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Ireland's Viking Age Hoards:
Sources and Contacts

John Sheehan

Introduction

The first recorded Viking raids on Ireland took place in 795 and over the following forty years or so many sporadic attacks occurred. By the early 840s the Vikings had begun to establish permanent raiding bases or *longphuirt* along the coastal and inland waterways, the most important of which was located at Dublin. A rather violent period followed, characterised by large-scale attacks, during which the Vikings may have been attempting to conquer territories for settlement. The Irish kings contained the threat, however, and thereafter 9th-century Scandinavian settlement seems to have been confined to a small number of coastal bases and their hinterlands. Several of these seem to have become active as trading centres as well as functioning as raiding bases, and the wealth accumulated in them may well have been very substantial. Much of the 40 kg of silver in the Cuerdale hoard, from Lancashire, for instance, appears to have been accumulated in the late 9th-century Dublin *longphort.*

From the mid-point of the 9th century onwards the Scandinavians became increasingly integrated into the world of Irish politics. They frequently served as military allies for Irish kings, for instance, in their internal power struggles. By the early decades of the 10th century, however, they may have come to realise that they could not conquer and settle territories in Ireland in the same manner as they had in large parts of England and Scotland. Consequently, they may have decided to adopt an alternative strategy of colonising Ireland economically. To this end they founded a number of trading towns, including Dublin, Limerick and Cork. Over time these were to become accepted elements within the framework of local kingdoms which formed the political structure of Early Medieval Ireland. The new towns became prosperous centres which developed important political and economic interests, both within Ireland and abroad. During the 10th century, for instance, Dublin was heavily involved in the political affairs of the Irish Sea region as well as developing into a commercial centre of international importance.

That the nature of Scandinavian activity in Ireland during the Viking Age was distinctive was due in no small measure to the fact that the political, social and economic conditions which the Vikings encountered there differed in several respects to those pertaining elsewhere in the West and the North Atlantic region. The foundation of towns – unknown, for instance, in Scandinavian Scotland – formed one such unique response to Irish conditions, while the establishment of a commercially orientated economy constituted another. Given the nature of this economy it is not surprising that silver, which was used throughout the Viking world as the principal means of exchange, has been found in large amounts in Ireland. Neither is it surprising that the silver-working tradition which was developed there by the Hiberno-Scandinavians became the dominant one of the Viking West.

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The purpose of this paper is three-fold: firstly, to provide a brief and very general account of Viking Age silver hoards from Ireland; secondly, to consider the question of the source of the silver represented in these hoards; and, thirdly, to focus attention on the influence exerted by the silver-working traditions of the southern Scandinavian and Baltic regions on that developed in Ireland by the Hiberno-Scandinavians.

Hoards in Ireland

During the Viking Age it was only in the late Anglo-Saxon economy of Viking Age England that silver circulated for commercial purposes solely in the form of coin. Elsewhere, as in Ireland, it also circulated by weight and was thus acceptable in alternative forms. Consequently silver hoards of Scandinavian or Hiberno-Scandinavian character from Ireland may be composed of coins or of a combination of ingots, ornaments and hack-silver (the cut-up fragments of ingots or ornaments), with or without coins. Over one hundred and thirty silver hoards of general Scandinavian or Hiberno-Scandinavian character have been found there, representing a concentration of wealth unequalled in the West and, indeed, rarely surpassed elsewhere in the Viking World. It should be noted, however, that the Viking Age in Ireland is generally considered to have extended down to as late as 1170, when Dublin was captured by the invading Anglo-Normans. Nonetheless, when one considers only the 9th and 10th century finds, the total of over a hundred hoards which may be safely attributed to this period is still exceptional by any standards.

Ireland's Viking Age silver hoards, like those of the Scandinavian homelands, may be divided into three categories: coinless hoards, mixed hoards and coin hoards. Coinless hoards consist exclusively of non-numismatic material and range in composition from complete ornaments and/or ingots to hack-silver. About half of Ireland's 9th and 10th century hoards fall into this category, and a high proportion of these consist wholly or largely of Hiberno-Scandinavian ornaments. Well-known examples of finds of this type include those from Cushalogurt, Co. Mayo (Hall 1973, 78-85) and from near Raphoe, Co. Donegal (Graham-Campbell 1988, 102-111). The object type that dominates the coinless hoard is the broad-band armring (Fig. 1), the Hiberno-Scandinavian silver artefact type *par excellence,* the date range of which indicates that the majority of these hoards are assignable to the century between c. 850 and c. 950.

In Ireland, coinless hoards may be divided into three sub-groups on the basis of their form and structure (Sheehan 2000). The first constitutes the typical Irish Viking Age coinless hoard, accounting for practically half of the total number. Hoards in this sub-group contain neither ingots nor hack-silver, being composed exclusively of complete ornaments; in most cases these ornaments are of Hiberno-Scandinavian type and vary in number from two to four examples. The second sub-group consists of hoards which contain ingots, with or without ornaments, but no hack-silver. This type is relatively uncommon, representing only sixteen per cent of the total number of coinless hoards. The third sub-group, accounting for thirty-six per cent of the total, is characterised by the presence of hack-silver (whether derived from ingots or ornaments) and most examples also contain ingots. A classic example of this type of hoard is that from Carraig Aille, Co. Limerick, which contains one complete ring, three ring fragments, two ingots and an ingot fragment.

Mixed hoards consist of non-numismatic silver combined with coins. Some sixteen of Ireland's Viking Age hoards are of this type, fifteen of which were deposited during the 10th century, and most of these contain ingots or ingot-derived hack-silver in addition to coins and, occasionally, ornament-derived hack-silver. Three, including that from Co. Antrim (Fig. 2), date to the opening decade of the 10th century and share the characteristic of containing hack-silver derived from or-

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Fig. 1. Selection of Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band armrings from Ireland (courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

naments of Hiberno-Scandinavian type. The most remarkable of these three, however, is that from Dysart Island, Co. Westmeath, which was deposited c. 907 and consists of eighty-five ingots and ingot fragments as well as twenty-nine pieces of cut ornaments (M. Ryan et al 1984, 339-356). As with the other mixed hoards from Ireland this find has particular implications for the dating of the coinless hoards but, in addition, it is the only hoard known to contain highly fragmented hack-silver derived from a wide variety of ornament types.

Hoards consisting exclusively of coins represent an insignificant element, in bullion terms, of the overall silver wealth of the Viking Age in Ireland. While over sixty examples are on record most of these are rather small in size (M. Kenny 1987, 518). The majority was deposited after c. 940 and the type of issues found in them are predominately Anglo-Saxon. However, Arabic coins, as well as those issued by the Viking Northumbrian and East Anglian rulers, are also represented, while Hiberno-Norse issues dominate the composition of the 11th-century hoards.

A number of interesting patterns reveal themselves when the distribution of Ireland's Viking Age silver hoards is plotted (Fig. 3). The distribution of the coinless hoards is fairly evenly spread, but with a pronounced concentration in the central midlands, while the distributions of the mixed and coin hoards are focused on the midlands and the east coast. Given that most of the hoards were deposited in areas of the country that were not controlled or settled by the Scandinavians, and on the basis of other evidence, it may be concluded that a very considerable amount of silver wealth ended up in native Irish ownership. The means by which the Irish acquired this wealth are not obvious, though it seems likely that these hoards evidence trade – as well as processes of tribute and gift-exchange – between the Scandinavians and the Irish.

The progression of the Viking Age silver economy in Ireland may be gauged by noting the changing structure of its hoards. There appears to be a steady transformation from the late 9th- and early 10th-century bullion economy, with its coinless hoards, to one in which imported coins begin to be conserved and retained – presumably for commercial purposes. This transition is represented by the mixed hoards, with their coins, ingots and hack-silver, and it is tempting to associate it with the foundation of the Scandinavian towns during the opening decades of the 10th century. From the mid-point of this century onwards, however, the coinless and mixed hoards decline strongly in significance while the coin hoards rise to the fore. By the beginning of the 11th century the transformation from the bullion economy is completed, fol-

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Fig. 2. Mixed hoard, with hack-silver, provenanced to 'Co. Antrim.' Photograph reproduced courtesy the Trustees of National Museums Northern Ireland.

lowing the establishment of the Hiberno-Norse mint in Dublin in c. 997.

The predominantly 10th-and 11th-century range of deposition dates for the coin hoards does not reflect the period during which the Scandinavians first introduced silver into Ireland. Analysis and dating of the coinless and mixed hoards, which account, in bullion terms, for the great bulk of Viking Age silver in Ireland, indicate that the period during which the greatest amounts of silver were imported lies between c. 850 and c. 950. Given the general scarcity of coin hoards and the small amounts of identifiable non-numismatic silver imports that date to this period, it may be inferred that much of the imported silver – whether in the form of coins, ornaments or ingots – was routinely melted down for conversion into the ornament types characteristic of the Hiberno-Scandinavian tradition. Products of this silver-working tradition, which was centred on the settlement of Dublin (Sheehan 1998a, 177-183) and, to a much lesser extent, the Munster towns (Sheehan 1998b, 154-156), account for the clear majority of the culturally diagnostic components of Ireland's coinless and mixed hoards. Apart from confirming the vigorous nature of their tradition, this point raises the question of what sources of silver were used by the Hiberno-Scandinavians.

Silver sources

The presence of imported silver objects and coins in Ireland's Viking Age hoards has implications concerning this question of silver sources. Only a limited number of hoards feature objects derived

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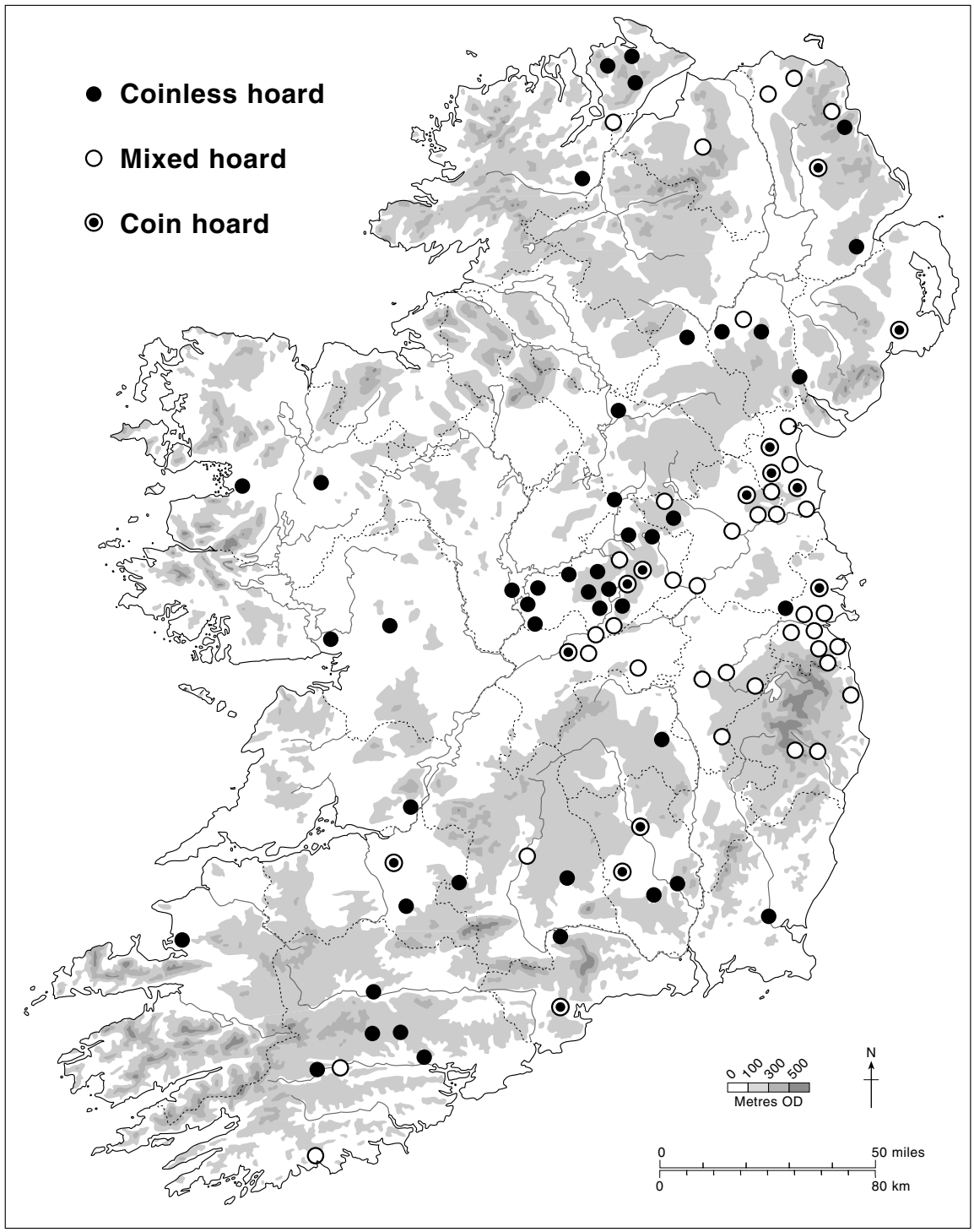


Fig. 3. Distribution of Viking Age silver hoards (9th and 10th centuries) in Ireland.

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from Scandinavia and the Baltic region, less than fifteen per cent of the total, but these objects should be regarded as being merely representative of the much larger quantities of material that were routinely consigned to the Hiberno-Scandinavian melting-pot on arrival in Ireland (Sheehan 1998a, 184-194). Relevant hoards in this regard, featuring imported material, include those from: Dysart Island, Co. Westmeath (M. Ryan et al 1984, 339-356), deposited c. 907, which contains hack-silver fragments of penannular brooch and armring types of Baltic origin; an unlocalised find from Co. Dublin (Graham-Campbell 1976, 49), deposited c. 935, which contains fragments of a spiral-ring of the type commonly found in southern Scandinavian and Baltic hoards (Fig. 3); Lough Creeve, Co. Meath (Sheehan 1998a, 189-190), which contains a hack-silver fragment of a Norwegian variant of a Baltic type penannular brooch; and Rathmooley, Co. Tipperary (Sheehan 1992, 211-215), which contains a rod armring of Norwegian manufacture. The recognisable imported objects in Ireland's hoards, such as the examples listed above, are derived in the main through southern Scandinavia and the Baltic region. This is of particular interest as it is from this region also that Arabic coins found their way to Ireland.

Arabic coins of Kufic type are of regulated weight and high silver content. Consequently they were in great demand in Viking Age Scandinavia, where they were valued as bullion rather than as currency, and they were acquired in large quantities through trading routes that stretched along the great Russian rivers. Within Scandinavia they are found in the greatest numbers on Gotland, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Finland, with Norway producing significantly smaller totals (Hovén 1981, 122-123). Programmes of analysis on ingots, ornaments and hack-silver from southern Swedish hoards (Arrhenius et al 1973; Hårdh 1976, 110-27) have demonstrated that high proportions of the tested material corresponded closely in metallurgical composition to that of Arabic coinage, indicating that significant quantities of the latter was melted down on arrival in the Baltic region.

In Ireland and Britain, Arabic coins form part of twenty-one hoards – two-thirds of which were deposited between c. 900 and c. 930. Ten of these are from Ireland, where most are found in northern Leinster, while the majority of the British finds are from the north and north-west of England. Though the dominant distributional pattern of these coins in the West may be identified, in the geographical sense, as an Irish Sea one, their cultural context should probably be regarded as Hiberno-Scandinavian. This view is reinforced when the strong Hiberno-Scandinavian elements of several of the hoards from Britain which contain such coins are considered (Sheehan 1998a, 187-188).

In Ireland, Arabic coins are more than twice as likely to occur in hoards containing non-numismatic material as in those which are composed entirely of coins. This may indicate that the Arabic material tended to form part of the same circulation as the non-numismatic silver and, in addition, it reinforces the likelihood that recycled Arabic silver was used, alongside silver from other sources, to make Hiberno-Scandinavian ornaments and ingots. Included among these other sources are the non-numismatic material from Scandinavia and the Baltic region, as discussed above, which is represented in the hoards from Ireland, as well as coined silver from Anglo-Saxon England and elsewhere.

Coin and mixed hoards from Ireland include, in addition to the Arabic material, a large proportion of Anglo-Saxon coins, as well as issues from the Viking Northumbrian and Anglian rulers and the Carolingian empire. While it is likely that considerable quantities of coins of these types were melted down to contribute to the source of silver for the Hiberno-Scandinavian industry, this cannot be demonstrated in the absence of a comprehensive programme of metallurgical analysis. Unfortunately, only one such programme of significance has been carried out on Viking Age silver

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Fig. 4. Fragment of a 'Permian' spiral-ring from Ireland, unprovenanced (courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

from Ireland – that from the Dysart Island mixed hoard of coins and hack-silver (M. Ryan et al 1984, 356-361). Its results indicated that this silver was not won from any known ore source in Ireland and, in addition, that the silver used to produce the Dysart ingots derived from broadly similar sources to those represented in the hoard from Cuerdale (Kruse 1992, 81) – a finding which is of some interest in that the Dysart and Cuerdale hoards share other important characteristics (Graham-Campbell 1987c, 112). In Britain, however, several analytical programmes have been carried out on a broad range of non-numismatic silver objects, including some from hoards with strong Hiberno-Scandinavian elements, and in some cases it has proved possible to demonstrate the probable use of Arabic and/or Anglo-Saxon silver as the source for particular objects. In the case of the Skaill, Orkney, hoard, for instance, the compositions of some of its ornaments and ingots were shown to be similar to those of Arabic coins (Kruse & Tate 1995, 74-75). On the other hand, the composition of some of the components of the hoard from Storr Rock, Skye, were closer to those of Anglo-Saxon coins, though these do not seem to have provided their sole source. On present evidence, therefore, it seems that a mixed stock of silver was being used in the Irish Sea area, particularly during the later 9th and early 10th centuries, and that this was derived from both recycled Arabic and Anglo-Saxon coinage as well as from the non-numismatic silver imported from Scandinavia and the Baltic region.

Although it served as one of the sources for its silver supply, the Anglo-Saxon world had no apparent influence on the Hiberno-Scandinavian silver-working tradition in terms of the characteristic form and ornamentation of its products. Presumably this is simply because Anglo-Saxon silver was imported into Viking Age Ireland solely in coin form. Scandinavian and Baltic silver, on the other hand, was also imported in the form of ornaments. Although most of these were melted down and recycled, the scale of influence of the latter silver-working traditions on those of Ireland may be gauged by considering the origins of the principle product of the Hiberno-Scandinavian tradition – the broad-band armring.

In numerical terms broad-band armrings form the most important product of the Hiberno-Scandinavian silver-working tradition (Sheehan 1998a, 178-180). Rings of this type are usually of penannular form and are made from a thick, flat band which tapers in width from the mid-point towards the terminals. They are normally decorated with rows of transversely disposed stamped grooves, formed with distinctive bar-shaped punches, and feature, in most cases, a diagonal-cross motif on the expanded central area (Fig. 1). Over one hundred examples are on record from Ireland where they are known to occur, sometimes in hack-silver form, in twenty-three hoards. Examples are also found in hoards from Britain and Norway, including those from Cuerdale, in which a substantial portion of the non-numismatic silver is demonstrably of Hiberno-Scandinavian origin (Graham-Campbell 1987c, 339-340) and Slemmedal, Aust-

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Agder (Blindheim 1981, 16-18). The occurrence of this type of armring in a number of coin-dated hoards from Ireland, Britain and Scandinavia indicates that the type developed during the second half of the 9th century and continued in general circulation until c. 930-40 (Graham-Campbell & Sheehan 1996, 776).

The evidence from Ireland suggests that broad-band armrings were manufactured there, probably by the Hiberno-Scandinavians centred on Dublin, for the storage and circulation of silver. Although it is likely that they also served as status objects, the rings appear to have been manufactured to conform to variations on a target weight-unit of 26.15 g. The weights of individual rings were not intended to be precise multiples or sub-multiples of this target unit, and weighing would have been required during commercial transactions. The nature of a metal-weight economy necessitated the reduction of ornaments to hack-silver, and examples of broad-band armrings reduced to this form occur in many hoards in Ireland.

It has been proposed by Graham-Campbell (in Brooks & Graham-Campbell 1986, 96-98) and Sheehan (1998a, 194-198) that the origins of the broad-band armring type, as developed in Ireland, lie in 9th-century Denmark. Ultimately, this is because of the importance of the southern Scandinavian and Baltic region as a source for the silver used to supply, through Denmark, the Hiberno-Scandinavian silver-working tradition. The case for the Danish inspiration for this armring type rests on the occurrence of rings of similar form and ornamentation in several 9th-century hoards from Denmark and Skåne. It is likely that these latter rings are of local manufacture given that contemporary variants of spiral-rings produced in Denmark (such as those from the Illebølle Hoard: Munksgaard 1970, 59) feature ornament such as transversely disposed stamped grooves and diagonal crosses – which is closely related to that on the armrings. Thus, given its early date, combined with its form and ornamentation, this Danish form of armring may be regarded as the prototype for the Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band series. This view is supported by the occurrence of a fragment of such a prototype ring in the hoard from Croydon, Surrey, which was deposited c. 872. On the basis of its contents, its geographical context and its probable connections with the Great Army's campaign in England, this hoard may reasonably be regarded as Danish in origin (Brooks & Graham-Campbell 1986, 110). Its location in the south of England may indicate the route by which some of the southern Scandinavian and Baltic materials discussed above may have travelled to reach Ireland.

Several individual armrings that could either be imported prototype rings from Denmark or Hiberno-Scandinavian copies of these may be identified in finds from both Britain and Ireland. A ring possibly from the Irish midlands, for instance, and a hack-silver fragment from the Cuerdale hoard (B.M. Reg. No's 53,10-14, 3 and 41, 7-11, 277, respectively) bear close comparison with the prototype armring in the hoard from Hørdum, Jutland (Skovmand 1942, 29-30). It is also possible to identify certain close parallels between the motifs and schemes of ornamentation exhibited on Hiberno-Scandinavian broad-band armrings and on related Danish material. These parallels include the use of bar-punches with serrated edges or central rows of pellets, such as were used to ornament the rings in the Kærbyholm, Odense, hoard, (Munksgaard, 1970, 59-60), on rings from many finds in Ireland, including those from Cave Hill, Co. Antrim, Roosky, Co. Donegal, Cushalogurt, Co. Mayo and Carraig Aille, Co. Limerick. Similarly, the use of plain bar-punches on armrings in the hoards from Hørdum and Nørre Anslev, Falster, is paralleled on a selection of Hiberno-Scandinavian rings from Ireland, such as those found at Emyvale, Co. Monaghan. The identification of these types of punch serves to reinforce the proposed links between the Hiberno-Scandinavian silver-working tradition and that of 9th-century Den-

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mark, as these were not commonly used to ornament silver objects within Scandinavia itself. In fact, they appear to be entirely lacking from Norway, where individual-motif punches appear to have been the preferred fashion.

Conclusion

Three important issues, worthy of further and more detailed consideration, arise from the points considered in this paper. The first concerns the finding that, despite the fact that both the historical and the archaeological evidence clearly indicate that the Norwegians were much more concerned with Ireland than were the Danes, the southern Scandinavian and Baltic regions – through Denmark – were of greater importance than Norway to the development of the most important silver-working tradition in the West. Is there other evidence in the archaeological record to support the existence of important connections between Ireland and Denmark and, if so, is this also to be understood within the context of Denmark as a supplier of silver? The second issue concerns the economic factors that were involved in the importation of large quantities of silver into Ireland during the Viking Age. To date there has been little consideration given to this complex and important question. Any such consideration, however, must inevitably take the third issue – the role of Ireland's 9th-century *longphuirt* – into account. The large quantities of silver in circulation in Ireland before the establishment of true urban centres in the 10th century, combined with the evidence for a thriving bullion economy there at this time, argue for a radical reassessment of these little-understood settlements.

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