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The Cuerdale hoard

Found at Cuerdale, Lancashire, England
 Viking, buried between about AD 905–910

The largest Viking silver hoard known from western Europe

This enormous silver treasure was discovered by workmen repairing the bank of the River Ribble in 1840. Records from the time describe how one workman's spade hit loose coins, spilling them into his wheelbarrow. He and his companions began to fill their pockets, only to empty them again at the order of the bailiff – but they were allowed to keep one piece each. The hoard was taken to Cuerdale Hall, where it was said to cover a sitting-room floor.

The Cuerdale Hoard consists of over 8500 silver objects, weighing some 40kg in total. Most of the pieces are coins, together with ingots (silver bars) and cut-up brooches, chains, rings and other ornaments (hacksilver). It had been buried in a lead container. Five bone pins said to have been found with the treasure suggest that some of it was parcelled up in cloth bags.

Most of the hoard's coins were minted in Viking-controlled England, while the hacksilver is mainly Irish or Irish-Viking in form and decoration. Other pieces originated from further afield – Scotland, the Continent, Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea region and the Islamic lands of Central Asia and the Middle East. In this way, the Cuerdale Hoard reflects the Vikings' extensive international connections across much of the known world.

A hoard of this size represents extraordinary wealth – probably of many persons rather than one individual. It is likely to have been collected over time as loot, tribute and through trade. The reasons for the Cuerdale Hoard's burial are not known. It may have been hidden for safe-keeping at a time of unrest, or represents a secure method of stock-piling riches over time.

The latest coins in the hoard enable us to date its burial to between about AD 905 and 910. This, together with the Irish origin of most of the hacksilver, has fuelled speculation that the hoard belonged to Vikings who were expelled from Dublin in AD 902. The River Ribble, where the hoard was found, lay directly across the Irish Sea from Dublin, offering a convenient place for fleeing Vikings to regroup. It was also on an overland route to York – the powerbase of the Northumbrian Vikings who could be called upon for support. But while this explanation for the Cuerdale Hoard is enticing, it remains unproven.

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