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DATASHEET 40

Bone and antler combs

by

Steve Ashby

Northamptonshire Portable Antiquities Scheme, c/o Archives Service,
Northamptonshire County Council, PO Box 163, County Hall, Northampton NN1 1AX
ashbysteve@hotmail.com

Bone and antler hair combs are among the early medieval period's most frequently recovered artefacts, both from settlement and funerary contexts. Their use as a hygiene implement, coupled with their low economic value, relative to that of ornamental metalwork, renders them unlikely to have functioned as heirlooms (Ambrosiani 1981, 15), so they are of considerable utility as dating tools.

A number of studies of Saxon, Viking and medieval combs have been undertaken over the last century (see in particular Ulbricht 1980; Ambrosiani 1981; Dunlevy 1988; Flodin 1989; MacGregor et al. 1999; Smirnova 2005), but as yet there has been no comprehensive classification of the combs found on sites in the British Isles. To this end, a new typology is devised including combs from neighbouring regions of northern Europe. The typology has been successfully applied in a large-scale study of combs from northern Britain in the period AD 700-1400 (Ashby 2006), and should be broadly applicable across the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Combs can be briefly divided into single-sided (i.e. bearing teeth on one edge only) and

double-sided forms, of one-piece and composite construction (the latter consisting of two to four connecting plates riveted to a larger number of toothplates using rivets of iron, copper alloy or occasionally bone). Decoration varies according to type, but may include simple incised lines, ring-and-dot motifs, interlace design and zoomorphism. Openwork ornament is encountered less frequently. The processes involved in the manufacture and decoration of combs have been described in detail in previous works (see Bibliography).

This typology focuses on composite forms, with only one group (Type 14) of one-piece combs. Indeed, single-sided one-piece combs are excluded from this typology altogether. Though relatively common in prehistoric contexts (e.g. Tuohy 1999), few such combs are known from medieval deposits in the British Isles, and those that are known are of 'special' function, such as the miniature 'beard' combs often found in Anglo-Saxon graves. Such combs are worthy of attention in their own right, and are not covered herein.

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Single-Sided Composite Combs (Figures 1-2)

Type 1 combs are composite single-sided combs united by their low length:height ratio, and frequently elaborate ornament (Fig. 1.1b). Type 1a combs are small, ornate, triangular or round-backed, usually dated to the Late Antique and early Saxon periods (e.g. Roes 1963; MacGregor 1985, 83). Type 1b combs have 'extra' connecting plates (i.e. 3 or 4 plates in total). Such combs have been referred to as Frisian in origin, though an Anglo-Saxon origin is perhaps more likely (see Hills 1981), and their similarity to Type 1a suggests that this formed their basic template. They are relatively long-lived, and thus show some development within the type. MacGregor (1985, 85-7) suggests that they date between the late 4th and 8th centuries, with small, highly ornate zoomorphic forms at the earlier end of this range.

Ornate, high-backed composite combs are well known in Ireland and Scotland (Curl 1982, 22-4; Dunlevy 1988, 356-8, 'class C') and herein make up Type 1c. MacGregor (1985, 87-8) suggests a date between the 5th and 8th centuries for this class, and it seems likely that they are developed out of Type 1b.

Type 2 combs are single-sided composite combs, and differ from Type 1 in that they are long in relation to their height (Fig. 1.2b). The type may be divided up into two subtypes, both of which have been traditionally dated to a period between the 5th and 8th centuries. No doubt they developed out of Type 1a (and 1b) combs, as 'hybrid' examples attest. In detail, Type 2a combs are characterised by flat connecting plates, frequently carved from split bovid ribs, and are of rather rudimentary manufacture. They are common finds at 7th- to 8th-century sites in England (e.g. Rogers 1993). The well-known 'hogback' or 'winged' combs come under Type 2b. Such combs frequently feature large, flared endplates, often with zoomorphic carving, and connecting plates have a concavo-convex profile. They are commonly dated to the 7th and 8th centuries, though MacGregor (1985,

87) notes the existence of some Viking Age examples.

Type 3 encompasses asymmetric and handled combs (see MacGregor 1985, 87, 91-2; Riddler 1990; 1998). Asymmetric combs, in which one endplate is devoid of teeth, and thus provides a handhold, are known on the Continent (Roes 1963, pl. 29) and, in smaller numbers, in Scandinavia (e.g. Birka). They seem to date to the 8th and 9th centuries. Handled combs proper have a longitudinal handle formed from a single antler tine, or a pair of bone strips (Fig. 1.3). They are known on the Continent, but are more common in Saxon England (Riddler 1990), and date to the period between the 8th and 11th centuries.

Type 4 consists of 'riveted mounts'; short, roughly hewn strips of bone, fastened with two, three or four iron rivets, representing the remains of combs with horn toothplates (Fig. 1.4; see Biddle 1990; MacGregor et al. 1999, 1952-4). They are clearly a discrete group, being apparently restricted to large settlements in England and Ireland, where they are found in 10th- to 12th-century phases (Biddle 1990; MacGregor et al. 1999, 1952). Though they have not always been recognised as the remains of combs, their function now seems assured.

Type 5 combs are characterised by their large size (complete examples are generally over 15 cm in length), and connecting plates with a plano-convex profile and shallow plano-convex section (Fig. 1.5). Most examples feature graduated teeth (i.e. the teeth close to the ends of the comb are shorter than those close to the centre). The group includes those examples commonly known as Ambrosiani A combs (dated to the period c.AD 800-950, Ambrosiani 1981, 25, 62-3), but is rather more broadly defined than this. Indeed, it takes in a number of Scandinavian and Frisian variants, such as the very large, ornate 'horse combs', and pre-Viking antecedents (see Ambrosiani 1981, 68-9). Type 6 corresponds to the Ambrosiani B combs characteristic of the 10th century (ibid., 62, 64); short combs (between 10 and 15 cm in length) with connecting plates

that have plano-convex profiles and a deep plano-convex section (Fig. 1.6).

Type 7 combs are characterised by a deep plano-convex connecting plate section and straight endplates, but their form differs from

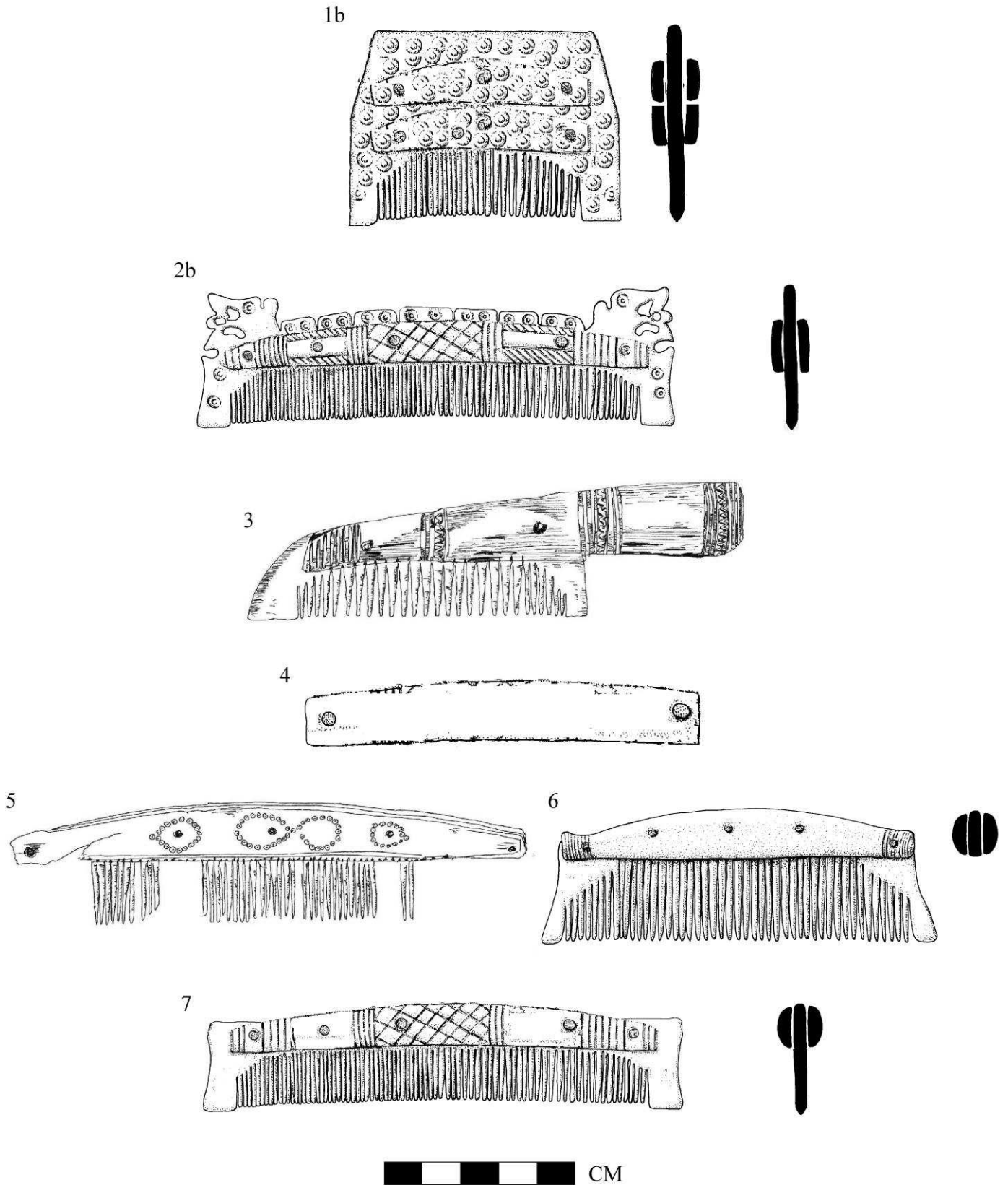


Figure 1: Types 1-7. 1b & 3: reconstructions based on examples from Yorkshire and Cottam; 2b & 7: based on examples from York; 4: from York; 5 & 6: from Birka. 1b, 2b, 6 & 7 show schematic profiles.

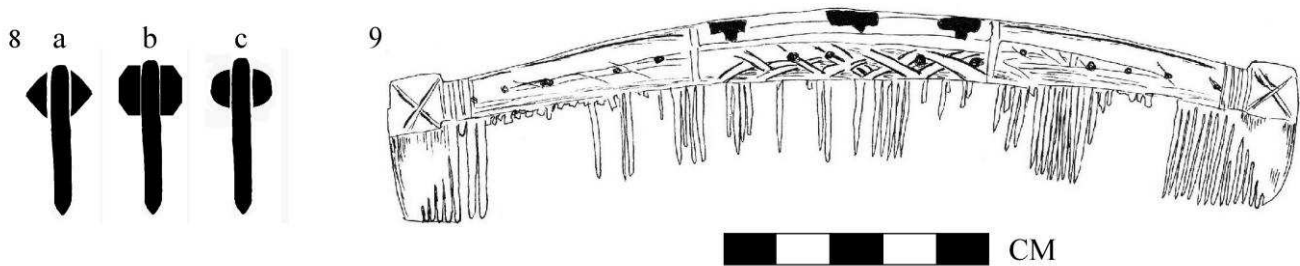


Figure 2: Types 8 & 9. 8: schematic profiles based on examples from York, Durham and Orkney; 9: from York.

Type 6 in that they are larger, and that they are less uniformly manufactured, bearing simple ornament, and displaying a range of irregular profiles (Fig. 1.7). Some have connecting plates of marked concavo-convex profile, while others are straight. In Dunlevy's classification (1988), Type 7 combs fit into class F2, which she dated to the late 9th to 12th centuries, though on the basis of sites such as Coppergate, York, most examples can surely be assigned to the years between AD 900 and 1100.

Type 8 combs (Fig. 2.8) are united by their similarity to Types 6 and 7 in general form, but they differ from these in terms of connecting plate section and ornament. Overall, the group dates to between the 10th and 13th centuries. Type 8a, which are characterised by connecting plates of triangular section, and 8b combs, which have connecting plates of trapezoidal section, date to the 10th to 12th centuries. Type 8c combs may represent a simplification of Type 6, as they have a deep plano-convex section, but their shape is much more square and less elegant, and they lack ornament. In Dunlevy's Irish corpus, they fit into class G (Dunlevy 1988, 367-8), which she dates broadly between the 9th and 13th centuries. However, they seem much more common towards the end of this range, and most can be placed in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Type 9 combs are finely cut, single-sided combs, characterised by a lack of complex incised ornament, and by the decorative use of copper alloy riveting (Fig. 2.9). From the 11th century, Type 9 combs are common across

Scandinavia (see for example Flodin 1989; Ulbricht 1980), are present in much of Atlantic Scotland (Curle 1982), and are known as far east as Russia (Smirnova 2005, fig. 3.36). Their detailed chronology is unclear, but they may be broadly dated between the late 10th and 13th centuries.

Double-Sided Composite Combs (Figure 3)

Types 10-13 differ from 1-9 in that they are double-sided composite forms. Type 10 are highly distinctive, ornate double-sided combs with differentiated teeth (i.e. the tooth gauge is different on either side of the comb), often with denticulate end profiles, and complex geometric or zoomorphic ornament (Fig. 3.10). They are known primarily from Roman contexts in the British Isles and northern Europe, but may have continued in use into the 5th century, as they were presumably the model for later forms.

Other double-sided combs are herein categorised as Types 11, 12, and 13. Type 11 combs are ornate double-sided composite combs with straight ends, iron rivets, graduated, undifferentiated teeth, and bevelled connecting plates (Curle's type A, and Dunlevy's class B), frequently decorated with multiple horizontal lines of motifs (Fig. 3.11). Type 12 combs are longer, much more rudimentary, and sometimes unornamented double-sided combs with undifferentiated teeth and iron rivets (Fig. 3.12). Traditionally, both forms have been dated to the period between the 6th and 8th centuries, but Type 12 in particular may have extended into the 9th century.

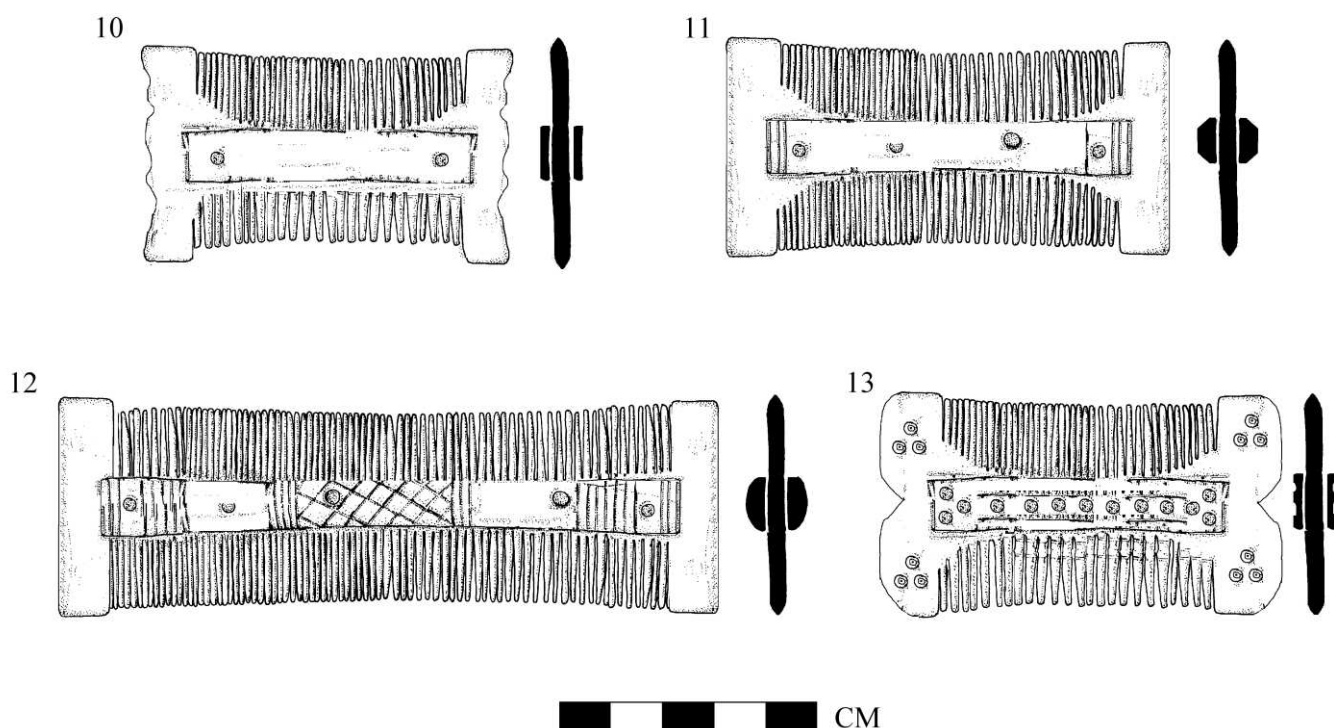


Figure 3: Types 10-13. 10 & 12: reconstructions based on examples from York; 11 & 13: reconstructions based on examples from Orkney.

Type 13 combs are finely-cut, double-sided combs with differentiated teeth, and a restricted range of ornament (Fig. 3.13). The vast majority are fixed with copper alloy rivets, and it is common for these to be applied in a decorative manner, often being closely set, in pairs, or in double rows. Like Type 9, this group incorporates a diverse array of forms, dating to between the 12th and 15th centuries.

Double-Sided Simple Combs (Figure 4)

Type 14 double-sided combs differ from all those discussed above, in that they are of simple, one-piece construction. There are three variants: large (often over 10 cm high) combs of walrus ivory and elk antler known from later medieval Scandinavia and eastern Europe (Type 14a); the smaller (generally less than 6 cm high) bone combs with differentiated teeth often referred to as nit combs, which date to the latest Middle Ages and post-medieval period (Type 14b; Fig. 4), and the much rarer, ornate ivory combs that may be adorned with religious or secular scenes (Type 14c). Types 14a and 14c are rare finds in the British Isles, while Type 14b is relatively common.

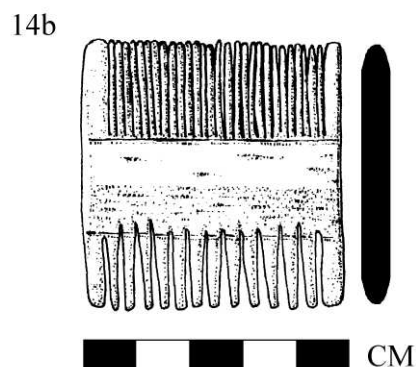


Figure 4: 14b: from York.

Closing Remarks

The identification of combs to type is important from both chronological and cultural perspectives. The distribution of these types across Europe has shown interesting patterns, and allowed reconsideration of the theory that Viking Age combs are uniform and heterogeneous in style, which has important implications for their manufacture and distribution, and for our understanding of their use in the construction of identity (see Ashby 2006). The accurate recording of future comb finds is vital if such artefacts are to continue to add to our understanding of the societies and economies of Britain over the last two thousand years.

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