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Dedicated followers of fashion? Decorative bone hairpins from Roman London

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Catherine Johns has previously noted that hairpins carved in the shape of statuettes and busts or other representational motifs were intended to be seen and admired when in use and the choice of subject would generally have been made for the symbolic meaning as well as the visual appeal (Johns 1996, 115). She was reviewing the subject matter of a bone hairpin, originally identified as depicting Cybele (Wheeler 1930, 103, fig. 32, 1) but with a bust which is now re-identified as Isis (Henig 1977, 359; Johns 1996). Catherine pointed out that pins that depict a deity or attribute might have been valued by the wearer on three levels: as practical devices for maintaining a fashionable hairstyle, as decorative embellishments to the hair and as symbols of good fortune. Henig also compares the choice of a bust with portrait busts or ancestral '*imagines*' denoting a reference to death and the hope of resurrection (1977, 359-61). This paper seeks to review such pins from Roman London and is presented to Catherine with grateful thanks from the authors for her longstanding advice and encouragement on Roman small finds.

The London collections held both in the Museum of London reserve collections and archaeological archive present a selection of bone hairpins that depict either busts or hands. Most busts are set on pedestals (e.g. Fig. 1, n° 1; Fig. 2, n°s 2-5)³ or globes (Fig. 2, n° 7). A prime example is the Museum of London hairpin previously published by Catherine, where a carved head depicting a female bust is held aloft in the fingers of the right hand (Fig. 3, n° 13) but other pins depict female busts of varying quality. One type of pin features a female bust with an elaborate hairstyle where the hair is built up high above the forehead. Such a style would have needed numerous pins to secure the hair and these pins would necessarily have needed long shafts to fix the hair in place (Fig. 1, n° 1) and see an almost identical example from the British Museum

(O.A.245, British Museum 1951, 28, fig. 14).

The quality of the carving of these particular pins is superb and they must have been an expensive item of adornment. So what if other, perhaps less wealthy, ladies in Roman London wanted to wear similar items? Other examples from the Museum of London collections show female busts produced in a much cruder style (Fig. 3, n°s 11-12), also one similar to n° 7 (Wilmott 1991, 128-9). They must have been locally produced copies that survive in sufficient numbers to show an obvious desire to follow the fashion for that particular type of hair ornament. However, the design of the finer pins make them liable to break at their weakest point, at the neck, and many examples remain with the bust still intact but with the head missing (Fig. 2). Votive offerings were ritually mutilated and statuettes decapitated to release the spirits and it is possible that the pins could have been ritually 'beheaded'. However, the provenances of the excavated examples, mostly dumps, do not suggest any obvious pattern that might support this.

As Henig and Johns both noted (1977; 1996), the Isis pin is not the only decorative London example depicting a goddess. The British Museum owns a bronze pin from the city with a bust of Venus, and another in bone that depicts the whole figure of the goddess Fortuna (Brailsford 1964; fig. 14, 10-11) and two pins in the Museum of London collections depict Minerva (Fig. 4, n°s 8-9), showing that there was an interest in wearing pins depicting female goddesses and suggesting that these goddesses were regarded as beneficial to the wearer. One of these pins (n° 8) was found in a 2nd/3rd-century building outside the amphitheatre, but there is no demonstrable association with events in the amphitheatre itself. Two other pins (Fig. 3, n°s 11-12), which are carved in a crude but robust style, superficially bear no resemblance to the

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³ Numbers are those given in the catalogue.



Fig. 1. Hairpin decorated with a female bust: n° 1. Scale 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

elegant figure of Isis (Fig. 3, n° 13), but certain features, notably the treatment of the hair, which could of course be a chronological rather than an iconographic feature, bear comparison. Both have a distinctive headdress or hair ornament and it is just possible that this is a poorly executed, misunderstood version of the solar crown, and that these less than naturalistic portraits were also intended to represent the goddess. In both cases, the

pedestal on which the bust stands is represented by badly executed cordons, separating the head from the pin shaft.

The Isis pin (n° 13), where the bust of the goddess is held in the right hand, is in a class of its own. The choice of hand was made for superstitious reasons – the right hand being the bearer of good luck or a fertility symbol for generating life. A number of pins in the Museum of London collections depict a right hand (Fig. 5) and where they survive intact (as n° 14), the hand delicately and carefully holds an object in outstretched fingers, whether a fruit or an egg (as discussed by Arthur 1977) can be difficult to identify. The holding of a fruit such as a pomegranate denotes fertility and an egg is associated with life and death and Arthur preferred to look at such pins as a conflation of the two symbols. A small group of hand pins (nos 19–21, not illustrated) show only the hand, with extended thumb and bent index finger. While these may suggest a *mano fica* gesture, the fingers are incomplete and they may originally have held fruit.

More importantly several pins show other symbolic elements, notably snake ornaments which are depicted either as a snake twisting its way up towards the fruit in question or as a snake bracelet (Fig. 3, n° 13, Fig. 5, nos 14–16). The hand holding Isis has a snake-bracelet on the arm and Johns points out that snakes were ‘regarded as a good omen, associated with healing, rebirth and the spirits of the departed’ (1996, 117). Snakes were closely associated with Isis or Sabazios (Bird 1996) for whom the snake was the main symbol of fertility. The style of bracelet portrayed is also a dating aid and such pins seem to be 1st and 2nd century in date. A variation on the theme is seen on a pin from the Vicus Augustanus (Castel-porziano), on the Larentine shore near Rome. It shows a hand holding a sprouting seed or bean, with a marked groove on its surface (A. Claridge pers. comm.). The shoot curls around the wrist in a manner very similar to the treatment of the snake ornament discussed above and although the object is clearly neither an egg nor a pomegranate, the symbolism appears to be identical. On several of the London pins, the hand emerges from the fronds of a calyx (Fig. 5, nos 17–18). This can be seen also on the pedestal of a large-busted pin from Southwark (Fig. 4, n° 10), possibly the depiction of an historical figure, where the bust is supported by a pedestal of fronds. Henig suggests (1977, 359; 1988) that this is perhaps a lotus flower and therefore the pin may also have Isiac associations.

A more unusual pin is one best viewed with the point up, when it can be seen that the shaft represents a stylised phallus rising from the testes (Fig. 6, n° 22), more frequently seen on votive offerings but also seen as a symbol of fertility. The phallus was used as an amulet or charm at all levels of society (Henig 1984, 185) and is found in London on numerous amuletic pendants in various materials, as copper-alloy and bone examples from Southwark show (Stephenson 1993, 85, n° 9; 106, n° 1, pl. 18). A phallus appears on a child’s gold finger ring



Fig. 2. Hairpins decorated with bust terminals: from left to right, n^{os} 2-5 & 7. Scale 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

from London (MoL 816), acting as a protection against the evil eye to which children were thought to be vulnerable, but as a hairpin for an adult woman it may have been regarded as both protective and a fertility symbol.

This brief survey shows some of the variety of hair ornament available to the fashionable woman of Roman London and has also raised some issues of interpretation and demonstrated the cross-over in daily life between fashion, superstition and religion in Roman Britain. In conclusion, therefore, one wonders how easy it was for them to choose what to wear: did they choose their pins purely as a fashion statement, an indicator of status or as an insurance against the pitfalls of daily life? Having made that choice, the variety of workmanship in the execution of the pins shows that such pins were available to suit all purses.

Catalogue

Each catalogue entry includes either the Museum of London accession number (MoL) or the excavation site code followed by <accession number> and [context].

Busts or heads

1. Fig. 1. MoL 559; London.

Complete. L. 200 mm; L. of bust 57 mm; W. of bust 18 mm. Henig 1977, 359, pl. 15.VI.b.

Hairpin of elegant design, decorated with a female bust carved as a flat representation rather than in the round. The bust has an elaborate high-fronted hairstyle fashionable in the late 1st to early 2nd century and is perhaps modelled on the hairstyle of the empress Sabina, wife of Hadrian. The style entailed the hair being wound around a frame, shown on the pin as five layers, and fixed in place with a series of long-shafted pins of the same type as this pin itself. The drapery on the bust hangs in loose folds and is fastened at the shoulders by brooches. The detail of the carving on the reverse is less well-defined. The face, however, is skilfully carved. The bust is mounted on a rectangular plaque acting as the terminal to the pin itself and the top of the shaft has a band of engraved cross hatching set between concentric lines. The pin is carved in one piece and is clearly from the same workshop as a similar pin in the British Museum (Johns 1996, 115; British Museum 1951, 28, fig. 14).

2. Fig. 2. MoL 560; London Wall, London.

Incomplete; L. 93 mm; W. of bust 12 mm.

One-piece pin, with two rectangular cordons at the top of the shaft, surmounted asymmetrically by a plain heart-shaped bust. The neck is carved into the bust but the head is missing at this point.

3. Fig. 2. MoL 571; Austin Friars, London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 101 mm.

Made in one piece, there are three concentric cordons and two deep grooves carved around the top of the shaft below the terminal. The pin terminates in a crudely-carved elongated oval for the bust but the head is missing, broken off just below the chin. The shaft is roughly carved giving a faceted appearance and point of the pin is also incomplete.

4. Fig. 2. GHT00 <2295> [10126]; Blossoms Inn, 30 Gresham Street, London, 2000.

Incomplete; surviving L. 124.5 mm.

Bust set on three cordons separated by grooves; head missing. The lower part of the bust is complete and well shaped but undecorated; broken at the narrowest point of the neck. From a 2nd-century context.

5. Fig. 2. MoL 657; London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 92 mm; W. of bust 15 mm.

Short heavy pin, with widely tapering shaft. The end terminates in two oval cordons with a wide central concave groove surmounted by the possible remains of a bust.

6. Not illustrated. MoL 703; London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 116 mm.

One-piece pin with end terminating in two oval cordons with a deep central groove surmounted by the very fragmentary possible remains of the base of a bust.

7. Fig. 2. MoL 573b; London Wall, London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 91 mm; W. of bust 12 mm.

One-piece pin, the top of the shaft decorated with two concentric cordons with a central groove, topped by a globe and surmounted by a female bust. The bust has drapery at the shoul-



Fig. 3. Hairpins decorated with female busts with hair ornaments: n° 11, left, and n° 12, centre. Right, hand and bust of Isis: n° 13. Scale 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

ders, indicated by two v-shaped grooves over the bust. Two further grooves around the neck indicate a necklace while the head is broken off just above that point. This form of bust set on a globe is mirrored by another example from London (Wilmott 1991, 128-9 but misidentified as MoL 19127 and now unlocated).

8. Fig. 4. GYE92 <1084> [14887]; Period 5 (2nd/3rd century), Building 3, outside the site of Guildhall amphitheatre, London, 1992.

Incomplete; L. 68 mm; diameter 4 mm (at mid point of shaft). Bateman 2002, 37.

Hairpin with the head of Minerva elaborately carved in the round and wearing a crested helmet, decorated at the front with a six-pointed star. The goddess' features are clearly shown and her shoulders are draped. The bust is set on top of a globe, below which are three cordons and grooves and the object is carved in one piece. The attribution of the piece is clear and it may have been worn to invoke the goddess as a saviour.

9. Fig. 4. MoL A17638; Unrecorded provenance.

Incomplete; surviving L. 93 mm.

Portion of pin with bulbous shaft surmounted by a helmeted head mounted on a pedestal base. The head is very small and narrow in comparison with other examples and is better seen in

profile. The crudely worked head is carved in the round and wears a crested helmet and the pin is made in one piece. The head may depict the goddess Minerva. Its size and style, although not the detail, are similar to the preceding piece.

10. Fig. 4. 199BHS74 <26> [6]; 199 Borough High Street, 1974.

Incomplete; surviving L. 110 mm. Henig 1977, 359, pl. 15.VI.c; 1988, 391-393; Murdoch 1991, n° 491.

Portion of pin with simple tapering shaft and a head set on a pedestal. The head is well carved in the round and depicts a youthful female wearing a late first-century hairstyle which Henig (1988, 391-3) compares to the hairstyle of Julia, daughter of the emperor Titus. The hair consists of four rolls of curls that frame the face and the excess hair is then braided and neatly scraped back into a high bun. The head is supported asymmetrically on four curling out fronds of a calyx that form the pedestal. Henig suggests that this might instead be a lotus flower and links the lotus to the goddess Isis. The craftsmanship is competent and the pin is well-detailed.

11. Fig. 3. MoL 19112; Bucklersbury House, Walbrook, 1955.

Incomplete; surviving L. 119 mm; L. of bust 42 mm; W. of bust 11 mm.

The top of the shaft is decorated with a concentric cordon surmounted by a crudely-carved bust and female head. The right shoulder of the bust has been damaged and is missing. Drapery on the front of the bust is suggested by two V-shaped grooves on either side finishing at the point of the bust. An elaborate high-fronted hairstyle, of four rows of curls, is decorated with a bifurcated hair ornament. The back of the bust is undecorated except for crossed grooves depicting some form of hair treatment on the head while the facial features are badly executed. Dated to the 1st-2nd century.

12. Fig.3. PNS01 <505> [1896]; Paternoster Row, 2001.

Incomplete; surviving L. 54 mm; L. of head 30.5 mm. Keily in prep.

Decorated with a roughly carved but detailed female head, made in one piece with the shaft. The hair is elaborately dressed in Flavian style with rows of curls piled high on the head, indicated by bands of small carved rectangles and zig-zag grooves on the back may suggest plaiting or interweaving of the hair. The



Fig. 4. Hairpins depicting female deities or dignitaries: n°s 8-10, from left to right. Scale approximately 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

top of the head bears a bifurcated headdress or hair ornament (seen also on n°11). Crossed grooves continue downwards to form a collar around the neck, separating the head from the pin shaft. The strong facial features are deeply carved. The hairstyle suggests a late 1st- or early 2nd-century date and the pin is from a late 2nd- to 3rd-century context.

Bust and hand pin

13. Fig. 3. MoL A2310; Moorgate Street, 1912.

Incomplete; surviving L. 94 mm; L. of bust 28 mm. Wheeler 1930, 130, fig. 32.1; Henig 1977, 359, pl. 15.VI.a; Johns 1996, 115-118.

Upper portion of pin carved in the form of a right hand holding the head of the goddess Isis. The head is gently balanced within the straight fingers of the hand, which are nicely detailed. The goddess is depicted with her hair styled in three coils framing the face and with a pendant lock on either side hanging to the shoulders. Crossed grooves across the back of the head indicate plaiting or interweaving. Her hair is surmounted by a solar crown, a sun-disc between cow's horns flanked by two ears of corn. The top of the shaft has a concentric raised band to denote a snake ornament coiled around the wrist.

Hand pins

14. Fig. 5. MoL 637; London.

?Complete; ?reworked, surviving L. 176 mm. Arthur 1977, 367-374.

Large pin with expanding shaft forming into a right hand, the fingers of which are drawn together to carefully hold an egg. The fingers are spindly in comparison with the size of the hand and rough slashes indicate the finger joints and fingernails. A raised band with occasional cross-hatched decoration starts at the wrist and coils down the shaft away from the hand. This would seem to depict a form of spiral snake bracelet, perhaps of the sort depicted on the Isis headed pin and dated by Johns as a 1st-century type (Johns 1996,117).

15. Fig. 5. MoL 704; London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 125 mm.

Upper portion of a thick pin with expanding shaft forming into a large right hand. Only stumps of the fingers remain but a decorative band or snake travels down the outside of the thumb, across the base of the thumb and winds down the back of the wrist. The hand may possibly have held a pomegranate (as n° 14).

16. Fig. 5. LYD88 <196> [1311]; Cannon Street, 1988.

Incomplete; surviving L. 70mm.

The head of the pin, carved in one piece with the shaft takes the form of a right hand, with extended thumb and bent index finger in the classic *mano fica* gesture seen on fist-and-phallus and other amulets. Coiled around the wrist and forearm is a raised band, clearly intended from its expanded oval head and the series of cross grooves along its length, to be a snake or snake ornament.

Hand pins found in metal generally hold a symbolic object, for example an egg or pomegranate (Cool 1990, 157, group 7), as does the elaborate bone hairpin discussed by Johns (1996) in which the hand holds a bust of the goddess Isis. Like the new pin however, the Isis pin also has a snake bracelet on the arm, a feature also seen on other pins (Arthur 1977) and Johns notes that the presence of snake-bracelets on hairpins depicting human hands may be more widespread than has previously been reco-



Fig. 5. Hairpins with hand terminals: n°s 14-18, from left to right. Scale 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

gnised (1996). This particular snake band is however more naturalistic than the bracelet-like ornament seen on the Isis pin and on the metal examples, more akin to the type of snake seen on artefacts associated with the cult of the god Sabazios (Bird 1996), although these are generally seen with other creatures and symbols.

17. Fig. 5. MoL 706; London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 101 mm.

Upper portion of pin with expanding shaft, terminating in a large right hand emerging from a three-frond calyx. The leaves of the calyx are curled back from the wrist and the hand may have been holding an egg or pomegranate but only the base of the thumb and middle finger of the hand remains, the others survive as broken stumps. The position of the middle finger suggests that the finger is crooked outwards. Creases in the palm of the hand are carelessly detailed.

18. Fig. 5. MoL 31.97/21; Bedford Street, Strand, London, 1931.

?Complete; surviving L. 99 mm.

Heavy short pin with expanding shaft terminating in a right hand protruding from a calyx (as n° 17). The detailing of the striations on the calyx is well executed as are the creases in the palm of the hand. The fingers of the hand are broken off except for what remains of the index finger.

19. Not illustrated. MoL 639; London Wall, London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 95 mm.

Upper portion of pin which narrows at the top before widening again to depict a right hand with the thumb extended and index finger bent to touch it, either in the *mano fica* gesture or in order to hold such a fruit as a pomegranate, as depicted on a silver pin from Walbrook, London (Arthur 1977, pl.16.1a), now in the British Museum. Portions of the possible fruit and other fingers are broken off.

20. Not illustrated. MoL 15773; Leadenhall Street, London.

Incomplete; surviving L. 85 mm.

Upper portion of pin with what remains of a right hand. The thumb is extended and the index finger is bent while the rest of the fingers would have extended straight, now broken. This *mano fica* gesture is denoted by a neat hole drilled between the thumb and index finger.

21. Not illustrated. MoL 19625; Bucklersbury House, Walbrook, 1955.

Incomplete; surviving L. 84 mm.

Upper portion of pin with the remains of a terminal decoration, possibly a clenched hand mounted on a cordon. Dated to the 1st-2nd century.

22. Fig. 6. NGT00 <287> [3581]; Paternoster Square, 2000.

Complete; L. 143 mm; W. of head 18 mm. Keily in prep.

Pin in the form of a stylised phallus. Regularly tapering shaft, now in three fragments, with a head consisting of two flattened spheres separated from the shaft by deep slanting grooves. The pin is much sturdier than regular hairpins and it may have been used to secure a bun, or perhaps as an aid to dressing the hair.

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Fig. 6. Hairpin in the form of a stylised phallus, n° 22. Scale 1:1. Photo: © Museum of London.

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