

Viking hoards



Buried wealth of the Norse North West

The discovery of two Viking hoards in 2011 yielded silver coins, ingots, and jewellery. **Dot Boughton, Gareth Williams, and Barry Ager** reveal how they also provide a window into a turbulent time.

The Viking legacy in north-west England is mixed. Although there are many Norse place names in the region, material remains from this part of the Danelaw are far less plentiful. This made the 2011 discovery of two spectacular silver hoards dating to the period of Viking settlement especially important. These hoards offer a rare glimpse of early Medieval activity in the North West, and are the first substantial Viking relics to be recovered from there since the Cumwhitton burials in Cumbria in 2004 (see CA 204).

Found near Furness and Silverdale, both hoards reflect the Viking predilection for storing wealth as silver, and contained coins, complete artefacts, and hacked-up fragments used as bullion.



PHOTO: D. S. EARL

ABOVE The area in which the Silverdale Hoard was found, from the air. As well as Morecambe Bay, Lancaster and Carnforth are visible.

LEFT The impressive haul of Viking silverwork found near Silverdale by metal-detectorist Darren Webster in September 2011.



Antiquities Scheme, a project dedicated to encouraging members of the public to report archaeological material. The Furness Hoard was unearthed on Easter Sunday and promptly reported. Although the finder was a relatively recent convert to the hobby, he was acquainted with a more experienced local detectorist who regularly records finds with the Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) for Lancashire and Cumbria, Dot Boughton. As the nature of the hoard meant that it came under the Treasure Act, the FLO explained the legal process to the finder and informed the local coroner on his behalf.

The next hoard was found by local detectorist Darren Webster near Silverdale, North Lancashire, nearly six months later. Although it was the second to be discovered, it had been buried first, around half a century earlier than the Furness cache. It was also far larger. The detectorist had been working with the FLO for some time, and had previously witnessed Treasure finds being reported and processed. Immediately identifying his discovery as potential Treasure, he reported the hoard less than 24 hours after its discovery.

Although both discoveries were reported almost immediately, it is regrettable that neither finder called out the FLO at the actual time of discovery. An exact archaeological record of how the objects had been placed in the ground would have been invaluable. In neither case, however, was the significance of the find immediately apparent. The finders were asked to describe or write up the exact position of the objects as they had found them. Aided by these, funding from the British Museum (via the Portable Antiquities Scheme), the CBA (North West Region), and the Research Grant Committee of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society have permitted the investigation of both find-spots, although work on the Furness site is still under way. ➔

Together these emphasise the vast range of Norse trading links, with the settlers who buried these precious-metal caches able to amass material from as far as Russia and the Islamic world. The hoards also provide an insight into life closer to home, and one Silverdale coin even preserves the name of a previously unknown Northumbrian king who failed to survive long enough to make it into the history books. Yet despite their similarities, the two hoards were buried 50 years apart, spanning a tumultuous period in northern England.

Treasure retrieved

Both hoards were discovered by metal-detectorists. The successful recording of these finds represents the most impressive success in 2011 for the Portable



ABOVE The 'nest' of arm rings. These were pressed together, probably for burial.

TOP RIGHT A range of European and Islamic issues make up the coins in the Silverdale Hoard.

BELOW This coin records a previously unknown king called Harthacnut. One side spells out 'AIRDECONUT' in what appears to be an attempt to render this Scandinavian name. The other arranges the letters *DNS REX* as a cross.

Silverdale's silver

The first glimpse of the Silverdale Hoard was less than promising. Digging down to find the source of the signal registered by his machine, the finder struck what appeared to be a 'lump of lead'. Cleaning quickly revealed this was a simple container that had been placed upside down in the earth. It was only when he lifted it from the ground that the true importance of the find became apparent. Noticing silver objects poking out of the upturned vessel, the detectorist turned it over and was greeted with the sight of a container crammed with small silver objects.

He took the container home, and then returned to the site to check whether he had missed any further silver fragments or coins. Instead, he found five complete silver arm-rings, three of them set inside each other like Russian dolls. These had been placed in the ground first, with the lead container then positioned on top of them. After discovering the arm-rings the finder made a final sweep before informing the

farmer and landowner, and reporting the find as potential Treasure.

The contents of the hoard are impressive. In total 201 silver artefacts were concealed within or under the lead container. These included 27 coins, 10 complete arm-rings of various Viking-period types, 2 finger-rings, and 14 ingots, as well as 6 bossed brooch fragments, a fine wire chain, and 141 fragments of chopped-up arm-rings and ingots, collectively known as 'hack-silver'. Thanks to the protection of the lead container they are still in excellent condition, despite the passing of over ten centuries.

The coins are a mixture of Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Viking, Frankish, and Islamic types, including coins of Alfred the Great (871-899) and his godson, the Viking leader Guthrum. He went on to become king of East Anglia after assuming the baptismal name of Athelstan. Coins from Viking Northumbria, issued c.900, are also present. Among these is one with the name Alwaldus, a type attributed to Alfred's nephew Æthelwold, who tried unsuccessfully to claim Alfred's kingdom after his death, and subsequently fled to the Vikings in Northumbria. Here he was accepted as a king, before being killed a few years later.

A previously unrecorded coin type is of particular interest. This appears to reveal the name of an otherwise unknown and presumably short-lived Viking ruler in northern England. One side of the coin renders the letters *DNS (Dominus) REX* in the form of a cross, reflecting the successful conversion of many Viking settlers to Christianity. The other side carries the enigmatic inscription:





PHOTO: JIMMY WATSON

AIRDECONUT. This is presumably an attempt to represent the Scandinavian name Harthacnut. The coin design has strong parallels to those of the kings Siefredus and Cnut, who ruled the Viking kingdom of Northumbria around AD 900. This suggests a similar date for the reign of the ill-fated Harthacnut.

The mixture of coin origins is typical of Viking hoards in Britain and Ireland dating to the end of the 9th and beginning of the 10th centuries. One unusual inclusion is a plated forgery of a Frankish silver denier. Objects in Viking hoards often show tell-tale signs of testing to establish the purity of their precious metal. As a result it is rare to find forgeries in hoards, presumably because they were weeded out by the testing processes.

ABOVE The view from Silverdale across Morecambe Bay, traditionally seen as a landing ground for Vikings travelling from the Isle of Man of Ireland.

TOP Pieces of 'hack-silver'. Used as bullion, these pieces are brooch fragments of mainly Irish type.

The arm-rings and fragmentary brooches broadly match known Viking-period jewellery found in the Irish Sea region and Scandinavia around the late 9th and earlier part of the 10th century, at a time when Norse settlers were attempting to establish trading centres and farmsteads in Ireland, northern and eastern England, and in the north and north-west of Scotland.

Some of the arm-rings are very finely decorated with elaborate punch-work, and one of them has ornate and highly unusual animal-head terminals. Although the types are Scandinavian in origin, they reflect regional artistic influences from areas where the Vikings settled, such as Dublin. Further study of the distinctive punched stamp designs may establish whether some objects were made in the same workshop. The brooches are of Irish manufacture, adopted by the Vikings as cloak fasteners. One fragment of rod with a distinctive twisted appearance was cut from an arm-ring, known as a Permian ring, manufactured in central or northern Russia. Such objects were most likely obtained by the Vikings through trade with, or as tribute from, the Finno-Ugrian inhabitants of the region.

In order to learn as much as possible about the hoard site, Minerva Heritage Ltd (Lancaster) were contracted to undertake a trial excavation. Both the landowner and tenant readily gave permission, and the finder was invited to join the dig. The backfill created during the discovery of the hoard was removed from the find-spot hole in half-section. This established that the cut made when the hoard was originally deposited had been entirely removed.

The remaining finder's backfill was then dug out. This produced a small quantity of post-Medieval pottery from the topsoil, a tiny quantity of burnt bone, and two metal items: one piece of lead and an unidentified iron object. It seems very likely that the lead was part of the slightly damaged rim of the container. X-radiography of the iron object at the British Museum revealed only a corroded, undiagnostic lump that has no demonstrable association with the hoard.

The Furness Hoard

Unlike the Silverdale Hoard, the Furness finds were not discovered as a single cache of artefacts. Instead the objects were spread over an area of approximately one square metre. The field was not under plough, and the finder reported that the individual finds were heavily caked in ➤



ABOVE The finely decorated animal-head terminals on the outer of the three arm-rings forming a 'nest'. Although the arm-ring is of a Scandinavian type, the animal heads display Irish influence.

INSET A punch-decorated arm-ring that appears to have been made to match a specific Viking unit of weight.

BELOW The view down into Silverdale.

mud. The first find was a silver coin. Not being able to put an exact date on it, the detectorist continued searching in the same area. There were more scattered signals, but it was only after excavating them and examining them at home that he realised many of the coins were so similar they must have been buried together.

The field in which he had been detecting is littered with huge boulders (left over from the Ice Age). These obstacles determined its modern use as pasture and make it unlikely that it was routinely ploughed in the past. It is also possible that the boulder under which the hoard was buried was deliberately selected to serve as a memorable marker stone.

Buried around half a century after the Silverdale Hoard, and significantly smaller, the



Furness find contained a number of interesting objects. These consisted of 13 silver fragments, including arm-ring fragments, ingots, and 79 silver coins. Two of the silver pieces fit together to make a complete ring.

The non-numismatic items in the hoard are either characteristic Viking forms or show typically Viking secondary treatment in the form of hacking them into bullion, or test marks to establish quality. They have close parallels with Viking finds from northern England, Scotland, and around the Irish Sea. The coins are predominantly Anglo-Saxon pennies, with a smaller number of Anglo-Viking pennies, including rare issues of Olaf Guthfrithsson (939-941), Olaf Sihtricsson (second reign 948-952), and Eric Haraldson (second reign 952-954), and two Islamic dirhams. This mixture is again typically Viking, as is the combination of coinage and non-numismatic silver in a single hoard. There is no reason to doubt that all of the objects derive from a single cache.

Wealth of knowledge

The artefacts and coins in both hoards bear witness to diverse cultural contacts and a wide Viking trading network, extending from Ireland in the west to central or northern Russia and the Islamic world in the east. The hack-silver and arm-rings served as a form of currency in a bullion economy. This perspective further reinforces the picture gained by study of the finds from the 2007 Vale of York Hoard, which contained over 600 coins and a range of other items, including ornaments and ingots, from numerous countries.

The careful burial of the Silverdale Hoard suggests an intention to keep everything safely together until it was possible for the owner to recover it. For whatever reason, perhaps as the result of death in battle or a voyage overseas, they never did return.





ABOVE The dispersed group of coins at Furness, which alerted the finder that he was dealing with a hoard.

INSET Ingots and arming fragments from the Furness Hoard. The two curved fragments (top left) fit together to form a complete ring.

Probably the most significant connection to emerge from a preliminary examination of the Silverdale finds is the similarity shown by a number of the objects to pieces from the famous Viking silver hoard found in 1840 at Cuerdale, Lancashire, and containing over 8,600 objects. This can be dated to c.AD 905-910 on the basis of the combination of coins. The Silverdale Hoard contains many of the same issues, and was apparently buried at much the same time, or possibly slightly earlier. At present, an approximate date of c.900-910 seems secure.

The Silverdale Hoard was thus buried at a time when the Anglo-Saxons were attempting to wrest control of the north of the country from the Vikings, who had made York the capital of their Kingdom of Northumbria. But the very sparseness of documentary evidence relating to the north-west of England at that time means that discoveries such as the hoard are of vital importance for understanding the early history of the area. All this new evidence sheds increasing light on the region and its material culture during a period of social, military, and political upheaval.

Several comparable Viking hoards have been recorded from 10th-century England, typically dating from the first three decades of the century, around or before the unification of England under Athelstan in AD 927. By contrast, although a few of the coins (and perhaps some of the non-numismatic objects) in the Furness Hoard date from the early 10th century, both the Anglo-Saxon and

Anglo-Viking coins show a concentration in the 940s and 950s, reflecting in part the resurgence of Viking power in northern England at this time, culminating in the death of Eirik Haraldsson (normally identified with Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway) in 954. However, the presence of a significant number of coins from the end of the reign of Eadred (946-955), and from the reign of Eadwig (955-959), combined with the absence of any coins of his younger brother Eadgar (957/959-975), suggests a deposition date of c.955-957, after the Viking resurgence had been suppressed.

Such a late date is unusual for a Viking hoard from northern England, but western Cumbria still lay beyond the borders of the emerging kingdom of England at this time. The hoard shows similarities with Viking hoards of the same period from Scotland, Ireland, and the Isle of Man, reflecting the proximity of the Furness area to the economic area of the Irish Sea, as well as the strong evidence for Viking settlement across the North West in the form of place-names, sculpture, and other hoards. Within the relatively loosely controlled bullion economy of this region, such material may have circulated longer without being refreshed by more recent coins than would have been possible within the kingdom of England itself. Deposition anywhere within the period 955-c.965 seems plausible, although it is more likely that the hoard was deposited towards the earlier end of this period. By then, Viking fortunes in the North West had changed forever. @

SOURCE

Dot Boughton is Finds Liaison Officer for Lancashire and Cumbria, Gareth Williams is Curator of Early Medieval Coinage at the British Museum, and Barry Ager is Curator of Continental Early Medieval Collection at the British Museum.

Both of these hoards will be studied in more detail as part of a major reassessment of Viking hoards in England, to be published by the British Museum in 2013.