The Silver Hoards of Viking-Age Scotland: The Power of 'ring-money'

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THE Viking-age silver of Scotland is a widely-discussed topic which continues to divide scholars on the extent of Scotland's economic wealth during its period of Norse occupancy. Some have argued that Scotland was an important emporium, linking Dublin with the market centres of Norway. Others have played down the region's involvement in trading, pointing to its failure to produce a national coinage as a sign of a less sophisticated, and lagging, economy. The uncertainty derives, in part, from the ephemeral nature of the material itself; inevitably much of the silver has been lost, melted down, or is still hidden and, therefore, gives an incomplete picture of Scotland's actual silver stock. There has also been, in recent years, an increased interest in economic anthropology which has challenged previously-held assumptions about how economies worked and, importantly, this field has highlighted the social functions of ostensibly monetary objects. Too often the social dimension is neglected in favour of what these objects can tell us about trade and commerce and, yet, there appears to be a more explicitly social function intended for some of these items than is generally supposed. In many ways the following discussion stems from a wider appeal made by Märit Gaimster to better understand the non-monetary, socio-political role of precious metal in the Medieval period.[1]

The focus of this paper is the enigmatic 'ring-money' of Viking-age Scotland. There are over ninety complete examples of these plain, pennanular arm-rings from Scandinavian contexts in Scotland, dated to between the ninth and eleventh centuries (although they predominate the late tenth and early eleventh centuries).[2] Outside of northern and western Scotland 'ring-money'

1 Märit Gaimster, 'Scandinavian Gold Bracteates in Britain. Money and Media in the Dark Ages', *Medieval Archaeology*, 36 (1992-3), 1-28.

2 James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking-Age Gold and Silver of Scotland (AD 800-1100)* (Edinburgh, 1995); all subsequent references to individual hoards are from this edition unless stated otherwise.

is extremely rare, so that it appears to be a highly regionalised, perhaps even culturally specific, phenomenon. Scholars have tended to argue that 'ring-money' circulated as a form of active currency and, therefore, had monetary value. Seen in this light, the 'ring-money' has been used as evidence to support the claim that Viking-age Scotland was thoroughly engaged in a successful bullion economy. Others have cautioned against this, but have still given relatively little attention to its importance within a socio-political context. What is of interest in this discussion is an item which has, for the most part, only been considered as a means of payment analogous to coin. I would argue, however, that an important ideological dimension is being overlooked in such an assessment, as well as a misunderstanding of the wider role of coinage during the Viking Age. There are firm reasons for believing that 'ring-money' fulfilled a predominantly socio-political requirement, integral to the power base established by the Norse in the Scottish Isles. Relevant to this argument is a (re)consideration of theories pertaining to the practice of gift-exchange and their significance to society in Viking-age Scotland. It is by adopting an ideological approach to the function of 'ring-money' that this paper will attempt to provide a fuller understanding of how precious metals were used in the mediation of social-political power in this region. Before examining the theoretical material it is necessary to outline the grounds on which it has been argued that 'ring-money' approximated a kind of 'money' at all.

The analysis of hoard structure has been used to interpret the ways in which silver and other precious metals most likely functioned. The importance of hoard composition has been advocated by Birgitta Hårdh, who argues that hoards containing hack-silver and fragmented coins are indicative of a society's advancement towards a fully-monetised economy, because they reveal that smaller units of exchange were needed for transactions.[3] Several of the hoards containing 'ring-money' also contain large quantities of hack-silver; the Skaill and Burray hoards on Orkney are notable examples. Consequently, this has reinforced the notion that 'ring-money' was used as bullion for day-to-day transactions, based on its occurrence alongside hack-silver and other fragmented items. However, while there is evidence of fragmented 'ring-money' which might have served a more monetary purpose, it is important to note that 'ring-money' does appear in its complete form. There are also finds where 'ring-money' alone has been found, or 'ring-money' and other ornamental arm-ring pieces. Although small in number, these finds do point towards a context in which 'ring-money' had its own independent value that

3 Birgitta Hårdh, *Silver in the Viking Age: A Regional-Economic Study*, Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, xxv (Stockholm, 1996), p. 86.

was not necessarily tied up in a monetary economy. Clearly, it is crucial that we study items in isolation as well as part of an assemblage.

Analysis of 'ring-money' has produced a body of evidence which, some have argued, clearly suggests that 'ring-money' had a standardised weight to facilitate its use as a currency with nominal value. Richard Warner's study of the weight deviation between examples of 'ring-money' indicated that these objects might have been produced to a target weight equivalent to that of the Norwegian *øre*.[4] It was based on this analysis that Barbara Crawford claimed that the 'ring-money' acted as a "state currency" which was used almost exclusively among the Norse in Scotland.[5] However, Warner did draw attention to the degree of standard-deviation found in the 'ring-money' which made his conclusions, at best, only tentative speculations. On the one hand, this could simply indicate that accuracy was not considered important in this particular silver economy; indeed, even in predominantly coin-using economies the coinage was not necessarily tightly regulated.[6] On the other hand, the weight discrepancies point towards a use outside of the bullion economy where the social implications of these items took precedence over any monetary value they might have. Indeed, Susan E. Kruse has been critical of Crawford's claim that 'ring-money' represented an independent, local currency, describing her argument as 'overly elaborate'.[7] I, too, would be inclined to question Crawford's interpretation of the 'ring-money'. To my mind, there are sufficiently high deviations between the weights of these items to argue that there was no attempt being made to standardise the 'ring-money' at all and that its primary use was reserved for socio-political contexts.

It is not so much that Crawford's model is overly elaborate – the ideologies I am about to propose are equally complex – but, rather, the 'ring-money' more readily reflects socio-political intentions than it does monetary usage. Firstly, as Williams has pointed out, complete examples of 'ring-money' are very heavy indeed and were probably unsuitable for everyday trade.[8] Secondly

4 Richard Warner, 'Scottish Silver Arm-Rings: An Analysis of Weights', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 107 (1975-6), 136-143.

5 Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), pp. 128-134.

6 Gareth Williams, 'Kingship, Christianity and Coinage: Monetary and Political Perspectives on Silver Economy in the Viking Age', in *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams (California, 2007), pp. 177-214, (p. 181).

7 Susan E. Kruse, 'Silver Storage and Circulation in Viking-Age Scotland: The Evidence of the Silver Ingots', in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. by Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 187-203.

8 Gareth Williams, 'Land Assessment and the Silver Economy of Norse Scotland', in *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, ed. by Gareth Williams and Paul Bibire (Leiden, 2004), pp. 65-104 (p. 79).

and more importantly, I think, is a very obvious quality of the 'ring-money' itself: the ringed shape. This characteristic was (and continues to be) highly symbolic and no doubt communicated an important social message between giver and receiver. What this social message was and why it is invested in such objects has been explored by the eminent Marcel Mauss, who made a most important contribution to the understanding of gift-bestowal and exchange in primitive, tribal communities.[9] While we may question the apparent ease with which he applies his theories to ancient Scandinavian practices, his work is still vital to understanding the ideology behind gift-exchange and is a relevant starting point for this study. Crucial to his theory is the idea that while gift exchange appears to be 'voluntary' it is, in fact, 'obligatory'. In other words, an act of giving by one party demands an act of reciprocity by the other. The giving of a gift, according to Mauss, initially places the recipient in a position subordinate to that of the giver. Until the receiver reciprocates that gift in some way, his position is inferior. Therefore, gift-exchange was fundamental to the negotiation and consolidation of power because the gift-item imposed an obligation. Moreover, the image of the 'ring' was a visually powerful symbol of that on-going commitment to reciprocate.

In light of the power relationships that gift-giving could dictate, 'ring-money' might have played a role in the levying of mercenary forces by the earls and chieftains who held sway in Scotland. This view has been put forward by James Barrett, although he reduces the activity to an act of payment where the 'ring-money' behaves like Crawford's 'state currency'.[10] Mauss's theory demands that the 'ring-money' was seen as more than just 'payment'. The 'ring-money' was given to those in the service of the earls and was, at once, a symbolic reminder of the obligation and loyalty a warrior owed to his retainer, as well as a valuable item in itself. The dateable 'ring-money' certainly coincides with the zenith of power achieved by the earls of Orkney according to *Orkneyinga saga*, when we might expect their mercenary activity to be greatest.[11] However, based on Gareth William's observation that the 'ring-money' was unsuitable for day-to-day trade, we might also argue that it would have been unsuitable for widespread distribution to war-bands also, at least in its complete form. It seems more likely that 'ring-money' was

9 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Gift Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by W. D. Halls (London, 2002).

10 James Barrett, 'The Pirate Fishermen: The Political Economy of a Medieval Maritime Society', in *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300*, ed. by Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams (Leiden, 2007), pp. 299-340, (p. 318).

11 *Orkneyinga saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth, 1981).

bestowed upon the foremost figures in society, although we could still be missing a considerable body of material which might otherwise indicate more widespread use. What is interesting is that Barrett equates the capacity to levy a war or plundering party with economic wealth, so that if 'ring-money' was involved in the recruitment process it also became a symbol of that potential wealth, as well as a tool for pledging allegiance.

So far it has been suggested that 'ring-money' was used in the negotiation of power structures, placing its recipient in a position subordinate to the giver and ensuring that a service was rendered. The recipient was compelled to give something in return, but for how long might the 'ring-money' impose this obligation on him? And, could the 'ring-money' be kept indefinitely, or was it meant to come back to its former owner? These questions must inevitably lead to a consideration of why these items were hoarded and then buried, and whether this reveals anything about how they functioned socially. Hoarding is a practice that we know very little about and there are numerous theories as to why it might have been done. The reasons for hoarding may even have varied regionally, as well as chronologically. While hoarded material is redundant from a monetary point of view, socially and politically it could still be active. As Mauss has remarked:

> What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him.[12]

There is, then, the sense that the object embodies the success and power of its owner and that these attributes become intrinsic characteristics of the item. A. Ya. Gurevich took this concept further in his paper which concentrated specifically on gift-bestowal among the ancient Scandinavians.[13] Gurevich suggested that, once hoarded, such items became a kind of 'transcendent treasure' which encompass the prosperity and success of their owner that is required for the 'next world' after death, but also acting as a procurement for the success of that owner's living kin. According to Gurevich the hoards were not designed to be recovered again; 'No reference to such a practice exists in either the sagas or runic inscriptions'.[14]

The use of saga evidence here is interesting if, ultimately, problematic. Gurevich uses the material rather uncritically, ignoring the danger of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literary ideals in favour of assuming that the sagas'

12 Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 15.

13 A. Ya. Gurevich, 'Wealth and Gift-Bestowal among the Ancient Scandinavians', *Scandinavica*, 7. 2 (1968), 126-138.

14 Gurevich, 'Wealth and Gift-Bestowal', 132.

silence on this matter reflects historical fact. The amount of silver discovered in Scotland is really very little when compared to the rest of the British Isles, but the sagas have always given the general impression of unprecedented silver wealth among their elite. What is apparent in the sagas and in verse is that well-placed generosity was a favoured characteristic and that the *hringr* ('ring') was emblematic of those who displayed this quality. A skaldic verse in praise of Earl Þorfinn of Orkney, by Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, reminds us of this:

> Ein vas sús Engla minnir
> egghríð né mun síðan,
> hefr við helming, meiri,
> hringdrífr komit þingat;
> bitu sverð, en þar þurðu,
> þunngǫr fyr Mǫn sunnan
> Rǫgnvalds kind, und randir
> ramlig folk, ens gamla.[15]

There are many ways of expressing 'ring-giver' in skaldic poetry; *hringdrífr*, as seen here, is just one of many expressions. The term should not, perhaps, always be taken literally. It is probably more frequently used to mean 'generous' in a wider sense, rather than describing a specific act of ring-giving. Nevertheless, the imagery of the ring is ubiquitous and it is quite likely that the earls did invoke this symbolism through the gifting of rings. The literature's silence on hoarding and hoard recovery does not mean that the practice did not exist. It might have been a given that precious items were always buried for safe keeping and intended for retrieval later; the act of doing so was simply an unremarkable part of the process and seen as an unnecessary digression in the plot. Perhaps saga writers felt it detracted from the splendour and munificence of gift-bestowal.

A different theory of hoarding is offered by Ross Samson who has taken the circularity of Mauss's theory – whereby gift-bestowal incites the recipient to outdo the giver with the bestowal of more elaborate gifts – to argue that Viking-age hoards are indicative of a 'cycle of competitive gift-giving' between the elite members of society and that the hoard is 'part of the procedure of assembling wealth to be gifted'.[16] In this case the hoards *were* intended to be recovered at some stage. Again, the 'ring-money' fits in with this idea of

15 Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa*, 16, ed. by Diana Whaley, <http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?table=verses&id=1609> [accessed online 27 February, 2008].

16 Ross Samson, 'Fighting with Silver: Rethinking Trading, Raiding, and Hoarding', in *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. by Ross Samson (Glasgow, 1991), pp. 123-133 (p. 131).

perpetual exchange and commitment. Further to Samson's interpretation of hoards, it is worth noting that the sites on which hoards containing 'ring-money' are often found near to pre-existing landmarks like the enigmatic brochs, natural features such as lochs, and other prominent undulations in the ground. This suggests that the location needed to be remembered. Although the hoards themselves are invisible, it is possible that they were very much visible to the geographical memory of the owners or, in fact, anyone who was familiar with the topography of the area. The extent to which people during this period interacted with the landscape and assigned meaning to its features will probably never be fully realised. In the case of hoards the find contexts are often so poorly recorded, or not recorded at all, that we will never be able to fully explore their relationship to the landscape and what this might signify. However, there is a strong possibility that the 'ring-money' was not to be forgotten, but made easily retrievable. Perhaps their geographic location was even designed to be recognised by other people, as a sign of the amassed wealth and status of a particular member of society. This last comment fits well with Samson's theory of 'competitive gift-giving', but there is a further body of evidence which also lends support to the argument that 'ring-money' functioned as part of the 'status' economy within a socially elite milieu.

Place-name studies are often cited as the most important source of information for our understanding of Norse influence in Scotland, even though this field is fraught with its own difficulties. Of relevance to this study is the recent argument put forward by James Graham-Campbell and Berit Sandnes that topographical place-names are indicative of primary Norse settlements sites, rather than the habitative place-names which, although explicitly referring to settlement, were probably secondary sites that were coined later.[17] There are several hoards found where place-names contain the topographical generics *–dalr* and *–ness*; Caldale, Dibadale, Stronness all contain 'ring-money'. And, of course, there is the uncompounded topographical generic *skaill*, the site of the largest and most impressive of the silver hoards in Scotland. If the arguments of Sandnes and Graham-Campbell hold, then the hoard evidence studied here could indicate the position of 'ring-money' as high-status social media which came into the hands of important and well-established families in the Isles. It is important to remember that 'ring-money' was not static, but we are only ever likely to know of its final resting place where it was last

17 James Graham-Campbell, 'Some Reflections on the Distribution of Norse Place-Names in Northern Scotland', in *Names Through the Looking-Glass: Festschrift in Honour of Gillian Fellows-Jensen, July 5th 2006*, ed. by Peder Gammeltoft and Bent Jørgensen (Copenhagen, 2006), pp. 53-84; Berit Sandnes, 'Toponyms as Settlement Names – of No Relevance in Settlement History?', in ibid., pp. 230-253.

buried. This is still significant for a consideration of the contexts in which 'ring-money' was used. If these were, indeed, primary settlement sites, then the 'ring-money' found there may well indicate the seat of power of a prestigious family or chieftain.

The use of place-names in relation to hoard evidence is an area worthy of further, detailed investigation which goes beyond the scope of the present discussion. In a field where our contextual understanding of the material is so incomplete, the incorporation of evidence other than that of the sagas should be encouraged, even if it only confirms our existing convictions. Further archaeological evidence of settlement sites can also support the arguments put forward above. Jarlshof, Shetland, is the site of a single-find of 'ring-money' hidden in a tenth-century drain. Excavations at Jarlshof have revealed what appears to be the farmstead of a single extended family which was established in the ninth century and continually rebuilt well into the late Viking Age and beyond.[18] The long survival of this site attests to its success as a dwelling place and we can assume that it probably belonged to a family of some standing; the 'ring-money' is an unequivocal, albeit concealed, sign of that procured wealth.

Of course, it would be misguided to view 'ring-money', or any precious metal for that matter, as having only social value, dispelling the notion that trade ever existed in the Viking Age (unfortunately, this is the upshot of Samson's argument). Clearly, 'competitive gift-giving' existed as part of the 'status' economy, but that did not prevent these items from being used as bullion elsewhere. It is not the intention of this paper to dismiss the possible monetary use of 'ring-money' completely. For example, there is evidence of pecking on some of the 'ring-money'. Pecking was done to assess the quality of the silver and, hence, its value. Metallurgical analysis has shown some 'ring-money' to contain higher silver content than others, although it is still difficult to argue whether this was done to facilitate its use in trade or its suitability as a high-value status item. The Skaill hoard, for example, has a higher silver content than the 'ring-money' belonging to the Burray Hoard, but it has been suggested that the Skaill hoard was the amassed wealth of a powerful family due to the presence of high-quality jewellery items, whereas the Burray hoard belonged to a merchant for use in trade on account of its less ornate content.[19] That said, it has been observed that there was a general

18 Anna Ritchie, 'Great Sites', *British Archaeology*, 69 (March 2003) <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/BA/ba69/feat3.shtml> [accessed online 9th April, 2008].

19 N. White and J. Tate, 'Non-dispersive XRF analysis of Viking Silver from Orkney', in *Proceedings of the 22nd Symposium on Archaeometry, Bradford, 30th March – 30th April 1982*, ed. by A. Aspinall and S. E. Warren (Bradford, 1983), pp. 245-253.

degradation of silver into the eleventh century and the Burray hoard is later in date (c. 997-1010) than Skaill (c. 950-70), perhaps reflecting nothing more than declining quality of silver stocks. More fascinating and problematic still, was the discovery of 'ring-money' at Whithorn. The examples found here were shown to be 'contemporary fakes' made from base metal with a silver coating.[20] The fact that attempts were made to imitate this item suggests that 'ring-money' must have had considerable value within the economy of tenth- and eleventh-century Scotland, at least considerable enough that some would actively try to abuse it. This presents the strong possibility that 'ring-money' did have potential purchasing power.

However, evidence so far has revealed that 'ring-money' was prolific in the Scottish Isles, but less prevalent elsewhere. Was it really a regional phenomenon that was only recognised in specific contexts? Although there are some examples from Ireland and a significant number on the Isle of Man which might point to an Irish sea-region of commercial and political activity, the question remains as to why Ireland and the Isle of Man quickly began minting their own coinage alongside this other media, while Scotland chose to continue down what John Sheehan describes as the '"ring-money" cul-de-sac'.[21] The suggestion put forward by Sheehan is that the adoption of coin enabled better economic performance and was necessitated by the emergence of large market towns which engaged in overseas trade. However, coinage was not necessarily motivated by economic factors alone; it could have a strong social, rather than monetary, function. Gareth Williams has convincingly argued that coinage in England and the northwest continent was driven, in part, by the desire to emulate the Romanised Christian kingship of south-western Europe.[22] Situated on the northern fringes of the mainland, peripheral to trends happening further south, the political climate in Scotland was somewhat different. Williams points to two influential differences: firstly, Christianity was rather loosely accepted and not formally made state policy until 1048 under Earl Þorfinnr, therefore it was not considered vital that the rulers of this region were seen as Christians; secondly, the Scottish Isles constituted an earldom, not a kingship, and 'the production of coinage with

20 James Graham-Campbell, 'The Viking-Age Gold and Silver of the North Atlantic Region', in *Viking and Norse in the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Viking Congress, Tórshavn, 19th-30th July 2001* ed. by Andras Mortensen and Símun V. Arge (Faroe Islands, 2005), pp. 125-140 (p. 126).

21 John Sheehan, 'Viking-age Hoards in Scotland and Ireland: Regional Diversities', in *Viking and Norse in the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Viking Congress, Tórshavn, 19th-30th July 2001*, ed. by Andras Mortensen and Símun V. Arge (Faroe Islands, 2005), pp. 323-327 (p. 327).

22 Williams, 'Kingship, Christianity and Coinage', p. 206.

rare exceptions... was seen as a royal prerogative'.[23] It would seem that, during the tenth and eleventh centuries, Viking-age Scotland was not ignorant of coinage, but simply had no need for it in a region which maintained alternative power structures.

James Barrett has attempted a definition of 'ring-money' as '*coinage without a king*'.[24] This is a satisfactory assessment provided it is understood that coinage also moved freely between bullion and 'status' economies and that no sharp distinction can easily be made between items with purely monetary purposes for trade and items with purely social purposes for displaying status; silver was a multifunctional media which transcended both spheres. This is surely due to its amorphous nature: its capacity to be cut up, melted down and transformed into something else. The social importance of 'ring-money' derived from the very nature of political rule in Viking-age Scotland which was concerned with the lordship over small clusters of people on island and coastal areas, as opposed to lordship over large swathes of heavily populated territory where coinage was widely distributed. This is why 'ring-money' was such a powerful social tool for the consolidation of allegiances across the Isles, especially between the plethora of ethnic identities emerging in this region: Scandinavians from Norway and Iceland, Irish-Gaels, Scots-Gaels, Hiberno-Norse, Orcadians even. The basis of power was forged through displays of gift-bestowal and procured wealth which, it would seem, enabled the chieftains and earls to enjoy considerable influence in the region without having to mint their own coinage. As Kruse states,

> [I]t can be argued that silver never had a great influence on the local economy in the Viking-Age. This is not to say that it was not valued or had a potential for purchase. However, this is more likely to have been on an *ad hoc* basis and for external goods, rather than as an element in an established local trading system.[25]

Kruse's argument makes clear why a consideration of the *social* function of silver is so important and why the 'ring-money' should not be perceived as an inferior type of monetary unit. Such a conclusion is to misunderstand the fluidity with which all precious metal could move between the bullion economy and the 'status' economy. It also neglects the unique power of 'ring-money' by only discussing it as part of an assemblage of other silver items like hack-silver. It was the intention of this paper to show how 'ring-

23 Williams, 'Kingship, Christianity and Coinage', p. 205.
24 Barrett, 'The Pirate Fishermen', p. 318.
25 Kruse, 'Silver Storage', p. 199.

money' satisfied a special niche in the socio-political climate of Viking-age Scotland, where the influential figures implemented a recognisable symbol of loyalty and obligation to secure their position of power. It is hoped that the theoretical material facilitated an understanding of how social relationships can be invested in such objects. At the same time it has been demonstrated that the ring could, literally, melt into the silver stock of a trader and acquire another value entirely. In many ways 'ring-money' encapsulates the nature of the silver economy in the Viking Age: the cyclical movement from one economy into the next.

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