

## **From Late Roman to Early Anglo-Saxon, via the comb by Ian**

**Riddler** held on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2024 via Zoom.

Report edited by Sarah Hanna.

This transition period has a fascination for archaeologists, but it's elusive: between c350 and 430AD, when new coinage and Roman ceramic industries disappeared after the Romans withdrew their armies from Britain, leaving a gap in finds of easily datable materials from excavations. Combs and bone needle cases, however, do span this period - combs have not been closely studied in the past, but are now recognised as a consistent dating tool. Some ten years ago the number of reports increased as more combs were being excavated, especially as part of cremations. The publication of excavations at Spong Hill Anglo-Saxon cemetery in 2013 was a break-through: radio-carbon dates identified three phases (A1 & A2, dated from 375AD; B, dated 400-440AD; and C, dated 475-525AD), which correlated with types of cremation urn. This enabled distribution patterns to be developed, and tables of Correspondence Analysis were drawn up showing an overlap of manufacture from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century (350 to 525AD) for wooden, bone and antler combs in England. This led to re-analysis of earlier excavated assemblages.

### Types of comb

These are composite combs, many have animal heads profiled on the end segments, often horse heads, with the teeth forming the mane, which seem to have been made in England. Handford Road, Ipswich site revealed combs with heads having eyes and teeth forming the mane. Snell's Corner, Meonstoke and Lankhill in Hampshire also produced combs with beast's heads and manufactured with both fine and coarse teeth. The use of antler was an improvement on wooden combs, being more hard wearing.

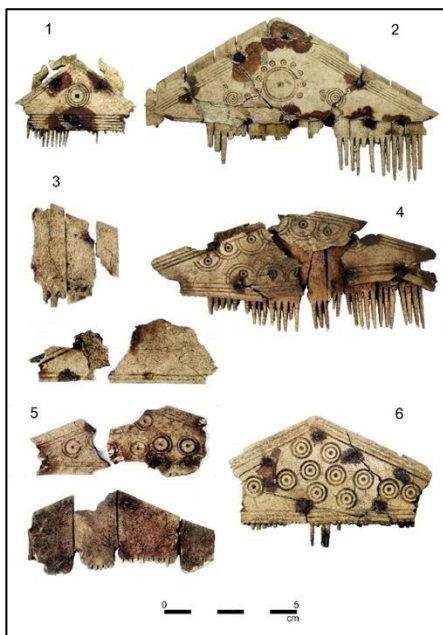
Late Roman combs from c 425AD were found in cremation urns, with a slightly different riveting layout and using copper rivets instead of iron. In the last year, two more have emerged from royal sites at Lyminge, Kent and Rendlesham, Suffolk, which have connecting plates with off-set iron rivets. A double-sided composite comb from Lyminge, Kent has a cut-out, with animal profile but is later in date, well stratified and manufactured during Phase B. Late Roman-style combs continue to be made but become more schematic, using ideas from across the channel such as some found in Mondelange, France. During Phase C, profiling disappears completely, combs become more stylised (Abbots Worthy, Winchester examples) with basic centralised rivets and teeth of the same size. These types of comb remained popular in the Early Anglo-Saxon period.

Antler comb fragments found in a grave at Lackford, Suffolk led to a suggestion that it belonged to a shaman who would have used the comb for ceremonial purposes. While this may have been possible, the pieces appeared too big, and an alternative explanation might be that it was late Roman waste placed in the grave of an antler worker.

Both before and contemporary with the manufacture of double-sided Roman composite combs, triangular or semi-circular Types A to E were being produced outside the Roman Empire ('Germanic'). A type B comb found at Richborough, Kent has the ends missing, and features large and small ring and dot decoration. A few examples have been found in England but these are clearly from overseas. Type E has animal heads above the connecting

plates, described as pigs but they are just head cut-outs. This type is very rare across Europe, often found around the Danube area, with a similar date to those from Spong Hill.

Technology is important to dating combs, especially the way they are put together. Phase A combs are usually centrally rivetted, with combs after c 450AD having central and edge riveting, and latterly just rivetted on the edge. The most common are Type D, broken down to D1 and a later form as D2. A D2 comb found in Winchester was larger, probably from the first part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. A D1 comb found in Mansell Street, London displays perforations but no framing lines, ring and dot and centre riveting. It is a small comb, so earlier - possibly the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. A D2 type was found in Spong Hill and a few of type D3 from the cremation cemetery.



*Illustration showing types of triangular one-sided comb, and styles of decoration. Image credit: Ian Riddler.*

The type B combs manufactured between c 350 to 450/70AD seem to be the longest used. Type C Triangular, enclosed in framing lines, c 350/375AD (late Roman). The best example is from Broom Quarry, Beds, very defining, centre rivetted. Type A combs are semi-circular, simple and upright in form, but with four sets of teeth reaching only half way up the holding plates. Combs with hollow rivets of copper alloy generally originated in Scandinavia. The length of combs increases through the phases, reaching up to 30cm (1 ft) long. There are some luxury traded (ivory) combs but they are fairly rare, and made locally.

The work of sorting comb typologies is in the early stages, and not supported/contradicted so far by scientific analysis, which needs to be developed. The design of comb types do show progression, but with considerable continuity through the years. Ideas seemed to come mostly from the near continent, until Scandinavian designs appeared in England with the Vikings. Improved dating techniques within archaeology will further assist in dating these items and the sites where they are found.

The talk was held online, attended by 42 people both SAS members and guests.

*Thanks to Mandy Kesby's detailed notes, and to Sue Davies for her comments.*