

Liturgical Combs or Liturgical Use of Combs? An Evaluation of Textual and Material Evidence, 10th-13th century

This article argues that it is preferable to avoid the rigid categorization of certain combs as “liturgical combs”, but rather to observe that certain combs have been known to be used ritually in a variety of ways. In fact, combs produced in secular context and for secular purposes could acquire sacred value because they had been gifted to churches and become a part of their treasure, or because they had been associated with holy individuals. This makes it difficult to distinguish between «liturgical» and «non liturgical» combs, regardless of the materials used (since the fact that most combs preserved for the 10th-13th century are made of ivory also depends on its durability and value), subject of the decoration (religious or not), the shape (since H-shaped combs were used in both religious and lay settings).

An overview of the attested uses of combs in medieval churches c. 10th-13th century allows to show that next to well attested and well known uses, such as the ritual combing of a priest before celebrating Mass and the ritual combing of a bishop during the consecration ceremony, there were also other uses which seems to have been peculiar of specific religious foundations.

In the final section, the article focuses on how these combs were perceived. Textual sources such as letters and hagiographies are used to reconstruct the meanings associated with the act of combing, complementing the information provided by more traditionally used sources like liturgical treatises. The act of combing and/or of being combed, in which sensorial stimulation played an important role, emerges as an intimate experience which could forge a personal link between the comber and the person combed or remind the person whose hair were being combed of the donor of the comb. Furthermore, combing is associated with cleansing of both body and mind by bringing purification and order, and was often accompanied by prayer. On the basis of the collected evidence, the article puts forth the hypothesis that these associations extended well beyond the liturgical context, for example to personal devotion, where the act of combing may have been associated with meditation and prayer.