by Paules wharfe, 1582), 378.

interrogative approach. However, by triangulating the evidence that survives, a richer understanding of the medieval past has resulted, one that reflects how difficult it is to view the past through a narrative or linear way and instead celebrates the nuances that combs reveal about the way medieval people lived their lives.

This thesis uses combs as the framing to understand how people thought about each other, their bodies, and their lives and deaths, as well as the material world more broadly. Combs provide unexpected insight into religious and magical beliefs, reflecting medieval ideas about ownership and gifts, privacy and intimacy, discipline and order. Each chapter is divided into two or three sub-sections, titled *Life*, *Death* and *Worship*. *Worship* seeks to understand how these combs might have been used in Christian rites, questioning whether it is accurate to label these combs as liturgical, what makes a comb liturgical in the first place, and why the ornate ivory combs look so different to their ordinary counterparts. In order to understand why combs would have been desirable objects to use in rites in the first place, *Life* explores how combs were used in daily life, how medieval people might have thought about combs or used them regularly, and why this might impact how they were used in more heightened, ritualized moments. Finally, *Death* explores how combs were used, or thought of, in relation to death and dying in the medieval period. For Chapter 1 especially this is the largest subsection, purely because of how much evidence we have from grave goods, which diminishes to almost nothing by the ninth century. For this reason, Chapter 1 does not have a section on *Worship*. For those earlier centuries, much of how we understand worldview comes from mortuary rituals, and so worship is brought into this section, though belief is still a major strand in both the sections on life and death.

The spread of sources also means a diverse selection of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and material culture experts have been studied in order to provide the necessary framing for the evidence. Rather than being intentionally interdisciplinary by design, it is so by necessity, driven by the aims of the research – to understand what combs

can tell us about the lived experience of the medieval period. This approach has then opened up new avenues of questioning, providing an opportunity to explore the affordances combs offer as historical sources.

Rituals leave traces in the historical and material record even though it is impossible to reconstruct them in their entirety, usually leaving out not just what they sounded, smelled or tasted like, but also how a person interacted with them, their thoughts and feelings during the process. Catherine Bell's work on ritual provides the support for my analysis, which focuses on what ritual *does* rather than a definition of what ritual is.[28] This is particularly useful as this thesis covers a wide range of rituals. Regular hair brushing, for instance, could be considered a daily ritual, whereas preparing for a bishop's liturgical performance includes a different kind of hair combing. However, different terminology does not necessarily address the actual differences between those things, and the problems these categories create, and so broad terminology is used. In this thesis, ritual results from a process of distinguishing certain social actions from others in a process called *ritualization* – at a basic level, ritualization is the 'production' of this differentiation.[29] This differentiation is used to distinguish, and privilege, activities which are usually more 'quotidian'.[30] A genuine distinction is needed to be made between gestures or activities which are 'sacred', and which are 'profane'.[31] In this thesis the profane can be roughly divided into two groupings, all of which are relatively regular, repeated actions that make up some aspect of daily life. These could either be driven by some kind of necessity for living, such as food preparation, clothing or shelter, or by shared cultural expectations, such as in what way they are clothed, how they brush their hair, how often they do this, etc. What is sacred, by contrast, is ring-fenced from the profane even if at times it is derivative of it. Bell considers

[28] Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (*Oxford University Press, 2009); Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 1997).
[29] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 90.
[30] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 74.
[31] Bell, *Ritual Theory* ,74.

the sacred to be differentiated from the profane by the performance of it, and ritualization is the factor through which the sacred can be separated.[32]

What is sacred is tied into religion, but more broadly reflects worldviews, or peoples' beliefs about the worlds they inhabited. A distinction needs to be made between what is ritual versus what is religious, the definition of which will be taken from John Hines' work.[33] The religious is something performed in connection with a definitive and distinct element of *belief* related to when people have a perception of, an 'intangible spirit realm'.[34] This definition can be used to interrogate uses of combs which might be defined as ritual even if they are not related to Christian belief, or when the combs have perceived power to change a physical symptom, for instance when they appear in a tenth-century medical text *Medicina de Quadripedibus,* more fully explored in Chapter 2. Liturgy is used when dealing with the formal, Christian worship. However, the liturgy is still a ritual, and the combs used in it are part of the ritualization process. So, the ritual framing applies to the liturgy as it also might apply to medical aid, even if we can understand that these two rituals are different from one another. Despite these difficulties in finding a vocabulary that is both broad enough to apply across a thousand years and still distinct enough to be useful, this framework has hopefully allowed better questions to be asked.

Beyond these theoretical considerations, for comb studies generally, Steve Ashby's work has been the starting point, as his PhD thesis and subsequent research summarises most of the discussions about comb makers, styles and how this might inform specifically Viking identities.[35] Arthur MacGregor's typology and Ian Riddler's work on many of the more recent excavated examples, advising on comb types and forms have also been

[32] Bell, *Ritual Theory,* 91.
[33] John Hines, "Burial and Religion in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England," in *Dying Gods: Religious Belief in Northern and Eastern Europe at the time of Christianisation,* eds. Vera Brieske, Christiane Ruhmann (Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2015), 64.
[34] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 64.
[35] Ashby, "Time, Trade and Identity," 225-45.

indispensable from an archaeological perspective.[36] Howard Williams' contributions to the relationship between combs, death and identity in the early medieval period has already been referenced,[37] but Franz Swoboda's dissertation on the liturgical comb, written in 1963, is an important development in the study of liturgical combs,[38] and the first time that any special attention had been paid to them after Henry John Feasey's late-nineteenth century account.[39] Finally, Peter Lakso's chapter on the comb of St Cuthbert was the first detailed study of a single comb.[40]

When studying combs it is impossible not to consider hair. Roberta Milliken's edited volume on the cultural history of hair is an important basis for this, especially in regards to the later periods.[41] Ian Wood's work on the tonsure in the early medieval West has been the basis for much understanding for the earlier parts of this thesis.[42] Christopher Tilley, Christopher Gosden and Daniel Miller have been influential in the material culture framing that this thesis uses as an approach.[43] Mary Douglas' work on dirt and cleanliness, has also been essential in providing the theoretical framework for understanding why personal grooming was so important.[44]

The main words used in sources for comb are the Latin *pecten*, the Ancient Greek *kteis* and the Old English *camb* (and variations thereof). In Latin, translations of *pecten* are

[36] Arthur Macgregor, "Barred Combs of Frisian Type in England," *Medieval archaeology* 19 (1975): 195-219; Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski, "Objects of Bone and Antler," in *The Anglo-Saxon Settlement at Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire* eds. Gavin Speed and Neil Finn (University of Leicester, 2024), 87;
Ian Forbes, et al., *Spong Hill. Part IX, Chronology and Synthesis,* eds. Catherine Hills and Sam Lucy (McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2013).
[37] Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 89-128.
[38] Franz Swoboda, "Die liturgischen Kämme," (Unpublished PhD diss., Eberhard-Karls Universität, 1963).
[39] Feasey, "The Use of the Comb in Church Ceremonies," 312-16.
[40] Peter Lakso, "The Comb," in *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert: Studies by Various Authors*, ed. C. F. Battiscombe (Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral, 1956), 336-355.
[41] Roberta Milliken, ed., *The Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages* (Bloomsbury, 2019).
[42] Ian Wood, "Hair and Beards in the Early Medieval West," *Al-Masāq, Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean,* Vol 30, (2018): 107-116.
[43] Tilley, *Handbook of Material Culture;* Gosden, "What do Objects Want,"; Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Polity Books, 2010).
[44] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 1984).

not limited to combs for human hair, but also curry-combs for horses and wool-combs.[45] The context is relied upon to make the specific type of comb clear, though those meanings all suggest an act of combing is involved, using the teeth of an object to untangle things – human hair, horse hair, or embroidery thread. *Pecten* also, interestingly, can refer to comb-shaped artefacts, including in one instance the teeth of a portcullis.[46] It can also be part of the name for what Pliny calls Venus' Comb, or Shephard's Needle (*pecten Veneris*), a plant with white flowers with comb-like bristles, as well as the pubic bone.[47] *Kteis* is also used in the Greek to refer to the comb for both hair and wool, and the comb left in the loom, but also scallops, virilia and pubes, and the 'pudenda mulierbira,'[48] In Old English, *camb* refers again simply to comb, but also things that are comb-like, such as the crest of a hill, or the crest on a helmet.[49] It does not carry the medical or euphemistic associations to the pubic bone or vagina, however, as seen in the final section on *Life* in chapter 3, badges with combs and penises suggest that associations between combs and genitals continue – these through the Anglo-Norman route, with *penil*, derived from *pecten*, referring also to pubic hair, or the lower part of the abdomen above the genitals.[50]

Hair being long or short, covered or not, depended on a range of reasons and contexts, nevertheless, it would have had to be brushed. Although many early sources relating to the Church Fathers specifically focus on the religious reasons for veiling, there was a range of reasons why women would have covered their hair, including status,

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[45] R. E. Latham, and British Academy, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, (Oxford University Press, 1976), 2515.
[45] Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin,* 2515.
[46] – 'pectine ferrato tacitos suspendit in usus' J. EXON, BT I 490. Via R. E. Latham, and British Academy, Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin,* 2515.
[47] Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin,* 2515.
[48] This euphemistic phrasing does not appear in the Latin entry for *pecten.* "LSJ," *Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon online,* https://lsj.gr/wiki, first accessed 6 May 2026.
[49] Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Old English*, University of Toronto. Centre for Medieval Studies, Dictionary of Old English Project.
[50] *Anglo-Norman Dictionary (AND² Online Edition)*, s.v., "penil[1]," https://anglo-norman.net/entry/penil_1, first accessed 2 June 2026.

occupation and fashion.[51] However, whether covered or uncovered, if hair was longer than being shorn, it still would have required combing. Knots form when hair is introduced to friction – this happens as strands of the hair rub together or rub against a material, like a veil, hood, pillow, or large hat, something which continues to happen today. In addition to untangling hair, hair combing was understood to help contribute to the cleanliness of a person. The *Trotula* has a remedy for hair washing, including burnt vine ashes and barley chaff boiled in water, intended to turn hair 'golden and shimmering.'[52] It also has separate instructions for hair combing, with a remedy for a scented powder made from dried roses, cloves, nutmeg, watercress and galangal.[53] This is mixed in rose water, sprinkled over the head, with the comb also dipped in the water, before being used to distribute the scent evenly. There is also a remedy for scented veils, which would add another layer of fragrance.[54] While written evidence mostly dates to the later period, given the large numbers of combs found in archaeological excavations, is fair to say that across the thousand years this thesis covers, people recognised that combing or brushing hair (these words are used interchangeably), was an important part of personal grooming. Combs then were used to detangle, to arrange fashionably, to remove lice, and to help a person smell and look clean.

Combs, as material, profane objects might not, at first glance, be able to tell us much about the immaterial considerations of medieval people. However, due to their contexts or appearance, we can see that some combs were different from others. They were overlarge, or kept in cathedrals, or buried in graves. Why are these, different combs special, and what can the existence of special combs tell us about medieval belief? People believed their rituals were necessary and powerful. They would not have bothered doing them otherwise, and so the material remnants of their rituals are surviving evidence of the logic that powered them.

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[51] Grace Stafford, "Veiling and Head-Covering in Late Antiquity: Between Ideology, Aesthetics and Practicality," *Past & Present*, Volume 263, Issue 1 (2024): 6.
[52] Green, *The Trotula,* 114.
[53] Green, *The Trotula,* 114.
[54] Green, *The Trotula,* 114-115.

Studying medieval combs makes you an easy person to buy gifts for, and my own previously non-existent collection has expanded in the process of writing this doctoral thesis. The most striking thing about using them is the time involved. Modern hairbrushes are designed to remove knots in the quickest and least painful way possible, whereas the medieval technology differs. Old combs, double or single-sided, take time, and brushing is no longer an absent-minded activity. Coupled with the higher risk of snagging on a knot and causing pain, it is a more attentive process. This is not to say that every time medieval people combed their hair it was a heightened, ritualized moment. It is more to demonstrate the initial, immediate difference between hair combing a thousand years ago, compared to our modern experiences of a similar process, which is a useful starting point when going on to consider medieval combs. Medieval grooming took more time, and was likely more uncomfortable than our modern routines.

Beyond this obvious daily role, there are even deeper mysteries associated with medieval combs. Why were they exchanged between Popes and Queens? Hidden as relics? Displayed on cathedral walls, given between lovers, burnt or broken on funeral pyres? Their physical appearance may have remained broadly consistent, but a thousand years contains what feels like a thousand different ways these objects could be thought of. Medieval combs were used to brush hair, but they can tell us so much more about the past than that.

Chapter One: Breaking and Burning. Combs 400-699 AD

Life

Combs are objects, and because of this, at all stages of their life they require intervention from people. Decisions around how to make, use and dispose of them had to be made and remade constantly. These decisions in some cases are clearer to see, for instance the archaeological evidence for how combs were used in death between c. 400-699 AD is plentiful, thanks to the relatively widespread practice of depositing objects in graves. Other decisions are less lasting in the historical record. The written evidence for this early medieval period is notoriously scanty, with only a few sources remaining, and nearly all written later than the time they are referring to.[55]

As a result, this chapter first deals with the combs themselves. They are found scattered across settlements, and the contexts are examined, as how they were abandoned might help us understand how they were used. The information gleaned from this is not always clear, and so the chapter then turns to less direct evidence. Dwelling size, settlement organisation and veiling practices have all been interrogated. If we cannot understand how people considered combs from the combs themselves, understanding the structures of the worlds within which combs were used, might help answer questions about their significance.

How people died might not always reflect how they lived, and so before examining the reasons for the inclusion of combs in graves, it is important first to understand how they were used when people were alive. By doing this, we can see if there were connections between everyday comb use and their inclusion in graves, or whether those practices were entirely distinct.

[55] John Hines, "Literary Sources and Archaeology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Algo-Saxon Archaeology,* eds. Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press, 2011). 917.

Combs

Most people would have owned a comb, and so the archaeological evidence, while patchy, is still rich. They are common-enough finds in archaeological investigations. In the Midlands settlement excavations record six or seven combs at Eye Kettleby,[56] twenty-three in Barrow Hills (Oxfordshire), seven combs in Higham Ferrers (Northamptonshire) with, eight from Pennyland (Buckinghamshire) and twenty-six from Walton, Aylesbury.[57] One of the largest collections was recorded at West Stow (West Suffolk), where 106 combs were found, which is a well-excavated settlement, although this is uncommon for this period.[58] On the other hand, some sites have no combs: at Cowdery's Down (Hampshire), for instance, none survive.[59] At Chalton (Bedforshire), similarly no combs were found, though an impression of a comb on a textile was excavated.[60] However, these sites also are distinct – they are princely great hall sites and so not representative of daily life. Alternatively, soil conditions are likely to have also been a factor in why few survive. Although the records are not consistent, when considered alongside the sheer numbers of combs that are found in early medieval graves, it is likely that these were common objects, used across communities and time periods.

When not included in graves, combs are very rarely found intact and complete. The high level of fragmentation might be a result of the years in the ground, but it also might have occurred before the comb was discarded. The seven combs at Eye Kettleby were all in pieces.[61] The most complete comb – SF110 – has the panel intact, though it has lost all its

[56] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Objects of Bone and Antler," 87.
[57] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Objects of Bone and Antler," 91.
[58] Stanley E. West, *West Stow: The Anglo-Saxon Village*, East Anglian Archaeology; Report No. 24 (Suffolk County Planning Department, 1985), 126–28.
[59] P. V. Addyman et al., "Anglo-Saxon Houses at Chalton, Hampshire," *Medieval Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (1972): 29.
[60] Addyman et al., "Anglo-Saxon Houses at Chalton, Hampshire", 29.
[61] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Objects of Bone and Antler," 89.

teeth.[62] At Barrow Hills fragments from twenty-three combs,[63] were recovered from the settlement that was established there between the fifth-seventh century.[64] All were double-sided, all were made from antler, and all were in pieces.[65] Some of the combs at West Stow are more complete in condition, though as 106 combs were recovered from the site, it should not be considered unusual that the overall higher number of combs has resulted in more complete combs (i.e., SF 151, 154, 138 and others).[66] However, even those combs are still 'heavily worn', showing teeth that bow in the middle from repeated use.[67] While it is difficult to determine at what point exactly these combs would have been fractured, they were objects that were used over years, not months, and looked after until they were no longer functional.[68]

They were also often found as part of other waste deposits. Comb SF151 from West Stow, for instance, is found alongside thirteen other artefacts – a well-worn brooch, iron nails, fragments of glass, a few other combs, needles and 183 fragments of pottery.[69] Fills from the other sunken featured buildings from the same site contain similar waste objects – needles, strap ends, bits of nail and pottery are all common finds. These combs were treated like other waste objects, suggesting a more routine disposal, rather than a deliberate deposition. Furthermore, all the objects were also fragmented, suggesting that their disposal or decay was usual.[70]

There are some examples where combs might have been deposited in a deliberate, ritualized manner. This is tentative. Helena Hamerow and C. M. Sofield's work on placed

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[62] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Objects of Bone and Antler," 89.
[63] Richard Chambers and Ellen McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire, Vol. 2: The Romano-British Cemetery and Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford Archaeology: Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No. 25, 2007), 251.
[64] Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Roman settlements also existed at the same site. R. Bradley, R. A. Chambers, C. E. Halpin, *Barrow Hills, Radley 1983-4, Excavations: an Interim Report* (Offset Printing: Oxford Archaeological Unit, 1984), 26.
[65] Chambers and McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills,* 251.
[66] West, *West Stow,* 17-18, 126–28.
[67] West, *West Stow*, 18.
[68] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Bone and Antler," 92.
[69] West, *West Stow,* 17-18.
[70] West, *West Stow,* 17-18.

deposits does not record any examples of combs being included in these types of ritual assemblages, which represent forms of deposition suggested to be intentional and possibly related to religion or worldview, a part of Anglo-Saxon life.[71] However, some combs are slightly different to others. At Eye Kettleby, a sixth-century comb, find 264 (50.1 x 44.3mm), discarded at the mid-point of the settlement occupation, was recovered from a pit alongside ashes of other objects.[72] The ashes came from an alternative pit, indicating that they were burnt in one pit and the remains moved separately to another.[73] The comb fragment is composite and double-sided, made from antler with the typical ring and dot decorative motifs incised on the end-plates. The pit group 3, which contained the comb, was made up of two adjacent sub-circular pits, each containing dark, grey-brown, sandy silt fills, with frequent charcoal inclusions, pottery and bone.[74] It might have been part of a wider, normal waste-removal process, or the burning of the waste in a separate location and its translation to a secondary pit might have had a ritualized function. At Radley, Barrow Hills, the finest and most intricately-carved comb was also found in one of the larger and more significantly situated buildings. SFB12 lies to the east of the prehistoric oval barrow. The oval barrow consists of a central mound, within which a male and female, both 30-35 years of age, were buried.[75] The female is curled up with her head facing SW, a flint knife next to it. The male is also curled up, their legs overlapping, his head facing NE. He has a flint arrowhead near him. Their grave was added to over the years, with further ditches dug around, possibly to add to the barrow mound. Red deer antler and human skull fragments were placed into the fills. Posts were put in. In the early medieval period SFB9 was constructed on top of this,[76]

[71] Helena Hamerow, '"Special Deposits" in Anglo-Saxon Settlements," *Medieval Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2006): 1–30; C. M. Sofield, "Placed Deposits in Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon Rural Settlements," (Dphil diss., University of Oxford, 2012).
[72] Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski, "Bone and Antler," 89.
[73] Speed and Finn, *Eye Kettleby* 52.
[74] Speed and Finn, *Eye Kettleby,* 52.
[75] Chambers and McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills*, 111.
[76] Dating for the two SFBs is generally suggested to have been towards the later end of occupation, before the settlement was abandoned at the end of the seventh century. Ellen McAdam, "The Anglo-Saxon Settlement, Structural Evidence," in Chambers and McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills*, 81, 111.

and to the east, SFB12 was constructed and suggested to have been a hall space.[77] In it, seven small finds were uncovered – two fragments from the top stones of rotary querns, a tooth fragment from a second comb, two small iron pins, one iron woodworking nail, and a reused base from a Roman pottery vessel.[78] The location of the hall, and the unusually decorated nature of the comb (Fig. 1.1), might suggest that this was disposed of in a special manner, or it was seen as an important object kept within one of the largest settlement buildings.

At West Stow, the halls also seemed to be where a specific type of comb was deposited, as out of seven halls, four of them contained a comb. Halls 3, 4, 5 and 7 had triangular bone combs among their finds.[79] It is interesting that the combs included in the halls were all triangular, and all were decorated with a range of ring-and-dot variations. Large halls in general were places of heightened ritual activity, whereas more ordinary buildings have more evidence of everyday rituals (such as special deposits, which are largely made up of items such as pins etc) suggesting that domestic rituals were 'embedded' in daily



Fig. 1.1: Bone comb, Barrow Hills (Oxfordshire), 146mm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, AN1988.171. Image via Ashmolean Museum online.

[77] Bradley et al., *Barrow Hills,* 26.
[78] Chambers and McAdam, *Excavations at Radley Barrow Hills*, 115-117.
[79] SF841, SF1500 and SF1207 + SF 1193, SF3026. West, *West Stow*, 11–12.

life.[80] Combs might not have been part of domestic rituals, but included in larger ceremonies. However, enough evidence does not exist to make the claim for ritual deposition of combs conclusively, and this was not the only place in the settlement that triangular combs were found. SFB44 and SFB56 also had bone triangular composite combs.[81] While there may be some associations between comb deposition and ritualized actions, these are too faint to understand now.

The combs found in settlements show that generally, combs were used until they were not able to be used anymore. The archaeological evidence indicates that their function as a tool to comb hair was their central role, and when they were unable to fulfil this, they were discarded. This was an important function and combs were numerous – most people would have had one, and keeping hair groomed was likely to have been an important part of life. But they were disposed of like other household objects when necessary, treated as other essential, everyday objects were. This does not mean they were meaningless, as the everyday rituals we engage in make up our worldviews.[82] However, the archaeological evidence indicates that their meaning and significance in early medieval rituals was not found in the everyday.

In direct contrast, the written sources for this two-hundred year period presents them in a different light. According to Bede, combs were not just ordinary objects, but could also be prestigious ones. In the *Ecclesiastical History*, he records that in 625 Pope Boniface sent Queen Ethelburga a 'silver mirror and ivory comb, adorned with gold.'[83] Ethelburga received this gift because of her role in helping the English convert to Christianity. Her

[80] Sarah Semple, "The Pre-Christian Landscape in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Dying Gods: Religious Belief in Northern and Eastern Europe at the time of Christianisation,* eds. Vera Brieske and Christiane Ruhmann (Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2015), 101.
[81] West, *West Stow,* 37, 45.
[82] John C Barrett, "Time and tradition: rituals of everyday life," in *Bronze Age Studies: Transactions of the British-Scandinavian Colloquium in Stockholm, May 10-11 1985*, eds. Hans-Åke Nordström, and Anita Knape (Statens Historiska Museum, 1989), 122.
[83] 'Praeterea benedictionem protectoris uestri beati Petri apostolorum principis uobis direximus, id est speculum argenteum et pectine eboreum inauratum,' [83] Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. and ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford Medieval Texts, 1969), ii.XI p.175.

conversion is acknowledged as the powerful catalyst which will bring about a conversion of the Northumbrians, not just her husband, King Edwin:

> Our heart has been greatly rejoiced by the goodness and bounty of the Lord, because He has deigned to kindle by your conversion the spark of orthodox religion; that thereby He could the more easily inflame with His love not only the mind of your illustrious husband but of all the nation that is subject to you.[84]

The gift is described in the letter as being a blessing of 'your protector' St. Peter.[85] The comb and mirror are the physical objects that link Ethelburga with one of the most senior of Christ's disciples, imbuing the objects with his power and influence. While the letter flatters Ethelburga, it also functions as a warning: if Edwin, the King of the Northumbrians and Ethelburga's husband, does not convert, then they will not be able to 'enjoy the rights of marriage in undefiled union.'[86] In short, their marriage will not count in the eyes of the Church, and Ethelburga's eternal soul will be at risk.

The historiography of gift-giving is extensive – a good summary of it in relation to the early medieval period is helpfully pulled together by Chris Wickham in the conclusion to *The Language of Gift in the Early Middle Ages*.[87] However, what is most relevant here is the possibility that gifts, and the exchange of gifts in early medieval society, did not have one fixed meaning – they were able to work in different ways depending on their contexts.[88] Wickham argues that the scale of the gift is also involved with how easily its meaning can be contested, giving examples of the Franks' willingness to view gifts from the Islamic Empire as no more than tributes, rather than interpreting the gifts as vehicles to

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[84] 'Magno ergo largitatis Dominicae beneficio mens nostra gaudio exultavit, quod scintillam orthodoxae religionis in vestra dignatus est confessione succendere; ex qua re non solum gloriosi coniugis 35ntist, immo totius gentis subpositae vobis intelligentiam in amore sui facile inflammaret.' Bede, *HE,* trans. Colgrave and Mynors, ii.XI p. 172.
[85] 'Praeterea benedictionem protectoris uestri beati Petri apostolorum principis uobis direximus, id est speculum argenteum et pectine eboreum inauratum,' Bede, *HE,* trans. Colgrave and Mynors, ii.XI, p.174.
[86] 'ut perinde intemerato societas foedere iura teneas maritalis consortii,' Bede, *HE,* trans. Colgrave and Mynors, ii.XI, p.172.
[87] Chris Wickham, "Conclusion," in *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages,* eds. Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 238-261.
[88] Wickham, "Conclusion," 239.

demonstrate greater sophistication, as when Harun al Rashid sent a water clock to Charlemagne in 807.[89] The comb and mirror were considered appropriate objects to convey these mutable meanings as an object that would remind Ethelburga of her status, reinforce a relationship to St. Peter, and act as a symbol of the faith the Pope has in her, but also act as, if needed, a reminder of the duty she must fulfil. Given the inherent flexibility in gifts and their ability to have many meanings,[90] it is possible that the Pope's gift was both a sign of favour and a warning. It is also unclear how this would have been received. It was another two years before Edwin finally converted.[91] We do not know if the comb was ever used by Ethelburga, whether it was effective in reminding her of the urgency of her task, or whether she displayed it, using it to reinforce her connection to one the most powerful men of the church, demonstrating her own independent status at the same time.

There are several reasons why a comb might be considered an ideal object to do this. First, they are easily transportable; logistically, the comb and mirror would have been able to cross Western Europe with minimal difficulty. Secondly, they are made from rare materials, ensuring that the receiver is reminded of the giver's wealth and power. And finally, they are objects that would have been used every day. Whenever Ethelburga had her hair combed, or even if she merely displayed the gift among her other combs, she would have been reminded of the message Boniface sent. Compared to the archaeological evidence which survives, this comb is proof that, firstly, combs were being sent across large distances at least as early as the seventh century, and, secondly, that combs could be considered special and, potentially, holy.

Hair

[89] Wickham, "Conclusion," 240.
[90] Wickham, "Conclusion," 240.
[91] Bede, *HE,* ii. XIV p. 187.

To understand why combs were exchanged as diplomatic or holy gifts, while simultaneously being ordinary tools that most people would have owned, it is worth considering the wider context in which they were used. Understanding the ways early medieval people styled their hair and the environments within which they did so is key, as how people styled their hair has repercussions for how they used combs. For example, elaborate hairdos that had been popular during the Roman period would have taken time and help to produce, indicating that elite combs would have been important tools that were used *on,* rather than *by,* people.[92] On the other hand, veiled or covered hair meant that moments when the hair was uncovered and loose would have had more intimate connotations, these moments transgressing the norm of how early medieval people presented themselves the majority of the time.

The adoption of veiling in this period suggests that for women, uncovered hair was especially significant. In the Late Antique world, writers were keen to associate veiling with Christianity, and so virginal status was likely to have been in part represented by the wearing of a veil. Jerome's letter to Demetrias (letter 130)(c. 414 AD) describes the rite in which a virgin presents herself to her bishop, which includes the wearing of a 'virgin's bridal-veil,' suggesting veils would have been worn by married women, and women who were married to Christ.[93] This is likely a result of the teachings of Corinthians (11:4-8), which decrees that men should leave their heads uncovered while women cover theirs, but only when praying.[94] Other early Christian writers also emphasised this association between virginity and veiling – Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD) suggested that girls should be veiled at

[92] Cool, "The parts left over," 48.
[93] Jerome, Letter 130.2, in Kate Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40. Translation by Wilkinson.
[94] 'Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.' – 1 Cor. 11: 4-8, English Standard Version.

puberty, Cyril of Alexandra (c. 376-444 AD) described covering a woman's head as part of natural law, and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) thought that women should be fully covered unless at home.[95] Tertullian especially railed against time-consuming styling in his work *De cultu feminarem* (the apparel of women).[96] His rather miserable critique of women's hairstyles also extended to men who took 'excessive' time when styling their hair, with overdrawn or over-stylised beards for men, and fake hair for women, being considered a particular example of evil.[97] Accordingly, a simple bun at the nape of a neck was considered by him the most appropriate hairstyle.[98]

Though these men were not living or writing about British practices, holy men in the British Isles in the early middle ages were clearly aware of these dress expectations.[99] Aldhelm (639-709 AD) used plenty of Late Antique imagery when writing to the nuns at Barking on holy virginity. When comparing married women to virgins, he says: 'The one [the married woman] is busy being alluringly coiffed with the twisted curls of her ringlets curling round the tongs…the other, with an uncombed mane of hair and with her tresses carelessly matted bears the crown of glory with the palm-wreath of virginity on her head…'[100] This comparison of hair styles comes between a comparison of the wearing of jewellery (virgins are content to be adorned with their chastity), and a description of the two groups' behaviour in public.[101] Aldhelm's letter deliberately employs the rhetorical comparative device of married women versus virgins in an extension of the tradition of the Church fathers, all of whom had previously written on the subject of virginity, and with whom Aldhelm would have been familiar.[102] The comparison might not be contemporary

[95] Stafford, "Veiling and Head-Covering,"4.
[96] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works,* trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly and Edward A. Quain (Catholic University of America Press, 1959).
[97] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works,* trans. Arbesmann, Daly and Quain, 138-40.
[98] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works,* trans. Arbesmann, Daly and Quain, 138..
[99] Aldhelm would have been familiar at least with works by Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. Aldhelm, *Aldhelm, the Prose Works,* trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (D.S Brewer, 2009), 52.
[100] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm*, trans. Lapidge and Herren, 73.
[101] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm*, 73.
[102] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm*, 52.

but rather built on previous authorial works, and this source was probably not a faithful record of English seventh-century hair styling. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the metaphor suggests it would have been understood by Aldhelm's audience.

It is also only women's hair which Aldhelm refers to throughout his letter, though he tells stories of both male and female virgins. This could be because he is tailoring the content to his audience, or it could be reflective of wider attitudes towards hair and women. Naturally curled hair is given particular weight – the virgin Eugenia who shaved off her 'curling locks' is presented as a shocking way to reject a marriage proposal, the act 'against the laws of nature.'[103] The natural beauty of three sisters is emphasised because it was, 'not produced by make-up, nor achieved by ringlets curling from the crimping-iron.'[104] While Eugenia deliberately chose to remove her hair demonstrating a particular extremism, shaving the head was also used as a method of punishment, showing how important hair was in the way women were seen: the virgin Christina is punished by having her head shaved for refusing to worship pagan idols.[105] Despite the likelihood that much of these writings was influenced by Late Antique traditions, and not a direct reflection of the way people behaved ordinarily, the dramatic reduction of hair pins,[106] and the focus on combs in furnished burials, including for important Christian women of the same period, indicates that hair covering and combing continued to be important, though simpler arrangements were preferred in the early middle ages.

Furthermore, it is highly likely the nuns Aldhelm wrote to veiled their hair. An early depiction of Mary in the Book of Kells shows how this kind of religious veiling might be conceptualised (Fig. 1.2). Mary is tightly veiled with several layers of fabric, in a fashion that Grace Stafford has argued is the third of her veiling categories, a combination of a tight-

[103] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* trans. Lapidge and Herren, 110.
[104] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* trans. Lapidge and Herren, 117.
[105] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* 114.
[106] Cool, "The parts left over," 48.

fitting cover and a loose veil draped over the head.[107] The tight veil would have provided a thin layer to keep the dirt and oil from her skin and hair from seeping into the thicker, more expensive, fabrics that were used to drape over the head, as well as maintaining the correct shape of the head, which could have been faked by hair pieces.[108] However covered, combs would have been important in keeping the hair underneath these veils neat and clean, and the use of veils did not mean that the underlying hair was left un-styled or un-groomed. It is also worth considering the experience of wearing a headdress like that depicted in Fig. 1.2.[109] With ears being covered the hearing is muffled, especially when recreating the look with

[107] Stafford, "Veiling and Head Covering," 14.
[108] Burials in the Antinoöpolis cemetery (Egypt) contain evidence of hair pieces that would have been worn underneath veil caps in order to shape the head to make it appear more appealing. Stafford, "Veiling and Head Covering," 30-1.
[109] An Irish image, there were still exchanges of ideas and styles between the two landmasses. Written records to veiling practices in Ireland come from the earliest Lives of St Brigit, namely the *Life by Cogitosus*, and the *Vita I*. In the seventh or eighth century *Vita I*, Brigit and her female companions are presented to the bishop as *sanctae virgins* who 'wish to take the veil of virginity from you.' Bernard Meehan, "Interactions with Ireland," in *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms,* eds. Breay and Story (British Library, 2018), 39; Footnote 88, Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 47.

many layers of cloth. Mary's head covering here protrudes out from her head, likely impacting her peripheral vision. Veiling like this requires time and a fairly sedentary lifestyle – it would not be practical attire to move around in.

Although associated with Christian theological arguments, it is equally possible that veiling also expressed status. This veil was not the head covering of an ordinary woman, but one with the wealth to afford the layers of material, and the lifestyle that did not necessitate manual labour, and so brushing the hair when it was normally covered by layers of ornate fabric would have been meaningful in an entirely new way. The uncovering of the head,



Fig. 1.2: Close up of Mary in The Book of Kells. Dublin, The Library of Trinity College Dublin Digital Collections, IE TCD MS 58, f. 7v. Image via Digital Collections.

gradually removing the layers of veil, might have been an act that required time and privacy. The nuns who made up these early convents were not ordinary, and so we might be able to consider that brushing their hair became meaningful not just because their hair was often covered for religious reasons, but also for those of status. Towards the end of the seventh

century, daughters and wives of kings had been withdrawing from secular life in order to run or found monasteries and abbeys, perhaps reflecting a shift in the way women held power. Hild (c. 614-680 AD), a relative of King Edwin of Northumbria, had founded the double-house at Whitby.[110] King Edwin's daughter, Eanflad, then took over as abbess after her death in 680 and a marriage to King Osiwu, after also having founded a monastery at Gilling. [111] Further south, the abbey at Ely was founded by the former wife of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria (670-685 AD), Æthelthryth, and Cuthberg, sister of King Ine of Wessex, founded the monastery at Wimbourne.[112]

Many women were buried with head coverings, and head coverings in Kentish graves specifically can be compared to continental dress practices,[113] the most elaborate example of which being the burial of Queen Arnegund (c. 515-580 AD), the mother of Chilperic I (561-584 AD), who was buried in a veil.[114] Reflecting her status as a Merovingian queen and mother of a dynasty, Arnegund's veil was made from red and yellow pattered silk samite.[115] It is possible that her hair was covered to indicate her status as a married woman, and it is equally possible it was covered because of her status as a Queen.[116] Varieties of head-coverings suggests that even for high-status women there was fluctuation – some graves had decorative hair ornaments like beads scattered at the back of their skull (for instance nine pins found near the head of a girl in Lyminge (Kent), or beads found in Grave 18 at Lechlade (Gloucestershire).[117] Kentish burials specifically, however, demonstrate that veiling practices

[110] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* 52.
[111] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm*, 52.
[112] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* 52.
[113] Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, (Boydell Press, 2004), 90-102.
[114] Patrick Périn, « La reconstitution du costume d'Arégonde. Nouvelles propositions », *Revue archéologique de Picardie* 1, no. 1 (2009) : 69-75.
[115] Périn, "La reconstitution," 72.
[116] The Merovingians had a particularly significant relationship with their hair, being described by Gregory of Tours as the 'long-haired kings,' whose authority was related to the length of this: they "set up long-haired kings (reges) in each country district and each city chosen from the foremost and most noble family of their race." Erik Goosmann, "The Long-haired Kings of the Franks: 'Like so Many Samsons?'" *Early medieval Europe* 20, no. 3 (2012): 240.
[117] Owen-Crocker, *Dress,* 80.

in relation to status did cross the channel, even if these were not the only way women with status reflected that.[118] At the same time, veiling in the Late Antique world became an opportunity to express this status in new ways, making the most of bright colours, fine silks, and gold thread.[119]

For ordinary women in England, it is less clear whether or not these practices had an impact on how they arranged their hair, and as a result, when they would have used hair combs. While Aldhelm's letter suggests that women were curling the hair on show at their temples, it is equally possible he was reproducing established metaphors, instead of faithfully recording seventh-century hair styles. It is more likely that women covered their

[118] Owen-Crocker, *Dress,* 102.
[119] Stafford, "Veiling and Head Covering," 28.



Fig. 1.3: The Spong Man, fifth-century. 143mm. Norwich, Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, NWHCM : 1994.192.1. Image via Wikimedia commons.

hair for practical reasons, and could do this by throwing a shawl over their head or wearing a scarf, tightening or changing when needed, to carry out various tasks that would have been dangerous with loose hair, such as tending or lighting fires.[120] However, by the seventh

[120] Owen-Crocker, *Dress,* 78, 81.

century at least, religious women would have veiled their hair, and some women, though this may have changed depending on local ideas of kingship, would have covered their hair as a mark of status. When considered in association with the comb that Ethelburga received, combs could be suggested to be specially significant for women whose hair was often covered, and these women were possibly more likely to be in positions of political or religious status.

These expressions of status, and what they might mean for the hair underneath, were not restricted to women. The Spong man is a fifth-century depiction of a seated figure that is found on the lid of a pot, wearing a hat of some kind (Fig. 1.3). It is described as cremation 3324, though it was not found with an associated cremation urn or bones.[121] The figure appears genderless, with no facial hair or breasts, and with a blank abdomen. [122] Despite its androgynous nature, two cuffs appear to be encircling its wrists, and the person is seated, giving it an air, according to Catherine Hills, of authority.[123] Bracelets generally are considered a female dress accessory, though not always. The presence of the cuffs here might also denote status within a community – one example of beaded bracelets found in Catterick (North Yorkshire) has been argued to be part of a priest of the goddess Cybele's ceremonial wear.[124] Not appearing beaded however, these cuffs might have been made from bone or ivory, a type of bracelet that becomes more popular in the late fourth and fifth centuries, such as the ivory bracelet, c. 375-80 AD, from Barnsley Park (Gloucestershire).[125] If Hills is correct in the relationship between the figure being seated and their authority, then it is also possible that the head covering on the Spong man is a further indicator of this.

[121] According to the characteristics of the pot this lid is mostly for, it is likely to be a fifth-century lid and part of either phase A or B of the cemetery's dating. Catherine Hills, '"Spong Man" in Context', in *Landscapes and Artefacts*, with Steven Ashley et al. (Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2014), 79, 83.
[122] Breay and Story, eds. *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms,* 66.
[123] Hills, "Spong Man," 79.
[124] H E M Cool, P. R. Wilson, *Cataractonium: Roman Catterick and Its Hinterland: Excavations and Research, 1958-1997*, CBA Research Report, 128 & 129 (Council for British Archaeology, 2002): 41-2.
[125] H E M Cool, "The parts left over," 49.

Later examples of high-status hair styling can be seen on the Whetstone Sceptre from Sutton Hoo Mound 1 (Fig. 1.4). Eight distinct faces with different hair stylings are depicted.

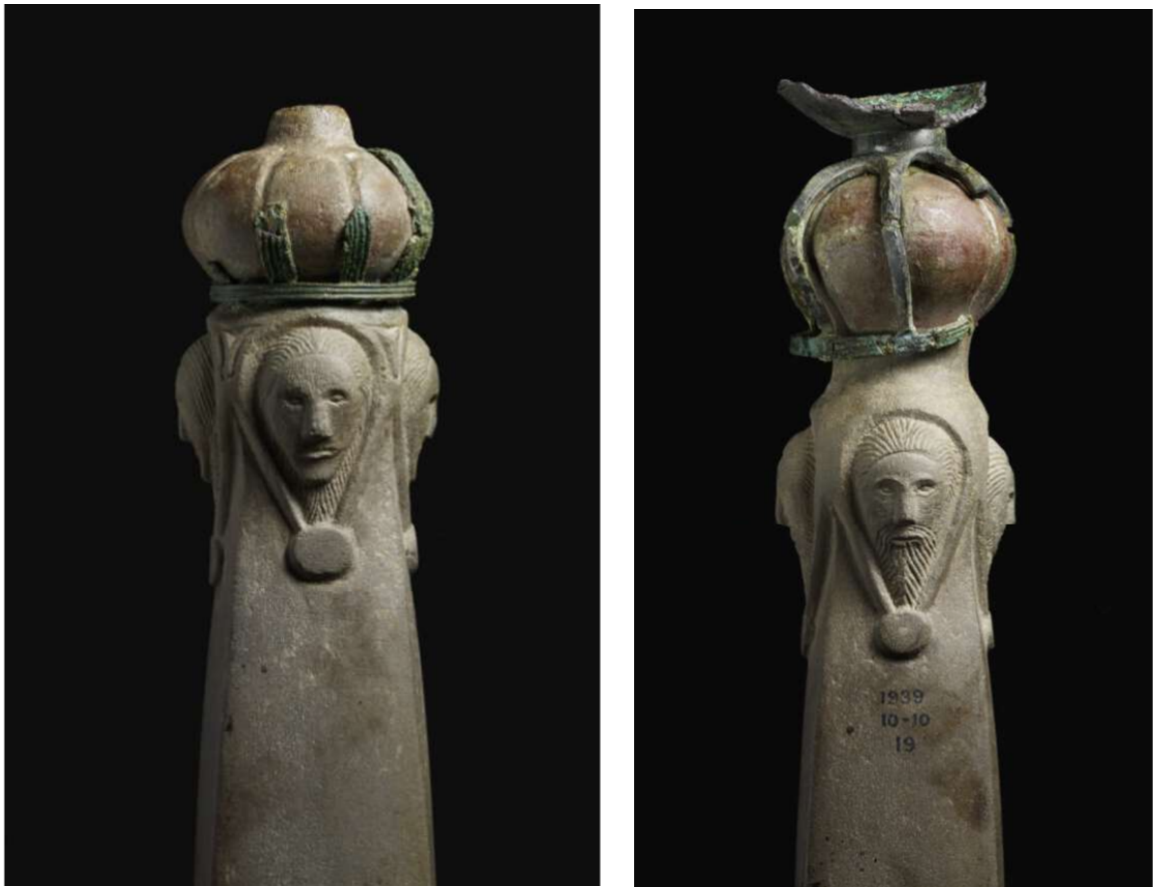

Fig. 1.4: Two examples of facial hair on the Whestone Sceptre. Early seventh-century. 820mm (incl. metal fittings). London, The British Museum, 1939,1010.160.

Some have it drawn straight backwards as though tied, others have it falling around their face (Owen-Crocker suggests that the unbearded faces represent women, though this is not necessarily the case).[126] Beards are popular in contrast to the Spong 'man', who is smooth and hairless. The objects are several hundred years and roughly 70 miles apart, though both located in Suffolk. These two sources are both objects of status, depicting status – though the types and ways they do this are different. It is interesting to see how the visual expressions of this status shifted, and how hair was a key part of this. By the seventh century, the Sutton Hoo sceptre was being buried as Ethelburga was receiving a comb from the Pope.

[126] Owen-Crocker, *Dress,* 79.

Hair and its manipulation was an important expression of authority; combs became tools that enabled this.

The protection of hair styling in early law codes show that for ordinary people it was still important, though to a lesser extent. The Kentish laws of Æthelberht I (d. 617 AD) include one for fining any man who seized another by the hair.[127] The fine itself is a comparatively small amount of fifty sceattas. Most fines listed are measured in shillings, rather than the smaller sceattas; thirty shillings if one disables another man's shoulder, for instance, compared to the other cost of fifty sceattas, which was the fine for a man 'lying with a slave of the second class'.[128] The financial difference suggests hair pulling was considered a minor offence. Serious injuries like dislocating a shoulder had immediate practical implications. Physical damage meant a man would not be able to work, and so fines may have taken into account a loss of potential livelihood. Hair pulling would not have made a person unable to farm or build, but the fact it is still listed suggests, firstly, enough hair was on display to be at risk of being grabbed, and, secondly, touching it was transgressive enough to deserve a punishment, however minor it was. Pulling hair was included in these laws because of the disrespect associated with the gesture, rather than the damage caused.

For holy men, their hair was equally important in being an instant visual sign of their status. In the late seventh-century Laws of Wihtred, the tonsure was an important marker:

> If a tonsured man [who is] not under ecclesiastical discipline, wanders about looking for hospitality, once [only] shall it be granted to him, and unless he has permission, he shall not be entertained further.[129]

[127] Rule 33. 'For seizing a man by the hair, 50 sceattas shall be paid as compensation.' *Laws of the Earliest English Kings,* trans. and ed. Frederick Levi Attenborough (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 9.
[128] Rule 38. 'If a shoulder is disabled, 30 shillings shall be paid as compensation.' Attenborough, *Laws,* 9. Rule 16. 'If a man lies with a commoner's serving maid, he shall pay 6 schillings compensation; [if he lies] with a slave of the second class [he shall pay] 50 sceattas [compensation]; if with one of the third class, 30 sceattas.' *Laws*, trans. Attenborough, 7.
[129] 'Gif bescoren man steorlas gange him an gestliðnesse, gefe him man ænas; 7 þæt ne geweorðe, buton he leafnesse habbe, þæt hine man læng feormige.' *Laws*, trans. Attenborough, 26-27.

Here the tonsure becomes an unavoidable marker of his identity, both allowing and restricting his actions. Had the man fled his monastic way of life, he would be able to be marked out even by strangers because of his particular hair style. It also implies that tonsure was something that was maintained rigorously – the cutting, combing and shaving of the head being a regular process that was essential in ensuring religious men were able at all times to be recognised as such.

For most, the way they covered their hair probably varied, linked to a range of factors, all of which were considered when the hair was being arranged. Weather, activity and occasion all might have had an impact on the way men and women chose to cover themselves. Status was clearly important, both political and religious, which indicates hair combs were tools that shaped the visual response to leadership and authority. Furthermore, if the most common form of styling involved hair being covered, the impact of seeing unbound and uncovered hair would have been dramatic or transgressive. Considering the physical environments within which people did uncover and comb their hair then, can reveal whether or not combing becomes heightened due to the times and spaces in which it took place.

Homes

Houses frequently 'have close links to cosmology, world view, and social organization,'[130] and so examining the settlements of early medieval England provides a literal framework within which to imagine the worlds combs inhabited, and how they were used within them. This is especially important if hair was covered or concealed. The moments when the hair was uncovered could then have had connotations of privacy, transgression or intimacy.

[130] Marianne Hem Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead. The Power of Doorways and Thresholds in Viking Age Scandinavia," *Archaeological Dialogues* 20, no. 2 (2013): 190.

The architecture of early medieval houses – however little remains – shows that private spaces were likely rare, and boundaries between sleeping areas, working areas, and living areas were relatively permeable.[131] This was likely similar in some ways to how Late Antique and Roman households considered privacy. In Roman society, the *domina,* the house, was not a separate space reserved for women and children, while the economic and political world outside was inhabited by adult men.[132] Rather than being in isolation, the *domus* was, as described by Kate Cooper, a 'central arena' for the social, economic, and political negotiations of all the members of the home.[133] Not just physical, this could also refer to a broader kinship group, able to be categorised as both physical space and symbolic role.[134] The Roman home, then, was made up of porous boundaries which a range of individuals would cross at regular intervals. This sense of fluid boundaries would have likely contributed to concepts of personal space or privacy being unfamiliar. Gerald of Aurillac's (855-909 AD) personal rooms were a source of mockery for lay contemporaries, and most early medieval individuals would have been accustomed to spending time with others constantly, both in the day and while sleeping.[135]

The size of early houses in England suggests that spaces were small and required to be multi-purpose. The fifth-seventh centuries saw a uniformity in dwelling styles across England.[136] These were generally much smaller than their counterparts across the North Sea, averaging 8-10m long and 4-5m wide, and supported their weight on the walls, rather than centrally.[137] The size of the dwellings could suggest that people did not spend a large amount of time inside them, and would have worked across various buildings in the

[131] For an introduction to the difficulties in tracing early medieval settlements, see John Blair, *The British Culture of Anglo-Saxon Settlement*, H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures 24 (Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, 2013).
[132] Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 96.
[133] Cooper, *The Fall,* 97.
[134] Cooper, *The Fall,* 96.
[135] Janet L. Nelson, "The Problematic in the Private," *Social History* 15, no. 3 (1990): 365.
[136] Helena Hamerow, *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.
[137] Hamerow, *Rural Settlements,* 17-18.

community. This is also shown by the number of the second type of early medieval structure, *Grübenhauser,* which were used for storage or work such as weaving.[138]

Rather than houses, temporal boundaries could have been more significant, as access to physical private space was limited. Boundaries can be both physical or temporal,[139] and so the times when medieval people combed their hair might have been more significant than the spaces they entered to do so. If there were certain times when hair was permitted to be uncovered, then that suggests when the hair was covered, the veil worked to preserve a level of privacy for a body which was not often separate from the society in which it lived.[140] In this way, veils and head coverings became physical boundaries that were worn on the person, restricting access to them and heightening the impact of their presence because of this restriction.

A key component of a boundary is a threshold, the moment when the boundary is crossed and the new state entered, marking the point between inside and outside.[141] This importance, or focus, on transformations was significant in early medieval society, and the centrality of threshold crossing was reflected in the architecture of these settlements. These early building traditions placed emphasis on regularity, formality and symmetry, which was especially marked in larger and 'arguably more important buildings.'[142] Large doorways and entryways, and the frequent repair and replacement of the wood used in their construction, underlines this.[143] In the early medieval world their symbolic power was also recognised through the larger number of placed deposits that make use of this positioning. Placed deposits are found predominantly in doorways and corners, as well as associated with

[138] Hamerow, *Rural Settlements,* 64-65.
[139] Christena Nippert-Eng, "Calendars and Keys: The Classification of "Home" and "Work"", *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 3 (1996): 563–82.
[140] Nelson, "Private," 364.
[141] Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 189.
[142] Helena Hamerow, "Anglo-Saxon Timber Buildings and Their Social Context", in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, eds. Helena Hamerow, David Alban Hinton, Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press, 2011), 138.
[143] Hamerow, "Anglo-Saxon Timber Buildings," 140.

closing rites of buildings, indicate that a ritualized significance was attached to the spaces.[144] For example, at building A2, Yeavering (Northumberland), the horn of a sheep or goat was placed in the doorpost in the southern wall, while the teeth of an ox and boar were identified in the door-pits of the eastern and western partitions.[145] Thresholds were important parts of myths, representing the earthly and spiritual worlds.[146] This was reflected in the art of the period, where men appear to become beast and vice versa – these hybrid creatures are depicted in the process of transforming.[147] The 'ambiguous or mutating nature' of wild animals was also why their remains were appealing for placed deposits.[148] Wildness, however, is not just appealing because it can be physically transformational or dangerous. Mary Douglas argues it offers an opportunity to learn knowledge unable to be accessed by those living in organised society.[149]

I suggest that doorways are not the only boundaries or thresholds that were powerful. The veil or head covering also became a type of threshold or boundary, the times when the hair comb was used a transitional moment. As crossing a threshold, combing the hair was an activity that was done regularly.[150] Both actions were not always ritualized but offered the *possibility* of ritualization. We know that covering hair was related in some cases to status, so controlling the hair maintained and supported existing expressions of this. But it was also an activity that was transformational. Before covering the hair it must be combed, and when this took place the medieval body moved from one state to another, undressed to dressed. Beyond this, the raw material of many of the combs could be seen to want to make the most of these animistic forces in a worldview that prized them. [151] Antler is a common material for combs, the stag an important animal in early medieval storytelling. It stands, for

[144] Sofield, "Placed Deposits," 121.
[145] Hamerow, "Anglo-Saxon Timber Buildings," 140.
[146] Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, *Celtic Art: Reading the Messages* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), 137.
[147] Aldhouse-Green, *Celtic Art,* 137.
[148] Sofield, "Placed Deposits," 206.
[149] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 95.
[150] Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 189.
[151] Sofield, "Placed Deposits," 196.

example, on top of the whetstone sceptre and Hrothgar's Hall is named Heorot or 'hart' in Beowulf.[152] In contrast to their raw material, once formed and shaped, combs are controlled, their animal associations possibly channelled. In turn, they control and maintain the boundaries of physical appearance. These boundaries then impose order on society, both visually and otherwise.[153] Combs act like doorways might – a moment where order is both enforced and undermined, a point of danger between made and unmade, an opportunity for control or freedom.

Conclusion

There is a tension in combs which makes understanding their role in early medieval society complex. They were common, everyday objects. Many of them were used until they broke, suggesting that people combed their hair regularly. They were tools that helped prepare the body to look an expected way, like religious or high-status women who needed to comb their hair before veiling it, restricting who could see it. Even for ordinary men, with uncovered hair, seizing it was an insult worth legislating against. Combs played a part in preparing the body in an appropriate way, ensuring people were adhering to cultural expectations that could be endangered by the grasping of hair, or viewing it when it was uncovered.

Not using combs was transgressive, though for some groups it seems transgression was permitted. Aldhelm describes someone having 'an uncombed mane of hair and with her tresses carelessly matted [she] bears the crown of glory with the palm-wreath of virginity on her head…'[154] This might be a leftover from a previous, Late Antique vision of virginity. It might be a metaphor against vanity. Nevertheless, its use suggests that the possibilities of

[152] Joshua Davies, "The Landscapes of Thanet and the Legend of St Mildrith: Human and Nonhuman Voices, Agencies and Histories," *English Studies* (Lisse) 96, no. 5 (2015): 494.
[153] Sofield, "Placed Deposits," 200.
[154] Aldhelm, *Aldhelm,* trans. Lapidge and Herren, 73.

transgression which combs, or not using combs, offered, might have been part of their appeal as objects.

Combs were everywhere, and this accessibility was part of their potency. They were discarded across settlements, though the association between fine combs being found in larger buildings is certainly something that is worth considering further. It might be that combs were not used in domestic rituals, and so that is why they are more consistently associated with Hall contexts, as their ritual associations were differentiated from the everyday.

Combs as gifts, and their association with conversion in early Christianity, as expressed in Bede, however, is evidence that they could have symbolic associations beyond the functional, and that combs were being considered as objects capable of being special from an early period. Conversion is, like veiling or unveiling, a crossing of a boundary, and combs clearly were associated with the movement from one state to the next, as will be demonstrated even more strongly in the next chapter. Home spaces, boundaries and temporality all continue to underline this. Combs, especially considering their role in funerals, were objects of transformation.

Death

One moment of transformation, one boundary that everyone would have crossed, was between life and death. Many of the rites associated with death involved combs, and this section explores why this is. Why were combs used as grave goods in some cases and not others? Why were combs used at all? Does the inclusions of combs as grave goods have anything to do with later, liturgical combs?

Combs were actively placed in some inhumations and cremations, and not in others. Managing death involves a series of decisions such as what to do with the body, the belongings of the deceased, or how to remember them.[155] This section will seek to understand the reasons behind why combs were sometimes included in burials. When we consider that everything in the graves made its way there deliberately,[156] we can understand how useful early medieval deaths are, especially at a period where much other evidence is missing. This has resulted in a considerable amount of study,[157] especially by early medieval archaeologists, of both inhumation and cremation practices.[158] However, the studies of early medieval combs and burials have generally been part of the wider analysis of a single site. In this section, I will bring together a range of data, through the lens of one specific object.

Early medieval death is also one of the key areas of study where combs have already been examined in their own right, most notably in Howard Williams' work on the combs at

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[155] Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (The Boydell Press, 2004), 7.
[156] Howard Williams and Duncan Sawyer, "'Halls of mirrors,': death and identity in medieval archaeology," in *Mortuary practices and social identities in the Middle Ages: essays in burial archaeology in honour of Heinrich Härke* eds. D. Sayer and H. Williams (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 1-22. Snails were found in high numbers for example at Cleatham. Kirsty Squires, "An osteological analysis and social investigation of the cremation rite at the cemeteries of Elsham and Cleatham, North Lincolnshire," (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2011), 218.
[157] Surveys of dying in the early medieval period include Thompson, *Dying and Death,* and Howard Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[158] Much of this work has focused on serialising and organising the data, which has been invaluable for my analysis. See especially Alex Bayliss, John Hines, Karen Høilund Nielsen, Gerry McCormac, and Christopher Scull, *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework*, (Society for Medieval Archaeology, 2013), and John Hines, *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework* [data-set] (York: Archaeology Data Service, 2013), [distributor] https://doi.org/10.5284/1018290, for inhumation data in relation to combs, and Sam Lucy and Ian Riddler, Spong Hill dataset collection – item 5: Spong Comb List. [Dataset]. University of Cambridge, 2014. https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/245158, in relation to cremations.

the predominantly cremation cemetery at Spong Hill (Norfolk).[159] Williams' initial analysis of combs and cremations, and subsequent works, looked at the relation between combs and the identity of the deceased, and how these objects facilitated the construction of identity by communities after their death.[160] He argues that combs were a mnemonic object, working to 'articulate the reconstruction of the deceased's personhood in death through strategies of remembrance and forgetting.'[161] This was a compelling starting point for my research, and one that immediately brought up further questions. This section therefore seeks to take this and probe more widely into the role of combs in early medieval funerary rites, and what this might have meant for how these communities thought about life and death.

This section covers two types of burial – inhumation and cremation. The treatment of combs in these is very different. Combs are the most common grave good found in cremation burials, whereas they are rare in inhumations, even though both rites were in use in the same time periods and same geographic locations.[162] Practices differed hugely across, and even within, communities,[163] with some Migration Period cemeteries particularly showing a lot of variation in placement and type of burial.[164]

The different treatment of combs indicates that they had specific functions in some instances and not others. Furthermore, within those two broad umbrella terms of 'cremation' and 'inhumation', combs were treated very differently. Why were some combs burned while others broken, why were some buried underneath a body while others placed on top? This section will take what is known – the location of the comb in the graves or urns, the treatment of the comb before burial, the design of the comb and the evidence for the

[159] Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 89-128.
[160] Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," but also Williams, *Death and Memory*.
[161] Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 89.
[162] There is a slight geographical shift with cremations being more predominant in the east than the midlands, Thames valley and south coast, however both rites were in use. For example Sancton, Newark and Spong Hill, all of which will be examined. Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," Fig. 1.1, 5.
[163] John Hines, "Burial and Religion," 67.
[164] Charlotte Behr, "How widely were pre-Christian religious ideas shared in northern Europe?" in *Dying Gods: Religious Belief in Northern and Eastern Europe at the time of Christianisation*, eds. Vera Brieske and Christiane Ruhmann (Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2015), 16.

identity of the deceased – as a base to hone other questions about the mechanics of early medieval funerals, and how people related to these objects.

Cremations

Combs were the most common early medieval grave good found in cremation burials. This section's primary aim is to consider why. It looks at data from six cremation sites, Spong Hill (Norfolk),[165] Sancton (Yorkshire),[166] Newark (Nottinghamshire),[167] Caistor-by-Norwich (Norfolk),[168] Cleatham (Lincolnshire), and Elsham (Lincolnshire).[169] What we can know – the positioning within the urn, the age and sex of the deceased, the way combs were treated, burnt, broken or buried – is then used to explore why combs were the object chosen for these rites. *Life* has established that combs were everyday objects, used most of the time until they were broken, discarded with other household waste. They were also tools that upheld order, through helping individuals present themselves in a specific way, and, sometimes, considered as special objects worthy of being given as diplomatic gifts.

The fact that combs are found in high numbers in cremations before they were being exchanged as gifts between early Christian elites, suggests immediately that they had important functions in a pre-Christian funerary context. Why, and what this means, is what this section aims to examine further. Because of their ubiquity, combs and cremations have,

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[165] Catherine Hills, Kenneth Penn, and Robert Rickett, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham. Part V, Catalogue of Cremations (Nos. 2800-3334)* (Norfolk Museums Service, 1994); Jacqueline I McKinley, et al., *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham. Part VIII, The Cremations* (Norfolk Museums Service, 1994); Ian Forbes et al. *Spong Hill. Part IX*.
[166] Jane Timby, et al., "Sancton I Anglo-Saxon Cemetery Excavations Carried Out Between 1976 and 1980," *Archaeological Journal*, 150:1 (1993):243-365.
[167] A. G. Kingsley, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Millgate, Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire: Excavations between 1958 and 1978 by F. and B. Waters, M.J. Dean, K.E. Seville, G. Fairclough and M.S. Gorin* (Nottingham Department of Classical and Archaeological Studies, 1989).
[168] J. N. L. Myres, and Barbara Green, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall, Norfolk* (Thames and Hudson, 1973), 103-201.
[169] The Cleatham cemetery data is examined in the same secondary sources as Elsham. Kevin Leahy, *The Excavation of the Cleatham Anglo-Saxon Cemetery,* [data-set], York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor](2014): https://doi.org/10.5284/1000011; Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham,"; Kevin Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots: The Excavation of Cleatham Anglo-Saxon Cemetery* (Council for British Archaeology, 2007).

as already mentioned, been the subject of study, notably by Williams.[170] Aside from this, their presence has predominantly been examined In terms of how they reflect the social identity of the deceased. These arguments have mainly traced comb style, particularly Saxon or Frisian influence, to look at how migration impacted communities and how those communities dealt with external influences.[171] Although Hines has argued that cremations have less scope for individuality compared to inhumations,[172] the treatment of combs is one variable that suggests there was flexibility in commemorating the deceased.

In this section I will first present the cremation data from the six sites selected. It will look at general trends in comb deposition, urn placement and comb treatment, as well as any associations between the age and sex of the cremated, and the distribution of combs. Once the data has been presented, I will move on to the analysis. This will be divided into three sections. In the first, *Burning*, the technology of the cremation rite in general will be explored, specifically focusing on how this would have been experienced by the community of mourners, why some combs were burnt while others not. The second, *Breaking*, will look at the deliberate fragmentation of combs, and the final part, *Bestowing*, will focus on dummy combs – the small number of combs that were unable to have been used on hair. Although examples are few, their presence is significant.

In total, this section hopes to explore how combs were used in the cremation rite, what this means for our understanding of how they were considered tools used in rites, and why this evidence is so starkly different from the inhumation data.

[170] Williams, "Material culture as memory," 89-128.
[171] Mainly see Macgregor, "Barred Combs of Frisian Type," and Kristina Ambrosiani, "Viking Age Combs, Comb Making and Comb Makers: In the Light of Finds from Birka and Ribe," (Published PhD diss., Dept. of Archaeology, North-European, University of Stockholm, 1981), and Ashby, *A Typological Guide,* for relation between comb style and identity particularly during the Viking invasions.
[172] Hines, "Religion and Belief," 67.

Data

In order to understand how and why combs were used in cremations, 821 combs from six cemeteries have been examined. I have chosen these six cemeteries, Spong Hill (Norfolk), Sancton (Yorkshire), Newark (Nottinghamshire), Caistor-by-Norwich (Norfolk), Cleatham (Lincolnshire), and Elsham (Lincolnshire), because they are all large and well-recorded. Where available I have examined the number of combs in the cemeteries, the age of the associated remains, the sex, the form of the comb, the placement within the urn, the treatment of the comb before burial and the number of combs included within each urn. The data available across the six sites does vary. Cleatham, for example, is the only cemetery with consistent references to comb placement within the urns.[173] It also has all the finds information listed on the Archaeological Data Service.[174] Similarly, Spong Hill has made the site's archive available for download.[175] As a result of both the depth and availability of this data, these two cemeteries are analysed in more detail than the others.

Combs are one of the most frequently found artefacts in cremation urns.[176] Table 1 reveals the percentages of combs out of the number of graves containing grave goods – for example Cleatham has 288 cremation burials that contain combs (Table 1).[177] Even for those cemeteries where the percentage of total combs is lower – at Newark combs are only found in 25.9% of graves – they are still the most common grave good.[178] This does not mean to say that all cremation cemeteries from this period contained combs, Elkington (Lincolnshire), for example, seems to have had none whatsoever.[179] This is also interesting when compared

[173] Leahy, *The Excavation of the Cleatham* [data-set].
[174] Leahy, *The Excavation of the Cleatham* [data-set].
[175] Lucy and Riddler, *Spong Hill dataset collection* [data-set].
[176] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 230.
[177] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham,", 229.
[178] The next most-common find is ivory objects, 21 examples of which are found at Newark. Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 27.
[179] Although this may be partly explained by poor bone preservation at this site. Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 105.

to the huge numbers of combs in Cleatham and Elsham, both in the same county. Geographical proximity did not necessarily result in similar traditions.

Cemetery	Number of combs found	% of total grave goods
Cleatham	288	46.1
Elsham	113	33.3
Sancton	62	28.3
Newark	44	25.9
Spong Hill	294	22.4
Caistor-by-Norwich	27	17.4

Table 1: Number of combs found across six major cemeteries. Data from Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 230.

High numbers of combs were not consistently found across the entire life cycles of the cemeteries, though it is likely that major changes in the inclusion of combs were more to do with preservation rather than a shift in practice, especially if numbers of combs in later phases returned to similar levels as earlier phases. For example, Cleatham phases 1 and 2 had the highest percentage of combs of these six sites (Table 2). This fell sharply in phase 3,

Phase	% of combs
1	33.9
2	45.2
3	21.7
4	31
5	23.8

Table 2: Distribution of combs at Cleatham in phases. Data from Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 204.

but recovered in phases 4 and 5 (Table 2). Because of this dramatic fall and recovery, Kevin Leahy has argued it is best to assume the inclusion of combs was at a relatively high level throughout the use of the cemetery, from the mid-fifth to the late seventh century.[180] At Spong Hill, Phase 2 (c. 400-500 AD) has over 60% of the total Spong Hill combs, whereas the other phases have much lower levels: Phase 1, (c. 375-475 AD) has 16% of the total number of combs, Phase 3 (c. 450-550 AD), has 17% of the total, while Phase 4 (c. 475-600 AD) has only 5%.[181] It is possible that a similar explanation is also applicable.

In terms of the relationship between age and combs, at Elsham, Cleatham and Spong Hill combs were all most common in adult burials.[182] At Spong Hill 191 of the combs were found with adult graves, forty-one with subadults and twenty-six with infants.[183] At Elsham, combs in combinations with beads were found in equally high numbers in subadult burials (0-18 years).[184] Spong Hill was the only cemetery which has a strong association between a certain type of comb and age. At Spong Hill, barred zoomorphic combs are much more common with subadults and infants rather than adults.[185] This is the only cemetery which has enough evidence to demonstrate a true association – six barred zoomorphic combs were found in Newark, but only one of them was found with a child's remains.[186]

Combs in cremations seem to have been deposited equally with male and female remains. Sancton shows no general associations with age or sex.[187] At Elsham there is no female/male bias, but there are more combs that occur in female graves in the raw data, purely because the cemetery has greater number of graves sexed as female.[188] The split at Spong Hill is also even, with a slight female bias, with forty-one combs being found in male

[180] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 204.
[181] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX,* table 2.22, 142.
[182] 148 adult and 63 subadult burials. Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 167.
[183] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 144.
[184] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham,", 117 and 231.
[185] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX,* table 2.20, 121.
[186] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 54.
[187] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276.
[188] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," Fig. 6.31, 172.

or ?male graves, and fifty-nine graves found in female or ?female graves.[189] In total, grave goods were recovered from 67% of the cremations at Spong Hill,[190] in 85% of female and 70% male-identified graves with grave goods.[191] At Cleatham, combs were the most frequently occurring artefact type in male burials, though not by a significant number.[192] At Sancton, five of the combs have been sexed to belong to female graves, compared to three for male.[193] Because of the low numbers, it is impossible to say whether this difference is meaningful. It is likely that similar to the other cemeteries, there is not an overwhelming bias towards their inclusion in male or female graves.

The most consistently available data across all sites is in relation to the design of the comb, especially whether the comb is single or double sided (Table 3). At Cleatham single-sided combs were preferred, with 70.4% of all combs being single-sided.[194] Leahy has suggested this favouring of single versus double-sided was related to dating because at Castledyke South (North Lincolnshire), a primarily inhumation cemetery from a later phase, 81.8% of combs were double, rather than single-sided.[195] The majority of single-sided combs from this cemetery were also found in the earliest phase.[196] It might be that the prevalence for single or double-sided combs was related to differences in their function. Alternatively, it may indicate different, more localised, choices or customs.

At Sancton, out of the fifteen graves with combs that were excavated as part of the 1976-80 excavations, seven have been identified as single-sided, while only two are double-sided.[197] From the 1954 excavation, seven of the combs were indeterminate, fourteen of them

[189] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 144.
[190] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 86.
[191] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII*, 88.
[192] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham,", 237.
[193] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276.
[194] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 205.
[195] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 205.
[196] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 206.
[197] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276.

single-sided and only one double-sided.[198] In total at the cemetery, twenty-one combs were single-sided compared to three double-sided. In line with the single-sided comb distribution at Cleatham, 211 combs from Spong Hill were single-sided, compared to twenty-one double-sided combs.[199] At Caistor-by-Norwich, two combs are double-sided (E14ii and D10).[200] Twenty-three combs out of twenty-seven are single sided.[201] Finally, at Newark, seven out of forty-nine combs are double-sided, while thirty-four are single-sided.[202] The data for style of combs at Elsham are not available.

Cemetery	**Single sided**	**Double sided**	**Unknown**
Spong Hill	211	21	62
Sancton	21	3	13
Caistor	23	2	2
Newark	34	7	15
Cleatham	143	56	91
Elsham	?	?	?
Total	**432**	**89**	**121**

Table 3: Single vs double-sided combs at six major cremation cemeteries. Data compilated by author.

It is difficult, due to the extremely fragmented nature of most of the evidence, to get a sense of the clear stylistic differences of each type of comb, beyond this basic analysis. However, data at Spong Hill has been able to be further separated by type quite effectively, divided into five sections and then sub-divided into a total of 25 categories.[203] It is possible that differences in comb design were dictated by general development of shifts in taste, at

[198]J. N. L. Myres, and William Herbert Southern, *The Anglo-Saxon Cremation Cemetery at Sancton, East Yorkshire* (Hull Museums, 1973), 36-104.
[199] Lucy and Riddler, *Spong Hill dataset collection* [data set].
[200] Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich*, 103-201.
[201] Myers and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich,* 103-201.
[202] Kinglsey, *Newark-on-Trent,* 19-72.
[203] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX,* table 2.20, 121.

Cleatham, double-sided combs become gently more popular during the period, though never outweigh the single-sided.[204] This is also mirrored at other places like West Stow, where the double-sided design becomes more prevalent in the sixth and seventh centuries.[205] Again at Cleatham, all barred zoomorphic combs that were discovered, were so in phase 1, underlining that their design is early,[206] and that certain types of combs were in favour at particular times.

The many small differences between each comb, in shape, size, decoration, indicates that personal taste was also an important factor. Even when influenced by local choices, for example the majority of combs at Spong Hill are single-sided triangular composite combs, there are still enough variations between each one that suggests people chose combs that they liked.[207] Importantly, it doesn't appear that a specific kind of comb design indicates a different positioning in the ritual, either in their placement in the urn or whether or not they were burned.[208]

Overall, combs were included in cremation urns evenly across the two-hundred year period when cremating was most active. The type of comb you were buried with was most likely related to when you died, and determined by cultural taste markers. There is more of an association between combs and adults, though this may be skewed by the generally low numbers of infants in cemeteries from this period. There is not a clear relationship between the comb and the sex, age or status of the deceased. Instead, the size and design of the cremation urn seems to have more of a relationship with social factors that were related to who the deceased was in life, and how this might have affected how they were remembered.[209]

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[204] Leahy, *The Pots,* 206.
[205] Importantly, the majority of the inhumations which contain combs are also dated to this period, and the prevalence of double-sided combs within such burials may be related to the general chronology. Leahy, *The Pots,* 206.
[206] Three fifths of the combs able to be phased. Leahy, *The Pots,* 206.
[207] Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 107.
[208] No associations between urn placement and comb type have been found.
[209] Timby, et al., "Sancton," 313.

Burning

If there are no clear markers that determine why combs were included in relation to sex, age, geographic location or relationship to other grave goods, analysing how the comb was treated before and during the rite helps clarify this question. Whether or not a comb was burnt helps us to place it within the timeline of the cremation rite.

Most of the combs used as part of the cremation rite were actually not burnt at all (Fig. 1.5), instead being added to either the cinerary remains while they were being collected, or placed in the urn before or after the remains. At Sancton, Caistor-by-Norwich, Cleatham and Newark there was clearly a preference for unburnt combs over burnt combs.[210] It is unclear if, at Elsham, the combs were burnt or unburnt, as they have never been subject to

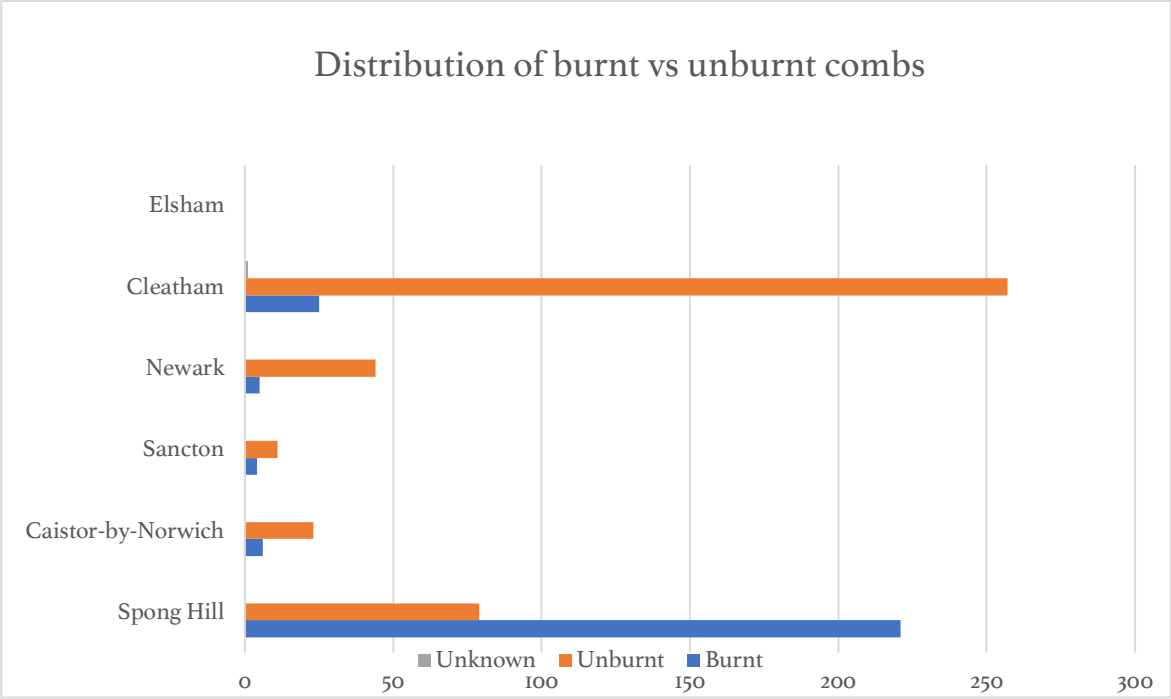

Fig. 1. 5: Bar chart displaying the distribution of burnt and unburnt combs across all six major cemeteries. Data compiled by author.

extensive investigation.[211] At Sancton, fifteen combs were recovered during the 1976-80

[210] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276; Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich*, 92' Leahy, *Cleatham* [data-set]; Kingsley, *Newark*, 27.
[211] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 165.

excavations, and this results in an overall figure of 63% of the combs being unburnt, and there are only four clear examples where the comb has been burnt – A924, A1170 (Fig. 1.6), MS47B and MS118A.[212] (The earlier excavations do not make a record of comb burning and

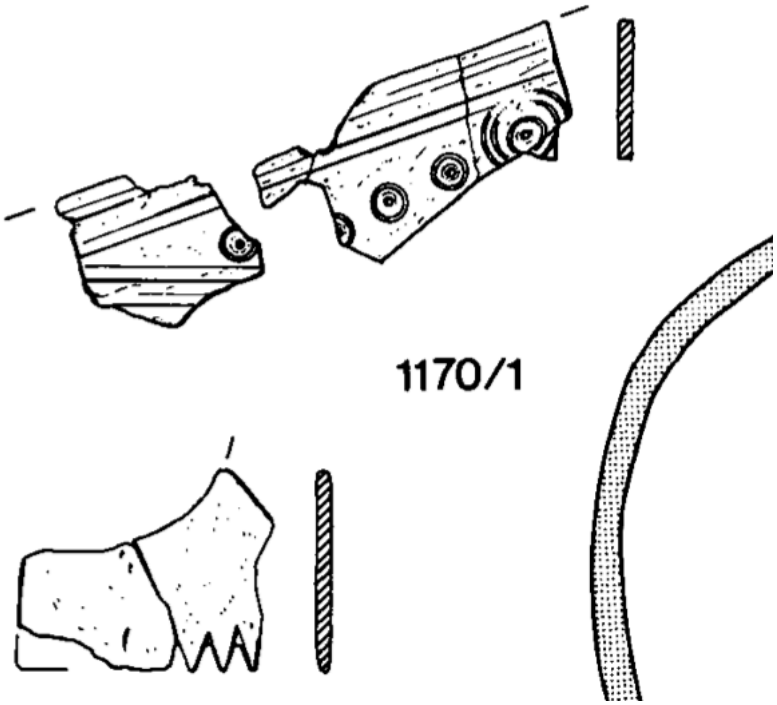

Fig. 1.6: Burnt comb fragment from urn 1170, Sancton. Timby et al., "Sancton," 331.

so are not counted in this). This might not seem particularly overwhelming. However, for the rest of the grave goods found at Sancton – 144 goods were recovered from ninety-four urns as part of the later excavations – almost all of them were burnt.[213] The combs were evidently treated differently to the rest of the grave goods, which were likely worn by the corpse. Burnt residue of these other grave goods was found on bones that suggested these items were placed on the body as they were used in life: glass beads were fused to rib fragments, and copper-alloy brooches were found on rib, vault and mandible bones.[214]

[212] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276.
[213] Timby et al., "Sancton," 298.
[214] Timby et al., "Sancton," 298.

While the body was dressed for cremation, laid supine on the pyre and extended with the arms across the chest, the combs at Sancton were kept separate.[215]

The rest of the cemeteries, bar Spong Hill, reflect a similar story. In total, thirty-eight of the combs at Cleatham were burnt, leaving the vast majority unburnt.[216] The burnt combs, however, were generally found more complete than the unburnt, suggesting that unburnt combs may have gone through a process of deliberate fragmentation, or a different kind of destruction compared to the burning.[217] At Caistor-by-Norwich, only six out of twenty-seven urns contained combs affected by fire (meaning roughly 78% of combs were unburnt).[218] At Newark, combs (and toilet sets) are generally found unburnt.[219] Five combs are recorded as being burnt – 366ii, 386ii, 359i, 362i and 388i.[220]

The overwhelming emphasis of unburnt combs suggests that their inclusion in the cremation rite was not associated with items of clothing, and in the funerary rite they were not considered a dress accessory. The other grave goods, most of which were included on the pyre, suggest that there was a ceremonial aspect to the dressing of the corpse before it was added to the pyre. However, combs were not included in this. Given their frequent use during a person's lifetime to brush and neaten hair, it is perhaps surprising that they are not treated in a similar manner in death. The one exception is Spong Hill, where the majority of grave goods were burnt, with the exception of one antler ring, one spindle whorl, and seventy-nine combs (24% of the total combs).[221] Of the unburnt combs most were triangular, though not exclusively.[222] It is difficult to tell whether this shift in burnt or unburnt combs at Spong Hill indicates that the cremation rite there represented a different set of beliefs, or whether it was just another expression of a shared worldview.

[215] Timby et al., "Sancton," 298-9.
[216] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots*, 204.
[217] For example like at Timby et al., "Sancton," 276 and Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 19.
[218] E1, E14i, M13B, N10B, Y8B, no. 3. Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich*, 92.
[219] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 27.
[220] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 27.
[221] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 91.
[222] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII*, 91.

Some urns have more than one comb, and these examples help us understand that there were at least two different rites in which combs could be used in cremations, which were taking place concurrently. Urn E14 from Caistor-by-Norwich contains the remains of at least two combs – one burnt comb (Bi), a more complete, single-sided comb, and an unburnt, double-sided comb fragment (Bii).[223] The difference in comb design is interesting – the smaller fragment comes from the comb unaffected by fire, whereas the more complete fragments, including visible ring and dot designs, were burnt (Fig. 1.7 - redacted). This is possibly due to deliberate fragmentation of the unburnt pieces, which will be addressed

Fig. 1.7: Comb fragments and grave goods from urn E14, Caistor-by-Norwich. Image via Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich,* Fig. 2. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication of *Caistor-by-Norwich*.

[223] Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich,* 131.

later. The burnt comb was most likely placed on the body during the cremation, playing a different role in the rite, and perhaps was part of the dress assemblage.

Cleatham, like Caistor-by-Norwich, also has several examples where two combs, differently treated, were found in one urn. In total at the site, ten single deposit (graves with remains of one individual) urns had more than one comb. In six cases, one comb had been burnt and the other unburnt.[224] In two urns, both the combs had been burnt, and in three urns neither of the combs included were burned.[225] Though the numbers are small, when more than one comb is found in an urn, the likelihood is that the combs will be treated differently, having been part of separate aspects of the cremation rite. These fragments are then treated differently in the urn again, indicating several times during the cremation process where decisions about combs had to be made. Whether the comb was burnt or not, when the comb was included in the urn, how the comb was placed in the urn, whether the comb was broken or not, and what type of comb was included were all moments where the community mourning had to make a choice. Urn 296 contains an unburnt and burnt comb, the remains of both which were mixed throughout,[226] which suggests the unburnt comb remnants might have been scattered among the ashes on the pyre before being gathered into the urn. Urn numbers 306, 312, and 511 are also the same in that they all have a burnt and unburnt comb.[227] However, for urn 306 the unburnt comb fragments were placed on top of the remains.[228] Both combs were found beside urn 312 rather than mixed within, and in urn 511 the unburnt comb was once again placed on top of the remains, rather than mixed throughout, like the burnt comb.[229] The range of inclusions suggests that decisions about

[224] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 204.
[225] Leahy, *Interrupting the Pots,* 204.
[226] Leahy, *Cleatham,* [data set], Urn 296.
[227] Leahy, *Cleatham,* [data set], Urn 306, urn 312, urn 511.
[228] Leahy, *Cleatham,* [data set], Urn 306.
[229] Leahy, *Cleatham,* [data set], Urn 511.

how to deal with the combs were being engaged with constantly. Not everyone was automatically buried the same way.

The wider ritual would have been a dynamic, physically demanding event, one which accelerated the body's natural decay in a way that was 'visually spectacular'.[230] The process of cremating a person is labour intensive.[231] Estimates for the amount of wood required to cremate an adult range from a conservative 146kg to three times that amount. [232] There is evidence that the pyres at Spong Hill were constructed mainly with oak, with some hazel, alder, pine, ash and possibly hawthorn,[233] as well as evidence for both large wood and brushwood.[234] This corresponds to other anthropological research into cremation pyre construction, which typically consists of large logs filled in with smaller brushwood-type kindling to aid ignition, and also to open the pyre for air circulation to encourage the burning to continue.[235] This was especially important as remains at Spong Hill and Sancton show poor oxidation, which suggests that the pyres were not tended once they had been lit.[236] The process of cremating in the open air could last from anything from one hour, to a whole day.[237]

Where this burning took place is difficult to tell, as very few pyre sites have been found.[238] However, the cremated remains obviously indicate that the bodies were burnt at some point, and as a result of the melted grave goods and patterns of burning across the bones, we also know most people were burnt in full dress and lying supine.[239] After the corpse was burnt, ashes could be swept into the urns hot (demonstrating that the pyre must

[230] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 67.
[231] Leahy has argued that it was partly a result of the amount of labour involved in cremating a person that drove the gradual shift towards inhumations being the dominant funerary rite. Leahy, *The Pots,* 11.
[232] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 85.
[233] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII*, 82.
[234] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 82.
[235] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 82.
[236] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 84.
[237] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 89.
[238] A rare possible example can be found at Snape in Suffolk, where an area of fired clay has been theorised to be a pyre site. Mary Chester-Kadwell, *Early Anglo-Saxon Communities in the Landscape of Norfolk (*BAR British Series 481, 2009), 29.
[239] Leahy, *The Pots,* 298-9.

have been close to the burial plot, as shown by a few examples from Spong Hill),[240] or there was a period of waiting for the ashes to cool, or possibly cooling the remains artificially before adding them to the urns.[241] Similar patterns of burning on bones suggest that even if beliefs around the rite varied by location, the cremation technology remained consistent.[242] This theory is also strengthened when the weights of the remains are compared. Analysis undertaken by Squires has argued that urn weights at Cleatham are comparable to average weights at Elsham, Sancton and Spong Hill.[243] Not only was a similar cremation technique taking place, but it was rare to bury the remains of an entire cadaver.[244]

Given the labour involved in building a cremation pyre, it would be easier to transport the burnt remains to the cemetery, and have pyre sites closer to where the community lived, compared to constructing the pyre far from the settlement, and having to transport the unburnt body a long distance.[245] The movement of the burnt remains would have involved a procession from the pyre site to the cremation site, and the existence of combs that had fallen to the sides in some cremation urns at Cleatham may be evidence for this.[246] Multiple deposits at Cleatham have been suggested by Squires to be a practical decision because of how labour intensive a cremation would be, although proving that two individuals were cremated on the same pyre is difficult.[247]

Re-opening the grave in order to include more than one set of remains, burnt at a different time, was probably considered risky or dangerous, though it is likely that many parts of the burial process would have been considered dangerous. Transitional states, like death, are often treated with caution, and the use of ritual as part of them acts as a way to

[240] McKinley, *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 82.
[241] McKinley, *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 82.
[242] Leahy, *The Pots,* 296.
[243] 525g at Cleatham compared to 523g, 566g and 514g respectively. Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 198.
[244] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 199.
[245] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill, Part VIII,* 82.
[246] For instance, the comb down the side of Urn 724. Leahy, *Cleatham*, [data set]; Williams, *Death and Memory*, 87.
[247] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 264.

enforce order, and manage these feelings.[248] Because of the immediately destructive nature of the rite, cremation has also been suggested to represent a 'particularly powerful conception of the recently deceased as somehow a threat, perhaps a polluting presence…'[249] Anxiety around the safety of the rite may also be illuminated by the fact that once lit, it does not appear that people engaged with the cremation fires at all.[250] The avoidance of the pyre is not unusual for this period, underlining again that the body in a transitional process was a source of anxiety.[251] The external symbolism of these rites is a representation of safety, authority, order and a well-maintained social system.[252] Was the burning of the comb a symbol that demonstrated the destruction of the uncertainty and the triumph of the social order? These associations may have been heightened considering the role combs played in moving from one state to another during a person's life, as outlined in *Life*. It might have been natural for these associations to be even further emphasised in a more extreme transition.

The procession in the cremation rite, the amount of raw materials involved, and the importance of the combs as familiar and recognisable touchpoints during a ritual sequence brought people into a deliberately heightened state of emotion. While an explanation for why some combs were or weren't burnt is impossible, it is clear that making this choice was deliberate, and there was nothing accidental about the presence of combs on the pyre. It is possible that when combs were burnt, they were done so as part of a cleansing ritual. Small numbers of cremation urns which contain both burnt and unburnt combs allow us to consider that combs were used as part of different aspects of the cremation rite, and depending on their treatment on or off the pyre, had different meanings as part of the

[248] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 96.
[249] Hines, "Religion and Belief," 67.
[250] Squires, "Cleatham and Elsham," 289.
[251] McKinley et al., *Spong Hill Part VIII,* 84.
[252] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 99.

funeral. There was not one single rite in which combs were important. Instead, there were at least two distinct rituals, in both of which combs were a key part.

Breaking

The destructive power of the cremation rite and the shared symbolism that the burnt combs might have helped reinforce was not the only way combs were ritually destroyed. Sancton and Cleatham, and to a lesser extent Newark and Spong Hill, all contain examples where combs appear to have been deliberately broken.[253] This section will examine why, asking what happened to the fragments, why some were distributed among the ashes while others scattered on the top, and why combs had evidence of repair, if they were going to be snapped in the first place.

Assessing whether or not a comb has been deliberately broken, versus broken as a result of it being underground for over a thousand years, is difficult.[254] Nevertheless, the presence of saw marks, the consistency of the same aspects of the comb surviving, and some clear evidence where combs have been cut in half, with both halves remaining, do point to a rite in which a comb was broken on purpose, before being added to the urn. Most combs at Sancton, for example, were fragmented, which Jane Timby et al., have argued shows they

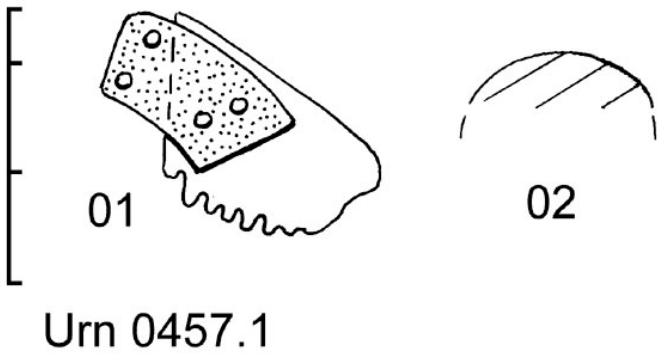

Fig. 1.8: Comb from urn 457, Cleatham. Leahy, Cleatham [data-set], ADS Collection 731.

[253] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276; Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, Fig. 18, 19; Riddler et al., *Spong Hill. Part IX*, 142.
[254] Williams, "Material culture as memory," 108.

were incomplete prior to their inclusion in burial.[255] At Newark, Kingsley has noted that the most common fragment to survive is the end plates.[256] This led him to suggest that fragments were deliberately chosen to include in the urns.[257] There are three examples that back up his argument – 40(i) was sawn into pieces, 6(ii) similarly treated, and 94(i) also appears to have been buried as a fragment, due to the lack of iron staining around the rivet holes.[258]

This is strengthened by the number of fragmented combs at other cemeteries. Most combs from Cleatham were fragmented. Urn 457 contains a comb that has been repaired twice using copper alloy (Fig. 1.8). The comb is unburnt and so would not have been placed on the funerary pyre, and so the fragmentation is not a result of the incendiary process. The piece of comb included has been broken along the previous repair line, with the copper-alloy mending strip still in place (also unburnt). This would have been a weak point in the comb, and it is possible that, if deliberately breaking, this would have been an ideal place to add pressure and snap. Also from Cleatham Urn 731 (Fig. 1.9) are two comb fragments from the same comb, one of which displays a clean line, as though it had been broken by a sharp object. The sharpness of the break suggests it was undertaken by a tool, though it may also

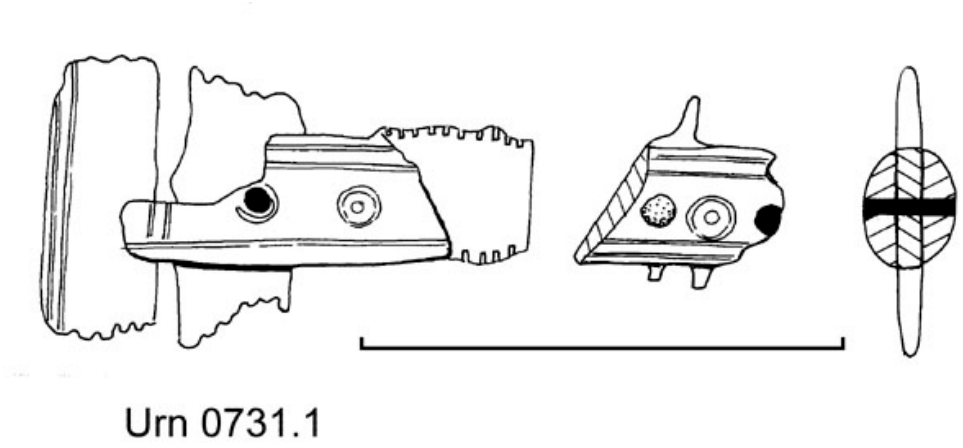

Fig. 1.9: Comb from urn 731, Cleatham. Leahy, Cleatham [data-set], ADS Collection 731.

[255] Timby et al., "Sancton," 276.
[256] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 19.
[257] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 19.
[258] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 19.

have been snapped.[259] The comb is composite, and the individual breaking the comb would have had to make their way through three layers of bone – if done by hand this would have been difficult to do in a way that was even throughout all three layers, and so it is likely that this comb was separated by a sharp object such as a knife or saw. Williams has argued, based on the general low levels of cremated bone found in the urns, that it was possible cremated bone of the deceased was sometimes circulated among the mourners.[260] Williams was discussing this in relation to the low weights of remains found in the urns at Spong Hill, but as already demonstrated, similar weights of cremated bone were included in the urns at all of the cemeteries.[261] If cremated bone of the deceased was circulated, and combs were being broken deliberately, would fragments of the comb also end up in circulation as mementos of the deceased?

This would have made been an especially potent memento if the comb was used by the deceased during their lifetime. Repair marks, like those on the comb from Cleatham urn 457 (Fig. 1.8), show that combs were used (though not necessarily by the deceased). The rounded teeth of many of the combs also suggests that they were used before being included in the rite, rather than being made especially for it. The familiarity of a household object being a key component of an end-of-life ritual might have served to heighten emotions during the funeral. The anthropologist and archaeologist Chris Gosden has argued that aesthetics and emotions are intertwined, as seeing a piece of art causes emotions, and as a result, aesthetic values are 'felt in the body as emotions.'[262] Combs were not the only object likely used in life before becoming meaningful in death – Gareth Perry's work on pots has

[259] Antler specifically is much harder to break when dry compared to wet, and would need a considerable force to separate the many layers of a comb. J D Currey, et al., "The Mechanical Properties of Red Deer Antler Bone When Used in Fighting," *Journal of experimental biology* 212, no. Pt 24 (2009): 3985–3993.
[260] Williams, *Death and Memory*, 87.
[261] 525g at Cleatham compared to 523g, 566g and 514g at Elsham, Sancton and Spong Hill. Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," 198.
[262] Chris Gosden, "Aesthetics, Intelligence and Emotions," in *Rethinking Materiality: the Engagement of Mind with the Material World,* eds. Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden, and Colin Renfrew (McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2004), 37.

shown that household pots were used as urns.[263] The use of objects in shaping and encouraging a specific response to a ritual, guiding the mourners into a heightened emotional state might have happened here. The presence of household objects in different yet familiar settings might have encouraged people to a specific kind of emotional response that does not survive in the material remains. Combs, then, which already were used in life and then placed, unburnt or burnt on the pyre or urn filled with cooled remains, might have helped hone this cognitive state which was brought on by the multi-sensory nature of an early medieval ritual.

The theatricality of breaking a comb is interesting to consider. Would the comb have been broken in front of an audience of mourners? If so, how would it have been viewed – if it was chopped then it would have to have been resting on a surface, but if it was close to the ground it would not have been visible by many people. Perhaps it was broken and the pieces held up for viewing. Interestingly, the comb from Urn 731 (Fig. 1.9) was mixed throughout the remains, suggesting that its deliberate fragmentation took place before the remains were collected and placed in the urn at the same time as them.[264] Anthropologists Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntingdon argue that death itself acts to literally sever relationships – those mourning become a 'psychological amputee,' who are 'reduced' by the trauma of having a loved one taken away from them.[265] The shattered combs could be an extension of this feeling of grief – especially heightened if the comb was, as Williams positions, an important mnemonic device,[266] and also an object that was used closely on the physical body of the deceased in their life.

[263] G. Perry, "A hole for the soul? Possible functions of post-firing perforations and lead plugs in early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns", in *Make Do and Mend: The Archaeology of Compromise?* B. Jervis and A. Kyle, eds. (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2009), 43-52.
[264] Leahy, *Cleatham* [data-set], Urn 731.
[265] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge University Press Online, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803178.006, 82.
[266] Williams, "Material culture as memory," 89.

This personal connection might be most explicitly (and most unusually) emphasised in graves 576 and 577 at Cleatham. Here, fragments of the same comb are found across both burials. In 577 the fragments are mixed throughout the urn, whereas in urn 576 the comb fragments are on top of the urn.[267] It is not clear if these were burnt at the same time, or if the comb was added to the urns at different times. However, this may be evidence of a comb being distributed among the living, and then included in another person's grave. The comb may have been split across two urns as a result of the same time of death (though that information is not available), or if they were particularly close in life, or for another reason now lost.

If symbols act as vehicles for conception,[268] then destruction is symbolically emphasised multiple times in the cremation rite. Not only by the breaking down of the body, but also the breaking or burning of the comb. Clifford Geertz argues that these symbols are essential in creating order, enabling one to cope even with 'the gravest sort of anxiety.[269] The combs did not just represent who someone had been, but were a tool, and the breaking of them was part of a closing rite where the living were presented with even further physical evidence of the fragmentation of the deceased – first broken down by the fire and then symbolically broken apart through an object closely associated with the physicality of the body. These were physical embodiments of emotional pain.

In contrast, the shattering of the comb might not represent the end of the deceased's life, but work as a symbol of protection for the living. Work on ritualized doors in Viking Age Scandinavia, undertaken by Marianne Hem Eriksen has shown how graves were places of anxiety because they were points where people could access the space of the dead, and seals, like doors, would have been needed to control access between the living and the

[267] Leahy, *Cleatham* [data set]. Urns 576 and 577.
[268] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Fontana Press, 1993), 91.
[269] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 99.

dead.[270] At times this could have been as a result of a desire for connection. Feasting at the graveside suggested a shared sensory experience between the living and the dead,[271] or even taking parts of the cremated body or shattered comb with you could have indicated a desire to remain connected. On the other, it could be a type of protection,[272] a need to be kept safe from the dead or to try to control the space between the worlds. The comb breaking might symbolise the creation of a seal or the severing of the relationship between both.

If early medieval pagans in the British Isles had a pluralistic belief of the soul,[273] then the comb breaking at the end of the rite may have either acted as a symbol of the final journey beginning, but also to ensure that the soul did not try to return to its corpse. If the body or soul of the deceased has a final journey to undertake once the remains are interred, then the comb fragmentation might not have just had a role in demonstrating to the mourners that the body was complete, it might have acted as a kind of protective seal, possibly confusing the travelling soul so that it could not return to its body.[274] The comb fragments, then, don't just act as symbols for the living but to confuse the dead, protecting the living from someone returning to it.

Given that many of the broken comb fragments are found on top, or distributed throughout, the urn, the shattering of the comb likely took place as part of the closing series of rites for the medieval cremation. Breaking the comb was a final symbol – either mirroring

[270] Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 187–214.
[271] Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 204.
[272] Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 205.
[273] Common in pagan societies that modern anthropologists have studied – i.e. the Samí, often divided between a 'breathsoul' and a 'free soul' – the breath soul typically leaves the body at the time of death, whereas the free soul stays until the corpse has collapsed completely. Early Christian writings also contain images of the soul as birds, like Bede comparing the soul of a Christian to a swallow, and the Seafarer and Wanderer poems invoking this imagery. Alexandra Sanmark, "Ancestors and the Soul," in Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark and Sarah Semple (eds.), *Signals of Belief: paganism in early England* (Oxbow Books: 2010), 161-162.
[274] A lack of grave markers for cremation urns might support this theory, though more work needs to be done in relation to this in England. Karen Høilund-Nielsen has argued that in Scandinavian cemeteries, the general lack of grave markers indicates that the dead were not thought to remain in their graves after the burial rite had taken place – they were separated from the 'known world' and passed on. Karen Høilund-Nielsen, "Rituals to free the spirit – or what the cremation pyre told," in *Mortuary practices and social identities in the Middle Ages: essays in burial archaeology in honour of Heinrich Härke,* D. Sayer and H. Williams, eds. (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 102.

the destruction of the physical body or acting as a way to protect the living, powerful because of the connection between the comb and the deceased. Regardless of the reasoning behind it, deliberate comb fragmentation in many guises was a key part of the rite.

Bestowing

Combs are wilfully destroyed in multiple ways as part of the cremation rite. They are burnt and broken. However, their destruction is not always a factor for their inclusion. Small numbers of dummy and miniature combs in cremation urns indicate that combs were not only included in the funerary rite to destroy. Having something that looked like a comb, and that inhabited the essence of a comb, may have been more important than having one that worked.

These combs are either too small to use properly (miniature), or combs that are full sized but are unusable, because their teeth are too roughly cut, or they are clearly unfinished (dummy).[275] At Spong Hill, the combs are described as 'single-sided simple combs,' and are divided into two groupings – symbolic and functional.[276] I consider that given all combs in the cremation rite held a symbolic function, this is not fitting as a descriptor in these cases, and Leahy's description of them as dummy combs is more useful.[277] At Spong Hill, these dummy single-sided simple combs are overwhelmingly associated with infants, and the ones still able to comb hair with adults.[278]

Cleatham has both miniature and dummy combs. There were 18 miniature objects from nine urns and two graves, and nine dummy objects were found in six urns. Out of these, two were dummy combs and three were miniature combs.[279] All of the objects were

[275] Leahy, *The Pots*, 213.
[276] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX,* 144.
[277] Leahy, *The Pots*, 213.
[278] Riddler et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 144.
[279] Leahy, *The Pots*, 213.

unburnt.[280] Interestingly, the combs were found across all five phases of use.[281] Out of the fifteen excavated combs at Sancton in the 1970s, two were miniature single sided combs (A488 and the stray find).[282] The comb from urn A488 belong to an adult male, and it was also found with iron tweezers and unfinished miniature copper-alloy shears.[283] There is a similar example from urn R12 at Caistor-by-Norwich. The comb itself is unburnt and appears unused, suggesting that it was made to be associated with the miniature grooming set. There was one other miniature comb at the cemetery, X 23E. Both combs were made from a single piece of bone, though analysis of the bones has not been undertaken, and it is not clear if these were included in infant burials.[284] Based on the urn style, these have both been dated to the mid-fifth century. [285] At Newark, a fragment from 208 (i) includes a comb that could be non-functional, and the cemetery has four miniature combs, three of which are pierced, as though for suspension.[286]

[280] Leahy, *The Pots*, 213.
[281] Table 88, Leahy, *The Pots,* 212.
[282] Timby et al., "Sancton I," 276.
[283] Timby et al., "Sancton I," 276.
[284] Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich,* 97.
[285] Myres and Green, *Caistor-by-Norwich,* 97.
[286] Kingsley, *Newark-on-Trent*, 20.

Fig 1.10: Single-sided 'miniature' and 'dummy' combs from Spong Hill. Image via Forbes et al., *Spong Hill IX*, 130. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication of *Spong Hill*.

Only four out of over 200 combs found at Spong Hill have been labelled as symbolic, or non-functional. However, I think their presence is worth examining further. Out of eight combs placed into a 'single-sided simple comb' definition, four of them fit the dummy designation, whereas the other four are functional, or miniature (Fig. 1.10). Only one of the functional combs has any decoration at all, with small ring-and-dot motifs running along

the edge, along with an iron suspension ring and suspension loop.[287] Most are triangular in shape, with two carved in a semi-circle. They are, thanks to the simplicity of their design and the crudeness of the way they were made, most likely to have been carved by unskilled tradesmen, or perhaps even by the relatives of the deceased. Combs from C1454 and C1500/2 have scored lines running close to their apices (Fig. 1.10), suggested remnants of guidelines that were cut with a knife, but guidelines that someone ran out of time or inclination to finish smoothing all the way down. Despite their plain nature, the rounded teeth of the functional comb division suggests wear, implying that they had been used before burial on numerous occasions.[288]

The hasty construction apparent on the combs with guidelines (1454/5 for instance) hints that their presence in the urn or on the pyre was more important than their aesthetic form. What's more, their teeth are too short to grab hair and show no signs of wear.[289] These combs were not meant to be used but they were still deemed important to include, even if enough time was not available to construct them in an aesthetic way. The existence of these non-functional combs in general, then, can help us understand the importance that combs had in the rite, outside of their use as functional objects in life. The presence of the *form* of the comb was the important symbol, necessary for creating order amongst disordered emotions of grief.[290]

Simple single-sided combs were not solely buried with infants, but they often were: three out of the four dummy combs at Spong Hill were included in infant burials.[291] Urn C2414 contains two bodies and two combs. They are both infants. One comb is designated as symbolic (2414a) as the teeth are too close together to be able to move through hair. The other is indeterminate due to fragmentation. Both combs have these horizontal guidelines,

[287] C2773/4 – Forbes et al., *Spong Hill Part IX,* 130.
[288] Forbes et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX,* 132.
[289] Forbes et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 131.
[290] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 99.
[291] Forbes et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 133.

the rough sketch perhaps of what they *should* look like. Despite their imperfections, it is clear that someone wanted them in the urns. It also was not enough to have one comb in one urn – each infant had to have their own. They may have been able to share a resting place (this is not uncommon – other urns held remains from more than one individual), but they clearly needed a comb each.[292] The youth of the owners of these combs might indicate that they were not old enough to own their own comb yet. If this was the case, then it suggests that after their untimely death, the presence of the comb was so required that those close to the deceased scrambled to find one to bury with them. Crispin Sartwell has argued that in many cultures, ritual objects 'must be made with great skill and must conform to traditionally specified configurations.'[293] Many combs were elaborately made. Even a plain composite comb with minimal decoration would have had to be pieced together carefully, and in order to be able to carve the fine teeth, skill would have been involved.[294] But these objects reveal that ritual objects did not always have to be perfect. They could have made combs from wood, perhaps a more forgiving material, and perhaps this is what others did. Instead, they chose bone or antler. They rushed the construction. Much has been said about the practicality of infant cremations – smaller pyres would have used fewer resources, and societies might have been more reluctant to share resources with those who have not 'fulfilled their social role.'[295] In general, children and infants are underrepresented in cemeteries, prompting some to suggest that for the most part, they were buried in different ways.[296] Further arguments have been made for children being more likely to be buried in possible ritual deposits in the home, or water deposits.[297] These unskilled combs, however, show that not only were surviving infant burials treated with as much care as their adult

[292] Forbes et al., *Spong Hill, Part IX*, 133.
[293] Crispin Sartwell, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics,* ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2003), 762.
[294] For a debate on the itinerant versus local combmaker, Ashby's PhD thesis contains a useful summary of scholarship. Ashby, "Time, trade and identity,"32-36.
[295] Squires, "Cleatham and Elsham," 272.
[296] Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham,"255.
[297] Hamerow, "'Special Deposits,'" 254.

counterparts, but also that the comb was a symbolically significant object that had a role far beyond its ability to comb hair. The presence of these imperfect combs seems to reveal the depths of emotions that were experienced in funerals. The need for the cremation to be complete and correct outweighed the need for a beautiful item – the ritual function was more important than its precise form.

Conclusion

Analysis of the data reveals two key things. Firstly, combs were the most common object in cremations. Secondly, they were equally popular for both males and females. There were, however, several variations in the ways that combs were treated, depending on when and how they were included in the cremation urn or pyre. The destructive nature of the cremation rite as a whole is mirrored in the destructive way most combs were dealt with. Although we have seen that multiple combs were used in at least two different rites, at the centre of each was a way to destroy the comb – to break or burn it.

The combs in cremations might have acted as proxies for the deceased's soul, and could have been seen as equally dangerous and polluting. On the other hand, these combs could have been protective, and fragments of them taken by the mourners to ensure they are kept safe from any lingering spirits. Their inclusion and deliberate shattering could mark the separation between the living and the dead, a symbol for the bereaved so that they were able to move onto the next phase of their mourning.[298] Their significance in the early medieval cremation rite could have been a result of the way they were used in life, as objects that maintained boundaries on the body, but also kept people clean.

Translating any kind of cohesive funerary rite from the fragments of evidence that remain is difficult, and to understand the full extent of these practices is impossible. We can

[298] Asa Larsson, "Breaking and Making Bodies and Pots. Material and Ritual Practices in Sweden in the Third Millennium BC", *Department of Archaeology and Ancient History* (Aun 40, Uppsala, 2009), 348.

examine the leftovers of rituals even if we cannot get at the social rules that governed them.[299] Instead, the roughly one-hundred-year period when cremation was a popular way to dispose of the dead was filled with a huge variation in rite. While the act of burning the body was the same, within that framework there appears to be few uniting factors. Instead, this variation points to a lively and local series of customs, which likely reflected the complex ways that early medieval people thought about themselves and their place in the world.

Nevertheless, because there is such a focus on destroying the combs, whether that is through breaking or burning, I suggest that this was a key point of the rite. This destruction mirrors the destruction of the corpse – while we cannot understand the reasons a medieval person considered this important, the combs still show evidence that a dramatic symbol of severance between living and dead was important.

[299] John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (Duckworth, 2001), 15.

Inhumations

Combs were not used for only one reason in the cremation rite. Instead, combs were involved in at least two different rites, and these rites were not interchangeable or mutually exclusive, but rather, were related to at least two distinct series of actions. The key point for both of them however was in relation to their destruction, which was intended to mirror the destruction of the corpse, in an alternative spectacle.

Combs in inhumations, while resembling the combs used in cremations, do not represent the same set of significances. These objects play a different role, and this section will explore that. It will look at the difference between male and female grave assemblages and question why they are found more with female graves, and what their presence might indicate in the rare male graves they are found in. It will examine the placement within the graves itself, why they might be placed within containers for some, and on display in others. It questions their role in the inhumation rite more generally, considering how combs might be viewed by the community that witnessed the burial of one of their members. Combs as luxury objects, ritualized uses of combs, combs as gifts and the specific relationship between combs and women are all things brought into consideration by the evidence.

The data from the graves selected is first presented, before the process of inhumation is examined. How the combs were found in the graves is considered in order to make inferences about when they would have been used during the funerary process. The difference between male and female inhumations and the relationship between combs and grave wealth or status is then explored, before combs in early Christian inhumation graves are considered. Although they exist in fewer numbers than in cremations, combs in inhumations stretch across the conversion period, suggesting their use was a long-established social practice.

Data

This section primarily makes use of the extensive survey of early medieval grave goods undertaken by John Hines and Alex Bayliss, which was first published in 2013 and made available through a searchable dataset online in the same year.[300] This is primarily for reasons of practicality – the combs as part of this survey have been organised through seriation and, in several cases, radiocarbon dated,[301] providing a strong backdrop to assess change over time. This is not a comprehensive survey of all combs included in early medieval inhumations, but relies on the data already collected. However, the combs as part of this dataset are indicative of wider trends. In total, there are nineteen sites where combs were found in inhumations, out of a total of 224, meaning only 8.5% of the sites surveyed between the fifth and seventh centuries contained combs in inhumations.[302] In total, this is thirty-eight combs. Two extra combs from Castledyke South have been added to the analysis, which will be discussed later on.

Within the sites that did contain combs as part of inhumation assemblages, they are still not common objects. For example, at Edix Hill, out of the seventeen inhumations surveyed, only two contained combs.[303] At Buckland, similarly low numbers are found, with only three combs found across seventy-four inhumations.[304] However, the graves chosen to be surveyed by Bayliss and Hines should also be considered carefully, as the sample tends to focus on relatively well-furnished and well-dated graves. At Coddenham, only one grave was included in the Hines survey, yet there are four bed burials in that location, with three of them containing combs.[305] Sutton Hoo is another example where there are many combs found, but only two inhumations have been included in the Hines and Bayliss survey. At

[300] Bayliss, et al., *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods*, and Hines, *Anglo-Saxon Graves,* [data set].
[301] This however also was driven by suitability of remains able to be radiocarbon dated, and so this sample has generally strong regional biases. Christopher Scull, "The Project," *Anglo-Saxon Graves,* 98.
[302] Bayliss et al., *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods*, 3, and Hines, *Anglo-Saxon Graves,* [data set].
[303] Tim Malim and John Hines, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Edix Hill (Barrington A), Cambridgeshire,* CBA Research Report 112 (Council for British Archaeology, 1998).
[304] Vera I Evison, *Dover: The Buckland Anglo-Saxon Cemetery* (Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, 1987).
[305] Kenneth Penn, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Shrubland Hall Quarry, Coddenham, Suffolk* (Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service in conjunction with ALGAO East, 2011), 24.

Lowbury Hill and Ford, which are barrow burials, both contain combs.[306] However, because of their assemblage and grave location, they are still unusual graves.

Although there are some places with relatively high numbers of combs, the majority of inhumations that contain combs are on the low end of the scale, and the large variation in percentage numbers from cemetery to cemetery is enough to suggest significant regional differences. In total, combs occur across these inhumation burials 14% of the time. Howard Williams has also surveyed this difference between combs in cremation cemeteries compared to inhumation cemeteries, and his working has also underlined the vast discrepancy in the appearance of combs across the two rites (Fig. 1.11).

Both cremations and inhumations were in use as practices during the fifth to seventh centuries, though cremations do occur more towards the earlier end of the time scale, whereas combs in inhumation burials generally are found towards the latter end, predominantly being focused in the sixth and seventh centuries.[307] Nonetheless, people continued to be burnt with combs or had combs placed in their cremation urns, at the same

[306] Donald Atkinson, *The Romano-British Site on Lowbury Hill in Berkshire* (Reading: University College, 1916), 19; John Musty, "The Excavation of Two Barrows, One of Saxon Date, at Ford, Laverstock, near Salisbury, Wiltshire," *Antiquaries journal* 49, no. 1 (1969): 101.
[307] E.g. Sancton, Newark and Spong Hill. Squires, "Elsham and Cleatham," Fig. 1.1, 5.

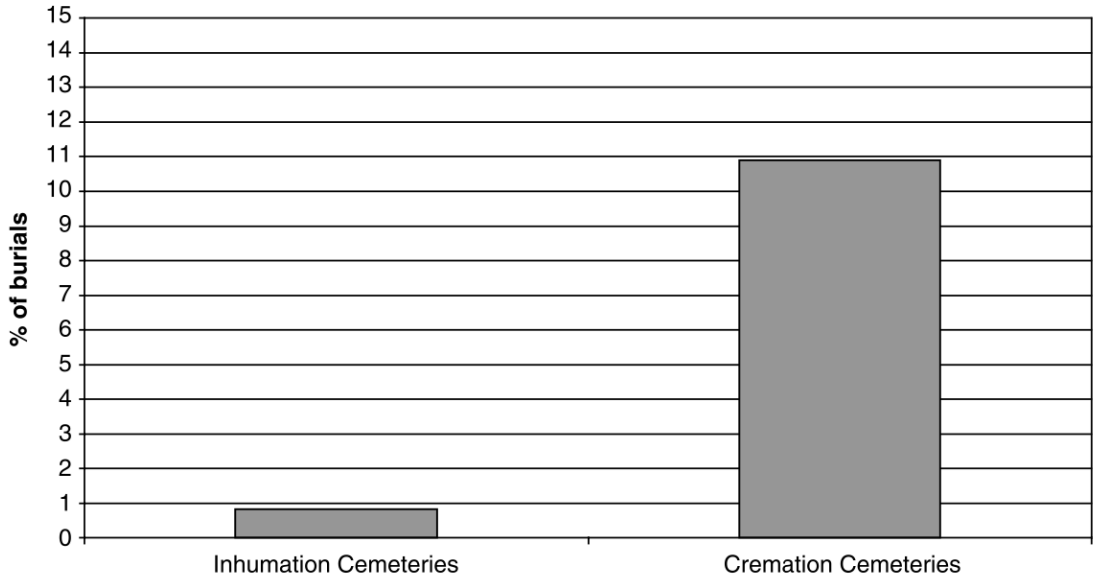

Fig. 1.11: Relative frequency of combs in cremation and inhumation contexts: 543 combs from sample of 4,981 cremation burials and 25 combs from a sample of 3,011 inhumation burials. Graph from Williams, "Material Culture as Memory," 113.

time as the majority of people were inhumed without one. Combs in inhumations were not common, but their inclusion was not a practice that replaced combs in cremations – these objects were included in different rites for different reasons.

If combs were unusual, then, it is worth questioning briefly whether or not they were found in other unusual burials of the time. Andrew Reynolds's survey of deviant burials examines burials from the early medieval period, referring to burials of people who were 'considered somehow different, and perhaps dangerous to the living in distinctive ways,' especially focusing on those who had been othered by the societies they lived in or on the fringes of.[308] The graves of those who were buried in ways that were unusual also contained grave goods, though they were usually restricted to dress accessories, with buckles found mainly at the hips and pelvis, and rings found on the fingers.[309] Combs were not included in any of the burials examined by Reynolds at all.[310]

[308] Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.
[309] Reynolds, *Deviant Burial Customs,* Appendix 3.14, 270-71.
[310] Reynolds, *Deviant Burial Customs,* Appendix 3.14, 270-71.

If combs are a marker of an unusual burial, their inclusion is not associated with deviant burials. Furthermore, combs could often be worn on the person.[311] If those buried as part of a deviant burial were dressed, any other dress accessories they might have worn, like a comb, were deliberately removed. Combs were unusual but they were important enough to be taken off the corpse, or the body, before its execution, and set to one side. Clearly, the inclusion of the comb in the grave was deliberate, but also this choice was made within a set of boundaries or rules that were understood by the communities that were burying people in this two-hundred year span. Combs could be buried as part of an unusual funerary rite, but the reason the rite was unusual could not be because of a deviant burial in any way.

If combs were unusual, but not included in deviant burials, then which burials were they included in, and why?

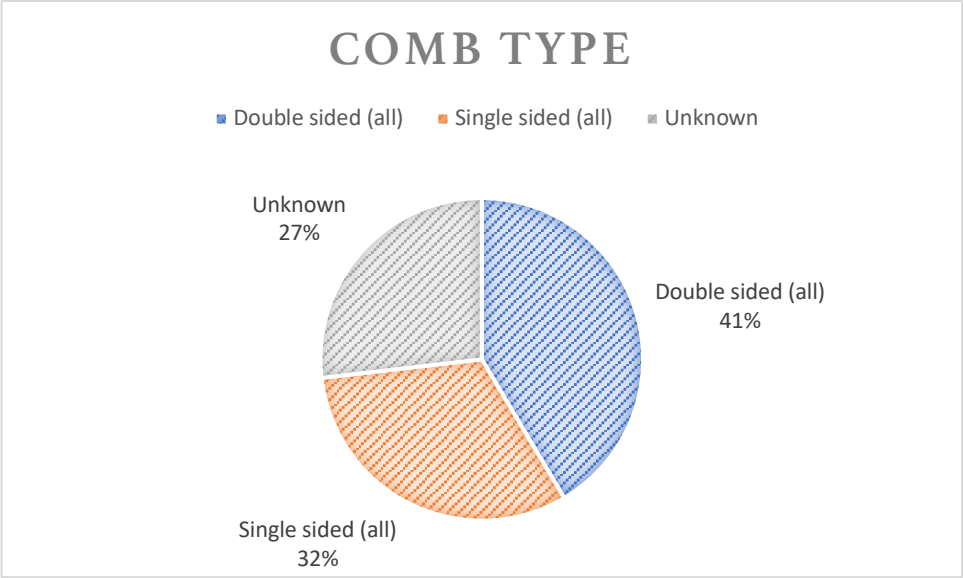

Fig. 1.12: Pie chart demonstrating the difference in comb type. Data from Bayliss and Hines.

Comb style

[311] The existence of comb cases implied they were carried around, as does their appearance near the waist or with suspension holes. Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life,* 108.

Combs from this period are made in a variety of different styles, broadly divided into two formal groups – single- or double-sided. For the cremation rite, the style of comb did not appear to have a bearing on the reason why it was included, save for the simple single-sided combs, or dummy combs, that were not able to comb hair. There are no such examples of these combs found in inhumations, and I would suggest that in a similar way, comb design in the inhumation rite does not have much of a bearing on the reason for their inclusion. There does not appear to be an overwhelmingly strong emphasis either way on single- or double-sided combs. According to my survey, double-sided combs were slightly more popular, though in most cemeteries there are mixes of both (Fig. 1.12).[312] All the combs examined were composite, however, and there were no merely decorative or non-functional combs as there are occasionally in cremations, such as at Spong Hill.[313] Interestingly, there is no prevalence of single- or double-sided combs with either sex (Fig. 1.14). For female inhumations, there were eight single and twelve double-sided combs, with eleven indeterminate.[314] For males, there are four single and five double-sided.[315] There is a slight bias towards double-sided combs found in male inhumations. However, at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, three combs were found, one being double-sided and two being single-sided.[316]

[312] For example, out of the six combs studied from Castledyke South, four are double-sided and two are single-sided. G Drinkall and Martin Foreman, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 38, 44, 52, 72, 89, 94.
[313] Forbes et. Al, *Spong Hill, Part IX,* 130.
[314] The single-sided combs were BuD030, CasD013, Bur032, Bur083, Bur121, GarS12, Cod30, KiD299. The double-sided were Fin138, BuD110, Lec018, Lec145/2, EH014, EH091, CasD031, CasD183, CasDI, MelSG065, MelSG082, Mel09.
[315] The single-sided combs were CasD129, Low, SutH01/b, SutH01/c. Double-sided were EmpII045, F02, CasD055, SutH/7, SutH01/a.
[316] Bruce Mitford and Rupert Leo Scott, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: a Handbook* (British Museum, 1968), 216.

Comb placement

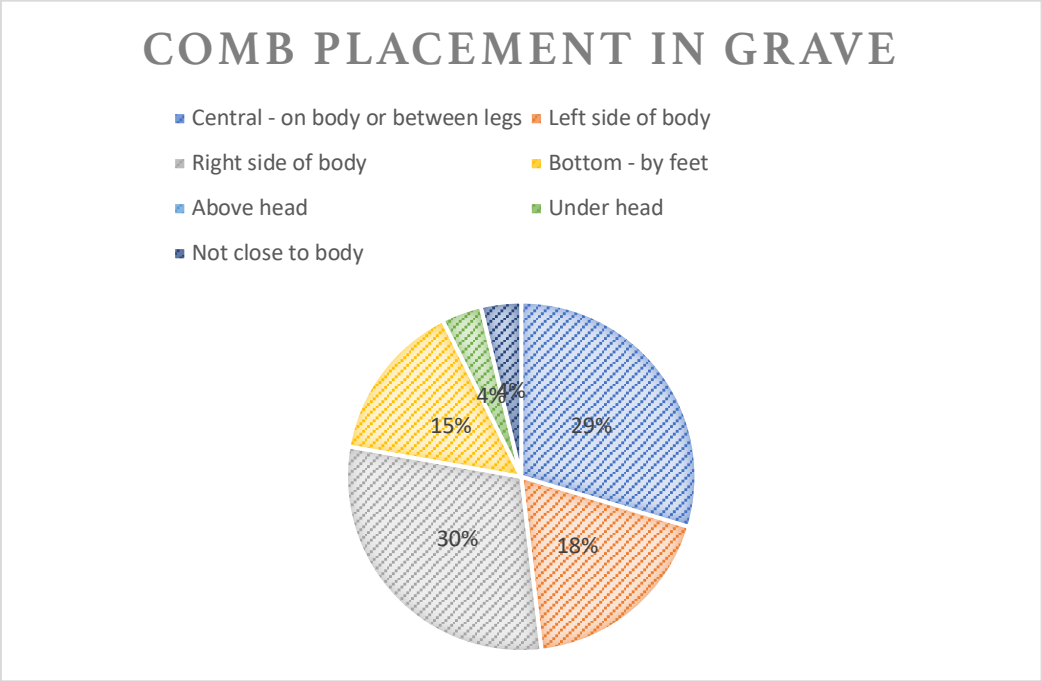

Fig. 1.13: Pie chart demonstrating variation in comb placement in the grave. Data from Bayliss and Hines.

Comb placement within the grave was also considered, as where and how the comb was placed in the grave could indicate how the comb was included during the inhumation rite. This will be further expanded on in *Transformation*. It provided by far the most varied results, with there being few examples of combs appearing in exactly the same place in a grave. The categories in Fig. 1.13 are broadly generalised, but even within them there was a lot of fluctuation. The most popular choices were either placing combs on the body, between the legs, or along the right side of the body. There are no apparent regional or chronological trends that dictate these choices. (This is not including the eighteen graves for which the comb placement is not recorded, as the inclusion of graves where it is not recorded would dominate the rest of the findings.) There is an increase in dress items deposited in bags/boxes instead of being worn on the body c. 660-80 AD,[317] and so this might have

[317] Scull, "Chronology, Burial and Conversion," 78.

impacted the way combs were discarded – for the later burials, combs are more commonly found in boxes especially in female-sexed graves.

Sex

In cremations, combs are found in relatively balanced numbers across both male and female cremation urns.[318] By contrast, in inhumations combs are overwhelmingly associated with females. [319] Out of all the combs found in inhumations in the sixth and seventh centuries, 70% of those combs are found in female graves, whereas only 17% of them are found in male graves (Fig. 1.14).

Does this mean that combs are somehow representative of early medieval womanhood? Gender and sex are not the same thing – the former being a social construct partly articulated through the material world.[320] If gender is constructed through this

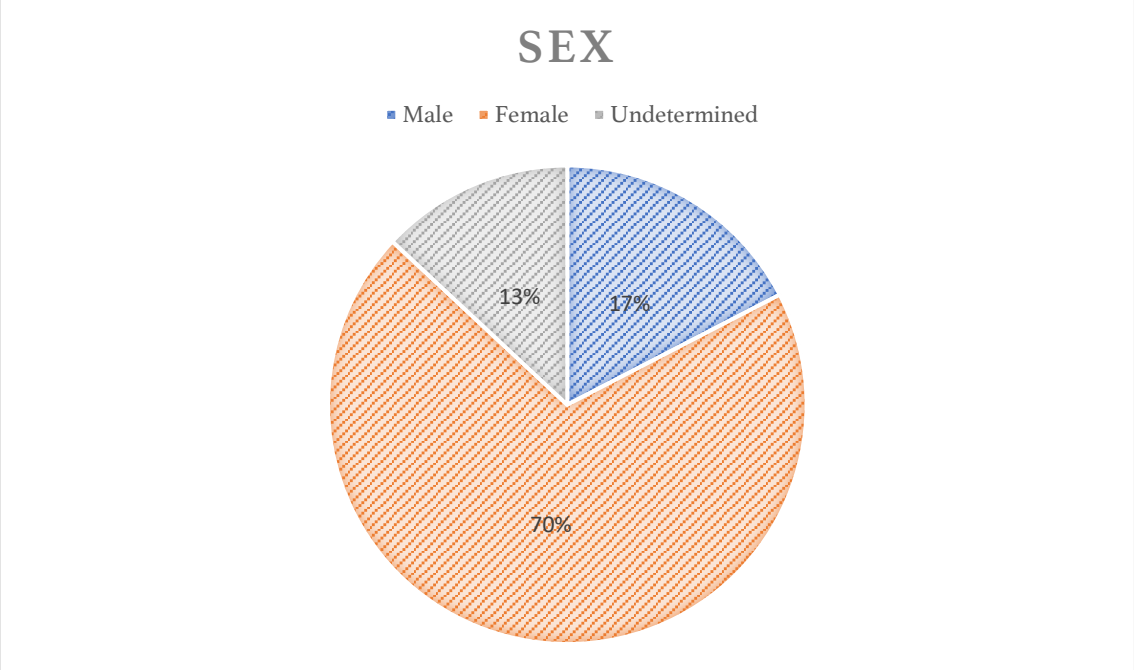

Fig. 1.14: Pie chart showing the split between male and female inhumations from the Bayliss and Hines' sample.

[318] Williams, "Material culture as memory," 112.
[319] Nick Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear: A Critical Enquiry into the Construction and Meaning of Gender in the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite* (BAR British Series, 1999), 33.
[320] For a more detailed discussion of sex and gender, especially in the medieval world, see Stoodley, *Spindle and the Spear,* especially chapter 1.

material world, and combs are an important symbol of womanhood across early medieval societies, it would surely have resulted in higher numbers of combs being found across inhumations, and a more weighted association with female cremations, which has been demonstrated not to be true. Furthermore, combs are not considered a key part of grave-sexing processes, as they are not considered dress accessories.

However, this data covers a two-hundred year period, and 70% of combs found in female inhumations represents the total percentage across the entirety of this timespan. It is plausible that there were trends in comb inclusion, and these trends might help us understand to a greater degree why combs were being placed into graves, and when. For instance, were combs always more likely to be found as part of female grave assemblages, or was this a trend that started with male burial practices and was eventually adopted?

Phase 1 – 400-570 AD	**Phase 2 – 570 – 650 AD**
Empingham 45, 525-550 (calAD, 95%)	Castledyke South 13, 570-630 (calAD, 95%)
Lechlade 18, 540-575 (calAD, 95%)	Melbourn, MelSG082, 595-650 (calAD, 95%)
Edix Hill 14, 545-574 (calAD, 95%)	**Sutton Hoo Mound 1,** 595-635 (calAD, 95%)
	Sutton Hoo Mound 17, 595-635 (calAD, 95%)
	Castledyke South 183, 600-650
	Ford, 620-650
	Coddenham 30, 635-660 (calAD, 95%)
	Bloodmoor Hill, c. 649.
	Edix Hill, 650-670 (calAD, 95%)
	Burwell 032, Mid-late 7th century
	Burwell 083, Mid-late 7th century
	Burwell 121, Mid-late 7th century

Table 4: Phasing of dateable combs, with combs found in male graves in bold. Data from Bayliss and Hines.

Out of a corpus of thirty-six individual combs, fifteen are able to be tightly dated (Table 4). They have been narrowed down to two phases – phase 1 (400-570 AD), and phase 2 (570-650 AD). The majority of these combs are found in phase 2, though this could be in part a result of the methodological difficulties with dating earlier graves, and the general focus of the Hines and Bayliss survey being from 570 AD onwards, though earlier, dated combs are clearly included.[321] However, in phase 1 there is one comb found as part of a male inhumation (Empingham 045), with two found as part of female inhumation assemblages (Lechlade 18, Edix Hill 14) (Table 5). There is a bigger difference in phase 2, again partly because of the wider data set. Just three out of twelve of the grave assemblages that contain combs are related to males (Sutton Hoo Mound 1, Sutton Hoo Mound 17, and Ford).

The example from Empingham is one of three combs from the site overall, with the other two combs (graves 67 and 115) found in female graves. Empingham 45 contained several weapons – a spearhead, an iron knife and a shield boss, and the comb itself was placed over the chest of the young man (aged 17-25), possibly underneath the shield boss.[322] A copper-alloy bowl covered the middle of the body, placed upside down upon his figure.[323] The female graves contain both a higher number of grave goods and richer objects, including iron chatelaines, beads, brooches and pendants.[324]

Despite this early example in a male grave, we then go on to see that combs are quickly more likely to be found within female inhumations, specifically high-status female inhumations. There is a cluster of combs included with male burials at the beginning of the seventh century which I will go on to examine further in *Transformation*, which are associated with the princely burials that arose from individuals wanting to find new ways to

[321] Bayliss et al., *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods.*
[322] Jane R. Timby, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Empingham II, Rutland: excavations carried out between 1974 and 1975* (Oxbow Monograph 70: 1996), 108.
[323] Timby, *Empingham II,* 108.
[324] Timby, *Empingham II,* 112-13 and 126-27.

assert status in a shifting socio-political backdrop.[325] For example, Ford and Coddenham are aristocratic graves which emulate elements of the princely burials at Sutton Hoo and Prittlewell, but perhaps are slightly below these top levels – possibly representative of regional or sub-kingship.[326] To further underline this, feasting equipment found at Sutton Hoo and Prittlewell 'underlines its importance as a basis for authority among the emerging elite,'[327] and Lowbury Hill also contains evidence of feasting with a hanging bowl.[328] Despite this cluster at the beginning of the seventh century, by the end of the century this practice is almost solely restricted to women. Importantly, while it appears this practice might start with men, and deposition in male graves fluctuates over time, it never outweighs the association of combs and women.

This mirrors a shift in practices as a whole, which shows a general increase in quantity and range of artefacts from the fifth-mid-sixth century, before decreasing from 560s/570s.[329] The frequency of male furnished burial remains consistently low until the end of furnished burial entirely (c. 680 AD).[330] Women's furnished burial continues between 630-680 AD, however, and probably outnumbers male furnished burials in this fifty-year period at a rate of 6:1.[331] I would suggest, then, that it is not the relation to gender or sex alone that is important when it comes to explaining the presence of combs within inhumation graves, as these associations mirror wider deposition practices. While sex is a part of it, I will argue that the relation between sex and status is actually more revealing for understanding why they appear in low numbers. It is the relation to the sex of the deceased and in turn, their own status and wealth and how that status and wealth is manipulated, that is key to understanding why combs were included in inhumations.

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[325] Martin O. H. Carver, "Overview: Signals of Power," in *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology,* eds. Helena Hamerow, David Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press), 845.
[326] Scull, "Chronology, Burial and Conversion," 79.
[327] Sofield, "Anglo-Saxon Placed Deposits," 113.
[328] Atkinson, *Lowbury,* 16-17.
[329] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 68.
[330] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 68.
[331] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 68.

Technology

What happened at an early medieval inhumation burial? This subsection will briefly outline the funeral in order to provide some wider context for when the combs were used. Inhumation funerals, like cremations, would have been multi-sensory events that involved the wider community. They provided an opportunity for the community to gather and mourn their loss, but also to reaffirm the new social order caused by it.[332] This, as Duncan Sayer has argued, likely extended beyond the family to include more flexible relationships that would have developed through everyday interaction with those who lived close to you, as evidenced by the use of the term *frēondas* in early medieval law codes.[333] The non-specific expression, Sayer argues, encompassed a wide range of people beyond kinsmen or family by marriage, and it is likely the *frēondas* would be the ones attending the funeral. Before the seventh century, family was not the main component emphasised at the funeral, and the focus instead was on expressions of social identity, the household being one part of this.[334]

Part of the inhumation rite would have taken place *at* the place of burial, with the grave being kept open and mourners invited to attend it. Grave goods would have been added at this point,[335] and there is some evidence that the tableau of the grave and the arrangement of the goods in it was an important element of the process. Clause 21 of the early seventh-century laws of Æthelbert decrees that 'If anyone kills a man he is to pay as an ordinary wergild 100 shillings…of which 20 are to be paid at the open grave.'[336] Graves, then, would have been kept open long enough for at least the mourners to attend them, a

[332] Howard Williams, "Engendered Bodies and Objects of Memory in Final Phase Graves," in *Burial in Later Anglo-Saxon England, c. 650-1100 AD,* eds. Buckberry and Cherryson (Oxbow Books: 2010), 60.
[333] Duncan Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation: the seventh-century Kentish family," in *Mortuary practices and social identities in the Middle Ages,* eds. Duncan Sayer and Howard Williams (Liverpool University Press, 2009), 152.
[334] Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation," 168.
[335] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 33.
[336] Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation," 152.

theory that is compounded by archaeological evidence, which shows in some cases identification of fly and insect pupa.[337]

What the grave would have looked like varied. Coffin use is inconsistent, in many places there is little evidence for their use, whereas at Edix Hill, coffins were found in twenty-eight graves, representing approximately a quarter of all burial locations.[338] These appear to concentrate around the crest of Edix Hill, complementing other evidence for the comparatively high status of burials in this zone of the cemetery.[339] The two combs included in the graves surveyed by Hines and Bayliss were not part of these coffined burials, though the comb found in grave 14 (CalAD545-574) was placed next to the skeleton, who's skull had been 'pillowed' up on the side of the grave, which may have been a variation on the coffin burial.[340] Grave, 91 has been dated to 650-70 AD, and also has no trace of a coffin.[341] The open nature of these graves would have placed great emphasis on the visual element of the body on display, surrounded by chosen grave goods.[342]

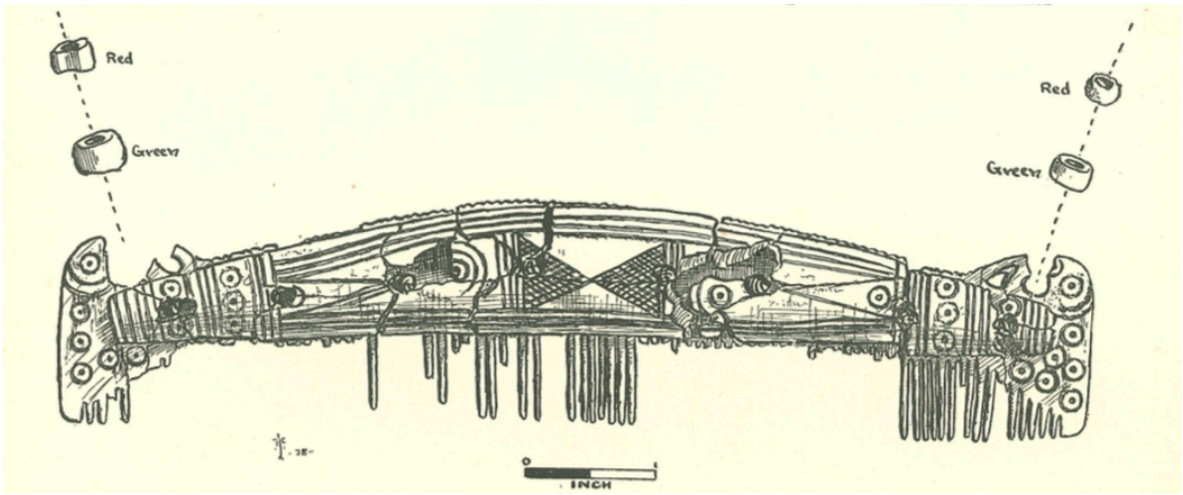

Fig. 1.15: Comb from grave 83, Burwell. Mid-late seventh century, 203mm. Drawing from Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations* 65.

[337] Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation," 152-3.
[338]Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill, 33*.
[339] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill, 33*.
[340] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 50.
[341] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill, 80.*
[342] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill, 33*.

Coffin or not, the objects in the grave would have likely been part of a rite with display and demonstration as key aspects. There is trace of a coffin at Finglesham (exact date unknown), where a very rich female grave assemblage also included a comb.[343] The comb was placed to the left of the body along with an iron knife, shears and a suspension loop, with a chatelaine and other grave goods on the right.[344] At Burwell one woman literally wore a comb around her neck, as demonstrated by the location of beads on her chest (Fig. 1.14). Both ends of the comb are bored with a hole, and two beads on each side appear to suggest that this comb was made up to look like a decorated necklace.[345] Combs with two holes become more common when it comes to the later, larger ceremonial combs made of ivory, such as the so-called comb of Charles the Bald (London, V&A Museum, A.544-1910), which is pierced in a similar way. Given the grave is from the mid-late seventh century, it may be an early example of a large, ceremonial combs which are mostly later in date. The size and intricacy of the comb (Fig. 1.15) shows it was an object made by a master craftsperson. The comb itself is composite, and the density of decoration, the fine lines, cross hatching and ring-and-dot decoration, as well as the fine teeth all make it very special. It is large – over 200mm long – and the bored holes and necklace beads indicate it was intended to be seen. The position of the comb-necklace, strung around the woman's neck only further underlines the importance of its role as an object that is meant to be *displayed*.

Might it have been a relic? Recent work by Catherine Hills on small, copper-alloy containers assessing whether or not they are reliquaries might be relevant.[346] It was uncommon, but not unheard of in the seventh century to wear relics – Gregory of Tours

[343] Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, Guy Grainger, and Birte Brugmann, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent* (Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2006), 97.
[344] Hawkes, Grainger and Brugmann, *Finglesham,* 198.
[345] Thomas Charles Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations in Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk: A Report* (Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 1931), 65.
[346] Catherine Hills, "Work boxes or reliquaries? Small copper-alloy containers in seventh century Anglo-Saxon graves," in *Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology: Papers in Honour of Martin G. Welch*, eds. Martin G Welch, Stuart Brookes, Sue Harrington, and Andrew Reynolds (British Archaeological Reports Ltd, 2011), 54.

wore relics, while noting it was an unusual practice at the time. And then Germanus of Auxerre (475-480 AD) wore a reliquary around his neck, which was used to perform miracles. If the placement around the neck is part associated with their value as a relic, or a role in their community which might have a spiritually protective element, and combs in cremations could also have a protective element, then it could be possible that this comb around the neck was a unique marker of the same status or role within the community.

Some examples of combs reveal clues about the process of burial rather than the person. For Coddenham, burial 30, which has been radiocarbon dated to calAD 630-660, the comb itself was found on the right side of the body, overlying the wall chamber (Fig. 1.16 - redacted).[347] It is single-sided, composite and finely made, with minimal decoration and narrow and precise teeth, measuring 175mm long.[348] The positioning of the comb in the grave suggests that it was placed or thrown onto the burial before it was filled in, because it is overlying the wall chamber. A similar placement is found in Sutton Hoo Mound 17, a burial of a young adult with a horse, where the comb was found above the shield, 'in the fill'.[349] The date range for the burial is calAD 595-635.[350] Both of these combs were likely placed on top of the grave as it was in the process of being filled, or perhaps they were placed centrally and once the grave was closed and the soil was starting to cover them, and the impact of the soil hitting the combs dislodged them from their central placements. Both graves were also very high status – Coddenham 30 is a bed burial, whereas Sutton Hoo

[347] Penn, *Coddenham*, 25.
[348] Penn, *Coddenham*, 27.
[349] Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A seventh-century princely burial ground and its context*, (Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, no. 69, 2005), 132.
[350] Hines and Bayliss, *Ango-Saxon Graves,* 319.

Mound 17 is a mound burial. Coddenham and Sutton Hoo are roughly 15 miles apart, which is either a five hour walk or a two or two and a half hour ride. The physical and chronological proximity of these two burials suggests that there may well have been a moment in time or a generation when these practices were overlapping, and there might have been a specific

Fig. 1.16: Grave map at Coddenham 30. Drawing from Penn, *Coddenham,* 25. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication of *Coddenham*.

regional practice that related to high status burials during this time.

This variation of comb placement in the grave makes it difficult to tell not just when the comb was included, but also why. At Castledyke South, two combs (graves 31 and 183) were buried to the right of the skull. Grave 31 is undated, and 183 has been dated to 600-50 AD, potentially contemporary with Mound 17 and Coddenham 30. In both cases at Castledyke the females were relatively young, 18-29 and 25-35 respectively. In the undated

grave 30 at Buckland cemetery (Kent) (Fig. 1.17 - redacted), a single-sided comb is placed underneath the head of the deceased woman.[351] The comb was likely to have been placed in the grave first, perhaps after the final dressing of the hair of the corpse, or placed in the hair as she was dressed. Alternatively, the head would have had to be lifted, carefully, in order to place the comb underneath. Putting combs by the head might have been a specific act of connecting the everyday function of the comb with the deceased person. If our emotional life is 'created and shaped by the settings in which it takes place,'[352] the placement of the comb mirroring how a comb was used in life both reminds the mourners of an intimate act, but also that this series of actions is at an end – they will never brush their hair again. The familiar placement of combs within graves as at Castledyke or Buckland then acts as a connection between the memory of the dead as living, and the reality of their death.

Fig. 1.17: Comb from grave 30, Dover, Buckland. Drawing from Evison, *Buckland,* 289. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication of *Buckland*.

[351] Evison, *Buckland,* 340.
[352] Gosden, "Aesthetics," 37.

Inhumation funerals were organised, busy, and involved a processional or display element of the deceased. While the range of placements of combs in the graves and different types of graves that have combs, do not provide any clear or concrete answers as to their inclusion, they do reveal that at least one person, (but likely multiple), was involved in a selection process for these goods. Items in the grave had to be placed there by a person. Williams and Geake have argued for a predominant role of early medieval women in the arrangement and control of pre and early-Christian funerals in England, suggesting that women appear to have acted as 'custodians of the past,' responsible for shaping and configuring social memory for their communities.[353] So women could have been the ones deciding on which combs to include in male graves, or women could have been placing their own combs in the graves as a way to signify their relationship to the deceased.

Intimacy, in general, is evident throughout the burial process, and this connection between the intimate associations of the comb and the deceased/mourner relationship can be seen when we consider the placement of combs in relation to the body. Combs were inherently personal. They were used on the body, and they were sometimes placed on the body in the grave. In grave 45 at Empingham (Lincolnshire), the comb was found under a copper-alloy bowl, directly on the lower legs of the deceased.[354] Another example is from the later barrow burial at Ford (Wiltshire), where the comb is found in between the deceased's legs.[355] These are intimate placements, and whoever put them there would have likely known the deceased well enough to be this familiar with their body. For women who would most likely have been veiled during this period, a comb might be an especially

[353] Williams, "Engendered Bodies," 34; Helen Geake, "The Control of Burial Practice in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300,* ed. Martin Carver (York Medieval Press, 2003), 266.
[354] Timby, *Empingham II*, 108.
[355] Musty, "Ford," 101.

intimate offering, as they would have used combs on their hair only when unveiled and in privacy.[356]

According to Stoodley, women over the age of 18 were more likely to cover their hair, and also more likely to be buried with objects that had been collected over the course of their lifetimes, possibly received or obtained at different stages of life.[357] Moments of transition from one age group to the next (Stoodley described four age sets for the early medieval woman, whereas early medieval men appeared to have two based on their grave goods),[358] were often marked by the exchange of goods.[359] These goods, as indicated by their inclusion in the funerary rite, were not passed down as heirlooms, but rather kept with the owner, perhaps because of their relationship with the person. One of the most commonly included objects in the cremation rite, this inclusion of them as a burial object might be representative of the important relationship between comb and person.

If the comb belonged to the deceased themselves, then it may have been an act of care that was only reserved for the most intimate of companions. Roman statues of ladies in waiting attending a woman, for instance, suggest that this act may have been one of subservience.[360] But it could also have been a way to see people at their most vulnerable or in their most private moments – when combing hair, one is without any of the kind of trappings of status that might be related to a role in public life.[361] Without the head coverings and material indicators of status, you are stripped of that public-facing persona. For the person presenting the comb, being able to demonstrate that familiarity and intimacy at the

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[356] See section 1, *Life*.
[357] Toby F. Martin, "The Lives and Deaths of People and Things: Biographical Approaches to Dress," in *Writing the Lives of People and Things, AD 500-1700: A Multi-Disciplinary Future for Biography*, eds. Robert Smith and Gemma Watson (Routledge, 2016), 77-86.
[358] Stoodley, *Spindle and the Spear,* 117.
[359] Martin, "The Lives and Deaths of People and Things," 74.
[360] As depicted in art, like the fresco found at Herculaneum showing a slave combing a girl's hair. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Picture number: XIR119475.
[361] Later monastic sign language demonstrates how central hair coverings were to conveying status, as the sign for the Abbott is to take hold of the hair according to the Canterbury Cathedral Priory Sign List (London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A iii). In David Sherlock, *Monastic Sign Language in Medieval England* (Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, 2016), 22.

graveside may well have been useful, especially if we consider the funeral the final public appearance of the deceased.[362]

The presence and offering of combs at the graves of deceased individuals within the community may well have been a stage on which the relationship with the deceased could be expressed, in order to improve or solidify the social standing of those who survived them.[363] At the closing rites at Coddenham and Mound 17 the comb is placed on last, whereas the comb under the head at Buckland would likely be first, or the head would have been lifted in an especially intimate act in order to place the comb underneath it. Both positions suggest significance or an element of control over the proceedings, or prioritisation. The placement of combs, then, in some cases was intended to be visible, a demonstration of association or status, and part of the funerary procession. It is possible that women were in charge of their deposition. But what about their placement in male graves?

Transformations

Can combs tell us anything about the status of the deceased? Wealth and status were possibly displayed in different ways, even if they may have often intertwined.[364] Generally however, the complexity of the whole rite (including method of burial, labour and time involved) is thought to be related to the status of the deceased.[365]

Combs in male graves occur in low numbers, and there is not a clear association between number of grave goods and the likelihood of there being a comb. For example, two male graves from Castledyke South have a low number of grave goods but both include a comb. Grave 129 contains a male over the age of 45, who is buried with a highly decorated,

[362] Høilund-Nielsen, theorised that the lighting of the funeral pyre may have been an rite of passage, and a similar thing could be taking place in other graveside rituals. Høilund-Nielsen, "Rituals to free the spirit," 101.
[363] Williams, "Engendered Bodies," 35.
[364] Jane Brennan, *Hanging Bowls and their Contexts: an archaeological survey of their socio-economic significance from the fifth to seventh centuries A.D.* (BAR British Series 220, 1991), 76-7.
[365] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill*, 317.

single-sided antler comb by his right shoulder, a buckle around his waist, presumably from a belt, and two knives by his left wrist.[366] Grave 55 is for a younger male, 25-35, who has similar goods – two buckles, one by his left shoulder, the other across his waist, a knife across his chest, possibly strapped to him by the buckles, and an antler double-sided composite comb by the left side of his body.[367] In Empingham grave 45, a burial of a male adult, 17-25 years (CalAD525-550?), is the earliest dated burial containing a comb in the dataset.[368] It contains, among other things, a shield boss covering the waist area, a knife and spear, a copper-alloy bowl placed over the body, and a comb again in the middle area of the body, below the shield boss in the lower chest/waist region.[369]

Out of the seven male burials with combs – the two Castledyke South burials, Empingham 45, Lowbury Hill, Ford, and the two Sutton Hoo burials – three of them contained bowls. At Lowbury Hill (c. 550-650AD), [370] the comb was found next to a bronze hanging bowl at the man's side, in a leather comb case, underneath the bowl and placed on edge against the side of the grave.[371] The barrow burial at Ford (620-650 AD) also contained a bronze bowl that had traces of vegetable matter, perhaps suggesting it was used for feasting at the graveside as part of the funeral process. [372] The other objects in the grave are mainly weapons, including seaxes, spearheads and shield bosses.[373] The bowl at Lowbury Hill could not have been used for anything that involved heat,[374] and so likely would have had a different role to the one at Ford. The bowl at Empingham was made from iron, and given the earlier date, might have been part of another different rite. Additionally, the male was buried in a grave and not a barrow or other ancient monument.[375] Shepard has argued that

[366] Drinkall and Foreman*, Castledyke South,* 72.
[367] Drinkall and Foreman, *Castledyke South,* 52.
[368] Timby, *Empingham II,* 108.
[369] Timby, *Empingham II,* 108.
[370] Dated from the hanging bowl. Atkinson, *Lowbury Hill*, 19.
[371] Atkinson, *Lowbury Hill*, 16-17.
[372] Musty, "Ford," 109.
[373] Musty, "Ford," 105.
[374] Atkinson, *Lowbury Hill*, 19.
[375] Timby, *Empingham II,* 108.

the existence of barrow burials, like Ford and Lowbury Hill, took place at the same time as early medieval society was becoming more hierarchical, and when 'entry into its upper ranks was restricted and ascribed rather than achieved.'[376] While the hanging bowls might be further proof of the importance of the display of goods, being related to feasting at the graveside or making the grave a point where people can gather, the inclusion of the comb in relation to the hanging bowl does not necessarily suggest anything about why combs were included in these few male examples and not others. Additionally, the two examples from Castledyke South, while not dated specifically, do show that the association between male inhumations and combs was not always restricted to the most elite burials.[377]

In contrast, the four combs found in the graves sampled from Sutton Hoo came from princely burials, which have been suggested to be part of a wider movement where powerful individuals had to re-articulate their status in relation to their communities, as ideas about kingship were shifting.[378] The comb in Mound 17, Sutton Hoo, which contained the body of a male and horse, is tied into the closing rite like at Coddenham, as previously discussed, having been likely thrown or placed on the grave as it was covered in soil.[379] However, Mound 1, the ship barrow, contained three combs underneath the Anastasius dish.[380] It perhaps is not surprising, given the unusually high numbers of objects in the grave, that this ship burial contained three combs – what is surprising is that comparable princely burials at Prittlewell, Broomfield and Taplow did not have combs as part of the burial assemblages.[381]

The low presence of combs in male graves certainly mimics wider trends of grave goods, as male graves from the 560s/70s onwards have generally lower quantities and ranges

[376] Brennan, *Hanging Bowls*, 84.
[377] Drinkall and Foreman*, Castledyke South,* 52 and 72.
[378] Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation," 142.
[379] Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (British Museum Press, 1998), 21.
[380] Mitford and Scott, *Sutton Hoo*, 216.
[381] S. M. Hirst and Christopher Scull, *The Anglo-Saxon princely burial at Prittlewell, Southend-on-Sea* (MOLA, 2019); Audrey Meaney, *A gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon burial sites,* (Allen & Unwin, 1964).

of artefacts. [382] However, their low numbers even across the most well-furnished graves suggest that combs were not just included as part of a range of goods, and they might have had a more specific function.

If there is no clear reason why combs appear in some male graves and not others, it is worth considering their appearance in female inhumation graves. Female assemblages tend to contain a wider variety of objects, [383] so perhaps it should not be surprising that more combs are found in them. However, they are also typically found within well-appointed graves, and no graves contain just a comb, suggesting perhaps that combs were buried with women of status. At Finglesham, grave 138, a young woman with a comb was buried in one of the most well-appointed graves. The comb was placed along the left side of her body, along with a cache of other objects including an iron knife and shears, and a bronze suspension loop.[384] The comb survives in fragmentary form and is double-sided and composite, decorated with incised lines and criss-crossing lines. Two of the rivet heads used to secure the centre panel of the comb together had traces of textile on them.[385] Sayer has suggested the cemetery was divided into plots of mixed wealth, with a particular focus in each grouping, suggesting that these wealthy burials were the focus of households, and the funeral of a single member of that household – likely the head – was an important event that justified special treatment.[386] This female grave, because of its positioning within the cemetery likely belonged to a woman of status within the community.

At Edix Hill, there is also a clearer association between combs being included in a burial and a specific ceremonial role an individual had within their community, and here, expressions of status were not just related to number of grave goods of central cemetery

[382] Hines, "Burial and Religion," 68.
[383] Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear,* 97.
[384] Sonia Hawkes, Guy Grainger, and Birte Brugmann, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent* (Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2006), 100-101.
[385] Hawkes et al., *Finglesham*, 100.
[386] Sayer, "Laws, funerals and cemetery organisation," 168.

plots. This can be demonstrated through a series of graves which belonged to a family but were all buried in different ways. Four adult women from phase 1 graves and two children all share a heritable anomaly in their skeletons, having an additional vertebra.[387] In contrast to the familial organisation Sayer has argued exists at Finglesham, these burials are relatively dispersed throughout the cemetery, although the children are buried close to graves 19 and 20. However, grave 14 is the only one that contains a comb.[388] Grave 5 contained the lowest number of grave goods, with just a few beads, a knife and some pottery.[389] Grave 19 contained a brooch, beads, buckle, finger ring and two pairs of wrist clasps, whereas 20 also had a brooch and beads, as well as chatelaine fragments, a ring, tweezers and nail and iron objects.[390] Although grave 14 has a lower number of objects (beads, a knife, a pot and a comb), the combination of amber beads and the double-sided comb might suggest that she had a role in the community that was related to ritual organisation.[391] There were five amber beads within grave 14, argued to be one of the most well-attested ritual materials in early medieval period, and in use in the mid-late sixth century (grave 14 is dated c. 545-575 AD).[392] In addition to the comb, the person buried in Edix Hill grave 14 is also one of six that appear to have been laid to rest 'as if they were sleeping'.[393] The grave included a rise at the end, giving the appearance that the skull had been 'pillowed,' [394] perhaps indicating a different type of bed burial. The unusual placement of the body, the presence of amber beads and the inclusion of the comb could be triangulated to suggest the status of the person buried was not directly associated with its wealth, or its relation to other kin.[395] Instead, the comb and other goods were to signify their role in the community.

[387] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 311.
[388] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 50.
[389] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill*, 45.
[390] Malim and Hines*, Edix Hill,* 53 and 55.
[391] Malim and Hines*, Edix Hill*, 50.
[392] Audrey Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones,* (BAR British Series 96, 1981), 67.
[393] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 41.
[394] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 41.
[395] Grave 14's wealth 'score', according to the range of identifiable artefact categories (RIAC score) is actually lower than the median at this cemetery – at 4 compared to a median of 5-6. The relatively low RIAC score of

Not included in Hines and Bayliss' survey, a later bed burial at Edix Hill also has a comb and other ritually significant objects, indicating perhaps that the comb continued to be an indicator of specific status within this specific community. In grave 18, the comb is placed within a wooden box before being included in the grave.[396] The female in grave 18 was young, between 17-25, and showed evidence of early leprosy (though this was in such early stages that it is likely not what she died of, and therefore the use of a bed burial in this instance was not related to sickness or disease).[397] The woman was buried with a number of grave goods that are fairly standard parts of female grave assemblages, including beads, rings, a key, two knives, and a weaving batten, a rare find.[398] There are other grave goods which are less common. In the wooden box (which was made from ash), there was a single-sided composite comb, a fossil sea urchin and sheep's astralagus – a bone found in the hind legs of the animal.[399] Fossils in early medieval graves are thought to be amulets, in use from about the mid-sixth century into the early seventh at least.[400] Although their frequency is too low to ascribe any specific use, Audrey Meaney has categorised them as magical.[401] The placement of the comb among items including the fossil and sheep's bone suggests that the role of combs in caskets was not just to evoke a performance of offering at the graveside, but also was tied to these women's roles in their life, one that was demonstrated by the inclusion of the comb alongside other objects that were used in rituals. The third example of a grave of a woman at Edix Hill who was also associated with these types of objects is found in grave 91, where a rich assemblage includes a comb, a pendant of rock crystal, a gold scutiform pendant (dated to at least c. 645 AD), and wire rings likely strung on a necklace. [402] Due to

grave 14 but the inclusion of the comb then might suggest that the comb is related to status in the same way that placement of the body is related to status, and neither of those things have a direct association with the number of grave goods included in the grave. Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill*, 302.

[396] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 268.
[397] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill*, 268.
[398] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 52-53.
[399] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 234 and 52-3.
[400] Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets*, 122.
[401] Meaney*, Anglo-Saxon Amulets*, 122.
[402] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill*, 212.

the dating of the pendant and the bed burial in grave 18, graves 91 and 18 may be relatively close in age.[403] The difference in end plates of the comb in grave 91 has also been suggested as evidence that this comb, too, was repaired, indicating that like some of the combs in the cremation rite, this was used during the lifetime of the deceased.[404] Even ceremonial combs in the early medieval period had a dual function – they were ordinary objects intended to detangle, and they were capable of being used within ritual contexts like other, later examples.

Combs, then, could have been part of a range of objects which expressed the status of the deceased, but the combination of these varied over time. They were found in graves that were differentiated from others, either through the positioning of the body or the architecture of the grave itself. At Edix Hill, it could be suggested that the presence of the comb was linked to the expression of status, and this status was tied to their role as a ritual custodian,[405] and this association between combs and this role was consistent across the use of the cemetery, even as other factors, like number of grave goods or types of burial, changed. Their association with the body and their placement by the head in other inhumation cemeteries might indicate that they, like sieve-spoons, were 'placed somewhere on the line between status symbols and amulets.'[406]

The inclusion of the comb in a box in grave 18 is likely to be part of the later seventh-century movement, where it was more common for objects to be placed in graves in boxes.[407] Combs were found in boxes in four other graves – at Castledyke South 13, Kingston Down 299, Garton Slack I, and Burwell, although it has been suggested that the comb in Garton Slack was found in a satchel rather than a wooden box.[408] The comb in Grave 121 at Burwell

[403] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 282 and 280.
[404] Malim and Hines, *Edix Hill,* 219.
[405] Williams, "Engendered Bodies," 27.
[406] Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets,* 148.
[407] Helen Geake, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion-Period England, c.600-c.850* (BAR British Series, 1997), 34.
[408] J. R. Mortimer and T. Sheppard, *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire: Including Romano-British Discoveries, and a Description of the Ancient Entrencements of a Section of the Yorkshire Wolds*, (A. Brown and Sons ltd., 1905), 251.

was found in a box placed on the feet of the female.[409] The contents of the rest of the box included three chalk whorls, two fragments of bronze plate, an iron object with a wooden handle (possibly steel for sharpening knives), a lump of pyrite and a fragment of a silver disk girdle hanger.[410] The rest of the grave goods were worn on the person, like the chatelaine hanging from the belt and necklace around the neck, and so this comb makes up this more private assemblage, again with ritual objects like the silver disk and pyrite. The size of the comb from Burwell, 203 mm long (the same size as the other comb at Burwell found on display in grave 83 – Fig. 1.15), measures as one of the largest combs found in inhumations, and also suggests perhaps a less practical, more ceremonial role.[411] A comb of this size would have required help to use, and would have been easy to see while on display. The third comb at Burwell, from grave 32, is smaller than the other two, measuring 150 mm long.[412] It was found under the right arm of the woman, with her left arm curved across her body, holding the remains of a 'very young' child.[413] When compared with the two more monumental comb sizes, from graves 83 and 121, it might be evidence that some combs included in inhumations were everyday objects that were used to brush hair, while others had a more ceremonial function.

The comb from grave 12 at Garton Slack was also found at the bottom of the feet underneath an iron object that may have been the framework of a satchel.[414] Animal bones were found in the grave behind the knees, which 'no doubt had been deposited with the flesh on them,' implying sacrifice over graveside feasting.[415] Hiding the combs in caskets or satchels meant that they were not able to be seen as part of a funerary tableau.[416] Their grouping with the other objects in the casket or satchel was more important than their

[409] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations*, 67.
[410] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations,* 67.
[411] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations,* Fig. 30, 68.
[412] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations,* 52.
[413] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations,* 52.
[414] Mortimer and Sheppard, *Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*, 251.
[415] Mortimer and Sheppard, *Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire,* 251.
[416] Williams, "Engendered Bodies,"32.

overall display, suggesting their role was not to be seen, but rather to represent something to those who knew the objects were there.

The monumental combs at Burwell from the mid-late seventh century seem to suggest that while some combs were used to brush hair, there were some that had greater significance. That still leaves the question of male graves. Why were combs not included in more princely burials? It may have been a result of soil conditions, though given the range of other objects that did survive in these graves, this does not feel a particularly satisfying explanation. When considering the seventh-century story of the gift as marked by Bede, and the obvious display and presentation of goods in inhumation rite, it might be that the use of combs as gifts was an important part of their appeal as objects, and therefore the combs found in male inhumations had been given to these people. And, given the more general association between combs and female inhumations, they might have been given to them by women. If women exerted control over funerary or mourning rituals,[417] and this status, according to Helen Geake, may have continued into the early stages of the conversion process,[418] it is possible that the exchange of combs at the graveside was an infrequent but not meaningless practice, one that was led by women. Easily portable, objects that demonstrated intimacy, combs might have been an ideal object to place in a grave when a woman was demonstrating her association with the deceased during a period of enormous upheaval.[419]

Transitions

The presence of combs in inhumation graves was not restricted to pre-Christian burials. Maximal burials were still undertaken for individuals of particular status or renown,

[417] Williams, "Engendered Bodies," 34, Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets,* 255.
[418] Geake, "Control of Burial Practice,", 266.
[419] Christopher Scull, "Social Transactions, Gift Exchange, and Power in the Archaeology of the Fifth to Seventh Centuries," in *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology,* eds. Helena Hamerow, David Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press, 2011), 853.

most explicitly demonstrated by Saint Cuthbert, who died in 687 AD. In the twelfth-century anonymous account of his life we are told that when they open the coffin in 1104 was literally *stuffed* with relics, so much so that the body was on its side, in order to fit everything in.[420] The image conjured by this twelfth century account is one of excess, but Cuthbert wanted to be buried, we are told by Bede, in a plain shroud, given to him by the Abbess Vecca.[421] When it appeared he was dying, his monastic brethren, sensing that he was going to be even more important in death, (allegedly) pressured him into accepting a burial fit for his position. Right before he died Cuthbert, finally, relented.[422] It benefits the hagiographers to position Cuthbert as humble, and the solitude and simplicity he often sought in his life might suggest that this request for a minimal burial was in character. On the other hand, high status burials were still taking place at the end of the seventh century, and Cuthbert himself might have understood why and how such a burial for him would have been useful. The maximal nature, then, of this burial should be viewed within a wider seventh-century

[420] 'Their first wish was to remove the holy body from its lateral position and place it on its back; but they were unable to effect this on account of the multitude of relics which surrounded it.' Cuthbert's coffin was allegedly re-opened and gifts and relics placed into it throughout the years. "Anonymous Account of the Translation of St Cuthbert," trans. R A B Mynors, in Battiscomb *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert,* 102.
[421] C. Battiscomb, "Introduction," *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*, 21; Bede, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, trans. Bertram Colgrave, (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 18.
[422] Battiscomb, "Introduction," 21

context, where such things were not abnormal. Cuthbert's comb, then, arguably is an object that makes sense to be included among the other contemporary grave goods.

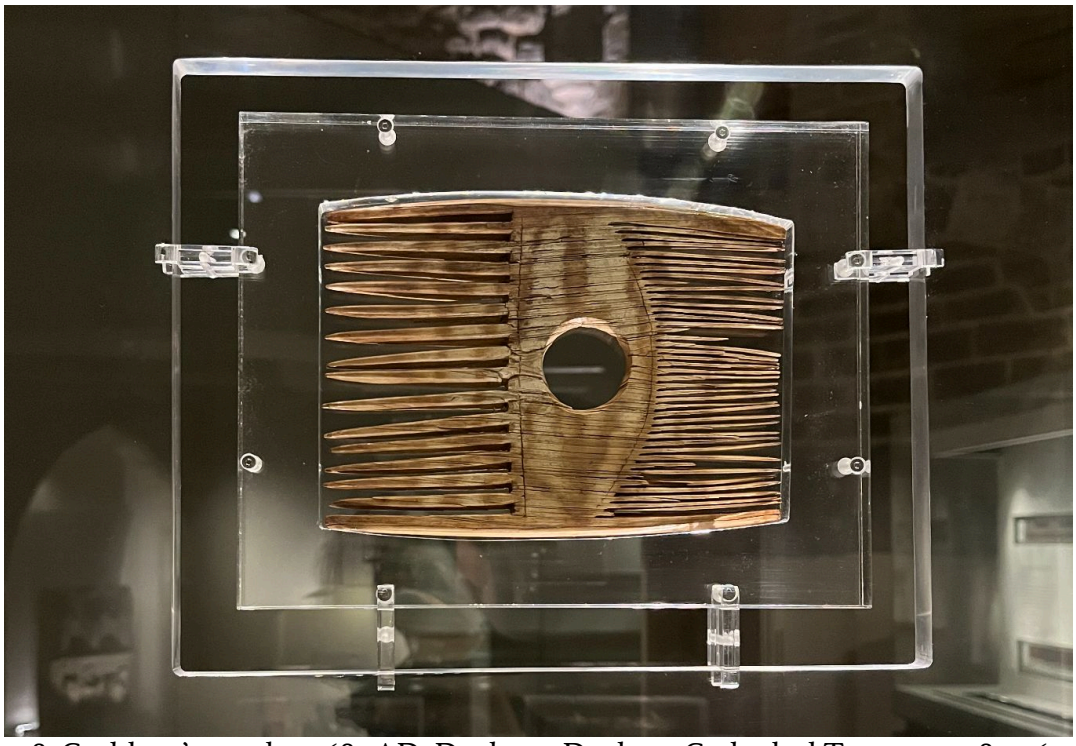

Fig. 1.18: Cuthbert's comb, c. 687 AD. Durham, Durham Cathedral Treasury. 118 x 163 mm. Photo taken by author.

Cuthbert's comb is not mentioned until the anonymous account from 1104; it is not discussed in the earlier references to his burial.[423] However, it is still possible for it to have been included in the original grave assemblage and been contemporary to his life. The pectoral cross, for instance, is not referenced earlier either, but was found on his chest, again very close to the body, hidden by the clothing in which Cuthbert was dressed.[424] Bede also skips over other items we know were contemporary, as he only says that when the monks reported to the bishop on what they had found (Cuthbert's uncorrupted body), they 'brought him part of the clothes that had enwrapped the holy body,' before wrapping 'the body in a new garment.'[425] The comb, in contrast, was found right on top of the layers, tucked

[423] Battiscomb, "Introduction," 23.
[424] Battiscomb, "Introduction," 23.
[425] Battiscomb, "Introduction," 23.

into the top layer of fabric coverings. While we cannot say the reason that it was not referenced in earlier texts was because it was not visible, the scanty detail that Bede provides indicates that there were likely many things that just were not recorded.

Some have used this disparity between the archaeological evidence and written accounts to suggest that the comb was added later, when the tomb was opened in the twelfth century.[426] However, Peter Lakso has convincingly argued based on stylistic grounds that this comb was contemporary with Cuthbert himself.[427] It's form is compared to contemporary Coptic versions which are all made in the vertical, rather than horizontal that was more common in the West. [428] Given that the material is also African elephant ivory, it would make sense that it was made in a similar form. I would also argue that given the time that Cuthbert was buried, when grave goods were still a common practice even if they were rare for men, it would have made more sense for him to be buried with a comb, than it would be in the twelfth century. Cuthbert's association between his miraculously growing hair and nails, recorded in the twelfth century (sometime after 1172, by Reginald of Durham), mark the beginning of this association in textual sources between the saint and hair.[429] However, I would suggest that this association is a result of the comb being in place, rather than a prompt for someone to include the comb, as well as being part of a wider practice of associating continuously growing hair and nails with saints.[430] As already suggested, combing the hair of the deceased was a task reserved for the most intimate of companions. While we have records of kings visiting and lavishing further gifts on Cuthbert, like King

[426] Lakso, "The Comb," 338-349.
[427] Lakso, "The Comb," 344-349.
[428] Lakso, "The Comb," 344-349.
[429] Lakso, "The Comb," 339.
[430] Hair and nails were parts of the body that were permitted to be separated from the corpse as they continued to grow after death, which meant they were popular relics. Arnold Angenendt, "Relics and their Veneration," in *Treasures of Heaven: saints, relics and devotion in medieval Europe,* eds. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann and James Robinson (The British Museum, 2010), 22.

Gunfrith and King Cnut, none of them mention a comb as a later gift.[431] And so the comb in Cuthbert's tomb is much more likely to be a part of his original assemblage,

Cuthbert's comb itself was also clearly used, if not by him, then at least by someone. Fig. 1.18 shows there is slight wear on the ends of the comb teeth, caused by the repeated movement of the comb through the hair, and pressing against the scalp. The comb, then, was either his, or a gift from someone close to him, and very possibly a woman. We know Cuthbert had accepted gifts from important religious women because of the shroud that Abbess Vecca gave to him, that was allegedly the only thing he wanted to be buried in.[432] In addition to the shroud, Sam Lucy has also recently argued that Cuthbert's pectoral cross may have been a gift from another powerful woman, because of the similar phasing we have with pectoral crosses when compared to combs – they are both objects that are typically found within female inhumation graves.[433]

Importantly, by the end of the seventh century, the inhumations that contain combs mainly belong to women (Table 4). The combs buried at Burwell do not resemble Cuthbert's (Fig. 1.18) – they are all single-sided rather than double-sided, but their large size might also suggest a ceremonial role.[434] The presence of the comb, the reference to Vecca's shroud and the pectoral cross could be seen as an indication that even at the end of the seventh century, women still held influence over grave goods and the funerary rite, and Cuthbert's comb was a gift from one of them.

Conclusion

Combs in inhumations and cremations indicate that they were ritually significant objects in the early medieval period, though in different ways, and therefore possibly for

[431] Battiscomb, " Introduction,", 31,39-40.
[432] Battiscomb, "Introduction,", 21.
[433] Sam Lucy, "The Trumpington Cross in Context," *Anglo-Saxon England* 45 (2016): 7.
[434] Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations,* Fig. 30, 68.

different reasons. Before the conversion, combs in cremations were the most common grave good, with equal distribution across male and female graves. They were used in at least several different rites, sometimes at the same time. The burning or shattering of the comb at the graveside or cremation pyre could be reflective of a similar worldview, and combs became proxies for the souls of the deceased that were being released. Alternatively, they could be a sacrifice for the soul to take to the afterlife, or a mnemonic souvenir for the mourners, a way to carry their memory of the death with them. The inclusion of dummy combs, though rare, suggests that the symbolism of the combs was the most important part of their inclusion – it is possibly because of their use as cleansing equipment this symbolism was tied to ideas of pollution. Combs did not just organise and control the hair, they could also be used to maintain control after death.

Between the fifth and seventh centuries, combs, when included in inhumations, were more likely to be associated with women. When found as part of male assemblages, it is likely that these were gifts from women who were close to the deceased person, and who wanted to express their intimacy with this person at the graveside, while also communicating to the other spectators the intimacy of their relationship to the deceased. The fact that the weighting of evidence between male and female graves, by the end of the seventh century, is so heavily with female graves, is particularly interesting in light of Cuthbert being buried with one. It might indicate that Cuthbert, as a religious male, was not held to traditional expectations of gender. However, it might also show that the comb itself was given to Cuthbert by a woman. Cuthbert's comb was not the only seventh-century comb associated with church leaders. Ethelburga's gift shows that these association had begun at the beginning of the seventh-century, and they had first started with women.

The ways that combs were used in funerary rites mirrors the way they were used during the lifetimes of these individuals. Long life-spans, as indicated by waste combs in settlements, shows that these were objects that people owned for a long period of time, and

these objects shaped them just as they shaped the combs themselves, wearing down the teeth and eventually being broken or snapped. As in inhumation burials, an association between women, hair covering and status might suggest that combs, when they belonged to women, were powerfully intimate objects. They kept the hair neat and ordered, bolstering the boundaries created within society. For men, they were possibly more functional, though likely still important when gifted, either during their lifetimes or at the graves, where opportunities existed to benefit from a flux in power. Combs in life were intimate, but used daily. They were not necessarily disposed of in a meaningful way outside of funerals. But they were important objects in funerals, and they were exchanged as meaningful gifts in both life and in death. There seems to be more to do to understand how combs were treated in life outside merely of brushing hair. Nevertheless, intimate, orderly, transformative – early medieval combs were small but powerful tools.

Chapter Two: Cleanliness and Care. Combs 700-1099 AD

The evidence for the use of combs in the eighth to eleventh centuries differs from that examined in Chapter 1. As grave goods declined in number, the majority of the archaeological evidence comes from other contexts. They have predominantly been found in workshop-style sites, like those at Coppergate (York), and Hamwic (Southampton).[1] Additionally, there is more visual and written evidence for hair and hair styling, with poems and manuscript illuminations revealing more about the expectations of how people covered themselves. These sources form the evidence base for the section, *Life*. Although the number of grave goods being deposited declined, they did not completely disappear. There are a few instances of combs being found in burials, and these are used as evidence for the sub-section, *Death*. Finally, this period is when we first get unambiguous evidence for the use of combs in liturgical rites, which is explored in *Worship*. The combs themselves, with perforations and hanging loops, carved in different sizes and styles, are all considered, and these physical qualities are examined, alongside references in manuscripts, to assess their importance.

This period, perhaps because of the nature of the evidence, shows both great change, and also continuity. Considerations of combs that had begun in the seventh century, such as combs as gifts between ecclesiastical elites, or combs associated with the role of the deceased, do continue. People continue to cover their hair, and combs continue to be used to brush it. However, combs are found in new contexts. Changes in ownership of large ivory combs reveal that the functions of some long-lived combs transformed during their lifespans. Medical remedies involving combs reflect a new type of ritualized grooming. Now

[1] Steven P. Ashby, "Technologies of Appearance: Hair Behaviour in Early Medieval Europe," *Archaeological Journal* 171, no. 1 (2014): 162; Arthur MacGregor, A. J Mainman, and Nicola S. H Rogers. *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life: Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn from Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York* (Council for British Archaeology, 1999); Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski, *The Craft of Antler, Bone, Horn and Ivory Working in the Early Medieval Emporia C. AD 600-850* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 103.

being produced in workshops in greater numbers, combs were being used and discarded in different ways.

Life

During the eighth and ninth centuries, there were significant changes in the way combs were produced. Skilled specialists had the resources and market to produce combs on a larger scale than before, as demonstrated by the 20,000 fragments of antler waste material, related to combs, that were recovered from the Six Dials site at Hamwic, for instance.[2] It is also feasible that they were being exchanged across distances. Kevin Leahy has demonstrated that bulky items like pots were being distributed far from their place of manufacture, with pots made in Leicestershire found across the East Midlands and beyond,[3] and it is possible that combs, which are much easier to transport, were also being exchanged in this way. The expansions in scale of production, and diversification of form and quality of combs demonstrated by Ashby,[4] shows how numbers of combs in circulation, and styles of combs, increased. This chapter considers how the increase in combs altered the consideration of them, especially in regard to hair and hair styling. Despite this, there are still moments in the sources which demonstrate that combs were also used in heightened, ritualized circumstances.

Styling

Considering how hair was styled is essential for understanding the contexts within which combs would have been used. Under a broad umbrella of everyday behaviour, this section examines attitudes to hair including regular grooming practices, common modes of

[2] Steven P. Ashby, "Technologies of Appearance: Hair Behaviour in Early Medieval Europe," *Archaeological Journal* 171, no. 1 (2014): 161.
[3] Kevin Leahy, "Anglo-Saxon Crafts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology,* eds. Helena Hamerow, David Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press, 2011), 445.
[4] Ashby, "Technologies of Appearance," 163.

hair styling, and written criticisms, which can be used to inform our understanding of popular approaches to hair styling and the use of combs.

Most women in the medieval period would have had their hair covered.[5] While younger girls would have left theirs free, a symbol of age and marital status, older, married women would have covered theirs, often with more than one layer of fabric.[6] This is important for understanding how combs were used, because it limits the times and places when hair combing would have taken place, making the acts more associated with intimate behaviours, or a state of undress.

Increased contact with Scandinavia led to a change in relationship between combs and individuals. The Scandinavian diaspora seem to have used combs as visible accessories as well as functional tools, at times hanging from belts or being displayed on the person, carried in elaborately decorated cases.[7] Differences in how combs were used on the hair was also made clear through Alcuin's remarks at the end of the eighth century (c. 793 AD), who separates 'pagans' from the 'English' by their hairstyles: 'See how you have wanted to copy the pagan way of cutting hair and beards. Are not these the people whose terror threatens us, yet you want to copy their hair?'[8] Hair styles were important in maintaining senses of identity and community, even if standards of grooming were relative and cultural. The tenth-century Islamic chronicler Ibn Fadlan, for example, found how the Rūs washed their faces and combed their hair repulsive, calling them 'the filthiest of God's creatures'.[9] Because of these more cohesive cultural connections however, combs became tools

[5] According to the *Handbook of Medieval Costume*, in the ninth and tenth centuries the veil was 'indispensable' for all women of all classes, worn all the time 'even in bed'. There are on record: 'golden hair ties and crispin needles to curl and plait the hair withal', even if the hair was hidden. C. Willett Cunnington and P. E. Cunnington, *Handbook of English Mediaeval Costume* (Faber & Faber, 1969), 18.
[6] Roberta Milliken, *Ambiguous Locks: An Iconology of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature* (McFarland & Company, 2012), 49-50.
[7] Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life,* 108.
[8] Alcuin, *Alcuin of York, c. A.D. 732 to 804: His Life and Letters* ed. and trans. Stephen Allott (William Sessions Ltd, 1974), 19.
[9] Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga,* trans. James E. Montgomery (New York University Press, 2017), 76.

important in not just demonstrating allegiance to a group, but also marking one out as different, by not using one in the same way.

The importance of the correct hairstyle, one recognised as appropriate to an individual's gender, or particular social, religious or age status, was so great that it was enshrined in King Alfred's late ninth-century law code. These laws demanded fines to be paid if the hair was cut incorrectly. If a man was tonsured despite not being a priest, and without being bound, the barber had to pay thirty shillings compensation.[10] If the barber gave his customer a bad haircut, that was a ten shilling fine.[11] And if he cut off his customer's beard, twenty shillings.[12] But if the barber 'lays bonds' on him and then tonsured him, the cost was sixty shillings.[13] Hair was clearly sensitive business, but so was how it was used to reflect your place in society – here the main issue is if a man is groomed to show him as something he is not; assuming another's identity clearly threatened the social order, and was clear cause for legal persecution. Combs, then, were tools that could both protect or put this at risk.

[10] 'Gif he hine to preoste bescire unbundenne, mid XXX scill. Gebete'. *Laws,* trans. Attenborough, 78-79.
[11] 'Gif he hine on bismor to homolan bescire, mid X scill. Gebete.' *Laws,* trans. Attenborough, 78-79.
[12] 'Gif he ðone beard ófascire, mid XX scill. Gebete,' *Laws,* trans. Attenborough,-79.
[13] 'Gif he hine gebinde 7 þonne to preoste bescire, mid LX scill. Gebete,' *Laws,* trans. Attenborough, 78-79.



Fig. 2.1: The 'Fuller Brooch', hammered sheet metal. Late-ninth century. Diameter: 144mm. London, The British Museum, 1952,0404.1.

The late ninth-century Fuller brooch also shows how while men did not have to have their hair covered, there was certainly an expectation that it ought to be neat. The individuals representing the five senses all have smooth and orderly hair,[14] whereas in contrasting images that will be explored later, uncombed hair for men could symbolise transgression, wildness and danger. Anselm of Canterbury refused, in 1094 AD, to give ashes

[14] Neatly combed hair can also be seen in the tenth-century carved ivory panel depicting Christ in Majesty, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M 319A, or the depiction of Saint Luke at the beginning of his gospel in the late-eight century pocket gospel, London, British Library, Additional MS 40618. Marion Archibald et al., *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art (*British Museum Trustees and the British Library Board, 1984), 29 and 38.

or blessings on Ash Wednesday to any men who grew their hair long – this resulted in a number of them cutting their hair short in order to receive a blessing.[15] Long male hair continued to be critically considered in the accounts of William of Malmesbury,[16] and the *Orderic Vitalis*.[17] When considering alongside the proliferation, at the same time, of antler workshops, the most common material used to make combs in the tenth-eleventh century at places like Coppergate in York,[18] for example, we can see that there was both awareness and anxiety about the correct way to style hair which ensured combs were continuously made and bought objects, even if these hairstyles changed.

[15] Martin Rule, *The Life and Times of St. Anselm: Archibishop of Canterbury and Primate of the Britains,* (Kegan, Paul, Tench and Co, 1883), Vol. 2, 24.
[16] William recounts a story where a knight, who grew his hair long, dreamt he was strangled by his locks. On waking he promptly cut it all off, though after a year the courtiers who had copied him had forgotten this: 'They vied with women in the length of their locks, and, when the hair was inadequate, they fastened on a kind of hair-piece, forgetting, or rather not knowing, the Apostle's judgement, 'If a man have long hair it is a shame unto him.' William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella: The Contemporary History,* ed. and trans. Edmund King, (Oxford Medieval Texts: 1998), Book 1, 12-13.
[17] Recorded at the Council of Rouen, 1096: 'no man shall grow his hair long; instead let him be shorn as befits a Christian….' Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica* Vol. 5, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford Medieval Texts, 2022) Book IX, iii, 23. See also Book VIII on corrupt fashions and morals of the time – 'They parted their hair from the crown of the head to the forehead, grew long and luxurious locks like women, and loved to deck themselves in long, over-tight shirts and tunics.' Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* trans. Chibnall, Vol. 4, viii, 189.
[18] A. MacGregor and A. J, Mainman, "Comb making evidence," in *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn,* 1917.



Fig. 2.2: Ivory panel from the Genoels Elderen, right side. Belgium, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Musée du Cinquantenaire, MRAH 1474. 300 x 180 mm. Wikipedia commons, public access image, uploaded April 2009.

Hair styling was important for men in ensuring status, community and culture were all communicated. For women, veil styling was used in a similar way. For religious women, veiling in England was established in writing by Bede in the eighth century, who records

Æthelthryth receiving the 'veil and habit of a nun from Bishop Wilfrid'.[19] However, there were distinctions between religious and lay women in the way they veiled their hair. The eighth-century ivory panels are part of the Genoels Elderen diptych, and were found in Belgium, though on stylistic grounds they were at least inspired by Northumbrian fashions and potentially made in the region.[20] Different occupations could lead to different types of hair coverings. In these panels (Fig. 2.2), which, due to the perforated holes has been suggested to have been nailed to a book cover,[21] Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, are in identical outfits with the double veil, with a tight underlayer with loose, flowing fabric draped over the construction. In contrast, the female attendant, in the bottom right, wears her hair covered in a different way, with a shorter veil wrapped round her hair. More practical jobs would have required more practical clothing, though both sets of women had their hair covered. The long, flowing veils made up of multiple fabrics are a continuation from the seventh-century portrait of Mary in the Book of Kells (Chapter 1, Fig. 1.2), and were

[19] 'accepto uelamine sanctimonialis / habitus a praefator antistite Uilfrido.' Bede, *HE*, trans. Colgrave and Mynors, iv. XVIII, 393-393.
[20] Owen-Crocker, *Dress,* 97.
[21] Belgium, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Inv no. 1474.

Fig. 2.3: London, British Library Add. MS 49598, f. 5IV, Winchester, Old Minster, c. 971-84. The Benedictional of St Æthelwold, The Women at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. *Manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon Age,* Michelle P. Brown (The British Library, 2007), 116. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication of *Manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon Age.*

likely to have continued to be associated with individuals of status, who were not required to undertake physical labour. Another tenth-century manuscript with a depiction of women at the tomb (Fig. 2.3) reveals similar but not identical ways of twisting and draping fabric. Women could cover their hair in multiple ways; these did not reduce their opportunities to visually communicate who they were. The tenth-century will of Æthelgifu, for example, lists

a *beafodgewædo* as a headdress, [22] whereas the will of Wynflæed, a likely mid-tenth century text existing through an eleventh-century copy, lists several kinds of head coverings passed down to her children. It also contains headbands – *binde* – which appear to have been used to secure other head coverings (known as *cuffia,* or *rift*).[23] Ways to cover hair therefore were numerous and varied.

While religious women and women of status were likely to wear their hair fully covered, some hair may have been visible for lay women, even if most of it remained covered. Alcuin, at the end of the eighth century (c. 793 AD), warned the clergy about not caring excessively about the way they were dressed, as 'What seems praiseworthy among the laity, that is care in one's clothing, is recognized as extremely reprehensible among clerics and monks, for the lord of the apostles prohibited luxurious clothing and the twisting of hair even for women.'[24] The religious criticism of hair styling continued into the ninth century, with Amalar of Metz (775-850 AD) arguing 'some men also grew their hair, and women came to the church bareheaded, glorying in their hair, which was not only disgraceful, but also inflamed desire.'[25] Women were meant to cover their hair in church and stand on the opposite side of the building, lest the men become 'inflamed with lust'.[26]

The evidence has changed, but combs continued to be considered objects that were capable of enforcing behaviour. Instead of found broken or burnt in cremations, combs in the eighth to eleventh centuries were more plentiful in waste sites, and the impact of their use more visible in manuscript illuminations and surviving writings from the time. However, hair was expected to be kept neat and tidy, and subverting those expectations was

[22] 'headdress', Æthelgifu, *The Will of Æthelgifu: A Tenth-Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript,*, trans. Dorothy Whitelock, with Neil Ker and Lord Rennell (The Roxburghe Club for Oxford University Press, 1968), 13, lines 45 and 47-9.
[23] Gale R. Owen, "Wynflæd's wardrobe," *Anglo-Saxon England 8* (1979): 215. Translation by Owen.
[24] 'Quod in laicis laus esse videtur, id est vestimentorum cultus, hoc in clericis et maxime in monachis reprehension esse cognoscitur. Sed et ipse princeps apostolorum etiam feminas a pretiosis vestimentis et circulates capillis prohibuit.', Alcuin, *Letters*, trans. Allott, 54, 55–6.
[25] Amalarius, *On the Liturgy*, trans. Eric Knibbs, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library: 35-26 (Harvard University Press, 2014), 15.
[26] '*accendatur ad libidinem*'. Amalarius, *On the Liturgy,*trans. Knibbs, 14.

reflected poorly in the sources and deemed dangerous by contemporary writers, like Alcuin's anxiety over invasions or Amalar's concern over the way people dressed for church. Protection and enforcement were two themes associated with early medieval cremations, and though the evidence is different, it still suggests these associations continued into later centuries.

Sexuality

Manuscript illustrations and stories from this period show how hair was used as a short hand to demonstrate certain character traits, especially for women. Because women's hair was displayed less often, the times when it was depicted as unbound or wild were especially charged.

The tenth-century Old English retelling of the Biblical story Judith and Holofernes is a good example of how uncovered hair was used as a narrative device to underline a combination of sexuality and vulnerability, describing Judith's hair in ways that are different from the original Biblical version. In the Bible, Judith's people are about to be conquered by the general Holofernes, and, as a last resort, she purposefully dresses herself to be appealing to Holofernes, planning to distract him with her beauty, get him drunk, and exact revenge on him for her people. This involves taking off her hair cloth, plaiting her hair and putting on a head covering, or bonnet (Judith 10:2-3).[27] When Holofernes passes out, she beheads him, the invading army flees, and her people are saved (Judith 10-14).

There are marked changes in the Old English version in comparison to the Biblical story, and these changes are done to make Judith's actions appear more palatable for the intended audience, according to the poem's author, Ælfric.[28] Judith, in the tenth century Old English poem *Judith and Holofernes*, is described with uncovered hair at the moment she

[27] Translation from Dhouy Rheims version, the Vulgate uses *mitram* to refer to the head covering.
[28] Mary Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith: Manipulative or Manipulated?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994): 223–25.

enters Holofernes' tent, with the intention of killing him. In contrast to the Biblical story, where Judith deliberately gets Holofernes drunk and flirts with him on purpose, (and her hair is not mentioned at the moment of seduction), the tenth century version softens Judith's agency. In Ælfric's *Judith,* he deliberately restricts her power in contrast to the original story. She does not get Holofernes drunk on purpose and her beauty is mentioned in direct relation to her chastity as she 'lived in purity'[29] – this Judith is 'more decorous and less active,' because Ælfric deemed this more appropriate for his religious audience.[30]

Her unbound hair in the Old English poem still signifies her sexual availability, but in an almost passive manner. Two words only are used to describe her appearance – *aelfscinu*, 'of elfin beauty' which is used once, and then *wundenlocc,* or 'with braided hair' used twice, once when she picks up Holofernes' sword with a view to decapitate him, and when she makes the first blow.[31] Although her uncovered hair, and her appearance in Holofernes' tent suggest sexual availability, there is also an undertone of vulnerability to Judith's position, emphasised by her praying.[32] Holofernes could wake at any moment, and her plans could fall apart.[33] In contrast, the Biblical Judith is much more active in her pursuit of revenge, and much more actively sexual as part of this. This Judith parts her hair as she prepares to meet Holofernes, removing the 'garments of her widowhood' with the intent of seduction (Judith 10:2-3). Holofernes' lust for Judith is emphasised as is everyone else's appreciation of her beauty, and her deliberate actions resulted in astonishment and admiration (Judith 10:7). Biblical Judith is active in moulding her appearance, whereas Ælfric's Judith is not.

[29] Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," 223.
[30] Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," 224.
[31] Peter J. Lucas, ""Judith" and the Woman Hero," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 19.
[32] Lucas, "Judith," 20.
[33] Lucas, "Judith," 20-21.

The choice to restrict Judith's agency over her own appearance reveals what a tenth-century religious audience would have considered appropriate behaviour.[34] Removing Judith's agency, but still using her hair to depict the sexuality that is inescapable from the original story, suggests that this was an acceptable shorthand in the tenth century. But the implications are more subtle than unbound hair only symbolising sexual availability. In Ælfric's poem, the image of Judith in Holofernes' tent is not one of female empowerment but one of vulnerability. Her unbound hair might indicate sexuality in a way that Ælfric could not, but it also tells the audience that this is a woman in danger.

The use of unbound hair as a narrative or visual device to signal sexual availability is used more explicitly in illustrated versions of the *Psychomachia*. Written by Prudentius in the late fourth or early fifth centuries, the manuscripts describe the internal battles that Christians face between vice and virtue.[35] Three complete, or near complete, illustrated cycles were produced in England and known from the late tenth century, connected to reform centres including Canterbury and Malmesbury.[36] The earliest extant, unillustrated version of the manuscript dates to the ninth century, though Richard Stettiner has proposed that the text was first illustrated much earlier, within a century of Prudentius' death in 413 AD.[37] It is also possible that the first introduction of the manuscript in England predates the ninth century. According to Stephenie McGucken it is 'not difficult' to imagine the context which the first extant manuscript was ordered, as part of Alfred's reforms and then the further tenth century monastic reforms under Edgar and Æthelwold.[38] The *Psychomachia*, along with the retelling of Judith and Holofernes, is a useful source that reveals expected behaviour for both men and women, and crucially how that behaviour might be reinforced

[34] Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," 216.
[35] Stephenie McGucken, "Vice & Virtue As Woman?: The Iconography of Gender Identity in the Late Anglo-Saxon Psychomachia Illustrations," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no. 1 (2019): 44.
[36] McGucken, "Vice & Virtue As Woman?" 45.
[37] McGucken, "Vice & Virtue As Woman?" 44.
[38] McGucken, "Vice & Virtue As Woman?" 44.

or undermined by the physical appearance of the characters. While Judith and Holofernes mentions hair styling as a key plot point, the depiction of different hairstyles in the Psychomachia also acts as a visual shorthand for their characteristics.

Gender in the Psychomachia is complicated, with figures appearing to shift between male and female attributes depending on their place in the story. When celebrating their presence in heaven, the virtues are robed as women, with their heads covered, but when storming the gates, they are as male, military figures.[39] Nonetheless, the unveiled depiction of lust with loose, flowing hair, underlines that uncovered hair is directly and consistently

Fig. 2.4: Lust fighting off Modesty. f. 7v. London, The British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C viii. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript at the British Library, London.

[39] McGucken, "Vice & Virtue as Woman?" 44.

associated with sexual promiscuity or barbarian behaviour, underlining its association with wildness and disorder. In the late tenth-century manuscript, MS Cotton Cleopatra C viii,

Fig. 2.5: f. 6v. Idolatry holding off Faith with a spear. London, The British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C viii. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript at the British Library, London.

Fig. 2.6: Anger confronting Patience. f. 11r. London, The British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C viii. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript at the British Library, London.

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folios 7v – 8r (Fig. 2.4 - redacted) show lust with her hair down. By contrast, the virtuous female figures are veiled and heavily cloaked, covered in long swathes of material that appears to almost billow around them. The clinging nature of the robes on lust, not to mention her long, unbound hair, was a visual shorthand depicting her sin.

Unbound hair, however, can also be used to narratively signal wildness, or a person acting outside the realms of what is appropriate. *Idolatriam*, wearing a one-armed toga, and holding *Fides* off with a spear while a horned animal stands on a plinth behind him has loose,

curling hair (Fig. 2.5 - redacted). While male figures in the manuscript do have their hair uncovered, they are mostly close cropped and neat, in contrast to the wild and untamed presentation of *Idolatriam's*. *Ira*, on folios 10v and 11r also has uncovered hair, wild and sticking up on its ends, in contrast to the tightly veiled *Patientia* (Fig. 2.6 - redacted). The unveiled, uncombed hair in the *Pshychomachia* is used to demonstrate either lust, or barbarianism. This is not just a visual shorthand that was used in more moralising texts. In the illustrated calendar for a manuscript produced about the middle of the eleventh century,[40] London, British Library MS Arundel 60, Libra, a male figure holding the scales of justice is neatly combed and cut, whereas the female Virgo is heavily veiled (Fig. 2.7 - redacted). Sagittarius, however, as half man-half centaur, has unbound hair sticking on its ends (Fig. 2.8 - redacted). Hair combing does not just indicate sexual availability, but rationality and order, and figures who have uncombed hair are outside the expectations of society for one reason or another.

[40] Thomas-H. Bestul, "British Library, MS Arundel 60, and the Anselmian Apocrypha," *Scriptorium 35.2* (1981): 271.

Fig. 2.7: Virgo and Libra, f. 5v-6r. The British Library, London, MS Arundel 60. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript at the British Library, London.

Another mid-eleventh century manuscript at the British Library also shows how wild hair is one trait that can be used to reinforce wildness. London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B. V/I has several scenes where the groomed men are in contrast to monsters that otherwise take human forms in the section on Marvels of the East (f. 78.v-87.v - redacted). Positioned as strange and fantastical in numerous ways, there are also plenty of comparisons to the neatly coiffed and acceptably tunic-ed figures that make up examples of normal people, like 83v, instead of the long-haired man in a loincloth feeding his two dogs on 85r, or the satyr creature with even longer hair on the same folio.

If female sexuality and vulnerability was associated with unbound hair, then the moments when a woman's hair was being combed would have been points of intimacy.

Fig. 2.8: Sagittarius, f. 7r. London, The British Library, MS Arundel 60. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript at the British Library, London.

These were not occasions that occurred in front of an audience, instead it is likely that they took place away from public spaces or were reserved for periods of time when their privacy would be more assured. The act of brushing the hair, especially with these combs that often had narrow teeth and were made from wood and antler, would have been much more time consuming than it is today when modern hair brushes are used. The narrow teeth would have detangled bit by bit, and the fashion for women to have long, though covered hair, would have meant that the process of grooming would have been lengthy. The reality of when women uncovered and brushed their hair might have been different, driven by more functional requirements like time or space limitations. But clearly the associations between sexuality and uncovered hair were well-known enough to permeate not just through stories and poems, but calendars too.

Care

Unbound, or unbrushed hair in art was a shorthand to indicate disorder, as demonstrated by the illustrations in the *Psychomachia* and calendars. In everyday life, a moment when unbound and unbrushed hair might have been encountered was when a person became sick. While different to undressing, sickness was also a state which threatened order and could be dangerous to an entire community. The use of combs in medical remedies in the medieval period shows that they became symbols of care and reassurance, easing anxieties about disease as well as being active ingredients in certain remedies.

For many of the cures used in early medieval medicine, combs were likely present but invisible in the sources, being used as tools even if they were not often recorded as active remedy ingredients. This is not unusual, as many of the tools needed to make a cure are not listed. The *Herbarium*, for example, is organised by ingredient and not by remedy, which suggests the texts act more as reference books than instructional treatises. Ingredients are listed, but information about the preparation is missing, in the same way a cookbook for experts would list ingredients and vague instructions without considering it necessary to fully explain every detail of the process.[41] In Bald's *Leechbook,* for another example, comparing the Old English texts to the Latin and Greek originals they were based on reveals that remedies that contained lots of rare ingredients were often omitted, implying that this was a text that was being produced for practical reasons, and not just to titillate a reader.[42]

This lack of detail could also apply to the tools required as part of the remedy. One headache recipe in the *Leechbook*, for example, suggests smearing the top of the head, the

[41]A good example of a remedy that provides very little information beyond an ingredient list is when a remedy for a fever is just described as applying an oil of Mugwort to a person with a fever. Anne Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies: The Old English Herbarium and Early-Medieval Medicine* (Routledge, 2023), 153.
[42] M. L. Cameron, "Bald's 'Leechbook' and cultural interactions in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 19, (1990): 7.

temples and the forehead with a salve made from salt, mountain rue and an ivy flower suspended in honey.[43] This remedy does not mention the beaker nor the bowl that the ingredients would have been mixed in, nor the implement that was used to mix the paste together. If a comb had been used to aide in the application of the salve to the person's head, it is not surprising that it went unrecorded. All the main sources that we have for this period – the *Leechbook*, the *Lacnunga*, the *Herbarium* and the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* – involve recipes that imply the use of combs.[44] For instance, remedies could involve washing the hair, as one headache remedy calls to wash the head in a mixture of mustard seed and mountain rue water.[45] These involved creating an oil mixture and applying it regularly. The hair, after being washed, would have needed to be brushed as it dried in order to prevent tangling.

Other cures involved sweating, which would have resulted in tangled hair that necessitated the use of a comb. An elaborate cure against elf-disease involves the patient being smoked with 'frankincense and bittersweet nightshade' until he sweats.[46] If a woman's menstrual cycle flows 'too quickly', fresh horse dung should be added to a fire until she sweats a lot.[47] A long recipe against paralysis calls for the person suffering to take frequent hot baths after steaming themselves over a kettle, which would cause both sweating and necessitate the washing of hair.[48] When the hair becomes wet it tangles and becomes

[43] 'Wiþ swiþe ealdum heafod ece: nim sealt and rudan and ifig, crop, cnua ealle tosomne, do on hunig and smire mid þa þunwangan and þone hnifel and ufan þæt heofod.' Brooke Bullock, ed., trans., *Leechbook III: a new digital edition*, 111r-v. Accessed 10 November 2022. https://leechbookiii.github.io/index.html.
[44] Christine Sempers, *Anglo Saxon Magic, Medicine & Wisdom* (Corvus Books, 2004); Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (Nijhoff, 1948).
[45] 'Wiþ þon ilcan: nim senepes sæd and rudan. Gegnid on ele. Do on hat wæter. Þweah gelome þæt heafod on þam wætre. He biþ hal.' Bullock, *Leechbook III,* trans. Bullock, 111r.
[46] 'Lege stor and ælfþonan on þa gleda and rec hine mid þæt he swæte and þæt hus geond rec and georne þone man gesena and þonne he on reste gange, ete…' Bullock, *Leechbook III,* trans. Bullock, 124r.
[47] 'Sele drincan and beþe wif on hatum baþe and drince þone drenc on þam baþe.' Bullock, *Leechbook III,* trans. Bullock, 119r.
[48] 'Þonne hit sie swiþe gewylled, do of þam fyre and sete and gewyrc þam men setl ofer þam citele and bewreoh ðone man mid þæt se æþm ne mæge ut nahwær, butan he mæge a geeþian. Beþe hine mid þisse beþinge þa hwile þe he mæge aræfnan…Hafa him þonne oþer bæþ geara: genim æmet bed mid ealle þara þe hwilum fleogað beoþ reade. Wyl on wætre. Beþe hine mid ongemet hatum.' Bullock, *Leechbook III*, trans. Bullock, 121v.

damaged more easily (the moisture causing the cuticle to open up),[49] meaning that the process of sweating, and tossing and turning as a result of discomfort caused by illness, would have left hair in need of grooming.[50] Even if hair was braided, it would likely have to be re-braided or cleaned after such an experience.

The remedies in the *Leechbook* are also written from the perspective that the person healing the sick and the sick person are not the same – there are at least two people involved in every cure. This means that the individual who is ill, unveiled and bathing, is in a particularly vulnerable state. In addition to the bathing, the administration of salves or steams, the secondary person treating the sick individual would probably have been the one to comb their hair. Lack of interest in personal grooming (i.e., the sick would not have been interested in combing the hair themselves), lack of appetite and depression are all evolutionary responses to a fever or raised temperature that have allowed both humans and animals to survive in the wild.[51] Animal coats grow visibly matted because of this, and humans also stop personal grooming to the same extent that they would engage with when well.[52] Given an individuals' own decreased interest in grooming at such a time, and the nature of many of the remedies suggesting at least more than one person was involved in their application, it is most likely that the hair of the sick person would have been combed by someone else. Treating the sick involved managing the symptoms of a disease rather than the internal causes,[53] and most medieval medicine was based on observation.[54] The hair

[49] "What is a hair cuticle and why you need to seal it," L'Oréal Paris, accessed 2 December 2022, https://www.lorealparisusa.com/beauty-magazine/hair-care/damaged-hair/what-is-hair-cuticle#:~:text=Hair%20cuticles%20are%20normally%20closed,damage%20like%20breakage%20and%20frizz.
[50] Clarence R. Thomas, *Chemical and Physical Behaviour of Human Hair* (Springer, 2012), 394-395.
[51] Benjamin Hart, "Biological Basis of the Behavior of Sick Animals," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 12, no. 2 (1988): 123.
[52] Hart, "Sick Animals," 123.
[53] M. L. Cameron, A*nglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 117-18.
[54] Recent scholarship has redressed the assumptions that medieval medicine was not effective. See Peregrine Horden's "What's Wrong With Early Medieval Medicine?" *Social History of Medicine Advanced Access,* (2009): 1-21, or the introductory chapters in Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies.*

combing, then, is part of the wider cure driven by attention, something that is both tender and necessary.

Furthermore, the comb might have indicated the coming to an end of a period of treatment or isolation. This final act of care, of combing and dressing the body as it returns to strength, would have carried meaning – if it is impossible to have social relationships without symbolic acts, as Mary Douglas argues,[55] then these symbolic acts would have been important building blocks in society. These rituals of cure were essential in creating a reality that would not exist without them,[56] and would have allowed the individual to feel not just physically well, but mentally recovered. Combing and grooming a sick person might have been an evolutionary response, but it was also a communal one that was important to maintain the bonds that were integral to a society.

Combs were not just tools that were important building blocks for recovery and symbols of intimacy during a period of vulnerability. They also might have been tools that were used to protect a vulnerable part of the body. The head in general was considered important. While debates around whether or not the head or the heart contained the soul continued into the later medieval period,[57] the head still needed protection. In one remedy in the *Leechbook*, the hair is referred to as a 'helmet of safety'.[58] The tool that organised this, i.e., the comb, might have had an added symbolic association as being a protective tool. When hair was included in a remedy, it is not always specified what type of hair it is or how it should have been collected. Dioscorides records it in a remedy to help with uterine suffocation,[59] but whether a comb might have been used to collect hair strands is not

[55] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 62.
[56] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 62.
[57] These debates generally placed more importance on the head than the centre of the body by the twelfth-thirteenth century. Esther Cohen, "The Meaning of the Head in High Medieval Culture," in *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. Catrien Santing, Anita Traninger, and Barbara Baert (Brill, 2013), 69.
[58] 'helm hælo beoðo westo heafde,' *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, trans. Grattan and Singer, 138.
[59] John G. Fitch, *On Simples, Attributed to Dioscorides: Introduction, Translation, Concordances* (Brill, 2022), 123.

included. Combs might have become tools that helped gather these ingredients, a process in itself that could also have been ritualized.

Combs were powerful tools in enabling rituals to take place, cleaning the body when sick and applying salves to the head. However, they could also be *active participants* in these rituals, as a remedy from the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* illuminates.[60] Most of the time we have to imagine when or where a comb was used, whereas the comb in the following remedy is an ingredient in its own right. This comb then is not like the other uses of the comb in relation to medieval medicine.

The *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* is a collection of remedies that exist only in manuscripts which also contain the *Herbarium,* a more common early medieval herbal. While the *Herbarium* is based on a fourth-century Latin text, *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* is based on a fifth-century one.[61] The *Medicina* exists in Old English in four manuscripts, all with the *Herbarium,* though the *Herbarium* exists in other manuscripts without it.[62] The cure, *Wið wifes flewsan* (the first three words of the remedy) is part of a small collection of recipes written to promote the properties and useful applications of the mulberry tree in medicine. Although not as common as the *Herbarium*, this does not mean it was not widely distributed at the time, and while the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* was written a hundred years later than the original Latin *Herbarium,* it was still in circulation, and intended to be used.

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[60] Sextus Placitus, *The Old English Herbarium and Medicina de Quadrupedibus* ed. Hubert Jan de Vriend (The Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, 1984*),* 239. Translation by author, and Thomas Oswald Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England: Being a Collection of Documents Illustrating the History of Science in This Country before the Norman Conquest. Volume 1* (Cambridge Library Collection, 2013), 331.

[61] Placitus, *The Old English Herbarium,* lxiii.

[62] The Old English manuscripts containing the Medicina de Quadrupedibus are London, British Library Cotton Vitellius C III, London, British Library, Harley 6258 B, London, British Library Harley 585 and Oxford, Bodleian Library Hatton 76. The first two are examined as part of de Vriend's *Herbarium,* the third was viewed online and the fourth I saw in person in Oxford. All four MS have the same version of the cure *Wið wifes flewsan*. The one difference in the texts is that Harley 6258 B misses out a reference to using the remedy on a downward facing branch to encourage the blood to flow, De Vriend, *Hebrarium,* 241. De Vriend suggests the similarities across the texts indicate a 'common ancestor', and the Medicina explicitly is closely connected with an early Anglian version. *Herbarium,* xliii.
In terms of the Latin MS, De Vriend uses Lucca, Biblioteca Governativa no. 296. London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library no. 573 also contains the extract. Both sources also match.

It follows as such: if a woman is bleeding too much as a result of her menstruation, she should make her way to a mulberry tree. When there, she should comb her hair underneath the branches. Whatever hair is pulled out and ends up in the comb should then be placed over an upwards facing branch. If the blood needs to be encouraged to flow, then it should be a downwards facing branch. The comb should be taken away, the hair left in the tree. Once the blood starts or stops flowing as desired, the hair should be collected from the branch, and the hair and comb carefully kept away from others, not to be used by anyone else.[63]

Out of the three main medical texts from the early medieval period, the *Leechbook*, the *Lacnunga*, and the *Herbarium,* there appears to be three different kinds of cures – those taken internally, those applied externally, and those that are a mixture of both. The type of illness you have doesn't necessarily mean you will only have external or internal cures – for instance headaches often require purely external cures, like the application of salves, but not all headache remedies are only external in nature.[64] These divisions generally make sense and underline the importance of observation when treating medieval disease: the symptoms were examined and treated rather than the root cause.[65] The ritual involving the mulberry tree in this light might be considered unusual. Modern medicine clearly shows that issues relating to menstruation are internal, and indeed many other remedies for menstrual cramps and bleeding from the early medieval period also require internal cures.[66] But this cure is made up of elements that by a modern approach would have no physical impact on the person suffering from excess bleeding.

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[63] Placitus, *The Old English Herbarium,* 239. Translation by author.
[64] One remedy in the *Herbarium* calls for rue to be added to wine and then drunk. However, it does also then suggest pressing the juice into vinegar and then smearing it onto the head. Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies,* 189.
[65] Cameron, A*nglo-Saxon Medicine*, 117-18.
[66] For example, the remedy for 'A woman's menstrual flow,' which involves simmering a blackberry concentrate for the afflicted to drink for three days in a row on an empty stomach. Given that the cure involves drinking a hot drink, it may be that this was intended to ease the pain of cramping. Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies*, 187.

The cure is made up of three elements. These may not have cured the physical symptoms by our reasoning, but the act of undertaking this could have had an impact on the mind, the intention in the remedy also being one of the ingredients for its success.[67] A heightened, ritualized version of an ordinary action – hair combing – the specificity of the other ingredients; a mulberry tree, a comb that has not been used by anyone else, and will not be used after,[68] the direction of the branch, all combine to suggest a thoughtfulness about each element which shapes the participant's behaviour and differentiates it from brushing hair as part of a regular grooming regime.

[67] Christina Pössel, "The magic of early medieval ritual," *Early Medieval Europe* 17, 2, (2009): 116.
[68] 'genim þone camb þe heo ana hyre heafod mid cemde, 7 nænig man ær mid cemde ne æfter cembe.' "let her take the comb with which she alone combs her hair, with which no other person combed it before nor ever shall comb it after." Trans. Joseph Delcourt, *Medicina de Quadrupedibus: an early ME version with introduction, notes, translation and glossary* (C. Winter, 1914), 7.

The *Medicina* was intended to highlight the specific benefits of the mulberry tree, and there most likely would have been an oral element along with the transmission of the manuscript. Experts would have been able to explain or teach those who needed to know, and the remedies would have served more to jog memories than provide a fool-proof guide to their use, as the *Herbarium* also was intended to do. MS Hatton 76, a manuscript which contains a copy of the *Medicina* and the *Herbarium* has the corner reinforced on the folio where this remedy is written. This reinforcement implies that perhaps it would have been

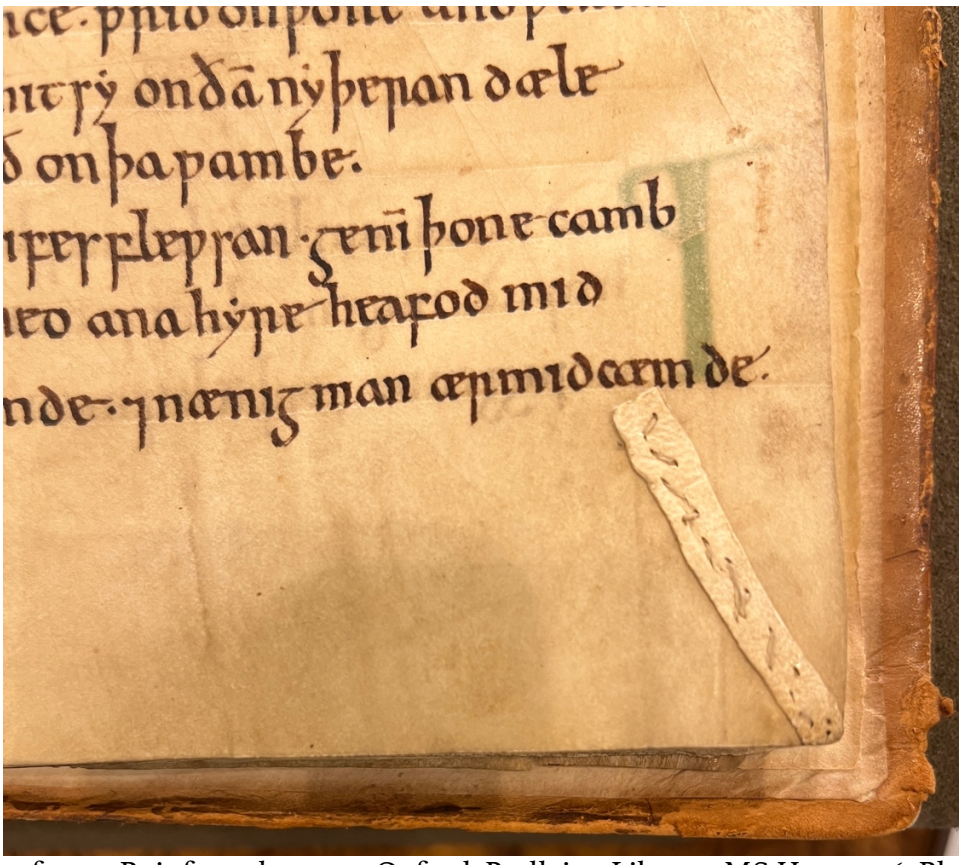

Fig. 2.9: f. 92 v. Reinforced corner. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 76. Photo by author.

referred to regularly, and the splatters of gold ink – which is not a colour used in the rest of the text – also might be a sign that this page was left open while other works were being

made or consulted. The use of MS Hatton 76, an eleventh-century copy of the text, suggests that at least in Worcester this manuscript was well used.[69]

The role of the comb in this remedy is clear, though the reasoning behind it is, at first glance, less-so. In order to understand its place, it is worth briefly examining the other elements that make up this remedy. The mulberry tree is the first element involved, the hair (and by extension, person) the second, and the comb is the third. Even the parts of the remedy that occasionally come into contact with the body, or start as part of the body – the comb, the hair – are separated from it, in order for the cure to work. If these issues were seen as external, were the remedies intended to provide some kind of protection against external 'threats'?[70] The ritual, then, could be understood in terms of protecting; was the comb a shield or did it play another role?

First – the mulberry tree. Mulberry trees are not native to the United Kingdom, though they would have been grown during the medieval period.[71] They were brought to Britain via the Romans, and seeds have been discovered in excavations from the first, second and third centuries at Silchester, New Fresh Wharf and St Thomas Street in London.[72] Because mulberry fruits are so soft, and there is no evidence for a food culture of preserving them, it is suggested that the Romans would have introduced the trees themselves, as the fruit would not have survived the travel.[73] Although some fruits, such as grapes used to make wine, were cultivated by the Romans and likely subsequently abandoned,[74] it does not appear that mulberry is one of them, partly because of the proliferation of it as an ingredient. Mulberry was used in cooking and eating, for adding colour and flavour to medieval dishes

[69] Personal correspondence with Laure Miolo, 2 February 2023.
[70] Audrey Meaney, "The Anglo-Saxon View of the Causes of Disease," in *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture,* eds. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall and David Klausner (Macmillan, 1992), 20.
[71] "Morus Nigra," RHS, accessed 8 December 2022, https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/11217/i-morus-nigra-i-(f)/details.
[72] F. A. Roach, *Cultivated Fruits of Britain: Their origin and history* (Blackwell, 1985), 215.
[73] H E M Cool, *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122.
[74] A. G. Brown et al., "Roman Vineyards in Britain: Stratigraphic and Palynological Data from Wollaston in the Nene Valley, England," *Antiquity* 75, no. 290 (2001): 745.

and also for making 'murry', a kind of puree or pottage that could be added to spiced meats or as a pudding.[75] The Old English word used is *morbeame* and can sometimes be translated as a blackberry bush.[76] Given that the woman must stand under the mulberry tree for the remedy to work, it is likely that the fauna necessary in this was the mulberry tree instead of the blackberry bush.[77] It is unclear whether the mulberry tree would have been commonly dispersed throughout the British Isles in the early medieval period, but it was certainly known in Worcester, London and Silchester in the Roman period. An early, though unproven example is a tree in Bochym Manor, Cornwall that is apparently over 1000 years old.[78] There are also written references to them in association with religious communities in Canterbury and York from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[79]

Mulberries are frequently mentioned in Late Antique medical texts for a wide range of ailments. Dioscorides, for example, often includes mulberry sap for both internal and external cures. It's used for soothing burns and healing issues with itching, gums and toothaches, and chronic headaches.[80] In the only remedy that might relate mulberries and blood, it is the blossoms that are tied round the neck, in an intriguing cure for nosebleeds.[81] Pliny however explicitly connects mulberries with menstruation, and berries from the tree, when attached to the person, were said to stop bleeding.[82] Mulberries turn up in other Old

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[75] Roach, *Cultivated Fruits,* 216.
[76] "Mór-beám," Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online, accessed 4 December 2022, https://bosworthtoller.com/23125.
[77] Blackberries are also used in remedies to aid menstruation. One remedy (the Old English used here is *bremel*, so no confusion between it and mulberry exists), suggests making a concentrate from the berries after simmering them in water. The afflicted must drink the warm mixture first thing in the morning. Given the importance of heating the drink, it might be that this was intended to ease menstrual cramping, rather than stopping blood flow. Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies,* 187.
For other plants that were also associated with stopping menstruation, comfrey was used, although it was administered through a drink. After the comfrey was pounded into a fine powder it was added to wine. Van Arsdall, *Medieval Herbal Remedies*, 175.
[78] Stephen Bowe, *Mulberry: The Material Culture of Mulberry Trees (*Liverpool University Press, 2015), 28.
[79] Bowe, *Mulberry*, 27.
[80] Fitch, *On Simples*, 72, 57, 47, 44, and 27 respectively.
[81] Fitch, *On Simples*, 80
[82] The mulberry itself, at germination, is what is required to attach to the body. Pliny, *HN* 23.137–8, via Kassandra Miller, "Intentional Menstrual Suppression in Imperial Rome." *Journal of Roman Studies* 114 (2024): 38.

English manuscripts, though not frequently – the *Lacnunga* includes the use of mulberry negus, a fortified wine made from mulberries, as part of a long and complex prescription for a salve good for 'headache and all infirmity of organs'.[83]

The mulberry tree, in the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, was not strictly related to menstruation, but blood flow more generally. The other remedies in Section II of the text involve stopping blood for both men and women – in one, the berry is lifted up for cures involving the upper body, and lowered for those involving the lower.[84] The mulberry tree grown in the UK is the *morus nigra,* and the juices of the fruit are dark and sticky, described as blood-like. [85] By 1653 it was written in John Gerard's herbal that the dried berries were 'good to stay fluxes, lasks, and the abundance of women's menses.'[86] The mulberry tree itself was apparently so well-recognised that it did not need illustration.[87] Given the association was so long-lasting, I would suggest that by the time of the tenth-century manuscript versions, the mulberry tree was already associated with blood, and it was understood you could benefit from these healing powers by just standing underneath it.

Removing oneself from one's environment, to a less familiar or unusual one, would have worked to shift the mindset. Ritual actions, because rituals are partly made up of belief, are only effective when performed in the appropriate spatial setting.[88] This appropriate setting, as well as providing the environment within which to act out the ritual, in turn forces the gestures and movements to be shaped by that environment, creating a circularity between the body's interaction with the outside world.[89] In order to comb the hair there are physical limitations: low branches forcing an individual to crouch, roots breaking through

[83] 'To 3odre bansealfe pe mæ wið heafodece 7 wið ealra lyma tyddernysse'. Mulberry negus is 'eald morod'. Translation by Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, 111-113.
[84] Delcourt, *Medicina de Quadrupedibus,* 7.
[85] Bowe, *Mulberry*, 27.
[86] Bowe, *Mulberry,* 112.
[87] Bowe, *Mulberry*, 28.
[88] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 20 and Frank H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series; 91 (JSOT Press, 1990), 32.
[89] Bell, *Ritual Theory,* 99.

the surface of the ground making it uneven, high or low branches making it difficult to drape the hair over. The mulberry tree, then, provides the physical and mental framework for the cure to take place.

Due to the associations between hair, sexuality, and women, it might be assumed that hair is a typical ingredient found in cures regarding menstruation, or other issues solely related to women. However, because hair would have been usually covered, revealing it in any way outside of a controlled environment like their homes, as demonstrated earlier, introduces vulnerability. Because hair is so linked to the person and is an important marker of identity, involving it in this ritual would have done two things. First, perhaps aided by that vulnerability or the sense of crossing a boundary, it would have helped place the individual in the ritual headspace needed for it to work.[90] And, secondly, it was the element that connected the cure to the *person.*

But the hair in this remedy is left in the branches of the tree. Both the hair and the tree's relationship are what controls the flow of the blood. Placing it on a downward facing branch encourages the blood to flow, the upward facing branch encourages it to stop. If the tree is symbolic of the blood, then the hair is the object that links the blood flow *to* that person. Hair is personal, literally a part of the body. Leaving it somewhere, especially when it was usually covered, would have ensured that even though you left the site of the ritual, the cure was still being linked to you, because there was a part of yourself that acted as a tether between the place and the body.

Finally, the comb. The comb first appears to be the aspect of the remedy that associates it with the woman. The mulberry tree is associated with blood flow, appearing in remedies for bleeding men and women, but the only remedies involving the mulberry tree and women are related to hair and the comb.[91] The comb is in part a tool, being used to

[90] Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, 32.
[91] Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft*, 329.

gather up hairs. However, it is also powerful because of its status as an object directly connected to an individual, building on the ideas that combs were considered especially intimate in this period. In order for the remedy to work, a comb that has not been used by anyone else must be chosen for this task – '*genim þone camb þe heo ana hyre heafod mid cemde, 7 nænig man ær mid cemde ne æfter cembe*.'[92] It is repeated, and therefore important, that the comb is not used by anyone else after the remedy either, suggesting that the comb also could have acted as a seal, one that ensured the affliction would not return to the woman who was seeking to be cured. In this, another person touching the comb was the polluting, dangerous element.

The symbolic role of the comb, as well as its single use, are essential in the rite's effectiveness. The success of the remedy, for there is no medical reason why it would work, is entirely based on whether or not the woman combing her hair believed it did.[93] As plants, gems or artefacts could be linked with the stars and planets to channel their power, so can a leaf shaped like a liver help heal that part of the body.[94] The mulberry tree, because of its association with blood across genders, is linked to the bleeding. The hair ties it to the person. Symbolic manipulation 'claims an efficacy like that of science and will be seen by its practitioners as a type of science.'[95] So the comb is the conduit through which the remedy is enabled, the final, essential part of a triplicate that exists to ease suffering for the woman, and ensure that the cure remains tied to her.

Given the proliferation of amulets in this period, combs might be considered among them.[96] In this particular cure, the need for the comb to be used only by the person suffering is stressed. Other remedies that involve amulets, for instance where a woman's spindle

[92] Placitus, *The Old English Herbarium*, 238. Rough translation by author.
[93] Pössel, "Early medieval ritual," 116.
[94] Richard Kieckhefer, "Rethinking How to Define Magic," in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic,* eds. Catherine Rider and Sophie Page (Routledge, 2019), 17.
[95] Kieckhefer, "How to Define Magic," 18.
[96] Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, 32.

whorl is bound to the neck with a woollen thread to cure cheek disease, are explicit in the attachment of the charm to the body.[97] Natural objects that were thought to have 'occult



Fig. 2.10: Copper-alloy comb pendant, c. eleventh century. Brecland (Norfolk). 48 x 36 mm. Unique ID: NMS-5269D4, Portable Antiquities Service.

properties' were also often incorporated into daily jewellery for protection, and so this would not have been unusual.[98] The mulberry, according to Pliny, was able to stop menstruation when attached to the body.[99] There are even some later eleventh-century pendants (more popular in Scandinavia, though a few examples have been found in England), in the shape of combs, decorated with zoomorphic elements and made from copper alloy (Fig. 2.10).[100] However, there is no such call in this remedy, despite combs being able to be worn on the body. Perhaps this is another example of an inherent pattern of behaviour that did not need to be discussed explicitly, and people would have attached the comb to themselves until their bleeding stopped.[101]

[97] Bullock, *The Leechbook III,* 113r.
[98] Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: pious motives, illicit interests, and occult approaches to the medieval universe* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013)*,* 49.
[99] The mulberry itself, at germination, is what is required to attach to the body, though it is only the tree and not the berries that are mentioned in this remedy. Pliny, *HN* 23.137–8, via Miller, "Intentional Menstrual Suppression," 38.
[100]"Comb Pendant (LIN-DD07D2)" EMIDS Vikings, accessed 10 December 2022, https://emidsvikings.ac.uk/items/comb-pendant-lin-dd07d2/.
[101] Ashby, *A Viking Way of Life*, 15.

The comb was not the only type of object that could do this – move from generally functional, little recorded, to being an active part in another remedy. Even if combs do not emerge regularly in these sources, they are still part of a wider corpus of objects that do. Knives, for example, were occasionally mentioned in the *Lacnunga,* and they play both practical and spiritual roles in the same way that combs move between states. One example against elf-sickness involves thrusting a knife into elecampane, a herb part of the sunflower family with a bright yellow flower and thin petals, and when digging the plant up, the knife is left sticking in it. The bundle is then taken to the church, and the herb and knife are left under the altar.[102] Another example from the *Leechbook* is the previously mentioned cure requiring a woman's spindle whorl to be bound to the neck with a woollen thread.[103] Like the comb, the knife and the spindle whorl are only one part of the remedy. The knife is plunged into the herb, the natural part of this remedy, and is not taken out. Similarly, the spindle whorl is bound to the person until the remedy is complete (once they have swilled warm goats' milk in their mouth and their symptoms have eased).[104] It was not unusual for everyday objects to act as shields, or perhaps as *seals* for these remedies.

By studying the implied presence of the comb in remedies, we can see how it became a symbol of reassurance. Even though the comb would not be an active part of the cure, and would not play a role in the effectiveness of the medicine, it would play an emotional role in the care for the sick. I suggest that the implied presence of the comb in the remedies would have further associated the object with specific characteristics: nurture, care, wellness. For a medieval sick person, the comb might even have represented hope and relief, a symbol of the end of an incubation period of sickness and of preparation to re-enter the wider world. While we know very little about the daily practices of taking care of the body during this

[102] Among other parts of this complex charm. Storms, *Anglo Saxon Magic*, 225.
[103] 'nim þone hweorfan þe wif mid spinnað. Bind on his sweoran mid wyllenan þræde and swile innan mid hate gate meolce.' Bullock, "The Leechbook III," trans. Bullock, 113r.
[104] Bullock, "The Leechbook III," 113r.

period, we know they were important and meaningful because the physical things that are associated with such practices, like decorated combs, were made with care and consideration.[105]

Conclusion

There are fewer direct references to combs in the sources in this period, though their impact becomes more clear, as greater evidence for hair styles and expectations for behaviour around hair, first seen in Alfred's law codes, are more common. Depictions of women in stories show how hair could be charged, and how expectations of how people were supposed to cover or comb it were so entrenched, that these depictions were essential shorthands in communicating character traits.

These fictional depictions of women and hair must have had a relation to how hair was dealt with in daily life. Uncovered hair was reserved for moments of privacy or intimacy. These moments would have forced individuals to stop and be still. They might have used this time for exchanging news or gossip, or discussing matters that were equally considered as private as the actions they were going through. Combs were inbuilt into some of the daily rituals most closely associated with intimacy. And because of these associations, the use of combs as gifts becomes even more potent.

There are more combs being made in this period than before, and there is more evidence in relation to hair styling and the types of hair coverings available. However, there are not necessarily more references to the combs themselves. But combs had power as symbols even if they were not recorded. Their use in remedies helped people feel cared for at the times when they were most vulnerable. With the emphasis most broadly on hair rather than the combs, it might be that the combs were important because of how they made

[105] Albrecht Classen, "Introduction: Bathing, Health Care, Medicine, and Water in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age," in *Bodily and Spiritual Hygeine in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: Explorations of Textual Presentations of Filth and Water,* ed. Albrecht Classen (De Grutyer: 2017), 2.

people feel, what they represented, rather than their physical qualities. The combs themselves do not provide the act of service, but they are the tools that enabled these acts of service to take place.

The presence of the comb as a remedy tool in the single example in *De Quadripedibus* is unusual, but also an example of the central difficulty in analysing medieval combs. This is one example of a comb that is distinct, that is clearly dealt with in a way that is unusual and special. This is not an everyday comb. However, its power in the remedy is most likely related to its everyday function. While combs could be considered powerful objects at certain times or within certain spaces, it appears to be a result of how they were considered otherwise, as objects that demonstrated intimacy, privacy, the crossing of boundaries or the upholding of social orders. And it is possibly a result of these meanings, that they do not completely stop being included in graves in this period.

Death

While the earlier section, *Life,* has demonstrated that in the eighth-eleventh centuries combs became increasingly associated with order and intimacy, there is much less evidence in relation to how combs were used in death. This is in stark contrast to the fifth-seventh centuries, when the deposition of grave goods was common.[106] However, the practice of including combs in inhumation graves did not completely end, and we continue to find combs in graves up until the eleventh century.

This section deals with a very small number of combs, as there are few examples generally. Five combs from two locations are included, in addition to one unusual written reference for a comb found in a will. This is partly due to the limitations in archaeological evidence, as there are fewer excavated cemeteries from the later seventh to eleventh centuries.[107] Victoria Thompson's work on medieval death, Dawn Hadley and Jo Buckberry's work on caring for the dead in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and Roberta Gilchrist's book on the medieval life course have all sought to redress this balance, though the eighth and ninth centuries particularly are less examined.[108]

Broadly, burial changed in many ways in this period. Firstly, death and dying was treated in a more formulaic way.[109] This was, as argued by Thompson, partly driven by the presence of reform houses in the south and a more widespread general increase in rural and urban churches.[110] There was also a greater chance of dying with a priest present and therefore more emphasis on the last rites as a key part of the dying process, a shorter journey to the graveyard, and generally more priests around in both life and death, as priests now

[106] See Appendix 13, Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 283.
[107] D. M. Hadley, "Late Saxon Burial Practice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, eds. Helena Hamerow, David Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford University Press, 2011), 290.
[108] Thompson, *Dying and Death;* Dawn Hadley and Jo Buckberry, "Caring for the Dead in Late Anglo-Saxon England," in *Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England,* ed. Francesca Tinti (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 121-147; Gilchrist, *Medieval Life.*
[109] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* 45.
[110] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 45.

lived among communities where they ministered.[111] The location of burials also changed and cemeteries were diverse and scattered, with church burial restricted to the elite and professionally religious, until the tenth or eleventh centuries.[112]

The idea that post-conversion grave goods died out instantly at the end of the seventh century is inaccurate,[113] though their nature did change.[114] The graves are not devoid of the presence of material culture, as coffins, shrouds and pins were all items of grave furniture or used to wrap a body. Although the types and possibly beliefs behind the inclusion of objects changes, it appears that the inclusion of a few objects, and their placement on the body, continued to be important.[115] Grave goods are also recorded in stories and poems, suggesting that the concept of them was familiar. *The Seafarer*, perhaps written in the eighth century but recorded in the tenth-century Exeter Book, suggests that furnished burial would not assist in atonement for sin, but does not otherwise indicate that including grave goods in general was un-Christian – 'Though he would strew the grave with gold, a brother for his kinsman, bury with the dead a mass of treasure, it will not work, nor can the soul which is full of sin preserve the gold before the fear of God.'[116]

One thing that remained important was the preparation of the body, which would have taken place regardless of differences in burial. Cleaning and preparing the corpse would likely have involved using a comb. One particularly striking example of a young nun buried in the cemetery at Romsey Abbey has revealed a preserved head of hair, covered in resin.[117] This resin may well have been applied by a comb as it was so thoroughly dispersed

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[111] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 45.
[112] D. M. Hadley, "Burial Practices in Northern England in the Later Anglo-Saxon Period," in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, eds. Andrew Reynolds and Sam Lucy (1st ed. Routledge, 2002), 210; Elizabeth Flora Craig, "Burial Practices in Northern England c a.D650-850: A Bio-Cultural Approach," (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2010), 432.
[113] D. M. Hadley, "Burial, Belief and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England," in *Reflections: 50 Years of Medieval Archaeology, 1957–2007*, eds. Roberta Gilchrist and Andrew Reynolds (1st ed. Routledge, 2009), 467.
[114] Hadley, "Burial, Belief and Identity," 469.
[115] Hadley and Buckberry, "Caring for the Dead," 140.
[116] Hadley, "Burial, Belief and Identity," 467.
[117] Jamie Cameron, Thibaut Devièse and Frances Green, "Scientific analysis of a preserved head of hair at Romsey Abbey," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports,* 13 (2017): 270.

throughout the hair. So while combs might not have had the same role as they did in the cremation rite, or even the furnished burial rite that declined in the seventh century, they were still likely in use during the funeral process.

Burial combs

At Ladykirk chapel in Ripon, Yorkshire, four combs and two comb cases were found directly underneath the chapel floor. Ladykirk chapel dates back to at least the fourteenth century, as records indicate that a chantry was founded on the site, 15 February, 1392.[118] The archaeological evidence however is older, with four combs found underneath the chancel dated on account of their style between the ninth and eleventh centuries (Fig. 2.12).[119] Clustered together under the east wing of the chancel, the skeletal remains which the combs might be associated with have been suggested to be priests based on their location within the church.[120] There is only one comb that has any record of indicating the exact context in which it was found: comb number 2 was found sheathed in case number 5,[121] and still in the fill of grave 27, having been placed on the chest of the skeleton.[122] Furthermore, comb number 2 belongs to the latter end of the date range, as the shorter length combs are dated towards the eleventh century.[123]

The inclusion of combs in these graves is, by this point, an unusual practice. Either the dating of the comb is incorrect and this belongs to an earlier practice where such deposition was more usual, *or* burial with combs continued much later than we might have thought, even down to the placement on the corpse mirroring earlier graves. It is tempting to suggest that the associations between combs and status, and combs and caretaking roles

[118] R. A. Hall, Mark Whyman, et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon, North Yorkshire, From the 7th to 11th Centuries A.D." *Medieval Archaeology*, 40:1 (1996): 125.
[119] Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 127.
[120] Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 130.
[121] Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 127.
[122]Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 127.
[123] Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 127.

within a community, might have continued. Given that burial at this time in or near the church was restricted to either the extremely wealthy, or the professional religious,[124] the individuals with the combs were continuing practices of earlier burials.

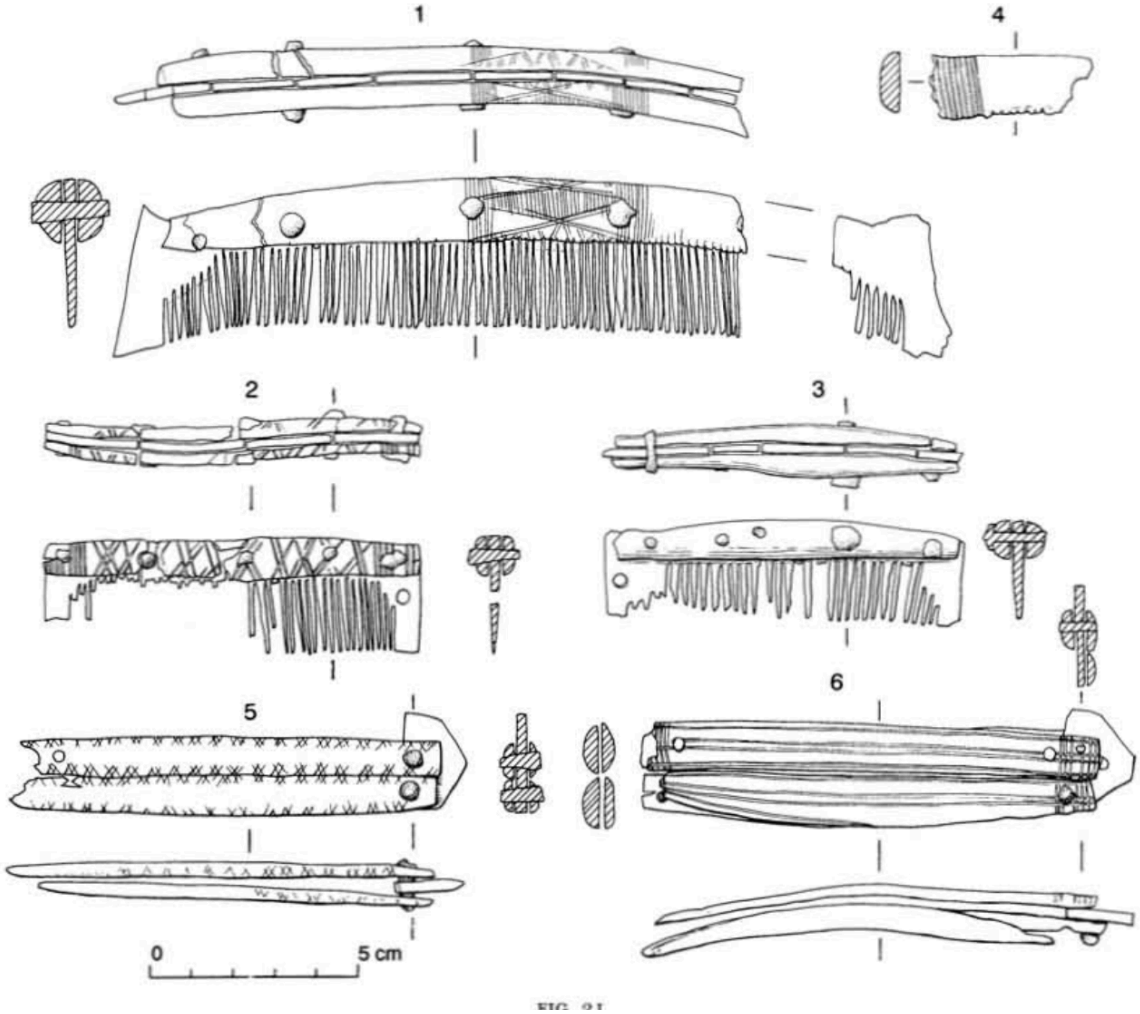

Fig. 2.11: Combs and comb cases found at Ladykirk Chapel, Ripon (Yorkshire). Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 128.

Given the differences in comb style and decoration, I would suggest that these four possible priests, or other significant people within the community, belonged to several generations. For a period of time, the tradition within the church was to bury these individuals with combs, in a position of importance underneath the building itself. It is not clear why this practice continued in this chapel. According to Bede, the chapel at Ladykirk

[124] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 30.

was associated with Wilfrid.[125] Wilfrid was an influential man whose religious career was furthered by a seventh-century powerful woman. When he was only fourteen, he was sent to Lindisfarne courtesy of Queen Eanflad, who then also, after he returned home, helped him go to Rome.[126] Eanflad was not just another powerful seventh-century queen. She was the daughter of Ethelburga, the Queen of Northumbria who had earlier in the century received a comb as a gift from the Pope.[127] At the end of the seventh century, then, there is a network of influence in which the women are important players, and who all possibly would

[125] Hall et al., "Settlement and Monasticism at Ripon," 63.
[126] 'He at once went to Queen Eanflæd because she knew him and because it was through her counsel and at her request that he had been admitted to the monastery. He told her of his desire to visit the shrines of the blessed apostles. She was delighted with the youth's excellent plan and sent him to King Eorcenberht of Kent, who was her cousin, asking him to send Wilfrid honourably to Rome.' Bede, *HE*, trans. Colgrave and Mynors, v. XIX, 520.
[127] Bede, *HE,* trans. Colgrave and Mynors, ii. XI, 172.

have been aware of the gift of the comb to Ethelburga, and all the associations that object would have had.

Fig. 2.12: Plan of early features of St. Patrick's Chapel, Heysham (Lancashire). Image via Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 63. Drawn: English Heritage. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication, "Heysham, Lancashire".

While there may not be enough direct evidence to argue that the comb Cuthbert was buried with directly ended up influencing how priests thought about what kind of burials they wanted several hundred years later, it is worth pointing out that there is a thread that connects this group of people, this being the network of women associated with Queen Ethleburga and Eanflad, and, later, the patrons of Cuthbert, and the associations of several combs between them. It is possible, given that combs do exist in the burials, that by the time

stories about Cuthbert's hair being combed and it continuing to grow were circulating, these other priests viewed that comb within the context of their own time, namely that burial with a comb was something that important churchmen did.

At St Patrick's Church in Heysham, Lancashire another example of a comb is found buried with a woman in grave 63 (Fig. 2.13 - redacted). Fig. 2.13 also shows that the woman was buried in a position indicating status within this community, which was right at the door of the chapel. St Patrick's was built around the eighth century, and its cemetery has apparently been in use from that period.[128] Grave 63 is part of the early, though not earliest, series of burials in the churchyard.[129] Aside from the comb, the rest of her burial is typical of the period. She was buried wrapped in a shroud, demonstrated by traces of linen on the comb rivets, and her hands have been crossed over her chest.[130] There was a thin spread of charcoal over the top of the grave, in addition to the comb itself being found on the right side of her pelvis.[131] The presence of charcoal in graves of this period is regarded to reflect 'ecclesiastical emphasis on the importance of humility and penance,' perhaps linked to the 'sackcloth and ashes' or monastic burial rites, purifying penitential ashes of Ash Wednesday, or as a way to prepare a dry grave, another important marker of cleanliness and purity. [132] Charcoal in graves was a much more common practice than combs in graves in this period,[133] and so a concern about cleanliness and purity might not have been the only factor in including the comb in the burial.

[128] T. W. Potter, F.S.A. and R. D. Andrews, "Excavation and Survey At St Patrick's Chapel and St Peter's Church, Heysham, Lancashire, 1977-8," *The Antiquaries Journal,* 3 Vol. 74 (1994): 79.
[129] Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 55.
[130] Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 79.
[131] Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 79.
[132] Hadley, "Late Saxon Burial Practice," 297.
[133] Over 300 charcoal burials are known from 35 cemeteries in England. James Holloway, "Material Symbolism and Death: Charcoal Burial in Later Anglo-Saxon England," in *Burial in later Anglo-Saxon England, c. 650-1100,* eds. Jo Buckberry and Annia Cherryson (Oxbow Books, 2010), 85.

At the time of the site write up they argued that this comb was evidence of 'wavering paganism', and because of its inclusion in the grave she would have been of Scandinavian origin.[134] Rather than the comb being a symbol of identity, I think it might be associated with the status of the deceased.[135] Hadley has argued on the basis of the positioning of the body within the grave that burial at this time was informed by behaviour and status in life, as well as anticipated fate in the afterlife.[136] The positioning at the door of the church does not suggest a person of wavering faith, and the comb may well have denoted a certain status or role, one that was still part of a Christian burial practice.

Fig. 2.13: Bone comb, grave 63 Heysham (Lancashire). Found to the right of pelvis. 197mm. Image via Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 123. Drawn: English Heritage. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original publication, "Heysham, Lancashire".

When considered alongside the combs underneath the chancel floor in Ripon, Yorkshire, it might be evidence of a localised north-western burial tradition that did not last for a long time, but was nonetheless significant to those engaging with it. The two sites are

[134] Potter and Andrews, "Heysham, Lancashire," 128.
[135] Catherine Hills, "Anglo-Saxon DNA?" In *Mortuary Practices and Social Identities in the Middle Ages: essays in burial archaeology in honour of Heinrich Härke*, eds. D. Sayer & H. Williams (Liverpool University Press, 2009), 124.
[136] Hadley, "Late Saxon Burial Practice," 296.

roughly two-days' walk away, a not insurmountable distance, and it is entirely possible that there was a shared association between the two. The comb in Heysham is extremely similar to one of the combs from Ripon, and is dated to the same time period. Based on stylistic grounds again, the Heysham comb fits within the parameters of Ashby Type 7 – long single-sided combs with iron rivets and shallow connecting plates – which have a ninth to tenth century date range.[137] Given that this burial was placed in the early phase of the cemetery, a ninth- or tenth-century date for it would make sense. I would suggest these two sites, while not necessarily being indicative of a wider trend, show that for certain groups the inclusion of combs in a burial were reserved for individuals of status. Both sets of bodies are found in significant contexts, directly underneath the chancel floor or directly in the doorway to the chapel, in addition to having similarly styled combs.

Finally, this period sees the first instance of a comb being given by a bishop in his will. In 1062 AD, the Bishop Sigeward in Abingdon (Oxfordshire) gave a 'beautiful' ivory comb, to his chapel, along with other items such as copies of the Gospel, a chalice and vestments.[138] This suggests that the association between church leaders and combs was not restricted to a geographic area. However, this is the only account of the death of a bishop of Abingdon that also contains a comb, which might indicate that these items continued to be precious, and rare. Sigeward's comb may have been passed down for inclusion in his chapel because of its material, as an ivory comb it might have been kept in display, whereas the other bone combs found in churchyards at this time were more likely to have been personal possessions.

[137] Type 7. Ashby, *Atlas of Medieval Combs*. https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue30/3/type7.cfm.
[138] 'Cunctum etiam suae capellae paratum, in qua continebantur scrinium sanctarum reliquiarum, evangeliorum duo codices, non granditate sed venustate decenter argenti et auri parati, calix laudabilis operis permaximus, pecten eburneus et decorus, alba, superhumerale, stola cum fanone et casula albi coloris, de pallio aurifrixo singula perlucida, pluraque alia, quae brevitatis studio praeterimus.' Joseph Stevenson, *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon: Rolls Series (*TannerRitchie Publishing, 2007), 462. Translation by author.

At this date, when combs do appear in graves or wills, they are rare and special, included in the burials of people also considered significant. There might be some continuity between the late seventh-century furnished inhumation practices with combs appearing in graves that demonstrate a person's particular role within the community. Even if not directly related to the earlier practice, these combs were still included for a reason. It could be a relation to their role in wider society. Discipline, the ordering of the hair, was something considered so important that it had to take priority in the next world. Their associations with cleanliness or care might have been the reason for their appearance, or it could have been their associations with intimacy and connection to the physical body of the deceased. It is interesting that when combs do appear they are associated with ecclesiastics, first Cuthbert at the end of the seventh century, and then the priests in Ripon. By the end of this period, a single ivory comb is recorded as being passed down by a bishop, made from ivory and described as beautiful. This strengthens the idea that combs were associated with particular ritual specialists.

Worship

This section deals with liturgical rites, as well as sources from a wider, ecclesiastical context, in order to try and understand the significance combs had in the early church, and whether this significance meant combs can be accurately described as a category of liturgical object. It includes accounts of combs exchanged between religious elites, combs that might have been made for coronations, combs for saints, combs inscribed with charms, stories of combs creating miracles, and accounts of combs in the sacramentaries and pontificals. These are all assessed alongside the physical combs themselves. This range of evidence is considered in order to try to fully understand the role of the comb in relation to liturgical rites, and wider rituals relating to the Christian Church.

The study of the liturgical rites explicitly for this period is characterised in many ways by diversity,[139] and so perhaps it is not surprising that the evidence range for Christian worship in relation to combs is also varied, and that the breadth of it ought to be considered in order to get a full account of their use and meaning from the eighth to the eleventh century. The study of the emergence of the medieval liturgy is broad and has recently been reinvigorated by more interdisciplinary projects and a new appreciation of the breadth of source material, and so these approaches have been useful in navigating the evidence,[140] as combs appear in a variety of contexts.

In the previous chapter, combs were clearly related to the cremation rite, and occasionally involved in inhumations. This section aims to understand whether any of the associations from this earlier period contribute to the more Victorian understanding of

[139] Helen Gittos, "Researching the History of Rites," in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy: Essays in Interpretation,* eds. Helen Gittos and Sarah Hamilton (Routledge, 2016), 13-14.
[140] For example, Helen Gittos, "Is There Any Evidence for the Liturgy of Parish Churches in Late Anglo-Saxon England? The Red Book of Darley and the Status of Old English," in *Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, with Francesca Tinti, vol. 6 (Boydell & Brewer, 2005); Gittos and Hamilton, *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*; Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Helen Gittos and M. Bradford Bedingfield, *The Liturgy of the Late Anglo-Saxon Church* (Henry Bradshaw Society, Boydell Press, 2005); Beth Williamson, "Material Culture and Medieval Christianity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, ed. John H. Arnold (Oxford University Press, 2014).

some combs as liturgical, used by bishops when vesting or in consecration rites. Or, this section explores whether combs became special objects for reasons that were entirely distinct.

Gifts

The exchange of combs as gifts is one aspect of commonality between the earlier period and this one. Combs were exchanged between Christian elites from the seventh century,[141] and this continued. Alcuin received a comb from the Archbishop Riculf of Mainz in 794, a present that inspired him to write two playful responses as thanks.[142] The comb was made from elephant ivory, a detail from the prose letter as Alcuin describes the item as not as big as an elephant, but made of beautiful ivory nonetheless.[143] Ethelburga and Cuthbert both also received combs made from elephant ivory, suggesting that there is a material element to these offerings. It was expected, perhaps, that individuals would have possessed personal combs. However, if sending a comb as a gift, it needed to be materially distinct from an object that the recipient might already have. In these instances, it was the luxury material that differentiated these objects, elevating them to a new status. Elephant ivory was available in 'abundance' in the Byzantine empire between the fourth and sixth centuries, though was much reduced after that.[144] Shipments from the Horn of Africa to Spain were not resumed until the tenth and eleventh centuries.[145] The specification of elephant ivory being used is even more significant in this light, as while the most numerous of ivory carvings come from the Romanesque period, they made use of other kinds of ivory for

[141] Bede, *HE,* ii. XI, 172.
[142] Paul Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," *Neophilologus 80,* (1996): 311.
[143] 'non elefantinae magnitudinis, sed ebumeae pulchritudinis.' Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 312. Translation by Sorrell.
[144] Anthony Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory: Sources, Techniques, and Uses in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 200-1400* (Dumbarton Oaks, Research Library and Collection, 1985), 29.
[145] Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory,* 30.

carvings, including whalebone, narwhal and especially walrus tusks.[146] Elephant ivory, in contrast, was less readily available, especially in the eighth century.[147]

This is not to say that the material, or a comb made from it, was completely unattainable. A ninth-century Frankish bishop (likely Salomon Constance II) sent Louis the German several presents, including fine fruits and spices like cinnamon, pomegranate, and cloves, all alongside a comb of elephant ivory.[148] Many of the objects included in this gift, which has been suggested by Clare Burridge to be intended to 'appease' Louis the German, appeared in medical texts, and some of them – cinnamon, galingale and mastic – were also part of incense recipes.[149] No explicit connection is made to either incense or medicine in the letter, but it is entirely possible that this gift was not just centred around luxury foodstuffs or foreign spices, but hard-to-come-by objects with an explicitly liturgical function. Incense, particularly, would have been required for ceremonial purposes, and many of the royal residences that Louis spent time in would also have contained private chapels, suggesting that a private supply of the ingredients to make it would have been required.[150] An elephant ivory comb, then, was not an object that stood alone, but rather could have been part of an ecclesiastical collection of objects, access to which was controlled through bishops.[151]

The comb Alcuin received from the archbishop and former student, Riculf, however, was set apart, or if it was sent alongside other goods, was so remarkable that it deserved its

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[146] Anthony Cutler, *The Hand of the Master. Craftsmanship, Ivory and Society in Byzantium* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 41.
[147] Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory,* 29.
[148] 'Palliolum coloris prasini et aliud polimitum, spatulas palmarum cum suis fructibus, cynamomi, calangani, cariofili, masticis et piperis fasciculum, caricas ficorum, malogranata, **pectinem elefantium**, vermiculos, cicadas, aves psitacos, merulam albam et longissimam spinam de pisce marino.' Collectio Sangallensis, ed. K. Zeumer, MGH Formulae Merowingici et Karolini aevi (Hanover,1886), letter 29, p. 415: via Clare Burridge, "Incense in medicine: An Early Medieval Perspective," *Early Medieval Europe* 28, no. 2 (2020): 242. Translation by Burridge, emphasis author's own.
[149] Burridge, "Incense in medicine," 242.
[150] Burridge, "Incense in medicine," 242.
[151] Ethelburga also received her comb alongside a mirror. While not an object with ecclesiastical undertones, it nevertheless indicates that combs were not always sent as objects by themselves.

two responses to be independent from other thanks. Alcuin includes slightly different information in both. The detail about elephant ivory is skipped in the verse version, which is written in a short verse-epistle in hexameters (a line of verse containing six feet, common in Latin and Ancient Greek poetry as well as early medieval),[152] showcasing Alcuin's familiarity with both vernacular and Anglo-Latin riddle traditions.[153] Alcuin describes the comb he received as a 'wonderful animal with two heads and sixty teeth,' but the verse version reveals more about the comb's design.[154] The comb, or 'beast', has two heads connected by a 'single jaw', suggesting another point of similarity with the double-sided comb Cuthbert was buried with, though it is not clear if Alcuin's also had the hole in the centre.[155] In verse lines five to seven, Alcuin says:

> Food was building up in these from off a living body,
> but it was neither meat nor produce.
> It devoured with its teeth neither fruit nor tipplers' wines,
> yet it didn't waste away with its open mouth.[156]

The food this 'animal' eats comes from a living body, yet is not meat or produce – as such, it might be an allusion to head-lice, as combing through and removing nits and other lice was an important function of medieval combs, in addition to being the subject matter of several early medieval riddles.[157] In addition to the comb's high-status material being a reason it prompted effusive thanks, the comb itself was still meant to be functional, with Alcuin intending to use it to remove lice and brush hair, as well as treasure it because of its luxurious material properties.

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[152] Sorrell, "Alcuin's' Comb Riddle," 312.
[153] For a full comparison of Exeter Riddles which mirror this form, though none also have combs as the subject matter, see Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 313.
[154] The number '60' might have been a reference to reward in a later stage of life (Isaac's two sons are born when he is 60), though it is not clear. (Genesis: 25-26). Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 311. Translation by Sorrell.
[155] Due to the unique nature of Cuthbert's comb in the archaeological record, it seems unlikely this was a common design feature. Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 316.
[156] 'Esca fuit crescens illis de corpore vivo, Nec caro, nec fruges. Fructus nec vina bibentum Dentibus edebat; patulo non tabuit ore.' Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 312. Translation by Sorrell.
[157] Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 315.

While the initial use was to keep the hair clean and tidy, the comb could have more than one function, and more than one meaning. In the final line of the prose riddle, Alcuin thanks Riculf, and cherishes the affection of 'the sender, which I have always found utterly reliable.'[158] In addition to a beautiful artefact and a way to keep clean, the comb acted as a physical embodiment, and daily reminder, of their relationship. The personification of the comb in Alcuin's response and the physical presence of it near him, when Riculf was not, shows that the comb was not just a representation; it was a part of the actual relationship. This exchange of combs across these networks, often spread across large distances, shows that combs continued to be used in the ways they had been in the early seventh century. The reasons for their exchange might have differed. None of these later combs, for instance, were reminders of a duty to convert a people. Nevertheless, they still benefitted from the associations that combs had of intimacy and connection, and these associations continued throughout these later centuries.

Relics

The ninth-century account of Alcuin's life and death shows how combs, especially those that belonged to important people, were invested with meaning through their social interactions, and these meanings were able to be consistently renegotiated.[159] Alcuin's comb outlived him, gaining new significance after his death.

In two instances in the Life of Alcuin (written anonymously in the ninth century),[160] the comb heals people close to him. Alcuin's student, Sigulfus was in charge of preparing the body for death, a process which was said to involve washing the body with honour, and

[158] 'sed caritaten in mittente dilexi, quam semper fideliter in illo probavi.' Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 312. Translation by Sorrell.
[159] Gosden and Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects", 170.
[160] Rebecca Thomas, "The Vita Alcuini, Asser and Scholarly Service at the Court of Alfred the Great*", *The English Historical Review* 134, no. 566 (2019): 1–24.

then laying it on the bier (*feretrum*).[161] The word was also able to be translated as a litter, intended to carry the bodies of the dead in a procession, highlighting immediately that Alcuin's body itself was to be considered a relic in the aftermath of his death.[162] During this process, Sigulfus suffered a 'great headache', yet as he looked above Alcuin's bed during the process of readying his former teacher, he saw the comb which hung there and was inspired to touch it to his head: 'Then taking it in his hands, he said: 'I believe, Lord Jesus, that if I comb my head with this comb of my teacher, it will be healed immediately by its merits.'[163] The comb worked upon first touch, but Sigulfus was required to brush his hair thoroughly, or pass it around his whole head, in order to remove all vestiges of the headache.[164] This distinction is an interesting expression of the power, as the comb had a limited power when applied to the area, rather than one touch working to completely remove all issues. A second pupil, Eangist, was then urged by Sigulfus to use the comb in a similar manner, touching it to his tooth so his toothache might be healed – a remedy that was successful as he used the comb 'with faith'.[165] The comb is used on the head in both instances, as it would have been used by Alcuin in his life (as stated in his letters of thanks). [166] Alcuin's comb was a part of his relationship with Archbishop Riculf. It also became part of the relationship he shared with his students, with the comb and the students continuing to develop this relationship beyond Alcuin's death. This process takes place immediately on Alcuin's death, as Sigulfus

[161] *Vita Alcuini (BHL-0242),* Brepols Publishers, 2014, SS 15,1, Cap.: 27, pag.: 197, lin.: 1: 'Pater denique Sigulfus corpus patris cum quibusdam aqua honorifice lavans, posuit super feretrum.' Translation by author.
[162] The definition of relic here is taken from Julia Smith's work, that relics are 'material objects whose primary role is as non-sacramental channels of interaction between humans and divine.' Julia Smith, *Relics and the Insular World, c. 600-c. 800* (Hughes Hall & Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2017), 3.
[163] *Vita Alcuini (BHL-0242),* Brepols Publishers, 2014, SS 15,1, Cap.: 27, pag.: 197, lin.: 4. '*Istum ergo 17oeceipt sumens, ait: 'Credo, domine Iesu, quia, si isto magistri mei pectine meum pectinavero caput, meritis illius statim sanabitur*'.' Translation by author.
[164]*Vita Alcuini* pag.: 197, lin.: 5. 'Ubi igitur prima vice pecten duxit per caput, quantum de eo tetigit, totum sanum habuit; sicque totum pectinando girans, omnem dolorem amisit.' Translation by author.
[165] *Vita Alcuini* pag.: 197, lin.: 6. 'Alter discipulorum eius Eangist dentium immenso graviter afflictus dolore, hortatu patris Sigulfi eodem pectine dentes tetigit, et continuo, quoniam cum fide fecit, sanitatem meritis Alchuini recepit.' Translation by author.
[166] Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 312.

is healed from the headache he suffers from as he is dressing Alcuin's body for burial. [167] This is an already intimate process. Sigulfus is in Alcuin's room, we understand from the passage that he takes down the comb from where it was hanging over Alcuin's bed.[168] Among his personal items, he is also attending the body of his former teacher, washing it.[169] By taking the comb, already an object that was used directly on the body of his teacher in an intimate manner, and a cherished gift, Sigulfus inserts himself into this network of individuals. The comb is attached to Alcuin, and it is because of this relationship to the man that it manages to heal him. Alcuin's comb becomes a relic.

Alcuin's comb as a relic is no longer well-known, and his identity or reputation is not linked to the object, nor did the comb to continue to be associated with Alcuin after his *Vita*. However, similar types of stories relating to local saints might underline how while not an identical object, this type of contact-relic was a narrative device. Recorded by Eadmer in his *Miracula s. Oswaldi* (1116 AD), the tale involves St. Oswald's cup, kept by his monastic community at Ramsey and used after his death to bless the brotherhood.[170] Eadwacer, a disfigured monk, is healed by the cup, as he, after drinking from it, holds it against a neck tumour. The tumour is removed from the neck as he pulls away the cup, and Eadwacer rejoices for his miraculous recovery.[171] Although a more gruesome tale than healing a headache, there are similarities in the way Alcuin's comb and Oswald's cup are presented. While the objects are different, they could both be considered anagogical.[172] Both cup and comb were likely used daily by the respective men when they were alive. It is because of this

[167] *Vita Alcuini*, pag.: 197, lin.: 1-4. Translation by author.
[168] 'Oculos namque super magistri lectulum elevans, cernit pecten, quo ipse suum solebat pectinare caput.' *Vita Alcuini* (BHL-0242) SS 15,1, Cap.: 27, pag.: 197, lin: 3. Translation by author.
[169] *Vita Alcuini*, pag.: 197, lin.: 1.
[170] Rebecca Browett, "Touching the Holy: The Rise of Contact Relics in Medieval England," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68, no. 3 (July 2017): 493–509.
[171] Browett, "Touching the Holy," 496.
[172] Browett, "Touching the Holy," 496.

intimate connection, built up over frequent use, that they become contact relics, after the death of their original owner.[173]

Alcuin's comb is the first known recorded example of a comb becoming a relic.[174] Scattered examples from across Europe are worth briefly considering, in order to demonstrate that this was not a hyper-localised practice, and combs were considered objects that could become relics elsewhere. In addition, relic practices more broadly were exchanged across the channel, with Anglo-Saxon recorded examples showing a 'familiarity' with those of Gaul and the Mediterranean world,[175] and so comparing alternative relic combs from this period is worth doing, to assess any similarities. Two examples from the Abbey of Saint Remacle in Stavelot, Belgium,[176] are the clearest combs-as-relics, though there is no written evidence to indicate how they might have been considered powerful. In a little-described letter written in 1702, the anonymous author records the combs as being part of a box filled with objects associated with the saint, which also contained the leather sandal (a known relic of the saint), his robe, chausable, stole and maniple.[177] The sandal dates to the tenth century, and the eleventh-century relic label does not describe the comb as a relic, the description just reading: '*[1] de reliquiis beator(um) Patr(um), [2] de cappa beati Remagli et se scandaliis (f) [3] beati Lanb(er)ti sive Remagli c(on)fessoris*.'[178] Given the combs were found in association with a known relic of the saint, it is possible that these two combs were also considered contact relics. All three examples, the two Belgium combs and Alcuin's, were

[173] This is in contrast to other relics which have their miracle powers unattached to any specific saint, like Bede's account of the monk Felgild, who's own disfigurement is healed with a scrap of leather previously affixed to the wall in Lindisfarne. Browett, "Touching the Holy," 496.
[174] Cuthbert's comb might have been considered a relic by this point, though in the absence of written evidence before the eleventh century, it is unclear when this transition took place. By the sixteenth century, the inhabitants of late medieval village venerated St Osgyth's comb, though Alcuin certainly appears to be the earliest in written evidence. John Blair, "A Saint for Every Minster? Local Cults in Anglo-Saxon England," *Local Saints And Local Churches: In The Early Medieval West*, eds. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford University Press, 2002), 477.
[175] Smith, *Relics and the Insular World,* 9.
[176] Philippe George, "Documents inédits sur le trésor des reliques de l'abbaye de Stavelot-Malmedy et dépendances (Ixe-XVIIe siècles)," *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire* CLIII et CLIII (1987) : 79.
[177] Philippe George, *Les Reliques de Stavelot-Malmedy : nouveaux documents* (Malmedy Art & Histoire, 1989), 50, 79 and 142.
[178] George, *Les Reliques,* 34.

made from ivory. However, their designs all differ, showing how these unusual combs were not at this time restricted to one particular style or shape, in the same way that other combs from this period also displayed a wide range of designs and styles.[179] Alcuin's comb is described very much in the same style as Cuthbert's, and it is probably not unlikely that it resembled it in some way, with a central curving arch between two sets of teeth. In the same manner, Fig. 2.15, the second Stavelot comb, might be a more ornately designed version of the comb. Dating later than Alcuin's comb, which is from the eighth century, Fig. 2.15 was made very much in the Carolingian style.[180]

The triangular comb (Fig. 2.14) from Stavelot dates from the ninth or tenth century, but was probably used by different individuals, or in different contexts, as a personal item before being given to the cathedral. This is because the suspension loop added to the lower left corner bisects the inscription: 'Whoever has made smooth his head from me, may live



Fig. 2.14: Triangle comb from Stavelot. Belgium, Cinquantenaire Museum, 155 x 120 mm. Image via Wikimedia Commons, accessed 10 June, 2022.

[179] For a range of comb styles in the ninth century, see Ashby, *A Typological Guide.*
[180] For comparative examples see London, V&A Museum, A.544-1910 or Paris, Musée de Louvre, MR 358.

happily for 50 years',[181] suggesting that the ivory comb first was intended for actual use, and then subsequently became a display object. Just as Alcuin's comb experienced a new life after his death, this comb was also used and reused, either across the lifetime of one person, or across several. The different contexts for this comb resulted in a physical impact on the artefact.

In contrast, provision for the inscription most likely was a key part of the planning process. The teeth leave enough of a gap along the bottom for the border, and generally the words are carved with relative skill, avoiding what is known as 'picking up,' when fine lines become jagged when carving against the grain.[182] The clean, fine lines of this inscription indicate a skilled craftsman. Even if the spacing of the letters is uneven at times, this is likely more to do with the aforementioned grain and curves of the letters than a lack of ability. Adding the text was often the last part of the carving process, and because of how difficult it was, it was frequently skipped altogether. In Cutler's study of Byzantine ivories, the majority of them lack inscription of any sort.[183] The fact that this inscription was not just added but a key feature of the comb's design, shows how important it was to the person commissioning or making the object. The inscription was part of its appeal, and held power.

The inscription emphasises a link between grooming and order, as the person using the comb will 'live happily for fifty years' as a result. The original inscription might have functioned as a charm,[184] before becoming enhanced with further meaning through the

[181] 'quisquis ex me suum planaverit quoque caput, ipse vivat feliciter semper annis L.' Translation author's own. The translation of this is interesting, as most current scholarship currently does not recognise the 'L' and misses it off, leaving the meaning: 'Whoever has made smooth his head from me will live happily ever after.' Modern sources who include this Latin transcription include: Eric Palazzo, "Les Peignes Liturgiques: des Objets Ecclésiastiques au service de la Théoloqie du Rituel," in *O Clero Secular Medieval E As Suas Catedrais: Novas Perspectivas E Abordagens,* eds. Anísio Miguel de Sousa Saraiva and Maria do Rosàrio Barbosa Moujão (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Centro de Estudoes de História Religiosa, 2014): 141-154; and Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Âge* (Office du Livre, 1978), 191.
[182] Cutler, *The Hand of the Master,* 139-40. An example of 'picking up' can be seen on 140.
[183] Cutler, *The Hand of the Master.*
[184] As the inscription does not directly mention the Saint, and the perforated hole was made after the comb was made, it is likely that the comb had multiple uses, and the intercessory power of the Saint was not a consideration on first making. Instead, the words had power in their own right, which would define it as a charm. This definition comes from Edina Bozoky, who argues that charms are texts written in verse of prose,

comb's association with the saint.[185] At 155 x 120mm, it is small enough for personal use. Comparative ordinary combs from the ninth century found in the UK and Scandinavia measure between 100mm-150mm,[186] and so the triangular Stavelot comb, though unusual in shape, was not unusual in size, and it might well have first begun as a personal comb, owned by a single person before being given to the Church. The second comb found in the altar is, however, one of the largest ivory combs from the medieval era (Fig 2.15). This dates from the tenth century, and measures 310 x 125mm. Despite its large size it has no signs of perforation

whereas apotropaic prayers involve either calling to God or saints. Edina Bozoky, *Charmes et prierès apotropaïques,* (Brepols, 2003).
[185] George, *Les Reliques,* 34.
[186] Type 6, Steve Ashby, "An Atlas of Medieval Combs from Northern Europe," https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue30/3/type6.cfm.



Fig. 2.15: Ivory comb with silver, c. 875-900. Brussels, Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire, Metz. Inv no: 1824. 310 x 125mm. Image via Wikimedia Commons, accessed 10 June, 2022.

for a suspension loop (Fig. 2.15). It has, however, been repaired. The upper right tooth was broken off and reattached with two plated silver brackets. Evidently this was a high-status item that was worth maintaining and fixing. This is not uncommon with other combs of the

period.[187] Ivory does not go through a process of transformation when being made, and its state is not altered, melted, or burned.[188] For that reason, despite the need for a maintained humidity, it can survive remarkably well, and once carved it is difficult for it to be broken down and made into other things. The main threat to the carved items was breakage, and if a comb was made from expensive raw materials and was associated with a powerful individual, it would have been worth repurposing or renewing.

Thinking of combs as decorative objects within ecclesiastical spaces adds another dimension to their function beyond hair combing. While ordinary combs could have suspension loops to hang from belts, these bigger, ivory objects, because of their exaggerated size, could have been intended to be displayed, propped up or suspended in order to overawe and enchant the people viewing them.[189] Whether this makes them liturgical, or whether they are better considered ornamental, is worth exploring further.

Coronations

The association of the comb and coronations is never made explicit, though Edward the Confessor (1003-1066 AD) was said to have had an ivory comb as part of his coronation regalia. In the list of relics Edward left to Westminster cathedral, which were written in 1359 AD on a 'mutilated' sheet of paper, Edward leaves among other objects a '*pectenem eburneum*.' [190] The source was apparently written by three monks who desired to ensure that Edward's relics were recorded for posterity, a J. Redyng, J. Bokenhull, and J. Arundel.[191] In the list of relics of the confessors, later on in Flete's account, a slightly different wording is

[187] See also the ivory comb depicting Samson fighting the lion at the Louvre, c. 870. Paris, Musée de Louvre, MR358.
[188] Cutler, *The Hand of the Master,* 29, 41.
[189] Chris Gosden, "Technologies of Routine and Enchantment," in *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell* eds. Liana Chua and Mark Elliott (Berghahn Books, 2013), 42.
[190] John Flete, *The History of Westminster Abbey*, ed. J. Armitage Robinson (Cambridge University Press, 1909), 19. Translation by author.
[191] Flete, *History of Westminster Abbey,* 18.

used and the comb is made from gold.[192] Edward apparently ordered 'all the royal ornaments he had been crowned be preserved in this church,' including the golden comb.[193] It may have been that two combs were associated with Edward the Confessor, or that the single comb was made from both ivory and gold.

There are other indications that combs were used in early medieval coronations. A comb currently at the V&A Museum, London, might give us some idea as to what Edward the Confessor's coronation comb may have looked like. A large ivory ninth-century comb (Fig. 2.16), made from gold and ivory and originally found in the cathedral treasury at Pavia, has two small holes in the top end plates, showing how suspension adjustments could be more sympathetically incorporated with the object, compared to those depicted in Fig. 2.15.[194] The comb in Fig. 2.16 is large in size, 212mm x 106mm, and would have been unwieldy to use by oneself. Combining the size, the near-perfect condition of the comb, and the drilled suspension holes, it is possible that the comb was never really intended to be used to brush hair, and rather had a different purpose. The decorative central panel on one side depicts Sagittarius firing an arrow at Capricorn, and on the other the tree of life. The astrological symbols might hint at an activity that took place in December, between the two signs. Furthermore, the style of the comb itself and the technique used on the gold foil inlay was associated with other objects, most notably a throne, produced in the late ninth century.[195]

On December 25, 875 AD, Charles the Bald was crowned as Emperor in St. Peter's, Rome.[196] Having visited Pavia before and after the coronation, and having other objects made in the same style and with the same techniques as this ivory comb, it is highly likely

[192] 'unum pectinem aureum,' Flete, *History of Westminster Abbey,* 71. Translation by author.
[193] 'sanctus Edwardus rex et confessor ad memoriam futurorum et pro dignitate regiae coronationis omnia regalia ornamenta in ecclesia hac reservari praecepit, cum quibus ipse coronatus fuit.' Flete, *History of Westminster Abbey,* 71. Translation by author.
[194] London, V&A Museum, A.544-1910. Paul Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings: Early Christian to Romanesque* (V&A Publishing, 2010), 178-9.
[195] Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings,* 178.
[196] *Annales Vedastini* SS rer. Germ. 12, anno: 875, pag.: 40, lin.: 9

that the comb was made for his coronation, and given to Pavia cathedral afterwards.[197] The teeth show little, if any, signs of wear, and the presence of it in Pavia cathedral treasury certainly suggests it was an object of status that had been given to them. However, the comb is decorated on both sides, implying it was originally intended to be seen from both sides and not just hung in place against a wall.[198] As demonstrated by the suspension hole for Fig. 2.14, it was not unusual for these combs that were displayed or hung, to have had prior uses, that were then adapted when the purpose of the object changed. The size of the comb also suggests that it would have been mostly intended to be held up and viewed, or at least used during a communal dressing process, with multiple people being able to benefit from the

[197] Williamson, *Medieval Ivory Carvings,* 178.
[198] For instance, a comb fragment at the Berlin State Museum has a plain back central panel, whereas the front depicts the discovery of the bones of St Clemens by St Cyril, along with the later inscription 'CLEMENS E TUMULO.' Franz Swoboda, "Die liturgischen Kämme," 95-6. Another fragment (c.1180-1220) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Ascension no. 1973.70) shows the same thing, with a smooth back and detailed front. Both of these examples have had their teeth removed, presumably to repurpose the panel.

visual impact of combing the hair with such a tool. The gold detailing and the coloured glass would have reflected candlelight or beams of sunlight, combining with the heavily embroidered vestments worn by Charles either during his coronation or during a secondary



Fig. 2.16: Ivory comb attributed to Charles the Bald c. 875. London, V&A Museum. A.544-1910. 212 x 106 mm. Photo taken by author.

ritual associated with it to heighten the experience and as a result enhance the comb's own social power, as a result of the sensory and emotional responses elicited.[199]

Because it has been used so little and because of the very fine materials used to make it, this example certainly suggests that some combs were objects that were intended for single, specific uses. However, even if made with one particular use in mind, it did not stop the object from being repurposed, and that repurposing being enhanced by this initial use. The comb was kept in Pavia, a re-gift from Charles to the cathedral, and it is possible that it was displayed there, a symbolic and visual connection to the ruler of an empire. While not used as a comb, it still exemplifies the qualities that make it a powerful object in ordinary circumstances. The naturally intimate nature of the object acts as a proxy, representing the intimate nature of the relationship between Charles and the Church.

Cleanliness

Despite the varying ways combs were used, as gifts, personal objects and for hanging in chapels, the intimate nature of them, the fact that they were used on the body, was a core appeal of their varied associations with Christianity.

Combs were used to comb hair, even in ecclesiastical contexts. In fact, this was especially important in ecclesiastical contexts. Order and cleanliness became increasingly significant over this period, and combs were tools that enabled both. For ordinary monks who were not saints, ritualized grooming was still part of their lives. Although this was predominantly related to the way they washed their hands, anxiety around the correct way to organise hair was reflected in England from at least the seventh century, since the debates about the tonsure at the Synod of Whitby (664 AD). [200] While generally agreed to have sprung from Acts 18:18, in which Paul cuts off his hair after he took his vow, there was

[199] Gosden, "What Do Objects Want?" 198.
[200] Alexa Sand, "Religion and Ritualized Belief," in *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages,* ed. Roberta Milliken (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 31-32.

disagreement about what the correct tonsure should look like.[201] For some of the eastern churches, tonsure meant the shaving of the whole head, whereas the early Irish monastic tradition maintained that tonsure meant shaving the front part of the head.[202] The design we would most associate with tonsuring today – shaving the crown of the head – came from the tradition within the Roman Church, and it was at the Whitby Synod that this was agreed.[203] Manipulation of the hair in such a way provided an inescapable sign of the occupation of the person who was tonsured, acting as an outward symbol of their internal commitment.[204]

The importance of ritualised hair grooming or arranging was not restricted to monks. Women, especially those who had chosen a monastic way of life, also had to tread the line around expectations for the way they dressed their hair. On the one hand, excessive care for one's appearance was critiqued harshly within Christian texts as vanity, and was seen as a temptation to sexual sin.[205] On the other, religious women were in general (from at least the seventh century) instructed to keep their hair long, but veiled, as demonstrated earlier.[206] The combs in these instances would likely have been used in spaces where privacy was even more strictly enforced, given that no hair was visible. As a result, their use may have become even more charged.

Maintaining religious grooming requirements were embedded in a monastic way of life.[207] They were not often recorded in manuscripts, but we do know they were associated with the routine cleaning of the body, as evidenced by the sign language used at the time.

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[201] Sand, "Religion and Ritualized Belief," 31.
[202] Sand, "Religion and Ritualized Belief," 31.
[203] Sand, "Religion and Ritualized Belief," 31-32.
[204] For instance, Wihtred's laws (c. 695) decree that tonsured men who are 'wandering' looking for hospitality should only be grated it once, until they are able to demonstrate they have permission. Attenborough, *Laws*, 27.
[205] Laura Michele Diener, "Production and Practice," in *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages,* ed. Roberta Milliken (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 72.
[206] 1 Corinthians 11:13-15. Peter warns that wives should not dress their hair or be distracted by fine clothes and jewellery (1 Peter 3: 3-5). Attitudes to veiling in the early medieval period have also been more fully addressed in *Life*, in both Chapters One and Two.
[207] Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, Their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe, c.800–c.1200* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 72.

The eleventh-century manuscript Cotton MS Tiberius A III includes vocabulary that was used in relation to the bathhouse, with signs for a nail-knife, washing one's head, and a comb, associating the act of combing one's hair with cleanliness in general.[208]

Cleanliness however was not just a state of being, but a powerful metaphor. The eleventh-century reforms especially utilised this language in respect of clerical celibacy, positioning clerical marriage as 'filthy'.[209] In Ælfric's Letter to Wulfstan (c. 1006 AD) and his earlier Letter to Wulfsige (c. 993-5 AD), Ælfric announced that mass-priests needed a certain selection of books, but also clean vestments, as 'One cannot produce such things without toil, but those will be worthy of honour in eternity with God who serve him well with wisdom and with cleanliness.'[210] In both letters, Ælfric wrote about the importance of clerical chastity, underlining an association between cleanliness and marital status. These late tenth- and early eleventh-century campaigns for clerical celibacy culminated in Gregory VII's autumn Synod of 1078 AD, where he called for any bishops that permit the 'fornication of priests, deacons, and subdeacons…' to be suspended from office.[211]

The opposite of order and cleanliness, dirt, was a useful criticism. Biblical and Canon law texts were employed to argue clerical marriage was 'filthy'.[212] Æthelwold, the tenth-century bishop of Winchester, used 'filth' to critique the clergy he sought to expel in the 960s and 970s.[213] Æthelwold's positioning of clerical marriage as something unclean was at the time one that he had to justify.[214] However, his use of the term and the suggestions that these married individuals might pollute the cathedral by their actions,[215] show that

[208] Debby Banham and British Library, *Monasteriales Indicia: The Anglo-Saxon Monastic Sign Language* (Anglo-Saxon Books, 1991), 41-3.
[209] Megan McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000-1122* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). 35.
[210] *Councils & Synods, with Other Documents Relating to the English Church. I, A.D. 871-1204*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock et al., (Clarendon Press, 1981), 208. See also 291.
[211] McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority,* 33.
[212] McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority,* 35.
[213] Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World,* 93.
[214] Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World*, 93.
[215] Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World*, 93.

representing right and wrong through clean or unclean wording was a powerful rhetorical device. Cleanliness had significance beyond the physical act of cleansing, it could be, by the tenth century at least, an ideological frame that was able to be leveraged to alter the infrastructure of the church. Things that supported this ideological stance, like hand washing or hair combing, then might have had even more importance.

The connection between inward and outward cleanliness was established from at least the early eleventh century. The *Missa Illyrica* (1022-1036 AD), an early ordo, includes a vesting prayer that makes this link explicit: 'as the external pollutions of the hands are washed away, so may the internal pollutions of the minds be cleansed by you.'[216] By the thirteenth century this thinking has been explored even further, with William Durand's justification of the liturgy.[217] While cleanliness had always had ties to morality, by the eleventh century the metaphor was a new way to rationalise or control the behavior of the religious elites who made up the Church. Disorder and disarrangement were causes of anxiety in the eighth century, and by the eleventh, the relationship between outward cleansing and inward clarity was established.[218] As objects that directly contributed to the physical appearance of cleanliness, combs then become tools that were essential in upholding this order.

Vesting

[216] 'ut sicut hie exterius abluuntur inquinamenta manuum. Sic a te mundentur interius 184ollutions mentium', J. M. Pierce, "Sacerdotal spirituality at mass: Text and study of the prayerbook of Sigebert of Minden (1022-1036)," (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1988), 156. Translation author's own.
[217] Compared to Durand's reasoning about the comb: 'It is therefore appropriate that the hair is flattened, arranged and separated at the roots, to denote, especially at that particular moment, that the priest must compose himself and banish all vain thoughts…' *Guillelmi Duranti Rationale Divinorum Officiorum: I-IV,* eds. A. Davril and Timothy Thibodeau, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1995), 260. Translation by Thibodeau. William Durand, *Rationale IV: On the Mass and Each Action Pertaining to It*, ed. and trans. Timothy M Thibodeau (Brepols Publishers, 2013), 78.
[218]For example, in a 796 letter to Eanblad, a former pupil and a man recently made Archbishop, Alcuin shared the following advice: 'Do everything decently and in order…Wash your face in penitence and anoint your head with love that all may be acceptable to God, who has chosen you as his priest.' Letter 6. Alcuin, *Letters,* trans. Allott, 6-10.

In light of a new anxiety around cleanliness, it is perhaps notable that the first reference to a comb in relation to a vesting prayer occurs in this same period, in the late tenth-century Sacramentary of Ratoldus, named for the abbot of Corbie (d. 986 AD).[219] This source is the first time a comb appears as part of the liturgical rites, and could be argued to be the first explicitly liturgical comb. Its appearance is especially interesting when considering the episcopal character of the reforms, as the vesting prayer referencing a comb takes place during the *ordo missae*, set within the mass for Easter Sunday, and arranged for pontifical service.[220] The bishop's vesting is accompanied by a series of prayers only otherwise found in the late tenth-century Canterbury portions of the Leofric Missal, though the comb is unique to the Ratoldus Sacramentary.[221]

Written by three scribes and dated to c. 972-986 AD, the Sacramentary of Ratoldus combines a sacramentary and pontifical and draws on a wide range of sources, including a sacramentary that started out at Saint-Denis, and a pontifical from Canterbury, possibly taken to the continent by Archbishop Oda's nephew.[222] The comb is mentioned as part of the vesting process,[223] when the bishop prepares himself to say Mass, a process which commonly involves ritual washing and dressing, accompanied by prayers.[224] It is the only vesting prayer, out of many found within the manuscript, that references a comb, and no similar prayers exist elsewhere.[225] It is part of the vesting prayers for Easter Sunday – *dominia in die sancto paschae* – and the comb is blessed along with the cap. The other items included in the blessings are the 'sandals, and the rest of his garments, a shoulder-cloth, a white belt,

[219] Nicholas Orchard ed., *The Sacramentary of Ratoldus (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale De France, Lat. 12052)*, (Henry Bradshaw Society, 2005), xiii.
[220] Helen Gittos, "Introduction," in *The Liturgy of the Late Anglo-Saxon Church*, eds. Helen Gittos and M. Bradford Bedingfield (Boydell Press, Henry Bradshaw Society, 2005), 5; Orchard, *Ratoldus,* clxxiii.
[221] Orchard, *Ratoldus*, clxx.
[222] Orchard, *Ratoldus*, vii.
[223]This falls as part of the manuscript extracted from the English pontifical, which has an 'almost certain' Canterbury origination. Orchard, *Ratoldus,* xxxi-xxxii.
[224] Julie Glodt, "Putting on Christ: The Priest's Clothing and Its Metaphors at the End of the Middle Ages (1250–1500)," *Religion and the Arts* 24, no. 5 (2020): 492.
[225] Orchard, *Ratoldus*, clxx.

a girdle, robe, tunic, a comb and cap, sleeve, ring on the right hand, above the sleeve, a chasuble, and the light cuff of chastity."[226] Water is brought to the hands for washing along with a comb and a cap, as the prayers are said:

> 1081: DEINDE MINISTRETUR EI AQVA AD MANVS, ET PECTEN AD CAPVT, ET DICAT MINISTER, VT SUPRA. <RESPONDET EPISCOPVS:> Omnipotens et misericors deus, precor clementiam tuam, ut me audaciter accedentem non sinas perire, sed dignare lauare, ornare, et laeniter suscipere. Per omnia.[227]

The first definitive evidence for the use of combs in the liturgy then is found in an instructional rubric, alongside water for the hands. It was not unusual for individual monastic communities to record and describe the liturgical, and 'extra-liturgical' customs after the Rule of Benedict, which was recognised as sparse.[228] According to Joyce Hill, the need for individual communities to do this became more urgent in the ninth- and tenth-centuries as a response to the Carolingian (especially the Cluniac and Lotharingian) monastic reforms which established a 'more elaborate liturgical ritual'.[229] Nicholas Orchard has suggested that the individual nature of Ratoldus could be because it was prepared for a specific owner, fulfilling individual needs rather than that of a wider community.[230] It was also common for precise, local liturgical customs to be noted by contemporaries, one example of which being Lanfranc, who wrote to John, the archbishop of Rouen about vestments and the variation in practice.[231] Does Ratoldus fit into this trend, and was it a manuscript designed for one, particular bishop? If so, does the vesting prayer specifically relate to a series of behaviours restricted to bishops, rather than practised by priests more widely?

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[226] 'sandalia, Se caeteris indumentis, superhumerale, Alba, Cingulum, Baltem pudicitiae, Stolam iocunditatis, Tunica gyris, Pecten et caput, Manicem, Anulus in dextera manu, desuper manica, Casula, and the Levae manupulus castitatis.' Orchard, *Ratoldus*, 236-8. Translation by Orchard.
[227] 'Almighty and merciful God, I beg your clemency, that you will not permit me to perish, but deign to wash, adorn, and gently approach me. By all means.' Rough translation by Orchard*, Ratoldus,* 237.
[228] Joyce Hill, "Rending the Garment and Reading by the Rood: *Regulari concordia* Rituals for Men and Women," in *The Liturgy of the Late Anglo-Saxon Church*', eds. Helen Gittos and M. Bradford Bedingfield, (Boydell Press, Henry Bradshaw Society, 2005), 53-4.
[229] Hill, "Rending the Garment," 54.
[230] Orchard, *Ratoldus* clxxxviii.
[231] Gittos, "Researching the History of Rites," 15-16.

Not necessarily. Clear evidence of continued copying of earlier manuscripts, despite changes in what typically was included in these, does show that some liturgical practices had long histories. Earlier practices of the long-standing associations between ritualised washing before praying especially in the Late Antique world,[232] and the anxieties around cleanliness and order, might suggest this inclusion of the comb in a vesting prayer did not denote the first time this practice took place, the first time such behaviour had been recorded. Sporadic future references to combs as part of the vesting process and vesting prayers also suggest that they continued to be used in consistent ways across the entire later medieval period, and this source was not a one-off.

In the same way the combs under the chapel floor in Ladykirk (Fig. 2.11) are more ordinary in appearance compared to the more elaborate ivory creations shown in the rest of the chapter, the reference in Ratoldus might have been the high-status version of an ordinary behaviour. Priests had to be clean and wear clean mass clothes, and it is likely they combed their hair. However, very few books for priests survive until much later in the fourteenth century, and so it might have been normal for priests, though only recorded in a book for a bishop.[233] These gestures would likely have been learnt by experience, in the same way that other liturgical gestures were learnt, with priests copying each other physically rather than recording detailed descriptions of the precise visual language that made up the liturgy.[234] Therefore, despite rarely being mentioned in liturgical texts or liturgical contexts, it is still likely, as a result of our understanding of attitudes to cleanliness and hair grooming (i.e., tonsure), that combs would have been used by religious individuals, in ritualised ways, before the tenth century.

[232] Hand-washing before prayer dates from at least the third century. A.-G. Hamman, *Early Christian Prayers* (H. Regnery Co, 1961), 253.
[233] Gittos, personal correspondence.
[234] Gittos, "Researching the history of rites," 14.

By the eleventh century, there are sporadic references to combs being present within multiple ecclesiastical contexts. These associations seem to have arisen from earlier practices which became formalised, and then recorded, in the tenth century. It is highly likely, as demonstrated for other liturgical practices such as the use of buckets and bowls as baptismal fonts,[235] that liturgical combs had earlier, domestic roots.

Nevertheless, the tenth-century vesting prayer that includes a comb, used specifically by a bishop, was recorded just as the English Benedictine reform movement was gathering pace. As framing around cleanliness was deployed to argue against clerical marriage, it is possible there was a specifically episcopal aspect of the development of the liturgical comb, differentiated from other uses by the clergy. Outside of vesting prayers, combs were important gifts between religious elites, archbishops and theologians, maintaining intimate relationships between individuals who were otherwise geographically distant, continuing this significance first presented in Chapter 1.

The combs of this chapter also demonstrate how they are objects with long lifespans, belonging to multiple people or places over the centuries. Several of the examples mentioned – Alcuin's comb, the combs at Stavelot and the comb allegedly belonging to Charles the Bald – all demonstrate that these large ivory combs often had multiple lives. They indicate that most combs brought into ecclesiastical contexts began life as personal objects, which were part of the objects' value, which was in turn then transferred or enhanced when the comb was given to an institution. The triangular comb from Stavelot (Fig. 2.14), for example, was likely intended as a personal gift, imbued with the charm inscribed into its borders. We now understand it as a relic comb attributed to Saint Remacle, one that was also, because of the suspension hole, hung from a wall or from a person at some point in its life. Sigeward's comb handed down in his will, is another example of a personal

[235] Blair, "The prehistory of English fonts,"149-79.

comb being passed into an ecclesiastical context.[236] By examining these objects in their full contexts we are able to understand so much more about their power as objects, not just in relation to the liturgy. As items that were intrinsically linked with cleanliness both in and outside of the Church, they were powerful metaphors. Their associations with intimacy positioned them as objects able to demonstrate close relationships, even between saints and people. And their beautiful designs ensured they were treasured, experiencing new uses after the deaths of their owners.

Conclusion

Medieval ivory combs were representative of long-distance connections, made from materials from across the world.[237] The very nature of these combs, small but luxurious, portable but capable of inspiring awe, suggests they were objects which carried meaning. These meanings were not static, but just as transportable as the combs themselves. Combs were able to cross large distances, be used on bodies, and be displayed. In the process, they could become gifts, relationship proxies, beautiful decorations, or miracle enablers.

Because combs were readily available, common objects, their use often had to be inferred. There are a handful of examples for this period where their use in healing remedies and the coronations of kings is made explicitly. It is highly likely, however, that they were commonly used in rites much more often, and it is because of how frequently they were used that they were not often recorded. We might not see evidence of combs in manuscripts until later, more voluminous instructional rubrics,[238] but they were likely in use in these instances long before they were finally recorded. For instance, although our earliest evidence for such

[236] Stevenson,*Monasterii de Abingdon*, 462.
[237] For instance, Alcuin's comb was made from African elephant ivory brought up through a sub-Saharan trade route, before being carved in a workshop where Riculf would have purchased it, and then sent to him at Charlemagne's court. Sorrell, "Alcuin's Comb Riddle," 311-16.
[238] One way scholars have worked around this gap in source material has been to understand that many of the gestures, movements and traditions recorded later are part of earlier traditions. See Gittos, "Researching the History of Rites," 17.

use in relation to vesting occurs in this period, with Ratoldus, it fits well with other evidence we will encounter in the next chapter.

The evidence available for use in this chapter is very different in character than for the previous one, yet there are hints at some surprising continuities in their use in rituals. Combs had qualities that lent themselves to uses beyond the quotidian, because they were personal, intimate objects that were used to change the state of bodies and make them socially acceptable in various ways. Their potential use in coronations is a heightened example of how they were used to mark other, more quotidian changes, from sick to well, from dressed to undressed. Their presence in the mulberry remedy shows that these ritual associations were able to permeate through all layers of society, as a result of these inherent qualities.

Overwhelmingly in this period, combs as ritual objects are associated with the church. Discussions around clerical cleanliness might have served to make them more potent, but they were also used in ways similar to the seventh-century. They were still exchanged as gifts, and now more evidence reveals how these objects could collect meanings or significances over time – combs could go through transitions just as they signified transitions for others. Alcuin's comb started out as a personal gift and reminder of a relationship, it ended as a contact relic capable of healing. These developments were not restricted to England and likely took place in other countries, as suggested by the combs found at Stavelot. And while they no longer were common objects to include in burials, the small number of instances where they were included hint at localised practices, perhaps relating to seventh-century relic combs.

Combs were used in all these different ways *because* of their affordances as objects. Their qualities lent themselves to uses beyond the quotidian. It is only by placing these objects within a longue durée that we can see how these uses had deep roots. Their affordances – their intimate, personal nature and their use to change people's states, meant

they were special in ways that were harnessed in very different contexts, from remedies to rituals, and relics.

Chapter Three: Order and Ownership. Combs 1100-1400 AD

At first glance, the later medieval period has the largest amount of evidence available to study. The reality is that there are special challenges with working on this later period. In comparison with the combs studied in chapters one and two, which have been relatively well-studied, little work has been undertaken on later medieval combs.

This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is less archaeological evidence, mainly because the materials that most combs were made from, horn and wood, are less stable than earlier ones made from bone or antler. Because fewer combs have been found in archaeological contexts, they have not been studied. There are also fewer material culture specialists who work in this period. There has, however, been work on the iconographically rich ones, although most of these were made, or survived, in France and Italy. These ivory combs have predominantly been studied from an art historical perspective, as these elaborate carved combs are strikingly different to the everyday varieties, rather than their meanings being interrogated.

In this period there is, though, increase in manuscript evidence. Liturgical writings, especially, and rubrics in liturgical manuscripts, become more detailed and extensive, records of cathedral treasuries better preserved, and a desire to rationalise the liturgy have all led to a richer textual backdrop from which to place religious combs into more detailed contexts. For the domestic contexts, manuscripts such as books of manners and letters show how combs were used by the nobility as part of their everyday ablutions.

The third chapter of this thesis examines combs from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. These combs are once again split into three sections: *Life*, *Death*, and *Worship*. In the first section the roles of later medieval combs in daily life and non-liturgical ceremonies are considered. In this period combs became popular gifts for lovers to exchange. It will also explain why, although common, there are few examples of them being passed down in wills.

In relation to everyday life, and death, the answers are much less clear than in previous chapters. By contrast, liturgical manuscripts are more plentiful, so a greater understanding of what a liturgical comb might be or do is easier to understand. This final section will examine this diverse body of material, as well as demonstrate how much work there is still to do in this area. By the end of the medieval period, there probably *was* a specific type of comb that could be referred to as a liturgical comb. Nonetheless, this is only one aspect of how combs continued to be meaningful.

Life

This section focuses on combs and attitudes to hair combing in daily life from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. During this period there is an increase in the amount of source material available, both physical and literary. Medieval romances, romance manuals, and etiquette books mention combs as part of stories and instructions. These show how combs were considered by contemporary writers, and I will question how they might reflect contemporary attitudes to hair combing. More oblique manuscript evidence contains instructions or suggestions about when hair might be changed or transformed at key social moments, and I draw on this to consider how and when combs were used in these instances. The material evidence is more elaborate than it is abundant. Many later ivory combs from this period are decorated in ways that suggest a use with lay, rather than ecclesiastical, contexts. These decorations are explored, as is the role of ivory and ivory carving, so that a broader idea of how these deluxe objects would have been considered in daily life can be constructed.

This chapter begins by looking at ordinary and extraordinary combs separately. In the first two chapters, large ivory combs have generally been associated with individuals of status. In nearly every instance, this has been related to the church. Ethelburga, Alcuin and Cuthbert all had important roles in early Christianity in the British Isles, and even the large combs found without attribution were discovered in Christian contexts or related to

Christian figures. They are clearly different to the more common bone and antler examples, in size and raw material. From the twelfth century onwards, there is an increase in numbers of large ivory combs that were clearly special. However, for the first time these combs are not found in Christian contexts. Despite their arguably lay use, they are also different from the other, lay double-sided combs made from wood and horn, and so this chapter seeks to understand what this difference means for the way people used hair combs.

Ordinary combs

There is a modern understanding that in the later medieval period, a relatively clear distinction exists in style ordinary and special combs, because they look so different. For this section, some of the most significant and substantial excavations of medieval urban places will be examined, primarily Exeter, Winchester, Norwich and York, where a large number of what we might consider everyday combs, used by the majority of people, were found. These excavations, thanks to the large amount of material published in relation to them, provide key insights.

There was a significant change in the production of combs from the eleventh century onwards. Across the eleventh and twelfth century, horn gradually supplants combs of other materials, though it was possibly introduced as a material from as early as the ninth and tenth.[1] Horn combs probably became popular for practical reasons. Compared to antler and bone combs, which were often composite and therefore made from multiple pieces, all of which required a degree of relative skill to fit together, horn combs were made from a single piece, were cheaper to produce, lighter and less elaborate in appearance.[2] It is also because of this material choice that the archaeological evidence for combs after the eleventh century

[1] Martin Biddle, *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester* (Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2025), 684.
[2] Peter Saunders and N. Griffiths, *Salisbury Museum Medieval Catalogue. Part 3, Bone Objects, Glass Vessels, Pottery, Jettons, Cloth Seals, Bullae and Other Base Metal Objects* (Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, 2001), 23.

is so different from previous periods. Horn, as a raw material, is incredibly unstable and is much less likely to survive.[3] Because of its instability, considerably more bone-sided plates made for horn combs survive, whereas the horn itself does not. Having horn supplant bone and antler as the predominant comb material is part of the reason why later medieval combs survive in different numbers. It is *because* no combs were found at Winchester from this period, along with other sites, that we know they were manufactured from horn.[4]

At Norwich castle eight, or possibly ten, pieces of antler from single-sided composite combs were found, only four of which were late Anglo-Saxon.[5] The post-Conquest combs were found in deposits dating shortly afterwards, though little evidence for combs continues beyond the twelfth century. These examples were found in pits or external dumps, suggesting that they were being discarded in a casual fashion, rather than deposited ritually.[6] There is evidence for this from other sites too, such as Old Sarum, where a composite comb was found in a probable garderobe pit, in a late twelfth-century context.[7] At Exeter, no combs are mentioned in the write ups of the site led by Stephen Rippon and N. Holbrook,[8] though horn working is referenced, possibly in relation to leatherworking.[9] Other combs would have been made from wood, like the comb found carried by a man from the Mary Rose, one with a romantic inscription from the Swan Lane excavations in London,

[3] Biddle, *Object and Economy,* 684.
[4] Biddle, *Object and Economy,* 684.
[5] Elizabeth Popescu, "Norwich Castle: Excavations and Historical Survey 1987-98," East Anglian Archaeology 132 (Published PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2009), 147.
[6] Popescu, "Norwich Castle," 147–48.
[7] Saunders and Griffiths, *Salisbury Museum Medieval Catalogue*, 23.
[8] Stephen Rippon and N. Holbrook, *Studies in the Roman and Medieval Archaeology of Exeter*, Exeter: A Place in Time 2 (Oxbow Books, 2021); Stephen Rippon and N. Holbrook, *Roman and Medieval Exeter and Their Hinterlands: From Isca to Excester*, Exeter: A Place in Time (Oxbow Books, 2021).
[9] Rippon and Holbrook, *Roman and Medieval Exeter*, 207.

a comb from a pit in Southampton, and a comb from Bedern York.[10] However, these also do not survive in large numbers.

Fig. 3.1: Comb seller and pilgrim examining wares in John Lydgate's Pilgrimage of the Life of Man. London, The British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. VII, f.93. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the original manuscript held at the British Library.

Manuscript evidence demonstrates that even when the combs do not survive, we can still understand where they were purchased, and how much for. Combs were bought as part of household expenses, as shown by the accounts of John Howard, who in February 1464 paid six pence for three ivory combs.[11] For most people in a city, these would probably have been purchased from a shop, though they would not necessarily have been the single item such a person would sell. In Fig. 3.1 (redacted), an illumination from John Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, the perfumes are lined in bottles behind the shopkeeper, but set out on the table are an array of combs, mirrors and horse combs or curry combs, which the pilgrim is inspecting.[12] While the hair combs appear similar to the ivory double-sided varieties that are

[10] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, 126, 133, 153, 168.
[11] Roughly £21.51 in today's money. Beriah Botfield and Thomas Hudson Turner, eds., *Manners and Household Expenses of England in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Illustrated by Original Records* (W. Nicol, Shakespeare Press, 1841), 491.
[12] The shopkeeper has 'Kömbes, (mo than nyne or ten,)/ Both ffor horse and eke ffor men.'

most common in this period, the curry combs are a perhaps surprising inclusion. It has been suggested that these were possibly symbolic of the practice of 'currying favour',[13] and they, too, were given as tokens of affection. The combination of the horse combs and the ordinary combs being side by side could be interpreted as an indication of how medieval people were happy to perceive combs on multiple levels. They had symbolic associations of love or favour, hence the placement close to the horse combs which were purely symbolic in 'currying favour', but they also had practical applications of de-knotting and de-lousing hair. These diverse meanings were not understood in spite of each other, rather the way combs were used normally, informed how they were understood on a more emblematic level.

While the shopkeeper offers the pilgrim time to browse and promotes the wide range of goods they have on offer, including knives, chalices, and ornamental trimmings (*phyllettys*), it is the mirror which attracts the pilgrim. Named in the text as 'Adulacyoun', the mirror is a symbol of insincere praise or flattery, which is also an important theme throughout the poem. John Lydgate, *Pilgrimige of the Life of Man, Englisht By John Lydgate, A.D. 1426, From the French Of Guillaume De Deguileville, A.D. 1330, 1355: The Text Edited By F. J. Furnivall ... With Introduction, Notes, Glossary and Indexes By Katharine B. Locock.* Ed. F. J. Furnivall (Published for The Early English Text Society by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1899), Lines 22331-22518.

[13] Patricia Basing, *Trades and Crafts in Medieval Manuscripts*, with The British Library (British Library, 1990), 47.



Fig. 3.2: Token with comb and rays, c. 1425-90. Diameter: 11.71mm, LON-0E1F38. Portable Antiquities Scheme.



Fig. 3.3: Token with comb and rays, c. 1425-90. Diameter 12.63mm, LON-816E70. Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Combs could also be depicted on late medieval tokens. Some examples have been published in Michael Mitchiner and Ann Skinner's *English Tokens* series, and two more have been recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Figs 3.2 and 3.3).[14] These tokens are not money, but more 'chit for service', a phrase used to emphasise that they did not compete with coinage or have a set monetary value, but were exchanged. [15] The direction of the

[14] Michael Mitchiner, and Ann Skinner.,"English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425." *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. 53, (1983): 29.
[15] Mitchiner and Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425", 29.

oblique rays on either side of the tokens indicates where they originate from, as the Parisian versions run the opposite way to the English.[16] Both examples on the PAS were found mudlarking and so their context does not give any clues to have they were used, though they may have been used in relation to the cult of St. Blaise (more in *Worship*), or they may have been used in relation to the production or selling of combs. Ecclesiastical tokens did exist and were generally made from pewter, at least before 1300 AD, and these could be distributed among pilgrims in exchange for food or lodging on their journey, or they could be given to chaplains and others who received tokens for attending church services.[17] Alternatively, secular tokens were also in circulation. A French charter in 1167 AD, for example, referred to tokens as 'articles well known' and also that they conferred on those who carried them an 'exclusive right to cry, carry and sell certain commodities which were specified.'[18] It is possible that the comb tokens were used by comb manufacturers to indicate a speciality, or that the comb could represent carving of antler or bone, as they were materials commonly used to make them. Given the material that the two examples listed on the PAS are made from – lead, and their date – post 1400, it is likely, though not certain, they were used in relation to secular rather than ecclesiastical activities. Church tokens were generally made from pewter, whereas the Pewterers Guild produced them in lead.[19] It is possible that what began as an ecclesiastical practice was then extended to encompass a range of commercial functions.[20]

[16] Michael Mitchiner and Ann Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1425-1600." *British Numismatic Journal*, vol. 54, (1984): 94.
[17] Mitchiner and Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425," 30-33.
[18] Mitchiner and Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425," 33.
[19] Mitchiner and Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425," 36.
[20] Mitchiner and Skinner, "English Tokens 'c.' 1200 to 1425," 38.

Late medieval combs were probably as close to mass-produced as one could get, with craftspeople producing large numbers of them available for sale in cities and towns.[21] These ordinary combs would have been used mostly for brushing hair and removing lice. They were discarded in normal ways, in waste pits or middens, and if they were not, the evidence no longer survives. But they were not purely functional, as suggested by the presence of combs and curry combs, and combs on badges and tokens. Even ordinary combs were able to be perceived on multiple levels.



Fig. 3.4: Wooden comb found on the Thames foreshore, London. c. 1270-1400, 48.6 x 66.8mm. LON-6F7626. Returned to finder. Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Rites of passage

The importance of having neat hair had moral weight for both men and women. For teenagers undergoing apprenticeships, drinking vessels used in initiation rites often depicted bearded men, associating long hair with sexual maturity.[22] This association was

[21] Martin Biddle, *Object and Economy*, 265.
[22] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course,* 92.

further exaggerated through male fertility amulets, which frequently depicted 'wildmen': male creatures covered head to toe in hair, who were violent, irrational and indulged entirely in feelings of sexual desire.[23] Not always negative – these connotations could also be seen as evidence for a young man's shift to being sexually active, with excessive hairiness of the wildmen being also associated with virility.[24] By the later fourteenth century the disorder that wildmen represent comes to be seen in a more positive light. As more people moved to towns and cities, the imagined country life of the wildmen was seen as simple and enviable, away from convention and corruption of the cities.[25]

While the material culture that survives indicates a relationship between hair, and rites of passage, these practices, which likely involved preparing hair in a particular ways, are not described in detail. This is not unusual. William of Poitiers, in his account of Harold and William the Conqueror refers generally to 'the sacred ritual recognised among Christian men,' when describing how Harold swore fealty to him.[26] Chroniclers, not always reliable when it comes to ascertaining the facts of a particular historical moment, at least reveal where practices were considered so universal as to be understood by their readership.[27] It is likely that hair combing in relation to these transition or transformation rituals was one area where combs were so ubiquitous, it was unnecessary to emphasise their presence.

For most medieval women, the age when they began covering their hair with a veil was an important moment that marked the crossing of a boundary into maturity. The parish of Westminster kept a circlet for maidens to wear when they were married and there is some

[23] Timothy Husband, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 4.
[24] Dorothy Yamamoto *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 163.
[25] Husband, *The Wild Man,* 5 and Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human,* 148-9.
[26] David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, eds., *English Historical Documents, 1042-1189* (Routledge, 1996), 232.
[27] Bernard S. Bachrach, *Warfare in Medieval Europe c.400-c.1453* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2022), 44.

evidence to suggest that brides wore their hair loose and uncovered,[28] whereas for second marriages the bride's head was covered during the ceremony.[29] Beyond marriage, veils were also used to indicate transition. Married women were expected to wear their hair covered, and white veils were worn on a woman's churching, which was the rite when women were welcomed back into the Church six weeks after giving birth.[30] The practice in England dates back at least to the fourteenth century, with the earliest evidence being in a copy of the Sarum Manual, though there is much earlier evidence for the practice on the continent.[31] The next time a married woman's hair would be publicly visible was at the funeral of her husband, when it might be released as part of her grief, before she would take on a 'widow's' headdress, which was a linen barbe, wrapped under the chin to cover the hair and neck, with a separate veil that concealed the front of the neck and chest.[32]

What people wore, and the way they wore it, mattered, as demonstrated by the range and number of brooches and items like jewellery, as well as the sumptuary laws.[33] These rites of passage used costume and dress to indicate a transition, including specific ways of styling hair. However, it is likely that the combs used at these points would have been the same ones as were used every day. Normal combs then were important in upholding the structures that governed society, even if they could be also used during transitional moments like the beginning of an apprenticeship or preparing for marriage. A single comb could move between states of ordinary and extraordinary, dependant on the context.

Control

[28] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, 132.
[29] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, 94.
[30] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, 183.
[31] Geoffrey Sedlezky, *The Significance of Doorway Positions in English Medieval Parochial Churches and Chapels* (Archaeopress, 2023), 192-3.
[32] Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, 96.
[33] David Hinton, *Gold and Gilt, Pots and Pins: Possessions and People in Medieval Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 205.

By the later medieval period, women were broadly considered as one of three states – virgin, wife, or widow – with all three expressed in some way by the state of her body.[34] For widows and virgins, there were particular ways of covering or uncovering hair, and transgressing these boundaries could result in anxiety around a collapse of social order.[35] Descriptions of widows letting down their hair and lamenting at the funerals of their husbands were relatively widespread, for example, but not always well-received. In thirteenth-century Rome, professional mourners were available for hire to achieve the desired amount of hysteria at funerals.[36] Reginald of Durham also includes an anecdote where women were unveiling their hair as part of the mourning process, distinguishing their actions from those of the men, suggesting that this behaviour was gendered: 'you could see the men running up, the wives letting their hair down in lamentation and both sexes pouring out tears and cries with copious wailing.'[37] The gestures of these wailing widows were at times considered 'excessive' and dangerous.[38] Criticism of women's hair and the way it was, and was not, covered underlines the importance of controlling women's bodies, and excessive movement was treated as a threat. In the Luttrell Psalter (c. 1320-1340 AD) the Luttrell women, Agnes and Beatrice, wear elaborately shaped hats with veils that hang straight down, representing stillness. In contrast, other women in the manuscript are sometimes depicted wearing 'devils sails' – the headdresses with winged-out sides also known as 'kercheuves' that Robert Mannyng said would blow fashionable ladies 'to helle'.[39] These headdresses suggest dynamism and activity, strong, decisive and attention-grabbing movements, like those of the wailing widows who mourn too much. For women, this was

[34] Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Macmillan, 1999), 4.
[35] Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York University Press, 1976), 18.
[36] Robert Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12, Vol.4 (1994): 54.
[37] Libellus XCII, ed. Raine, 201-4, via Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages," 54.
[38] Barasch, *Gestures of Despair,* 18.
[39] Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (Reaktion Books, 1998), 108.

inappropriate, suggesting a body that was out of control and moving beyond its limits, one that was "loose' rather than tightly controlled.'[40] The way women dressed themselves, as well as how they did their hair, was under such scrutiny that the main sign of female sin in the Psalter, aside from animal imagery hinting at sexual nature, was excess in dress, which is criticised throughout.[41]

In a similar manner, the Wildman and his excessive hairiness, and excessive sexuality, was a threat, as well as a marker of a rite of passage: his humanity was interrupted by animalistic associations. In the Luttrell Psalter for men as well as women, excess hair is 'another of the loaded negative bodily signs....'[42] The Smithfield Decretals and the Taymouth Hours also have margins which contain depictions of wild, hairy men carrying off noblewomen, and the Scots were described thus in contemporary chronicles.[43] Peasants in the Psalter were reduced to this common trope as well, linking personal grooming with wealth, with extreme hairiness making the peasants appear similar to wild men, an opposite to the elevated, controlled, Geoffrey Luttrell.[44] While some usages of the wild men were important in transitional rites, they equally were able to serve as a warning against excess.

This anxiety around uncontrolled hair could have been related to practical considerations. Keeping hair out of the face, especially for a job involving manual labour, was an important part of staying safe. Cotton MS Nero D I, f. 23v (1250-1259 AD), produced in St Albans, depicts the construction of St Albans overseen by King Offa of Mercia, who is instantly recognisable by his crown, but also by his neat, coiffed hair. The Master of Works and another official next to him both have similarly coiffed hair dos, which would have required careful shaping. Comparatively, the labourers wear a mix of head coverings and

[40] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 298–99.
[41] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 298.
[42] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 112.
[43] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 291.
[44] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 290.

hairstyles, many of which are covered presumably for more practical reasons.[45] For men, then, combs were also tools that maintained order in a very literal sense, keeping unbrushed or unruly hair out of the vision for a labourer working with dangerous tools. They could also maintain order in a more figurative way. Combs were used at the same time on Kings and Masters, ensuring their comparative status was also maintained, having hairstyles that would have been impractical for those lower in the social order.

The dangers of excess hair were decried again from a more metaphorical standpoint. John Mirk (c. 1380-1420 AD), an Augustinian Canon based in Shropshire, made a direct link between removing facial hair and removing sin in one of his Maundy Thursday sermons: 'On Maundy Thursday a man shall save his head and clip his heard…So just as we shave and shear away the excess of filth without, so too shall we shave and shear away the excess of sin and vice within.'[46] There is not just an association between hairiness and sin, but hairiness and appearing 'womanly': William of Malmesbury particularly is consistent in his dislike of long hair on men, associating it with femininity and weakness, as evidenced in his *Life of Wulfstan*, when the long-haired citizens of England are positioned as unable to defend themselves against the Norman Conquest.[47]

It was not just hair, but also the combs themselves, that were used to identify communities. This is apparent as in 1366 AD, the account of Thomas of Malmesbury records the Welsh as hanging combs and money on their trousers.[48] This is immediately marked out as strange by the author at the beginning of the section on the Welsh, as according to him the Welshman 'differs from the English custom in clothing and food and many other

[45] A range of men's hairstyles while working can be seen in Basing, *Trades and Crafts in Medieval Manuscripts*, 20–42.
[46] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 292.
[47] William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani XVI*, ed. R. R. Darlington (Royal Historical Society, 1928), 23. Translation by author.
[48] 'His pecten et pecunia pendunt ad femoralia…' "They hang comb and money on their trousers…" Frank Scott Hayden, ed., *Eulogium (Historiarum sive Temporis): Chronicon ab Orbe condito usque ad Annum Domini MCCCLXVI a Monacho quodam Malmesburiensi exaratum. Volume 2*, (TannerRitchie Publising, 2008), 135. Translation by author.

things.'[49] While again, a medieval chronicler and therefore the work has its own agenda, and ensuring that the Welsh and English were positioned as separate was part of this, it is interesting that how they wore combs was chosen as a way to demonstrate abnormality. The Welsh, as people who wore combs on the outside of their clothing, rather than kept hidden, or private, might have been seen as people who were less controlled as a result of this, reinforcing the importance of not just well-groomed, but privately groomed hair, for the late medieval Englishman.

For women, who predominantly had their hair covered, combs were especially intimate. Combs controlled, straightening and organising loose hair. Blowing strands, moving veils, all things that reveal dynamic movement or indicate activity – these were all tamed by the use of combs. They were used on people in states of undress, but they were also tools which maintained social order, through controlling the hair, binding it under head coverings and hiding it from view. For women, combs were both used at intimate moments, and enforced strict dress and behavioural codes. Men, too, had important codes of conduct and dress that combs were a part of. As the sumptuary laws show, it was not just the lower orders who had certain expectations but the upper, also, who had an obligation to 'perform nobility.'[50] Though there are no records of prosecutions,[51] the fact these laws existed at least suggests that the way people could present themselves was understood to be dangerous and to subvert hierarchies. Hair, and the styling of it, appears to have been a large part of this. The manuscript illuminations and the presence of workshops show that combs were sold in normal shops and able to be purchased regularly, even if few everyday examples still survive. However, these everyday combs were not frequently mentioned. Compared to the

[49]'communitas nam patriae differt a ritu angliae in vestibus et victibus, et caeteris quampluribus.' Hayden, *Eulogium*, 134. Translation by author.
[50] Hinton, *Gold and Gilt,* 218.
[51] Hinton, *Gold and Gilt,* 218.

earlier centuries they were not parts of cures or amulets. Instead, combs became absorbed into the rhythms of daily life, even as some of their decorations became more extraordinary.

Extraordinary combs

The previous section has demonstrated that combs were important objects in rites of passage and upholding order and status, though the combs themselves became less elaborate. This section seeks to examine the elite combs that survive. These combs were special, due to their material or their decoration, and so how they were used might differ from their everyday counterparts.

Ivory was a material that has been used by historians to immediately demonstrate a special or extraordinary comb. By the later medieval period, not all medieval ivory combs were considered equal. One double-sided comb decorated with 'groups of incised lines along the solid zone and pierced with lobed holes along the edges of the comb,' was found in a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century context in Norwich at Botolph Street.[52] A 'schoolboys' inventory' from c. 1380 AD, as part of the Stonor papers, includes a list of items owned by the schoolmaster of Ewelme, including 'a combe of iveri and a peyr of shouys j furrid and iij cheachyfys…'[53] suggesting that they might have been luxury items but they were not out of reach from working professionals. An example of these potentially more ordinary ivory combs can be seen in Fig. 3.5. Additionally, in 1413 AD, ivory combs were on a list of goods seized by the customs searchers of Bristol and the miscellaneous cargo 'probably came from Flanders.'[54] The merchandise was arrested by John Redrys and William Markes Searcheours de Brist', and was made up of a number of household goods including fabrics,

[52] Susan M. Margeson, *Norwich Households: The Medieval and Post-Medieval Finds from Norwich Survey Excavations 1971-1978*, with Norwich Survey et al., East Anglian Archaeology; Report No. 58 (Survey/Norfolk Museums Service in conjunction with the Scole Archaeological Committee, 1993), 66.
[53] Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *Supplementary Stonor Letters and Papers: (1314-1482), 1923* (Offices for the society, 1923), 2.
[54] E. M. Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*, Bristol Record Society's Publications; Vol. VII (Printed for the Bristol Record Society, 1937), 50.

spices, and items of small furniture such as candlesticks. The pound of ivory combs was listed at six shillings and eight pence, which roughly is equivalent to £286 in 2025.[55] (Ivory



Fig. 3.5: Small double-sided ivory comb found in London, c.1200-1500 AD. 75 x 30.19mm, LON-A5C847. Portable Antiquities Scheme.

was weighed by the pound, and still was in East Africa up to the 1994 edition of Anthony Cutler's work).[56] Compared to the two combs that Edward I purchased in Paris in 1278 for 32s 6d, which is the equivalent of roughly £1,500 in today's money, there was clearly a range of ivory combs available for purchase.[57]

The ivory combs purchased by Edward I probably resembled the most extraordinary large combs from this period (for a later example, see Fig. 3.6). They are double sided with fine and wider-set teeth, their central panel often carries scenes taken from romances or the

[55] 'Item j li. De Iverycombez vis. viijd' Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*, 51. Currency conversion via the National Archives' National Currency Converter (https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result), and the Bank of England's inflation calculator (https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator), accessed 18 August 2025.
[56] Anthony Cutler, *The Hand of the Master,* 29.
[57] £1594.42 using the National Archives Currency Converter and Bank of England's inflation calculator. Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard, *Dress Accessories, c. 1150-1450*, Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 3 (HMSO, 1991), 376.

Bible, and they occasionally carry traces of polychromatic paint. These combs are different from the ordinary combs individuals bought from a shop, and likely were different also from the ivory combs that were more affordable, or more simply decorated, such as the example from Botolph Street.[58] They are found predominantly in France and Italy but some English examples survive. They are made from ivory or boxwood, are finely carved, highly decorated, and survive in relatively high numbers, appearing unused or barely used. They are resolutely different to the types of combs found buried in middens, and they have also attracted more interest and attention by historians and art historians. The study of the later medieval extraordinary combs however has generally been restricted to their material properties. While their likely role as betrothal gifts has been acknowledged,[59] the reason for this, and the potential usages or associations of these combs and ritualized processes has not

[58] Margeson, *Norwich Households*, 66.
[59] For instance by Paul Williamson in *The Wyvern Collection: Medieval and Later Ivory Carvings and Small Sculpture* (Thames and Hudson, 2019).

been interrogated. Instead, the forms and raw material of the combs have understandably been the focus.

The main database which provides information on the European ivory combs is the Courtauld's 'Gothic Ivories' project ca. 1200-1530 AD.[60] The vast majority of these combs were made in France or Italy, and found on the continent.[61] Paris was one of the centres of production, and became so well-known for its ivory carving that in 1324 AD legislation had to be brought in to ensure that counterfeit bone combs were not being sold as ivory.[62] These examples, and the database they come from, are worth generally considering even if not

Fig. 3.6: North Italian ivory comb with the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi, c.1450. 115 x 132 x 4 mm. UK, Wyvern Collection, 208. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from The Wyvern Collection.

[60] "Gothic Ivories Project at The Courtauld Institute of Art," The Courtauld Institute of Art, accessed 12 June 2024, www.gothicivories.courtauld.ac.uk.
[61] 28 combs are Italian or likely Italian, whereas 35 combs are French or likely French. This is out of a total of 77 combs. "Gothic Ivories Project."
[62] London Museum, *Medieval Catalogue* (London: H.M.S.O, 1967), 370.

studying in detail. Firstly, there are two examples made in England of these ivory combs, while more were imported, or purchased abroad, as Edward I did in 1278 AD.[63] The Bristol account where ivory combs were seized from Flanders was also indication that these items were being traded across Europe, though the relatively low price for these suggests they were not the same as the large combs that fall under the extraordinary descriptor. Outside of Flanders, there were connections between England and centres of luxury good production where combs were found: the Low Countries, France, Spain, Portugal and the Mediterranean sea-route linking Venice and Florence,[64] two centres of comb production in addition to Paris.[65]

[63] Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories, c. 1150-1450*, 376.
[64] J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500* (Dent, 1985), 287.
[65] Two Venetian examples can be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, for example. Inv no. 228-1867 and 151-1879. "Gothic Ivories Project."



Figs. 3.7 & 3.8: Fragments of the English ivory combs listed on the Courtauld Gothic Ivories project. From left to right: Thirteenth century ivory comb fragment found in the Thames, depicting a dragon. London, The British Museum. 58 x 38 x 7mm. 1877,0116.35 (Dalton 253). Early fourteenth century ivory comb, London, The British Museum. 64 x 30 x 15mm. 1856,0701.1501 (Dalton 254).

There were also stylistic commonalities between the types of combs that crossed the Channel. Fig. 3.8 is a fragment of a fourteenth-century ivory comb with parts of a scene depicting courtly lovers meeting under an arch. It was made in an English style,[66] but thematically is in line with trends on the continent. By the fourteenth century, romantic scenes were commonly used in the central panels of ivory combs. Out of a total of seventy-seven ivory combs catalogued between 1200-1530 AD, fifty-five of them display such scenes, seventeen display scenes of a Biblical nature (though this does not necessarily mean they are liturgical), and five are unclear.[67] Some of the Biblical scenes, for example, are outwardly

[66] Though not depicting an exclusively English 'scene', lovers in courtyards are a popular decorative choice from this time. "Gothic Ivories Project."
[67] For a full record of late medieval ivory combs, c.1200-1530, see the "Gothic Ivories Project."

erotic or have erotic undertones, like the popularity of David and Bathsheba bathing in the sixteenth century (six of the twelve combs show this), or combs depicting the Annunciation, which have been suggested by Paul Williamson to be betrothal combs, given the themes of conception.[68] The earliest ivory comb depicting lovers is the early-fourteenth-century example found in England (Fig. 3.8), and the latest is one listed from the 1520s (London, V&A museum, A. 567-1910), showing that these design choices spanned the entirety of the later medieval period.

However, there are some differences between the two English fragments and the large, predominantly ivory versions from France and Italy. They clearly, even at a glance, have a very different appearance. The continental examples have generally been preserved to a higher standard, with few fragmented teeth if any, and little to no signs of obvious wear. This would suggest they were barely used, but carefully kept. The teeth are especially fine and liable to break easily. When running a finger along them gently they bend, and though the thicker teeth are far more sturdy, their large size also puts them at risk of being dropped, as they are unwieldy to hold in one hand. The two English combs do not look like this. Their ivory is darkened with age, a likely result of damage and poor preservation, they are heavily fragmented. They are also, even despite this fragmentation, smaller than those on the continent. The average height and width for all the whole, double-sided combs on the Gothic Ivories Project is 123.2 x 145.4mm. While Fig. 3.7, with the dragon, is fragmented, the height is still clear – measuring only 58mm. The other English example which is in good condition and will be discussed further in *Worship*, is 86 x 86mm.[69] The difference in size might be a result of a difference in raw material, and these two English combs were made

[68] Williamson, *Medieval and Later Ivory Carvings.*
[69] These sizes do not fluctuate massively by date either – when taking the definitively dated, whole combs, the breakdown of the data is: 2 combs, thirteenth century: 103 x 84.5. 9 combs, fourteenth century: 116.6 x 154.2. 31 combs, fifteenth century: 125.97 x 146.19. 9 combs, sixteenth century: 130 x 149.56. "Gothic Ivories Project."

from other types of ivory such as whalebone, meaning the comb had to be carved from a smaller amount of raw material.

Aside from raw material, the differences between the English combs and those found on the continent are related to decoration. The earliest comb, the thirteenth-century English example depicting a dragon, is very unusual, as we only have one comb with this design. This could be because of its early date, and dragons may have been a popular motif that only had a short span of appeal. We know that trends in decorations did occur, as while the majority of the combs with courtly or romance decorations date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, medieval ivories with scenes from the romance tradition are generally dated to the fourteenth century,[70] whereas David and Batsheba becomes popular in the sixteenth.[71] The dragon might have been a very early decoration associated with romance, as while most romances that include dragons and dragon-slaying are from the fourteenth century,[72] Gottfried's telling of Tristan and Isolde, where Tristan wins Isolde's hand after being prove to have slain the dragon in the prelude to their tragedy, dates to the early thirteenth century.[73] On the other hand, the inclusion of the dragon on the comb should not necessarily be considered as part of this practice.

The association between combs and romance, however, predates Romantic literature. From at least the twelfth century onwards it is clear that they were especially marked out as gifts to be exchanged between courting couples. The understanding was established in writing in Andrea Capellanus' work *De Amore* (c. 1180s AD). Capellanus, a French author presumed to be a courtier of the Countess of Champagne, firstly argues that

[70] Richard H. Randall, "Medieval Ivories in the Romance Tradition," *Gesta (Fort Tryon Park, N.Y.)* 28, no. 1 (1989): 30. In addition, sixteen combs from the database, with scenes explicitly from romances, are dated conclusively to the fourteenth century, twenty-four to the fifteenth. Only two combs from the thirteenth century depict romantic scenes. "Gothic Ivories Project."
[71] Six combs depicting David and Batsheba are dated to the sixteenth century, compared to one in the fifteenth and no earlier examples. "Gothic Ivories Project."
[72] Including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the life of Bevis of Hampton, *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois*. Martin Arnold, *The Dragon: Fear and Power* (Reaktion Books Ltd, 2019), 192-5.
[73] Martin Arnold, *Dragon: Fear and Power,* 192.

any woman truly in love 'always rejects and hates gifts from her lover,' as she instead is supposed to focus on increasing his wealth.[74] However, a lover should be generous and ensure the object of his affections wants for nothing, which results in the decision made by the Countess of Champagne, that ladies were able to accept certain kinds of gifts, including 'a handkerchief, a fillet for the hair, a wreath of gold or silver, a breastpin, a mirror, a girdle, a purse, a tassel, a comb…'[75] There was clearly a hierarchy of what gifts were considered appropriate, and the nature of the gift was determined by the stage of courtship. In later sixteenth century England, clothing and leather goods were permissible for an earlier stage, whereas 'money, metal, and household goods' were more appropriate to cement betrothal and prepare for marriage.[76] An example of a comb found in London with a French inscription along the central panel shows that this association between combs and romantic gifting was probably established in England as well.[77] Wood was a common material for these romantic combs, especially boxwood, as the dense grain of the wood, and the verticality of the grain, allowed for very precise carving.[78] It might also explain why so few examples survive today.

Stories of romances also show that combs were presented as intimate gifts in fiction. Chrètien de Troyes (d. 1190 AD), around the same time as De Capellanus was writing *De Amore*, was also writing for Countess Marie de Champagne, and a comb figures in one of his stories, *The Knight of the Cart*. It is possible that combs were an important part of the Countess of Champagne's court explicitly, though if this were the case it might be expected that more than two references survive, and instead they were part of more widely shared courtly romance ideals. In the tale, Lancelot stumbles upon a comb of ivory and gold so fine

[74] Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, with John Jay Parry (Columbia University Press, 1941), 145
[75] Capellanus, *Art of Love,* 145, 176.
[76] Gilchrist, *Archaeology of Life Cycle,* 109.
[77] Gilchrist, *Archaeology of Life Cycle*, 211.
[78] William D. Wixom ed. *Mirror of the Medieval World* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 211.

that 'No one, wise man or fool,/Had seen its like.'[79] Among the teeth, hairs of Guinevere, the queen Lancelot seeks and is in love with, are entangled. The lady accompanying Lancelot, who tries to keep him from the token and fails, in the end relents and asks for the comb herself because it is so beautiful.[80] Lancelot happily hands it over, but not before carefully removing the hairs from its teeth and tucking them into his breast.[81] Here the hairs, the body of the woman he loves and seeks, are the real treasures, though the magnificence of the comb is stressed in order to further underline these courtly ideals, and because the comb caresses her as he wants to be able to do – 'Once a man/Has fallen in love with a woman/No one in all the world/Can lavish such wild adoration/Even on the objects she owns…'[82] Combs were not always exchanged between lovers, but when they were given as gifts it was still likely to be between two people who were close to each other. For example, Edward I had another comb given to him by his daughter, the Countess of Bar, at Ghent (d. 1298 AD), which was then handed down to Edward II, and stolen when he was forced to leave his baggage train behind in 1312 AD, being pursued by Thomas, earl of Lancaster.[83]

Combs were especially significant romantic gifts because women's hair was mainly covered, and so the reveal of it, or the use of the object on revealed hair, would have been intimate – the comb acts as a proxy for the lover. Given married women wore their hair covered, whereas unmarried women did not, the comb as a betrothal gift might be especially relevant, a recognition of the future where the woman's hair would become hidden after marriage. However, combs also had the added benefit of being tools that were associated with control at the same time as sexuality. Anxiety around women's grooming partly

[79] Chrétien De Troyes, *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart* trans. Burton Raffel (Yale University Press, 1997), 44.
[80] Chrétien, *Knight of the Cart,* 47.
[81] Chrétien, *Knight of the Cart,* 44-48.
[82] Chrétien, *Knight of the Cart,* trans. Raffel, 47.
[83] "Item, en un cofre, lie de feer, une mirour d'argent enamaille; in pigne; un priket que fust done au Roi, par la countesse de Bare, a Gant." Translation by Kathryn Warner: "In a chest bound with iron, a silver enamelled mirror, a comb, a pricket [a spike for holding a candle], which was given to the king by the countess of Bar at Ghent." Thomas Rymer ed. *Foedera, Conventiones, Litteræ, et cujuscunque generis Acta Publica inter Reges Angliæ et alios etc. Treaties, Agreements, Letters and Public Acts made between the Kings of England and others etc., volume 2 Part 1 (1307 – 1327)* (TannerRitchie Publishing, 2006), 204.

stemmed from the belief that women were more sexually libidinous than men, and more susceptible to sexual corruption.[84] This concept was linked to women as temptresses, which became 'one of the defining elements of female sexuality in the Middle Ages.'[85] Women were both meant to dress well enough to please a husband, but not so well that they invited attention from others.[86] They had to be open and receptive to men's active sexuality but they could not be active themselves – women were meant to lure men to them, but then subjugate themselves to men once this had been successful.[87] Combs might have been intimate, but their use as tools to control was also able to be appreciated.

These associations were not used only in the most extraordinary instances. Cheaper badges with combs and decorated with phalluses signify that they were well-known throughout society. Badges at the London Museum have been suggested to be sexual or satirical rather than associated with Saint Blaise (*Worship*), though only one is decorated with phalluses and obviously not associated with the saint (London, Museum of London, 8737). This badge further confirms that combs and sexuality were linked, possibly, in this instance due to a play on words – '*penil*' in Anglo-Norman meant 'little comb', or 'penis', 'pubes' or 'groin'. Furthermore, the Latin (*pecten*) and Ancient Greek (*kteis*) were also slang for genitalia. However, they also pose a problem for the historian, as it is not always clear whether or not comb badges, especially those not also decorated with genitalia, were for sexual or religious reasons. It is also unclear whether this ambiguity would have been part of the appeal in the first place, or whether individuals would have understood this instinctively based on context. However, it has been argued, for example, by David Hinton, that this ambiguity would not have been confusing for medieval people, who were accustomed to imagery and symbols, and these meanings were also perfectly capable of

[84] Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Routledge, 2010), 86.
[85] Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 87.
[86] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 109–10.
[87] Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 87.

being stacked on each other, with one meaning to the maker, another to the purchaser and a third to the wearer.[88]

For men, while it is unclear if combs were ever given as romantic gifts, the mention of an ivory comb in John Russell's *Boke of Nurture* certainly indicates that ivory combs would have been used by them. Written by John Russell about his service to the Duke of Gloucester sometime before 1446 AD,[89] the book is an instructional for the different duties undertaken by those in service to gentlemen. The office of the chamberlain is the one concerned with the maintenance of the Lord's bedchamber,[90] and so grooming and dressing were his responsibilities. The Chamberlain's duties in general include keeping the 'hed well kempt,'[91] which should take place at multiple times throughout the day. While the reality of whether this was practical or not remains to be ascertained, the fact that this book offers an ideal of behaviour is still important in understanding how well-dressed and well-combed hair was not just a manner of moral superiority, but also one of status. Noblemen were expected to look a certain way, and they employed men in order to live up to these expectations. For the chamberlain, the morning activities began as soon as his Lord had risen and sat in front of the fire, where he was to provide him with 'combe and kercheff/looke þere bothe be had youre souereyn had to keymbe or he be graytly clad,'[92] as the hair is combed while the master sits in front of the fire, before he is dressed. However, the morning ablutions are not restricted to one combing – after the Lord has been full dressed and the doublet laced then he is combed again. This time, the material of the comb is specified: 'curteisly þan ye kembe his hed with combe of yvery.'[93] At the end of the day a similar process is repeated – the head is combed while the servant kneels before him, after removing the man's breeches, which

[88] David Hinton, "Symbols of Power," in *The Oxford Handbook of Later Medieval Archaeology in Britain,* eds. Christopher M. Gerrard and Alejandra Gutiérrez (Oxford University Press, 2020), 429.
[89] P. Burwell Rogers, "John Russell's the Boke of Nurture," *The Bucknell Review*, 5, no. 4 (1955): 43.
[90] Rogers, "John Russell's the Boke of Nurture," 39.
[91] John Russell, *The Boke of Nurture,* ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (Bungay, Printed by J. Childs and son, 1867), 60.
[92] Russell, *The Boke of Nurture*, 61.
[93] Russell, *The Boke of Nurture*, 62.

are meant to be slung over his shoulder, 'youre souereynes hed ye kembe/but furst ye knele to ground;...'[94] If the master wished to take a nap in the day, clean pillows, kerchief and a comb must all be ready at a moment's notice.[95] Should the Lord sleep at any point then he will have his hair carefully combed back into place afterwards.

While peasantry was linked unfavourably to hairiness, members of the higher echelons were expected to comb their hair upwards of three times a day. The proliferation of elaborate ivory combs on the continent certainly seems to suggest that these requirements were supported by extraordinary versions of these objects. Men and women in the late medieval period had stringent expectations for dress,[96] and so the tools which enabled proper presentation were also important. Negotiation between the symbolic and practical was a key aspect of later medieval combs. The fragile, highly decorated ivory examples suggest that they were both used and understood on multiple levels.

In England, the surviving ivory combs differ from those in France or Italy. The ones that do survive are often simple and were possibly purchased by individuals of a professional class. It was not necessarily the ivory comb itself that denoted status, as evidenced by the range of prices of ivory combs, but rather the intersection between maintaining a certain kind of hairstyle, (one that could not be maintained if undertaking manual labour), and owning combs made from luxurious materials. Given however the exchange of goods, ideas and literature between England and the Continent, it might be more likely that while this exchange of combs might not have reached the heights it did in comparative courts, hair combing was still an important part of everyday life, and some examples like the smaller ivory dragon comb fragment show that elaborate, extraordinary examples were being purchased.

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[94] Russell, *The Boke of Nurture*, 65.
[95] 'yef he wille take a slepe/...looke bothe kercheff and combe/ þat ye haue þere prest...' Russell, *The Boke of Nurture*, 65.
[96] Hinton, "Symbols of Power," 429.

Conclusions

According to Roberta Gilchrist, hair was 'the most potent sexual symbol of sexuality for both men and women.'[97] Treatment of the hair then was important in demonstrating sexual availability, or lack of availability, in the case of the religious.[98] The association with hair and sexuality was first evidenced in Chapter 2, but it becomes more apparent in these later centuries. For both men and women, combs were essential in maintaining strict ideals of how they should present themselves. While I am talking about 'idealised gender systems' which overstate the norms and underestimate the diversity of practices,[99] given the evidence, there is still a compelling relationship between gender and hair combing. While these behaviours might not necessarily be always considered ritualized, they were certainly regimented and built into daily life. However, it is because of these regular uses and the associations between availability, control, and the threat of loss of control, that they become meaningful in other ways.

The use of combs when crossing a threshold continued. By the fifteenth century, combs were still being used to navigate rites of passage, like marriage, widowhood, or being recognised as an apprentice, even if these rites of passage were different from those of the fifth and sixth century. And, like earlier centuries, combs in the later medieval society were still associated with control, even if what needed to be controlled was different. The Luttrell Psalter (c. 1345 AD) and John Russel's Book of Nurture (c. 1450 AD) are both manuscripts which demonstrate how the importance of order is influenced through daily action and dress. This concern with marking boundaries and maintaining control over them is, as argued by Camille, a part of the Psalter itself. The book is concerned with marking limits – a landowner like Geoffrey Luttrell would have considered the maintenance of boundaries in real life through fences, furrows and ditches an important part of his work, and this

[97] Gilchrist, *Archaeology of Life Cycle,* 99.
[98] Gilchrist, *Archaeology of Life Cycle,* 98.
[99] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Public Square Book Series (Princeton University Press, 2007), 154.

concern has in some ways bled into the manuscript – the Luttrell Psalter appears to depict 'an inclusive social world in which everyone has their assigned place, the peasants in the fields, the knight in his hall, the clerics singing in the church.' [100] This is not to suggest that the concern and interest in marking order was always upheld, in fact the Psalter itself shows, underneath these interests, a 'space for resistance' reflected by the artists themselves, whose creativity 'cannot be kept within the bounds of Christian exegesis and certainly not within the regimes of Geoffrey Luttrell's ideas.'[101]

For John Russell, his concern is focused around seating arrangements in a noble household, the solution being to divide his guests into five hierarchal groups, which were further divided to ensure an equation between members of the clergy and the laity, matching dukes with archbishops, bishops and earls, et cetera.[102] Internal gradations of society are also seen in *De amore*, as there are clear rules about who can be in love with who, rules that were important not to break, though they certainly would have been. The relationship between the strict and overly attentive etiquette books versus the actual behaviour of people is obviously a central point of contention for any historian, but these texts were still reflecting real concerns of the time. Late medieval rhetoric also made use of the public good or 'common weal' in political arguments, and the proliferation of these etiquette books shows there was an encouragement for people to 'conform to, and hence be identifiable in terms of, their social role.'[103]

The sources discussed in this section are by no means an exhaustive survey, but they do indicate that order was important, and able to be communicated in multiple ways. This then suggests that order was able to be enforced in multiple ways, too. And this in turn is

[100] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 307.
[101] Camille, *Mirror in Parchment*, 308.
[102] S. H. Rigby, "Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change in Late Medieval England," in *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*, eds. Rosemary Horrox and W. M. Ormrod (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.
[103] Miri Rubin, "Identity," *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*, eds. Rosemary Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 384.

important for the combs from this period, as they were objects that were involved in people presenting themselves in the way that was expected. As prominent gifts between the laity in these later centuries, as intimate objects, they were enforcers of the way society was constructed, as well as reminders of relationships between individuals. Combs were not, however, just tools of order, but also of disorder. Their association with sexuality through slang terminology and the blatantly erotic scenes used as decoration show that combs were objects that embraced the tension between order and disorder, playing with their associations of intimacy.

The large, double-sided and intricately carved ivory combs that are often found in museums from this period are evidence for a very high status, lay comb. However, it is important to note the French and Italian contexts of these, as well as the other written contexts where combs appear. *De amore* was a text first written in France and many of these combs were made in French and Italy. Although I have demonstrated that it was likely they were purchased by some English people, it is also possible that there was a heightened or more intricate series of ways people styled their hair on the continent. For example, gravoirs, or hair parters, were also carved from ivory and used to part women's hair. It is intriguing that none survive in England. An internationally comparative study is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it should be noted that the material weighting of the evidence suggests a slightly heightened social set of hair behaviours to be in circulation among the French or Italian nobilities, compared to the English.

Nevertheless hair, the combing, covering and arranging of it, continued to be important, and therefore the tools that helped to manage it were also important. As Chris Gosden argues, when people 'put time, effort, and materials into formalizing and ritualizing some element of their lives it must be because this aspect is a key element in the way they

live.'[104] Combs were a key element, important gifts and present at periods of social transformation – for widows, young brides and young men, all of whom were transitioning from one group to another. In the everyday they were present in more routine transitions too, between waking and sleeping, between privacy and solitude. However, this period seems to have more evidence that points to the combs as being objects more invisible in the infrastructure of the everyday. Heightened restrictions for dress and display suggest that what combs enabled became increasingly important, but fewer material examples do not provide proof that the combs themselves were treated with unusual care. Ivory combs were more commonly available, and available for an emerging professional class of people, but in England there is less evidence to suggest that elaborately carved ivory betrothal combs were as much of a practice as they were on the continent.

Combs, like clothing, enforced boundaries and order, ordering and straightening hair, or covering the naked body and hiding it from view. They were also moveable objects that encountered a certain fluidity. Hair flowed through, over and around them. They were used, displayed, carried around easily. They were objects that while creating this order were in use at points that threatened it – when in a state of undress for instance, or after an excessive and public display of mourning. Combs then, are objects that can reinforce what we understand about medieval society, and they are reflectors of the varied ways medieval people engaged with each other.

[104] Chris Gosden, "Anthropology and Archaeology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. David A. Hinton, Sally Crawford, and Helena Hamerow (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1014.

Death

Evidence for combs relating to funerary practices for the later medieval period is very rare. References in wills are few, and in addition to the few scattered appearances, the archaeological evidence is minimal. The further decline of furnished burial means that there are no known examples from graves. Bishops were not buried with combs when they were inhumed, and they were also not common funerary symbolism or used on tombs. Nor does their association with dying change after the Black Death – from the eleventh century onwards there are few links between death and combs. Given this, the approach will be restricted to the instances where combs do emerge, which are entirely in late medieval wills. These wills will then be considered alongside how combs were thought of in *Life*, to try and ascertain how and why medieval combs had gone from a significant part of the funerary rite, to hardly appearing in the belongings that were passed down.

For lay individuals, there are a handful of wills that reveal that combs were very occasionally included amongst the goods passed down through families and family groups. However, this is far less common than one might imagine. This is especially interesting when considering the rich ivory combs that were clearly produced in this period. These objects were in many cases not used – they were perhaps placed into boxes or cases and kept as mementos of important periods in life.[105] Such treatment might especially suggest they would have been included in wills, with the combination of both material wealth and commemorative meaning. As we will see, however, this is not quite the case. Given the strong associations between combs and individuals presented in the first two sections of this thesis, this shift is interesting to note. Why, for instance, are there only five examples of combs being handed down in wills from the twelfth century onwards, when we know that most people would have owned them? Were they objects that were made inalienable by

[105] Williamson, *The Wyvern Collection*.

their personal attachments? But if lay wills were intended not only to pass on wealth, but also objects with which to remember the one who has died, why were combs not included more often?

Combs clearly did have a commemorative function in relation specifically to betrothals or weddings. They were also *kept*, as the ones that survive do so in excellent condition – these were clearly special.[106] When combs were recorded in wills however, they are never described as betrothal combs, only by their material. This is perhaps more a reflection of the practice of the time, as later cathedral treasuries also describe combs in the same way, likely the result of an intention to record their economic worth.

There are five wills in which combs appear, all dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Three of the wills are written by women, two by men. The first, recorded in 1319 AD is the will of Margery of Crioll, of Irchester (North Northamptonshire). Margery left her daughter an ivory comb which was said to belong to Saint Thomas of Canterbury, along with her great breviary.[107] She also left the shrine of St Thomas Becket an emerald which she was engaged with, indicating a preference for the Saint.[108] In 1358 AD, the magistrate Thomas de la Mare bequeathed Marjorie de Langton several fine trinkets, including a silver box in which to put her rings and an ivory comb. [109] In 1391 AD, Richard Dalton left Thomas de Garton several grooming implements, including an ivory comb, brush and ivory-handled

[106] The combs that survive might only have been able to survive because of this status as 'special', and therefore out of the ordinary. Other, more heavily used ivory combs like the one found at Botolph street might be more indicative of how more 'normal' ivory combs were used, and so the sample of these elaborate ivory combs might be weighted. Nevertheless, they do make up a large part of the evidence of late medieval combs.
[107] Nicholas Bennett ed., *The Registers of Bishop Henry Burghersh, 1320-1342* (Boydell Press for the Lincoln Record Society, 1999), 149.
[108] Bennett, *Registers,* 149.
[109] 'consanguineae mese unam peeiam argenti coopertam, unum note cum pede deaurato, meliorem parvum murreum et **unum pecten de ebore ac unum pixidem argenti cum catenis pro anulo imponendo**...' James Raine and John William Clay, eds., *Testamenta Eboracensia; or, Wills Registered at York, Illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, Statistics, &c., of the Province of York, from the Year 1300 Downwards* (J. B. Nichols, 1836), 69. Emphasis and translation author's own.

razor.[110] In 1430 AD the widow of a merchant in York left the magistrate John Carleton her towel and ivory comb, a second ivory comb to his son, and to Robert Smeton a comb made from wood.[111] Finally, in 1434 AD Margaret Asshcombe of London left Aneys Copursmyth an ivory comb.[112] The comb in this will is unusually placed right at the end of the document, even after the date and the executors had been announced, which is different for other wills from the same source, in that decade.[113] It is not clear why this is. The rest of the will focuses on money which she donates mainly to the church, and a few garments handed down to the women she knows, as well as a gold ring to her cousin's wife.[114] The ivory comb added right at the end might have been an afterthought, a precious possession she had forgotten and did not want sold.

There is no gender or age division clear among these wills – men give combs to men and women, and women likewise give combs to both men and women in return. Both Dalton and the York widow left combs in association with other grooming or cleansing objects, whereas the comb left to Marjorie de Langton was included with other items one might assume would sit on a dressing table. The various objects they are passed down with are interesting, and clearly show that combs continued to be linked with the practice of dressing or undressing, associated with removing or putting on one's rings, or shaving one's face. Margery de Crioll's comb stands out compared to the later three because it clearly was, to her, a relic, apparently the personal comb of Thomas Becket, and therefore a good deal

[110] 'Item domino Thomas de Garton j pelvem rotundam parvam, j pecten de ebore., j brusche, j speculum, j cathedram cum sege, unum coclear novum, quod habet in sua pocessione, j razur habens manubrium de ebore.' Raine and Clay, *Testamenta Eboracensia,* 184. Translation by author.
[111] 'Et magistro Johanni Carleton optimam mappam meam cum tuella et j pecten de ebore; et magistro Johanni f filio suo unum aliud pecten de ebore, et Roberto Smeton vj s. viij d. et j pecten de busshe.' Raine and Clay, *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 8. Translation by author.
[112] 'wretoñ the ij day of Novembre th[e] yere of Kyng Harri the .vjte aftur the conqueste xiijtht. to the wheche executoires, y bequethe eyther, x s' for heŕ labouŕ. alsoo y bequ[e]the to Aneys Copursmyt*ħ* a combe of yverie, & to Aneys hiŕ maydeñ, a russet kyrteł furred with lambe.' "Fifty earliest English wills in the Court of Probate, London: A. D. 1387-1439: with a priest's of 1454/copied and edited from the original registers in Somerset House by Frederick J. Furnivall." In the digital collection *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. University of Michigan Library Digital Collection. Accessed December 28, 2025. 96-7.
[113] "Fifty Earliest English Wills", 96-7.
[114] "Fifty Earliest English Wills,"96-7.

more valuable than a more normal ivory comb.[115] It is possible that the comb mentioned by her might have resembled the ivory comb now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which depicts scenes from Becket's life and death (Fig. 3.12). It is easier to understand why this comb was left in a will – it was considered a holy relic and not a comb that was used.

Passing down personal items was not common during the period, unless in relation to property or clothes.[116] Only three out of twelve wills from the fifteenth century from the Court of the Deanery of Wisbeach (Ely, Cambridgeshire), were concerned with clothing or personal jewellery.[117] For the very wealthy also, a comb of ivory might not be the luxury object we perceive it as today, and therefore not worth including among the numerous other goods.[118] As a general rule, combs were not included in the wills of the aristocracy. Edmund, the Earl of March for instance left Walsyngham Priory an extensive list of fine fabrics, but no combs.[119] Such a man was highly likely to have owned precious combs, btu ivory combs were not the preserve of the super-wealthy, as demonstrated by the schoolmaster of Ewelme and the cost of the household accounts to purchase three ivory combs. Ivory was also not included in the various sumptuary laws, perhaps underlining a relative indifference to the use of it for commoners.[120] On the other end of the economic spectrum, combs are rarely included among the belongings of the very poor. *The material culture of English rural households* by Ben Jervis, Chris Briggs and others, synthesises three types of data – archaeological, lists of seized goods by the Escheator in the fourteenth and fifteenth

[115] Bennett, ed., *Registers of Bishop Henry Burghersh*, 149.
[116] Cordelia Beattie, "Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England," *Law and History Review* 37, no. 1 (2019): 43.
[117]Beattie, "Married Women," 46.
[118] Combs are not mentioned in John Nichols' work on the Wills of the Royal Family and nobility, perhaps suggesting that they were not considered in the same vein as jewels, money or gold. John Nichols, *A Collection of All the Wills, Now Known to Be Extant, of the Kings and Queens of England, Princes and Princesses of Wales, and Every Branch of the Blood Royal: From the Reign of William the Conqueror, to That of Henry the Seventh Exclusive* (Kraus Reprint, 1969).
[119] The priory received; 'une chapelle blanche, cest assavoir, deuz curtynes, trois aubes, trois amytes, deux estoles, trois fanons, un chesible, deux tonicles, trois chapes, deux fronteles, un towaill ove un frountell, un longe towaill pur l'autier, un ca spur un corpora ove le corporas accordant a la chapele, toute d'une feute.' Nichols, *A Collection of All the Wills*, 107. Translation by author.
[120] Paul J. Lane, "Introduction: Archaeological Ivories in a Global Perspective," *World Archaeology* 47, no. 3 (2015): 326.

centuries, and lists generated by the coroner for the sixteenth century. The work is thorough, but only lists a handful of sites were combs were found: Wharram Percy (Yorkshire), Islington (London), Exmouth (Devon), Thetford (Norfolk) and West Cotton (North Northamptonshire).[121] These lists cover some of the poorest people in medieval society, yet still, combs remain scarce.

It is difficult to understand why so few combs were included. The ones that do appear in wills are, with one exception, made from ivory. This material was luxurious but it was not out of reach for the middle class. However, even for the upper classes, ivory combs are not common items found in wills. We know from the previous section that combs were used by many people, and continued to be emblematic of romantic relationships as well as order and control. It might have been because these combs were so personal that they had to be disposed of, a later-medieval mirroring of the ways cremated combs were destroyed a thousand years before. The combs that were handed down might not have been used at all, which is certainly possible when considering the comb that was considered a relic of Thomas Becket. If this is the case, then what is unusual is not that few combs were handed down, but that any were.

[121] Ben Jervis, *The Material Culture of English Rural Households c. 1250–1600* (Cardiff University Press, 2023), 245.

Worship

The previous chapters have established that combs could be both ordinary and special, capable of being used in multiple contexts. By the later medieval period, the predominant secular ritualized context combs were used in was related to betrothal and marriage, built from associations between unbound hair and sexuality. At the same time, the use of the term liturgical comb as a descriptor for ornately carved ivory combs found in religious contexts, becomes more accurate. The combs that will be studied in this section are more uniform than any examples presented in the thesis thus far. The selection has come from Swodoba, whose 1963 thesis was the first study of what he considered explicitly liturgical combs, which were generally large ivory combs either found in religious contexts such as church treasuries, or with religious decoration on their central panels.[122] This section will deal with the ones made or found in England.

The introductory chapter outlined briefly the historiography of a liturgical comb, and so this introduction will quickly reiterate the main findings. There is no clear definition of what a liturgical comb was during the medieval period. Medieval writers never used the word '*liturgica*' or '*liturgicus*', and in church documents the word 'liturgy' does not often appear before the twentieth century.[123] The concept of a liturgical comb was introduced in the late nineteenth century as a way to describe ornate ivory combs found in churches or decorated with Biblical scenes, but the evidence for what a liturgical comb actually was is less clear.[124] While the modern desire to classify this group of objects as 'liturgical' is reflective of an eagerness to place these objects within a context we understand, it has led to

[122] Swoboda, "Die liturgischen Kämme," 36-41.
[123] Alice L. Harting-Correa, *Walahfrid Strabo's Libellus De Exordiis et Incrementis Quarunduam in Observationibus Ecclesiasticis Rerum: A Translation and Liturgical Commentary,* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York, 1996), 3.
[124] Even when using the term at the end of the nineteenth century there was some hesitation as to the utility of it – Swedish historian and archaeologist Hans Hildebrand in his works on the cultural history of the Swedes, included a small paragraph on liturgical combs. After describing them he admitted that 'no liturgical comb is preserved in Sweden. Nor have I found any such mention in Swedish documents.' Hans Hildebrand, *Svreiges Medeltid: Kulturhistorisk Skildring,* (Stockholm: 1879), 667. Translation author's own.

a mistranslation of their meanings.[125] Aside from being anachronistic, the term 'liturgical comb' implies a cohesive corpus of objects that are static in their meanings and uniform in their use.

However, as evidenced in the discussion in the previous chapter of the references to combs in liturgical manuscripts, they sometimes were considered liturgical objects even if they were not expressly described as such. From the twelfth century onwards, we see two things happening in parallel – the increasing numbers of references to combs in ecclesiastical sources, and a more uniform approach and unification between secular and religious combs in terms of style and material. These later medieval ivory combs were designated as special through their material qualities, but also through their placement in church treasuries, becoming part of an increasingly rich visual landscape, transforming themselves from personal objects to liturgical tools.

Again, the number of ivory or liturgical combs found in England is much lower than that on the continent, and most references to these survive only in written texts. Sacramentaries, treasuries, and discussions of the liturgy provide the bulk of the evidence in this section. The development of the ivory liturgical comb on the continent has much more evidence, although many of those combs strongly resemble the betrothal ivory combs in form, and sometimes decoration, with biblical scenes being craved into the central panels. Nevertheless, because of the focus on the liturgical comb in England, many of these sources will not be examined in depth. Instead, the English examples will be studied.

The physical evidence

There are four ivory combs for this period that have been identified as having been made in England. These date from the twelfth and early-thirteenth century and have ecclesiastical connections.

[125] Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria*, 22:2, (2010): 101.

Judging by the decoration used in the central panels, these examples suggest that medieval liturgical combs, perhaps like the early medieval cremation combs, could also have a commemorative or mnemonic role. A large ivory comb c. 1100 AD (Fig. 3.9), found in a Welsh church,[126] depicts a Norman knight vanquishing his foe, piercing the enemy's body while animalistic figures look on and curling leaves encircle them.[127] Despite the comb's fragmentary nature, it is a majestic size – 220mm x 130mm. The original would have been at least an extra third in length, as the fragment reveals three sections divided by two diving lines. It has a Latin inscription which has not been completely deciphered, '[...]VD.VVLT.D[...]DEVS.IHC.XPS', which suggests religious use or association.[128] While the inscription of the comb has not been deciphered, there are several things it might reference. It is possible, given the comb's early twelfth-century date, that it might be referring to the crusades. The '*vult deus*' in the inscription might be a reworking of '*deus vult*,' or 'god wills it', a refrain that was recorded in one source from Clemence II's crusading speech where he instructed people to invade Jerusalem, as it was the will of God.[129] Alternatively, the passage could be a reference to a part of Paul's letters, which often expound on God's will. The inscription fits the space perfectly, and the border decoration

[126] Described in the 1854 meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute on 3 March as 'unusually large,' and owned by a Mr Boöcke, there is no further information on where it was first found. Mr. Westwood, "Antiquities and Works of Art Exhibited," *The Archaeological Journal: 11. 1854* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1854), 179.
[127] George Zarnecki, Janet Holt and Tristram Holland, *English Romanesque Art 1066-1200,* Arts Council of Great Britain (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984), 215.
[128] T. Richard Blurton ed., *The Enduring Image: Treasures from the British Museum* (The British Council, 1997), 146.
[129] Edward Peters, *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 28. With thanks to Clare Whitton for her ideas surrounding 'deus vult'.

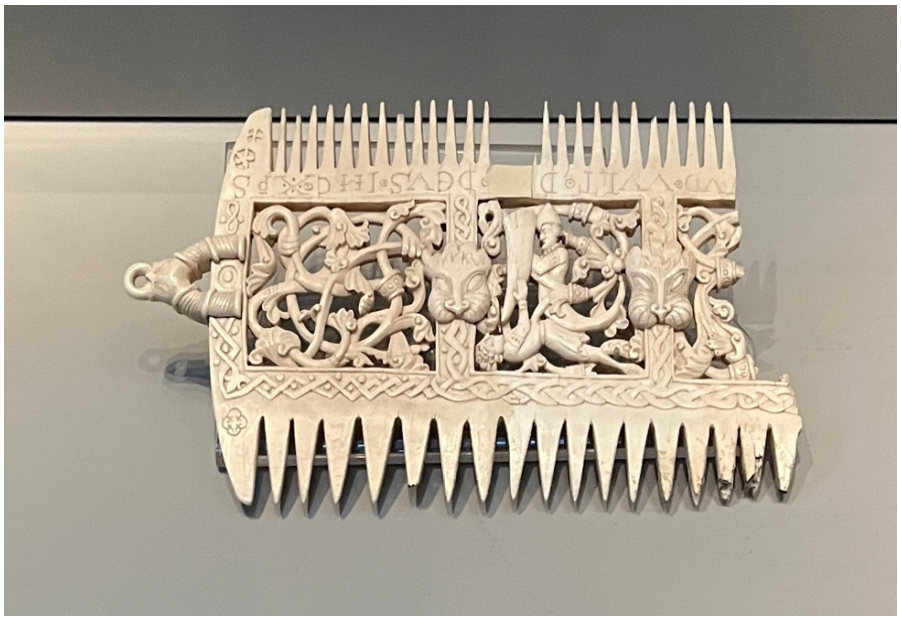

Fig. 3.9: Ivory comb found in Wales, c. 1100. 220 x 130mm. London, The British Museum, 1856,0623.29.

on the wide-tooth side shows that this space was deliberately left in order to include it, suggesting it was made at the time of the comb's construction and not added at a later date. This comb also has one of the larger and more deliberate suspension loops. It has been carefully designed to match the rest of the object – the lion's head is like those guarding the dividing panel lines, and the delicate incising on the rest of the loop compliments the curving vegetation, which suggests it was deliberately carved in order to be displayed, a key feature and an important part of its function. When bearing in mind the account of the Welsh, which says that they wore their combs on display, it might however be that this comb was carved deliberately in a way that mirrored how other Welsh combs were worn.[130] Nevertheless, it was clearly meant to be seen, potentially even from a distance. An item of this size would have been visible within a church, whether it was hung on the wall or held above the head of a person. The ivory would have shone in dim light, the comb smooth to the touch, creating a sensory experience for both the person wielding it and those watching

[130] Hayden, *Eulogium*, 135. Examples at the National Museum, Cardiff, (Amgueddfa Cymru), also show everyday combs with perforated suspension holes. While the form is not similar, it still gives credit to the later account. See 62.203/F.19, or 62.203/F.20.

it. The war-like decoration combined with the religious inscription, the overlarge size and the suspension loop all suggest that this was a comb intended to commemorate a divine victory, and frequently remind those who viewed it of their success. This, then, is a comb that both commemorates a victory but also is reminiscent of older combs found on the continent, like the Carolingian examples with their, smaller, suspension loops (see Chapter 2). It is unclear whether or not this comb was made with that example in mind, and very likely it was not, nonetheless, it is worth recognising that having an overlarge ivory comb on display within a church was a consistent use of the object across different centuries and different countries.



Fig. 3.10: The Lloyd-Baker comb, c. 1130. 111 x 90 x 15mm. London, V&A Museum, A27-1977.

Likely made at a similar time, though in a very different style, are two surviving ivory combs originally produced in St. Albans. The 'Lloyd-Baker' comb (Fig. 3.10) is so named because it was found in Lloyd-Baker's house in Gloucestershire, and the Verdun comb (Fig. 3.11 - redacted) is named as it was found in Verdun. While we have little knowledge of who commissioned the Lloyd-Baker comb, the comb at Verdun has a slightly clearer attribution. Cathedral inventories from 1745 and 1773 AD state that the comb was a gift from Emperor

Henry II (1002-1024 AD) to Richard, Abbot of Saint-Vennes. However, considering the style of the comb, it is much more likely that the owner or donor of the comb was Henry,

Fig. 3.11: Verdun comb, c. 1120. 120 x 850 x 11mm. Verdun, Musée de la Princerie, 85.6.25. The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of awaiting confirmation of copyright. The Image was sourced from the Musée de la Princerie.

archdeacon of Winchester, who became the Bishop of Verdun in 1117 AD.[131] It is not clear whether the comb was Henry's before he came to Verdun, or if he commissioned the comb after he had become archdeacon. The gifting of the comb to the cathedral at Verdun is another example of individuals who owned combs passing them into the church, first referenced in bishop Sigeward's will, with later evidence for this practice taking place at other English cathedrals such as St. Paul's.[132] It also might explain why the majority of these ivory combs are found in ecclesiastical contexts and not in wills from this time, an argument which will be more fully explored in the section on treasuries and ownership.

[131] Katherine Roberta Bateman, "St Albans: Its Ivory and Manuscript Workshops: A solution to the St. Albans/Bury St Edwards Dilemma," (Unpublished PhD Diss, University of Michigan,1976), 57.
[132] Edward Maunde Thompson, *Customary of the Benedictine monasteries of Saint Augustine, Canterbury, and Saint Peter, Westminster* (Boydell Press, 2010), 57 and 112.

Both combs depict similar scenes from the Bible, though the combination of them is rare and without a logical narrative sequence – scenes on one side of the Lloyd-Baker comb include the Nativity, the Flight into Egypt, the Crucifixion and the Entombment in the four corners, with the Washing of the Feet of the Disciples, the Last Supper (with only eight disciples) and the Betrayal. The collection of images is extremely dense, and though the comb is thick it is not large. At 90 x 110mm, it is smaller than the fragment of the ivory comb found in Wales. The other side depicts fewer scenes, though is no less cramped, with the Massacre of the Innocents, the Adoration of the Magi, the Dream of the Magi and the Annunciation to the Shepherds. The ends show a continuation of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, and the soldiers on guard at the Sepulchre.[133] The soldiers on the comb, however, do wear pointed helmets with brackets over the nose, a similarity to the headwear depicted on the Welsh comb.

It has been suggested that the scenes depicted on the two combs, due to the unusual nature of them and their dense clustering, might be inspired by particularly dramatic rituals, and the images chosen were commemorating biblical events or major feasts, like Christmas and Easter. These combs were closely tied to the church, and if we are to understand the medieval liturgy as a thing that was created compositionally,[134] the existence of the two ivory combs, with their unusual collection of scenes, might suggest that powerful individuals were involved in the design and production of objects as well as texts, and that these objects are also valuable as liturgical sources. The two combs suggest that commissions to the ivory workshop could be a collaboration between maker and patron, in a similar way to how surviving letters between priests and nuns shows how requests were sent in the production of liturgical vestments.[135] The scene depicting the angel with the Three Marys at the Tomb

[133] Bateman, "St Albans," 40.
[134] Carol Symes, "Liturgical text and performance practices," in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*, Sarah Hamilton and Helen Gittos, eds. (Routledge, 2016), 297.
[135] Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, 147-8.

on the Verdun comb, for example, seems to relate to the Easter *Visitatio Sepulchri.*[136] Geoffrey, the abbot of St Albans (1119-1146 AD) was very interested in these dramas (in the *Gestum Abbatum* lengthy descriptive passages of liturgical 'garbs' provided for the church are included), and so it is possible that his influence drove the selection of scenes depicted.[137]

Furthermore, the presence of the ivory workshop at St Albans demonstrates that these objects were not just being produced on the European Continent and traded into England, despite the larger corpus of evidence being found in Europe. While ivory was certainly a rare commodity in the British Isles until the thirteenth century,[138] there were craftsmen who were familiar enough with the raw material to produce highly detailed objects. The two combs, although made around the same time, because of their difference in figural depiction, have been suggested to have been made by at least two separate people. These individuals were also not specialists only in ivory. In fact, the production of such works was likely done by artists comfortable working across multiple different mediums. In Trier, in the first half of the eleventh century, an artisan known as Gregory the Master has a

[136] Bateman, "St Albans," 89.
[137] Bateman, "St Albans," 93.
[138] Arthur MacGregor, A. J Mainman, and Nicola S. H Rogers. *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life: Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn from Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York* (Council for British Archaeology, 1999), 2006.

manuscript and ivory panel showing the crucifixion attributed to him, and in the chronicles of Bury St Edmunds, Master Hugo, who was the head illuminator of the Bury Bible, also carved two small figures of Mary and John and a cross from ivory.[139]

A double-sided ivory comb now held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York was originally found in Canterbury, and is from the early thirteenth century (Fig. 3.12). This comb displays scenes from Becket's life: one with him being named archbishop of Canterbury, the other depicting his martyrdom. This comb may have been produced in order to commemorate the martyrdom, or as part of the burgeoning market for Becket souvenirs for wealthier pilgrims. It may have been similar to the comb referenced in the will



Fig. 3.12: Ivory comb depicting Thomas Becket's martyrdom, c. 1200-1210. 86 x 86 x 12 mm. New York, The MET Museum, 1988.279.

of Margery of Crioll, recorded roughly a hundred years after this comb was made.[140] It is

[139] Bateman, "St Albans," 98.
[140] Bennett, *Registers of Bishop Henry Burghersh*, 149.

perhaps unlikely that this is the same comb Margery owned, and so might indicate that a series of commemorative combs were produced, as a luxurious souvenir for well off and devout pilgrims to purchase after their journey to Canterbury. On the other end of the economic spectrum, pilgrim's badges with combs on them are found in relation to another saint, St. Blaise, who was tortured using a heated metal comb, which was then scraped over his skin before he was beheaded. Four examples listed on the Portable Antiquities Scheme reveal these badges could take many different forms, though they all show double-sided combs (NMS-82C754, NMS-1FC390, NARC-3E4393, LVPL-4E9DA4). They were also discovered across the country, from Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Norfolk, despite the shrine of Saint Blaise being located in Canterbury, Kent.

The examples of the combs from this period suggest an alternate function, beyond gift-giving or ritual cleansing. These combs were intended to commemorate, remembering acts of the past. Again, this relationship between comb and memory is something that was capitalised on in earlier, pre-Christian centuries. Chapter 1 has already argued for the presence of combs in cremation urns to be evidence of their mnemonic functions. There they were ties between the memory of the deceased and the funeral. In later centuries, these memories might more be in relation to Bible stories, or to events that had been significant, like war. Combs became more literally communicative devices, with the Welsh comb possibly being used to commemorate a battle, or the combs made in St. Albans serving to remind a viewer of a particular liturgical drama, or the pilgrim badges being the most obvious time a comb was employed to remember, and demonstrate the memory of, an event.

Anthony Cutler defines 'facture' as the way an object is made, and by implication, how that object feels in the hand.[141] It is the experience of touching, making, holding something. Combs are beautiful, smooth to touch, often larger than you would anticipate. Due to the collagen in the ivory, they have a natural sheen, which would have been

[141] Cutler, *Hand of the Master*, 3.

enhanced in the presence of candlelight.[142] So far, most of this analysis has focused on the experience of seeing or what using these objects might have been like, but it is also worth considering the role of the maker in this process. This meditation over the material itself may be reflected in the 'penitential philosophic mood' that was central to the monastic system of St Albans.[143] Community members were urged to resist base, animalistic instinct.[144] The concentration required to work as both a manuscript illuminator and ivory carver might have been an important way of navigating these emotions. The act of making the comb was just as important as the using of the item.

All the physical evidence from this period suggests that for these combs that may have been liturgical, they were considered so because of their ability to commemorate something. They were intended to evoke a memory or an event when being examined. While the later written sources explore combs in relation to vesting and cleansing, these physical examples show that there is more to the combs than just their use in liturgical rites. Their physical properties clearly intended them to be understood on multiple levels, at times being story-telling devices themselves, directly traced to production or ownership in Britain. It is by studying both written and physical sources that we are able to fully celebrate the multiple meanings capable of being communicated by these objects.

The remaining evidence for medieval liturgical combs is predominantly found among texts. These are divided roughly into three types of texts. Firstly, church treasuries sometimes include reference to combs in their possession. Secondly, manuscripts written to explain the liturgy and the role of the objects within it provide the most obvious evidence for a comb as a liturgical object. Finally, sacramentaries, pontificals, and rules for monastic living make a range of reference to combs, all of which will be examined so as to ascertain the role of combs in relation to the medieval liturgy.

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[142] Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory,* 16.
[143] Bateman, "St Albans," 99.
[144] In the Albani Psalter there is a personal gloss on the subject. Bateman, "St Albans," 99.

Vesting

The tenth-century sacramentary of Ratoldus is the first known written source that linked vesting and combs explicitly. This association continues to be made more overt, especially from the thirteenth century onwards. A brief survey of liturgical manuscripts mainly kept in Oxford has revealed that out of twenty-three medieval manuscripts containing rubrics, eight contain mentions of combs, and out of these eight, six are in direct relation to vesting before the mass, with the remaining two being related to general grooming times for monks.[145] The survey predominantly focuses on manuscripts from well-known centres such as Canterbury, York, and Westminster, and then a range of variations on the Use of Sarum and the Cistercian Rule. Several manuscripts kept at Cambridge were also assessed – these were restricted to the ones made digitally available. This selection was decided upon through a review of the texts edited by the Henry Bradshaw Society. Out of the Henry Bradshaw Society texts that existed in the library, the majority of those that were useful were described in some way as Customaries. Nigel Morgan's unpublished database of the English liturgical manuscripts was a great help in briefly surveying the manuscripts kept in Oxford. References to combs in use in liturgical contexts tend to be found in pontificals, books containing rights reserved for bishops. Combs tend to turn up in the same parts of the manuscripts – in the vesting instructions, usually for bishops or abbots, often in

[145] Customary of St Peter's Westminster, Customary of Saint Augustine, Canterbury, Ordinal and Customary of St Mary's Abbey, York, Liber Evesham (MS Barlow 7), Lanfranc's Monastic Constitutions, William Durand, The Stowe Missal, (George F Warner, ed, *The Stowe missal: MS D. II. 3 in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 1906).The Sacrementary of Ratoldus, Directorium Sacerdotum, (Clement Maydeston et. al, *Ordinale Sarum, sive, Directorium sacerdotum: (liber, quem Pica Sarum vulgovocitat clerus)* (Boydell, Henry Bradshaw Society, 2010); Rosslyn Missal, (Hugh Jackson Lawlor, *The Rosslyn Missal: An Irish Manuscript in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh* (Henry Bradshaw Society, Boydell, 2010);
The Red Book of Darley (CCCC MS 42); MS Bodl. 435, MS Bodl. 443, MS Jones 59, MS Laud. Misc. 362, MS Rawl. A. 371, MS Wood empt. 14, Trinity College MS 75, University College MS 78A, University College MS 78B, MS Rawl. C 425, (all Oxford, Bodleian Library), Cambridge College Christ Church (CCCC) MS 79, CCCC MS 146, CCCC MS 170. The references to general grooming are St. Mary's York and Lanfranc's instructions.

conjunction with washing hands or putting on the cap. Given this similarity, it perhaps is not a surprise that they are recorded so rarely.

The eight manuscripts which I have so far found to include references to combs span the tenth to the fifteenth century, showing a remarkable consistency in their placement within liturgical manuscripts. Five hundred years of vesting would have a lot of transformations: Glodt has outlined the shift in thinking about dressing that takes place, and Durand's contemporary writings show the development of the thought process behind the actions.[146] However, because the use of these objects is so consistent, I would argue that combs were used much more often than we previously might have assumed, as part of every vesting process in advance of the mass.

At Westminster and Canterbury, the comb is found in relation to the vesting and cleansing before the Mass, as in *Ratoldus*. The Westminster Consuetudinary, compiled under the direction of abbot Richard de Ware (1259-1283 AD) for the monks at St Peter's, says that the Abbot must comb himself before an important mass – *pectinare se debet in vestiario* – and that this process takes place in the vestry itself.[147] This manuscript, (MS Otho C. xi.) is very similar to MS Faustina C. xii., for the monks at St Augustine's, Canterbury, and the two have been suggested to share a common source.[148] Sir Edward Thompson suggests it was the Canterbury customary that came after Westminster at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and that the Westminster manuscript was actually an original document – differences between the two include Westminster-specific practices like colours of

[146] Durand, *Rationale IV: On the Mass*.

[147] 'Abbas autem, sive prior, quocienscumque missam capitalem vel magnam missam in convent est celebraturus, pectinare se debet in vestiario, ante ipsam missam, prius-quam manus abluat, revestiario, et non famulo, eidem ministrante.' Edward Maunde Thompson, *Customary of the Benedictine monasteries of Saint Augustine, Canterbury, and Saint Peter, Westminster*, (Henry Bradshaw Society, Boydell Press, 2010), 57. Translation by author.

[148] Thompson, *Customary of Canterbury and Westminster,* viii.

vestments used and the duties of cellarers at Westminster, which differ from the duties undertaken at Canterbury.[149]

The two sections which involve the comb however are the same in both manuscripts, although there is some minor differentiation in the wording.

> Westminster:
> Abbas autem, sive prior, quocienscumque missam capitalem vel magnam missam in convent est celebraturus, pectinare se debet in vestiario, ante ipsam missam, priusquam manus abluat, revestiario, et non famulo, eidem ministrante.
>
> Canterbury:
> Abbas autem, sive prior, quocienscumque missam capitalem vel magnam missam in convent est celebraturus, pectinare se debet in vestiario, ante ipsam missam **tamen prius manus abluat, revestiario, et non famulo, eidem ministrante et pectinante.**

Both extracts come from the same section: *De sacrista et suis sociis, atque de his quæ ad eorum spectant official (officium* in the Westminster MS),[150] though this section is found in different places in the two manuscripts.[151] The Westminster manuscript places the chapter on the sacristan's offices earlier than the Canterbury manuscript, and it follows a series of other instructions for those also part of the monastery – instructions for the abbot, the prior, the sub-prior, the third and fourth prior and the cantor before leading to the sacristan.[152] The Canterbury manuscript includes a brief history of the reforms of abbot Nicholas, as well as information for novices and other offices from those involved in running the monastery before including the same explanation of duties.[153]

In both places the abbot combs himself, and then returns to the vestry. At Canterbury he combs himself once more, at Westminster it is not mentioned. The difference in the Canterbury manuscript seems to stress the repeated action of hair combing, but the original order of combing and vesting remains the same. However, the instruction to comb

[149] Thompson, *Customary of Canterbury and Westminster,* xi.
[150] 'Of the sacristan and his associates, and of what concerns their officials/duties'. Thompson, 57 and 112. Translation by author.
[151] Thompson, *Customary of Canterbury and Westminster,* 57 for Westminster, 112 for Canterbury.
[152] *Tabula capululorum*, Thompson, *Customary of Canterbury and Westminster*, 57.
[153] *Tabula*. Thompson, *Customary of Canterbury and Westminster,* 112.

for both is in relation to a '*missam capitalem vel magnum missam*' – a mass that is important, not part of their everyday occurrences. Perhaps important masses require more careful instructions, which is why the comb use is more explicit here. Or, perhaps, important masses were opportunities to use combs that were also extraordinary, and one was able to comb one's hair with an item from the treasury, compared to a personal comb that might have been used for more ordinary masses.

Further demonstration of the consistent association between vesting and combs is found in the Book of Evesham, another thirteenth-century manuscript which was likely made for abbot John de Brokehampton (1282-1316 AD) and surviving in MS Barlow 7.[154] It is a large, heavy book, but the text is easy to read, and the margins relatively free from marginalia, or general additions to the text. Musical notation is scattered throughout, and it uses black, blue and red ink. It seems likely that the first two sections of the book were reproductions of the work of a former abbot.[155] The book itself contains no episcopal offices, and was likely made for the use of the abbot, a handbook of sorts, where previous traditions have been handed down and collated by de Brokehampton.[156] It is made up into three sections. The first contains some directions (which are also found in Harley MS 3763, a twelfth century manuscript), where the duties of the abbot are set forth.[157] The further two sections cover the order of the special ceremonial on certain days, and benedictions for use before the lessons on All Saint's Day, and then orders for the Visitation and Anointing of the Sick, and for the Burial of the Dead.[158]

[154] It is 'pretty certain' that a book involving different benedictions of vestments would be given to the abbot when he took on the office at Evesham. Henry Wilson, ed., *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum secundum usum Eveshamensis monasterii; nunc primum typis mandatum curante Henrico Austin Wilson* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 1893), xi. See also Richard Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England: a history,* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219-20.
[155] Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum*, xi.
[156] Wilson, *icium ecclesiasticum abbatum,* viii.
[157] Wilson*, icium ecclesiasticum abbatum,* xiv.
[158] Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum*, xi.

This manuscript contains several mentions of combs, all of which are found in the first section. As mentioned, H. A. Wilson has posited that the makeup of the manuscript suggests an earlier existence and was later copied, which is further evidence that the ritual combing traditions were in circulation earlier than the evidence indicates, only being *recorded* sporadically, but not being used sporadically.

The first reference to a comb is found immediately on the second folio, which references a fairly quotidian vesting process. Should the abbot wish to sing in the evenings, a garment and cap are placed in the vestiary for him, along with water in silver basins, the manitergeum and the comb and mitre. The abbot, once he has combed himself and washed his hands then clothes himself in the alb and cap, his mitre, and his ring and staff, with the chaplains 'humbly' helping him with the process.[159]

The next mention mirrors these instructions, being part of *De matutinis.* However, the instructions are not exactly the same. This time the maniter is placed on the shoulders as the hair is combed. There is a clearer sense of the ritual process in this section; the chaplain is said to be standing at the back of the choir holding a lantern, processing towards the vestiary before the abbot, who presumably follows. The mass again is indicated to be sung, and after the abbot has washed his hands and put on his cap, taken up his staff, he then proceeds with overseeing the evening.[160] The inclusion of the lantern, which was not included in the vesting process for the evening (when it likely was getting dark) also might indicate that the comb was another item that was included most of the time and did not require recording in every single instance. Compared to the special masses in the earlier

[159] 'De preparation Abbatis ad vesperas. Dum Abbas vesperas voluerit cantare: ponatur in vestiario vestimentum et capa ad opus eius. Aqua etiam in bacinis argenteis. Et manitergium. Pecten et mitra. Cerotece et baculus. Abba vero pectinato capite et lotis manibus in vestiario: revestiat se alba. Capa. Mitra. Cirotecis. Anulo et baculo. Capellanis sibi in omnibus humiliter ministrantibus.' Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum,* 1. Translation by author.
[160] 'Te deum: presto sit Capellanus eius retro chorum cum lanterna accensa qui ipsum precedat in vestiario. Et posito manitergio contra humeros abbatis pectinetur. Et lavet manus suas capellanis ministrantibus. Postea induatur quasi cantatarus missam exceptis scadaliis. Et accepto baculo procesdat ministris preeuntibus.' Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum*, 7. Translation by author.

examples, these everyday applications show that hair combing was a regular part of the vesting process, and something to be undertaken as part of the routine. But even when there was variation in the order, or different parts of the ritual were recorded, the comb was still used as part of that same circumstance, with the same associations: preparation and cleanliness.

The Book of Evesham contains one further example where a comb is included, in preparation for *De sollempni processione*, when the church is exorcised, which comes after *De matutinis* in the manuscript. The two are linked in the text – the instructions for the combing section in *De matutinis* begin 'Notandum quod cum abbas lecturus sit evangelium si in vi festis et in processione sollempni.'[161] The abbot combs and washes his hands first here, before then administering the rest of the vestments. He is the one who must be cleansed in advance of processing throughout the church and cemetery, cleansing himself before they cleanse the physical landscape they inhabit.[162]

It is at the end of the thirteenth century when the most explicit source for combs and their role relating to the liturgy is recorded. William Durand's thirteenth-century treatise, *Rationale divinorum officiorum (*1291-1296 AD), offers an extensive explanation comprising eight volumes about the sacred rites, places and times of the Western Christian liturgy.[163]

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[161] 'Si Abbas in aliquo desto caparum ad horam ante missam maiorem uel ad processionem presens esse voluerit: premunitus a precentore ingrediatur vestiarium cum capellanis suis. Primo pectinetur. Postea lotus manibus: induatur alba stola capa. Mitra. Cirotecis et anulo. Capellanis semper ministrantibus.' Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum*, 7. Translation by author.

[162] Wilson, *Officium ecclesiasticum abbatum*, 13. Again, while this is the only example of a comb being used in relation to an exorcism I have found, this would likely not be the only time combs were used in the vesting process in advance of exorcisms. Purification rites are especially emphasised before such rituals, though this appears mainly to be achieved through ritual fasting rather than washing. However, protective clothing also becomes increasingly important across the later medieval period when engaging with demons, and the alb and stole eventually become presented as a sort of literal armour against the devil. Florence Chave-Mahir, "Medieval exorcism: liturgical and hagiographical sources," in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy,* eds. Sarah Hamilton and Helen Gittos (Routledge 2016), 166-167. Interestingly, one account from a twelfth century exorcism ritual, found in the Sacramentary of Gellone, and surviving in MS Vatican, BAV, Vat. lat. 7701, lists the body parts from which the demon should be cast out from, and uses the Latin *pectine* to refer to the pubic bone: 'de omni carne, de toto sanguine, de omni humore illius,de cunctis quinque sensibus eius, de genitalibus locis, de semine, de inguinibus, depectine, de uessica, de foramine aluei, de urina, de sudore, de omni egestione ipsius expelleris…' Florence Chave-Mahir, *L'exorcisme des possédés dans l'Eglise d'Occident (Xe-XIVe siècle)*, (Brepols Publishers, 2011), 363.

[163] Stephen Mark Homes, "Reading the Church: William Durandus and a New Approach to the History of Ecclesiology," *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011): 36. William Durand, *William Durand: On the clergy and their vestments: A new*

Durand's aim was to 'uncover the *rationes et veritas* (the inner meaning) of the various parts of the liturgy by means of spiritual exegesis,' part of a programme of clergy education.[164] For Durand, the liturgy was a complex set of symbols to be interpreted in the same way as scripture.[165]

The chapter on the 'grooming of the hair and the washing of the hands' takes place at the beginning of book four, the book dedicated to the mass and each action relating to it.[166] The vesting process is fully explained in book three, where the comb is not mentioned, but the rest of the items involved in dressing the priest are.[167] The separation of the comb and the vestments is interesting and seems to suggest that the comb is not considered an item of clothing or dress accessory, but rather something else.

Durand's writings on the preparation for the mass derive from three main sources: Innocent III's *De missarum mysteriis* (c. 1198 AD), Sicard of Cremona (c. 1150-1215 AD) especially his *Mitrale,* and William of Auxerre (c. 1150-1231 AD).[168] The author that Durand relies most heavily upon is Innocent III, and the reliance on these earlier authors shows that Durand was, like others, tending to record earlier beliefs and practices. The differences between the first and second redaction of the text (the first likely circulating around 1291-2 AD, and the final form c. 1294-96 AD) for the section on hair grooming mainly revolve around the organisation of the writing, but the key points are repeated in both – that the comb was used to organise the thoughts as it organised the hair, that washing of the hands was related closely enough as a gesture to share a chapter with, and that these gestures were

translation of books 2-3 of the Rationale divinorum officiorum, trans. and introduction, Timothy Thibodeau (University of Scranton Press, 2010), 13.
[164] Homes, "Reading the Church," 38.
[165] Homes, "Reading the Church," 39.
[166] Durand, *Rationale IV: On the Mass.*
[167] Book three contains: 'On the amice -- On the alb -- On the girdle or belt -- On the stole -- On the maniple -- On the chasuble or planeta -- On the stockings and sandals -- On the girdle and orale -- On the tunic -- On the dalmatic -- On the gloves -- On the miter -- On the ring -- On the pastoral staff -- On the sudarium -- On the pallium -- On the colors that the church uses for ecclesiastical vestments -- On the vestments of the law or the Old Testament' Durand, *On the clergy and their vestments.*
[168] Durand, *Rationale IV: On the Mass,* 26-28.

done to prepare the priest mentally.[169] However, references to hair combing are not found in Durand's other sources, suggesting that either Durand added the information on the spiritual meaning of combs in relation to the mass himself, or, that his source has not been identified.

According to Durand, the comb's use to smooth and arrange the hair had a spiritual significance, much greater than any pedestrian practicalities such as ensuring the hair was free from knots:

> the strands of hair signify superfluous thoughts and anxiety over worldly things; the head signifies the mind and one's intention, which rules all the acts of the soul just as the head stands above all the other members of the body. It is therefore appropriate that the hair is flattened, arranged and separated at the roots, to denote, especially at that particular moment, that the priest must compose himself and banish all vain thoughts, according to what the Prophet says: Put away your evil thoughts (Isa 1:16); and that his mind, through a previous process of discernment, ought to separate itself, quiet itself, and purge itself from worldly cares, and it ought to adorn itself with the virtues. The comb, on account of its arrangement and division into teeth, signifies the discernment through which the intentions of the soul are adorned, just as the hairs of the head are adorned with the comb.[170]

The act of combing, restricting, or bringing order to the hair can reflect the act of taming, or controlling the disorder that threatens. As Douglas argues, 'ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.'[171] Here, Durand implies that the combing of the hair was part of a meditative experience, literally ordering the mind as you order your hair, effectively taming 'worldly cares'. It acted as a way to impose these systems, organise the thoughts, and control the 'inherently untidy experience.' The comb was part of a series of

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[169] For a comparison between the first and second edition of the text, see Durand, *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, 259-262.

[170]Text taken from the second manuscript edition. 'nam per capillos superflue cogitations et cura terrene sollicitudinis, per caput mens et intentio, que cunctis anime actibus sicut caput ceteris membris supereminet, significantur. Congrue igitur pectine capilli complanantur et ordinantur et euulsi separantur, ad notandum quod tunc specialiter mores componere et superfluas cogitations a se repellere debet, iuxta illud propheticum: *Auferte malum cogitationum uestrarum,* atque mens ipsius preuia discretion separari, quietari et purgari a terrenis sollicitudinibus, et uirtutibus ornari debet. Pecten enim, propter ordinatam in incisionibus diuisionem, discretionem significat qua intentio anime adornatur, sicut apilli capitis pectine adornantur.' Durand, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum,* 260. Durand, *On the Mass,* trans. Thibodeau, 78.,

[171] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 3.

behaviours that were considered a ritual transition moment, the words and gestures used at this time offer several means of understanding and entering into another reality, that is public and intimate with the sacred.

A final, particularly fine reference to combs and vesting is found in one of three Pontificals kept at Corpus Christi College Cambridge (CCCC MS 79). Described as 'the most elaborate decorated Pontifical to survive from medieval England,' the text is an English version of the church services particular to bishops, rather than the Durand version that was widely used throughout Europe at the time.[172] There is one reference to the comb found on f. 60r/v (CCCC MS 79), as part of the vesting process.

The reference to the comb itself is found at the beginning of the consecration for holy virgins, where the bishops is given instructions to dress and prepare.[173] The items included are similar to previous vesting sections, though with the addition of the linens that would have been used to wipe the hands of the virgins, or possibly cover their heads. The combs themselves are not mentioned strictly in relation to vesting, instead they are outlined clearly in relation to the linen head covers, and the wiping/cleaning of hands.[174] Interestingly, after the combing is mentioned it is followed by further wiping of the hands and head: '*Tolalia et pecten: ad pectinendum. Mica panis, ad tergendum, manus et caput...*'[175]

References to 'mica panis' in liturgical instances has been found in a few places – the first subsequent one coming from a seventeenth century book written by the puritan William Prynne. Here, the bread crumbs are rubbed into the hands of a glove-less French King before they are washed and have nothing to do with combing, or the act of consecrating

[172] "Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 079: Pontifical," Parker Library on the Web, accessed 23 June 2023. https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/tx112pf2826.
[173] 'calige, sandalia, amictus, alba, Cingulum, stola, manipulum, tunicella, dalmatica, planeta et plumale: albi coloris, cuothece, anulus pontificalis, et alius anulus paruus. Mitra. Aurifurisiliata. Baculus pastoralis. Duo baculia. Tolalia y minibus tergedis. Tolalia ad ponendum coram consecratorem. Tolalia et pecten: ad pectinendum. Mica panis, ad tergendum, manus et caput…' f. 60.V, CCCC MS79. MS 079: Pontifical." Translation by author.
[174] Tolalia has been translated as 'linens' here, although there is no other evidence of it being used this way on the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (DMLBS). Translation by author.
[175] f. 60 v., CCCC MS79. "MS 079: Pontifical."

holy virgins: '*et mica panis vel cumsale friceut, deinde lavent sibi manus, quibus lotis et manibus etiam Archiepiscopi, benedicat Archiepiscopus Annulum sic dicens. Oremus*.'[176] In this source, the bread crumbs are only used if the King does not have gloves, and salt is an acceptable alternative, suggesting they had a cleansing function.[177] The second reference comes from a confirmation rite in the *Rituale Romanum Pauli V Pontificis Maximi,* from 1925, again where the priest wipes with bread crumbs, this time as part of the Confirmation rite.[178] The final example is found in a twentieth-century manual where the Pope wipes the hands with bread crumbs, again after confirmation.[179] Combs are not included in any of these later examples. While the inclusion of the breadcrumbs in this consecration ceremony from the fifteenth century might be unusual, the context in which they are found is also consistently related to cleansing. Along with the vesting process, this again shows how combs are tied to quite narrow instructions or instances where they emerge. However, the consistency in the placements within the sources indicates this sporadic inclusion was likely more because their use was so well-known and accepted, than a rarely used tool.

However, some new, specific instances that build on the relation between combs and vesting do continue to emerge. Combs in relation to the consecration of the bishop are recorded in the fifteenth century. According to the Sarum Pontifical, the consecration of the

[176]"The signal loyalty and devotion of God's true saints and pious Christians, especially in this our island towards their kings: (as also of some idolatrous pagans) Both before, and under the law and gospel; expressed by their private and publick prayers, supplications, intercessions, thanksgivings, well-wishes for the health, safety, long life, prosperity, temporal, spiritual, eternal felicity of the kings and emperours under whom they lived, whether pagan or Christian, bad or good, heterodox or orthodox, Papists or Protestants, persecutors or protectors of them: and likewise for their royal issue, posterity realms; and by their dutiful conscientious obedience and subjection to them; with the true reasons thereof from scripture and policy. Evidenced by presidents and testimonies in all ages, worthy the knowledg, imitation, and serious consideration of our present degenerated disloyal, antimonarchical generation. In two parts. By William Prynne Esq; late bencher, and reader of Lincolns-In." In the digital collection *Early English Books Online*. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed July 21, 2024. 210. https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A91279.0001.001.

[177] Prynne, "The signal loyalty," 210.

[178] 'Omnibus confirmatis, Sacerdos lergit cum mica panis, et levat pollicem et manus super pelvim…' *Rituale Romanum: Pauli V Pontificis Maximi* (Laudate Domini Liturgical Editions, 1925), 297. Translation by author.

[179] 'Omnibus confirmatis, Pontifex tergit cum mica panis, et lavat pollicem, et manus super pelvim.' Rt. Rev. Aurelius Stehle, *Manual of episcopal ceremonies; based on the Caeremoniale episcoporum, decrees of the Sacred Congregation of Rites and approved authors* (The Archabbey Press, 1925), 350. Translation by author.

bishop elect required 'Towels and comb for combing.'[180] The late-fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting depicting scenes from Saint Augustine of Hippo's life, the central of which being his consecration as bishop of Hippo Regius, reveals an attendant with a comb (standing figure) as part of the rite (Fig. 3.13). By 1623 AD, an ivory comb along with a ring with a blessed gem are to be given according to the Roman Rite.[181] This final instance is



Fig. 3.13: Close up of Scenes from the Life of Saint Augustine of Hippo c. 1490, Netherlands. New York, The Metropolitan Museum, 61.199.

possibly what has led later liturgical historians to explain that combs were used in the consecration of bishops, however it is only in the fifteenth century, right at the end of the medieval period, when this practice most explicitly emerges.

[180] 'Tolalia et pecten ad pectinandum,' Feasey, "The Use of the Comb," 314. Translation by author.
[181] *"Annulus cum gemma benedicenus, et Electo tradendus, pecten eburneus."* Anon, *Pontificale Romanum: Clementis VIII ac Urbani VIII jussu editum et a Benedicto XIV, recognitum et castigatum, juxta recèntioren editionem Romanam ac demum in commodiorem formam redactum* (Jouby, 1859),61.

Order and discipline

Later medieval lay use of combs has been suggested to be part of a desire to stratify and control appearance, which was of concern to all. This extends into the ecclesiastical contexts in a much more explicit way, and two sources from this period are extremely prescriptive regarding when combs ought to be used as part of daily life within communities.

Lanfranc's Monastic Institutions (c. 1070 AD), related when novices ought to keep their hair tidy: if children wake up before the abbot, they were roused quietly, then washed and combed their hair before heading to the schoolroom.[182] For the *Instruction of Novices* for Christ Church, Canterbury (1250-75 AD), heavily based on the *Institutions*,[183] they too were told to comb their hair and wash their hands when returning to the dormitory before Terce.[184] The Ordinal and Customary of St Mary's Abbey, in York, probably written during the reign of Abbot Thomas Pygot (1398-1405 AD), is exceptional for the detail which it contains.[185] The information regarding lunch, for example, takes place over ten folios.[186] Monks are told to brush their hair before lunch. Although a late source and unusual for its

[182] 'Magister tamen infantum si uiderit transire horam, qua sonitus a priore fieri solet, surgat, et quam quietius possit infantes excitet, uirga tantummodo tangens pannos, quibus cooperti sunt. Quo facto exeuntes de dormitorio lauent se, et pectant, et factis solitis orationibus in scolam suam redeant, et cum silentio sedeant donec abbas de lecto surgat.'
"If the master of the children see that the hour is passing at which the signal is wont to be given by the prior, he should rise and rouse the children as quietly as may be, simply touching with his rod their bedclothes. This done, they shall leave the dormitory, wash and comb their hair, and after the usual prayers return to their school, sitting in silence till the abbot rises." David Knowles, trans., and C. N. L. Brooke, eds., *Oxford Medieval Texts: The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc*, (Oxford Scholarly Editions, 2019), 111.
[183] Knowles and Brooke, *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc*, liii.
[184] "When day has dawned he should rise straightway when the signal is heard and take his night shoes and go to the church, and there say the *Miserere* at the desks until *Deus in adiutorium* is said. After Prime the seven penitential psalms are straightway said with the litany and prostration—that is, we prostrate ourselves after the seven psalms. After the litany and the collects that follow they go forthwith to the dormitory and then, taking their books, descend into the cloister, and there sit and study in their books, each in his appointed place, until the signal known as the 'shoe-signal' is heard. **Then, shod and carrying knife and comb,** he descends again to the cloister, and putting the books on the seat goes to the washing-place, and having washed his hands stands again by his book and combs his hair. Then, book in hand, he goes in order to church for Terce." Knowles and Brooke, *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc,* trans. Knowles, 213. Emphasis author's own.
[185] The manuscript contains information of the death of his predecessor, Dom Thomas (d. 1398). The Abbess of Stanbrook, J. B. L. Tolhurst eds., *The Ordinal and Customary of the Abbey of Saint Mary York (St. John's College Cambridge), MS. D. 27* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 1936), vii.
[186]Stanbrooke and Tolhurst, *Abbey of Saint Mary York,* 142-155, fols. 109r-118r.

detail, this is useful because it gives a sense of the structure of the day and how routines not just relating to keeping the hours or celebrating various religious holidays, might be formed. From Easter until the Exaltation of the Cross (usually 14 September), the before-lunch ritual (*prandio)* involves a period of reflection in the dormitory before hand-washing and hair combing.[187] They then process while singing for their meal – but for days when they are fasting during this period, the handwashing and hair combing still takes place. Instead of descending to eat, they read in peace until Vespers.[188]

In the mass for the dead, brothers are told to comb their hair at the end of the day and as they wash their hands, before sitting in silence and reflecting.[189] Specific hair-combing times are also brought up during the Christmas masses, when, again at the end of the day, brothers are to wash their hands and comb their hair, before going to the choir and singing the final prayer.[190] And at Easter, the hair combing was marked out as part of the general dressing and cleaning of the brothers.[191] Although instructions to comb hair do not turn up in all the major festivals, they clearly are marked out for a number. Given the calendar stretch that these all cover, it seems that hair combing was regimented throughout the year.

These examples seem to enhance what Durand described as a key function of the comb in vesting, which was a way to organise and rationalise the thoughts through the combing

[187] 'Pulsato signo post meridianam fratres cum omni festinatione surgent et induti, ad claustrum transeant, manus lavent et capita pectent.' Stanbrooke and Tolhurst, *Abbey of Saint Mary York,* 154. Translation by author.
[188] 'Per dies jejunii hora Nona ante prandium cantabitur, et post meridiem Paulo ante horam Vesperarum pulsato signo in dormitorio per priorem vel custodem ordinis, surgent fratres de sompno et ad claustrum festinantes et qui psalteria reddunt ea de dormitorio secum portantes, manus lavent capita pectent circa claustrum in processione non pergant, sed acceptis libris usque ad tincetetus Vesperarum ad sedes sua sedeant in pace.' Stanbrooke and Tolhurst, *Abbey of Saint Mary York.* Translation by author.
[189] 'Et lotis manibus, stantes in angulo juxta ostium refectorii capita sua pectent. Postea ad sedes suas in silencio sedeant donec audient signum secundum.' Stanbrooke and Tolhurst, *Abbey of Saint Mary York*. Translation by author.
[190] 'Completa Missa et divestitis omnibus, vadant fratres in dormitorium nocturnalia sua mutare….vel ab alio ordinis custode, in dormitorio, quod fieri solet in festis duodecim lectionum, ad lavatoria omnes vadant, lotisque manibus et pectis capitibus, transeant ad chorum orationem solitam facturi.' Tolhurst et al,, 186.
[191] 'Et postea, froccis impositis, ad lavatoria claustra, et lotis manibus pectisque capitibus, pausent in sedibus suis donec aliud signum in ecclesia pulsetur.' Stanbrooke and Tolhurst*, Abbey of Saint Mary York, 263.* Translation by author.

of hair. As order becomes more frequently discussed, so do most of the elements of the liturgy, and combs are no exception.

Treasuries and ownership

Who owned combs in ecclesiastical contexts is one question which sees the most change from earlier centuries. Before, what might have been considered a liturgical comb by later scholars was generally owned by an individual of specific status, for example Alcuin's comb has significance because of its relationship to the man. As different written sources, like cathedral treasuries, emerge, combs increasingly become clear to have been part of more general possessions owned by the Church from the thirteenth-century onwards, building on the eleventh-century reference in Sigeward's will. What this means for the ways combs were used in the liturgy however is less clear.

In 1222 AD, St. Paul's Cathedral had 'six or seven' ivory combs in its possession.[192] A later list from 1245 AD includes an increased number of the objects, and in greater detail. One comb is attributed to Saint Thomas Becket.[193] A further six are referenced, with three being described as 'thick and large,', the second group of three being 'thin and regular,' and there being 'four new combs.'[194] In total, there are eleven combs by 1245. An increase in four or five combs across twenty-three years could suggest that these combs may have been collected from various members of the cathedral, which were then passed into communal storage or possession. Other places also had large collections, for example according to the Annales of the Monastery of St Albans, compiled in the reign of Henry IV (1367-1413 AD), there were nine ivory combs.[195]

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[192] Maskell, *A Description of the Ivories*, 70.
[193] W Sparrow Simpson, "Two Inventories of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London, Dated Respectively 1245 and 1402; Now, for the First Time, Printed, with an Introduction," *Archaeologia: or Miscellaneous tracts relating to antiquity* 50, no. 2 (1887): 471.
[194] 'tres spissi et magni, tres tenues et usuales,' Simpson, "Two Inventories," 472. Translation by author.
[195] 'Item, habentur novem pectines eburnei.' Henry Thomas Riley, ed. *Annales Monasterii S. Albani a Johanne Amundesham, Monacho, ut videtur, Conscripti (A.D. 1421-1440). Quibus praefigitur Chronicon Rerum Gestarum in*

It was not just cathedrals who owned ivory combs, even smaller churches had more modest collections. In 1220 AD, the Church of Mere (Wiltshire), listed in the Register of St Osmund, had an ivory comb as part of the 'vestments and other ornaments of the church.'[196] In the same source in 1226 AD, the Church of Knook (Wiltshire) also had an ivory comb, listed among the ornaments, books and other vestments.[197] The Monastery of Melsa (Yorkshire) in its 1336 AD inventory lists an ivory comb in the sacristy, among the other ornaments kept *in camera infra dormitorium,*[198] separate from the vestments, which were stored *in triangulo in ecclesia,* or *in armorio in eccelsia.*[199] The 1297 AD account of Furneaux Pelham (Hertfordshire), a 'comparatively unimportant parish' according to the nineteenth-century historian John Edward Cussans, included among many other things 'An ivory comb sufficiently good.'[200]

The physical locations of the combs within the church might illuminate why they were considered important in liturgical contexts. At Westminster Abbey, combs are found in the third part of the inventory: the first part being about the clothes of the priest, the second, the processional objects, and the third about the ornaments of the altar, including combs alongside an extensive list of items:

> the ridells, costers, and other curtains, the chalices and corporas cases, the mass-books and other liturgical books and the text, the pax bredes, the basons, the cruets for the wine and water, the oil stocks, the pixes, pomes or balls for warming the hands, a fan for driving away flies from the chalice, super-altars, (that is, portable altar-stones) combs, towels, sudaria, (that is, silken veils for covering the elements as they were carried to the altar, or for wrapping up the paten during the canon) cushions, painted diptychs or triptychs, chairs of state with their coverings of

Monasterio S. Albani (A.D. 1422-1431), a Quodam Auctore Ignoto Compilatum. Volume II [Rolls Series], (TannerRitchie Pubishing, 2019), 329. Translation by author.

[196] W. H. Rich Jones, ed. *Vetus Registrum Sarisberiense alias dictum Registrum S. Osmundi Episcopi. The Register of S. Osmund. Volume I [Rolls Series]* (TannerRitchie Publishing, 2019), 291.

[197] Jones, *Registrum S. Osmundi Episcopi,* 296.

[198] Edward A. Bond, ed., *Chronica monasterii de Melsa a fundatione usque ad annum 1396, auctore Thoma de Burton, abbate. Accedit continuatio ad annum 1406, a monacho quodam ipsius domus. Volume 3 [1339-1417] [Rolls Series]* (TannerRitchie Publishing, 2019), lxxx

[199] Bond, *Chronica monasterii de Melsa,* lxxxi.

[200] John Edwin Cussans, *Inventory of Furniture and Ornaments Remaining in All the Parish Churches of Hertfordshire in the Last Year of the Reign of King Edward the Sixth; Transcribed from the Original Records* (J. Parker & co., 1873), 10.

> precious stuffs, the Lenten veil to hang up between the choir and presbytery during Lent, and Lenten coverings for images.[201]

Combs are found in a similar list-placement at Canterbury, where in the records of the vestry items from 1315-16 AD there are eight ivory combs noted.[202] This placement mirrors how combs are treated in Durand – while these are objects that are part of the vesting process, they are not the same as the vestments, and should not be considered a vestment. In a way that mirrors modern archaeological divisions, combs are not categorised as 'dress accessories', they are objects which enable dressing.

Despite these general references to ivory combs in treasury lists, when a comb's association with an individual is mentioned, the link between the object and person is what continues to make them special. The personal nature of the object continues to be an important aspect of its function. One of the combs at Westminster was a gift from Henry III and marked out especially in the treasury list for the fact it had belonged to both him, and was dipped in the blood of the archbishop of Canterbury, making it a particularly potent object:

> rex Henricus tertius dedit reliquias de cilicio, pellicio supellectili et aliis vestibus, cum uno pectine eburneo et sanguine archiepiscopi Cantuariensis; item plures crustas de capite sancti Christophori, item caput sancti Mauricii 10 martyri.[203]

An ivory comb is also listed on the following page as from Edward I, who gave one to the church along with a robe dipped in Edward the Confessor's blood.[204] In the 1432 AD Glasgow cathedral inventory, two combs are listed as part of a precious burse (a pouch or case, usually for a special purpose), belonging to St Kentigern and St Thomas of Canterbury.[205] These

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[201] J. Wickham Legg, "An Inventory of the Vestry in Westminster Abbey, Taken in 1388," *Archaeologia: or Miscellaneous tracts relating to antiquity* 52, no. 2 (1890): 201.
[202] J. Wickham Legg and William Henry Hope, *Inventories of Christchurch Canterbury; with historical and topographical introductions and illustrative documents* (A. Constable & Co., 1902), 74.
[203] Flete, *History of Westminster Abbey*, 71.
[204] 'item togellam intinctarn sanguine sancti Edmundi episcopi et confessoris, et cultellum cum quo evisceratus fuerat, una cum mitra, cerothecis, pectine eburneo, cum aliis reliquiis ejusdem.' Flete, *History of Westminster Abbey,* 72.
[205] John Dowden, "The Inventory of Ornaments, Jewels, Relicks, Vestments, Service-Books, Etc., Belonging to the Cathedral Church of Glasgow in 1432, Illustrated from Various Sources, and More Particularly from the Inventories of the Cathedral of Aberdeen," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 33 (1899): 299.

combs are listed with other relics, including four burses with saint's bones, and a silver cross containing part of the Cross.[206] The combs at Glasgow may not exist anymore, and without any physical evidence it is difficult to date them. However, the comb of St. Kentigern may well have been produced as part of Bishop Jocelin's (1175-1199 AD) attempts to recentre this local saint. Jocelin commissioned a new hagiography of the city's patron saint, thought to have lived in the seventh-century, at the end of the twelfth, possibly as part of a campaign to secure ecclesiastical independence from York.[207] This, if true, would date the comb to around the end of the twelfth century, but would also place Jocelin in line with another seventh-century saint with a comb – Cuthbert – whose own comb was first recorded in the twelfth century.[208] While combs as relics do not appear to be common (even for Saint Blaise who is most often depicted with a comb compared to other saints), they clearly were recognised well into the late medieval period.

It is interesting that despite their association with bishops, combs do not appear in bishop's wills very often, nor in their tombs. Christopher Woolgar's study of bishop's material possessions makes no references to combs being passed down between bishops.[209] However, we know in rare occasions that they were. Hubert Walter (d. 1205 AD), archbishop of Canterbury, is, after Sigeward, one of the only late medieval examples I have come across. He gives an ivory comb on his death to the Church of Halstow in Canterbury, along with large numbers of other ecclesiastic ornaments, such as vestments, candelabras, and books.[210] Bishops are not defined by their combs, and combs are not used as a visual shorthand even

[206] Dowden, "Cathedral Church of Glasgow," 298.
[207] At the beginning of the twelfth century York had claimed supremacy over the entire Scottish church. However, in 1175 the pope declared Glasgow his 'special daughter'. In 1192, he then declared that the entire Scottish church was his 'special daughter', meaning that it was answerable directly to Rome and no one else. Mairi Cowan, "A Contested Conception: Jocelin of Furness and the Local Traditions about St Kentigern in Twelfth-Century Glasgow," in *From Learning to Love: Schools, Law, and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Joseph W. Goering,* ed. Tristan Sharp (Pontifical institute of Medieval Studies, 2017), 571-577.
[208] Mynors, "Anonymous account of the translation of St. Cuthbert," 103.
[209] Christopher Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," in Martin Heale, *The Prelate in England and Europe, 1300-1560* (York Medieval Press, 2014), 173-90.
[210] Gervase, *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury Vol. II: The Minor Works, Comprising The Gesta Regum with its continuation, the Actus Pontificum and the Mappa Mundi,* ed. William Stubbs (TannerRitchie Publishing, 2019), 413-14.

as they were using them in their consecration ceremonies, and so this single example of Walter is difficult to interpret. Although it was not the only time combs were handed down in wills, nevertheless, it is still highly infrequent. It might be argued that as the St Paul's inventory shows, combs were continuously being given to the church. In the twenty-three years where the combs increased by four or five, there were only three bishops of London.[211] It could be that the majority of these combs were given by the bishops, but not all.

Ivory combs found in these treasuries were part of the general material possessions that made up the church, and modern ideas of ownership when considering them are not particularly useful in untangling their meaning. Many bishops' received goods from the cathedral church when taking up their possession, with the intention that these would be returned at the end of their episcopate.[212] Some of these were even remade – Bishop Mitford of Salisbury remade a crosier, before returning it in perpetuity.[213] Ivory combs found in cathedral treasuries also show evidence of being mended or enhanced – for instance the Carolingian comb depicting Samson fighting the lion shows how these combs could be repaired, though the silverwork on this comb is undated.[214] Alternatively, the combs might have been considered part of the furnishings of the bishop's chapel, which comprised the bishop's principle liturgical vestments and ecclesiastical ornaments.[215] It would have been understood that these objects, because of their sacerdotal functions, should not be 'exposed to sale' and kept in contexts where their liturgical use would continue.[216] The sacrist's roll of Lichfield Cathedral Church, written in 1345 AD, has three combs, one of which is unusable: '*Item (tria pectina eburnea) quorum unus ineptus*'.[217] *Ineptus* is usually translated as silly or

[211] Eustace of Fauconberg (1221-1228), Roger Niger (1228-1241), Fulk Basset (1241-1259).
[212] Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," 182.
[213] Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," 182.
[214] Ivory comb depicting Samson fighting the lion, c. 870, Metz. 195 x 104 x 8mm. Parise, Musee de Louvre, MR 358.
[215] Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," 183.
[216] Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," 183.
[217] William Salt Archaelogical Society, ed. *Collections for a History of Staffordshire, Volume VI - Part II* (TannerRitchie Publishing, 2017), 204. Translation by author.

foolish, though in this instance I consider it more likely to mean useless. Useless combs were not just kept in smaller Cathedrals, and in the 1388 AD Inventory of the Vestry in Westminster Abbey there are two combs, one of which is whole, and the other which is broken: *De Pectinibus. Capitulum xvij. Pectines autem eburnei sunt duo quorum primus est integer et planus. Secundus scul[p]tus sed in medio confractus. [. . t in incremento de novo.]*[218] These sources suggest two things about these ivory, possibly liturgical combs. Firstly, it was intended that many of them, when included in the church treasuries, continued to be used as combs, and it is possible that what had been considered an inalienable possession, when brought into the collective ownership of the church, was perfectly able to be used by multiple people. Secondly, it also suggests that these combs, even when their primary function could not be fulfilled, were still kept.

This suggests a fundamental shift in the ways combs were considered as ritual objects. The personal connections that combs had previously fostered and enhanced were now only one aspect of their use, and certainly not a requirement for their inclusion in sacred spaces. The large, decorative ivory combs likely used by Charles the Bald or found in the Stavelot altar are evidence that combs had already been used for symbolic or decorative purposes, but the presence of otherwise little described, likely more normal-sized ivory combs that were still kept, is different from before. Alternatively, this took place as the overall numbers of peoples' personal possessions increased.[219] With more combs generally in circulation, ideas about what it meant to own a comb might have changed as the number of ivory combs available also changed.

It is important, however, not to overstate their appearance in these sources, as there are many more churches that do not have combs as part of their inventory than do. Simon,

[218] Legg, *Westminster Abbey*, 239.
[219] Woolgar, "Treasure, Material Possessions and the Bishops," 173.

Archbishop of Canterbury in 1368 AD directed that each parish ought to own and keep in 'proper repair' the following items, which did not include a comb:[220]

> Legend, antiphoner, gradale, two psalters, troper, ordinal, missal, manual, chalice, principal vestment with chausable, dalmatic, tunic, cope for choir with their appendages, frontal to the great altar with three towels, three surplices, one rochet, processional cross, cross for funerals, thurible, lantern, bell to carry before the Eucharist at the visitation of the sick, Pix for the Eucharist, Chrismatory, veil for Lent, banner for Rogation days, Handbell and bells in belfry, with cords. Bier for the dead, holy-water stoup, osculatory, candlestick for the paschal light, font with lock, images in church, principal images in chancel.[221]

When reviewing the 1552 AD inventories, which were compiled on demand of Edward VI and listed by Eamon Duffy, [222] it becomes clear how scattered comb ownership continued to be. Bedfordshire has no combs which are included in Church treasuries,[223] and there are no combs in Surrey,[224] or Norfolk.[225] The records of Cornwall and Devon no longer exist in their entirety, but the summaries that do exist refer to: 'plate Jewelles belles and ornaments' or 'money pate and Juelles'.[226] Ivory combs are not included. London churches do not list combs,[227] even if some of the parishes list detailed accounts of their belongings, many of which were gifts from parishioners to the church. At St Margaret Patten's, gifts include cushions, textiles like altar clothes and suits, silver basins and books, but no combs.[228]

The inventory lists are a new kind of evidence, and they show us different ways combs were thought of in ecclesiastical contexts. They were not just decorative, even though many

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[220] J. Robert Daniel-Tyssen ed. and trans. *Inventories of the Goods and Ornaments in the Churches of Surrey in the Reign of King Edward the Sixth* (Surrey Archaeological Collections, 1869), 9.
[221] Trans. Daniel-Tyssen, *Goods and Ornaments in the Churches of Surrey,* 9.
[222] Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 112.
[223] C. Eeles & J. E. Brown eds., *The Edwardian Inventories for Bedfordshire* (Alcuin Club Collections 6,1905), iii-v; W. Page ed., *The Inventories of Church Goods for the Counties of York, Durham and Northumberland* (Surtees Society 97, 1896).
[224] Daniel-Tyssen, *Inventories of the Goods and Ornaments in the Churches of Surrey,* 1-189.
[225] The Norfolk inventories were edited by H. B. Walters between 1935 and 1957 in *Norfolk Archaeology*. 1935-7 vol XXVI, 245–70, 1938-40 vol. XXVII, 97–144, 263–89, 1941-45 vol. XXVIII, 89–106, 133–80, 1947-50 vol. XXX, 75–87, 160–7, 213–19, 370–8, 1955-57 vol. XXXI, 200–9, 233–98.
[226] S*eventh Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (H.M.S.O, 1846), Appendix 10, 312-13.
[227] H. B. Walters, *London Churches at the Reformation: With an Account of Their Contents* (Society for Promoting Christian knowledge, 1939).
[228] W. H. St John Hope ed., "Ancient Inventories of Goods belonging to the Parish Church of St Margaret Pattens in the City of London," *The Archaeological Journal*, vol. 42 (1885): 320–5.

of the physical examples studied are highly decorated. They were not entirely related to vesting, but they were considered adjacent to it. They continued to benefit from historic associations between important people. These associations could enhance, but did not inhibit, their wider use and appreciation.

Conclusion

By the fourteenth century, it could be said that the relationship between combs and Christian worship was no longer primarily driven by an association with an individual. This time, what might be described as a liturgical comb was likely a comb that a priest or bishop used to prepare himself to say Mass. This continued throughout the later medieval period, and becomes more obvious in the sources. However, I would argue these combs did not have to look special or different, whereas the large, ivory carved combs were more symbolically significant.

Personal relationships continued to be important, as the combs belonging to Siegward and St Kentigern show, and ivory continued to be the primary material luxury combs were made from. However, ivory combs were not all meaningful because of a connection with a saint. It is perhaps interesting that the cult of St Blaise, while using some comb iconography, does not always rely on the imagery.[229] The higher numbers in cathedral treasuries of such combs, many of which are unidentified by owner, suggest that these treasures become owned by the corporation, in the general sense, rather than an individual. Considering combs for the lay population during this time are increasingly associated with privacy, order and sex, and the display of combs by the Welsh is pointed out as unusual, it is perhaps intriguing that combs within the church are no longer necessarily personal objects.

[229] Blaise is primarily depicted with a crozier and two candles, without the comb. Helen Roeder, *Saints and Their Attributes; with a Guide to Localities and Patronage* (H. Regnery Co., 1955), 117.

The manuals from Lanfranc and St Mary's show that everyday hair combing was very much part of daily routines, and this was likely done by a comb that was owned by an individual. However, there is a difference between this everyday combing, even within ecclesiastical contexts, and the kind of hair combing done by a bishop with an ivory comb. It is this type of combing that has been considered liturgical. For these combs, the written sources place them in two distinct contexts – either they were used as part of the vesting process, or they were kept in treasuries. Across at least five hundred years of history, the consistent appearance indicates that combs were used in similar ways. The lack of combs in written sources, then, was because of this consistent use rather than their sporadic appearance – combs were considered inherent parts of the vesting process, before the Mass, but they are only occasionally referred to in liturgical sources.

At larger institutions the vesting process involved multiple people, and while in most cases it appears the abbot or bishop combed his hair himself, it still would have been done in front of an audience. The transformation, then, that by the twelfth century Glodt argues was becoming more about a literal transformation rather than a figurative changing of clothes, was also a visible, shared experience.[230] This ties into arguments about the theatre of the medieval liturgy, and how important these repeated ritual gestures were, even if they were not always recorded, especially in earlier written sources.[231] The importance of these gestures would not have been novel– the act of liturgy has a precise visual language itself, and the gestures would have had to be done deliberately, with appropriate care and reverence so as to indicate that the one undertaking them was aware of the deeper levels of meaning.[232]

In addition, the act of combing was closely related to an internal shift of mind, too. Durand spells this out most explicitly in his chapter, arguing that by combing the hair the

[230] Glodt, "Putting on Christ," 491.
[231] Symes, "Liturgical text and performance practices," 296.
[232] Peter Fink, *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Liturgical Press, 1990), 498.

thoughts are soothed, but the practice of ritual hair combing was not a thirteenth-century phenomenon. People had associated combing with intimacy for hundreds of years by that point, and the use of the comb in the vesting prayers may have been equally valuable as a quiet moment of reflection as it was for a wider ceremonial demonstration.

The physical evidence from Cuthbert onwards indicates what the sources often don't: that they were often intended for functions beyond hair combing. Not just for soothing the thoughts of the individual, when large and stately enough these combs become works of art in their own right, intended for display, to prompt devotion, as well as use.

The four surviving deluxe ivory combs, with clear links to England, show how their physical forms can reveal different things about their use. All four appear to be commemorative of an occasion or story. Commemorative combs were not new, the French example likely relating to Charles the Bald, and the cremation combs from the fifth and sixth centuries, show that people had used combs to mark events before, though they are unusual in this later context. It is also remarkable that all four remaining examples date from across the twelfth century, whereas the written evidence dates from the thirteenth century onwards. This might indicate a comparatively short-lived phenomenon, or it might be chance. Alternatively, there might have been something specific about these four combs, because of their role as objects intended to remember things, that played a part in their survival. Combs, which had both a sacred character given their role in consecration rites, and their connections with memory, through carvings depicting Biblical events and the way they were used, were fluid and useful episcopal treasures indeed.

The term liturgical comb is used casually, and has not been properly interrogated since the nineteenth century. I have demonstrated that combs were used in the consecration of bishops, and more generally in preparation for the mass, which is how most common understandings are reduced. However, combs were considered in ways that fit outside this narrow definition; as relics, as objects associated with individuals, even as objects that did

not appear to have been consecrated as other liturgical objects were. Even their placement in treasury lists seems to reflect how they sat outside an easily-defined category of objects – they were not vestments, they were not placed on the altar, even as they were kept close to both sets of items. Instead, the wider context, bringing together how combs were used outside of ecclesiastical contexts, has shed light on the many layers of symbolism these combs could accrue. A liturgical comb seems static, when they were anything but.

Conclusion

This cultural history uses combs as a lens through which to consider life, death and belief from c. 400-1400 AD. It demonstrates how one object type can provide a framework for enquiry. The thousand-year scope of this thesis was chosen mainly because of well-established temporal boundaries. It shows that combs in the fifth and combs in the fifteenth century had some things in common. They were personal objects associated with intimacy and people's bodies, they were also tools to change people's status, sometimes in a quotidian way, sometimes in heightened ritual contexts. These commonalities almost certainly had deeper roots in the Late Roman period, and extended later into the Early Modern period too. This underscores the value of historical enquiry focused on long-lived, widely used objects. They provide windows through which to observe many different aspects of people's lives.

Medieval combs were enduring. As a result, they are particularly valuable for studying large time periods, and understanding how behaviours both changed and continued. An early medieval cremation involving a comb might, to a later medieval person, appear an alien and unholy ritual. The use of ivory display combs in the ninth century might, in the fifteenth century, be unremarkable. A focus however purely on these later liturgical combs, or earlier cremation combs, results in a limited understanding of these objects. The longue durée approach offers an opportunity to get at the full, rich understanding for why combs were valuable in those contexts. Studying only domestic combs would result in a thesis which understood their everyday uses but missed the ritual applications. A thesis only about liturgical combs might result in viewing the liturgical comb as a unique or strange phenomenon. It is only when placed in the wider context that we understand it is not.

The wider context shows up gaps in the scholarship. Treating later medieval combs in the way early medieval combs have been studied would be of enormous benefit, with finds being stratified and organised into databases more clearly to understand shifts in design and production in greater detail. A regional approach would also be of use, as it is unclear currently if different regions within England considered combs differently. Another long comparative project between England and the rest of Western Europe would be interesting and useful, especially in light of the number of later ivory combs that survive on the continent. On a smaller scale, there is great opportunity to use combs as a base for microhistory on a certain region or individual, like Ethelburga and her own status in a converting early medieval community. The implications of this thesis are also not limited to the study of combs. They are a type of object that enjoyed symbolic interpretation or had the possibility for ceremonial or ritualised significance, which was driven by the meanings of their immediate functions. The importance of combs is *because* of their ability to comb hair first. In this manner, this approach could be extended to a wide range of household objects which could also be considered within ritual contexts. Cups, spoons, and knives are all items that are worth examining with this in mind.

This thesis has demonstrated how to triangulate scattered evidence in order to make fuller assessments on how medieval people formed relationships between each other, through the exchange and use of objects. Archaeological evidence, such as grave goods and skeletal remains have been supported or, at times, undermined by textual evidence: the early medieval record of a comb being a significant gift from the Pope, for instance, contrasts directly to the evidence of combs found in settlement waste deposits. This example shows why this approach is so valuable – it enables multiple perspectives. Combining the evidence reveals people in the medieval period were comfortable using objects from their daily lives to represent larger, more symbolic actions, and that these objects had meaning as a result of their everyday associations. The study of medieval combs reveals how medieval people were

comfortable thinking about objects on a spectrum, one that was both fluid and heavily reliant on context. I think this method of evidence triangulation – archaeological, anthropological and textual – would be ideal to trace other objects in this way. Chairs, for instance, were objects that were used by many, but which also have potent symbolic applications. Thrones for rulers, empty thrones in churches to signify Christ, and chairs being left out to symbolise a missing person all have the potential to derive meaning from their everyday use: people sitting, resting and eating together. It is not just chairs that would benefit from this study. I would suggest any object which survives through clear, deliberate deposition or has a deliberate focused presence in the historical sources, as well as a more accidental survival through waste deposits, or referenced in passing, would be suited for this approach. The stone sanctuary chair in Beverley Minster was protected for hundreds of years, because it had social importance. Manuscript illuminations showing decorated folding chairs (as in the Old English Hexateuch, London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B IV, f.43v and 68v), show a more transient, practical version of the same object. Knives found in graves can be compared to those used as part of medieval remedies. Illuminations of the Luttrell family using spoons (London, British Library, MS Add. 42130 f.208) can be considered alongside the twelfth-century coronation spoon (Royal Collections Trust, RCIN 31733). The entanglement of this evidence is worth interrogating further, as combs have been.

What this approach has allowed is a full understanding of the affordances of medieval combs. These combs repeatedly offer opportunities for connection, cleanliness, and commemoration in ways which are surprisingly long-winded. Despite the differences that a thousand-year project naturally brings up, across the entire timeline, there are certain themes which show remarkable resilience. These groupings derive from the primary function of these tools – to comb hair.

Ownership

Who owned combs, who gave combs, who received them? Combs were for the most part individually owned objects, connected to a specific person. This is a clear part of their use as objects from the beginning of this timeline in early cremations and inhumations. While we may be cautious about their presence in the burials, the written sources showing their use as gifts to individuals makes it much more likely that the combs people were buried with tended to be their own, albeit perhaps ones that had been given as gifts during their life. Ethelburga, and Alcuin, for example, both received combs as gifts that in theory were voluntary exchanges, in reality demanded some form of reciprocity.[233] These reciprocities were varied. Ethelburga's comb was explicitly stated to be a reminder or a demand of her role in the conversion of Northumbria to Christianity. Alcuin's became a physical part of the relationship between him and his former student, before later becoming a relic due to its close association with him.

The exchange of combs, and their role in these gift-giving economies, continues throughout the period. They are listed among incense ingredients in a gift to Louis the German in the ninth century,[234] they are described as appropriate romantic gifts into the fourteenth century,[235] and later sixteenth-century examples held at the V&A Museum London (e.g.W.2-1914), show that combs continued to be exchanged well into the Early Modern period too.

This idea of personal ownership in some cases tends to fracture in the later centuries, or at least combs become less directly tied to individuals. Later combs in liturgical contexts show that ownership does not necessarily have to be between two individuals, and combs can become owned by collectives, by the cathedrals they are given to, which certainly becomes where more of them are found by the end of the medieval period. However, these

[233] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (Routledge, 2002), 3.
[234] Burridge, "Incense in medicine," 242.
[235] Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, 145

combs were likely associated with an individual first, before coming into less specified ownership. Examples, like the comb allegedly of Charles the Bald's coronation, first found at Pavia cathedral, show that this practice was taking place in the earlier centuries, but was only really being recorded in cathedral treasury lists, often written much later. This could demonstrate a change in understanding how objects like combs moved from personal to communal in later liturgical contexts.

Privacy

A key aspect of understanding the medieval comb is its function as a tool to comb hair. This also remains its most consistent physical identifier of the object, as despite variations in size, materials or shape, all combs have teeth which are used to detangle strands of hair. It is because of this that combs were objects closely associated with the physical body through the entire period. These were tools that were held in the hand, scraped over the scalp, entangled in knots. They were essential in maintaining a person's health, removing lice or other pests. They were used for long periods of time, as the fine teeth would have taken a while to ensure hair was knot-free. They were made from bones, antler, wood, and horn, each with differing materialities.

Their prevalence as gifts might have, in part, been practical. They were generally small enough to carry on the person, and light enough to be easily transported great distances. But it was also likely a result of their associations with intimacy, which allowed combs to be objects that were commemorative, not just of a person but also of an occasion. This is particularly demonstrable in early medieval funerary contexts. Combs in cremations played an important mnemonic function, symbolically severing relationships between the living and the dead. In inhumations, they were placed in the graves, most likely as part of a graveside demonstration intended to mourn the deceased's role in the community, while also sharing in this status. Although they stopped being regularly placed in burials after the

later seventh-century, their intimate, personal and connecting characteristics continued. The Norman Welsh comb, carved with depictions of military victory was likely a monumental example. And the romantic, later gift exchanges served to remind a person of their lover during the particularly intimate routine of dressing or undressing.

For individuals with covered hair, combs would have been used either in spaces or moments of privacy. In the secular world these associations of intimacy result in them becoming betrothal gifts, or used as symbols of sexual availability or potency. Unbound hair was both indicative of sexuality but also vulnerability, and so the comb could be both lewd or intimate depending on context. These entangled contexts were implicitly, if not explicitly, understood.

Discipline

For tonsured men, their hair combing would have been part of a regular routine of a ritual designed to immediately and physically mark them out as distinct, a badge of the occupation they chose. For high status individuals such as kings or queens, how they dressed their hair held immediate implications for how their status was understood. These implications shifted over time. From the long-haired Merovingian kings to the smooth-headed Spong Hill man, the long-haired, unbrushed virgin, or the bishop or abbot seeking to prepare himself appropriately before worship, how they used their combs would have been different. However, the arrangement of the hair would have been a core part of this expression of status, something that would have taken place before other ways of covering or dressing the hair.

The relationship between grooming and expressions of status is an explicit and intricate example of wider socio-political understandings of cleanliness and order. An important aspect of the comb is its ability to keep bodies clean, a functional aspect which can easily be considered metaphorically. From cremations, where they are shattered

possibly to mimic the destructive nature of the rite and to ensure no lingering pollutants remain and threaten society, to the need for monks to comb their hair at regular and predetermined intervals, combs are used to manage dirt and therefore danger. They were tools that upheld the order of society, even if these orders were variable across time periods. The unbrushed hair of Late Antique virgins that Alcuin cites was a clear violation of what was considered normal, but because of their status, these women were able to ignore otherwise expected standards of early medieval grooming. In a wider context, the covered hair of married women, a relatively consistent expectation across the medieval period, shows how combs were intimate tools that were used in private once these women were recognised to be sexually active by wider society. The times then when these women would have used combs would have shifted from when they were younger, marking a new life stage.

Life stages were not the only boundary where combs were important. Many different types of transitions, across different types of community, used combs as a way to mark these movements, and while they appear to differ, the point in common is the comb as an underlying, oft unremarked upon tool, that helps enable this. Combs as part of early medieval medicine were used in remedies to apply various ointments to the head. More likely, they were tools that helped tend the sick, a marker of when the person was recovered enough to be bathed and dressed properly, or to navigate feverish moments as an expression of care, a reminder that they were being looked after by their community at a vulnerable time. They also appear to have been used in coronations, marking a much greater transition, from a man to a divinely ordained king. These vastly different transitions take place upon what might be considered a spectrum of ritualization, from the more everyday to the most sacred, and yet despite this difference, the comb was present in all.

In the later medieval period for nobles, hair combing was clearly an important part of moving through the daily routine, from undressed to dressed, from sleep to waking. These

waking moments would have been filled with the responsibilities of the household, and therefore combs can be seen as objects that upheld medieval expressions of status. When compared to the early medieval law codes which fined individuals for hair pulling, it could be suggested that even if not covered for men most of the time, the different ways combed hair was expected to demonstrate certain status or masculinity indicate that despite changes, combed hair was an important aspect of medieval masculinity, even if the direct ways in which this masculinity was demonstrated – short hair or long, beard or no beard – were more changeable. Combs upheld social boundaries and expectations.

Change and transition

As much as combs are used in cohesive ways across a thousand years, so they differ, too. The comb's common presence in the cremation rite is a practice that dies out in the sixth century, and does not appear to have a lasting impact even in contemporary inhumation practices. The difference between the way combs were used in cremations and inhumations is puzzling – why are they used in such different ways? Different practices are able to coexist, but given how central combs were in cremations it seems interesting that their symbolic role does not appear to be mimicked in any way in the inhumation practice. However, there does appear to be a continuation of the understanding that combs could be conduits, or contain themselves, dangerous pollutants, as seen in the remedy in the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*.

From the earliest perspective, combs were referenced in the development of the early church because of their relation to an individual of status, who used combs in part to indicate this status, but also gave combs in order to maintain their network. These individual connections eventually become less remarked upon, with cathedral treasuries, when they do include combs, not always announcing their relation to a specific owner. However, the fact that many treasuries held onto these objects, even if they were broken or unusable, suggests that they continued to be considered special.

Hair grooming was important for all priests. It is only in the tenth century that the use of combs in vesting for mass begins to be recorded. Sporadic references to this throughout the period indicate that it was a long-lived, well-known practice that was only rarely recorded. The existence of elaborate ivory combs with explicitly theological imagery attests to their widespread use. The range of ivory comb shapes and styles show that there was still an enormous amount of individuality, and this continues until the thirteenth century. As Durand breaks down every aspect of the liturgy, so does a more standardised form of liturgical comb emerge – one that is double-sided and heavily engraved, with a series of frequently chosen Biblical scenes.

It is between the eighth and eleventh centuries that such a thing as a liturgical comb might emerge. It was used to brush hair before Mass, during the vesting process. It was used in close proximity to the liturgy. This was probably a practice that was taking place in the centuries before they were recording detailed instructional rubrics. These liturgical combs could, in some places, be made from ivory. However, many of the combs described as liturgical now, because of their material, were not strictly liturgical combs. They could be commemorative combs, coronation combs, relic combs, ceremonial combs more broadly. Looking at these in the wider context of this thesis allows me to see that these were building on other ritual uses. These date back to the fifth century, with combs in cremations, and the seventh-century combs which were ceremonial in size, with holes for hanging up and even being worn on the chest. The written records of combs in vesting prayers, letters and treasury lists are essential in placing these ivory combs in context. But the physical evidence indicates what the sources often do not: that they were often intended for functions beyond hair combing. Not just for organising the thoughts of the individual, when large and stately enough these combs become works of art in their own right, intended for display as well as use.

Medieval combs have been researched sporadically in various ways across the last two hundred years, each study being driven by the concerns and interests of the time as well as historical enquiry. The first, taking place in the Victorian era coincided with a resurgence of relic culture, which resulted in an increased interest in hair, especially in regard to death and the material culture surrounding it.[236] Later studies emerged from the need to catalogue finds more strategically, developments in archaeological advancements in dating and stratifying, and new interdisciplinary approaches enabling more holistic understandings of distant cultures. This project is no exception. Aside from new approaches and the material turn, the past twenty years of technological advancement and the shadow of a global pandemic has led to a life, for many people, lived increasingly online. The abstract anxieties of the 2020s: the need to define humanity in the face of new forms of artificial intelligence, the unmooring of identities in an ever-more global world, the distancing of genuine human connection, are equally responsible. This is a thesis which foregrounds connections and intimacies between medieval people through their relationship with their material world, written from a materially-focused, physically-distanced one. It seeks meaning in the way combs can be reminders of human connection, and the ways these connections are forged and maintained. It is a modern piece of work, even as it considers a thousand years of the past.

Combs are deceptively simple tools. Even their manufacture might at first seem uncomplicated, though this is far from the truth. Comb makers would have had an intimate knowledge of the bones of dead creatures, the life-cycle of the deer, the fantastical worlds of elephants and walrus' and whales. The raw materials of the combs dictated what kinds of objects they would be, and in many ways their creation out of these raw materials can, and should, be considered a collaboration. They were riveted and refined by human hands,

[236] Deborah Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2011): 128.

given between people and places, travelled across great distances. They could have been sacred, or profane, or both, moving between states as easily as they untangled knots. They did not even all comb hair, some having purely decorative functions. They hopefully demonstrate how powerful ordinary objects can be, how difficult it is to untangle the layers of meaning that can accrue in such objects. Medieval combs are markers of the cares and concerns of a distant world. They reveal the value of studying the most everyday of objects. By only focusing on the exotic, liturgical combs as Victorian scholars did, we miss how connected they were to people's daily lives. Instead, looking at what might at first appear mundane objects that almost everyone owned, provides a way to understand some of the shared ideas and practices that connected people within society, and over a thousand years.

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