

The Comb Fragment

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The object is an end-plate from a single-sided composite comb. It is of average size for such a piece (maximum height 35.4mm; maximum width 13.5mm; maximum thickness 2.8mm), of rectangular shape with straight edges, and its cross-section is lentoid. It seems likely that there was a single pair of connecting plates. The sloping back of the piece indicates that the comb's back profile was more likely to have been bowed than straight. A small round hole surrounded by oxide corrosion suggests that the connecting rivets would have been of iron, and that this plate (and possibly any others from the original comb) was riveted at its edge, rather than through the centre. This has been noted as a common western European tradition (see Smirnova 2002: 38).

Only a single tooth is preserved, but its low height suggests that the tooth-cutting may have been slightly gradational. The tooth shows no evidence of wear, but closer examination shows that it was cut with an obliquely held saw, creating marked striations on internal tooth faces. Indeed, the quality of preservation of working marks on the whole is extraordinary. Fine transverse and longitudinal saw cuts are visible, presumably used in marking up, as well as deeper cuts. The overall finish of the comb is quite highly polished, but one edge is broken vertically, along the longitudinal 'grain' of the material. There is also some evidence of post-depositional damage in the form of pitting.

Decoration is difficult to assess on the basis of this single fragment. Three straight, vertical incised lines are evident, and these finish short of the back of the comb. This might be taken to suggest that the connecting plates extended to, or close to the extremities of the comb.

The raw material used is skeletal bone rather than antler (identification confirmed by Professor Terry O'Connor, zooarchaeologist). The use of bone billets (tooth- and endplates) is unusual in British Viking Age contexts (although see Mann 1982), but

less so in late pre-Viking England and Scotland (see for example Riddler 1992), and the later Middle Ages (although by this time the trend was generally for single-piece combs). However, it is not feasible to use this feature to date the object in question. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that it is not of antler, the material of choice in the heyday of the composite comb-maker.

Classification to type is inadvisable, as most composite comb typologies require details which are not known in this case (such as the cross-sectional profile of connecting plates). However, the plate is not inconsistent with endplates attributed to the early medieval period from Orkney (Porter 1997; Curle 1982), York (see Ambrosiani 1981; Rogers 1993), Haithabu (Ulbricht 1978), and Birka (Ambrosiani 1981), but nothing about the fragment is clearly diagnostic, and comparisons are dangerous. Nonetheless, we can say that it would have been part of a straight-ended, probably bow-backed comb, decorated with incised lines (though additional ornament may have been present on other parts of the comb).

References

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