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The Cuerdale Hoard

By Gareth Williams and Leslie Webster

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The Cuerdale Hoard is the largest Viking silver treasure trove ever found, outside Russia. Gareth Williams and Leslie Webster unearth the secrets that were buried with it.

Discovery

The Cuerdale Hoard is the greatest Viking silver treasure trove ever found, outside Russia, far exceeding in scale and range any hoard found in the Scandinavian homelands or in the western areas of Viking settlement. Containing around 8,600 items of silver coins and bullion when found, and weighing some 40kg, it is an astonishing assemblage, as impressive even in its slightly depleted form today as it must have been when it was first put together in the early tenth century.

... this massive treasure may have been a war chest ...

It was found on 15 May 1840, by workmen engaged in repairing the embankment on the south side of the River Ribble at Cuerdale, near Preston, Lancashire. The hoard had been buried in a lead chest, fragments of which survive, and the presence of small bone pins suggests that some of the coins or bullion had been parcelled up into separate bags or parcels, secured by these pins.

Prompt action by the landowner's bailiff ensured that almost all the hoard was retrieved; the labourers were allowed to retain one coin each for themselves. It was declared Treasure Trove at an inquest on 15 August 1840, the property of Queen Victoria in right of her Duchy of Lancaster; the Duchy then passed it to the British Museum for examination prior to its distribution to over 170 recipients. The lion's share, however, was allocated to the British Museum.



The Cuerdale Hoard, a general view ©

The coins found with the hoard reveal that it must have been buried in the years between 905 and 910, shortly after the expulsion of the Vikings from Dublin in 902. The Ribble Valley, a peaceful backwater today, was then the main route between Viking York and the Irish Sea; this fact, together with the Irish Norse origins of much of the bullion, and the presence of newly minted coins made by the York Vikings, have led scholars to suggest that this massive treasure may have been a war chest, assembled by Irish Norse exiles intending to mount an expeditionary force to reoccupy Dublin from a base on the Ribble estuary.

Hoards and hoarding



Silver ingots like these were both a means of storing wealth and the raw material for creating high-status jewellery ©

It is often assumed that hoards from the Viking Age were buried in times of danger, and not recovered because the person who had hidden the hoard was killed, captured or forced to flee. This is probably a good explanation for many hoards, and the threat of Viking raids was itself sufficient to make many people hide their treasures. However, there are other possible reasons why treasure might be hidden and not recovered.

One is that the treasure was buried for religious reasons. It is said that pagans in the Viking Age believed that a man would have the use in the afterlife of any treasure he buried while still alive. However, this story was written down long after the Christianisation of Scandinavia, and it is not known whether it is true.

Another possibility is that hoarding might be linked with the display of wealth and power. If a leader wished to appear generous and successful, he needed to be able to hand out silver to his followers. This would mean stockpiling silver ready for handouts, and even without a specific threat, it would be important to keep the silver safe until it was given out.

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An even more dramatic display of wealth would be to remove the silver from circulation permanently, by burying it. In Egil's saga, the hero Egil Skallagrimsson does precisely that, hiding his hoard to provide a permanent talking point for others. That sort of ostentatious destruction of wealth finds parallels in many cultures.

Some of these possibilities can probably be excluded in the case of Cuerdale. The hoard contains both quite freshly minted Christian coins from the Danelaw, and ingots marked with a cross. This suggests that the hoard is unlikely to have been buried for religious reasons, while its huge size makes it unlikely that it was symbolically removed from circulation. However, the fact that the hoard contains identifiable parcels, acquired at different times and places, would be consistent with a carefully hidden stockpile which was added to gradually, as well as with a single hoard buried because of a sudden crisis.

The coins



Byzantine silver hexagram of Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine. Minted AD 615-30 this is by far the oldest coin in the hoard ©

The Cuerdale hoard contains over 7,000 coins. Between them they demonstrate very clearly the international scale of Viking activity, as well as providing evidence for the dating of the hoard. Not surprisingly, most of the coins come from England, both official Anglo-Saxon issues (about 1,000) and coins of the Danelaw (about 5,000). However, the hoard also contained about 1,000 Frankish coins, a handful of early Scandinavian coins, about 50 Kufic dirhams from all over the Islamic world, a few imitations of Kufic coins from eastern Europe, and a single Byzantine coin.

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It is likely that the Scandinavian, Byzantine, Kufic and imitation Kufic coins all came to Britain from Scandinavia, reflecting the Vikings' links to the east through the Russian river systems. The Frankish coins reflect multiple raids on the continent.

One group contains coins of the so-called Middle Kingdom, which stretched from the modern Netherlands down into northern Italy. Such coins were probably acquired from raids on the Netherlands, where the port of Dorestad was a repeated target. The date and condition of these coins suggest they were acquired on at least two occasions. The same is true of the much larger group of coins acquired in raids on what is now western France.



Silver penny of Ceolwulf II, who became king of Mercia in 874 after the Vikings forced his predecessor Burgred into exile ©

The English material also suggests a variety of sources. The condition of the Anglo-Saxon coins suggests that they came in a steady trickle rather than all being acquired at the same time, and this probably reflects ongoing trade as much as raiding.

By contrast, the coinage from the southern Danelaw seems to have come north in distinct groups, one of which had only recently been struck when the hoard was deposited. Finally, the local coinage of Viking Northumbria, the largest single group in the hoard, shows some variation of wear, but all the coins were relatively new. This suggests that these issues were circulating locally, and that the hoard was buried only a few years after this coinage was first introduced.

Our knowledge of the dating of the Danelaw issues largely derives from the hoard, rather than the other way round, but the Anglo-Saxon,

Frankish and Kufic coins all point consistently to a date between AD 905 and AD 910.

The bullion

The bulk of the hoard, weight-wise, was bullion - weighing over 36kg (80lb). Some of this had been melted down into ingots of various shapes and weights; much of the rest consists of silver jewellery, and other items that had been chopped up into small pieces designed for the melting pot or for sharing out as payments.



Fragments of Pictish, Irish and Carolingian luxury items ©

...Among all this vast assemblage there are only two items of Anglo-Saxon origin...

The very varied nature of this so-called hack-silver testifies to the mobility and far-ranging contacts of the Vikings. Much of it is of Norse Irish origin, including distinctive stamped arm-ring types, both whole and chopped up, and fragments of spectacular bossed penannular brooches and thistle brooches; such large and imposing items of personal jewellery were portable wealth as well as functional and decorative attachments.



Scandinavian and Irish jewellery from the hoard ©

Alongside these relatively local products, however, were more exotic items, matching the coins in the hoard in their range and diversity. Arm-rings and neck-rings of different types from Scandinavia are present in some quantity, as one might expect; but there are also fragments of so-called Permian rings, from the eastern Baltic, as well as some Slav beads.

From western Europe comes a very fine gilded

Carolingian buckle, along with brooch fragments and a decorative mount - testimony no doubt to the well-attested Viking raids on France. The northerly reach of Viking enterprise is seen in a decorated silver sheet and a fragment of a silver comb, both apparently of Pictish origin.

Perhaps the greatest surprise, however, is that among all this vast assemblage there are only two items of Anglo-Saxon origin - a fine strap-end and a tiny mount - to set against the total of over 1,000 Anglo-Saxon coins in the hoard.

These different elements came together in the hoard from many separate parcels, accumulated over time and across distances; but they are a graphic witness both to the boldly ranging scope of Viking activity, and to the enormous wealth it generated.

Find out more

Books

Viking Treasure from the North West - The Cuerdale Hoard in Context edited by James Graham Campbell (National Museums and Galleries in Merseyside, 1992)

Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age by John Haywood (Thames & Hudson, 2000)

Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings by John Haywood (Penguin, 1996). Detailed maps of Viking settlements in Scotland, Ireland, England, Iceland and Normandy.

Links

Nova Online: The Vikings. Build a Viking village, write your name in runes and discover the secret of Norse ships.

Compass. Take a tour of some of the British Museum's best artefacts on the web.

The Smithsonian Institution's Vikings Exhibit. Commemorating the 1,000-year anniversary of Leif Eriksson's arrival in North America.

Places to visit

The British Museum. Important collections of Viking material, as well as displays relating to religions and beliefs from all over the world.

Bede's World. Provides a fascinating insight into Christian life in Anglo-Saxon England just before the Viking Age.

Jorvik Centre. Explores many aspects of daily life in Viking York in the tenth century.

About the author

Gareth Williams is curator of Early Medieval Coins at the British Museum. In addition to coinage, he specialises in the history of the Viking Age, with particular interests in the nature of royal power, and in the relationship between history and literature. He is also a member of the re-enactment/living history group Vikings of Middle England.