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Viking-Age Silver in North-West England: Hoards and Single Finds

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ABSTRACT Silver hoards of Scandinavian character are arguably the most important archaeological source for Viking activity in the North West. They give a clear impression of the vast pools of silver wealth acquired by the Vikings through plunder and exchange, but why were they concealed in the first place?; What they reveal about the uses of silver in Viking society?; And, what can they tell us about Scandinavian activity and settlement in north-west England more broadly? In this chapter, I aim to address such questions by examining the hoards' contents and location, as well as their relationship with single finds from the region.



Introduction

In north-west England, as in many other places across the Viking World, the Viking Age was a silver age. The region is home to a series of silver hoards of Scandinavian character, the most recent of which were discovered only in 2011, at Barrow-in-Furness (Cumbria) and Silverdale (Lancashire). Together, the hoards give a clear impression of wealth generated by Scandinavian activity. But their significance extends far beyond their status as Viking treasure troves. As repositories of coins and objects accumulated by the Vikings through plunder, tribute, and commerce, the hoards offer unparalleled insights into the mobility and cultural contacts of their owners, as well as the economic spheres in which the silver circulated. More broadly, the hoards also illuminate the symbolic value of silver in the Viking World, particularly as a medium for the display of wealth and status.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of current thinking about Viking-Age silver hoards from the North West, as well as to introduce some new research relating to the region's single finds. Accordingly, it addresses several key questions, including: what are the origins of Viking-Age silver from north-west England? What was silver used for? Why were so many hoards deposited in this region? And, what does the combined evidence from hoards and single finds tell us about broader patterns of Scandinavian settlement? But before we can address these questions, we need to have an understanding

of the economic activity that preceded the Viking presence. We therefore turn first to consider evidence for wealth and currency before the Vikings.

Background: Wealth and Currency in North-West England before the Vikings

Silver coinage was issued on a large scale in Anglo-Saxon England from the mid eighth century, but evidence for its use in north-west England prior to the arrival of the Vikings is extremely limited. In the ninth century, much of modern-day Lancashire and Cumbria fell under Northumbrian rule and contemporary coins minted at the Northumbrian capital, York, are occasionally found west of the Pennines. However, these consisted not of regular silver pennies of the type minted in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but of small, highly debased silver/copper-alloy coins, known today as *stycas*. The issue of debased coins suggests that precious metal was in short supply in Northumbria, although it is also possible that the coins were specifically designed for use in everyday, low-value transactions (Williams 2008, 48). In the North West, *stycas* have been found in substantial quantities at the Cumbrian monastic centres of Carlisle and Dacre, and in smaller numbers on coastal sites including Grange-over-Sands (Cumbria); a probable *styca* hoard, of uncertain size, is also known from Otterspool (Lancs) (Howard-Davis et al. 2009, 686; Newman 2006, 105; Metcalf 1960, 94, 97–8). This distribution points to market activity at settled monastic communities and to seaborne trade along the Irish Sea coast, but is not indicative of a widespread monetary economy. Further south, evidence for coin use in the pre-Viking period in Cheshire, part of Anglo-Saxon Mercia, is even rarer. With the exception of a small group of eighth- and ninth-century coins, including four *stycas*, from the trading site of Meols on the Wirral peninsula, contemporary coin finds from Cheshire are practically non-existent, meaning that the local population will have been largely unfamiliar with coinage (Griffiths et al. 2007, 343).

Coin use thus appears to have been limited in the region, but this is not to say that there was a lack of wealth or indeed currency. Rather than operating a monetary economy, it is likely that the inhabitants of north-west England valued and traded wealth via a different medium, namely commodities (Skre 2011; Gullbekk 2011). It is difficult to gauge the precise nature and extent of commodity exchange from the archaeological record, but surviving documentary evidence from neighbouring regions of the western British Isles indicates a system in which payments could be made in various kinds of goods, on a par with coinage. In the early medieval Irish law codes, for instance, commodities such as cattle, silver and, less certainly, grain are described as means of payments for fines and other forms of social obligations. They could be valued in standardised units relative to each other and also provided units of account (Gerreits 1985). Thus, in the text known as *Crith Gablach*, one *cumal* (a measurement standard, which also means ‘female slave’) is worth ten cows, and is also a measurement of silver (Charles-Edwards 1993, 478–85). As it appears in the law codes, payment in commodities relates only to social obligations, but it is possible that such a system also characterised commercial trade at local and regional levels (Skre 2011, 68). Unfortunately, there is no surviving documentary evidence relating to north-west England, but the practice there of a similar ‘commodity money’ system seems likely.

The ‘Age of Silver’

The nature and longevity of the commodity exchange system in north-west England is ~~unfortunately~~ difficult to measure. What is clear is that the onset of Scandinavian activity and settlement in the region (beginning, in earnest, in the early tenth century) brought about a tremendous increase in the supply of silver and, with it, a new medium of wealth and currency (Graham-Campbell 1998, 107–16). From this date, a series of silver hoards testify to the operation of a Viking-style silver economy, of a type similar to that in the Scandinavian homelands. The most famous of these was discovered in 1840 on the banks of the River Ribble, close to Cuerdale Hall near Preston, Lancashire (Figure 10.1). The Cuerdale hoard, deposited in c. 905–10, is the largest and most varied silver hoard in the Western Viking World. Containing c. 7,500 coins and over 1,100 extant items of assorted bullion, it weighs an estimated c. 42.6 kg silver



FIGURE 10.1 A selection of artefacts from the Cuerdale hoard, Lancashire (© British Museum).

(Graham-Campbell 2011). To put this in context, the next largest silver hoard from the British Isles after Cuerdale, found at Skaill, Orkney, weighs just over 8kg.

Yet the impressive size of the Cuerdale hoard should not obscure the fact that north-west England is also home to fifteen other precious-metal hoards of broadly contemporary date, making this region the most silver-rich area of Viking England. The remaining hoards vary in size, date and character, and encompass both antiquarian finds and modern discoveries, typically made by metal-detector enthusiasts. While some contain only ornaments, and are thus difficult to date precisely, others can be dated on the basis of coins contained within them (the latest coins in the hoards determining the date after which the hoard was deposited). In north-west England, the series starts with the Cuerdale hoard, deposited in c. 905–10. It ends with a hoard from Halton Moor, Lancashire, deposited in c. 1025, although most hoards fall within the first three decades of the tenth century. This chronological clustering is an interesting trend, and may correlate with a period of pronounced political instability (see below p. 157).

The geographical distribution of the hoards also reveals some interesting trends (Figure 10.2). Many are located along important east-west communication routes connecting the two main centres of Scandinavian power in Ireland and England: Dublin and York (Williams 2009, 78). The Cuerdale hoard, for instance, is located close to a north/south crossing of the River Ribble: a position which leads, to the west, to the Ribble estuary and the Irish Sea, and, to the east, to a trans-Pennine Roman road network passing through the Aire Gap into the Vale of York (Graham-Campbell 2011, 155, Figure 9.3). Clusters of hoards mark other important crossing points, for instance, at Chester and, further north, at Penrith. A number of hoards, including two recent discoveries from Barrow-in-Furness and Silverdale, populate the lands surrounding Morecambe Bay, which leads, via the River Kent, to a further route to York.

The silver contained within the hoards comes from a mix of sources. Through their raids and trading activity, the Vikings acquired silver coin and other precious metal items from the Islamic Caliphates, the Carolingian Continent, Anglo-Saxon England, and the Danelaw (the area of Scandinavian settlement in northern and eastern England, broadly corresponding with East Anglia, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire). In most parts of Scandinavia, the Vikings did not use coins as coins, in the way that we would today (i.e., by trusting them at face value), but valued them simply for their bullion content. Only the weight and silver purity of the coin was important. Consequently, they preserved some of the silver in its original

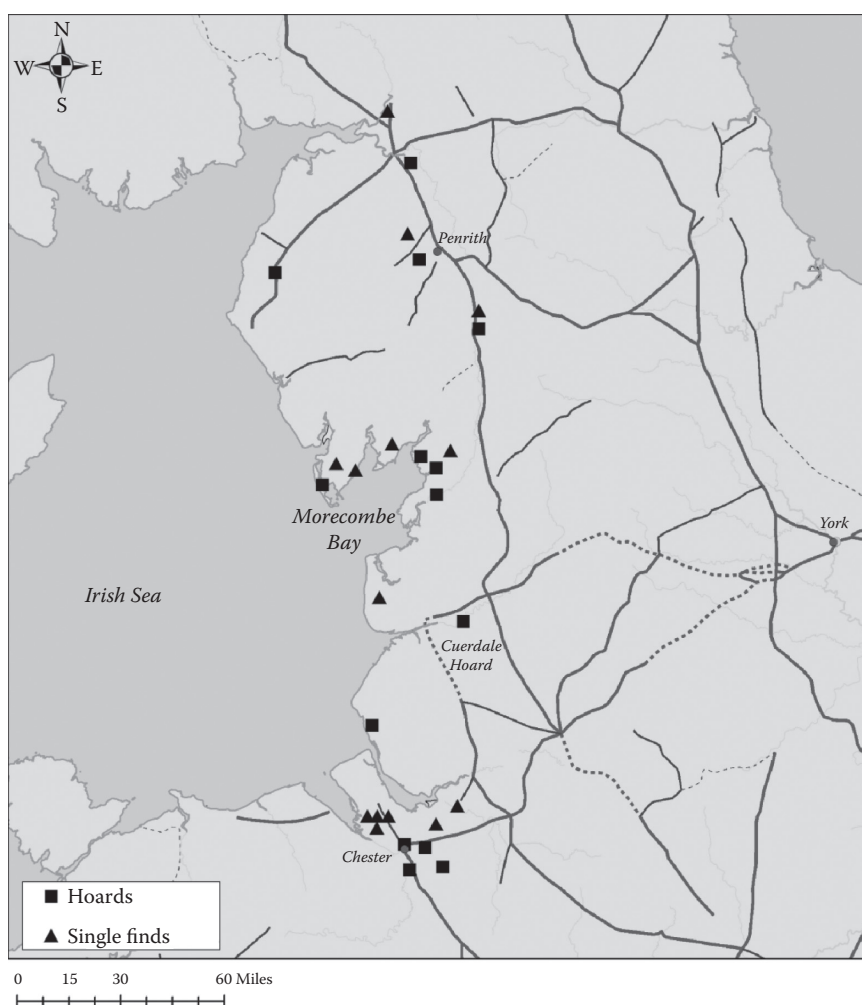


FIGURE 10.2 Hoards and single finds in north-west England shown against Roman roads and major rivers, excluding an unlocalised hoard from 'Lancashire' (© author).

form, but melted down other acquisitions into forms more suitable for the storage, transport and, in some cases, display, of silver, such as ingots and various types of ring. Trace element analysis can sometimes be used to reveal the source of the silver stored in such forms. Metallurgical examination of objects contained in hoards from southern Scandinavia has shown that they were principally made from Arabic silver coins, known as dirhams, but in north-west England, the picture is more varied (Hårdh 1976, 110–27; Arrhenius et al. 1972–3). Ingots from the Cuerdale (Lancs), Scotby (Cumbria) and Castle Esplanade, Chester, hoards do not correlate with any single source of silver. They derive instead from a mix of different sources, and were probably made from silver derived from multiple different coinages and bullion objects (Kruse and Tate 1992).

In hoards from the North West, silver thus takes one of two forms: coins, minted in various countries, and other silver objects, such as jewellery and ingots. Both can be studied to reveal the external cultural contacts of the Vikings, and the contexts of their wealth accumulation. Turning first to coins, what is most striking is the sheer range of different mints represented in the hoards. Although no coinage was minted in north-west England, the Vikings who settled in the Danelaw did produce their own coinage from the late ninth century, and these Viking Danelaw issues are well represented in the region's hoards. Official coins from York, in the northern Danelaw, were produced on a large scale and are particularly



FIGURE 10.3 Islamic silver dirhams are easily recognisable by their large size and Arabic script. This example was found in 2011 in a hoard from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria (© PAS).

prominent in hoards from the North West, appearing in the Cuerdale (Lancs), Dean (Cumbria), Harkirk (formerly Lancashire, now Merseyside) and Chester, St John's, hoards. Indeed, York coins are the largest coin group within the Cuerdale hoard. Many were freshly struck at the time of their deposit, suggesting that this coin component had been assembled in York shortly before making its way to Cuerdale (Williams 2011, 43, 70–71).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Anglo-Saxon coins also contribute a major element in the region's hoards. Of the c. 7,500 coins contained in the Cuerdale hoard, around 900 are in the name of Alfred of Wessex (871–899), although some are copies from the Danelaw rather than official issues. Smaller numbers are recorded in the name of other Anglo-Saxon rulers, including Ceolwulf II of Mercia (874– c. 879) and Edward the Elder (899–924) (Williams 2011, 42). Arabic dirhams, large silver coins minted in the Islamic Caliphates, are also contained in the region's hoards (Figure 10.3). The Vikings obtained these coins in exchange for furs, slaves, timber and amber in Russia: huge quantities were imported into Scandinavia, and from there, a smaller number reached Britain and Ireland. Around fifty dirhams are known from the Cuerdale hoard, from mints as diverse as ~~Al-Andalus in Arabic Spain~~, Baghdad in the Abbasid Caliphate and Al-Banjhir in the Hindu Kush (Lowick 1976). Dirhams also appear in hoards from Warton (Lancs), ~~Dean (Cumbria)~~ and Flusco Pike (Cumbria). Carolingian coins, most likely acquired through Viking raiding and trading in France, are also present in smaller quantities, in hoards from Cuerdale, Harkirk and Dean (Williams 2009, 74, Figure 8.1).

Coins thus make up a significant component of silver contained in hoards from the North West. The other main category of hoarded silver is assorted bullion objects, or what is sometimes referred to as non-numismatic silver. These objects include items such as ingots, rings and brooches. Like the coins, they reflect the contacts of the Vikings, most notably with Scandinavia and Ireland. Simple cast bar ingots with oval or D-shaped sections are found in a number of local hoards, including those from Cuerdale and Silverdale (Lancs), Flusco Pike (2) (Cumbria) and Huxley and Eccleston (Cheshire) (see Figures 10.1 and 10.5). They were made by casting molten silver into damp sand or open stone or clay moulds, two examples of which have been found in Chester, at Lower Bridge Street and Cuppin Street (Mason 2007, Figure 30; Bean 2000, 17). Cast bar ingots occur throughout Scandinavian-settled regions and are not culturally diagnostic. Nonetheless, it is often assumed that those contained in the Cuerdale hoard originated in Ireland, since this is the likely source of much of the hoard's other bullion content (Kruse 1992, 81; but see Williams 2011, 70–71).

Other types of silver object have identifiable origins. Dublin is thought to have been the main centre of production for a distinctive type of penannular arm-ring (the so-called 'Hiberno-Scandinavian broadband' arm-ring, Hiberno-Scandinavian referring to Scandinavians established in Ireland) (Sheehan 2011). Examples of these arm-rings occur in hoards from Cuerdale and Silverdale (Lancs) and Huxley (Cheshire) (Figure 10.4). Silver penannular (open ring) brooches with long pins, of the type found in the Cuerdale and Flusco Pike (1) hoards, were also produced by Irish-Scandinavian communities, and reflect pre-Viking Irish metalworking traditions. Such objects reached north-west England by way of the Irish Sea. Other types of silver ornament, including arm- and neck-rings made from twisted or plaited rods, are more likely to have been produced within Scandinavia. A silver twisted-rod neck-ring deposited in a hoard from Halton Moor (Lancs) has western Norwegian parallels (Graham-Campbell 2011, 89). Spiral rings, so called because of their spiral-striated appearance, were imported from Russia and southern Scandinavia, and are distinctive elements in the Cuerdale and Silverdale hoards. The routes by



FIGURE 10.4 Folded Hiberno-Scandinavian arm-rings from the Huxley hoard, Cheshire (© Liverpool Museum).

which such items travelled from Scandinavia to north-west England probably varied: they could have entered via the Irish Sea, or have travelled westwards through the Danelaw, possibly via Lincoln or York. Combined, then, the coins and bullion objects portray the great diversity of contacts and breadth of silver sources of the Scandinavians in the North West, whilst emphasizing particularly strong connections to the Ireland (in terms of bullion objects) and the northern Danelaw (in terms of coins).

The Uses and Meanings of Silver: The ‘Bullion’ and ‘Display’ Economies

The Viking silver economy was thus based on a mixture of distinct artefact types and coin. But why was silver important, and how was it used? Within Scandinavia, silver fulfilled two important roles, and the same is true in north-west England: it had a currency role, and could pass by weight as a means of exchange within a bullion or metal-weight economy, but it also functioned as a status symbol, and could be worn and displayed in shows of wealth, or given as a gift to reward followers and/or to create allegiances and friendships. In this sense, it is possible to speak of two different types of silver economy: one ‘bullion’ and the other ‘display’, reflecting the monetary and social roles of silver respectively (Williams 2009, 74–75).^{*} Gold could likewise be used as both a means of payment and of display, although it appears to have been predominantly used in the latter sense.[†] Gold objects are occasionally found in Viking-Age hoards from Britain and Ireland, but their occurrence in north-west England is rare. The current corpus includes just six gold discs contained in the Halton Moor (Lancs) hoard, and a handful of gold finger-rings recovered as single finds from Sedburgh and Workington (Cumbria), and Aldersey and Chester (Cheshire) (Ager 2011a, 127–28; Graham-Campbell 2011, 107, 160, Handlist 2).

The diverse role of silver in north-west England is reflected in its varying treatment both within and between the region’s hoards. Within the Scandinavian bullion economy, silver (and gold) passed by weight and fineness regardless of its form. The deliberate cutting of precious metal provided convenient units of payment, which could then be weighed to the required sums using hand-held balances and weights (some examples of which have been found in the North West, as we consider below). One of the hallmarks of bullion use is therefore deliberately fragmented or ‘hack-’ silver. In hoards from our region, it is typical to find ingots cut at one or both ends. Some examples bear transverse hammer marks and deep grooves, both of which were designed to prepare the surface for cutting. Brooches and rings were also deliberately fragmented to generate hack-silver, as were Arabic dirhams (Figure 10.5). Other

^{*} In some Scandinavian-settled territories, such as the Danelaw, it is also possible to speak of a third type of silver economy, namely a monetary economy, based on officially-issued coin. However the Vikings did not mint their own coins in north-west England in the ninth or tenth centuries (Williams 2009, 75).

[†] The will of Wulfric Spot, who held lands in north-west England in around 1000, describes payments to the king in gold, as well horses and weapons (Griffiths 2010, 54).



FIGURE 10.5 The Silverdale hoard, Lancashire, contains many deliberately fragmented ingots and ornaments (© PAS).



FIGURE 10.6 This ingot from West Yorkshire (just outside our region) displays small knife cuts or 'nicks', indicating it has been tested for its silver content (© PAS).

types of coin, for instance, from Anglo-Saxon England and France, are not usually cut, but this probably reflects the fact that they were smaller and lighter than dirhams, and thus already in a form suitable for use in small-scale transactions (Williams 2009, 78).

Another physical indication of the use of silver as currency is provided by the appearance of test marks on both coins and non-numismatic objects. Testing the silver was designed to expose plated forgeries and/or to test the fineness of silver by means of a resistance test; an object or coin was thus most likely to acquire test marks when it changed hands during a commercial transaction. Small knife cuts known as 'nicks' were made to the surface of ingots and ornaments, and are visible today as small, crescent-shaped marks (Figure 10.6). Coins were also tested, by means of sharp, angled 'pecks', made by the point of a knife. These survive as small sprues of metal. Interestingly, 'pecking' seems to have been introduced by Vikings in England during a period in which both debased and good quality Anglo-Saxon coins were in circulation, suggesting that the phenomenon arose out of the need to distinguish bad coins from good (Archibald 2011, 64). In both forms of testing, if the silver was felt to be too soft, there was a chance it had been adulterated with lead; too hard, and additional copper might be present. Since it probably required quite a lot of experience and skill to judge the 'right' feel of the silver, testing may have been a job for specialists (*ibid.*, 56).

A hoard discovered in 2011 in Silverdale (Lancs) is a good example of a predominantly 'hack-silver' hoard, in which the silver seems to have been primarily treated as currency. The hoard was found in a lead container, deposited face down. It contained a mix of silver ingots and ornaments, as well as Anglo-Saxon, [Danish](#), Carolingian, and Arabic coins, on the basis of which it has been preliminary dated to c. 900–910.



FIGURE 10.7 A penannular 'thistle brooch' with long pin, Flusco Pike, Cumbria (© British Museum).

The non-numismatic silver is predominantly in the form of hack-silver, derived from both ornaments and ingots (Figure 10.5). Of 129 ingots in the hoard, for instance, only thirteen are complete, with the remainder cut at one or both ends. Around 75% of the ornaments, chiefly arm-rings, also occur in hack-silver form. Much of the silver in the hoard has also been tested, and many of the coins are bent and/or pecked. Notably, coins minted by Viking rulers from the Danelaw were pecked alongside other types of 'foreign' coin, suggesting that they were not trusted any more than Frankish, Anglo-Saxon or Islamic issues.

Other items in Viking-Age hoards from our region are preserved as complete, intact objects. They highlight an altogether different function of silver in the North West, namely, that of display. Ornaments such as the massive 'thistle-brooches' found at Flusco Pike (Cumbria), so-called because of the thistle-like appearance of their terminals, were prominent status objects: they served as cloak fasteners and were worn on the shoulder with the pin facing upwards (Figure 10.7). Their weight and design made them impractical for everyday dress (the largest 'thistle-brooch' weighs over 700g, with a pin measuring 50cm in length) so it is likely that they were worn only on special occasions, for instance, at public or ritual functions. Such items would have enhanced the status of their owner, but they could also be given as gifts to reward followers and create allegiances. In the Icelandic sagas, kings sometimes give gold rings to members of their retinue as rewards for military service, or to honour court poets (Ager 2011b, 127–28). Perhaps the brooches from Flusco Pike were bestowed for similar purposes. Related brooches are known from the Orton Scar (Cumbria) and Cuerdale (Lancs) hoards, but display objects could also encapsulate items such as complete vessels and weaponry. The Halton Moor hoard, for instance, contained an antique silver-gilt Carolingian cup, which may have functioned as elaborate tableware (Graham-Campbell 2011, cat. no. 4; Wamers 2011, 134).

It is important to note that the use of precious metals in these contexts was fluid and flexible. While complete ornaments were primarily intended for display, they also acted as a store of bullion and could be cut up as necessary to generate payment. Indeed, complete objects sometimes carry conspicuous 'nicks', which can be distinguished from scratches and dinks that an object might naturally acquire after a prolonged period of use or in the ground. These indicate that they have been tested for their silver content, as is the case with most of the (more or less) intact silver penannular brooches contained in the Flusco Pike (1) (Cumbria) hoard (Graham-Campbell 2011, cat. nos. 2:1–5). Similarly, fragmented silver could be pooled together and melted down to create new items of jewellery, suitable for display. Although there is no direct physical evidence for this from north-west England, such a process is vividly described in an episode recounted in a thirteenth-century Icelandic saga collection known as *Heimskringla*. In this, the tenth-century poet, Eyvind, receives a reward of silver coins, which is purified and worked into a shoulder-pin weighing 25 lbs (equivalent to over 10 kg of silver, a weight that would have been much too heavy to wear). Rather than wearing the pin, however, Eyvind breaks up the silver, and uses the bullion to purchase a farm (Graham-Campbell 2007, 216). Notably, several hoards from our region, including those from Cuerdale and Silverdale, contain both complete ornaments and hack-silver, highlighting co-existence and overlap between the 'display' and 'bullion' economies.

The merging of the display and bullion functions of silver is also attested by ornaments and ingots manufactured to standardised weights. This is the case with several types of arm-ring, for instance, including Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-rings, complete examples of which reflect a weight unit (c. 26.15g) which seems to have been commonplace in Viking-Age Dublin (Sheehan 2011, 99;

Wallace 2013, 304). Such weight adjustment would not be necessary if the objects were intended only to be worn, but would make sense if they were also to be traded or stored as countable wealth. Complete ingots appear to reflect a similar, but slightly lighter weight unit of c. 25g: a standard more apparent in Scandinavian material (Kruse 1988). A type of plain penannular ring known as 'ring-money', which appears in the Cuerdale hoard, seems to have been made to a target weight of c. 24g (Warner 1976, but see Kruse 1988, 288). In a region exposed to influences from both Scandinavia and the Irish Sea, it is perhaps unsurprising that weight units varied across object types. The existence of multiple weight standards will have required traders to be sufficiently flexible to weigh to different units. To ensure confidence in transactions, and to guard against fraud, it is likely that both trading partners measured the silver to be exchanged, using their own hand-held balances and scale weights.

Economic Development

Since silver occurred in a number of different forms, reflecting different types of economy, the composition of hoards can be studied to reveal changes in the use of silver over time. In general within the Scandinavian silver economy, it is possible to identify a gradual transition from the 'display' to 'bullion', and eventually to 'coin' economies, as the monetary functions of silver gradually replaces its symbolic role in social contexts and as the exchange of small sums of hack-silver paved the way for coinage. Certainly, datable hoards within Scandinavia show a general trajectory, starting with intact ornaments in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, followed by a period of silver fragmentation in the tenth century, to hoards dominated by coinage in the eleventh century (Hårdh 1996, 104–107).


However, silver-handling traditions varied across different regions, and north-west England was sandwiched in between two areas with distinct traditions of silver use, namely Ireland and the Danelaw. In the Danelaw, coins were minted by Scandinavian rulers from the late ninth century, and bullion and coin co-existed until the use of bullion ceased in c. 930. In Ireland, by contrast, bullion continued in use into the second half of the tenth century, and coin production only began in the late 990s (Blackburn 2011, 124–36). To judge from the nature of surviving hoards, the 'display' economy also appears to have played a more important role in Ireland relative to the Danelaw, although there is evidence for intact jewellery items even in the latest hoard currently known from Yorkshire (deposited in the Vale of York in c. 928) (Sheehan 2007; Ager and Williams 2011). It would be too simplistic to label Ireland a bullion economy and the Danelaw a coin or dual bullion/coin economy, given evidence for the diverse use of silver in both areas. Nonetheless, it does appear that silver was principally used in different ways between the two regions.

It is thus unsurprising that the composition of hoards from north-west England signals multiple and overlapping silver economies throughout the tenth century, reflecting a combination of influences from east and west. Several early hoards from the region contain significant numbers of coins from York and other Danelaw mints, indicating an exposure to the monetary economy of this region. In addition to containing coin, the Cuerdale and Silverdale hoards also contain large quantities of hack-silver, demonstrating that by c. 900, the concept of the use of silver as a means of payment was well established. Despite this, the silver economy of the North West remained mixed. Hack-silver hoards from the 920s are known from Warton (Lancs) and Flusco Pike (2) (Cumbria). Yet intact ornaments continue to appear in hoards throughout the tenth century, and indeed beyond. Ornament hoards such as that from Flusco Pike (1) (Cumbria), dated on typological grounds to the 920s/30s, bear witness to the survival of the 'display' economy (Graham-Campbell 2001, 224). Even the latest hoard of Scandinavian character on record from north-west England, deposited in c. 1025 in Halton Moor (Lancs), retains a display component in the form of a complete silver cup and neck-ring (Graham-Campbell 2011, cat. no. 4.1 and 4.2).

If the transition from the 'display' to 'bullion' economies is far from clear-cut, the status of coins in the North West is even more complex. Although a conventional coin economy was never established in the region, large numbers of imported coins did reach north-west England in Viking hands. Coins from various mints appear alongside non-numismatic silver in many of the region's hoards, often in a form that indicates that they have been tested for their silver content. Since coins from different mints had different weights and variable silver contents, it is likely that they passed primarily as bullion, to be weighed out alongside other forms of silver in metal-weight transactions.

However, from the 910s, several coin-only hoards are also recorded. While two of these, from Dean (Cumbria) and Chester, St John's, contained a mix of coins from multiple mints, a hoard of the same date from 'Lancashire' is formed entirely of York issues (Graham-Campbell 2001, 218–19). It is possible that the owner of this hoard accepted the coins as coinage, passing them by tale (that is, by counting them out) rather than by weight. Although removed from the area of jurisdiction in which they were minted, the York coins may have achieved a nominal status as coins, in effect providing a substitute for a local currency.* Certainly, by the later tenth century, there is evidence that coins in hoards from north-west England were treated differently to silver in other forms. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the recently discovered hoard from Barrow-in-Furness, deposited in c. 955–57. The 79 coins found along with thirteen ingot fragments were preserved either as complete coins or as deliberately cut halves, while only around a quarter had been tested for their silver content. This treatment suggests that the coins were, to an extent, taken at face value, the presence of coin halves speaking of the desire to create smaller units of currency that could still be accommodated alongside complete coins in what were presumably coin-based or mixed bullion/coin transactions. In this way, the hoard would appear to indicate a shift towards the appreciation of coin as coin.

Reasons for Hoarding

Precious-metal hoards represent accumulations of wealth that were deposited by their owners and never recovered. But why did silver enter the ground in the first place, and why did north-west England in particular see hoarding on such a large scale in the early tenth century? Archaeologists have interpreted hoards in a number of different ways. A common explanation is that they were buried for safe keeping during periods of political turmoil or absence. To take an example from a much later period, Samuel Pepys, the seventeenth-century diarist, gives a vivid account of his concealment of over £1,300 ~~per~~  of gold upon hearing about a threatened Dutch invasion. He instructed his father and wife to bury the gold on his family estate in Huntingdonshire, but when they came to recover the hoard a year later, they couldn't remember exactly where it had been buried. It was only 'by poking with a spit' that Pepys eventually located the hoard, and even then he found that the coins had been scattered and some lost for good (Latham and Matthews 1985, 788–89, 838–39).†

In other cases, hoards may have been concealed without a specific threat, simply for the purpose of storing value and stockpiling wealth for future use. Here, hoards could be viewed as proxy savings banks (without the benefit of interest). Hoards containing objects spanning a long date range are candidates for such deposits, since this suggests that they were added to over an extended period of time (Sindbæk 2011, 57). In both contexts, the hoards known to us today represent 'failed' hoards that were never reunited with their owner. If we assume that most hoards were successfully recovered, those that 'survive' must represent just a small fraction of the number of hoards that were originally concealed.

Other hoards may have been deposited without the intention of recovery, for ritual or ceremonial reasons. Viking-Age gold hoards and single gold finds from Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland, are frequently associated with watery places such as bogs, rivers and lakes, from which they would have been difficult (although perhaps not impossible) to retrieve (Hårdh 1996, 134; Graham-Campbell and Sheehan 2009). An association with silver hoards and watery environments has not been established, which may suggest a broad distinction in the treatment of hoards containing (silver) currency, and those containing (gold) display items. An altogether different explanation for hoarding is offered by the thirteenth-century Icelandic historian, Snorri Sturluson. He states that pre-Christian Scandinavians believed that they would have access to whatever they had buried in hoards in the afterlife, a principle sometimes

* It may seem odd that coin could serve as currency outside of the area in which it was minted, since there would be no legal framework guaranteeing its value. However, there are numerous examples of foreign coin serving an important role in local economies, as in Colonial America, when settlers adopted various foreign currencies, including the Spanish 8-reales, or in seventeenth-century Poland, when local coin supply was dominated by Swedish and Saxon coin. Indeed, in tenth-century Ireland, Anglo-Saxon coins were a trusted currency prior to the establishment of a mint in c. 997 (Bornholdt-Collins 2010, 22–23; Eagleton and Williams 2011, 167; Sheehan 2007, 159).

† The entries are for the 13th June and 10–11th October 1667.

referred to as ‘Odin’s Law’ (Ager 2011b, 133). This belief is also indirectly referenced in the Icelandic sagas. In *Egil’s Saga*, for instance, Egil’s father deposits a chest of silver and a bronze cauldron in a marsh immediately prior to his death; before he dies, Egil himself hides two chests of silver, again in boggy land (Graham-Campbell and Sheehan 2009, 89). It is unclear, however, whether such accounts reflect genuine tenth-century beliefs or simply literary devices to account for the activities of earlier, pre-Christian generations.

Returning to the Viking-Age North West, the contents and contexts of hoards can provide some clues as to the possible motivations for their concealment. In our area, most hoards contain a currency element, and thus are usually accounted for within an economic, rather than ritual, framework. Certainly, the concentration of hoarding in the first three decades of the tenth century does correspond with a period of pronounced political upheaval between Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Scandinavian forces, as Scandinavians exiles from Ireland sought new lands in Cheshire and coastal Lancashire, and Anglo-Saxon rulers from Mercia and Wessex looked to extend their authority into the power vacuum left by the earlier collapse of Northumbria (Griffiths 2010, 41–45).

The landscape contexts of the hoards from our region have not yet been studied in any detail, although they could usefully be explored in the case of the most recent discoveries. However, no hoards are known to derive from watery environments. Here, it is also worth observing that a number of hoards, including those from Cuerdale and Silverdale (Lancs), Huxley (Cheshire) and Dean (Cumbria) were buried in lead containers, while a hoard from Chester, Castle Esplanade, was contained within a pot (Graham-Campbell 2011, 130–31). The use of such containers, which were presumably intended to protect the hoards, may indicate that they were intended for recovery ~~at some point~~ (Ager 2011b, 133).

The combined evidence thus suggests that many of the region’s hoards are likely to have been deposited for safekeeping in a period of general upheaval, although some hoards may well have been concealed for different reasons. Individual hoards have plausibly been linked with documented ‘crisis’ events. On the basis of its date, location and strong Scandinavian-Irish characteristics, the Cuerdale hoard has been interpreted as wealth accumulated by the Irish-Norse elite following their expulsion from Dublin and Waterford in 902 (Graham-Campbell 1992, 114). The contemporary hoards from Silverdale (Lancs) and Huxley (Cheshire) may belong to a similar context. Two hoards concealed in the 920s/30s in Flusco Pike, near Penrith, may have been connected with the meeting at nearby Eamont Bridge between the West Saxon King, Æthelstan, and the Kings of the Scots and of Cumbria in 927. During this gathering, the northern rulers submitted to Æthelstan, secured a new northern frontier: events that may have encouraged the guarding of wealth (Williams 2009, 80; Graham-Campbell 2011, 156). There are, however, difficulties in correlating hoards with specific historical events; it is equally possible that the hoards relate to events which are not known to us today.

Hoards vs Single Finds

Whatever the motivation for hoarding, hoards are distinct from a second category of evidence for the silver economy in north-west England, namely single finds. Whereas hoards represent deliberate deposits of accumulated wealth, single finds are individual items, for instance, ingots or coins, that were most likely dropped or mislaid by their owners. They are typically retrieved during metal-detector surveys and reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), which hosts an extensive on-line database of such discoveries (www.finds.org.uk). As a source of information for Scandinavian silver economies, single finds are potentially hugely valuable. Unlike hoards, they are not confined to precious metal, but also include tools used in commercial transactions, such as weights and balances. Moreover, whereas hoards are deliberately concealed deposits, single finds are assumed to represent accidental losses, and will therefore reflect a more or less random sample of silver and related artefacts in circulation.

Given the large number of hoards recovered from the region, we might expect single finds to be similarly plentiful. In fact, this is not the case. The corpus of single finds of silver bullion is small, comprising just a cut fragment of an Arabic dirham, from Skelton (Cumbria); a Frankish silver coin of Charles the Bald (840–77), found in Puddington (Cheshire); and an ingot with ‘nicks’ from Aston (Cheshire) (PAS ‘Find-ID’ LVPL522; Cowell and Philpott 1993; *Treasure Annual Report* 2003, no. 83). A further



FIGURE 10.8 A decorated lead weight, Newton, Lancashire (© PAS).

nicked ingot, together with a piece of hack-silver, is recorded from the village of Neston near the Dee estuary (Griffiths 2010, 115, Figure 68; Bean 2000). A silver Thor's hammer, which may have been worn as a pendant or used in a bullion context, is also recorded, from Longtown (Cumbria) (PAS 'Find-ID' LANCUM-ED9222) (a further Thor's hammer find, said to come from Cumbria, was recently dismissed as a fake). In addition to these silver items, several gold finger-rings of Scandinavian type are on record (see above, [p. 152](#)). These rings are complete, and thus in a form that would appear to relate primarily to the 'display' economy.

Somewhat more common as single finds, totalling seven items, are lead weights decorated with inset metalwork (see, for instance, PAS 'Find-ID' LANCUM-45FF34; LVPL1049) (Figure 10.8). This is a fairly common type of Viking scale weight, thought to be associated with the weighing of bullion: examples have been found with hand-held balances in Viking-Age graves, and at market and productive sites in presumed commercial contexts (Graham-Campbell 1980, no. 307; Redknap 2009, 38). Just outside of our region, two decorated lead weights have been found at the fortified coastal trading-site of Llanbedrgoch, Anglesey, and have been linked to merchant activity (Redknap 2000, 61, Figure 82). The added metalwork is usually British or Irish in origin, and thus the weights have been identified as an Insular Viking phenomenon, created mainly during the later ninth century, but remaining in production and use into the tenth. The exact function of the added metalwork is unclear, but one possibility is that it served to personalise weights, allowing the owner to easily recognise their set in a trading environment where multiple sets of weights were in use.

The small number of single finds makes them difficult to evaluate as a group. Nevertheless, their findspots have the potential to reveal locations in which bullion-users were concentrated. Figure 10.2 shows that the single finds cluster in two areas: around the Dee and Mersey estuaries flanking the Wirral, and on the coasts surrounding Morecambe Bay in north Lancashire and southern Cumbria, including on the Furness peninsula. Notably, both areas also see concentrations of hoards, although there is no direct overlap between the two find categories. It is unclear if the single finds represent stray losses made by people travelling across the landscape, or if they relate to permanent settlements or market sites that may have had a more seasonal character. Certainly, the Wirral peninsula is considered by many to have been a focus of Scandinavian settlement and the single finds may relate to concentrations of bullion users at its southern edge (Philpott, Chapter 7). Morecambe Bay was also an important, strategic harbour, and a number of burials and stone sculptures from its coastal edges hint at significant local Scandinavian landholding (Griffiths 2010, 55–56, Figure 19). Metal-weight exchange may thus relate directly to Scandinavian settlement in these two areas.

Overall, the number of single finds from the North West remains small. Notably, the area of the Danelaw has yielded a far greater number of single finds, including over 60 ingots, 50 dirhams and eight neck- or arm-rings/ring fragments. Also found in the region are numerous lead and copper-alloy weights, including types not recorded at all in the North West. What factors may explain this difference?

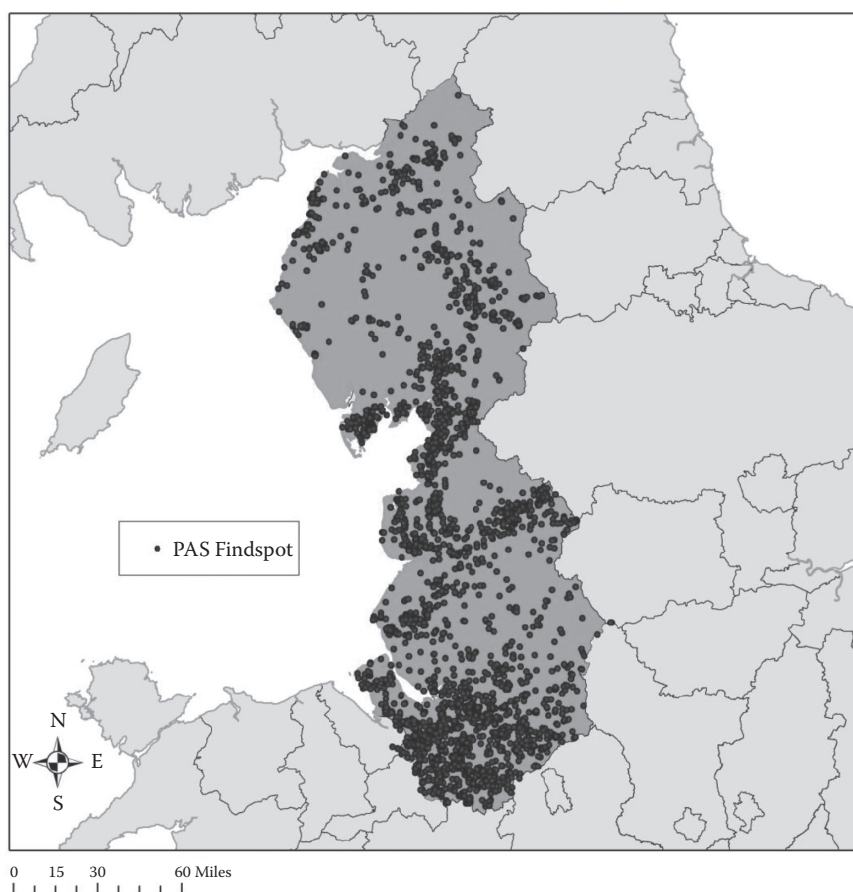


FIGURE 10.9 Roman, Medieval and Post-Medieval finds recorded by the PAS in north-west England as of July 2013 (© author).

Metal-detecting is certainly more common in eastern England than in the west, where much land is unavailable to detectorists because of large urban centres and extensive pastoral farming. However, north-west England, particularly Cheshire and the area of southern Cumbria and northern Lancashire, has produced a significant number of portable antiquities from the Roman, Medieval and post-Medieval periods (Figure 10.9). Metal-detector coverage is not, then, the cause of the low number of bullion-related single finds from the region. Indeed, if we look at other types of early medieval finds such as dress accessories, we find that they are also rare, a pattern which suggests that the frequency of bullion-related finds in particular is representative of broader patterns in contemporary metalwork consumption and loss (Richards et al. 2009, 3.3.1.2). North-west England is a region of highland, and was historically sparsely settled (*ibid*, 3.3.1.1). Even with an influx of Scandinavian settlement in the early tenth century, it is likely that overall population levels remained low.

Why, then, has the north west yielded so many hoards? It is possible that hoards have a higher chance of being detected and recorded than single finds, both in antiquity, and in modern-day metal-detecting. However, in other parts of England we get the opposite pattern: East Anglia, for instance, has yielded a vast number of single finds, but no certain hoards of Scandinavian character. An arguably more likely explanation for the pattern in north-west England is that the hoards were simply passing through the region at the time they were concealed. Rather than reflecting local silver use, the hoards probably represent wealth in transit. Of course, there may well be exceptions, and, as noted above, individual hoards have been linked to centres of Scandinavian land holding in the region. Nevertheless, the hoards are often located on prominent east-west communication routes linking the northern Danelaw with the Irish

Sea region: a pattern that highlights the importance of the North West as a conduit for the movement of wealth, and presumably also people and goods, between the two regions. Despite the richness of the region's hoards, the overall conclusion must be that north-west England was primarily an area through which silver travelled, rather than one in which it was actively used.

Conclusions

The hoards of north-west England reveal the silver riches of the Vikings active in the region during the tenth century, but they are more than showcases for Viking plunder and tribute. Not only do they reveal the external contacts and wealth sources of the Scandinavians, they also elucidate the ways in which the Vikings conceptualised and valued silver, in both the economic and symbolic spheres. As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, the origins of the hoarded silver are diverse, reflecting the background of Vikings in the Scandinavian homelands, as well as their activities in Russia, on the Continent, in England (including in the Danelaw) and in the Irish Sea region. Overall, however, the hoards show strongest connections with Ireland and the northern Danelaw, highlighting the prevailing influence of these two areas over north-west England.

The uses of silver in the region ~~west~~ were similarly diverse, the hoards demonstrating the role of silver both as a means of payment within a metal-weight system, and as a means of display in social settings. There is little evidence for changes in the use of silver over time. Although we might expect the 'display' economy to give way to the 'bullion' economy, it seems instead that the uses of silver remained mixed for much of the tenth century, a pattern which serves as a reminder that silver economies developed in different ways in different parts of the Viking World. The reasons why so many hoards were deposited in this area of England are opaque, but a case was made for most hoards being deposited for economic reasons, at a time of general political instability. What is made clear from a comparison with the region's single finds is that the hoards are anomalous in their local context. Rather than representing silver that was in active use locally, the hoards appear to represent wealth in transit between York/the northern Danelaw and Dublin/the Irish Sea region. In this sense, the hoards demonstrate the movement of wealth between east and west, and highlight the role of north-west England as an intermediary link between the two areas.

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