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# The Deer and the Viking

Viking passion for ornamental combs offers an insight into material networks in early-medieval Britain, says Steve Ashby

This article is about deer in the Viking Age (c. AD 850–1066). More particularly, it discusses certain aspects of the relationship between deer and people in this

period. It is clear that deer held a particular importance to the people of early-medieval Europe, and though on multiple grounds a case could be made for their symbolic, cosmological, or ritual significance, that is not the tack taken here.

Rather, my concern is with the practical and economic significance of deer. Quite apart from its role as a provider of high quality meat, and as the elite’s game animal of choice, probably even before the Norman Conquest, the deer was also the source of a key raw material: antler.

What we may very loosely term ‘skeletal materials’ – antler, bone, horn, and ivory – were

key raw materials in early-medieval craft.<sup>1</sup> While the decorative uses of ivory are well known,<sup>2</sup> those of the other materials are perhaps less so. Cattle horn was used for a

range of low-cost items, while bones (particularly the ribs and longbones of domestic mammals) were one of the most widely used resources of the pre-modern world. Indeed, prior to the development of plastics, bone was one of the most readily accessible and easily worked hardwearing materials one could hope to find. Its hardwearing nature also makes it invaluable to the archaeologist. Bone artefacts are far more commonly preserved

than are their wooden counterparts, which are dependent on exceptional preservation conditions (as at Coppergate, Viking age York, for instance) in order to survive.



Figure 1. An Anglo-Saxon comb from Burdale, Yorkshire. Made of red deer antler

Our many finds of bone objects and manufacturing debris show us that, together with metalwork, bone was central to the production of portable items, being worked on both professional and rudimentary, ad hoc bases, according to context. Thus, sheep ribs could be split and polished to produce mounts for boxes and caskets, pig fibulae could be quickly worked into rudimentary pins, and horse metapodials could be finished into serviceable ice skates.

However, one of the best represented personal items of the early medieval period is the hair comb (Fig. 1). Quite why hair combs were of such significance in the early-medieval period is a complex subject, and one which I have discussed at length elsewhere<sup>3,4</sup> but here it will suffice to say that they had a meaningful content that went beyond the purely hygienic. There were no doubt important status and identity considerations at play, as personal appearance has always been central to the identification of friends or strangers, and thus to the signalling of group membership. Moreover, the ability to spend significant time and resources on personal beautification was probably a privilege reserved only for freemen and women, and particularly for members of the elite. In some early-medieval contexts, hairstyles were even guarded as key symbols of royalty.<sup>5,6</sup>

Whatever their precise meaning, we know that combs were significant, as early-medieval people went to great lengths to manufacture them. In the Viking Age in particular, many examples were grossly oversized and over-elaborate

if their function were one of simple utility. Moreover, one might argue that early-medieval combs as a group were somewhat over-engineered. Few were carved from a single piece of raw material, but were rather composed of many small antler components carefully riveted together. Manufacturing waste is well known in early-medieval towns such as York (Fig. 2), and analysis of this has shown us that the manufacturing sequence was complex.<sup>7</sup> By piecing together the fragments of waste material found in these manufacturing deposits, comparing them with finished objects and what are often termed 'semi-manufactures', it has been possible to reconstruct something of the comb-production sequence. Hypotheses can then be tested by experimental archaeology, that is to say the present-day manufacture of combs using traditional techniques. Indeed, by considering the waste material produced in the various stages of manufacture, it has been possible to make sense of the archaeological remains we find.

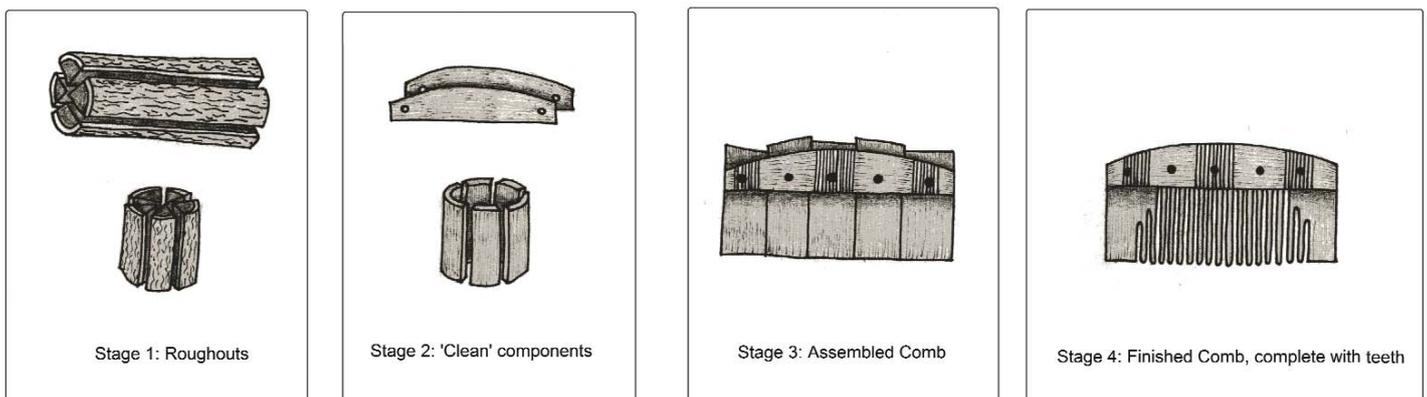
To summarise, it is now clear that combs were made according to a process that was relatively standardised in outline (Fig. 3). A series of short, rectangular pieces of bone or antler were cut and prepared to form toothplates. These were then riveted between a pair of long strips referred to as connecting plates. The whole was then trimmed and decorated, teeth cut in the toothplates, and final polishing and finishing undertaken. There was, no doubt, variation in the detail of this sequence,<sup>8,9</sup> but the basic pattern is now well established. On the



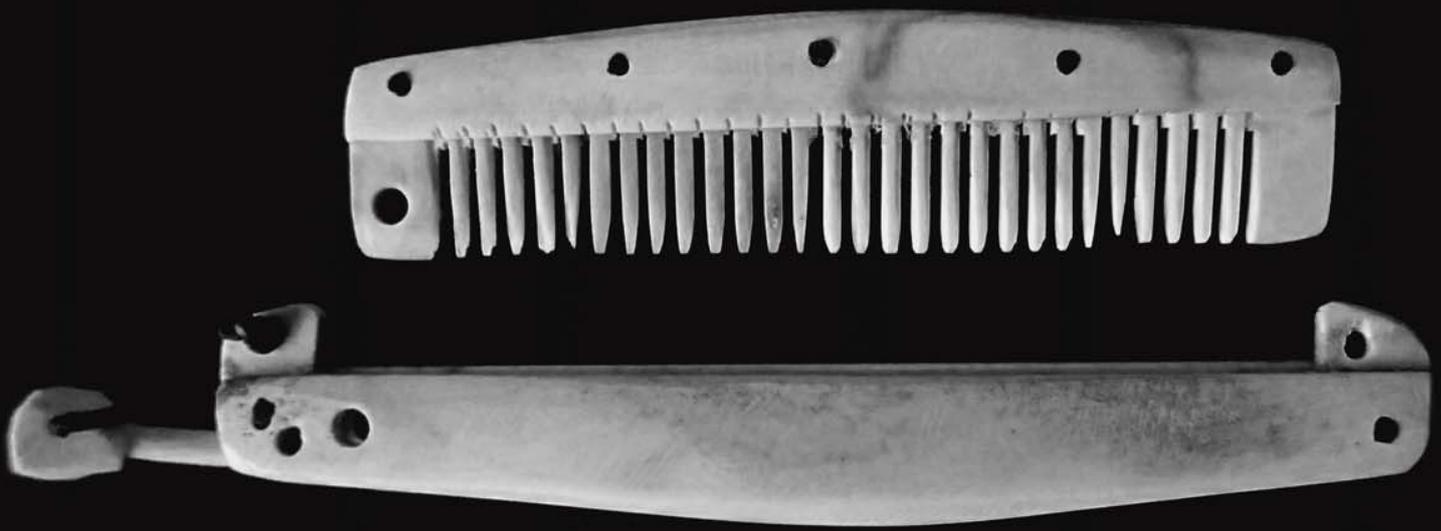
Figure 2. Antler waste from a Viking-Age pit at Hungate, York

evidence of experimental archaeology, one could not have expected to manufacture much more than a single comb in a day. For a time it was thought that the rationale for this complex mode of construction was that it allowed broken segments to be replaced, but if this were the case, one would expect to see many more examples of combs that had been repaired in this way. Instead, the explanation seems much simpler: it was a technological response to material qualities.

Figure 3



Simplified Comb Production Sequence



Viking-Age combs are very largely composed of deer antler, rather than bone. There may well be cosmological or other unpragmatic (to our eyes) reasons for this phenomenon, but the choice can also be explained in simple physical and mechanical terms: antler is tougher than bone in certain respects, and is thus better adapted to the stresses exerted by the hair on what could be quite fine teeth.<sup>10</sup> However, antler is strongest in the longitudinal direction, and it is thus important that the comb teeth are cut in such a way that they respect, rather than cross this grain. The implication of this is that only very narrow pieces of antler can be cut for toothplates (at least in red deer; in reindeer, and certainly in elk, the problem is somewhat mitigated). Thus, it seems that the properties of antler as a raw material were valued to such an extent that a complex technological solution was developed in order to address its shortcomings.

### Sourcing Antler for Viking Craft

Having established the importance of antler as a raw material, the obvious question that arises relates to the way in which supplies were acquired. While bones would have been relatively easily picked up in the burgeoning markets and early towns of northern Europe – presumably through a combination of midden-raiding and negotiation with butchers and tanners – antler would have been more difficult to come by.

Deer bones are not frequently found in deposits in urban sites, which is where most combmaking seems to have taken place, and though studies have not been comprehensive, evidence suggests that the craft was largely reliant upon the use of shed antler, rather than material taken from butchered carcasses.<sup>11</sup> If this was so, then where did the artisans acquire their stocks?

A number of suggestions have been proposed, though it should be said that these ideas have emerged through a process of logical reasoning, rather than being empirically tested. Moreover, they were invoked as phenomena of second-order importance relative to the issue of the organisation of the craft in itself. Most popularly, the combmaker has been seen as an itinerant artisan, or a sort of highly-skilled tinker, travelling from market to market in order to make and sell combs to the local townsfolk.<sup>12</sup> It has been assumed that this lifestyle would allow combmakers the opportunity to build up a stock of raw material on arrival in town, either through collecting it in the hinterland themselves, or through trading on arrival.

Now, there are many logical and empirical reasons to question the universal applicability of this, which we may term the ‘itinerant craftsman’ model.<sup>13</sup> However, of particular relevance here are the suggested means of raw material collection, and their implications for the relationship between the combmaker,

the urban consumers, the rural landscape, and the deer. There are good reasons to doubt the suggestion that combmakers could have arrived at market hoping that the locals would supply them with raw materials at a reasonable price. However, the alternatives – that these artisans simply collected materials on their travels, or made swift searches of the local area soon after arrival – are even less tenable. Antler is simply not that easy to find, and both classical and medieval authors have commented on this very fact.

The situation may have differed in detail between the British Isles and different parts of Scandinavia, where diverse landscapes offered very different potentials and challenges. Moreover, the means by which red deer, reindeer or elk antler could be acquired would be very different. Thus, in order to secure a regular and reliable supply of antler, I believe that a combmaker needed to understand their local environment, and in particular the behaviour and whereabouts of the deer that inhabited it. Alternatively, they needed to have a reliable local contact – perhaps a gamekeeper or warden of some sort in the employ of the local lord, perhaps hunters or peasants with an empathy for their surroundings – who understood these things. In either case, I propose that this requires a certain degree of sedentism, or at least ‘restricted itinerancy’. The situation may perhaps have been different in wetland Sweden

or arctic Norway, but in Viking-Age England, some understanding of the local landscape inhabited by a population of red deer would have been essential. Such understanding can only be acquired through practical engagement: getting mud on your boots. In what remains of this article, I would like to speculate a little as to the nature of this local knowledge and how it was acquired: exactly how the Viking-Age antler collector went about researching his or her quarry.

## Understanding Deer and Landscape

There is much published on this subject, not least in publications such as *Deer*,



A complete comb from a burial in Skail Bay, Orkney

and here I only intend to summarise some key points. On a basic level, any collector would need to understand the habitats in which these animals live, and to have some specific local knowledge, such as the location of preferred watering holes, patches of vegetation, woodland or scrub. They would also need to understand the influence of weather conditions: antlers may, for instance, be found more tightly clustered together in harsh winters, as the search for nutrition and shelter forces together animals otherwise predisposed to disperse. Beginning the search in late winter improves chances of success, as the spring vegetation has not yet started to make tracks difficult to follow, while overcast days provide the ideal 'spotting' conditions.

Shed antlers are frequently associated

with couches, while signs of feeding, of antler fraying or bark rubbing, caught hair, scrapes, footprints and droppings are all broader indications that an area has been frequented by deer. Likewise features that force deer to jump, such as ditches, streams etc. may hurry along antler loss. Contemporary hunters, trackers and collectors also note the importance of an ability to read the landscape in order to locate water sources, browse, and areas of escape cover that may not be immediately apparent to the human eye.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note the suggestion that the potential for successful antler collection is increased when carried out as a team exercise, and that children have a particular eye for the task. This fosters the training of an experienced eye, which was a fundamental for successful collection.

There is little we can know for sure about the people who collected these antlers. But someone did, and through a little informed analogy and speculation, it becomes clear that there are elements of Viking-Age organisation and economy that we are still far from understanding. The antler comb trade was key to early-medieval market development, and yet we have little understanding of how it worked or how it articulated with other trades. Most importantly, it was a craft that was fundamentally dependent on controlled access to wild resources, and that brought together the urban craftsmen and the rural landscape. It is a salutary note that the development of a craft such as this, which some in Scandinavia have even used as a proxy for the growth of towns, is so closely entwined with understanding of the countryside. Thus, although they are frequently overlooked by archaeologists, interactions with deer clearly played an important role in the development of the medieval economy.



*The arguments raised in this article are expanded upon in a forthcoming volume by the author, entitled 'A Viking Way of Life.'*

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