

Fig. 1: late Roman bone comb from Pudding Lane. Actual size.

Late Saxon or late Roman? A comb from Pudding Lane

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BRIAN HOBLEY'S lavishly illustrated Museum of London Annual Archaeology lecture for 1985 includes a beautiful colour photograph of a comb from Pudding Lane. The text and caption for the comb agree in describing it as 'Late Saxon', and on p. 20 its provenance is given as 'Pudding Lane'¹.

Is the comb actually late Saxon? There is every reason to suspect that it is not, and that it dates to the late Roman period. The comb is almost complete and lacks just a few of its teeth (Fig. 1). There is no beading across the teeth and no clear indication that the comb had ever been used. It consists of six tooth-segments and two end-segments, fastened between two connecting plates and secured by seven iron rivets. The connecting plates are modelled and their central raised element is decorated by an irregular sequence of crossed diagonal lines. There is no obvious reason for this irregularity until it is realised that the decoration was added after the comb was fastened together. Thus, the diagonal lines avoid the rivets, and the design

can be seen as nothing more than an attempt to set a lattice pattern into a sequence of blank spaces between the rivets. The rivets themselves are unevenly spaced, the intervals in their spacing being determined by the lengths of the tooth-segments which they secure. Fig. 2 shows the rivetting sequence for the comb, where the end-segments are perforated by rivets whilst the tooth-segments are held by rivets at their edges. The lengths of the tooth-segments thus determine the character of the incised decoration of the comb.

Late Roman combs are now tolerably well known and have been discussed in several publications². Of particular importance for Britain are the sequences of combs from the Lankhills cemetery near Winchester, and from Colchester³. A further important sequence from the Poundbury cemetery near Dorchester awaits publication, while the combs from South Shields are also of some significance⁴. Late Roman combs can be separated into two broad categories, depending on whether they possess a

1. Brian Hobley *Roman and Saxon London. A Reappraisal*. Museum of London Annual Archaeology Lecture 1985 (1986). The ascription of the comb to Milk Street on p. 22 is incorrect.
2. E. Keller 'Die spätrömische Grabfunde in Südbayern' *Münchener Beiträge zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 14 (1971) 112-3; C. Hills 'Barred Zoomorphic combs of the Migration Period' in *Angles, Saxons and Jutes* (ed) V. I. Evison (1981)

97-8; A. MacGregor *Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn* (1984) 92.
3. P. Galloway 'The Combs' in *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills Winchester Studies 3: Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester, Part 2* (ed) G. Clarke (1979) 246-8; N. Crummy *The Roman Small Finds from Excavations in Colchester 1971-9* Colchester Archaeological Reports 2 (1983) 55-7.
4. L. Allason-Jones and R. Miket *The catalogue of Small Finds from South Shields Roman Fort* (1984).

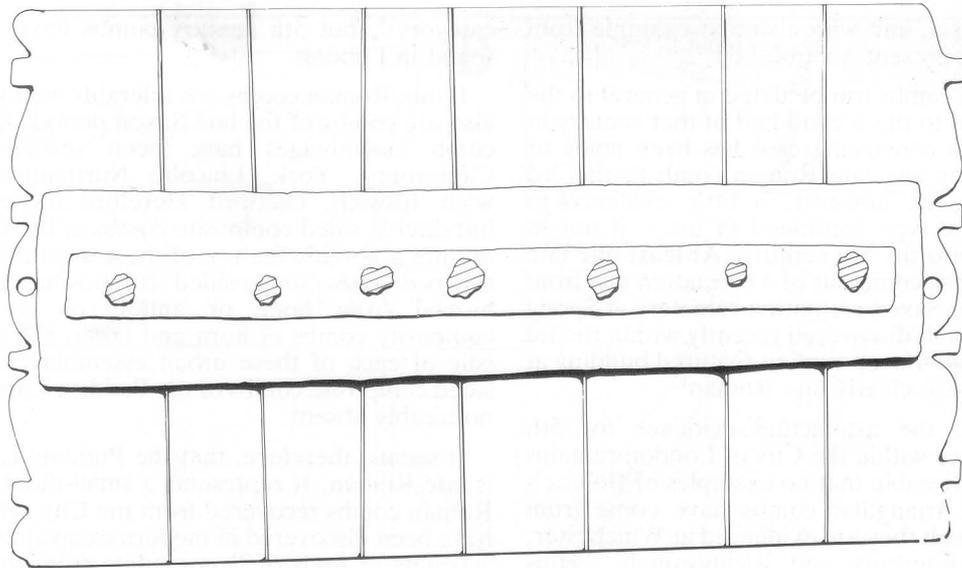


Fig. 2: drawing to show rivetting sequence of the comb.

single or double connecting plate format; the latter comb type does not concern us here⁵. The more prosaic single-connecting-plate type is defined by its squat and broad proportions and by the profiling of its end segments. The comb teeth are invariably long and of different values across the comb. The connecting plates are generally broad and are sometimes modelled to provide a stepped profile, as here. There is a tremendous variety in elements of form and decoration, so that no two late Roman combs are precisely the same, as Anna Roes pointed out some time ago⁶, but the characteristics of form which define the type, outlined above, remain relatively constant.

The technology of comb construction is also important. The rivetting system employed on the Pudding Lane comb recurs on a number of late Roman combs, like the curious 'owl' comb from Cirencester, or two of the combs from Lankhills⁷. It

5. D. Haupt 'Jakobswüllesheim, Kr. Duren. 2. Jahresbericht 1968' *Bonner Jahrbücher* 170 (1970) 381-91; MacGregor *op cit* fn 2.

6. A. Roes *Bone and Antler Objects from the Frisian Terp Mounds* (1963) 14.

7. A. McWhirr, L. Viner and C. Wells *Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester* (1982) fig 80.175; Galloway *op cit* fn

is only one of a number of rivetting systems employed during the late Roman period, but it is interesting to note that all of these systems were intended to secure individual tooth-segments. With a few notable exceptions, like a sequence of 6th century combs from Canterbury, post-Roman combs are rivetted across pairs of tooth-segments and do not fasten individual segments⁸. It is only in the 11th century that systems which involve the rivetting of individual tooth-segments return to general use.

The Pudding Lane comb can be compared to a number of combs with a similar stepped profile to their connecting plates. To a certain extent, the incised design of the comb looks like a poor relative of the design of a comb from the site of the Cups Hotel, Colchester; two other combs from Colchester also have stepped connecting plate profiles⁹. The closest parallel for the particular profile of the Pudding Lane end segments lies however with a

3, fig 31.9 and 316.

8. I. Riddler *Hamwic Finds Volume 3: Organic Materials* forthcoming.

9. P. Crummy *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester* CBA Res Rep 39 (1981) fig 8.2; N. Crummy *op cit* fn 3, figs 58.1851 and 59.1857.

Local Societies – amendments

THE EIGHTH SET of amendments to the list of local societies (Vol. 4, no. 15, 403-4) is below. Secretaries of local societies are asked to tell us of any errors in or changes to this list.

Bexley Archaeological Group Sec. Peter Dawson, 291 Long Lane, Bexleyheath, Kent DA7 5JD.

Hornsey Hist. Soc. Sec. Miss Susan Hector, The Old Schoolhouse, 136 Tottenham Lane, N8 7EL.

Kingston upon Thames Arch. Soc. Sec. Julie Wileman, 48 Bond Road, Tolworth, Surrey KT6 7SH.

Orpington & Dist. Arch. Soc. Sec. Sue Cover, 25 Clovelly Way, off Cotswold Rise, Orpington, Kent BR6 0WD.

Pinner Local Hist. Soc. Sec. John Young, 24 Melrose Road, Pinner, HA5 5RA.

comb from Frisia, and with a similar example from Canterbury, at present unpublished¹⁰.

Late Roman combs can be dated in general to the 4th century and to the second half of that century in particular¹¹. No convincing case has been made as yet for assigning any late Roman comb to the 3rd century. There is, however, a little evidence to suggest that the type continued in use – if not in production – into the 5th century. At least one late Roman comb has come out of a cremation urn from the early Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery at Spong Hill, while a comb discovered recently within the fill of an early Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured building at Meonstoke is also clearly late Roman¹².

Nonetheless, the artefactual evidence for 5th century presence within the City of London remains sparse. It is noticeable that no examples of Böhme's Class D or E triangular combs have come from London, although they are evidenced at Winchester, Colchester, Canterbury and Richborough¹³. Hills has suggested that a comb from London may be related to the triangular comb series of late 4th or 5th century date; but the comb belongs to the medieval period¹⁴. Other examples of barred zoomorphic and triangular combs do exist, and a connecting plate from the early Saxon cemetery near Reading could perhaps be added to the former

10. Roes *op cit* fn 6, pl XVI.1.

11. Keller *op cit* fn 2, 112.

12. C. Hills, K. Penn and R. Rickett *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham. Part 2* East Anglian Archaeol 11 (1981) fig 174.1743; M. Hughes *Excavations at Meonstoke 1985-6* (1986) fig 7.

13. H. W. Böhme *Germanische Grabfunde des 4 bis 5 Jahr-*

category¹⁵; but 5th century combs have yet to be found in London.

If late Roman combs are tolerably well known, so also are combs of the late Saxon period. Impressive comb assemblages have been recovered from Canterbury, York, Lincoln, Northampton, Norwich, Ipswich, Thetford, Hereford and elsewhere; but double-sided composite combs of bone or antler are not a notable feature of these assemblages. The reliance upon single-sided composite combs fashioned from bone or antler, or double-sided composite combs of horn and bone, is a characteristic of each of these urban assemblages. Double-sided composite combs of the Pudding Lane type are noticeably absent.

It seems, therefore, that the Pudding Lane comb is late Roman. It represents a small number of late Roman combs recovered from the City, all of which have been discovered in modern excavations; earlier accounts of finds of Roman date from the City do not include combs¹⁶.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Nick Griffiths for the original drawing upon which my drawings are based; also Nia Trzaska-Nartowski for general help and encouragement.

hunderts zwischen unterer Elbe und Loire (1974) 122-6.

14. Hills *op cit* fn 2, 100; MacGregor *op cit* fn 2, 91.

15. J. Stevens 'The discovery of a Saxon burial near Reading' *Journ Brit Archaeol Assoc* 50 (1894) fig 18.

16. *Catalogue of the Collection of London Antiquities in the London Museum* (1903); R. E. M. Wheeler *London in Roman Times* London Museum Catalogue No 3 (1930).

Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, EC2Y 5HN (01-600 3699).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (01-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (01-600 3699 x241).

Local enquiries to:

North London: 3-7 Ray Street, London EC1R 3DJ (01-837 8363).

South-west London: St. Luke's House, Sandycombe Road, Kew, Surrey (01-940 5989).

Southwark and Lambeth: 6-8 Cole Street, London SE1 4YH (01-407 1989 or 403 2920 – office – and 407 1258 – warehouse).

West London: 273A Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex (01-560 3880).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays,

7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (01-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Shipley, Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (01-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (01-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (01-703 3324).

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly British Archaeological News (9 issues a year). It gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription of £7.50, including postage, is payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, SE11 6RE (01-582 0494).