



EXPLORING THE MIDDLE AGES

The Bjørkum Combs; Actors, Production and Networks during the Viking Age

New information about comb production, crafts specialisation and the integration of rural western Norway into the wide-ranging communication and trading networks of the Viking world.

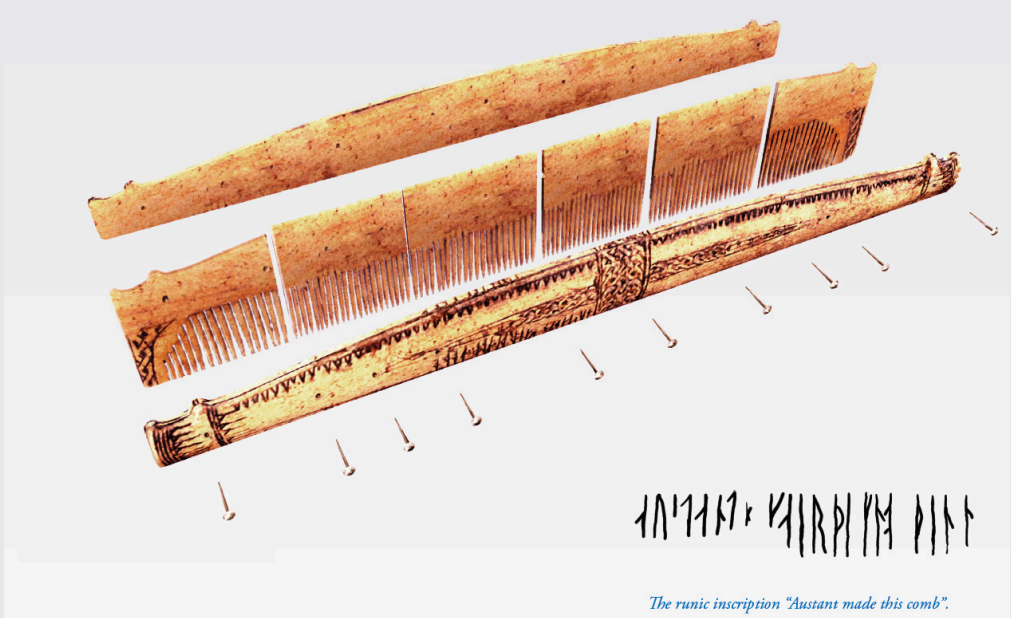
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Aerial view of Bjørkum and its wider landscape setting.

Antler combs are frequently found in Norwegian Viking Age graves. However, unlike contemporary sites in Northern Europe there is little information about local manufacturing traditions as no workshops have been encountered to date.

During excavations at the Late Iron Age site Bjørkum, a small number of complete and fragmented combs were found. Alongside fragments of cut reindeer antler and antler debris, this testifies to on-site small scale craft production. The Bjørkum site provides new insights into the social and economic aspects of rural Late Iron Age Norway as well as the networks that were at play in wider areas of northern Europe.



Composition and construction of single composite comb from the site based on x-ray and documentation.

Viking Age Combs

Scandinavian Viking Age combs are composite single-sided antler combs where the different parts are riveted together. The combs display a high degree of craftsmanship. Apart from their functional use, combs were important objects displaying the owner's social status and role, but may also have been ritual objects or used as gift items. Ornamentation, either in the form of lines, ring-and-dot motif or interlaced ornament, supports a more symbolic reading. The standardized forms of the finished combs are taken as an indication

of close and integrated social and economic networks operating over larger parts of Viking Age Northern Europe.

The Viking Age site Bjørkum

During the Viking Age, Bjørkum seems to have played a role beyond a mere farmstead. Based on a variety of data, a complex picture emerges of a site oriented towards seasonal gatherings with feasting, ritual activities as well as small-scale craft production and specialization.

Bjørkum is the first secure context in Norway with Viking Age comb production. The main goals of this research is a careful investigation into the antler material in order to identify the amount and scale of comb production at the site, to reveal information about their status as possible luxury or high status objects as well as addressing the level of itinerancy versus locally based craftsmanship.

Reindeer antler and production

A small amount of cut antler and antler debris was found at several different locations at the site. No particular workshop or activity areas for antler working were identified. Although in limited number, all stages of the manufacturing were found, from prefabricated blanks for tooth plates and connection plates, to smaller worked fragments. A total of three more or less complete combs were found. In addition, remains of another nine combs were encountered.



Antler, and different pre-fabs and waste materials related to comb-production at the site.

From the hunting grounds to the outside world

Like the rest of Norway, the mountains surrounding Bjørkum is literally dotted with constructions for mass trapping of reindeer. At the transition to the Viking Age the hunt intensifies and the antlers are increasingly removed from the kill and butchering sites. This can be related to a greater demand for antler as well as the development of new networks



Reconstruction of the Bjørkum site 800 AD. Bjørkum is located about 130 masl, around 20 km from Lærdal, Western Norway.

for exchange and consumption. However, until the discovery of Bjørkum, transitional sites for redistribution or acquiring these products were lacking.

Access to raw materials represents an important element in the organisation of craft production. Bjørkum offers a glimpse into the actors involved along the line from production to consumption. The preliminary results indicate that the Bjørkum combs were the products of specialists rather than local craftsmen. If the craftsmen were not hunters themselves, Bjørkum, surrounded by reindeer hunting grounds, was clearly a good place to obtain high-quality antler.

The language of the comb maker

Even though the find assemblage is small, the combs themselves really stand out compared to other Viking Age workshops and other contexts with combs. The quality and overall aesthetics demonstrate that the Bjørkum combs are luxury or display combs produced at the highest level of craftsmanship.

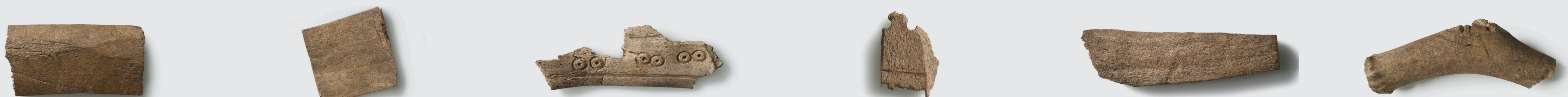


Type A comb, in situ. A-combs have their origins and main production in Norway and parts of Sweden. However, these items had an extremely wide distribution from Starja Ladoga in Russia to Hedeby in Germany and Jarlshof in Shetland.

A connection point

Bjørkum represents a connection point between the trapping systems and hunters in the mountains and the distribution networks covering Northern Europe. While the manufacturing of combs was never of any great scale, the site can easily be envisaged as a place for re-distribution of high quality antlers from the mountain areas as well as small scale production of high quality combs. This provides new information on how the different levels of exchange were mediated, the scale of local production and how it was integrated into the distributional networks of other prestige items in the Viking World.

Further reading: <http://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/ramstad328/>



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