

ROMAN LADIES AT THEIR TOILET

– Beauty care in the Roman Age

ANNAMÁRIA R. FACSÁDY

Countless graves were uncovered during the excavations at Aquincum and in the province of Pannonia. The artefacts deposited in the burials shed light on various aspects of daily life in the Roman province. Combined with the information from various depictions and the descriptions in the works by Roman writers, some of these articles contribute to the study of personal beauty grooming, hairstyles and fashion during Roman times. These issues have been explored in other provinces of the Roman Empire too – comparing the findings of these studies to the customs in Aquincum can shed light on whether the beauty practices of the ladies in Aquincum were unique or whether they conformed to practices elsewhere in the Empire.

The various artefacts brought to light during excavations often help fill in the minor and more elusive details of life in bygone ages. While the powder boxes, perfume containers, mirrors, tweezers and combs are eloquent testimony to body and beauty care, it is virtually impossible to imagine how the ancients pampered their body, how they wore their hair and how they applied cosmetics from the human remains found in burials. In addition to various toiletry articles deposited in burials, researchers of the Roman Age working in the Empire's former provinces can turn to various depictions such as the portrayals on gravestones and coins, as well as to descriptions in Roman writings when trying to reconstruct the beauty practices of the ancient world. Although the latter tend to record the beauty regimes of the wealthy inhabitants of Rome during the 1st–2nd centuries AD, these references can be regarded as valid for other regions too. The preoccupation with health and beauty is reflected by scattered remarks in the works of Plautus, Iuvenal, Martial, Seneca, Ovid and Pliny, but even Tertullian, the Christian church father of African background, had something to say on the subject. Unlike most male writers who disapproved of cosmetics, Ovid took a more lenient view of make-up. Although he took care to point out the health hazards of the substances used by the ladies of his day, he was generous with tips on make-up¹ and hairstyle.² In his *Natural History*, Pliny offers guidance on the



1. kép: Faustina maior érem Aquincumból



2. kép: Illatszeres üveg aquincumi sírból

¹ Ovid, *Medicamina Faciei Feminae*. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/lboo/lboo62.htm>

² Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3, 129–168. <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Artoflovehome.htm>

cosmetic use of various substances and a recipe for certain products with his usual precision.

Despite Ovid's words of caution, Roman ladies were determined to keep up with the day's fashion – nothing new! – and paid little heed to his warnings. They were not deterred by the lead content of the creams used for whitening the face, the period's epitome of beauty, as shown by the chemical analysis of the facial cream remains found in a small canister in London in 2003.³ After powdering their face to a creamy white, the ladies accentuated their brows, lined their eyes with kohl and rouged their lips. The make-up of the face was a genuine work of art, as was the time-consuming preparation of elaborate coiffures. The changes in fashionable coiffure can be traced on coin portrayals.⁴ Some ladies of the imperial families changed their hair-do quite often, while other stayed faithful to one style. In the Early Imperial period, women preferred to pile their hair above the forehead. Roman ladies wore piles of flamboyant curls, ringlets and artistically woven tiny braids in the early decades of the 2nd century AD. The empresses of the 2nd century seemingly opted for simpler hairstyles by arranging their hair into chignons. The silhouette of the head changed and the emphasis shifted to the back of the head. The Empress Julia Donna wore her hair arranged into a helmet-like coiffure, a hairstyle typical for the turn of the 2nd–3rd centuries, with many variations on the basic style. During the 3rd century and, occasionally also in the 4th century, ladies followed the trend set by the Empress Plautilla, who wore her hair with the individual braids drawn together to form a broad, flat band of hair that was folded over the nape of the neck and then pulled up the back of the head. Several variations of this coiffure are known.

Echoes of the “imperial” fashion dictated by the empresses appear on the stone relics from Aquincum. The coiffure of women following the Roman fashion is often helpful in dating these gravestones because even a less skilful stonecutter was capable of portraying the most important elements of the period's hairstyle. We can recognise the fashion set by the Empresses Faustina maior, Julia Mamaea, Orbiana, Otacilia Severa, Salonina and Mariniana.⁵ However, it is sometimes difficult to identify the coiffure known from statues on



3. kép: a.) Julia Maesa érem Aquincumból b.) Salonina érem Aquincumból



4. kép: Részlet egy aquincumi sírkőről



5. kép: Sírkő részlete Aquincumból

³ R. P. Evershed, R. Berstan, F. Grew, M. S. Copley, A. J. H. Charmant, E. Barham, H. R. Mottram, and G. Brown, “Archaeology: Formulation of a Roman cosmetic,” *Nature* 432 (4 November 2004), 35–36.

⁴ A. Alexandridis, *Die Frauen des Römischen Kaiserhauses. Eine Untersuchung ihrer bildlichen Darstellung von Livia bis Iulia Domna* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2004), 271; K. Wessel, “Römische Frauenfrisuren von der Severischen bis zur Konstantinischen Zeit,” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 61/62. (1946/47), 64.

⁵ A. Facsády, “La représentation de la femme sur les stèles funéraires romaines du musée d’Aquincum (Budapest),” in *Les ateliers de sculpture régionaux: techniques, styles et iconographie. Actes du Xe Colloque sur l’Art Provincial Romain 2007*, ed. V. Gaggadis-Robin, A. Hermony, M. Reddé, and C. Sintès (Aix-en-Provence-Arles, 2009), 683–69.



6. kép: Szépségápoláshoz használatos eszközök

which the minor details are only apparent from a side or rear view because the portrayals on the grave steles are in the frontal view.

While a few artefacts used in beauty care occasionally appear on the gravestones, it is the artefacts themselves that can contribute to the reconstruction of the actual practices. The boundary between medical usage⁶ and beauty care is very narrow. Small rods of glass, bone and bronze, bone and bronze spoons and spatulas were used for preparing cosmetics and for removing them from their containers. Various bronze artefacts were used in beauty care. Small rods with a spoon-like bowl at one end and an olive stone shaped thickening at the other were probably used for mixing and applying cosmetic pigments, and it seems likely that these small bronze rods, used for creating the artistic make-up of the face, were covered with some soft, removable material. Ears, nails and teeth were cleaned with bronze or bone implements. These often formed a set and were threaded on a ring and worn suspended from the belt, ensuring that ear-scoops, tweezers, nail cleaners, files and tooth-picks were always at hand. A longish box, known as *theca vulneraria*, used for storing various implements of this type, has been brought to light from one of the graves excavated at Aquincum.⁷ One of the mummy burials from Aquincum contained a round lidded box carved from ash. The

⁶ P. Zsidi, "Doctoring in the border province of the Roman Empire, the relics of healing in Pannonia Inferior and its governor's seat, in Aquincum," in *Ancient Medicine and Pannonia*, ed. P. Zsidy and Gy. Németh. Aquincum Nostrum II. 4. (Budapest: Pro aquinco Foundation, 2006), 57–58.

⁷ T. Hable, "Újabb sírok az aquincumi katonaváros nyugati temetőjéből" (New graves from the western cemetery of Aquincum Military Town), *Aquincumi füzetek* 7 (2001), 27, Fig. 4.

substance found inside the box was made up of rice starch and rust coloured vegetal pigments, suggesting that it had been the powder compact of the woman buried in the grave.⁸

After completing the daily hygiene routine, many different kinds of fragrant ointments, oils and perfumes, known as *unguentum*, were available for skincare and scenting for the wealthy Romans who could afford them. These were stored in alabaster containers of the most diverse forms, small glass bottles, bone boxes and small caskets carved from shell.⁹ Ladies used mirrors of various forms and sizes during their beauty regime. The written sources mention full-length glass mirrors,¹⁰ and we also know of wall mirrors, as well as of hand-held pieces and lidded box mirrors. Hand-held mirrors, the most widespread type, could be round or rectangular. Some were made from glass set in ornate frames, others were of polished bronze. Most of the mirrors we know come from graves; the custom of depositing mirrors into burials was also recorded by Pliny.¹¹



7. kép: Tükörkeret

RECOMMENDED READING:

TOPÁL, JUDIT

Die Gräberfeld von Aquincum. *Forschungen in Aquincum 1969–2002*, hrsg. P. Zsidi, 161–167. *Aquincum Nostrum II.2*. Budapest: Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, 2003.

VIRGILI, PAOLA

Acconciature e maquillage. Vita e costumi dei Romani antichi 7. Roma: Museo della Civiltà Romana, Edizione Quasar, 1989.

WILNER, ORTHA L.

Roman Beauty Culture. *The Classical Journal* 27/1 (1931) 26–38.

⁸ L. Nagy, *Aquincumi múmia-temetkezések* (Mumienbegräbnisse aus Aquincum). *DissPann* Ser. I. Fasc. 4. (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 1935), 15–16.

⁹ O. Láng, “Decorated *Pinctada Margaritifera*: new data to the presence of eastern people in the Civil town of Aquincum?” *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* (2006), 149–161.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Questiones Naturales* 1, 17, 8. <http://naturalesquaestiones.blogspot.hu/2009/08/book-i-tr-john-clarke.html>

¹¹ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXXVI, 131. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc&redirect=true>