Material culture as memory: combs and cremation in early medieval Britain

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This paper argues that mortuary practices can be understood as ‘technologies of remembrance’. The frequent discovery of combs in early medieval cremation burials can be explained by their mnemonic significance in the post-cremation rite. Combs (and other objects used to maintain the body’s surface in life) served to articulate the reconstruction of the deceased’s personhood in death through strategies of remembering and forgetting. This interpretation suggests new perspectives on the relationships between death, material culture and social memory in early medieval Europe.

How was the past perceived and created in early medieval Europe? Recent studies have discussed the dual roles of literacy and orality as ways by which the past was produced, reproduced and sometimes invented. Early medieval memory can be regarded as a social and ideological, rather than psychological, phenomenon. A wide range of studies have explored the roles and interactions between literacy and oral tradition in actively selecting and transforming the past in the light of contemporary socio-political needs. In this way, it is argued that the political structures, world-views and identities of kingdoms and communities were negotiated through the making and remaking of social memory. Yet words (spoken or written) are only one means by which the past can be communicated, negotiated and contested. Social memory can be communicated through commemorative ceremonies and bodily

practices. Paul Connerton collectively calls these ‘incorporating practices’, in contrast to the ‘inscribing practices’ of remembrance (such as texts and inscriptions) that usually form the focus of discussions of early medieval remembrance.² Hence, memories are not merely inscribed and stored, they are reproduced through social practices and ritual performances.³ The embodied, material and ritualized aspects of remembering and forgetting can constitute themselves in many ways and in different contexts.⁴ In particular, material culture can be used in both incorporating and inscribing memories, making the study of early medieval material culture a rich field for exploring the strategies by which the past was produced and reproduced, and in turn, appreciating the roles of materialized memory in the construction and reproduction of identities.⁵ If these arguments are accepted, then material culture can be identified as a medium (parallel to, and interacting with, words and texts) through which social memories might be transmitted and reproduced in the early Middle Ages.

This perspective has particular implications for the study of mortuary practices in early medieval Europe. For many societies, rituals surrounding death, disposal and commemoration can have a particularly poignant role in the way the past is remembered through both inscribing and embodying practices. There might be numerous reasons for this. Funerals connect the past and present because they focus on constructing and mediating relations between the living and the dead. They are also times when emotional and ritualized behaviour is heightened and hence societies’ attitudes to the past, myths of origin and cosmogonies are more likely to take an overt and discursive form.⁶ Yet first and foremost, mortuary practices are rites of passage aimed at transforming the social, cosmological and ontological status of both the dead and the living. In this sense, they need to be considered less as rituals aimed at maintaining the social order and links with a static and ‘known’ past, but more as a means of reconstructing perceptions of the past in response to contemporary concerns and the death of a community member. Consequently, mortuary practices can be regarded as techniques allowing social memories

and identities to be transformed and reconstituted. Indeed, a range of anthropological and sociological studies have explored the rich and varied ways in which material culture is deployed and interacts with both the bodies of mourners and the deceased during funerary ceremonies in order to influence strategies of remembering and forgetting.7

Traditionally, the rich evidence for early medieval cemeteries and mortuary practices has been interpreted in terms of racial and cultural labels (‘Pictish’, ‘Jutish’, ‘Frankish’, etc.) or with reference to religious beliefs (pagan or Christian). More recently, burial rites have been interpreted as either a direct window onto the legal and social structures of past societies or as symbolic and ideological constructions masking and transforming social structures.8 Only recently have studies of early medieval burials begun to move beyond the ‘mirror or mirage’ debate by focusing on the role of mortuary practices in constructing and reproducing social memories.9 Such approaches have been most influential in the investigation of the landscape context and monumentality of early medieval graves and, in particular, interpreting the practice of monument reuse.10 Yet if mortuary practices and performances can influence remembering and forgetting, we need to consider the interactions

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8 See discussions in S. Lucy, The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death (Stroud, 2000); S. Lucy and A. Reynolds (eds), Death and Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales (Leeds, 2002).


between the corpse and portable artefacts in strategies of remembrance. These approaches have been explored to good effect in prehistoric archaeology, focusing on the materiality, biographies, fragmentation and aesthetics of material culture in mortuary practices.\(^\text{11}\) In contrast, early medieval studies are only beginning to explore these fruitful lines of enquiry.\(^\text{12}\)

To develop this argument and illustrate the value of its application, this paper focuses upon the artefacts employed in cremation rites in early Anglo-Saxon eastern England. It is argued that social memory was constituted through the interaction between the transformation of the body by fire and the subsequent choices of artefacts placed with the dead during post-cremation rites. At first glance, placing a comb in a cremation grave seems paradoxical. Combs are associated with hair and its management, yet cremation destroys the corpse’s hair and flesh, and fragments the skeletal integrity of the dead person. Yet the significance of combs can be identified within this paradox. Following cremation, great attention was paid to collecting, transporting and burying the ashes in an appropriate manner through rituals that were repeated hundreds of times at individual burial sites. It is suggested that these rituals played a mnemonic role in commemorating the new social, cosmological and ontological status of the deceased achieved by the end of the funerary ceremonies. Combs were not merely ‘symbolic’, nor did their presence denote the identity of the deceased when alive. Instead, it is argued that they served to reconstitute, embody and ‘re-member’ the dead; combs provided a material focus for remembrance. As such, this paper provides a case study for how we might theorize early medieval mortuary practices in a new way. Instead of regarding the deployment


of material culture as intentionally aimed at articulating a fixed status or identity for the dead, material culture operated to encourage the transformation of the deceased’s identity and the selective remembering and forgetting of certain attributes of the individual during life. In this sense, objects such as combs operated as memory, serving as mnemonic devices that mediated remembering and forgetting through their association with the deceased’s physical remains. On a broader scale, early medieval mortuary practices can be regarded as ‘technologies of remembrance’ and were contexts in which social memories were performed, embodied and negotiated, that in turn served to construct concepts of personhood and perhaps also group identity.13

**Cremation cemeteries in early Anglo-Saxon England**

The archaeology of southern and eastern England in the fifth and sixth centuries is best recorded through its burial sites. Both furnished inhumation and cremation burial rites were practised, with the latter particularly dominant in East Anglia and the East Midlands.14 In eastern England, archaeologists have been aware of a distinctive form of burial site dating to the fifth, sixth and early seventh centuries AD where cremation burials predominate (Fig. 1).15 Many of these sites are known from antiquarian and early archaeological studies but our richest data comes from cemeteries excavated in the last half-century, notably those at Newark in Nottinghamshire (Figs 2 and 3), Sancton in East Yorkshire (Fig. 4), and Spong Hill in Norfolk.17 While early studies focused

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14 Lucy, Anglo-Saxon Way of Death.
on the form and decoration of the pots in isolation, the publication of these reports has allowed the analysis of the contents of urns (human and animal bone, and pyre and grave-goods), and consequently has also enabled an investigation of the character and variability of the cremation ritual.

While the rites vary considerably, a broad sequence of the ritual practices before, during and after the cremation can be reconstructed from a careful examination of the artefacts and bones. For instance, from the discovery of molten bronze fused to cremated bone, it can be

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shown that the dead were burned on the pyre dressed for death, in a comparable fashion to (broadly contemporary) inhumed individuals. As with the inhumation rite, the objects placed with the dead varied greatly depending on the age, sex, wealth and ethno-political affiliations.

McKinley, *Spong Hill*, pp. 83–4. The evidence consists mainly of fragments of jewellery found adhering to bones of the upper torso of adult female cremated individuals. Given the elusive evidence for the costumes of many adult males and children we would not expect to find similar evidence for these groups in the cremated finds. It would be perverse to suggest on this evidence that only adult females were dressed for death. The strongest likelihood remains that the corpses of males and children were also washed, prepared and dressed for death prior to cremation. I have argued elsewhere that the under-representation of iron items including...
of the deceased and their family. In this sense, both rites have much in common. Whether an individual was cremated or inhumed, the mourners dressed and transformed the dead, and consequently used material culture to construct their relationships and memories of the dead through the funerary rituals.

Yet, the choice to cremate or inhume an individual seems to have embodied important differences in the conception of the social person


weapons, knives and buckles in cremation graves has another explanation: H. Williams, ‘Keeping the Dead at Arm’s Length: Weaponry and Memory in Early Medieval Mortuary Practices’ (forthcoming).

and created contrasting strategies for remembrance. Observing and participating in the technology of cremation itself and the subsequent retrieving, handling, transporting and burying of the cremated remains would have been markedly different from the ways that unburnt bodies were experienced and treated. In addition to a different ritual process, cremation involved associations with divergent materials and substances. Some differences in the frequencies of artefacts found in inhumation versus cremation rites are to be expected due to the destructive nature of the cremation rite. However, practical considerations do not explain the contrasting occurrences of many artefacts. Some objects are far more common with inhumations while others are more widespread among cremation burials.

Knives and weaponry are frequently found in the inhumation rite and their occurrence has been shown to relate to aspects of the deceased’s identity. In contrast, these iron objects are rare in cremation burials. This is despite the fact that iron items are the most likely to survive the flames and that many fragments of artefacts made from less durable materials like ivory, glass, and non-ferrous metals frequently survived the funeral fire to be collected and buried in the cinerary urns with the ashes (see below). It may be the case that weapons and knives were not employed in the pre-cremation and cremation rites. Alternatively, if these artefacts were employed in cremation ceremonies, they were taken away and recirculated among the living either before or after the cremation. In either scenario, weapons and knives were deliberately dissociated from the physical remains of the dead and not employed in the construction of the identities and memories of the deceased.

Other objects are found in comparable quantities in both cremation and inhumation rites, but the contrasting ritual processes gave them different appearances to mourners and onlookers. Whereas objects associated with the inhumed dead would vanish when the body was interred (or possibly earlier given the evidence that many metal objects were concealed within textile coverings and coffins), objects that had undergone cremation bore visible testimony to their transformation through the signs of melting, breakage and distortion by the heat of the pyre. While this can be regarded as an inevitable consequence of the cremation process, it had a marked effect on the post-cremation appearance of the artefacts associated with the corpse. Although many objects

would be distorted and fragmented beyond recognition, some would have remained recognizable when carefully collected and placed in the cinerary urns before burial.  

Through choosing to include them in the urns rather than leave them on the pyre or separate them from the cremated bone, these artefacts may have been regarded as having an active role in the post-cremation rites. Like the bones themselves, perhaps the burnt and fragmented objects emphasized the process of transformation undergone by the deceased.

Other artefacts were much more common in cremation than in inhumation graves, suggesting that they played a special role in constructing the identities and memories of the cremated dead through the post-cremation rituals. These are pots, animal remains, toilet implements and combs. Pots are sometimes found as accessory vessels in inhumation burials, but the vast majority of cremated remains were placed in ceramic urns. While plain pots are found, these urns frequently bear complex decorative schemes incorporating a range of incised, stamped and plastic decorative motifs. Great care was taken in placing the cremated remains within pots and consequently it may be possible to regard the pots as representing a new ‘skin’ or ‘surface’ of a metaphorical ‘body’ created for the dead in the post-cremation rites. The aim may have been for the various materials that made up the burial deposit to reconstitute the integrity of the corpse lost through cremation.

The cremation deposit was frequently composed of animal, as well as human, cremated bone. A range of species including horses, cattle, sheep/goats and pigs were sacrificed and their remains placed on the pyre to accompany the dead. This practice contrasts with the inhumation rite where animal remains are rarely found; either animal sacrifice was not important in the inhumation rite, or when beasts were slaughtered their remains were disposed of elsewhere. In either case it appears that no attempt was made to create intimate connection between the deceased person and animals as we find in cremation ceremonies. Here it is not simply that specially killed animals (perhaps important symbols of wealth whether they were gifts or possessions) were placed on the

24 The precise methods and care taken in retrieving bones and objects from the pyre are difficult to determine due to the degree of post-depositional fragmentation that occurs in cremation burials. A survey of ethnographic evidence shows that when attempts are made to retrieve bone from pyres, mourners are easily able to identify and recognize fragments of bones and artefacts, and to make informed choices over how and to what extent they wish to treat the remains; H. Williams, ‘Burnt Germans’.


26 A cross-cultural review of the ethnographic, anthropological and sociological literature has shown the social, cosmological, ontological and mnemonic importance that can be attached to the post-cremation disposal of ‘cremains’: see Williams, ‘Burnt Germans’, pp. 132–79.

27 Myres, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery; Richards, Anglo-Saxon Cremation Urns.

pyre with the deceased. Equally important was that no effort was taken to differentiate human and animal bones in the post-cremation rites; usually both were collected from the pyre and mixed within the cinerary urn. On some occasions, however, the sacrificed animals were interred separately, sometimes in their own pots. This attention to the continuing close relationship between animals and people in the post-cremation rite suggests that the animals were more than simply symbols of wealth. They may have been regarded as essential components of the deceased’s changing personhood, perhaps allowing the deceased’s proper transformation to a new state of being, an argument I have developed elsewhere.29

Portable artefacts were also deliberately and preferentially selected for burial with the cremated remains. The most commonly found items are toilet implements of bronze and iron including tweezers, shears, razors and earscoops. Some of these were miniature items that could not have been used by the living, while others show no signs of fire. Together with their frequency, this evidence suggests that toilet artefacts were more than personal grooming items, but intentional ‘grave-goods’ added to the urns after the cremation and holding a special role in the post-cremation rites. If animals and the pots were included in the burial to construct a new identity for the deceased person, then these items were also appropriate for this purpose. They were linked to the maintenance of the body’s surface during life and hence in the repeated construction of the self. They may also have been used in the corpse’s preparation for the pyre and hence considered polluted through intimate contact with the dead. In the case of the full-sized tweezers, it is even possible that they were used to sift through and select bones from the pyre debris. As items closely connected with the body of the deceased, it is possible that toilet artefacts may have been employed to articulate metaphorically the remaking of the deceased’s ‘new body’ by mourners. In Hertz’s terms, this would be a rite of incorporation, serving to reconstitute the personhood of the deceased following the conflagration of the body on the pyre.30

This evidence suggests that the two rites selectively enhanced the association of different objects with the dead. Hence, cremation and inhumation should not be seen as alternative means of achieving the same end. Both involved different ritual sequences, technologies of transformation, and the deployment of contrasting forms of material culture.31

31 Williams, ‘Arm’s Length’.
Material culture as memory

Combs from early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials

All these elements – animal remains, ceramic urns and toilet sets – created a distinctive social identity for the dead in cremation rites by emphasizing the remembering and forgetting of the deceased’s identity in life. Yet the key to understanding the significance of all these artefacts and materials may lie with the final category of object frequently associated with cremation burials – bone and antler combs. After glass beads (the remains of necklaces used to adorn the body or added to the pyre as gifts from mourners), combs are the most common artefacts placed with the cremated dead (Figs 2–5). Like tweezers and razors, combs were also associated with the management of the body’s surface. Why were these particular objects associated with the cremated dead? How did this promote a distinctive form of social remembrance? The rest of this paper will focus on the role of combs in the cremation burial rite and seek answers to these questions.

While combs of wood, metal and ivory are known from early medieval contexts, bone and antler combs are common finds on early medieval sites across northern Europe and Scandinavia. Combs have always been

Fig. 5 The ten most commonly found artefacts in early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials.

recognized as an important part of the Anglo-Saxon cremation rite and are found in the cremation burials of the Late Roman and Migration Periods of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia. However, in the British literature at least, they have rarely received the attention they deserve. Certainly the presence of combs in cremation graves was frequently noted in antiquarian and archaeological excavation reports, where they are discussed in relation to Anglo-Saxon art, technology, chronology, and cultural affinities based on comb form and decoration. However, their specific significance and role in the cremation rite has only occasionally been addressed, and always in a cursory fashion. A rare attempt to explain their occurrence was made by the nineteenth-century Lincolnshire archaeologist, the Reverend Edward Trollope. In the *Archaeological Journal* he stated:

I feel convinced that it was customary with the Saxons of Lincolnshire to deposit these fragments [of combs] with their dead, the remaining portions being probably kept as reminiscences of lost relatives by those who first gave the bodies of the deceased to the fire, and then gathered up the fragments of their bones, which they deposited in urns and confided to the earth . . .

Trollope’s account appears unique in nineteenth-century reports in attempting to explain the presence of combs in a fragmented state in cremation burials. It is equally difficult to find explanations of combs in more recent studies. T.C. Lethbridge’s influential comments concerning the combs he recovered from cinerary urns at Lackford in Suffolk

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34 Combs have been recognized among the contents of cremation urns since the first detailed description of urns from Walsingham in Norfolk by the seventeenth-century antiquary Thomas Browne, see T. Browne, *Hydrotaphia, Urn-Burial; with an account of some urns found at Brampton in Norfolk* (London, 1893 [1698]), pp. 21, 29. Discussions of combs formed an important element of the characteristics that first led mid-nineteenth-century archaeologists to define the burials as ‘Anglo-Saxon’: see J.M. Kemble, ‘Burial and Cremation’, *Archaeological Journal* 12 (1855), pp. 309–37, at p. 316; J.M. Kemble, ‘On Mortuary Urns found at Stade-on-the-Elbe, and other parts of North Germany, now in the Museum of the Historical Society of Hannover’, *Archaeologia* 36 (1856), pp. 270–83, at p. 275; T. Wright, ‘On Recent Discoveries of Anglo-Saxon Antiquities’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 2 (1847), pp. 50–9, at p. 59. Culture-historical approaches of the twentieth century regarded combs as objects of personal adornment and evidence of Anglo-Saxon artistic tendencies and technical abilities, yet few interpretations were offered of their presence in the burial context, e.g. Myres, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery*. More recent studies have followed this trend, focusing on terminology and typology, e.g. P. Galloway, ‘Note on Descriptions of Bone and Antler Combs’, *Medieval Archaeology* 20 (1976), pp. 154–6; the technology of comb making, e.g. MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn*; and their cultural affiliations, e.g. A. MacGregor, ‘Barred Combs of Frisian Type in England’, *Medieval Archaeology* 19 (1975), pp. 195–8.
provide the only explicit interpretation that I have discovered in the twentieth-century literature. It is worth quoting at length:

It has been observed that the inclusion of these objects [combs and toilet implements] in cremations is in a different category from that of the partly burnt or melted things which are found in burials. The combs, tweezers and shears were invariably unburnt when they were placed in the funerary urn. The combs, in practically every case, had been deliberately broken. Their inclusion in the urn was clearly magical. They were objects so closely associated with the personality of the dead individual that no one must be allowed to use them again. Combs, tweezers, and shears were in each case associated with the hair of the dead person and, as we know, the hair could be used for sympathetic magic. These toilet articles were therefore placed with the dead to prevent any unauthorized person, or demon, using them for an evil purpose. The comb in particular had to be deliberately ‘killed’. As the original belief grew weaker, small dummy or token copies were put in the urns as symbols of the real things. These were often very roughly made.36

In the light of more recent findings we can cast doubt on Lethbridge’s generalizations that all toilet implements and combs were unburnt and deliberately broken and that miniatures are chronologically later than full-sized objects. His interpretation may be flawed in other respects. For instance, Lethbridge does not explain why combs, and their association with hair, were especially important in cremation ceremonies. Certainly he does not address why combs and toilet implements were associated with the cremated remains when the hair of the deceased had clearly been destroyed during the cremation. Moreover, his specific interpretation in terms of sympathetic magic is only one among many possibilities for the importance of hair manipulation in mourning ceremonies (see below) and sits uneasily with the funerary context in which combs were discovered. Yet Lethbridge’s interpretation is important in suggesting a ritual significance for the presence of combs in the cremation rite.

More recent and systematic studies have tended to focus on the social and symbolic roles of artefacts in early Anglo-Saxon graves in reflecting, or perhaps constituting, the social identity of the deceased through the actions of mourners.37 Approaching the subject from these perspectives, both Julian Richards and Catherine Hills have identified that certain comb types are more common with particular age categories, although

they are found with both sexes. There are tendencies for them to be found in wealthier burials, with certain other categories of grave-goods and with certain urn forms and decorative schemes.\textsuperscript{38} These are patterns that will be discussed further below. Moreover, it can be observed that, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, combs formed an integral part of the high status cremation barrow-burial rite as found at Sutton Hoo.\textsuperscript{39} This evidence hints that combs could form part of the social symbolism of the cremation rite, used to articulate the social identity of the dead individual in relation to the mourners. However, this approach also has its problems. The symbolic approach to grave-goods adopted by many Anglo-Saxon archaeologists and followed by Richards and Hills fails to explain why the functions, materiality and biography of the particular signifier (in this case combs) encouraged its use as a symbol for the signified (the dead person’s identity). Consequently, this approach sees a comb as one of many arbitrary ‘signs’ related to the age, gender and other aspects of personal identity.\textsuperscript{40} In this sense, a symbolic interpretation does not engage with the ways in which the practice of comb making, use, fragmentation and disposal, interacted with the structuring principles influencing their meanings and uses, to conceive of a practical logic (or \textit{habitus}) that made them appropriate for burial with the dead.\textsuperscript{41}

A further difficulty with symbolic interpretations of grave-goods and of particular relevance to the understanding of combs in cremation graves, is that symbolic interpretations assume that an object was buried in order to reflect a static social category (whether real or idealized) that the deceased held in life. Certainly numerous commentators have noted that the ‘dead do not bury themselves’ and that mourners influence how the dead are treated. Consequently, artefacts may reflect the concerns and strategies of mourners or perhaps the cosmologies and ideologies predominant in that society, rather than the identity of the deceased.\textsuperscript{42} Yet a point that is less frequently made, is that the very aim of mortuary practices is not usually to portray a static identity for the


\textsuperscript{40} This is a typical criticism of symbolic and structural approaches to material culture: see I. Hodder, \textit{Reading the Past} (Cambridge, 1986); C. Tilley, \textit{Material Culture as Text} (London, 1990), pp. 123–6.


\textsuperscript{42} Lucy, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Way of Death}; M. Parker Pearson, \textit{The Archaeology of Death and Burial} (Stroud, 1999).
deceased but to mediate the transformation of both mourners and the deceased between identities. This is where remembrance becomes important, since it is through the selective remembering and forgetting influenced by the use of material culture, that the transformation between states can be achieved and the dead are situated in relation to personal and group histories and myths. Therefore, while magical and social/symbolic interpretations address the presence of combs in the cremation rite it is, in fact, Trollope’s account composed two centuries ago that gets us closest to appreciating the possible mnemonic motivations that encouraged the association of bone and antler combs with the cremated dead.

**A new analysis of combs in early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials**

In order to explore the significance of bone and antler combs from cremation graves, an analysis was undertaken of a large database of almost five thousand early Anglo-Saxon cremation graves incorporating the rich data from the sites of Newark, Sancton and Spong Hill.43

The evidence confirms that combs are the second most frequently found artefact-type recovered from cremation graves (Fig. 5). They are only rare or absent from some small samples of graves from mixed-rite cemeteries,44 and from cemeteries like South Elkington where poor bone preservation and limited post-excavation analysis might explain their absence (Tables 1 and 2).45 The variations in the frequency of combs between cemeteries is difficult to assess given that bone, antler and ivory objects have not been adequately identified at many sites. For instance, at Sancton and Spong Hill, many small and fragmentary traces of artefacts made from these materials were only identified once examined by bone specialists. Consequently, it is likely that the frequency of combs has been underestimated at cemeteries investigated less thoroughly, and in some cases completely overlooked. The larger samples of graves from Newark, Sancton and Spong Hill may perhaps provide the most reliable data on comb frequency. At each site, between twelve per cent and fifteen per cent of graves contained combs. Yet even these percentages should be regarded as minimum figures because soil conditions, plough damage and methods of retrieval and analysis may have led to combs being overlooked. In order to provide a clearer impression of the frequency of combs at these sites we can examine the occurrence

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of artefacts recovered from only undisturbed and complete burials (Table 2). In these graves, combs were even more common: at least one-quarter of graves at Spong Hill and Sancton, and at least one-third at Newark, had combs buried in them. In short, in graves that are relatively well preserved, excavated and recorded, at least one in four cremation burials contained a comb. It is evident that their use in the mortuary rite was not exclusive to a small minority, but was employed throughout the buried population.
Many different types of comb are found in the burials – both simple and composite, single- and double-sided.\(^{46}\) However, the majority are single-sided triangular composite combs (Fig. 2). Rarer forms include the single-sided barred and zoomorphic composite, and double-sided composite varieties (Table 3). There are also a small number of round-backed and single-piece combs. Finally there are instances of miniature combs that could not have had any practical use and therefore could be interpreted as symbolic objects, perhaps made especially for the funeral.

We have seen that Lethbridge believed that combs were placed as unburned, deliberately broken fragments in the Lackford urns. A full analysis of combs to test this assertion has yet to be made. Kinsley finds limited evidence for burning among the Newark material.\(^{47}\) For Spong Hill, McKinley partially contradicts Lethbridge’s statement, noting that many items placed on the exterior of the body (such as combs worn in the hair of the deceased) could easily fall away from the fire and display no evidence of burning to indicate their presence on the pyre. There is also evidence from Spong Hill that a minority of combs, particularly triangular single-sided varieties, show signs of burning and therefore appear to have been cremated with the body.\(^{48}\) Yet, the fact that many combs show no signs of burning seems to support the argument that, in some cases, they were grave-goods (as opposed to pyre goods) added to the urns after cremation.

Deliberate fragmentation is also difficult to prove; combs could be broken during a lifetime of use, accidentally during the cremation and post-cremation rites, or afterwards due to post-depositional disturbance and during the excavation process. Yet the extreme rarity of near-complete combs together with the frequent discovery of half-combs or small

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**Table 3** The frequency of combs found in undisturbed cremation burials from the three largest cemetery sites included in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Newark</th>
<th>Sancton</th>
<th>Spong hill</th>
<th>Other sites</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type Unknown</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangular</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barred &amp; Zoomorphic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double-Sided</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miniature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{46}\) Galloway, ‘Notes on Descriptions of Bone and Antler Combs’.

\(^{47}\) Kinsley, *Newark*, p. 19.

\(^{48}\) McKinley, *Spong Hill*, pp. 90–1. The full evidence for burning among the Spong Hill combs has yet to be published.
fragments suggests that portions were deliberately added to the burial. \(^{49}\) Practices may have varied, but in many cases it appears that parts of combs could suffice in the burial, perhaps allowing the remnant of the item to be circulated among the mourners.

The combs placed in graves could have been the property of the dead person and used by him or her during their lifetime. Equally they could have been gifts presented by mourners to the deceased. They may even have been used to prepare the corpse for the pyre and therefore been regarded as intimately linked to the body through the successive stages of the funerary process. The use of combs may have varied and the details of ritual practices are inevitably lost to us. What we can say is that combs were often consciously selected as an integral part of the contents of the final burial deposit ending the obsequies at many early Anglo-Saxon funerals.

Yet, not every burial contained a comb, and as Catherine Hills and Julian Richards have argued, the social identity of the deceased appeared to have had a bearing on the provision of these artefacts. In this sample, combs are common in both male and female graves although there is a slight female bias (Fig. 6). Yet all categories of comb

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49 A.G. Kinsley noted that in two, or possibly three cases, combs from Newark appear to have been sawn into pieces. This is supported by the preponderance of end-fragments in the Newark material: Kinsley, *Newark*, p. 19. This argument is supported by the recent study of the large and well-preserved cremation burials from Cleatham, where combs rarely showed signs of burning and most were only found as fragments; K. Leahy, pers. comm.
could, however, be placed with males and females (Figs 6 and 7). The correlation with the age of the interred individual is more pronounced (Figs 8 and 9). While Richards noted that combs are common in all age categories apart from infants, different patterns are observed in the present sample. Comb fragments of unknown type are found in similar frequencies at both Spong Hill and other cemeteries among infant, child and adult burials. Single-sided triangular combs are found in all age groups but are rarer in infant graves. Other comb types show different associations between cemeteries. At Spong Hill, double-sided combs are most frequently found with infants while barred zoomorphic combs are more commonly found with children. At other cemeteries, both types are found only with adults. While this may reflect different practices between cemeteries it could equally reflect biases in the sample sizes and the quality of the results between cemeteries. Finally, miniature combs are found predominantly in infant graves at Spong Hill. The choice to bury the dead with a comb may therefore have been related to the social category of the dead person but these patterns are far from clear-cut, and all age and gender groups could be buried with a comb. This evidence shows that combs could be used to distinguish between different categories of the cremated dead but that the provision of combs was a common theme linking the funerals of many different social categories.

50 See also: Richards, Anglo-Saxon Cremation Urns, p. 127.
51 The definitions used are a simplification of McKinley’s osteological sexing and ageing categories. For sexing: male or female = McKinley’s ‘certain male or female’; possible male or female = McKinley’s ‘probable’ and ‘possible’ male or female. For ageing: infant = 0–4 years, child = 5–18 years, adult = 18+ years. See McKinley, Spong Hill, pp. 11–21.
There appears to be no significant correlation between the presence of combs and either the sacrifice of particular species of animals or the presence of inscribed, plastic or stamped decoration found on the cinerary urns. However, there seems to be a correspondence between...
the presence of combs and the provision of certain other grave- and pyre goods. Supporting the osteological evidence, combs can be found with every category of artefact including both artefacts with a female bias (e.g. brooches and glass beads) and those with a male bias (e.g. tweezers and bone beads), showing that they were not exclusive to one particular gender group. Yet their frequent association with razors underscores the significance of combs as items for maintaining the appearance of the body (Fig. 10). Combs are also more common in wealthier cremation burials, hinting at their use as a sign of status (Fig. 11).

We can summarize these results as follows:

- Combs are the second most common artefact type found in cremation graves.
- Whether put on the pyre or directly in the urn, they were often placed with the dead in the post-cremation rites.
- There are suggestions that on at least some occasions, they were placed with the dead in a fragmentary condition.
- It is possible that the missing parts of combs were retained among the mourners as mementoes.
- Combs are found buried with almost equal frequency with males and females, although slightly more commonly with females.

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Fig. 10 The percentage of the most common artefact types found in association with combs in cremation burials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artefact Type</th>
<th>% of Artefact Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glass Bead</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweezers</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shears</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blade</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nail &amp; Rivets</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Bead</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass Vessel</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spindle Whorl</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Piece</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Razor</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• They are common among infants, children and adults, although certain comb-types are more likely to occur with particular age groups.
• Combs were clearly used to differentiate age and possibly gender groups, but they were not exclusive to particular groups. They were widely used in burials irrespective of the age and sex of the deceased.
• Combs are most frequently found in association with toilet implements, particularly razors, supporting their significance in the management of hair and the body’s surface.

**Combs in context**

The archaeological evidence presents a strong case for a special significance for bone and antler combs in relation to the cremation rite of eastern England in the early Anglo-Saxon period. This is supported by a comparison with the types and frequency of combs discovered in other kinds of early Anglo-Saxon contexts.

The particular significance of combs in the cremation rite is supported by their relative rarity in contemporary early Anglo-Saxon inhumations (Fig. 12). Many have explained the low frequency of combs from Anglo-Saxon inhumations in taphonomic terms. Bone and antler objects are rarely found in good condition in the well-drained and

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acidic soils of many early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries.\textsuperscript{54} This is particularly the case with reference to inhumation graves. Exposed to the soil in these conditions, combs will often be destroyed while those burnt and/or contained within an urn have a higher likelihood of survival.\textsuperscript{55} However, others have suggested that soil conditions cannot account for the disparity in frequency in combs between the rites.\textsuperscript{56} There are a number of arguments to support this view. The first point to be made is that combs are probably under-represented in both the cremation and inhumation rites. Just as combs in inhumation graves are damaged by the soil matrix, so in cremation, the protection provided by the urn is counteracted by the damage caused by cremation and possible deliberate fragmentation. Consequently, in some cases only the iron rivets are testimony to the former presence of a comb in a grave.

To this argument we can add a detailed survey of forty-nine Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries of the fifth to seventh centuries from across southern and eastern England. At some cemeteries studied, the absence of combs probably reflects the overall poor bone preservation.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} MacGregor et al., \textit{Craft, Industry and Everyday Life}.
\textsuperscript{57} E.g. B. Green, A. Rogerson, and S.G. White, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Morning Thorpe, Norfolk. East Anglian Archaeology No. 36} (Dereham, 1987); Hills, ‘Barred Zoomorphic Combs’, p. 103; Hills et al., \textit{Spong Hill Part III}.
However, even in inhumations with good bone preservation, combs are rare. Also, when present, combs can come from inhumations with both poor and good bone preservation. In addition, if combs were as common in inhumations as cremations, then one would expect the bronze and iron rivets to be common finds even when the bone and antler have decomposed. This does not appear to be the case, and shield and buckle rivets are much more commonly encountered than those likely to be the remains of combs. A final point is that while combs are rare on some settlement sites, they are found at others and in far greater frequency than might be expected from the evidence of inhumation graves. While it is accepted that combs are under-represented in inhumation graves as a result of post-depositional processes, the difference between the two rites still needs to be explained in terms of the choices made by mourners at the funeral.

The difference between the rites is more than merely one of comb frequency. Combs appear to be used in different ways in the inhumation rite. As in cremation graves, combs can be found in both male and female inhumations. Yet in inhumation graves, an even stronger bias exists towards females than in cremation burials suggesting that they had a more restricted use as personal grooming items (Fig. 13). Combs are also more restricted to adults in inhumation contexts (Fig. 14). Both patterns suggest that combs held a broader significance in the funerals of a wider range of age and gender groups in the cremation rite.

Still more strikingly, the kinds of comb being buried with the dead contrast markedly between cremation and inhumation graves (Fig. 15). While cremation graves commonly contain single-sided combs (triangular, barred zoomorphic, round-backed, single-piece and miniature combs) these are almost absent from inhumation graves where double-sided types of comb dominate the assemblage. This pattern could be partly explained by chronology, reflecting the earlier date of some


59 The ‘final-phase’ cemetery at Harford Farm, Norfolk, provides an ideal example of this: K. Penn, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass, 1989–91 Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Harford Farm, Caistor St Edmund, Norfolk*, *East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 92* (Norwich, 2000), p. 61.


cremation graves. Yet combs are as often found in cremation burials of
the sixth century (dateable by their stamped pottery) as in fifth-century
graves.64 Furthermore, both double-sided and single-sided varieties are
found together on the West Stow settlement site that begins in the late

64 Combs at Cleatham were found throughout the chronological sequence established for the
cemetery by Kevin Leahy; Leahy, pers. comm.
fifth century and continues through the seventh century (Fig. 15). This suggests that different combs, perhaps serving different functions, were more appropriate for one rite than the other. In summary, it appears that combs were usually retained by mourners during inhumation ceremonies while in cremation rites it was often considered appropriate to deposit combs in the urn.

The materiality and symbolism of combs and hair

Let us now look in more detail at the character of the combs to suggest a ‘practical logic’ to their use in the cremation rite. Studies of combs have shown that the vast majority are made from deer antler, either from animals killed during the hunt, or more likely from antlers seasonally shed and collected for the purpose of comb making. Even if combs were carefully curated, a range of factors such as accidental breakage and loss, ritual breakage and their disposal in funerary rites shortened their ‘life expectancies’ and may have kept demand for combs high even in scattered rural communities. In a society that valued these items for personal grooming and for use in ritual practices, their production may have been an important craft and was certainly a skilled activity. Consequently, while combs were not rare, they are likely to

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65 West, West Stow.
66 MacGregor, Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn; MacGregor et al., Craft, Industry and Everyday Life.
have been cherished and valuable items. This argument is supported by the high level of ornamentation on many of them; experiments have shown that more time and labour went into their decoration than into making them functional.\(^{67}\)

It is also important to recognize that combs may not only have gained significance through their association with the dead. Combs may have held metaphorical associations based on their provenance and materiality. For instance, Alcuin refers to an ivory comb that he received as a gift as a ‘remarkable animal’ with ‘two heads and sixty teeth’.\(^ {68}\) While this is simply a poetic abstraction, it suggests some of the metaphorical associations that combs may have held in early medieval communities. The possibility that combs were artefacts imbued with personality may derive from the awareness that they were made from a material shed from the heads of wild animals and were subsequently used in the management of hair on the heads of people. It may be significant that the texture and appearance of bone and antler combs inevitably resembles unworked animal bone, but also human skeletal material, encouraging a special association with the bones of the dead. Also, antler is ambiguous, being somewhat like hair, and in other ways like bone. Both antler and human hair were materials that were extensions of the body, yet could be removed without endangering the well-being of animals or people. Also, when worked, antler smells like the burning of human hair.\(^ {69}\) Such material observations may have encouraged associations between animals and people, and enhanced the association of combs with the burnt bones of animals and people in the cremation rite.

As objects of value when produced, exchanged and used, combs would have been intimately connected with the presentation and management of the social person in life. In this sense they were artefacts not only with a set function, but through their routine use in presenting and managing head, facial and perhaps also body hair, they were integral to the social construction of the body and selfhood.\(^ {70}\) Moreover, such objects were not simply used to construct the self, but also helped to define relationships between people. Expectations of correct appearance may have defined individuals as members of age, gender and other groups, and distinguished them from others. Meanwhile, rather than simply cultivating personal appearance, combing the hair and beard may have been social activities performed by others, defining relative

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\(^{68}\) MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn*, p. 79.

\(^{69}\) H. Adams, pers. comm.

status, identities and relationships between individuals. Furthermore, as with other objects, they could have been gifts, given and received during social gatherings and perhaps also during rites of passage during the life cycle such as birth, initiation and marriage.

The role of hair in personal appearance and perhaps in constituting social and sacred identities is supported by the wider material culture of early medieval Europe. Depictions of human figures are rare in early Anglo-Saxon England and unusual instances, such as the clay pot lid depicting a seated figure from Spong Hill, have no recognizable facial or head hair. Other artefacts do, however, portray human faces and often their elaborate long hair, moustaches and beards are emphasized. For instance, many button, applied and saucer brooches, and even some cruciform brooches, incorporate human male faces in this way. Although less relevant to Migration Period England, it is tempting to mention the long-haired warriors depicted on the Sutton Hoo helmet and the depictions of riders with flowing hair upon Scandinavian Migration Period bracteates, often interpreted as early depictions of the god Woden. Once again the link with animals is emphasized as in some cases the head hair is portrayed in the form of a bird. Similar sacred and/or noble associations could explain the prominent representation of long hair on Scandinavian Migration Period bracteates. From the Viking period, the stylized carved wooden heads with seemingly well-combed beards from the rich ninth-century grave from Oseberg in Norway provide another illustration of the social and aesthetic importance of grooming for an ideal appearance of the aristocracy and/or deities in early medieval societies.

The possibility that both hair and combs had a pre-Christian or secular funerary significance is given further support by the study of bog bodies from the Scandinavian and British Iron Age, many of which show evidence of distinctive hair arrangements that may have been...
ritual acts of transformation accompanying their sacrificial killing.⁷⁹ Although from the Christian context of Merovingian France, the unusual Frankish gravestone from Niederdollendorf is worth mentioning in this context. On one side a warrior is depicted (perhaps the deceased) seemingly in the act of combing his hair, perhaps to articulate the deceased’s movement to an afterlife existence.⁸⁰ Combs appear as an important symbol on funerary monuments from other parts of Europe: most notably, they are frequently depicted on Pictish symbol stones.⁸¹ Let us now turn to the historical and literary sources to search for further evidence through which to understand funerary comb use in Anglo-Saxon England.

### Hair and combs in historical sources

Direct literary and historical evidence for the meanings and significance of combs is hard to find for Anglo-Saxon England, yet there is a range of disparate evidence from across early medieval Europe that, by analogy, suggests the potential significance of hair and of objects used in its management in constructing and transforming identities and concepts of personhood. Tacitus, writing at the end of the first century, records the practice among the Suebi of combing the hair into a knot on the side of the head and twisting the hair backwards so that it bristles, perhaps kept in place with soap.⁸² In the tenth century, Ibn Fadlan recorded the Viking practice of daily washing hands, face and hair in a basin of water and then arranging the hair with a comb.⁸³ This resonates with John of Wallingford’s comment in the twelfth century that Scandinaevians combed their hair and beards daily.⁸⁴

Further sources indicate the specific social importance associated with hair and its management. The most familiar case of social status invested in hair is that of the Merovingian ‘long-haired’ kings. Their long hair is thought to embody status, vitality and perhaps even magical power. It was certainly symbolic of their nobility, authority and perhaps also their claim to divine descent.⁸⁵ The management of hair could

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⁸⁴ MacGregor, *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn*, p. 73.
articulate vertical social differentiation between groups and individuals;\textsuperscript{86} aspects of gender, age and profession;\textsuperscript{87} and even ethnicity.\textsuperscript{88} For example, in the case of the fifth-century (Continental) Saxons, Sidonius Apollinaris records their practice of shaving the front of the head, giving the distinctive appearance of an elongated forehead.\textsuperscript{89} Consequently, it may be possible to look to the provision of combs as more than objects with a practical purpose, but as central to the construction of personhood and group identity through the \textit{habitus} of their regular use.\textsuperscript{90} Just as clothing was an important medium for early medieval social display and identity negotiation,\textsuperscript{91} hair, beards and their maintenance and display, were also employed in this way.

Combs gained their role in articulating identities from their function in daily activities, but they are also known to have played a more overt role in early medieval ritual practices. Hair may have held associations that the church thought inappropriate as it is mentioned in relation to both sanctioned and illicit ritual and magical practices. For instance, in the ninth century Hincmar of Rheims mentions that hair from human heads and genitals could be used in conjuring.\textsuperscript{92} Most of the evidence, however, comes from a thoroughly Christianized milieu and is of doubtful value for understanding pre-Conversion England. For example, the association of hair with vitality has biblical origins and may have encouraged the attribution of magical properties to hair, at least among aristocracy and royalty. Hair could also be among the relics of

\textsuperscript{86} E. James, ‘Bede and the Tonsure Question’, \textit{Peritia} 3 (1984), pp. 85–98, at p. 93. The Visigothic king, Theodoric, frequently had his nose hairs plucked by his barber, again showing a possible link between status, identity and the management of hair, referenced in: Baldwin Brown, \textit{Arts of Early England}, IV, 592. Among the Suebi, Tacitus recorded that the more elaborate the style, the higher the person’s status. Tacitus argued that this hair design not only distinguished the Suebi from other tribes, but also distinguished between freemen and slaves among the Suebi: Tacitus, \textit{Agricola and Germany}, p. 57.

\textsuperscript{87} Letting hair grow unmanaged is mentioned by Tacitus as a practice conducted by warriors prior to their first kill: Tacitus, \textit{Agricola and Germany}, p. 53. For the importance of managing hair prior to battle see p. 57.


\textsuperscript{89} ‘Here in Bordeaux we see the blue-eyed Saxon afraid of the land, accustomed as he is to the sea; along the extreme edges of his pate the razor, refusing to restrain its bit, pushes back the frontier of his hair and, with the growth thus clipped to the skin, his head is reduced and his face enlarged.’ Sidonius, \textit{Poems and Letters}, trans. W.B. Anderson, 10 vols (Harvard, 1965), VIII, 9, 5. For a recent discussion of Sidonius’s view of Saxons, see K. Dark, \textit{Britain and the End of the Roman Empire}, (Stroud, 2000), pp. 25–6.

\textsuperscript{90} Bourdieu, \textit{Logic of Practice}; for ethnicity constructed through \textit{habitus}, see S. Jones, \textit{The Archaeology of Ethnicity} (London, 1997).

\textsuperscript{91} See also: Stoodley, \textit{Spindle and the Spear}, pp. 105–18.

\textsuperscript{92} Flint, \textit{Rise of Magic}, pp. 64, 314.
saints that circulated in early medieval Europe. The social and mnemonic significance of hair and combs could, however, have transcended the Conversion, and even Christian ritual uses might have been alternatives to pre-Christian practices. While the length of hair and its maintenance could define identity and hold magical qualities, so the cutting of hair, as in clerical tonsuring, denoted a symbolic change of social and spiritual status. Religious concepts of sanctity and purity are clearly linked to hair and its management in the early church, and Isidore of Seville in the seventh century explicitly links the act of hair cutting with the cleansing of sin. The cutting of hair was ubiquitous in rites of passage such as baptism and mourning. It symbolized a range of relationships between individuals and between individuals and the sacred. As Edward James shows, hair cutting could serve as a sign of devotion, submission, and sacrifice, or figure in vows of allegiance and respect. It could also be used to enforce a status upon others and act as a sign of humiliation or punishment. During the Christian liturgy, the hair was combed as a sign of purity, and ivory liturgical combs have been recovered, most famously from the late seventh-century coffin of St Cuthbert.

Did hair and combs have other, specifically funerary and commemorative associations? The only clear and overt mnemonic significance of hair management is found in one meaning of the tonsure, as a memory of Christ’s passion. Medieval literary sources sometimes refer to mourners refraining from their usual practices of hair and beard management, and in the poem Beowulf the dishevelled nature of hair is used to symbolize the grief of a female mourner at the hero’s cremation.

In the absence of direct historical evidence, we must rely on analogy with the significance of hair in other liminal contexts and situations in

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95 James, ‘Bede and the Tonsure Question’, p. 88.
96 James, ‘Bede and the Tonsure Question’, pp. 89–91. The loss of hair as a punishment for unsocial acts such as adultery, as recorded by Tacitus, underpins the importance of hair for identity: Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, p. 47.
98 James, ‘Bede and the Tonsure Question’, p. 85.
99 ‘A woman of the Geats in grief sang out, the lament for this death. Loudly she sang, her hair bound up, the burden of her fear that evil days were destined for her . . . ’: M. Alexander (trans.), *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* (London, 1975), ll. 3150–3.
early medieval Europe. It is only a small step to suggesting that the hair of the dead may have also been managed and cut to reflect and articulate the deceased’s changing status through the funerary process. While not directly applicable to early Anglo-Saxon England, this evidence at least provides a broad context within which to situate the significance of combs in hair management during funerary rites and commemorative contexts.

**Cremation, hair and social memory**

In combination, the diverse and widely scattered early medieval sources suggest that hair and its manipulation could be a focus for the articulation of the transforming identity of the deceased during funerary practices. What they fail to provide is a precise insight into the ways in which cremation practices interacted to construct social memories through the manipulation of hair and associated artefacts. In order to gain this insight we must explore further afield, and investigate the rich ethnographic, anthropological and sociological literature concerning cremation rites across the globe. These sources do not provide a direct parallel for the situation in early Anglo-Saxon England, but they provide a set of possibilities that may inform our explanations of the mnemonic significance of artefacts and hair in cremation ceremonies.

Many anthropological studies have addressed the social and religious significance of hair, including how its appearance and management can be used to articulate the identity of the social person and their relations with others including aspects of age, gender, social status and ethnicity. Rooted in psychology or social function, early attempts to create cross-cultural generalizations concerning the meaning of hair length and hair cutting can be rejected. However, ethnographies provide evidence for the kinds of symbolism and associations that can be drawn from the material qualities of hair. These include the fact that hair can be cut without pain (and hence its ambiguous relationship with the body), its resistance to decay (unlike other bodily substances), and its continuous growth, even for a time after biological death. In particular, it has long been realized that the social and magical qualities attributed to hair in many cultures may be important during life cycle rites, including those

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100 James, ‘Bede and the Tonsure Question’, pp. 88–91.
101 C. Gosden, *Anthropology and Archaeology: A Changing Relationship* (London, 1999). There are many problems and pitfalls with ethnographic analogies. Here the ethnographic and anthropological evidence is used in the same way as the historical evidence from other regions and periods in Europe. They provide useful insights and possibilities, but in no way should be taken as direct parallels based on cross-cultural generalizations or assumptions of levels of social sophistication. See I. Hodder, *The Present Past* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 28–46.
surrounding death. Rituals and prohibitions not only surround the cutting of hair, but also the combing of hair and the disposal of hair once cut. Frequently, mourners symbolize and express their grief through the ritual treatment of their hair, either by cutting, shaving, or dressing the hair in a different manner, or by refraining from the usual practices of hair management. In this way, the management of hair can be a means of articulating the movement between states during funerary rites and serves to manage death pollution.

The hair of the dead may also be subject to manipulation. In many societies, as well as washing and clothing the body for the funeral, the hair is dressed, cut, shaved or washed. Yet the hair of the dead is ambiguous; as already noted it may be observed to grow after death and, unlike the flesh, remains intact after death. Furthermore, the hair may be regarded as an extension of the body, and through its alteration the identity of the dead is transformed together with that of the mourners. This is true in many societies that cremate their dead, such as the Tlingit of the American north-west coast where the hair of both the mourners and the deceased is prepared in a comparable manner during the funerary process.

Such practices and beliefs are so common as to be regarded by some anthropologists as near-universal aspects of funerary ritual worldwide, yet they have a distinctive resonance in relation to the treatment of the dead during cremation rites. Cremation involves the rapid dissolution of the physical form of the corpse followed by its rebuilding into a new form and ancestral identity through the collection, transformation and disposal of the ashes. In the light of this transformation, the hair of the dead can have a particular significance, since it is the first element to be burned by the pyre and hence symbolizes this process of dissolution through conflagration. Sometimes, the items used to prepare the body, such as combs, are deemed polluted and therefore are no longer useable

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106 Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*; Huntingdon and Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death*.
by the living and must accompany the corpse onto the pyre. In other instances, the hair of the deceased and its associated artefacts play more active roles in the pre- and post-cremation rites in contributing towards the construction of an image or symbolic ‘body’ for the deceased.

Some examples help to illustrate this argument. Among the Nivkh of north-east Siberia, for instance, combing the hair is prohibited during mourning. In addition, a hair is cut from the head of a female mourner and is used to serve as a symbolic ‘inner sole’ for the footwear needed by the dead to cross to the other world. The hair is incorporated into the shrine of the deceased with the cremated remains in the post-cremation rites. So in this case, while the body is dissolved, the hair is retained and used to create a mnemonic continuity between the pre-cremation and post-cremation rites and used to articulate the incorporation of the deceased into the afterlife and community of the dead. Among the Luiseno and Diegueno Indians of Southern California, one woman’s hair was cut off the day after the cremation and used later in the year to construct an image of the deceased at a feast to celebrate a number of deaths. Meanwhile, Rivers described how the Todas of southern India cut a lock of hair from the dead before cremating the corpse. Together with pieces of bone retrieved from the remains of the pyre, the hair is wrapped within two pieces of bark and kept throughout the liminal period. Months later at the second funeral the relics are opened up, rubbed with butter, and the hair and two pieces of the deceased’s skull are tied together and placed in an ornamental cloak. These are then placed upon a miniature pyre and given a symbolic second cremation to mark the end of the period of mourning. In all these instances, the hair is a powerful symbol of the separation of the living from the dead during cremation. Its role in post-cremation rites is to enact the transformation and incorporation of the dead into a new state of being, a new cosmological location, and a new social status in relation to the living.

The greatest detail concerning the relationship between the treatment of hair and the cremation process is found in accounts of north

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114 P. Vitebsky, *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India* (Cambridge, 1993).
Indian funerary rituals and these are worth describing at some length. Rituals focusing upon hair are found in the pre-cremation, cremation and post-cremation rites, punctuating and ensuring the proper transformation between states of the deceased’s physical and spiritual elements, and mourners. During the mourning period, the chief mourner, the funerary priest (Mahabrahman or great Brahman) and other mourners must abstain from shaving, or using soap or oil on their hair; nor may they wear shoes or a shirt. Also, female mourners must abstain from wearing cosmetics and cannot use ornaments that might constrain their hair. Consequently, mourner’s hair becomes dishevelled as a visible expression of grief. Indeed, the family barber for many castes has an important role as a ritual specialist during the funerary rite, maintaining the hair of those closest to the corpse. He tonsures the chief mourner at the cremation ground, and sometimes also the sons of the deceased. In other cases the corpse receives the same treatment, as in Brahman ritual where the body is shaved and cleaned of all faecal matter and the orifices are blocked with clarified butter prior to cremation.

The cremation is not the end of the funeral as the post-cremation rites aim to convert the dangerous ghost (pret) into an ancestor (pitr) by symbolically building a new ‘body’ for the dead. Balls of rice (pinda) are made and consumed by mourners leading up to, or during, the ten- and twelve-day ceremonies when the mourners are reintegrated into society and the dead achieve a new status as ancestors. The end of mourning involves many rituals including the barber shaving the head of mourners and paring their nails.

Why is hair particularly significant? In northern Indian Hindu belief, the extremities of the body are regarded as liminal and are foci for the symbolism of impurity, and the hair is believed to ‘soak up’ the

118 Parry, Death in Benares, p. 155.
119 Kaushik, ‘Symbolic Representations’, pp. 269–70, 277; Parry, Death in Benares, p. 76.
120 Parry, Death in Benares, p. 176.
121 Kaushik, ‘Symbolic Representations’, p. 277; Parry, Death in Benares.
pollution of death.125 Since the chief mourner is regarded as a ‘sacrificer’, pollution derives from the ‘sin’ of burning the flesh of the deceased, including the hairs on the skin. After this liminal period, the mourners’ hair must be cut since it has soaked up the sin of the act of cremation.126 The hair is one of the physical components of the body’s ‘flesh’ (deemed female) that is destroyed by cremation leaving the pure, white, (male) bone. Both mourners and the corpse need to be purified through the manipulation of hair.127 The physical manipulation of the corpse is therefore the means by which the deceased’s personhood is selectively remembered and forgotten.128 In this sense, the management of the surfaces and hair of both the dead and the mourners serve as incorporating practices of remembrance, changing the physical body as a means of affecting the way both the living and the dead are remembered.

**Conclusion**

In bones well burnt, fire makes a wall against itself . . . That devouring agent leaves almost allways a morsell for the Earth, whereof all things are but a colonie; and which, if time permits, the mother Element will have in their primitive masse again.129

Teeth, bones, and hair, give the most lasting defiance to corruption.130

This paper has explored the archaeological evidence with a more summary exploration of the historical and anthropological literature on combs, hair and cremation in order to understand the role of combs in the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite. It is argued that combs in the post-cremation rites of early Anglo-Saxon England can be understood as a strategy for social remembrance. Combs, retrieved in a fragmentary state from the pyre, or deliberately broken and placed in the cinerary urn, helped to reconstitute the dead into a new ancestral material form. Together with the human and animal bone, burnt artefacts and the ceramic urn used to enclose them, combs and toilet sets were selected and placed with the dead to articulate the building of a new ‘body’ for the dead. Combs, as well as toilet sets, had been used to maintain the

125 Parry, *Death in Benares*, p. 127; Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*.
Material culture as memory

The external surface of the body destroyed in the funeral fire and may have been used in the pre-cremation rites in preparing the body for the pyre. As mourners searched through the ashes at the pyre site and placed them in urns, the addition of combs and toilet sets may have been regarded as a necessary or auspicious means of ensuring the proper transformation of the dead. Following the ethnographic and historical evidence discussed above we may regard combs as symbols of vitality or regeneration serving to incorporate the dead into a new state in the post-cremation rites. Their efficacy built on their role as mnemonic devices connecting the living with the deceased and orchestrating the remembering and forgetting of the social person. Bones and material culture were retrieved, transported and buried together to articulate the social, ontological and cosmological transitions through which both the mourners and the dead had passed.131

From a Western perspective, in which the cremation is a destructive process and an end point for relations between the living and the dead, these rites make no sense. Similarly, for the seventeenth-century writer and antiquary Sir Thomas Browne in his commentary on the early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns from Walsingham, the focus on the physical remains of post-cremation rites was a fallacy. They were: ‘Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves, a fruitlesse continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as Emblems of mortal vanities’.132 Archaeologists have tended to share this perspective and have given primacy to the destructive act of cremation over the less spectacular but equally important post-cremation rites for which, paradoxically, archaeologists have greater evidence. However, many societies regard cremation as an act of separation that requires further obsequies to transform and incorporate the dead as an ancestor into the social memories of the community, rites that mediate remembrance.

The implications of emphasizing the essential and often important role of combs in social remembrance are manifold. If the use of material culture in social remembrance can be seen as an important means by which identities were reproduced and transformed in early medieval societies, then we are in a stronger position to explain and discuss the local and regional variations in mortuary practices in early Anglo-Saxon England. We are also better able to explain and engage with the social significance of early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites and the similarities between mortuary practices in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia.

131 Davies, Death, Ritual and Belief; Hertz, Death and the Right Hand; Huntingdon and Metcalf, Celebrations of Death.
132 Huntingdon and Metcalf, Celebrations of Death, p. 74.
and those among communities that developed in eastern England following the end of Roman rule. If these connections can be explained in terms of related ‘technologies of remembrance’ rather than loosely and vaguely through discussions of ‘cultural connections’, ‘invasions’ and ‘migrations’, then we can begin to formulate new models for understanding the role of mortuary practices in social change at the beginnings of the Migration Period. At the other end of the period, appreciating the mnemonic role of cremation and material culture enables us to re-appraise the changing form and contexts of burial rites in the ‘final-phase’ of the seventh century and beyond. Yet, as suggested at the beginning of this paper, the most far-reaching implication is that, rather than focusing on prestigious monuments and exotic artefacts, studies of social memory can engage equally with quite humble objects. Consequently, it might be possible to promote a new archaeological perspective in early medieval Europe, emphasizing the role of material culture as memory.

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