Brooches in context. Two cases from the Palatine Hill (Rome) and their different ways of communicating personal identity

Abstract

Two Roman brooches from the north-eastern slopes of the Palatine Hill in Rome demonstrate the different ways that personal identity was expressed, for example, through the choice of objects from the past or by a marked peculiarity in shape and decoration. One brooch provides an opportunity to reflect on the concept of personal adornment acquiring particular meanings and values over time, potentially as a family heirloom. A second brooch, characterised by unusual shape and decoration, provides an invitation to further explore the relationship between the expression of personal identity and style. This paper, therefore, focuses on the potential of these objects to reveal new information about the relationship between objects of adornment and personal identity.

Introduction

The study of objects of personal adornment poses some basic problems that derive from their wider category of classification as ‘small finds.’ Although approaches to the study of these artefacts vary considerably across different countries, with significant theoretical advancements made especially in British scholarship, it can be argued that small finds are generally paid little attention or considered as a secondary specialism. Moreover, excavation reports often are dedicated almost exclusively to architecture and pottery, with very little (or no) space left to illustrate small finds. Even when they are included, the volume often contains a mere chronological/typological classification of the artefacts, divided by material or function (only rarely considered in relation to their context), without any attempt to reflect on what more these objects can tell us. For small finds from Italian contexts, several recent books

1 Swift 2007.
2 E.g., Allason-Jones 2011; Eckardt 2014; Swift 2017; Van Oyen, Pitts 2017.
3 Crummy (1983) still serves today as a reference for the functional classification of small finds.
4 A contextual approach can be found in the work of Allison 1997; 2006.
have been published\textsuperscript{6} that demonstrate, despite a predominantly chronological approach, an increased interest in the topic and a broader, more detailed consideration of this material.\textsuperscript{7}

Small finds have most often been studied in relation to issues of chronology,\textsuperscript{8} function,\textsuperscript{9} technology, artisanal skills, and creativity,\textsuperscript{10} as well as style and personal taste. Despite this, it seems that the potential of personal adornment is often underestimated. The generic label of ‘small finds’ often means that these objects are seen as a general curiosity, unable to make any significant improvement to understanding what is being excavated. This is even more so for objects that are not part of funerary assemblages but rather are found in debris, dumps, or on floors.

\textit{Brooches as small finds}

One of the best-known categories classified as ‘small finds’ is that of brooches. In their double function as clothes-fasteners and ornaments, brooches have been well studied, and a sound and detailed typological framework exists for these objects.\textsuperscript{11} This also has included study of their features, production, and regional traditions. Moreover, their importance as evidence for dating sites is well known. Yet, their potential as a means to convey information about their wearers is often underestimated. In this article, I will discuss two case studies that illustrate the different ways brooches were used to express identity.

The two brooches under study come from the rich and complex stratigraphy of the north-eastern slope of the Palatine Hill in Rome. This area was the subject of archaeological investigation between 2001 and 2017 under the direction of Prof. Clementina Panella of La Sapienza University, Rome\textsuperscript{12} (Fig. 1). Here, excavations uncovered a substantial stratigraphic sequence documenting occupation from the eighth century BC\textsuperscript{13} and the notable construction of the Curiae Veteres sanctuary through Late Antiquity.

\textit{An ‘old’ brooch: a question of time}

One of the artefacts discovered in these excavations was a copper-alloy Aucissa-type brooch. The longitudinal opening in the bow, in particular, is comparable to examples from southern Gaul (type Feugère 22a) and is similar to the previous Alesia-type brooches (type Feugère 21a3), which are also characterised by the pierced bow\textsuperscript{14} (Fig. 2). The Palatine brooch demonstrates the similarity between the late Alesia-style and the early Aucissa-style noted by Maurizio Buora.\textsuperscript{15} The bow with two or more openings can be found, for example, in both types, especially in the early Aucissa specimens identified in northern Italy and Switzerland.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[8] Taylor 1948, 131.
\item[9] This issue has been thoroughly assessed in Swift 2017, 18-101.
\item[12] For an overview, see Panella et al. 2014; Ferrandes 2016; Panella, Zeggio 2017, with bibliography.
\end{footnotes}
It must be noted, however, that this feature seems to have been abandoned soon enough, due to its intrinsic fragility, in favour of the non-perforated bow, which guaranteed greater solidity to an object which had a prominent functional purpose. Nevertheless, the overall form, such as the shape of the foot, suggests that the Palatine brooch belongs in the early Aucissa series. With this in mind, it seems plausible that the Palatine brooch dates to the early years of the first century AD.

The Palatine brooch is part of a miscellaneous assemblage of finds from a rectangular pit that was dug during construction work carried out at the Curiae Veteres sanctuary after the great fire of AD 64 (Fig. 3). During the reign of Nero, construction had already begun on this side of the hill, with a complex of vaulted rooms built around the sanctuary in support of a large terrace that was probably part of the Domus Aurea. After Nero’s death, the emperors of the Flavian dynasty undertook a series of modifications to correct some structural problems in the area.

The pit has a rectangular and markedly regular shape and was probably dug for the construction of a reinforcing pillar to the Neronian structures. The ceramic finds from the fill date mainly to the Neronian age, although the presence of a significant amount of type A1 African Red Slip Ware together with a Vespasianic sestertius dating to AD 71-73 provide a fill date in the last building phase. Based on this material, it can be argued, therefore, that the brooch likely entered the archaeological record between the Neronian and Flavian periods and should thus be considered residual material in this context.

However, to what extent can the concept of residuality be applied to brooches or to objects of personal adornment in general? An artefact of personal adornment, such as a brooch, can carry a strong cultural and psychological meaning. Therefore, adopting a strictly chronologically/typological approach to their study is somewhat reductive and risks substantially neglecting important aspects of their analysis, such as the human-object relationship. With regard to this, Ellen Swift has convincingly drawn attention to the concept of curation, that is “the retention of an artefact well beyond its production date, entailing some changes in the cultural perception of the artefact,” related to “psychological attachment and individual narratives and memories.” It seems most likely that this idea of curation fits very well with the Palatine brooch, which may therefore be interpreted as an heirloom.

Katina Lillios presented four criteria for the identification of objects as heirlooms, and in fact, the Aucissa-style brooch seems to meet at least two of these criteria, as it both dates to an earlier period than other objects in the same context and is an item of ornamentation. Moreover, as Lillios noted, because of their portability, heirlooms of personal adornment could contribute to the construction and communication of identity. It is possible, therefore,
that the wearer of the Palatine brooch could have used it as a way of communicating a familial relationship or as “a manifestation of an emotionally significant relationship.” While it can only be hypothesised that the brooch represented the memory of an ancestor to its owner, this seems to be a fairly plausible explanation for its use several decades after its manufacture.

While heirlooms can be more easily recognised in funerary contexts, it becomes harder to identify them and to detect their meaning and function outside this well-defined sphere. Nonetheless, it seems that careful (re-)consideration of objects of personal adornment that have been classified as ‘residual’ may reveal that at least some of these artefacts could have been still in use at the moment of their deposition in the archaeological record. This is the case of the brooch from the Palatine, whose context, together with the related finds assemblage, rules out an interpretation of this artefact as a votive offering.

Moreover, it should be remembered that objects of personal adornment had a personal value, which did not always coincide with their economic one. Additionally, while typology is, beyond doubt, a fundamental tool for contextualising and classifying artefacts, it cannot be used uncritically. The bonds established between people and their objects – defined by the memories and emotions associated with particular artefacts – can be more complex and can last for a much longer time than the chronological framework defined by their typology.

An unusual brooch: a question of style

A second brooch belongs to the late-antique phase of the excavation on the north-eastern slopes of the Palatine (Fig. 4). From the early fifth century AD, the gradual abandonment and dismantling of the Curiae Veteres sanctuary brought about dramatic transformations and changes to the use of space. In the second half of the century, for example, two of the vaulted rooms which underpinned the terrace overlooking the temple were permanently abandoned and filled to the ceiling with mixed materials. Among this fill, there was a fairly large group of copper-alloy objects, probably related to a metalworking area discovered nearby, that included an unusual brooch (Fig. 5).

The brooch measures 5.5 centimetres in length and 3.3 centimetres in height. Its principal features are the markedly accentuated curve of the bow and its thinness. The brooch is decorated by a row of small indentations along both edges, resembling a zig-zag pattern; the catch plate is elongated and tubular, with no final knob. The pin, held by an inward hinge, is broken immediately after the hinge. It must be emphasised that, while the brooch was part of an assemblage of miscellaneous metal objects and scraps (probably put aside to be melted down for recycling), it looks complete. This suggests that the piece was not actively being worked when the assemblage was discarded.

25 Foxhall 2012.
26 Swift 2004, 220.
28 For this phase and its contexts, see Ferrandes 2011, 148-151; Panella et al. 2011.
29 The assemblage is currently under study by the author.
Unusual brooches such as this one are not such a rarity; however, the difficulty in finding a comparison for this object provides an opportunity for more general reflection. According to Sophia Jundi and J.D. Hill, “the style of a brooch may be another means of understanding its significance.” Therefore, since the style of an object can be seen as a means to create and express personal and social identity, it is possible that uniqueness in design may hint at the role played by personal taste and preference in the production of objects of adornment. An interesting indication of this may come from a passage in Plautus’ The Two Menechmuses. In Acts III and IV, a bracelet is taken to the goldsmith “ut fieret nouom” (“to have a makeover”), where the “makeover” is very likely intended to fit the taste of its new owner (as well as disguising the object from its original owner, the lover’s wife).

A similar example of a unique object of personal adornment can be seen in a first-century AD iron decorative button from a Roman military belt (cingulum). The button was subsequently (probably between the second and third centuries AD) turned into a ‘button brooch,’ with the addition of a bronze imperial portrait surrounded by a silver decorative pattern (FIG. 6). The only known parallel for this piece is a similar button, inlaid with a golden medallion and decorated by the same silver pattern. This suggests a common origin for both pieces, although this second ‘button brooch’ is considerably richer than the previous one. Very likely, these brooches were produced by re-adapting or customising, possibly at the client’s request, common artefacts in order to make them convey a precise message of loyalty and support for the emperor. Therefore, it seems that some objects could be adapted on request or produced from scratch following the instructions of customers. However, how common was this practice, and what importance did such commissions have for the production and distribution of objects of personal adornment in the ancient world? Unfortunately, these are not questions that can be answered at the current time.

While these may have been the motivations behind the uniqueness of the late-antique brooch from the Palatine, it is also possible that there were other reasons behind the brooch’s production. The emphasised shape of the bow, for example, could have been useful for fastening a heavy, thick kind of cloth. In this scenario, the brooch may have been fashioned for a specific, perhaps purely functional, purpose. Nonetheless, one scenario does not exclude the other. Clearly there could have been multiple motivations for the choices linked to the physical and formal characteristics of objects.

We know that brooch production, especially in the Roman period, was a standardised process; yet, as Emilie Riha noted for examples from Augst (northern Switzerland), finding two identical pieces is impossible, as the finishing process was carried out individually or in smaller workshops. The production of brooches was also a process which required consid-

30 Comparable brooches could not be found in the principal publications on brooches and site excavation reports within the territory of the Roman empire: Almgren 1897; Frisch, Toll 1949; Cunliffe 1968; Böhme 1972; Ettlinger 1973; Jobst 1975; Riha 1979; 1994; Waldbaum 1983; Feugère 1985; Bishop, Dore 1988; Snape 1993; Buora et al. 2008; Mackreth 2010; Sàró 2014.
33 Plaut., Men., III, 525; IV, 683.
34 Rychener 1999, n. 2591.
36 Riha (1979, 36-37) was referring in particular to Aucissa-type brooches.
erable technical expertise. It can be argued that, from an economic viewpoint, producing single pieces on a commission basis would be more expensive and less convenient than standardised production; on the other hand, the numerous brooches with no close parallels (or no parallels at all), such as the second brooch from the Palatine Hill, suggest that perhaps the relationship between standardised and personalised production in ancient craftsmanship, which has so far been little investigated, needs further exploration, especially for our understanding of identity communication and social interaction.

Concluding remarks: a proposal for a different approach

The two brooches from the Palatine provide possible evidence for different motivations in the choice of personal adornment. In the Aucissa-series brooch, we can see an example of the representation of personal identity through the use of an older object, most likely a family heirloom. Such heirlooms reflect an important category of artefacts that deserves more study in order to understand the ancient mentality behind the use of personal adornment. In the case of the late-antique brooch, on the other hand, we can see a starting point to further explore the relationship between the expression of personal identity, style, and their connections to production processes.

The analysis of both brooches provides insights into how personal adornment items and other categories of small finds can be useful to update traditional studies of material culture. This is especially the case for Italian scholarship, which has so far favoured a more conventional approach to such finds. It would, therefore, be useful to reconsider such small finds, combining a theoretically informed study with material- and production-related analyses. In so doing, a biographical approach could prove a useful tool in trying to reconstruct the different stages in the lives of these objects, including cultural aspects of their use and the reasons for their creation.

Object biography can be useful precisely because it explores the simultaneous development of humans and the things that belong to them. In this respect, the contextual analysis of objects of personal adornment is key to revealing the value of individual objects through the stages of their ‘life’. Moving beyond typological and chronological data can help us gain a richer and clearer understanding of certain aspects of ancient society, i.e. personal adornment and the choices made by the wearer that, by their very nature, tend to be more elusive. The use of contextual analysis and the reconstruction of the chaîne opératoire should thus be fundamental tools for understanding the use and function of artefacts of adornment.

Consequently, find context, production, and craftsmanship must be taken into consideration if we aim to identify a complete history of these artefacts. The latter aspects, in particu-

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37 Bayley, Butcher 2004. For more general issues concerning brooch production, see Cociş, Bârcă 2013; Chardron Picault 1999.
39 Kopytoff 1986, 66.
40 Pitts, Van Oyen 2017, 13.
42 Van Oyen, Pitts 2017, 13.
43 Swift 2017, 237.
lar, can shed light on style and potential information about the commission of these objects. Objects of personal adornment were both functional and stylistic/symbolic, as every product of human craftsmanship is the result of a mixture of actions, thoughts, behaviour, and symbolism. Therefore, the study of these two brooches, with the different messages they conveyed, may open up new avenues of research, showing the importance for all scholarly traditions to consider the meanings and values of objects as an essential part of the study of material culture.

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44 Dunnel 1978.
Almgren O. 1897: Studien über nordeuropäische fibelformen der ersten nachchristlichen jahrhunderte mit berücksichtigung der provinzialrömischen und südrussischen formen, Stockholm.
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Fig. 1 – Rome. North-eastern slope of the Palatine Hill. The excavation area lies within the rectangle (from Panella, Zeggio 2017).

Fig. 2 – The Aucissa-type brooch (Special Find Number: 5152. Photo and drawing, G. Bison).
Fig. 3 – The north-eastern slopes of the Palatine Hill during the Flavian period (from Ferrandes 2011). The star marks the findspot of the Aucissa-series brooch.

Fig. 4 – The north-eastern slopes of the Palatine Hill during Late Antiquity (from Ferrandes 2011). The star marks the findspot of the late-antique brooch.
Fig. 5 – Unusual brooch (Special Find Number: 4981. Photo G. Bison – drawing G. Pardini).

Fig. 6 – Button from a military belt transformed into a brooch (from Feugère 2018, 207, n. 136).