

The Huxley Hoard

Viking silver unearthed

In 2004, a unique hoard of unusual Viking silver arm-rings was found by a metal detectorist in a field near Chester. What does this discovery add to our understanding of Scandinavian settlement in north-west England? **Lisa Westcott** examines the evidence.

Picture a cold and wet November Sunday morning on the Cheshire Plain, six miles south of Chester: the landscape is dominated by pasture and criss-crossed by hedge lines, stock-proof fencing and the meandering course of the River Gowy. On this particular morning, in 2004, the grazing cattle had been replaced by a host of metal detectorists, clad in water-proofs, making their systematic sweeps up and down the unpromising fields.

At about 11.00am, Dan Garner, the Senior Archaeologist for Chester City Council, received an excited phone call about a hoard of silver being excavated that very moment in Huxley. Dan's



Sunday morning plans were suspended as he rushed over to investigate. One of the detectorists had unearthed some large fragments of lead sheet about a foot below turf level, rapidly followed by the recovery of several large silver items. Further excavation revealed about three dozen fragments of lead sheet and 22 pieces of silver, which were clearly Viking artefacts.

The spectacular Huxley Hoard consists of 1.4kg of silver, comprising 20 flattened, band-shaped arm-rings, one ingot and one decorated bracelet rod that had been deliberately twisted out of shape. There are also 39 fragments of decayed lead sheet, presumably from a wrapping or container. The Huxley Hoard is coinless and, given that the arm-rings had been reduced to an unwearable state before burial, the value of the silver would have been measured by weight – in other words, a bullion hoard. Most likely buried in the early 10th century, the Huxley Hoard has triggered a reconsideration of the early years of the Scandinavian settlement of north-west England (Cumbria, Lancashire, and Cheshire) and the coastal areas of North Wales from Clywd to Anglesey.

Finding the hoard

When Dan Garner arrived at the metal detecting rally, he was met by the hoard's finder, Mr S Reynoldson, heading in the opposite direction. Although rally organisers had asked Reynoldson not to remove anything until archaeologists arrived on site, he had tired of waiting for Dan and had decided to call it a day. However, he agreed to head back out with Dan to identify the find-spot, which unfortunately had by now been

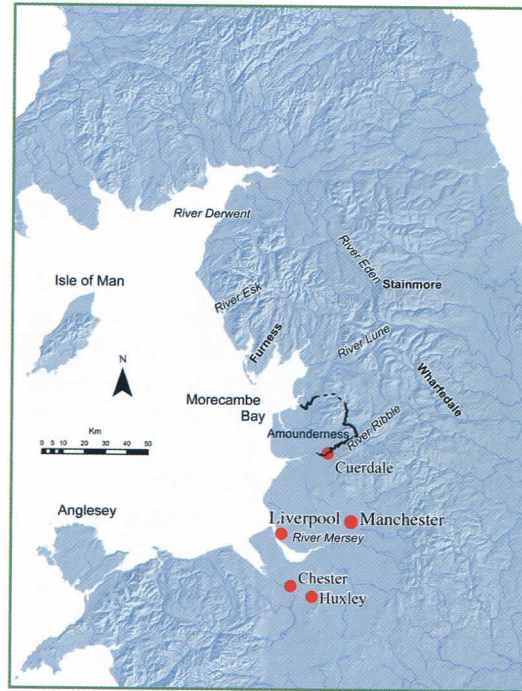


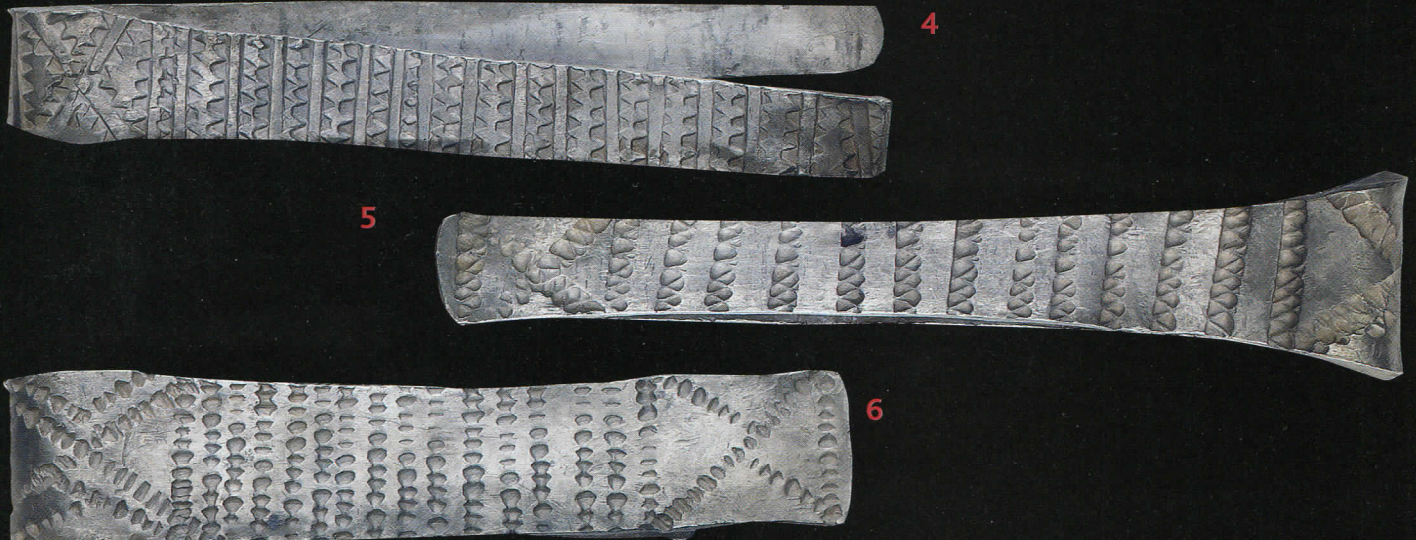
PHOTO: Dr Fiona Edmonds

LEFT Showing the locations of the Huxley and Cuerdale hoards.

thoroughly trampled. After a bit of prospecting, Dan located the recently-excavated hole and removed enough backfill to expose an undisturbed section edge of Reynoldson's pit.

The entire profile from the turf to the base was 0.4m; it seems likely the hoard was contained within a shallow cut at the top of the clay, though it had been disturbed several times by post-Medieval ploughing and had narrowly missed being entirely dislodged and scattered. Once the precise location of the hoard had been verified, the only thing left to do under the circumstances was to record the location as accurately as possible. Following Dan Garner's involvement, the hoard

BELOW AND FOLLOWING PAGES The deliberately flattened silver armbands, decorated with punch designs, and (No. 21) the twisted decorated bracelet.



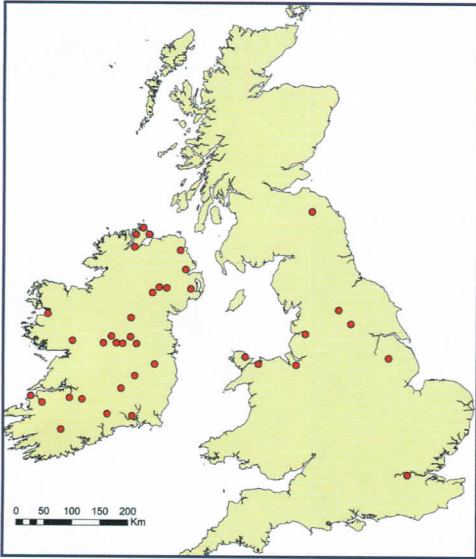


IMAGE: John G. Sheehy

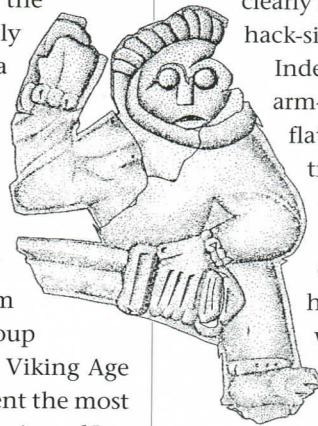
ABOVE Distribution map of Viking Age hoards and assemblages containing Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band arm-rings from Britain and Ireland.

was reported to Nick Herepath, at that time the Finds Liaison Officer for the North West, who then recorded the hoard and arranged for its transfer to the British Museum.

The Huxley Hoard was declared Treasure on 15 July 2005 by the Coroner for Chester, and subsequently valued at £28,000. In 2006, the Heritage Lottery Fund funded the purchase of the hoard, and it is now jointly owned by National Museums Liverpool and Cheshire West and Chester Museums.

Unusual evidence

The Huxley Hoard was buried sometime around AD 900 in an isolated spot close to the River Gowy, which would probably have been accessible to the Irish Sea and navigable via the Mersey Estuary. Of the 22 objects recovered, 20 are band-shaped, penannular arm-rings of Hiberno-Scandinavian type, decorated with punched designs and flattened in half. Arm-rings of the Hiberno-Scandinavian type form the largest and most impressive group of arm-rings known from Ireland's Viking Age silver-working tradition, and represent the most distinctive form of arm-ring from Britain and Ireland during the period c.850-c.950.



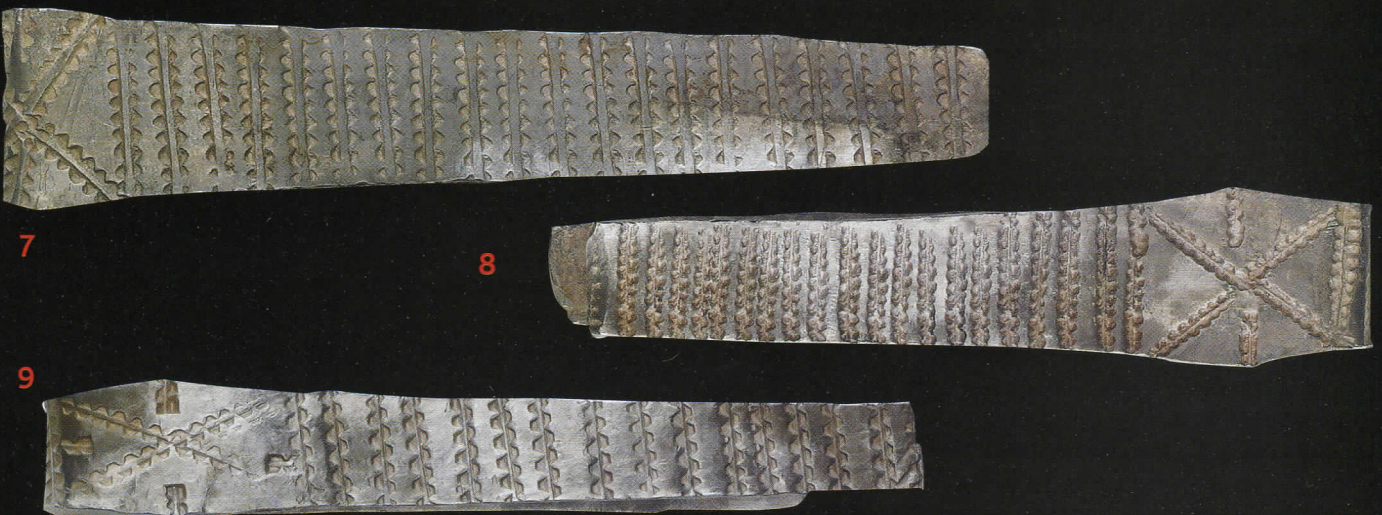
RIGHT Illustration of a piece of impressed gold foil from Sorte Muld, Bornholm, Denmark, showing a man wielding a sword and wearing arm-rings.

The Huxley arm-rings are mostly complete, although four of them have had a small piece cut off one end (numbers 4, 8, 9 and 13). The flattened shape would have made the arm rings much easier to pack into the lead container – and thus, much easier to conceal and transport. In this form, they also would have been much easier to turn into ‘hack silver’ (cut-up fragments of jewellery and ingots, for use by weight) or to melt down for re-casting.

The decorations show a range of designs, although a saltire design is popular, (a diagonal cross or star pattern) appearing in the central panel of numbers 1-12. There is one unfinished ring in the hoard (number 10) which looks like the work of an apprentice, where the decorative stamping was clearly started in the central field (the saltire) and worked towards one end; however, in this case, the stamping was so poorly executed that it was abandoned halfway through the job. This ring was never meant to be worn – clearly destined, from early on, to become hack-silver.

Indeed, the fact that all the broad-band arm-rings in the Huxley Hoard have been flattened is very unusual. This specific treatment does not occur anywhere else in the hoard evidence from Britain and Ireland, though there is one close parallel in the Vale of York hoard – where an annular arm-ring was flattened without bending it in half – and many hack-silver fragments of similar arm-rings were found in the Cuerdale hoard. It is possible that the Huxley arm-rings were never

PHOTO: Aler Watt (1999)



The Cuerdale Hoard

Discovered on 15 May 1840 on the southern bank of a bend of the River Ribble near Preston, Lancashire, the Cuerdale hoard contains over 8,600 items including silver coins, English and Carolingian jewellery, hack silver and ingots. It is larger in both number of objects and weight than any hoard found in Scandinavia, or any other western areas settled by the Vikings.

The coins in the hoard are from three sources, including the Viking kingdoms of eastern England, Alfred's Wessex and also foreign sources, which include Byzantine, Scandinavian, Islamic, Papal, North Italian and Carolingian mints. It is believed the hoard was buried between AD 903 and 910, soon after the Vikings were expelled from Dublin in 902.



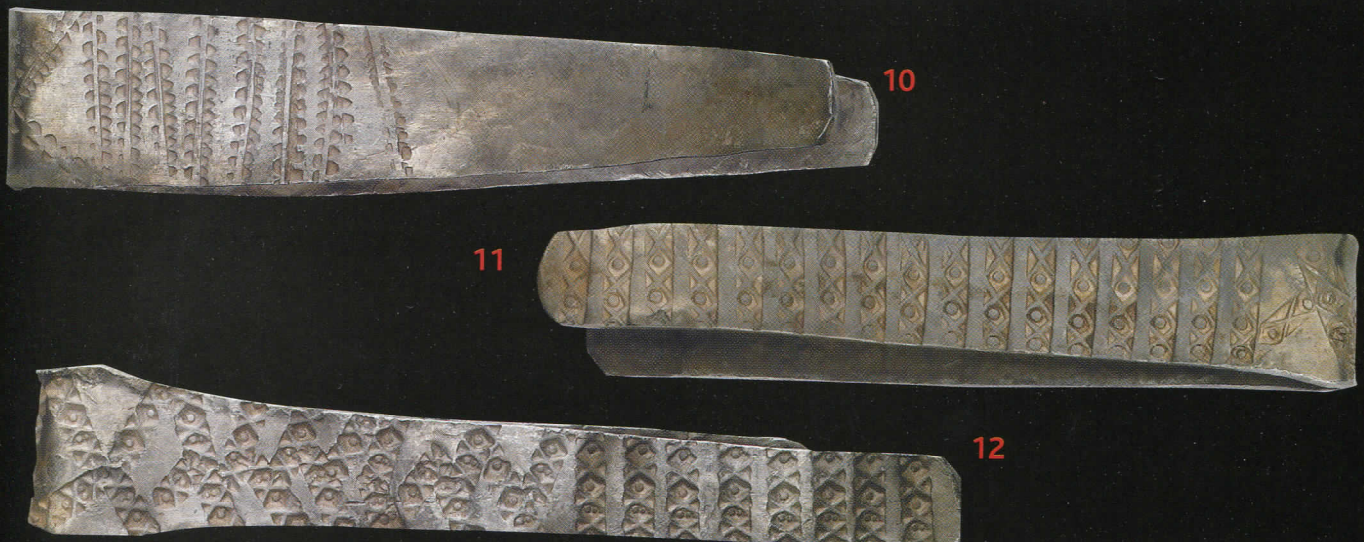
PHOTO: Trustees of the British Museum

RIGHT A selection of objects from the Cuerdale Hoard.

manufactured into ring form, but were instead bent in half from their flattened state. It seems unlikely anyone would go to the trouble of flattening 20 fully-formed, finished arm-rings and then bend them in half, when there were other, easier options; what would have been the point of flattening and bending them, if only to cut them up for hack-silver?

This question might partly be answered by the fact that all but one of the Huxley arm-bands lacks

evidence of nicking (test-marks to test the quality of the silver and ensure it was not plated), which is an indication that they never entered into circulation as currency rings, at least in a Scandinavian culture. It seems likely, then, that they were never finished into complete ring form, which means that this group represents the product of a single workshop rather than a gradual accumulation of wealth: perhaps the work of a couple of silversmiths and the apprentice – who earned his



The Danelaw

The Danelaw is the historical name given to northern and eastern England from approximately AD 800 to 954, where the laws of the 'Danes' dominated those of the Anglo-Saxons. This included the kingdoms of Northumbria and East Anglia, as well as the Five Boroughs – of Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Stamford and Lincoln.

'Danelaw' is also used to describe the legal terms created in the treaties between Alfred the Great and the Danish warlord, Guthrum, written following Guthrum's defeat at the Battle of Ethandun in 878. In 886, the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum was formalised, defining the boundaries of their kingdoms, with provisions for peaceful relations between the English and the Vikings. The prosperity of the Danelaw, especially Eoforwic (Danish Jórviik, modern York), led to its targeting by later Viking raiders. Conflict with Wessex – under the leadership of Alfred's son Edward the Elder – and Mercia, sapped the strength of the Danelaw, most dramatically in AD 910 at Tettenhall, ultimately leading to its submission in AD 917 in return for protection.

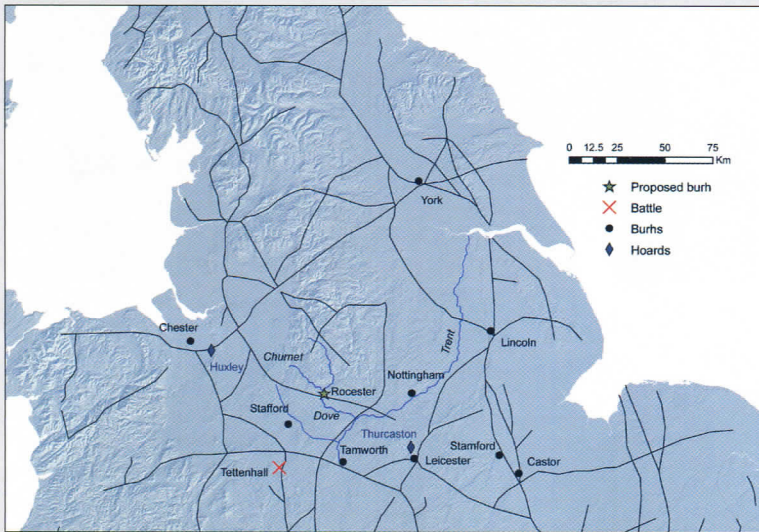


IMAGE: Dr Gareth Williams

ABOVE Hoards and frontiers of the northern Danelaw: the geographical distribution of the hoards reveals many were located either on or very near important east-west routes within the northern Danelaw. Here, Huxley clearly sits on the route between Chester and York.

place in history as the sole result of the botched decoration on arm-ring number 10.

The Huxley Hoard appears to have been buried under a lead cover or container, so it seems likely that it was concealed with the intention of recovery rather than permanently buried as a ritual offering. Three other early 10th century hoards have been found associated with leaden containers: the Cuerdale Hoard, which was discovered with lead fragments; the Bossall/Flaxton, which was described as having been in a leaden box; and the recent hoard from the Vale of York (CA 212), which was either in a lead container, or under a sheet of lead.

Hoard of the Danelaw

The Huxley Hoard is an important find in a growing body of material, and one of a number of recent hoards from the Viking Age. Of these, the 2007 Vale of York Hoard (initially called the Harrogate Hoard) has attracted the most attention as the largest and most varied hoard of this kind to have been found since the famous Cuerdale Hoard, was discovered in 1840. Included in this group are recent hoards from Flusco Pike in Cumbria, Warton in Lancashire, and a hoard from North Yorkshire discovered in 2004. This group in turn forms part of the larger corpus of 18 Viking hoards from the Northern Danelaw (present-day Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire), which are tightly dated to the first decades of the 10th century.

Huxley is unique among the northern hoards as the only substantial pure bullion hoard; though with a total bullion weight of c.1.4kg, it only rates as



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medium-sized. Very little is yet known about how or why the Huxley Hoard was gathered together, or about the social status of the owner – although it is likely that he or she came lower down the social scale than the owners of the Vale of York and Cuerdale hoards. The Huxley Hoard, however, would still have been very valuable indeed at the time, equivalent to the annual yield of a small estate as recorded in the *Domesday Book*.

There are four main categories of objects in the Viking hoards of the northern Danelaw: jewellery and ornaments, bullion, imported coinage, and locally-produced coinage. Taken as a group, these varied contents contain clues about political and economic boundaries in northern England during the 10th century, and raise questions not only about the uses of the items prior to their burial, but also challenge pre-existing ideas about power centres, communication routes and settlement patterns for this period. Larger hoards such as the Cuerdale and the Vale of York may have combined items that were brought together in burial to preserve different forms of wealth against a perceived threat; or, moving beyond obvious economic reasons for burying wealth, may have fulfilled social functions such as ritual offerings and conspicuous consumption.

Turbulent beginnings

But what of the world to which the objects in the Huxley Hoard belonged? In order to begin to speculate about the possible reasons why the hoard was buried, it is necessary to look at the circumstances of the time. The Scandinavian settlement of this region has long inspired scholarly

study, including the most recent investigations linking the DNA of modern Wirral residents to their forbears (CA 245); however, evidence is scant and the history must be pieced together through interdisciplinary research including archaeology, art history, place-name evidence and comparisons with better-documented areas such as North East England, Ireland and Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde line. The area rarely appears in texts from the Viking Age (though the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the main source of information for this period, does record the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in AD 793) and archaeological evidence has been patchy. It has long been accepted the Vikings settled in North West England after their expulsion from Dublin in AD 902, when much of the population dispersed to various places. The coastline of the north-west would obviously have been an attractive destination, far from established centres of political authority.

During the last decade of the 8th century (traditionally accepted as the beginning of the Viking Age in Britain), North West England was divided between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia. During the 860s, these kingdoms were devastated by the Vikings, whose army gained control of York in 876 and then carved up the former kingdom of Northumbria. In 874, Mercia suffered a similar fate. The later 9th and early 10th centuries saw a steep rise in the strategic significance of the Dee and Mersey basin, which appears to have begun in AD 893–894 when a group of Danes, recently defeated by Alfred's forces at Buttington (Montgomeryshire) overwintered in what the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* called 'a deserted city called Chester'. ▶



The early-to-mid 10th century of the North West is characterised by the power struggles of Edward the Elder of Wessex; the ambitions of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs who were looking north towards the remnants of Northumbrian and British-ruled areas of Cumbria and northern Lancashire; and the machinations of the Mercian and West Saxon rulers who were expanding their own power into the vacuum left by the collapse of Northumbria. Clusters of Viking settlements sat uneasily on the outer margins, and there is no doubt that bands of Vikings, some armed and some merely seeking to turn a profit, were moving around and settling in the North West at this time.

Recent research has argued convincingly that a group of the Dublin exiles settled on the River Ribble, and thus can be associated with the Cuerdale Hoard, buried on its banks between AD 905-910. Much of that bullion came from Ireland, though it also contained freshly minted coins from York. What does this mean for the Huxley Hoard? It is difficult to securely date coinless hoards; however, it is entirely possible that the cache of arm-rings in the Huxley Hoard was part of the war chest of the Vikings who had been driven out of Dublin.

Was the Huxley hoard banked in the earth for retrieval or buried at a time of crisis? This may perhaps be answered by its suggested burial in the early 10th century, a period of great political and social upheaval in North West England. At this time, the Ribble Valley was an important Viking route between the Irish Sea and York; an important detail, given that the hoards often seem to be placed along communication routes – although it

Much of the bullion came from Ireland, though it also contained freshly minted coins from York.

is possible that individual hoards (or groups of hoards) might represent more localised accumulation of wealth and power. It is hard to say which is the case with Huxley.

What is certain is that, together with Chester and Eccleston, Huxley forms a concentrated group of hoards in the area in and around Chester, at just the period when the borough of Chester was developing its importance, having only a few years before been no more than a 'deserted Roman fort'. This could reflect Chester's growing importance as a power centre, with the Huxley Hoard representing local rather than transient wealth. Equally, it is possible that the hoard and development of Chester reflect the importance of this area as a gateway between the Irish Sea and the northern Danelaw.

At the core of these questions is the importance of trade – not only in Chester, but elsewhere in the North West region during the Viking Age. Coins and bullion provide central clues, as do parallels with archaeological material to the west and north. As more is discovered, such as the graves at Cumwhitton (CA 204), the settlement site at Llanbeddroch in Wales, and the recent hoards, the picture of this region grows ever clearer, and a more coherent story of Viking settlement around the rim of the Irish Sea emerges. Future research is clearly on track to fill in the gaps of our knowledge of this fascinating and turbulent period. [@](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION ↗

Reap and Tillage Exhibition Until 9 January 2011, Grosvenor Museum, 27 Grosvenor Street, Chester, CH1 2DD Tel: 01244 402033, grosvenormuseum@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

