

The Viking-Age Silver Hoard(s) from Dunrossness, Shetland

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THERE has for long existed some confusion as to the number of Viking-age silver hoards found in Shetland during the nineteenth century (cf. Graham-Campbell 1993, 176-7). That is to say: was it one hoard or two? Or maybe even three? Of the putative three hoards, there is only one that can be accepted without question. This was discovered in November 1830, while 'digging for stones in some Corn land called the Tofts', near Garthbanks, 'a little way south of the House of Quendale in the Parish of Dunrossness, in the Mainland of Zetland'. This is as recorded in the official declaration made by the finders to Andrew Duncan, the Sheriff Substitute of Zetland, on 7 December 1830 (Graham-Campbell 1995, 101), a copy of which is preserved in the manuscript collections of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Antiquaries MS Communications, vol. VI, 1829-32).

On the other hand, the proposed hoard which was known as 'Shetland, 1821', by Michael Dolley (1966, no. 130), has been demonstrated to be the invention of C.R. Beard, in his book entitled *The Romance of Treasure Trove* (1933, 85). Beard's belief in the existence of such a Viking-age hoard from Shetland arose from a footnote added (in press) by Sir Walter Scott to the second edition of his novel, *The Pirate*, published in 1831 (Scott 1831; Graham-Campbell 1976, 128-9, note iv).¹ This concerns the (then recent) discovery of a silver hoard, 'near the Fitful Head', which had been drawn to his attention by Lord Meadowbank (Alexander Maconochie), in a letter dated 18 January 1831 (National Library of Scotland, MS 3916, ff.62-3). Beard assumed, mistakenly, that Scott had carried over this reference (which is, of course, to the above-mentioned (1830) Quendale hoard) from the first

1 The use made by Walter Scott of the historical/archaeological information gathered by himself during his one (and only) visit to Shetland, in 1814, has been admirably described and discussed by Marinell Ash (1984) – including, of course, his invention of the name 'Jarlshof' (see also now, Wawn 1996).

edition of *The Pirate*, published in 1821 – with the result that Dolley was led into listing this supposed ‘Shetland, 1821’ hoard, without there being any independent ‘evidence’ for it ever having existed (Graham-Campbell 1976, 128; 1995, 101).

In order to deal with the problems surrounding the existence – or otherwise – of the third proposed hoard, that currently known as ‘Dunrossness (Skelberry), pre-1844’ (Graham-Campbell 1995, 103, no. 16), it is necessary to return to such details as are known concerning the contents of the Quendale hoard itself (*ibid.*, 100-1, no. 11, pl. 5).

The documentary evidence concerning the Quendale (Garthbanks) hoard is threefold: (i) the formal declaration made by the finders to the Sheriff Substitute (Andrew Duncan), in Lerwick, within a week or two of its discovery (as already cited); (ii) the letter from Lord Meadowbank (who was the Sheriff’s brother) to Scott (as also mentioned above), together with his communication to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, which included a copy of (i); and (iii) a letter from the Lord Treasurer’s Remembrancer (Robert Montgomery), from the Exchequer Chambers in Edinburgh (dated 7 April 1831), to the Procurator Fiscal in Lerwick (James Grieg) requesting that the hoard might be ‘transmitted to this office for the disposal of the Barons’ (Shetland Archives: D.6/9/9).

The initial declaration (i) establishes that the finders:

came upon the remains of an old wall which apparently had been part of a dwelling House at some period or other;² where they found ... a decayed Neat’s horn which upon examination appeared to have been wrapped up in a piece of coarse Cloth with a yellow thread round it, upon the removal of which the horn crumbled to pieces, when its Contents which had consisted of some small and very thin old Coins much wasted with some bits of uncoined silver, all sticking together in a mass with rust, was discovered.

But, in addition:

on the outside of the Horn, there were Six or Seven metal Hoops, which [were] immediately discovered to be silver formed of Small

2 Nothing is known today as to the exact location of these building remains, concerning which Joseph Anderson added nothing in his first published mention of the hoard (1874, 584-5); however, as Brian Smith informs me (pers. com.), the area ‘was cleared in the early 1870s to provide a sheepfarm for the proprietor’, so that ‘no-one has lived there for 140 years making any oral account of the district almost impossible’. Chris Dyer (Shetland Amenity Trust) has kindly confirmed that there is ‘nothing helpful’ in the SMR (pers. com.).

square bars bent to the shape of the Horn till the two points met within about a thumbbreadth.

It was also declared that 'the Hoops and the other uncoined Silver' had been sold 'in Lerwick, for three pounds Sterling, and the few Coins were given away or disposed of for mere trifles'.

It is thus not surprising that the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer seems to have requested the surrender of the hoard in vain (in April 1831), given that a good three months had elapsed since its discovery the previous year. It has, however, been suggested that he was the source of the six extant coins now in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow (Robertson 1961, xii), which are of Eadwig, Edgar and Æthelred II.³ It is perhaps more likely that their ultimate source was the minister of Dunrossness who appears to have been in possession of the best selection. The local minister in 1830 was David Thomson (1759-1841), a native of Auchtermuchty, who had started at Dunrossness in 1828. His contribution on Dunrossness to the *New Statistical Account* (in June 1841) suggests that he had no antiquarian interests, which might well provide the explanation for his apparent early disposal of this local treasure.

Andrew Duncan had, however, taken impressions of 'many of the coins' (according to Lord Meadowbank's letter to Scott), 'in Sealing wax by permission of the present possessor of the originals, the minister of this parish' (as stated in the Declaration). These must have been forwarded by him to the Sheriff, together with 'two or three' actual coin fragments; he presumably then passed them on to Lord Meadowbank, who in turn presented them to the Antiquaries, although they are long lost (Stevenson 1966, ix and xix). On the other hand, the Declaration states that:

the Coins appear to be chiefly of the reigns of 'Ethered', 'Athelstan', 'Edwg', 'Eadgar', and 'Ethelred'. One or two are said to belong to the period of the Heptarchy ...

On the basis of this report and the few surviving coins, Michael Metcalf (in Graham-Campbell 1995, 23) has estimated the probable date of deposition of the Quendale hoard to have been within the period c.991-1000.

Duncan also attached to his report 'a rude drawing representing the size and form of the hoops or rings that were said to have been round the

3 Metcalf (in Graham-Campbell 1995, 23) comments that: 'Six now in Glasgow are of Eadwig (1), Eadgar (4, all north-eastern), and Æthelred's Crux type (York). Once again the survival of pre-reform coins in Scotland is attested.'

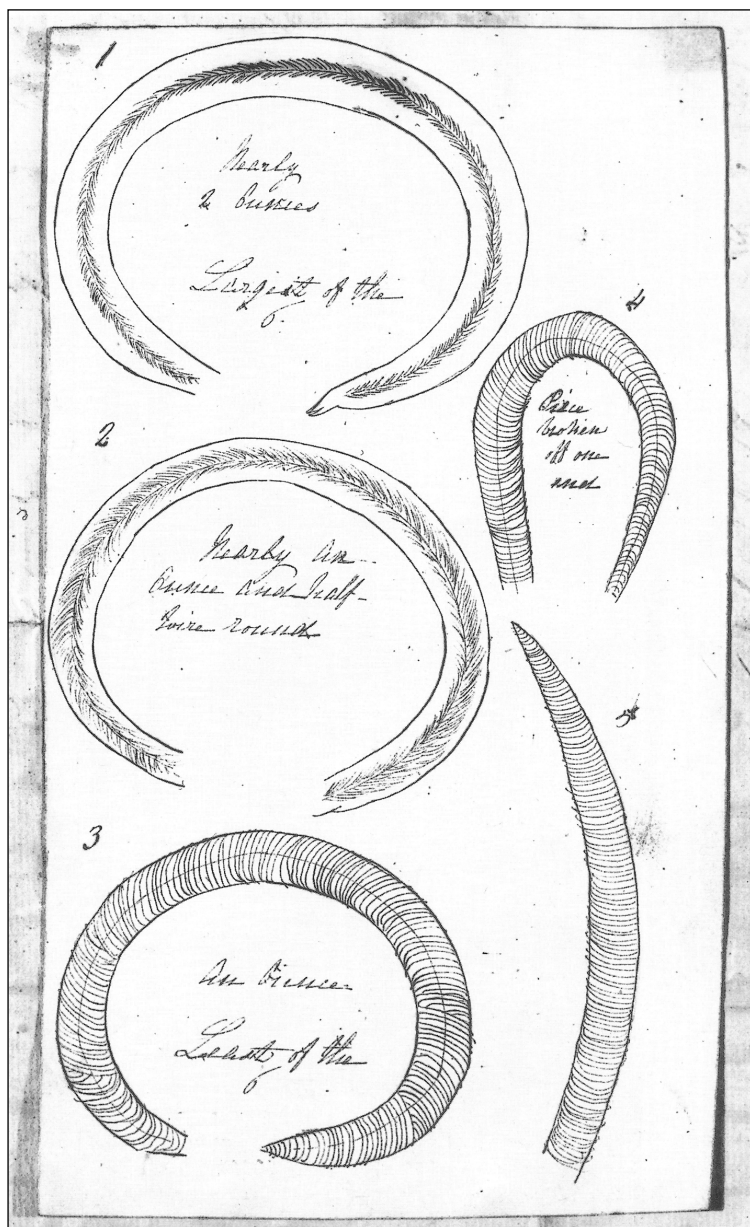


Figure 1. Andrew Duncan's drawings of three penannular arm-rings and two fragments from Dunrossness (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland).

outside of the horn' which fortunately survives (Figure 1) because it also formed part of Lord Meadowbank's presentation to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. These examples of complete silver penannular arm-rings (six, or possibly seven, in total), together with (many?) more than two fragments of hack-silver, represent the type of simple 'ring-money' well known from Scandinavian Scotland during the tenth/eleventh centuries which requires no further discussion here (cf. Kruse 1993; Graham-Campbell 1995, 57-9).

Steffen Stumann Hansen has recently published, in two separate papers (2007, 438-9; 2009, 178), the contents of a letter written on 31 August 1843 by Christian Pløyen (the then Danish 'Governor' of the Faroe Islands) to accompany a small collection of Shetland artefacts being shipped to Carl Christian Rafn (as Secretary of the Society of Northern Antiquaries), for presentation to the Museum of Antiquities in Copenhagen. The first paragraph concerns 'one stone axe, found on Mainland Shetland', but the second is that of immediate relevance (in Stumann Hansen's translation):

2. one small coin, found in the parish of Dunrossness; from the same site derive an ancient horn, halves and quarters of coins of similar type, as well as a number of fragmented silver-armlets.⁴ I have seen fragments of the armlets in Shetland but was not able to purchase them ...

Both of these objects were stored by Mr William Bain, a ship-agent in Lerwick, for the purpose to include them in relevant Danish museums.⁵ Mr Bain has a nice small collection of Shetland antiquities ...

4 Although Stumann Hansen states in his (2009) paper, on 'A Shetland Viking comb in Copenhagen', that 'no attention has so far been paid to' this bone fragment, it does in fact feature in his paper written in honour of Barbara Crawford (2007, 439, illus. 58); however, the Dunrossness coin receives no discussion in either of these two papers, on the grounds that it 'has been widely dealt with in archaeological literature' (2009, 178). Unfortunately, this 'archaeological literature' is not cited so that readers will not necessarily be aware of the on-going debate concerning its context, which was in fact highlighted by myself in the same issue of *Proc Soc Antiq Scotland* 138 (2008), 194.

5 All too little is known about William Bain's 'nice small collection of Shetland antiquities', except for the fact that it appears to have constituted the 'Lerwick museum', mentioned a couple of times in the mid-19th century (and for the last time in 1846); however, references to Bain 'cease abruptly in the mid-1840s, which might mean that he left Shetland (Brian Smith and Tommy Watt, pers. com.)' (Stumann Hansen 2007, 439, note 18), when presumably his collection would either have been removed with him, or dispersed.

Pløyen's visit to Shetland had taken place a few years earlier, in 1839. The coin in question was registered in the Royal Coin Cabinet in Copenhagen in 1844, although it was to remain unpublished until over 130 years later (Dolley and Skaare 1973). It is a triquetra penny of Harald Hardrada of Norway (from the period c.1055-65), which, according to the *Gave-Protocol*, had been found 'på Shetlandsøerne i Dunrossness Præstegaard, i Forbindelse med flere lignende og adskillige ituhugne Sølvarmbaand' (*ibid.*, 222). That is: 'on the Shetland Islands in the glebe of Dunrossness parish, together with many similar and several cut-up silver arm-rings' (Graham-Campbell 1995, 103). The problem is that the manse and glebe for Dunrossness is at Skelberry, which is located about three kilometres to the north-east of Quendale/Garthbanks.

Pløyen's letter seems to indicate that he believed the coin, amongst the antiquities which he was forwarding to Copenhagen, was derived from what is now known as the Quendale (Garthbanks) hoard, about which we know that he had seen some for himself, in 1839, although not apparently any of the coins. Indeed, one may well wonder whether, by then, any of the Quendale (1830) coins were still 'in circulation' in Shetland, let alone five years later. On the other hand, it is possible that Pløyen simply jumped to a conclusion, on the basis of this knowledge, with his 'information' then being incorporated into the *Gave-Protocol*. It would certainly seem to have been the case that the coin itself was accompanied by the further information, presumably from William Bain, that it had been found 'i Dunrossness Præstegaard'. It is thus presumably the case that Bain had acquired the coin from the then minister of Dunrossness, John Charteris (1792-1858), who had succeeded Thomson in 1841.

In the context of 'cultural' – rather than 'living' – memory,⁶ it is important to recall the testimony of the late Tom Henderson (1911-82), as told to Olwyn Owen (Graham-Campbell 1995, 103), that:

these two postulated hoards were one and the same find; he himself came from Dunrossness, as did Gilbert Goudie [1843-1918], who, Henderson believed would have known about it had there been two separate hoards [cf. Goudie 1904].

In the light of the accumulated evidence, including the information contained in Pløyen's newly-published letter, it is now proposed that there

6 Following the terminology utilised by Prof. John Hunter in his paper on 'Fishing and folk memory', delivered on the occasion of the Society's AGM, in Edinburgh, on 28 November 2009.

was only one Viking-age hoard found in the parish of Dunrossness during the first half of the nineteenth century: the mixed 'Quendale (Garthbanks), 1830' hoard, deposited c.1000.

There exists no convincing evidence that the Norwegian coin (in Copenhagen), with a Skelberry provenance (found in or before 1843), derives from the Quendale hoard – or, for that matter, any other hoard. Indeed, given that the coin in question could not have been lost, or deposited (if having formed part of a hoard), any earlier than c.1060, it seems altogether improbable that it derives from the earlier (1830) hoard. There is therefore every reason to endorse the suggestion, made by Gareth Williams (as communicated in Graham-Campbell 2009, 194; cf. Williams 2006, 166-7; 2007, 203) that the Skelberry coin is best regarded as a single find, particularly given that a definite stray coin of Harald Hadrada is on record from elsewhere in Scandinavian Scotland – that excavated at The Udal, North Uist (Dolley and Skaare 1973; Bateson in Graham-Campbell 1995, 87, no. 21; see also now, Williams 2006).⁷

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Brian Smith for much helpful information concerning people and places in Shetland; he is likewise of the opinion that 'no-one could possibly have referred to Garthbanks as any sort of part of Dunrossness *præstegaard*' (pers. com.). Gareth Williams has kindly approved (pers. com.) my endorsement of his suggestion that 'the Skelberry coin is best regarded as a single find' and is 'completely' in agreement with my statement that 'it is altogether improbable that the coin derives from Quendale (Garthbanks)'.

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7 In which case, the suggestion recently made by Jørgen Steen Jensen (2004, 87-91) that 'three early medieval Norwegian coins in the trays of The Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, in Copenhagen, might also have had origins in this [Skelberry] hoard' (Graham-Campbell 2005, 129) cannot be substantiated from the available evidence.

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