SILVER ECONOMY IN THE VIKING AGE
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Gareth Williams has been Curator of Early Medieval Coinage at the British Museum since 1996. His research interests are focussed on the history and archaeology of early medieval Britain and Scandinavia, and particularly on interdisciplinary approaches to the study of coinage in its broader context.
Preface

During April to August 2000, a temporary exhibition was mounted at the British Museum by Dr Gareth Williams (Department of Coins and Medals), entitled ‘Paid in Burnt Silver: Wealth and Power in the Viking Age’, with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy, through their ‘Visions of Norway’ programme. The two of us considered that this important event provided an appropriate occasion for the British Museum and the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, to organise a joint symposium on the subject of the economic uses of Viking silver, to be co-sponsored by the Department of Coins and Medals (BM) and the Complex Societies Research Group (IoA). Some 40 international specialists, comprising archaeologists, historians and numismatists, were invited to participate, with 12 papers planned for delivery on the theme of ‘Silver Economy in the Viking Age’. In the event, Svein Gullbekk, who was to have spoken on ‘Monetary Development and State Formation in 11th-century Scandinavia’ was unfortunately unable to be present, and a paper on ‘Coinage, Kingship and State Formation in the Late Viking Age’, by Gareth Williams, was substituted in its place. As the organisers, we would like to record our appreciation of those colleagues who shared, together with James Graham-Campbell, the responsibility for chairing the six sessions: Barry Ager, Marion Archibald and Leslie Webster, all of the British Museum.

The Symposium was held at the Institute of Archaeology, on 26–27 May 2000, and we are grateful to then Director, Professor Peter Ucko, for having enabled this most stimulating event to have been held there, with the support of the Institute’s Research Committee. We would also like to express our gratitude to the British Academy for their generous support for the symposium through a Conference Grant. At the same time, it is a pleasure to thank both the then Director of the British Museum, Dr Robert Anderson, and the then Keeper of Coins and Medals, Dr Andrew Burnett, for having invited participants to a private view of the exhibition, on our first evening, and last, but very far from least, Dr Per Sörbom and the Royal Swedish Embassy for having sponsored the reception in the Gallery that helped make this a particularly memorable occasion.

Ten of the 12 papers delivered during the symposium are published here in edited form, although we have not sought to impose absolute uniformity of style on our speakers, who in any case represent seven different nationalities, so as to retain something of a sense of the occasion, which included much lively but good-natured discussion. As both organisers and editors, we allowed ourselves, then and now, the last word(s) and so there are, indeed, 12 papers in this volume.

After discussion with the editors, it was agreed that the important paper delivered by James Barrett, on ‘Wealth, Power and Trade in Scandinavian Scotland’, would be held over for expansion and publication by him elsewhere. Mark Blackburn’s paper on ‘The Monetary Economy in the Danelaw under Scandinavian Control, 880–927’ overlapped heavily with two other papers already promised for publication elsewhere, so with the agreement of the editors he has chosen instead to expand here on one aspect of his symposium paper, which he has developed into a new and broader paper on ‘Gold in England during the “Age of Silver” (Eighth–Eleventh Centuries)’. Similarly, the paper by Gareth Williams on ‘Coinage, Kingship and State Formation in the Late Viking Age’ does
not appear in the form that it was presented at the symposium, but the theme of that paper is one of those explored in his editorial overview paper in this volume, which also includes a more detailed exploration of the themes presented in the ‘Paid in Burnt Silver’ exhibition. The paper by Marion Archibald, on ‘The Evidence of Pecking on Coins from the Cuerdale Hoard’, is published here only in a summary version, being work in progress for her contribution to the catalogue of The Cuerdale Hoard and related Viking-Age Gold and Silver from Britain and Ireland, in the British Museum, in preparation by James Graham-Campbell.

As the co-editors of these proceedings, we are most grateful to the Publications Committee of the Institute of Archaeology for having readily agreed to take this volume under their wing, recommending it in due course for publication by UCL Press, and to both the Viking Society for Northern Research and the Dorothea Coke Memorial Fund, University of Cambridge, for grants to help defray its printing costs. Finally, we would both like to express our gratitude to all the contributors for their patience during the not inconsiderable delay of the appearance of their papers in print (especially after impatient demands on our part for submission in one or two cases!); in other words, we appreciate their understanding that we have both found ourselves, in our different ways, undergoing unexpected and demanding challenges during the past two or three years.

30 April 2005

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Emeritus Professor of Medieval Archaeology
University College London

Gareth Williams
Curator of Early Medieval Coinage
British Museum

This book in its current form (as described by us above) was intended for publication in late 2005. Unexpected difficulties during the production phase and changes in the ownership of UCL Press have led to a delay of a year in its publication. To avoid the possibility of any additional delay, the editorial decision was taken not to allow contributors the opportunity of further revising their texts, so that any failure to address issues raised in very recent publications is thus our own responsibility and not that of individual contributors. We would like to express again our gratitude to them for their patience and forbearance, and to Mitch Allen and colleagues at Left Coast Press Inc. for having seen the volume through its final stages into print.

8 November 2006

JG-C and GW
List of Abbreviations

Antiq J  Antiquaries Journal
ASSAH  Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History
BAR  British Archaeological Reports
BCDA  *Bulletin de la Commission départementale des Antiquités de la Seine-Inférieure/Seine-Maritime*
BCEN  *Bulletin du Cercle d'études numismatiques*
BM  British Museum, London
BnF  Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
BNJ  *British Numismatic Journal*
BSFN  *Bulletin de la Société française de numismatique*
CBA  Council for British Archaeology
CH  ‘Coin Hoards’ (published in *NC*)
CNS  Corpus Nummorum Saeculorum IX–XI
EHR  *Economic History Review*
FM  Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
GDR  ‘Gratia Dei Rex’ coinage of Charles the Bald
IMNHA SP  *Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society Proceedings*
JRSAI  Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland
MDA  Musée départemental des Antiquités de la Seine-Maritime, Rouen
Med Arch  Medieval Archaeology
N Munster Antiq J  North Munster Antiquarian Journal
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Numismatic Chronicle</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCirc</td>
<td>Spink's Numismatic Circular</td>
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<td>NH</td>
<td>Northern History</td>
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<td>NMI</td>
<td>National Museum of Ireland, Dublin</td>
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<td>NNUM</td>
<td>Nordisk Numismatisk Unions Medlemsblad</td>
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<td>NNÁ</td>
<td>Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Poey d'Avant, F (1858–62), <em>Monnaies féodales de France</em>, 3 vols, Paris</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNM</td>
<td>Publications of the National Museum [of Denmark]</td>
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<td>PRIA</td>
<td>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSAS</td>
<td>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland</td>
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<tr>
<td>RBN</td>
<td>Revue belge de numismatique</td>
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<td>RN</td>
<td>Revue numismatique</td>
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<tr>
<td>RNS</td>
<td>Royal Numismatic Society</td>
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<td>SCBI</td>
<td>Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles</td>
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<td>TRHS</td>
<td>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</td>
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Regions Around the North Sea With a Monetised Economy in the Pre-Viking and Viking Ages

D M Metcalf

The circular letter calling for papers for our symposium spoke of the transition from the gift/status economies of the pre-Viking Age to the monetised ‘nation states’ which were emerging by the end of the Viking Age. This view of the English Viking Age being, in my opinion, seriously out of touch with current research, I felt some doubts whether I could make any useful contribution to the occasion, but I wrote to ask Dr Gareth Williams whether a paper that might be thought controversial would be acceptable. He replied with exemplary serenity, ‘… by all means be as controversial as you like … the whole point of a symposium like this is for people to share their ideas with others, whether or not everyone agrees in the end. Certainly it often makes for a more interesting debate when people argue (constructively!) with each other’s opinions.’ Encouraged by this wise response, I should like to try to set out as clearly and accurately as possible the framework of the argument, as I see it, which says that in the pre-Viking-Age parts of England, and also other regions across the North Sea, had already developed an intensive money economy comparable with that which they enjoyed in the eleventh century. Between the two there was a monetary downturn in southern England, and similarly on the Continent. Pirenne could see the monetary upturn which followed, and mistook it for the beginnings of monetisation in north-western Europe. He was unable to see the preceding downturn, and therefore failed to do justice to the character of the economy in the early middle ages. Tenth-century numismatics, which tends to be difficult, has been intensively and very ably studied by a group of scholars of whom Christopher Blunt was the doyen. Tenth-century monetary history, which is another kettle of fish altogether, requires to be set into a wide context if the perspectives are to be accurately drawn. Between the eighth century and the eleventh, much of the economic infrastructure in southern England fell on hard times; wics and proto-towns were replaced by a new urban network. There is a considerable but scattered literature on monetary history, and the general historian may well be grateful for an overview. What he or she is most likely to need is a sense of how the arguments mesh together.

It is well enough known that in eighth-century England the degree of monetisation varied regionally, being much greater in the south-east and the east, and thinning out westwards to such an extent that the south-western peninsula, the whole of Wales and the north-west, let alone the Pennine region and Cumbria, were relatively coinless. The east-west
gradient was evidently generated by trade across the English Channel and around the coasts of the North Sea (Metcalf 1989, 267–274). It is to some extent a perennial pattern in English monetary history throughout the early middle ages and indeed into the high middle ages. It does not correlate closely with regional prosperity, as we may judge from the Domesday Survey (Darby 1979, 200). Rich farming landscapes, for example in Herefordshire or Shropshire or in Somerset, have yielded extremely few stray finds of coins compared with Kent or East Anglia, a discrepancy by a factor of 10 or 20, whether it is viewed per capita or per acre. Similarly, the gradient does not correlate closely with political power. Mercia became a major player in the progressive consolidation of smaller tribal groupings, as the Tribal Hidage reveals (Hart 1977, 43–61), largely without the benefit of a money economy, and it was able eventually to gain the upper hand over the kingdom of the East Angles (Dumville 1989, 123–140) in spite of the greater monetary wealth of that kingdom. It is a similar story south of the Thames: the early primacy of east Kent (which surely reflects its locational advantages) is challenged by Wessex, in spite of the much later and weaker monetisation of the West Saxon kingdom.

What emerges as a conclusion clearly enough from all this is that monetisation in the pre-Viking Age was significantly linked with long-distance or inter-regional trade. Wics were the nodal points of the trade-routes: the wics of the Wantsum Channel; Ipswich; Lundenwic, Eoforwic, Hamwic. And the English wics are part of a larger picture, of trade around the North Sea coastlands, with Dorestad as the dominant centre, and again with some regions strongly monetised and others, such as north-eastern France and Belgium, much less so (Op den Velde, De Boone and Pol 1984, 117–145). The relative intensity of monetary exchanges in the hinterland of each wic seems to have varied, for reasons that are not clear. One might have supposed that the prosperity of the wic arose from the trade passing through it. But it seems that monetary exchanges may to some extent, and to a variable extent, have been concentrated in the wics, rather than evenly spread through the hinterland area which supported the urban economy: for example, farmers brought their cattle to market and, although they may have taken their money home again, it was in the marketplace that there was the greatest risk of accidentally losing a coin. Thus, Ribe, in Jutland, was a wic full of money (we can all, I hope, agree on that), yet finds of sceattas anywhere east of Ribe are exceedingly few, and not for want of searching.

The concentration of money in wics could also have been partly because that was where wealth was generated – not just the value-added wealth of traders who lived in the towns, but that produced by craft industries – comb-making at Ribe (Bendixen 1981, 200), glass-making at Hamwic (Andrews 1997, 216–218) and so on. Specialised production tends to require cash payments rather than barter.

When all is said and done, however, the wics are coastal: they are essentially ports prospering through maritime trade, and unless they were eking out a livelihood by taking in each others’ washing, that implies that a wic was functionally linked to its hinterland.

There is a problem of method, in that our impressions of the degree of monetisation tend to be based on the relative numbers of stray losses from this region and that. Although the chances of coins being accidentally lost are most likely to have been in direct proportion to the number of occasions on which they changed hands (rather than, for example, the size of the accumulated currency in a region), there are so many other unknown variables that the conclusion may be deemed unsafe, unless the margins of difference are very substantial. Different styles of husbandry, different settlement patterns, coins of different purchasing power – each may have had a significant effect on the
statistics. Again, ratios of stray finds may not equate with ratios of stray losses for the purposes of the exercise, because of differences in the intensity of metal-detector searches or of archaeological excavations, or even of techniques of excavation. The uncertainties can to some extent be discounted, but it is well to remember that comparisons between regions based simply on global numbers of stray finds should be treated with caution. The east-west gradient of which we spoke is so pronounced and so widely evidenced that its significance is unlikely to be compromised by methodological uncertainties. The paucity of detector finds of eighth-century coins in westerly regions, for example, can be confirmed if one takes into account the relatively large numbers of Roman and other coins found by detectorists in those same regions. It is worth underlining that this paucity in the west is relative. It does not mean that coinage was virtually unknown there. At Bidford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, for example, a detectorist who has searched the area year in year out for 14 years, finding one or two sceattas a year, had at the last count pushed the total to 29 sceattas from this one village.

Having established the broad, regional perspectives, one can turn to the local topography, to marshal another argument, based on the contexts of the find-spots. There are now over 650 localities on record from which in total more than 2,360 single-finds of thrymsas and sceattas have been recorded in England (see the map, Figure 1.1) – far more than for eleventh-century coins (Metcalf 1998, 249–271). As regards the alleged gift/status economy of the pre-Viking Age, need I say more, really? Of the 650 localities, some include several separate sites within the boundaries of the same parish. The point to be seized is that the great majority of these 650+ localities (necessarily) are just villages, with nothing special about them. There is no visible correlation with royal manors, or with minster churches. There is no concentration of finds from royal centres such as Winchester or Tamworth (both well excavated). Coins have not been found in proximity to Offa’s Dyke. Sceattas were being lost predominantly in the course of ordinary village life, and, one must suppose, by ordinary people – everyday farming folk.

The acid test, general historians might be inclined to suppose, of whether coins were in widespread use for everyday purposes would be if they were ordinarily handled by women. A capitulary of Charles the Bald issued at Quierzy in 861, while specifying penalties for refusing good coin, goes on to exempt women from this provision, on the grounds that it is well known that they are accustomed to bargain before agreeing a price and making a purchase (Grierson 1990, 64). Legal documents rarely record such mundane details, which have the charm of immediacy. But one may well ask which is the better evidence, the anecdotal from which it may or may not be safe to generalise, or the more comprehensive review of a range of archaeological evidence.

If the latter is open, as a whole, to some residual doubt because of the unknown variables referred to above, there are, fortunately, some aspects of the evidence of stray finds which are much more secure. When coins from different mint-places, but of the same date and the same face value, mingled freely in circulation, they will arguably have been lost at random in respect of their mint-place, and the composition of the finds from a site should provide excellent evidence of the proportions, in the currency of that place, of the respective kinds and, by extension, of the relative scale of inter-regional transfers. In other words we are on much safer ground if we rely on within-sample variation. Thus, for example, the sharp contrast between the eighth-century finds from York (including its southern suburbium of Fishergate) and from Whitby (Rigold and Metcalf 1984, 245–268) respectively raises intriguing problems of interpretation. Another example: the relative