

# Composite Antler Combs from Olbia Pontica

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# Composite Antler Combs from Olbia Pontica

Alisa Semenova<sup>a</sup>

In this paper, for the first time are presented the full selection of finds of antler composite combs with a single row of teeth from Olbia Pontica. All of them belong to the Cherniakhiv culture and are related to the time of the last settlement of the territory of the ancient city. From a typological point of view, all of them can be divided into two groups: combs with semicircular or trapezoidal handle and, slightly older than them, comb handles of a complex shape, which is based on a rectangle with a semicircular middle part.

KEY-WORDS: antler comb, Olbia Pontica, the Cherniakhiv-Sântana de Mureş culture, Northern Black Sea region

During scientific archaeological investigations at Olbia Pontica were found at least eight antler composite combs with a single row of teeth. They have been found in different parts of the site: in the city and at the necropolis. They differ from the rectangular and double-sided, mostly wooden, combs that are characteristic of the ancient Greek cities of the northern Black Sea coast (Sokol'skiy 1971: 138–149). Three of them are well-known to researchers from previous publications (Farmakovskiy 1903: 73; *Otchet Imperatorskoy...* 1903: 133; Peters 1986: 142), and five were unknown, published in the current article for the first time. In addition to them, the collection has a certain number of fragments, which unfortunately cannot provide any information about the type of artefact. Despite the fact that combs are among the most well known of bone artefacts from late antiquity to mediaeval time, their potential remains to be fulfilled.

All composite combs from Olbia Pontica which have been studied in this article belong to the “barbarian” type and originate from the Cherniakhiv-Sântana de Mureş culture. The current state of research of the subject may be briefly summarised. A major study of these artefacts was published by Sigrid Thomas (1960: 54–215) and this is still considered the main work on this topic. She composed the first

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typology of European combs of the Roman period. She divided the material into two large groups: one-layer and three-layer combs. Within these groups, the author divided them into types, focusing on the shape of the handle. Three-layer combs were divided into three types with several subtypes. Type I – with semicircular handle; Type II – with triangular handle; Type III – with handle of complex shape, which is based on a rectangle with a semicircular middle part.

This typology was based on a relatively small sample of combs originating mainly from the territory of Central and Northern Europe and almost does not involve materials from Eastern Europe. In addition, since the time of that publication, the number of artefacts has also increased significantly, owing to archaeological research. The typology indicated above is still relevant but needs to be adapted according to the number of features that are characteristic, for example, for combs of the Cherniakhiv culture, which contributed to further developments.

In the following years, the first typology was refined and detailed by modern archaeologists (Petrauskas 2009: 193–194; 2017: 126); some of them composed their own variants of the typology (Petković: 1995: 21–27; Shyshkin 1999; 2002). Separately, it is worth mentioning the detailed studies devoted to the so-called combs with a bell-shaped handle (Cnotliwy 2010). In the current research, the Thomas typology was utilized, along with some of the subsequent developments mentioned above.

Composite combs were most commonly made from antler (Thomas 1960: 76). Their very design is dictated by the particularity of the raw material; one-layer combs were small. In order to obtain products of larger sizes, ancient craftsmen had to invent a different form (Thomas 1960: 75). Composite three-layer combs consisted of several plates with teeth connected to each other by means of two mostly continuous side plates. In some cases, an additional reinforcing plate was used in the upper part. This whole structure was fixed with metal rivets, and possibly with glue. In some cases, the side plates could be decorated. Technological aspects were not, however, the main aim of the current research, so that part will not be discussed separately.

The first finds of three-layer combs were discovered during excavations at the beginning of the 20th century. Various publications mentioned them repeatedly, but some details still need to be specified. These works provided information in quite general ways and were supplemented by low quality illustrations, which are difficult to use in research. Taking into account the fact that these materials could not be analysed in person by the author herself, these publications should be used in the study as the main source of information.

One of these three-layer combs was found, together with other equipment, in the burial No. 8, during the excavations of the necropolis of Olbia in 1901. It was built as an earthen crypt with a dromos (Farmakovskiy 1903: 73). In addition

to a sparse description, the author provided a photo of the comb itself, without specifying the dimensions, as well as the date of the feature as a whole (Farmakovskiy 1903: 67). As was written in later publications, this comb is stored in the State Historical Museum (Moscow, Russian Federation) and has the inventory number 42707 (Sorokina 1976: 203; Peters 1986: 142, tabl. XII:13). For some reason, the pictures from these publications do not show the rivets mentioned in the original source (Farmakovskiy 1903: 73). According to the photo and drawings, it can be stated that this comb appears to be Thomas Type I. It has a semicircular handle, the height of which is approximately half the width. Such proportions make it possible (Shyshkin 2002: 244) to date it to the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 4th century (Peters 1986: 142).

Another important find of a comb was mentioned in the literature as a find either from Olbia or Berezan (Peters 1986: 142, tabl. XII:14). In fact, it was purchased as part of the private collection of antiquities from Olbia and Berezan of the Ochakiv archpriest N. Levitskiy (*Otchet Imperatorskoy...* 1903: 133), but this is certainly not reliable evidence of the origin of the object from Olbia. Its storage location is currently unknown, as are its dimensions and any other related information. The previous publication has only a single photo. Judging by this picture, this is a three-layer comb with a handle of complex shape (Thomas Type III) assembled using a large number of rivets. These features allow dating this comb no earlier than the middle of the 4th century (Shyshkin 2002: 245), while Peters dates it to the 3rd–4th centuries (Peters 1986: 142).

The next example was found during an excavation in 1910 (Peters 1986: 142, tab. XIII:15). Unfortunately, it is preserved in a highly fragmented state. It has a trapezoidal handle and curved sides, parts of which are held together with rivets. It was found in earthen grave No. 43, and is now stored in the State Hermitage Museum (Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation) under inventory number 3244. It can be classified as Thomas Type I. While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions based solely on the available image, the flat top and arcuate bend of the sides allow it to be classified as variant 3, according to Petrauskas. Analogous combs were dated no later than the middle of the 4th century (Petrauskas 2009: 193–194).

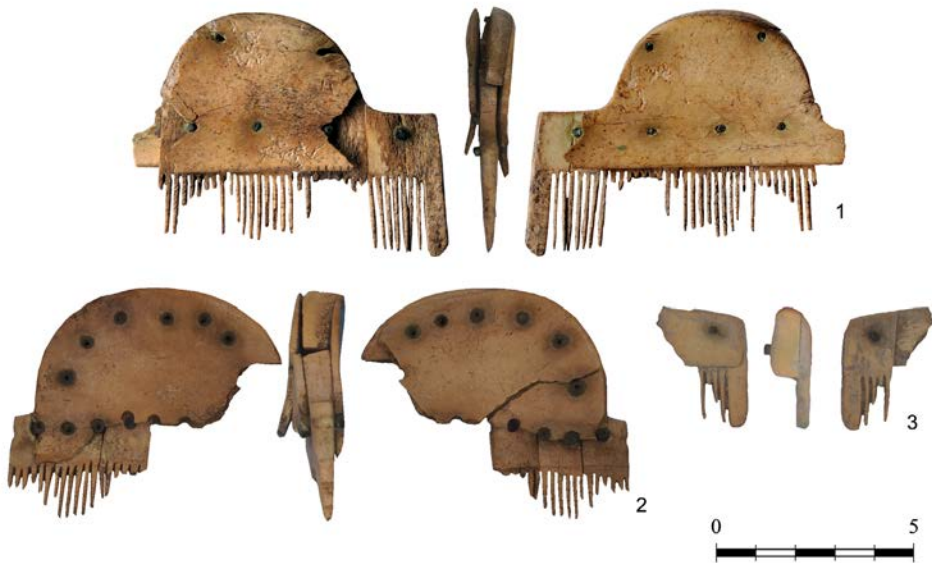
Another restored fragment of an antler comb was discovered during excavation in 1952 (Fig. 1:1). It is preserved in the collection of the Olbia National Reserve under inventory number 1185. Unfortunately, work with archival data has not provided any information about the part of the site or sector where it was found. This is a three-layered antler comb; Type I, according to Thomas. It is preserved quite fragmentarily: the semi-circular handle has survived partly; the middle part with the teeth is completely lost. The handle plates are fixed with metal rivets, only four on the lower edge and three on the upper edge of the handle remain. The preserved



**Fig. 1.** Combs with semicircular handle. 1 – O-1952-1185, 2 – O-2009 R-25 No 1391.  
Photo: A. Semenova.

height of the handle of the plate is 4.3 cm; the width is 8.5 cm. Despite significant damage, it can be stated that the height of the handle is approximately equal to half the width. This is an additional argument that allows to date this object to the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 4th century.

Another comb originates from the Upper Town, namely from sector R-25 (O-2009 number 1391). Today, it is preserved in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Fig. 1:2). It is distinguished from the previous ones by the fact that it originates from the fill of a feature – a pit. Diverse but chronologically uniform material gave researchers the opportunity to date it to the 3rd–4th centuries (Krapivina and Buiskykh 2009: 52). This three-layer comb belongs to Thomas Type I. It has a semicircular handle without shoulders that was fastened with bronze rivets. There were probably seven of them in total, but due to damaged edges, only five have survived (another one can be traced by reason of the presence of a partially preserved hole). The height of the plate is 4.4 cm,



**Fig. 2.** Combs with handles of complex shape, which is based on a rectangle with a semicircular middle part, the so-called bell-shaped handle. 1 – O-1967 No 902, 2 – O-2003 No 457, 3 – O-2016 No 223. Photo: A. Semenova.

and the preserved width is 9.8 cm. The ratio of the height and width of the handle allows us to date this object to the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 4th century. It corresponds to the dating of the entire feature.

The next two examples are composite combs made of antler that were found in the Lower Town. A three-layer, partially damaged comb with a rounded back and straight shoulders was found exactly in the sector NGTS (O-1967, number 902). It belongs to Type III, according to Thomas (Fig. 2:1). The parts were fastened with bronze rivets; only two in the rounded part and four along the lower edge of the plate have survived. The height of the handle is 3.9 cm, the width could be approximately 9.2 cm. Separately, the presence should be mentioned of the end of the comb (extreme teeth), which, in combination with the proportions (Shyshkin 2002: 245), gives reason to date it no earlier than the middle of the 4th – the beginning of the 5th century. It is preserved in the collection of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

A damaged composite comb was found in the sector NGS (O-2003 number 457) and it is stored in the Archaeological Museum of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Fig. 2:2). It has a three-layer construction and a handle of the so-called complex shape with a round back, the shoulders are almost absent, but it can be assumed that they were straight. Part of the handle was also damaged, and only three segments remained from the inner plate with teeth. The height and width of the plate are preserved, 4 cm and 6.4 cm, respectively. Despite the damage, the comb was attributed to Type III, according to Thomas, and was dated to no earlier than the middle of the 4th century – the beginning of the 5th century. The fact that the comb most likely refers to late variants of the type is also confirmed by the large number of tubular rivets, ten of which have been preserved, a few more only have holes left.

A small fragment of a three-layer comb was discovered in the same area, in 2016 (O-2016 number 223). It measures only 2.9 cm by 2.2 cm and likely belongs to Type III, according to Thomas<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 2:3). Only the middle part with teeth and a fragment of the side plate have been preserved and one of the rivets that fastened the comb. By analogous materials, it can be dated to the end of 4th – the beginning of the 5th century. It is stored in the collection of the Olbia National Reserve.

From a typological point of view, all the three-layer combs from Olbia can be divided into two groups. The first is represented by the Type I according to Thomas, in two variations. They differ in the shape of the handle: one is semicircular (Fig. 1) and the another is trapezoidal (Peters 1986: 142, tabl. XII:15). They are generally dated to the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 4th century.

The second group is represented by the next class of finds. These combs have handles of complex shape, which is based on a rectangle with a semicircular middle part. This group of finds corresponds to Type III according to Thomas. Similar combs were dated to the second half of the 4th – the beginning of the 5th centuries.

It should be noted that the vast majority of combs from Olbia are dated on the basis of chronological developments determined on the basis of materials from other sites. This is due to the fact that almost all of the Olbia examples were found outside of dated assemblages (or detailed information about these assemblages is lost). The general chronology of the existence of the combs coincides with the time when the population that lived on the territory of Olbia and its economic district is identified with the bearers of the Cherniakhiv culture, namely the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 5th centuries. Archaeological objects related to this time are recorded at the site of Olbia in several sectors in the Upper and Lower parts of the city. The combs also were mostly found in these sectors.

<sup>1</sup> For assistance in identifying this specimen and valuable advice, we are grateful to O.V. Petrauskas, PhD in History, Head of the Department of Early Slavic Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

For a long time, the presence of the Cherniakhiv culture communities in the territory of Olbia was a controversial problem. There was an opinion that in the last period of its existence, Olbia continued as a Hellenic city (Krapivina 1993). The opposite point of view claims that the carriers of the Cherniakhiv culture settled here on the ruins of the ancient city (Zubar 2001: 132–138; Magomedov 2007: 47–54). Eventually, individual finds, however impressive, cannot serve as a convincing cultural indicator. Only the finding of a complex of such finds could be reliable evidence in that question. In addition to the actual combs, mentioned above, many other artefacts were found on the territory of Olbia that indicate the cultural affinities of the local population to the Cherniakhiv culture, such as specific types of fibulae, glass vessels and, of course, characteristic greyware ceramics (Magomedov 2007: 48). In this context, the study of greyware ceramics from closed dated complexes of a number of hillforts and settlements of the Olbia district, provide interesting results about development of the area. These investigations have allowed distinguishing two chronological stages that are clearly divided among themselves: classical antiquity and the Cherniakhiv periods. The latter covers the second half of the 3rd – the beginning of the 5th century (Magomedov 2007: 49). Therefore, only further systematic research of both new excavations and the introduction into the scientific circulation of materials from previous years by their fuller publication, will help to solve a number of issues related to the last stage of settlement of the territory of Olbia.

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