

Fermanagh in 100 objects: The Drumclay Bird Headed Comb

Dr Nóra Bermingham

Introduction

Sometimes there is an object that can propel you back in time almost instantly. Your feet might be standing in 2013 but your head has been transported swiftly and assuredly to an earlier time virtually unrecognisable from your own. At Drumclay, this was my experience when a simple but charming comb emerged in February 2013. The comb with the birds' heads resonated with everyone who saw it when found. Julian Fowler from the BBC Northern Ireland happened to be on site that day and images of the comb were transmitted around the world within hours of its discovery. Perhaps it is because of the comb's simplicity and elegance, or because combs are such personal objects, that this comb appears to speak so strongly. Its impact does not appear to have lessened. If anything it has become one of the most iconic objects from Drumclay.

Archaeological investigations at Drumclay, near Enniskillen in Co. Fermanagh, concerned the excavation of an early medieval lake-settlement called a crannóg. These are artificial islands within lakes typically built from imported deposits of soil, wood, peat and stone (Wood-Martin 1886, O'Sullivan 1998). People built such settlements throughout prehistory but during the middle of the first millennium AD, crannóg-building underwent a significant resurgence and crannógs represent a distinctive element within the settlement record of the early medieval period, i.e. from around AD 400 to 1100 (O'Sullivan et al. 2013). Drumclay Crannog is one of around 143 such settlements within Co. Fermanagh (Foley and McHugh 2014, 585) and dates from around the 7th to 15th century AD if not later (Bermingham 2014; Bermingham et al. 2013).

The comb's discovery

One of the reasons this comb struck a chord instantly was because until its discovery we had been floating somewhere between the 7th and 10th century AD for several weeks. Excavations began at Drumclay in June 2012 and the six months or so until the end of that year saw the removal of the later medieval levels of occupation from across the former lake settlement. During this time the crannóg yielded scores of artefacts, largely domestic objects with a wide variety of types and materials represented. By the year end the excavation had exposed levels that dated anywhere from between the 7th to 10th century. This was evident in

the sorts of objects being recovered but a four-hundred year range is extremely broad especially when trying to understanding how the settlement at Drumclay grew and changed through time. Following a break over the Christmas period, and by the time the excavation had recommenced in January 2013 it looked very much like that seventh or eighth century levels had been reached. Other forms of evidence, in particular the type of carpentry which was occurring, suggested the houses and hearths and related accumulated waste and consolidation deposits belonged in and around the eighth century. But we needed more. We needed an object that would support our impressions and one of team, archaeologist Mariusz Paszkiewicz, adroitly delivered the comb from within the remains of a possible house he was excavating on yet another cold Friday in February. This small, simple pretty object transported what was a very modern project back to the seventh or eighth century and confirmed current thinking on the crannóg's dating almost instantly.

This comb was allocated the find number [1868] and was recovered from soft, dark grey silty peat (4074) from around a hearth located centrally with an occupation platform (8118). It is probable a house once stood on this platform. Other finds from the same context included a wooden pin, a possible spindle, also of wood, and a wooden stopper.

Making and decorating the comb

Like the majority of combs from Drumclay is made from red deer antler. It cannot be said with certainty if the antler used was shed and subsequently collected, or if it was recovered through the hunting of deer. From within the crannóg, a small number of unworked pieces recovered during the excavation derive from shed antler. It may be therefore that the antler used in the manufacture of the comb represents a collected resource rather than a by-product of hunting.

The bird headed comb is a single piece, high-backed example with a short row of teeth on the lower edge (Illus. 1 and 2). To make the comb, an appropriately-sized plate was cut from part of the antler where it was sufficiently wide to allow for the manufacture of the comb. The shape of the comb was outlined and then cut from the plate. The comb's maximum dimensions are 40 mm long, 40 mm wide and 2 mm thick. This piece may then have been sanded, at least to some degree, before the teeth were sawn. The whole may then have been sanded to create polished surfaces and refine the fifteen teeth that populated the comb's working edge. Some of the comb's teeth display a good degree of wear. Tips towards the middle of the tooth row are broken and/or beaded. This sort of wear is produced over a long

period, most likely several years, and its presence suggests the comb was well minded, and was perhaps a precious possession.

The front of the comb was highly polished compared with the back but both surfaces were decorated. The front has five incised double ring-and-dot circular motifs and there are two bird-like heads at the top of the comb. The opposing ring-and-dot motifs and the beak-like edges, as well as the smaller perforations reminiscent of a nostril on a bird's beak, evoke the birds' heads which provide the comb with its name. This design is repeated on the back although here the decoration is plainer and five circular motifs are distributed more widely over this surface. On the front, the ring-and-dot decoration, and the comb's teeth border a panel demarcated by two incised, single parallel lines between which is a series of double-lined chevrons. This design recalls the connecting plates found in more complex combs and is referred to as a false connecting plate (see below). These sort of motifs were commonly used within early medieval Ireland and further afield, although it remains to be seen if the particular arrangement displayed on the Drumclay comb has more precise parallels.

The size of the comb meant it could have been carried in small bag or pouch. The largest perforation, located below the possible beaks, is a suspension hole and allowed the comb to be strung, perhaps with a leather thong. It could then be worn around the neck, as an item of dress, or hung up somewhere for safekeeping.

Parallels

We don't know where this comb was made or if it was made on the crannóg itself. We do know that it is a distinctly Irish comb with a small number of known parallels. Future analysis of the entire comb assemblage from Drumclay, which numbers around 34 individual examples, may provide answers as to the comb's origins. Luckily, however, Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski, experts in the study of medieval bone and antler objects, were happy to provide an initial indication of the comb's place in the archaeological record, and in the world beyond the shore surrounding Drumclay, within an hour or two of it having been found. Mobile internet networks meant within minutes of finding the comb, details were forwarded to Ian and Nicola for comment.

From: Nora
Date: 15/02/2013 10:22
To: Ian and Nicola

Subj: New Drumclay Comb

Hi Ian and Nicola

Could you take a look at this comb. It has just come up. Lovely high backed comb, single piece with ring and dot decoration and what may be two facing bird heads. It comes from a hearth within a house. Prior to its discovery we thought we were in at least the 7th century AD. But this comb makes me think we are earlier. Can you comment?

Thanks, Nora

On 15 February 2013 11:24, Ian wrote:

Hello Nora, No worries at all, you are in the 7th century ! We re-dated these combs to the 7th century in the Knowth volume, the bit at the beginning of the comb text, which is enclosed here. And as an aside, another comb article has just come out and we enclose that as well. Essentially the key point about these combs is that they include false connecting plates on one side, which suggests that they were produced when composite combs with connecting plates were in existence, and they do resemble the composite high-backed series, which we put around the 7th to 8th century nowadays. There is a later form of simple comb that is trapezoidal in shape and doesn't have heads on it and that is an 8th to 9th century development, but it isn't relevant in this case. Also enclosed are the Clonmacnoise combs, which haven't been published yet, unfortunately. Great to hear that you are still producing wonderful things out at Drumclay, which just looks like a fabulous site altogether.

All best wishes, Ian Riddler

Ian and Nicola have recently re-evaluated combs from some of the most significant early medieval settlements in Ireland including Knowth and Lagore in Co. Meath, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly and Carraig Aille, Co. Limerick (Riddler et al. 2012, 369–89). These settlements of which one, Lagore, was a crannóg, have each yielded combs similar to the Drumclay find. This comb-type is however rare with only nine, including the comb from Drumclay, known. Mairead Dunlevy (1988) established a classification system for Irish combs and the Drumclay find lies within her Class A2, i.e. “single-edged, single piece, robust, well decorated combs ... [with] ... high backs, [and] a suspension hole in the centre top”. Another distinctive feature of these type of combs can be the presence of bird-head ornamentation near the apex of the comb. This is the case with combs from Knowth and Clonmacnoise (Figures 3 and 4). The birds' heads on these finds are more realistic, and also gentler in form, than those from Drumclay and are positioned above the line of the comb back, rather than integrated into the comb, as at Drumclay. In each case however, the maker produced a pretty, precise and distinctive object and it is difficult not to wonder if the designs were made to order, perhaps even for a specific person or group of people. Ian and Nicola have also wondered why birds

were chosen to decorate the combs, as opposed to another form of animal, or indeed any other motif. The birds' heads may have had a particular meaning, not yet understood.

And what of the combmakers or *círmaire* as they were known (Kelly 1998, 56)? Did they travel between settlements? Bring finished goods with them or make the combs on-site? Were their certain kinds of combs made only for certain kinds of people? Would that in part explain why so few high-backed bird headed combs have been found? Future research will help address these and many other questions arising from the discovery of the Drumclay comb.

Signs of use and deposition

The wear on the comb teeth mentioned above shows that the comb was a functional object. It is easy to imagine it being used within family group, or exclusively by just one person over several years. And although worn prior to its deposition it was by no means at the end of its working life; most of the teeth were intact and would still have allowed hair to be combed quite easily. It is possible the comb was simply discarded, that it was no longer wanted. But equally it is conceivable the comb represents a deliberate deposit, a lucky charm for example, related perhaps to the foundation or closing of an episode of occupation such as the demolition of an existing house or the construction a new dwelling. If this comb was a treasured object, perhaps even passed from one generation to the next, it may have been an obvious choice for use in such circumstances. Our understanding of how and why any of the objects recovered from Drumclay came to occupy the position in which they were found will develop over time as the objects, including this comb are analysed, compared, plotted and considered in relation to other artefacts and their overall context within the crannóg, and generally within early medieval Ireland.

The comb's date

Another area that requires further consideration is the date of the comb. Recently, at the Drumclay Public Information Day in Enniskillen held on September 27th 2014, Ian and Nicola suggested that these types of combs date somewhere between AD 600 and 750, a considerably narrower period than the 7th to 10th century range I had been working with during the excavation. This date range suggests that the level at which the comb was found may lie within the 7th and mid-8th century.

We do not yet know how old the comb was before it was deposited; whether it was a young object, or if it was an heirloom of some antiquity. It is probable that the comb's date range broadly reflects the time when the occupation to which it relates took place. Ultimately, greater chronological resolution than this is required as it is probable the houses were built, knocked and rebuilt within considerably shorter periods, perhaps at 10 or 20 year intervals. This stylish, well used, and perhaps well-loved comb has brought us one step closer to achieving this objective.

Conclusion

This comb is likely to remain one of my favourite objects recovered from the excavations at Drumclay. It immediately stood out, despite the myriad of other wonderful items that were found. This comb was not simply a mundane functional item; it was well designed and crafted. It is a tactile object that makes one want to pick it up, turn it, twist it, hold it, use it and keep it safe. It might well have made combing the hair of a restless child, or man or woman busy with other things, somehow more enjoyable. It is not certain if such combs were used for hair on the head or face; they may have been used to comb out beards. Nonetheless, the comb makes it easier to picture those who made, used and discarded it. And, if that's not enough it is almost an ideal archaeological find as through it, we can investigate varied topics including chronology, art, craftsmanship, trade and exchange, not only of objects but of ideas and actions.

The impact the comb has had reached beyond my own experience. An artist, who happened to visit the excavation and saw the comb, remarked that the decoration reminded her of the crannóg's layout and that the design might represent a sort of map of Drumclay. When she visited, the working model of the crannóg's development was of a central platform surrounded by a series of satellite platforms. The crannóg was positioned close to the shore and the lake was thought to have been shallow and subject to seasonal fluctuations. The arrangement of the circular motifs, one central example ringed by four others, triggered her response. She saw the false panel with the zig-zag lines as representative of water, such as waves from within a lake. We will never know if the combmaker thought in this way and whoever this person was, he (and it is probable it was a man) may just have wanted to produce an elegant comb using motifs that were familiar to the people of the day. But the

anecdote provides a glimpse at the different reactions that people have to objects, particularly those from our shared past.

Bibliography

Bermingham, N. 2014. Drumclay Crannog: A multi-generational settlement explored. *Medieval Archaeology*, **58**, 376–82.

Bermingham, N., Moore, C. O’Keeffe, J. and Gormley, M. 2013. Drumclay: A most surprising crannóg. *Archaeology Ireland*, **27** (2), 37–40.

Dunlevy, M. 1988. A classification of early Irish bone combs. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Society* **88C**, 341–422.

Foley, C. and McHugh, R. 2014. *An archaeological survey of county Fermanagh. Vol. 1, Part 2. The Early Christian and medieval periods*. NIEA, Newtownards.

Kelly, F. 1998. *Early Irish farming. A study based on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD*. School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin.

O’Sullivan, A. 1998. *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland*. Discovery Programme Monographs 4. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

O’Sullivan, A., McCormick, F., Kerr, T.R. and Haney, L. 2014. *Early medieval Ireland AD400-1100. The evidence from archaeological excavations*. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Riddler, I., Trzaska-Nartowski, N. and Barton-Murray, R. 2012. The antler combs, in G. Eogan, *The archaeology of Knowth in the first and second millennia AD*, 369–89. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

Wood-martin, W.G. 1886. *The lake dwellings of Ireland*. Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin.

Illus. 1: The front of the Drumclay bird headed comb. (© Crown, NIEA)



Illus. 2: The back of the Drumclay bird headed comb. (© Crown, NIEA)



Illus. 3: The bird headed comb from Knowth, Co. Meath. (Photo: Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski)



Illus. 4: Two examples of Class A2 combs from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. (Photos: Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski)



