# ‘With staff in hand, and dog at heel’? What did it mean to be an ‘Itinerant’ artisan?

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This paper considers the life of the ‘itinerant’ artisan in Viking-Age and medieval Europe. Archaeologists and historians have characterised a number of trades as ‘itinerant’, and many papers in this volume relate evidence of the importance of a ‘travelling’ component in the distribution of any craft or industry. However, the volume also demonstrates the diverse ways in which crafts and trades may be structured, and even the ways in which movement itself may be framed. To date, such diversity has rarely been discussed in any detail. In many cases, in an attempt to make sense of particular patterning in the distribution of artefacts, workshops, and production debris, terms such as ‘part-time’, ‘specialist’, ‘non-specialist’, or ‘homecraft’ are invoked, with little further elaboration. To apply a label to a phenomenon is, of course, neither to describe it nor to properly characterise or explain it. More often than not, such labelling tends to close off the subject from further consideration, rather than opening it up for more detailed discussion. This, I would argue, is the case with the idea of the itinerant artisan.

More precisely then, this paper is concerned with the diverse lifeways that may have been followed by certain Viking-Age and medieval artisans. Of course, it is unlikely that any such actors operated with absolute freedom to control the ways in which they lived and worked, so we should take care not to invoke a world of unfettered choice and infinite possibility. Nonetheless, a range of interpretative models concerning the organisation of Viking-Age and medieval craft - and the lifestyles of their associated artisans - *are* available to the researcher, and it is unfortunate that we have become straitjacketed into default ways of thinking about these issues. The aim of this paper is therefore not to provide a correction to the interpretative models currently in use, but rather to propose a range of alternatives: to promote an awareness of spatial, chronological, economic and political contingency.

## *The Itinerant Medieval Craftsman*

For our period of interest, there is a genuine appeal to investing certain craftworkers with an itinerant lifestyle. In more recent times, the travails of the travelling peddler are known to have provided an effective mechanism for the maintenance of connections between town and country (Jaffee 1990), and the idea that certain Viking and medieval craftspeople travelled in a similar manner should not be dismissed out-of-hand. It is, however, important that we think about the model critically, paying particular attention to (1) the universality (or otherwise) of its applicability, and (2) its efficacy and suitability as a sort of explanatory metanarrative.

On a number of occasions, scholars have claimed itinerancy as an important contributing element to the organisation of various crafts (e.g. Ambrosiani 1981; Callmer 2003; Leahy 2003, 168, 171; *cf*  Hinton 2000; Hinton 2006, chapter 3). The reasons for this assertion are diverse, but tend to include references to (1) the nature and distribution of identifiable workshops and associated production debris; and (2) the nature and distribution of finished products, as well as appeals to ‘common sense’ or logics of efficiency. The evidence relating to the above points is often ambiguous, as is the nature of the relationship between that evidence and particular models of production.

Perhaps the best example comes from the study of the Viking-Age combmaker. One of the formative studies in this field was Ingrid Ulbricht’s (1978) classic monograph on the bone and antlerworking from Hedeby. Ulbricht conducted a meticulous analysis of the debris from the site, and concluded that the quantities of material preserved could not represent the output of a full-time combmaker. Rather, she argued, the artisan should be seen as a specialist, but one who manufactured combs only on a part-time basis, spending their time equally on other crafts, such as amberworking.

Ulbricht’s model failed to really catch on, but it is in the context of this work that the more influential ‘itinerant combmaker’ model was developed. Kristina Ambrosiani’s (1981) studies of material from Birka and Ribe noted a similar mismatch between the quantity of waste one might expect to be produced by a full-time combmaker’s workshop and that which was actually recovered, but her interpretation was different in important respects. Ambrosiani suggested that, rather than dividing their time between two or more crafts, that combmakers were full-time specialists, but that they did not work on a sedentary basis. This would explain what has been perceived as the small size of waste deposits found at Birka, Ribe, Hedeby, and beyond, as well as providing a mechanism by which an artisan could busy themselves throughout the year in the manufacture of an object for which demand must have been relatively limited.

 With some exceptions (see Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2011), Ambrosiani’s model has become something of a received wisdom, and it is therefore worth spending a little time on it. According to Ambrosiani’s model, our mobile craftsmen moved around from market to market,and this lifestyle allowed them the time and opportunity to source raw materials, manufacture and trade in combs. In order to maximise the market for their products, combmakers frequented a number of markets.As they did so, they interacted and communicated with colleagues and rivals, forming an overlapping and interdigitated network that spanned northern Europe, via which not just objects, but also styles, technologies, and ideas were exchanged. The result was a uniform corpus of combs, within which it is impossible to distinguish combs from Norway, Frisia, or Russia.

Having set out its keys premises, it is worth our considering briefly the principles on which this model is based. Ambrosiani invokes the model in order to explain the following phenomena:

1. The small size of workshop waste deposits
2. The morphological and ornamental homogeneity of north European combs
3. The fact that the dynamics of the trade in certain combs appears to run counter to what one would expect, given the greater availability of antler as a source of raw material in northern Scandinavia, and this region’s apparent position as a consumer of combs produced further south (see Ambrosiani 1981, 38; Ashby 2012, 304-305 for further discussion).

All of these grounds are refutable, but that is not the purpose of this piece. Rather, the intention is to critically investigate the genesis of this model and the reasons for its dominance, to consider the implications of that interpretative hegemony, and to pose some alternative ways forward. It is possible, superficially, to see the invocation of a model of itinerant craft as a natural and rather unproblematic response to the above observations. The idea, however, has rather a long heritage, and subsequently carries a certain amount of theoretical baggage. We should thus take some time to consider the history of the idea of itinerant craftworkers.

## *A Brief Historiography of Itinerancy*

The identification of antiquity’s artisans as itinerant specialists has some scholarly pedigree, and finds its origin in the early works of V. Gordon Childe (Childe 1930, 4-11; Childe 1939, 113-117). Childe explains the pan-European distribution of Bronze-Age metalwork by invoking the existence and action of itinerant smiths. The theory runs as follows: if technological developments emanated from the eastern Mediterranean, as was the dominant theory in the early 20th century, then the means by which they were diffused across the rest of Europe needed to be explained. Given that, at the time, the earliest known evidence for the development of such prehistoric innovations came from sites in the Danube region, then these phenomena must have related to the presence of exiles from the Mediterranean world. The actions of these travelling metalworkers resulted in the northward movement of the technology, catalysed by a sort of Bronze-Age arms race (Gibson 1996, 107). In this strange and dangerous world, smiths occupied a sort of liminal realm, allowing them to move freely across social and geographical boundaries. Childe himself refers to them as ‘detribalized’, immune for the bondage of social custom, yet woven into a complex network of specialists concerned with mining, smelting, and smithing. This model proved popular over the succeeding decades, and while invoked out of pragmatism - in order to explain macro-scale patterning within a culture-historical framework - the smith developed particular resonances as a type of social agent: associations with liminality, freedom, even independence, and for many researchers these qualities found a significance that was difficult to shift.

Archaeological theory, of course, never stands still for long. The last three decades have seen not only paradigm shifts that have encouraged us to favour home-grown innovation over diffusionist models, but also the accumulation of a raft of empirical evidence to suggest that later-prehistoric technological development is more likely to have taken place in the Balkan region than further to the south and east. Nonetheless, the idea that metalsmiths lived a peripatetic existence has proven remarkably persistent, notwithstanding the redundancy of the concept as an engine of cultural or technological change. Of course, even if itinerant craftspeople are no longer needed in order to explain spatial patterning, it does not follow that they never existed, and the way in which we interpret their working lives is still loaded with social implications. Indeed, the perceived qualities of the itinerant lifestyle have proven remarkably persistent in the archaeological literature, such that the smith’s associations with freedom and even independence have outlived his/her efficacy as a key player in social and technological change (see, for example Leahy 2003, 168).

That a model has persisted in the face of such change may, perhaps, suggest that it contains a kernel of truth. However, doubts have been raised. In the 1970s, Michael Rowlands (1971) took an ethnographic perspective on the issue of itinerancy. Rowlands demonstrated that while there is a certain amount of evidence for itinerant metalworking in contemporary non-western societies, that this is by no means the only or most important mode of operation, and that we should not assume their dominance (or even presence) in prehistoric Europe. He also argued that the archaeological data to support the existence of such a mode of organisation in the prehistoric past is in many cases flimsy, and that the persistence of the model owes much to a culture-historical paradigm, and to its explanatory power regarding the distribution of artefact types, rather than to any basis in empirical evidence. Itinerant smithing may have happened, but if so it constituted just one of several scenarios, and should not be invoked as a model to explain patterning on the macro-scale.

More recently, Gibson (1996, 108-109) has shown that Childe’s model for the European Bronze Age is not borne out either by the experience of contemporary non-western societies, or by written evidence in the historically attested context of metalworking in early-medieval Ireland. In Polynesia, Gibson has outlined how the activities of craftspeople may be characterised by a certain degree of mobility, but has noted that while such artisans may have travelled between settlements according to demand, they had established homebases, and lived a fundamentally sedentary existence. They were part-time workers, farming livestock when not producing objects: a commitment fundamentally at odds with a peripatetic lifestyle (unless we are to invoke an unlikely pairing of transhumant subsistence and craft-based itinerancy).

While this case study is of analogical interest, Gibson’s review of the written evidence from early-medieval Ireland is of course directly relevant to the present context of study. Here, neither the ubiquity of ironwork, nor the much more patterned distribution of evidence for non-ferrous metalworking - which seems to be exclusively associated with the settlements and estate centres of the secular and ecclesiastical elite, so far as we can trust the source material- really sits comfortably with Childe’s notion of the free, itinerant smith (Gibson 1996, 110-111). It seems, then, that caution is required; the model is well represented neither in contemporary societies nor in documented early-medieval contexts.

*Clarity of context, comparison, and classification*

The confusion that characterises the idea of early-medieval itinerancy no doubt stems from the rather uncritical manner in which certain models and terminologies have been applied, and it does us a service to return to first principles. Many of the methodological problems we face have long been acknowledged. Back in the early 1990s, Costin critically characterised the ways in which craft production had been studied, and attempted to refine our terminology and apparatus. I think it is fair to say that few of her ideas have been actively engaged with, at least in medieval archaeology, and it is appropriate to briefly rehearse them herein.

In the study of craft production generally, Costin has noted that there is a noticeable absence of a consistent vocabulary. Moreover, it may be fairly suggested that we have, by and large, failed to think carefully enough about what it is that the data we associate with production actually measure (Costin 1991, 2). That seems like an obvious point, but too many assumptions have been made regarding the relationship between archaeological workshop assemblages, mode of production, and site formation processes. Indeed, the latter phenomena have in many cases barely been critically considered at all. The output of early-medieval craft - in the form of both finished objects and debris - is (with the exception of items such as stone sculpture) usually easily portable. It thus stands to reason that site-formation processes are key to understanding workshop assemblages (Costin 1991, 19). One cannot really comment on the scale, intensity, or organisation of a craft or industry without detailed understanding of the means by which debris was disposed of. Sadly, too often these considerations are given insufficient attention (a problem not unique to the Middle Ages; see Costin 1991, 13). Moreover, it is not possible to draw a one-to-one relationship between the quantities or densities of debitage and intensity of production; quite apart from the taphonomic considerations identified above, multiple variables are involved, the value for most of which are unknown to the archaeologist (Costin 1991, 31). We are therefore faced with a problem of equifinality, wherein multiple scenarios could conceivably result in the same evidential fingerprint.

It should also be noted that production models have traditionally been derived from empirical analyses of limited datasets (Costin 1991, 8). Notwithstanding the usefulness of the detailed analyses of individual sites or regions, it is important that we look at production evidence in comparative perspective: numbers alone are meaningless (Costin 1991, 2). This rather obvious fact has been too often overlooked in studies of early-medieval craft, with vastly different quantities of waste being described as ‘small’, and thus as insufficient evidence to support a hypothesis based on full-time sedentary activity. In sum, I am unconvinced that a rigidly quantitative approach to the analysis of working waste is a reliable way of telling us anything about the nature of craft production; there are simply too many unknowns. Costin (1991, 32) has proposed an alternative - if much more difficult- means of characterising intensity of production. This holistic approach is dependent on the analyst paying close attention to evidence for *other* actions undertaken onsite; this might facilitate a more believable reading of the organisation of craft *vis-à-vis* domestic and agricultural activities (Costin 1991, 32).

One of Costin’s key points relates to the lax use of terminology, and in particular what we mean by ‘specialists’. Costin argues that it is erroneous to characterise craft by reference to a specialist: non-specialist dichotomy. This is, again, a basic point, and one that has been considered in Scandinavian archaeology (see, for instance, Hagen 1994) but in Britain we all too often we fall into the trap of pigeonholing artefacts as the result of ‘specialist skills’ on the one hand, or ‘homecraft’ and ‘expediency’ on the other (see Hagen 1994). Costin (1991, 4) makes the point plainly: craftworkers can be specialised both to different degrees, and in different ways. For instance, we should not assume that, just because a craft appears to be particularly complex or highly skilled, it was organised in a particular way (undertaken by a full-time, apprenticed craftsperson, for instance). Thus, craft specialisation is not only non-dichotomous, neither can it be represented on a continuum, but is rather multi-dimensional (Costin 1991, 5).

Another simple but important caution is that we should resist the urge to concatenate or pigeonhole crafts. How often do we see reference to ‘the status of the smith’? What do we mean by this precisely? The craft of smithing was a diverse one in terms of skills, materials, products and, no doubt, organisation. Calling on ethnographic study, Rowlands (1971, 210-211) reminds us that a skilled artisan attached to an aristocracy need not be subject to the same conditions or organisational structures as one producing tools for the general population. Yet both actors might be referred to as smiths, and, given what we know from literary sources about the former, it is all too easy to apply such ideas to the circumstances of the latter.

*Lessons from Ethnography*

A key point that is emphasised in the ethnographic literature is that of diversity, and we have no reason to assume that past crafts and industries were organised in any more homogeneous a manner ([Rowlands, 1971](#_ENREF_8), 214). This anticipates a point I have made about combmaking more recently (Ashby 2011b, 2012, 2013); we should not seek to find an all-embracing model for the organisation of a craft, as local and regional variations in phenomena such as politics, economic structure, settlement pattern and population density may all impact on the manner in which a craft is organised (see [Rowlands, 1971](#_ENREF_8), 214), to say nothing of the impact of competition, market forces, topography and access to raw materials.

Notwithstanding this diversity, the ethnographic record does highlight a number of more specific points that may be important for our understanding of early-medieval craft. These points go back to Rowlands’ (1971) survey, which even now remains a useful reminder to think more critically about how craft was practised in antiquity.

1. Full-Time Craftsmen are Rare
2. Itinerancy is Rare.
3. Raw Material Supply need not be rigidly structured.
4. There need not be only one mechanism of exchange
5. Sustainability is not dependent on a steady supply of work

In short, Rowlands (1971) cautions that we should be careful not to uncritically accept the idea that craftworkers were free-roaming individuals, and certainly not that they occupied any particular ‘liminal’ sense of social place. There is a real danger in attempting to a apply a single explanatory model to craft in diverse contexts, and even if the presence of one particular form of craft organisation can be demonstrated in a certain situation, then we should not uncritically extrapolate from it, assuming the same organisation or structures across space and time. Evidence for the existence of a certain way of working is a long way from evidence that that system explains archaeological phenomena such as distribution patterns on a wider scale. Moreover, logical reasoning, received wisdom, and intellectual rhetoric are no basis for the formulation of such a model. We must be led by the evidence.

It is interesting that Rowlands’ argument, written over forty years ago, is closely echoed by my own suggestions - independently developed - regarding Viking-Age combmaking (*e.g.* Ashby 2011b; Ashby 2012; Ashby 2013). Moreover, these ideas have not been widely accepted, or at least are yet to find their way into the mainstream of early-medieval archaeological debate. Neither is the situation unique to bone- and antler-working. Early-medievalists frequently find themselves without the theoretical or methodological apparatus necessary to test for the operation of itinerancy (e.g. Wicker 1994). Wicker’s call for further study of methods of manufacture (as opposed to stylistic traits), in order to distinguish between the movement of objects and the movements of craftsmen, was welcome, but it is noticeable that she was also forced to plead for the development of ‘models for mechanisms of craft distribution’ (Wicker 1994, 70). One might well ask why these questions are not yet close to finding their resolution, given that prehistorians were debunking itinerancy as an agent of diffusion as far back as the early 1970s. More often than not, early-medieval syntheses appear to accept existing models of craftworking as packaged. Ambrosiani’s model, in particular, is often accepted as fact despite the fact that (though she invoked it as an explanation for patterning in comb distributions across northern-Europe) the model was based on data from the Baltic region alone (with particular emphasis on two sites: Birka, Sweden and Ribe, Denmark). This takes some explaining.

## *Early Medieval Itinerancy: A Critique*

In the case of Viking-Age comb production, while a logical case for itinerancy may be made, I have questioned its evidential basis (Ashby 2006; 2012; 2013), and suggested that similar evidence, in different contexts, might even be taken as an indication of sedentary industry. Indeed, the key point is the significance of context; we should not assume that the same model persists in all regions, under all conditions, at all times. Thus, my point is not to *dismiss* the possibility that certain artisans operated on an itinerant basis, but rather to argue that to label a craft as ‘itinerant’ is not to offer an explanatory model.

We must think more carefully about the different means by which an early-medieval craft may have been organised. In what follows, I will propose something of a typology of organisation, but it should be remembered that this is a simplification; the reality is that crafts may be organised along a continuum, from pure sedentism to perpetual movement. Of course, a number of crafts may have grouped in the middle of this spectrum, but such a broad conclusion is rather unsatisfactory, and as we will see, even this view is rather two dimensional. In what follows then, we will discuss some of the possibilities that may have pertained, and in what circumstances. This has the benefit of developing our question from a purely economic one into something more social: what did it *mean* to be itinerant? How were the lives of our actors organised?

## *Key Variables*

In order to address these questions, we need to think about the dimensions along which the lives of artisans were structured. Costin (1991) has shown how we should consider production in terms of context (the social, economic, and political situation of the work undertaken), concentration (distribution of craftspeople across the landscape), scale (size and organisation of production unit), and intensity (the amount of time spent by an artisan on their craft; for reasons outlined above, I believe this parameter to be archaeologically problematic, and it will not be dwelt upon herein). However by studying craft production along our other three dimensions (context; concentration, and scale), we may be able to offer a particular gloss on the question of itinerant craft. For our purposes, the key dimensions are *scale* and *freedom*.

First we need to consider the geographical scale on which our craftworkers were moving. We may envision them as moving between places of production and exchange, or between multiple market sites, either on a local, regional, or supra-regional (ie long-distance) scale. The distances are important, as it is not simply a question of ‘scaling up’ or down the same system. Rather, small and large-scale systems each have their own implications for organisation and logistics.

Furthermore, we need to account for the temporal scale of movement. We should consider, for instance, the regularity with which an artisan revisited the same spot. As we have seen in the work of Sindbæk (2005, 2007, 2008) and others, the nodal points in networks of long-distance exchange tend to be situated at places where communication routes converge. Indeed, such sites are often located at the nexus of winter and summer travel routes. Moreover, following Sindbæk, the ‘hinterlands’ for these nodal points must be seen to include the waterways that feed them with goods, materials, and information, rather than simply the landscape of rural estates and settlements that are usually taken to support a trade centre. This, of course, has implications not just for resourcing in terms of food and drink, but also for the supply of the raw materials fundamental to craft production. We may agree that unless we envision artisans bringing materials with them when they arrive at a site, then they must be supplied by the network of contacts extant at that site. In a network of long-distance exchange, one must envision the raw materials of glass-, bone-, and metalworking being brought in from various rural estates for trade and use at the nodal points. However, on a more local scale, such a wide network is not available to the craftworker. Certain settlements, for instance, may have a need for crafted products, yet lie outwith the regions in which iron ore, glass, or antler are readily available. If our artisans are peripatetic, when they travel to such sites, their work is dependent on either (1) bringing materials to market with them, (2) local resourcing through personal collection from the immediate surroundings, or (3) local resourcing through organised supply upon arrival. None of these arrangements are robust or infallible. Clearly (1) is impractical where materials are bulky or heavy, while (2) suffers from the same problem, and is also dependent upon about combmaking local knowledge, and option (3) relies upon a well organised and controlled structure of supply. The latter scenario might function effectively within a well administered network of long-distance exchange, in which the hands of powerful actors must have been important. However, it is more difficult to imagine how it could have been facilitated and controlled on a more local scale. If an artisan were to arrive at market without the necessary materials, they would need either local knowledge in order to either collect them oneself, or contacts in order to ensure efficient supply once they arrived at market. Moreover, one might expect that any local authorities or institutions with power over material supply or property would prefer to do business with a limited number of people already known to them. Such a scenario would, indeed, be preferable to both parties. The small-scale peripatetic craftworker then, was very much rooted in local community and landscape. One must question whether it is really appropriate to refer to such an individual as itinerant; it may be better to think of them as *community artisans.*

These individuals need not have been full-time craftworkers. They may have undertaken agriculture or other tasks for part of the year, in order to secure a stable income. In producing and trading their wares, they may have moved from town to town, or market to market, but throughout maintained a small farmstead or holding: perhaps leaving family members at home to keep things running. Such a lifestyle fits well with certain crafts routinely considered as itinerant activities. Antlerworking, for instance, is fundamentally a *rural* craft in terms of its raw materials. We may therefore conceive of such artisans as having had a rural homebase, but travelling to larger towns and markets in the summer months, when they had gathered sufficient materials to manufacture objects. Where the market was large enough to sustain it (perhaps in York or Lincoln, for instance) they may have stayed at one property throughout the season, but we must assume that for many craftworkers it would have been necessary to travel around more, exploiting smaller settlements and beach markets for shorter periods of time. Depending on the scale of travel, we may envision either regular back-and-forth travel between the rural homebase and various markets, or a cycle of ‘seasonal itinerancy’, moving from market to market, before returning home once either raw materials or demand had dried up. Of course, such scenarios must remain speculative in the absence of clear evidence for their operation, but they remain no less likely than currently accepted models.

*Models in Practice: A Case Study*

It is, of course, only possible to go so far in the abstract, and in what follows I intend to illustrate some of these proposed scenarios through reference to my own work, and that of others, on combmaking in Viking-Age Britain and Scandinavia. Of course, it is not suggested that the detail of the following will be directly applicable to the study of other crafts; that is directly antithetical to that which I have been trying to achieve here (namely an awareness of contingency and the possibility of variation). Rather, the study should serve simply as an example of the ways in which the ideas outlined above might be played out in the archaeology.

As we have seen, Ambrosiani has argued that the combmakers of Birka, Ribe, and beyond operated on an itinerant basis. The evidence behind her model is as follows:

* 10th-century comb-forms appear to have appeared first in Denmark, from where they spread northwards into Sweden and beyond. If they were produced by sedentary artisans, we might have expected the direction of ‘diffusion’ to have been precisely the reverse, given the much greater availability of antler in the north.
* Combmaking workshops appear to have operated at a relatively low intensity, with a small output, given the small size of deposits of manufacturing debris;
* Looking at the finished combs found at sites across northern Europe, there is very little variation in either form or decoration.

There is little need to go into the arguments against this evidence in detail; I have done so at length elsewhere (*e.g.* Ashby 2006, Ashby 2012 ). However, it is germane to briefly recap the key evidential and logical problems. The first point is relatively easily dismissed, as an economic assumption with little to back it up. The equation of small deposits of workshop debris with a limited output represents a more considered argument, but is dependent on negative evidence, and makes a number of assumptions about the relationship between scale, intensity, and logistics of production, not to mention the complex question of site formation and taphonomy (Costin 1991). It also begs the question of frame of reference. What precisely, qualifies as a ‘small’ production deposit? What quantities would be required in order for us to postulate the presence of a sedentary, full-time craftworker? The question cannot be answered of course, because in itself, quantity of output is not an appropriate measure of scale or character of production. Finally, it is not a given that the actions of a network of peripatetic artisans would produce a corpus of objects uniform in aesthetic character. Rather, even if one accepts this superficial homogeneity (which I have elsewhere shown to be an overgeneralisation; Ashby 2011a; 2013), a case might be made that a such similarity could result from a small number of centralised ‘factories’ provisioning wide areas.

Let us, for a moment then, assume the uniformity of combs and the small size of manufacturing deposits as meaningful and well attested, and take Ambrosiani’s model as the most parsimonious solution available to us. What would be the logistical implications of artisans working within such a framework; what would such a model *look like* in action? And what would be its broader archaeological signature? If, as Ambrosiani proposes, itinerant artisans worked within restricted but overlapping geographical territories (the mechanism by which it is envisioned that information, technologies and ideas were communicated), then one might well ask about the number of production sites in the network. Were such sites limited to Birka, Ribe, and entrepôts of comparable scale and significance (Sindbaek’s ‘nodal points’)? Or are we missing evidence of a number of smaller production sites, perhaps akin to the beach markets documented in coastal southern Scandinavia (Ulriksen 1994, 1998, 2004)? Given the distances between the large northern European entrepots - hundreds of miles in some cases - the former scenario does not sit well within Ambrosiani’s model as originally formulated. However, it does become feasible if we believe in the existence of a community of crafters and merchants travelling between the nodal points or hubs of a vast Baltic network (as proposed by Sindbæk (*e.g.* Sindbæk 2007, 2008).

None of this is to say that itinerancy *did not* happen. Indeed, there are logical reasons to believe that, at least in certain situations, such a model would prove an efficient and effective mechanism for production and trade, particularly over long distances. Rather, I simply suggest that the evidence presented by Ambrosiani does not demand to be interpreted in this manner, and that in many cases we should consider other alternatives. Moreover, it should be pointed out that Ambrosiani at least presented her model and the evidential basis on which it stood clearly and with minimal ambiguity, making it easy to critically analyse it and assess its applicability to diverse contexts. It is important that we do this, rather than accept it as the default position for the understanding of early-medieval combmaking, or of craft more generally. Moreover, I believe that we should cease attempting to label the organisation of craft, but rather turn our attention to explaining some of the requirements of such an economy, however organised. For instance, by what means did craftworkers acquire raw materials? How did they identify a market in which to trade?

In answer to these questions, it is interesting to note that Gibson finds the most important element in the organisation of craft production to be access to raw materials (Gibson 1996, 111). Strikingly, Sindbæk has shown that certain crafts are almost exclusively found in his entrepôts - glassworking and the casting of non-ferrous metals particular - and he explains this with reference to their dependence upon access to imported raw materials (Sindbæk 2005, 278). However, it is notable that the production evidence for certain crafts often thought to have an ‘itinerant’ basis (such as antler- and iron-working) appears to be geographically more restricted than that relating to the manufacture of objects organised along more certainly ‘sedentary’ lines, such as textiles (*e.g.* Callmer 2002; Sindbæk 2007). No doubt this constitutes the solution to a complex array of problems, including (but not limited to) ready access to a market, as well as to raw materials. Nonetheless, the latter must have been a concern, and if the elite controlled production of sources of stone and metal ore (as we must assume them to have done; see contributions by Baug and Schou, this volume), then perhaps they may also have found ways in which to exert authority over the supply of raw materials such as clays, or even more portable/mobile sources such as leather, furs, or bone and antler. In the absence of detailed documentary evidence for the role of, for instance, a forester in the collection, storage, and distribution of shed antler, this suggestion must remain speculative. It is, nonetheless, interesting to reflect upon the possibility that raw material supply was dependent upon some kind of structured network. In such a situation, even a politically ‘free’ combmaker could never really see themselves as free, bound as they were to this framework of control-by-supply.

## *Discussion: A Typology of Itinerant Trade*

In synthesis then, we must note the need for clarity regarding whether the subject of study is production or distribution; though the manufacturers and traders of combs may have been the same people, this was not necessarily the case, and we should be clear about what it is that we are looking for, as production and distribution will be discretely evidenced in the archaeological record. Such clarity has not always been forthcoming, and early-medieval studies of craft have tended to lack the systematic attention to detail that is characteristic of studies of prehistoric technology, and which is necessary if we are to construct believable models of the nature of craft in the period (see for instance Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Costin 1991 and references therein). In closing, we may go beyond the sedentary : itinerant dichotomy, and offer some more nuanced models (Figure 1). These might even include a ‘sedentary homebase’ situation, wherein craftworkers were permanently based in settlements of various forms and sizes. Local market visits might have been possible in a variation on this arrangement, but the artisan would have had to return to their homebase on a regular basis. Alternatively, they may have maintained a homebase, but visited markets on a circuit, returning only to their home on a seasonal basis. Finally, they may not have had a homebase at all, living in perpetual movement: a true itinerant.

This schema of course still simplifies the situation, and represents an array of ideal scenarios, but it nonetheless constitutes an advance on extant models. No single model perfectly reflects any particular archaeologically attested situation, much less the wider geographical patterning. Moreover, we should not see these scenarios as dichotomous or mutually exclusive, but as points along a continuum: better yet, points within a multidimensional scatter.

That is, of course, a little evasive, and the reader may justifiably ask which model the author prefers. I tend to see combmaking, in England at least, as an urban artform, but with elements of rural craft. The materials after all, were fundamentally rural. In many towns, it is conceivable that the materials were acquired via some centrally administered system of provisioning. However, all combmakers need not have worked in the same way, and there is no reason to assume that the same system pertained in all contexts. Rather, the particularities of organisation and logistics would be contingent upon a somewhat unpredictable combination of environmental factors (including local politics and economics as well as settlement structure, landscape and connectedness) and responses (driven, no doubt, by efficiency, but also by acquired knowledge, social norms, beliefs, and traditional ‘ways of doing’). As a result, we might expect a craft in Lund to look very different to its equivalent in Lincoln. Thus, depending on local structures controlling supply, accommodation, rents and taxes, some combmakers may have been permanently town-based specialists, some may have been in almost perpetual motion, while it is even possible that some were free peasants practising subsistence farming, perhaps rearing livestock, and supplementing their income with craft production. Such artisans would have been settled in the countryside, but travelled to town on a seasonal basis to make and sell objects. For these actors, catch-all terms like ‘sedentary’ and ‘itinerant’ are insufficient. These individuals were part-time, but not undertaking a second craft. They were also fundamentally mobile, though anchored rather than peripatetic.

However the craft was organised in any given situation, we must believe that it *was* organised. Just as Sindbæk (2005) has shown the importance of routinisation to long-distance trade, so structures were needed in order to control supply of materials, access to appropriate properties for manufacture and/or trade, as well as rent and tax. Any image of the travelling artisan as a sort of unfettered, Micawberish tinker must be exposed for the romantic fantasy that it is. These actors may not have stayed in one place for their whole lives, but they were nonetheless anchored into a system, tethered to particular movements between particular places, and meetings with particular people.

## *Postscript and Acknowledgements*

These thoughts have emerged over a decade or so of research on the subject of craft in general, and combmaking in particular. Over this time, my perspectives have been informed and transformed through discussion (and argument) with a number of scholars: a list too long to present here. Nonetheless, I should pay particular thanks to James Barrett, Arthur MacGregor and Ian Riddler, who from an early stage encouraged me to question the paradigms in which we have been working. It goes without saying, of course, that all errors and idiosyncrasies remain the author’s own.

The title of the paper - which may until now have seemed a little opaque - refers toan iteration of a traditional English folk taleknown as the *Tinker of Swaffham*. It tells the story of a hard-up Norfolk pedlar who travels to London Bridge on the strength of a dream, in order to meet a man who will tell him how to make his fortune. After days of hopeless waiting on the bridge, he is eventually given information that leads to his finding a hoard back in his hometown. If anachronous, the story at least furnishes us with a useful allegory: the tale of a travelling tradesman who travels to town with no real plans for his survival or upkeep; only that he needs to do it to make his fortune. It turns out well for the tinker of Swaffham, but it is, after all, a fairytale.