

## Double-Sided Antler and Bone Combs in Late Roman Britain





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# Double-Sided Antler and Bone Combs in Late Roman Britain

Stylistic Groups, Context and Status

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

Nina Crummy writes: My interest in combs of this form was first raised in the 1980s not, as might be expected, by those from Colchester's Butt Road cemetery, despite my close involvement at the time with both the small finds from that town and in particular that funerary site, but by some remarkable examples with zoomorphic end-plates from Winchester. For the invitation to be involved in the publication of first the bone-working debris and then, more broadly, the non-ferrous small finds from the Winchester suburbs I am grateful to Patrick Ottaway and Ken Qualmann, both then of Winchester Museums Service, which led not only to a long interest in combs but also to fruitful and much appreciated working relationships with their colleagues Gillian Dunn, Sandy Mounsey, Geoff Denford, and most particularly, Helen Rees, the latter being the driving force behind completion of the long-gestated small finds volume, *Artefact and Society in Roman and Medieval Winchester. Small Finds from the Suburbs and Defences, 1971–86* (Rees *et al.* 2018).

In the 1990s, when I was employed in the Archaeological Archive of the Museum of London, Ian Riddler, then of the Museum's Archaeological Service (MoLAS), drew my attention to an unusual comb with a central parade of zoomorphs, which was from a burial on the unpublished Giltspur Street site. Knowing my involvement with the Winchester material, he suggested that I contribute a chapter on the Romano-British examples to a multi-period volume on combs he was planning with Arthur Macgregor, then of the Ashmolean Museum. This volume never materialised, but my contribution morphed into 'Bone-working in Roman Britain: a model for itinerant craftsmen?', an article published in Michel Polfer's 2001 *Instrumentum Monograph, L'Artisanat romain: évolutions, continuités et ruptures (Italie et provinces occidentales)*. I am grateful to all three of them for these opportunities, and to Nick Merriman, then of the Museum of London, for arranging for Nick Griffiths to provide the drawings for the article.

At the end of the 1990s I shifted to working as an independent specialist, and over the next twenty-five years was commissioned to write small finds reports by Reading University and by a number of archaeological units based in southern and central Britain, which enabled me gradually to collect information on other combs that I came across in site assemblages and earlier publications. It was at this period that Nick Cooke, then of Wessex Archaeology, engaged me in discussing combs and their use, and subsequently provided me with information on new finds, especially those from more recent excavations in Winchester's Lankhills cemetery. Patrick Ottaway, by then working for York Archaeological Trust, drew my attention to the Wellington Row combs from the city, and both he and Nick's encouragement kept the 'comb project' alive in the 00s, for which I owe them many thanks.

This volume, then, has been a long and slow developer. It was first planned as a book chapter, then a journal article, and, having grown beyond that, has finally reached fruition here. Its completion is the result of collaboration with Richard Henry, who, alongside the technical ability to generate many of the necessary illustrations, has supplied the enthusiasm to bring the study to a conclusion. His interest in combs is far more recent, as they form part of his doctoral studies at Reading University on the material culture of late Roman Britain, and this has led him to learn of several recent discoveries from southern Britain. It is to him that I owe the greatest thanks.

Both Richard and I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Nick Griffiths, who overcame the varied styles and sizes in which many of these combs were drawn in a number of publications, old and new, in order to make the visual appearance of the assemblage both comparable and coherent. We would also like to thank the Roman Finds Group for a grant towards Nick's work, and Stephen Greep for sharing updated information and images of combs in York Museum.

Over the course of the last 30 years or so many other people have helped in many ways, from discussion, to providing contextual information, to notifications of newly-excavated combs, to photographs and permission to use them; we are immensely grateful to them all. There is no fairer way to list those not mentioned above but alphabetically: Robert Atkins (MOLA Northampton), Alistair Barclay (Cotswold Archaeology), Kath Barclay (Winchester Excavation Committee), Mili Bhatt (volunteer, Southampton Cultural Services), Paul Booth (Oxford Archaeology), Ian Cartwright (Institute of Archaeology, Oxford), Hilary Cool, Geoffrey Dannell, Ellie Drew (York Archaeological Trust), Hella Eckardt (Reading University), David Evans (Pontefract Museum), Martin Green, Luke Harris (Wardell Armstrong), Rachel Jones, Jenny Mann (City of Lincoln Archaeology Unit), Christine McDonnell (York Archaeological Trust), Aleks Osinska (Cotswold Archaeology), Rachael Seager Smith (Wessex Archaeology), Jacky Sommerville (Cotswold Archaeology) and Stephen Upex (Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge). Our families have been supportive, as always, and Kate and Jamie Crummy also provided practical help.

Thank you to Andy Murdock and Ioannis Sofos from Maploom for their work creating the interactive map which includes the distribution of late Roman double-sided antler combs.

We are particularly grateful to Mike Fulford (Reading University), who kindly read through the text, much to its benefit, and to David Davison, Mike Schurer, Ben Heaney and Kristina Gwartzman of Archaeopress for steering the volume through to publication.

#### *Interactive map*

An interactive distribution map for the various stylistic groups of combs is available at:  
<https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803276441-Map>



# Chapter 1

## Introducing the combs

### The dataset

The dataset of late Romano-British double-sided composite combs is not large by many standards, but it can nevertheless be used in a variety of ways. We have concentrated on various contextual and stylistic themes, such as date, typology, archaeological, social and geographical contexts, age, gender and identity. The decorative cutting of the end-plates can be linked to contemporary Romano-British artefacts that use a similar repertoire of motifs. Over time it passes from elaborate to rudimentary, adding to the dating evidence for individual combs. The less elaborate examples are here referred to here as ‘devolved’, rather than debased or degenerated, as the change does not represent a linear shift but one that leads to a variety of forms. The Catalogue gives summary details of the provenance, archaeological contexts and descriptions of the combs, and provides a bibliography for each. Appendix 1 groups the combs from burials by sex and age, Appendix 2 is a concordance by end-plate form and Appendix 3 by site type.

We have not discussed the practical use of these combs and the benefits of combing to the hair and scalp, as they are covered in Paola Pugsley’s discussion of the use of the H comb (2003: 23–25), nor have we discussed hair in Roman literature and life, and readers wishing to follow this line of research are referred again to Pugsley 2003, and also to Boon 1991, Croom 2002, Eckardt and Crummy 2008, Stephens 2008, Olson 2009, Derks and Vos 2010 and Jones 2013.

Collection has not been absolute but has concentrated on combs from burials, or with stylistically relevant end-plates, or those providing good dating or contextual evidence, the main aim being to answer questions of typology, chronology and social distribution. Many comb finds are only teeth or broken tooth-plate fragments that could not be assigned to a comb type, or in some cases a certain Romano-British date, and only a selection has been included here. New notifications have also not been included, such as two tooth-plate fragments from Piddington villa in Northamptonshire (S. Greep, pers. comm., 2022). Some items listed in Greep 1983 are used in our distribution map but have not been catalogued here as they either have no archaeological context attached, or the context is ambiguous, or the identification as Roman could not be verified (see the list at the end of the Catalogue). For example, a small (24 by 18mm) piece of a double-sided composite comb from the villa at Frocester, Gloucestershire, has not been included in the Catalogue because it is too small for a Roman date to be confirmed, there was pottery dating from the 5th to 8th centuries from the site, and it came from medieval ploughsoil (Price 2000: vol. 1, 113; vol. 2, 99, no, 56). Also from ploughsoil is a comb fragment from Farthinghoe, Northamptonshire, logged on the Portable Antiquities database (NARC-242E72). It is so little worn, with crisp ring-and-dot ornament and barely corroded iron rivets, that the recorder noted that its preservation ‘is extraordinary given that it was discovered on the surface of a ploughed field’. The end-plate design could be slotted into the scheme outlined in Chapter 5, but replica combs can be found at craft and re-enactors

markets (a good replica of a Winchester comb has been seen at one) and a Romano-British date for this fragment is not absolutely certain.

### Terminology

Different finds specialists have used a range of terms to describe the three structural elements of late Roman double-sided combs. The terminology used here is based on that of Patricia Galloway (1979; 1983) and is preferred for its lack of ambiguity. The rectangular central sections with teeth cut along the full length of the outer edges are known as *tooth-plates*, the two end sections as *end-plates*, and the two long strips that are riveted onto these plates to combine them into a comb as *connecting-plates* (Figure 1.1). End-plates have sometimes been referred to as handles or end segments (Henderson 1949: 151; Greep 1983: 305), and terms used for the connecting-plates have included cleats, handles, side-plates, strengtheners, retaining plates, reinforcing bars, central bars and connecting bars (Ward 1911: 264; Radford 1932: 82; Jones 1975: 113; Greep 1983: 305; MacGregor 1985: 74–75; Allason-Jones 2006: 236; Booth *et al.* 2010: 91, 121, 169, 181).

### The combs in a wider context

Late Roman composite combs, both double- and single-sided, represent the first appearance of a comb-making technology that continued into the medieval period. They are major signifiers of the late fourth- to fifth-century transition, along with distinctive pieces of metalwork such as zoomorphic belt-fittings and spurs (Hawkes and Dunning 1961; Shortt 1959; Leahy 1996; Henry 2022a). Just as the arrival of one-piece combs of ivory and wood represented a new technology of grooming in Britain in the mid 1st century AD (Pugsley 2003: 22–23), the introduction of antler or bone composite combs to Britain over three hundred years later heralded a shift in comb-making technique that persisted into the 2nd millennium. Such a prolonged survival argues for the success of the technology, which over that period enabled various forms to be produced, single- and double-sided, handled, boxed and cased, all able to fulfil their prime function of grooming human hair.

The origins and development of composite combs lie in the 1st or 2nd century AD in northern Europe, principally in the lands around the Baltic, and have been set out in Thomas 1960 and MacGregor 1985. A summary of all the various forms, technologies and chronologies of both one-

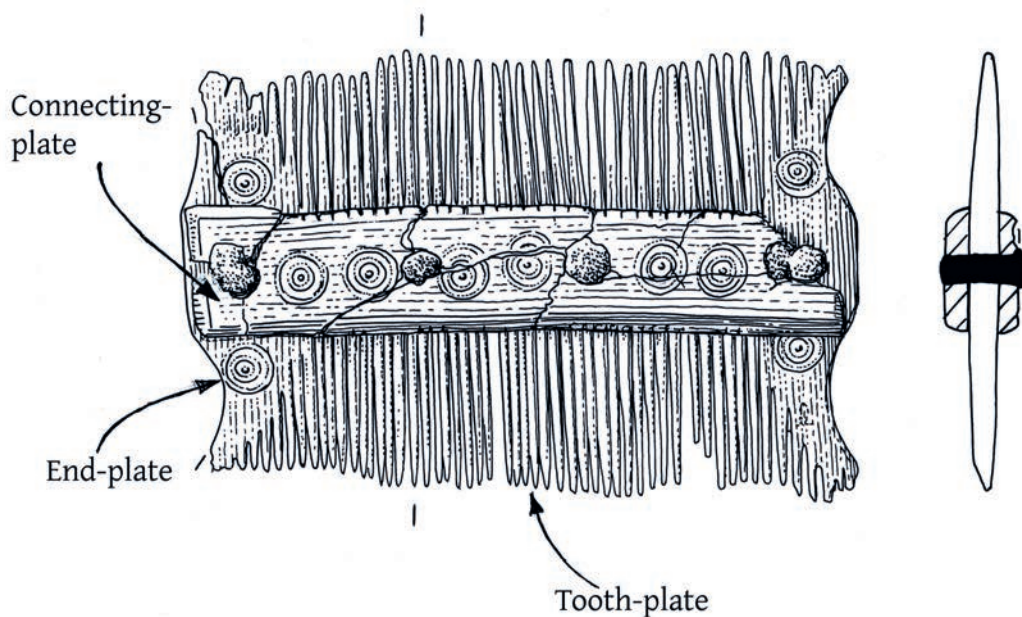


Figure 1.1. Terminology used for the parts of a comb.

piece and composite combs made of ivory, antler, bone and horn can be found in MacGregor 1985 (73–96), while early historic and Viking-period combs from Atlantic Scotland have been studied in detail by Ashby (2009; 2011), and early Irish combs by Dunlevy (1988). Late Roman double-sided combs are the equivalent of Ashby's pre-Viking Age type 10. There are substantial assemblages of Saxo-Norman combs from London and Anglo-Scandinavian to medieval combs from York that chart the changes in materials and the technology of manufacture over those periods (Pritchard 1991; MacGregor *et al.* 1999: 1923–1940).

The end-plates of late Romano-British composite double-sided combs are decoratively profiled, even if only slightly, and may be further ornamented by incised decoration and/or variously shaped perforations. Some have zoomorphic end-plates, showing dolphins, horses, and what are defined here as owls. Dolphins and horses are also shown on the contemporary metal buckles described by Hawkes and Dunning (1961), suggesting that the appearance of these combs in Britain might also be linked in some way to the social upheaval and military activity of the AD 360s. A broad classification scheme is proposed here for the combs, and explorations of their distribution and range of contexts, particularly in terms of funerary use and gender associations, sets them within the wider social and material culture of late Roman Britain. They are summarily described in the Catalogue and are referred to in the text and illustrations by the Catalogue number in bold type.

Before focusing on these late Roman composite combs, it is worth setting them briefly in the context of combs in the preceding centuries.

### ***Combs and grooming in Iron Age and Roman Britain***

In the sense of a comb being an object with teeth, and given that wooden and horn objects do not survive well in the archaeological record, there is no concrete evidence to show that the Iron Age peoples of Britain ever used such an implement to untangle or style their hair. There are a very few copper-alloy, single-sided, coarse-toothed combs, although their use on human hair is far from certain (Ashby and Bolton 2010). There are also substantial one-piece, single-sided bone or antler combs that are often markedly curved at the lower coarse-toothed end and are generally

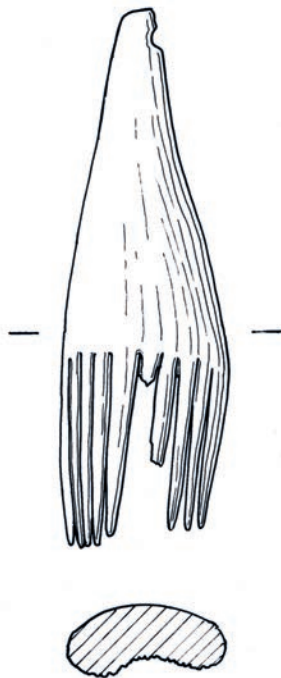


Figure 1.2. Antler weaving (?) comb from Colchester (after Crummy 1992: fig. 6.10). Not to scale.

accepted from their contexts and associations as weaving tools used to beat down the weft on warp-weighted looms (Figure 1.2; Wild 1970: 66–67; Sellwood 1984: 371–378). Although there is an example from a Middle and Later Bronze Age context at Birka in Sweden, these combs do not appear in Britain until around the middle of the 1st millennium BC and there are many examples that suggest they remained in use in the north into the 2nd century AD (Hodder and Hedges 1977; Greep 1998: 279–280). Various authors have explored alternative interpretations for their function, and Greep in particular has argued that, where they occur on Roman sites with little or no other weaving equipment, they may have been used for other purposes (Greep 1998: 279–280), but there is as yet no substantive evidence that they were used for combing the hair of either animals or people. None has been found in a burial in direct association with other grooming equipment, and it is only primary contextual evidence of this kind that is likely to provide grounds for reinterpretation of their use.

That personal grooming in Britain took on new forms from the 1st century BC is evident by the increase in grooming implements, and particularly in the immediate pre-conquest period (Hill 1997). Instead of combs, personal grooming is chiefly evidenced by metal cosmetic grinding sets, tweezers, nail-cleaners and ear-scoops found either linked together as small toilet sets or as individual instruments, razors and hand mirrors (Jackson 2010; Eckardt and Crummy 2008; Stead 1967: 38; Stead and Rigby 1989: 105; Boon 1991: 28; Johns 2006; Sealey 2006; Joy 2010).

The Sicilian historian Diodorus Siculus, writing c. 60-30 BC, briefly described the Britons, or more accurately *some* Britons, from a 'soft' primitivist viewpoint (Piggott 1975: 92), albeit one that included statements that can be verified historically and archaeologically. He noted that their houses were built of logs and thatched with reeds, that they harvested grain by cutting off the ears and storing them in pits, and that they used chariots in warfare. He did not describe their dress or hair, but implied that they were not vain or overly concerned with their appearance:

*They are simple in their habits and far removed from the cunning and vice of modern men. Their way of life is modest and they are free of the luxury which is begotten of wealth. (History V, 21)*

Caesar's description of British men, taken at first hand, is well known, even if again this can only apply to those in direct contact with Gaul and Rome:

*Indeed, all the Britons dye themselves with woad, which produces a blue colour, and gives them an even more terrifying appearance in battle; they wear their hair long and shave every part of their body apart from the head and the upper lip. (de bello Gallico V.14).*

Iron Age British women also seem to have kept their hair long, with Cassius Dio describing Boudica as having thick, tawny locks that came down to her hips (*Roman History*, LXII.ii.2-4). Even allowing for Dio's taste for exaggeration, the image is close enough to that given by Caesar for British men that we can assume it was reasonably accurate. Yet the hair of males in Britain may not have been as long as this implies, as perception of the hair length of others is dependent upon what the viewer regards as the norm, and men's hair in the Julio-Claudian period, and particularly in the Julio-Claudian family, was short enough to leave the lower brow and face clear (Zanker 1990: 293; Croom 2002: fig. 23, 1).

Grave 203 at King Harry Lane, Verulamium, is dated to c. AD 40-60 and gives some substance to Caesar's statement. It has been identified as a male burial that contained a toilet set and a cosmetic set, suggesting that the man was concerned with his appearance, both cleaning his nails and ears and grinding pigments with which to colour his face and body (Stead and Rigby 1989: 326; Eckardt and Crummy 2008: 77-78, 90; Jackson 2010: 62, 178, no. 436). We might, though, query whether or not this really was a male burial, as there were no items generally regarded as male-gendered within the grave. Similarly, Grave 13 in the same cemetery appeared to be a male buried with a mirror (Stead and Rigby 1989: 103, 278), an artefact generally regarded as female-gendered but with some debate as to whether this is indeed the case (Johns 2006: 68-71; Sealey 2010; Joy 2010: 220-223). However, recent theoretical approaches to material culture have emphasised that identity is not static but complex and mutable, that in the past an individual was unlikely to have an egocentric view of self-identity but one based within a framework of gender, kinship or class, and that artefacts cannot always be taken *prima facie* as evidence of gender (Díaz-Andreu 2005; Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005; Insoll 2007: 3, 15; Meskell 2007: 28-35). A case in point is that of the Late Iron Age cist burial from Bryher, Isles of Scilly (Johns 2006). Dated to the first half of the 1st century BC, this grave was furnished with a scabbarded sword with its belt, a shield, a mirror, a brooch, a finger-ring and an unidentified tin object; fragments of haematite in the burial fill show signs of wear consistent with grinding to produce a red powder that could be used as body paint. Given this array of grave goods, some have argued that the cist contained a double burial, a male with a sword and shield and a female with a mirror, but the excavation was very carefully done

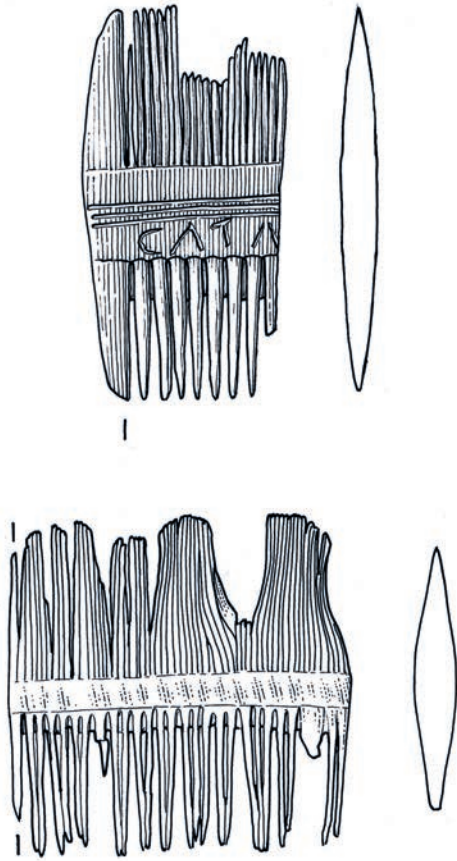


Figure 1.3. Horn and boxwood combs from Fishbourne (after Henig and MacGregor 1996: fig. 54, 1-2). Not to scale.

and there is no substantive evidence to support the inclusion of a second body, while recent DNA analysis of the enamel peptides from the teeth judged the deceased to have a c. 96 per cent probability of being female (Johns 2006: 18–19; Mays *et al.* 2023).

The absence of a comb from any Late Iron Age burial, male or female, is quite striking, particularly when set against a list of Iron Age mirror burials (Johns 2006: table 15). A double-sided, one-piece horn comb residual in soil used as make-up c. AD 75 for the Period 2 garden at Fishbourne might imply that Iron Age Britons used combs made from materials that need anaerobic conditions to survive deposition, yet the form of the comb is so similar to the one-piece ivory, bone and boxwood combs of the Mediterranean world, and Fishbourne itself is a site so redolent of wealth and continental influence well before AD 75, that this comb may well be an import (Figure 1.3; Henig and MacGregor 1996).

As no wooden, horn, bone or ivory comb that can conclusively be shown to have been used for grooming the hair has been found in an Iron Age context in Britain (Pugsley 2003: 22; Greep 1983), it seems that the conquest-period influx

of new people with new ideas of how to look and how to live was the point at which one-piece combs in these materials reached Britain, and it was certainly when they reached the province in any quantity. It seems that most would have been made of wood, as although horn, ivory and wood are all materials that require damp conditions to survive in the archaeological record, only wooden combs have been found in any number. One-piece bone combs of much the same double-sided form as those of ivory and wood are known from Pompeii, but none has been found in Britain (Ward-Perkins and Claridge 1976: no. 70), while a rare find of an ivory comb came from a late Roman inhumation burial, probably of a juvenile female, during the Cambridge to Matching Green pipeline excavation of 2001–2002. Although in poor condition and fragmentary, enough remained of the comb to show that it was a one-piece type made of ivory, >70mm long and 40mm wide. The grave also contained a figurine of Mercury and a necklace made up of silver, jet and glass beads (CMG01, Site 3, excavated by Network Archaeology Ltd, SF 13176, context 13456; Crummy 2004.)

Two surveys of ivory artefacts from Roman Britain have estimated that there are fewer than 70 from the whole province, with combs making up a very small proportion of the total. Although the data for one survey were gathered over 40 years ago, and the other did not set out to be comprehensive, the number of ivory combs from Britain is unlikely ever to have to be great (Greep 1983; 2004: 403; Eckardt 2014: 96–104). In contrast, 153 wooden combs have been found in Britain, 61 of them from waterlogged contexts at Vindolanda; most are of boxwood but some are of Norway spruce or fruitwoods (Pugsley 2003: 14–26). Given that both wood and ivory need specific conditions to survive in the ground, the difference here between combs of the two materials undoubtedly reflects their economic value.

Although so few combs dating from the conquest up to the late 4th century have survived in Britain, we can be sure that there would have been many thousands more, especially of wood, found in a wide range of social and economic contexts. Pugsley has stressed that combs were used not only for grooming but also for cleaning and delousing the hair (2003: 25), and Derks and Vos also point out that there is evidence from Roman military contexts that cleanliness, neatness and conformity of appearance were prime factors in bonding groups of soldiers, an observation supported by the quantity of combs from Vindolanda in Britain and Vechten in the Netherlands (2010: 65). Compared to military personnel, some post-conquest Romano-Britons, male or female, may have left their hair comparatively poorly groomed while continuing to use cosmetic grinding sets and small toilet kits containing nail-cleaners, the first a purely indigenous artefact type, the second a continental La Tène introduction that survived in post-conquest Britain even though Romanisation had effectively removed the nail-cleaner from the grooming equipment of Gaul by the Augustan period (Jackson 2010: 67; Eckardt and Crummy 2008: 69–72).

With the arrival of the new composite comb-making technology sometime in the AD 360s and with antler and bone being less prone to decay except in very adverse soil conditions, the number of combs in the archaeological record increased. The Catalogue in this volume is by no means comprehensive but lists just over 150 from a period covering some 60–70 years at the broadest, compared to the 153 wooden combs from the preceding 320 years from c. AD 43 to c. AD 360 (Pugsley 2003: 145–150). As with the wooden combs, we can be reasonably certain that many more double-sided composite combs would have been in use than are listed here, and the extent to which they penetrated the material culture of late Roman Britain is demonstrated by their recovery from a wide range of social contexts.

### **Combs and Winchester: a preliminary note**

A particularly distinctive feature within the assemblage of double-sided composite combs from funerary contexts is the substantial number from Winchester, particularly from its northern cemeteries and most particularly from Lankhills. Although from a purely local viewpoint these combs form only one small element in the town's range of grave deposits (Ottaway *et al.* 2012: 350), they make up nearly a quarter (22.5 per cent) of the wider British assemblage. Combs from Winchester are referred to throughout the following chapters describing style, distribution and context, and it seems reasonable to propose that a workshop making double-sided composite combs was established in the town in the mid to late 4th century. Stylistic evidence points to other workshops in the north and east (see Chapter 6), but these were not necessarily large and in some cases they appeared to serve only a local community, while Winchester and its hinterland appear to lie at the heart of the comb data. How far that hinterland spread is not certain. It certainly included Andover, some 18 miles to the north, and may have embraced several urban centres, such as Silchester and Dorchester-on-Thames, about 30 and 50 miles north respectively, Dorchester, some 60 miles to the south-west, and Cirencester about 65 miles to the north-west, none of which have so far produced large numbers of combs (Figure 1.4).



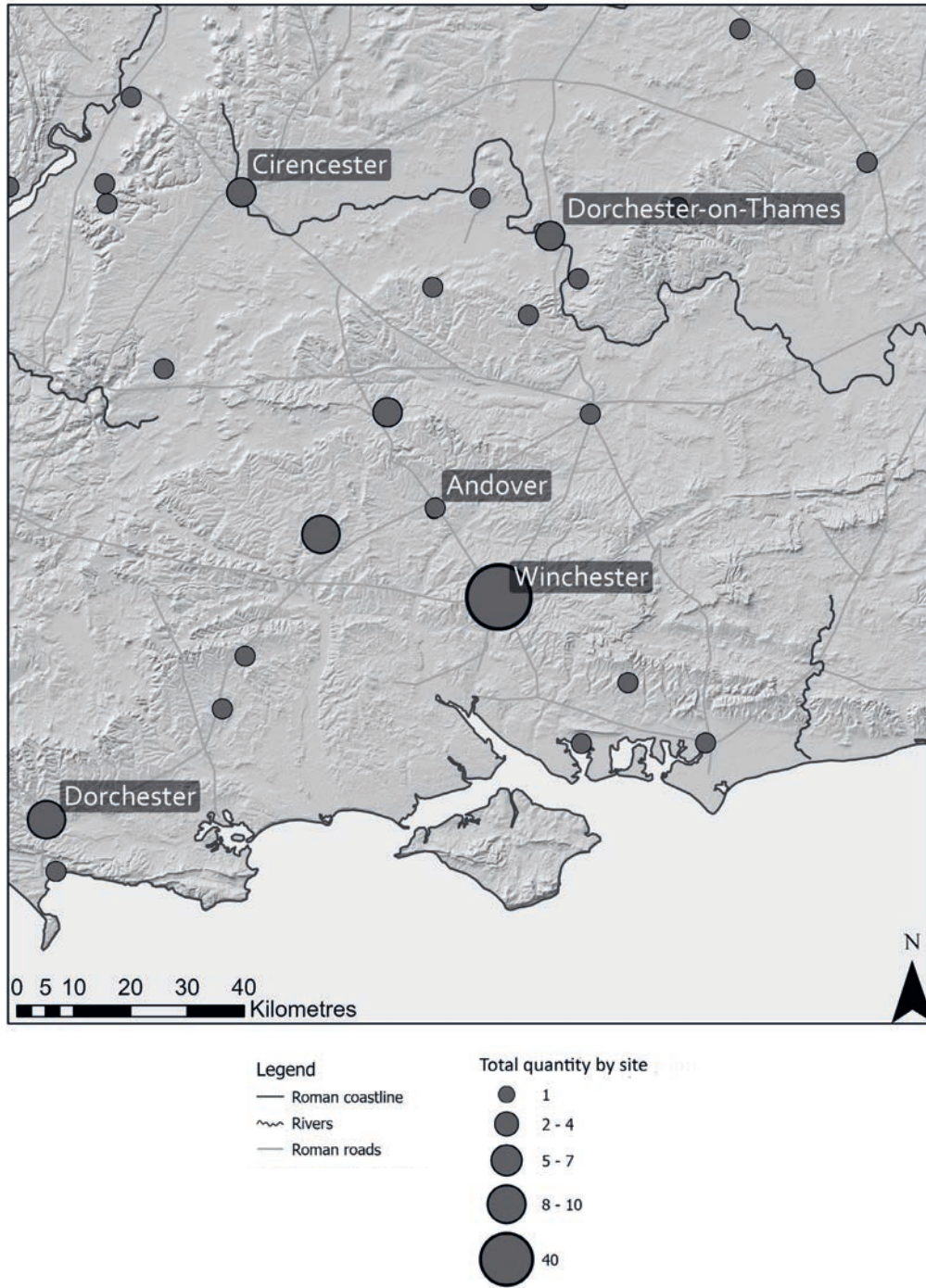


Figure 1.4. The distribution of combs in the Winchester region.