

# A Shetland Viking comb in Copenhagen

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## ABSTRACT

*With the founding of The Society of Northern Antiquaries in 1825, Copenhagen became a centre for worldwide archaeology. A network of agents helped establish an extensive collection of artefacts. The Danish governor in the Faroe Islands, Christian Pløyen, acted as such when he visited Shetland in 1839. One of the interesting objects he secured for Copenhagen was a fragment of a Viking comb, which until now has been stored unnoticed in the National Museum of Denmark.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Society of Northern Antiquaries was founded in Copenhagen in 1825. One of its founders was Carl Christian Rafn (1795–1864) who acted as secretary until his death. His ambition was to secure members from all over the world, and an impressive network was established, especially during the 1830s and 1840s. The network was an important instrument for Rafn to distribute his own writings and it provided the Society with funding through membership fees. It also provided the Society, and thereby the Museum of Antiquities in Copenhagen, with archaeological objects from all over the world (Jensen & Jensen 1988).

Thus, when the Danish ‘Governor’ (*amtmand*) in the Faroe Islands, Christian Pløyen (1803–67), embarked upon a journey to Orkney and Shetland in 1839, Rafn saw the opportunity of establishing a foothold there. Pløyen made the acquaintance of the leading local antiquarians on that occasion and he mediated, via his position in Tórshavn, in the subsequent antiquarian connections between Shetland and Copenhagen.

Pløyen immediately provided the Museum of Antiquities in Copenhagen via the Society,

with a flow of Shetland antiquities, helping to satisfy Rafn’s ambitions. The collection of Shetland objects presented to the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries following Pløyen’s visit to Shetland is still stored at the National Museum of Denmark. One of the more interesting items in the collection is a fragment of a Viking comb.<sup>1</sup>

Among the people who Pløyen was introduced to during his stay, was Captain William Cameron Mouat (1780–1855) of Garth. He hosted Pløyen at his residence *Gardie House* on the island of Bressay (Pløyen 1894: 145). Pløyen was with him during a visit to the island of Unst to his estate there, *Belmont* (Pløyen 1894: 176). In Unst Pløyen visited important archaeological sites such as the stone-circles at Crucifield and the so-called King Harald Haarfager’s grave (Pløyen 1894: 178–9).

Pløyen also visited the small island of Uyea off the south coast of Unst where he met the owner of the island, Mrs Margaret Leisk (1765–1843).<sup>2</sup> Pløyen stated, ‘At the pretty little island of Uyea, which belongs to Unst, I was so fortunate as to be presented by the proprietress, Mrs Leisk, with a stone urn, which had been dug up there. I have sent it, with some other

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Shetland curiosities, to the Northern Antiquarian Museum at Copenhagen' (Pløyen 1894: 179). Pløyen subsequently visited the island of Yell and brought as a travelling companion Gilbert Spence (c 1788–1850) of Hamar, whom he described as 'a worthy laird from Unst' (Pløyen 1894: 180–1). Spence had a keen interest in matters antiquarian. In a letter of 5 January 1822 to Thomas Irvine of Midbrake, he had asked for a Danish grammar 'in the expectation that it might serve as a key to unlock a great store of local antiquity – a study of which I am very fond'.<sup>3</sup>

Rafn approached Cameron Mouat offering him membership of the society in a letter of 5 December 1840 from Copenhagen. Cameron Mouat immediately accepted: 'this very distinguished honour is as unexpected as it is unmerited on my part, and I beg you will assure the Royal Society of Northern Antiquarians that I highly appreciate this testimony of their esteem and respect'.<sup>4</sup>

The Copenhagen investment in Shetland quickly paid off. On 11 May 1841 Cameron Mouat wrote to Rafn:

I have ... succeeded in procuring a few 'Steinbarts' [Neolithic axes] of different shapes, and as the Belgian Schooner of War the 'Louise Marie', which is on the eve of sailing from Brassay harbour, intends to touch at Thorshaven I now send a small box containing these Steinbarts to my worthy friend H. Exc. Governor Ployen who I have no doubt will embrace the first opportunity of forwarding the Box to you, it contains also a small specimen of the Asbestos [presumably steatite] that is found in some of our Islands. I request you will do me the honor to present in my name to the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries at Copenhagen the few Steinbarts and Asbestos contained in the box, and to express my regret that I have been unable to procure larger and more perfect Steinbarts.<sup>5</sup>

On 31 August 1843 Pløyen, in Tórshavn, was able to ship another collection of Shetland artefacts to Rafn in Copenhagen:<sup>6</sup>

To  
The Royal Antiquities Commission  
in Copenhagen

I hereby take the liberty to present to the honoured Commission:

1. one stone axe, found on Mainland Shetland, and
2. one small coin, found in the parish of Dunrossness; from the same site derive an ancient horn, halves and quarters of coins of similar type, as well as a number of fragmented silver-armlets. I have seen fragments of the armlets in Shetland but was not able to purchase them; Shetland collectors regard the coins as an example of the so-called Danegeld.

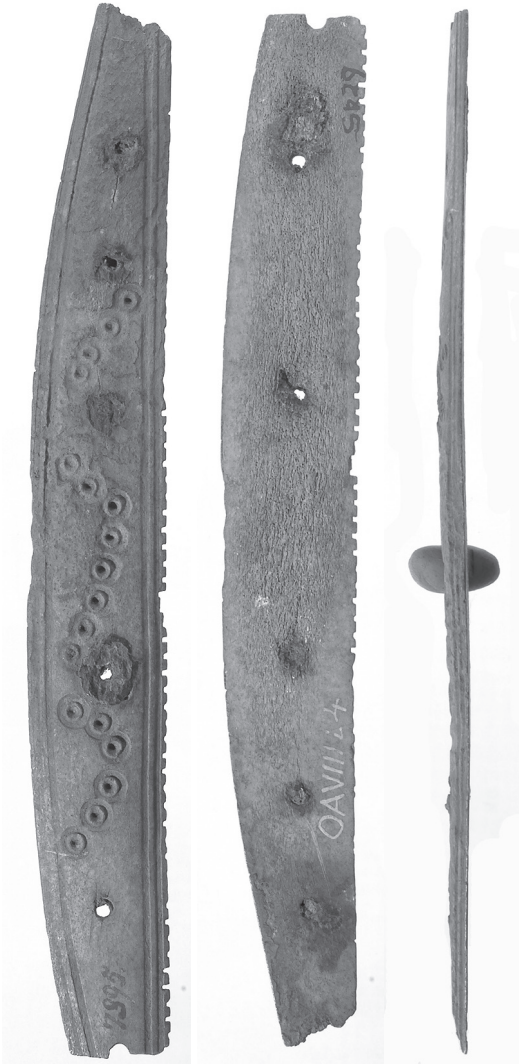
Both of these objects were stored by Mr William Bain, a ship-agent in Lerwick, for the purpose to include them in relevant Danish museums. Mr Bain has a nice small collection of Shetland antiquities, and among these the most impressive example of a stone axe, I have ever seen; the museum in Copenhagen has not got its like.

3. one antique fragment of bone, unearthed at Unst, in the Shetland Isles, and presented to me by Mr. Spence of Hammer in Unst, as the remains of a comb; although I cannot regard the fragment to be of a comb, I shall not omit to offer it to the museum.

This was the only shipment sent from Shetland to Copenhagen that contained artefacts from periods other than the Stone Age. While the Viking coin has been widely dealt with in archaeological literature, no attention has so far been paid to the 'antique fragment of bone'.

## THE COMB

The 'antique fragment of bone' is, in spite of Pløyen's reservations, the preserved fragment of a connecting plate from a single-sided antler comb (illus 1). The base of the plate is flat, while the upper side is slightly curved and outlined by a double contour line. Both ends of the plate are missing. The fragment has a length of 146mm, a maximum width of 19mm and a thickness



ILLUS 1 The Viking comb which Gilbert Spence of Hamar in 1839 handed over to the Danish Governor in Faroe, Christian Pløyen, and which subsequently ended up in the so-called 'Foreign Prehistoric Collection' in the National Museum of Denmark. Scale 1:1. Photo: National Museum of Denmark/Pia Brejnholt Jensen

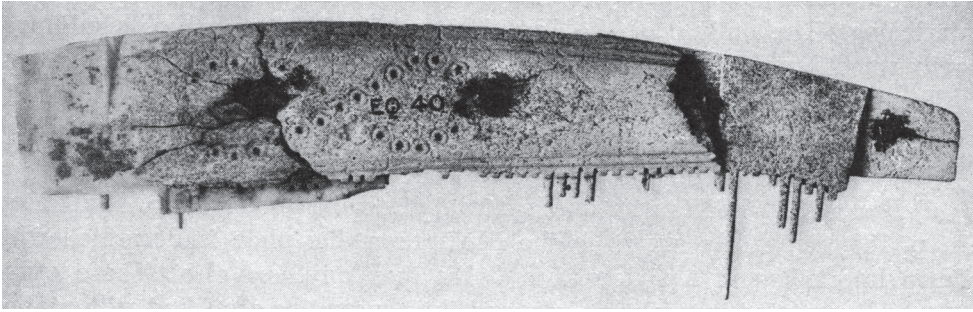
of 3mm. Seven rivet holes are preserved with heavily corroded iron rivets in some of them. The central decoration is dot-in-circle in the well-known recumbent S-like pattern.

## CONTEXT AND DATING

In 1969 Wolf-Dieter Tempel established a typology for the combs from Haithabu (Tempel 1969). Of interest here is Tempel's Type 2 (Formengruppe 2). The combs have an average length of *c* 20cm. The connecting plates have a flat base and a slightly curved upper side. The back of the plate curves towards the narrow ends. Among the typical decorations on the connecting plates are the double contour line along the edges, and the clusters of dot-in-circle ornaments, which are often organised in repeated patterns or the well-known recumbent S-pattern. Both of these decorative features are also characteristics of Tempel's Type 1, which is linked to the transitional phase between the Merovingian and Viking period (Tempel 1969: 79–84).

Tempel's Type 2 is dated from the late 8th century to the end of the 9th century, with a majority of finds confined to the first half of the 9th century (Tempel 1969: 121) in a wide geographical distribution. They appear in all the Scandinavian countries (see Arbman 1937: 136–7, Abb 26; Arbman 1937: 239, Taf 74, 1; Danielsen 1973: 41, fig 251), Haithabu (Tempel 1970: 34, Abb 1), Friesland (Holwerda 1930: Abb 72, 96; Roes 1965: 60–1, pl XXVII), Altladoga, England and Scotland (Tempel 1969: 81).

Another two Type 2 examples have been found in Scotland. One comes from a 9th-century Viking grave on South Uist in the Western Isles. This comb has the same double contour lines and dot-in-circle-ornamentation in a recumbent S-pattern (Grieg 1940: 74–5, fig 42) (illus 2). On the comb from South Uist the tooth plate expanded beyond the ends of the connecting plates, which made Roes include it into a group of combs which have their origin in Friesland (Roes 1963: 24; Tempel 1970: 37; Tempel 1972). The other example comes from the 9th century 'lower Norse horizon' at the Brough of Birsay in Orkney and is characterised by a similar shape and pattern (Curle 1982: 58, fig 224; Ritchie 1993: 57, fig 36) (illus 3).



ILLUS 2 Viking comb from South Uist (after Grieg 1940). The length of the fragment is 145mm

As the ends of the connecting plates are not preserved for the combs from Brough of Birsay or Unst, it cannot be established with certainty if they should be ascribed to Roes' Frisian group. Their similarity with the comb from South Uist, however, makes this plausible.

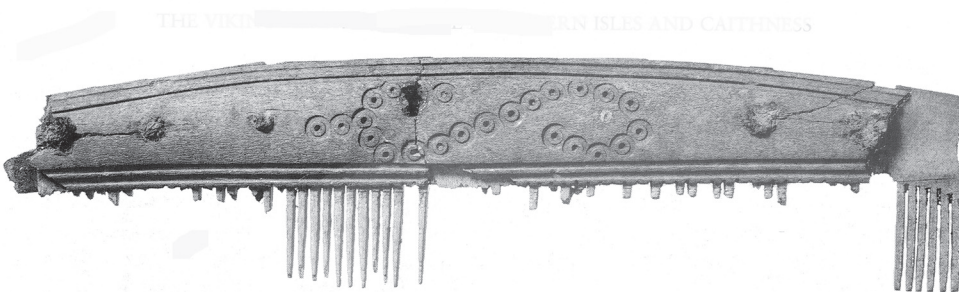
#### PROVENANCE IN UNST

Pløyen did not go into detail regarding the provenance of the comb fragment. He stated that it was 'unearthed at Unst', information he was obviously given by the presenter Mr Gilbert Spence of Hamar, a native of Unst.

The number of known Viking Age sites in Shetland was very limited until a few decades ago. Only two settlement sites had been excavated, namely Jarlshof on the southern tip of Mainland (Hamilton 1956) and Underhoull

on the island of Unst (Small 1967). Jarlshof had been the most productive in terms of small finds, and was the only one to produce organic artefacts.

A systematic survey of Scandinavian sites of the Viking Age and Medieval period in Unst, conducted by the author during the 1990s, brought the number of settlement sites up to more than thirty on this island alone (Stummann Hansen 2000). Two sites were trial excavated, and large-scale excavations were initiated at the sites of Setters in the southwest of the island, and at Soterberg near Haroldswick on the east coast (Stummann Hansen 2000: 90–4). The site Clugan on the east coast should also be mentioned where a small amateur excavation was conducted in 1971 (Beveridge 1972). None of these sites produced organic materials. A recent excavation of a Viking settlement at Norwick produced no organic objects (Ballin Smith 2007).



ILLUS 3 Viking comb from *Brough of Birsay*, Orkney (after Ritchie 1993). The length of the fragment is c 170mm



Likewise, only two artefact assemblages were known from Viking graves in Unst. Neither produced objects of organic material (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 64).

A likely candidate for the provenance of the comb fragment is the sandy beach at Sandwick on the east coast. Antiquities at Sandwick beach were first mentioned in a Shetland Times article from 1905: ‘north along the shore is the steeds of a house with a midden beside it. These were disclosed by the great tidal wave and tempest of February, 1900. Midden is rich in animal and fish bones, ashes and shells. Two coins and a comb of ancient pattern were found in the midden, but we could not trace who has these now’ (Saxby 1905: 5; Saxby 1932: 15).

Structural remains and cultural deposits were later found at three locations along the beach and reported to the RCAHMS:

Mr P Moar, of Lerwick, reports that remains of masonry were exposed by the storms of January 1937 at three points on the shore of Sand Wick. One site is at the extreme N. end of the bay, the

second being 80 yds. and the third 250 yds. S. of it. At the northernmost site quantities of burned broken stones were observed and some fragments of steatite urns were picked up. At the central site are five perforated ‘tether-stones’; and here were also found two bone combs of Viking type, one of which is now in the National Museum. The southernmost site, too, yielded burned stones and steatite fragments, as well as another Viking comb which, like the second comb from the central site, has passed into private collections. At all three sites the structural remains are very scanty (RCAHMS 1946, 169–170).

In the 1970s large-scale excavations were conducted by Gerald F Bigelow at the most southerly of the three reported Scandinavian sites on the beach, Sandwick South. The excavations produced a large number of artefacts, including fragments of antler or bone combs. The site has been dated to the 12th to 14th centuries by the excavator (Bigelow 1985; 1987; 1989).

In 1995 the author conducted a rescue excavation at the site of Sandwick North, situated 300m to the north along the beach.



ILLUS 4 The sandy Sandwick beach at the east coast of Unst seen from the north.  
Photo: S Stummann Hansen

This site also produced a large number of artefacts, including fragments of antler combs. The site seems to have been established in the early 11th century (Stummann Hansen 1996; 1998).

It is therefore unlikely that the comb fragment which Pløyen sent to Copenhagen came from either of these two sites, based on site chronology. The comb may have come from the most northerly site at Sandwick; this site had been situated at the far north end of the beach but is now, unfortunately, completely lost to the sea (illus 4).

## POSTSCRIPT

The transfer of antiquities from Shetland to Copenhagen which Pløyen orchestrated shortly after his return in 1839 was to be followed by others. The fine Shetland collection, which Pløyen procured for the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries and followed by later donations, is preserved intact today in the National Museum of Denmark. It represents evidence of strong antiquarian links between Shetland and Denmark, established more than a hundred and fifty years ago (Stummann Hansen 2007).

The hitherto unnoticed 9th-century comb from Unst, now stored in Copenhagen, is a little piece of 'new' evidence of Shetland's much earlier links to Scandinavia.

## NOTES

- 1 For a full account of these early antiquarian links between Shetland and Copenhagen, see Stummann Hansen 2007.
- 2 Margaret McMurdo, daughter of George McMurdo of Dumfries, Scotland, was born in 1765. She married Thomas Leisk, merchant at Burravoe in Shetland in 1801. They eventually lived in the island of Uyea, just south of Unst. Thomas Leisk, who was a 'taxman' of various Shetland estates, was noted for his robust defences of landlord power in Shetland. He died in 1837, and she on 16 January 1843.

- 3 Shetland Archives (D 16/387/48). The information about Gilbert Spence of Hamar is sparse. He lived at Hamar north the voe at Baltasound, and had a small estate in mid and north Unst. As well as a proprietor he was a land surveyor, and surveyed various properties in the North Isles in the 1830–40s.
- 4 Archives of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries (1342), author's translation from Danish. It has not been possible to trace Rafn's letter to Cameron Mouat.
- 5 Archives of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries (1342). Cameron Mouat became a member of the society that year. In a letter by Preller & Gabain, London, to Cameron Mouat, they stated: 'We have had the pleasure to receive your favour of the 21st ultimo with a remittance for £3 15s 6d which we have placed to the credit of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries at Copenhagen, the receipt of which Professor Rafn will be informed of in due course' (Gardie House Archive).
- 6 Letter from Pløyen to Rafn. Archives of the National Museum of Denmark. Author's translation from Danish.

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