

## NOTE ON DESCRIPTIONS OF BONE AND ANTLER COMBS (FIG. 48)

In preparing reports on the medieval bone and antler combs from excavations in Winchester and Trondheim, I have had occasion to study much of the relevant literature for northern Europe and the North Sea area. A major difficulty in dealing with this is the fact that the terminology used for comb descriptions (where they are described at all) tends to be coined *ad hoc*, with little effort being expended on developing a system of exact descriptive terminology, especially in English;<sup>127</sup> a procedure of this kind for referring to pottery has already been recognized as confused and confusing.<sup>128</sup> It is in the hope of changing this state of affairs that I wish to suggest a terminology for use with bone and antler combs from the late Roman to post-medieval periods. It is imperative that the terminology be as unambiguous and denotative as possible; also it must be unconnected with specific typological classifications — whose limitations in archaeology are well known.

Great confusion has arisen in the study of combs because of material and functional limitations on the construction of the object, which result in four possible basic form classes (FIG. 48). These are in fact poor chronological indicators: but within them, a wide range of further variation in shape and decoration occurs, and this is quite adequate for establishing chronological type series. This important fact has been obscured by the confusion between form classes and types; that is, between descriptive and typological terminology. The system of terminology to be presented here, then, is meant to establish a means of description so unambiguous that at least general parallels can be drawn with confidence even when illustrations are not available. I have tried to conserve the very few agreed terms where feasible, but my chief concern has been to choose words which are as ordinary and as restricted in meaning as possible. The system is characterized by an hierarchical, almost grammatical, structure which seeks to parallel the known stages of construction of the artifact. It defines basic terms for form and structure, while suggesting a range and style of description for shapes and decoration which can be extended at need. The general principle which determines choice of terms is that metaphors derived from other recognizable objects should be avoided as far as possible.

The first, most general level of terminology is that of the four form classes already mentioned. These are shown schematically in FIG. 48; they represent a symmetrical articulation of two oppositions, double-sided and single-sided, simple and composite. This four-form concept was most fully outlined by Zofia Hilczerówna, who recognized the need for a summary of possible forms, even though the corpus she studied did not include all four form classes.<sup>129</sup> Comparison of these classes with any corpus of combs will show that all combs can be described with reference to them.

At the next level is the structural terminology, which refers to parts of combs. These terms will be defined with reference to FIG. 48, which shows a suggested orientation convention for comb descriptions. The *end* (1) of any comb refers to the two opposing edges which do not normally incorporate teeth. The *teeth* of a comb are cut into its *side(s)* (5), and may be *fine* (2), averaging nine teeth per cm., or *coarse* (3), with about five teeth per cm. On single-sided combs, the edge opposite the teeth is called the *back* (6). On

<sup>127</sup> The most complete conscious formulation of a terminology is in the Polish essay by Zofia Hilczerówna, 'Rogonictwo Gdanskie w X–XIV Wieku', *Gdanskie Towarzystwo Naukowe* (1961). Some rather clumsy English translations of a few of these terms are given in figs. 2 and 43 and in the English summary, pp. 94–8, but the list is incomplete and awkward in its phrasing. A scattering of terms may be found in Anna Roes, *Bone and Antler Objects from the Frisian Terp-Mounds* (Haarlem, 1963), but these terms are nowhere organized and sometimes there are several terms for the same referent. An unpublished thesis by Mairead Dunlevy Reynolds, 'Aspects of toilet combs found in Ireland (prehistoric to the 17th century)' (National University of Ireland, Dublin), contains many useful terms, though the geographical particularity of the study and its typological interest tends to make some of them rather more metaphorical than might be desirable.

<sup>128</sup> I refer to the present efforts of the Medieval Pottery Research Group to produce a badly needed glossary of pottery terminology.

<sup>129</sup> Hilczerówna, loc. cit. in note 127.

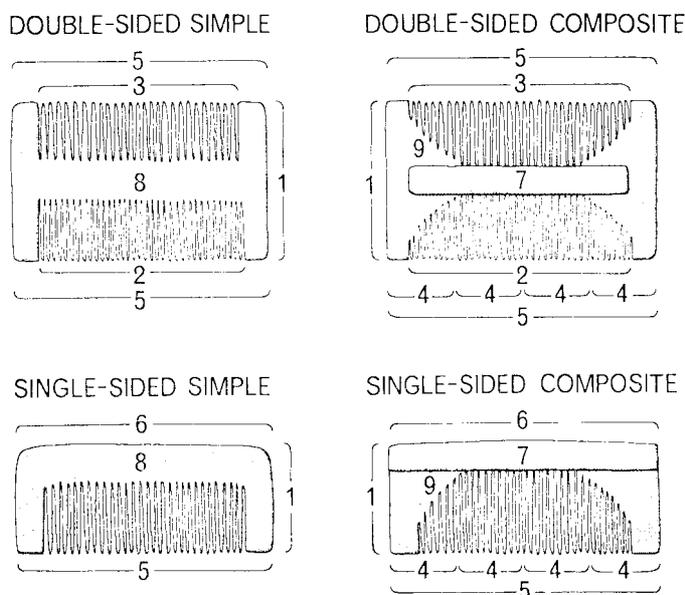


FIG. 48

## FORM CLASSES AND STRUCTURES OF BONE AND ANTLER COMBS

1. End; 2. Fine teeth; 3. Coarse teeth; 4. Tooth segments; 5. Side; 6. Back;  
7. Connecting plate; 8. Solid zone; 9. Graduation of teeth

*composite* combs, the body of the comb will be made up of *tooth segments* (4), small plates in which the grain of the material will run in the same direction as the teeth are to be cut, held together by riveting them between two or more *connecting plates* (7), strips whose grain will run perpendicular to that of the tooth segments. On single-sided composite combs the edge of the connecting plate next to the teeth is called the *base*.<sup>130</sup> These combs can have their tooth segments *extended* above the connecting plate, though generally they will be trimmed flush with it. *Simple* combs consist of a single large piece of antler, bone, or ivory, the teeth being cut with the grain of the material. On the simple combs the area between or above the teeth may be referred to simply as the *solid zone* (8). On any comb the teeth may be cut the same length throughout or *graduated* (9) in length at either end. I will not treat comb cases specifically here; they are generally to be described in the same terms as composite combs, with the exception that in the place of tooth segments they have *separator segments* inserted at the ends and sometimes along one edge to provide an open space between connecting plates to receive the teeth of a comb.

The parts which have been named show much variation in shape. It is desirable to have a generalized terminology for shape taken from the vocabulary of geometry, terms which can be further specified at the discretion of the archaeologist. Thus the ends of the comb, referring to a vertical orientation, may be vertical, concave, convex, double convex, or oblique; some combs have ends of different shapes. The connecting plates, which may be flat, convex, or variously profiled in section, can have rectangular, semicircular, triangular, or composite shapes, such as that of a narrow rectangle with imposed semicircle or of a straight base opposed to a slightly curved back. The solid

<sup>130</sup> This and the following term have been omitted from the drawing to avoid crowding. I wish to thank Nick Griffiths for the preparation of this illustration.

zones of simple combs may be similarly shaped. Exceptionally, the entire comb may be given some shape. More commonly than this, the connecting plates may be extended beyond one end of the comb, forming a handle.

Decorative motifs are generally incised, and they may appear anywhere on the comb where teeth have not been cut. In practice, this means that several decorated zones are defined. These zones are the end tooth segments, the connecting plates or solid zone, and, on single-sided combs, the edge of the back or the extended tooth segments. Decorative motifs may appear on any, all, or none of these, in any combination that can be accommodated in the space available. Except in the case of the double-sided simple ivory combs of the late medieval period and others of their kind, which may be elaborately carved on the solid zone with figural scenes, incised decoration on combs is as a rule composed of circles and straight lines. The circles are made using either a stamp or a device similar to compasses, and therefore consist of a central point and one or several concentric circles. Such motifs may be referred to accurately as dot in circle, dot in double circle, etc. Lines, with reference to the conventional orientation suggested, may be vertical, horizontal (often used to outline the contours of the connecting plate), oblique, opposing oblique, superimposed, etc. In instances where incised ornament is too complex to be described conveniently in these simple geometric terms, the comb is probably of enough importance to be illustrated. Metaphorical terms like 'chain', for example, may seem perfectly clear at first glance, but entirely dissimilar motifs from widely separated contexts can be described by this term and others like it, making them meaningless for practical use.

In some very elaborate composite combs connecting plates are perforated to display a thin metal sheet which has been inserted between tooth segments and connecting plate. Other holes found on the comb, especially in the end segments, most probably have to do with securing the comb in its case, though since their purpose often remains obscure they should probably be referred to simply as perforations, with an indication of their position on the comb.<sup>131</sup> Some mention should also be made of the placement, spacing, and material of the rivets of a composite comb, as this feature is often part of the decorative design.

Tooth segments extended above the connecting plate may be confined to a shaped border and perhaps perforated in a pattern, but they are sometimes shaped in such a way that incised decoration upon them suggests a zoomorphic interpretation. Similarly, end tooth segments may combine shape and decoration in such ornament. The search for zoomorphic ornament on combs should not be pushed too far, however, and in general a clear description of the motifs actually present is preferable to inferential statements regarding the species depicted. The same rule as for complex decoration applies here as well: if some zoomorphic ornament of this kind is present, the artifact is probably rare enough and important enough to be illustrated, and its general description can be confined to the simplified terminology of shape and decoration already mentioned.

As with all other artifacts, limitations of space may often preclude the full publication of combs with complete descriptions and illustrations. I suggest, however, that a certain minimum description, consisting of form class, structural peculiarities (such as the use of multiple connecting plates), and enumeration of decorated zones and the motifs they bear, would be extremely useful. This is a standard which requires no commitment to a typology but which could immensely facilitate international research.

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<sup>131</sup> In instances where the perforations were clearly used for some other purpose, as with the comb suspended on a necklace in grave 83 at Burwell, Cambs. (T. C. Lethbridge, *Recent Excavations in Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk*, Cambridge Antiq. Soc. 4to publns., n.s., III, 1931, fig. 34), this usage should of course be indicated.