

## Bone and Antler Working

Bone and antler are materials that have been utilized by almost all human cultures in every time period. These tough, readily available materials were relatively easily worked and shaped into hardwearing tools and decorative objects, although the experimental archaeology workshops showed that many objects required a great deal of time, particularly before metal tools were available. Many ancient bone and antler artefacts have been found.



*Mesolithic antler harpoon found at Tarradale, Muir of Ord.*

Bone is made up of a hard outer layer and a spongy 'marrow' core. Mammal longbones provided the most useful material for working, as there was plenty of thick outer bone. Before working, the marrow was scraped away and the remaining bone left to grow harder. The 'seasoned' bone could then be split or sawn into sections ready to be carved into whatever was required.



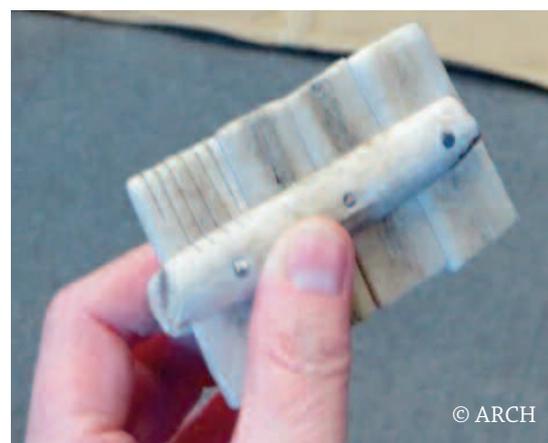
*Model of a bone worker's workshop, Ribe Museum, Denmark*

Antlers are shed by deer each year, and could be gathered without having to kill the animal. Antler has a similar structure to bone with a spongy core, but it can be soaked to make it temporarily softer and easier to work.

Bone and antler were shaped using stone tools in early prehistory. Some of the earliest finds from Mesolithic Scotland have been harpoons and adzes or picks shaped from antler.

Many late prehistoric domestic sites have been found to contain a multitude of bone tools. Some of the most numerous and simple tools are bone points, the use of which remains uncertain. More sophisticated items include decorative pins and weaving combs. These items could be made with relatively basic tools and some practice, so may have been produced as needed by non-specialists.

Bone and antler hair combs (or fragments of them) are relatively common finds from late prehistoric and early Medieval sites. These are constructed from flat plates of bone riveted together – a more complex process of construction that requires skill and a range of more specialised tools including saws and drills. This suggests that there may also have been specialist craftspeople producing items like combs.



*Antler comb under construction. The plates are riveted into position before sawing teeth*

### See also:

Box 2 object sheets: Bone Pin, Bone Dice  
Box 3 object sheet: Antler Comb

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